

Dreams of a Storm

The lake and sky matched in color and texture, grey-green and ripples of a coming storm. The wind came in steadily, bending the trees over the water that rustled in the summer warmth, only the hidden alcoves kept a relative calm. Ripples still lined the surface, but neatly. Lilies in bloom and their pads rode inch high waves as the raft rode by. Paddle strokes carried the boy along the shoreline while their sounds were swallowed by the songs of the wind in the leaves. On the air was the fresh scent of the coming rain and metallic notes of worry. He would find her here.

Muscles tense, he restrained himself from picking up his pace. He tried to stand up so tall his back arched, while his bare feet on the wood and rope lifted onto their balls, heels hovering. From one of these calmer alcoves she would come up out of the water. He'd seen it in his dream.

It was a risk being out so far from the village just before a storm and worse to be out on the water. He could feel the air pressure shifting, the trees sucked back from the water toward the forest, then pushed in again cracking and rushing like a waterfall. Not a time to be on a small log raft in naught but a loincloth, but his grandfather had hastened him to the lake when the first signs of the dream had proven true. Always heed the cautious man urging haste.

The lily pads dragged at the raft as it passed. He was used to being out on the lake alone, as a fisherman's son just old enough to make his own trips, but there was a different loneliness today. There was an empty feeling all around; fish, all deer and buffalo, squirrels and even the bugs had hidden away to wait out the storm. He paddled over the surface unwatched, and watching. It was almost like stillness, if it weren't for the wind in the trees and the lake roiling. Almost like silence but for the rushing of the leaves.

So where was she? This was exactly the image in his dream. Under a bowing bobbing tree with leaves that stroked the water, out from the lily pads devoid of frog or even waterbugs as the sky raged above, a woman would emerge looking like she were born of the algae and frogs in the mud, she would surface to tell him of the coming danger. He wished he remembered her words. He'd awoken and immediately come to tell the elders, but felt more embarrassed as he told his tale. He could tell all of what he saw – of the storm that the witches said was not due to come, but could say little of what the woman from the lake had told him. Only that she had foretold the coming of some certain doom.

The wind swirled harder and even the water in the alcove started to churn. The boy felt tears in corners of his eyes and a hot walnut in the back of his throat. The weather couldn't change too much more or it would mean his vision wasn't truth. If it started to rain before he was visited then it was only a dream, and he was far out alone in the storm. The storm that had come so suddenly from blue skies.

It was that fact that had convinced the elders of the veracity of his tale. Standing before them, all sitting on bearskins cross-legged in a semicircle beside the fire around him, the weight of their gazes the same as the weight of the bears they sat upon. Even the smallest elder, wrinkled and frail, seemed a towering figure despite the boy casting his gaze downward to look on him. His grandfather, broad chest and belly out in the firelight who was taller than him even sitting, loomed like a mountain. When he'd tried to recall the woman's words his memory faltered, and the scowls were an avalanche until Abu-Hai, the eldest, reservedly croaked his belief.

He spoke, eyes far away gazing back in time, of the lake and the spirit of its waters. He spoke of a woman of surpassing beauty, twice the size of the largest man, and green as pine. The boy must have seen her daughter just as Abu-Hai had seen the mother when he was a boy. The respect for Abu-Hai among the elders took some weight off of the boy, but the rest were not convinced until the storm came the next morning and they hurried him on his way.

Water lapped onto the top of the raft forcing the boy to bend his knees to keep balance. The wood of the raft felt hard and dense, soaked in the cold water, water unnaturally cold for summer. The chill slithered up from his feet to his spine. He shivered and stopped paddling, the lump in his throat growing with each moment. His nakedness felt complete. The trees around were a mix of shades of green leaves and the dark of pines, all swaying against the silver-green sky, all muted, almost blue with the absence of sunlight. He let the waves drift him, and finally the rain arrived. Or was it his tears?

He reached up to touch the water on his cheeks when he stopped. He smelled her before he saw her. Like fresh fish, mud, and algae, her scent cut across the static fragrance of the coming storm. Then he heard the sound of the surface of the water breaking as if from much further away under the sounds of the storm. He could have reached her in two paddle strokes, but did not dip even once, only gripped tight and held his breath. The daughter of the spirit of the lake was just as he'd seen her in his dream. Her skin was the pale green of a still pond with dark seaweed hair, features smooth like river stones tossed for a millennia downstream. Her eyes were just too large, her mouth just too wide, yet she was still oddly alluring. The boy wanted to paddle closer but could only stare. She reached out to him with a webbed hand and he looked right into her black eyes. They were the darkest gaps between the stars of the night sky, the deepest depths of iron cold water in winter. She too, stared, letting him lean in and tip, and fall right into the pupils. Visions rushed into his mind blocking out his sight and the feel of the cold water on his feet. All that was left was the roar of the wind in the trees.

A tall powerfully muscular man, bare chested, raised his spear and shield and roared. A belt of gold plates gleamed at his waist in the high sun and a shining red crown adorned his black hair that tumbled over his shoulders each as large as a normal man's head. The roar was returned by a thousandfold echo from a crowd filling a field below him rattling their own spears and oval shields painted white with a red crown. The same red crown on their King's head.

The vision changed. The red crown army swarmed over a village of brown conical tents putting them to the torch in the night. The tents were foreign to the boy, in no style he'd ever seen. Women ran and were run down with spears to fall among the tall grass already laden with the bodies of the men. Smoke rose into a starry sky, and the vision changed again.

The Red Crown King stood at the prow of a ship, greater than any ship the boy could have imagined, a half dozen masts and a deck to fit five hundred strong, the wood painted all red with white sails. A hundred ships were in his fleet and spread on the ocean as far as the boy could see. The sun only shone on the gold plates at the back of the King, for ahead was a storm. They did not sail into the storm, rather it went ahead of them, and the boy knew it was the storm he was about to meet.

Once more the vision changed and the boy saw homes made of logs, far too similar to those of his own village. The army stood in mud surrounded by bent and broken trees as if a hurricane had just come through. It was a dark night with clouds overhead, the only light came from homes on fire and a large bonfire in front of the largest home. There the King stood, sweat gleaming like sparks in the firelight, and at his foot an elderly man. The boy didn't recognize the elderly man by face, but he knew the tattoos that covered his back. They were the same tattoos his great grandmother bore, the mark

of an elder of the village she'd lived in as a child only a fortnight's hike away. They were the story writers. They set words to paper to keep their memories beyond the lifespans of men. The storm would hit them soon, the boy knew somehow, this had yet to come to pass. They must be warned of the King's coming as soon as he told his own elders.

The crack of lightning flashed and the visions were gone. It had started to rain. The spirit's daughter looked to the sky, then sank back into the lake with a splash. The boy didn't want her to go. He tried to reach for the water before he remembered that he must be the one to relay his visions. He froze with his hand reaching for the water and looked to the sky. He had to get back to the village before the end of the storm. The rain lashed his face and he shivered with dread and cold.

Before he could move there was another splash and the boy was tugged into the water. The cold of the water was a shock, but the hand on his wrist was warm. He struggled, but not for long. The last thing he saw was the surface of the lake from below, boiling with the pouring rain, with the feeling of an anchor on his wrist. His warning bubbled to the surface with the last of his breath.

The Dread of Storm's End

A Mother's hands dip in water and pull out the sun.
From swirling chaos dark and cold,
came warms and light to see.
Night and day and time to grow old,
and fruit from bearing tree.
A Teacher's hands dip in ink and pull out a pen.
A lettered people may grow wise,
Knowledge passed on and on.
Unwritten the sun does not rise,
for civilization's dawn.

They had not seen the sun for days. The storm raged outside the cabin as Naya read these words to her son. He had finally stopped crying from the cold that had come in the night. She had stretched canvas over the windows cut into the cabin walls, usually enough for the rain and even winters if the fire burned in the hearth, but the wind ripped at them and they flapped sounding like whips, the cold crept in with sprays of rain. Only a small fire burned with the logs too damp to catch well.

Naya huddled around the fire with her boy held to her chest reading not from the light of the smoky logs but from her counting candle. She was reading from the Keteb, the final holy book of the Lesh, her people of the Land of Lakes. The Keteb was the Book of Letters, it told of how history began with the development of the written word, the importance of education and the blessing of being a good teacher. Their other books told their history of settlement from being nomads alongside the divine gift of the written word, and the importance of changing as the world changes around you.

The world was changing now, Naya could feel it. Nobody had ever seen a storm this strong last for so long. Lightning flashed and the candle glowed and flickered. The thunder that followed cracked like a felling oak and the cabin shook as if each log were shuddering in the memory of their own cutting. With the shudder the candle guttered out. It was time to see the witch.

A second cloak would likely not keep out the cold entirely, but Naya pulled one on anyway. Her son she swaddled to her chest, one hand on his back, the other held her cloaks around him. Normally he would be swaddled to her back pressed against her tattoos of the poetry of the Keteb but she would need to give him all the protection she could against the elements. At a whim, she bundled the book against him, perhaps it would keep some of the water off his wrappings. Stepping out into the storm felt like plunging through the ice on the lake in winter. The shock froze her for a moment, then she pressed ahead. Wind buffeted her side to side seeming to come from all directions at once. Her boots splashed on the muddy road, inaudible in the cacophony of rain wind and thunder, but she trudged on. The witch's tent wasn't far but it felt miles away. Each flash of lightning revealed the vague shapes of the town around her all under the swaying trees.

The cold sat heavy and damp on both cloaks, each step an effort to pull from the black mud. If she had any other option she would never take her son out in these conditions, but the witch had promised her answers about the storm that now began to feel like the end of all things. Perhaps one day her son would pen and teach a final book of the Lesh, The Book of the Storm. Finally a flash from the heavens, wherever they were, revealed the large cone at the edge of town that was the witch's tent. Naya almost lost a shoe in the mud when she picked up her pace in her rush to get out of the wind and rain.

Inside was blessedly warm. It was dim with an eerie blue light from the fire in the middle of the room. A fire that threw up no smoke. Naya's gut clenched as she pulled off her outer cloak; The witch's dark craft was already in the room with her. A low hoarse voice called on her to approach the fire, inviting her to warm herself. Naya stole half a glance at the witch while she obeyed and she felt a fist grab hold of her insides. Ageless, one moment old and lined, the next with a new shift of the light young, and yet however light played, her face was strong, proud, and in her heavily lidded eyes was a wisdom and a hunger.

Her tent walls were lined with vines and in pots almost filling the space were plants of every color and shape. The only evidence that the tent was a residence was a thick bed sized mat to one wall with a green pillow that looked like a log. In the center of the tent, suspended above the fire on a rod between two tall prongs was a silver basin. To this the witch gestured with a hand whose wrinkles changed with the light just as her face. In the basin was murky water bubbling at a simmer.

"Look in the lake water."

Naya did. For a moment all Naya saw was the bubbles, but then giving Naya's heart a twitch that made it feel like it had jumped into her throat, the bubbles cleared. The water became clear as a mirror and reflected stars it could not see. She crept closer and looked down into it, almost considering reaching in to pick out a star. A face loomed up, but it was not Naya's. Instead, it was a girl's, but not any girl Naya had ever seen. She wondered if it was a trick of the blue light, as it had painted all in the tent an ominous blue, but it appeared as if the girl in the witch's mirror had green skin and darker green hair. But no, it must not be the light as the whites of her eyes were untouched by the fire's glow, eyes that were too big for her face. Her hair floated around her as if she were under water. Then, it was revealed she was not alone. Beside her sat a boy on a muddy bed of a lake or pond, his hair too floating around his face, but otherwise with the normal features of someone who walked on land. His lips did not move, but she heard his voice in her head.

He said, "I too saw a storm just as the one that rages in your forest. The sort of storm that leaves trees felled and splintered in a ten acre boneyard, the kind of storm that springs new rivers. And yet, you should pray for the storm to go on for the storm's end means the arrival of the Red Crown King. As the King conquers and grows in power, so does the storm that precedes him.

His armies come with sword and spear and a fury and fervor even the rivers say they've never seen before, and their fires so hot even the logs drenched by the storm will burn. Only women who may bear children and those docile enough to labor without fuss escape blade and flame. Your storm has been long. He is coming."

The boy's voice left Naya's head, but before she could think to respond he was gone and the water boiled over, barely leaving her time to step back in shock. She looked up blinking, the witch was gone, as was the noise of the storm. Naya began to breathe hard, her son rising and falling with each breath while panic and dread settled on her. She had no will to see a Red Crown King ruled world.

She stepped out of the tent and saw her people coming out of their homes for a slaughter they didn't know was coming. She would warn them, but first she must save her son. Distantly she heard the river rushing and felt herself flush; she knew what she had to do. The beating rays of the sun brought her all too quickly from the storm's dread to a heat that preceded panic. She reached into the tent and took a pot, wide and flat bottomed and rounded at its sides. She pulled out the white flowers from the pot and carried it out of the town. All around trees lay or hung splintered from split trunks. The Red Crown King hadn't even arrived yet and the forest was already dead. Naya ran through the wreckage with only one small hope in her heart, and not for herself. The river was loud. It was swollen to the absolute height of the once deep banks rushing through reed and grass. Unwrapping her boy, Naya placed him in the flower pot and out of the wrap fell the Keteb, Book of Letters. She had to tell her story but in her haste she had no quill or ink. With a kiss, she sent them off.

Talia, concubine of the king, dipped her hands in the water and pulled out a flower pot, not yet knowing she was a mother.

Dreams after the Storm

The stars looked down on a father and his two sons as they walked through fields in the dark. The high grasses, now appearing indigo while bathed only in the sparkle of stars, waved lazily, feeling with the family the calm of the approaching day of rest, the labor of the week but a memory. They made for an oak alone among the grass. The father sat with his back to the trunk and his boys took seats at his feet.

A sigh took the breeze into the father's lungs and he looked up, returning the stars' gaze. "Tell me," he said aloud without looking down, "what did you learn at school this week?" Forgive me, he implored the stars, I cannot take a more active roll in their learning in this new world. He reached up and tugged on his dark beard, now flecked with grey prematurely, then finally looked down at his sons. Hopefully this ritual would connect them with the importance of learning he wished to instill even if he could not do the teaching himself.

"Mostly sums this week, Abu," his older boy replied, "they say they ready us for jobs in building, like you." The boy's thin face was serious, his eyes said he knew his father's pains.

These Westerners cared little for education, even the teachers, and scoff at the idea of learning for learning's sake. He wouldn't have to tell his son what he thought about school being treated as apprenticeship in this way. His oldest had always held himself apart from the locals. They held eye contact for a moment just to ensure they were on the same page, and both turned to the younger.

"We learned about the Red Crown King and his empire," he said, understanding it was his turn.

A cloud passed over the stars and a cold finger entered the wind's blow. "An important figure of history," his father responded stiffly. Too young to hear it all, he thought. The cloud moved on and the stars once again looked on. With a glance up the father continued, "An evil man for our people, as you may remember me saying."

The boy nodded slowly and furrowed his brow as if searching for words. "In school," he began slowly, and he too glanced at the stars above him, "They said he was God's chosen."

"His God," his father corrected, "you are looking at our Gods." He pointed at the stars above. "Our ancestors, each with their own star, their own light and wisdom shining on us through the ethereal ink. There," he pointed toward a bright pair far to the East, "Is Sheher, Father of our people, parentless, born from our holy book the Keteb and found in the river by his adopted mother Talia. She is there in the sky beside him."

"I remember," his son responded, the furrow in his brow ironing out as the comfort of familiarity returned. "He was born from the book in the boat. The words in the book were written with the babbles of the river, and the words then grew him from the stardust on the water."

His father nodded his approval, encouraging his son's memory. "Good. And there," his finger pointed directly upward to a cluster of stars, "is Rehen and his ships as our people finally left the Land of Lakes to escape the Red Crown Kingdom's oppression when he passed and the land turned to civil war under his sons."

"And that's how we came here." The encouragement was doing its work, his son sounded proud to know their history. The boy reached up at the sky for a moment as if he wished to pluck the star down to keep.

"Yes and no. We landed on this continent's far Eastern shores and had to keep moving inland to arrive here. But those later migrations have their own stories." The three of them stared at the stars, the youngest in wonder, the older two men reading the history in each shape and space drawn in light.

"What about that Red one?" his older son asked pointing again toward the East.

"Hasara's Star."

"We've read about him!" the older son said excitedly, "punished for his hubris."

"Shhh! Let me tell it." This would be the story of the night, their father decided. "It all started when he fell in love with one of the Red Crown King's Concubines..."

Hasara was a neighborhood messenger in the town Arienne the concubine had her apartments. He was often in and out of the apartments as they were nearly a neighborhood all by themselves, with all the staff that lived to serve the Lady. He would often rest in a room of the apartments that was almost never occupied, the library. There he would read and, as often, sleep.

She caught him, their first time meeting, as he slept. As he rubbed the sleep from his eyes he made to leave as quickly as possible but she called him back and demanded he explain himself.

"Why here?" Arienne asked.

"Lady," he replied. His hand reached up and into the hair on the back of his head as he tried to blink sleep from his eyes. The pause was expectant, but comfortable, she was more interested in a real reply than to put him in his place, he realized. He took a look around at the high window, suspending dust in a sunbeam drifting from the blue velvet upholstery to already dust caked book spines. "I read here."

She looked around as well as if she'd forgotten the function of the room until then. Books scattered all surfaces, it was quite unkempt. Hasara's doing, only he ever came here. "I've never been in here," She said, "I can't read."

Hasara was not surprised. Most couldn't. He'd only learned because he was one of Sheher's people, a culture centered around learning. Being one of the few common people who could read was what got him his job. If it were his world to pen, a concubine with all the resources in the world

available to her would have learned, but the apartments' Butler had told him he read her all of her letters.

It was a shame though, he thought. Gorgeous women should read. "Let me help you pick this place up," he said before thinking, then froze for just a second. A woman like this has never lifted a finger to clean, all her gold bracelets, her white robe immaculate, her hair twisted into ornate knots not a one loose. Then he made to pick up a book to feign casualness.

Her look conveyed exactly this thought as if it were one he'd shared, but then she too reached for a book.

"That one is good," he said pointedly eyeing the one she held before turning to the shelf to return his own.

"Good how, what does it say?"

He smiled with his back to her. "A series of poems lamenting the loss of simple village life for this city life, when The King conquered Dunsany." His hand froze in returning the book as he listened for her reply.

"I can understand it must have been horrible. My own people faced something similar, or so I'm told. But is poetry not meant to be beautiful? How can something so heartbreaking be made to sound so?"

Hasara let out a small sigh of triumph before replying, "Mournful words are often beautiful. I find words of homes lost and left especially so. My people faced these things too." He almost dared not look back while speaking. "It goes just here," he added, pointing to a spot on the shelf beside him. He watched her out of the corner of his eye as she slotted it in, the way she stood on tip toe despite it being well within reach, wanting to be eye level with the shelf she put it on.

There was a pull to remark on this but the room shushed Hasara, as libraries do. And so they continued for a while, quietly with little more than a "there," and hums until they began to glance over their shoulders at the doors and windows, fearful to be caught in this intimate act, courier and concubine. The dust layered on thicker, muffling, stifling with the closeness of the vast room until their glances at one another were fencing thrusts daring each other to lunge or show an opening to strike. More dangerous than fencing, felt Hasara, to be caught returning books with a Concubine of The King.

He couldn't bear it, but just as he were about to make his excuse and flee she spoke. "Would you read me some poetry, courier?"

The thrust landed, puncturing both the tension and the lungs. When he found his breath a moment later he said, "of course, my Lady." Then, "the next time we meet. I think I've shirked my responsibilities more than is wise for today." He bowed and exited, barely making it out alive.

He thought the whole way home, past the quarry, past the dump pit full of animal bones, broken pottery, ruined clothing, and the occasional body, why should he feel so scared at being caught talking to the Lady? Rumor said that the King had never come calling, and the country was littered with villages around concubine apartments forgotten by him. The King was a jealous man, self proclaimed, who had done his best to wipe out all ways of life that did not glorify him, but Hasara was a courier. The King would never know unless another courier wished, and Hasara would never believe one would do that to another. There was too much honor in the learned professions.

And they embarked, him teaching her to read and write. And as sailors set off with a prayer, Hasara set off with a recitation of the final grateful words in the Keteb, book of his people the Sheher.

The Ancestral Scribes said in final thanks to their people whom they'd shaped with their gift of language:

When I shaped the letters that made your minds, never in my ink

was contained the loveliness of these words in song, nor the delicate caress of a whisper. Not even in my dreams were the chimes of their use in jest, nor their strength to knit together souls.
For these gifts my people have given back to me,
never will my people be gone from this earth I've penned,
Even if they find themselves scattered and missing, my words will remain to shield them from the swords of all others, and they will find each other by my language and begin the binding anew.

The dust in the library was cleared and the sunbeams streamed in through the windows in full force, as did the moonbeams. Through waves and rocky pass and storm did he take her, guiding and instructing her to sail in the seas of story, to find the streams of sentence, and to harness the letters in her sails as wind. In time she began to wield the words. She read her own messages and wrote them. Indeed she came to run her own household. And in tandem did the Ancestral Scribes' unintended consequences they were so thankful for, too come to be.

Hasara began to write to her, writing as he never had before as if the spirit of his ancestors rested on his hand and the words that had shaped the world and mind had begun again the penning of its creation. His sentences took shapes his mind didn't readily know and were all the loveliest he had ever written until one day he could take it no longer.

"Lady," he said, as he always called her, "I feel the words I put to page flow freely from my heart in ways I cannot explain but by the hand of my ancestors holding my own as I use my pen. We have fulfilled their words and bound our souls together through teaching and learning and language. Allow me to live in this metaphor and spend my life with you."

It wasn't unexpected as the leanings of their teaching and learning had ever been in the direction of the binding of hearts. Her blush, therefore was one without shock.

"I have imagined this moment," she began, her countenance becoming ever more somber, "And in none of those imaginings did I respond how I know I must; I am pledged to another."

"The Red Crown King?" Hasara knew deep down it was something he would have to face. He had fooled himself that love would be enough.

"But how could you?" For the first time in months words failed him, "With everything... what he..."

Arienne tilted her head with a face of mild disappointment, as if she were the teacher and he the student who'd failed to grasp the lesson. "He has given me everything I have, funded me through all of my life. Without his gift of these apartments we would never have met. These books all are his."

It was an effort for Hasara not to raise his voice, something she'd never seen him, nor would see him do. "Only because his armies..."

Arienne silenced him with a hand. "I want you Hasara," She had never used his name, only ever Courier. "But if I try to bind myself to another without his leave, I will surely die. As it has been since I was taken as a child."

Hasara cast his eyes downward, "Then I must ask." But he knew the Red Crown King did not grant such things, especially not to those who defied him by bringing their culture forward into his world he had created. The Grandium, his public arena, awaited.

"This had better be important," the courier said to Hasara as they stood outside the King's private office. His voice was low to keep their words between couriers, to not float in through the open door. "His majesty is preparing for his next tour of healing."

The royal palace wasn't the place for his usual retorts about causing a hundred wounds to heal ten all in exchange for total devotion. This was a time to watch his usually quick tongue.

"I always have time for my subjects," came a gentle voice from within. The palace was all in red marble, the hall they occupied particularly dark. What it drank in light it must project in sound for the king to have heard.

The office was long and well lit by a skylight and windows all along one side. Carpets and tapestries softened the marble, bookshelves stood behind the desk at the back. And there he sat. A layered wave of emotion crashed over the shore of Hasara's nerves; fury and revulsion, awe and fear, a sudden urge to hide, but as the wave receded the sands of his resolve remained. For Arienne.

"I'm glad you've come to see me," the voice of the king was gentle and kind, his demeanor serene.

Hasara had been preparing himself for someone violent, he attempted to mask how this disarmed him with a polite, "Oh?"

"Of course," the king said, and Hasara believed him, "I am so rarely peaceably approached by Sheher's people."

"I'm sure you can understand why," Hasara allowed an edge of irony to boarder his response.

"Yes, and no," the king tilted his head to the side, "of course, but also, how can a people so interested in the answer to 'what hand of power writes history?' be so opposed to the given answer?"

The preparation Hasara had done, the hours of furious debate he had played and replayed in his mind, began to return. He had to remind himself why he had come. This visit was not for a theological battle, though both avenues felt equally doomed. "I wish to marry your concubine Arienne," he said trying to match the king's serenity.

The king smiled a sad smile almost as if he wished for such a thing as well. "I cannot allow this. You've already begun a process I cannot abide." There was no anger nor threat in his voice. "I do have a request of you, Hasara." He took a look around the room, out the window, to his bookshelves, to the skylight, at the walls that were painted with so much blood of the world.

Something stirred in Hasara then, grand purpose and unease.

"Write an account of your encounter with me today."

Hasara blinked, "An account? What would it tell people? This is merely a conversation."

The king laughed but for a second, yet the room filled with it, with a deep warmth like an embrace. "I will be going soon. People will not believe I was real. They'll say I was many in truth, a line of kings. You will tell them it is I and I alone who sat before you. Those who read all there is to learn about me should be able to get some truth."

Breathless and again taken where he was not expecting, Hasara hesitated just a moment. "My portrait would never be flattering, whatever your stated purpose, I would show what I see, what I know from the history of this place, of my people."

An understanding nod still smiling met this rebuke. "You underestimate the power of time and people's need for a kind greater power. I've brought continents of hovel-living savages into a civilized world, uplifted them. My own writings will suffice to tell them of the godly intent and my true character. Their reality of a life devoid of witches and child-drowning river spirits will suffice to convince them of my goodness. You will serve to give, from the point of view of one bitter conquered man yes, the truth of my existence. I cannot convince you it was all out of benevolence." His smile became pitying, "though I truly wish I could." He took a breath to let this linger, "but if you will not have it, perhaps others could."

His words broke the spell of his demeanor. His delivery could not mask them from being just what Hasara had built his disgusted rebuttals around his whole life. "I came only to ask for Arienne's

hand. I have been told that if you are not willing to grant it willingly, that by all the laws of the land that came even before you, I may request to fight for her.”

The pity on the king’s face grew and he pulled a pipe from a desk drawer. He spoke as he packed it. “Laws from before me are no more, and attempts to follow them shows only stubbornness and ignorance. But I may grant you this still, though there is another way.”

“Do tell, please.” Desperation entered Hasara’s voice for the first time.

“The Keteb says that the history of the world is written by the literate. That all great deeds are achieved by those who can pass on the stories. I must admit, before I settled after my conquering, I was unlettered. For all your high minds, you were conquered by someone who your book does not consider at all.” The king paused to light his pipe with his thumb, no trace of the sadness or pity remained. Only warmth, but it too had changed, now a warmth of strength and power, a slight static as if lightning were soon to strike charged the air around the desk.

The history of the world is written in language, Hasara thought, it is a metaphor for language giving us the ability to pass on stories, that great deeds are carried through this sort of memory. He misunderstands the very writings he claims dominance over. But before he could put a word in, the flame from the king’s hand had been flicked away, and with a puff he continued.

“Indeed I prove the falseness of your Ancestors’ words, for you are a defeated people, and did he not promise you never would be? The Keteb promises wisdom and sight to it’s followers, yet I took them unawares such that so few of you remain, and fewer books. See the truth in me, alive for three centuries now. There is no magic in this world but such that I grant. I will allow you Arienne on the condition that you admit my godhood in your account, burn all copies of your false Keteb, and use your scribal talents to write my doctrine. You will be as mine own son, and Arienne shall be yours.”

So much bubbled up in Hasara just then, but instead of voice it he adopted the sad but resolved demeanor the king had begun with. “I don’t wish to possess her, o’ king. I wish to spend my life with her.”

“They are one in the same.”

“You know my answer,” Hasara’s eyes were sad, his words heavy.

“Then I will see you in the Grandium.”

As he strapped on the armor that had been given to him, as thunder rolled outside, Hasara’s mind wandered. It fled the gladiatorial armory, fled the Grandium and far from the thousands of screaming citizens who came to see a display of their king’s power. His mind fled back into the library, among the dust and books, so different from the sand and dried blood that flecked the wooden table and stone walls around him. The armor was heavy, Hasara was no warrior, strong but not a killer or trained for battle. The sword felt unwieldy in his hand. Memories of guiding his love’s hand as she formed letters glided through his mind. He heard as if from far away the rush of rain and the wind howl as the king made a spectacle of his might. Even through the storm he could hear the roar of the crowd, but it was drowned out by the memories of Arienne’s whispers. Here at the end all memories felt both so present as if to be in the room with him, and so distant they may never have happened.

Under the stars a thousand years later, a youngest son asked his father, “Did he really think he could win, dad?”