

ONE

LO-MELKHIIN KILLED three hundred girls before he came to my village looking for a wife.

She that he chose of us would be a hero. She would give the others life. Lo-Melkhiin would not return to the same village until he had married a girl from every camp, from every town, and from each district inside city walls—for that was the law, struck in desperation though it was. She that he chose would give hope of a future, of love, to those of us who stayed behind.

She would be a smallgod for her own people, certainly, in the time after her leaving. She would go out from us, but we would hold on to a piece of her spirit, and nurture it with

the power of our memories. Her name would be whispered with reverent hush around new-built shrines to her honor. The other girls would sing hymns of thanksgiving, light voices carried by the desert winds and scattered over the fine-ground sand. Their parents would bring sweet-water flowers, even in the height of the desert wilt, and pickled gage-root to leave as offerings. She that he chose of us would never be forgotten.

She would still be dead.

Every time, the story began the same way: Lo-Melkhiin picked one girl and took her back to his qasr to be his wife. Some in his keeping lasted one night, some as many as thirty, but in the end all were food for the sand-crows. He went to every corner of the land, into every village and city. Each tribe, every family was at risk. He consumed them the way a careful child eats dates: one at a time, ever searching for the sweetest. In turn, he found none of them to suit.

When he came to my village, I was not afraid for myself. I had been long ago resigned to a life in the shadow of my sister, my elder by ten moons and my year-twin. She was the beauty. I was the spare. Before Lo-Melkhiin's law, before the terror of his marriage bed reached across the sand like a parched gage-tree reaches for water, I had known that I would marry after my sister, likely to a brother or cousin of her betrothed. She was a prize, but she was also loath to

separate herself from me, and it was well known in our village that we came as a pair. I would not be a lesser wife in her household—our father was too powerful for that—but I would wed a lesser man.

“You are not unlovely,” she said to me when we saw the desert burn with the sun of our fourteenth summer, and I knew that it was true.

Our mothers were both beautiful, and our father likewise handsome. From what I could see of my own self, my sister and I were very much alike. We had skin of burnt bronze, a deeper brown than sand, and dusker where it was exposed to the wind and sky. Our hair was long enough to sit upon, and dark: the color around the stars, when night was at its fullest. I had decided the difference must be in our faces, in the shape of our eyes or the slant of our mouths. I knew my sister’s face could take my breath away. I had not ever seen my own. We had little bronze or copper, and the only water was at the bottom of our well.

“I am not you,” I said to her. I was not bitter. She had never made me feel the lesser, and she had only scorn for those who did.

“That is true,” she said. “And men will lack the imagination to see us as separate beings. For that I am sorry.”

“I am not,” I told her, and I was not, “for I love you more than I love the rain.”

“How remarkable,” she said, and laughed, “for you see my face every day and do not tire of it.” And we ran together, sure-footed, across the shifting sand.

We were strong together, carrying the water jar between us to share the weight. Its thick ceramic sides made it heavy, even without the weight of the water, but there were four handles, and we had four hands. We learned the trick when we were small, and were rewarded with candied figs for spilling so little water as we walked. Even when we were old enough to carry a jug each, we did the chore together, and more besides. In most things, from weaving to cooking to spearing the poisonous snakes that came to our well, we were equal. My voice was better at the songs and stories our traditions gave us, but my sister could find her own words to say, and did not rely on the deeds of others to make her point. Maybe that fire was what made her beautiful; maybe that was what set my sister’s face apart from mine. Maybe that was why I did not tire of it.

I feared that Lo-Melkhiin would think my sister’s face was something, something at last, that he too would not tire of. He had married only beautiful girls at first, the daughters of our highest lords and wealthiest merchants. But when his wives began to die, the powerful men of the desert did not like it, and began to look elsewhere for Lo-Melkhiin’s brides. They began to scour the villages for women that would suit, and for a time no one paid mind to the host of

poorer daughters that went to their deaths. Soon, though, the smaller villages tallied their dead and ceased trade with the cities. From thence, the law was struck: one girl from each village and one from every district inside city walls, and then the cycle would begin again. So many girls had been lost, and I did not wish to lose my sister to him. The stories were very clear about two things: Lo-Melkhiin always took one girl, and she always, always died.

When the dust rose over the desert, we knew that he was coming. He would know our numbers, and he would know who had daughters that must be presented to him. The census was part of the law, the way that men were able to tell themselves that it was fair.

“But it isn’t fair,” whispered my sister as we lay underneath the sky and watched the stars rise on our seventeenth summer. “They do not marry and die.”

“No,” I said to her. “They do not.”

So we stood in the shadow of our father’s tent, and we waited. Around us the air was full of cries and moans; mothers held their daughters; fathers paced, unable to intervene, unwilling to circumvent the law. Our father was not here. He had gone to trade. We had not known that Lo-Melkhiin would come. Our father would return to find his fairest flower gone, and only the weed left for him to use as he saw fit.

My hair was unbound under my veil, and both blew

wildly around my face. My sister had tied back her braid and stood with straight shoulders, her veil pulled back and her black hair gleaming in the sun. She was looking out at the coming storm, but there was a storm brewing in her eyes that only made her more beautiful. I could not lose her, and surely once Lo-Melkhiin saw her, she would be lost.

I thought of all the stories I had heard, those whispered at my mother's hearth and those told in the booming voice of our father when the village elders met in his tent for council. I knew them all: where we had come from, who our ancestors had been, what heroes were in my lineage, which small gods my family had made and loved. I tried to think if there was any one thing in the stories that I could use, but there was not. The world had never seen another like Lo-Melkhiin, and it had no stories to combat him.

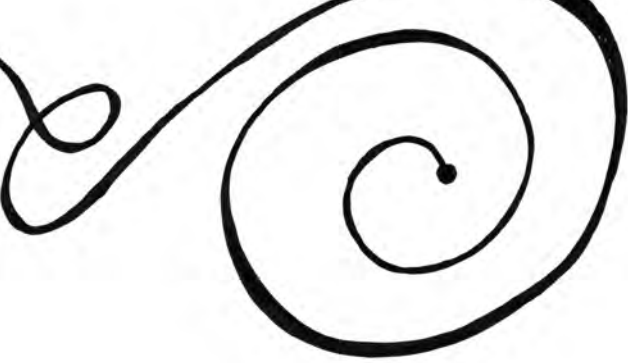
Not whole stories, but maybe there was something smaller. A thread in the story of a warrior who laid siege to a walled city. A fragment in the story of a father who had two daughters, and was forced to choose which of them to send into the desert at night. An intrigue in the story of two lovers who wed against the wishes of their fathers. A path in the story of an old woman whose sons were taken, unlawfully, to fight a war they were not part of. There were stories, and then there were stories.

No single tale that I could draw from would save my sister from a short and cruel marriage, but I had pieces aplenty.

I held them in my hands like so many grains of sand, and they slipped away from me, running through my fingers, even as I tried to gather more. But I knew sand. I had been born to it and learned to walk on it. It had blown in my face and I had picked it from my food. I knew that I had only to hold it for long enough, to find the right fire, and the sand would harden into glass—into something I could use.

My sister watched the dust cloud for Lo-Melkhiin, but I watched it for the sand. I took strength from her bravery in the face of that storm, and she took my hand and smiled, even though she did not know what I was trying to do. She had accepted that she would be the one to save us, the one to be made a smallgod and sung to after her time of leaving. The one who died. But I would not allow it.

By the time the village elders could see flashes of bronze armor in the dust cloud, and hear the footfalls of horses that rode, too hard, under the sun—by the time the wind pulled at my sister's braid and worked a few strands loose to play with, as though it, too, feared to lose her—by then, I had a plan.



TWO

WHEN LO-MELKHIIN CAME, some of the girls rent their veils and cut off their hair with sheep-shears. I looked at them and felt their fear. I was the only one with a sister the right age, the only one who was a spare. I could stand beside her and be unseen. The others had no one to shield them this way. They would face Lo-Melkhiin alone, and they disfigured themselves in the hope that this would put them beneath his attention.

Lo-Melkhiin did not always notice, not anymore. Now that he no longer took only the most beautiful, it seemed that he chose at random. It was not as though his bride would last. Our father had heard tales when he was out

with the caravan, that Lo-Melkhiin would take his new bride away, to his qasr in the Great Oasis, and she would be given new silks, and perfumed so that she no longer smelled of the desert. It did not matter what she looked like in the dust of her village, for dust could be washed away. But if there was a girl who was like my sister, who drew the eyes of men and smallgods when she walked past with the water jar balanced on her hip, Lo-Melkhiin would be sure to take her.

My sister was dressed in white linen that blistered the eye with the sun's glare. She looked simple and striking, and all the more so because she was surrounded by girls who keened in terror as the horses drew near. I knew that I must work quickly.

I went into her mother's tent, where my sister had been made and born and learned to dance. Her mother sat upon the pillows of her bed, weeping quietly. I went to her and knelt beside her, extending the silk of my veil should she need to wipe her eyes.

"Lady mother," I said to her, for that was how mothers who did not bear you were called. "Lady mother, we must be quick if we are to save your daughter."

My sister's mother looked up and clung to the silk I offered to her.

"How?" she said to me, and I saw a desperate hope burn in her eyes.

“Dress me in my sister’s clothes,” I bade her. “Braid my hair as you would hers, and give me those charms she would not grieve to lose.”

“She will grieve to lose her sister,” my sister’s mother said, but her hands had already begun the work. Like me, she was eager to save her daughter, and was not thinking too much of the cost.

“Someone must be chosen,” I said. I was not yet afraid. “My mother has sons.”

“Perhaps,” my sister’s mother said. “But a son is not a daughter.”

I did not tell her that a daughter is less than a son. She knew it, for she had brothers of her own. Her daughter, my sister, had no brothers left, and her marriage would be what kept her mother alive should our father die. My mother would survive without me, but without my sister, her mother had no such assurance. I would save more than my sister, though that had not been my intent. I never thought that maybe, maybe, my mother would grieve for me, for no reason other than her heart.

My sister burst into the tent as her mother was fastening the last gilt necklace around my neck. I wore her purple dishdashah, bound at my wrists and waist with braided cord. My sister and I had done the black embroidery on the collar, chest, and arms ourselves, stitching a map of the whispers we spoke to one another as we worked. It had

taken us the better part of our fifteenth winter to do it, from raw threads to finished cloth. It was to be her marriage dress, and I had nothing like it. She had told me, as we stitched, that because I had put my hands to making it, it was as much mine as it was hers. There were secrets in this dress—dreams and confessions we had kept even from our mothers—in the weave and weft, and in the decorations and in the dye. It was to be hers, but since she wished us to share it, I looked beautiful, cased in purple and black, and beauty was what I needed.

“No,” my sister said to me when her eyes lost their desert-sun haze and she saw me standing clearly before her. She knew, for one time only, the eyes that looked at us would slide past her and fix on me. “No, my sister, you must not.”

“It is too late,” I said to her. “Lo-Melkhiin’s men come for us.”

“Thank you, daughter of my heart,” my sister’s mother breathed. She had always been fair and kind to me when I was a child. She had taught me the ways of mourning alongside my sister, but at that moment I knew that she loved me also. “I will pray to you, when you have gone.”

My sister took my hand and pulled me into the sunlight so that Lo-Melkhiin’s men would not have cause to drag us from the tent. I would walk to my fate, and she would walk beside me. For the first time, I was the one who drew looks. We rejoined the other girls, all of them staring at me as I

walked past them in my finery. I stood at the very front, dark and bright. My sister, who had been so radiant in her simple garb, now looked unfinished at my side. Lovely, but second. I could hear the men whisper.

“Pity,” they hissed. “Pity we did not notice she was as beautiful as her sister.”

I did not look at them. I held my sister’s hand, and we led the way toward the horses that stamped and sweated by the well. We passed the tents of the other families, those with fewer sheep and fewer children. The girls followed us, staying close. They sensed that they could hide in my shadow, my purple oasis, and perhaps be safe. We drew our lives from the well, and now one of us would go to her death by it.

Lo-Melkhiin did not get down from his horse. He sat above us, casting a shadow across the sand where we stood. I could not see his face. When I looked up at him, all I could see was black and sun, and it was too bright to bear. I stared at the horse instead. I would not look at the ground. Behind me stood the other girls, and behind them the village elders held the girls’ mothers back. I wondered who held my mother, with my father and brothers gone, but I did not look back to see. I wished to be stone, to be resolute, but fear whispered in my heart. What if my sister was chosen, despite my efforts? What if I was chosen, and died? I pushed those thoughts away, and called on the stories I had woven together to make my plan. Those heroes did not falter. They

walked their paths, regardless of what lay before them, and they did not look back.

“Make me a smallgod,” I whispered to my sister. “When I have gone.”

“I will make you a smallgod now,” she said to me, and the tack jingled as Lo-Melkhiin’s men dismounted and came near. “What good to be revered when you are dead? We will begin the moment they take you, and you shall be a smallgod before you reach the qasr.”

I had prayed to smallgods my whole life. Our father’s father’s father had been a great herdsman, with more sheep than a man could count in one day. He had traded wool to villages far and near, and it was to him we prayed when our father was away with the caravan. Our father always returned home safely, with gifts for our mothers and work for my brothers and profit for us all, but sometimes I wondered if it was the smallgod’s doing. For the first time, I wished that our father was here. I knew he would not have saved me, but I might have asked if he had ever felt the smallgod we prayed to aiding him on the road.

“Thank you, sister,” I said. I was unsure if it would help me, but it could not harm me.

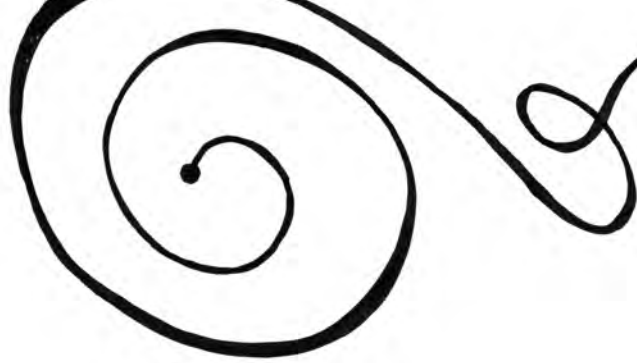
Lo-Melkhiin’s guard closed his hand on my arm, but I followed him willingly toward the horses. His face was covered by a sand-scarf, but his eyes betrayed him. He wanted to be here no more than I did, yet he did his duty, as did I.

When he saw that I would not fight him, he relaxed, and his hand became more a guide than a shackle. I stood straight and did not look back, though I could hear the wails behind me as my mother began to grieve. Perhaps I should have gone to her, instead of my sister's mother. But she would not have helped me. She would have done what my father could not, and she would have tried to keep me safe. She would have cost me my sister.

"I love you," I called out. The words were for everyone, for my mothers, and the words were only for my sister.

My sister was on her knees when they put me on the horse, her white linen browned by the sand and her hair falling forward across her face. She chanted in the family tongue, the one my father's father's father practiced when he tended his sheep, the one we heard at my father's knee as he taught it to my brothers and we sat close by to overhear. My sister's mother knelt beside her and chanted too. I could hear the words, but I could not make them out. I knew they were for me, for I could feel the way the wind pulled at my veil, curious to see the face of the girl who received such fervent prayer.

Lo-Melkhiin sat atop his horse and laughed, for he thought she wept to lose me. But I knew better. I could feel it, in my soul.



THREE

LO-MELKHIIN'S HORSES WERE SWIFT, like the wind circles that danced on the sand. Our father's tents, and the tents around our well, were swallowed up by the sky before I had time to look back at them. They had been my whole world, before the guard lifted me into the saddle, and now they were lost to me. Never again would I tell my sister stories, using the warm light of the lamp to make shadows with my hands on the canvas. I would be a queen, for however short a time, and I would never live in a tent again.

Lo-Melkhiin rode at the head of the party, and his guards arrayed themselves around me in a loose formation. They need not have bothered. I was new to riding, and spent

my concentration staying upright. Even had I been able to get away, I had nowhere to go. If I went home to my village, the guards could simply follow me there, and if I tried to flee into the desert, I would be food for the sand-crows sooner than if I stayed my course. So I watched the guards, how they sat and how they held their legs against their horses' flanks. I did my best to mimic their seat, and after a while my muscles ached. I was glad my veil hid my face. I had no wish for them to see me suffer.

When the sun was high, we halted to water the horses. They were desert-bred, and could ride all day if they had to, but their way would be easier if we let them rest. Lo-Melkhiin wore no spurs. I had always thought that horses must be expensive, because even our father did not have one, and now I knew they must be, because Lo-Melkhiin was kind to his. He held the beast's head himself, and raised the water skin to its lips for it to drink. His hand was light upon the horse's face, and I began to wonder.

What sort of man could have so much blood on his hands that he could choose a wife within moments of seeing her, and know that she would soon be added to the litany of the dead, but would call a halt on the ride home to spare the horses? I had not stopped to think, in my haste to save my sister. I had thought of her life, of her mother's happiness, and I had not thought about what was to be my marriage. One night or thirty, I would know Lo-Melkhiin, who

laughed at my sister's tears and watered his horse with his own hands.

We had spoken of marriage, of course, my sister and our mothers and I. We had stitched the purple dishdashah I wore, and filled it with the hopes and dreams of our future. We knew that someday, our father would announce my sister's match, and then mine soon after, and we would move into the tents of our husbands' families. There would be a feast, and songs, and all the old traditions. And there would be the wedding night. I would have none of that, now, except the last.

I looked down from my perch on the horse's back. No one had come to help me dismount, and I was determined not to fall trying. The guard who had pulled me away from my sister was tall, and wore riding leathers much more suited to the desert than my dress. He came toward me, holding out a water skin. I took it from him, drinking only a little before handing it back, and he did not meet my eyes.

"Salt," said Lo-Melkhiin. It was the first word I heard him say.

The guard passed up his salt canister, a small ornate box he carried at his waist. When I held it in my hands, I realized it was wood, and worth more than the cloth I wore. Inside it was the precious mineral that would keep us all alive in the desert sun. I licked my finger and coated it in the coarse white grains. I knew it would taste foul, but I slid my

hand under my veil and forced myself to eat it all, and then the guard passed me the water skin again. I took more this time, to cleanse my mouth of the taste, but I was still able to watch him stow the canister away, carefully, securely. Almost lovingly. It was worth more than wood to him.

“Thank you,” I said.

Too late, I wondered if that was permitted. Some men did not allow their wives to speak outside the home, and certainly not to other men. I was not a wife yet, but I was as good as wed, and Lo-Melkhiin might be the kind of husband who expected a demure, retiring creature.

“You are welcome,” the guard said, and there was no fear in his voice. He still did not look at me, and I knew it was because he pitied me. He pitied my death.

Lo-Melkhiin swung back into his saddle, his heavy robe billowing behind him, and his light boots tucked against the belly of his horse. At that signal the other guards remounted. I shifted, trying to find a place on my seat that did not feel bruised, but could not. I ground my teeth behind my veil, and we rode on.

Time is an odd thing in the desert. They say that in the city, the Skeptics have found a way to measure time with water and glass, but in the desert, the sand goes on forever, and takes time with it. You cannot tell how far you have come, or how far you have to go. The sand is what kills you, if you die in the desert, because the sand is everywhere, and

it does not care if you get out. So we rode for hours, but it felt as though we rode for days. We were not on a caravan route, so we passed no travelers or other villages. Had I to guess, I would have said that we were riding in a straight line back to Lo-Melkhiin's qasr, where other travelers would have followed the circuitous route made safe by the oases. But our direction, like our duration, was blown about with the sand.

As the sun drew near the horizon, and the sky turned from blasted blue to a dark and darker red, I saw a distortion in the distance, and knew that we were, finally, close. Lo-Melkhiin's father's father's father had built the qasr of white stone. Our father and brothers had told us of it, for they had seen it when they were out with the caravan, and now that my mother and my sister's mother no longer traveled, they liked to hear tales of the world. In the daytime it gleamed, gathering the sun's rays into itself, heating slowly as the day progressed. As night approached and the desert cooled, the heat came out of the walls and tried to find the sun again, but since the sun was setting, the heat moved in weaving lines, seen from a distance like through a veil of the finest silk, blurred and indistinct. But it was no false vision, seen by one sunstroked and delusional. It was solid, and we were drawing near.

The city was made of three parts. At the heart was the qasr, where Lo-Melkhiin lived, met petitioners, and where

the temple stood. Around it were the crooked streets and pale houses, the dust and dirty tents. And around that was the wall, high and strong. There had not been invaders in generations, but the wall was from a less peaceful time. We prospered under Lo-Melkhiin—or, men did, and it was men who kept the accounts of everything, from grain and sheep to life and death.

The city gates stood open, for Lo-Melkhiin was expected. I imagined that at one time the people had come to see Lo-Melkhiin's bride to wish her well. In my village, we sang for prosperity and long life when the bride went past. Those songs were not heard inside the qasr, not for me. There were people in the streets, come to see their momentary queen as I passed under the towers, but they were quiet and did not sing. Most did not look at me for very long. Mothers pulled their children away, hiding them in doorways instead of behind tent flaps, though they looked and dressed the way our mothers did. The guards rode close by me now, but Lo-Melkhiin rode by himself. He had no fear of his own people; most of them he did not rule harshly.

The horses could sense that they were nearing home, and pranced through the streets. The guards sat up straight in their saddles, trying to look the part, though they were covered in dust. I could only cling to the reins and pray that I did not fall. The city had roused me again, lights gleaming warmly. I had the false sense that I was home. The long

hours in the desert had numbed me, and I'd forgotten my aching body; now my muscles were screaming. When we came at last to the stables, the guards dismounted and the salt-guard came to take me down. I let myself nearly tumble into his arms, and when he set me on the ground, he waited a moment before releasing me. I straightened my legs and my back, and there was fire along my bones. I bit my tongue against the pain of it, but I would not lean against the guard.

"This one has more than her face to give her spirit," Lo-Melkhiin said. He was not laughing when he said it. I thought it odd, as he had laughed at my sister's discomfort before, but his attention had already turned to a new man in a fine red robe. I took him to be the steward, and his words confirmed my guess.

"Her rooms have been prepared, my lord," he said. "As have yours, if you are ready to go in."

"I shall walk the wall for a time," Lo-Melkhiin said. "I wish to look upon the stars."

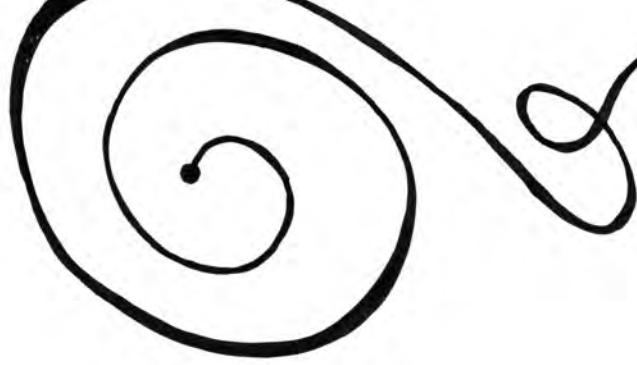
"As you say," said the steward with a bow. He gestured to the salt-guard, who still stood next to me. "Come."

The other guards fell away, and the salt-guard took my arm again, gently this time. We followed the steward inside; my hesitation on the steps drew a long gaze from my escort, but no remarks, and we continued down a long corridor and through a garden. There was a sound in the garden I had never heard before, like soft whispering, but it was too dark

to see what caused it. It reminded me of something I had heard long ago, but the feel of the city, of the qasr, drove the desert from my memory.

On the other side of the garden, a woman waited. She was old and her cloth was plain, though it was well woven. Her back was unbowed and she smiled at me. It was the first smile I had seen since the morning. She drew me into a well-lit bathing room, waving off the salt-guard and steward, and I followed her toward the smell of heavy perfume and the whispering sound of moving silks. Other women waited for us there, with brushes and oils and cloth so fine it glittered in the light of the lamp.

They would wash and prepare me like a bride, but I knew that I was being dressed for death. Yet there was that sound, pulling at the whirlwind of my thoughts. I decided in that moment that I must live through the night, because I wished to know what made that sound. I walked up the stairs, and into Lo-Melkhiin's harem.



FOUR

WHEN THE SUN BURNED OUT our fifth summer, we had a rainy season like none I have seen since. It began quietly, dark mist on the horizon, and I did not know that it was something to be feared. My sister and I were with the sheep, who did not stray during the hot times because they knew that if they wandered, they would die. The first sign was when the ram took fright, bleating more desperately than if we had been bringing him to the knife for dinner. He butted at us, and at the ewes, and we wept. He had been our pet, and we had made much of him, feeding him the best greens we could find, and leaning up against his flank for sparse shade in the heat of the sun.

He knocked me off my feet and was set to trample me when my brothers arrived. They did not shout at us, nor did they tease, as was their custom. This was the second sign, and when we became truly afraid. They took our staves from us, pushing our small herd back to the village, and when I fell, legs weak from being hit by the ram, the eldest of them—the only full brother my sister had—picked me up in his arms when he might have scorned me. We fled, not to the tents, but to the honeycombed caverns where we enshrined our dead. The sky was much darker now, an odd dark. It was not the black night that I knew; it was grey and boiling, and there was a green around the edges of it that I did not like.

When we reached the caverns, our mothers were waiting for us before the entrance. They were dressed in their priestly-whites, as they were on funerals and feast days, and at their feet lay the scattered remains of a hasty ceremony. We did not come here with the living—or we had not, in my lifetime—and so I knew from my mother's lessons that since we did not bring a body with us today, we must beg for entrance.

Behind us, the rest of my village clambered up the rise, carrying all they could. It was not everything. Below, where the tents were clustered, I could see many beloved objects left behind. Fear took me, though I still did not know why, and I clung to my sister and to my mother's priestly-veil.

“May we go in?” asked our father, his tone the hushed and reverent one he used when my mother was thus dressed, and not the commanding voice he used in our tent.

Our mothers looked at one another, and something passed between them. They had not yet begun to whisper to us of this office—of the small, terrible power they held with the dead among the village—but I could see it in their eyes, even if I could not decipher it. My mother nodded, and my sister’s mother raised her hands.

“We have made the offerings and done the rites,” my sister’s mother said. “We have not heard the dead speak against us, and so we bid you enter, though there may yet be a price.”

“I must risk it,” our father said to them, “because the clouds draw nearer, and we have nowhere else to go.”

Clouds. The word felt strange against my tongue as I repeated it, and I feared its weight there. They were closer now, dark and heavy, and low in the sky. They waited for us, but they would not wait very much longer.

“Then enter,” said my mother. She spoke to our father, but she cast her arms wide to include everyone. “Enter, but be careful where you tread. The dead sleep lightly when there is wind such as this in the air.”

We left the sheep outside with my sister’s older brother to guard them. We went into the caves, and our mothers spread white cloaks on the ground for us to sit upon. Our

father went to each family, advising them where to sit and how best to settle their belongings so they did not disturb the dead. Then he returned to us.

“Come,” he said to my sister and to me. “You must see this, so that you will know it.”

He had not spoken to us so directly before. Always his orders had come from our mothers, or from my sister’s brother. We were the girl-children, born so close together that few men could tell us apart, save that the older of us was already more graceful. We did not know what to do, so my mother pushed us forward and my sister’s mother twisted the hem of our father’s robes into our hands.

“Do not let go,” she said to us. She had spoken before of a price. “No matter what, hold fast and return to us.”

We followed our father back to the mouth of the caverns, where my sister’s brother waited with the sheep. The clouds were above us now, stretching as far as the eye could see. I did not like the taste of the air, and when I wrinkled my nose, our father smiled.

“Yes, daughter-mine,” he said. “Remember this smell. Remember the skies, how they look. Remember how the sheep worried you and tried to knock you down. Remember all of that, and remember what comes next.”

He smiled. It was the most he had ever said to me. I was afraid, but I also felt the sand in my heart turn to glass. Whatever was coming, our father wanted my sister and me

to see it, to know it, and to be safe from it when it came again. This was how I learned that he loved us.

As we watched, the sky turned to black and finally the clouds could hold no more. They burst with wet, and the sheep reared up and pressed themselves against the hill. It was water, I saw after a moment. And it was deafening. All the water I had ever seen in my life had come from our well. I had bathed with it and drunk it and poured it over melon vines, but I had not ever seen anything like this.

“It is called rain,” our father said. “It falls upon green hills far from here, and rushes to us down the dry wadi bed. But when the small gods will it, the clouds slip free from those green hills and come to us with speed, and with such water as you will see only a few times in your life. We need the water, but it is dangerous, and soon you will see why.”

We watched. The rain poured from the sky as from a countless number of jugs. It cut into the rock above us, peeling back the sand and sending it rushing toward the wadi bed. The sheep were soaked through, like how we soaked their wool in dye, and they were giving off a smell I liked even less than the smell before the rain came.

There was a roaring sound behind the tents, where I could not see. Our father looked down at us, at our hands clenched in his hem, and looked to my sister’s brother, who stood just beyond the cave wall, as wet as the sheep, but with a burning energy in his eyes that did not speak of fear.

There was another sound, and for a long moment, I did not know what it was. It was my sister screaming. I had never heard her make that sound before, and I stared at her, thinking she must have been injured by the rain. Our father took my face in his hands, and forced me to look back at the tents. Behind them, a great grey wall had risen up where the wadi should have been. It bore down on the circle where we had slept and ate and played, and it crashed down upon it, sweeping through hide and rope like they were nothing.

The wall continued toward us, rushing up the slope toward the caverns. I felt a scream of my own building in my chest. The water had taken the tents and the places where we slept. If it came into the caves, there was no way out. Our father stood in front of us, and we clung to him as the water came. It stretched for us, and for a long moment I thought we would all be taken. But then, as though it had been checked by a small god, the surge pulled back, and though it lapped at our father's sandals, it did not take him.

It was then that the ram panicked again. The ewes shifted around him, water swirling around their flanks, and their discomfort heightened his. He charged my sister's brother, who was watching the water surge past us, and butted him hard. With a cry he fell, rolling down the slope, until the water closed over his head and carried him away.

Our father keened, but did not move. Had he tried, he would have pulled my sister and me along behind, and while

the water might have spared him, it certainly would have taken us. Instead we watched, helpless, as the dark shape of my brother was pulled farther and farther down the wadi, until he passed beyond our sight.

“Come,” our father said then. “There is nothing left for you to see.”

The price my mother had warned of was paid, and my sister’s mother wailed when our father told her. She held my sister close and wept. The dead had taken their due, and my sister’s brother would never lie among them. His bones were lost to the desert, and my sister and I had learned the terrible cost of green and life.

The sound in the garden, I realized as Lo-Melkhiin’s women bathed and perfumed me, was the sound we had heard at the beginning of the flood. It was so soft I had not recognized it at first, until the women had put me in the heated tub and pushed me under the surface to wet my hair. Water had rushed into my nose and ears, and I had come up coughing. They pitied that, like they pitied everything else about me. I was a doomed bride, so provincial that I had never even had enough water for a proper bath. But when my eyes cleared, I knew the sound.

It was the sound of death and wet and green. It was the sound of cost and worth. But if I could find something like the hem of our father’s robe, if I could find something to hold on to, then it would be the sound of hope.