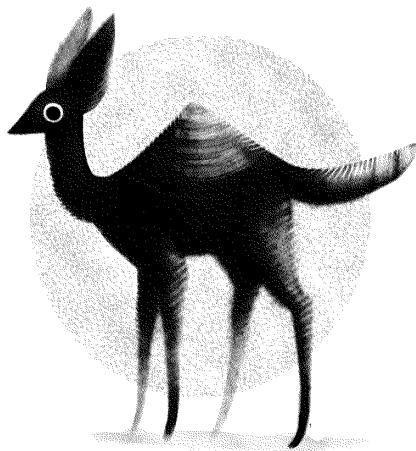


REK BELL
WIKTOPHER



HUNDRED RABBITS



WIKTOPHER

— DESERT TALES —

Rek Bell

Edited by
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HUNDREDRABBITS

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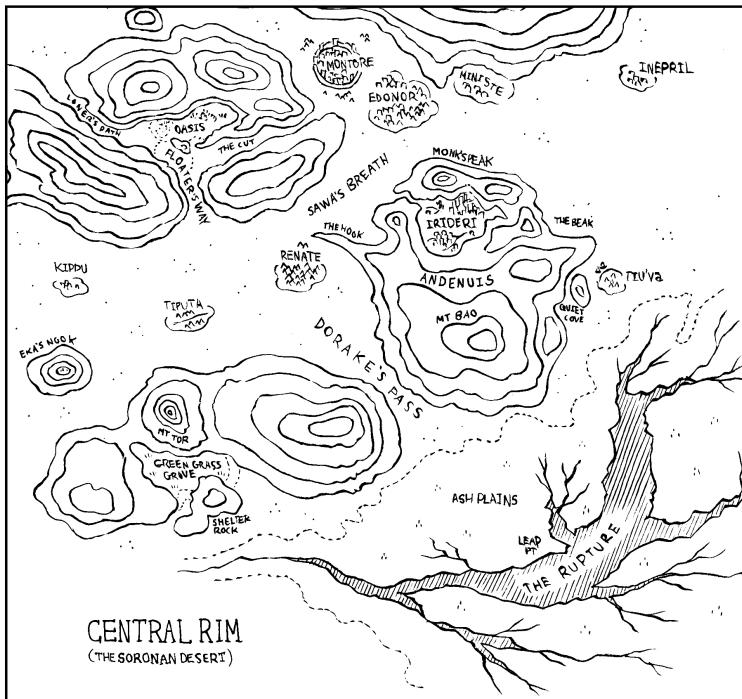
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This story takes place in the Central Rim of the Soronan Desert, but the world is bigger than this region. The wind blows counter-clockwise around the planet. The top of the planet is referred to as Yoramawa, and its bottom as Yoralo.



Directions in Wiktopher are written in Finic:

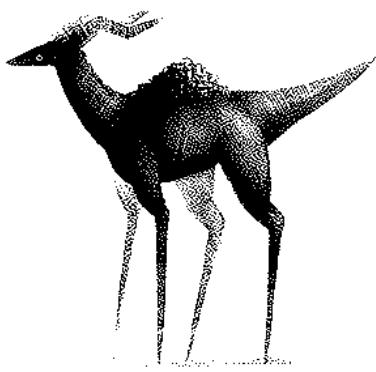
Saamu(sawa'muko) — against the wind

Saata(sawa'atae) — with the wind

Yoramu(yoramawa'muko) — towards the soul of the land

Yorata(yoramawa'atae) — away from the soul of the land

Bed Of Dust



The giant walkers of the Soronan desert. There are three Ilk in existence: Oto, Bala and Vol. To communicate with each other, Ilk produce low-frequency vocalizations at high amplitudes.

"When the people of the Soronan Desert are ready to die, they journey to the Ash Plains to leap into the Rupture. Choosing to take the Leap¹ is a conscious decision, but what is happening to me right now isn't my choice."

A long tether was tied around Lupen's waist, one end was frayed and flailing in the wind, its strands coming undone. Lupen's eyes were set on a blue ribbon dancing upon a yellow world.

"I remember being grown, I couldn't see, or smell, but I could hear singing. Someone was singing to me while I was still in the ground. Can I remember life as a seed? Life before that? No, I can't remember. There was only darkness. How can I know I exist if I can't see or feel anything? But wait, rocks exist, and they can't smell, see or feel. Maybe that's what it was like to be a seed, before a rock was a rock. I felt nothing then, and after, I will feel the same nothing once more. That makes it okay. Yeah, it's okay. This is okay. I'm okay."

A great mass met with Lupen's body. And then, nothing.

The seed, the light, we sow, we sow.

A leaf, a child, I grow, I grow,

My heart, my mind, hello, hello.

Lupen, eyes closed, was becoming part of the desert once more. Soon, Lupen would be just a word.

Together, forever.

Lengths of frayed rope lay in the sand. Small breaths escaped from Lupen's mouth.

Below, below.

"It's time." The bones and muscles agreed, but the brain refused to give in. "No one is letting go!"

"But we're broken! It hurts!" The left arm and its corresponding

¹A death ceremony which involves leaping into the Rupture, or from the snout of an Ilk.

muscles cried out in pain. A rush of adrenaline came, the body and the mind stopped quarreling and began working together again.

Lupen looked around, but the Ilk was gone. “They’re all gone. Everyone is gone.” Lupen wanted to cry. “Why didn’t I die from the fall? This is cruel, too, *too* cruel!”

The storm had passed, the two suns were visible. In this heat, without cover or water, it wouldn’t take long for death to come. The scarf, which provided protection against the desert sun, had disappeared in the fall and moving to search for it was out of the question. “What is the point of *this!*” Lupen cried out, weeping at the thought of never seeing Volare² again.

“I’m useless”, Lupen thought, and felt tired of thinking.

A leaf, a child, I grow, I grow...

The song was soothing, but the eyelids were heavy. “No wait...” The Verido’s yellow eyes found something moving in the distance.

An Ilk? No. Smaller than an Ilk, but big. Very big!

The figure was coming this way. “This better not be land sickness playing tricks.” Now, *that* would be cruel.”

A tall rider sitting on an enormous large-eared furry beast disembarked and came closer, carrying a blue scarf, the one Lupen’s mapa had made — it had slipped off during the fall. “Blue ribbon.” Lupen thought. It looked tiny, held between the giant’s digits. A pair of heavy knees crashed onto the sand, the stranger’s head towered high above, obscuring one of the two suns.

“Hello Lupen of Volare,” the rider’s voice boomed, startling a flock of Passari Tremblers nearby.

The giant had dark hair, sharp facial contours, eyes like silver marbles, and carried a thick yellow robe that resembled the desert. It was as large as a dune, and could shelter a handful of people. Silver eyes inspected Lupen’s broken body.

“How do you know my name?!”

²**Volare.** A Verido city built on the back of Vol, an Ilk. Volare is also the name of the city’s founder.

“It’s written on your face.” The rider replied with a soft smile. “I’m Uno.”

Lupen, growing weaker, was drifting in and out of sleep. “Look up at the sky. Protus is out. Name all the skyrocks that you know, out loud so I can hear.” The giant said in a commanding voice.

When Verido children are young, they make a game of naming all the known lights in the sky. Their names are difficult, so anyone who can remember them all wins the game. No one knows who had named them, but the names were passed on by way of song, and games. Protus was one of the moons in view now. Encela was another.

Lupen knew many of them, but was too tired to remember, “Bal-adavos.” A fear gripped Lupen, “Cencitris. Naxagorus.” Was this giant the embodiment of Death, an hallucination? There was a chance that pain brought forth this vision. At any moment, Uno and the beast would vanish, and the darkness would return, “Lim-inik. Omoretus.” The darkness did not come. Uno and the beast were stubborn hallucinations. Thinking about skyrocks kept Lupen’s mind away from the allure of sleep.

Uno began unfastening sheets of rolled fabric from the beast’s back, all the while humming a tune that reverberated down into Lupen’s core. The tune was soothing, like a salve, it helped to quiet the pain.

“Retna. Alpanensis.”

Uno pulled out some long poles, raised a tent, and laid a vibrant orange carpet inside it. Another bag lay strapped to the furry creature’s side, Uno grabbed it and began to unload its contents. A collection of herbs, grains, a small kettle, mugs, plates and a crate of waterstones³.

Uno walked back to Lupen, “you’re only missing Aristollo.”

“I’ve never won the skyrock game,” Lupen breathed.

³A liquid preserved in a hard membrane, protecting it from evaporation. The water can be extracted using a press, or a heavy tool. It’s also possible to draw out the liquid by putting the stone in the mouth, the water will seep out from a collection of pores on the stone’s surface.

"That's okay," The giants scooped the Verido's body up with ease, and carefully carried it inside the tent.

While Lupen slept, Uno stayed close, reading through a pile of old books, a thick finger rapidly tracing down each page. The rest of the time, Uno was cooking and caring for Lupen's wounds, leaving the tent every now and again, but never for long.

"Why do you carry so many books?" Lupen had asked once.

"They are my roots," was all Uno had said.

At one time, Lupen noticed Uno holding a copy of A Tale of Three, covered in annotations but, overcome by fatigue, could not gather the energy to ask about it.

"You look better," Uno said one morning, offering the patient a cup of lemilim⁴ tea.

Lupen nodded, feeling better only physically. "You don't have anywhere to be? I feel bad to keep you here like this."

"Everything heals in time. The sand doesn't blame the wind for shifting it around day after day, and the wind doesn't know guilt. Take your time."

Like every other first sunrise they had spent together, the giant served tea, a mixture of medililly⁵ and lemilim herbs. "Great for circulation," Uno would say.

Lupen did not know how much time had passed, but noticed that the wind outside was getting stronger everyday. A constant strong wind in this area meant that they were in the gusty season. "I've been here a long, long while haven't I", Lupen thought, there are 240 twin sunrises in an annum⁶, "I've seen at least 30."

Most places in the Soronan Desert have severe weather at some point or another, but the Ilk always walked ahead of the gusty sea-

⁴An antifungal culinary herb with a subtle tang, used fresh or dried.

⁵A leafy, hard to grow plants that requires a lot of water and attention. It takes annums to grow to maturity (the only time when the plant gains its medical properties). It is used to reduce inflammation.

⁶An annum follows the growing cycle of teaweed, which takes 240 twin sunrises. There are 10 annums in a kiannum.

son. Verido people were blessed with good weather all annum long. Storms could still happen on the back of an Ilk, but they were rare.

After serving tea, the giant's silver eyes scanned the skies and the horizon, before stopping on a mountain. "Drink your tea. You need to be in good shape if you're going to climb that mountain," Uno said with a grin, a long finger pointed to a tall shape in the distance, a thick layer of clouds obscured its upper half, "all the way to the top is what you said. Very brave of you."

"What? I never said that," Lupen replied, "I'm better than I was, but I'm not fully healed."

Uno's silver eyes scanned the Verido's body and in a calm, authoritative voice, "You're healed enough."

"Why would I want to climb that mountain?" Lupen asked, eyes now set on the mountain, wondering if it had always been there. Uno had cast a spell on the world, the mere mention of a mountain had spawned one into existence.

"My friend came back today," Uno said, walking out of the tent, "come, let me introduce you."

Lupen felt too weak to stand, but Uno pretended not to notice.

"Come!" Uno insisted. Lupen stood up groaning, and crawled to the entrance of the tent.

"Lupen, meet Kit!"

Images of a tall rider sitting atop a beast resurfaced. Kit was a large big-eared creature with light-coloured fur and black spots spattered all over. Two darker marks sat over the eyes, giving Kit a constant air of severity and general discontent.

"I thought hyroos were extinct..."

It occurred to Lupen that, like the mountain with no name, Uno was familiar. Lupen remembered a story with giants that towered above the clouds and spent all their time watching the passing sky-rocks and far away lights. They kept their eyes to the skies, but then one day, a skyrock landed at their feet and they began looking ground-ward, watching sandstorms forming and dissipating. Green things began to sprout at their feet, and the longer they looked down, the more they shrank.

"It's you," Lupen mumbled, eyes fixed on Uno, unable to draw breath, it was like the air had vanished from the world.

"What was it like in the early days of the world?" The Verido asked suddenly, eyes full of wonder.

Uno laughed a thunderous, but friendly, laugh that did not confirm or deny it. Lupen spent the rest of the day watching the ageless giant. Uno's head did not reach the clouds. Lupen tried to imagine what other great creatures wandered the desert floor.

The following day, the mountain in the horizon came back to Lupen's mind. "I'm going to climb you." Lupen shared the plan with Uno, who denied ever having introduced the idea in the first place.

"Good idea."

One morning Uno got up and began packing the carpet, the herbs and the waterstones. It was time to go. Before they parted ways, Uno handed a copy of *The Tale of Three* to Lupen.

"For you," the book was bound with a beautiful red thread, made from a material unknown to Lupen. Even the paper felt strange, it had a familiar blue tint. "I transcribed it from a rare original. It's all true, all about your people. You'll enjoy it." There was another gift too, a small sheet of fabric rolled up tight and folded over itself so that it was now the size of a small loaf of bread. Uno also gave Lupen a single short banabo⁷ pole. "Fabric is hard to come by in these parts. You can use it for shelter."

"Thank you." Lupen also presented a gift, Levi's blue scarf. "My mapa⁸ told me I would need it to be very long, maybe it's because it was meant to be yours." Uno accepted it and took a liking to it straight away, carefully rearranging the knot, as if handling the petals of a flower. It appeared tiny on Uno's neck, the length of fabric could not go a full two turns around it so the giant wrapped it around once.

⁷A tall, tree-like plant. Its trunk is wide, dense and it is often used as a material to build houses and other hard structures. Its top leaves are often used as brooms and to weave decorative items.

⁸A term of endearment, used by the child of the bearing parent.

Uno climbed up on Kit's back, sending a flurry of sand flying around them.

"Aristollo was an Iridi, and a good friend of mine, who reminds me of you actually." As the giant said this, Kit bounded up high and far into the horizon.

Mountain With No Name



Hyroos are large creatures with big rounded ears and strong hind legs, known for being able to jump across long distances with little effort. Their large snouts allows them to smell things from far away. They are thought to be extinct.

Lupen, carrying a bag full of waterstones, loaves of teaweed⁹ bread, and a few dried root vegetables, headed toward the mountain. Lupen couldn't walk well yet, but made good time, arriving just as the first sun rose over the horizon.

Throughout the climb, there was no evident road or path, Lupen progressed slowly, climbing jagged rocks, finding creases for support, stopping often to eat, sleep, or to watch the world below get smaller. The altitude was comforting like being on the back of an Ilk. The sandy plains stretched beyond Lupen's vision, what looked unfamiliar from the ground was easy to recognize from up here. Their recent campsite was just a few dunes away from the mountain.

Lupen eventually ascended beyond the height of an Ilk. "If I were a giant, this scene would be most ordinary! Oh yes! With a flick of my finger, I could brush that dune away or pinch a new one over there!" Lupen said with a laugh, gesturing over specific points on the horizon.

The air became progressively moist, and soon, thick wet clouds engulfed everything. "Like breathing water!" The walls were perspiring, stained with verdant green. Lupen's climb slowed to a crawl. It wouldn't take much to slip over the edge.

"One fall was plenty." Lupen mumbled, reaching to find a grip, but instead of rock, found wet moss.

The Verido stretched and gazed at the top of the nameless mountain. The summit was flat, blanketed in shrubbery and flowers. Mesmerized at the sight of the flowers, Lupen's knees met with the damp ground. The flowers had massive petals bound together by a single fuzzy yellow button. Lupen brushed off little droplets of mildew that held on the leaves and tasted them. "Is any of this *real*?"

Tucked in a recess in the lush vegetation and moist leaves on the ground slept a red-haired being, who's chest rose and fell, lips curved into a smile. Verido people sometimes color their hair, but no dye could produce a red as vibrant as that, it burned the eyes.

Lupen took a step back, keeping a line of tall grass between them.

⁹A staple grain. It is easy to grow, requiring little water.

Why would anyone be alone up here? Perhaps this place is a refuge. The grass was tall and thick, it had been allowed to grow unhindered for many, many annums. It didn't appear that anyone else had ever come here for a long time. Lupen gulped, realizing how careless it had been to climb up here without a clear goal, and wondered if Uno knew that someone lay here.

There was no shelter, no pots, not even a kettle, but there were fresh herbs everywhere. Every passing moment revealed something new and amazing, but Lupen's attention was on the one with red hair. "I ought to call you something. How about Saffa?" Lupen waited for a response for a short while, then nodded to no one. "Saffa it is, until you wake up anyway. What question should I ask you first? Where's your kettle? What is this plant? And that one? What about this one? Yes. So many plants to ask about, maybe I can take some home!" The Verido paused, there was no point in grieving at this point.

"No one sleeps forever, right?" Saffa did not stir, the peaceful breathing continued. Lupen sighed, impatient, but knew better than to disturb someone's sleep without a good reason. Lupen would have to wait for a cue, a yawn, maybe some stretching or some wrinkling of the eyes. After much waiting, the sleeper still lay there, not a yawn or hint of eye wrinkling.

The mountain top was quiet. Lupen watched the flowers all day, undisturbed. There was an astonishing variety of plants, some sat atop lanky stems, others had long green fingers, curling around bits of neighboring grasses. A beautiful rosary of dew drops accumulated on everything. Saffa's skin bore these silvery jewels too, the result of the occasional droplet of water slipping down the center of a leaf, and dripping onto this living canvas. Saffa's torso now had a complicated motif all over it, thousands of little wet eyes.

After many days, burdened by disquietude, Lupen decided to try and speak to the stranger.

"Ahem—" clearing the cobwebs from this throat was the first step, "he-hello?" A quiet voice was key, no sense in startling Saffa

into wakefulness. No answer. I'll have to be a bit louder. "Hello?" Again, no answer.

What if Saffa was stuck in a state of perpetual sleep and couldn't wake up? Lupen could still wait a few days longer. Dwindling supplies wasn't an issue, there were enough plants and water here, but loneliness.. Verido people lived in groups and were seldom left on their own. Lupen imagined holding this vigil over Saffa for annums. Maybe this was a trap ensnaring people until plants would sprout from their ears and make a garden of their remains. Lupen decided that staying here forever was not an option, but leaving meant that the Verido would always wonder about the one sleeping in the bed of grass.

"Just a few days longer, then I'll leave."

The air, unlike that at the foot of the mountain which was always thick with sand, was sweet-smelling and clear. Its perfume varied depending on the time of day. There was no need to protect the skin from the harshness of the desert. Lupen had no need of a sweater either, it sat at the waist along with the vest that was underneath.

Lupen stretched out on a spot in the soft grass next to Saffa.

Lupen dreamt of a city erected on the back of a giant hyroo, in which the inhabitants had braided the fur into elaborate houses. The leaflings would play hide-and-seek in the fur forest. A hatter twisted fur into elaborate fur hats. Lupen was fluent in "hyroo speak" and would climb up to the hyroo's ears and send loud whoops traveling far across the world. In the dream, something happened that threw the city, along with all its inhabitants, off the hyroo's back. Lupen fell. There were no stars, and the hyroo vanished into space. Even the suns had gone. Lupen felt nothing, and began to weep.

A loud whooping sound woke Lupen up, a dark figure zipped through the clouds above and landed nearby without disturbing the droplets that held onto the grasses. The beast had large round ears, like Kit, in fact, it looked very much like Kit, although its fur bore a different pattern.

"Is that you Kit?"

Sitting up, mildew trickled into the grass from Lupen's chest. The fear of bodily intrusion by plants returned, but Lupen's ears were sprout-free. Perhaps Saffa had arrived a few days before, and exhausted, had lain here to rest.

The beast let out a laugh, a high-pitched noise caused droplets to slide off their beds. This was definitely the sound that Lupen had heard in the dream. The creature was a hyroo too, like Kit. It moved over to Saffa and went in for a good long lick. Saffa yawned, stirred, smiled, lips curving and carving a new shape on the cheeks. Arms and legs stretched out, Saffa's hands found the tip of the beast's snout and moved to caress its large head. All the while, the beast kept its eyes on Lupen, Saffa's eyes opened and followed its gaze and stopped upon the stranger. They stared at each other for a long while, but Saffa's silvery voice broke the silence.

"Can I have *that*?" Saffa asked, reaching forward and tugging at the isilk¹⁰ sweater wrapped around the Verido's waist. Lupen blinked, undid the sweater, and handed it over without hesitation. Saffa slipped it on, then put a pink nose in it to smell it. "Hmm! Smells like sand and earth! I can feel the hands that made it! Ah! I love sweaters, they tell so much about a person. Every fiber has its own story y'know!" Saffa took a deep whiff again. "Wow! You wear this a lot." Saffa smelled the fibers some more, and looked at Lupen again, wide-eyed. "Oh oh oh oh oh...ohhh... ohhh oh!" This Oh-ing did not stop for some time. "Oh. Oh, oh! No, no, no!" Saffa said, reaching forward. "You're lucky to have survived a fall like that!"

Saffa was full of energy. Lupen's tongue had somehow gotten itself into a terrible knot, plus all this talk of sweaters was confusing. Saffa left the bed of green and went to look at some flowers, swaying from side to side as if there was a song playing.

Saffa turned to face Lupen. "Are you ready to go? I'm dying to get down there to see what's changed!"

Lupen swallowed hard. "Um. Wait. I have so many questions!"

"Nope! No questions! I forbid all questions unless they are about

¹⁰A sought-after fabric made from Ilk hair.

food, but I will say this! My name is Eka, and that fuzzy beast is,” Eka paused, as if trying to remember something important, but the hyroo filled in the silence, letting out a series of quick low barks. “Hush! We are Eka and Hush!” Eka said, brushing bits of red hair behind rounded ears. Hush, the hyroo, let out a whoop, taking a seat by Eka, who was inspecting the blue markings on Lupen’s face. “Lu-pen. Lovely! Will you come and see the world with me?” Without waiting for an answer, Eka climbed up on Hush’s back. “Let’s go Lu!”

Lupen was too stunned to answer. Eka’s arm shot forward, gripped the Verido’s collar and with a yank and a pull, both were sitting on the beast. Seconds after that, Hush pushed off the ground with its powerful hind legs, bounding high and away from the mountain top, piercing the layer of wet clouds, the sandy world below coming into view. Eka laughed, while the other passenger tried not to scream. Hush made a few dampening landings, before its paws reached the warm yellow soil.

Both slid from Hush’s back. Eka laughed at the state of the Verido’s hair and brushed a hand through it to comb it back into place. “You’ve got blue in your hair.”

“Looberries¹¹.” Lupen said, hands reaching up to try and get the rest of the dye out. “Don’t ask.”

“Okay, I won’t! So! Where should we go first?” Eka stepped forward so close that the tips of their noses touched.

Lupen blinked and turned a deep shade of red. “W-what?”

“You’re so timid!”

Lupen pulled away. “I’m not timid! You were unconscious just a moment ago! This is weird.”

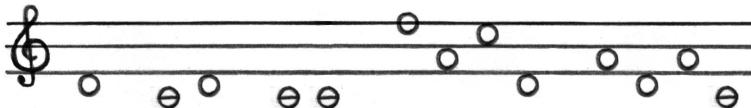
“Do you always call things you don’t understand weird? If you want weird-weird look at this,” Eka’s ears wiggled about, independent of each other, waiting for a reaction.

Lupen smirked, mirroring the ear movements exactly. Verido had

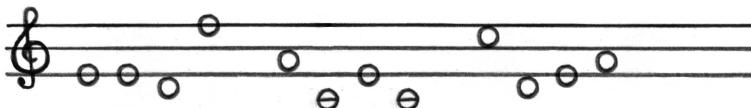
¹¹A sweet eatable fruit with a hard outer shell, often used as ink, and as a face and hair dye by Verido people.

three dozen muscles per ear, allowing them to rotate their ears 180 degrees. To finish, Lupen's flute-shaped ears unfolded and flared open, before twisting back into shape. Eka watched the trick and laughed aloud. "Here's a weird-weird move I bet you can't do." Lupen said. A whistle tunneled out from the Verido's rounded lips, a poem in Ilken¹².

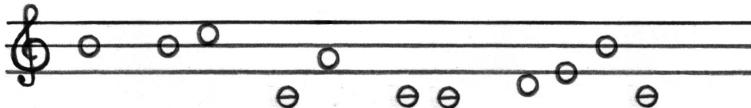
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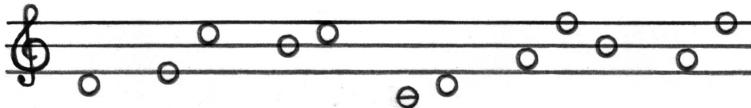
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¹²A whistled language spoken by Verido Voices, playable with an instrument. It is used to speak over long distances, and to converse with the Ilks.

Eka's smile would broaden and narrow depending on what was being said in the poem. Was it possible that Eka knew Ilken? Only Voices knew how to speak it. Lupen stopped, turning red again. "Did you... understand the lyrics of the song?"

"Something about a beautiful Saffa flower on a green mountain," Eka said, smirking still, "I'm flattered."

Lupen couldn't believe it. How is it that everyone out here understands Ilk tongue? The Verido was going to ask, but didn't have time because Eka had wandered off, running through the sand, kicking up loads of it while laughing.

"Do you know a city called Inepril?" Eka asked, kicking up more sand while exaggerating a walk.

"Vol went by it a few annums ago, not much left there though. When the waterstone well went dry, everyone left."

Eka paced back and forth, making a mental note of this. "Um. Okay! Then Montore it is!"

"Why do you want to go there?"

Vol stopped there every annum, Montore was modern and exciting. Lupen had heard that many important people lived there. Lupen had never stepped down to visit any city while living on Vol, only the adventurous, or those who exchanged goods with locals dared to do that.

"They make really good babam¹³ cakes there. Cakes paired with a fresh cup of mepperpint¹⁴ tea." Eka paused, eyes closed with a hand pretending to hold a cup. "It's like your insides become green! Maybe they really do turn green, I've never checked. I will get you a cup as soon we get there, and we'll fill a bag so we never run out!" Eka continued, before climbing back up onto Hush.

Lupen laughed and moved onto the hyroo's back. "So we'll live off mepperpint leaves then?"

"No. No you can't. If you eat too much your eyes will sprout leaves."

¹³A starchy, hearty tuber that softens when cooked.

¹⁴A leafy plant with rounded bulbs that hang from a thick central stem. Its leaves have a warm pungent taste with a cooling aftertaste.

Lupen fell silent, suddenly very afraid of mepperpint.

