

MAFAVERNA

NDI



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English Edition

MAFAVERNA
•DEMOCRACY•

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Editorial

“Reading the world precedes reading the word.”
Paulo Freire (The Importance of the Act of Reading)

The year is 2022. In Brazil, there’s hope.

This adventure started with an invitation: to organize an issue that explores “positive views of democracy.” Dr. Amy Johnson, a writer and researcher at MIT, invited us to take up this theme, with funding support from NDI—the National Democratic Institute, a non-profit, non-partisan, non-governmental organization that works in partnership around the world to strengthen and safeguard democratic institutions, processes, norms, and values.

The invitation sparked A Taverna and Mafagafo to finally join forces. And so, two magazines that were about to take a hiatus, instead started to work together on a project that, for the first time in Brazil, enabled pro-rate remuneration to authors and staff. The larger project collaboration extended beyond Brazilian borders, with two other notable SFF magazines also publishing issues themed around positive views of democracy—Mithila Review, an international magazine based in Asia, and Omenana, which publishes stories by writers from Africa or the African diaspora. Some of the stories from the three issues will also be published together by NDI later in 2022.

Our issue presents five short stories drawing on different genres, worldbuilding, and points of view—proving that there are many positive ways not only to live in a democracy, but also to write about the egalitarian reality we seek. These are stories about giving voice to all citizens and about communities finding ways to promote egalitarian access to knowledge. We made a point to select stories that highlight the importance of education in the democratic process, how education brings to life the hope of a better reality. After all, as Paulo Freire, the Brazilian

education patron, taught us, creating what doesn't exist should be the aspiration of every person alive.

Talking about access, this is a bilingual—Portuguese/English—issue, so more people can be inspired by the presents and futures imagined by our authors. Grab your beverage, take a seat, and enjoy this collection of short reminders: it's worth fighting for a democratic world.

Diogo Ramos and Jana Bianchi

August 2022



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The true story of a Kartenian soldier in an enemy land

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about 6,100 words

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AFTER THE WAR, all one saw were books. From north to south, in villages, cities and by the side of roads, boards were removed from shop windows, stalls raised in the streets, volumes taken out from boxes—pages bound in leather or unrolled parchments showed small letters or colorful illustrations. Yian had never seen so many books. He’d never seen one. In Karten, he’d learned to wield a hoe by the age of five and a sword before reaching ten. Reading was for noblemen or judges or alchemists, nothing that remotely touched his reality.

In the damned republic of Lacconia, though, the books never seemed to end.

Of all the strange things in that land, it was the second he found the most unsettling.

The first were the lights.

*

It was snowing the night he finally reached the capital. His stolen boots squelched as he crossed a maze of narrow streets. It hurt to breathe. He’d fractured something, and the cut in his leg throbbed nonstop. His skin

was hot and sticky inside the heavy coat; a sluggishness had taken over his body, slowing his steps and thoughts.

He left a trail of red drops in the snow.

After three weeks of slinking around fields and woods, avoiding people, exchanging his filthy uniform for the clothes of enemy corpses and grabbing food wherever and whenever possible, he couldn't stop now. The port was right there in the capital, and he only had to reach it and sneak onto a ship bound for Karten to return home.

He leaned against a wall, each exhale fogging up the air. The frozen streets were empty; the only signs of life were the lights behind dozens of closed windows.

They all shone red.

It can't be, he told himself. It was unthinkable that the bastards burnt *crimson stone* to light up their houses...

Turning his head, he almost laughed. He'd stopped in front of another book display. But these were different; Yian could tell even without understanding a single word. It was the colors. Vivid, the illustrations caught the eye—a man arguing with a fairy, a warrior lady fighting a dragon, two children lost in the woods. Stories. He knew them. He vaguely remembered hearing them as a child, or at least versions of them. He rubbed the frost-covered glass clean.

"Pretty, aren't they?"

The voice came from behind, and the shock drove him away from the wall. He hadn't heard the woman approach, but now she was right in front of him.

He needed to move. Run. But his vision swayed like a ship at sea...

"They're mine," she continued. "We're closed now, but you can come tomorrow if... oh!" She was all bundled up in a scarf and wool hat. A gloved hand rose, but came down when Yian flinched, keeping his eyes on the ground. "Kid, you alright? That overcoat is too thin." He didn't say anything, driving his nails into his palms. "My name is Amelia. What's yours?" Silence. "You... you don't want to chitchat, clearly, but..."

Overcoat? Chitchat?

Except for a word or two, her language was very similar to Yian's. But he *couldn't* reply—he was sure his accent would betray him as soon as he opened his mouth. He shook his head, not knowing what he was denying, and staggered on his feet.

"Hey, hey," whispered the woman, as if speaking to a frightened animal, and reached out to steady him. She was old—must've been over forty—but her eyes were lively. She bit her lip. "Are you hungry?"

Just thinking about food made his stomach cramp. A few days earlier it would have been easy to refuse, but now he was ravenous in a way he hadn't been since the last plague had killed all the cattle in his village.

"Come in for a moment," she said, "and have some soup to warm up."

Before he realized it, he was nodding.

The first thing he noticed inside was the heat, and then he let himself be pulled through the shop lined with bookshelves to the back of the house. A part of his brain yelled that it was a trap, but the next second they were in a kitchen and he was sitting down. Yian smelled food—something was being heated in the stove, fragrant with spices he couldn't name—and he didn't move until a hand lightly touched his forehead and a bowl was put in front of him.

He inhaled the steam coming off the broth.

I'll just get my strength back, he decided, and then go.

*

The rest came in flashes.

Something soft beneath him.

A door opening and two people talking in low voices. The woman, Amelia's, and another one, lower. When he cracked open an eye, he saw both women at the door, outlined against the red light of the hall.

"What did you do, love?"

"He fell in the snow... he's burning up."

Hands touched his forehead, his neck, pulled his coat aside. He tried to attack the unknown woman, but she moved away.

Amelia's face appeared next. "This is my wife, Dana. She's a... doctor. Do you understand? She can help you. We need to bring your fever down."

No. They were going to throw him in a hospital and he'd be found. He couldn't stay here, but his body was heavy, heavy as iron...

Something wet left traces down his face.

The world spun.

Darkness.

"Sweetheart, he's not..."

"I know, Dana. Please. He's just a kid."

Then hands felt his torso and leg and he felt an excruciating, never-ending pain, which might've lasted for a second or an hour or a day and only faded with unconsciousness.

*

When he opened his eyes, he was in a small room with white curtains that let in the morning sun. The memories of the night before returned suddenly, jumpstarting his heart.

He'd let himself be captured.

He tried to sit up and groaned, falling back down. His torso was naked under the blankets, but wrapped in bandages—so was the injury in his leg.

A figure appeared in the doorway.

“Oh, you're awake!” Amelia raised her hands in a show of peace when he shrank against the headboard. “It's alright. Can I... *measure* your temperature?”

He didn't answer, but also didn't try to run. Amelia laid her palm on his forehead. “Much better.” She turned to the bedside table, where there was a pile of towels, a basin of water, and a thin glass object with a thick red liquid inside. Yian's eyes widened, but she just asked him to open his mouth and shoved it inside. “I'll take it out in a second.” She wet a cloth and brought it to his forehead. He looked around dizzily, and saw through the curtain that it was still snowing. How was the house so *warm*?

Amelia sat in a chair next to the bed. “Kid, do you understand me?”

He nodded.

“You've been here for two days. You had a fever, and the cut in your leg was *suppurating*. Dana is taking care of you. I don't know if you remember her—the dark-skinned woman?”

He nodded again.

“You broke a...” She traced a finger under his heart from one side to the other. “Rib. You need to rest and take your medicine. You can stay with us until you heal.”

He widened his eyes, heart thumping wildly again, and shook his head.

Amelia raised her hands. “I don't know where you came from, but we didn't tell anyone you're here. And we don't have to. Just rest.” She pulled the glass object from Yian's mouth and examined it.

Despite the room's temperature, a cold despair took over his limbs. Weak like this, he'd never make it to the port. What could they be planning? Why hadn't they called the authorities yet? Maybe they didn't know. Maybe they thought he was a street kid, though he hadn't seen many of them in the alleys of Lacconia. Could it be a trick? Did they want revenge?

Amelia didn't seem to burn with rage against the enemy. For the first time he noticed that the woman's hair was dark like his, tied up in a messy

bun. She had lines around her eyes that became more pronounced when she smiled.

“If you’re worried about money,” she said, “you can help me out with a few things.”

He narrowed his eyes. Work? That made more sense. He could understand exchanging services for food.

A corner of Amelia’s mouth twitched. “How do you feel about making books?”

*

Their living quarters were behind the store, on the other side of a curtain. It consisted of the kitchen, the small room he’d woken up in, the women’s bedroom, Amelia’s workshop, and something called Dana’s *laboratory*, a word he didn’t know but that seemed to mean the room was always locked.

“She keeps her work stuff there,” explained Amelia. “So don’t go in, alright? It’s dangerous.”

The doctor spent the better part of every day hidden away in that room or visiting patients. In the mornings, she changed Yian’s bandages, emphatically recommending that he didn’t do any heavy work, and made him drink a disgusting medicine that made him nauseous. She was a woman of few words and decisive gestures, eyes always bloodshot as if she didn’t sleep enough.

The rest of the day he spent with Amelia.

She was the shop’s owner. She sold—and made—the books. When Yian managed to get up, she led him to her workshop, a narrow room with a huge wooden machine, a desk, piles of paper and fabric, skeins of yarn, and many small pieces of metal. He watched her take a tray full of the metal objects, fit it in the machine, and brought it down with the pull of a lever until it touched the page beneath. When she raised the mechanism, the paper was filled with markings.

Words.

“We print the books page by page,” said Amelia. “Then we bind them.”

But what drew Yian’s attention were the plaques piled up in a corner. Unlike the metal trays with letters, they were stone. Bright red stone.

“They’re for the illustrations,” she said, shooting him a strange look. “Crimson stone is more *malleable*, so it’s easier for the artists to *carve*. Have you ever seen one?”

He stared at her.

Each of those plaques was worth more in Karten than Yian's whole family had ever earned. Just one of those impossible objects—inside a random shop in Lacconia, in the possession of two women who didn't even seem to be rich—would be enough reason to kill and be killed in his kingdom.

Whether in liquid or solid form, the sacred metal was the most precious substance in the world. In Karten, nobles used it to forge swords that could run through any material and kill with the smallest of cuts. Cannonballs were made with it, and one often heard stories of some soldier who had lost his arm messing with things better left alone. It was said alchemists invoked evil spirits to use the stone's power and create walls impossible to break down, roofs impossible to burn, ships impossible to sink. It was even said they consumed the metal, prolonging their lives for hundreds of years.

They went to *war* over it.

And it wasn't just the plaques. Tubes that ran from the kitchen expelled crimson stone steam to heat up the whole house, and every single one of the lamps in the rooms emitted a red, odorless light. The first time he saw Amelia pour the shiny red liquid into the one in his room, he'd watched, flabbergasted, as the light immediately burned stronger.

"We have to be careful," Amelia had said casually. "Crimson water can hurt you. The metal's too concentrated."

He had stayed up at night considering how many of those lamps he could fit inside his coat when he ran away.

So he only shook his head when she repeated the question, waking him from his reverie. *No, I've never seen one.*

"Well, I thought you could help me with the..." She pointed at the metal plaques. "*Matrixes*. I compose each page based on the original text," she raised a pile of handwritten pages from the desk, "and it takes some time. You can help me out. If you want."

When she saw that he stared confusedly at the scrawl on the parchments—which didn't look at all like the metal letters on the tray—she seemed to realize something.

"But I guess it's not that easy, is it?" A small smile touched her lips. "Don't worry, I can teach you the letters."

His heart thumped hard, as if she'd offered some forbidden treasure.

His only choices were yes and no.

Yian nodded.

Day after day in the workshop, Yian repeated the sound of each letter in his mind as he put words together. It took him ages to create a single matrix—Amelia did the same work so fast he felt his face heat up.

But she didn't complain. If anything, she was always talking about how nice it was to have help and some company. When business was slow at the shop and after closing time, she'd sit on the other side of the desk. Faced with his silence, she talked about one thing or another: how she'd met Dana, her family who lived in the countryside, the places she'd visited, the debates happening in the University of Lacconia, the books they were composing. She never talked about the war. Maybe it had ended so quickly, thought Yian, that she didn't even think about it anymore.

She called him "kid," but the word sounded affectionate—unlike when nobles spat it out to demand small services from him.

Amelia only asked personal questions once, wondering if he wanted to send a message to anyone or if she could help him return to his family.

I don't have any family and all I need is a ship, he'd thought.

But he had only shaken his head.

A small bell over the front door rang whenever a customer came in, and Amelia ran to meet them with a flutter of skirts and a smile on her face. Yian listened carefully, trying to pick out any useful information, but quickly realized that a large portion of her clientele were children. They came with their parents and didn't seem to fear anything—they touched the books, laughed loudly, asked Amelia to tell stories.

And many afternoons, she would sit on a stool, pick up a book and start reading to a circle of boys and girls with bright eyes and easy smiles.

Yian would hide behind the curtain that separated the store from the house, peering through the gap and listening attentively. He still couldn't read well; it took him a long time to make out sentences and he didn't know many words in Lacconian. But when Amelia told stories to the kids, losing a word or two wasn't a problem—he could grasp the meaning of the sentences, feel the emotion in the voice of the characters.

One night, she left that day's book on his bedside table. Yian mouthed the sound of the words and touched the illustrations, tracing the outline of the vibrant images. He'd never had anything so beautiful in his hands.

A few days later, while composing an adventure story full of pirates and monsters, he realized he'd stopped working to read a few pages ahead and find out how the hero was going to escape the scrape he was in. He raised his eyes, but Amelia didn't seem worried across from him.

And then, without much thought, he selected a few metal letters and waited.

She raised her eyes and smiled. “What is it? Is the text too hard?”

He set the letter down on the table, in order.

She read slowly: Y-I-A-N.

Her eyes widened. “Your name?” she asked quietly.

Yes.

She smiled brightly, the corner of her eyes crinkling. Was he imagining it, or were they shinier? She raised a hand as if to stroke his hair, like he was one of the kids she told stories to, and he lowered his face.

“Oh, that’s lovely. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Yian.”

*

One day, he heard Dana leave her laboratory in a huff and tell her wife she was going to buy some supplies she was out of. Next thing he knew, maybe because of how strangely safe he’d felt lately, he found himself in front of the mysterious door, a hand on the knob.

Yian twisted.

It opened.

The room was small and crowded—there were boxes piled up against a wall and two bookshelves with glass jars full of herbs and colorful liquids. But it was the worktable in the middle of the room that caught his eye. Connected transparent tubes created a complex device that expelled steam and hissed like a furious teapot. Crimson water flowed between the various levels, running down the channels until it fell, drop by drop, in a bowl at the center. He took one more step. The table was entirely covered in white chalk drawings—criss-crossed lines and circles that spread out from the center, covered with symbols that were definitely not the Lacconian letters he’d learned.

The ringing in his ears was cut off by a voice behind him. “Guess I should’ve remembered that kids are curious.”

Amelia didn’t sound cold, but a block of ice still settled in Yian’s stomach. He shivered when she touched his back.

“What’s with the face?” she joked when he flinched away from her touch. “Is it really so scary?”

Scary didn’t begin to describe it. Alchemy was evil, everybody knew that. Alchemists could create monstrosities, torture and poison, could drive people mad or kill them in a thousand different ways. And Amelia... *lived* with that woman. She was *married* to an alchemist.

Even if he dared speak, he might not have been able to. His throat was dry, closed off. A terror he hadn’t felt since the night he escaped the

battlefield washed over him.

Dana had touched him. Treated him. Given him some mysterious concoction to drink.

He too was living with an alchemist.

“Don’t be scared,” urged Amelia, her voice low. “I don’t understand any of *this* either,” she pointed at the strange drawings, “but think of it like... another language. I don’t speak it, but it doesn’t mean it’s saying something bad.” She sighed. “Shall we go back? I won’t tell Dana you came in here.”

*

Every time Dana spoke at dinner that night, Yian lowered his nose almost to his plate, terror probably clear on his face. He couldn’t taste the food. His hands shook around the cutlery. Neither of the women said anything, but Dana’s scowl grew deeper and deeper.

Later, he lay awake thinking about escape for the first time in days—perhaps weeks. But at some point he must have slept, because he woke with Amelia looming over him, a sheepish smile on her face.

“Good morning. I wanted to see if you were still—I mean, I have something different for you today.”

Seeing no way out, he followed her to the workshop, with a glance at the laboratory’s closed door. Amelia made him sit down in front of a new manuscript.

He almost choked when he read the first part.

Calterite, popularly known as crimson stone or the sacred metal (or in its liquid form, crimson water, blood of the gods or the divine elixir) is a mineral that allows a connection with the attributes of the high celestial sphere via alchemical commands...

Yian didn’t have a clue what a *high celestial sphere* was, but he knew he shouldn’t be holding that thing. It was a manual for alchemists. A book of magic, secret, forbidden... that Amelia was going to *sell* to whoever walked in? He felt dizzy.

Wouldn’t he be *killed* for reading it?

Apparently not. Apparently, in Lacconia, secrets were displayed in shop windows. He carried on for the next few days, avoiding Dana whenever possible—afraid to stay, but unable to drive himself to leave. Because,

although the book was complicated and full of unknown words, something always made him return to it like a castaway finding the shore.

Calterite is employed in medicine, in the arts, in the rituals of many religions and also in war...

With alchemical symbols and a celestial diagram, we construct a matrix...

The connection between the alchemist and the superior attributes allows the metal to assume the desired properties and obey the commands of the matrix...

And then there were calculations and diagrams, and the so-called *matrixes* which were nothing like the ones he knew, and lists of plants and their properties, incomprehensible information about water and earth, descriptions of animals and their organs and the human body in each of its peculiarities. It was all very complex—and boring. He'd never thought the world's biggest secrets would be *boring*. All the same, he felt an indescribable emotion whenever he understood anything, as if he'd stolen an especially tasty treat from the hands of a nobleman.

One day he sat down to breakfast when Dana was at the table. Her lips curled up. Her smile was different than Amelia's—a little ironic, as if laughing at a joke he didn't understand.

"It's the first time in five days you don't look as if you're going to run off at the sight of me." She put down her cup. "Finally. Today you're not going to the workshop. *I* also need some help."

She waited in silence until he finally nodded.

*

The Kartenian alchemists' attack on the capital had destroyed a good portion of the port. There'd been dead and injured, some of whom Dana had treated after the peace accord—or, more accurately, Karten's capitulation.

The war would be quick, the sergeant had said when Yian left with his battalion. And it had been. They just hadn't known they'd be on the losing side.

Now, he realized it couldn't have happened any other way.

"This matrix is simple," said Dana, pointing to the most complicated drawing he'd ever seen in his life. "To sum up, this part describes the

substances and the properties we want to extract from them, this explains the patient's condition, this invokes the divine attributes we're going to use, and this is something like my personal signature, which will connect me to the rest in order to supply the strength for the transformation. And, naturally, the diagram represents the star map which will guide the process, and defines the dominant element, in this case water. Did you get all that?"

No, he thought. He nodded.

Dana laughed. "Liar. It took me years to start understanding these things." She took a bowl with crushed herbs, a thick resin, and blood from the woman for whom she was making the potion. Then she looked at him and pointed at a jar on the table. "Three drops."

Yian tried to keep his hands steady as he put that exact amount of crimson water in the bowl with a dropper. He closed the flask and, feeling his heart in his throat, took a few steps back as instructed.

Dana laid the bowl at the center of the matrix and made a gesture over the table. The lines of chalk lit up, shining red, and Yian felt the air in the lab change, covering his arms in goosebumps.

And he saw alchemy work for the first time.

To his surprise, he wasn't afraid—that wild heartbeat meant something else. The potion swirled slowly, as if spun by an invisible spoon, and Dana's eyes shone like two drops of blood. She closed them a moment later and, when she opened them again, the hue had faded into a slight redness. The lines on the table shone weaker, like embers on a bonfire.

She spoke in a whisper. "They say the world was created after a great cosmic battle and that crimson stone is the blood the deities *spilled*. That's why they call it blood of the gods." She snorted. "Who knows, maybe it's true. Every time I make a transformation, I feel I'm connected to something larger than myself."

Yian could understand. He felt his own world had widened irreversibly.

*

He hadn't lost the habit of listening behind doors, and stopped short outside the women's room when he heard the word he was always attuned to.

"Are the war prisoners still detained in the north?" Amelia asked.

"Are you keeping up with the news?"

"I read they sent a *delegation* to negotiate with Karten."

"Well, they'll only print this tomorrow, but... they refused the offer."

Silence. “Refused?”

“Karten doesn’t want the prisoners back.”

“Then what...?”

“There’ll be a council vote to decide what to do with them.” Dana’s sigh was loud behind the closed door. “I don’t know what they’ll decide.”

“What’s to decide?”

Her wife hesitated again. “Some are proposing executing them all,” she finally said.

Executing. Yian had read the word in one of his novels.

“Those *beasts!*” Amelia’s voice was harsh. Yian had never heard her so furious. “It wasn’t those soldiers who asked to launch an invasion. They were abandoned by their own country!”

“Sweetheart, you don’t need to convince me. But tensions are high. People get taken in by instigators in times like this. We’ve had casualties. And though we won quickly, they did raze houses and farms as they came through...”

Yian flinched.

“So let them hold the generals accountable, demand reparations from the king,” said Amelia. “Since when does this country simply kill people?”

“It doesn’t; that’s precisely why there’ll be a vote. There hasn’t been an execution since the new constitution, let alone on this scale. They’d need the majority of the councilors to agree.”

“And do you think they will?”

“Well—I don’t know. Public opinion has weight in this kind of thing, and it *is* an election year... I just want you to be prepared if...” Yian didn’t hear the end of the sentence.

They were silent for a moment until Amelia said, “Well, we’re the public too. I think it’s time we expressed our opinion.”

Yian tiptoed away, heart clenching. He could move now. His injuries had healed a long time ago.

He’d heard enough to know what he had to do.

*

The laboratory was immersed in weak moonlight that came through the high window as he pondered his decision. He didn’t hear the door open.

“I’d suggest the stone,” said Dana behind him, making him jump. “It’s heavier, but safer. If you spill a *single* drop of the liquid on your skin, it’ll open a hole. Of course, we’d rather you didn’t go.” She took him by the arm. “Come. Amelia wants to discuss something with you.”

Her wife was sitting on the covers, hair messy and eyes tired.

He sat on the edge of the bed while Dana left them alone. Amelia took his hands. "When you arrived here with a fever, you were delirious," she began. "And you spoke to me. Do you remember?"

His heart raced. *No.*

Her next words sounded like a secret. "I know you didn't want to come here." His stomach lurched. She knew—she'd known from the start. "Your... comrades are detained." *Yes.* "There'll be a vote to decide what to do with them. Depending on the result, it might... not be safe for you to stay here any longer. But I had an idea. I don't know if it'll help, but I think it's worth the risk." She tried to smile. "You like the stories, don't you?"

The question caught him by surprise. *Yes.*

"Would you be willing to tell me one?" She squeezed his hand. "Yours?"

Yian wanted to say there was nothing interesting in his story. That he was just an unimportant soldier that people wanted dead. That he'd been silent for so long that he didn't know if he could speak, or in what language. And more importantly, that he thought that, even if he did speak, no one would want to listen.

But Amelia looked at him calmly—expectantly.

"I think," she said, "we can change some opinions."

And he found himself nodding once again.

*

"This is Illo, my nephew," introduced Dana the next day, pointing at a youth a few years older than Yian, with blonde hair, glasses, and a garish outfit. "He looks like a *fop*, but he's a good writer."

"Damn, auntie," whined the young man, then smiled at Yian as he gave an exaggerated bow. "Hi. No need to fear." He made a gesture as if closing his mouth. "I won't tell anyone you're here and I won't put your name in the book."

Book?

Illo sat at the kitchen table, where a pile of blank pages awaited. "Talk however you like. About whatever you want. You can start with the war or your birth, your family or your kingdom. Leave it to me to put order to it all." He smoothed out one of the pages, quill hovering over it. "And, of course, you can speak in Kartenian. I know your language."

Amelia ran a hand across his back and pulled out a chair. Yian sat between the two women.

What did he want to say? Where could he start?

For a moment, he feared his voice was gone due to lack of use.

Then he felt his lips move on their own.

“My brother died when he was two,” was what came out.

And suddenly words started pouring out.

Yian talked about the hunger and the cold. About the tributes that his parents had to pay to the lord who controlled their lands. About the illnesses that struck the villages and left piles of bodies behind. About the first man he saw die, swinging on a rope for stealing a sliver of crimson stone.

He talked about how, one day, soldiers had come to the village conscripting boys to fight for the kingdom. About the training, the weight of the sword in his hands, the exhaustion and the inedible food. About the sergeant who was always snarling at them and saying it was an honor to fight for the glory of Kartern. About how the king would conquer Lacconia, take possession of the crimson stone mines of the neighboring country and create an empire. How each of them would get a few drops of metal if they fought well.

He talked about the alchemists who walked across the camp, arrogant and powerful, evoking terror in the hearts of all.

He talked about Kartern’s plan—how the alchemists would attack the capital while soldiers would land in the north and advance through the countryside. The people wouldn’t resist; they’d burn everything in their path and the Lacconians would surrender.

He talked about how the people fled, but didn’t surrender. About the slow and cumbersome advance. Wherever they went, everything was already razed to the ground, and soon the diseases started. Rumor had it that the local population had poisoned the earth and the water. Then one day, when half the regiment was out of action, Lacconian troops fell on them.

He talked about the battle, at least what he remembered of it—flashes of terror and blood.

He talked about being injured. Seeing his comrades captured, pretending he was dead and rising in the dead of night, fleeing while the enemy raised their camp. He talked about crossing the country from north to south.

He talked about how he’d never seen a book before.

*

The next day, Amelia handed him a new pile of pages.

It was his life, but in a way he never could've told it himself. Had he really spoken about the scent of flowers in the summer? His brother's stiff body when they buried him? The fear of punishment that seemed to hover over everybody's lives?

He couldn't remember.

The story was intensely familiar and at the same time seemed like someone else's life. Someone important.

"Sometimes the truth becomes clearer through someone else's eyes," said Illo later when Yian mentioned it.

*

"The title's the most important part!" the writer said that night. All four of them were gathered in the kitchen like conspirators. "It has to catch the eye."

"The life of a Kartenian boy?" suggested Dana.

"Boring," said her nephew.

"The true story of something," said Amelia. "People like true stories, even if most of them have a good deal of fantasy."

"Perfect! *The True Story of a Kartenian Soldier...*"

"...in an Enemy Land," added Dana. "It already points out the conflict."

Illo gave a slow and satisfied smile, then turned to him.

Yian repeated the words in his head. It sounded like a real book, he thought.

And because habits were hard to quit, he just nodded.

*

He'd never seen the man who came into the shop a few days later, but by the drop-shaped badge that shone on his clothes, Yian knew he was an alchemist. And unlike Dana, who claimed to be just a doctor, he was clearly an important man.

Amelia didn't say anything as he touched the pile of copies of *The True Story* that sat in the middle of the store.

"All I hear about is this book," said the man. "No one knows where it came from, only that many places started selling it at the same time. So I did some digging and discovered the original was delivered anonymously to several bookmakers. Free of charge." He paused. "Very generous of the authors."

"They must prize the diffusion of knowledge," answered Amelia.

The man raised an eyebrow. “What are you doing?”

She shrugged. “What I’ve always done. Making books. As far as I know, and I’m not breaking any laws.”

“No,” he ceded. “But I should warn you, you’re playing with fire. Did you see the review on the paper this morning?”

She had, and showed it to Yian—the author complimented the narrative, saying it was “at once touching and revolting”. Later he’d read another opinion piece calling it “pure enemy propaganda.”

“If you wanted attention, congratulations,” said the man. “You got it. They started a petition at the university for the Kartenian prisoners, and tomorrow there’ll be a demonstration in front of the council building against executing the troops.”

“Really?” Amelia didn’t hide her joy.

“And believe me, *some* of your elected officials are not at all happy about it. They were counting on the anti-Kartenian mood to pass some projects to restrict the movement of foreigners.”

“What a shame.”

“And hypothetically, if the story is *true*, it might cause problems for whoever took in the fugitive.”

“Hypothetically, councilor, what are the odds that civility will win?” Amelia shot back.

He huffed and shook his head. “There are five days left. The future will tell.” And as he turned from her, Yian could hear him mutter, “I had no idea a book could cause so much fuss.”

*

The day of the vote, Amelia and Dana couldn’t stand just waiting for news and went to the council building to watch the vote, leaving Yian alone.

With the shop windows closed, he thumbed through books he’d never been interested in before, regretting it now that he’d probably never get a chance to read them. How many stories would he never hear, how many things would he never learn? It wasn’t surprising that these people were so creative in war and peace. They lived surrounded by ideas.

When Amelia and Dana burst through the door, he only had time to notice that Amelia was crying before finding himself in a crushing hug—and it took him two wild heartbeats to notice they were tears of joy.

She tripped on the words. *Pardoned. Freed. They’ll finance the return of those who want to go home.*

Dana laid a hand on his head. “But you can stay, of course. We’d like you to.”

How strange and wonderful, he thought, to have choices.

That night, he fell asleep under a soft red light—an open book over his chest, to be taken up again tomorrow.



The Apprentice with the Thousand Eyes

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about 5,400 words

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WHEN THE GRADUATION day arrived, Eusébio got up early, cleaned his wife's portrait and cried in secret, even though the house was empty. This was his morning habit for the last of his nine decades of life. The body, unaccustomed as it was to such longing, searched for someone to touch, to clasp in an embrace and say good morning. However, when the old man actually woke up, he remembered the house was a continuous absence.

That morning, the paper pennants were already scattered all over the small town of Ponta Serena. In a few hours, a flock of children would take up the square. Each would invoke their unique spell for the graduation, and among them would be old Eusébio and his thin shins.

Eusébio walked through the cornfield seeing nothing but the red soil, the growing ears, and the gate a few steps ahead. Further afield, there was only the fog. The eyes were covered by the hat, its brim torn. Like he did every morning—always with the cane in hand and with the calm step of someone who does not expect news from the world—he looked at the tomatoes, cashews, and heavy watermelons sprawled across the ground. He treated every speck of dust, every leaf, and every snail with the tenderness that his father had taught him. It was from here that he had

taken his sustenance throughout life. He thought of all the people across Pagu, the shriveled-up country, who had once fed on these fruits. After ninety years with his hand on the earth, Eusébio felt now it was the earth who was about to bury the hand of the man.

He approached the only bald patch of land left, where the clay gave way to the rocky texture of a carapace. The hull, the size of three men, crawled up and down. Eusébio said nothing, just tapped his cane three times on the floor and waited. The ground shifted, and as the carapace rose, sand poured back into the crater it left behind.

Two sleepy eyes emerged from the hole. They opened up, whitish like melted candles. Tambor was a mountain mutt, his body covered in black-blue fur, its back protected by a long series of bony plates. Its drawn-out horns betrayed its advanced age. The dog opened its mouth, and a heavy tongue lazily spilled out of it. Eusébio took a handful of food from his pocket and poured it into the dog's mouth. Tambor, weak in the jaw, chewed slowly.

That's when, with the land taken by silence, he saw a moth lie down on a cashew leaf. It spread its wings. In them, he could see the shape of two lit eyes, yellow amidst brown. The wind only needed to ruffle the leaves to send the moth along its merry way. The apparition was brief, but somehow left its mark. The old man, alone once more, went back into the house to finish what had to be done.

He turned on the dusty record player, heated the water for the coffee. He stood in front of the stove, watching until the first bubble of heat burst and a timid, coffee-smelling steam came out. Other bubbles soon joined it. Eusébio would not leave his position, because the distraction caused by age could make him forget even that he had lit the fire, just as he forgot every morning that Francisca no longer walked around the house, covered by her white nightgown torn under the armpit.

He chewed his bread unhurriedly, and sipped his coffee without enthusiasm. Only after setting the table did he place the graduation gown on the bed. He admired the gown, then took the spell book out of the wardrobe, its yellow pages crowded with the letters he had learned in his old age. He opened the leather-bound book and ran his finger along the pen marks. All those spells and incantations and invocations written by his thin, calloused hand. Writing hurt the fingertips, but it was a good pain. Of all those words, there was one spell that had not yet seen the world: the one Eusébio could only summon on his graduation day. If he failed, they would not let him have the diploma. Even though he was nervous, he smiled.

I brought these words into this world.

He showered, splashed lavender perfume on his body, put on his gown, and looked at himself in the mirror. It was the first time he'd smiled in a long time. The corners of his mouth throbbed, unaccustomed to laughter. Eusébio, with his thinning hair and wrinkled skin, the tip of his nose burned by the sun, wore the sorcerer's cloak, and instead of the walking stick, he carried the staff he had dreamed of carrying all his life. He mimicked the way Francisca parted his hair, slicked to the side.

Dressed like a child on graduation day, Eusébio sat at the door of his house with his shins bare and his grimoire heavy in his hand. When the image of Banzé appeared in the distance, mounted on the motorcycle, the old man took Francisca's picture out of the frame and put it in his pocket.

*

When he was a child, Eusébio saw dozens of boys passing by that same road. They talked loudly, carrying sticks in their hands and leather-bound books under their arms. Their hair was neatly combed, and they wore white linen shirts tucked into their trousers. Little Eusébio hid behind the gate, trying not to be seen, but peeking between the planks with his big eyes. If he stuck around long enough, he might see one child cast a spell, causing the specter of a thrush to rise from the ground or something like that. He opened his ears, trying to learn everything: how the classes were and what the enchanted words tasted like.

Those boys were literate in the art of reading the world; their future was an extensive road of possibilities. Over the years, they would become little heroes, their names spoken in honor by the townspeople. They would take part in the parades, choosing to follow military life or to serve the people in other ways, by charming the crops, the streets, or the herds.

Eusébio's childhood split into two. There was a world in which he walked with the boys and their staffs, learned to read and to raise little thrushes. And then there was the only childhood he could actually live, carried out behind the gates. The boys were already gone, but Eusébio's mind was still there with them.

"Zezé, where are you?!"

The thick voice came from the backyard. Even knowing that he should return, Eusébio remained stuck to the fence, inventing a new life. He would go back when they found him; otherwise, he would continue to hang with his eyes on the world. It was Tambor who approached from behind, sniffing the boy. At the time, the dog was the same size as Eusébio,

with small horns and a fragile carapace. Raimundo, Eusébio's father, followed closely behind.

"Now, now, what are you doing hanging around there?"

"Nothing, Dad. I thought I saw a fox, so I came to look. I wanted to keep an eye on the chickens."

"Aye, right then, son," Raimundo scratched his beard. "Best to leave it as is. If it really is a fox, Tambor will take care of it. It's high time he learned something."

"Oh, I see..."

After the meal settled in his belly, it was time to learn. Eusébio didn't learn the magic signs because Raimundo spent the afternoon explaining the details of the land. He taught his son to discern the textures of seeds and to perceive the fertility of the plowed earth. Under his rough face, Raimundo had a soft heart and a light voice. He took his son every day to see a small branch grow until it became a complete work. He never made the boy carry a weight that his little bones could not uphold.

Thus, Eusébio lived with the memory of Raimundo's eyes, the spark that lit up every time he spoke about the craft of agriculture cultivated within the family. The little shoots would grow, enter homes, and feed families. They had decided the family's function after the popular meetings in the square, Raimundo recounted. His father, Eusébio's grandfather, had taken his son to watch the heated debates. In the end, the responsibility of each neighborhood had been determined, everything paid for with the people's money. There was no lack of work: planting, fishing, collecting shellfish, making handicrafts, making lace. Each gave their best to make things work.

On the way home, after working in the dirt, Eusébio couldn't get the urge to speak off the tip of his tongue. One day, Raimundo was writing the expenses in his notebook, leaning over the table. Eusébio approached his father as if he had no cares in the world. He rehearsed the words in his mind a few times before plucking up the courage to speak.

"Dad..." The voice trailed off.

"Aye?"

"Can I ask you a question? I swear it's fast."

"Well, shoot." Raimundo took off his hat and put it on the table.

"There are some boys that pass in front of the house every day, I dunno know if you've seen them..." He waited for an answer from his father, but found him tight-lipped. "Have you seen them?"

"Aye, I think I have. The ones who study at the school up the road, yes?"

"Yeah, those boys."

“And what about them, Zezé?”

“They also learn things, but they are different things. They learn other words, you know. Just the other day, I saw one of them create a thrush with the end of a stick. So, I was thinking...”

“You were thinking you want to learn those words as well.”

“Yeah! I want to do what they do...”

It was daytime, but something clouded Raimundo’s face. A shadow without an owner. There were things in those eyes that Eusébio would only understand with time. The boy was the owner of a youthful body, one that believed that the desires inside one’s breast were greater than the limitations of life.

Still, he insisted, “I could go in the morning, learn those words, and write them in my notebook. After lunch I would be back here, then you’d teach me about the land.”

“Zezé, that’s not possible. Our place is here.”

“Yes, Dad. I know that! But see, what if I learn something to help you?” Eusébio pointed to the field. “Like something to increase the size of the cashew tree, or make three watermelons grow at once. People would have more food, we could even expand the land and...”

“Zé, people need to eat today and not in a few years. You don’t need magic for that; you never have. You need to know the land, and that’s enough. Forget that. Get your bearings, ‘cause we’ve got plenty to do already.” The sour taste of those words made his father’s eyes water. “Those boys are of different breeding. They can attend school. We were born to put our hands on the land. We have to fit where there’s room, and that’s it. We are already lucky to have learned our first words.”

“But, Dad...” The voice grew weaker.

“Off we go, lad.”

Since that afternoon, a gap had opened up between the two. The wind rushed through the open space that never really closed. Eusébio kept his words to himself, but the want never stopped screaming inside his mouth. He stood in front of the gate, but the desire died in time. Those boys who passed by grew up. And the passing of time, which embraces everyone, was also reflected in the body of little Eusébio. The time for dreaming had passed.

*

The boy Eusébio treated like a son smiled like a child.

He made the old man, for the briefest of moments, believe he had lost himself in time. But Banzé was no longer the boy who needed to be held by the hand, but a tall, dark-skinned man with broad curls. He was smiling wider than ever, showing all his teeth. It was a righteous smile—that day was an achievement for both of them.

Taking his time, Banzé accepted a sip of black coffee and stuck around. Until they needed to leave, they talked about the past, nurturing the memory of Francisca and the bond between them.

*

When Francisca shrank, bending over her body and breathing for the last time, it was Banzé who stood alongside Eusébio. He was the one who set up camp on the couch in the house and lived there for months. He made the old man get out of bed even when his body had given up. He forced Eusébio to eat, drink and even smile. The son Eusébio never had. On one of the many nights they spent awake, listening to the old transistor radio, Eusébio confessed his fever dream: when he was little, he had wanted to be a Mage. Study the words, enchant things. Then he mocked his own naivete, because even though everything was always changing, even though people elected their representatives and organized themselves to be better heard, certain things always remained the same. Even if the world was moving forward, it was too late for him.

“My dream was to have a child,” Eusébio said. “I would enroll him at school to learn the magic words. Back in my day, it was difficult, but everything is changing these days. Too bad my time’s ended. Imagine that, Banzé. An old man like me, in a room full of children. That can’t be done, right?... But it would be nice if it were possible. Oh, never you mind, that’s the folly of an aging git... What a silly idea. Forget about it.”

They both laughed, but Eusébio stopped showing his teeth when he felt the voice barely fit in the mouth. He went to bed late, a little drunk on liquor. Banzé had heard everything and paid close attention to all the words. As he watched the night—at the old man’s door, listening to Tambor’s snoring—an idea seized him.

In the following months, Banzé breathed nothing but the papers. Every time Eusébio questioned him about his disappearance, he changed the subject. He joked about being in love, getting to know someone, and then he would stop talking. But, quietly, Banzé was trying to move the heavens.

He wrote, locked in his room, the beginning of what many would know later as the first Law of Inclusion of the Elderly and People with Disabilities. In the first articles, he explained the need for elderly people to have access to regular teaching of magic, as well as schools of first words. After the draft, he needed other hands to weave the document. A citizens' initiative, something that not even Banzé believed possible. But the possibility was in the constitution of Pagu. The lad needed to collect the signature of one in every twenty municipal voters and, even under protests from the most arcane conservatives, he kept knocking from door to door. Eusébio, quiet in his grief, was the last to know about the proposal.

Banzé had a hoarse, shy voice that sometimes avoided even being heard. The noise he made was like a stone plunging into a stream. Still, the small ripples motivated many others. Over there, there was no lack of dreams well dreamed trapped in lives badly lived. There was no corner in Ponta Serena where the news hadn't reached. No matter how loud the brook rumbled, other voices hurled themselves in like stones, falling on the water in an incessant rain.

The process went on for years. It was on the old man's eighty-fifth birthday that Banzé appeared at the house with tears in his eyes, bringing a gift. Eusébio opened it and found a folded newspaper announcing the news. To enforce the agreement, the college of other words and enchantments would open the first class exclusively for teaching seniors. Banzé was beside Eusébio when he cried dryly. Without a tear in his eyes, the old man was beside himself. He groaned. He found in those grunts the mourning he could not put into words.

"It's a joke, isn't it? Say it's a joke, Banzé," he repeated between sobs.

That's how, though reluctantly, Eusébio enrolled in the class. And stepping on the floor of the school was like touching a dream with his feet.

Banzé accompanied him on the first day of school, dressed him as he would a child. He combed the old man's thinning hair and wept at the sight of the stooped man disappearing down the hallway.

There was not a moment during the following years when the old man didn't wish to return home with his hopes in shreds, deceived by his own faith. As if that event was a big joke waiting for the punchline. Still, on he went, until the end.

Now the two of them were there, standing in the doorway: Eusébio dressed for graduation, and Banzé barely contained the feelings inside him.

“Are you ready, old man?” The smile got in the way of words.

“Truth be told, I’ve no clue.”

“Yeah, I don’t know either. Francisca would be very proud of you, Zezé.”

“She is.” As he spoke, he remembered the moth resting in the cashew tree.

*

If Eusébio were asked what kind of person Francisca was, he would say that she wasn’t a person, but an event. Something simple that enters one’s life and changes everything when you least expect it. For him, the world existed before and after that small woman with big eyes and small teeth. She liked the slow pace of the living things, but she absolutely hated the stagnation of society, as she was always eager to point out.

Eusébio and Francisca had been children at the same time. However, they only knew each other when youth had already settled on their bodies. The young magicians were on their way to graduation, and Eusébio was mourning a lost hope. One couldn’t dream past the age of seventeen.

Still, after spending the whole day with his father, the boy would leave the field to walk about the dominions of his world. He walked along the edge of the pond, occasionally carrying a stick that he found on the ground. He pointed at the little green branches as if he could make them grow at his will. He felt foolish, but entirely satisfied by the nonsense. His only audience was the mountain mutt that followed his steps, always slinking along the ground behind him.

One afternoon, he recited a made-up word, pretending it was a spell. He added a letter and then another until a funny sound came out of his mouth. He swung the branch in the air and pointed toward a paçu, a bird that kept its nest on its back and camouflaged itself on top of the cashew trees. He waited, almost believing he could cast a spell by merely willing it so.

Between one silence and another, he heard a calm voice. He honed his ears to hear it better. A lullaby. He approached the other end of the pond and his eyes fell on the owner of the singing voice: a woman, her reflection reeling in the water. In the moment their glances met, the existence of all things bent towards them. Both bodies tensed at the same time. Francisca was bathing a child, the small Banzé — the neighbor’s son, whom the young woman treated like a younger brother. She hid from the sun under the shade of a cashew tree, where small moths landed on the leaves,

covering the green with the yellow of the eyes printed on their wings. Francisca's voice, like a spark in the dark, seemed to attract the desire and ambition of the tiny insects.

After that, it was just a matter of time. Every day, Eusébio wandered on that bank. He would sit by the roots of a cashew tree and listen to the figure of the pond sing. She, for her part, was already expecting the visit of the faithful spectator. He approached her slowly. For the first few days, he only took his ears, then a bag of fruit harvested from the backyard.

It was Francisca who taught Eusébio to love and seek beauty in things. Not only that; he always liked to talk about the world. She pointed to the streets, the roads and the detours that the waters made until it reached the houses.

"If you look at it, none of this here is natural. A pipe is not a living creature, huh? Zé, everything is a conquest. Look, if there's a pipeline there, it's because there are people, and it is for the people that cities exist. My father told me that, when I was a little girl, I remember it to this day! He would start any meeting by saying, 'We are twice what we thought we'd ever be, but we're still not half of what we can be.' At first, I was confused too, but then you end up getting it. Life will teach you."

Taken by the feeling, Eusébio, who was little interested in the world's rules and regulations, listened to everything with desire, treating each speech as poetry spoken in the open. He never forgot the day when Francisca told the story of the previous year, when a water stallion trampled a delivery man while he was drinking water from the river during his work shift. The courier was dismissed, deemed unable to work. Only after the residents' union and demonstrations did popular pressure guaranteed the subject's protection. It was when the first unions had appeared, alongside a system of control for magical creatures.

Between talk of love, Francisca talked about how there wasn't such a thing as freedom so perfect it couldn't be altered. Little Banzé grew up among those conversations. It was Eusébio's helplessness and Francisca's firm voice speaking of the world which inflamed the young man to the point of making him love the first words, the change, and the movement.

*

The parade had begun; the children put on their gowns, each carrying a staff in their left hand and a leather book in their right. They walked in the same rhythm, knees raised at every step, all smiles. From the audience, flashbulbs announced the proud relatives. The entire city could come and

busy itself with the prestige for the little sorcerers. It was a holiday, and the residents crowded Our Lady Square. Eusébio followed, with his hair sparsely combed, his fragile legs and Banzé's arm serving as support.

He rebuilt the smile he had practiced all his life. He saw that, besides the children's relatives, there were other known faces in the audience — different from the expected crowd, but familiar to the old graduate. The domino players, the shellfish gatherers, the fairground men and elderly women, people who, on that morning, could see themselves reflected in Eusébio's joy. They all smiled with the same wide grin. When they saw that bent over man pass by, they shouted,

“Look at our Zezé!”

“C'mon, Zé, give us a wave!”

He raised his trembling hand and grinned. On impulse, he sought Francisca's presence in those faces. The walk ended under the monument of Serena, represented by a large mermaid carved in marble. Her tail curled around the baobab, extending itself along the tree. The statue, however large, did not reach the branches.

Below, the Great Mother waited for everyone. She was a tall woman, as tall as four humans, and she wore a purple robe. Her slender fingers that protruded like long claws called for silence. The moment had come. Eusébio felt his fragile bladder falter. He felt fear, happiness, sadness, grief, hope. He felt more than he could hold together in that small body. He felt everything.

The newly elected mayor of Ponta Serena was the first to speak. Short and awkward, he took his time untangling the microphone cord, nearly tripping over it in the process. Overcoming the unforeseen difficulty, he greeted the graduates again, and spoke of the joy of having those children as bastions of a better future. The rest, Eusébio couldn't quite hear. Not so much because of the distance, but because of his restlessness.

The first student on the list was called Amelia, a girl with wide arms and a convincing smile. She opened the grimoire on the page where she had written her original spell. She was shaking. Still, she nodded to her parents and affirmed she was ready as she addressed the Mother. The audience was completely silent. Amelia waved her staff above her head, the cracks in the wood gleaming. It happened fast: the leaves split from the smaller trees, snaked in the wind and fell together to the ground. From the small pile of leaves came the shape of a green steed. Amelia confidently made the animal walk across the square, elegant and invulnerable. Applause erupted around her.

The children went in alphabetical order, but Eusébio was called only after all the young people had come forward. The old apprentice was a one-man crew, a chair full of will in an empty room. After the applause ended, Eusébio was called to the front. The sound got lost on the way—or, if it did ever arrive, the old man couldn't listen. Banzé had to look at him, smile, and say, "Well, shall we? It's about time."

*

Eusébio always avoided that holiday. He used to go far away so that his want wouldn't hurt him, out of range of the marching band, the applause, the speeches, and fireworks. During the first three years of their relationship, he had hidden the secret from Francisca. Every time, he called his wife to walk through the dams, move away from the city center. Francisca, who liked to feel the soles of her sandals roaming the world, never turned down the offer to get away from the noise. But the distrust was clear every time Eusébio looked sadly at the fireworks. Something inside that man died, or perhaps lived too much. She could tell by the unusual way his body curved inwards and his sad eyes bulged out.

When one is in love, time softens, it flows. Two more years passed until the matter came to light. There were no more hiding places. Francisca, determined, convinced Eusébio to attend the graduation at least once. From the audience, Eusébio reviewed the uniforms, the staffs, and the craving. At the fair, they bought sweets and popcorn. Even immersed in his sadness, Eusébio smiled. He smiled because he liked to see the charms being born from pieces of wood and the trembling voices that invoked them.

Under the bursts of fireworks, Eusébio fell in love for the second time. He shared with Francisca what he kept from the eyes of the world, the embarrassed hope of getting caught daydreaming.

"Fran...when we have our son, I want him to be there."

But the son never came; it became a dream, one word thrown away, a mirage taken away by time. Eusébio understood that a dream without a body is a delirium. Over the years, the promise has waned. A wound that was never put into words, but shortened in the silence.

Francisca left the world the way she had entered it: singing, small on a wide land. For Eusébio, all that remained was the empty chair in the kitchen corner, and the passing of the moths every morning. Francisca left scent and words behind. And until the day when Banzé showed up at the door with that newspaper, Eusébio fled conversations about the world,

politics, and the fate of things. Nothing would change; even if it changed, he felt that time itself was running out. The world could flip, but nothing would ever be different for the little boy with his hand on earth who forgot his dreams.

*

The Great Mother's eyes were a dark, open abyss that devoured things at the same speed with which they could speak, shout, and receive. Eusébio felt comfortable, nevertheless. He had spent his nights in the classroom with her, in the only occupied chair. It was she who, with all the patience in the world, had made him hold the pen and flood the old notebook with scribbles.

The Mother had made him write the world.

When Banzé released him, Eusébio walked slowly under the watchful eyes of the audience. He knew that not everyone there was in favor of his training. After all, an elderly person didn't have long to live, they said, so he could no longer be of use to society. Banzé was always sharp in his answers—he replied that living was not about being useful, it was about existing. Cities needed to be useful because they were meant to be filled with people; that was why they were there. People were only supposed to be useful to others, and there were millions of ways to do that other than serving or working until the last days of their lives. It was the same speech he used to fight for fairer pensions, which could guarantee some quality of life for those who could no longer work.

When he looked at his friends, seeing them inspired by the walk, Eusébio felt useful. Not for serving, but for inspiring a new future. He would give anything to see what the next evening class would be like.

Noticing that Eusébio's hands did not hold the grimoire firmly, the Mother held out her own. She held up the book so the man could read what he had written. The old man took his glasses out of his pocket, and that made his face look funny. He traced his slender finger through the erasures and alterations on the scratched page. In the audience, no one breathed. With the little strength he had, Eusébio raised his staff and recited some confused words, interrupted by lack of breath.

Then he fell silent.

People waited, but nothing happened.

Eusébio closed the book and lowered the staff. The weather ran dry; the silence suffocated him. After a few seconds, the whispers began.

What went wrong?

He didn't make it?

Ha! I knew this was going to happen.

Amid the hubbub, Eusébio took off his glasses and put them in his pocket. At that moment, he remembered perfectly the song that Francisca was singing at the edge of the pond. When he noticed it, he already had the melody in his dry mouth. Banzé, who was still nearby, recognized the song. That was why he cried.

Tears also fell from Eusébio's eyes. Though transparent at first, they soon turned yellow. You could see the old man's face from afar, thick wax oozing from under the eyebrows like two lit candles. It fell in heavy drops to the ground, each tear like a seed digging deep. The puddle broke the silence, almost bubbling. From every drop that fell to the ground, a moth jumped. They flapped their wings as if getting rid of the wax, stuck in the mud. Then they flew free. The old man's wrinkled skin crumbled, and there was nothing left of him but a cloud of those little colorful bugs with yellow eyes on their wings.

The audience's astonishment only dissipated when the moths all flew the same way. They landed on the tree in Our Lady Square, the old baobab tree. Each one landed on a leaf. Their spread wings formed a swarm of a thousand eyes. The audience looked, and the tree looked back at them.

That morning, Eusébio wept the tears of a thousand eyes, felt the heart of a thousand breasts, loved for the flesh of a thousand bodies. Scattered by the thousand-eyed tree, he remembered Francisca, and, seeing as people applauded, he understood the movement that his wife loved so much—perhaps the same movement his father was so afraid of. It was there that the old apprentice felt how things always changed. An earthquake of mute lips, moving underneath their feet. He recited to himself: *I am twice what I once was, but half of what I can be.*



Days of Bedlam and Rebellion in Vilerma

Renan Bernardo

about 6,200 words

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IT IS SHE who comes this way, yes, it is, along the only road that leads to Vilerma. Jovaldir walks out of the stable, wiping the sweat off his brow, his hand caressing a recently saddled stallion. Cócegas and Coceira stop playing dice—pay attention to this, because when those two stop playing anything, something really important is about to happen. They gawk at the shape fluttering in the sultriness of the Wide Cerrados.

In the palisade's watchtower, Carombé takes off his helmet, breaking the rules of the barracks. He squints at the gray spot on the horizon. He has heard stories about this woman, but never thought them true. When people fill up their bellies with cachaça, they concoct unbelievable tales! But a solitary traveler arriving in Vilerma? It can only be her. Messengers from the nearby villages have already warned them of the woman's approach. Vagabond, errant, sorceress...Carombé's grandmother used to say she brought only good things, but no one was ever able to tell him what kind of things. Is she a luxury goods saleswoman? Perhaps selling those giant blocks of ice some cities use to cool off during hot seasons? Most people say the woman builds houses...but alone? Captain Gridenaldo,

however, goes against the majority: he says the vagabond brings chaos, discord, and revolt.

But it really is her. It is. Word travels fast through Vilerma, hopping between the ocas, hovels, and stone houses, crossing the river, bumping into the clerics and bouncing off from wherever there's cachaça. And when it is mixed with booze, the news travels like wildfire. Some people even scream about it, mind you. Excited, furious...everyone's a bit confused, like Jovaldir and Carombé are. And on goes the news. Mouth to ear to mouth to ear. It is her. It can only be her. Soon, everyone in town will be aware of her arrival.

Isn't *this woman a myth?*

The first to see her should've been one of Vilerma's guards—their work consists of taking care of the town, after all. But who can outpace two euphoric children?

"It's the Scholar," says Cócegas, running, his loose pants flapping, the wind buffeting his locks. "Wearing a hood, gray clothes...we need to see her face! People say we know her by her face."

"It isn't her," Coceira complains, always lagging a bit behind. At least running helps relieve his heat rash. "It must be just a saleswoman trying to sell spices!"

"Listen to me!" Cócegas pants, but doesn't slow down. "It's the Scholar! She brings gifts, you fool. If we get there first, we'll grab the best ones."

Coceira sprints after Cócegas, partially convinced by the possibility of gifts, his ankles scratching against the rebellious shrubs flanking the dirt road.

"Brats!" And here comes Gridenaldo, captain of the Vilerma Guard. He rides a horse and cuts in between the boys. "Go back now. Everything out here is dangerous. Do I need to slap you with my sword to remind you?"

"We're going back, Mr. Captain," Coceira says.

They stop and walk back, but soon kneel behind some shrubs to watch.

It really is her, after all. The Scholar. Folks do know everything, right? The depigmented patches on the traveler's brown face, around her mouth and nose, are proof enough that they are being visited by the infamous portaler of Eriná: the Scholar. And it's from the mouths of the people, once again, where you learn the meaning of this woman.

Those who wait for chaos and disorder grimace. Those who think she brings hope smile.

Quite obvious that they'd give her the filthiest room in the most decaying inn of Vilerma. Anatélia didn't imagine anything better than that. Only a bed, a small table, and a mouse hole fit inside, though there was plenty of room for the stench of the latrine.

Gridenaldo, the so-called captain of the Guard, is a surly man who spits his words. The town kids, on the other hand, are the cutest. Two of them followed her the whole time while Gridenaldo escorted her to the inn. They thought they were masterfully hiding behind the barrels and boxes of the Middle Plaza's market, but it was easy to spot their round, curious eyes.

Anatélia sits on the bed and lowers her hood. She opens up her robe and produces a piece of chalk. It shines softly, somewhere between the gleam of a diamond and a pale, feeble yellow. She lays it on the small table—wobbly, of course—and unfolds her map. She's been in eight of the Wide Cerrados' towns. Still a lot to go. *Every day there's a new village sprouting up in the middle of the Cerrados with a scoundrel claiming to be king*, is what people say in the Great University of Eriná. But Vilerma is special to Anatélia. The king is her father. That should make things easier, but Anatélia expects the opposite. Edelundo doesn't like what she does. As far as she knows, her father is a severe critic of everything that has to do with Eriná, including his own daughter.

But it doesn't matter. Anatélia stands, rolls up her map, and pockets her chalk. Her work never starts with the rulers, but with the kids. After eating, grabbing a sip of pinga, and waiting for nightfall, Anatélia is going to meet the two brats.

*

Anatélia has never been to Vilerma. She walks through the narrow streets, flanked by a mixture of wood and straw huts, ocas, and hovels. Those mingle with the manors, which look more like rough boulders than anything else. That's where the nobles, clerics, magistrates, and soldiers live, flocking around the king in an eternal exchange of favors. The town lighting is poor: merely torches scattered at a few points in the streets. Here and there, a hawker strolls by, offering squirrel meat, trinkets, and unforgettable nights.

Anatélia's father became king of Vilerma by way of abuse, like all rulers. By the time she was twelve, her mother had already taken her away from Edelundo. Soon after, her father conquered Vilerma. He piled properties, killed, and evicted people. There were fires, scuffles, fights... Anatélia

remembers the news the messengers brought every day. She was very frightened by everything she learned against her will while she painted or wrote on the parchment rolls Mom gave her. She feigned concentration while Mom cried, absorbing the bad tidings of her father's new world. Edelundo never thought of himself as a bad man—people like him never do—but he used to say that good only came through severity. Until Anatólia started studying portalogy, philosophy, and mathematics at the Great University of Eriná, she thought he'd come back. But in her history classes, she learned that love for power often prevails.

Ah! The Buriti Garden. A tiny, empty spot behind a row of manors, and the perfect place for her to be found by nosy children. Anatólia sits on a bench to wait, but doesn't need to.

"Go first," someone murmurs from behind one of the few buritis that remain standing in Vilerma.

"No, I'm not good at talking," says another child. "And look at my heat rashes. They'll scare her."

"And I'm dirty! I stepped in a puddle near the market."

"Me too!"

"But you already have your heat rashes. With all that, no one will notice there's something wrong with you."

"Damn you, Cócegas."

"Don't push me."

"It wasn't me. It was my arm."

Anatólia stands and says loudly, "Whoever gets here first will receive a —"

The boys dart forward. They stop before her, mouths agape, bewildered, tripping over their own feet. They're about twelve years old, their hair curly and shaggy.

"I didn't even say what I'd give you," Anatólia laughs.

"Didn't I tell you about the stains?" the one called Cócegas murmurs, elbowing his partner. "Hi, lady."

"These stains?" Anatólia says, running her hands around her mouth and on her cheeks. "We call it vitiligo at the University."

"University? I told you she dabbles in witchcraft," Coceira whispers to his friend. "Let's get away from here."

"Witchcraft, eh?" It's not the first time someone has said that, but it never bothers her. So far, all the witches she has met have been completely fair and well-mannered people. "You can call me a witch if you want."

"It's the lad who cooks for us who says it," says Coceira. "He's also the one who collects the taxes for the Great King and Earthly Divinity of

Vilerma, but we don't need to pay because we're from the streets."

Anatélia roars a laugh.

"You call him that all the time?"

"We're used to it," says Cócegas. "If Gridenaldo learns we don't call the king that, he'll slap our shins with his sheathed sword."

Anatélia's laughter fades quickly. You dig a little and you always find abuse in those towns. But it's not time for dismay. That won't end overnight. Not even after she concludes her work. But one day...one day...

"Do you know what I do?" She gets closer. The two boys recoil before the Scholar's nearly two meters of height. To them, she must look like a giant. Coceira grabs Cócegas's hands. Anatélia pulls the chalk from her robe. "Do you know why I came?"

"It's her magic wand," Coceira murmurs to his friend. "Quite tiny, but powerful."

"This is chalk, you silly," Anatélia says, wagging the small object.

"Chalk? What's that?" Cócegas scratches his head.

"A teaching instrument."

"Like the whips the clerics use to teach at the Temple of Vilerma?" says Cócegas. "They say we must be whipped if we don't leave offerings for the gods. Coceira was even whipped on his foot."

"Yes, yes!" Coceira agrees. "Here the gods like food, but they favor coins! I think coins last longer."

Anatélia snorts. The boys recoil again.

"Come with me," she says. A bit reluctant, they whisper something to each other but decide to follow her. "By the way, what are your names?"

"I'm Cócegas. He's Coceira."

"And your real names?"

The boys frown at the question.

"Those are our names, Tia," Coceira says. "It was Gridenaldo who gave them to us when we were seven or eight."

In Eriná, the clerics have a different function. Instead of spitting out piffle and extorting the people, they tread throughout the great metropolis in their bluish tunics, learning about births and the arrival of migrants. They advise families that every child should be properly registered in the People of Eriná's Archive.

The trio arrives at an open field near one of Vilerma's gates, but still far from the snopy eyes of her father's guards. It's a good area for the work she needs to do. She turns to the boys and holds them firmly by their shoulders. They shiver.

"You will see...things," she says. "Stay calm. You can trust me."

“Every witch says that,” says Coceira.

“Stereotypes,” Anatélia says. “A good first lesson for you.”

Cócegas bites his lips and squeezes his friend’s hand. It’s normal for people to be frightened at first, but they soon get used to it.

Anatélia walks up to a piece of unfinished wall, probably from a failed attempt at building the city’s enclosure. With her chalk, she sketches a circle. Opening a portal requires either seeing or previously knowing the other side, in whichever world it is. She closes her eyes. Her mind transits to Noldarolândia. She recalls the details of her friends’ grange, then closes the circle. Inside its border, a gelatinous mass of green and nut-brown bubbles up, almost like a vegetable soup. There—the portal is open.

Teteléquio and Fuzequim’s heads pop out of the portal, their round, emerald eyes curious and cautious.

“Opa, opa, my lovely Télia!” Fuzequim calls out, his tiny ears fluttering. His eyes twinkle in Vilerma’s moonlight like two living lamps. “A multitude of kisses to you!”

Anatélia smiles and blows three kisses to the capívaro. He and his partner cross the portal.

“I was so profoundly asleep,” Teteléquio says. His ears are short like Fuzequim’s, but his furry torso is tattooed with hundreds of his relatives’ names. Capívaros are beings of a bit more than half a meter high with heightened intelligence, usually quite furry and with protruding faces, resembling capybaras.

“You’ll have time to sleep later,” Anatélia says. “These are my two new friends: Cócegas and Coceira. Boys, these two work with me.”

“So capívaros do exist?” Coceira is astonished.

The boys trust her: they sit with their legs crossed like curious children about to watch a street show.

“In several worlds,” Anatélia says. “Though there are not many in this one. If it were up to kings and captains, there would be none.”

Teteléquio and Fuzequim leave through the portal again. The dimples of frustration on boys’ faces are unforgettable. However, a few seconds later, the capívaros return. The spectacle is about to begin. Used to it, Anatélia sits next to the boys and waits.

First, the capívaros bring the walls, which they skillfully assemble around the area, including even the ruins of the city wall. They’re quick at opening holes in the boards of wood, but they carve them carefully to turn them into windows. Then, they set up planks to make the floor. Cócegas, Coceira, and Anatélia hop from one corner to another while the capívaros put the structure in place with hammers and hacksaws. Then come the

shelves, cabinets, lamps, and candlesticks. Some things come from kingdoms that Anatélia doesn't know. Others come from Eriná itself. Using a flint, the capívaros add the orange light of flames to the portal's emerald. Teteléquio brings a blackboard and hangs it on the wall opposite the ruins. The kids turn around to watch. At last, Fuzequim arrives with a cart filled with books, its wheels sliding easily on the recently waxed floor. Teteléquio steers it to a corner and starts filling the shelves with philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, ethics, alchemy, language, drama, and art. As Anatélia always asks them to, the capívaros leave empty places so the citizens may fill them up with their own writings. In twenty minutes, the room is finished.

"Is this what Gridenaldo calls a Den of Rebellion, isn't it?" Cócegas says. "The captain always says the Scholar builds those dens everywhere she goes, sowing death and destruction. But it doesn't seem related to death, Tia. Not like the headless lads the captain throws into the river."

"This is a classroom, Cócegas," Anatélia says. "We have several of them in Eriná."

"Oh, the City of Doom." Cócegas nods, the city's nickname at the tip of his tongue. "Gridenaldo talks a lot about it in the taverns. He says everyone who comes from there is bad."

Anatélia shakes her head, then faces Teteléquio and Fuzequim, who have already heard so many things in their long lives, but still frown their furry foreheads when they listen to nonsense.

"You can stay here if you want. Teteléquio is a master of mathematical and natural sciences, geometry, and engineering. Fuzequim is a master of world history, philosophy, ethics, and advanced portalogy. They can teach you a few things today."

"Aren't capívaros all crooks?" Coceira says.

"Oh, yes." Anatélia snaps her fingers. "Fuzequim, their first lesson should be about stereotypes."

"Aren't little Vilermen kids all ugly?" Fuzequim says, leaning toward the boys, who immediately sulk. Fuzequim opens a wide smile at Anatélia. "Maybe they already got the basics, but I'll explain."

"What is mathematics?" Coceira says, raising his hand.

"Is that the only thing they said you don't know about?" Cócegas asks, confused.

"You'll learn, sweeties." Anatélia smiles and turns to the capívaros. "One more thing: keep an eye out. I have other business before sunrise."

Always before dawn: that's when Edelundo calculates the taxes collected during the day, when he expresses his gratitude to the gods. It's in the silence, alone in his bedroom without the muscles of his guard or the unceasing voices of the clerics, that the self-proclaimed king of Vilerma realizes how fragile he is. Anatélia knows all about it already; nothing like buying some shots of pinga for a few watchmen.

Anatélia concentrates on an empty balcony protruding from Edelundo's "castle"—a three-story house, not much better than similar buildings in Vilerma. She draws a portal on the grass, and it opens to the balcony. She leaps into the greenish goo before someone notices the insurgent light. The portal closes behind her. With her father's bedroom in sight, Anatélia opens another passage. Her heart misses a beat. The last time she saw this man, she was on a horse with Mom, crossing the border between the Wide Cerrados and the Araucaria Woods while her father shouted that they wouldn't be bold enough to abandon him.

Anatélia enters the portal.

Edelundo is stooped over a book, one she knows doesn't contain stories. Her father is not fond of reading. Most likely, he's only checking a ledger of extortions sanctioned as taxes and tithes.

"Have you taken enough from the baker today?" Anatélia says, her voice resounding in the silent room.

Edelundo gasps, leaping from the chair and pulling his dagger from his belt. The vitiligo draws a set of flames around his wrists and hands, the same hands that fed her so many times, that held her, that tucked strands of hair behind her ear between promises of unconditional protection and care. For an anomalous instant, Anatélia forgets all the bad things her father has done.

"My little daughter," Edelundo says, resting the weapon on the table and closing his eyes.

The place smells like rotten food and rust. Anatélia remembers the man gathering swords, arrows, and spears, screaming at his wife and boasting that he was assembling a band of adventurers. He arrived home stinking of rust, his threadbare clothes stained with the dirt of all the junk he haggled over with road merchants. In those items, he spent the few coins his family could have used to eat with some dignity.

"Your Majesty," Anatélia says, full of scorn. "I'm here to warn you that the people of Vilerma might change a little."

Edelundo shakes his head, the lines around his mouth tightening amidst his stubble. He wears a shirt with imitations of gold filigree and a crest hastily sewn on the right side.

“The ways of Eriná,” Edelundo says. “The Great Metropolis is imposing its way of living on the peaceful realms of the Wide Cerrados. What else could I expect from you? I used to tell your mother that the University would be the ruin of our lands and ways. She never listened.”

“I’m not imposing anything,” Anatélia says, annoyed.

That subject bothers her once in a while. Indeed, Eriná tries to impose its culture on some neighboring peoples, but Anatélia isn’t visiting the Wide Cerrados on Eriná’s orders.

“What I do here is my idea,” she says, more to herself than to her father. “Not many care about the Wide Cerrados.”

“And why do you care?” Edelundo says with a shrug.

“So that one day the ceaseless wars might end, along with all the territorial struggles and monarchies that exploit the Cerrados’ people. And —“ She gulps.

Deep down, those are all part of her objective, but what really matters are the opportunities her rooms will give to the people of those places. She doesn’t say this to Edelundo. He would laugh.

“So the King of Eriná will be supreme?” Edelundo roughens his voice, filling it with derision and anger. “Ruling everyone with an iron hand, fairly and kindly?”

“Eriná will not rule anything...and Eriná doesn’t have a king anymore.”

“And who rules in the Great Metropolis?” Edelundo frowns. “Teachers?”

“The people choose. It can be anyone.”

Edelundo roars a laugh. Not so different from the reaction she gets whenever she talks about Eriná’s new form of government.

“Why are you here, my daughter?” Edelundo says, sitting. The chair creaks underneath him. “I’m very busy with...accounting? Is that what you call it in the University?”

It’s the tone of his voice. It has always been, and only now does Anatélia realize it. It’s Edelundo’s tone that distinguishes the harassing ruler from the tired father. For an instant, her chest swells with an ardor, a longing, a desire to rattle the man sitting before his ledger until she can shake out of him all the pleasant moments they had together. She can’t recall a lot of them...a pony race, her father helping her mount. An archery contest, her finger cut, the kisses and jokes of a man who would end up dedicating his time to pillaging and war. Delightful peals of laughter, his and Mom’s, intertwining on a starry night while the little girl played with a wooden toy.

“Father...” She deems it fair to call him that now. For a second, Edelundo raises his head and widens his eyes, but the moment passes.

“Don’t interfere in what I came to do. If you care about your people, let them decide.”

“I won’t interfere,” Edelundo says, turning his attention back to his documents. “But there are people who might not like it, no matter my orders.”

Gridenaldo. The captain is more than a king’s subordinate. In that kind of relationship, some people know how to take advantage of power. Without Gridenaldo’s influence in the streets, the king is nothing.

“Daughter...” Edelundo calls without taking his eyes off the ledger, running his finger along a list of numbers. “I know your next steps. You’ll fill my town with portals and make those two creatures build those Dens of Rebellion everywhere, am I right?”

Anatélia takes a deep breath.

“Then...I will be hanged at some point...” Edelundo adds.

Anatélia quivers at the truth in those words as she draws a portal on the bedroom wall.

*

On the next morning, the scent of burning awakens Anatélia. She sits up in bed and runs a hand through her hair, untangling her locks. Some reprisal was expected.

In the open field, she sees Teteléquio and Fuzequim’s building in flames, an ominous black smoke rising up into the cloudless sky. Two spearmen laugh before the fire. One of them pokes a scorched book with his foot. Anatélia recognizes it by the spine. *The Rights of All Creatures*, by Tupixá Naulir.

“We lost two kids because of you, foreigner.” The voice comes from behind.

Anatélia turns around, patient, already prepared for the stink of the captain’s breath, which reminded her of graveyards.

She grits her teeth and sticks a hand into her robe’s pocket, touching her chalk. Portalers were used as executioners in the past, closing portals on the necks of convicts. For a few seconds, she lets the wrath take control of her. Luckily, seconds fly.

“Vilerma won’t taste this rebellion, Scholar. Go away.”

She turns around and walks away from the ruins of Vilerma’s first classroom.

*

She feels the relief as a twinge in her belly when she sees Cócegas and Coceira on the small road that leads to the eastern gate.

“Télia! Télia!” It’s Coceira, talking hastily as usual. The smiles on the boys’ faces bring her to tears. She rubs her eyes. “You won’t believe, really you won’t, what the Captain’s henchmen did—they came running with torches, we were inside and—”

“Thou shalt slow down, my boy,” Teteléquio says. The capívaros join the group, coming out of an oca. “Thou looks like an exponential function.”

Coceira laughs, panting. Cócegas takes the lead in explaining.

“Tio Teté and Tio Fuzi got into trouble. We will have to give them lessons on how to walk in Vilerma!”

Coceira gives a boisterous laugh.

“We saw the captain’s men first,” he says. “Then we took Tio Teté and Tio Fuzi through the manholes. It was right when Tio Fuzi was telling us how kings are born.”

“These boys have a vast knowledge of these portals that open in the ground,” Fuzequim says, pointing with his chin to an uncovered manhole.

Anatélia kneels and takes both boys into her arms. Becoming attached to people easily is often a problem during her missions, but she never intends to let go of this trait.

“Guys...” She stands, biting her lip. “Gridenaldo won’t stop. You’ll build and he’ll destroy.”

“Did thou speak with the king?” Teteléquio says. “We already have twelve rooms.”

“It wasn’t the king who ordered the destruction of the first room. He simply doesn’t like disagreeing with his captain—did you say *twelve*?”

Teteléquio nods, proud. The two of them are always brisk. It’s in their nature, but they also know that the quicker the people learn about the Scholar’s idea, the quicker they become tempted to protect the rooms.

“We built some in basements,” Fuzequim says. “Also on rooftops. Even on a treetop. Tiny ones, but they’re ready.”

“We can help!” Cócegas jigs happily. “Gridenaldo always puts us to work! The day before yesterday I carried eighteen boxes of oranges by myself. Look!”

He exhibits his bruised forearms as a sign of pride.

“No!” Anatélia shakes her head.

“No!” Teteléquio stops right beside her.

“No!” Fuzequim echoes his friends.

“We’re strong!” Coceira protests.

“Knock on doors,” Anatélia says. “Invite people you trust. Strong people, too. Tell them to go to the rooms. And ask them to bring things they like or things they’ve created. Parchments, drawings, musical instruments, prayers, oral traditions...not weapons.”

“And if they don’t want to?” Cócegas shrugs. “I’ve seen people get scared of books.”

“Don’t force anyone to go, sweetie. Teteléquio and Fuzequim will help you.”

The capivaros and the boys walk along the dirt road. Days before leaving her alone with Mom, Edelundo bragged about glory and conquests, swearing he’d bring a revolution to the Wide Cerrados. He’d have a kingdom of his own, he said, so he could bring bliss and prosperity to the people. In his fantasies, Edelundo had promised the end of famine and misery without realizing that he first needed to eradicate the misery in his soul and his hunger for glory. Anatélia’s mother knew that, and so she left him.

*

“Destroy the illegal occupation! King’s orders!” On a dais in the Middle Plaza, Gridenaldo yells at uncertain and confused people. “Hammers and mallets will be provided by the Great King and Earthly Divinity of Vilerma! Whoever obeys his orders will get a silver coin!”

Hooded, hiding in the crowd, Anatélia watches the people’s movements. The promise of coin is a dangerous one, because it carries with it that of glory—and more than that, of fresh bread on the table. Gridenaldo leaves the dais and orders a man to bring a carriage filled with rusty tools. It has been five hours since Anatélia last saw her friends. By her calculations, the city should be peppered with at least fifty rooms, either cloaked or in the open, but each of them a piece of Vilerma now.

Unfortunately, some people embrace Gridenaldo’s promises. Men, women—even children—gather to pick up the rusty weapons. Then they scatter throughout the town. It can only end in death. In all her incursions, Anatélia had never met a captain so intent on crushing the will of the people using the people themselves. She has also never met two kids so excited. Anatélia is certain that both of them have won over Teteléquio and Fuzequim’s soft hearts, which made them skip rest to please the boys and quickly spread the rooms.

Anatélia dashes through the narrow streets of Vilerma. She draws portals on some walls that lead to the Country of Golden Cows. Instead of

the usual luminous soup, she decides to reveal what's on the other side. Immediately a beach appears, clustered with palm trees. Beneath them, piles of gold coins shine under the beams of their world's three suns. Anatólia hides in an abandoned hovel while four groups sprint into the Country of Golden Cows. As soon as they cross the border, the portal closes. She'll leave them there for a few hours until they realize that the gold turns into milk. But the trick won't be enough to deal with every group.

A few streets ahead, an outcry and the sound of steel pierce the air. If corpses start filling up the gardens of Vilerma, the blame all falls on her. Her father and the captain will be right. Anatólia will become a woman who brings destruction. There's a thin line between provoking a rebellion with classrooms and one with weapons. Anatólia fears that she's crossed to the wrong side for the first time. Everything boils down to the people's behavior, but also that of their leaders. On one side, herself. On the other...

Anatólia finds Gridenaldo where she suspects he will be: in the Middle Plaza, protected by three guards and far from where the conflicts are unfolding. Taking him out of the game will leave the small groups scattered through town with no one to report to. Even better, they won't have anyone to ensure they get their silver coin.

Anticipating the movements of the captain and of the guards, Anatólia crouches and draws an ellipse on the plaza's floor, leaving only a small section unfinished.

"Hey, stinky!" She yells, waving.

"There she is!" Says one of the guards. "Let's go!"

The trio marches ahead, unsheathing their swords. Gridenaldo accompanies them, but cautiously. Anatólia must be accurate. If she truly has to fight, then she'll stand no chance. When two of the guards approach, she closes the ellipse. A green flash illuminates the guards' surprised faces, and there go two more people to the Country of Golden Cows.

"Turn around, fool!" Gridenaldo screams to the last guard, an enormous woman, twice as tall as Anatólia. The captain remains at a safe distance.

Anatólia is too cautious with portals. She rarely opens the dangerous ones, the forbidden ones, those who have secrets locked on the other side. She respects the oath of her education. But rarely isn't never. Carefully, Anatólia draws a circle on the floor, smaller than her fist. A tentacle quickly squirms out of it. She calls the world on the other side the Octopus Cemetery, though she doesn't know much about the creatures there. The

guard raises her swords to battle the tentacle, but it curls around her legs and pulls, dripping a black liquid.

Anatélia concentrates on closing the portal before the creature drags the woman's leg inside. The tentacle is cut off, falling on the ground and spasming. But Gridenaldo's last defense is now neutralized, still trying to set her leg free, moaning in disgust.

Unfortunately, there's no more time for Anatélia. While she battled the guard, Gridenaldo gained an advantage. The captain leaps over Anatélia, and she tries to push him back, but he's a lot heavier than her in his chainmail and rusty boots. He presses her against the ground with a forced grin marring his cheeks, exhaling fury and barely hiding his nervousness.

"I'd ask your capívaros to stop building these Dens of Rebellion," he says, drooling. "But I think it will be more pleasant if I let the people decide what to do with those subversive places. Isn't that what you wanted? Let the people decide? Some friends listened to your conversation with your dear daddy."

Anatélia takes a deep breath, the chalk tight in her hand. The main mistake of tyrants is forgetting the true weapons of those who oppose them.

Grunting, Gridenaldo pulls his dagger and touches it to Anatélia's neck. Once in a while, the captain looks behind, aware of his vulnerability. Anatélia takes advantage of his distraction to sketch an ellipse on the ground—or the closest thing she can manage while immobilized, unable to look and with a blade on her neck.

The soul of a portaler is linked to the other side of any open portal, allowing movement between worlds while the portaler desires it. But there is another type of link possible, the hardest one, which requires twelve courses and a lot of training at the University. Anatélia keeps her chalk against the ground, hands firm and taut. Something hot runs down her neck and she pretends to not know what it is. She closes her eyes so she won't see Gridenaldo.

Teteléquio had been her supervisor at the University; Fuzequim, a teacher. Since then, the three of them have formed a bond. But they only became true companions when they decided to share the mission of bringing these rooms to as many places as possible. And it's that connection that allows a portaler to open a passage next to those she cares about, even if she doesn't know where they physically are.

Anatélia closes the ellipse.

Teteléquio and Fuzequim jump out of the portal, rubbing against its narrow border. Without hesitation, the capívaros tackle Gridenaldo. Fuzequim slaps him and Teteléquio takes him down with a headbutt. The captain stumbles, but dodges the capívaros and runs into an alleyway. But the portal soon fills up with heads: Janildo, the baker; Samara, the painter of storefronts; Vernão das Torres, the accountant; Selênia, the woodworker. More than fifteen Vilermen emerge from the portal and run after Gridenaldo. In minutes, they bring him back with his arms and legs tied.

“Stop struggling, man,” Fuzequim says. “You’ll only get tired.”

“What thou hatest the most awaits thee, captain,” Teteléquio says.

“They’re going to kill him!” Cócegas’s head springs out of the portal. “Tio Fuze, you told us that killing isn’t good!”

Anatélia yanks Cócegas up by the collar. He rolls to the ground. Coceira follows soon after. The mention of death makes Anatélia stare at Edelundo’s manor, which stands on Vilerma’s highest spot.

“Are they going to kill him?” Coceira says, worry impressed on his face. Anatélia bites her lips, thinking for a moment that Coceira means her father.

Teteléquio and Fuzequim hoist the captain up and carry him to a street of ocas on the plaza’s west side. Anatélia embraces the two boys, partly because she doesn’t want them to follow the capívaros, but mostly just because she’s realized they’re fine.

“Where are they taking Gridenaldo?” Coceira asks.

Anatélia smiles when she sees a quill behind the boy’s ear and a roll of parchment tied to his trousers.

“Do you remember I told you not to force anyone to go into the rooms?” she says. “Well...I’ll make an exception today.”

*

What weird little place is this room atop Zemaiás Tavern? That’s what Jovaldir thinks when he sits at a small table and someone gives him a quill and an ink bottle. Two boys laugh and whisper in the back. Look! There’s Mrs. Xuiá coming in, a basket full of eggplants underneath her arm. By the look on her face, she’s also a bit confused, but curiosity never killed the cat.

*

There's something odd in all of this! Carombé is wearing a hooded robe and his worst clothes. He has also smudged his face so no one will notice him sitting there. He entered as a spy for the captain, but he's too comfortable here for his own taste. Shouldn't he be nervous that a capívoro entered with a bag full of books? Gridenaldo insists that books are the spark that will send a city up in flames. Really, if you gather a lot of them and put them on fire...but he doesn't want to set anything on fire. In the corner of a big, rectangular slab hanging on the wall, the other capívoro writes some words. Carombé doesn't know how to read, but he feels some kind of magic flowing there. Perhaps these creatures will send him out of the room capable of recognizing written words.

*

Pelanca and his friends creep through the night toward one of the rooms at the riverside. He carries a hammer. The other lads carry sticks. The sparkle of a silver coin would be very welcome. Baltazar says his sister is in one of the rooms and that maybe she's in that one. So what? The boys tell Baltazar to stop being silly. But minutes later, for some reason, Pelanca sides with Baltazar. A silver coin would be very welcome indeed, but it's not worth anyone's sister. When half of the boys give up the fight and run, Pelanca wonders whether it's not a good idea to protect the rooms instead of destroying them. What he didn't tell anyone was that he spent the previous night in one of them, listening to Dona Marinelva talk about wheat planting.

*

There she goes, the Scholar. She's probably on her way to another town, another one of those little kingdoms scattered across the Wide Cerrados. Weeks after she passes through Vilerma, the people ask how she managed to change so much in so little time. Some folks didn't even see her! It seems that even the king has become more generous after everything that happened. People say that Nové, the messenger, sends letters to Eriná in the king's name. And as for the captain, some argue that he should be thrown into the dungeons. Instead, others volunteer to reeducate the grumpy man, taking him daily to some of the Scholar's rooms.

How did the Scholar manage all of that? What weapons did she bring with her? What kind of war did she wage within the palisades of Vilerma?

One day someone, maybe two very smart kids, will realize that a voice and a piece of chalk is almost always enough.



Over the Mountains, Towards Windvill

R.R. Portela

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ARUNA SLAMMED HIS mug of beer down on the table, reached into the pile of frozen yak manure and threw another piece into the flames, rekindling the fire. As he did so, he looked right into the red face of the man sitting in front of him, as if he expected him to burst out laughing at his own poor joke.

“You can’t be serious,” Aruna said at last, as he chewed on a clump of the ice that had formed on his drink. Aruna was an old man with fewer teeth in his mouth than expected and an expression that won him no favours. “There is no life beyond Iceumbrae.”

“Of course there is!” Zangbu replied, his straight spine showing an excessive sense of discipline. He was young and inexperienced. Aruna was used to dealing with people like that. “Windvill exists!”

“I know it does, my lad. I roamed by the mountains near Iceumbrae long before your dad knew how to beget sons. What I’m saying is that there is no life beyond Iceumbrae because nothing survives there. What you want is to find death.”

“It’s nothing of that sort.” The lad rummaged through his own things, revealing mountain goat skins decorated with a lot of blots. Aruna couldn’t care less. He wasn’t able to read. “I have an official document here saying I

can find any mountaineer I want and pay him whatever amount is necessary to take me from Iceumbrae to Windvill.”

“I don’t care about that. I don’t even know if what’s written there is what you’re actually telling me. And, as I said, there is no life beyond Iceumbrae.”

Aruna liked to study the people who hired his services. He worked with all kinds of clients and would go on any kind of trip, which meant he knew quite a lot of people. Men like the lad before him used to ask to be taken to Needledome, intending to study or become clergy. Those who wanted to go further away from populated areas tended to look much more like criminals than this young man did.

The boy looked unprepared. He wore wool and leather, surely brought from Stonefall, so he must have money. But even with such new and beautiful robes, there was no way he was ready to face the cold beyond Iceumbrae. What he wore was enough to save him from freezing to death, but the cold would make him fatigued to the point of not being able to travel.

“Aruna,” the young man insisted. “I was told you’re the best mountaineer in Iceumbrae. And I need the best. As you can see, I don’t have the knowledge to face this journey. I can’t make the trip just knowing the way. And I don’t even actually know the way, I just have a vague notion. I need you to take me. Please.”

“What’s your name again, my lad?”

“I’m Zangbu.”

“Zangbu. Right. When people say that Iceumbrae is the furthest place from Uyarinna, there’s a reason for that, right?”

“That’s where it’s coldest. Hardest to get to. I know all these things.”

“Correct. You crossed the Sarcophagus Pass and saw all those frozen people.”

“Aye, I did.”

“But Iceumbrae is not the furthest place from Uyarinna. There are other places, many others. This is just the furthest place they managed to build a community. If you go north, you’ll find even worse mountains. Impossible places to live, where there is immeasurable cold. Places where breathing hurts, where there is not even air to breathe. Places where the spirits of Larger Circles live. Do you understand all this?”

“Of course I do. I’m a teacher. “

“Windvill is way up north. A village on the peak of a mountain fifteen days from here. There are only a few air pockets along the way. At night, the cold can be twice as bad as what you feel in Iceumbrae. Your blood will

freeze in moments if you stay dressed like that, boy. Have you noticed my head?"

Aruna pointed to the left side of his face. Zangbu noticed the absence of an ear.

"Aye, I did."

"Excellent. Losing an ear is the least that can happen to you. My left foot is also missing two toes. I've met mountain people who lost their entire foot or all the fingers on one hand. I'm getting old, Zangbu. You may ask me to go down to the caves of Iceumbrae, despite the rumours of what's down there. You can ask me to take you to Stonefall, which is a good two months away from here. But not Windvill. Not without good reason."

"I have a good reason."

"And what is it, may I ask?"

Zangbu explained his reason. And Aruna changed his mind.

*

Kipa tied the last bag of supplies to the yak so they would survive the journey. She gave a tug to check that everything was properly secured, and the animal complained.

"Calm down, Big Baby. The weight will decrease as we travel. Like you didn't know that already."

She caressed Big Baby. Before leaving the yak, she counted all the bags again. Everything was present and accounted for. Kipa was very pragmatic and liked to check things as many times as possible before she left. She understood her work like no one else: she had known someone who had died many years earlier because they hadn't taken enough yak manure to burn. Hypothermia had been the least of their problems. They had found that person hacked to pieces after becoming a meal for some kind of Higher Spirit. Kipa shuddered to imagine. She didn't want her body to be found by evil ghosts.

She pulled the yak through Iceumbrae, a towering cavern with different entrances for its several sections. People built their houses on walls or in holes, positioning wooden or iron doors at the entrances. The houses all looked built-in, and because of that the place just seemed like a huge, empty space, except for the coming and going of the few people and yaks.

Big Baby moaned with pleasure as they left, feeling the sunlight on its muzzle. The light was weak, but it was better than the total darkness of the

labyrinthine caverns of Iceumbrae.

Kipa found Aruna with the travellers. There was another yak there, loaded with leather bags which were much more expensive and less worn than the goatskin ones Big Baby carried. She noticed the two men who would accompany them: a very tall young man with a straight back, and an even younger man, not much more than a child, with the quick eyes of a mountaineer.

“Kipa, I want to introduce our customers,” said Aruna, approaching the two men. “This is Zangbu, a teacher from Needledome, and this is Tenzing, his assistant.”

Kipa introduced herself, finding it all too strange. The boy, Tenzing, seemed excited about her presence, eager to talk.

The trip to Needledome took about twelve days. Although Aruna had asked Kipa to prepare a month-long trip, it made no sense to carry all that baggage with them. It was possible to buy food and fuel in Needledome; they needed to lessen the weight that the yaks had to carry.

Kipa pulled Aruna into the corner, with the excuse that she needed his help to check the equipment. After she had expressed her doubts, the man responded, “It’s simple, Kipa, we’re not going to Needledome. We’re headed towards Windvill.”

“You’re kidding me...”

“Nope, I mean it.”

“Man, age’s caught up with you, Aruna, ‘cause this is madness. There’s no road towards Windvill, especially not with these two blokes who are unaccustomed to walking on the mountain. No money in this world’s worth it if you won’t be alive to spend it.”

“Trust me, Kipa. The boy has a good reason to make this trip, and he has enough determination to follow through to the end.”

“Right, I want to see if that determination will still exist when we step into the cold that freezes the blood in his veins.”

Aruna smiled and put his hand on her shoulder. “If you can’t trust them, trust me, Kipa. I’m old, but I don’t fancy dying just yet. And I don’t fancy killing you, either.”

And all be damned, but she trusted him. Aruna was like a father to Kipa, a girl who had never known her actual family. She had been found in a state of hypothermia in Sarcophagus Pass when she was just a child. She’d been too small to remember what she was doing there, but her rescuers also found a small caravan some distance away. All had died, probably because of the irresponsibility of the mountaineer conducting the group. Kipa would be dead if a caravan under Aruna’s command hadn’t

passed by. He had adopted the little girl himself after cutting three fingers off her left hand—frozen fingers that would never return to normal.

Aruna had taught her everything she knew, through love or pain. He had even helped her become a *dana*. It was he who had given her the talisman that let her partner with a Lower Circle spirit.

“There are mountaineers who survive perilous journeys without associating with a spirit,” he had explained many years before. “But having one on your side can determine whether you will survive in the mountains.”

Kipa let the frigid air touch her skin, as strong as the sun. Then she ran her fingers along the string of stones around her neck, invoking her Lower Circle spirit.

It was as if the wind became a physical entity. The air moved and formed a minor storm behind her, distorting reality, abandoning its own world and returning to appear on her back as a being with a long neck, an even bigger nose, and bug-like eyes. Gray, as if made of stone, it hopped with nimble paws around Kipa and then circled Big Baby. It was a *Khaba*, a spirit that charmed rocks and could find ways through them. Its name was Kosang.

The group started the journey crossing the Sarcophagus Pass. Whenever she passed by that place, Kipa felt its phantom fingers. She slipped her hand inside her clothes and held her breath as they roamed the place. On the way, they came across one or two caravans, all heading down the mountain, looking for better places to live. But not them. Tenzing spent the entire time looking at the frozen lake and the walls of ice, watching the sleeping bodies inside. It was really something impressive. Kipa wondered if one day, should the mountains fall and the cold end, those people would come back alive or dead.

“I hate this place,” Tenzing suddenly whispered beside her.

“Are you afraid of ghosts?” she asked.

“No. I just don’t think this is the most presentable place in Iceumbrae. But it’s the first place we get to see.”

“A great first impression.”

“A sinister one, actually.”

They travelled for a while longer. They didn’t take the road leading down, but went ahead on another path towards the mountains of Uyarinna.

Tenzing seemed excited about the journey and very interested in Kosang. The creature didn’t care that much about him, but the boy insisted on walking beside Kipa to stay close to the spirit.

“Have you never seen one of these?” the woman asked.

“Yes, but not of that sort. I usually see the house type, not the mountain type. I almost hooked up with one. But I didn't. I was afraid of becoming more likely to have contact with Higher Spirits. I'm afraid of those.”

That was pure superstition. Becoming a *dana* and associating with a spirit didn't call an evil being unless you wanted it to. Tenzing was a little childish, Kipa realised.

“If you have a bond with a *Khaba*, does Aruna have a bond with a *Yod*?” Tenzing continued to make conversation. *Yod* were warrior spirits. She shook her head.

“Aruna doesn't associate with any spirits.”

“And how does he manage to travel around?”

Kipa almost laughed at the boy and his innocence. “You've never been out of Needledome, have you?”

“No. It's my first time out.”

“And now you're going to Windvill. Have you ever thought that you might not survive the trip?”

“Zangbu warned me about this sort of thing when we left the Dome. I came regardless.”

“And why's that?”

“He changed my life. I believe and trust him. And I believe in what Zangbu is trying to do.”

“And that is...?”

“To teach the people at Windvill.”

“Teach them what?”

“Everything.”

“That makes no sense. How can he teach everything?”

Tenzing looked at Kipa as if he didn't understand what she meant, and she kept staring at the boy, searching for meaning in his words.

“Zangbu is a teacher. He teaches all sorts of things.”

“That still makes little sense.”

Kipa had known teachers all her life. Older men and women would take on one or two pupils and teach them something specific, something they were very good at and wanted to pass on. Aruna taught her mountaineering. Jigsa had taught her how to make a pact with a Lower Spirit. But she had never met a teacher who taught everything. Furthermore, what kind of teacher traveled so far to find students?

“Of course it makes sense!” Tenzing insisted. “He teaches numbers, letters, history and religion to all who want to learn. Students sit on chairs

facing Zangbu, who passes on all the knowledge to them. Zangbu dreams of transforming Uyarnna. He wants people to be literate, to have enough knowledge to choose what they want out of life beyond the things that they were taught to do. Windvill is a test for him, a way of proving to people in Needledome that it's possible to change and strengthen lives through knowledge. “

“Now wait a moment. He wants to be a teacher of everything for all the people of Windvill?”

“Yeah! Isn't it great?” Tenzing's teeth shone brighter than his eyes when he flashed an infectious smile. But Kipa didn't smile back. Now she knew for sure Zangbu was crazy, and Aruna was crazier to have accepted this trip.

*

“There are a few things you need to know before we continue,” Aruna said, passing around the hot beer. They swished the drink in their mouths before they swallowed it, feeling the heat touching their stomachs and percolating into the rest of their bodies. They were sitting in a circle before a fire, eating goat meat to accompany the drink, a breath of fresh air after a tiring day of travel. The two yaks rested a few metres away, lying in the snow.

“The first thing you need to know is...” Aruna held up a gloved finger. “Make the most of this rest period. The thin air will sap all our strength from here on. There are very few air pockets along the way. Three, to be more specific; we'll reach them on days two, seven, and twelve, if we continue our journey in this way. The second thing is to avoid a lot of movement. There will come a time when I'll have to ban conversations. Knowing how to conserve your breath will be crucial for the survival of our caravan. Shortness of breath comes with other symptoms, so if you start to feel odd, please let me know. Say, if you have trouble breathing or if your heart is racing. Headache and discomfort will creep in slowly, so when you feel it, let me know so we can avoid deaths. The third thing is: follow in my footsteps and Kosang's. From tomorrow on, the trip will get a little more difficult, and it will only go back to normal when we arrive in Windvill. We may have to go through places buried in enough snow to swallow a whole person, or through snow that weighs so much it could knock down part of the mountain and whoever is on top of it. I hope this won't happen to us, but there is always the possibility of encountering hungry ghosts. I'm the only one that knows where it's safe. Don't get distracted, don't lose focus.

The journey is arduous, and focus will be necessary to complete it. The fourth thing is that we're going to need everyone's commitment to follow these recommendations. Understood?"

Everyone agreed. Aruna cracked a smile as the mug returned to him. He took a sip and left the beer in his mouth for a while, without swallowing. That kept him heated enough, and it was all he needed at the moment. Zangbu raised his hand, wanting to speak, and Aruna passed him the mug.

"I want to tell Aruna and his ward that I'm not making this trip for pretentious reasons. It's a genuine wish to do something for the Windvill people, not a magnanimous desire to bring education, whatever that means, to all peoples. But Windvill can serve as a gateway to other villages. I am thrilled that Aruna agreed to make this trip. Thanks to Kipa for accepting too. You are heroes and you are making a big difference. Thanks."

He bowed his head. Aruna gave him a smile and patted him on the shoulder. Kipa found it all indecipherable. It made little sense for her master to have so much respect for Zangbu. He was much younger than Aruna. Though both were masters of their respective subjects, Aruna had no history of holding his customers in such high regard.

Kipa felt she was missing something, but she ignored it. She decided it'd be better to sleep.

The next day, the journey became more difficult, though not at first. In the morning, they descended a few more meters on a narrow path, walking in a line. The increasing temperature provided some relief. But things got worse—and slower—when the path rose again. They came to a point where Kipa had to let Kosang go ahead, looking for better trails in the rocks to cross with the yaks. They were in a narrow corridor, a sort of valley that'd take them to the top of the mountain.

During this part of the journey, Tenzing tried to make conversation with Kipa. He kept panting as he talked about Kosang and other spirits. Apparently Zangbu couldn't teach him how to be a *dana*. *So he's not a teacher of everything after all*, Kipa thought, finding it funny. Tenzing also commented on the walls through which they had passed the day before and started talking excitedly about jumping, a sport common in Stonefall, which consisted of hanging on a mountain wall and jumping to another. It was a sort of death-wish game, but very widespread. Kipa, however, listened to everything with disinterest. She enjoyed jumping, but Tenzing talked too much when he shouldn't. Zangbu interrupted the young man, his voice deep as thunder.

“You heard Aruna’s recommendations last night, Tenzing. Did you forget them already? Do I need to go over them with you?”

“No, sir. Sorry.”

Tenzing fell silent, and Kipa was grateful for it; the end of the valley was so steep that they needed to concentrate harder on their movements and their own breathing in order to carry on. The impossible cold was already rising again—when they left the narrow path and reached the top of the mountain, the icy winds whipped at the little exposed skin they had.

But the view was worth it.

From here, they could look south and see the solitary summit of an immense mountain. It was Iceumbrae. They felt that they were even higher here, as if they could touch the sky. There were only a handful of clouds, and the sky was just a blue expanse from one side to the other. Kipa liked to think that if she stretched out her arms, she could embrace the world from east to west and from north to south.

Big Baby moaned beside her, bringing Kipa’s attention back to the trail. Aruna and Kosang were taking them along a complicated path, with a lot of snow and scant ground. Kosang went ahead of the caravan leader, finding the way just as effectively as the old mountaineer could, but faster. Still, passage was difficult, both because of their uncertainty over where to step, and their concerns about the weight of the yaks and the strength of the wind.

The following days would be complicated, but at least there was an air pocket ahead. That’s what Kipa believed. She didn’t know the region, but Aruna had said they’d come to the air pocket on the second day, and she believed him without reservation.

*

To reach the air pocket, they had to keep walking even after night fell and the cold got worse. They were already tired and panting, which was dangerous. Tenzing complained of shortness of breath and a headache. They needed to find the pocket soon, or they would die.

But Aruna had not lied. They reached a slightly warmer cave, with a breeze coming in from a huge precipice, blowing air up from the bottom of the mountain—hot air, which forced them to open their coats. Hot air was all well and good, but they’d still need fire.

But there was a silver lining: they could breathe at last, could fill their lungs and expel air.

“Tenzing, eat potatoes today, as many as they offer you,” Zangbu said while the others settled down and prepared the food. “Carbohydrates can help you survive. Fatty foods can be a problem.”

Kipa settled herself on the floor. The group cooked a potato soup with some pieces of meat.

“When do you intend to return?” Aruna asked the professor. “I imagine your trip will take some time.”

“I intend to spend four years in Windvill. The Needledome assembly agreed to send someone to pick me up four years from now and evaluate the difference in the village. Then they will know that my method worked.”

“Your teaching method.”

“Aye, that.”

“Don’t you want to talk a little about it?” Aruna asked, looking at Kipa. “I think my ward would like to hear it.”

“Yes, I would love to,” she said. In fact, ever since Tenzing had commented on that absurdity, Kipa really had wanted to understand more about the subject.

Zangbu relaxed. It was certainly a subject he liked to talk about.

“I have my criticisms about the usual way of teaching in Uyarnna. The idea is that, in order to learn, apprentices need to find a master who passes on all their knowledge to their student. But this makes learning a scattered thing, superficial and dependent on the master’s knowledge and experience. It’s inexact, and important information can be lost forever. Aruna may have learned from his previous master some knowledge about the mountains that he forgot later on. Or there may be things that he never learned the right way. But that is not the only issue. A master accepts three to five students at a time. A *dana* passes on their knowledge in the same way, as does a cleric. That’s not enough. Literacy, mathematics, all these are the domains of a few important people in Needledome, and sometimes not even that. I believe writing is the future. The invention of the century. With it, we can pass knowledge on, all of it. I come from a line that believes education should be for anyone, and that it can make Uyarnna better. If everyone has the same schooling and the same methods of accumulating knowledge, we will spend less time rediscovering things that someone already knows. In fact, it will be possible to discover more things. People will learn more about themselves. And who knows? There may even come a day when we can come down from the mountains. If everyone owns the knowledge, our society can develop. If everyone learns a little about everything and specialises only in what they want, then the sky, or in our case the ground, is the limit.”

Kipa reflected on what she had just heard. She couldn't read. Neither could Aruna. And it had never made a difference in their lives.

She had seen Needledome's literate people. They always moved about with immense pride, noses stuck in the air, as if they were smarter than everyone else. Aruna had always told her not to mess with them, but she knew that was mostly because people from Needledome wouldn't know how to defend themselves against her. In Kipa's view, they were nobody.

Still, Zangbu's ideas made some sense. The way Tenzing had explained it had made the whole thing sound stupid. The teacher didn't intend to be the bearer of all the knowledge in the world, nor was he positioning himself as the saviour of all the people of Uyarnna. He just offered another teaching method.

No, she realised as she looked at Aruna. It wasn't another teaching method, because there wasn't a proper teaching method to begin with. She remembered when she had studied with Jigsa. She had a method. She sat the pupils around her and explained everything. And she explained it well, considering the complexity of the whole conceptual question of a relationship with a Lower Circle spirit. But when she needed to travel with Aruna or when it was too cold to go to the *dana*, Kipa had learned about mountaineering. Aruna explained everything in a complicated way, stumbling over words and refusing to return to certain subjects. He was the best mountaineer and the worst teacher. When Kipa didn't understand what the master was saying, Aruna would hit her, and she wasn't the sort of person to take that lying down. They often ended up fighting each other, and Kipa was proud to say that at least two scars on the man's face were her doing.

For a long time, she'd thought mountaineering wasn't for her. Even so, she had insisted on learning it, out of respect for the good relationship she had with Aruna outside of teaching. Not to mention that, when they travelled, he could teach her things as they went along, and Kipa felt much better that way. She learned more like that.

There were two different methods. With two different tutors.

"That might make sense," she said at last. Zangbu smiled. Aruna did the same.

Over the next few days, Kipa thought a lot about Zangbu's words. She asked Tenzing to explain the idea better. The boy talked a little about Zangbu and about the letters.

"Imagine learning without a teacher, Kipa. Imagine being able to read about anything, and write about it, too. You could pass your knowledge on to anyone. You could say whatever you wanted. It's like magic."

She smiled. Aye, knowledge was magic.

*

“No talking,” said Aruna. They were passing through a difficult area, almost like climbing a mountain. There was only a narrow ledge where the yaks could advance. Kosang went ahead, pausing now and then to check the rock it was standing on. Near them, balancing on the difficult terrain, walked Tenzing and Zangbu. Every time the spirit stopped, Kipa held her breath. If they couldn’t get through, they would have to go back and find another way.

Eventually Aruna decided to climb to the top and check the route himself. It was more tiring, but it made sense. At his request, Kipa went ahead with him.

And Kipa wanted to talk; she had things on her mind.

“Why didn’t you tell me about Zangbu’s plan for Windvill?”

“No talking. Can’t you see where we are?”

“Please, Aruna. I want to understand.”

“And what difference would it make?”

“If it weren’t for his intentions, we wouldn’t be here on this bloody mountain with the wind trying to knock us down. I want to understand you, Aruna. You need to explain to me. Please.”

He hid his face. Maybe it was the wind, or perhaps shame. She couldn’t tell; neither of them could blush in the violent cold.

“You almost cut me to pieces, Kipa. That’s why.”

“What?”

“I never had the patience to teach anyone. I’m a poor teacher. You only learned because you’re very good. I don’t know enough words, and I make a mess of everything when I speak. I learned almost everything by instinct. My master was terrible. He hit me more than I hit you. I learned as I went about the job. Either you learned or you’d get punched. I never fought back like you. When you almost cut me to pieces, I realised you were replicating my acts. I’m not good at teaching. That’s why I sent you to Jigsa: so you could learn new things, and use them to find another way in mountaineering or even give up mountaineering altogether. It was an opportunity for you not to be with me all the time, the way I was with my master.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“If we leave teaching to those who are prepared for it, all the better. I’m not cut out for this job. Kipa, I always wanted to learn to read, more than I

wanted to learn about mountaineering.”

Kipa didn't have time to absorb these words. A scream echoed through the mountain, louder than the wind. She saw Tenzing lose his balance. The ledge had cracked, and the resulting tremors destabilised him. Zangbu was faster than the mountaineers, and closer; he grabbed Tenzing, pulling him and throwing him towards Big Baby. The yak roared when the young man landed on its fur. The teacher, on the other hand, slipped and began to fall, his outstretched hands reaching for something to hold.

Aruna reacted before Kipa could move, stepping on the ledge with one foot and grabbing Zangbu by his clothes. The teacher's body still hung over the edge, and Aruna could not hold him.

Kipa had to act. She knew losing Zangbu would mean even more than losing Uyarnna's unexpected future. He was their client. The man's death would mean that everything they had done until that moment had been in vain.

In vain.

Kipa moved forward.

She remembered the Stonefall jumping game, and how the sport only worked because the walls were straighter and more vertical than the ones they now faced. Only trained people played that game, and even so, many accidents happened. There were people who jumped straight to their deaths. The risk here was even worse; these walls were covered in bumps and peaks that could cause serious, irreversible injury. She would never be able to climb a mountain again.

Kipa didn't want to think about it. She didn't even want to look at the distance between her and the ground. She pulled a spike from the wall and analysed the trajectory from Zangbu to the mountain below him. She jumped. She felt the stiff wind hitting her face, the sensation of her body in free fall, her stomach crushed by the pressure.

Zangbu yelled when Aruna could no longer hold him. His body began to fall, but the professor didn't plummet the way he imagined he would, because someone grabbed him and pulled him with all their might. It was Kipa, who was also falling, taking the man with her. During the fall, she scraped her spike against the ice wall, which slowed their fall, but could not stop their movement completely.

She tried again. The spike broke loose again. They were back in free fall. Kipa kept hitting the wall tirelessly, but it was no use. She tried with the spike in her other hand, but, while holding Zangbu, she didn't have enough strength. The object slammed into the ice and slipped out of her hand, disappearing into the void.

She came to realise she was going to die. Neither she nor Zangbu would survive. Kipa avoided looking down, preferring to face the sky, the mountain, Aruna and Tenzing standing up there unable to help. Then something came towards her with immense speed. She didn't understand what it was right away, but Zangbu's words revealed its identity.

"It's Kosang!"

Kipa thought the spirit would help them stop their fall, but Kosang passed straight through them. She didn't understand its actions, as she watched Kosang crash against one rock, then another, and another, until the wall moved. A *Khaba could* enchant rocks. And that was exactly what it did, stretching a piece of the mountain out to catch them. Suddenly, Kipa's vision changed.

It was the link with Kosang. The spirit only existed in this world through the talisman, and, in times of need, it didn't just swap its energy and methods with Kipa. They now shared their vision, something she didn't know she could do. And, she thought, Jigsa didn't know that either.

Kipa found her way up the mountain. She saw golden spots on the rock, like little suns. She raised the spike once more and hit the mountain at the exact centre of that light. The spike crept along the wall, clearing a path through the snow, dirt, and rock. Their speed slowed. But towards the end, the spike broke loose. The pair spun in midair before reaching the ground Kosang had created for them.

Kipa fell flat on her stomach, her nose crushed under the weight of her own head. She felt the blood flowing out, as thick as molasses at first, then freezing. She couldn't breathe well. Zangbu brought her to her feet, seemingly unharmed beside her. They had survived. That was all that mattered.

"Thanks," he said.

She tried to smile, but the pain was immense.

*

The following days were hellish for Kipa. The pain in her nose was unbearable, and it made sleeping difficult. Still, she faced the difficulties head on, especially because of the pride that filled her whenever someone thanked her. She was the woman who had saved the trip. Tenzing bowed to her as if Kipa had saved the entire future of Uyarnna.

"Don't overdo it, Tenzing," Zangbu said. "She saved my life, and that's enough."

The rest of the trip went smoothly, all in all. The path was still very difficult, and they ended each day panting. For Kipa, unfortunately, that was becoming common; she breathed more often because of the pain. It would hurt for a long time, Zangbu claimed, but he said he could help lessen the burden. The teacher put Kipa's nose back into place, though he said it would end up crooked for good.

She didn't care.

Then, exactly fifteen days after starting the journey, the group spotted an extensive plain covered in snow. They were on a low mountain, surrounded by bigger ones. On the plain, they could see precipices descending straight into the ground. They also felt the breeze on their faces, the air coming from below and blowing to the top of the mountain. It was a place where breathing didn't feel difficult.

It was the entrance to Windvill.

About a hundred people waited, all spread out, watching the approaching travellers.

"They were waiting for me," Zangbu said as he walked. "I chose Windvill for its remote location and lack of education. Their life is already too hard. I can teach them how to deal with their own problems, and to survive."

Kipa smiled beneath her crooked nose. When Zangbu got close to the people, they bowed in respect. The teacher introduced himself and those who accompanied him. In response, villagers offered to drive the yaks up the mountain to the village. The children lined up in front of Zangbu, offering him charcoal drawings on scraps of goatskin. The teacher accepted and praised each one of them before going to the next.

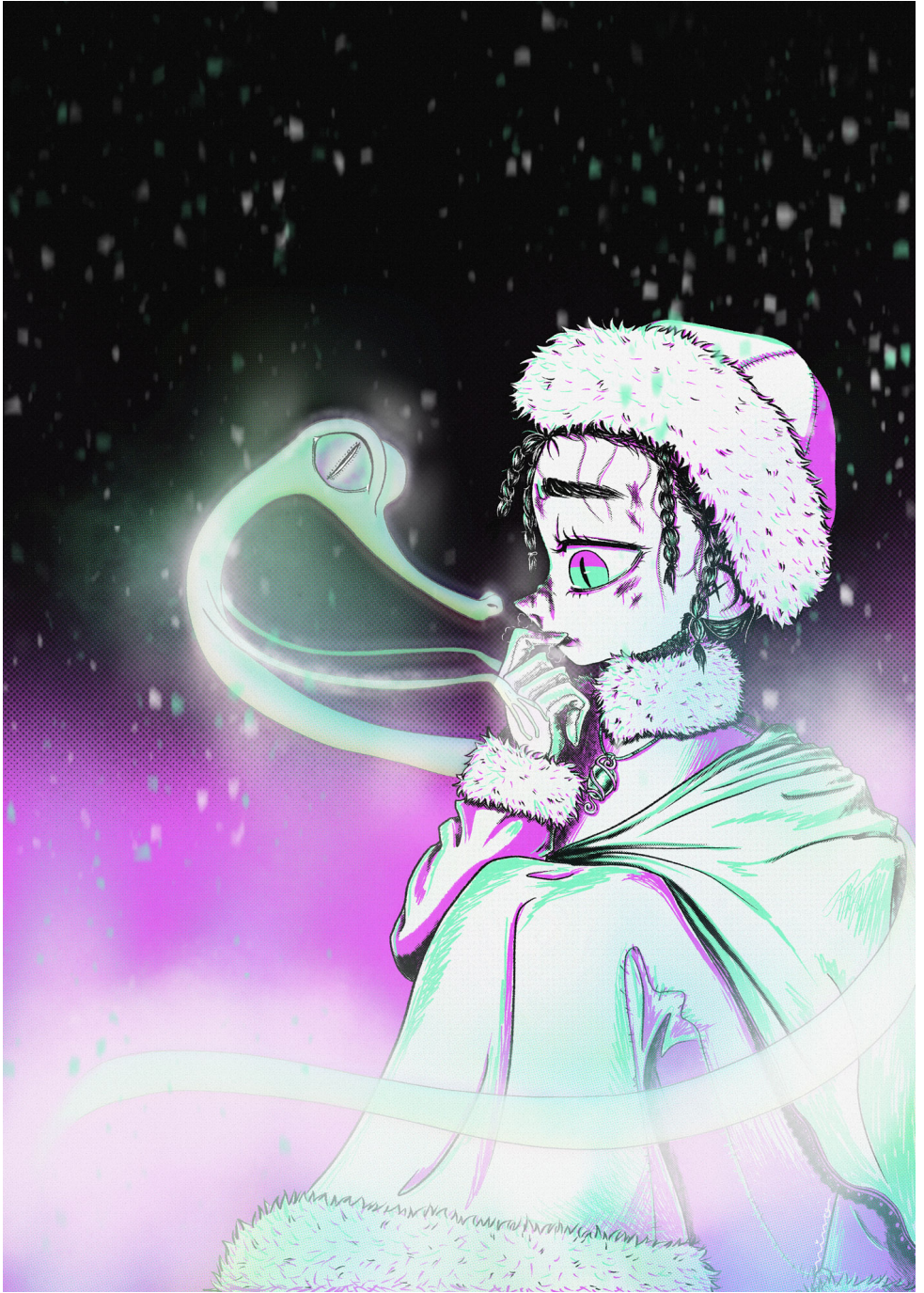
"I tried to draw our future classes," said one child.

"I tried to write like the images Pasang brought back from Iceumbrae," said a little girl.

"I tried to draw myself as a mountaineer."

Aruna exchanged glances with Kipa. This was what the man's arrival meant to the village, she realised. It was the same thing that Aruna had offered her when he found her as good as dead in the Sarcophagus Pass.

He didn't just offer knowledge. He also brought hope.



Worker's Song

H. Pueyo

about 3.300 words

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HERE LIES THE queen, giant and still, each of her six arms sprawled open, curved, twitching like she has forgotten she no longer breathes. Here, in the royal chamber, among us who only know how to serve, a goddess instead of a woman, a creature so gargantuan that not even dozens of us could move her, she who covers all, whom we have fed since she was born. We who transformed her into what she is and what she has been admire her now, not knowing how to continue without her orders telling us what to do and where to go.

Some approach her. The queen's body refuses to rot, frozen in an eternal chrysalis, firm and dry, highlighting what we should have already known: she is grotesque. Lying on comfortable pillows, the queen rests facing the ceiling, her two upper arms extended in martyrdom, her central pair folded unnaturally, her legs propped against the walls.

The Great Mother is dead, some of us say—our whispers echoing inside the chamber. Others clean her body, wiping the soil and dust off her articulated limbs, polishing the terracotta hue of the royal corpse. The neck ligature of the former ruler has been split, almost entirely amputated, and doubt spreads among us: the stripes of organic tissue look like they have been slashed, a poorly executed decapitation, perhaps. The question remains: what will we do now?

We only hear our own echo for days. Without the duty of work, we aimlessly roam the complex tunnels we have been building for years, and wander the fungal gardens we lovingly cultivated, turned into nothing more than entwined white carcasses. In the nursery, the children toss and turn without the food we used to deliver without fail. The underground booms with the queen's title—the Great Mother—and we cover her chamber with leaves as dead as her.

“There is no reason to leave the body here,” says Vinca, walking amid the barren fingers of our monarch. “The royal chamber is far larger than the others. It could house two or three nurseries.”

“What is a nursery for, without offspring?” we ask. “Only the queen can give birth to new children.”

“An archive, then,” says Vinca.

“What is memory without its people?” we answer back. “What are we, without a leader?”

“Or a plantation.” Vinca climbs the phalanges of the deceased, walking over the joints of the arm and stopping above the thorax. “It could be greater than any garden. With the humidity and the space we have here...”

“Why cultivate, if we are already dead?”

Vinca gazes down at our mother. The queen lies naked, like she always was on her sumptuous pillows, partially covered by the crimson fabric that spirals from her breast to the middle of her inanimate legs. It makes the body look like the body it should be: beautiful, maternal, immaculate, immense. For a moment, that is how we see her: ephemeral, not the end of our lineage, not an announced calamity, not the imminent destruction of our anthill that now decays without new life.

She is nothing but a body.

The realization is transmitted through our shared network of minds. Our mother is just a body; she is not divine. We keep no secrets from each other—we should keep no secrets—we cannot have them. We are more than individuals, we are the web that ties us, the internal skeleton connecting every dot of this colony, where visions and opinions drip without explanation from one sister to the other, streaming from the same infinite source. We have no secrets, but the queen remains dead, and no one knows who killed her. The grief that controls us is not for her, but for ourselves. The desire to live is a thirst; it burns in the throats of our guttural tunnels; it twists the bodies of our children, who cry and plead for attention, activating a mechanism unknown until now: that of the most primal instinct, urging us to survive.

In the nursery, we hear another voice.

“Do we have any princesses? I could swear I saw one or two of them, the other day,” says Hosta, huge compared to so many others, but still childlike in front of the queen.

“There are none,” we answer. “The queen ate them all.”

Hosta’s muscular arms are not made for the young, and her mandibles are heavy and inept before the pale newborns. She touches one of the grubs, whose thin, translucent pellicle is yet to crystallize in the shape of an adult, and the girl wriggles like she has been burned. There are cradles of baked clay scattered across the room, thousands of them that go from the floor to the ceiling, tiny holes hiding equally tiny creatures.

“Excellent.” Hosta leaves the baby aside and returns to the center of the nursery, where we observe her, as fearful of her harshness as the children are fearful of her size and strength. “If you happen to find one, she must be fed like all the others; she must be raised like all the others, without privilege or special conditions, independently of what she eventually becomes. Do you understand?”

The nursemaids nod.

Those squalid old women surround Hosta, peering at her from the gloom. Something changes within us. In the depths of our home, there are factions that agree with Hosta, while others side with Vinca: why not repurpose the royal chamber? Why should we have another queen? Hosta tears a piece of crimson fabric and ties it to one of her six sinewy arms, and her supporters mimic her, weaving linen and dyeing it with annatto for their own armbands.

Vinca does the same, but instead of tying a red crest around her arm, she covers her narrow shoulders with cloth, an improvised scarlet shawl. Her companions, all of them quick and small-framed workers like herself, paint their exposed thoraxes with the same shade of red ink.

We agree; we disagree; we doubt. We do not know who is wrong or right. We do not even know if Vinca or Hosta have the right to complain or suggest, but their words spread like a forest fire. We who have dearly revered the queen now see her vacant and untouched shell and her long, symmetrical arms as a threat. We who braided the waves of her antennae leave the threads unfurled on the ground, countless brown roots coming out of her regal head.

She who birthed and governed us, who chose which of us were most fitting to serve her; which were too old and should be banished to the nurseries; which were relegated to manual labor; which should dig more and more tunnels that branch into more and more chambers. All from the comfort of her pillows, tall, melancholy and silent, never even bothering to

she speak. She just lifted a finger, and the order was branded in our heads and extended to our comrades: you, strong one, to the squadron. You, architect, mold clay. You, servant, mine.

Our minuscule sisters crawled over her chest, covering one breast with cloth, braiding the antennae that grew longer each year, reaching miles in length. Her three compound eyes, dark and red like the soil of our home, never looked at us, not even once.

Another idea rustles the colony.

“If we want to save the garden, we must bring in new apprentices,” says Sienna, one of the few elders who works outside of the nurseries. She has a missing leg, but we have carved her a wooden replacement with almost perfect articulations covering the embedded mechanism. The prosthetic limb is pale compared to her rutilant complexion, but it allows her to move more freely. “I would like to call some of the squadron girls, since they have so many reserves sitting around.”

The gardeners exchange glances. The ones sucking the fermented wine from sculpted pipes raise confused faces. The ones pruning the longest twigs of the yeast bushes set their tools aside. The ones plucking the delicate bioluminescent mushrooms that light up the underground freeze, their hands rigid around the flat caps or the stems that keep them still.

“The squadron can only do what it was born to do,” we say. “They are strong, nothing else.”

“They only know what they learned to know,” replies Sienna. “They have been told they are big and sturdy, so they fight. But they have arms like ours, and they are as capable as we are of comprehension, attention and care. We can teach them.”

“Not everyone knows how to learn,” we insist. “Not everyone wants to.”

Sienna walks under the fungal lanterns, bluish sparks shimmering above her head. Her skin is tough and shriveled like leather because of her age, her skilled fingers are scarred and fragile. The tools have marked her body, excavating grooves like those of a chiseled trunk, and her limbs have burn scars from the acid of other women’s bites and the toxins of some of the species she farms.

“Everyone *can* learn. Everyone has the right to try.”

“The nursemaids are too old to learn. The guards never come down to the chambers; they stay above ground, patrolling, watching a planet that is not ours. The maids were designed to clean waste and serve the queen.” The multitude of voices reverberates through the spiraling paths of the anthill. Vinca and Hosta raise their heads, hearing the exchange even from far away. “If we stop being who we are, we are lost. If we change, we die.”

“Then we can burn the garden, bury the tunnels, and close the entrances,” says Sienna. “If we remain as we are, we are already dead.”

Change terrifies us. It always has. Fear runs free through our maze, and with it the expectation of what is to come. We expected that our mental network of memories and knowledge would be sufficient; that the fabric of every colony that existed before ours, the lineage of queen after queen leading to our dead monarch, would tell us the exact solution to this equation. It does not. Here we are, dizzy, divided between three influences and none. Little by little, we can feel our companions walking away from the mother mind, thinking outside the invisible web that follows us.

Deserters walk down the corridors painted or dressed, always in red. Royal red is now known as communal red: the color that the workers use to sculpt a new room, the shade that embellishes the stairways to the exit of the anthill, the thread that sews the leaf awnings around the sentinel tower. We cover the children with scarlet bedspreads and label the mushrooms that need to be transferred with annatto.

Without the safe embrace of the superorganism, Vinca feels lost. She never wanted to be a leader. She longed to criticize, yes; she dreaded the Great Mother and the way she sacrificed the workers for the colony. She could not stand to see her surrounded by servants fanning her with leaves, or with the juice from the fruits collected by gatherers dripping from her hypertrophied jaw. She yearned for the day they could all share the perishable goods found on the surface, or the moment they would sleep in spacious and comfortable chambers, like the queen did.

She had no wish to replace her.

Vinca walks out of the shadows of a corridor after hours searching for a moment where she and Hosta can talk alone.

“Despite everything, we agree,” Vinca says. “I don’t want them to choose another queen. In fact, I don’t want to look at us from above.”

Hosta stares at her. As a manual worker, the small, agile, and precise Vinca is almost helpless facing a ranger from the platoon. Her brown antennae are tied with a red strip of cloth woven into the braid that rests on her shoulder. Her narrow waist disappears under a shawl. She squares up her six limbs, alarmed.

“Maybe so,” answers Hosta. “What if we do?”

Vinca stares back. Hosta with her short antennae, her five tiny eyes, her rough and hardened face. Hosta with an old scar cut deep into her forehead, the spoil of a successful battle against invaders. Hosta with red bands around her wrists, red cloth binding her chest. She could attack her,

but she will not. She could devour her, but she will not. The superorganism imprinted the good old survival instinct in all of them.

“I also heard that you agree with repurposing the royal chamber,” continues Vinca. “Do you have any suggestions on how to deal with the body?”

“If I were to choose, I would chop her in pieces and feed the nursery with the remains.” Hosta’s voice is fierce, and Vinca tries to pull away when the other woman grasps her by the wrist, twisting one of her articulations, her own arm thin as a twig. “Not everyone seems to agree.”

Vinca clicks her jaw, thoughtful.

“The division between us worries me more than the purpose of the chamber. If we continue like this...”

“If we continue like this, we die,” finishes Hosta, releasing her. “Is that so?”

“The others are still prisoners to the affection they felt for the Great Mother. Or, perhaps, the affection they feel for our history...” Vinca forgets their previous animosity, and feels the drastic urge to throw herself in Hosta’s arms. She realizes, at last, that she has been abandoned by the intricate mental net that unite us. She lacks the solace of our biological connection, the tranquility of exemption. She has to make her own choices and reach her own conclusions. Not even the ancestral traditions woven into our genetic code seem accessible to her, and all she has left is an equal: Hosta. “Maybe that’s the problem. The others also matter. We need to hear what they want and, perhaps, concede what needs to be conceded. If the price of no longer having a queen is keeping the memory-body, so be it. We can make this small sacrifice.”

They exchange looks. Hosta knows she has been repelled by the hive consciousness too; and, as hard as it is to admit it, she feels the lack of structure in her thorax. She seizes Vinca’s face, touching foreheads and antennae. Equality is comforting. Yes, it is still possible to have what they had before the loss.

“Perhaps, then, it is time to ask,” admits Hosta. “But where do we begin?”

We can feel our stray sisters coming back. We hear their steps, ascending the narrow tunnels, crossing hollowed rooms. And, as they walk to the fungal garden to speak to Sienna, we all murmur a distant song, marching toward the royal chamber.

Sienna teaches one of the sentries how to make the yeast rise and turn it into bread, while her aides show a pair of nannies where the bioluminescent mushrooms should be placed.

“We prefer to keep the lights on the nursery floor to keep the children from waking up; in the headquarters, we put them on the ceiling to illuminate the barracks as much as possible.”

Hosta and Vinca call the elder in hushed voices, like they know instinctively of our congregation in the middle of the anthill. Maybe they hear the vibration of our steps, or maybe the fragments of collective mentality are saying come back, come back, come back. Our song resounds in the excavated channels, echoing the chorus of thousands of voices like a heart pumping hemolymph.

“Indeed, the best we can do is decide together,” agrees Sienna, her two right hands taking Hosta’s arm while her two left hands take Vinca’s. Age has made her warmer than most. “We were all born here, and the ones who were not were raised here. If the Great Mother has left us any inheritance, maybe it is this place.”

United, the three of them go on the same pilgrimage to the royal quarters. They leave the fungal garden, cross the construction rooms, the nursery, the tunnels that serpentine out of the barracks, the stairways that lead to the turrets. At last they find us, and we make way for them, our many bodies moving like one.

The queen remains in the same place we left her, but the spasms are gone. Someone arranged her harmonic limbs over the pillows, forever trapped in a deep, peaceful sleep. There are so many of us that we pile over each other, crawling on walls, pushing elbow against elbow, sitting on the legs and the torso of this perpetual mother.

The coils of her antennae are adorned with leaves, and her slashed neck is covered by a garland of shimmering mushrooms.

They do not need to call nor beg for our attention. The heavy jaws of the platoon rangers click, making sound resonate in our cave. The lights flicker. The nursemaids brought the children, the gatherers left a trail of plants and pieces of meat on the ground. The workers are stained with soil. Some have painted themselves with red dye, others have not. But all of us, even the once expatriated ones, are connecting to the other web of our singular mind.

The queen is dead, and we only understand it now.

Without the queen there are no offspring, but some of us remember other lives, when workers managed to replenish the nursery with children. We do not know how, not yet. It is not a problem. Together, we will build patience.

Even without these possibilities, we have living children. Daughters who wriggle, demanding attention, our little starving mouths. We have

sisters who learn, who are more than the limits once imposed on them. The garden spreads through the corridors, invading other chambers, benign. The gatherers know what to bring to enhance it; they even know how to modify the species we already have and add others to the existing crops. The aides want to follow them to the surface. We have never seen it, they say—we say.

Just keep the Great Mother down here, we ask. The empty womb from which we came. Do not give us a replacement; we require none. We want what we always wanted—what we always have when we are together. Each of the giant arms is a memory we keep. Maybe it is the embodiment of the archive Vinca envisioned. The spiraling antennae remind us of what we once were. They remind the servants who cleaned, fed, and spoiled the queen, and say: never again. They remind the gatherers who sweated and struggled on the surface to bring offerings to the queen: work should not be a sacrifice.

They remind the nursemaids who were banished to constant darkness: aging is not the end of life. They remind the squadrons who invaded the colonies of our enemies and defended us from attacks: the time to kill and die is past. They remind the gardeners and the archivists that knowledge must be shared. They remind the workers that they deserve the comfort of the chambers they carved by themselves.

Mandibles are clicking.

The anthill belongs to us it always did. The anthill belongs to our daughters. It extends across all land that we step on, all clay we mold, all seeds we harvest. It runs through the fructified veins of the garden, it condenses in the marmoreal truffles that feed us. It constitutes our articulated bodies, our intertwined existences. The chorus quiets. The hive reminds us that we are not just a swarm; we are our own organisms. One by one, we look at each other, understanding. Commitment is a laborious burden; never before have we been forced to carry its weight.

Individuality is intolerable, but thinking for everyone at all times is restrictive. The queen, reclined on her pillows, remains lifeless. Vinca holds a jug full of honey, once forbidden to all except the royals, and Sienna shares generous portions of sugary nectar in braided leaf bowls. Hosta grabs her own basin and stares at the exhausted face reflected on the viscous amber surface. Her compound eyes, her cropped antennae. When she realizes there is little left for Vinca, she cups her fingers and brings the honey to her companion's mouth.

"We changed," all of us sing, sitting around a circle. There is much to debate, much to learn, much to express. "We changed, we will keep

changing, we will always change.”

Here lies the queen, giant and still, each of her six arms sprawled open, curved, twitching like she has forgotten she no longer breathes. Here, in the royal chamber, among us who only know how to serve, a goddess instead of a woman, a creature so gargantuan that not even dozens of us could move her, she who covers all, whom we have fed since she was born. We who transformed her into what she is and what she has been admire her now, not knowing how to continue without her orders telling us what to do and where to go.

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“Why cultivate, if we are already dead?”

Vinca gazes down at our mother. The queen lies naked, like she always was on her sumptuous pillows, partially covered by the crimson fabric that spirals from her breast to the middle of her inanimate legs. It makes the body look like the body it should be: beautiful, maternal, immaculate, immense. For a moment, that is how we see her: ephemeral, not the end of our lineage, not an announced calamity, not the imminent destruction of our anthill that now decays without new life.

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The realization is transmitted through our shared network of minds. Our mother is just a body; she is not divine. We keep no secrets from each other—we should keep no secrets—we cannot have them. We are more than individuals, we are the web that ties us, the internal skeleton connecting every dot of this colony, where visions and opinions drip without explanation from one sister to the other, streaming from the same infinite source. We have no secrets, but the queen remains dead, and no one knows who killed her. The grief that controls us is not for her, but for ourselves. The desire to live is a thirst; it burns in the throats of our guttural tunnels; it twists the bodies of our children, who cry and plead for attention, activating a mechanism unknown until now: that of the most primal instinct, urging us to survive.

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“There are none,” we answer. “The queen ate them all.”

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factions that agree with Hosta, while others side with Vinca: why not repurpose the royal chamber? Why should we have another queen? Hosta tears a piece of crimson fabric and ties it to one of her six sinewy arms, and her supporters mimic her, weaving linen and dyeing it with annatto for their own armbands.

Vinca does the same, but instead of tying a red crest around her arm, she covers her narrow shoulders with cloth, an improvised scarlet shawl. Her companions, all of them quick and small-framed workers like herself, paint their exposed thoraxes with the same shade of red ink.

We agree; we disagree; we doubt. We do not know who is wrong or right. We do not even know if Vinca or Hosta have the right to complain or suggest, but their words spread like a forest fire. We who have dearly revered the queen now see her vacant and untouched shell and her long, symmetrical arms as a threat. We who braided the waves of her antennae leave the threads unfurled on the ground, countless brown roots coming out of her regal head.

She who birthed and governed us, who chose which of us were most fitting to serve her; which were too old and should be banished to the nurseries; which were relegated to manual labor; which should dig more and more tunnels that branch into more and more chambers. All from the comfort of her pillows, tall, melancholy and silent, never even bothering to speak. She just lifted a finger, and the order was branded in our heads and extended to our comrades: you, strong one, to the squadron. You, architect, mold clay. You, servant, mine.

Our minuscule sisters crawled over her chest, covering one breast with cloth, braiding the antennae that grew longer each year, reaching miles in length. Her three compound eyes, dark and red like the soil of our home, never looked at us, not even once.

Another idea rustles the colony.

“If we want to save the garden, we must bring in new apprentices,” says Sienna, one of the few elders who works outside of the nurseries. She has a missing leg, but we have carved her a wooden replacement with almost perfect articulations covering the embedded mechanism. The prosthetic limb is pale compared to her rutilate complexion, but it allows her to move more freely. “I would like to call some of the squadron girls, since they have so many reserves sitting around.”

The gardeners exchange glances. The ones sucking the fermented wine from sculpted pipes raise confused faces. The ones pruning the longest twigs of the yeast bushes set their tools aside. The ones plucking the

delicate bioluminescent mushrooms that light up the underground freeze, their hands rigid around the flat caps or the stems that keep them still.

“The squadron can only do what it was born to do,” we say. “They are strong, nothing else.”

“They only know what they learned to know,” replies Sienna. “They have been told they are big and sturdy, so they fight. But they have arms like ours, and they are as capable as we are of comprehension, attention and care. We can teach them.”

“Not everyone knows how to learn,” we insist. “Not everyone wants to.”

Sienna walks under the fungal lanterns, bluish sparks shimmering above her head. Her skin is tough and shriveled like leather because of her age, her skilled fingers are scarred and fragile. The tools have marked her body, excavating grooves like those of a chiseled trunk, and her limbs have burn scars from the acid of other women’s bites and the toxins of some of the species she farms.

“Everyone *can* learn. Everyone has the right to try.”

“The nursemaids are too old to learn. The guards never come down to the chambers; they stay above ground, patrolling, watching a planet that is not ours. The maids were designed to clean waste and serve the queen.” The multitude of voices reverberates through the spiraling paths of the anthill. Vinca and Hosta raise their heads, hearing the exchange even from far away. “If we stop being who we are, we are lost. If we change, we die.”

“Then we can burn the garden, bury the tunnels, and close the entrances,” says Sienna. “If we remain as we are, we are already dead.”

Change terrifies us. It always has. Fear runs free through our maze, and with it the expectation of what is to come. We expected that our mental network of memories and knowledge would be sufficient; that the fabric of every colony that existed before ours, the lineage of queen after queen leading to our dead monarch, would tell us the exact solution to this equation. It does not. Here we are, dizzy, divided between three influences and none. Little by little, we can feel our companions walking away from the mother mind, thinking outside the invisible web that follows us.

Deserters walk down the corridors painted or dressed, always in red. Royal red is now known as communal red: the color that the workers use to sculpt a new room, the shade that embellishes the stairways to the exit of the anthill, the thread that sews the leaf awnings around the sentinel tower. We cover the children with scarlet bedspreads and label the mushrooms that need to be transferred with annatto.

Without the safe embrace of the superorganism, Vinca feels lost. She never wanted to be a leader. She longed to criticize, yes; she dreaded the

Great Mother and the way she sacrificed the workers for the colony. She could not stand to see her surrounded by servants fanning her with leaves, or with the juice from the fruits collected by gatherers dripping from her hypertrophied jaw. She yearned for the day they could all share the perishable goods found on the surface, or the moment they would sleep in spacious and comfortable chambers, like the queen did.

She had no wish to replace her.

Vinca walks out of the shadows of a corridor after hours searching for a moment where she and Hosta can talk alone.

“Despite everything, we agree,” Vinca says. “I don’t want them to choose another queen. In fact, I don’t want to look at us from above.”

Hosta stares at her. As a manual worker, the small, agile, and precise Vinca is almost helpless facing a ranger from the platoon. Her brown antennae are tied with a red strip of cloth woven into the braid that rests on her shoulder. Her narrow waist disappears under a shawl. She squares up her six limbs, alarmed.

“Maybe so,” answers Hosta. “What if we do?”

Vinca stares back. Hosta with her short antennae, her five tiny eyes, her rough and hardened face. Hosta with an old scar cut deep into her forehead, the spoil of a successful battle against invaders. Hosta with red bands around her wrists, red cloth binding her chest. She could attack her, but she will not. She could devour her, but she will not. The superorganism imprinted the good old survival instinct in all of them.

“I also heard that you agree with repurposing the royal chamber,” continues Vinca. “Do you have any suggestions on how to deal with the body?”

“If I were to choose, I would chop her in pieces and feed the nursery with the remains.” Hosta’s voice is fierce, and Vinca tries to pull away when the other woman grasps her by the wrist, twisting one of her articulations, her own arm thin as a twig. “Not everyone seems to agree.”

Vinca clicks her jaw, thoughtful.

“The division between us worries me more than the purpose of the chamber. If we continue like this...”

“If we continue like this, we die,” finishes Hosta, releasing her. “Is that so?”

“The others are still prisoners to the affection they felt for the Great Mother. Or, perhaps, the affection they feel for our history...” Vinca forgets their previous animosity, and feels the drastic urge to throw herself in Hosta’s arms. She realizes, at last, that she has been abandoned by the intricate mental net that unite us. She lacks the solace of our biological

connection, the tranquility of exemption. She has to make her own choices and reach her own conclusions. Not even the ancestral traditions woven into our genetic code seem accessible to her, and all she has left is an equal: Hosta. “Maybe that’s the problem. The others also matter. We need to hear what they want and, perhaps, concede what needs to be conceded. If the price of no longer having a queen is keeping the memory-body, so be it. We can make this small sacrifice.”

They exchange looks. Hosta knows she has been repelled by the hive consciousness too; and, as hard as it is to admit it, she feels the lack of structure in her thorax. She seizes Vinca’s face, touching foreheads and antennae. Equality is comforting. Yes, it is still possible to have what they had before the loss.

“Perhaps, then, it is time to ask,” admits Hosta. “But where do we begin?”

We can feel our stray sisters coming back. We hear their steps, ascending the narrow tunnels, crossing hollowed rooms. And, as they walk to the fungal garden to speak to Sienna, we all murmur a distant song, marching toward the royal chamber.

Sienna teaches one of the sentries how to make the yeast rise and turn it into bread, while her aides show a pair of nannies where the bioluminescent mushrooms should be placed.

“We prefer to keep the lights on the nursery floor to keep the children from waking up; in the headquarters, we put them on the ceiling to illuminate the barracks as much as possible.”

Hosta and Vinca call the elder in hushed voices, like they know instinctively of our congregation in the middle of the anthill. Maybe they hear the vibration of our steps, or maybe the fragments of collective mentality are saying come back, come back, come back. Our song resounds in the excavated channels, echoing the chorus of thousands of voices like a heart pumping hemolymph.

“Indeed, the best we can do is decide together,” agrees Sienna, her two right hands taking Hosta’s arm while her two left hands take Vinca’s. Age has made her warmer than most. “We were all born here, and the ones who were not were raised here. If the Great Mother has left us any inheritance, maybe it is this place.”

United, the three of them go on the same pilgrimage to the royal quarters. They leave the fungal garden, cross the construction rooms, the nursery, the tunnels that serpentine out of the barracks, the stairways that lead to the turrets. At last they find us, and we make way for them, our many bodies moving like one.

The queen remains in the same place we left her, but the spasms are gone. Someone arranged her harmonic limbs over the pillows, forever trapped in a deep, peaceful sleep. There are so many of us that we pile over each other, crawling on walls, pushing elbow against elbow, sitting on the legs and the torso of this perpetual mother.

The coils of her antennae are adorned with leaves, and her slashed neck is covered by a garland of shimmering mushrooms.

They do not need to call nor beg for our attention. The heavy jaws of the platoon rangers click, making sound resonate in our cave. The lights flicker. The nursemaids brought the children, the gatherers left a trail of plants and pieces of meat on the ground. The workers are stained with soil. Some have painted themselves with red dye, others have not. But all of us, even the once expatriated ones, are connecting to the other web of our singular mind.

The queen is dead, and we only understand it now.

Without the queen there are no offspring, but some of us remember other lives, when workers managed to replenish the nursery with children. We do not know how, not yet. It is not a problem. Together, we will build patience.

Even without these possibilities, we have living children. Daughters who wriggle, demanding attention, our little starving mouths. We have sisters who learn, who are more than the limits once imposed on them. The garden spreads through the corridors, invading other chambers, benign. The gatherers know what to bring to enhance it; they even know how to modify the species we already have and add others to the existing crops. The aides want to follow them to the surface. We have never seen it, they say—we say.

Just keep the Great Mother down here, we ask. The empty womb from which we came. Do not give us a replacement; we require none. We want what we always wanted—what we always have when we are together. Each of the giant arms is a memory we keep. Maybe it is the embodiment of the archive Vinca envisioned. The spiraling antennae remind us of what we once were. They remind the servants who cleaned, fed, and spoiled the queen, and say: never again. They remind the gatherers who sweated and struggled on the surface to bring offerings to the queen: work should not be a sacrifice.

They remind the nursemaids who were banished to constant darkness: aging is not the end of life. They remind the squadrons who invaded the colonies of our enemies and defended us from attacks: the time to kill and die is past. They remind the gardeners and the archivists that knowledge

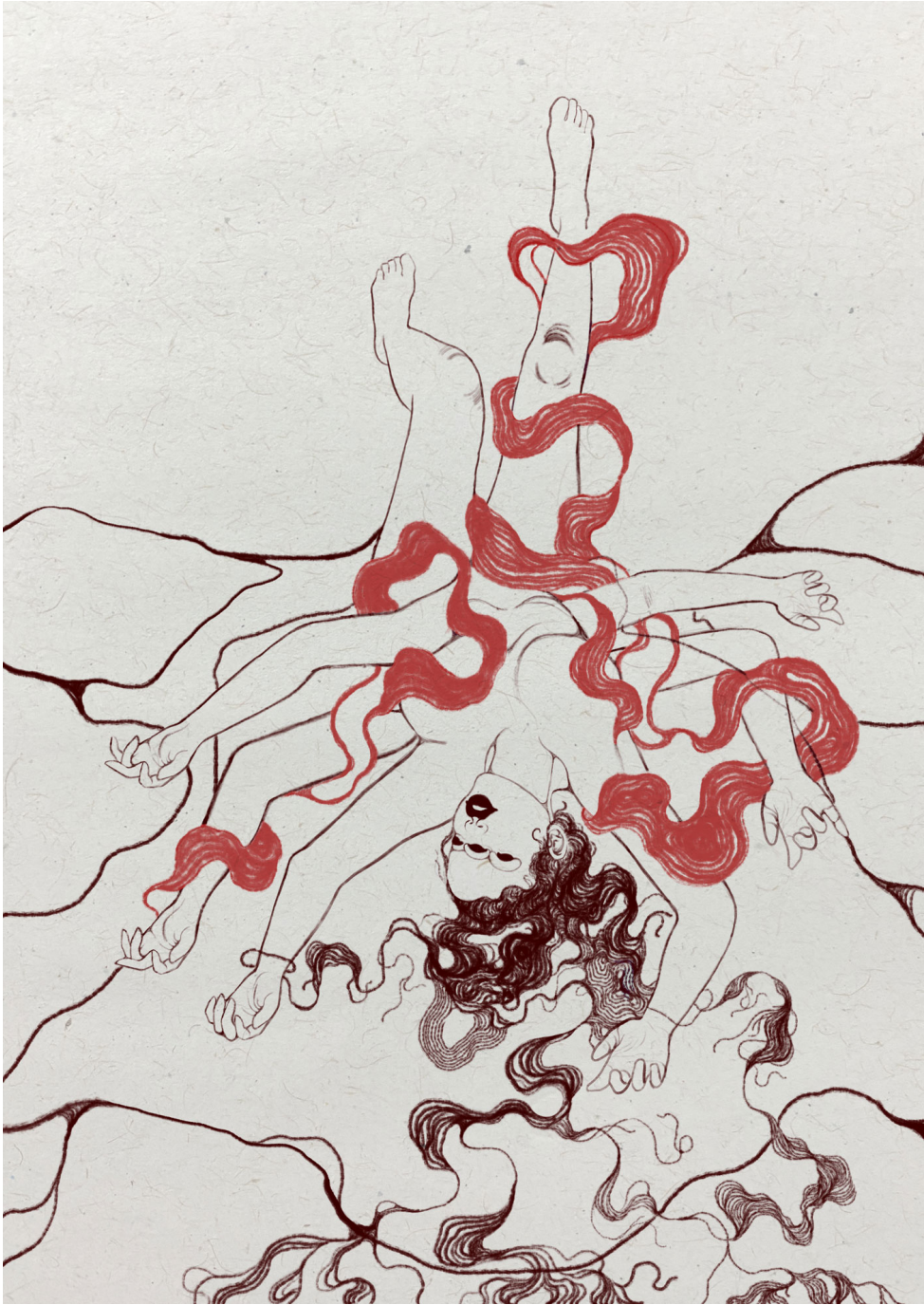
must be shared. They remind the workers that they deserve the comfort of the chambers they carved by themselves.

Mandibles are clicking.

The anthill belongs to us it always did. The anthill belongs to our daughters. It extends across all land that we step on, all clay we mold, all seeds we harvest. It runs through the fructified veins of the garden, it condenses in the marmoreal truffles that feed us. It constitutes our articulated bodies, our intertwined existences. The chorus quiets. The hive reminds us that we are not just a swarm; we are our own organisms. One by one, we look at each other, understanding. Commitment is a laborious burden; never before have we been forced to carry its weight.

Individuality is intolerable, but thinking for everyone at all times is restrictive. The queen, reclined on her pillows, remains lifeless. Vinca holds a jug full of honey, once forbidden to all except the royals, and Sienna shares generous portions of sugary nectar in braided leaf bowls. Hosta grabs her own basin and stares at the exhausted face reflected on the viscous amber surface. Her compound eyes, her cropped antennae. When she realizes there is little left for Vinca, she cups her fingers and brings the honey to her companion's mouth.

"We changed," all of us sing, sitting around a circle. There is much to debate, much to learn, much to express. "We changed, we will keep changing, we will always change."





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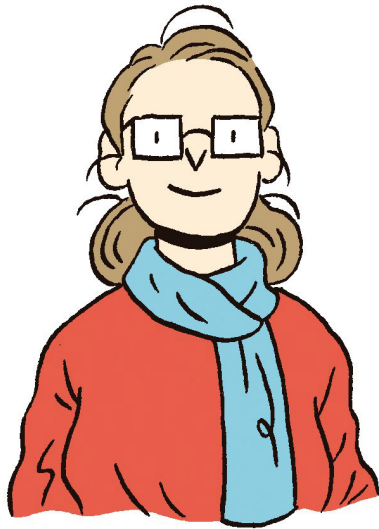


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