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THE STARSEED

The grandmothers say that the All-Tree was birthed from a starseed that fell from the sky. Before that, our planet was a water world. Only ocean as far as the eye could see.

It is a creation story, this tale of the All-Tree's beginning, passed down from our mothers and our mothers' mothers and their mothers before. It is the heartsong of my people, the Driad. It is as central to our ways as the sun rising and setting, the passing days, the seasons.

But I always believed it to be only a story.

Until today.

Little Sister and I stand on our flat-bottomed fishing boat under a branching stilt root, sharp-tipped spears and woven nets in our hands. Our mouths gape as we watch a shooting star streak across the sky.

It is not the first shooting star I have seen. The night sky fills with them, especially in the hot months when showers of stars blink and burn across the inky black, but it is the first one I have seen fall to earth.

It sizzles as it passes, a deafening hiss like a thousand insect songs or flesh against

a cooking fire. Little Sister throws her hands over her ears. I am older, eighteen by the turn of our sun, and only wince at the screeching wail.

But even I cannot keep from crying out when the star strikes the water near the horizon. It hits with a thunderous boom worse than the loudest storm. Our boat rocks wildly. A salty mist sprays our faces. Little Sister stumbles against me, her feet slipping, but I hold her steady.

After a moment, the gale dies off, the boat's mad rocking calms to a less nauseating sway. Little Sister grins, thinking we are safe.

But I know better.

Already, our boat begins to move again. This time out toward the open water, away from the safety of the branching network of stilt roots. And down, as the water beneath us disappears.

Fear knots my stomach. Every Driad knows what a receding wave means.

"Climb!" I shout.

I grasp Little Sister around the waist and hurl her to a higher root. Her arms and legs pinwheel, but she lands and heaves her small body up. I follow on her heels, leaping and scrambling, and then we're running for the next root. I curse myself for not staying closer to home, for venturing out so far today.

"Keep going!" I cry, my hand pressed against Little Sister's back.

We clamber ever upward, scaling the roots, ascending higher. The coming tsunami is a roar now. I feel its salty breath upon my neck. I drag Little Sister down, throw my body over hers, dig my fingers into the bark, and hold on.

The water hits, washing over our backs with force. But we have climbed high

enough to avoid the worst. I drag Little Sister, coughing and sputtering, to her feet.

“Go!” We must keep moving. Higher still before the ebb can pull us out to sea.

“I can’t,” Little Sister wails.

“You must!” I am merciless. She is scraped and bloody, but better hurting than dead.

Finally, we reach a root high enough that the water does not touch. I signal that we can rest. Little Sister falls to her knees, exhausted and soaked. Tears trickle down her cheeks.

“Are we safe?”

Safe? I do not know. But the immediate danger is over.

“What now, Sitra?” Little Sister asks. “I want to go home.”

The water is still high. The stilt root where we were standing when the star fell is so far underwater I cannot find it. My spear, my fishing net, our boat, also gone. The sun will set soon, and we are too far from home.

“I think we sleep here tonight,” I tell her. I rub her back for comfort. “Don’t worry. The village will send someone to find us tomorrow. And if not, all land is connected through the All-Tree. It is not so hard.”

I swallow around the lie. It is true that all land is connected, but much of it is underwater in the great network of roots that lie below the surface. Without a boat, we would be forced to climb to the high branches to make our way home on foot. It could take weeks, even months. But I do not say these things to Little Sister. She is already scared enough.

“What was that?” Little Sister asks. “That fell into the water?”

I look to the horizon where the star disappeared. “Nothing to worry about,” I say, but I do not believe my own words. My gut tells me that what we saw was no ordinary falling

star, but something special. A *starseed*, like the ones the grandmothers tell of. *That* starseed that fell changed life on our planet forever. Will this one do any less?

Our rescuers arrive with the dawn.

Little Sister spots the boat picking its way through the tangle of roots below. I stand, shading my eyes from the newly risen sun, relief easing the worry in my chest.

But my joy dampens when I pick out the boat's occupants. I want to be rescued, of course I do, but did it have to be Twasdi and his brother Baji that came for us?

Little Sister cries out, and the brothers, who had been carefully searching among the hollows of the roots, look up. Twasdi spies us high above and waves his hunting spear furiously.

Little Sister is gleeful, and she scampers down the way we came yesterday. I make my way more slowly.

"Sitra," Twasdi cries as I reach the boat. He embraces me in a stifling hug. I allow it. He is my betrothed, an agreement made by the grandmothers, and already he acts as my protector. How can I be cross that he only does what is expected of him? And yet, I find I am resentful. I do not dislike Twasdi, but I do not love him, either. And I think he will use all my mistakes against me.

"I was afraid for you," he whispers against my ear.

"Did you see the starseed fall?" Baji asks. He is not much older than Little Sister.

"We saw where it hit the water!" Little Sister exclaims.

Twasdi frowns and whispers only to me. "Perhaps it is best if you do not speak of what you saw."

My own expression darkens. “Why not?”

“The village is abuzz with it. *Omen* this, *sign* that. Some say it is good, others bad.”

“Let them speak.” The gossip is of no concern to me.

“I’m trying to protect you,” he protests. “Soon we will be married, and you will have a baby in your belly. Then you will stay home and no longer risk yourself out here on the Child-Trees near the open water.” His handsome face is alight. “Won’t that be better?”

I smile back, but it is a false smile. I know I should be happy. Twasdi’s father is the headman, which means Twasdi will be headman one day, and, unlike me, he is certain that he wishes to marry. But that only makes my throat tighten, so much that I lose my words.

“Let’s go find it,” Baji suggests.

“No!” Twasdi’s denial is immediate.

“Why not?” I nod encouragingly to Baji. He is Little Brother to Twasdi the way Hoja is Little Sister to me, but together we have more authority than alone. And Twasdi’s coddling makes me rebellious.

Twasdi glares at me. “It could be dangerous.”

“What danger?” Baji asks. “The tsunami has passed, the waters are calm. And we can be the first to see a starseed newly fallen. Imagine what Father will say. It will be a great story to tell at the fireplace.”

Little Sister bounces on her toes. The flat-bottomed boat gently dances.

Twasdi chews his lip. I can tell he is conflicted. It is a rare prize, to tell a great story at the fireplace, to make your mark among the people.

“We will go,” he proclaims. “But Sitra and Hoja will stay in the boat.”

I huff my annoyance at Twasdi's overbearance, but Little Sister squeals, simply happy to be included.

"I see it!" Baji shouts as he leans over the edge of the boat, dark eyes fixed on the water below.

"We all see it." Twasdi shoves his brother without looking up. "It's glowing."

A pure magenta light emanates from the depths and diffuses softly out into the waves. I expected the starseed to have cratered through the underwater roots that traverse our planet, but there it is, caught in their web only a dozen lengths below the surface. As if it had landed softly all along.

"Impossible," I murmur. "Why didn't it sink?" It struck with force. It caused a tsunami.

"Like recognizes like, no?" Twasdi worries his lip, thinking. "And it is not so large. Maybe twice as big as this boat. Maybe the All-Tree caught it and held it. Maybe it is like a Child-Tree. Maybe it is a relative."

Baji is already chewing the redleaf that aids underwater breathing. "Let's go down and look. Imagine what Father will say. We will be heroes!"

Twasdi grins and stuffs a handful of redleaf into his mouth, unable to resist adventure after all. I reach for some, but he grabs my arm and frowns. "We agreed you and Hoja would stay in the boat."

I shake him off. "Hoja can stay, but I'm going."

"Sitra," he begins, and I know what he will say. *You must obey me. I am your husband-to-be. I am only looking out for you.* But he gets none of his words out before Little

Sister says, “What is that?”

We follow her gaze out across the waters.

“A trick of the light?” Twasdi offers. But there is something there. A white dot skimming across the water. Moving quickly.

“Another boat?” Baji asks.

“No,” I say. “It’s moving too fast.” And it is. But worse. It’s headed straight for us. I shout, “It’s going to hit us!”

Baji scrambles for the pole to push the boat aside, but he’s too slow, or the white dot is too fast. I catch a glimpse of a white segmented sphere bouncing across the waves. Just before it collides with the boat, it unfurls. I see a dozen jointed legs, long tentacles, a wide flat body like a krill or a lobster but as big as Little Sister, and then it flings itself forward and disappears below the water.

The boat tilts. Twasdi stumbles and catches hard against the rail. I grab on to stop myself from falling overboard on the swell. Little Sister is not so lucky. Without so much as a scream, she tumbles into the water.

“Hoja!” I make to go in after her.

“No!” Twasdi pulls me back.

“She’s my sister!”

“You can’t go into the water! Not with that...that creature in there.”

“Let me go!”

“Not until—”

He is cut short by a strange, high-pitched scream. It claws at my ears and makes me clench my jaw.

“It’s coming from somewhere below,” Baji grates out between his teeth.

“Somewhere in the water.”

The creature! While Twasdi is distracted, I scoop up the fishing spear from the bottom of the boat and run for the edge.

“Sitra, no!” he shouts. But it is too late.

I dive headfirst into the water.

The water is hot, as if the starseed is a small sun. It shocks me at first, but I have no time to consider what it means or to decipher the screeching song coming from the white beast. It cuts its way to the starseed, its many legs churning. I was wrong. It is twice the size of Little Sister.

Hoja! Where is she?

I whirl around. There! I swim my way over, the spear making my movements awkward. But I dare not lose it while that creature lurks nearby. For now, it seems focused on the starseed, content to keen its awful melody.

Hoja is unconscious. She must have struck her head in the fall. Driad are good underwater breathers, but not when we are unconscious. I loop my arms around her and kick upward. We break the surface, and Twasdi and Baji are there to drag Hoja to the boat. Baji immediately begins to draw the water from her lungs, but Twasdi stares at me, an emotion I do not understand on his face. He looks angry, or ashamed, or maybe just confused. I start to ask him what his expression means, but he lifts his head, listening. I do the same. There is nothing, just the lapping of the waves against the boat.

“The song,” we both say, realizing at the same time that the white creature’s call

has stopped.

“Sitra!” he shouts, stumbling back. I turn to find the creature behind me, reared up on its hindquarters, legs clicking, attention focused on me.

I hurl myself to the side as it dives.

It narrowly misses me and sends the boat roiling away on a heavy wave. Twasdi stares in horror as he, and my safety, float away.

I am alone now in the water. I kick my legs and raise my spear, frantically searching for the creature. I know it circles somewhere below me.

I have only a moment’s warning before it comes up, again, this time almost on top of me. I’m ready this time and thrust my spear against its side. The wooden tip bounces off the segmented shell of its body, the shock jolting down my arm. But I hold onto my weapon and ready for its next attack.

This time, it comes up from under me.

I dive toward it, meeting it. I spear it between the eyes, but that doesn’t stop its momentum. It barrels into me, sending me flying toward the surface. I break through the water, and I am airborne. I catch a glimpse of sky, of water, of a white body. And then I’m falling.

I see the starseed shimmering in the depths.

I plummet down into light.

“Sitra!” Little Sister hisses. “Wake up!”

I groan and turn away from her nagging. “Let me sleep.”

“There are *beshidda* here! They came from the sky! In a ship!”

Hoja is talking nonsense. “What are you saying?” I bolt up, frantically looking for my spear as I remember the giant insect I fought in the water. “No more white creatures?”

“No,” she laughs. “They look like us. Well, mostly. The grandmothers think they are our distant ancestors returned from the stars!”

The Driad have stories of our ancestors that tell us we were once a star-faring people who crashed upon this planet, but it is only a story. “Did you hit your head when you went into the water?”

She groans as only Little Sister can. “Come see for yourself!”

I roll to my feet and realize I am in the headman’s house. Twasdi must have brought me here after we saw the starseed, but my last memories are a jumble of light and heat and emotion. I don’t have time to unravel it. Voices reach me from just beyond the woven leaf curtain. Voices I do not know.

WHO KILLED THE BLOODHOUND? WHO. KILLED...oh, fucking hell, Ash. You talk to him! You speak simpleton.

The babbletech doesn’t recognize their language. It’s some derivative dialect. Definitely Kind in origin, but it’s only giving me every other word, if that. They must be colonists who crashed here a millennia ago.

If they’re Kind, why are they green?

Environmental adaptation. I think they photosynthesize. I -I can’t say for sure. There’s bacterium in the water, something not in our records....

Well aren’t you fucking useless!

Barto, cool it. Ash is doing his best. We don’t need to know why they’re green or their origin. We’re only here for the relic. And Slater is already on the way with a replacement

hound. It will take him a few standard days to get here, but he's coming. We'll find the relic.

Why wait for Slater? There's a whole universe filled with relics now. The Emergence turned the universe into a freakin' treasure hunt. I say we move on.

Bird in hand, Barto. We shift course now and we'll be fighting Skadi and who knows who else for anything in this quadrant. I, for one, am not settling for scraps, again.

I say we move on.

I say we don't, and guess who's captain.

Fine. But these Greenies give me the creeps.

I'm sure the feeling is mutual. This is a First Contact. Who knows what they think of us.

I know this sounds strange, but I think the old woman is saying something about ancestors in the stars. I don't think they're hostile.

They killed my hound. I'm definitely hostile.

I said to cool it!

Historically, these proto-Type 1 civilizations have strong hospitality traditions. They might not know what to think of us, but they won't hurt us. They'll wait to see what we'll do first.

Sure. Like they didn't hurt my bloodhound?

We don't know that they killed it, or that they're hiding the relic.

It was signaling, and then it wasn't. And they're certainly not telling us where the relic is.

Maybe they don't know.

They know! Greedy little green bastards.

The voices continue. I peer through the curtain. There are three of them, three *beshidda*. Three foreigners.

The first one is short and thick, a mound of muscle with pale skin and a stubble of fair hair. They all wear the same tight black suit, but this one fills his out in an intimidating way. He holds a dull black weapon in his hands. It is not sharp like a spear, but it radiates menace. It is obvious he is a warrior.

The second one is a woman. Short and thick like the warrior, but not as muscled. Her skin is root dark and her hair twists into braids. She is their leader. I can tell by the way she stands with her shoulders back and her chin raised.

The last *beshidda* is taller, leaner, with a shock of black hair. He is the only one who notices me. His brow rises in curiosity, and a small smile curves across his mouth.

“Oh!” he breathes, his eyes on me. But before the other two spot me, Twasdi is there, pulling me back.

“Don’t let them see you!” he hisses, fingers tight around my arm.

“Why not?” I whisper right back. “I have as much right to be here as anyone else.”

“They are looking for the starseed. The beast that attacked you was theirs.”

“I know.”

He frowns. “How do you know?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Because now I am certain that the fallen star was a true starseed, and that these *beshidda* cannot have her. *Her*. She is a relative, just as Twasdi said on the boat.

A wild rage blossoms inside of me at the very idea of these foreigners touching the starseed. They would desecrate her, I know it. Break her into pieces for their own gain. Study her

as if she was not a living thing. Remove her from her new home, the one she chose, and treat her as nothing but an object.

There is a voice in my head screaming at me, imploring me to not let that happen. My desire to protect her feels like a flame, a heat that rolls over my skin, making me shake with rage, single-minded in my purpose. I think of a hundred ways for the *beshidda* to die.

“Sitra!” Twasdi says, his voice sharp with concern.

I glare at him. His eyes are wide. He takes a step back.

Little Sister takes my arm and pulls. I think to shake her off, but something in her expression makes me follow her to the basin of wash water in the corner. I look down and see my face. I press a hand to my cheek, wide-eyed, gaping like a hooked fish. Is this me? How is this me? All-Tree save me, what has happened?

“Sitra,” Little Sister says, voice caught between awe and fear. “You’re glowing.”

Later, when the foreigners have been fed and housed, the headman and the grandmothers call me to meet with them. I wash and wear my best clothes, Little Sister braids my hair. Once I am kneeling in the center of the circle, I give my greetings. When I raise my head, I find Twasdi seated by his father.

“Tell us what happened out there on the water,” the headman begins.

I tell him my story: Fishing with Little Sister and seeing the star fall, killing the creature, falling into the light, my irrational feelings of rage and the certainty that what we saw was a starseed, and, finally, my glowing reflection, which Twasdi witnessed too.

“You are not glowing now,” one of the grandmothers observes.

She is right. Once my anger faded, the glow faded too.

The headman looks at me. "My son says you understood the foreigners' words."

"I..." How do I explain?

"It is a gift," a grandmother says. "From the seed."

"So you believe me?" I wasn't sure they would. The grandmothers can be difficult.

She nods. "You are its protector now, Sitra."

"But why? Hoja fell into the water too."

"Perhaps the starseed recognized your nature."

"My nature?"

She smiles. "There is a reason we picked you to be the headman's wife. And Hoja told me that you protected her from the tsunami. Are you not a strong-minded woman? Are you not her guardian?"

Murmurs of wonder circle the room. The headman lifts his hand for silence.

"Grandmother is right," he says. "About both your nature and the *beshidda*. I do not need to understand their tongue to know that they covet. Greed shines in their eyes."

I think of the one with the dark hair, the tall one. I saw curiosity in his eyes, not greed, but he has come to take the starseed just like the others.

"They are our relatives, not our enemies," one of the grandmothers says. "Do we not have stories of our ancestors coming from the stars?"

"They may be our relatives," I say evenly, "but did Kerda not kill his brother last summer? Sometimes relatives cannot be trusted."

Twasi snorts, and the grandmothers mutter.

"And besides, the starseed is a relative too. And they cannot have what has chosen

to come here.”

“Perhaps we should send them on their way,” the headman suggests.

“They have called another bloodhound,” I remind them. “They will not go so easily.”

Another round of murmurs.

“We should kill them.” This is the angry voice inside me speaking, but it is my mouth that forms the words. “And the bloodhound that comes too. It is the only way to be sure.”

The grandmothers clack their teeth. It is a heavy thing to kill a guest once welcomed into your house, especially if they are our relatives.

“They are not our enemy yet, Sitra,” Twasdi says, but his brow furrows as he stares at me, as if perhaps he had never truly seen me before. “Do not be so quick to want blood.”

“My son is right,” the headman says. “We will treat them with honor until they prove otherwise.”

“I do not think—”

“Thank you, Sitra,” he says, cutting me off. He turns to the grandmothers. “It is decided.”

“It is decided,” they answer, and I know I have been overruled.

I stand to leave but the headman calls for me to stay. Once we are alone, he says, “I do not think you are wrong, Sitra. Only hasty. Sometimes, one must wait for the fish to show itself before striking with the spear.”

“But what if the fish is a shark?”

He touches a hand to my shoulder. “We need not be idle while we wait. I have a

task for you. They want to find the starseed. We will help them to do that.”

“But—” The rage immediately bubbles up again. I feel the heat suffuse my limbs, and I know I must be glowing.

“Not in truth,” he hurries to clarify. “We will keep them busy, watch them closely. Do not tell them you know their tongue. Only listen. And then tell me what they say. They may not be our enemies yet, but they are not our friends despite what the grandmothers say. And there is something to learn here.”

“And if I begin to glow again?”

He makes a thinking sound. “Best not to glow,” he advises, and then he sends me away.

The next morning I am on a pusher boat with the foreigners. I lead them around the network of stilt roots, in the opposite direction of where the starseed fell. I pretend I don’t know their language, and we muddle through communication with gestures and simple words. The large one shouts at me, as if this will make things clearer, and I feign confusion. It is not hard. I learn his name is Barto. The woman in command is Yebena, and the tall one is Ash. Ash talks to me the most. He wears a black rope that connects his ear and throat, and he tells me it is a device called babbletech that helps him understand our language. That the more we speak, the more the device learns.

“Tell me of your home,” Ash says, and gestures to the black rope. “It will help it learn.”

I tell them of our ways and how we seek harmony with the All-Tree. I point out

her wonders. The thick leaves that we use to weave rope and thatch roofs, the sturdy bark we gather to build homes, the plentiful fish and insects and sea creatures that nestle in her root system.

“The All-Tree is our mother,” I say. “As all things are our relatives.”

“You believe the tree is your mother?” Barto asks after Ash translates. I hear the mocking in his voice when he thinks I don’t understand.

“It is a creation story,” Ash explains. “It has symbolic meaning more than literal. Don’t be an ass.”

“It’s stupid.” He yawns. “Wake me if we find the relic.” He settles down into the corner of the boat to nap.

Yebena looks over at me, eyes narrowed. “Are you saying that this massive, world-spanning tree, the foundation of your civilization, grew from something you’re calling a starseed?”

“Yes.”

There is a glint in her eyes, but she says nothing else, and Ash asks another question. I have no time to dwell on Yebena’s strange look.

“Amazing,” Ash says more than once, as the day goes on. “Do you know how rare it is to encounter a proto-Type 1 civilization these days?”

I tilt my head in confusion.

“Of course you don’t.” He smiles and his voice takes on a tone I am familiar with from the grandmothers' lessons.

“In our culture, we classify people by their ability to travel through space. There is this thing called the Kardashev Scale that measures this,”

“Kardashev Scale,” I repeat.

“Not important.” He waves my careful pronunciation away. “What’s important is that Class II civilizations have mastered control over more than one stellar system. They’ve harnessed the power of their parent star and become capable of interstellar travel via superluminal technology. Maybe they’ve even built Dyson Spheres or various other megastructures. These species can starlift, use antimatter, build black hole bombs.”

I shake my head. I recognize so few of his words, but they only spill from his mouth faster, his face alight with excitement.

“Many people, including myself, believe that whoever or whatever built what you call starseeds and we call relics were representatives of a Type III civilization—entities capable of harnessing the power of an entire galaxy. There’s a colleague of mine, well...” For the first time his enthusiasm dims. He clears his throat, “A former colleague. Anyway, he believed that the makers of the relics belong to a Type IV civilization and are entities capable of mastering an entire universe.”

I smile blankly. It’s all nonsense.

“A god,” Yebena interjects. “They’re gods.”

“I wouldn’t—” Ash begins.

“Some things are beyond science,” Yebena says, jaw tightening as if this is not the first time she and Ash have disagreed about gods and science. “If relics aren’t proof of divinity, what is? I mean, she said it herself.” She gestures at me. “This fucking tree. Creation story.”

An uneasy silence settles over the ship, and I feel as if I’ve missed something important in the exchange. Ash looks worried, and Yebena triumphant. To break the tension, I ask Ash to tell me of their journey to Driad.

“We came on a starship,” he explains. “Like this boat, but we sail through space.”

“We were hired to find the relic,” Yebena adds. “That’s what we do. We’re relic hunters.”

“There are starships in our stories,” I explain, proud to show that we are not simpletons on his Kardashev Scale.

Ash’s face beams with delight. “Which would make us distantly related at least on the classification scale.”

Yebena glances skeptically at me before gesturing toward the horizon. “Well then, *cousin*, let’s find this relic, shall we?”

I smile and point in the wrong direction, and we pole out further among the roots, away from the open water.

“Well, today was a colossal waste of time,” Barto grumbles when we return to the village at sunset.

“Not a total waste,” Yebena counters enigmatically, as she hauls herself off the boat.

Barto grunts, but doesn’t speak again. Just slouches off to dinner.

Once his companions are gone, Ash turns to me. “You’ll have to forgive them,” he says. “They have no curiosity.”

“You are curious?” I ask.

He straightens. “I’m a biologist.”

I do not know this word.

“Scientist,” he tries. “Knowledge gatherer.”

“Ah.” I remember his lesson-giving voice from earlier. “A wise woman. Like a grandmother.”

He laughs. It is a nice laugh. “Well, not so wise. I got mixed up with this crew, didn’t I? Not the smartest thing I’ve done.”

“They are not your friends?”

“Coworkers at best. More like people working toward a shared goal.” His expression darkens. “But you know what they say. Desperate times, desperate measures.”

It is a strange thing to say, but I don’t remark on it. My job is only to listen and report back to the headman.

“Thank you, Sitra.” He leans forward and takes my hand. I hold very still. He kisses the back of my hand. His lips are soft, his huff of breath, warm.

And then he stands and follows his companions.

I sit in the boat, thinking. And then I go to make my report. I do not include the part about Ash kissing my hand.

The next day we meet again, and I take them in another direction. But the result is the same. No starseed. Barto grumbles and Yebena glares, but Ash and I talk of worlds he has seen in his travels and of wonders he has witnessed; and when we stop for a midday meal, he tells a story of catching fish when he was a boy before his home was destroyed by invaders.

“It is a sad tale,” I say.

He nods. “But it was long ago.”

Ash cannot be much older than me. “Not so long ago.”

“Not so long ago,” he agrees, his dark eyes solemn, his mouth tight.

He allows Yebena to change the subject.

Upon our return, I make my report. But there is little to say, and I can tell we all wait for the one called Slater to arrive.

The third day when I walk to our meeting place, it is only Ash who waits for me.

“The others aren’t coming,” he explains. “Yebena said she had something else to do, and Barto follows her lead.”

In a way, I am relieved. Barto and Yebena are poor company, but I have come to enjoy this time with Ash. I see the beauty of the All-Tree through his eyes, and wonder blossoms anew. He is so curious, almost like a child, but his questions are astute, and he listens better than Little Sister ever did.

Today, as we sail, he asks me about my family, and Twasdi, who he has seen hover around me when I walk through the village.

“I don’t think he likes me,” he confesses, his lips twisted in a rueful smile.

“No, he would not. You are a virile man, and you are spending time with me.”

He flushes. “You think I’m virile?”

I frown. Have I said the wrong word?

“Young,” I clarify. “Marriageable.”

“Ah.” He shakes his head, amused.

“He is my betrothed.”

“Oh!” He glances my way, face still heated, but he pauses, eyes narrowed. “You don’t seem happy about that.”

“I did not choose him,” I confess. “I agreed because Little Sister and I are alone, and if I marry him, it will be good for her. For us. I only wish...”

“Yes?”

“It does not matter,” I say hastily. “Some things cannot be changed. My marriage is one of them.”

“Anything can be changed,” he says. There is a surprising urgency in his gaze that belies the easy question. “You believe that, don’t you? That you always have a choice?”

“You do not know the ways of the Driad.”

“It doesn’t matter. You should still have a choice.”

“Just as you have a choice?” I challenge.

He stumbles. “What do you mean?”

“If it is so easy to choose, then leave the starseed alone. It doesn’t want to go with you. It doesn’t belong to you.”

His mouth opens, as if to speak, but then he stops, eyes going wide. “You know where it is!”

“What?”

“You know where the relic is.”

“I...I...” I stutter, realizing my mistake.

He leans back, face a riot of emotions, but then it settles into stubborn lines.

“You’re right to hide it from us.”

“I’m not hi—”

“Yebena will do anything to get her hands on it, and Barto would just as soon kill you for sport.” He curses, gaze on the water, before he turns back to me.

“There’s something you should know.”

Nervousness shivers down my spine, but I nod for him to continue.

“We’re not a real survey crew,” he says. “We’re criminals looking to get rich. You can’t trust us. You can’t trust me.” He spits this out as if the words burn his mouth. “That’s the truth, Sitra. I said I am a scientist, but I lied. I *was* a scientist. But that colleague I mentioned reported me for stealing research funds. A whole lot of research funds. I hadn’t planned it, but I owed money to some very persuasive people, and if I didn’t pay them...” His shoulders fall. “I am not a good person, Sitra.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I once lost my homeworld, and I wouldn’t wish that fate on anyone. I’m afraid Yebena’s planning something, something more than just retrieving the fallen relic, and it won’t end well for your people.”

I remember the woman’s strange look, her unsettling smile.

“Then I will stop her.”

His eyes are sad. “You are one of the best people I have ever met—kind, innocent, generous—but you cannot stop her.”

Perhaps not me alone, but the power of the starseed waits inside me. “You underestimate me.”

“Maybe I do, but we have technology you don’t. You saw our weapons.”

I look at the one he wears on his hip, the one Barto carries like a talisman.

“And I know Yebena and Barto,” he continues. “They can be ruthless.”

“I can be ruthless too.”

“Not like—”

“I have been lying to you,too!”

He freezes, startled.

“The headman sent me as a spy. And, as you said, to keep you away from the relic. And I understand your language. Everything you have said. I only pretended not to. So you see, I am not so innocent.”

He studies me. “You’re right. I did underestimate you.”

“It is a common mistake,” I say, thinking of Twasdi.

A noise rumbles the afternoon. We look up to see a starship streaking through the sky.

“Slater.” Ash says the name like a curse.

We race across the waters, but not fast enough.

The starship has landed by the time we arrive. Slater and his ship stand at the center of the village surrounded by the people, the headman, and the grandmothers. Yebena and Barto are there too, and everyone is shouting and gesturing, the tension thickening to imminent violence.

I am on Ash’s heels, but I stutter to a stop when I see the beast that Slater commands. The bloodhound slavers on a leash. It is the same as the first, a white segmented creature with a flat body and many legs.

Rage shivers across my skin. I feel myself growing hot. The presence inside me does not like this beast.

The creature swivels to face me. A high-pitched scream fills the air as it lunges

toward me. Slater is yanked forward, but he is big like Barto and holds tight to the leash. The creature writhes as it tries to free itself, all the while shrieking its terrible song, desperate to reach me.

Yebena's gaze locks on me. "You? How?"

"Sitra?" Ash's voice is soft. He comes back to me, eyes wide. "You're glowing."

I look down at my arms. Not only am I glowing, but faint magenta lines and dots curve across my skin.

"I don't understand," Slater grunts. These are the first words he's spoken, and his voice is the rumble of a storm. "I thought we were hunting a relic. That's a human of some kind."

"She's the relic," Yebena says. "She must have absorbed its power. God knows weirder shit has happened." She speaks to me. "You killed the first bloodhound, didn't you? It alerted, and you killed it."

"I'm more interested in those lines on her skin," Barto cuts in. "Those look a lot like constellations to me."

"A starmap?" Yebena hazards.

"To what?"

"More relics?" The hunger in her eyes is so intense I take a step back.

"You don't know that," Ash says.

Yebena shrugs. "No, but it makes sense. The Emergence has littered the universe with them. Maybe this one wants to get back to its siblings. Maybe it's showing us the way." She cocks her head, gaze still on me. "Only one way to find out."

"Wonder if you could carve it up, sell it to the highest bidder," Barto says idly.

Yebena chokes back a shocked laugh.

The big man shrugs, his keen eyes on me. “Cheaper than feeding another mouth. Plus, we could divide her into fours.” He glances at Ash. “Threes.”

“Spending too much time with the Ghast has made you a beast, Barto.” Yebena shakes her head. “We might be on the wrong side of the law here, but we’re not monsters. However, I think we *will* take her with us. Maybe she can lead us to what I really want.”

“What do you mean?” Ash’s tone is suspicious.

Yebena grins, but it is the kind of smile that shows teeth. “You heard what she said before. This whole damn world is grown from a relic.” She gestures at the All-Tree. “Who hunts a minnow when they can harpoon a whale?”

“You can’t,” Ash protests. “Removing the origin relic might damage the tree.”

“Collateral damage.” Yebena shrugs his concern off. “It’s got to be a mega-relic, and intact; not like the one that just came through. Imagine that.” Her eyes glaze over in wonder. “Skadi will be shitting her pants with envy.”

“I won’t allow it.” Ash straightens, shoulders squared, but his hands shake.

Barto laughs. “Like you have a choice.” He raises his weapon. “Come on, little girl. You’re with us now.”

Ash blocks my path. “No!”

“I *will* shoot you.”

He raises his chin. “You’re going to have to.”

I push Ash’s arm aside, meet his eyes. “I will choose for myself,” I say quietly. “And I choose for you not to die.”

“Sitra, no!”

“It’s fine. I will find a way. The starseed will guide me.” I am trembling, but I will

not let them have the heart of the All-Tree. And I must be close to them to stop them.

I am halfway across the square—the thing they call a bloodhound chittering and straining to my left, and Barto before me, gun raised—when Twasdi’s cry fills my ears.

He is a blur charging in from the right. He rushes Barto and hurls his spear, aiming for the bigger man’s chest. Barto ducks, more agile than he looks, and the spear meant for Barto pierces Slater’s back.

Barto shouts as he watches his comrade fall. The hound Slater was holding breaks its leash and charges toward me.

I have no weapon, no way to stop it.

I scream as I thrust out my hand, tensed for the attack.

But it never comes.

Heat and light flash across my vision, singeing my skin and forcing my eyes shut. With a thud, something heavy falls at my feet.

I open my eyes.

The bloodhound lies dead before me, severed in half, its legs still twitching.

I spin around, looking for my savior, only to see Ash staring, the villagers scattered, and Barto and Twasdi struggling for control of Barto’s weapon.

It was me! The thought judders through my mind. *I killed the bloodhound.*
Somehow it was me.

A sharp popping sound fills the air. I whirl to see Twasdi falling, shock on his face. Barto fires again and Twasdi crumbles.

Heat blazes past me as Ash fires his weapon, and now Barto drops, a piece of his face missing.

It all happens so quickly, and now the headman is shouting and Yebena is shooting wildly around the circle. People are running and falling, children are crying.

“Get down!” Ash tackles me. I stay down, my hands over my head, until the roar of a starship draws my gaze upward. Slater’s ship rises. Confused, I look to where the man fell, Twasdi’s spear through his back. He is still there, moaning on the ground. Then who is flying the ship?

“Yebena’s getting away!” Ash yells.

“Let her go!” I cry, already overcome by the death and the chaos.

“You don’t understand.” His eyes are frightened. “She’ll return, and this time with more men than your people can kill with spears or with...” He looks at me, and my hands, before he continues. “She believes you are some kind of living relic, and the heart of your All-Tree is worth more money than she ever thought to make in a lifetime. She’ll come for you, for the heart, and this time she won’t stop until she has you both.”

“I will fight!”

“There’s no running from the bloodhounds. They’re genetically engineered, unnatural. And now that she’s seen what you can do, she’ll be prepared. She’ll bring a pack.” He swallows, his next words coming hard. “And she might not be the only one, Sitra. There’s a whole universe of freebooters and treasure hunters out there right now, hungry for relics and willing to do almost anything to get them. She could bring them to help, or they could come alone. I think we were the only ones who tracked the relic, but I can’t be sure. I can’t be sure you’re safe.”

A grief-filled wail pierces my ears. It is Twasdi’s mother, and beside her his little brother kneeling, head bent. Their cries join with the voices of the others whose loved ones fell

under Yebena's fire.

Their sorrow kills my bravado like cold water on a fire, even more than Ash's warning, as the reality of death settles on the village. Did I cause this? If I had not taken us to see the starseed, if I had not insisted but instead obeyed Twasdi, would he still be alive? Is his death at my feet? Are all the deaths today at my feet?

"What have I done?" I whisper.

Ash takes my hand. It is the same one he kissed before. His jaw is set, his eyes determined. "This is not your doing. I brought this here. This is on me."

My gaze rises upward to where Yebena's ship faded into the sky.

"Can you follow her?"

"What?" Ash looks up. "Yes. We still have our ship, but—"

"Good. Then we follow."

"But—"

"I will not be hunted!" I whirl on him, my own grief bubbling up as rage and helplessness. But I am not helpless. I killed a bloodhound. Twice. "I will not be the one hunted when I am the hunter! I will not wait for Yebena to return and slaughter my people for her treasure. I will find her first, and she will answer for Twasdi. For everything!"

His nod is slow.

"You can help me as you say," I challenge, "or you can stay out of my way. Make your choice."

"You want to leave your home? Your people?"

"To protect them, yes! You said they are not safe, may never be safe again. Unless I do something." I swipe at the angry tears wetting my cheeks. "But I cannot fly, and I don't

know how....” I hold out my still-glowing arms. My voice shakes. “Will you help me, Ash?”

There is no reason he should. He is a bad man, after all. He told me so himself.

But I also remember his generous laugh, his wonder, the way he stepped between Barto and me.

His answer does not come quickly, but it comes. “I’ll help. It’s time I got myself back on the right side of things in this world. Let it begin here. With you and your people.”

We leave within the hour. It is a brisk goodbye, too fast to be proper, but I am afraid that if I linger, the weight of what I am doing might overwhelm me and I will change my mind. Little Sister is stalwart. I expected tears, but she is dry-faced, a warrior. Perhaps Twasdi’s death has shocked her into somewhere cold. It breaks my heart to know she suffers, but it steadies my resolve.

The grandmothers give me their blessing once Ash explains that he believes Yebena will return seeking the All-Tree’s heart, and the headman gifts me with a pendant carved from the tree.

“It was my son’s,” he says, face drawn.

I think to refuse, but in the end I know that it is a greater kindness to accept it.

“Thank you,” I say, and slip the necklace over my head.

And then there is nothing left to do but to leave.

We board Ash’s ship. It is small, only enough space for a few people and a cargo hold with a cage for the bloodhound. I try not to gape in wonder. The ship is a strange beast all its own.

“There are stories of starships in our legends,” I tell him when I catch him

watching me. “But they say the ruins are far below the waters, our ancestral technologies lost to the sea. I always thought them only stories.”

“It’s all real, Sitra,” he assures me as he clicks mechanical buttons and brings the ship to life.

He gestures to a seat, and I strap myself in. Before me is a large viewport. I stare at the waters and the branching roots of the All-Tree. Perhaps for the last time.

An ache tugs at my belly, but I let my purpose fill me. I will be a guardian of the Driad, a warrior for my people. My fingers rest against Twasdi’s pendant.

“I don’t usually fly,” Ash confesses as a hum fills the ship. “That was Yebena’s job, but...” He pulls the navigation stick back, and the ship slowly lifts off the ground.

I gasp and force myself to keep my eyes open. I watch as we rise, rise, until I begin to see the edges of the All-Tree. It is an impossible thing, the way it branches, the hundreds and hundreds of kilometers of roots. And then we are above it.

“Hold on,” Ash says, “We’re crossing through the atmosphere.”

The ship rumbles and shakes. My fingers grip the seat and I squeeze my eyes shut. But it finally stops.

“Sitra,” Ash says. “Open your eyes.”

Before me is the expanse of Driad, a sphere-shaped world with a massive leaf-covered canopy in an even larger sea of blue-green water.

“Your home.” There is sympathy in Ash’s voice, and I am reminded that he, too, once lost his home. He reaches over and presses his hand against mine. “We’ll find a way to protect your planet. I promise.”

“I know.”

“And when it’s safe, you can come home again.”

“Home.” It has already begun to feel like a memory as I watch my planet grow smaller and smaller. Something new fizzes through me, part glowing power, part purpose, all new. I should be grieving, and I am, but I am also being reborn into something stronger. Something new.

“I am a child of the universe now,” I tell him. “Yebena was right. I am a living starseed.”

Which means this is my creation story.

And whatever happens next, this is how I begin.

THE END