

Under a Starless Sky

By
Ion Light

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This book is available for free. It has adult content, and so even though I am inviting you to share it, use discernment.

WARNING: This book is intended for a mature audience. Due to violence and sexual themes, some persons, especially those suffering from PTSD or childhood trauma, could possibly experience unpleasant feelings or flashbacks. If you're a person who has been abducted by UFOs, suffering from DID, or possessed, be forewarned: you could be unintentionally triggered.

This book is dedicated to the world in crisis. May you have strength, love, and perseverance.

This book contains elements of magic, spirit, and tech. It is a continuation of my own exploration of love and light, and it seems consistent with the growing philosophy that seems exemplified in my work. This book is brim full of Tulpas. May you continue to find meaning and joy in you all your multiverses
Travel Light
Ion Light.

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निर्मित

An argument for tulpas:

Carl Jung quote: "He (man) cannot conquer the tremendous polarity of his own nature on his own resources: he can only do so through the terrifying experience of a psychic process that is independent of him, that works him rather than he it."

Chapter 1

To hear the child speak, you would believe he was from the other world, and that the stories of his adventures started before his birth. I can neither confirm nor deny his visions. I can only assure you that he is my son.

Lanore

Light blazed to life like a thousand suns simultaneously going nova. The shadowy places and dark corners melded into one; there were no shadows to contend with. Mundane objects looked surreal, fake even. The people looked fake. He didn't have to sort this, as he was instantly transported elsewhere. Memories assaulted him from all directions at once. Every thought, every dream, every nuanced reflection of word flavored with a thousand emotions came at him as he relived his entire life. Backwards. It was unpacked backwards and it bothered him going the other way. He had a thought outside of thoughts, 'this is not how it's supposed to be.'

There was no turning the light off. It was full on. It wasn't painful. It felt cold, clinical. It was just there. The sun isn't just there. It can be pleasant and unpleasant, but this light was present. It was as if it were alive, an entity in itself. The only option was to a retreat to a safe place. It was place of his own creation, a memory that defied the present law of physics. He established a forward going continuity that allowed him to make sense of the world line going backwards. He built walls and windows. Sometimes he would look out a window and see a younger version of him. It didn't make sense. There were things he didn't remember. It was hard to watch, the same way listening to a tape of your own voice is hard to listen to.

This unwinding did not happen in real time. It was accelerated time. He eventually came to a place of darkness. Darkness outside the room. There was nothing. His room became a sleeping bag. He curled up in it, completely zipped up, as if fighting a long winter's night. His own breath bothered him at first, too warm, but the cold outside the bag turned this into a welcome friend. He slept.

निर्मित

Lanore felt suddenly very odd. Her daughter, Candace, noticed. She looked at her expectantly. Candace was practicing her letters on a tablet at a small table next to the window facing the cliffs and the Tower Of Light. It was an overcast sky, and the light from the top of the tower gave the cloud a strange glow, as it often did at night.

"L'Ma?" Candace asked politely.

"Go fetch a-Ceolla, and have her guard the Light," Lanore instructed. "I'm going to see N'Ma."

Candace obeyed without hesitation. Lanore felt comfortable leaving her post to her apprentice guardian. After all, there was little wind, and the flame was constant. They had refueled only last week, and so there was not likely to be any emergencies. Lanore gathered her cloak, gripped her trusted staff, and headed out of her home. Each house was a dome, connected to each other and laid out in a circle, and under the Light, it strangely looked like an inch worm doubled back to investigate its tail end. There was the Central fire, and as always, several people gathered around it for warmth.

One of the fire guards was going to approach, but changed her mind as Ceolla arrived, urgent.

“L-Ma, what’s wrong?”

“Why must there be something wrong?” Lanore asked.

“Because your cloak is on?” Ceolla asked. “If you’re leaving me in charge, shouldn’t I know what is driving you out at this time of night?”

“I am going to see N’Ma,” Lanore said.

“It can’t wait till tomorrow?” Ceolla said. “For day light.”

“I trust my heart to guide me,” Lanore said. Before Ceolla could protest further, Lanore raised her hand. “Go inside, A. Continue with Candace’s lessons. Expect me back in two days, maybe three. I might linger.”

“You will take a guard,” Ceolla said.

“It isn’t necessary...”

Ceolla motioned towards the fire guard and one came running. She bowed. Lanore gave Ceolla a severe look.

“I could compel you to remain until morning,” Ceolla said. “Rule of three.”

Lanore turned the fire guard and bowed. “Tesh. You and Keila may join my walk. I am leaving to see N’Ma.”

Lanore turned and departed. Tesh looked to Ceolla but got nothing, and hurried after Lanore, whistling for Keila to join her. They caught up to Lanore quickly enough. She walked at a reasonable pace. Too reasonable for the dark. Just beyond the last tangible pooling of Village Light, they paused and adjusted to their second sense. Looking back they would see the flame of their village on the tower. Looking forwards, there was only blackness. On a clear night, one could sometimes see the flickering of N’Ma’s light. One would not see it at all tonight, with the clouds this low, not until they were practically on it or, not at all. They trusted their heart and the path.

An hour into the walk, their eyes began to play tricks on them. They saw things that weren’t there. Talking made the apparitions go away, but talking slowed their progress.

“Children,” Lanore said. “Please tell me you’re not afraid of the ghosts that come?”

“No, L’Ma,” they answered. Tesh sounded more believable than Keila. They didn’t see Lanore’s amused look. Lanore suspected Tesh was actually more afraid due to the fierceness of her response.

They proceeded only after the echoes of their voices faded. A sharp noise like a tree limb breaking sounded in the distance. Tesh invoked a spell. The tip of her staff illuminated. She held the staff forwards in the direction of the noise.

Lanore frowned at her. “Seriously, child. If there is something there, your staff light won’t reveal it.”

“I would rather see the bear I am fighting,” Tesh said.

“You will never see the bear you’re fighting,” Lanore said. “Not with your eyes.”

The brightness of the staff limited their vision to the circle around them. It made the shadows more ominous. Nothing came out of the shadows to attack. Tesh grudgingly relaxed, but only because she felt compelled by Lanore’s calmness.

“Extinguish the light, please,” Lanore said.

“Can’t we walk with our lights, please?” Keila asked.

“It will slow us down,” Lanore said.

“I am okay with slower,” Tesh said.

“Do I need to make you recite your lessons?” Lanore asked.

Tesh tapped her staff. The light extinguished. It went from a solid, bright blue, to a cool glowing orange that etched out patterns in the staff, luminescent veins that ran to where her hand gripped. Eventually even this was gone. They did not move into all the echoes of light had left their eyes. They did not speak. Lanore didn't say come. Lanore moved when her heart painted the path, and they followed. As they walked, they had to sort their own inner voice, and quiet the demons. Too much inner chatter interrupted the heart path. A person lost in their inner voice could wander off the path and be lost forever. After so many quiet foot falls and heartbeats, they lost track of time. They eventually saw the glow of the cloud above N'Ma's village. To maintain speed, they closed their eyes. They navigated paths as quickly and easily as if they were walking in broad daylight. They climbed hills, moved around obstacles, stones and tree trunks.

N'Ma's village, Midelay, was built into the side of a cliff, with one narrowing path up, followed by an S shaped bridge that led to the main entrance. The bridge had no walls or barricade. Those who didn't follow the heart would not arrive at the gate. Anyone who used a torch or a staff light would likely be shot the moment they touched the bridge. Three guards emerged and came out onto the bridge. One came silently forwards. Lanore stepped forwards. Lanore brought her hands together and bowed.

“Forgive my intrusion at this time of night, but I wish to see N'Ma,” Lanore said.

“Lanore,” the guard said. “I hear your voice, and my heart recognizes you. Come in out of the dark.”

They followed the guard in, and only after the doors were closed did the lights come up. Wall torches fueled by gas. The guards measured the travelers under the light and found the information consistent with their hearts. Eirwen was a strange bird. She was ghost white, thick muscles, tall, and blond, and considered one of the ugliest women to ever show up this side of Tamor. Her continued existence was due to N'ma's mercy. She was found and raised into the light of the Heart Path clan, and though she would likely never rise higher than village guard, she was esteemed for her courage. Her courage made up for her ugliness. Compared to the others, she was an alien.

“Your attendants seem too old to be in training,” Eirwen said.

“We're not training,” Tesh said.

“Forgive me. I see no injuries, and I assumed an explanation,” Eirwen said. “They will escort you to N'Ma. Toli will escort your attendants to a room.”

“You assume we will be separated,” Tesh said.

“She assumed right. I will speak with N'Ma alone,” Lanore said. “Go, rest. Thank you for accompanying me.”

“It is our duty,” Tesh said.

Lanore bowed. She followed Shey down a corridor, up a corridor, up a winding stairs, over to a room where she was offered a place to bathe, fresh linen, and then brought to another room where she was left to herself. There was a fireplace. A table with fruits and cheese. She warmed herself by the fire.

N'Ma entered. She did so without knocking. Her face was old, but her eyes seemed much younger than her face. If asked, she would explain if you use your heart to peer into the darkness, your eyes will stay young. She measured the room with her heart

before entering in further. She avoided eye contact, going past Lanore to the fire to warm her hands.

“What’s the matter, child,” Neri asked.

“I’m concerned. I felt movement, and distress. Surely it’s too soon for such activity,” Lanore said.

“Have you been thinking about re-absorption?” Neri asked.

“No, N’Ma! I plan to bring it to full term, and share life,” Lanore affirmed.

“Tian!” N’Ma called out.

Tian, her apprentice, was suddenly in the door way. “Yes, N’Ma. How may I serve you?”

“Fetch me a lavender candle, two of the sandal wood scent sticks, lilac mint drops, and the rose oil,” N’Ma said.

Tian bowed, withdrawing. Neri asked Lanore to follow her to her office. The office contained a stone table, several chairs, a wooden desk that stretched the length of the wall, and above the desk book cases. She opened a valve and fresh water flowed into a basin, down a path, and dropped into a hole that took it out. Neri washed her hands to the elbows in a ritualistic manner, chanting a few sacred words her own teacher use to chant, shook her hands in the air and then dried it with a white towel. When her hands were dry, she turned off the water with the towel. She turned to find Tian with a tray containing the things she had asked for. They lit candles and placed it on thin pillars that stood higher than the stone table. Tian withdrew, but remained in the room.

Lanore had taken a seat on the table. She didn’t need to be asked to sit. It was part of the ritual. She was once as Tian was now.

“May I touch you?” Neri asked.

In many cultures, the doctor or Shaman wouldn’t have even asked the patient or client for permission, but would have just assumed the right from their role in society.

“Of course, N’Ma,” Lanore said.

The first thing Neri did was put her left hand upon Lanore’s forehead, closed her eyes, and leaned in close to her. She inhaled slowly, observing the smell of Lanore’s breath, her hair, and then her ear. With her eyes still closed, both hands came up to examine the head, manipulating it ever so carefully through angles of articulation. She continued this down to the neck. She pulled the string and allowed her dress to fall to her waist. She extended arms, and moved the limb through its points of articulation, even the fingers, and came back to feel under the armpits. She examined the breast. She moved her to lay down. The cold stone caused her back to arch. N’Ma reached in and felt the small of her back, traced up to the stomach, feeling, tapping. He held her hand over the stomach for a moment, as if trying to discern something. She followed the sternum up to the heart and placed her hand over the heart. She came up again to her mouth, smelling, and pushed on her cheeks, drawing down on her chin, and opened her mouth.

N’Ma leaned in and kissed Lanore. She held this kiss for a moment, breathing in, tasting. She came up and away. Neri opened her eyes, and examined Lanore’s mouth, inserting her fingers in, scrutinizing the teeth and the gums. Neri went to her desk and unwrapped a thin piece of amber, which had the strange property of self illumination. She asked Lanore to open her mouth wide and used the amber to push down on the tongue, examined the back of the throat. She cleaned the amber and returned it to the cloth, leaned against the desk and studied her patient.

She motioned Lanore to bring her dress up and had a seat at her desk. She closed her eyes and thought for a long time.

“Have you changed any of your routines, your diet?”

“No, Nean,” Lanore said.

“Did the mating occur indoors or out?” N’Ma asked.

“Outdoors,” Lanore said. “In the ocean, actually. The father is Nevin, one of the sailors who works on my sister’s ship. We were playing in the waves...”

Neri waved off, not wanting more information. She mumbled something about ‘water babies’ being difficult. Still, babies conceived in play were healthier than the other kind, and water-born children seemed to have an easier transition. She continued to shift past her inner dialogue into Heart, seeking truth.

“Is something bothering you?” Neri asked.

“Everything is fine, N’Ma,” Lanore said.

Neri frowned. “Are you certain? No troubles with your new apprentice? Clan drama you are not wanting to speak about?”

“My apprentice is an intelligent young woman. She will make a fine replacement for me, or perhaps even run her own Light in the near future,” Lanore said, neither boasting nor bragging.

“I taste fear in you, more than just being concerned for the safety of your child can account for...” Neri said. “Would you lay down again, please?”

Lanore laid back on the table, and Neri probe her stomach, abdomen, and again asked permission to probe further. She laid an ear on the stomach and listened. She went and retrieved a wand with a crystal embedded in it. She lit it and examined between Lanore’s legs. When Neri finished, she again washed her hands, and asked Lanore to sit up. She took several herbs from her shelf and asked Lanore to hold them in her right hand, while she performed a muscle strength test. She sighed, replaced the herbs with a crystal, executed the muscle test again, and did this, exchanging the crystal for a mineral, and doing this a dozen times.

“I don’t detect an infection,” N’Ma said.

“I could have told you that. I feel fine. My heart is telling me something is different,” Lanore said.

“I can find neither a physical abnormality, nor an emotional cause for this imbalance...”

Lanore quivered.

(Light flared, and the only thing that prevented an onslaught of memories was a fixation on one particular item. A book he had read, how long ago, in that other place... “Johnny Get Your Gun...” Now why would I be fixating on that? Oh my god! No Eyes. My Eyes! No Ears, no sounds. I can’t hear and I can’t even hear my own voice... No voice! A silent, nightmare type screamed echoed through the far reaches of his mind. He felt weighted down, told himself it was sleep paralysis, couple with fever dream. There was warmth. He gave into the warmth. He slept.)

“Oh my god!” Lanore said. “Tell me you felt that?”

Neri nodded. She laid her back on the bed and again put her ears against Lanore’s stomach.

“Are you certain of your conception date?” Neri asked.

“I’ve only had one encounter, N’Ma.”

Neri nodded. She went and sat down by the fire, inviting Lanore to do the same. Lanore came to the chair by the fire and sat, adjusting her dress, pulling the shoulder back up. Neri took up a stick and prodded the fire.

“Is it bad?” Lanore said.

Neri came out of the fire and stared at Neri. “It is neither good nor bad. It is what it is.”

“What is it?” Lanore asked.

“I tasted fear,” Neri said.

“I am not afraid,” Lanore said.

Neri laughed. “You came rushing to me just after night fall, and you claim you weren’t motivated such?”

“I was concerned,” Lanore said.

Neri smirked. “Fear is fear. Love is love. That is all. There is a great deal of fear in you. I didn’t say it was yours, but it has influenced you. Heart Path Clan or no, you could have waited till morning. This is not something that will be cured with an herbal tea and a talk,” Neri said. “I have taught you better patience than this.”

Lanore nodded. “Not my fear? The baby?”

Neri studied her eyes. “The way I figure it is, either you are bringing in a soul so new to this domain, he is afraid of the light. Or, he is so old a soul, he is refusing to give up his past life.”

“What can I do?”

“Not rush out after night,” Neri said. “Never make a big decision when you’re experiencing emotions. Time will sort this.”

“How much time?”

“Time enough for birth,” Neri said.

Lanore chewed on a nail, contemplating. “You said boy. I know I am having a girl.”

“You’re having both,” Neri said.

“Twins?!” Lanore said. “That can’t be...”

“Measure again,” Neri said.

Lanore became serious, taking inventory of herself, closing her eyes, and tapping into her Heart. A vision began to arrive, a map of the room. The fire crackle washed it out, startling her. She redoubled her focus. There was the room. The fireplace looked strange, painted with the Heart Light. She could make out the difference in temperature gradients. There was movement, maybe smoke rising. She focused on her body. There they were, two babies. Way too young to discern gender. Way too young to discern anything other than her Heart told her they were there. She came out of her Light.

“How did miss this?”

“I don’t know,” Neri said.

“How do you know one is male?”

“Flavor,” Neri said.

“When will I be as discerning as you?” Lanore said.

“When you have lived so long that no one remembers your real name, and you become L’Ma for the remainder of your life,” Neri said.

“What was your birth name?” Lanore said.

“Child, that person is no longer with us. There is only N’Ma,” Neri said.

Chapter 2

The world was a much different place in the day. Near the cliffs of Midelay were orchards. Lanore, Tesh, and Keila gathered fruits as they departed, just enough to fill their bags. They had also been given seeds, each of a different fruit bearing tree, and as they walked, they planted. With each seed, they sang a prayer. The path from Midelay to Easterly Harbor could be dated by the growth of fruit trees defined the path. The oldest trees were likely planted by Lanore herself. She didn't claim any as hers. They were all beautiful to behold. She wondered if she would live long enough to see the entire path from Midelay to Easterly one long orchard.

It was well after noon when they arrived back to Easterly. The outskirts of their small village had the clear defined orchard with a variety of fruit bearing trees, incorporating Elder Trees that had been intentionally left standing. The rows of trees came off the Elder trees in concentric circles, clearly planned, but also an attempt to mimic nature. Two of the oldest Elders were Evergreen, and ground around them were brownish red with needles. Pinecones were a commodity that was sent back to Midelay, and from there dispersed out. The largest Elder Tree was considered a 'Sleeper' tree. It was a strange looking thing, like lightning shooting up into the sky and branching out. It was rare to find such a large Sleeper so far from a Sleeper Forest, but it was more than ideal. It was the first Omen that cemented Lanore on making this space hers. Ten of the trees they had planted on first settling were now bearing enough fruit they had a surplus.

Easterly Harbor was a series of step cliffs that went down to the beach, enfolding around a serene bay of blues and green, tapering off to the darker blue and black of the ocean beyond the land. The steps going down were cultivated gardens. The Eternal Flame of Easterly was at the highest peak, providing a beacon to any ocean travelers, but also a visible connection back to Midelay.

It was six seasons after Easterly Harbors Lighting before the first ship came. Ships were still sparse. Ocean life was much harsher than land. There were rumors of city ships that had gone years without sight of shore. Rumors and stories were great commodities; someone who could pen it down, providing names, and sources, and witnesses could make a good living.

Lanore had a good living. It was too good, and it was a struggle not to grow too fast. As it was, Elders beyond Midelay were speaking of her impending doom, that she too arrogant, too successful for her age. But the sea provided food. There gardens took. There were fruits and rabbits and squirrels enough to keep even the poorest beggar alive, with minimal efforts. How could one not thrive in such a paradise?

"Every Paradise has its snakes," Elders warned.

Lanore could not argue this, and she was wise enough not to, though there was a want. If God made Paradise, and placed all the creatures in that space, then weren't snakes also a necessary part? Could one learn to be an adult without facing adversity, or confronting snakes? If a snake got the best of you, and you learned from the experience, then were you not wiser? Was there a snake handler ever that was never burned? The one never burned is the one who becomes complacent.

Candace came running down the path to greet Lanore, crying "L'Ma, L'Ma," breaking her out of her fruitless philosophizing. She chided herself: fruitless only if not shared. Pen your thoughts, allow others to test your thesis.

Lanore was met by Candace with hugs. Others gathered as well, as Lanore approached a circle of stone just outside the gates going into the village. Men lingered in the back ground, but didn't approach.

"Are you well, L'Ma?" Candace asked.

"I am, thank you," Lanore said.

"I missed you. And we have visitors from the west. Dark people, Darker than the ocean people that came. They came in after the rain, and C'Ma has been caring for them. And Larc burnt the breakfast this morning, and C'Ma has been very cross," Candace said.

"Really? Why is Larc cooking the breakfast and not Ginder?"

"Ginder isn't feeling well," Candace said.

"Poor old fellow," Lanore said. "I guess we'll just have to make him better, won't we?"

Ceolla arrived at the gates, catching just enough of the conversation to make conclusion. She was accompanied by an elderly woman. She, too, made assumptions. "I say we put 'im out of his misery."

"Mother, I won't have you talking about father like that."

"He isn't worth a single ferret. Between his old age, and Larc's incompetence, it's a wonder we don't starve," G'Ma complained.

"We don't worry about the hunt anymore," Lanore said, putting her daughter down. Lanore took off her back pack and pulled out a two kits. "Candace, it is time for you to start training."

Candace screamed and swept up the two kits. G'Ma came over to examine the two frail little animals. They looked around timidly, as Candace held them both up.

"It'll be months before they can even catch their weight in rabbits, much less a full grown one," Ceolla complained.

"That's what this one is for?" Lanore said, pulling one last ferret out of her pack. "This one will hunt, and should offer us a few more kits by spring."

"I think you over estimate Ratchet," G'Ma said, and disappeared into the house.

"Candace, take Menace here and put her in the cage. And, be careful not to squeeze her, cause she nips."

"Kay," Candace said, putting the two kits in her pockets. "And can I keep the kits in my room?"

"Yes. Have Larc fetch the small cage in out of storage," Lanore said. "Run along."

Tesh had been growing impatient and now that Candace was out, she went direct to business. "Tell us about the strangers you're harboring."

"They knew the ritual," Ceolla said. "Three women, one man. They came just after dawn, yesterday. It was a fierce storm."

"From where?"

"They say they're from the south," Ceolla said.

"There is only ocean south," Keila said.

"They came along the shore," Ceolla said.

"No one comes from way of the sleeping forest," Tesh said.

“Are they Walking Bears?” Lanore asked.

“They denied knowing anything about Bears,” Ceolla said. “One of them is definitely a snake charmer.”

“You saw her with snakes?” Tesh asked.

“The burn pattern on her arm suggest snakes,” Ceolla said.

“I suppose I should meet these strangers,” Lanore said. “We’ve treated them with generously?”

“They know the ritual. They carry lights,” Ceolla said.

Lanore nodded and proceeded towards the dome that would most likely be commandeered to accommodate guests: the inner men’s barrack. It would have a central room with a hearth, and three private rooms, and one small water closet. There was a gas lamp on the outer wall where the dome was cut to allow entrance. Passing through revealed the stone wall to be just over 40 cm thick. The inner wall was textured as if painted by sack cloth. The three women were having breakfast at a table. The man was having his meal on the floor. The three women stood.

Lanore greeted with a sign. One of the three women stepped forwards, mirroring the heart gesture, bringing up a hand that blossomed into an open palm. She was a Master. A coil of burn mark scared her arm.

“Welcome to our home,” Lanore said.

“You put us in men’s rooms?” one of the guest said.

The Master looked at her, and the look cowed her into submission. She lowered her eyes, but did not assume an apologetic look.

The Master brought up her other hand, revealing empty palms. “We are grateful for the respite, and the food,” she said. “I am Tell. These are my apprentices Sheen and Abeth. Forgive Sheen. She is not happy I brought them on an impromptu journey into the night.”

“Please, sit,” Lanore invited. She sat with them. There was spare bowl, which she used to provide herself soup. She frowned at the taste. She looked at Ceolla. Ceolla bit her lip. “I’m sorry about breakfast. If you stay, I promise our next meal will be immensely improved.”

“The sun has returned. I would like to continue my journey along the shore,” Tell said. “Would you share a map with a wayward traveler?”

“I will share what we know,” Lanore said.

“There is nothing to know,” Tesh said. “We are Easterly. There is only water forever that way, Sleeping Forests above and below us, and Midelay West. No one passes through the Sleeping Forest.”

Tell listened. She was also observant. Lanore didn’t correct her, the way she had her apprentice. She nodded, gratefully. “Thank you, Master.”

“I am...”

Lanore raised one finger slightly. Tesh fell silent.

“I detect sarcasm,” Lanore said.

“You will address me, but not your apprentice?” Tell said.

“She may not be raised, but she is a sister,” Lanore said. “She speaks truth. The flavor could be seasoned. I have brought a light here. I will share my map. I am worried, seasoned traveler, you will find it inadequate to resolve your quest.”

“You are Heart Path. You grow as slow as the trees,” Tell said.

“We go as the food grows,” Lanore offered. “The trees were here before us. They will be here when we are gone.”

“I know of vast stretches where there are no trees,” Tell said.

Lanore tried to understand how such a place could sustain civilization. She forced herself to accept it, remembering stories of how everyone once walked the world.

“You don’t strike me as nomadic,” Lanore said.

“We are,” Tell said.

“And yet, Sheen is so accustomed that she feels we have disparaged her?” Lanore asked.

“I have already apologized...”

“Please, I am only reporting confusion,” Lanore said. “I am seeking clarity. Ceolla, go fetch my ark.”

Leona forced herself to eat, grimacing. She sighed.

“It is really uneatable,” Lanore lamented. “Tesh, bring us fresh fruit. If there’s a rabbit cooking, bring that. If there isn’t one cooking, put one on. Bring dried fish for them to sample, and if they favor it, bring them a bundle to carry.”

Tesh bowed out.

“Larc, take this food away. If the men can stomach it, they can eat it. If not, give it back to earth and apologize profusely, for poisoning her and for wasting,” Lanore said.

Larc began to clean the table.

“Why do you even let the men cook?” Sheen asked.

Tell gave her a cross look.

“Tell, I don’t know you. I don’t know your ways. It’s not offensive to me if she asks questions,” Lanore said.

“It is to me,” Tell said.

“I will trade. I will not judge them for their apparent lack of discernment of your expectations, if you will forgive that meal,” Lanore offered.

Tell softened. She nodded. Ceolla arrived with an ornate box. She sat it at the other end of the table, where she waited until Lanore took custody. She backed away. Lanore motioned for Tell to join her. They sat opposite of each other. Fruit and dried fish arrived as they sat down. Tesh used a knife to cut an avocado, and demonstrated how to eat it. There was bowl for seeds and bowl for peels.

Lanore opened the ark and brought out a book. She also brought out ink, choosing it from several options of colored ink, provided fresh, unused quills, and free paper. The feathers were mostly pink, tapering off to lavender, iridescent blues, shades of green that came out as the quill turned. Tell clearly favored the feather, but she was more interested in the paper. Tell asked for a sheet. She was given multiple sheets. It sparkled. It had a pleasant odor.

“I have never seen the like,” Tell admitted.

“Silk paper,” Lanore offered. “Do you have a book?”

Sheen brought Tell her bag. She retrieved a book, leather bound. An S mark over a line was etched into the leather. Lanore’s book was also leather. The quality of paper was very different. Her mark was etched into the cover revealing gold underlay, a tree, and a symbol for number five.

“You have filled five books?”

“I am not nomadic. I have had the luxury of penning many books,” Lanore said. “This my 5th attempt to realize the world. Copies of my work have made it to Sinter. If you tarry, I will show my personal library. In this you will find copies of my earlier maps, my updated map, and the most recent maps shared with me. If you allow me, I will add your map to mine. If you’re opposed, I can’t promise you I won’t try to recreate what you reveal to me, either in words or drawings.”

“Fair enough. My book is open to you,” Tell said.

“And mine is opened to you,” Lanore said.

They exchanged books. After a moment of study, Lanore conceded she was lost. She suspected Tell was equally lost, but Tell gave no tells of her inner thoughts. She studied her face as she read her book, delicately turning the pages as if it were a sacred object. She wondered if her face was capable of displaying emotions. She might have wondered if she could read at all, but she had revealed she had at least understood numbers.

“May I speak my world?” Lanore asked.

Tell bowed. Lanore took a sheet of silk paper and placed it on the table, and set Tell’s book on this, a sign of respect for her world. She took her book and skipped the words on the first page, opening it to the map behind it, which stretched from the 2nd and 3rd pages.

“Tamor,” Lanore said.

Tell laughed. “You have the entire world in your book?”

Lanore didn’t know how to respond. The study of Tell’s face revealed emotions. There was more than humor. There was embarrassment for having laughed, a hardness that came after: serious control. She wondered if the other side of the Sleeping Forest was a harsh world. She pointed to a place on the map. “Easterly. Here.” Symbol for forests on either side of Easterly, extending from shore back to mountains, and extended along the entire mountain as far north and south as the map could contain. She turned the map to page four. Easterly was better defined. There was evident path extending through the forest up to the mountain where another village was marked, which loosely followed a meandering river. When Easterly’s first dome was solid, the river had been nearer. Since it had shifted a bit north, and no longer broke over the cliffs into the bay. “Midelay.” On the other side of the mountain was more forest, and another path. The Sleeping Forest owned both sides of the mountains, and only one peak was known to be free of growth.

“You have made it over the mountains here?” Tell asked.

“I have not,” Lanore said. “The higher one goes, the thicker the forest. No one passes through the Sleeping Forest.”

“But this is a path...”

“You must go through the mountain at Midelay in order to travel to Sinter,” Lanore said.

“You walk through mountains?” Tell asked.

“I have been on both sides,” Lanore said. “I have even been to Sinter.”

“You have not,” Sheen said.

Tell pointed a finger at the apprentice, snapping: “Speak out of turn again, there will be penalty.”

Lanore didn’t interfere with this.

“You come from Sinter?” Tell asked.

“I was schooled in Sinter. I was born in East Midelay. I was a child when the East was opened up to us. I was not the first venture from Midelay, but I am the first to take roots and report back,” Lanore said. “My village is small, but it thrives. I have made contact with water people.”

“So have I,” Tell said. “They are stranger looking than even you. We call them walking fishes. They can stay submerged for nearly an entire hour glass of time.”

“Had I not experienced this myself, I would have thought this exaggeration,” Lanore agreed. “If I were not seeing you with my own eyes and heart, I would say you were a myth.”

“You have never met someone my color?” Tell asked.

“I have met your dead opposite,” Lanore said.

Tell laughed. “A ghost?”

Lanore nodded.

“You’re serious?” Tell asked.

“She is whiter than rice,” Lanore said.

“Rice?” Tell asked.

“Tesh, bring rice. Cooked and uncooked,” Lanore said.

Lanore took a sheet of paper and drew an image of the water people. Tell agreed; these resembled the Walking Fish she had met. She drew an image of Eirwen.

“How horrendous,” Tell said. “How could any people suffer her to live?”

“Her story is legend in Sinter. The legend of her doesn’t fit the reality of her. I suspect she was so hideous her family tossed her out,” Lanore said.

“Not another child on a river story,” Tell complained.

“Child on a river?”

“You never heard how the first walker was found floating on a lotus down the river?”

“You mean like the first Queen of Sinter?” Lanore asked. “A baby put in a reed basket?”

“I do not know this story,” Tell said. “This ghost? Does she have powers?”

“No more than any of us,” Lanore said. “The story I heard from her own lips was that she was taken by the Walking Bears when she was a child. She was recovered by people at about six, and raised in Sinter. I brought her back to Midelay when I returned from school.”

“Walking Bears are myths,” Tell said.

Lanore pointed to a black and white tail that framed a dream catcher, hanging above the hearth.

“That is the tail of a Walking Bear,” Lanore said. “They are known to kidnap children and carry them in their pouches.”

“Pouches?” Tell asked. “Like a purse?”

“I have not seen it,” Lanore said.

“Because it’s a myth,” Tell said. “Between Fire Snakes, dragons, darkness, and Sleeping Forests, we don’t need another adversary in the Land.”

“I agree,” Lanore said.

“Did the water people give you a map?”

“They spoke of floating islands. They want me to believe Tamor is a just one island of among many, floating. I think they have sea brain. They live and die on their

boats, going where the wind and sea take them. If they float and the islands floats, there could be no continuity.”

“I don’t trust them,” Tell admitted. “They must originate on land. How else could one make a boat as big as theirs?”

“I don’t know. They called them coracles,” Lanore said. She turned her book to a page where she had drawn the boat. It was huge, at least the circumference of her village. She revealed scale by placing people on desk. She had views of it from impossible angles, revealing she had used her Heart to see it fully. It was basic torus shape, the center opened to the sea. She had cut away views that revealed chambers and sections, and the inner space was curtained by a net where bred their own fish. They treated their home as if it were alive, just another entity on the sea. They claimed their villages never crashed on the shore, but they could not convince her of this, as it was clearly subject to the whims of the sea and the air. They used smaller boats and paddles to visit the shores to trade, but claimed to be completely self-sufficient.

“Trade?” Tell scoffed. “They wanted a gift of men.”

“They wanted that from us, too,” Lanore agreed. “I suspect they would have stolen it, if they could.”

“They lack Heart,” Tell said.

Lanore smiled. She understood. They can’t see in the dark.

“Perhaps they hope our men will give them the gift of Heart,” Tell said.

“I would have traded that Gift for the gift of breath holding,” Lanore said.

“They told me this isn’t something that has given, but acquired through living,” Tell said.

“They are very strange and secretive,” Lanore agreed. “They have a story that we all came here on such a ship, one that carried pairs of every living thing so that the world could be as it is.”

“I heard. I asked why they brought Fire Snakes.”

“They snuck on board,” Lanore offered the explanation that was given her.

Lanore and Tell laughed.

“Teach me your world,” Lanore asked.

Tell walked her through the maps, describing deserts, plains with deer and elk, pictures of which were in book. She would jump to picture in her book of creatures she had encountered in her journeys, some of them very strange in appearance. Her recent journey was taking them along the coast, trying to go around the Sleeping Forest. She described an artifact, maybe three days walk along the shore going south and east from the far side of the Sleeping Forest- a spectacular rock formation lay, carved by oceans, so the that the waves rushed through it. It was a great arch. It almost looked man made.

“I know this place,” Lanore said. “How did you get from there to this side of the forest?”

“Same as you?” Tell asked.

“I don’t understand,” Lanore said.

“We walked,” Tell said.

She took out a stick of graphite, wrapped with string; a pencil. She held it with her left hand, two fingers and a thumb. Lanore drew a sheet of paper towards her, She moved the pencil as if she were drawing on the air above the paper, before she commented to drawing a line. She brought the forest to the line. She drew Easterly. She drew the rock

where the ocean punched a hole through it. It was not drawn to scale. “I suspect, six day walk through the thick of this. Can’t be done. Maybe it’s thinner here, but the Forest comes to the cliff. You can’t skirt it. You can’t walk this cliff. Even the water people can’t swim this distance, with all the waves and rocks. I have yet to discern a negotiable path through the forest.”

“But you know about the Eye of the Needle?” Tell said.

“Extended Breath,” Lanore said.

“No heart can see that far, even on the stillest day,” Tell said.

“Extended Breath can see beyond the Heart’s wall,” Lanore said.

“You’re a seer? Can you see anything?” Tell asked. “Can you see the path I walked?”

Lanore was quiet for a long moment. Everyone grew quiet, as if measuring with their hearts. Lanore closed her eyes. So many ways to see things. The physical world tended to be hard, full of physicality and artifacts. The social world was more malleable, but there were places that were harder than any physical object. Words gave weight to things, making them more substantial and hard. There was the imagination and abstract, and she believed this was a world and they were all connected to it, and sometimes they had places that overlapped, just as sometimes the physical world overlapped, as hers and Tell’s were doing with ‘Eye of the Needle.’ Tell’s heart light was bold, pronounced, and there was no doubt she would be a fierce enemy, but there was no evidence of malice or anger. She opened her eyes. She stared at her lap.

“I have filled books with things I have seen,” Lanore said. If it was dark, the tone of her voice might have suggested they were going into a ghost story. “Inexplicable things. Things no one else has seen. Flying things...”

“Dragons?” Sheen asked.

Tell didn’t correct her.

“Dragons. Birds. Mostly the things are nature. Maybe because I love nature. I have more flowers than I can even count. I have seen people. I have seen cities made of glass and steel. I have seen islands in the dark. I have seen things looking back at me from the dark,” Lanore said.

“If you can see it, it can see you,” Tell said.

Lanore brought her eyes up to her. “Truth. How did you cross the Sleeping Forest?”

“Tell me, Seer,” Tell said.

“You didn’t walk,” Lanore said.

Tell gave no indication that Lanore could discern, but Lanore didn’t try to rewrite her understanding; ‘she did not walk.’ People that slept in the forest did not wake up. The glow beetles and ants would feast before a person would wake. Only the Walking Bear were known to resist the Sleep. That, and the Birds and Thumper Birds that could make a person ‘Sleep’ faster than a misstep. Not even fire snakes lived in the forest. Squirrels and rabbits avoided the Sleeping Forest. Lanore eyes narrowed. She took up a new paper, and with a graphite stick, wrapped in colorful, tightly wound string, and began drawing, first on air, then on paper. She drew a cloud. It wasn’t right, but she didn’t erase the cloud, just drew a circle. The circle wasn’t quite right, either. She shaped it into an oval. She drew lines on it, giving it shape. She retraced the lines making them darker. They seemed right. She hung something from it, a basket. She drew a line from the basket

down to an anchor. She attached the anchor to a tree. She decided anchor wasn't right. It was a bolt for a crossbow. No... That wasn't right either.

Tell touched her hand. "Would you like to see it in person?"

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