The Dying Gods

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The Dying Gods

by

Julia Yates

Honors Thesis

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Deepest thanks to Murphy Fox and the Honors Scholars Program for allowing me the artistic and intellectual freedom to write a fantasy novel for my senior thesis in Political Philosophy. It has been the highlight of my stay here at Carroll. I am also indebted to my thesis committee, director Murphy Fox, and readers Dr. Jeff Morris and Dr. Tomas Graman, as well as my mother, Ati Yates, and my step-father Tim Drackert for reading this 200-page monster and lending their most insightful comments.
Title: The Dying Gods

Abstract: Part One of a fantasy series inspired by Plato, Eric Voegelin, and Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, among others.

A god is dead, murdered by his fellow gods. Driven by their new-found fear of death, the gods plunge their countries into war. Two young goat herders, Mosy and Nuse, find themselves in the thick of it. As war approaches, the two struggle with each other and with their own problems: Mosy is newly blind, the result of an encounter with a god, while Nuse wrestles with strange dreams and forgotten memories. With their help, Sol, the sun god, must uncover the mystery of the god’s death before heaven and earth are destroyed. For these two mortals sing the songs of the Palí, a trickster and a shape-shifter who dies in each of his forms before he is born again. Some say the Palí is false and does not exist outside the souls of his worshipers. Yet the Palí may prove realer than them all.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PROLOGUE: A God is Dead</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ONE:</td>
<td>The Night of the Sun</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TWO:</td>
<td>The Aeolian Chorus</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THREE:</td>
<td>The Tongueless Tongue</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOUR:</td>
<td>The Soul Thief</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIVE:</td>
<td>A False God’s War</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIX:</td>
<td>The Dying God</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
HIMEROS

The god ran as men do, inhaling dust, feet hammering the earth. Faceless clouds hung low and monolithic over the Thanecian Plain. He'd left pieces of himself behind, smoking acridly in the afternoon, now shining in the night like some distant city. His own sneeze might send the rest of him whistling off in different directions. As it was, his spirit threatened to break his ribcage with its trembling. They would find him soon, he knew, and he would be in no state to face them again. He ran on into the night.
PROLOGUE: Years Ago

A God is Dead

Dry yellow hills rolled around the ashes like ocean waves, obscuring vision and twisting sounds from where they came. It was the kind of place where Custer could find himself surrounded by several thousand Lakota, where even a god could be ambushed and cornered. The air twitched unpleasantly as Sol squatted to sniff the cold ash. Himeros’ remains, some said. But Sol did not smell death, and a god had never before died. He stood indecisively and then hurried away from the shadow of the hills and into the evening sun.

Sol flew awhile, high above the Thanecian Plain. His straw colored wings spanned some fifteen feet, but they were a fleeting vision, here from one angle, gone from the next. As he flew, zephyrs ruffled his feathers and stirred up the blond sparks that nestled in the down. Sol had never seen the zephyrs but he had always imagined them as medium sized dogs with wolfish ears and long hair. Indeed, some called them sundogs because of their apparent preference for Sol. But they had none of the loyalty of dogs, though usually they did as he asked.

He made a hissing whistle with his tongue and they flew to him with scents from all directions. Already a day and a night old, Himeros’ trail was weak and dispersed. Sol flew in circles until he realized that it was on the ground, not in the air—Himeros was a clever fugitive, or else a gravely wounded one. The trail meandered, and Sol had to pay constant attention lest he overstep it. Finally he landed and resigned himself to a hasty stride, even as he felt each moment wrench from him. The night came and wore on.
Sol was more hidden on the ground, at least. His wings were difficult to see when they were still, and invisible when he walked. The ambiguous colors of his cloak—somewhere between twilight and thunderhead blue, always changing—buried the rest of him in the night. His bright hair, in contrast, radiated down his back in wavy tails, nearly as coarse as his beard. In color it could have been yellowed white as well as bleached blond, and in general he looked too young to look so wise. In fact he was neither young nor very wise. He possessed several million years of experience and only some wisdom to show for it. His eyes were the inhuman color and texture of winter grass, but set beside his hair and wings they looked natural enough. His face resembled an old woodcut sun, laughing or frowning at the scene below with the same round face, sad eyes, and wide smile. But now Sol’s mouth grew small with uncertainty, and had been threatening to stick that way for the past few centuries.

A little after midnight, Himeros’ trail lead into a human band camped near a village. Sol stayed the zephyrs with one hand and walked invisibly among the sleeping humans, his step as light as settling dust. Himeros’ trail went as far as the central fire, where a few women slept. From there Sol could not find the trail again— not in the camp, the air, nor leading away in any direction. Sol’s sense of smell was considerably better than most gods, but it was nothing compared to the zephyrs. So reluctantly he sent a few zephyrs through, admonishing them to be as quiet as possible.

Zephyrs, however, are rarely quiet-- they do not bark, but they whistle and whine, howling past men’s ears, bringing sounds home from far off times and places, some welcome, some unwelcome. They were obedient to Sol’s request at first—tents merely shuddered at their passing, and men pulled blankets closer in their sleep. Then one of the
more wary dogs caught the attention of a zephyr who couldn’t help himself. The dog had just rested his head back on his paws when the zephyr snuck into his ear and blew. The dog leapt up and snapped. The zephyr danced away gleefully to blow into the other ear. The dog began barking furiously, and his companions soon joined in. Men burst out of tents, and the women by the fire rose groggily to their feet. Sol’s zephyrs began to howl, and wild ones blew in from the hills. Men huddled together mumbling, and after several tents blew down in opposite directions, they decided that a god had some divine business here and wished them to leave.

From a nearby hill, Sol accepted his error grimly. There were too many zephyrs to call back now, not with his whistle alone. But fearing they would lose any remaining scent of Himeros, he sent out his own wind. It swept through the camp forcefully, bringing the zephyrs back in droves to whimper at his feet. The men left quickly, looking over their shoulders at the suddenly silent camp.

The zephyrs brought Sol no trace of Himeros, and in exasperation he pushed past them to smell again for himself. A few tent stakes and some flattened grass—it all smelled emphatically human, the camp as well as the departing trail. Sol sat cross-legged in the dust and yanked on his hair. Gods did to attack other gods, back in the old days. At first they danced and scattered over the waves, pure laughing light; later they floated on the ocean, basking in the stars overhead. There they merrily debated the nature of reality, not needing words to speak. Now, lead by the Lethenai, the gods mostly collected and traded men like playing cards. There were rules. But Himeros would neither play the game nor stop interfering with their worship. Normally such a dispute would be settled by a war between countries. But Himeros had no country; he commanded no humans. As he’d told
Sol, he did not like cockfights and he did not like battles. But it was rumored that if a Himerian worship ever got to its feet, it would sweep through the nations and obliterate the Lethenian Pantheon. So yesterday afternoon the Lethenai had set out to kill Himeros.

Everyone had seen Himeros’ star flare bright and then fade as mortal, soulless stars did. Now Sol could find no proof that Himeros had survived beyond this human fire pit on the Thanecian Plain. Himeros was dead, the Lethenai claimed. Sol laughed. Such a statement was not even grammatically correct in the divine tongue.

The zephyrs dared not come near him and all was quiet. He felt confused and wide-eyed, like a night sentry whose struggles to stay awake make him jump at every sound, real or imagined. He wished he had not called the wind. Such doings are noticed, especially in Thanecia, on the plain where the goddess Thana had lead ten Lethenai against Himeros. The wind had also exhausted Sol, for his divine talents did not lie in sudden or convenient creation, but in the gradual arts of growth, healing, and maintaining, projects which took months, years, and centuries to complete. Neither was he skilled at self-defense.

A swift sweat chilled him in the night air, and he took a sudden disliking to the dark. *Something behind him*—he whirled around—*nothing there*. Night does not usually affect gods as it does humans. Gods have far superior night vision, and few creatures prowl the night which are not their children, however unruly they may seem. But at this time of the year and at this place on the earth, Sol’s star did not rise at night. He wouldn’t be able to see it during the day either, as the sun outshone it, but still his starlight would come, and with it his power. Even now, he could feel his star on the soles of his feet, radiating up through the other side of the earth, passing through root and rock to find him. But it was
not enough, not on this night when the idea of darkness had gained substance and preyed on his spirit.

*Himeros is dead,* his heart beat intelligibly.

_The gods are mortal._

_The gods are dying._ His heart stopped. _Trapped, small, earth-bound, the lingering human scent of the camp pushing into his nostrils, Lethenai somewhere near, Himeros' death close behind—was this what it was like to be mortal?_  

_The gods are dying._ Sol’s heart started again. He thrust himself off the ground and flew blindly, like a child trying to hurl himself under the covers before the lights are out.
Mosy slept warm with two sheep skins thrown over her and an enormous dog on her feet. His tail thumped on the bed as the house began to stir. Her father, Payas, stood in the doorway counting the sheep and goats bedded down outside. Their hut was set high up on the north face of the slopes cradling the village below. Payas looked away towards the east, where the village’s narrow valley opened up to a view of the dry plains in the distance. There lay the city of Thane. Beyond that the Ridge Back Mountains rose dark and heavy against the pale yellow dawn. All around them lay the Wooly Foots, the hills where Footish herders grazed their flocks. Toward the plains the Foots rose and fell like swells on the ocean: no crests, no ridges, no land marks. But they had weight, these hills, weight and expanse. Some were so broad their crowns had their own horizons, which offered little view or navigational advantage. Mosy knew the Foots as well as Payas did; she and her enterprising friends had helped more than a few lost travelers find their way out, for a fee.

“Mosy,” Payas said inevitably, “Should we split the flock today?”

As always, starting a conversation with her while she was trying to sleep. The dog’s wolfish ears swiveled towards his voice. Payas didn’t really want her opinion, probably; he was just trying to wake her up. She drew the blanket tighter.

“You could take the goats into the steeper ravines that way, and I’d stay with the sheep up top?” No response. “Orex,” he called. The dog leapt up from her legs and came to him, stepping on Mosy as he went. “Orex, shouldn’t you be out guarding the sheep?” Payas spoke in the gruff manner of a shepherd who expects no answer but wouldn’t be
surprised if there was, since after months alone on the range a dog did once make some remark to him.

“He’s too stupid,” Mosy mumbled. At her voice Orex bounded to the bedside and licked her face. She sat up and wiped her mouth with one hand while keeping Orex occupied with the other.

“Moraka’s wandered off,” Payas informed her.

“Alright,” Mosy said. Moraka, in his youth, had been a bummer—a kid they’d had to raise themselves after his mother died and no other doe would take him. They had hoped he might become a bellwether but after a childhood spent in their house, sleeping with the dogs and hand fed by humans, he distained the company of the flock. He usually grazed ten feet away from the other sheep, and occasionally tried to butt his way into their hut at night to sleep in his old corner.

Mosy stumbled out the door before any more conversation ensued. She had never been very capable of thought in the morning.

“The Sathens are here!” she shouted to Payas once she and Orex had pushed past the sheep at the door. The Sathen horse traders hadn’t come that summer, as they normally did.

“I know, I saw them. We’ll go down there tonight probably.”

The goat was not in sight, so Mosy took the opportunity to wet her hands in the frosty grass and wipe her eyes. She stood on one foot to pick the grass out of a sore she had on the other, and then put her sandals on. She was small for her age, and the crook towered over her. Like most herders, she wore a knee-length hand-beaten felt jacket and a brimmed hat of stiffer but otherwise similar material. Beneath that she wore baggy riding
trousers, like the Sathen women wore, though in the entire villager there were only two horses and one donkey. She'd traded rabbits and a few knitted hats for them last summer. She had dark eyes and a swarthy complexion, like most of the Footish peoples, and her hair was dark brown. It came down to her shoulders in unruly waves, dull with split ends and frizz. The wind whipped the ends into her eyes and she jammed on her hat to keep them in place.

Little wonder the goat wasn't in the yellow fields the summer had left them. She continued up towards the mountains, where the hills merged into steep ravines which ran up to the forest to catch the snow melt. Here the land was more featured. Huge boulders and rocky towers grew from the earth like dragons rising from the sea. Tough old trees grew too, juniper and creeping cedar. The mountain forest began softly with aspen and birch growing in the snow melt. Higher up, a springy mat of pine cones and needles overcame the grass. Gone was the glass green flicker of the sun through the leaves. It was cozier here; darker one might say. The sun fell in triangles between the sap scented shadows of the pines. Those lanky young forests eventually gave way to old growth ponderosa, all grown so wide that black cracks broke through the orange jigsaw puzzle of their bark. Then came the Woolies proper, big mountains whose evening shadows reached all the way to the Ridge Back mountains across the plains to the east. Gods lived there, it was said, and as far as Mosy knew, the range extended to the ends of the earth, or perhaps at least to the sea.

Mosy headed for the grove next to their house, first through the poplars where the sheep had already grazed, and then into the dense underbrush. She clucked as she did when she fed the animals. She didn't actually have anything to give him, but he would
get to graze soon enough. Her own stomach growled and when something rustled to her left, she thought she might be able to go home for breakfast. But instead of the goat she saw the long ears of a hare, frozen in a bush fifteen strides away. She grabbed Orex by the collar and pinned him between her knees—he was a terrible hunter and would more likely scare it off than catch it. She drew her sling out and felt around on the ground for a suitable stone. Orex hadn’t seen or smelled the rabbit yet and though she’d bent down so he could lick her face. She couldn’t find a good stone on such short notice—normally her pockets were full, but she had emptied them before bed. So without wasting any more time she took one of the four miniature Stones of Truth from a pouch at her waist. She twirled the sling around her head, mumbling something about forgiveness from Thana for using the stone, and from the Palí in case he was disguised as the rabbit. Then out of the corner of her eye, far in the distance, she saw a herd of pure white cattle and a flash of blue—perhaps someone’s cloak. Then Moraka crashed through the brush next to the rabbit. The rabbit bolted. Orex escaped Mosy, nearly knocking her over, and tore after in pursuit. The stone flew off wildly.

Mosy cursed. Just as well, really. When she was younger she’d caught several rabbits in box traps, but she’d never known what to do with them once they were staring at her, eyes big and round. Once she’d tied a turnip to a stick propping up a heavy stone, but it had only injured the rabbit. She’d come home bloody and wide-eyed like she’d just killed a bear. She’d enjoyed its meat and the warmth of its fur, but she only used arrows and slings after that; they were a quicker kill.

Mosy poked through the bush half-heartedly, looking for the stone. She would have to find another one before the Quartzema, when everyone touched their stones to the Four
Stones of Truth at the edge of the village. Supposedly they were from Thane, and indeed she sometimes had trouble matching the color. But they were such a nice shape for throwing.

At the forest edge, Mosy looked into the distance for something blue and white, but she couldn’t remember what. By the next moment she’d forgotten about it all together. Some things were like that. She started home, driving Moraka before her. Orex bounded after, empty mouthed.

By late morning, Mosy and Payas had already eaten and walked a few hours with the flock. There was enough grass here to occupy the flock for a time, and now it was time for hot drinks. Mosy chewed on a wild onion green and closed her eyes against the smoke from the fire Payas was trying to start. She took a flute from her cloak and blew a few notes absently, but quickly put her hands back under her cloak.

“Too cold for ya?” Payas asked. His cloak was thrown back out of the way of the smoldering twigs, exposing his arms to the morning chill.

“So are you,” she retorted, nodding to the hair on his arms, which stood straight up. She drew her knees to her chest and hid her face under her hat brim. Orex, who sat almost as tall as she, leaned against her, his long ear hairs blowing and his eyes closed to sleepy slits. When she looked out again Payas had managed a small spitting blaze, and she closed her eyes again with pleasure. She sat up in cross-legged position.

This was Orex’s cue to elbow his enormous frame on her undersized lap. Today he managed to stretch his belly out on her knees, his head dangling off one side and his hind legs on the other. He pawed her if she stopped ruffling his coat and picking off fleas.
Later Payas would yell at him to stop being a lap dog and start guarding the sheep. Orex would then rest his head (and only his head) on Payas’ knee to get his ears rubbed.

They had other dogs anyway, who were more attentive to the sheep. Orex had shown up at their fireside when he was already a few years old, too old to be properly trained, or perhaps just too silly. But Mosy had fed him scraps—she was only seven at the time—and he’d stuck around until no one remembered just when he’d received permission to sleep on Mosy’s bed, or when Payas had first struck up a conversation. Mostly Orex sat around begging for attention or food—hence his name, which meant desire.

By now the fire burnt steadily and the sun had made a late rise from behind the clouds. Once Orex was bothering Payas instead of her, Mosy took out her pipes and began playing a traditional hymn to Thana. Her variations, noted Payas, were beginning to have a wobbling life of their own. He stifled his pride. Traditionals were to be played exactly as they had been composed, so as to stay as close as possible to the event they commemorated—for instance Thana’s gift of the Four Stones of Truths, or her triumphant battle in the sky with the ancient gods. A beautiful idea, really, if a bit sentimental. Nevertheless, Payas took a small guitar from his bag and played along with Mosy, mainly on the lowest string. He caught up with her variations skillfully until she winked at him—a habit she’d picked up from him, formerly used inappropriately or at random, as precocious children often do. But this time the wink preceded a drastic diversion from the melody which no accompanist could be expected to follow.

“That was different,” Mosy said afterwards.

“Don’t do that.” Payas said flatly. “Not on a traditional.”

“If you had droned it might have worked.”
He shook his head. “There are plenty of other songs besides traditionals for you to massacre or improve, which ever you like.”

“But no one is here now...”

“But I don’t trust you when they are, so there’s no need for you to get in the habit. First of all—stop fingering when I’m talking to you.”

“Sorry.” She sat on her hands.

“First of all, you don’t want to make it so different that no one can follow you. That’s just rude.”

“Sorry,” she said sincerely, though she had to a stifle a chuckle.

“No one can sing along if we go off that far.”

“Hardly anyone in the village sings along anymore...” She was not old enough to remember when they did, but she’d heard the complaint from Payas enough times to grumble it herself. The villagers actually did sing, just not as loud as the herders.

Payas looked irritated with her for a moment and then leaned closer. “But the city people are even worse—“ he dropped his voice to a whisper, “The city people always know when it’s wrong.”

Mosy stared at him silently. She couldn’t tell if he was serious. Finally she gave her hat an unnecessary adjustment and said, “Well then. How about a hilltop song?”

Payas looked down and struck a chord. The song was not a traditional, but one of the songs herders played deep in the range around hilltop bonfires. It was wild, the kind that frightened the feet into dance. Mosy joined in with a crying lyric, positively chilling in her young voice. Prudently, they stopped the song just short of the part which called the great shapeshifter, the Pali, to join them.
“How come no one else in the village is worried about the city people?” Mosy asked abruptly when they stopped.

"Because they aren’t musicians."

Mosy thought about this for a moment and dismissed it for the non-answer it was.

“How come city people never like anything new?”

“Because they aren’t musicians.”

“Weren’t the traditionals new once?”

“They came from the womb old and tired.” He looked away at the animals. He sounded tired enough himself. It was a saying usually applied to pious elders. To him the traditionals were in fact rather new—he had only started hearing them some fifteen years ago when he’d come back to Thanecia after his traveling years. He heard neither new songs nor ancient songs now, except on the hillsides, where the herd of old and new. The Footish people—and particularly the herd of old and new. The Footish people—and particularly the herd—had always dragged their feet when it came to city things.

Mosy looked down her pipes and blew lightly to herself, trying to reclaim the idea she’d been fingering earlier. Like catching minnows, Payas always said.

*

Sol whistle-hissed and the zephyrs swooped down, blowing at the heels of his cattle. The steers and cows were small and cream colored with hints of pale reddish gold, while the calves were snow white and frisky. The latter snapped their tails at the zephyrs and jostled each other, and the adults bore it with good-natured patience. They followed Sol wherever he led them; the zephyrs only hurried them up a bit. He used to fly the herd
where they needed to go if he had the energy, or else grew grass wherever they were. But he’d gotten good at this thing, walking; it gave him a certain sense of progress, of something accomplished. It made him tired enough to sleep through the night, and the cattle needed the exercise anyway.

Sol was just like everyone else really. No one liked Himeros’ death, and all the gods were a bit restless on their feet and sleepless in their beds. Lethenai threw themselves into religious wars, asserting their divinity with abandon. Sol herded cattle. Relatively speaking, cattle driving was a fairly harmless diversion, although trespassing through foreign lands had its dangers. In addition to attacking other countries, gods now attacked each other with startling regularity. Mostly fights occurred between individuals, but some Lethenai periodically banded together to hunt, intimidate, and capture non-Lethenai such as Sol. They hadn’t claimed to have killed any more gods besides Himeros, although there were a few gods who had not been seen for quite some time. Sol had had a few brushes with the Lethenai himself and now he was traveling through Thanecia again, Thana’s country. Thana had always been territorial, and now she led the most powerful faction of the Lethenai, the Ten, composed of the ten gods who had murdered Himeros.

Sol had taken the risk because he had heard from a tree that a member of a Sathen trader’s caravan spoke Sigê, the old Tongueless Tongue. Gods no longer spoke it because it was inconvenient, and they’d taken away mankind’s ability to speak it long ago. But Himeros, who had always delighted in breaking rules, had taught his Himerians to speak it. And talking to Himerians was Sol’s other hobby. He didn’t know why. Maybe for old time’s sake, or maybe because of the prophesies, which he didn’t believe in. Himerians
and devout Thanecians alike said that a successor to Himeros would rise—*He will speak in all tongues, he will speak without a tongue; he will bring sorrowful news of times long gone, joyful memory of things yet to be. and most frighteningly, he will turn men to gods and gods to men.* Understandably, the Thanecians viewed him rather apocalyptically. Sol didn’t like it much himself. The Himerians thought the successor might be Himeros himself, or else one of themselves. So it didn’t hurt, Sol figured, to keep track of the Himerians.

Sol had followed the Sathen caravan for several months without finding a single Himerian trader. And now, he discovered he’d lost one of his calves. He didn’t yell at the zephyrs; it was his own fault really. He’d given them too much to do—sniff for Lethenai, sniff for humans, and herd the cattle. The calf had probably strayed behind unnoticed, perhaps to investigate some enticing bit of greenery. Then he’d looked up and found that his grazing companions no longer breathed warmly around him; all they’d left behind were sweet smelling piles of manure. Sol chuckled. The cattle, like Sol himself, were not so much invisible to mortal eyes as they were inconspicuous and forgettable—the few who noticed them at all would forget them soon after. But the calves were inexperienced in this art, and when they strayed off they would find themselves suddenly alone. His fellows might only be only a few strides off, but the calf, having mortal eyes himself, would forget where they were. In his fear and without the help of the herd, the calf himself would soon become visible.

Sol left the cattle and flew with a few zephyrs back the way they’d come. He found the calf’s trail a five hours’ walk behind; the calf must have wandered off sometime after noon. From there the calf wandered into the forest, looking for crisp forest plants no
doubt. Sol tracked him through the poplars as the forest grew thicker, darker, and less edible. Men had passed by sometime earlier on horses, Sathens most likely. The calf’s trail fled before theirs. The forest turned to pine too thick to fly through and Sol slowed to a walk. He smelled blood before he saw the black spots on the amber pine needles. He clenched his jaw and strode swiftly on until he reached a small deserted clearing. The calf’s hooves had gashed the pine needle floor down to the black earth beneath. The zephyrs echoed the calf’s bawls. Sol smelled death.

The Sathen hunters had hewed off branches from nearby trees to make a sledge. Their trail of broken plants and scratched earth lead towards the camp. Sol cursed. He had hoped to catch the killers red handed and scare the living daylights out of them, preferably before they’d actually killed the calf. Somewhere deep down he supposed he’d wanted to get the calf away from them before they could cook it. But now he didn’t feel like catching up with them; really, it served them right. He headed back towards the herd to wait.

*  

Payas, Mosy, Orex, and a small entourage of their fellow herders arrived at the Sathen trader’s camp late that afternoon. Aias—whom villagers and herders looked to as leader—had already welcomed the traders earlier in the day, as was his duty as guest-friend to Momos, the leader of this band. But in trading, Payas always represented the village with Sathens because though both parties spoke Mesmé, the lingua franca of the day, Payas spoke Sathen, which he’d learned during his years as a traveling musician. This gave Payas advantages at the bargaining table, though not as much as it used to ten
years back, before the traders found out that he spoke it.

Usually the Sathens came during the summer to trade salt for grazing rights, meat, and wool goods. It was widely known but little discussed that the traders obtained their horses by less than honorable and sometimes violent means. So although the shepherds were glad to have the salt—vital to the health of their animals—they were always relieved when the traders left for Thane. Now it was fall, by which time the traders should already be headed back home, their horses sold. Yet here they were, with a full herd of warhorses. Looking around him, Payas saw they were suffering from the same drought—everyone looked wan and driven, particularly the horses. They wouldn’t be able to sell them in Thane like that; that’s why they’d come here to graze. If they wanted to get home before winter, they’d be in a hurry unless they planned to winter here. In any case this might make them more desperate at the bargaining table, but then the shepherds had less to give this year, and the Sathen group was larger. Their men looked more toughened than weakened by hard times.

Their hunters had just returned, dragging something on a makeshift sledge. The traders’ wives and children crowded around the kill in such excitement that they hardly noticed the arrival of the Footish delegation. Even Payas, with his single-minded concern for his own people, was happy for them. He smiled at a Momos, trying to catch his attention. Momos raised his hand in greeting, with a big trader’s grin. Then his face fell as he stood on his tiptoes to see what the hunters had brought. He spoke with the hunters and then the women bore the carcass away, blocking Payas’ view with their bodies.

The leader came up, rubbing his hands together. “Sorry to keep you waiting.” He cleared his throat. “How’ve you been?”
“Well, it looks like you did good on the hunt!” Payas said, clapping him on the back.

“Yes, we were lucky. Hasn’t been much game.”

“Is it a nice one?”

“A nice what?”

“Well I don’t know, what is it? A buck or a cow?”

“A cow.” Momos said shortly.

Payas looked over at it again, and this time caught a glimpse of a white hoof sticking out from among the women bearing it away. He laughed. “That’s a big hoof for a deer. Looks like a cow to me.”

“That’s what I said.”

Now Payas really laughed. “I see. No don’t worry, you didn’t poach one of ours. We only have sheep and goats.”

“Oh, not that,” the trader laughed uneasily, which is exactly the way Payas preferred his traders to laugh. “No, no, the hunters said they killed it far from your village—not the slightest chance, they said.”

“Shot it in the forest before they saw what it was?” Payas said with an understanding grin. “There’s no one for miles that keeps cattle here anyway. Owners must have long moved on.”

“Well you’d have to ask the hunters, I mean, I don’t actually know myself—”

“Come now, invite us to you hearth so we can talk,” Payas said, slapping him on the back again and steering him in the direction of the fire.

“Yes of course,” Momos said, regaining his trader’s confidence. “We’ll feast you on a stranger’s cow, then. Veal I think it is.” He guffawed.
So the Footish herders sat with the traders and talked about nothing while they waited for the traders’ women to butcher and cook the meat. By the time the talk had turned to trade, the meat was on the fire, and the sun was down.

Across from the men, the meat hissed and spat its juices at the two women tending it.

“What an odd piece of meat!” one remarked to the other.

“And a strange animal-- did you see its hide?”

“So white it shines! Almost glows.”

“Do you think it might be—I mean you don’t believe those old stories about the cattle of the sun...? And what happens if you eat them...?”

“Oh don’t be ridiculous.” The woman poked at it with a stick and the meat popped so loud she jumped. “Maybe we should give a piece to a dog or something.”

“Just to see...”

“I’m sure its fine.”

“But just to be safe.”

Predictably, Orex was the nearest dog around and without much coaxing he polished off a chunk of leg meat. The women watched him closely, and he wagged his tail and cocked his head, salivating for more. So the women laughed.

Then the meat began to make sounds. The hiss of escaping steam turned into a high wine, which gargled into a loud groan. Everyone fell silent. Then the meat shivered and spasmed until it knocked itself off the spit. When it hit the fire, it screamed and scrambled to its scorched feet. Then it ran headless and half-cooked from the camp. The hide slithered close behind; the head rolled after. Orex’s eyes went wide and then he bolted off in pursuit. Mosy had frozen in disbelief at the meat, but then she tore after her
dog, shouting at the top of her lungs.

As Sol neared the forest edge where his cattle waited, the air began to hum. A single zephyr rushed around his head at increasing speed until he grabbed its tail. It melted from his hands but held still in front of him. He smelled the sweat and blood of a panicked herd of cattle and something doggy. Zephyrs normally enjoyed marauding packs of dogs, but then zephyrs were often cowardly, and Sol was not immediately concerned for his own welfare. But as soon as he stepped out of the thick of the forest, another zephyr screamed into him, carrying the sent of ozone. There were clouds in the sky, but this was not the smell of a thunderstorm. It was the smell of a nix, a cloak which gods used to make themselves invisible to other gods, even to Sol, the Great Sun-mover, the Source of all Sight, as men called him. Made from the stuff of black holes, nixes were rare. As far as he knew the Lethenai had all of them; they collected such articles. But though a nix might deceive his eyes, it could not fool his nose: beneath the ozone Sol smelled two Lethenai.

Sol stumbled backwards a few paces and then broke into a run. He raised his wings and flew towards the forest close to the ground, gathering all the stray bits of power his cattle kept for him. Light of blinding and revealing gathered behind his eyes; destruction and defense rose in his lungs. The breath of a goddess shot towards him from behind, filled with burning stars. He turned and opened his eyes wide.

Mosy ran in the dark until the hills rose against her and bile tickled her throat. She stopped on the crest of a hill, just in time to see Orex lunge into the meat’s haunch. It
screamed and tumbled over, where Orex took a nip at its stomach. Mosy yelled again, but fell into a coughing fit and had to lean on her knees. She half ran, half fell down the hill, and threw herself on Orex. This gave the calf a chance to partially reunite with its head and hide. It took a few steps towards her with dazed eyes. “Run!” she yelled, her voice harsh. The animal bleated like a sheep and ran with surprising energy over the next hill. Orex grinned bloodily at Mosy and licked her face once before tearing away from her again. She picked herself up again and followed the brown trail of blood—or possibly marinade—up the next hill, dimly aware of someone calling her name from far away.

Mosy reached the top of the hill in time to see Orex disappear in mid-stride. She stopped, nearly sobbing with fear and exhaustion, but decided her eyes must have deceived her. She ran on until she suddenly found herself at the edge of a herd of cattle. They stamped and the whites of their eyes glinted. Above the wind rushing in her ears she heard Orex’s frenzied barking. She called to him but he didn’t recognize her as he had just before. He stared though her wildly and barked, spitting foam. She called again, pleading with him. A few cattle burst into a nervous trot around her, nearly running her over. Orex bolted towards the forest, and Mosy ran too, just as the cattle began to synchronize their panic into a stampede.

The wind howled and rushed around her without direction. Crisp shadows of the trees leapt towards her as a brilliant light from the forest swallowed up her sight of Orex. Her eyes narrowed of their own accord, but through her lashes she stared on entranced, even as she felt the light pierce the corneas of each eye, slip through the irises, and burn the blackest part of her retinas. It shot through the nerves beyond and seeped into her soul. Her lids shut, each squeezing out one tear—a psychosomatic reaction of spirit and tear
ducts to such radiance as mortals were never meant to see. On her lids she saw a branched network of red over yellow. The background faded to black and depthless shapes pulsated disturbingly in dark neon: blue and orange, yellow and purple, red and green. She felt faint, like she’d gotten up too quickly from a nap, and she put out a hand to steady herself. Then the last of the blood rushed from her head to her feet and she went down.

*

Sol stood propped up against a boulder in the field, breathing hard. The zephyrs had fled. He leaned his head back against the stone so he could take a sweeping look at the whole bright sky. It was empty, even of the stars, who had shut their eyes against his light. He’d seen the goddess behind the nix; it was Thana. To men she was the goddess of lullabies, peace, and death; the subject of a militant cult rapidly spreading beyond the Thanecian border. To immortals she was the lovely goddess of wise violet eyes and dark rippled hair streaked with grey. Grave and secretive, she was the most powerful and most feared god in the Lethenian Pantheon, the goddess who’d brought mortal dread into the divine world. Aided by the Ten—her accomplices in the murder of Himeros—she dominated the Lesser Lethenai, and she guarded her land of Thanecia with the territorial fierceness of bear. Sol had known that, but out here he hadn’t thought she would be so sensitive; there was no other country nearby, no border to guard, just the mountains.

The second god, whom he’d smelled but not seen, was also a member of the Ten: Lesath of the Desert— the secretive, charming, and occasionally kind god of prosperity and the country of Sath. He’d smelled Lesath two weeks ago, and now he wondered if the
god had been following him all this time, perhaps from a distance too great even for the zephyr’s noses.

Sol raised his wings to assess the damage. Thana’s star-filled breath had singed the flying feathers off one side and most of the other. It would take months to grow them back to flying capacity. He cursed. Thana’s vision would return much sooner—within the hour he guessed, since she was on her own land. She wouldn’t come back before then, and Lesath wouldn’t venture forward until Sol’s light had faded. They knew he was too injured to flee very far; they could take their time. Just as Thana kept power in her land and worshippers, Sol kept power in his cattle, but not enough to heal his wings. He’d already drawn the last of it into his lungs, where he held it like smoke. It burned and made him light-headed. He patted his chest with one finger as though he had an amulet there. He’d never held this much power at one time.

Now he had only to wait. Out of loneliness and habit more than anything, he called softly to his cattle, whose stampede had been slowed and scattered by the hills. Nothing happened for awhile, but then one by one they stumbled back, heads down, mouths shining with spittle. A calf mewed softly, and squatted awkwardly to lick the wound on his quivering flank. He moaned at Sol’s touch, but allowed him to examine the seam of blood which ran from his bowls to his ears. Where a butcher would cut the skin off, Sol thought as a whiff of humanity reached his nose. Sol pinched the skin; it lifted easily as he had expected. The calf cried piteously. The cattle were not immortal, but after generations of proximity to the Sun God they had learned a few tricks of their own. This was one of them. The wound would heal itself eventually, and Sol needed to save his strength, so he only stroked the calf’s ears until it fell asleep, still standing.
Sol pushed himself up from the rock and walked among the rest of the herd, escorted officiously by a few zephyrs. He found no more casualties until he tripped over Mosy. She was not of the traders, who smelled of iron, smoke, and spices among other more elusive and sometimes offensive scents. She smelled of grass, goats, and dogs. Why she was here he had no idea. An underage cattle rustler? In any case, she must have been too near. Humans could be killed by a glimpse of full divine glory—in order to reveal the Lethenai, Sol had revealed himself, shining his own natural light into the darkness. He sighed. Human lives were so short already. But then, whether one died at the age of fourteen or forty seemed a small difference; it was short either way. Himeros wouldn’t have liked that statement, Sol thought suddenly. He checked the girl’s pulse hastily; he didn’t even know if she was dead. He felt nothing for a moment, and began jabbing more urgently between her neck and her jaw. She arched her back slightly and made a small sound. He snatched his hand back and stroked her forehead nervously. Humans always set him on edge.

In the distance he heard men shouting something over and over again. Her name, he realized after a moment. He lifted one of her eyelids long enough to see that the eye was straw colored like his own. But her eyes had the smooth texture of brown eyes, whereas his eyes were torn and tattered as though they were blue. It wasn’t her natural color; it was the effect of what she’d seen. She would be blind. And she might die yet. Guilty bile rose in his throat. Such a short life not to see it, Himeros would say. Sol could not restore her sight in this instant, even in normal conditions. If he tried he might overdraw his power and go into a coma for a few years. And a proper defense against Thana would be out of the question. But if he could just get the process started, she might live and regain
her sight in a few years, or even in a few months if she was lucky. Himeros would have
done it, but look what happened to him. Sol’s hands went clammy with indecision. What
could one really see anyway, in such a short life?

With mounting irritation, Payas called Mosy’s name long after his voice had gone
hoarse. Finally Roron and Euenos, his childhood buddies, forcibly helped him to sit down
on the grass beside the forest before he did his voice permanent damage. He was, after
all, their best musician.

“His only child, see,” said Roron to Momos and a few other Sathens who’d come to
help.

“And the wife dead giving birth to her,” said another.

“The Pali keep her.”

“And Thana,” murmured Euenos absently. He was the village cleric.

“Amymone...Amy we called her. Brought her back from his travels,” said Roron.

“Named Mosy after her—‘Hē Mnemosyne tēs ’Amymonēs’ is her full name you know.”

“Memory of Amymone,” Euenos translated for the two traders.

“You shepherds give such long names to such little people,” said Momos, though not
unkindly.

“We call her Mosy for short.”

Some distance off, Payas sat on the ground. He was not the sort to go into hysterics;
he’d merely succumbed momentarily to the oxygen deprived craziness one gets from
running up and down steep hills. But now that he’d caught his breath and his mind was
clearing, the true madness of reality set in. His daughter had disappeared. Disappeared
into a night where the sun rose and set when you least expected and beef steaks ran free. And where great dripping rain clouds rolled towards them after a hopelessly dry summer had already decimated the crops and pasture. Payas laughed.

The hill before him glowed as though the sun had set just behind it, and a second night overtook them. As Payas stared into the calming emptiness, a hooded figure materialized in the way that pitch blackness conspires with the eyes to call forth substance. The man came directly out of death, they would say, carrying something back in his arms. He wore a wine-dark cloak with orange and yellow robes beneath, looking a bit like a pitcher of sangría. He walked unhesitatingly past the shepherds and traders towards Payas, who stumbled to his feet to meet him half way.

“This is yours,” the stranger said.

Payas took the limp form into his arms. Mosy was small, but she suddenly seemed too heavy to bear. He eased her onto the ground, his face ashen and hard.

“She’s not dead or anything,” Sol said uncomfortably. “She’ll wake in a day or so…”

Payas looked up in surprise and then looked down, swallowing convulsively. The man was sobbing, Sol realized, but he hid it well. Sol crouched beside Payas and tucked in a corner of Mosy’s cloak where it had fallen. “She won’t be able to see anything, though, for months, even years…” he said reluctantly, “and she’ll be weak for awhile…”

Payas nodded quickly. “Thank you.” A giddy smile spread across his face.

The other men stood in a group twenty feet away whispering to each other. “Must be a god.”

“But he’s got no wings!”

“They fold up real small when they’re on the ground, don’t you know.”
“But a god that speaks Mesmé with that Footish accent of yours?” exclaimed Momos.

“Accent? He has no accent,” said a shepherd.

“It’s you who has an accent!” said another to the trader.

“I don’t have an acce--”

Sol stood and glanced across at them. They lowered their eyes demurely. He raised a wing slightly, like a cocked eyebrow. They started. “Don’t kill anymore of my cattle,” he said in a trader’s accent. Then he walked back into the forest, stoking the fire in his lungs, readying himself as best he could.

*

Thana circled far above, hunting. She knew Sol was there, somewhere, but she couldn’t see well enough to find him. She would have blasted the whole area, but Lesath was below her, in her way. Evidently he was also looking for Sol, though she did not know why. She would have liked to give him the same blast she intended for Sol, for Lesath too trespassing in the touchy region of the Wooly Foots. But she couldn’t afford to lose his allegiance, not now with Wasat and the Lesser Lethenai gnashing their teeth again. She waited.

Fifteen minutes snuck by her in the unnaturally warm air, and the light faded until the night grew darker than the way it had begun. Her night vision was ruined and a cloud had covered the moon. She couldn’t tell the difference between cows and boulders, whose whiteness stood out in the dark. She said Lesath’s name once, in a loud imperious whisper.

Sol and Lesath heard her at the same moment. The zephyrs who had been roaring into
Thana’s ears turned away from her in unison, leaving an eerie quiet. Then all at once Sol breathed his power out and Lesath shot upwards into Thana’s side. She fumbled her power and Lesath knocked her away from the full force of a squall bearing down, reeking metallically of Sol’s power. The air was compressed into piercing rods, and the space between stretched to a sucking vacuum. Its wake tore through them like pins and needles, and dragged them ruthlessly to the ends of the earth and beyond, severing air from their lungs and the skin from their cheeks. They clung to each other with their remaining strength until finally it left them to spin uncontrollably into several more miles of night.

Sol fluttered to the ground as the wind left his lips. He broke the fall partially with one hand, and then rolled out on the forest floor unconscious. It began to rain.
Himeros closed his eyes as he ran across the Thanecian Plain. Light. Light so bright it would kill a man. He gazed until he could see nothing else, not even himself. He was a part of it, as he’d always been. Except now it was afternoon orange instead of white. It flickered. He looked over his shoulder, face cramped with fear. Light, as it should be, but yes, it was flickering. He turned in place and saw nothing but light. But emptiness crept behind him; it turned as he turned, and kept just out of his sight while it preyed on his soul. He opened his eyes. He ran on into the night.

Nuse woke considerably cleaner, though not particularly glad of it. In exchange for a bath, the rain had taken his sleep and warmth from him, and muddied his blankets. He resented briefly it with a stubbornness that came from somewhere beyond his waking moments. Its familiarity flashed through him—*the way he held the blanket, the dampness of the air, the urgency of the flickering sun, and the clouds running past*—and then, as it always did, the feeling melted away again as though it had never been. Nuse shook his head and folded the blanket over his arm. He had dreams of walking through fire and intense heat, darkness close behind. He didn’t pay attention to his dreams.

A little ways from camp, he spread the blanket on a patch of grass which had kept the earth from becoming mud. Momos was still asleep, which accounted for Nuse’s own late morning rise. Normally he startled up like a deer as soon as Momos stirred. Nuse scurried to the camp’s central cooking fire and began heating Momos’ water for breakfast. The dogs flocked to him as they always did, yapping about the bugs in the grass and trying to
convince him they were hungrier than he was. But he didn’t have anything for them and if he did he would eat it himself. The women at the fire did not chatter as they usually did, however. They were worried about the calf last night, the god the shepherds claimed to have seen, and the furies that had haunted the camp since they’d left Sath. Nuse had seen stranger things. A rock had once bitten him and the wind often snuffled warmly in his ear. Bald white faces flashed just beneath the surface of muddy pools, eyes closed, brows furrowed. He saw people in crowds that no one else did, and just a few weeks ago a blue cloaked spirit had stalked through the camp at dusk. But last night when the calf jumped up from the spit, Nuse saw what he’d never seen before—everyone around the fire jumped up; they had seen the same as he. Before he’d always assumed he was dreaming when he saw such things. Now he no longer knew.

Bubbles laced the inside of the cooking pot by the time Momos came to the fire. Momos was a hefty man who’d learned how to ride before walk. His bowlegged gait, Nuse had always privately remarked, resembled that of a short legged bird that had to move its whole torso around with each step.

“Almost ready,” Nuse said when Momos’ shadow fell on him. Momos looked at him oddly—Nuse rarely said anything to him. He sat down and Nuse poured the water over the ground sun cloak roots and set it before Momos with a minor splash.

“Jittery today, isn’t he?” Momos said to no one in particular. Nuse was a good slave, but Momos was wary of him; slaves became unpredictable when they reached this age.

No, he did not feel jittery, Nuse thought as he stared into the other pot full of bubbling aven wheat. It was something else. Normally he moved about his work with a speed calculated to be exactly as fast as necessary. He wasn’t like the newer slaves—pirate
fare—who ran about anxious with fear, knocking things over. And he wasn’t as sullen as they eventually grew to be. No, Nuse glided through life with as few thoughts as possible; he moved with calmness and tranquility; he knew what could be avoided and what had to be borne.

But it got harder each year. He was growing, he supposed. Though his characteristic quietness originally arose from a lack of things to say, now he only maintained it out of habit. He didn’t know it, but he was dying to talk to someone. He had a thousand jokes running around in his head, and even a few opinions. He did his best to keep them down.

So he was “jittery”—or whatever it was—in lieu of speaking. Jittery and hungry.

That morning the Footish people from the village came to camp again, and Nuse could tell they were going to be difficult. A shepherd girl had been blinded last night, which the Footish herders somehow connected with the veal incident. And they lost a dog, apparently. There were words.

“A great sacrilege has stained our land,” Aias was saying grandly. He wasn’t the one from the day before who spoke the trader’s language—that one was no where to be seen. Evidently the occasion called for someone of higher rank, for this one was older, and was Momos’ own guest-friend. And perhaps they preferred the cold neutrality of speaking in Mesmé, a second language to both groups. “Unknowingly, perhaps,” continued Aias, “but nevertheless, one of the Sun Cattle was killed. Killed and butchered. Your own leader, and my own dear friend, Momos—” Aias nodded in his direction, “saw the Great Sun Mover himself.”

“How dare you speak the names of the Old Gods! You bring misery and ruin on us
all!" began a old trader. Momos squeezed his shoulder.

"Punishment for this crime came exactly as the ancient songs tell us," continued Aias, "Except that it was us who suffered, not the perpetrators of the crime."

"Who are you to question the god’s judgment? It’s sacrilege to overturn—" Momos squeezed the old man’s shoulder harder.

"We do not worship the ancient gods!" Aias thundered. "True," he amended, "we respect their power, but they are too angry to be trusted or bargained with. We follow the Pali, the Ageless One, both ancient and newborn, the Great Shapeshifter who walks among us and sees. And we follow his wife Thana, who liberated us from the injustices of the ancient powers. Whether or not you follow our gods, you are in their keeping when you tread their land, and you will obey their laws. That is to say, you will compensate our loss." Aias folded his arms and waited.

Momos was silent for some time and Nuse wondered what tactic the man would take. Nuse had seen Momos grovel and he’d seen him shout and rave. He’d seen him give in and then come out on top. But they were in a tight position here with winter coming and no place to stay.

Momos strode out to the other side of the fire and turned towards Aias. "I cannot deny that something strange and divine happened out there last night, my most honorable friend of old." The traders grumbled and Momos raised his voice. "I was there and so was Telamon, and Salamis, and Badin. But I will not risk the wrath of the gods by debating what it all was. We can only be wrong in the face of such mysteries." He bowed his head for a moment. "As you have not ordered us to leave your land"—he gave a half smile to the Sathen men standing around him, as though daring anyone to order them anywhere—
"I assume that the trading is not over. Indeed it has not even begun.” He gave a slow circling look at the shepherds. “So if compensation will allow the trading to begin on even footing again, then we will do as best we can.”

A heated debate ensued regarding what exactly the vision of a girl was worth. It came out, first of all, that she was a valued member of their village, one of their best musicians. Even the traders’ spotty knowledge of musical history, however, was sufficient to quash the Footish claims as to the necessity of “visual cue;” Remo and Meruh, they pointed out, were two rather famous blind musicians. But she was as yet unwed, the Footish people protested, and who would marry a blind girl? Her vision would return, said Momos, the god had said so. But by then she’d be an old maid. Momos, however, soon got it out of them that, according to their own Footish customs, she was not expected to marry unless her widowed father took on a wife himself. Well, then. How could she care for him while she was blind? So eventually it came down to her labor in the field, where she—and the dog, apparently—helped her father with the flock.

Momos stood for a long while, feet set far apart. “Eight bags of salt,” he said finally, “for the stain on your land. And we will lend you a slave—for as long as we are here and the girl remains blind. This in exchange for a prosperous trading season for all, and for many seasons to come.” Momos nodded at Nuse, who moved to lift one of the salt bags. “No, here,” Momos said and pointed to the ground next to his feet. “He’s not as stupid as he looks. Speaks some Mesmé, and Sathen of course.” He grinned at the Footish men and put his hand on the boy’s shoulder. He immediately removed it as though he’d suffered a static shock but continued undeterred, “I offer you my very own...So what do you say?”

Finally it was settled: the Footish people would go home with ten bags of salt, a puppy
(of a good breed, which Aias had no intention of giving to Payas) and Nuse. The regular trading began, and it soon became clear that the traders sought to stay the winter. Aias sent Roron back to Payas’ house with Nuse and a bag of salt.

Once they were on their way, Roron clapped Nuse on the back, making him stumble under his load. “Hey! You can sing us Sathen songs,” he said in Mesmé, “Payas is always looking for new ones. Here I’ll take that.” Roron lifted the bag of salt from in front of Nuse’s face. Nuse mumbled that he didn’t sing.

“Can’t sing! Well Payas will cure you of that. We always joke that if he ever had any say the first thing he’d do is make everyone sing.”

Nuse smiled weakly, and asked what kind of man Payas was.

“Oh, he’s our best musician. And a herder of course. I’ve known him since we could walk. My brother-in-law too. His little sister’s my wife, see, Roxana. He has twenty two-heads in his herd, goats and sheep.”

Nuse nodded. “Oh.”

“Well what do you mean what kind of man is he?” Roron said after a pause.

Nuse shrugged. “I don’t know, forget it.” He shrugged again. “I mean, is he hard, is he a hard man.”

Roron looked at him for a moment and laughed softly. “Ah, don’t worry so much.”

Payas’ house was smaller than Nuse expected. From the negotiations that morning, he’d gotten the impression that Payas and his daughter (whose name was too long for him to remember) were important personages in the village. But it was just one-roomed shepherd’s hut; not the worst nor the best. The circular walls were made of large stones and timber, except where a boulder stuck through to provide the back for the hearth. Nuse
was glad of a proper fireplace instead of an open pit. Maybe his eyes would stop itching. As the shepherds were fond of doing here, broken pieces of glass—amber, green, and the occasional blue—were pressed into the mortar, one piece on the inside and another on the outside, to create a mosaic of miniature round windows running in a line at the top of the wall, just before the roof began. The Sathen traders sold all their broken glass to the village, and when they left the children trailed their fingers through the campsite dirt looking for more. The only thing that set the hut apart from other Footish houses were the instruments hanging from the wall and sitting in corners—drums, flutes, and pipes of various shapes and sizes, and two guitars.

Payas himself sat on a stump, hands folded tightly in his lap as though it took a fair amount of effort to keep them there. He was staring into one of the two beds against the wall. Roron and Nuse stood in the door until Roron called softly in Footish, “Hey, old man.” Payas stood up in surprise, knocking his head against a lamp hanging from the roof beam. Behind him Nuse saw a small face among the wool blankets. Payas passed a hand over his face as though his cheeks were stiff and then ushered them back into the sun, closing the door behind him.

“How is she?” asked Roron.

“She hasn’t woken,” Payas said without inflection. He glanced at the door.

“Well give or take a day, the god said, didn’t he?”

“Yeah.” Payas looked at Nuse, who, of course, had only picked out a few words of the Footish tongue. “Who’s this skinny thing?” Another discussion ensued, and Nuse received several more puzzled looks from Payas. Finally Payas said to Nuse in Sathen, “Well in that case.” He shrugged and gave Nuse a comradely look which said, “we don’t
have any control over these things, do we?"

After Roron left, there was nothing for Nuse to do but watch the animals poke through the yard forlornly, nibbling on what trampled grass they could find. Nuse drew circles in the dirt. He made an ant walk over the same leaf eight times. He cut tributaries into the foot wide stream left by the rain. He made a mote around the ant hill, then made the hill a lagoon. Then the whole thing became the next Atlantis. He used to be able to take a day off laying down.

Payas spent the day at the girl’s bedside, spinning half-heartedly on a drop spindle and nodding off occasionally. He showed Nuse where the food was, “in case you get hungry,” and then looked surprised when Nuse brought him lunch. Nuse ate too—goat cheese, bread, and some sort of withered but sweet fruit. It was almost more sensory stimulation than he could stand. He hadn’t had breakfast, or much dinner the night before. But by afternoon, Nuse realized he craved the empty mind of exhaustion, or just as well, a mind fully occupied by some productive task. Get something done. Make his dreams go away.

The trading season was good for that with its long days and heavy packs—though he’d never liked the blisters and bruises at the end of the trail, the short tempers at the end of a losing trading session, or the violence which occasionally broke out along the way. So finally, after he’d asked five times in one hour if there was anything he could do, Payas taught him how to spin. Nuse was not very good at it, but he liked the repetitiveness—the unspun wool twisted through his fingers down to the spindle hanging at the bottom of the new thread, which he turned hypnotically against his thigh. He spun until it was too dark to see, and sleep came easily to him that night. He dreamed of wool. Anything else he didn’t remember.
The next day, Payas’ sister, a hefty young woman named Roxana, insisted that it was unhealthy for Payas to sit around all day waiting for the girl to recover. Or at least that was Nuse’s interpretation—Roxana spoke in a bossy voice and shortly afterwards Nuse and Payas found themselves trudging behind the hungry animals. Roxana stayed with the girl.

*

Mosy first woke in the middle of the night, five days after “the Night of the Sun,” as they were already calling it. She opened her eyes, but the moon was already down tonight, or else it hadn’t come up, so night looked the same with her eyes open or shut. Her first thought was a vague one about the strangeness of being awake at night. How private it seemed! But this was a strange night. It was too warm. Her left arm in particular felt warm. Warm like being in front of a fire. But there was no fire—neither light, nor crackle, nor the bump of settling logs. A mystery to be sure, but a pleasant one for drifting back to sleep, where she belonged at this hour.

She slept for an hour longer, and when she woke again the warmth had moved to her face. This mystery was beginning to irritate her. She tried to sleep—the morning would come too soon, as it always did—but eventually she resigned herself dreamily to being an insomniac for the night. For entertainment she listened intently to the night sounds, which seemed loud and exaggerated. Animals moved about instead of breathing heavily, and chickens clucked in their sleep. A strange night, and such a dark one. Suddenly, someone walked briskly into the room, picked up something which clanged, and left. Mosy froze, eyes wide open. Had someone just stolen one of their pots? Surely not the big cauldron?
No, something must be wrong—a fire somewhere, a marauding bear, a prowling lion, a birth, a death. She sat up, but immediately fell back down. She felt faint. She slept.

Shortly afterwards Roxana came in again and felt Mosy’s forehead impatiently—she’d checked it six times this afternoon alone, to see if the fever wasn’t returning. She had her own private doubts about the probability of Mosy’s recovery. Roxana straightened and looked down at her with tight lips. Mosy frowned back without a trace of consciousness. Always a difficult child anyway, Mosy. Roxana had no children of her own, though she was twenty-six years old and had been married to Roron for the past eight. She’d given birth to two daughters and one boy, but the first and third were stillborn and the second had died when he was three. She was too old now to try again after all that, though the old busybodies said otherwise. Roxana moved Mosy by her shirt front so the sun wouldn’t shine on her face—not that it should make any difference but the girl looked uncomfortable. Then she went back to her wash.

Mosy was semi-cognizant by the time Nuse and Payas got back from the fields that day. By night fall she managed a few words—a question of some sort, Nuse deduced. He busied himself with the fire, head down. Payas sat on the bed and took Mosy’s face in his hands. Putting his forehead against hers he told her something and after a moment she began to cry. He gathered her to his chest and rocked her back and forth, not saying anything.

Later Payas came and sat by Nuse at the hearth, poking the coals with a stick.

“She knows her sight is supposed to come back?” Nuse wouldn’t have said anything, but her breath was still snuffy.
Payas looked at him, surprised; the boy had hardly said anything since he’d come. “Yeah, she knows.” He stared into the fire. “It’s the dog that got her worked up…” He gave a vigorous thrust into the fire. “He was a good dog……. If it weren’t for his eating that meat I’d say he might come back still. But it’s poison they say. You go wild, and then you die.” He sighed. “Anyway…”

Stretched in front of the fire that night, Nuse listened to the girl breathe for an hour before he managed to fall asleep. In the morning he couldn’t shake the darkness.

Mosy’s next few days passed in a haze. Once she raved at the gods: “What did Orex ever do to you? Don’t you know you created dogs to hunt? Don’t you—” Alarmed, Roxana ran in and clamped her hand on Mosy’s mouth, looking around and muttering Footish protections like Sol or the Pali might show up at any moment—or worse, Thana; the Pali at least had a sense of humor—might appear at any moment. When she looked at Mosy again, the heresies had stopped but the girl’s eyes bulged with the shock of being suffocated by her own aunt. Roxana removed her hand from Mosy’s nose but gave her a hard look and an order to be quiet before she released her mouth.

Otherwise Mosy slept. She couldn’t tell whether she was dreaming or thinking. Half awake she would feel Orex’s weight in the bed until a wandering foot found his space as empty as a missing limb. She sang sometimes, tunelessly, but she couldn’t find anything to hold on to. She couldn’t keep track of the time. Some days it seemed that she’d lived a thousand lives in her dreams by the time Payas and the slave returned. Other days they left in the morning and were back in a few moments. That scared her, when she cared to think about it. Sometimes she dreamed she was old. Sometimes she woke to find herself
lost and in a panic, crouched somewhere in the hut, without a memory of why or when she’d gotten up. She was too weak, really, to be moving around at all—more than a few minutes upright made her feel faint and confused.

Sometime in the afternoon of the fifth day, however, she remembered with startling clarity that she’d been looking for her reed pipes and that they were in her coat pocket, hanging on the bed post behind her. Still lying down, she stretched and strained until she jammed her little finger into one of the reeds. She put them on her chest and fell asleep, exhausted. Upon rediscovering them, she sighed a single note into the bass reed. It was a beautiful note—the micro-fluctuations in pitch and tone seemed symphonies in themselves. She played it again, just to listen. Now it seemed pure and simple, like the primordial silence from which all notes had once come.

Eventually she branched into multi-note melodies, but nothing like she’d heard before. She played sadness, confusion, and the brilliance she’d seen. She was in not in any condition to play properly, but if she lay perfectly flat she could manage enough breath to play sketches. Her mind filled in the rest. When her hands got tired she hummed and sang, which resulted in even wilder melodies. While pipes suggested certain patterns dictated by the habit of her hands and the physical limitations of the instrument, singing came to her unstructured and unbounded, save whatever baggage she carried in her mind. Often she couldn’t tell whether she was playing or listening. She would suddenly feel the reeds beneath her fingers and stop in surprise. While singing she would grow quiet to listen. Thus she chased her shadow for hours at a time.

Years later she wondered if what she’d played was any good, but even at the time she couldn’t remember what she’d played the day or hour before. Everything came fresh and
new. But in song and rhythm she chased the feeling of those strange days till the end of her time.

A week or so later, Mosy’s delirium had passed entirely, and Roxana began searching for a suitable task for a blind girl. Under her tutelage, Mosy spun uneven threads, carded wool until the fibers broke, and dropped loops in her knitting. Mosy could have tried harder, and she was not particularly patient. The eighth time her spinning thread broke, she fiercely wound the rest of it around her hand until her fingers went numb. She made a fist and the string snapped off weakly, leaving a pattern of white lines on red skin. She pressed her face into her knees, fists still clenched. She thought about Orex and wondered if she would ever see again. Her palms stung suddenly and she sprang apart. Little crescents of blood welled up where her fingernails had been, but her hands were already wet with sweat and she didn’t notice.

While she’d never been more than competent at wool crafts, however, she’d always had keen hearing. Out on the range the barest suggestions of sounds had often floated across the hills to her. Like any good herder she knew the barking of their dogs and the bleat of certain goats. Among humans she’d always paid attention to accents and speech mannerisms for the sake of humorous imitation—long ago Payas had taught her what he knew of Mesmé, Wasaecian, Thaneccian, and Sathen just to get her to stop imitating them in convincing gibberish. So now she recognized voices without trouble, and she soon distinguished between Roxana, Nuse, Payas, her friend Aithra, and various other villagers by their breath and footsteps alone. Of Nuse she knew little more. He rarely spoke, and she had never seen him before. So while she imagined Payas when she heard him, Nuse
remained invisible, like some soft stepping spirit made of breath and the occasional discrete cough. What little else she knew came from hearing him talk to the dogs when he thought no one was listening.

While Mosy learned how to be blind, Payas and Nuse assumed the grazing routine. With the additional pressure of Sathen horses on the land, they had to travel farther than before, but their days passed uneventfully. Payas did his best to engage Nuse in conversation, but Nuse was too absorbed in trying to spin as he walked, like he’d seen other herders do. So Payas played music. Nuse enjoyed the folksongs—he didn’t really listen to it as much as he allowed the familiar noise to fill up any cracks left by the spinning. But sometimes Payas played his own songs, which Nuse did not like. They were full of loss and longing, like a landscape too big and beautiful too look at. They reminded Nuse of his dreams and threatened what was left of his emotional equilibrium.

Mosy’s songs also carried a touch of Payas’ ache, and worse, they were catchy. They made Nuse want to release them into the air, but his humming scared them away after a few notes. Soon they would slip back into his mind again to taunt him. So they sat and festered. His only relief came from hearing her play them again in the evening, a dubious relief at that. She usually insisted on talking to him in between songs.

Mosy made him feel uncomfortable in general—those terrible pale eyes set in her dark features. They glowed, almost imperceptibly, in the dark. They did not rove like the blind beggars he’d seen in Skoor; she was blind as old people are blind. Her eyes moved together and they turned towards him when he spoke. She could wink with the best of them. Sometimes he looked up to find her starring at him, and it would take a moment before he remembered she couldn’t see.
But between Mesmé and Sathen, Nuse and Mosy could communicate well enough. As Mosy became more herself—or at least more accustomed to her new self—she began to asked him questions.

“How old are you?”

He told her he didn’t know.

“Doesn’t Momos even know?”

He told her Momos didn’t.

“I’m older than you, probably.”

He told her she didn’t look it.

She shrugged. “I’m small. So was my mother...Do you know any songs?”

He told her he didn’t.

Through such fruitless conversations, Nuse grew accustomed to her, and however kind he was to the dogs, Mosy came to wish that Momos would take him back. He made her uncomfortable.

*  

Among the Ten, Thana spoke in tones of maternal iron—gentle, patient, and utterly unyielding. She seemed older than them, and wiser. It made them uneasy. They sensed in her an alien wildness, untamable and impenetrable. When they flew with her, or sat beside her in council, they would not brush her sleeve or touch her hand: Thana was a knife too sharp to test with one’s thumb. They remembered when she first spoke out against Himeros. She was afraid; they could smell her sweat. But violence flashed in her eyes and suddenly it was they who were afraid and she who had come to save them.
When Himeros finally died, her face shone brighter than the sun. She came to the Thanecian Plain as the Goddess of the Afterlife for men; she left it as the Goddess of Death for the gods. She had no friends now, only visions and plans of which the Ten knew little, though they themselves carried them out. Still, a leader requires distance, and in the years after Himeros' death, the Ten came to obey her as no gods had obeyed before.

All except Lesath, who followed her jovially as though he were her peer. The others thought him foolish, and expected Thana would kill him one day. Thana was not sure if she wanted to kill Lesath or not, but when she killed again she intended to do it alone, without the help of the Ten. She was not yet ready. So she tolerated Lesath, even now after what had happened in the Foots. In any case there was little she could do now in this place past the ends of the earth where Sol's wind had left them. They were drifting, somewhat stunned, in darkness so hungry it would eat a man's words right out of his mouth. But the words of gods lie heavier than those of men. Thana was the first to speak.

"Explain yourself," she said.

"Explain what?" Lesath said cheerfully.

She looked at him, and then said wearily, "Lesath, you have virtually no feathers." He winced as she pulled out a stub from the goose flesh. His feathers had been a lovely emerald green, dusted in gold. Without feathers his wings were as easy to see as a piece of chicken, bereft of the dancing golden stars which normally confused the eye. "It will take you the better part of a year to grow them back, not to mention your skin. If I were to carry you we would not reach the earth for many months." Thana's wings had retained most of their grey feathers and white sparks. "If I leave you here we would not see you
on Earth for a year or more. In that time I or another god will have your country. Explain yourself.”

Lesath itched the raw backs of his hands and cleared his throat. For luck perhaps, he glanced at his star—a yellow one in a constellation his people called the Sathil, the Scorpion. “Sol was trespassing on my land,” he said.

She gave a thin lipped smile.

“And I wanted to see what he was doing, so I followed him onto yours.”

“And?”

“And I didn’t get a chance to find out, before you came. And you know, if I hadn’t pulled you out of the way of his wind, you would look like this instead of me.” He raised a wing.

“I am not sure of that,” Thana said calmly.

“Well, we’ll never know will we?”

“I wonder if you understand what I am capable of, if you remember what I am capable of.”

They continued like this, Thana pressing and Lesath squirming. Finally Lesath sighed, as if it was too boring to relate. “Sol was talking to my mortals about Himeros, and so naturally I suspected he might be fostering a Himerian revolution-- you know, planning to take on Himeros’ name himself. If you hadn’t become involved I might have found out where they were for you.” It was a common enough tactic for a god to use the name of another god who had set up roots and then abandoned them. Mortals would worship for generations after the original god had abandoned them and would welcome a “return” with priceless fervor. Lesath flicked his eyes to hers and then back down at his hands.
“And since there aren’t any Himerians in my land I thought maybe once I found out where they were I’d scare him off and...” He trailed off and then burst out, “Well, it’s not like you’re having the best of luck with the Wooly Foots—it’s not like I’d be taking anything away from you. I was just going to relieve you of some—a few—Himerians back with me to send across to Wasat to give him a hard time.”

This was just the sort of thing Lesath would do. Against any other god, it would only be a minor offence, and Lesath treated Thana like any other god. She resented it but she knew he meant no harm. So she merely flew in slow circles around him and berated him in her deliberate, obsessive way, her voice dry and slow but full of eternally unforgivable damnation—“You cannot tame Himerians, Lesath. You cannot play with them. They pay no allegiance, no worship, no respect. Not to anyone. They would pretend to worship you and soon they’d be away. It has taken me years to eradicate them from Thane alone, and it would take you—” But in mid-sentence doubt flickered. Lesath had started out quite in character, but now the god who normally took her threats with cavalier idiocy cowered before her. Why? Away from her land and her worshippers the worst she could do was to leave him here, and even so, surely he knew that she couldn’t afford to come back to Earth with one less ally.

It was difficult for gods to lie to one another, but it was not impossible. They could balance teetering contradictions in their heads while pure reason shone in wide unblinking eyes. Truth itself could tell the lie when placed in false context. And more cunningly still, a god could embrace his own dishonesty, let it seep through nervously, and then capitulate and confess to a decoy crime they had not committed. These were tricks of self-deception and subtlety, and surely Lesath thought too much of himself to be
so truly clever. But she catalogued the possibility and continued with her admonishment as though it had never occurred to her. She would find out before they reached home.

* *

"Where are you going?" Mosy asked Nuse one morning when Payas had left him at the house with some chores.

"Firewood," he said.

"All the way to the forest?"

"If I have to."

"You probably will." She sounded cheerful.

"So?"

"You’ll need help carrying it back."

"No I won’t."

"I’m coming with you."

He turned and looked at her. "I don’t need the help."

"Why not?"

"Why don’t you ask Payas first."

"I’m not a child. I’m probably older than you. And he’s not here so I can’t ask him."

"So wait till he gets back and then ask him for next time."

"I order you."

He didn’t answer.

"You can’t stop me."

"I wouldn’t have to." That shut her up. He turned and headed up the trail. Shortly he
heard her stick coursing across the ground behind him.

“If I get hurt going by myself you’ll be sorry. So will Payas.”

“My god you’re stubborn,” he said without turning around, “Give it a rest.” The footsteps behind him stopped and he turned to make sure she got home alright. But she just stood there.

“I just want to see if Orex—” she said almost inaudibly. “My father won’t let me, all right? Says he already looked. Doesn’t want me to get my hopes up,” she said savagely. “But there was never any body. He admits that. And he doesn’t know how to call him right. I just want to try myself, just to see, see if maybe…”

“All right, all right. Stop it.” He went to her and put her hand on his shoulder. “Here. We’ll go, all right? We’ll go.” He did not want to see her cry. He hated it when people cried. Luckily she didn’t want him to see her cry either and they continued on without a sniffle.

When they got to the forest she didn’t call right away. Maybe she was afraid, Nuse thought. Instead she sat on a boulder and played for awhile, something with lots of long notes. When she finished she stopped and waited for awhile before starting something else.

Then she stopped playing suddenly, in the middle of the song, ear cocked. “Did you hear that?”

“What?”

“I don’t know. It’s almost not a sound at all.”

*She expects me to listen for something that might not even make a noise?* But then he knew what she was talking about.
“I can’t tell if I’m feeling it or hearing it,” Mosy said.

But for Nuse it was beyond a feeling or a sound. Inexplicably, strange ideas had come into his head, full of meaning, but completely wordless. In particular, it reminded him of someone telling a dog, no, stay, and then, rather exasperatedly, come back here this instant.

Mosy heard an excited whine, and felt warm breath on her face. “Orex?” Mosy said before she could stop herself. But something was different. He didn’t paw or lick her, and she felt no weight on her lap. Her second thought was that it might be dangerous and she covered her face. Something pushed against it—furry, but the shape was elusive. It was as though she was flying across the sky at such a speed that she could feel curves in the air pressing against her hands. It must be a ghost. She tried to push it away but it leaned into her hands like a cat. “What is it?” she quavered, half fearful, half hopeful.

“The wind, I think,” Nuse said. It was snuffling in his ear again.

“The wind? No, on my lap. What does it look like?” She kept her hands up against her face.

Nuse looked, but saw nothing. “Where?”

Then she heard that low and melodic chortle, the one Orex used to make when she sang. Now she couldn’t stop herself. She put her hands down and a gust of wind crashed clumsily into her face, knocking her hat off. Then amid the warm blasts of air something like an ear or a nape of a neck pressed against Mosy’s fingers. Without thinking she began scratching, and the whole air around her began to purr. “Look! Look! I think it’s friendly,” Mosy said, unwilling to use the dog’s name again in case she was wrong.

But Nuse was too busy looking around for what was making the soundless sound. It
had taken on a tone of self-pity. *Can’t fly, can’t speak, can’t think.* But it wasn’t as clear as that; they did not come across as words. In place of “fly,” for instance, he felt a breeze and the ground far beneath him. In place of “can’t,” “speak” and “think” he felt such a barrage of experiences that he could barely tell what they held in common, let alone simplify them into single words.

Then a movement caught his eye. A hooded man had just slid to a crouch at the base of a tree, drawing his grey-blue cloak around him as though he were cold, or perhaps just lost. *Cattle gone, zephyrs away.... Almost killed myself in self-defense. How useful. If they come back now... well let’s not think about that*... The man didn’t appear to be aware of their presence, or didn’t think that they were aware of his. Even now, Nuse thought that if he looked away once, he might not be able to find him again, for the forest suddenly seemed too dense to remember where anything was.

Nuse had seen the man before, prowling around the trader’s camp in the twilight. He’d known then that the man was a spirit or a god because he walked so lightly his feet hardly touched the ground. He’d seemed full of power then, and Nuse had cowered under his blankets. But he seemed weakened now. Perhaps it was only the daylight.

A nearby aspen crouched beside the man, looking up into his face with concern. Nuse blinked. No, the tree itself had not crouched—it was more like a young woman standing in front of it, or inside of it, or perhaps part of the bark itself, had crouched. Though it didn’t seem as odd as all that. She was naked without seeming so, and her skin was the same greenish grey as the bark behind her, and likewise dotted with raised black marks and creases, especially at her joints. Her hair was bushy and grew straight back from her face before it fell to her shoulders. At the scalp the strands were as thick as kindling, and
the same color as her skin. From there it turned black and branched till each strand was as thin as a piece of grass. From the ends grew yellow heart-shaped leaves. She touched the spirit’s arm with her long knobby fingers, tentatively, almost reverently, but he paid her no heed. She spoke to him in rustles and creaks, and the man turned towards her uncomprehendingly. Finally she stood and dragged him to his feet by the arm with surprising strength. She led him into the woods until they were out of sight.

The ghost creature lingered a moment longer before it melted from Mosy’s lap and disappeared. She sighed and wondered whether to laugh or cry. She couldn’t hear Nuse moving around anymore. “Nuse?” she said finally. “You really didn’t see anything?”

Nuse started. How could she suspect there was anything to see? Or did she mean the wind? “No,” he said warily.

“Well did you look? It was here, on my lap. I felt it. I heard it. Are you sure?”

“I saw—” He stopped. There was no point in telling her the things he saw, even if she could feel the wind like he did. Not yet. He’d never told anyone about before. “I saw nothing.”

“Well that settles it then,” Mosy, fairly bursting with hope. “It must have been a ghost. Orex’s ghost.”

Orex’ ghost, Nuse repeated to himself as he spun wool that evening. The wind often twined around his head like a cat, and said things he didn’t want to hear. If he ignored it, it usually went away. It was not real, after all. No one had ever seen, or in this case felt, the things that he did. He looked at Mosy across the room. She was weaving. He generally avoided looking at her, but to his surprise he found her eyes were no longer
white wine yellow; they had faded to a hazel honey color. They weren’t exactly natural looking, but set in her olive complexion and framed by her brown hair they did not look like a mistake. He realized suddenly he was staring into her eyes. His gaze flickered down in embarrassment towards safer territory. Her hands were small, but without a trace of clumsiness or baby fat. Her fingers were fascinatingly long compared to her palms, and her boney knuckles made them look older than she herself. They also seemed to have an infinite capacity to stretch, as, for instance, when she played the lowest note on a full sized flute.

“Are you staring at me?” She said suddenly.

Naturally he started. “No.”

“What are you doing?”

“Spinning.”

“Oh,” she said, “Everything went quiet all of a sudden.”

He glanced at her again. She held her hands against her cheeks. Embarrassed, probably, for being so paranoid. Now he felt bad, like he should talk to her to make up for it. “Can you normally hear it?”

“I think so,” she said eagerly. “The wool scratching your fingers, the spindle hitting the floor, or knocking against something else. I’m just guessing really…. But there’s almost always something to listen to.” Nuse quietly let the spindle turn again and after a moment, she said, “There, see? Something changed.” She listened intently until it lost her interest. “So why do they call you Nuse anyway?”

“Should there be a reason?”

“I’ve never heard a Sathen called that. Is that what your mother called you?”
“No.” He gave the spindle a few vigorous turns. “Momos named me. Because my mother was Nussian.”

“What did she call you?”

“I don’t know.” He was really getting some thread spun now.

“You never asked Momos?”

He resigned himself to several complete sentences, executed briskly as though he was reading from a list: “I had a different name once. I don’t know who gave it to me. Momos couldn’t pronounce it. Doesn’t remember it now.” The string broke and the spindle shot to the ground.

“Don’t twirl it so fast.”

He looked up and caught her uninhibited smile. Satisfied, perhaps, with her hearing abilities. He reattached the string.

“Nussa… Isn’t that how you say spindle? In your language, I mean.”

“Spindle?”

“That thing in your hand.”

“No, that’s nusin…” He was going to leave it at that but after a moment he shrugged.

“Nussa means the wooden thing horses turn around on, like in a race. No one trades farther north than Nussa and so that’s where they turn back, because of the mountains.”

He let her draw her own etymological conclusions.

“Huh… So can we call you Stick then? Or Log.” She giggled. “Yes, Log.”

He looked up blankly.

“I’m teasing,” she said to his silence.

“Oh.” That made him feel good, for some reason. He was not teased very often. “Log,
yes, you may call me Log.” Next he found himself telling her that “Log” was better than what the traders called him. He waited for her to ask, and she did. He laughed. “Nuisance.” He explained what it meant and she laughed too. They fell back into spinning sounds.

* 

The god ran. He wondered if his life would pass before his eyes, as the humans claimed. His life was so much longer. He closed his eyes. Athalia. Athalia, tucking stray hairs behind her ear. They were on their way to the fair; between them they carried a reed basket of onions and mushrooms she’d gathered yesterday. She was sweating, even in the forest shade. Her honey skin was wrinkled a little around the eyes, but carefully, as though carved by a sculptor. Her hair used fall straight down in silky black; now it was bushy and shot with eggplant gray. She caught him looking at her and she smiled. “What are you looking at?” He tripped and looked down, hiding a smile. She looked like a goddess, he’d been thinking. She had an ageless quality that comes with middle age and divinity alike. The sun flickered through the leaves overhead like a lamp about to run out of oil. He opened his eyes and saw darkness. Over five hundred years ago, that was. He ran on into the night.

The next morning, Nuse woke determined to stay exactly as he was, to not get any closer to these shepherds, these musicians.

“Bye Nuse,” Mosy said as he and Payas went out the door.
“Yeah,” he said.

He rubbed his hands together and blew on them, letting the breath bounce back to his face. Winter would come soon.

“You ever been to Thane?” Payas asked with his usual morning gruffness.

“We go there every year,” Nuse said flatly.

“See any plays there?”

Nuse stared at him blankly.

“Or see any musicians?...No, huh? Even on the streets you didn’t even...?”

Nuse waited dumbly for the rest of the question, which Payas took as a no.

“Well have you seen them anywhere else in your travels? What I mean to say is, did you ever notice anything different about Thane?”

Nuse actually did think about it for a moment. He’d never seen any musicians or heard about any plays or schools in Thane. Skoor bustled with such things.

“I haven’t been to Thane in ten or fifteen years, much less anywhere else. I used to be quite the traveler, as a musician, you know. Last I was there I got fined for ‘busking,’ if you can imagine that. Apparently they have an ordinance against street musicians. Only I couldn’t pay it so they...well it was a nasty affair, but one of them took my flute and ceremoniously broke it over his knee. But I haven’t been there since and I like to know if its still the same...”

Nuse let the question hang for what he thought would be enough time to show himself to be slow and uninteresting. “Momos says that Thane has an excellent army,” he said finally.

“Oh so I’ve heard, so I’ve heard. That’s why the horse business is so good there. But
do you like these things, Nuse? Music and plays and things, I mean.”

Nuse shrugged. Had he been Mosy, he would have recognized this line of questioning as an opening to one of Payas’ favorite discussion topics: the Loss of Thanecian Culture. But Nuse’s lack of enthusiasm made Payas fall silent over the next hill.

“Or races? Do you like races?” Payas started up again as though he hadn’t stopped.

“With horses?” This seemed a change in topic.

“Or with men. Either way.”


“Do they have them in Thane?”

“No they don’t,” he answered with more inflection than he intended. “Momos would go if they did. He likes to bet.” A bit of pride kicked into his voice, for unlike sheep and spinning and music, there were two things he did know about: Momos and horses.

“Not even races anymore, then. It’s all in the same vein, music, plays, races. All about animals at their full potential.”

Nuse nodded, though he didn’t see at all. “They hardly ever buy Rowans or Salpas—the small quick breeds—in Thane.”

“What do they buy?”

“Clodos and Burdock,” Nuse said. “Sir,” he added, half remembering his earlier determination.

“Which are they?”

“Tall and heavy.” He would have left it at that but again he knew something and it was hard to contain it. “Hard to kill and it keeps cavalry men off the ground in battle. Momos says anyhow.”
“Ugly beasts I always thought. Which is the best horse do you think?”

“The dapple grey,” he said with the quickness of someone who, for entertainment, has laid awake at night weighing the pros and cons of each animal in the herd (and perhaps at sometime in his life had done the same with an assortment of buttons), and who has since been waiting for someone to ask him his verdict. The words slipped from him before he could stop them. “Not for speed or anything, but she doesn’t kick me when I clean her feet. And she’s not all temperamental like the puries. She likes having her forehead scratched.”

Payas grunted in amusement.

“Or you meant what kind of horse.”

“No, no.”

“Salpas, I guess.” He couldn’t stop now if he’d wanted to. “Or Pintos. Salpas are the smartest though. You have to watch them.”

From then on, conversations sprang up every few hours, with varying degrees of ease. By late afternoon, some part of Nuse felt like it had lost the game and had better try harder tomorrow. But another part felt flushed and giddy with wonder at its own existence.

*

Thana wings beat slowly against the darkness. Only the white sparks that buzzed between the feathers betrayed the great speed at which she and Lesath traveled. But wings were not meant for the silence beyond the earth, and her speed was nothing compared to what it was before she’d acquired the slowness of flesh. They’d been flying
for months, Lesath floating behind her, his hand on her shoulder. Months and even years were nothing for a being that lived millions, but it was hard to keep track of the time here, where it was never night and never day. There was only the same silver twilight of the stars shining from all directions.

She spent the time worrying. How were her people coping without her? Kiles and Bara surely could manage the city, with Tanis’ help. And the Quartzema—if she didn’t get back to Thane before the Quartzema a whole season of souls would be lost. And what were Wasat and his contingency plotting? Without her, the Ten would not move forward on the preemptive strike they’d planned. By the time she got back, Wasat might be ready for a full blown revolt. If she were Wasat, she would be watching the skies everywhere for their return—when she and Lesath broke through the sky there would be a great sound and a light which no one could help noticing. Lesath would arrive on earth unable to fly faster than a walk, and she would be tired and weak. She glanced at Lesath over her shoulder. He smiled back wearily, and she looked at him until he wore a confused frown. Why wasn’t he afraid? Of course he was never afraid when he should be, but was there another reason? Was he in league with Wasat? Was that his secret? And now this incident with Sol in the Foots—were there others hidden in the woods, waiting to attack her? The Foots were a weak spot in her realm; when she got back she would attend to them more forcefully. And Lesath with his stupid smile and fearless ease—he was the weak spot among her allies. But even if Lesath were involved she wouldn’t be able to coerce him into telling her without the help of the Ten. So this was all wild speculation; she wouldn’t know what Wasat was planning until they got there, when it would be too late. There would be no time to call for help, no time to recover and prepare. She glanced
at her grey star—was it twinkling? No it couldn’t be, there was no atmosphere here. But it seemed cold and far away. The earth loomed near and time escaped her faster than a stellar wind. For the first time in her long life she wondered if she’d lost something, if she should have been doing something else, if she’d been...wasting time. It was a foreign concept for one whose time is infinite. But something had changed. Time was running out.

* 

“Now’s our chance,” said Mosy, “Let’s go.” Payas had just left for the village. “You can play this time. Bring the drum.”

“I’m not going to play. I have work to do.”

“Then bring your spindle.”

Nuse looked out the door to see if Roxana or anyone was coming. Nuse feigned disinterest whenever Mosy brought up Orex’s ghost. But though he didn’t care to admit it, he was beginning to feel that they had something in common. So he threw Mosy one of the straps they used to tie wood bundles. “But if there’s any trouble about it I’m saying you made me.”

“It’s a deal,” she said, surprised that he hadn’t needed more persuading.

Neither the man, the tree, nor the ghost appeared in the place they were before, even after a half hour of playing. So Mosy directed the expedition elsewhere, though moving through the forest was slow going for her with all the boulders and underbrush to trip over. But with her directions, they got to where she wanted to go: a couple of boulders in a miniature canyon. Mosy put her flute to her lips and played a long sorrowful song,
making full use of the canyon’s echo.

When she turned to Nuse, he expected to see tears in her eyes, for even he, a mere half-willing listener, had to wipe his nose. But she grinned. “The sound is great here. If he’s anywhere he’ll hear it.” Then she pulled out a drum from her pack. “Come on, try it. Maybe with two of us he’ll come again.”

He wasn’t going to take the drum but she wouldn’t stop holding it out and he didn’t know what else to do. She began the same song again, and he played half-heartedly at random intervals. “That was really good,” she gushed, “now try playing with the beat.” She clapped her thigh and he played along. It wasn’t hard, he found sheepishly, not too much to ask of him. Then she changed and began clapping just a second after his beat, and then all around it. He stubbornly stuck to what they had started with. When they stopped she laughed, which made him feel uncomfortable. “You changed!” he protested after a moment.

“Of course I did!” she laughed again. “But you are good. You’ve played before!” she accused.

“No,” he said, confused.

“Whenever I do that to anyone else they always get it all messed up.” This was in fact a favorite game of hers; she was always trying to recruit other musicians from the village children.

“Oh.” He had thought he was supposed to follow whatever she did.

“Here, now I’ll try to stay the same.”

They played again, and he danced all around her beat like a moth before a flame. He played in the center and then on the rim, making different tones. She kept the beat steady
without effort, but her face changed as he played, like she was listening to a good story. Occasionally a giggle would escape her after something tricky, as though they’d just shared a private joke. By the end he found himself grinning. She laughed.

“How come you’ve been keeping this from us? You’re a musician, Nuse.”

He just smiled and said impatiently, “Play that song you were playing before.”

She complied. At first he played too much, trying to show off. It didn’t sound good but when he played less he got bored and faltered. But by the second or third time through he found that the song demanded certain rhythms and dynamics in some places, while in others it suggested several interpretations. This might take some work.

“It’s more difficult with a melody,” he preemptively excused himself when they finished.

But Mosy was in pure joy. As she had spent most of her life in the fields, Mosy had hardly played with anyone besides Payas. Her best friend Aithra had a decent singing voice, but she was only interested in the traditionals (her father was Euenos, the village cleric, though Aithra was perhaps more pious than he). Nuse came from a slightly different musical tradition and his playing—both his ideas and his mistakes—promised Pali’s flock to her, as they said in the Foots. “Now you have to sing at the same time.”

“I’m not going to sing,” Nuse said. He would just draw the line right there. He began drumming again, and they played another song, finishing with all the flourishies of a performance. The poplars tossed their heads and roared like a crowd. It was a calm day otherwise. The grass was still. Nuse looked around for the man in blue or any tree spirits, but saw nothing. Then gusts of wind rushed down on them, making the yellow leaves dance up from the ground. Mosy laughed through her flute but kept playing. Soon a
canine yodel joined in, and then a joyous cacophony of howls, chirps, and humming. Mosy ended the song and the winds rushed around again, murmuring in their ears. “They want us to sing with them!” Mosy raised her own voice and let the wind lead the melody into a droning chaos. Nuse heard another human voice, and it took him a second to realize his own throat was vibrating, harmonizing, though his mouth remained closed. But Mosy noticed and smiled slyly at him.

“See?” The wind twined between her outstretched hands. “Orex?” she said tentatively. Warm air crashed into her lap and she grinned. “Here, feel.” She guided Nuse’s hand to Orex’s ear. So excited at the thought of a new person’s hand, the ghost dog wriggled itself right out of Mosy’s lap and snuffled over to Nuse, blowing and pushing on his hands.

“Well it acts like a dog,” Nuse admitted, wondering if they had teeth. But soon he’d fallen into his normal rhythm with dogs, and Orex was on his lap just as surely as any mutt. “Maybe that’s what happens when you eat sun cattle.”

“Maybe they were all dogs once.” She put her hands out coaxingly and the other wisps of wind grazed her fingertips indecisively, swerving away at the last moment. Finally one came over, and then another. She laughed and punched Nuse on the arm (though it landed somewhere on his chest). They played another song and the winds danced and hummed along. At the end they spiraled up through the trees leaving only the echo of their melody behind.

They headed home, Mosy’s hand on Nuse’s shoulder. They hardly said anything to each other but something quivered in Nuse’ chest. He felt warmer than he ever had in his
life. He kept looking at Mosy, partially because she squeezed his shoulder every few moments as they walked.

When they got back to the house they burst into a veritable torrent of speculation and discussion of wind, music, and dogs. He told her of the spirit he’d seen in the woods the first time, and how he’d seen him before, prowling around the traders camp, how the traders thought they were haunted by furies, how he dreamt of light and darkness and how he’d never told anyone before. She told him of music and the Night of the Sun and they knew that they had seen things of the same nature.

When Payas got home they instinctively fell silent. Maybe they liked a secret, or they were afraid of what Payas might think about his daughter getting friendly with a slave boy. But when he went down to visit with the neighbors, the silence begged to be broken.

“What are you singing?” Mosy asked.

“Me? I’m not singing.” He had been replaying the day again in his mind while he spun.

“Yes you were, just your breath, no voice, whispering like.”

“I guess I was.”

“Sing it again.”

“I don’t know how it goes,” he refused half-heartedly.

“You just sang it.”

“You were playing it last night. You sing it.”

“Was it this?”

“No…”

“This?”
He shook his head. “No, I mean.”

“Sing it again,” she ordered.

“I can’t.”

“Try it,” she said menacingly. She turned supplicant again, “Come on.”

He hummed waveringly and she made him go on until he finally got into it at an easier part. “Oh I know now—” She began to sing with him, bailing him out of the hard parts until he trailed off.

“I kinda’ like that one,” he said after a moment.

“You kinda’,” she mocked. It was one of hers. “Now you sing one.”

“I just did.”

“One from your land.”

After an unprecedently small amount of pleading, he relented and sang, very quietly, a drinking song.

“That’s lovely,” she said with mock delicacy. “You have to teach it to me.”

“It’s a drinking song!”

“Well then you’ll have to sing me another one more suitable for young girls. And louder this time.”

He thought for an entire minute, while she waited faithfully. He began:

*There was an old woman who found an old shoe,*
*That’s just the thing to put in the stew!*
*So she picked it up and looked inside—*
*“No leather I’ll eat tonight!”*
*For thirty gold pieces she found in the toe!*
*so ’cross her back the boot she stowed*

*She walked on, but heavy it grew*
*Till lift it up she could not do,*
*So she turned round to see her prize—*
"No gold I'll eat tonight!"
For a jack rabbit's son she held by the ears!
so 'cross her back she carried the hare

It was a long song, the kind that can be easily added too by the singer. Mosy understood the lyrics quite a bit better this time, as there it lacked the vulgar drinking slang Payas had failed to teach her. By the end Mosy and Nuse had assisted the rabbit into turning into various other things—a deer, a mouse, a stone, a log, a mound of sheep dung, all accompanied by questionable rhymes in various languages. Each time the old woman dutifully congratulated herself on her good fortune for one absurd reason or another. Playing with a foreign language made them giddy and their jokes funnier than they would otherwise have found them. Before the end of the song Mosy and Nuse had collapsed into hysterics.

"We have a story like that too," Mosy said, her face soaked from laughter. "At the end it turns into the Pali, trying to play a trick on her."

"That's what happens in the song too! Only we call him the Hedyin Noe. But we never got to it—" They fell into another bout of laughter. When he'd recovered he sang:

She walked on, but heavy it grew
Till lift it up she couldn't do,
It had changed to a stone so round,
and it lay there on the ground,
Well a place to sit and rest my feet,
What more could I need!

So she sat on the stone at the top of the hill,
But the stone would not be still,
For under her there lay no stone,
But there the Hedyin Noe!
His mane afire, his eyes aglow,
Stamping at the ground below.

She jumped down and stamped her own foot,
At Hedyin a finger she shook,
"A fright you gave," so said she,
"To play that trick on me!"
But then she laughed, "now go away,"
Try again some other day.

But then the Noe he changed again
into a little old man,
"Well then, sir," she did say,
"Are you a man to stay?
For I'd not mind the company,
Won't you come have some tea?"

They laughed loud and they tales told,
All the nights he came were so,
Shed and pantry he kept filled,
And if any of Noe spoke ill,
She'd say, "he likes a trick or two,
But he's a fine old merry soul!"

"He must have been telling her how he likes to change into sheep du—" Mosy began.

They lost the rest of the sentence in laughter.

All through the fall and into the winter, their evenings continued in a similarly immature manner. They taught their language's slang to one another, and Mosy began to speak with Nuse's accent almost exclusively. As it got colder they had to go to the woods even more frequently for fuel, where they played music with the wind. Mosy made him sing at least one song a day to her, and Nuse, if at first only out of his trader's instincts, likewise demanded songs of her. "They're really very irritating, your songs," he would say. "They run around all day in my head demanding to be heard, and I can't do anything for them." She would make him tell her which one was the worst, and then make him falter through it long after she had already recognized it. Then she'd play it and make him sing until he got it right. Soon she demanded harmonies from him. Her songs still made him remember the ache from his dreams, but when he played them himself, he found they
reawakened some old joy as well.

Between Mosy’s influence at night and Payas’ during the day, he himself picked up their barbed way of conversing—it turned out that he was still young and impressionable, no matter how much dournness he had affected. And once given a style of conversing, Nuse found that he could converse, of his own initiative even. Not that he ever became talkative, but he learned that he lost nothing by giving up a few words into the air. And of course there was a new language to be practiced—Mosy and Payas were fond of switching languages mid-conversation, and they encouraged him to keep up. So it was their rough sense of humor, their music, and the windy ghosts, that drew him into the shepherding life at last.
THREE: The Tongueless Tongue

Not since the gods first came in from the stars had the earth looked so beautiful to Thana and Lesath. The earth was an ocean, back then, except for two white crowns; The gods had come as pure starlight. They had seen many wonders in their wanderings, but there was something about this bright blue dew drop of a planet, the way their light danced and scattered across the waters. They had always looked to vast distance for beauty, but they found and created more in this pebble than they had seen in all the universe. In the white, rainbows winked in beads of mist and crystal feathered from the dust. In the blue, fish flew like confetti and for a moment they saw their own faces reflected on the waves. In the green, trees greeted each other and the moss grew slowly. And everywhere, Thana and Lesath saw the pink and brown tones of their finest creation, their most treasured possession, the very substance of their divinity: mankind.

Their eyes watered at the sight as they waited for their countries, Thanecia and Sath, to rise around the curve of the earth. They saw a wisp of brown smoke first, and they exchanged a worried glance.

“It’s yours,” said Thana. She did not disguise her relief. “North Eastern, just above the desert. Skoor maybe.”

“Skoor!” he wailed. It was his principal city.

Good, she thought, for whatever reason, he’ll have one more reason to be anxious.

“Well come on, let’s go, I have to—“ Thana’s expression of cold regret interrupted him. “What?”

“We’re not going directly there.”
"What?" he repeated.

"They’re waiting for us. Wasat and the Lesser Lethenai."

"Wasat? Wasat is busy burning my country."

Well, we’ll see about that. "Aren’t you afraid to go back? You can hardly fly faster than you can run." Feathers now concealed the ugly gooseflesh flesh of his wings, but mostly soft down.

"No," he said.

"They might kill you."

"They might kill you."

"They’ll be watching the skies for our return," she said. "So we’ll come through the south, where the sky is too low and thin for them to see us enter from far away." And where her star would be nearer to the horizon than his, and therefore more powerful.

Lesath looked again at Sath.

"I could leave you here," she offered, "to drift. You don’t have enough speed to enter on your own."

Lesath and Thana landed in the middle of a snow field, which seemed warm compared to the darkness they’d been traveling through. Still, it was winter on the pole, and the red sun had scarcely risen over the blue ice at the horizon.

"Why are we stopping?" Lesath asked.

"Tell me about Sol," said Thana.

"What?"

"Tell me about Sol while we rest a bit."
Lesath sighed. "What about him?"

"Everything."

"I don’t know any more than you do. No one knows much. He’s a hermit. He’s anti-social."

"That’s what they tell me."

"He has the eyes of the sun and the nose of the wind. The Great Sun-Mover. The Source of all Sight."

"I know his epithets."

"He hasn’t sought a worship in millennia."

"Ah yes." She began to walk in circles around him. "And why then do you think he seeks worshipers now, after so many years? The Himerians, I mean."

"How should I know? He’s not a Lethenai, but he’s not a Nostosian either." The Nostosians abstained from all contact with humans.

"Neither Nostosian nor Lethenian," she repeated. "Like Himeros—I’ve heard they were friends."

Lesath kept his mind perfectly still, like deer before a cougar. If Thana suspected Sol did not seek worshipers, then did she suspect that Sol, as a friend of Himeros, sought Himeros’ successor? But surely she didn’t know the whole of it? "Sol and Himeros came here first, in the Beginning, before everyone else except the Moirai," he said carefully, "So I imagine they were close, after all that time."

"Hmm, yes. And I imagine he didn’t like it much that we killed Himeros."

"No, probably not." Lesath relaxed as Thana’s questions prowled past his secret in pursuit of other game. She’s nowhere near it. She’s merely about to call me a traitor, in
league with Sol. Fair enough, though he hadn’t seen it coming.

“You did not like it either,” she said casually, as though it were of no importance.

_Ah yes, here it is._ “Well, none of us agreed to it, technically.”

“Because no one thought it possible. Or was there some other reason on your part? I know, you thought it was _sufficient_ to capture and exile him, like everyone else. I was overruled, and no one worried much about it. If it were possible at all, I would certainly need their help, would I not?” She smiled faintly. Thana would not have been able to kill Himeros if he had not also had to deal with the Ten attempting to capture him. “But you worried, quietly, to yourself. You really thought I might kill him, and you resented it when I did. Really, you were my first true believer.”

“Where are we going with this?”

“Wasat wants to overthrow the Ten, and particularly me. He wants power. But other gods, even members of the Ten, might help him for many reasons, especially if it involves my death. Revenge for Himeros, perhaps.”

“You think Sol?” Lesath said, doe-eyed. Sol was not a member of the Ten.

“It has crossed my mind. You know what else has crossed my mind?”

“No,” he said in mock suspense.

“You were not protecting me in the Foots. You were protecting Sol.”

“I’ve told you I didn’t want you to injure him so badly that he couldn’t tell us where the Himerians were before they left. It was a mistake, I admit. I couldn’t know he had so much power ready or that he’d use it.” Most gods would not overdraw their power as Sol had because it would incapacitate them for months, thus leaving their countries free for the taking. But Sol had no country.
“Oh, I know you wouldn’t protect Sol for any love of him. But maybe for a higher purpose. Are you superstitious, Lesath?”

“No.”

She continued undeterred. Everyone knew he was. “There’s an old superstition-- or a saying if you like. Perhaps you know it? About the necessity of killing the killer of a god?”

“It is a Moiran Paradox,” he said stiffly, “’A killer is killed by the killing.’ It is not the human ‘eye for an eye.’ It is just what happens, not a call to action.” He stood in front of her, eye to eye. “Now get to the point.”

Thana did not blink. Her tone became brisk. “You can confess now and I will take you back beyond the ends of the earth and leave you to drift. When you grow your feathers back you can escape into exile and never come back. Otherwise I will leave you and come back immediately with those loyal to me—and don’t think that I have only the Ten. We will make you confess, and then we will kill you.” He was supposed to grovel now, and profess his innocence or guilt.

Lesath knew the steps, but he wouldn’t dance. He could only preserve the full force of truthfulness if he played himself. He looked her in the eyes. “I don’t like change, and I don’t like revolutions. I have a higher place in the Ten than Wasat could ever give me in. I have a monopoly on glass and horse trading in Thanecia, plus my ties with other members of the Ten. Furthermore, I hate Wasat and he hates me. He’s been attacking Sath for centuries.”

“Your loyalty is touching.” She’d always lamented the fact that a confederation of omnipotent beings could never fit into a stable hierarchy.
“I’m no mortal, much less one of yours.”

“So your loyalty can be bought?”

“Yes. The price would be astronomical. You know that. And besides, Wasat isn’t exactly trying to buy me. We just traded wounds a few months ago.”

“A ploy.”

Lesath pulled up his tattered sleeve to reveal a long wide scar running on the inside of his forearm. “A ploy,” he repeated. On a human, Thana would have guessed it was about twenty years old and still hurting, but divine flesh healed itself must faster. He must have received this wound just a few weeks before their encounter with Sol. In another few months it would disappear entirely. He didn’t flinch as she rolled the scar between her fingers and pressed under it from the sides. She felt the distinctive prickle of Wasat’s power. “And don’t think he hasn’t got one of his own,” he added.

Thana bit the inside of her cheek, still holding onto Lesath’s arm. Not superstition, not bribery. Blackmail? “Does he have something over you?” she asked, almost kindly.

“No, Thana. And this is getting old.”

She couldn’t think of anything which could threaten Lesath that he couldn’t handle on his own or with the help of the Ten. Wasat attacked Sath all the time, but he never gained much ground. Besides, a little war was always good for the health of the sort of primitive desert worship Lesath cultivated. She sighed and let his arm go. “Wasat is no friend of yours,” she agreed, “and perhaps then you are no traitor.” She paused. “But watch yourself and see that you don’t become one. You’re hiding something.”

Lesath gave her an irritated look and pulled his sleeve back down over his arm. “Great. Now can we go home?”
“No,” she said. “I still need more time to prepare. I was hoping you could tell me something.”

“Sorry I’m not in on the plan.”

“I am sorry,” she called over her shoulder as she walked away from him. She put him from her mind and began pacing in circles, hands behind her back, bare feet shuffling through their own tracks in the snow. She looked up only once. “You better start walking,” she said. It would take him several weeks to get back given the state of his wings. Lesath stalked away from her, lay down in the snow, and prepared to wait at least a day.

*

Sol did not lay long on the forest floor, back on that fall night when the sun rose. Creaking and rustling, tall dark figures carried their god deep into the mountains where the old ponderosas grew. He woke up in a few weeks, bereft of power, flight, and speech. He couldn’t even see his own wings. But as soon as he could, he trekked down the mountain to see what had happened to his cattle. He found them in a forest meadow; they looked up sagely, jaws grinding, and then put their heads back down in the grass. He sighed and called the zephyrs, intending to leave a few behind with the cattle for the winter. But then that new young zephyr who’d been hanging around gave a yodel and the rest took off after him. Sol followed after, but in the end he’d left the cattle in the care of a young aspen. He had not come down from the mountains since.

Now it was spring. The wind did not blow warm, but it no longer bit. The aspen grew long fuzzy flowers in their hair, the pines wore tan caps over tender needles, and grey silk
catkins nestled on the burgundy willows by the river. A few ambitious poplars had unfurled silver thick-veined leaves, and the moss pinks had long since bloomed on the rocky hillsides. It smelled like dirt.

All through the winter, zephyrs brought him snatches of music and conversation from the Foots, and now he’d come to see the two humans the zephyrs were so fond of. One was the girl he’d blinded, the other a Sathen boy. They sat piping and drumming in a small forest canyon. The zephyrs hummed nearby. He smiled faintly. At least her blindness had done her some good. It wasn’t every human who could feel zephyrs, and far fewer whom the zephyrs would approach. But the blind and the young have other sensitivities.

When they finished the song the two talked, but Sol did not understand the words anymore than he could speak them. He used to know all the tongues, but now he had trouble understanding hand signals. It was only recently that the trees managed to teach him to nod and shake his head. He still mixed them up sometimes.

But Sol wasn’t stupid. He couldn’t speak or think in words, but he had his own internal language that everyone has, made of the meaning intended even when a word won’t leave the tip of one’s tongue. Nouns, verbs and often whole sentences turned into memories and half-baked ideas, dark areas he avoided and noisy obsessions that crowded around. His own shorthand of idiosyncratic associations and relationships tied them together in place of prepositions and syntax. But though he could think coherently, he missed talking to himself. He could still talk to himself in the old tongueless tongue, Sigê, which he hadn’t spoken in centuries. But that language had no more words than he did and it never had. His thoughts nagged like phantom limbs, longing for the fleshy solidity
of a word, a saying, and just this moment, an expletive. He thought for a moment it was there, ready to be pronounced. But Sigê came out instead.

Nuse stopped playing and stood.

“What?” said Mosy. Orex, who was humming on her lap, sat up too.

“It’s what I heard that one time, when I saw the spirit.”

She listened for a moment. “But it’s not really hearing is it?”

“No...”

Sol, having understood none of their dialog, watched as the boy stood and turned slowly in place until he was facing Sol.

“I see him, Mosy,” Nuse whispered. “Twenty strides, away no more.”

“What’s he doing?” Mosy said, straining to hear a rustle or a breath. But there was only the granite under her fingers and the wind on her cheeks.

“Looking at us.”

Sol blinked. He’d seen the boy before, back in the fall while he was chasing after the zephyrs. After that, an aspen had tried to tell him that humans could see him, but at the time Sol thought he must have misunderstood her. It was human nature to only see him when he drew their attention. It wasn’t a power he could lose. But now he found his face growing warm and he glanced around for a place to hide. But, no, he wouldn’t hide. He was a god. But it wouldn’t do to tell them that, not in his condition. He cleared his throat and looked directly into the boy’s eyes. Then he sigêned something between a challenge and a question.

The boy’s eyes dropped immediately, though Sol wondered why he didn’t cower or run away.
“What was that?” Mosy asked, wanting to run away herself.

“I think he wants to know what I’m looking at him.”

Mosy heard the soundless sound again, but this time it had a familiar quality—inexplicably, she knew it came from Nuse, just as she knew when he came in the room. She grabbed Nuse’s sweaty hand with hers. “What did you do?!”

“I asked him what he was looking at.”

Sol’s eyes widened and he inhaled like he was about to say something. Nothing came. Then he realized the implications of the boy sigêning.

With dread, Mosy heard a rustle and she squeezed Nuse’s hand. No sooner had he squeezed back than the spirit was standing before them, hardly a foot away. Nuse jumped inwardly, his heart beating on his throat.

This boy must be the Sathen Himerian they spoke of. But he was too young! Himeros would have been long dead by the time this boy could walk. Sol bit down on his hope, hard, but he could scarcely stop himself from asking if the boy had seen Himeros.

A face flashed into Nuse’ mind: Curly hair, mottled in brown and brass like a hare in its summer coat. A long twisted beard of the same. Copper skin. Big eyebrows like streaks of charcoal. A wide smile beginning on his face. He’d laugh at pain or shout with joy with that same smile, and unconsciously Nuse’s own mouth moved to match it. Then for an instant, Nuse saw shining wings rising from behind the man’s back. They flickered in and out of his vision, as though they did not fully belong to this dimension. To look at them for long was to fall into them and see galaxies collide and stars begin. The feathers quaked slightly in the breeze and amber sparks danced across like a thousand suns.
“Wings, I see wings, Mosy,” Nuse said as the image flashed out, familiar as any dream, “in my head—like a dream or something I imagined, except—except it isn’t mine, I mean it didn’t come from me.”

“Gods have wings,” Mosy breathed.

“Who is he?” Nuse asked, and then sent his fading déjà vu.

Sol felt hope wriggle more forcefully in his breast—there was recognition. Vague recognition, certainly, but that didn’t surprise him. After all, gods took innumerable forms before humans, and the boy had probably never seen Himeros the way Sol and the other gods did. Himeros had probably looked like a human, so Sol sigêned his general idea of man. It died in the air. Not solid enough for Sigê, evidently. All right.

_A man, this one clearly not a god. Dirty and stooped with a scar on one cheek. Then a woman, wearing a red dress and carrying a hoe. Then another man, younger, with pale hair like the folks in the eastern tundra. And another and another. A few Nuse recognized from the Sathens and the Footish herders, but most he’d never seen. Men, women, children, each as unique and individual as the last._

Mosy neither saw nor understood what Nuse did, but she sensed something that made her quietly reverent. Half an hour of human faces went by and the three of them hardly noticed. That was always the problem with Sigê. To speak of the general, one had to speak of the million specifics.

_By now a sizeable crowd of people had gathered in Nuse’s mind, milling around on a barren plain, for lack of any place else. Then great amber wings rose from behind each man, woman, and child. Feathers flew like a startled flock of pidgeons, and the people looked at Nuse solemnly, their faces as mortal and ungodly as they had been before._
Their wings seemed cut out and pasted on, unlike the fleeting yet organic extension of the god. But yet the image portended something beyond simple sight.

Sol had to sit down. He hoped the boy knew what he meant because by now he himself couldn’t remember what the image symbolized. Symbolic images, like words, were difficult to keep in his head. And sigêning things of the imagination was always exhausting. That’s why the gods had created man instead of just talking about it, or more precisely, instead of just sigêning about it. Sol rested his head on his knees and closed his eyes.

“What was that?” Mosy asked finally.

“Wings. Thousands of people with wings.”

Mosy frowned, as puzzled as Nuse as to what it might mean.

“I think he went to sleep,” Nuse said after a while.

“Sounds like it,” Mosy replied.

The spirit looked vulnerable in sleep, but what harm could come to a spirit? So Nuse and Mosy left him there and hastened home. It was already late

*  
The sun skimmed across the ice on the horizon but rose no further in the reddened sky. The day passed.

Lesath stood in Thana’s way. “What are you thinking about?”

She walked around him and didn’t answer.

“Look, why don’t you go and bring the rest of the Ten here and we can go back together in full force? Like you were going to do before, when you said they’d kill me.”
She waved aside the possibility with her hand. “That was just a threat.” She was tired. “What if they’ve changed sides while we were gone? What if they tip Wasat off? What if they catch me on the way? At least here we’re safe for the present.”

“Those are the risks you take. That’s nothing. Any human would—“

“Don’t compare our lives to theirs.”

Lesath took a step back in spite of himself.

“They only risk the inevitable. They die no matter what they do. To risk a divine life is to risk eternity. We don’t have to die.”

“You’re afraid, aren’t you,” he said slowly, “You’re afraid they’ll kill you. You’re afraid of dying.”

Thana looked up in surprise. “Of course I am.”

“Awe, Thana,” he said, throwing his arms up. He almost wished he could tell her his secret. “That’s why you wasted all that time interrogating me. You were stalling. It was an excuse not to go back. You didn’t have any real reason to suspect me.”

She stopped and met his eyes. “Don’t be so familiar,” she said quietly. She began walking again. “You are hiding something and you’re only lucky that it does not concern me just now.”

“I already told you everything. I confessed. I was stealing your precious Himerians, so spangle me.” He laughed.

“Gods die. We could die. It’s not a time to laugh.” And you’re not afraid, she added privately—that irritated her the most perhaps.

“Well look now,” he said kindly. “Just because you could kill Himeros doesn’t mean they could do the same to you—you’re different gods.” And besides—I’ve been meaning
to ask you this—Himeros is dead, yes, but who’s to say what happened to his star?” He spoke recklessly now, giddy with visions of his city burning brighter by the second.

She shook her head. That explained it. He was so afraid of death he was delusional. “His star is gone, Lesath.”

“Interstellar debris, a nebula, a black hole in the way, anything. If it did go out it would take millennia before the final light of his star reached us. So it has to be something blocking it whether it’s out or not.”

“Well it’d be quite a coincidence. He dies, his star goes out. Besides, we have no precedence for what happens when a god dies. Our stars aren’t like other stars. Our starlight follows us. If we die who’s to say that it wouldn’t bend away from us?”

“The fact is that we don’t know!”

“That’s no reason to be optimistic—Mortals have always been terrified of what they don’t know and rightly so.”

“What, comparing us to mortals now?”

“And so what about Himeros’ star! What good is our star to us if we ourselves perish?”

Lesath shook his head. “Thana, it’s not for us to be afraid. It is for us to protect our mortals because we’re fearless.” Lesath spoke with idealistic conviction, almost in mockery of Thana, who often spoke that way. “You don’t know what’s going on in Thane just you didn’t see smoke. Your mortals, your children, as you are so fond of calling them, could be dying in hordes. Plagues, battles, blight, starvation—they don’t give off smoke. And you won’t go back to save them on account of a little risk.”

She looked down and didn’t answer. Why did she allow him to speak to her this way?
“Besides, tell me truly, do you have any evidence whatsoever that they are waiting for you or us? Do they even know that we were gone? It was only nine months we were gone I’d guess, and I’m sure Sol wiped himself out doing it. He might not have even been able to tell anyone, if he even wanted to in the first place.”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t know.” But I don’t want to die, Lesath. She stared into space along time, a bit of moisture at her nose threatening to freeze.

“Do it for them,” Lesath repeated.

Lesath watched thoughts flicker across her face: first the other worldly gaze and tightened brow of mortal fear, then the parted lips of distraction, and then an unreadable stillness. “Yes,” she said finally, “We have to go back.”

“Allright,” Lesath said with a triumphant sigh of relief.

*

That night, Mosy, Payas, and Nuse played music around the fire, which had become a nightly occurrence ever since Payas had found out Nuse could play. Nuse and Mosy were drumming, while Payas played the single-stringed bass gourd. They sang “the Ballad of Pali,” but this time the god was neither a little man nor a fire breathing horse:

I forbid you shepherds all,
That graze your goats down here,
To travel up Wooly Mount,
For young Pali is there.

None that go up Wooly Mount,
But they leave him a pledge,
Either their jackets of wool,
Or else their maidenhoods

Thana wore her jacket grey,
A song on her lips,
And she’s gone up Wooly Mount,
And left her sheep astray.

She’d not sung a single note,
One but then was two,
For up then came young Pali,
Sang, “lady sing no more.”
"Why come you up Wooly Mount,  
Without command from me?"
"I'll come and go," young Thana said,  
"And ask no leave of thee."

Pali and Thana they sang,  
Like no one had sung before,  
Pali and Thana they loved,  
Like no one had loved before.

They sang grass into goats,  
And dogs into men,  
They loved with all their lives,  
Yet never set the sun,

Thana wore her jacket grey,  
A song on her lips,  
And she's gone on down to Thane,  
To find her baby's father.

Thana sang into the sky,  
Pali sang in reply,  
"Quickly run to the Four Stones,  
And pull me out from them."

They will turn me in your arms,  
To a goat or a snake,  
But hold me tight and fear not,  
I am your baby's father.

Thana cried, "This cannot be,  
For I bear his child,  
Tell to me, Pine Tree," she said,  
"How can I go to him?"

They will turn me in your arms,  
Into a lion bold,  
But hold me tight and fear not,  
And you will love your child.

Nuse had always liked the song, but the rhythm Mosy played sounded like a startled heart beat. It made him uneasy. The catkins flew around them in the firelight like stars. Or like feathers. He remembered the winged humans—were they gods who had changed to men, just as the Pali had changed to a goat? Next their feathers would fall out in handfuls and fly out into the sky without them; the amber stars would fall and grow dark.

That was what the song was about wasn't it? To change from one thing to another—to lose one's self, to die, to turn to stone? "Pali dies in all his lives," the saying went. The song continued:

They will turn me in your arms,  
Into a beating drum,  
Clap your hands and fear not,  
It's only me the same,

They will turn me in your arms,  
Into a dancing crowd,  
Get up then and join them,  
It's me you're dancing with.

Yates 84
They will turn me in your arms,  
To nothing but a song,  
But sing with me and rejoice,  
For then I will be free,

I will turn me in your arms,  
Into a naked man,  
But cloak me in your mantle,  
And keep me out of sight,

In the middle of the night,  
Thana sang to Stone,  
She heeded what he did say,  
And young Pali she did win.

“Come to me Pali,” she said,  
“In any shape you like,  
I will love you just the same  
And we shall love our child.”

Come in any shape you like! As if it didn’t matter! The firelight drew shadows on their faces and made Payas and even Mosy look old and hard. Was there nothing that lasted? Nothing that just stayed the same? The gods, he supposed, unless it was true they could turn into men.

It was cloudy and it was the new moon. As the fire burnt down the dark drew nearer, formless and opaque except for the occasional glint of a goat’s eye. Nuse wondered what was out there, just beyond their circle of light. Flickering orange and creeping darkness. He stumbled in the rhythm but made it to the end.

“Nuse, you’re doin’ good these days,” said Payas when they finished. “Playing with Mosy is no easy feat you know.” He winked at his daughter.

They went inside. Payas had made Nuse a bed which fit underneath the tall bed where Payas slept. At night they pulled it out between Mosy’s bed and the fire. Nuse, who’d slept on the ground all his life, thought this a wondrous novelty. Momos had a bed, of course, but Nuse’s acquaintance with it had been limited to washing its sheets. Now he lay still, listening to Payas’ breathing.

“He’s asleep.” Mosy whispered.
Nuse turned over and saw her eyes glittering sightlessly in the dark. "I remembered what the wings reminded me of."

"That's why you fumbled, right?"

He laughed softly through his nostrils, but couldn't find a smile. "I have this one dream where there's this orange light, the same color as the stars on the wings I told you—that's what reminded me, it's such a strange color. It's beautiful, but then it starts to flicker." He spoke softly, like he was talking to himself. But she could hear anything, no matter how quiet. "God, I hate it when it flickers." He laughed again. "I don't know why."

Mosy reached out and found his knuckles curled around the edge of the bed. She walked over them with her fingers and rapped them with her thumb before pulling back. They had a whole language of touch as expressive as any look. "Tomorrow," Mosy whispered, "you can ask the—"

Payas groaned in his sleep and turned over.

Nuse gave her a g’night tap on the elbow and they fell silent for the night.

"I think it's Sol. It has to be," said Mosy. They were on their way to the forest. "You said his hair was yellow-white but he wasn't old. What kind of mortal looks like that?"

"Mosy, lots of mortals have hair that color. Whole countries. It's called blond. You've just never been out of these measly hills."

"And the eyes? You said—"

"You had eyes like that. And besides he's got no power, no wings. He's empty, I can feel it. And besides, I never said I thought he was human. I think he's a spirit."
Sol, as Mosy now called him, met them in the canyon, looking relieved that they’d come back. He waved and sat on beside them on the boulder, almost familiarly. He sent Nuse a questioning feeling, which Nuse took to refer to winged people. Nuse nodded and then sat in silence, lost in concentration. He sent a memory of falling asleep to signify “dream,” but the dream itself was more elusive. To send a feeling he was having at the moment was simply a matter of letting go. But if the feeling had already passed, he had to find it again first. It was like catching a feather on your finger, and then balancing it there long enough to blow it away again. It wasn’t until Mosy began drumming and singing “the Ballad of Pali” that the dream came. He opened himself without restraint and let it rush through him like a hurricane towards Sol.

*Light. Sweet as the girl’s voice, but with a volatile flicker timed to the drum beats. Everything will stay as it is, the light whispered treacherously. Like his own starlight whispered, Sol thought, but cheapened and different. The boy of course, knew nothing of the whispers of the stars, but—the light deepened to red-orange. A rumbling in its rays and under his feet—*

Sol fell to his knees and stumbled up just as quickly. Mosy dropped the drum. A bird whistled. A zephyr rumbled restlessly. Nuse thought he might like to take a nap.

Sol sat back down on the rock. This boy certainly had some mean nightmares. Painstakingly, he sent the boy images of a flower, which steeped in boiling water would provide dreamless sleep. That was what Sol did to keep them away.

Nuse frowned at this, and sent an image of the amber-winged god. Then a simple one of orange light. Then the feeling of familiarity. And a question.
Sol didn’t know what to make of that. Was there some hidden syntax there? Did the boy see a connection? Or was he asking if there was? Sol didn’t know why there would be. He’d think about it later. He didn’t want to think about it now. Changing the subject, he tried to ask Nuse who had taught him Sige. But he had no idea how one went about teaching Sige, and the question came out vague and went unanswered. Then the boy and girl left, sigêning something about dinner, and would he like to join them? There was also some question as to whether he needed to eat in general. Sol declined to answer and took his leave.

*  

Clouds flocked to where Lesath stood in the field outside of Skoor. The battle was over and it was quiet because the Wasaecians had put the wounded out of their misery. But at least the smoke from the burning farms gave him something to work with. As he dictated, each particle of smoke rose through the cold clouds above, calling moisture to their surfaces until they grew heavy enough to fall back down on the flames from which they’d come.

The siege was far from over, however—Wasaecian soldiers were already marching towards the city gates with a ram. He called lightning down but it slid around them, repelled by the power of Wasat which ran in their veins. He was about to try another one when he saw a flash in the clouds over the desert, which—since he had control of the weather system— he knew could not be lighting. At his command the clouds hurried out of his sight and he saw not just the black and orange wings of Wasat but some fifteen other gods about a mile up in the air over the distant desert. The number of gods was
staggering. They must really in fact intend to kill him. He wondered when he’d become so unpopular. But despite their superior number and his injured state, the heart of Lesath’s territory was not a wise place to carry out such an attempt—here his power had built up over the centuries in every pebble and blue bottle fly, in every grain of wheat and in each of his Sathen worshipers. But the gods did not fly towards him. In fact they were diving and swooping in a circle around a goddess, whom he recognized in the next instant as Thana. She’d flown him here and then left for the safety of her own country. But she hadn’t flown fast enough. Someone must have seen Thana towing Lesath towards Sath and alerted Wasat, who had long since leapt at the opportunity to attack an unguarded Skoor. So now Wasat and his allies in the Lesser Lethenai had Thana where they wanted her: far from Thanecia, and weak and tired from her journey, while her nearest ally, Lesath—never known for his loyalty—was wounded and busy defending his own city of Skoor.

Wasat and the Lesser Lethenai did not use elemental powers: the wind in its eagerness was likely to rip her out of their grasp and allow her to escape, and lightning would merely energize a god; the powers of the earth lay too far below them to be of use, and the sea too far away. So the gods let their power flow from them in the raw. Sparks curved from their hands like the arms of a galaxy, cutting black swaths across the grey. Nebulas of burning colors shimmered in their path. Thana’s chest shuddered at the sight; they looked like dead stars. She thought of what mortal’s called “a noble death,” and she wondered if she might at least have that, whatever it was. Then she lost herself in the rhythm of drawing her power and spitting it out in silver stars.
From the ground, Lesath watched as Wasat and the Lesser Lethenai drove Thana towards the desert floor. Lesath cursed, hurled a distracted and ineffectual bolt at the Wasaecians, and turned towards the battle over the desert. If he involved himself, they would certainly try to kill him as well, which, however unsuccessful it might be, would probably hurt and might cost him Skoor if not the entire country. He remembered the old Thana for a moment, the gay quirky one. If he let them do as they pleased they might let him keep his country, and if he helped them he retain some of his trading advantages.

Till this point Thana had blocked all direct strikes, but then one of Wasat’s larger stars hit her square in the back, between her wings. She dropped down without a sound, arms held straight out from her sides. Lighting leapt from Lesath’s fingertips and caught her in mid air. For a moment she disappeared in blue tinged whiteness, and then she burst upwards, wings pumping mightily and stars flying not just from her fingers but from her feet, knees, elbows, and hair. Lesath flew haltingly over the desert, kicking the ground every so often to stay aloft. Soon he was throwing stars from directly beneath them, so that the fifteen gods had to fight two fronts. Despite all appearances, Lesath was the most powerful god among them, for he fought on his own land. Though he himself was flightless, many of the stars that flew from him were the size of small boulders, instead of the pebbles and orange sized stars of the other gods. Nihal and two others broke the circle and fled from one of Lesath’s larger stars, while the goddess Deneb struggled to fly with a half scorched wing. Only Wasat’s dog-sized stars were any match for Lesath’s; he too had a piece of his land here in the shape of his troops.

Meanwhile Thana threw her own stars on top of Deneb’s first wound, searing the
flesh down to the bone. Deneb fell and three of her allies flew to catch her. The four of them fled. Thana burst through the hole in ranks at blinding speed, headed towards Thanecia. Wasat sent an arm of stars after her, but Lesath struck him first from the soles of his feet to his knees. Wasat’s stars went sideways and hit one of his own allies, who fled wounded. That left only Wasat and one goddess, Gomeisa. Now that Thana was out of reach, the two turned on Lesath. He matched them blow for blow until Gomeisa surprised him with a boom of high-pressured air which pushed Lesath against the ground. In itself it was nothing; its intent was to give Wasat the instant he needed to deal a crippling blow. Lesath exhaled sharply at the ground and sand swarmed up into Wasat’s face. Buzzing, it burrowed into his eyes and skin, leaving pin drops of blood all over his face. As it ran grittily through his veins, Wasat hesitated but then drew his hand swiftly back for the final blow.

But then he found his arm turning back farther than he’d intended, twisting around to a sickening degree. Thana was behind him, his fist in her hand, her lavender eyes calm, though her arm shook with the effort. Lesath leapt up. Gomeisa calculated the odds and fled. All was silent but for the rustle of Wasat sweating sand. He was alone now, with two powerful gods whom he’d just attacked. Thana laughed. “Go home, Wasat,” she said quietly. He wrenched his hand away and disappeared into the thunderheads.

It rained in torrents over Skoor and lightning struck all around. Though it only hit a single man, the Wasaecian soldiers felt a leakage in their breasts as their god left, just as the bane of any soldier, dysentery, was settling in. They would stay a half-hearted week longer, while Lesath picked them off as he chose, mostly through sickness and the
insidious festering of minor wounds. In the dirty darkness of the Skoorian streets, the quarreling ceased between the city-dwellers and the farmers who’d come in with animals. They whispered to one another: “Our god has returned.”

*

The forest was noisy with new rustling leaves. Mosy and Nuse had persuaded Payas to collect wood with them. It was Nuse’s idea. For one thing, he didn’t like sneaking off all the time. For another, he wanted to see if Payas could see him. Silently Sol appeared at Nuse’s elbow, making him drop the wood he’d collected. Sol gave a questioning glance towards Payas, who was bending down some distance away. Nuse shrugged. Sol cleared his throat significantly.

“Did you say something?” Payas asked.

“No,” said Nuse.

Payas stood and turned towards Nuse and Sol. He stretched his back. “Well I think this is enough for one load, don’t you?”

“Sure.”

Sol looked at Nuse strangely, almost accusingly, and then disappeared into the trees.

Sol hiked up the forest ridge with furious energy. The aspen was wrong after all. The man had not seen him; Sol had not lost the ability to remain invisible to humans. Except with this boy. True, the young might catch a glimpse of a god by accident—only because they paid attention to everything and expected nothing—and even an adult might in the moments between sleeping and waking. But they would forget it as soon as they blinked.
But this boy looked at him like he was any other thing in the world. Sol wished the Moirai were here. They would know what this was all about, though they might not tell him. He should have gone to see him about his own nightmares along time ago. That flower he’d told the boy about wasn’t working anymore, and he’d dreamed again last night. Of yellow light, not orange. Yellow like his star. It flickered, and he felt like he had on that night on the Thanecian Plain when he’d lost Himeros’ trail. Then there were Lethenai and the usual chaos of dreams ensued. But now the sunlight on the ridge top had a chill to it.

“But what if I’m crazy? What if I’m dreaming? What if he’s not real?” Nuse wailed.

“How can he be ‘not real’?” said Mosy.

“No one can see him, Mosy.”

“I can hear him.”

“But he doesn’t speak! How do you know you’re not just hearing the wind in the trees?”

“I know when some one is there and when they’re not. Besides, he coughs and clears his throat all the time.”

“Hm,” Nuse grunted, unconvinced.

Sol was waiting for them when they got there. Nuse sat down glumly, shooting untrusting glances towards Sol. Mosy sat down and reached out a hand to where she heard Sol breathing. Sol had been about to ask Nuse about his dreams, but he now he watched her curiously. When her hand reached his face she hesitated, as though asking for permission. When he didn’t stop her, she traced his features with both hands. Then
she smiled and withdrew her hands. “Thank you,” she said solemnly. Sol laughed, and unconsciously mouthed her words.

She turned to Nuse. “He’s real,” she said simply.

Nuse said something inaudible, feeling foolish.

“I knew you knew. Are you going to tell him your dream?”

“I can’t remember it,”

“Then let’s play.”

Mosy sang and the zephyrs hummed. Sol sat, frowning, until the girl stopped and pushed her drum into his lap, breaking his reverie. He looked at the boy questioningly, who shrugged and pantomimed drumming. Sol peered at the drum from various angles. He knew about rhythms. He knew the phases of the moon and the path of the sun. He knew the patter of the rain, and the flapping of a gull. He knew the crashing of the waves and the beating of a heart. With exactitude, he knew why they were, and how they would be. But of music he knew nothing. He did his best. His time was, in fact, perfect. Mosy was impressed. But when she changed from one part to another, or made the music swell or die, Sol wondered why. In fact, he couldn’t figure out why they played music at all.

Mosy began a new song and the bad feeling Nuse woke up with returned. He embraced it fiercely and sent it on its way.

*The Thanecian Plain. Lethenai behind him. Darkness ahead. His thoughts came amid static, and light flickered on his eyelids.*

*FLY! let’s fly!*

*Dancing on the edge of the night!*

*Teasing the shadows! Vanguard of light!*
Float up! Float out! Fleet foot past the stars!

You don't have to die, no you don't have to die.

You can go forever if you fly, if you fly, if you fly.

Out run the shadow, catch up to your light.

Ever life, ever more,

Looking backwards, never fore.

It's fly or die now, fly or die now, fly or—

It's fly, It's fly, It's fly—

But he still had things to do, damn it.

Men are being torn into body and soul.

The stars are fading, and the darkness catching up.

And what was there for him there, but fly, fly, fly?

Man can't live on starlight alone, you know. Of course not, and neither can gods. And men don't live on starlight at all, dummy. They keep some secretive secret from us, some elixer of death. For yes they die, but they also live. Lithe as light, now, he could change now, and—

It's fly or die now, fly or die now, fly or—

Sol stood, poised for flight. Mosy looked about ready to run too, but Nuse put his hand on her shoulder and she stayed. The zephyrs curled around Sol, and he sat down again. Himeros had escaped! He's fled the earth! The gods live undying! And then—This is Himeros' memory! He looked at the boy. What are you doing with Himeros' memories? Sol didn't know how to ask. He rested his forehead in his hands, breathing hard, looking up at Nuse. Nuse stared back silently.
Thana closed her eyes for a moment while she felt the wound in her back with her hand. “I didn’t expect that, Lesath,” she said finally.

“Risk everything to save it.” Lesath said, examining his own wings. “Not too bad.”

“You could have died.”

He shrugged. The desert floor had turned to glass with the heat and chemicals from above. It cracked underneath him as he sat down to examine his other wounds.

“I almost died,” Thana said.

Lesath shook his head. “Na. You weren’t anywhere near. Don’t you remember Himeros? He was on the ground for hours before—“

“Do you really think he died?”

Lesath started. “Of course he died; I saw the ashes. I only said maybe his star didn’t go out. It’s possible, is all. Who really knows anything. Shouldn’t you be getting back to your own country now? They might come back.”

“They won’t. Too many wounds to nurse,” she said with some pride.

He laughed. Yes it was good that she was still around, strutting her power. He doubted they would come back either; if they even contemplated another attempt they would want a fresh start.

“We work well together,” she added more modestly. She sat down beside him and was silent for a long time. “You’re different, aren’t you Lesath?” she said finally.

“Of course,” Lesath said. “I’m special.”

“You’ve never been afraid of me have you?”
Lesath eyed her warily.

"The other gods have been afraid of me since I killed Himeros. But you never changed. You’re like you always were."

"I’m afraid of you," he said unconvincingly. It was true at least that he didn’t like the way the conversation was going.

"I’ve always thought you were very clever at hiding your fear, when in fact you are only very unclever at faking your fear." She stood and began pacing. "And the Himerians. You’re obsessed with them. Everyone knows they can’t be used like other abandoned worshipers, yet you follow them around like they hold some promise. Or like you’re worried about them. As though they won’t die out in a few years by themselves anyway... You don’t think he flew back to his star. You don’t think Himeros is dead. You think he is alive and well. And Sol—Sol was his closest friend. He probably knows where Himeros is and you were following him hoping he’d lead you to him. Himeros, like any of us, could have flown away in the blink of an eye, perhaps behind a distraction of some sort. Even when he was already down on the ground. He would have lost quite a bit of flesh, but he would have if he could. But it was your job, and yours alone to watch his every muscle, paralyze his every move, while we were tending to the fire. A single moment of inattention could have allowed him to escape, you knew that. So you must have seen his every muscle fail, you who had your eyes open the whole time."

"Yes and I saw him die," he said half-heartedly, just in case.

"No," she said, her voice nearly inaudible, "No god has ever died. You closed your eyes. You let him go. You helped him fake his own death." She felt light, like waking to hot sunshine in the middle of a nightmare.
Lesath looked at her coolly and shrugged. If the gods smoked he would have taken a drag on his cigarette and put it out in the sand. “Yes,” he said.

At the same time as the old friendly immortality surged in, Thana saw all her power run away from her in rivulets, leaving her ridiculous as a naked human being. “You’re on his side!”

He shook his head. “No.”

“Then why—?”

He shrugged again and lay back flat in the broken glass. She stood over him for a moment before she made a frustrated sound and kicked the sand. He laughed, closed his eyes, and remembered:

“Blink damn you,” Himeros said, for Lesath’s ears alone. From where he lay in the burnt grass, he raised his head enough to look Lesath in the eyes.

Lesath smiled and Himeros smiled back, almost apologetically. “If you let them they will kill me.”

Lesath said nothing. Himeros had been talking to him all morning, and probably to the ten other Lethenai who surrounded him with fire in their hands. But Lesath was tired and irritated now, and it was hard to keep from answering.

“You are afraid of Thana, who wins her worshipers forever. She moves swiftly to your borders. But she never wins mine; not even in the heart of her own city. Capture me and let me show you how, or kill me and watch her take you town by town.”

“I don’t need you,” Lesath said, and cursed himself for it.

“They will kill me,” Himeros said eagerly. It was probably the first word he’d heard.
all day. “Will you watch?”

Himeros did not appeal to any pity of Lesath’s, but to the fact that Lesath did actually want to turn his head away, as though the mere sight could turn him into stone. *A god could only be killed by the sight of a god dying, humans said. Of course that was just man’s clumsy way of saying that a god could not be killed. Humans had always liked word games, they were always complicating thing...* He laughed that he should even have remembered such a saying.

“They laughed too, the Moirai,” said Himeros, “You know what they said.”

Lesath remembered three pairs of chapped and wrinkled divine lips: *Guard your eyes,* they cackled, *the gods are dying.* No one ever knew whether they spoke of the present or the future; the Moirai had never fully mastered the verb tenses. But they always laughed after particularly devastating prophecies.

“Let me go,” said Himeros.

“Shut up.”

“They will kill me.”

Iron fused all around the Ten, sucking up their air like a flame. They’d seen it before. Not in their own stars of course, but in the soulless generation which came after and died like flies. Those stars produced the stuff of the universe, first light things, and then heavier. Iron was always the last because it was too heavy for them and would cause them to collapse into themselves. But this could not be happening here on the Thanecian Plain, or else the earth would have long since been destroyed. Himeros must be crying out in Sigê; this must be what Himeros felt. It could perhaps be a memory of one of the soulless stars, but it seemed too crisp to be a memory, too intimate to be a soulless star.
“Let me go,” said Himeros.

“I can’t. I won’t.”

Cheek to the ground, Himeros nodded solemnly like a token of honesty. “You can. You will.”

A bead of sweat rolled down Lesath’s cheek and lodged in the dimple at the corner of his mouth. He caught it with his tongue. The heat was rising. “The others—”

“Will think I am dead. They will leave and then you can have me.”

“You won’t give yourself to me.”

Himeros smiled. “I didn’t say I wouldn’t give chase. No wait— I swear you will not hear of me in your land or any other’s, even if you don’t catch me.”

“You are that beaten?” Lesath felt the crush of the air as iron broke and contracted to an impossibly small point, at an impossibly high temperature, at an amount of pressure which could only be maintained for a few fragile moments before—

Himeros shrugged. “I am dying, Lesath.” He said it again, this time for all to hear: “I am dying.”

Lesath saw the truth in the god’s eyes. He looked at Thana and saw murder in hers. Himeros smiled. “So guard your eyes.”

Lesath blinked and saw the great flash in red through his eye lids. Blinking was such a small, quick thing that there was no time to know why exactly he’d chosen to, or whether indeed he had chosen anything at all. When he opened his eyes he saw only the smoky shadows of the Lethenai across from him in the circle.

The smoke cleared to reveal Thana holding glowing ember between her bare fingers. “Himeros’ flesh,” she said, turning for all to see, “A god is dead!” There was no denying
it. They felt cold and spent, with a new dread in their chests, dark and inexorable as the
dark wound left behind by a star. “An unfortunate accident, though we all knew or
suspected it was possible.” No one misunderstood her. Nothing had happened that she
hadn’t intended. “But will we tell them that it was an accident? Will any god, Lethenian
or otherwise, respect us, fear us, obey us, for an accident? And did we, in fact, really
make such a mistake?” She waited. “No, we did not.” The others were already agreeing
with her, agreeing with anything she said, though they did not yet say it out loud.

But then Lesath heard bitter laughter, for his ears alone: “Did you really think you
could kill me?” Lesath whirled around, but there was no one there. Yet Himeros’ words
rang truer than everything else Himeros had said, and Lesath’s earlier terror that a god
could die faded instantly into humiliation. Thus he had a new problem: not that a god was
dead, but that he, Lesath, had let him get away. Naturally, he did not share this
information at the time. He owed Thana nothing. Himeros would soon turn up and make
a fool of her.

But Himeros had abided by his promise to disappear, for the gods had not seen a trace
of him since that day on the Thanecian Plain. Soon it was too late for Lesath to tell
anyone; Himeros had faked his death too well for anyone—and least of all Thana—to
believe he was alive: his star was gone, blocked by some obstruction, and his “last”
sigêned cries still echoed in their minds. And besides, Lesath’s position as one of the Ten
was rather agreeable.

Now in the desert Lesath told Thana enough so that she could not doubt his motives.
When he finished she stared at him with a look of disgust. “Well they always said the
only one more superstitious than the Sathens was their god,” she said.
“Well you all saw him ‘die’ and look what’s happening. The Moirai are right; you’re not dying, but you were falling apart there on the pole. Meanwhile the rest are gearing up for a divine world war. But now look, you’re a goddess again. You’re invincible. You don’t have to worry about dying anymore. If you couldn’t kill Himeros certainly no one can kill you.”

And better yet, Thana thought, she had just survived an attempt on her life. It was almost as good as rising from the dead, as all the human’s imaginary gods always did. She knew now that Wasat wouldn’t have succeeded in killing her, but the rest didn’t. The rest were running scared—Wasat, the Lesser Lethenai, the Ten—while she knew something that gave her strength. “Who else knows?”

“You and me.”

“What about Sol?”

“Ah Sol, yes.” That was what had tipped her off in the end. “I don’t know if he knows or not. He knows Himeros got farther than the ashes. Remember how I, er, volunteered to watch the ashes to see that nothing strange happened? Sol came the next afternoon, sniffing.”

“His zephyrs? They’re real?”

“Yes of course. He created them from sunlight, they say.”

“I thought they were just a myth.”

“No. Anyway, he picked up a trail along the ground and followed it all the way across Thanecia. My guess is that that was Himeros’ trail.”

“And at the end of it?”

“Nothing. Sol burst up through the sky but didn’t go any further. I figured Himeros
had left the planet, but I can't believe that he doesn't plan on coming back. After that Sol just wandered around with his cattle. But the Moirai said that the sun shines on a dying god—which could refer to Himeros—so when I heard that he was asking about Himerians in Sath I thought maybe he was looking for him, or looking for this supposed successor. I was going to find out how much he knew, and more importantly, prevent him from telling anyone else. But by that time he'd already gone into Thanecia. Of course I didn't want you to capture him either, so I prevented you.”

He did not apologize, Thana noted, but she was no longer in the position to demand it of him.

“Well so what now?” he said after awhile. “Will you help me capture Sol?”

“Yes,” she agreed, “to see what he knows.”

“And then it will just be us two that know this secret while the others grow only weaker in their fear. Will we rule side by side, you and I? Will my people call you the Lady of the Desert?”

“And you my jester?” she said with little mirth. But though he'd said it mockingly, she realized now that he was indeed her peer, equal to her in power and knowledge. And it was only just now that they were equal; before he'd been her bona fide superior, looking down on her, watching her strut her empty power. So he would have to be cut in on the deal; she would have to tell him at least in part of the plans already boiling in her head.
FOUR: The Soul Thief

Summer came. Burgundy seed heads nodded and rolled atop long green stems of grass. It was morning.

"Now try to remember this is not a hill top summoning, you hear?" Payas said.

"I know," said Mosy.

"The city clerics are in the Foots this time, and we don’t want to attract their attention."

"I know."

"It’s just three days that we have to do it."

"I know. It’ll be fine."

"All right," Payas said, somewhat satisfied. "Morning, Nuse. Hope you slept well."

"Why?"

"Well it’s Quartzema."

"Oh right…What’s so hard about it?"


"We don’t sleep for three nights," Nuse repeated.

"In Thane," Mosy said, "they beat themselves to stay awake."

"Mosy…" said Payas.

"What? That’s what you said!"

"You’re scaring him."

She turned in Nuse’s general direction and rolled her blind eyes. "They do though,
seriously.” She shielded her mouth with one hand and whispered, “We just take naps. But we have to play practically the whole time. And the same song.” She groaned. “That song would put me to sleep on its own.”

“Three songs, actually,” amended Payas, “One for each day.”

“They’re all the same…” Mosy groaned.

“It’s just three days,” said Payas.

“And on the fourth, I’ll put down my pipes gladly.”

“The fourth day we get to sleep,” Payas explained. He tucked his flute into his coat and took a hand drum from the wall. “Here,” he said to Nuse, “We’ll switch off as we go.”

“He can sing too—we could do three part!”

“Mosy—” began Payas.

“All right, well, we could sing unison. I know, I know, the traditionals.”

“Mosy tends to get ‘inspired’ when we do harmony,” Payas explained to Nuse. “And, traditionally, the traditionals are done in unison.”

“But I still don’t see why he can’t play the bass drum, it’s got such a better feel.”

“Euenos specifically requested that we not use it. Last year he said, it made it hard to hear the recitation of the Truths. Because you played so ‘loud.’” Actually, she had only syncopated the beat a little. Euenos had noticed something and volume was the best complaint he could think of.

“Oh, right.” Mosy stifled a commemorative laugh. Payas shot her a look and shoved the small drum into Nuse’s hands. “All you have to do is play the same thing over and over again.”
“Have I heard the song?”

“It’s the Song of Giving,” said Mosy. “We played it a couple of days ago.”

“You play that all day?” The melody was pleasant enough, even relaxing, but rather repetitive.

“’Fraid so,” said Mosy.

“Just play on one and three,” Payas said.

They went down to the village and joined the crowd gathered at the square of the Four Stones. At seven feet tall and three feet wide, the Stones towered over them as they walked through. Mosy leaned against them like old friends but Nuse did not touch them. Except for one flat slide facing the center, the Stones were naturally shaped. According to Footish folklore, the properly trained eye could see truth itself in the veins and mica, and those who ate the lichen could not tell a lie for a week. They were old, older than Thana herself, or at least older than Thane. Lichen grew in brown velvet petals and ragged islands of bright orange, yellow-green, and grey. The smoke of ancient bonfires still blackened the dark grey granite, left from the days when people could call forth spirits from any stone.

“A drummer boy!” Euenos greeted Nuse, “I knew Payas wouldn’t let you out of his clutches without a new skill or two.”

“Mosy taught him, mostly,” said Payas.

“Mosy did, huh?” He frowned at her and then laughed, ruffling her hair.

When all had assembled, Euenos picked up a bell from the grass and rang it. The crowd grew quiet and he smiled. “After the Battle in the Sky, Thana marched victorious
into Thane. We were liberated from the old gods then, a great gift in itself. But the great Goddess of Peace gave us another gift...A gift and a promise...A gift that was a promise...” He cried out, “For Thana said: ‘Now children you will see a time of trials and toils, temptations and wars. But then I will bring you a paradise of peace.’ Now will pass—”

“Then will last,” finished the crowd good-naturedly.

“Rejoice not until Thana becomes Then! For then we shall want nothing! Thana has told us so.” His tone turned intimate. “Do you not see what a great gift this is?” He let it sink in for a moment and then shouted, “But Thana also saw our need in the present!” He drew a small pouch from his belt and rattled it above his head. His voice grew wondrous and happy. “She gave us truth! She spoke and the words fell right from her blessed mouth and turned to stone, the four great Stones of Truth in Thane.” He smiled contentedly as though he was finished, and walked a few paces to the center of the Stones. “So that everyone might go there and see the truth. ‘Truths to tide us till Then.’ And she spoke them again, so that each of Thana’s little villages might also have the truths nearby.” He gestured to the four boulders around him. Nuse looked, trying to imagine them as truth. They were certainly solid. “And then she spoke them again and again and again, so that each man, woman, and child might also have their own Four Stones of Truth.” He included the whole crowd in a sweeping motion of his arm. “To carry with them at all times, to provide strength in times of want, truth in times of doubt, hope in times of now, and peace in times of strife.” With a flourish he emptied four egg-sized stones into his hand from the pouch, and stood grinning at the crowd. Beside him, Nuse saw that Mosy and Payas, along everyone else, now also held stones in their hands. Their stones were
more pebble-sized, and he noticed that one of Mosy’s stones was rough instead of smooth.

Euenos chose one from his palm and held it up. “Behold, today’s stone, the Stone of Giving.”

“Want not, for all shall be given,” the crowd answered, holding up their own pebble.

Euenos touched his stone to one of the boulders and held up another stone. “The Stone of Knowing.”

“Wonder not, for all shall be clear.”

“The Stone of Then.”

“Love not, for all shall be anew.”

“The Stone of Peace.”

“Seek not, for peace shall be here.”

Euenos held the last stone in the air, gazing at it as though it was especially beautiful. Then he put all the stones back in his pouch and rang the bell again. “Let it begin.”

Payas and Mosy each touched one of their pebbles to the boulder and then began walking in a large circle around the green, playing the “Song of Giving.” The rest ambled after, chatting with their neighbors. When they reached the center of the stones they recited the Truth and touched their pebbles to the great Stone of Giving. Lacking pebbles, Nuse gave a sort of awkward bow to it each time he passed, as Payas had suggested. The children walked with their parents a few rounds before they ran off to play in the grass or take their turn watching the family flock. At lunch they stopped to picnic on the green, sharing the different breads, cheeses, meats, vegetables, and fruit they had brought.

This went on through the evening, punctuated by dinner, a few group recitations of the
Truths, and a few more speeches from Euenos. Euenos had an extra, quietly delivered message for everyone at the end of his sermon. “Now I know it really started to kick off around this time last year...but as you know, the villages down the way have reported city clerics in the Foots.” He rubbed his hands together. “And if everyone could cut down on the napping tomorrow...?” The walking began again and Euenos put his hand on Mosy’s shoulder. “And Mosy?”

She smiled innocently.

“She’ll be fine,” Payas assured him.

They walked on into the night, warmed by bonfires. At around two hours before sunrise the extremeness of it all occurred to Nuse. Nuse had spent most of his life walking, usually on ill-shod or unshod blistered feet. He had walked through the night before, like that time last winter when the Kells were chasing them across the desert for horse theft. But they always walked through strange lands, with a strange land ahead of them. But here there was neither destination nor anything to travel through. There was only the walking.

In the twilight he saw the squiggles and gnats of eyes unaccustomed to the dark. They swarmed about before Nuse’s drooping eyes, neither here nor there, and then drifted away, as though drawn by some central point on the horizon. No matter which way he looked they were headed east, towards Thane. He rubbed spit into his eyes and blinked, but they were still there.

Breakfast came eventually, around four.

“Aren’t you going to come sit?” Nuse asked Mosy, who was standing straight and still, her head down as though deep in thought. She didn’t answer. “Mosy?”
She jerked her head up, “I heard you.” Over the years she had perfect the art of snatching moments of half-sleep during these holidays. Even between notes sometimes. The three sat.

“You look pale,” Payas said to Nuse.

“Really?” By this time the rhythm pounded in his brain like a headache and he felt nauseous.

Mosy took his hands in hers and felt the palms. “Oh, you have blisters! Why did you use the mallet for so long?” She showed him a different grip on the drum, and told him to use the heel of his hand.

At daybreak the shepherds and farmers slipped off to feed their chickens, milk their goat, and spread some hay. Then the day went on exactly as the day before, except that no one felt much like talking. It was hot; the last of the spring had boiled off and left them with the beating sun.

“Wake up! Get up! Everybody!” a voice said in the distance. Nuse raised his head groggily as Payas sprang up from beside him. It was late afternoon and nearly everyone was asleep in the grass, or even home in their beds. Euenos was shouting at the far end of the green, tugging on arms and pointing vaguely towards the plains. “Tanis! Priest Tanis is coming!” With Payas’ help they were soon shuffling around the circle again, just as a skinny man came up over the hill.

“The holiest of holy days has come,” said Euenos grandly, looking over his shoulder at Tanis. “Er, next to holiest day—today’s the eve, when we look forward to tomorrow, the Day of Peace, the day of sleep, the day of rest…” Euenos was drunk with weariness
and barely contained terror. He slurred his words. "To remind us how sweet Then will be, how peaceful, how desirous—" He stopped for a moment trying to remember what came next. "How clear, how new, how pure. So seek not—" he waited for the crowd to answer. "Seek not—" he said louder.

"For peace is here," the crowd mumbled.

"Right. Sorry. Wrong order. Want not—" again he waited. "Want not—" he fairly shouted.

"For all is given," the crowd answered after a pause.

"Wonder not—"

"For all is clear."

"Love not—"

"For all is new."

"Alright here it is again. Seek not—"

"For all is here."

When Euenos was finished he greeted Tanis like a puppy. Tanis was nearly bald, and his temples and jaw line stood out like those on a skull. His eyes were sharp however, and his mouth could be bent into a friendly sort of smile. He and Euenos stood by the Stones, watching the people yawn through the Truths, cheeks grooved red with grass blades. "They're a faithful lot, that's for sure," said Euenos. "Always thinking of new ways to please their goddess."

"Looks like you have some work to do." Tanis nodded towards someone lying in the grass. "Or shall I?"

Euenos threw his hands up in the air. "Roron again," he said, as though Roron was
that one aberrant, that one drunk, that every town had and couldn’t be helped. Roron was in fact none of those things; he had merely tripped and not gotten up. Euenos hurried over and helped the man to his feet, hissing sharply in his ear, and sent him back into the line.

“You’re so kind with them,” said Tanis when Euenos returned.

“Thank you sir,” said Euenos awkwardly. “…The evening sermon is really something to see.”

“And I will be glad to see it.” Tanis said.

“Will we have the honor of your company tomorrow then?”

“Yes, and for some days to come. Thane is interested in bringing the outliers into the fold.”

“Oh but we are solidly in the fold—we are among the most devoted of all Thanecia, we are—“

“I sense that since you left Thane your soul has wavered, Euenos.”

“Oh but your holiness, I love Thana more than any—My soul is hers, your holiness—I am soul-given—”

“We should talk, Euenos.” Tanis spoke evenly, with no signs of weariness.

The next twelve hours went by with an unfeatured slowness which seemed endless at the time, but took up little space in memory. They did not light the bonfires that night and it was as cold as the next day was hot. More than a few people had collapsed, including Nuse, though he managed to prop himself up on one of the Stones until it passed. Tanis did not appear to feel any of it.

Though the day was hot, as she walked Mosy shivered at night from cold and
weariness. She had reached that stage of sleep deprivation where dreams merged nauseatingly with reality. She noticed each breath she took and every few moments a voice shouted the same unintelligible thing into her ear. This all gave her such jitters that had she been able to lie down it probably would have taken her at least an hour to find her sleepiness again.

Nuse was in much the same sleep deprived haze as Mosy. He felt lose, like a tooth. When he glanced around he saw everything in snapshots instead of a smooth pan. The funny little colorless particles still drifted east across the bright blue sky. A few streams of them seemed to rise from the crowd itself, like breath or sweat. Meanwhile his drum seemed to have taken on a life of its own, emphasizing the beats it pleased. He and Mosy were playing “the Song of Peace”—or the “Lullaby Funeral March,” as she put it—while Payas rested his fingers. Now everyone leaned on the rhythm of the song to move their steps forward—that must be the real purpose of the music, Nuse thought.

Mosy was having trouble with the simple melody, and she’d been making outright mistakes all morning. She was certain that the song itself was rising acidulously in her throat, rather than anything she’d ingested. This always happened by the hundredth repeat. But there was just this one twinge in the melody, a set of notes which suggested a more precarious, dramatic, resolution than the route it took. Every time she passed it in the song, the notes came out harder, as though trying to escape. This didn’t help Nuse’s control over the beat, and soon his runaway emphasis coincided with hers. He too heard the twinge in the melody that was giving Mosy so much trouble—a precipice just a little ways off of a safe road, calling for sightseers to come take a look at what height really is.

It was only when they looked down that they realized they’d taken off, and then it was
too late. They dipped down into the melody and out again for what seemed like measures upon measures, until they caught an up draft and soared on one long plaintive tone. The silence it left in its wake was almost as stunning as the note itself, and they realized what they’d done. They plunged back into the melody with a vengeance, as though no other resolution to the silence were possible.

Then a miracle occurred: in this musical context, the same melody which had bored everyone to tears a moment before became newly energized, as though it were being played for the first time. The villagers looked up, wondering what had happened—for while it is impressive to turn one thing into another, turning something into itself fairly blew them away. A faint humming could be heard now, a lyric here and there, and soon it became clear that quite a few people were *singing along*, if only to themselves. At the chorus the words could be made out: “Love not, for all shall be anew.”

Tanis looked out at the plains and frowned. Nuse looked too: the already feeble local streams from the crowd were slowing down; soon they had reversed their direction and returned to the crowd. The melody and words were changing of their own accord now, moving towards a song Nuse had heard before. It was a summoning song:

>We beat the drums and play the pipes,

*But who will sing the songs tonight?*

*Pali, Pali, Pali,*

> We sing the songs and clap our hands,

*Who will come and lead the dance?*
Palí, Palí, Palí,

We’ve prepared the feast and poured the wine,
but where is the groom and bride?
Pa-lí, Tha-na
Pa-lí, Tha-na

Nuse’s heart pounded with the blasphemy of singing of Palí on Thana’s day. From his travels with the traders he knew that pious Thaneans did not consider Palí to be Thana’s lover or husband as the Footish did; to them the Palí was a false god, an imposter, a primitive god of the backwards Foots.

People in the crowd were pulling pipes from coat pockets. Euenos was wringing his hands. Nuse’s eyes met Tanis’ and the priest ambled towards them, a pretense of a smile on his lips. Nuse whispered something helplessly to Mosy, but she kept playing and he himself felt powerless to stop.

“Hey!” Payas said for greeting as he slipped between the Stones and into Tanis’ path. Tanis stopped and Mosy and Nuse continued with the crowd around the circle.

“Payas!” Tanis said as he would to an old friend. “I remember you.” He looked him up and down. “Thane. Fifteen years ago…I remember her too.” He glanced at Mosy as she walked away. “Or her mother it was I suppose. What a striking resemblance! But I remember you the best. But do you remember me?” He stepped closer so their noses nearly touched. Payas was tall, and Tanis had to look up at him. Payas’ brown eyes flicked away and back, and his face tilted just perceptibly to the side. Tanis laughed. He
had a nice laugh, friendly and open. “You do remember. Will your apprentices remember me too, I wonder?”

“You will do nothing,” Payas said quietly.


Payas only looked at him.

“Did they make an error of some sort, Payas? Because if they did it’s hardly my place. To do anything or even listen very closely... Thana needs not my humble help.” He glanced at the crowd, which had launched into the chorus:

  Ay, Pali, li, li, li,
  Thana, na, na, na,
  from Thane we summon thee,
  Come and wed your true love,
  Ay, Pali, Pali, Pali,

  Ay, Pali, li, li, li,
  Always dies in all his lives,
  But never dies Pali,
  So let the gods dwell in the sky,
  And let Pali come home with me.

“And I need not call her, either, since you shepherds are so kind.” Tanis stepped away
from Payas. "You should be walking, shouldn't you?" Payas bobbed his head with a hard look on his face and stepped in the line behind Mosy and Nuse, his hands on their shoulders.

No one said anything, which Mosy took as a personal affront and possibly a punishment. Without seeing his face she couldn't tell if Payas was angry, and by the way he gripped her shoulder she was afraid to ask. She longed to exchange a smirk and glance with Nuse, to ease the stress of their misdemeanor. But no one said anything and so she was left isolated, hardly even knowing where they were. Her frustration rose in her throat nauseatingly—at this point every sensation took on a nauseous tone—and then welled up in her eyes. No one noticed, and she hadn't intended them to, for she too kept her silence. But then Nuse tapped her shoulder in a two-fingered ra-tat-tat, quick and expressive as any look. She brushed his fingers as he pulled away and smiled.

"Why doesn't Tanis stop them if he doesn't like it?" Nuse shouted to her above the crowd, which was chanting "Ay Pali, Pali, Pali," while others droned "Tha-na, Tha-na, Tha-na," in response. He was wondering if he'd missed something, as he often did in this foreign culture and language.

Mosy shrugged and shouted back, "Maybe he can't."

"And how does Tanis know Payas?"

But suddenly all was still, and Nuse's weariness evaporated into adrenaline. Nuse noticed the silence first, and then the deafening boom that had come just before. Rather casually, one of the Stones had fallen over. The earth shook, and he wasn't sure if it was the cause or result of the Stone falling, or else just the shaking of his knees. A groan, small and distant, broke the silence and stirred the crowd into murmuring action.
Beside Nuse, Mosy yanked on his sleeve. “Nuse!”

“I don’t know, I don’t know. I think a Stone fell on someone.”

Payas ran towards the Stones. “Give him room, give him room!” Screaming, Roron tugged vainly at his legs. One was caught from the thigh down and the other from hip. “Be still!” Payas shouted as he pulled him back. Roxana, Payas’ younger sister and Roron’s wife, took her husband’s head in her lap, gripping it like a ram she was about to shear. “A shovel!” she said to Payas, who shouted out the order: “A shovel! Or a branch! It’s too heavy to lift! Come on, let’s go!”

Nuse found himself wondering about Roron’s knee caps and suddenly he felt sick. Mosy tugged his sleeve sharply. “Get a shovel, Nuse,” she said. “Go to one of the houses with a garden.” Nuse turned away from Roron and fumbled around inside the nearest house till he found a hoe. “Stay with Mosy,” Payas shouted to him as he took the hoe.

It took an hour and several more branches and shovels before Euenos, Payas and seven other strong men managed to budge the rock at all. It was a tense, sweaty moment when they finally levered it enough for Roxana and one of her friends to pull him out before the Stone crashed back to the ground. “Praise Pali,” was all anyone said, even Euenos. Roron fainted. Out of breath, Payas looked around, his expression stony. Far up on the valley ridge, Tanis walked, his back towards them.

Roron groaned in his bed for four days before he died. When they’d first pulled him out they thought he might be all right. He was bleeding but it only seeped through his pants at a few places. But one of his hips was sidewise and his sandaled feet curled at funny angles. The bone setter wouldn’t touch him. Roxana stroked his face incessantly,
like a talisman, but he died anyway, on a hot afternoon. All over the village they heard a
deer screaming, but Payas was there and he swore it was only Roxana. They buried
Roron angry and too afraid to carry out the hill top wake he would have expected of
them.

*

The day after the funeral, Mosy sat by the door weaving. She was humming some silly
song about goats, but it turned into something mournful as she sang it. Everything she
touched these days seemed to weep. Engrossed in her new variation, and singing as
loudly as she was, she didn’t hear the soft footsteps until she breath and spittle fell on her
ear. “You missed a thread,” said a voice with a Thanean accent.

Mosy leapt up, dropping her yarn in the dust. She knew it was Tanis, but she was too
startled to make the proper signs of respect. She just stood there, eyes wide and rolling
like a spooked horse, hands gripping the lap loom.

“See, it’s that one right here.” Tanis jabbed at her weaving and pushed her fingers
against it.

“Thank you,” she managed.

“I will be speaking to the village tonight. I will see you there?”

Mosy jerked her head for a nod.

“And your father? Where is he?”

She murmured something about the fields and to her horror Tanis said he would wait.
They waited an hour and she didn’t finish a single line of her weaving. When Payas
returned, Tanis asked him to come with him to his room in the village. Payas gave a
shrug and went, turning only to order Nuse and Mosy to stay at the house. He said it so sternly that they did not even mention the possibility of eavesdropping once he’d left.

Mosy went in the house and sat on Payas’ bed. Like all good herders on the lonely range, and perhaps the result of growing up without a mother, Mosy tended to lose herself in her emotions instead of looking for external comfort. Nuse was the same way, but he came and sat next to her, startling her out of herself. She was relieved to remember he was there. They sat side by side until the wee hours when Payas stooped through the door. They leapt up and he gave a long tired look. He went to bed without a word.

“What did he want to see you for?” Mosy asked in the morning, first thing.

“Questions, just some questions,” Payas said.

“What about?”

“He’s thinking of starting up a flock of his own, don’t you know, and he wanted to know if he could purchase some off me,” Payas snapped. He sighed and she knew his anger wasn’t meant for her. “I don’t know, Mosy,” he said in a tired voice. “Pali, shepherds, hilltops. Himerians. The Sun God. Euenos. I still don’t know what he wants to know, I never did.”

“How do you know him from Thane?”

He scratched his beard and sighed again.

“..Fa?”

“I’m thinking Mosy.”

“You’re stalling.”

“It’s not funny, Mosy. It’s not funny at all.” She wasn’t actually trying to be funny, but the whole thing made her giddy. “And I’m not in any mood to be harassed, least of all
by *you*... Or *you* Nuse,” Payas added, “should it ever come in your head.” Nuse never gave him any trouble. He turned back towards Mosy, “I already told you anyway. They arrested me for busking.”

“Did Tanis catch you? Was *he* the one who broke your flute over his--”

“No.”

“Then how does he know about--”

“God Mosy, it’s too early in the morning...” Then he spoke quickly and idiomatically. “And it’s not for odd ears.”

He glanced at Nuse, who got up. “I’ll check on the goats.”

“Wait—“ began Payas, but Nuse was already gone.

“Now we can,” Mosy said.

“That boy’s too sensitive for his own good...No, no, it doesn’t have anything to do with him. It’s just not a thing for outside the family, Mosy. Or outside of you and me, if I in fact tell you.” Payas’ voice suddenly sounded so tired that Mosy didn’t protest the long silence that followed.

“Amy was—” He stopped. “Your mother I met in Wasaecia.... He stopped again, for longer this time. Then he shook something off and launched head long into his story telling voice and the familiar terrain of phrases he had mouthed many times before. It was his very own love story, the one story that never changed much between the tellings. “A flute girl, you know, one of the few who actually enjoy it. She wasn’t a slave, thank the gods; though she led the life of one. But she was free to go, and she went with me. We went to Thane, on our way back to the Foots—I thought we could get married here in the Foots where my family was, though we weren’t ready to settle down yet...Anyway, I
knew it had never been very good business in Thane but I hadn’t played there for some five years and we didn’t know about the busking ordinances. And so we played. And it was worse because we were playing on holy ground, in the main square, where the original Stones of Truth stand. And yes, then they caught us and broke my flute. You already know that…” Now he paused so long that Mosy doubted he would go on. When he started again his voice was so small that she became afraid of what she’d asked him to tell. “And Mosy—Mosy, they broke one of her fingers too. Just the pinky. The easiest one to break. I never told you because of the way you screamed when you burned your hand a tiny little bit and you couldn’t play for a few days, remember?”

Most nodded, pale faced.

“You didn’t cry when you burned it, just when you thought you’d never be able to play again…” Payas was tempted to keep veering off topic to the more recent past, but he didn’t want to have to broach the subject again and so he forced himself on. “They could’ve broken all of our hands and toes too if they’d wanted. There wasn’t anyone to stop them. But it was all very quick—so quick hardly anyone on the street gave it a second glance. A warning, they called it.

“Anyway, they left, and we fled. Didn’t know where we were going, just away. We were both pretty beaten up, no instruments, no money, quite dazed. And someone was following us, we thought. And so of course we walked right into a blind alley, and he followed after. He wanted to see your mother’s hand. I hadn’t seen it myself—hadn’t wanted to I guess—until finally she held it out to him. A little purple and green by this time, and the angle! So wrong!... The man touched it lightly—scarcely grazed it—and she snatched it back like a shock had passed between them. I pulled her back behind me
and prepared to fight, but she just kept staring at her finger. ‘Payas, it doesn’t hurt anymore,’ she said. I remember I didn’t want to take my eyes off the man but I give it a quick look. Her finger was straight again. Still discolored, but straight. She wriggled it. I looked back at the stranger, half expecting him to have disappeared, for I knew then that the man was a god. But he was still there, smiling a little. Then he led us down deep into the slums of Thane, where he left us at the door of a shack. The people there took us in and we stayed with them for months, quite comfortably—it looked like a shack from the outside, but on the inside they had couches and tables and everything. A floor even. Nothing fancy, you know, but comfortable. Quite large too—some seven or eight people lived there at a time.

“Anyway, after a while we figured out that they were theologians—they were always talking about this god or that, telling myths I’d never heard as though they had just happened yesterday, speculating on what might happen next. The god who’d helped us told them most of what they knew, they said. The God of Love, they called him, Himeros. An ancient god like the great Sun Mover, he accepted no worship.

“They didn’t worship Thana either, or any other god. They actually seemed to be against Thana—in Thane of all places! The Soul Collector they called her, the Spirit Thief.” Payas fingered his Stones of Truth through his pouch. “I found out then that there are two Thanas—our Thana, which is the wife of the Pali, and then Thane’s Thana...I learned a lot from them, most of which I’ve already told you, other things I still don’t understand.

“There was a whole tribe of people like them who traveled all over with Himeros...a few of them visited while we were there...strange people, like gods themselves almost.
But in Thane these people worked like everyone else by day—tradesmen, laborers, merchants, even an aristocrat or two. Some lived elsewhere with their families; others lived at the shack. In the evenings they’d gather to discuss. they’d bring home all sorts of criminals besides musicians: errant artisans, athletes, bards, art dealers, and more than a few Thanean priests who’d fallen out of favor. Many of those they helped were in fact quite dedicated to Thana, however maltreated they were by her clergy. But the theologians didn’t care. They did their best not to offend anyone. They were just interested in what the strange laws the priests invent were all about. That’s why we stayed for so long, mainly, because we became curious too. And of course they liked our music, which we played in the evenings, and they liked asking us questions about music, though they never seemed satisfied with the answers. So it was free room and board for a song and a chat.

But that was a mistake, to stay. It seemed relatively safe, since mostly all they did was talk. They weren’t collecting arms or something. But one day Thanean soldiers raided the place and we were all arrested. And that’s when I met Tanis, though I never knew his name until now...He was in charge of interrogations.” Payas looked at Mosy for the first time in his monologue. Sightless or not, she had gone wide-eyed. He continued on quickly without a pause. “They released your mother a few weeks later, and myself a few days after her. We weren’t what they were after evidently...We were quite ready to settle down after that and we came here directly.”

“What about the others?” Mosy stammered after a moment, “The theologians?”

“We didn’t stop to ask. And we never went back to the city.”
Mosy tilted her head back against the wall and let out a sound of amazement. After awhile she realized she was alone in the room.

Soon the village was abuzz with the news that Tanis would be staying to assist Euenos in his priestly tasks. The first thing to be done was to show more respect for the Stones. They were to be cleaned and the lichen scraped off. It was a disgrace, Tanis said, to allow them to be so defiled.

Tanis addressed the village nightly from the Stones. Tanis did not attempt to enforce attendance, but everyone saw his eyes roving the crowd, counting. During the day he went about the village, appearing out of nowhere like a ghost. Even if he couldn’t really keep track of who came and who didn’t, he needed do little else besides look into someone’s face to make him show up that night. The herders were the most truant, as they lived on the outskirts and were often far out in the fields. Roxana attended faithfully, wearing an unreadable face. She took Mosy with her if Payas and Nuse were late coming home. “Do it for your father,” Roxana would say. Payas never went. And so Mosy would sit on the grass, sweating, and imagine Tanis’ eyes boring through her body as he spoke of the “wild music” which would call down the old angry gods from whom Thana had saved them long ago. Then neither Thana nor the old gods would be happy with them.

Tanis came to the house, often preceded by one neighbor or another who’d give Payas enough warning to disappear into the fields again, taking Mosy and Nuse with him. Otherwise Tanis would take Payas away and keep him till dawn. Tanis never questioned Mosy or Nuse, but neither did he leave them alone. On their way to the woods to look for Sol, they would meet Tanis. He would purse his lips kindly and say that Mosy should not
be required to go along given “her condition.” They would have no choice but to collect their wood and head back.

The next time Mosy and Nuse walked a long way into the fields before cutting into the woods. The edge of the path slipped out from under Nuse’s foot once and he grabbed her arm to keep from falling.

“Watch your step,” she said. He looked at her wryly. She loved it when anyone tripped. Even blind, she was as surefooted as a goat on these slopes, which unlike the forest were fairly clear of debris. “My condition indeed,” he heard her mutter.

Sol looked ready to hug them with relief when he saw them. It had been weeks. He ruffled Mosy’s hair and she smiled. He did not touch Nuse. Mosy launched into a new song. When his dream came to him, Nuse did not deflect it as he would have a few months earlier. He explored and probed it like a wound in his mouth that he couldn’t let alone, no matter how much it hurt. But then he reached forward past the climax of the dream—in which someone died—and found the calmer part which had puzzled him.

*He was walking on a dusty road. A senseless gray covered the sky, diffuse and bright, the kind of light that wearies the mind and confuses the eye. It wasn’t a coincidence that the sky matched his mood; the weather was often sympathetic to gods. But he didn’t think about that, or any other such tired thought. All he could think was that he was alone. Again.*

*He flew through the grey until he met sunlight, and then followed the curve of the earth until he reached a mountain peak that jutted just above the clouds. The mountain rose jaggedly on one side, but fell softly down into a grassy flat where there stood a cedar house with windows of yellow glass. He landed and knocked on the door. When it*
opened he looked off to the side and didn’t say anything. The two gods stood there, the one golden haired, the other dark.

“Come on, then,” Sol said softly. He pulled Himeros in and gave him a push towards the chairs by the hearth.

It had taken Sol a second to recognize himself from another perspective and remember the scene for himself. Himeros had often come to him with the names of the dead written on his face. It was Athalia, that time. And their daughter Crisaia and their son Amak. Their grandchildren, Mikan, Shion, Falarie. His great grand children, and their great grandchildren. And besides wise Athalia, there was sad Dala, funny Falara, dark Tula, clever Rinial, and all his other wives and the children. Each in their own time and place had married a dark haired stranger who’d come wandering through their prairie village, seaside town, or bustling city. An ordinary looking man in appearance, almost familiar. A man who made men laugh, took children seriously, and had a way with women. Himeros loved each of his wives and each of his children like there would be no other, had been no other. And that was what hurt Himeros so badly: that beings so unique, so individual, should die so soon into nothingness, without trace. He took no solace in man’s so-called immortality through procreation. No god has ever been able to understand that. Sol could never figure out why Himeros kept trying. What was he looking for?

Sol looked at the boy, wondering what all this meant. Between the lines, as it were, he had seen flickers of the boy’s own life in dream—he gave his heart each year to horses he knew would be sold, and he befriended chickens bound for the chopping block. But then he’d also seen the boy’s reluctance to make friends with the girl and the girl’s father.
Maybe he was learning something after all. Meaning the boy, Sol reminded himself, not Himeros. The boy took a breath and the dream continued, leaving those questions unanswered and pressing on to new ones.

_Himeros and Sol sitting by the fire. Himeros still hadn’t looked at Sol. He was looking at Sol’s house. Hephaestus had built it, sculpting the walls from colored glass of different shapes and thicknesses—much of it was flat, but spheres, pinwheel galaxies, snail spirals, and dune ripples abounded. A warm evening yellow predominated the colors, infused by shades of red and orange and the occasional spark of blue. Frequent expanses of clear glass wove the surrounding mountains into the design. There was silver there too, white as the moon in some places, shinny as a mirror in others, and it was there in a reflection that Himeros by accident met Sol’s eyes. Himeros gave a laughing sigh and looked at his hands. He should tell him now. Surely Sol must wonder why he kept chasing after humans, living their lives and dying with each death. He should tell someone, the Moirai had said, because his dreams were not just dreams. Dreams moved faster than darkness, they said, and faster than light. He should tell him right now, or in the next moment, or that one right there. He made a few catching sounds in his throat, but the moments zipped by untaken, like flies on a river._

The boy’s dream ended there, but Sol remembered that they had talked of this and that, as they always did. Himeros hadn’t told him anything else. But the Moirai must know.
On their way back, Mosy and Nuse were talking of Sol’s new unease with Nuse when they met Tanis around the bend. But Tanis did not stop them, or say anything at all. He merely stepped to one side of the path and let them pass.

“Do you think he heard us?” Mosy asked.

“I don’t know. He had a strange expression on his face.”

* 

Most gods maintained residences on mountain tops, deserts, or sea beds. But Thana lived in the main city of her people, in an annex above the church between two bell-less bell towers. No one but her most trusted souls ever came there, and no one else knew of its existence. She had been too busy to even build it herself; it was originally meant as a dormitory for priestesses in the religion before hers (who had taken shifts at ringing the bells). She spent most of her time in what had been the common hearth area. It was not well kept but neither did it look messy, as there were few things in it besides a rug and some fraying furniture. It was a long room with a window overlooking the four Great Stones of Truth at the center of the city. Lesath sat on the pillow strewn window seat, with Thana seated on the other side, squinting at him. It was blindingly bright outside, which made the room seem darker.

“So why aren’t you basking in the worship of your people? Isn’t it some kind of special day today?” They’d been talking for hours, drinking grenadine. It had been a month since the Sathen victory over the Wasaecians and now it was one of Lesath’s minor holidays. With the power of his land beneath him, Lesath’s wings had blossomed
into their full plumage. Thana’s wounds had made likewise progress, though the one between her wings still ached occasionally.

“No,” Lesath said. He tipped his glass so that the last drop ran out into his mouth. “They have my effigies for that.”

“But don’t they miss your presence?”

“My presence is only bestowed on very special occasions, and even then I very rarely show myself—visually I mean—to large groups.”

“You don’t pay much attention to your people, do you? How can they ever love you?”

“They love me because I don’t pay attention.” He leaned forward to fill his glass, pausing over hers with a questioning look.

“Yes, thank you...But I don’t see how that works.”

“The humble love me because they love to be humble, to know their place, to bow before a prince that never gives them so much as a nod. The great love me because they aspire to be me, to look only down and never up, to culture pride and never pity, to put everyone to the same measure by which they esteem themselves.”

She made a musing sound and sipped her grenadine. This is nice, she thought. She hadn’t had peers in quite some time, let alone friends. She and Lesath were diametrically opposed in their divine ways, but that only made it interesting. She had grown to trust him a bit more over the month; now that his secret about Himeros was out, she sensed no other dishonesties in him. “I do things differently I guess.”

Lesath nodded, swallowing, “You have higher dreams.” He raised his glass as though saluting them. “Tell me about them.”
“Oh, it’s just that—” she made a dismissive gesture, like it wasn’t worth telling. “Well, do you watch the wars? Have you ever seen it when a man kills someone from their own side by mistake?...” She looked down at the Stones. “Sometimes he doesn’t notice, or pretends not to, but other times he backs away, shaking his head...” She shook her own head in unconscious imitation. “And you just know they know. You can see it in their faces. They’ve seen the open void. There is no glory in war. There is no glory in life. Every man has a fate, they say, and that fate is to die. Born to die. And they know it. They shouldn’t know it. But they know it...” She looked back at Lesath. ”That’s what they need us for. They need something eternal and everlasting to look upon, to dream of. That is what we are to them.”

Lesath smiled, remembering how she had only recently wrestled with mortal fear. She was rejuvenated now; not quite like she was in the old, old days, but she smiled more.

“But we can only relieve them intermittently. They are distractible. They divert themselves with sounds and pitches strung together in some imaginary structure. They scratch on the walls poor imitations of the things they see—seeking to preserve what passes, not realizing that stone and pigment perishes almost as fast. They lust and spawn, and if they love their children it’s only because they think they live on through their children. They build themselves up with treasures thinking to make themselves too heavy to pass from the earth, while glory seekers think to make themselves too famous. They kill each other, thinking to kill death, or they kill themselves. To get it over with maybe. They’ll invent their own human gods that die and rise again, and then martyr themselves in imitation.” She laughed and shook her head sadly. “But they can only manage one pathetic half of it; all they can do is die. They haven’t quite mastered the rising part...”
She sipped her grenadine and then put it down firmly. “Thus they play at being gods. But you see nothing lasts for them; they tire of music and art, greed and fame, love and war; they die and their children die.” She waved them away with her hand and lowered her voice. “But I give my Thanecians something more, something that doesn’t pass away.” She waited until she held Lesath’s gaze in her own, over the lip of his glass. “I give them myself. With me they have no other need.”

“We all give ourselves to our humans,” said Lesath.

“Ah yes, but there is only one way that we can truly give ourselves, so that they may receive us without distraction. They must give themselves too... They must give me their souls.”

“What do you do with their souls?” Lesath said after a moment.

“I keep them. It is the soul—or the spirit as others call it—that either turns toward the divine or is distracted from the divine, you see. I keep them from being distracted.” She shook her head with pride. “You’d never know a soul-given mortal just from looking at him. They go about their daily lives just like everyone else. They can be simple or clever, good-hearted or selfish, though usually not alarmingly one way or the other. They have normal personalities. But they know neither misery nor grief, fear nor uncertainty. Oh, they have emotions, but only good ones. They hate bad things, and they like good things and they don’t spend time wondering about the difference. They don’t wonder what happens after death, either, or how they will die; consequently they don’t fear it. They don’t wonder about the stars, not how long they’ve been there nor how long they will remain. So they don’t long for immortality; it doesn’t even occur to them.”

“And their beauty? Do they wonder at their beauty?”
"Their what? Of the stars? No." She looked out the window. "That would only make them long for something they can't have...That makes them 'free from want;' that's what is important. They are at peace."

"And do they wonder at you?"

Thana went silent for a moment, and then said quietly, "No. No, I don't think so. Their souls do maybe, in the beginning, when they first come to me. But it passes, as everything does with them...But the important thing is that the soul-given people themselves don't feel the loss of it, not once their soul is with me. And if their soul feel that loss, it never feels it again because it never has it again." Thana looked towards the Stones and then at Lesath. "And then they and their soul can be at peace."

"And in the name of that peace, your legions of fanatics crowd at your borders?"

"They know they are right and they love being right. They know others are wrong and they scorn them for it. That is why they do as I say. Because they know that they are doing right. They don't like not knowing."

They fell into silence. Thana was glad when Lesath said more cheerfully, "And are there other...advantages to this...soul keeping?"

Thana laughed too loudly and sat back against the pillows again. "You are an odd blend of transparency and stealth. But listen: 'We fear not life, nor death, for great is our faith. The hand of God, we are, and we in his hands.' Many worshipers say this of their gods, as a sort of reminder. Mine alone say it as a statement of fact."

Lesath nodded thoughtfully. "They will die for you without question. They do not know how to question. It is the soul that questions. Neither are they distracted by earthy wonders— for it is the soul that wonders. Love and religious conversion are a matter of
the orientation of the soul. You have their souls oriented to you permanently, or at least you keep them from being oriented toward anything else. That is why they cannot be converted, not to stargazing nor to Wasat nor Deneb nor me. It's very clever.”

She looked out the window again. “But yet that is my dream, Lesath, that all peoples lose their fear of death and enter into the realm of peace.” She heard a soft sound at the door and turned. “Ah look, there’s one right now. Lesath, meet Tanis’ soul. I call it Tanu.”

A dark figure about four feet high stood in the doorway anxious to come in, but wary of Lesath.

“Tanu!” Thana said fondly, and beckoned it to her like a cat. Except for a slight narrowing at the neck it was virtually featureless, like the shimmering after-image one sees after looking into a bright light. It came to her knee and she bent down so she could hear its whispy voice. “It says Tanis has been following a couple of children.” Thana said, “a boy and a girl—he thought that they were doing things they shouldn’t— and—“ she bent down again, “he heard them say something strange. So now he’s followed them again and wants me to look.” She stood and quickly went to the small seashell fountain she’d installed. It was not running—the pipes were actually broken off—but the basin was full. “I’ve told Tanis to look out for signs of Sol in the Foots, but he can’t see gods without my help,” she explained. She picked up the little spirit by where the armpits should have been and set it on the edge, its feet dangling in the water. “Come and see,” she said to Lesath. She had debated whether or not to show him, but she was proud of this particular innovation. “This is another ‘advantage,’ as you call it.” She gently laid the soul down in the water. It struggled and coughed, but she pushed it under anyway. “This
one especially sometimes forgets it's not attached to it's body and panics,” she explained, still holding the soul under. “Tanis has asthma I guess.” The water grew filmy as though oil had risen off the soul to the surface. But instead of the dark green and purple iridescence of most oils, it swirled in shades of gold. Still holding the soul under, Thana squatted slightly so she could catch the reflection of the sky through the window.

“There,” she said, “Look.”

But instead of sky, they saw tree bark, and far below in a forest ravine they saw a boy and a girl. “Log here,” the boy said. The girl put her hand down to touch it as she stepped over. “There he is,” said the boy. He waved and the field of vision moved in vain to see what he was waving at. The girl waved too, but that only compounded it as she waved in a different direction. But Thana narrowed her eyes at the image and suddenly—as though Tanis had simply not looked in the right direction—there appeared Sol, sitting on a boulder. He ruffled the girl’s hair. She smiled and sat down next to him.

“Amazing,” Lesath murmured, entranced. “And he doesn’t even know you’re watching.”

Then all of a sudden Sol sat up straight and looked around with a look of unease on his face. The girl followed suit. Thana instantly pulled the soul out of the water. It gave a small gasp and shook itself like a dog.

“Any god will notice eventually,” she said, turning her face away from the spray of water. “But even the girl noticed, so Tanis was probably just was clumsy. Sol merely noticed only his mortal presence, not mine. It’s much more useful in a crowd or with a mortal he expects to see.”

“What else can you do through them?”
“I can use most of my powers through the faithful. As a matter of fact, I thought we could fly down there now and burn him through these two children. Then we should be able to come back ourselves and take him without a fuss.”

“Do you already have their souls already then?”

“Children of that age give their souls easily, though they take them back just as soon. They are just becoming aware of themselves and they are unsure and unstable. So they’ll often give their souls for a time just for some relief.”

“And how will you take them?”

“You want all the secrets, don’t you?” She smiled. “But the secret is in keeping, not taking. And I don’t think I’ll tell you that just yet. But the taking is no secret—surely you’ve heard of the Quartzema? During the Quartzema their soul becomes stiff and numb and falls off like a scab. Having nowhere else to go it comes here. But that takes too long. For something quick and short term, the best way is to frighten them. They have been taught that though their bodies may perish, their soul may live on if only they give them to the Goddess. And so to escape fear they give their souls over to me.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier to just use Tanis?”

"I need Tanis just yet.”

Lesath looked at her blankly.

“Greater powers can’t pass through their bodies without doing damage,” she explained. “They usually die from the strain, or else afterwards,” she added in a human euphemism, “I close their eyes for them, so they don’t suffer.”
Mosy stopped suddenly while they were walking in the hills on their way to the forest. After yesterday’s short visit, the spirit had told Nuse that they should meet at a certain spot higher up on the mountain and farther to the north. Then he’d left with a worried air. So both Mosy and Nuse were jumpy. “Do you hear that?” she said.

Nuse listened intently, as he always did when she said she heard something. It was not the non-sound of the way he and Sol conversed. It sounded like a normal language, though one he’d never heard before, not in his waking moments at least. Then Nuse saw two people sitting on the edge of towering sheet of rock the shepherds called Dragon’s Scale. It rose lengthwise like a knife cutting through the earth so that nothing but the sharp blade showed. It was a sheer drop from the top, and Nuse wondered how they’d gotten up there and how they planned to get down. Then suddenly he knew the two were not man and woman.

“Let’s go!” Nuse said, pulling Mosy behind the boulder. Alarmed by the fear in his voice she followed without question, but it was too late. Before Nuse’s eyes, magnificent wings rose from the backs of the figures on the rock. Like falcons they leapt from the rock and glided towards them. In the next few seconds Nuse and Mosy whispered furiously, she asking and he answering, until they felt the wind from the gods’ wings upon them. They fell into a heart-pounding silence.

Nuse fell on his face immediately, pulling her down with him as she squeaked to him what he already knew: “Gods!” Face towards the ground, Nuse watched them through his bangs.

The gods stood five feet away, wings still raised. The wings were as fleeting a sight as they were in Nuse’s dreams and they did not obey normal physical laws. Where the
two gods’ wings overlapped, one wing would appear in front and then suddenly the other. The goddess’ wings were the same grey lavender as her large round eyes, and the feathers lay together smoothly. Her coarse wavy hair was tied back neatly, revealing a few wise streaks of grey amid the brown at her temples. Her skin seemed pale compared to Mosy and Nuse’ sun browned complexions. The god beside her had tan skin and short dark blond hair. His hazel eyes were long and slanted, perpetually squinted as though he were scanning a horizon. His feathers of gold dusted green hung like long thin knives.

Lesath laughed to see Nuse looking at him, and said out of the corner of his mouth, “That one’s one of mine, can’t you tell?”

“You allow them such liberties,” Thana said, clicking her tongue.

“Well don’t you do anything with him.”

“But Lesath, the other is blind!”

“So? You can still hear and feel through her can’t you?”

“If he’s really yours he probably doesn’t have the discipline anyway,” Thana said.

A breeze ruffled the gods’ feathers and made their wing sparks glow brighter, the one silver, the other gold. They flew like dandelion fluff into the faces of Mosy and Nuse. Mosy felt them but she did not know if they were the goddesses fingers or spiders or the wind. They tickled her face and then seeped into her blood like adrenaline. She had played one too many non-traditionals and now she was going to pay for it. Fear welled up in her chest and she remembered the promises of Thana who certainly must be the goddess standing before her now: “Give me your fear,” Euenos said she’d said. She could let it go, and enjoy calm and emptiness. But that frightened her even more. Besides, Pali had said quite the opposite: “Give into your fear.” That was probably what the Great
Goddess meant anyway. So she gave in, and for a moment she felt absolute terror ripple through her in a destructive current. But afterwards she found nothing broken, just a few things stretched. She looked up, surprised. She felt like a new born animal. “Pali,” she said. She did not mean that the Pali was actually the god or the goddess standing before her. She meant that while the two gods were present, so was the Pali.

Thana’s eyes widened at the name and Nuse braced himself for something terrible. All was deathly silent with what must be the Goddess’ rage. Through his bangs he snuck another look at them. Then he sat up and looked all around.

“Mosy, they’re gone.”

Sol was waiting when Nuse and Mosy got there. It had taken them an hour over tough territory, with Mosy tripping all the way. Nuse had had misgivings about continuing on to see Sol at all, and he told him immediately about the two gods. Sol paced for a while, shooting undecided glanced at Nuse now and then. Then he put his hands on their shoulders, nodded, and left. They never saw him at their meeting spot again.

“Shepherds can be like that,” Thana said, embarrassed. They were flying over the Sathen desert.

“So what now?” They’d considered following the children, but considering that they didn’t know Sol’s condition, they decided not to risk it.

“I don’t know,” Thana said. “I guess it’ll have to be Tanis.”
The Footish god had no name, only epithets. Thane believed this the result of their own decree against speaking the names of false gods, but the mountain herders knew better. Their god refused to be named. Footish people simply called him “the god” or by one of his many epithets such as “the god of many devices,” “the trickster,” “the shapeshifter,” and most popularly, “the pali.” In common parlance, “pali” meant, among other things, “finicky,” “transient,” and “clever.” Its use as a Footish epithet is best understood through the more formal unclipped form of “palitropas,” a combination of “pāli,” which meant “many,” and “tropas,” a versatile word for “way,” “shape,” “name,” and even “mode of music.” In its expansiveness then, “the pali,” was perhaps the god’s most accurate epithet.

—from Call on the Gods: a History of Divine Nomenclature

Thana and Lesath they sat on the limestone veranda of Lesath’s house, drinking lemonade. Peacocks strutted in the dusty yard and heat waves shimmered in over the desert horizon. “I have a proposal for you, Lesath,” said Thana.

“Pray tell.”

“I’d like you to attack my country.”

“With pleasure,” Lesath said, raising his eyebrows and taking a sip of lemonade. “And towards what possible purpose could I owe such an honor?”

“Well it suddenly occurred to me what that little shepherdess reminded me of when she said ‘Pāli.’ She reminded me of a Himerian.”
“A Himerian? Now wait, who is this Pali?”

“Oh, just a little local legend there in the Foots. Completely a product of their imaginations. A false god. You know.”

“A trickster god? Hobgoblin type?”

“Yes, exactly.”

Lesath nodded knowingly. “The desert people have one too. They have this horse—or a fox, I can’t remember—called Hedyin. In myth I’ve made him a sort of side kick of mine.”

“You can control it then?”

“No,” Lesath said, laughing, “I’ll give them a myth with him in it and the next time I hear it it’s changed all beyond recognition. That’s alright. I think of him as a kind of the spirit of man.”

“You’re much more tolerant than I.”

“Well what can you do about it?”

“Well I was thinking. If you were in the highly unusual position of a god pretending to be dead, under what name would you continue your worship? A name abandoned by another god who might come back to claim it? Or would you fill an empty god head, where no one would look?”

Lesath nodded. Then he frowned. “So you think Himeros is here, hiding behind this Pali.”

“Don’t worry I don’t want to kill him.”

“I don’t think you can.”

“I don’t think I can either.”
“All right then,” said Lesath.

“But surely you agree that capturing him would be advantageous?”

“Yes, I do. But let me ask you this. Why would Himeros hide behind Pali. Why not Hedyin or the Wasat’s trickster, Nowin? Unless you think—”

“I’m not ruling out the possibility that he is there too. But Himeros had a special interest in me, and if he is hiding anywhere in my domain it would have to be the Foots.”

“Oh?”

“He could have even been there before we tried to kill him. I mean really, how could these false gods be so tenacious? All this time it could have been Himeros.”

Lesath nodded at the possibility. “Only Himeros would seek such an odd worship. No great name, no country, no city, no wealth, not much ceremony. Its all stories, isn’t it? And the occasional revelry?”

Thana nodded. “But there’s only one way to find out. The difference between a false god and a real god comes in times of distress. I am hoping that an attack on the Foots would draw him out.”

“But surely after all these years Himeros won’t come out and reveal himself to you or me just to defend a few shepherds.”

“He won’t suspect it is you because you won’t be anywhere near. He won’t think it is divine at all. I thought your horse traders might do the job, the ones in the Foots grazing. But no divine commandments, dreams, prophesies; it must be natural as possible.”

“Everything the Sathens do is natural,” he reminded her. “I hardly ever speak to them directly. And as you no doubt have noticed, tempers are already high there. They’ve overstayed their welcome. The rain is scarce—my fault I’m afraid—the clouds I called in
Skoor didn’t all make it back to where they came from. They only want a bit more inspiration now. A few more incidents, a death to avenge perhaps."

"I forget you rule by appeal to their passions."

"You think me primitive?" Lesath said, smiling.

"Let us say a noble savage." She held her glass up. "I salute you, you are the last of the old order."

*

Nuse no longer tried to spin as he walked. Payas had made him a set of pipes and they played together in the fields all day. But now Payas took his flute from his lips. A knot of six or seven men stood at the base of a cliff, shouting in Mesmé.

"Well you just leave your horses to graze just anywhere!" said Alkandre, a shepherd.

"And you let your dogs run around just anywhere!" said Telamon, Momos’ brother.

"My dogs would never chase a—"

"And when they’re not chasing my horses, they’re chasing deer, and then the deer—"

"Well who cares about deer?"

"—the deer come stampeding down into our herds and spook the horses and then look what happens!"

Nuse caught a glimpse of two large forms behind the men, tangled and silent, one dun, the other dark brown. The hair around the brown’s neck stood in tufts, soaked with thick horse blood. Telamon held a bloody knife. Nuse guessed that the fall off the cliff hadn’t killed it and he’d had to finish it off.

"They’re dogs, that’s what they do!" protested another shepherd. "Yours do the
same!"

"Any dog of mine that chases a horse or a deer is dead," cried Telamon. "That's all there is to it--"

"It could have been a lion, a bear, divine madness! It's dangerous country!"

"Yeah but I've seen your dogs come around, and I haven't seen—"

"We've got a lot more to complain about--Your horses tear up the ground and muddy the watering places and--"

"Look, I'm sorry they made some mud down there, but that's what horses do," said another trader, still mounted on his horse.

"That was part of the deal—for everyone to be careful of the water—"

"The deal was to keep the herd numbers down, and as you can see, we had only twenty one here until your dogs—"

"Twenty two—"

"I'm riding this one—"

"What's the difference, he's still got four hooves!"

"Your sheep graze right down to the bare ground, your dogs chase our horses, your goats eat the trees—"

"If you don't like it," said Alkandre, "you can leave."

"How about if we just stayed here? What would you do then, huh?" spat back Telamon, "What gives you the divine right to these lands?"

This was getting dangerous, thought Nuse. He had a sixth sense for when words would erupt into violence; he knew exactly when to duck. Now Momos was coming up the hill, which couldn't improve things. Seeing him sent an odd feeling though him, like a
kid at summer camp seeing an advertisement for pencils. Payas glanced down at Nuse and put his hand on his shoulder protectively, though they both knew he had no such power. But Momos did not so much as glace at Nuse before strode up and put one hand on Telamon’s shoulder and the other on Alkandre, one of the shepherds. He spoke too quietly for Nuse to hear, but to his surprise, Momos then lead Telamon away from the group. Two horses was a monstrous loss to walk away from. The shepherds talked awhile and then returned to their flocks. Nuse fell irrevocably silent for the rest of the day.

"Don’t I get a song out of you tonight?" asked Mosy.

"To tell you the truth," he said with a certain excess of courtesy, "I think I’ve already sung everything I know."

Mosy ran her fingers over the last few rows of her weaving to make sure she hadn’t skipped any strings. She was sitting next to him on the hearth, a belt loom hanging from a rafter and attached to her waist. By now she could handle weaving directly on to the warp strings, though she made fewer mistakes if the yarn was thick and the weave wide. "No you haven’t," she contradicted him quietly, almost to herself.

Nuse shrugged, and didn’t care that she couldn’t see it.

Mosy finished a two entire rows before she spoke again. "Are you sick?"

"No."

"Are you mad?"

"No."

"Are you sad?"

"No."
“Do you have indigestion?”

“No, Mosy, I don’t.”

“Are you happy?”

“No—I mean, yes. I am happy.”

Mosy smiled at her trick. “Now you are mad, I think.”

He didn’t say anything.

She finished another row. “You saw Mamos today.”

“Yep.”

“Did he say when they’re leaving?”

“Nope.”

“Do you want to leave?”

“What’s the difference?”

“I want to know.”

“Well we don’t always get what we want do we?”

“Don’t be mean.”

He fell silent. “I’m already gone,” he said under his breath.

“What do you mean?” she asked more softly.

He didn’t answer right away. “It’s summer. If we are going to trade this season we’ll have to leave soon. We could leave anytime, tomorrow, tonight.”

“Not tonight. It’s already dark.”

“What’s the difference.”

“You’d get some warning.”

“Not much.” He shrugged. “A couple of days.”
“It’s just the not knowing.”

He couldn’t tell if she was speaking from his point of view or hers. For a moment he indulged the latter, but then decided it would be better not to care one way or the other.

A pause. “I’m gonna miss you,” said Mosy.

A longer pause. “I’ll miss you too.”

* * *

“Hail!” a voice boomed. Momos and four other Sathens turned to see a tall man striding up to their fire, where they were making tea. “Hail, country men! Praise be Lesath! I’ve been only two months away from our poor country and already I am lost and I long for the sound of my native tongue!”

At the sound of his Sathen hail, the traders quickly put a hot mug in his hands and sat him down beside them. He seemed less tall now, and his Skoorian accent, the match of their own, put them at ease.

“So what brings you here, traveler,” asked Momos.

I’m a refugee.”

“A refugee?”

“Like so many others,” he said, shaking his head. Then he looked up surprised, “But haven’t you heard?” The man stood up half way, as though he might get up and leave rather than herald the terrible news he must have for them. “The Wasaecians sacked and burned all the towns and farms for miles around Skoor! I lost my wife, my farm, half my village. Praise be Lesath they did not enter the city gates, but I have nothing left now, save restless feet.”
“And Poll?” one asked after a long stunned silence. Poll was their own village, just outside of Skoor.

“Poll, my friend, the very worst of it. Not a splinter left anywhere, and nothing grows in the ash. They say it was Poll’s fault that Lesath allowed the Wasaecians to attack in the first place. Everyone knows they killed a cleric there last winter, one favored by the God with the gift of prophecy. And he must have been a dear one. They say that nothing will grow anywhere until the murderer is buried beneath the Pollian fields.”

“But surely,” Momos said, his face pasty, “the murderer must have died in the fighting.”

The man shook his head. “But yet nothing grows. And they surely need it for the Wasaecians burned the spring crop. So everywhere they search for the murderer. They say there was a traveling band that had something against the cleric and left almost as soon as the murder had occurred. So most of all, Sathens wait for their return. They say they’ll kill the whole lot if they have too.”

At this the traders fell into stunned silence. After a time, the traveler bid them farewell. They did not, as they normally would, protest that he stay the night in their camp. Neither did the man ask. He smiled as he walked over the crest of a hill and out of sight. Then he spread his scarab green wings and flew.

*  

“We’re going to the trader’s camp today.” Mosy announced that evening.

“Who? Why?”

“You and me.”
"For what?"

"To listen."

"Well, I'm not going."

"Why not?"

"Because."

"I can't go without you," said Mosy. "I don't know where it is."

"Well then I guess you're not going."

"Why won't you go?"

"I don't want to."

"You don't want to see Momes."

"I don't want to see anyone."

"You don't have to. I'm not talking about listening at tent walls. You just have to find us a boulder or something nearby, once it's dark. Look," she leaned forward (not exactly towards him but the intention was there) and lowered her voice. "The traders are meeting tonight."

"And what?"

"A Sathen traveler came today, Fa said, with news from Skoor."

"And?"

"And the men they sent to Nussa have come back too, with twenty horses, my fa said."

"What do you mean 'they're meeting'? What do you think—they have nice organized assembly at precisely sundown to decide when we're leaving?"

"See? You know what I want to know. It's still on your mind..."

"Of course it's still on my mind. But I really don't see them calling any mass meetings"
over this. Momos will go around feeling people out is what happens.”

“Look, if you can find some boulder or tree at the edge of camp, we can sit and no one will see us. You can cover your eyes if you don’t want to see them.”

Nuse didn’t say anything.

“So we’re going then?”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Well you have until the sun goes behind the ridge.” She put her sandals on, grabbed her stick, and went out.

“Mosy?” Nuse called through the door. The sun was still well above the ridge.

“Mosy? I thought you said...”

“But we’re innocent of any such thing!” exclaimed one of the traders. “They can’t think—I mean, he was alive when we left! How can they accuse us.”

“It appears,” said Momos patiently, “that he may have died just after our leaving. We don’t know. It may have been the other traders, the ones who take the northern route. But in any case, what this means is we can’t get any more glass or salt from home. It’s all horses from here on out. And for obvious reasons we can’t trade in Kellas. That leaves just Thane, which is only a few week’s ride away. We can afford it, this year, with the lot Morgan brought back from Nussa. I suggest only send some of us to trade in Thane—since we have so many more with us than usual—while I would stay here with the rest to keep the peace.” With Aias as his guest friend, this was Momos’ natural function. “I remind you also that winter comes surely as always, and last winter here was quite preferable to the winter we spent wandering before it. I would venture that it is even
better here than the cold desert winds of home.”

“It’s not home,” said a trader, “you’re right about that.”

“What home do you refer to, Salamos?” Momos exclaimed, his voice as pained as that of man he spoke to. “Our home is our wives and children, who are here safe and sound? You’re mother I know. But she is old, Salamos, and quite likely dead.”

“What exactly are you proposing here, Momos?” said another trader. “We never agreed that we were never going back. It’s you and Telamon that are so obsessed with—”

Momos held his hands up. “I’m not proposing anything. We can’t go home this winter and that’s a fact. All I’m doing now is giving everyone something to think about before they go grumbling and picking fights with the shepherds. Why burn any bridges is all I’m saying.”

“I lost two horses!”

“Someone’s coming,” hissed Mosy to Nuse, who was sitting beside her behind a boulder. The camp glowed faintly orange, throwing shadows behind the bushes and stones that dotted the field. Nuse was so engrossed in what he was hearing that it took a moment for him to hear more local sounds. But then he heard a familiar burp. “Telamon,” he whispered. “He’s drunk.”

The two crouched down behind the boulder, which seemed infinitely smaller than before. The footsteps came directly to the other side, casting a dull shadow over their heads. They heard a clinking and then everything was still for a few unbearable moments while Nuse and Mosy held their breaths. Then came the sound of liquid splashing on the opposite face of the rock. Mosy made a face, but even in the dim firelight Nuse saw fear there as well. Then there was the clinking again, of a belt buckle being tightened. An
uninhibited yawn ensued, and Nuse saw the shadow stretch its arms wide.

Then Telamon, to their horror, walked out past the boulder and stood with his hands on his hips, head tilted upwards. Looking at the stars, apparently. Then he turned around and staggered towards them. He might have kept walking right past them, but something caught his eye. He stopped and leaned forward unsteadily, staring directly at them through a bit of brush. He picked up a big stick and headed towards them cautiously.

Mosy gripped Nuse’s wrist and shook it, a silent plea for him to tell her what he saw. Nuse looked at her and stared. Her eyes were glowing, faintly, like a cat’s. He threw his hand over them, hissing, “Close your eyes!”

Telamon’s stick dropped almost imperceptibly and he leaned forward. “Who’s that?” he slurred. He lunged forward and pulled Nuse up by the hair. “Nuse! Damn it. I thought you were a lion, god damn it.”

Mosy heard a slap and she let out a squeak.

“But what’s this?” Telamon’s voice changed abruptly from rage to interest. He shifted his grip to Nuse’s shirt collar for balance and leered towards her. He jerked back without touching her. “Ah, Nuse. Ah, Nuse, old buddy.” He gave Nuse’s shoulder a paternal shake. “Now see I was wondering when you would grow some hair down there old boy. Always thought you were older than Momos thought. You’re too tall really. Don’t see why you had to come all the way out here... See I see these glowing eyes out here,” Telamon spread his fingers claw like and gave a spitting alcoholic yowl. “I figured...But what the hell, you should have a drink, old man.” He let go of Nuse to search around in his coat, presumably for the flask.

Nuse cleared his throat. “I’m terribly sorry,” he declined politely, patting the man’s
hand, “but we were just leaving.” Nuse grabbed Mosy’s arm and pulled her up.

They ran hand in hand, Mosy crying, “Nuse! I can’t see anything! Nuse!”

“Neither can I!” They were out of the firelight already, and with the clouds the stars did little for them. He steered as quickly as possible out of the boulders and bushes and into a clearer area. Mosy tripped several times but he kept her from any bad falls. They ran until they were over a smallish hill, where they stopped, bent over and gasping.

“All right, let’s go,” said Mosy, “I’m ready to go again.”

Nuse flopped down on the slope, feet downwards. “He won’t come after us. Just let’s rest a bit. He probably won’t even remember it in the morning.”

She sat down next to him.

“So my eyes glow,” she said after a bit, “is that what you’re telling me?” She strived to imitate her normal tone of amiable confrontation, but she was still out of breath and her voice shook.

He rolled his head towards her. “Yes, they do. Not as bad as they first did. They’re fading. And only if it’s really dark.”

A pause. “That’s nice. My eyes glow.” She spat and hung her head between her knees.

“...thanks for telling me.”

“Sorry. Payas said not to.”

“Yeah.” She fell silent for awhile. Then she reached her hand out until she found his face.

Nuse watched with interest. “Yes, that is my nostril.”

“Your nose is all bent.”

“Yes. Long time ago.”
Something in his voice told her not to pursue it, so she moved on to his eyes. Satisfied, she withdrew her hand. “You didn’t even cry.”

“No, why would I?”

“He slapped you. Payas slapped me once and I cried. Not even very hard—I was younger,” she put in quickly. “From the surprise of it more than anything.”

“He missed. Fell on my neck. Anyway, it’s never really a surprise anymore.” He sat up. “We should go.”

“You didn’t tell my father that the traders are going to stay, did you?” asked Mosy the next night while she was trying, unsuccessfully and without much concentration, to knit.

“If you want to tell him that’s your business. You probably should.”

“But if they stay, you stay.”

Nuse’s heart fairly warmed at the statement, but he didn’t show it. Still, he was in a light-hearted mood; the date of his departure had been pushed into the vague future again.

“You’ll be crowded here if they stay. They don’t get along, traders and herdsmen. Anyway, I’d have to go back eventually anyway, as soon as you can see again.”

“But that could be years!” Mosy said cheerfully.

“Anyway, if they ‘stay’ here, that just means they set up base here. The men would still be gone trading half the year anyway. I would go with them.”

Mosy gave a harrumph.

“I’m the only one who could tell Payas, anyway. Without saying that we were over there in the middle of the night, eavesdropping. I could tell him I have inside knowledge.”

Yates 154
Mosy’s eyes widened. “You wouldn’t!”

“No, why would I, I’m a trader. Why would I help the herders?”

Mosy settled back comfortably. “That’s right. You won’t.”

“But I might.”

“Oh stop it.”

“This bunch can get violent you know.”

Mosy took this information in with the gravity it deserved, but said only, “Momos seems to be on the nonviolent ends of things.”

He laughed. “Yes, Momos the ever peaceful giant... Because of Aias... But in other parts they don’t call us traders. They call us bandits.”

“Don’t say ‘us.’ Besides, you’re too young to fight. It’ll be ten years before you even have a beard!”

“Six, six or seven. Anyway, their children have been stealing horses and killing for ten years by the time they get their first fur. But you’re right, they don’t give slaves weapons.” The Sathens in general were paranoid about slave revolts and so forth. “Anyway, even if Momos did give me a knife it wouldn’t be a shepherd that I’d use it on.” Nuse laughed darkly. “That’s why Sathens don’t give slaves knives.”

Mosy didn’t laugh. The penalty was death for a slave to so much as threaten his master or his master’s people. To actually raise a hand against anyone, even in self-defense, meant it would be a slow death.

“Anyway, I don’t think they would attack the shepherds,” said Nuse. “Momos’ family has been guest-friends with Aias’ family for generations. Momos is a bandit, but even bandits have honor.”
“What would it take to break that?”

Nuse didn't answer for awhile. “It’s a hard land back in Skoor. The desert is creeping up. The old folks say it’s grown a mile. Some say there’s too many people, too many farmers, too many horses, oxen, and everything else. Others say it’s a god who doesn’t like us. That the whole land is cursed..... While we were out on the route two years ago—Momos’ group that is—this Sathen priest comes up and says someone in specific is responsible. And that’s not going to be anyone who’s actually there in front of him, right? So it’s us—well at that point, us or the other traders that winter there. But when we get back for the winter, all these changes have been made—farm land seized by the temple, rules on when you can plant, when you can’t, where you can graze, where not. So Momos complains and the priest goes into a trance right there on the spot. Says he sees Momos’ band is the one that’s cursed, doomed to do heinous and sacrilegious things. So Momos tells everyone to get their women and kids together. And so everyone goes, all in a rage. It was too cold to go up to Nussa, where they uh,” Nuse cleared his throat significantly, “get their horses. Normally we’d drive the horses hard down from the north through the Sathen Desert till we come here to fatten them up for trade in Thane and Kellas. But since we couldn’t go north, we went to Kellas instead. They stole a few horses there, just to get by. That didn’t go over well with the Kells.”

Nuse stopped to change the wool he was carding.

“And?”

“We had to go the long way through the Sathen Desert just to escape, and driving hard. Even then we were going to try to make it to Thane to sell them. But by the time we got here the horses who’d even survived were in such sorry state that there wasn’t much...
point in trying to sell them. I was surprised I even survived that...Anyway, before they got this news from Skoor, they were probably ready to go back home this winter. But now this comes up, plus the horses. So I imagine they’re getting irritable...But Momos’ family has been guest-friends with Aias’ for generations. They’d have to be more than irritable for Momos to break that bond. Momos is a bandit but even bandits have honor.”

“Huh.” Mosy sat lost in thought for awhile. “But you’re still not going to tell Fa, right?”

“We can sit on it for awhile.” He smiled and put his hands behind his head. He liked her being at his mercy once and awhile, just as he liked picking up spools of thread for her when she dropped them. “Anyway, we don’t know anything too earth shattering. Everyone will see for themselves when only half leave for Thane.”

Half of the Sathens left for Thane, and the herders took due notice. But the horses went too, and things settled down. And in any case, the deep summer had arrived—the time when herders grazed on the highlands past the Badlands, where the snow stayed longer in the winter, and made the grass greener in the summer.

“Can’t you get someone else to take the flock?” Mosy asked Payas.

“You’re fourteen already,” he answered, “or fifteen even, I forget. Old enough to hold down the fort.”

“I’m helpless.”

“You’re staying with Roxana, anyway.”

“I’m blind.”
“Look.” She was about to say something about her ability to “look” at anything, but he beat her to the punch. “Or listen, if you prefer. I don’t want to go, but—”

“Well can Nuse stay?”

“I need his help, and besides, Roxana says she can’t keep him.”

Which wasn’t fair at all. Nuse more than earned his keep. “Then can I come?”

“You’re helpless and blind, remember?” He punched her on the arm and sighed. “You know what the Badlands are like. The sheep barely make it through and they can see. The rocks would chew you to bits.”

Mosy sulked out the door and felt along the house side until she found Nuse leaning against it, spinning.

“Did it work?”

“No.” She slid down next to him.

“I didn’t think it would.”

“I can’t believe Payas is even allowed to take you.”

“Momos trying to show good will or something.” Nuse was chewing on a piece of grass, and he threw it away toughly like a Sathen cigarette, smoked down to the bitter end. “So it goes, so it goes.” He threw his arms wide for dramatic effect. “Every man has a fate, my friend, embrace your fate and—”

His arm hit her in the face. “Oh you’re so funny.” She threw his arm back at him and a slapping fight broke out. Then, a bit sadly, they giggled all over each other in the sun.
SIX: The Dying God

Clotho: God made Man!

Atralia: Man made God!

The gods first came across the Bridge of Stars to the earth as the conscious emission of their respective suns. As they made the creatures of this world, they saw that is was good and so took similar material for themselves and their spirit became flesh. Thus men and gods as we know them rose simultaneously, neither knowing themselves till they knew the other, and never calling one immortal until they saw the other die. Thus we may agree with the third Moirai: “In creating man, the gods created themselves also.”

—from Moiran Paradoxes: Interpretation and Commentary by Genem

A dream had taken Sol by the hair and shaken him awake like a dog with a piece of meat. Now he couldn’t sleep. He had not dreamt of the Ten Lethenai with fire in their hands or of shining Thana in the Fooots. He’d dreamt again of supernovas and flickering light. He looked at his star. It said nothing, but his dream whispered on obsessively—Suppose your star isn’t there? Suppose the dream is true? Suppose all the stars are gone? Their light would come to earth for centuries, millennia, before the darkness caught up. Was that what Himeros had wanted to tell him? Had he too dreamt of dying stars? Dreams move faster than darkness, the Moirai used to say. The gods are dying, they said too.

Suddenly he wanted to fly away like Himeros, faster than his star could die. And Himeros, had he fled his dreams also, and not the Lethenai at all? But Sol could no more
fly faster than the speed of darkness than any body can. He would have to change back to how he used to be—a projection of his star, as fast as starlight. To do that, it was said, one had to fly into one’s own star, and burn, burn, burn, but come out alive and new, lithe as light, free to flash across the heavens or choose a new flesh again. But if one’s star was already exploded, one’s darkness already close behind, and the Lethenai even closer, what then?

Sol spread his wings and dropped off the ridge, feeling the wind in his newborn feathers. His speech was almost back too, he sensed. But he still felt dangerously fragile and empty in his chest, like his power had left a sucking vacuum where it had been. The Lethenai would burn him to the ground if they found him as weak as this.

Ten Lethenai with fire in their hands.

Ten Lethenai throwing stars at a single god. Over time, would that not burn off the flesh? Had Sol not seen the ashes there, left behind? Were those ashes Himeros’ flesh after all?

O Himeros! he sigened to the air, You tricked them! You provoked them! And obligingly they burned your flesh into light! And you laughed and escaped them in time to flee your own star’s darkness! They left you for dead and you left death in their hearts!

Himeros lithe as light, fleet foot past the stars.

But there was something else: the boy with the half smile and flashing eyes, this child of nightmares and miseries, who guarded his pain more carefully than any treasure, who kept stupidly getting up after being knocked down, who loved what he knew he must lose. Yes, Sol had seen these things. He was a god, after all. And he’d seen them twice, once in a god, and now in a human child.
Lithe as light, now, he could change now, fly or die now, fly or die— Once Himeros had become light again, he could have changed into a creature that took life from its own dying flesh instead of from a dying star. Thus he could cheat immediate death for a few paltry miserable mortal years, in exchange for—But Sol couldn’t imagine what. To save mankind? To save the world? With the two young mortals he was beginning to remember what it was like to have humans. Indeed, he would do many things for those two. He’d already saved the girl’s life, hadn’t he? And he would do it again if he had to, and overdraw his power in the same way he had. Yes, he would. But die for beings that were going to die anyway? No. Such a thing was unthinkable, illogical. And in any case, what could any mortal, even a mortal who was once a god, do to save the world? What could they possibly do against Thana or any other such threat? Least of all this child of nightmares.

Sol slept no more that night, nor touch the ground. He flew onwards over the mountains and over the sea until he reached the Moirai’s door.

The Moirai were the oldest gods of all, and they lived on the sea west of the Woolies. Thana commonly blamed them for all her problems in the Foots, though they seldom left their island. They built their house on the smooth white stone that first rose from the sea. For a long time there was little else but birds, wind, and salty grass, but now sheep, goats, alpacas, and rabbits played from the shoreline at one end of the island to the cliffs at the other. Sol pushed through the crowd of them and swung the door open, scattering galaxies of brilliantly colored lint into the sun shafting through the boards. It was little more than a drafty half-furnished barn. Unspun fibers filled baskets on the floor, and
dying vats stood near a fire by the open door on the other side. Yarns of every shade hung on the wall in coils, and filled several large looms. The Moirai themselves were hard at work: one spun, while the other two were up to their arms in red dye as through they had just sacrificed one of their rams. They reminded him of the little old peasant women who wore kerchiefs tied under their stubbly chins, black dresses over surprisingly dense torsos, and a bundle of wood on their backs.

"Well Sol!" said Lachasa, "What have you to say for yourself?"

Sol opened his mouth.

"He's lost his tongue," said Atralia.

"Oh Sol!" cried Clothîsmê, "you look so old and tired." She wiped the dye off on her apron, which by its colors must have been used for that purpose for several years. Putting her hands on either side of his face, she said to the others, "Don't joke, now, it's not the time."

"And right time or wrong time, there is little left." Atralia wiped her arms dry as well and came to stand by Sol. "Well?" she said.

He opened his mouth again and when nothing came out, Atralia hit him three times on the back, as though he were choking. Sol coughed, and then gasped, "Thank you." His eyes were watering and he felt like he'd just sneezed. "Thought it would never come back." He sat down on a chair and Atralia and Clothîsmê went to sit by Lachasa at the spinning wheel. They each took up a thick thread of a different color and attached each to the center of an empty spinning wheel, which Atralia turned with a foot peddle as they twirled the three into one strand of yarn. "It is a pity though. We miss that old Tongueless Tongue," she said, "no one ever uses it anymore."
“But the human way is just so much clearer.”

“Yes, otherwise you might understand.”

“Listen carefully, Sol.”

They spoke in turns, rising and falling as if arguing, contradicting themselves to the rhythm of the foot peddle.

“Indeed, as you thought,” began Clothismè.

“Himeros is a mortal!” cried Atralia.

“Himeros is a god!” Lachasa shouted back.

“These days gods are mortals,” amended Clothismè.

“These days mortals are gods!”

“Gods turn mortals!”

“Mortals turn gods!”

“And so gods die…” Clothismè wailed.

“And mortals live,” rose Lachasa hopefully.

A one-beat pause.

“But nothing dies without a fight,” Atralia sang-sung.

“A fight where everything will die,” cried Clothismè.

“Wars, walls, and worship!”

“Fanatics, famines, and floods!”

“The gods will burn the flesh of the earth.”

“And drown the souls of men.”

“All trying to save them.”

“Trying to save themselves.”
“All because the gods don’t know how to die.”

“All because the gods don’t know how to live.”

“What can we do?” asked Sol.

“That’s what Himeros came here and said.”

“’What can I do to save the gods?’”

“’And what can I do to save men?’”

“That’s what he said.”

“Cheeky boy, was he.”

“But to save the gods you’d have to be a man.”

“To save men you’d have to be a god.”

“So we need a thief!”

“A thief! A thief! To steal a god from men.”

“Not just any mortal god like you or me,”

“We need one of the Dying Gods.”

“For those who teach men how to die,”

“So too can teach the gods.”

“And me? What can I do?” asked Sol.

“Cheeky boy.”

“What does the sun normally do, Sol?”

“It runs around in circles!”

“Like chickens!” The three of them laughed hysterically for a moment.

“You will bring news to gods,”

“And news will bring a god from men.”
“Come now,” said Atralia as she cut the yarn from the wheel, “you know enough.”

“You have work to do,” said Clothismē as she handed him the yarn.

“Go now, Sol,” said Lachasa.

All three looked at him pointedly. He nodded once and made for the door.

“Be careful,” Clothismē called wistfully.

Sol went with the usual light-headedness the Moirai always bestowed on their visitors. He put the yarn in his pocket and flew off the island, back across the ocean, and into the Woolies, towards the Foots.

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A week into Mosy’s stay at Roxana’s house, a curious thing happened. Mosy was stealing a few minutes with her pipes when suddenly, in perfect time, a light appeared before her. Then it disappeared. She blew the note again, half expecting there to be some connection, but there was nothing. She turned her head from side to side, as though looking for someone to tell. But then it dawned on her that this must be the beginning of the end of her blindness, which she intended to keep secret for as long as possible. Nuse would have to be returned to Momos as soon as she could see again.

A few days later, just when she was beginning to think she had imagined the light, something else happened. One of her hands was engrossed in the warp strings of the loom, and the other with the wool. The texture and shape of the yarn had become such a self-sufficient entity for her that she almost didn’t noticed immediately when it suddenly acquired color as well. Dark brown-green, with the sun light glinting blurrily off the fibers. She stopped and held herself perfectly still. But it slipped away and left her in
darkness. She closed her eyes, savoring the memory.

The first time she saw a full eye’s worth of vision, she nearly cried. She was soaking a load of sheets when suddenly she saw the whole round basin, with the wooden wash board leaning against the side, the grey water and the folds of cloth spiraling slowly out from the center. Its symmetry fairly overwhelmed her.

From then on flashes came to her at odd moments. Sometimes they were so brief that she didn’t even recognize the things she saw. Outside, it was often too bright and she would have to close her eyes before she saw anything. But she hoarded these flashes and she went over them at night. They were so fresh compared to her memories from a year ago.

The next time her vision came she was petting Orex. She hadn’t been able to visit the forest without Nuse’s help, and to her surprise Orex had begun showing up at the house. She knew he was invisible, but at seeing her empty lap she panicked, thinking she’d been petting nothing. But then Orex complained in a low whine. She felt the substance of his movement, but at the same time she knew why Payas wouldn’t believe her if she told him. Suddenly she wanted to squeeze Orex to her chest, feel his old undeniable weight and firmness. But he just wasn’t solid enough. So she closed her eyes and buried her face in his currents. When she opened her eyes again her sight had left her. Orex stayed the night. Roxana complained of drafts in the house.

Finally the big day came when her vision stayed long enough for her to look around the yard, surreptitiously of course. It reminded her of her childhood, back when everything came in such rich colors, and vision was still a mysterious thing. She forced her eyes to stay open until they watered at the brightness of the day. From then on, her
vision stayed with her for hours at a time, with increasing clarity.

On one of these occasions Mosy did something rather stupid. She was longing to see some distance, but she couldn’t see either the Woolies or the plains from Roxana’s house. So one day when her sight came while Roxana was in the village, Mosy went up onto the ridge above Roxana’s house, Orex at her shoulder.

The view from there was almost unbearable: it was overcast where she stood, but in the distance the sun came down in sheets through the clouds and lit up the dry plains. Mosy was greedy for it, and she climbed over the ridge and onto the next knoll. From here her view was completely unobstructed. To the east she could see from the trader’s camp to the Ridge Back Mountains and even the smudge of Thane on the southern end of the plains. To the south she could see the Woolies, where the range curled around from the west. Down below she saw the village nestled in the steep valley, and then, quite a bit closer, a pair of men coming up from the village, about to pass between her knoll and Roxana’s house. She looked quickly around for a passable blind girl’s stick, but finding nothing, she headed down the other side of the mound. This put her out of their vision for the immediate future, but there were neither boulders nor trees to hide behind in the immediate vicinity. The voices came nearer. “I lost my stick, could you please help me home?” she practiced to herself. They sounded Sathen; maybe they wouldn’t recognize her as the blind girl from the Night of the Sun. Maybe they wouldn’t notice she didn’t have a stick. But then she heard their voices. Momos and Telemon were shouting at each other.

“You’re the reason, Telamon.” Momos was saying, “You’re the reason why we can’t
go back and you’re the reason why we can’t go to Kellas. Starts and ends with—"

“I did us and our home land a favor. They should welcome us back as heroes.”

“People back home liked that priest you—”

“But he was an ass!”

“That doesn’t mean you can just go—first you have to persuade everyone else that they don’t like him either.”

Mosy fled.

She ran towards the trader’s camp to the boulder covered area where she and Nuse had hid. She threw herself between a boulder and a juniper and breathed in deeply, taking in the smell of crushed juniper berries beneath her feet. She berated herself for panicking. She would simply wait until they passed.

But the voices were no longer coming or going. The two men had stopped, perhaps seeking the privacy of the field. If they didn’t leave soon she would have to go around them to make it back to the house before Roxana. But she didn’t want to leave the shadows of the juniper. She hadn’t noticed it earlier, but her eyes burned and ached from so much light and distance. She waited until she realized she was only stalling. She opened her eyes resolutely and looked behind her to see if she could exit the bush from the opposite side. But only night came between the branches and for a moment she thought she had slept through dusk without even realizing it. But no, she had only fallen for the same old trick that usually plagued her in the moments before waking: it was always night to blind eyes, and she was, once again, blind.

She sat back against the rock and a resigned calmness came over her. Orex whistled in through the branches and she realized that he hadn’t been with her till now. With him
came the voices of Telamon and Momos, now just clear enough for her to understand.

"But why can’t I at least tell our group here what I done for them? They certainly never liked him—" Telamon whined.

"Because, Telamon, they will quickly realize what you’ve done to them. Even I thought we could go back eventually, until the morning we were going to leave and you came round asking me to help hide the body. You stand between them and home. They’d turn you in themselves. They’d kill you yourselves and bring back your body to the priests in Skoor. You mean nothing to them, and it certainly wouldn’t help my own standing with them. I’m tempted to turn you in myself, for god’s sakes, my own god damn brother. I mean you didn’t even kill him honorably—you didn’t challenge him to a fight and he didn’t attack you. It even would have been better if you’d come up behind him with a shovel, at least then you could say you’d made a decision that it had to be done. But no, you were drunk, and you threw a flower pot from a roof and hit his head. You imbecile."

"I didn’t think it would actually hit him—what good is my aim when I’m drunk!"

"Your aim is so bad anyway that you could only hit him if you didn’t mean to."

"That just proves that I’m a divine agent, a messenger of the gods—"

"It proves you’re an idiot."

"How was I supposed to know it would actually hit him! I was drunk!—only the gods could see everything from above, only the gods—"

"Oh lay off it for Sath’s sake," Momos roared. They both fell silent.

"Don’t you think—" began Telamon again.

"No, I don’t."
“Just listen, Momos. This could be a good thing. Look at this land. Tell them to look at this land.”

“I thought that too at first. But it’s overcrowded.”

“Exactly. Its inhabitants are the only thing wrong with it.”

“Look, I can’t ask everyone to fight for a place which at this point they aren’t even sure they want.”

“It’s opportunity that should convince them of the necessity— as our ancestors did when they took Sath so long ago. Who knows what things will be like later... Let me talk to them. They will see. And this is the perfect time, Momos, now. When so many of their men are scattered out in the Badlands, a day’s ride from here.”

“But that’s exactly what we don’t want to do. It’s too soon...”

Momos lowered his voice. “Listen, all the shepherding men will be gone to the Badlands in a month. Then it’s practically just the farmers that’s left. A few shop owners. If we do it, it should be then. I’m not sure we should do it at all, or if we’ll even have to. But that’d give us time to persuade the others... We shouldn’t even be talking about this here anyway,” Momos ended, looking around. He sighed. “Just bide your time, Tel, come on. I don’t want to see you dead.”

The voices came closer again. If they found her now, knowing what she knew... Mosy crunched herself up so small it hurt. But even so she whispered the information to herself while it was fresh in her mind. But if they knew she’d heard... She couldn’t quite imagine them actually killing her, scarcely a few moments from Roxana’s house, but then, she realized suddenly, what else could they do, given what she now knew. Leave? Plot undone, when the plot itself involved so much killing? No, it would simply be a matter of
necessity. *She'd be like that rabbit she'd killed with a rock, and they'd leave her here all bloody... Or no, they had knives, she'd be like a sheep or a chicken or a—*

But the voices continued on past her to towards their camp.

When she finally moved again, she was stiff and cold with sweat. She crawled out of her hole, rocks pushing into her bare knees. For the first few yards she cowered to the ground at every breeze or sound, but then she forced herself to stand up and be calm, lest she become hopelessly disoriented, or worse, forget the details of what she'd heard. She took a deep breath and chose a direction. The going was slow, and she kept stumbling across bushes and boulders. She walked up a slope, hoping it was the mound and then at an arbitrary point she walked down the other side until the ground sloped up again. This should be the ridge of the village valley, and by her optimistic calculations, she should now only have to follow it to the west until she reached Roxana's house.

After an hour or so of walking along the ridge, Orex came and pushed her back on the well worn path to Roxana's, in the opposite direction as she was headed.

"Mnemosyne! Where have you been?!" said Roxana when she saw her.

"Is anyone else here?" Mosy asked quickly.

"I asked you a question," Roxana said, "Where-have-you-been?"

"I was on the ridge and I—"

"On the ridge—what were you doing on the ridge? You could have fallen, you could have—""

"I wanted to feel the breeze, all right, but I heard—"

"And without your stick? How did you even get up there?"

"I lost it when I got up there, but—"
“What do you mean you lost it?”

“It rolled away from me down the hill…”

Roxana pushed something smooth and wooden into Mosy’s hand. “It’s right here. You left it by the door.”

Then Roxana gave Mosy a look of suspicion and irritation that normally would undone her. But such looks do not work on the blind and Mosy contained her trembling rage. “Thank you,” she said evenly, “It was the other one—”

“Since when do you have another one? You know what I think—“ Roxana stopped passed her hand quickly in front of Mosy’s face. “Well you are still blind.”

“Of course I’m still blind!” Mosy snapped, both frozen at the thought of being found out and self-righteously incensed at being so accused.

“Well I’m not so sure you’d tell me if you did get your sight back. I know how you feel about spinning and knitting, and I know how you feel about that slave.”

At this revelation, coming at the same time as everything else, Mosy nearly burst into tears with impotence. But instead she fairly shrieked: “The traders are going to attack the village!”

Only then did Roxana notice that Mosy’s face was pale and damp. She put her hand on Mosy’s forehead—her failsafe reaction to anything that might be the matter. “Are you all right?”

“No.” Mosy jerked her head towards where she thought the village was, though she was too distraught to get it right. “I need to talk to Aias.”

“He said now is the time to attack the village—when so many people are gone. They
could attack the village now, if Telamon convinces Momos. And if he doesn’t, they’ll just wait until later, like he said, and it’ll be even worse,” Mosy repeated.

Aias and Euenos sat in formidable silence, starring at her. She looked up at Roxana for support, and then turned again towards the men, looking for some hopeful sign. She had not been in particularly good standing with either of them since the Quartzema.

Aias cleared his throat. “We will talk.”

For the next few hours, Mosy jumped at every sound, sure that the traders were about to swarm into the valley. She continued like this the next day and the day after. Nights she didn’t sleep more than an hour without suddenly going rigid in the bed she shared with Roxana, wide awake and listening in the dark.

Roxana saw these things and knew the girl told the truth, though she remained suspicious about how she’d come by the information. She treated Mosy gently, however, assuring her that Aias was on the lookout for anything strange. It was only two men, after all, who had any hostile intentions towards the village, and Mosy herself had heard them discuss the difficulties of convincing the others.

Soon it became clear that nothing was going to happen, at least not right away. Mosy was so relieved that she hardly noticed that Aias and Euenos trusted her less for it.

Meanwhile her sight grew stronger until she could see more often than not. She continued to hide it. Momos would take Nuse eventually, she knew, but she wanted to see him first. She wanted to know that he wasn’t sad when he was quiet, to see his smile when he laughed, to watch him while he slept. True, she might see him by chance in the trader’s camp, but there he would always be staggering under some load. There would be

Yates 173
a strangeness between them, then. Never mind that she and Nuse had carried firewood bundles and wool bushels that were just as big; Nuse’s load would always be heavier with Momos than with Payas.

So still she held out. She kept her head down whether Roxana was near by or not, and closed her eyes for long stretches so she wouldn’t forget how to act blind. She wore her hat tipped down over her eyes, and told Roxana she thought the light was bothering her, though she still couldn’t make the slightest thing out. Roxana did not test her again, though sometimes Mosy was sure she knew.

A few weeks later, on Lesath’s feast day, laughing and singing blew in from the trader’s camp to the village. Mosy did not allow herself to enjoy their music, since it was played by murders and thieves, but at least she could be sure there would be no attacks tonight—she couldn’t imagine anything distracting them from their merrymaking.

So she rested easy, even when she heard a few drunken traders make their giggling way down into the village, presumably to share the merriment. A little later there was some commotion down there, but it was too far away even for Mosy to hear the details.

But around midnight the house shook with hoof beats. She and Roxana ran into the yard in time to see Momos and his grey mare pound to the village edge. “Telamon! Telamon! My brother!” a broken voice cried in the trader’s tongue. “Tel…” When they heard him again he was shouting in Mesmé. “Who? Who did it?”

Aias’ voice came too softly for anyone but Mosy to hear from that distance. “He was drunk. He attacked us.”

“And he defiled the Stones!” cried someone else, who was quickly shushed.
"You kill men for that?!" Momos shouted.

Mosy closed her eyes in fear as she put the story together from the shouting below. Telamon had come to the village with a few other Sathens, singing and laughing and calling anyone and everyone to join them. The villagers stayed in their houses, clutching their stones and whispering alternately of Pali and Thana. Given the unwelcome atmosphere the Sathen merrymakers had gone to the village edge, where, either in drunken ignorance or drunken insolence, they had relieved themselves on the three remaining Stones. A village woman saw it and the men came out of their houses. Much to the villagers' surprise, the Stones did not fall on top of the Sathens, but that did not mean there would not be retribution later. A fist fight broke out. Someone pulled a knife—it was unclear who first, but both villagers and traders bore the wounds. Telamon had been stabbed in the stomach. The other Sathens ran off fairly unscathed to tell Momos, while the more sober villagers carried the dying man towards the trader's camp. Telamon was dead by the time Momos met them at the village edge.

Momos had no ears for it—"It was all of you who killed my brother!" he shouted, "All of you!" He went charging back the way he'd come. He pulled his horse to an abrupt halt in front of the house, sending a cloud of dust over Roxana and Mosy, whom he didn't notice. There he looked back at the village, breathing hard and making unintelligible sounds. His mare paced under him nervously, and Momos let her.

"His death will be avenged!" Momos cried hoarsely, shaking his fist. Mosy hardly heard him. She was staring at what was slung in front of him across the saddle, belly down, head turned sideways on the horse's stomach—Telamon's upside down face flashed at her, pale in the moonlight. His eyes had fallen open, and blood trailed black
and shiny from his mouth. The horse stamped and it fell to the ground. Momos galloped off, but the image remained long after. Roxana took one look at Mosy’s wide eyes and knew beyond a doubt that the girl could see.

Mosy shook herself out of it and met Roxana’s gaze steadily. “It was for Nuse,” Mosy said, “you were right.” Then, heady with fear, self-importance, and terrifying responsibility, she turned and walked up the ridge towards the trader’s camp.

“Where are you going?”

“To listen,” Mosy called without turning.

Roxana wanted to call her back, but her own fear stayed her voice. Only Mosy spoke the Sathen tongue; only Mosy could find out what Momos’ threat would come to. Roxana stamped her foot.

Mosy came back at around six in the morning with juniper sap in her hair and terrible words ringing in her head: “Our blood has been wrongly spilt on this land, and it cries to us!...We will bury a brother in this land, and he calls to us!...Let us not forget him! Let us not leave him!... Let us not leave a land which holds our sweat, our blood, and our flesh! We have paid the blood price that makes a land home! Lesath calls us to take what is ours! Now it is time that these infidels pay the price of their crimes!” She couldn’t remember who said what, for there were too many voices saying the same, while others cheered in agreement. Everyone had suddenly found something to fight for. Amazing, she thought, how one man’s death could motivate a retaliatory, territorial, and religious war, all at once.

Mosy and Roxana told Aias, and to their relief, he called a town meeting. The next
morning, the remaining shepherds did not go out to graze, and farmers did not go out to their fields. They all sat on the green by the Stones, praying and sharpening their kitchen knives. Other men watched the Sathen camp from the ridge, who caught Mosy trying to sneak by and listen to the traders again. The Sathens, they pointed out, had also put out guards, and she wouldn’t be able to get by.

So Mosy busied herself with making arrows, sitting near enough to Aias to hear any reports brought by the lookouts. At midmorning, the Sathens laboriously buried Telamon in the hard earth of the Foots (which was why Footish peoples had always preferred pyres). Later an excited young shepherd came to say that the traders were busy saddling their horses, moving things around in the camp. An attack seemed imminent. The next they heard, however, was that the traders were packing up. Aias went back with the shepherd to see for himself. By the time they got there, the camp was gone, and the Sathens were already in the distance, headed south towards Kellas. Aias scratched his beard and laughed. “Well,” he said.

The villagers remained wary of a surprise attack for a few days afterwards, but things in general turned back to normal. Farmers returned to their fields and the remaining shepherds took their flocks to graze, though they kept closer to the village than usual. Villagers marveled at the miraculous return of Mosy’s sight, and probably would have thrown a celebration had they not still been worried about attacks. Mosy herself, however, was hardly to be seen.

Mostly she sat on a wide flat boulder on the ridge, trying to make out the mountains through the haze. The forest fire season had started already, and the wind had changed to
blow the smoke their way. It was like an overcast day, except the sky was tinged brown and air was hot and dry instead of wet. The sun was red and dim enough to look at. Now and then a bit of white ash floated down. Mosy didn’t mind it really, and she liked the smell. It was familiar, like spring or any other season. There were fires every year, in some safely distant place, and they would cease with the first snowfall. From here at least she could see far towards the south. Of all the villagers she was the least convinced that the Sathens had gone for good. And besides, Nuse and Payas were there.

According to Nuse, good slaves like him were costly and hard to come by (though Mosy had formerly thought them expendable by the way they were treated). Momos would undoubtedly swing through the Badlands on his way to Kellas, just to collect him. No matter how much she swallowed, her throat hurt and ached and spasmed. Then she broke into sobs. It wasn’t as though Nuse was dead, she reproached herself. She just would never see him again.

She held her breath and gazed stubbornly south, as though looking in his direction were some consolation. Her eyes welled up anyway, clouding her vision and making the Badlands seem even farther away than they already were. But when her tears fell, everything became clear and close again. Only three days away, as a matter of fact. And that was with a herd of dawdling goats. And the Sathens likewise must be moving slowly—horses and humans alike would be fully loaded, most of them on foot. Momos would split off from them to search, but it might still take him days to find Nuse, or even to get through the Badlands, which in places were labyrinthine. Mosy, on the other hand knew the Badlands to some extent, and had an idea of where Payas liked to graze on the other side. She wiped her nose and dried her eyes. It was still morning. She could,
probably, make the Badlands by this time tomorrow, for the moon was full and she could travel by night if she was brave enough. With luck she would find them on the highlands the day after. At least she could say goodbye then. And maybe warn them that Momos would be coming. She the felt the knot in her chest cramp into hope. Momos might give up if they just kept one step ahead of him for long enough, especially if they could lose him in the long corridors between the rocks of the Badlands. She stood on top of the rock, dusting herself off. Had she thought of this yesterday she could already have been there. How surprised they would be to see her.

Mosy ran to Roxana’s house to grab a knap sack and some bread and cheese. And her walking stick and her bow. If she’d waited till her eyes were dry and her breathing easy, the last two items might have made her pause a moment to reflect on her still undependable eyesight and the dangerousness of such a venture in general. But she was on a roll with the momentum of a post-sob decision, and by chance, Roxana wasn’t there to stop her. So jammed on her hat and set off in oversized strides, doubts behind her and hopes ahead.

As evening came the smoke thinned out just enough to let the moon hazily through. Mosy pushed on in the twilight, pausing only to put on her felt jacket. Orex had traveled with her all morning, but now he’d gone again. Her doubts had long since caught up with her, and the night encouraged them like shadows. She’d found her friend Aithra in the fields near the village, and she’d told her she was going and not to worry. But had Aithra told Roxana as Mosy had asked? And if so, would Roxana have worried enough to send people to bring Mosy back? It was too late to turn around, and Roxana would be furious
if Mosy came back tomorrow. Of course, she would still be mad if Mosy came back with Payas and Nuse in a week, but then Mosy wouldn’t care about Roxana. She shouldn’t care about Roxana now, she told herself. Roxana hardly had the right to scold her anymore, when she was old enough to marry. Of course nothing seemed to stop Roxana from scolding her older brother Payas.

All that assumed Mosy would make it there or back. She heard coyotes laughing in the distance now, and she’d heard wolves sing last winter. And there was always the odd lion or bear who’d wandered down from the forest. There were cliffs to walk off of in the dark. Gods, who were dangerous as often as helpful, often flew by night. Spirits of the restless dead walked the fields, hand in hand with the fear, sorrow, or anger of the troubled living, emotions which had acquired lives of their own and now wandered in exile, venting and visiting on the unsuspecting passerby, particularly those traveling alone at night. Fear was always the most dangerous, Payas had said. For after all, it might be nothing other than someone else’s fear, looking for a new home. Payas would tell her to imagine she was as calm and fearless as a cougar on the hunt. With much effort, she was able to curl all her fears and doubts into a tight ball just below her throat, which she supposed was better than letting them have the run of her mind.

At midnight, Mosy laid down in a patch of long grass and slept fitfully for a few hours. Half awake, her stomach sore from shivering, she reached to pull her sheepskins closer around her, only to remember like a punch in the gut that she wasn’t safe in her bed. Body rigid and eyes open, she listened until all she could hear was her own rapid heartbeat. Then she stared at the hazy moon through the nodding heads of grass until she fell asleep again.
The second day was better than the first. The coolness of the night held the smoke to a light haze for a few hours and it was much too bright and sunny to be afraid. It was also too late to turn back, and so there was no agonizing over the temptation. Neither was there any sense in brooding over a decision already made, not when she could be fantasizing about coming back in triumph with Nuse. Payas, Mosy felt sure, would take him on as an apprentice musician and shepherd.

By midday the smoke had once again descended, and by late afternoon Mosy began to wonder if she was still going in the right direction. But then she reached a meadow and suddenly the multicolored cliffs stood before her. She nearly laughed in surprise—without the smoke they could normally see them from the hills for hours before they reached them.

Fifteen-foot-high rock formations shaped like miniature mountains rose vertically from the grass without warning. Protruding rosy veins ran horizontally through tan sandstone. This was the Great Wall, and you had to walk six miles around unless you knew where the Gate was—a place where two of the miniature ranges overlapped without touching, leaving an entry to the shortest path through the Badlands. She tried several likely looking corridors, but they turned out to be dead ends, sooner and sometimes later. So she walked along the Wall at a distance, hoping to recognize the Gate's shape, which to her eyes at least, resembled a nose. She knew at least that it was somewhere near by, for she remembered this meadow, which was only a mile long or so. As the sun lowered in the sky, the light filtered through the smoke in a clear red-orange. The rocks grew craggier with the shadows until finally a nostril jumped out of the rock, illuminated in light and shadow. Mosy studied it before going in, memorizing the way the meadow
dipped down before it and the veins in the rock behind it until she felt sure she would recognize it again in any light.

Once inside, Mosy found herself in shadows, though the tops of the rocks on either side still caught the sun high above. The way was only wide enough for three men to walk abreast in some places, though in others it bulged into clearings wide enough for the sun to feed a patch of grass. The corridor ran along the other side of wall for a quarter of a mile before began to branch off into different twisting corridors, some leading nowhere, others to difficult but passable terrain, a few to networks of small grassy clearings, and one to the high plain. But Mosy was an expert tracker of stray goats, and she did not miss the trail of droppings amongst the gravel.

By that time it was nearly dark and she was forced to camp again—she did not want to get lost in the Badlands at night. So she curled up in a small cave, an indentation in the rock, really, which protected her from the wind. To her delight, Orex joined her, wrapping himself around her neck and making her whole head tingle warmly.

She slept blissfully well for most of the night until she realized Orex had left. Even then she felt relatively safe, knowing the night was almost over anyway. Just as she was drifting back to sleep, she felt the air vibrate and heard him announce his presence with a nervous whine. She peaked out into the night to see if there was anything there.

She heard hoof beats and she jerked her head back in, her heart pounding. Orex slipped onto her lap, vibrating with fear, and she realized that the sound came from him; it was something he’d picked up from far away—*Dogs barking, then a crash of something being knocked over. A shout, a panicked bleating, a horse whinnying, then more shouts. The thud of something heavy hitting the earth. An expletive in the Footish*

Mosy stroked Orex with trembling fingers, her eyes as wide as they could go, imagining the scene, hardly believing that it wasn’t just outside her hollow. When Orex fell silent, she rose to a crouch and exited the rock, looking around anxiously. The clearing was silent and the rocks glowed silver in the hazy moonlight. She remembered dead Telamon’s voice: “But this is the perfect time, Momos, now. When so many of their men are scattered out in the Badlands, a day’s ride from here.” Then she fell against a rock and vomited—mostly dry heaves, since she’d only had a piece of bread the day before. She used the last of her water to rinse her mouth out. Still leaning against the rock, she closed her eyes. Momos had said to attack the village in the fall, when even more shepherds were gone. But Telamon hadn’t proposed they attack the village. He’d meant to pick off the shepherds when they were scattered in small groups, easy game. Now Momos was taking his suggestion.

Mosy straightened, looked around once more, and set off into the night as fast as she could.

Mosy followed Orex’s whines for an hour before they reached the camp, just on the other side of the Badlands. Dawn was just breaking and it was silent. A single dog trotted back and forth across the camp, but the goats and sheep were gone. She counted four bodies: two men, one woman, and a dog. Heart in her throat, she ran to the nearest man, who lay on his stomach. She turned his head around so she could see his face, and then heaved a shuddering sigh of relief that it wasn’t Payas. Then she nearly choked on her
spit as she recognized him as Faras, the father of two boys. She stumbled back from him and slipped on the grass, which was slick and dark with blood. He must have dragged himself a few feet before he died. He was the last person she thought about as she looked into the faces of the dead. She made sure they weren’t anyone whom she loved and then moved on.

She followed Orex, hoping he would lead her to Payas and Nuse. She tried to coax the camp dog to follow but it just looked at her. Three hours later the sun had come up and the smoke had descended. It was mainly grass here, but there were still walls of rock formations left over from the Badlands. She heard a goat bleat and immediately crouched down. She crept to a slit in the rocks and looked through.

A flock of goats and a trader. After years of gazing at the flock aimlessly, tracking down strays, milking, birthing, and separating them out from other shepherd’s flocks, she immediately recognized the animals before her as her own flock, Payas’ flock. The trader’s hands and arms were encrusted with blood. She jerked back again, and slid to a crouch, eating her hands with shock, and then rage. Trembling, she put an arrow to her bow and stood at the slit again. The Sathen was not even old enough to have a beard, but his scary little face lacked the youth it should have for its size. It looked broken in.

_They’ve been stealing horses and killing for ten years by the time they get a beard_, Nuse had said. She breathed in fiercely and raised her arrow to the slit in the stone.

“Orex!” The Sathen said, putting his hand out to the air with a grin. “What are doing out here old buddy?”

The arrow flew off into the grass harmlessly. Mosy ran sobbing to the familiar voice and threw herself into Nuse’s chest.
“Oh god, I almost killed you. God.” Her arms were around his neck and his hands in her hair. “I thought—I thought—Oh god, I thought you were dead already. And I thought you were a Sathen—you still wear their clothes!”

“Well, I don’t have any others!” he said without understanding a thing except that Mosy was nearly suffocating him. Orex tousled their hair together and chortled.

“Oh god,” she said again.

“Come on, you’re getting all dirty. I have afterbirth all over... Payas let me deliver a kid!”

For a moment she forgot everything and studied his stranger’s face, seeing his look of pride at the birth instead of just hearing it in his familiar voice.

“I had to go in half way up my shoulders because it was breeched and it was a little ewe and Payas’ arms were too big so—but hey!” He took her face in his hands and looked into her eyes. “You can see!”

She nodded and traced his features as she had done so many times before, marveling at how little she’d known. Nuse suddenly felt nervous. She fingered his hair. He’d told her it was black, but black covered such large range of colors. In the sun it fell in coarse mahogany waves, like the Sathens, not the silky blue-black his Nussian mother must have had. But his eyes were narrower and more slanted than the Sathens, though larger and rounder than those of the Nussians. Then she told him everything.

Mosy leaned into Payas, his arm around her shoulder. He told his grazing partner, Alkandre, to bring back the men, Coril and Toran who’d just left an hour ago. In the meantime they sharpened their knives and whittled their walking sticks into poor excuses
for spears. They had a few bows for shooting coyotes with and a couple of axes for chopping fire wood. The traders would have proper throwing axes and sabers—curved swords suited to slashing as one rode past.

“Nuse,” Payas said as he sat beside the boy, almost a man. He handed him a sheathed knife. “I don’t know what you’re gonna do.”

Nuse looked at him, the man he’d come to trust and respect over the last year. He’d never quite been able to think of him as a master. He’d never really known anyone like him. Maybe this, he wondered suddenly, was what it was like to have a father. He looked at the knife.

“But whatever you do, a boy your age should have that.”

“I will fight beside you,” Nuse said.

“It’s for gutting fish and skinning sheep, Nuse. Pray to the gods we don’t have to fight. But if we make it out of here alive, you have a place to stay...If I have a place to stay,” he chuckled bleakly. “They’ll probably go after the village next...But you know you’d be as free as any of us slaves of the weather and our sheep and our gods...” They fell silent for while. “You ever try to escape?”

“Once,” said Nuse. He gestured to his bent nose. “And never again.” He laughed through his nostrils.

“God, Nuse.”

“It’s all right. Kept me too ugly to sell for...other purposes.”

“You’re not ugly,” Mosy chimed in from where she sat some distance away.

“Ugly enough to kill!” Nuse yelled back in mock indignation.

“I told you I thought—“
“You thought!” He grinned and turned back towards Payas, who wasn’t smiling.

After a while he said, “Well, you’d have any home I did, just like a—well, as a son...I always wanted a son...As though Mosy wasn’t enough for me.”

Nuse suddenly felt guilty. “I—thank you. But I think you should know,” he swallowed and lowered his voice to a whisper, “I think you should know—I think I love your daughter.”

Mosy’s ears were no less keen than they were when she was blind, and she smiled.

“I know,” Payas groaned as he stood up. “So I wouldn’t have much choice about your being my son anyway...If we survive this we’ll talk.” Payas gave Nuse’s shoulder another shake and went off to sharpen the end of his walking stick.

The six of them and their flocks made it to the other side of the Badlands by nightfall. The smoke covered the moon, but they pressed on anyway into the dark. A few hours before dawn they lay down under a lone open branched pine. No one slept well. They lay in their blankets, rigid, weapons at hand. Orex flew overhead in circles, watching over them and wishing Payas would talk to him.

Mosy, who had the keenest hearing, she heard the hoof beats first. Soon everyone had slipped silently from their blankets and stood waiting in the dark dawn. There was no sense in trying to out run them, and there was certainly no hiding with a eighty head flock. Mosy went to fork in the tree, where she could see and shoot from but remain hidden from below. Nuse stood with the men, his throat tight and bitter.

The Sathens came. There were five of them, yelling and whooping, swords out. Mosy fired six arrows before they reached camp, and she hit two, one in the leg, the other in the
shoulder. Her short bow did not have the power to knock the latter off his horse at that range, but something—Orex, she suspected—frightened his horse, and he lost his balance and fell some distance before the camp, his foot still in the stirrup. She hoped Orex wasn’t solid enough to be wounded by a stray arrow. The horse galloped until it spooked at the man under its legs and began stamping.

Mosy’s tree shook with their hoof beats; the other four were at the camp in moments. Toran stood in front, and he was the first to fall. The saber slashed through his shoulder and then bounced up to his neck before the curved blade slid neatly away. Mosy fired again, and hit a man in the neck. He fell from his horse and Nuse and Payas descended on him with their sticks. He did not get up again.

Meanwhile Alkandre threw an ax at the man bearing down on him. He hit the horse in the neck instead, which Nuse was sorry for. The horse reared and kicked Alkandre in the thigh. The rider and his sword went flying in opposite directions. The man lunged forward as soon as he hit the ground, stabbing Alkandre in the left shoulder with his belt knife. Nuse rushed to Alkandre’s side and rammed his stick into the Sathen’s chest with all his weight. That threw the man off balance for a moment, and the stick splintered to a sharper point on his wooden breast plate. Nuse retreated. The man smiled. He was Momos’ cousin and Nuse had known him ever since he could remember. “I don’t want to kill you, boy...I’d rather take you back to camp, where they can—” The man sprang. But then Payas was there, guiding Nuse’s stick into the man’s belly. The Sathen fell and lay groaning.

The fifth Sathen—the only one who wore a full helmet—was still mounted and doing damage. Mosy shot him in the thigh, but he didn’t seem to feel it. He looked at the tree
shrewdly however, and took up a throwing ax. Mosy stood with one foot jammed in the fork, the other out slightly on the branch for balance, her body leaning against the trunk. The ax fell on a branch directly between her and the Sathen; needles fell in its path and the branch shuddered. He threw another ax but then he had to contend with Payas, who had thrown a rope around him and was now pulling from behind. Orex had been harassing his mare since the beginning, but she was better trained than the other, and its mount a better rider. But now Orex blew directly in the horse’s ear, high pitched and loud. She reared, lost her balance and fell over. Payas managed to get out of the way of the horse, but the rider fell backwards on top of him. The Sathen got up first, using his good leg to kick Payas down in the same motion. His sword was swinging up over Payas’ head when Nuse leapt onto his back, hanging on to the man’s neck with one arm. The knife went in with surprising ease; Nuse had thought that it would be harder. He stabbed until the man fell to his knees. Nuse leapt away from him as he tried to get up again, but then Alkandre limped over with Payas and the three of them stabbed and hit him until he no longer moved.

They looked from side to side, hearts pounding. Another Sathen lay dead in the grass. Coril and Toran lay dead near by. Two others lay elsewhere, one moving slightly, the other still. Alkandre’s shoulder bled freely and his thigh had already blossomed into a wide bruise. Payas and Nuse were cut all over, but nothing deep.

“Mosy?” Payas called. Nuse looked at the tree too, alarmed at Payas’ frightened voice.

“I’m fine,” she called down. She dropped down from the tree awkwardly, her knees suddenly too weak to spring. She went and stood by Nuse, who was staring at the dead man in the helmet.
“I killed him,” said Nuse.

“I think we all did,” Payas said with a dry laugh.

Too battle-fried to mind touching a dead man, Mosy squatted and pulled the helmet off. It was Momos, his dead eyes open.

“I always wanted to,” said Nuse absently.

Payas stared at Momos’ face in surprise. “You—well, you didn’t know, Nuse, you couldn’t have.” He patted Nuse’s shoulder, unsure if Nuse was sorry or glad.

Nuse wasn’t sure either but he shook his head. He’d known. He’d groomed Momos’ horse and washed Momos’ clothes too long to not know them from ten miles away. Mosy stood up, her shoulder brushing Nuse’s. He turned to her and didn’t look at Momos again.

They moved Coril and Toran’s bodies into the shade of the tree, mumbling Palian prayers as they did so. They left the others where they lay. The last wounded Sathen had stopped making sounds and they did not stop to check if he’d died. There was no time. They did not know what the traders planned, but the village had to be warned. So they put the wounded Alkandre on Momos’ dapple grey mare and went, Nuse leading the horse and Alkandre—who’d never ridden—doing his best to hold on.

The sky was grayish brown with smoke the next day, and the grimy ash stuck to their sweat. The sun didn’t shine; it hung, a dirty red circle in the sky. In that strange light a lone ewe came running towards them, bleating. The four herders looked at each other. They were only a few miles from the village now. They walked a bit more and then Payas stopped.

“Nuse. Mosy.” He said slowly, looking down and hitting the ground with his staff.
“Take the dogs, take the flock, and go into one of the little ravines way back behind the village.”

Nuse inhaled as though he might protest, but Payas continued on without a pause. “Don’t go into the forest—not with this smoke—but there’s a few separate stands of ponderosa there—far enough away from the forest I think—that’ll hide you. With their big horses the Sathens have avoided that area all year but if you see one, you leave the flock and slip off into the hills.” Nuse opened his mouth. “No, Nuse,” said Payas, “this is not your war.”

Nuse did not want to fight, and least of all in a war where he knew men on both sides, and where capture would mean certain torture and death. But he had accepted it as his sacred duty to fight beside Payas. He supposed it was the closest he would ever come to “honoring one’s parents.” Finally he shrugged and said, “Choose your battles, you always say, don’t you?” He laughed without smiling. “What if I choose this one?”

Payas shook his head. “No. Go now. Keep my daughter safe, and yourself. And besides,” said Payas, “we need those sheep too. If we survive this war—and a war it looks to be—it won’t do us much good if we and the rest of the village starve through the winter.”

“You can take the horse, too,” put in Alkandre. “I can walk well enough.”

“Why don’t you take the flock?” Nuse said somewhat sulkily to Alkandre.

“My family, Nuse, I have to look after my family. Now go on, that’s a good man.”

Payas and Nuse stared at each other for a bit. Then Nuse turned away towards the sheep.

“Take mine too,” Alkandre called after him.
“That was selfish of you,” said Alkandre once Mosy and Nuse had left. “You know he’s old enough to fight.”

“Everyone’s allowed a bit of selfishness,” said Payas gravely. “Thanks for the help though.” He punched him lightly on his good arm. “He’s right, though, you should have stayed with them. Your wife is going to yell at you.”

“Either way she would, good old Rebs.” He made a dismissive gesture and limped on in silence.

Nuse and Mosy walked gloomily before the flock in silence, the horse trailing behind, Orex flying above. They chose a steep ravine with hardly a foot of flatness at the bottom. It was flanked by towers of boulders green with lichen, and floored by an amber mat of pine needles. The flock was not happy with this development, as there was virtually nothing to graze on and they felt claustrophobic. The sheep stood forlornly, pawing the ground now and then, while the goats plotted mutiny. As usual, Moraka, the bummer goat, was the most ambitious and sneaky of the flock, and soon Mosy was far up in the ravine looking for him. As she went the smell of smoke became more immediate, and eight squirrels and a deer ran past her in the opposite direction. She was about to run back to Nuse, leaving Moraka to his own defenses, when she saw the ponderosa.

The tree stood calmly, her arm half-raised in graceful distraction. She was on fire. Her tawny puzzle-piece bark had turned white and black in a few places, while the edges glowed red-hot. Smoke drifted out from under her pinecone scale fingernails, and flames danced up her arms. Her hair was a wild root like mass which crackled and curled up at
the tips. Pine cones grew there, and one had bloomed in the heat like some fire gilded flower.

"Come tha sun." The tree lingered breathily on each sound, her voice full of musical creeks and whistling whispers. "Waith."

It took Mosy a moment to make out even the more recognizable words, but then she stammered, "Are you alright?"

The tree nodded and fell silent for such a long time that Mosy thought that might be the end of it. "Come tha sun. Waith."

Mosy nodded, almost as slowly as the tree had. "Wait?" Her nod changed to a vigorous shaking of her head. "No, I can't wait. The forest is on fire!" She began to turn away, but the tree slowly raised a hand, as though to calm her. Then she gestured slowly around herself and Mosy saw that the fire went no farther than a few feet out from the flaming tree.

"Safe, here," the tree said. "Waith the sun."

In the past Mosy might have taken the commandment of a tree as divine, but over the last year the difference between the supernatural and the natural had come to seem less important. And besides, the tree didn't seem nearly alarmed enough about being on fire herself to be trusted with deciding what was "safe." So she ran back to consult with Nuse, who insisted on going to see the tree himself. Mosy waited with the flock.

When Nuse arrived, Sol was there, stomping out the flames around the tree. The zephyrs gleefully blew them back to life until Sol snapped at them to stop. Then he saw Nuse. "I've been looking all over for you," he said.

"You can talk," said Nuse. And indeed Sol spoke in Nuse's own Sathen tongue.
Sol nodded. “It came back, that part at least. Had a nasty head wound.” He stared for awhile, and then said, “What’s your name?”

“Nuse...Yours?”

Sol looked hesitant, but finally he said it, “Sol.”

Nuse nodded. “That’s what Mosy—you know, my friend who plays pipes—that’s what she thought.”

“You’re not afraid?”

Nuse shrugged. “I feel like I’ve known you.” He shrugged again. “Aren’t you supposed to have wings then?”

Sol spread one wing and shook it so that it was visible. It was golden and beautiful, but still burnt in places.

Nuse’s eyebrows went up. “How come I never saw them before?”

“We can’t—” he stopped. “No one can see a god’s wings when they’re motionless, not even gods.”

They stared at each other in awkward silence while Sol thought. No, this boy, this Nuse, could not be Himeros. Sol could smell the mortal flesh decaying. He was dying, like all mortal humans. Himeros could not have done this to himself. Not when he could have fled into the stars, quick and immortal. And they didn’t look a bit a like. Except for that half-smile. And the way Nuse sigêned—it was so familiar, so characteristic of Sol’s conversations with Himeros when the earth was new, before the gods had learned to speak. But even if he were Himeros, Sol wondered how he had ever thought he was going to tell this miserable boy child that some part of him had chosen this life and this death, and had chosen it over immortality. “Come with me,” Sol said finally. He didn’t know
what else to do.

“Where?” asked Nuse

“In to the hills, where you’ll be safe.”

“With the threes,” put in the tree.

“I can’t leave,” said Nuse.

The tree said something to Sol in her rustling language. “Mosy can come too,” he reiterated impatiently.

“She won’t leave either. Her father—my master—is down there fighting—we’re not going leave him when—“

“So he can come too.”

“But he won’t leave the village either, not in the middle of the war.”

“So what, should we take the whole village?” exclaimed Sol. He kept forgetting that he was talking to a mere human boy, who should take his orders without question. He hadn’t even considered the possibility that he would refuse.

“No—Because they’re not going to leave their land and their houses and their animals.”

“We could take the animals,” Sol grumbled under his breath.

With no agreement reached, they left the tree where she was and went back down to the flock where Sol and the zephyrs affectionately greeted Mosy. He congratulated her on the return of her eyesight and she shyly thanked him. Then the three of them talked glumly about the Sathens for awhile. Mosy and Nuse were nervous and jittery, and Sol cursed himself that his power was still too weak to do anything. In any case, Thana would surely be watching for him. But at least he could stay here and make sure Nuse was safe.
until it was over.

After awhile they lapsed into silence, broken only by the sound of Mosy humming to herself. She always hummed when she was nervous. The zephyrs hummed along sympathetically, and she began to sing a song she had been working on: “And the windy dogs came rolling down, and drove the horsemen home.” The zephyrs liked it immensely, as though they knew it was about them.

“Don’t sing that too loud,” said Sol, half-smiling. “They’re very impressionable you know.”

Mosy stopped and wiped her sweaty palms on her pants. “I just wish I knew what was going on down there.”

But Sol’s attention was elsewhere. “Hey,” he said sharply. He whistle-hissed a few times and then gave a groan, “Too late. They’ve left.” He got up doggedly and ran off after the zephyrs. “Don’t go anywhere,” he called to Mosy and Nuse over his shoulder. But when he reached the burning tree, he stopped, thinking.

Far below in the hills, Payas, Alkandre, and Euenos lay in the sage with the other archers, peering over the lip of the dusky purple canyon. A herder had seen the Sathens headed in this direction, and so now they waited. While fighting the Sathens hand to hand would be a hopeless endeavor, here they could at least shoot down on them for a time. The Sathens would have their own bows and axes, of course, and once they were out of the canyon they would come after them. But that was part of the plan too, for the Footish only hoped to stall the Sathens long enough to give their women and children a head start into the hills. Given their current standing with the Goddess, they doubted she would
prevent the Sathens from selling them as slaves anywhere they wished.

Payas heard murmuring among the rest and looked up to see an enormous pine on the ridge burst into flames, as quickly as one torch lights another. The sky churned with yellow smoke. Payas cursed. He’d sent Mosy and Nuse in that direction. The hill below was already beginning to sparkle with a grass fire. “Euenos,” Alkandre said, “this isn’t the beginning of Then, is it?”

“I don’t know,” Euenos said as he fit an arrow to his bow, “I don’t know.”

They heard hoof beats in the distance and the Sathens entered the mouth of canyon confidently, their swords jingling, and a new leader at their head. Sweating and biting their lips, the archers waited until the Sathens were well into the canyon. Then in unison they let their arrows zip through the brush and into the Sathens and their horses. The Sathens had their bows out in an instant, but they could only shoot back blindly. The Footish managed to kill or incapacitate at least seven traders and lost only three of their own. But in half an hour the rest of Sathens were out of the canyon and charging towards them.

The Sathens hunted them down, and they fled like deer, never looking back at the dead. When Payas threw himself behind a boulder and a bush he did not know how many had fallen. He fitted an arrow to his bow and looked at the grass fire again.

The flames jumped toward the sky like goats, and for a moment, Payas thought he saw shaggy grinning creatures playing in the smoke, their ears pressed back and their eyes, if they had any, hidden in their fur. Others said they saw them crouched down on their forepaws like dogs before molehills, blowing at the flames and then bounding through. Whatever the case, the flames courteously passed the Footish archers by and rushed down
around the Sathens, herding them like sheep. The horses side-stepped and whinnied at first; then they began to rear and flick their ears as though something was after them. The Sathens themselves saw nothing in the flames, but as they rode the wind whistled in their ears and the fire crackled with the voices of the dead—their mothers and fathers said quite ordinary things, while old friends cracked jokes. They heard the coughing and wheezing of their siblings or children that had died in the Skoorian plague a few decades back. Then they heard their own living wives and children calling them from the flames. At this they could no longer control their horses. They pressed themselves flat and let them have their heads. Many got away. Others perished in the flames.

When it was over, Payas and the others came out of the rocks and looked around. The grass was smoking but flames lingered only in a few places. The traders were dead or gone. A few burned horses screamed, spooking each other more than the fire had, while in other parts horses grazed quietly beside their fallen riders. Footish people also lay dead and wounded, though as far as Payas could see, none suffered from burns.

It was dusk by the time Payas came to Mosy and Nuse in the ravine. The three of them embraced, collapsing on each other with relief. The ponderosa tree had gone and Sol had not returned, so Mosy and Nuse went with Payas to the village. Roxana shouted at Mosy when she saw her: “I lose all my children, and then you would go run off and get yourself killed and make me lose my brother’s child as well!” Mosy had never seen her weep before, not even at Roron’s funeral. She hugged her aunt awkwardly and Roxana held her breath, feeling like a child being ineffectually comforted by another child. “You’ve grown taller,” she said when she’d recovered.

Mosy and Nuse spent the rest of the day dragging bodies to the village to be tended.
No one told them to do it, but they did anyway, in silent agreement. They were exhausted and dirty, but they couldn’t bring themselves to wash up or sleep. So they took the horse and hauled bodies on a sledge of saplings. In the end there were twenty three Footish people dead, many of whom were brought back later from the Badlands. Alkandre was killed early on. Euenos was hit in the arm but seemed to be doing well. Of the Sathens they found twenty-seven men dead, although everyone agreed that more had died in the flames. It must have been an uncommonly hot fire to have burned the bones.

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Tanis got back long before the battle started. He’d been in the woods, trying to track down a wounded god, Sol, without success. But Thana had called him back and now he had camped on a hill in the Foots where he had a good view of the village area. As Thana had predicted, the Footish people had not won by themselves. He saw the strange behavior of the grass fire, but yet even with Thana looking through him, he saw no gods in the air, and he sensed no divine power rippling across the land. It was as though the fire had a will of its own.

So though he was out of food, Tanis waited two days on the hill, squinting in the sun and scanning the skies for foreign gods. He spent the nights chewing a grass stem. He never slept much anyway, and he hadn’t had a dream in years. In the morning he sucked on a pebble to wet his mouth and stayed in the shade until twilight. Then he stood to see the twinkling torchlight of a funeral procession wind up from the village to a hilltop across from his. Later he saw the flames of the pyres, and music drifted up to him on the wind. He started down the hill.
It was one of the old women who started singing first. It always was. Only they had been to enough funerals to know when it was time. Even they were not sure now, for the village hadn’t experienced such a catastrophe in living memory. They waited long after the wind had carried the widows’ wails away to lonely places, and long after the last body had burned. It was night when the crone began. She was a good singer, one of the best in the village. She started out humming, as though searching for a melody. Then she let out a keening cry. It might have only been another lamentation, but then her cracked voice took hold of a melody and words:

*Change our sorrow into song,*

*O Pali, Pali, Pali*

*Change our deaths into dance*

*O Pali, Pali, Pali*

*Change our souls into you*

*O Pali, Pali, Pali*

The other old women joined her in an ebb and flow of cries and song. They walked around one of the fires, and though they did not exactly dance, Nuse saw orange poppy petals or perhaps sparks flying from their fingers. Mosy assured him that they were only clapping and dancing with their hands. Soon everyone was crying and singing from that place beyond joy and sorrow. Dogs reared up on their hind legs and bugled. Drummers
drummed and pipers played. Nuse and Mosy danced hand in hand around the fire, echoing and harmonizing each other’s cries.

Half-way through the night the zephyrs came, and then the trees. Some said they found themselves suddenly in a forest, with unbelievably tall trees towering overhead where there had been none before. Others saw lanky men and women with long arms and fingers, tossing their hair back and forth in the wind—a young man whose hair of yellow willow branches trailed to the ground and whipped out behind him as he danced; a child with white berries growing in her hair, skin as red as a dogwood. They grabbed hands with the Footish people and sang along in their own windy voices, something about the ravenous fire that burned them away but let seeds out of pine cones and made the dirt rich. Soon no one could tell the difference between tree and man.

Nuse had never seen a wake such as this, but he took to it immediately. He felt something breaking and dissolving in his chest; his old miserable life, maybe, or perhaps just the stress of the last few days. It began to snow and trees and men alike laughed, stretching out their hands and tongues. The fire season never lasted long after the first snow. Nuse and Mosy threw their heads back to watch it until they could no longer tell whether the snow was falling to the ground or they were falling to the sky. For a moment Nuse remembered flying through the stars and he snapped his eyes shut. The stars would explode, all of them—The flickering light, the darkness, and then—a howl and tremendous outward speed—torn apart into a million pieces—dark, dark, dark, then—bright dust: red, blue, green, yellow, orange, red, violet, blue, gree—but were they stars or dust? Were they small or large? Or were they snow, or feathers? Or fluffy cottonwood seeds, waiting to be born? And where was he? He was nowhere. But what was death with
such beauty in it? But with the stardust shimmering on his eyelids he couldn’t think of anywhere else where a new star might be born. And what of Alkandre? What of Salamis, a Sathen who’d once given Nuse a pair of shoes? What of the bodies they’d dragged today? Terrible, terrible. Beautiful terror. Terrible beauty. A trick, a gift! A lie, an illusion! The trickster, the changer, the shapeshifter, the dying god, the Pali! They didn’t call him that for nothing.

When Nuse opened his eyes he was dancing again and the flakes were falling everywhere in eddies of gleeful zephyrs. The villagers were throwing more logs on the fire and the sparks jumped up to meet the snow. Out of the corner of his eyes Nuse saw Sol standing in the shadows, zephyrs tugging at his golden-white hair. Nuse remembered the first time they’d met, when Sol told him of the winged people on the plain, their feathers flying just as the snow fell, their wings full of sparks just like the fire. Was that a dream? Was this the dream?

Nuse laughed and he looked at Mosy to tell her that Sol was there, but he found that she was changed. She smiled and it was the Palí smiling. It was the god’s eyes he was looking into, and the god’s hand he was holding. And by the way she looked at him he knew that he too was the Palí. And Roxana and Payas and the trees and the dead men and women carried up in the smoke—they were all the Palí, shouting and dancing with the wisdom of gods who die a thousand deaths, who lose themselves but become many things at once: the destroyed and destroyer, the created and creator, the song and the singer. Nuse no longer knew what they were singing, except that it must be the Summoning Song and that Palí had come. They were all winged people now, half divine, half mortal. Nuse laughed aloud and called to Sol, “I think I understand now.” Then they
each grabbed one of Sol's hands and pulled him into the dance.

Sol resisted at first, but the dance was contagious, and Nuse was sigêning things only mortals were supposed to know—crazy, blasphemous things about men being gods and gods being men, about dying and living at the same time. He let go of their hands, as though that would stop the flow of Sigê, but it was too late. The rhythm was beating inside him, and when he clapped his hands it made the sound of a bass drum. He sang, and the zephyrs hummed all around him. He felt the chords call to each other as the moon pulls the tide, and the chorus rise in the verse like a wave about to crash. He knew what music was now. And he knew, with absolute certainty, that he would someday die, along with all the other good things of the universe. Just like Himeros' star, and quite possibly like all the divine stars, Sol's star had gone dark, and it was only a matter of time before the darkness reached the earth. But yet here humans celebrated his death and their own, and he with them, and suddenly he knew why Himeros had become one of these strange creatures who sang at funerals, who danced even knowing it would soon be their turn to die. Himeros could have flown into the stars, and lived a featureless—but perhaps immortal—life with darkness on his heels. But Himeros had always been the hunter and not the hunted, and he'd become human because humans had what he was searching for—of all creatures in the universe, only humans knew how to die. Himeros became human to save himself.

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By the time Tanis reached the top, his knees were killing him and his asthma was acting up again. But it was worth it to feel Thana walking with him, to feel her eyes
searching with his. It would all be over soon.

Sol saw Tanis before Tanis saw him. Sol was not immediately alarmed, since Tanis was only a man. Yet Tanis made him uneasy, and so Sol slipped through the crowd. But then Tanis’ eyes focused and he saw Sol. Sol stood and spread his wings over his head in challenge. Tanis walked towards him, his eyes brimming with divine power. Sol saw it all as if they were the only two people on the mountain, moving in crystal clear slowness through the blurry breeze of dancers. *Ah, now, thought Sol, this man scared him.* He’d never seen divine power in a mortal man, and it sickened him as though the man had an extra finger. Tanis’ pupils disappeared into light and Sol inhaled deeply. Sol was weak; his power would be no match for Thana’s. He breathed out and cat-sized puff of air was all that left his lips. Tanis coughed as it hit him in the chest, but he smiled; he knew it was nothing. But as it passed through, cold on his lungs, Tanis stumbled. He fell to the ground, hard, the wind knocked out of him. *Feet all around, too close.* He gasped and struggled to get up, but he couldn’t get a breath in.

The dancing mourners did not notice him underfoot as they cried out to their god and Tanis cried out to his. Sol thought he heard a goddess howl in answering rage, but he did not look back. He slipped off, trailed by a crowd of zephyrs and trees.

In the grey of the next morning, after most had gone down from the mountain, five Footish women stood around Tanis’ bruised and broken body. They argued for a bit, and then summarily hoisted it onto the nearest pyre. It was better that no one knew, they reasoned, if the Thaneans came to investigate. And besides, they could scarcely give Tanis a higher honor than to mix his ashes with their fallen warriors. They blew the
embers back to life and then continued picking up the debris left from the night before.

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Himeros’ body fell from him in glowing shards as he ran across the Thanecian Plain. Soon he would be nothing more than starlight, and when his darkness came, he would be nothing at all. He closed his eyes; the dark sapped his energy and tried to pull him in. It’s fly or die now, fly or die now, fly or die...

Just before dawn a little mortal spirit brushed past him in the dark. Instantly he seized its wrist and pinned it to the ground with his weight alone, having no other strength to spare. His choice had come. “Where are you going?” he panted.

“I am going to die,” the spirit said. “Did another spirit pass you? Like me, but small?”

“No,” Himeros said, “I’m sorry.” He rolled off the spirit and crouched beside it, rubbing its hands anxiously between his. “It’s not too late, I think, you’re still warm.” With renewed vigor, he pulled the spirit up and dragged it in the direction from which it had come. It dug its heals in the dirt and pleaded, but the god pushed on, promising that it would not be all that bad, and certainly better than before.

To the god’s relief the spirit’s body was still pliant and warm when they reached it. As he’d known from the first, the spirit belonged to a young woman, heavy with child. She was huddled with a few others by the central fire, surrounded by traders’ tents, snorting horses, and watchful dogs. Nothing stirred in her womb, though there was something there, hard as a stone. Without wasting anymore time, the god tucked her spirit back inside her body with a few comforting words. She sighed and fell asleep.
Himeros knew he would have to leave most his remaining self behind, and pack other parts so small that he would not remember them for some time. A few powers, a few useful or precious memories, and nothing else save his desire. So he ordered himself as best he could and laid himself down in the stone in the woman. The babe kicked once as he fell from death into slumber, and Himeros' star faded into darkness as though it had never been. The parts he'd left behind faded too, and crumpled into the camp fire dust. Then all was warm and dark as he waited to be born one last time, for one last chance at living. Perhaps one day this child would do something great for gods and men. But what does a man know of his life before he lives it?

In the morning when Nuse woke, Mosy was standing over him, telling him to get up. There were goats to feed and music to play.
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