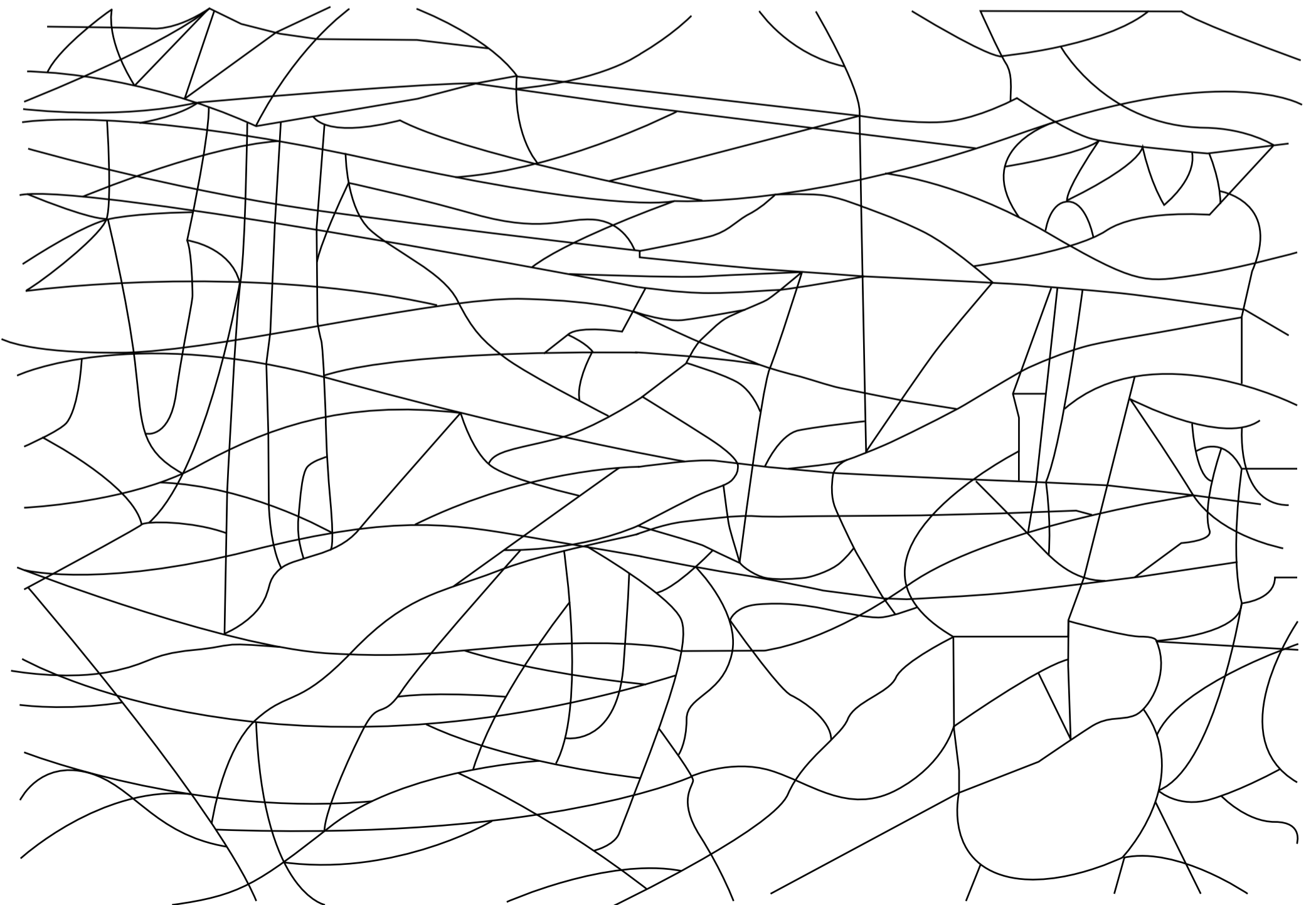


# Clattering

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## The Academy

Outside Sima's tall, slender window there was a wall. It was made of deep blue stone, put together as the ancestors intended, without mortar, stone over coarse Emoh stone, polished by water, collecting moss some seasons, but somehow always shining like Kalo pebbles in the stream. It was a low wall, easy for an adult to step over and even easier for Ruta, Sima's hippa, to clear.

When they leapt over it together at a gentle canter, Sima liked to release their hands' grip on Ruta's braids and their feet's pressure on the flanks at once, just as the hippa's right hind and left front feet hit the ground before the stone. They let the cords of Ruta's mane and their toes brush against the wall's ridge, where the sun had worn away the most color, as if borrowing the blue for its own shine. This pleasure occasionally turned to unwanted pain, when Sima let their mind turn from the path back to the Academy and onto their uncertainty, forgetting to remind Ruta to slow down before the wall scraped a few layers of skin from the tops of their feet.

Sima's bed faced this slender window, so that when they retired to their room or awoke in the morning, they could see the wall and the ways in which the guiding planets, Kalo, Emoh, and Utek, changed its color.

Sima's siblings' rooms also looked out on to the blue, so that all of them could clearly see the low wall, a feeble barrier between their fifteen stages at the academy and their eventual life as maintainers. They trained their eyes to shifts in color, desire and time.

Alone at night, a new feeling, Sima would stay up, watching, sketching the shifts in light as Utek's red gave way to Emoh's blue and eventually to Kalo's black absence. Whichever planet was in the foreground obscured most of the horizon, so close were the four to each other, always dancing into their corners. Many courses passed while Sima's charcoals itched and scratched the page, "This is the last place I will ever live." The thought tumbled in their mind, gaining speed and coming sometimes

at rapid fire, over and over like a chant or incantation. At first, they tried to bury it inside of themselves, deep as they could, to simply forget that their life, however long, was to be one of wandering, were it to go according to plan. When forgetting failed, they tried bargaining: if just one of their siblings had failed to become a Doyenne, all would be demoted to the role of future teacher, a shame that came with the compensation, at least, of confinement to a permanent home. But as they got older, they lost the ability to hope for their siblings' failure, and the thought again surfaced like tears through closed eyelids, now more slowly, sending small tremors through their chest, kneecaps, earlobes: "This is the last place I will ever live."

They wondered if other students experienced this intrusive thought. Their attempts to ease the anxiety by transmitting it, though, as if its fire were a limited resource that would dim if spread thinner, only added to their sense that the sentence did not belong in their mind. "Do you ever think about how this is the last place you will ever live?" they asked at breakfast, addressing two quintets many years their junior, between bites of thick khoo. For a moment, the question seemed to register with the dogs accompanying their audience. One tried to cross their left hind leg over the right, scratching at the small scab that outlined the stones that had just been implanted down their thigh. Another jumped off their person's lap, choreographing a routine around their feet. A third rolled onto their back, stretching their paws up overhead, as if surrendering, or taking in the midday sun. But these animals' more personable companions offered Sima only nothings and small laughs. Finally, the boldest child rose to their challenge: "We don't live here, Sima. We live all across Tellus, in every Meeting House and every garden. We just haven't moved in yet."

No, they knew this was the last place they would live. They just did not know, not just yet, that later, by switching up the tense, they could come to rely on this prayer.

## The Doyennes

As they entered their 20th stage, Sima had become a Doyenne, and as Doyennes they and their four siblings were now the oldest students in the academy.

As a Doyenne, Sima no longer slept with their siblings on the large bed of dried cereals they had shared since their 5th stage. A loss and a gain: this room with the slender window was their own, an earthen platform for a bed, a desk formed from mud from the river Fluss, but they had no one but Ven to whisper to when their mind got stuck on one concept in the night. When Sima was younger, they could always count on Sohail to cut off their speeches. “It takes five meters of linen to make a dress, maybe 200 meters of thread to sew it together,” they’d begin. Sohail would have been patient, at first, asking what they were thinking of making, when they would find time to assemble it. Sima had to keep going, though. “This means someone plants a few kilograms of flax seed, waits one current before weeding, watches each blue flower enjoy its sole day on Tellus, waits a few more currents for the harvest, and all that before they can even begin the shocking and rippling and retting and drying and breaking and scratching and hackling and spinning with wet fingers, then spinning with dry, boiling and beating the yarn, weaving the cloth,” they would go on, until their going made three of their siblings angry enough for Sohail to intervene. “So this is why you shoot like a 9th-stager—you’re busy planting imaginary gardens?” Sima, who loved to be teased by their sibling, would take this invitation to picture future plants they would maintain. Alone, now, no one stopped them from keeping going, wondering who did the spinning, who built the loom, who found the dyes to make their linen its light purple. And why were certain hues, now that they thought about it, the ones that required the sacrifice of thousands of snails, and therefore the labor of so many prayers, reserved for maintainers? They would be up all night, now, with objects to reverse engineer and problems to choose between repressing or solving.

As a Doyenne, they only attended meeting service. Their studies under the many trellises of leaves and fragrant flowers were finished, and they were to spend their time in the workshop, in the library, in the stables with Ruta or out foraging. They noticed that time had a different measure, now that the horn that marked the hours between periods no longer applied to them. If the planets were obscured by clouds, Sima might forget to leave their room for a whole day. On others, they would follow shadows, which seemed to move around the academy like a sick cat trying to find a private place to die. The empty space in a patch of blue light would drag its feet out their window and onto the wall, and Sima would run out of their room just in time to catch it creeping into the meeting hall, where the newly enrolled were getting their arms measured, into the annex connecting the hall to the kitchen, down to the cheese cellar, where it would disappear into the cave’s black. They would hurry back outside until they found what they took for the original shadow, evaluating its shape to notice any changes to its borders, just to the edge of the lunch grove.

As a Doyenne, Sima was no longer allowed to dine under the steeped awnings of woven red Maple trees with the other students. They had to forage and hunt for their food in order to prepare themselves for life on the paths between maintenance appointments and meeting houses. Unlike the other Doyennes, though, Sima was a poor hunter and had no patience for foraging, and as a result they had, in just one stage, gone from being slow and a little heavy to slow and very thin. Their siblings towered over them more each morning, as if the time they gained, once free of the structure of studies, was itself a food. Sima had always been smaller than their siblings, and whether they liked to acknowledge it or not, they were smaller than even students in their 13th and 14th stages. Their skin, usually a deep brown, had taken on a yellow undertone, which their siblings exaggerated when capturing their image in paint. Their equally deep brown eyes grew somehow larger, setting

themselves further into their face and garnering them a new nickname from their siblings: Big Buggy.

Those were the eyes that followed the shadow, and it was the shadow that helped them see what others missed. Families arrived, trying to present five children as siblings, and Sima saw the trainers pull aside one or two of the small beings that did not quite seem to complete the set.

These families were always turned away, whenever their lie was discovered, but Sima saw that the “when” mattered. Most came not for admission but for the meal that broke up the day of application. Sima was happy when the one who had been caught, the child whose accent was a little different from the other four, or who failed to remember some of the words of the family’s preferred lullaby, got away with a big bowl of stew, following their own lightless guides to find the best place to hide and eat in peace. The hunger of the stoneless mattered more than the hunger of maintainers, Sima understood, just as well as they understood not to repeat this

## The Story of Nani and Kalo

W h e n  
there was only the sun, and  
the sky seemed to have some vacancies, it is  
said that Nani, Jaffir, Ayla, Chul, and Veridis emerged  
from the great crater. They emerged whole, brown, alone.  
They wandered, they drank from the ancient rivers, they took rocks  
from the river banks, they broke them in their hands and wrapped them in  
clay, and from these clay-coated pieces of the sacred river stone, they made their  
lovers, their friends, their dogs, their spiders, their hippos, their fish, their snakes,  
their beetles, their birds, their cats big and small. They made every living being from the  
broken rocks, and it was like this that they continued to wander along the ancient rivers,  
breaking rocks, making beings, surprising one another with the many ways a being could  
be formed and reformed. One day, when Nani was alone on the bank of the great river Fluss,  
they heard a small sound beneath the current, a little call. Nani dunked their head into the water,  
gently moving stone after stone, following the sound until suddenly they came upon a purple black  
rock so large they could not see its base, though they looked directly into the single black eye peering  
up at them from this rock. The call came from within the rock, and Nani reached down to loosen it,  
pulling it up out of the water, almost falling into the current. Looking down into the eye, Nani saw  
everything and everyone and they were content, full. Nani went to their siblings to show them this  
wonder. The siblings circled around the rock as the rock blinked back up at them, until they too felt  
full. What to do with this feeling? Jaffir said to place the stone back where Nani had found it, Chul  
said that they should bring the rock with them to study it further, and Ayla suggested they bury  
the rock to quiet the sound. Veridis, at first, said nothing, touching the smooth underside of the  
rock, still listening to its call. From this listening, Veridis named the one-eyed rock Kalo. Nani,  
uncertain, asked the calling rock what it wanted and what it was called. The rock turned its  
eye first toward Veridis, “Kalo,” it hummed, turning its eye upward, and Nani understood.  
Holding Kalo, Nani began to spin, whirling themselves up, spinning, spinning, the ground  
steaming as the fire in their veins turned them into a great spinning screw, until finally  
they launched the singing rock into the sky. Kalo watches over all the beings of  
Tellus, keeping their song radiating through Chul’s wind. Kalo’s eye  
looks out to the great sky beyond Tellus and is visible only when  
it is time to harvest the great cereals, to begin the preparations to make children and to bring death  
to the ailing. Kalo watches us and  
reminds us we are full.

## Parting Gifts

Sima’s lack of hunting skill was a serious matter, and each of their siblings tried in their own way to help: Shevek by crafting Sima straight arrows with red cardinal feathers at the end; Saad by slipping a small hand-made book of edible grasses under Sima’s door; Sohail by knitting Sima a thick sweater which was impervious to brambles and thorns; and Shona, never subtle, by killing small birds and leaving them tied to Ruta for Sima to eventually find and cook in a small fire in a little glade by the blue wall. Knowing their sibling responded with more urgency to being needed than being instructed, they enlisted the help of younger students, trading treats in exchange for a 7th-stager’s convincing performance of being lost, hungry, in whatever woods Sima had chosen to lose themself in, or offering to do a 13th-stager’s service hours if they’d agree to beg Sima to show them how to shoot. Sima always helped the faux-helpless sent their way, but it didn’t seem to translate into their own development.

Sima, after all, did not think much about these offerings. The arrows did not conjure thoughts of meals that would sustain their maintenance, though admiring the feathers did give them ideas for patterns they would later cast into panes of glass. They enjoyed holding one tight in their hand, trying to reconstruct all details of the original bird from those they could find in a single, plucked element of it. The book went unread, even after they found themself hungry, out with Ruta far from the academy, in tall grasses uninterrupted by bushes, uncertain which were safe. The book was useless, having been left in the stable, where Sima had meant to read it while the hippas had breakfast. Just as they had found the right position—propping themself up with one arm, holding the book with the two hands of the other, planting their thighs into the ground—they looked around, and noticed a new red in the undercoat of Saad’s hippa, Noit, whose hair they usually mistook for a more boring acorn color. Only Utek’s light seemed to have passed through the building’s wooden slats, a common impairment in maintainer’s work before the invention of glass.

Filtered this way, Saad’s hippa was suddenly the most beautiful of the five, water now dripping over its temporarily red nose and onto its muzzle.

The sweater, admittedly, offered real protection, since Sohail knew Sima the best of their siblings. But even this more thoughtful gift went overlooked when Sima would strip it off, annoyed by their own sweat, just before jogging into a patch of roses, which, having lost their flowers, had offered insufficient color to attract their attention. They were most grateful for the squab, and for Shona’s literalism, as the roasting took long enough to give Sima time to plot out the metallic salts that could stain glass into a jaundiced terracotta. They wanted to give the impression of a clay portal, and to turn their own symptom of malnutrition into a lens that would filter visitors’ views.

Every time that Sima went out to hunt, in fact, every time that Sima did anything at all, they thought only of glass. Their mind was filled with thick flowing orbs of molten glass, moving from shape to shape. They muttered to themself, wondering if they might come up with new ways to join glass, to mold glass, to melt glass, to shape glass, to break glass only to mend glass and bend glass once more; they had an unending desire to be making glass no matter what they were doing, what they had set off to do, and always, before they knew what was happening, they would find themself tying Ruta up in front of the large workshop so that they could try out just one more test on one more panel of one more piece of glass. They had always been like this. As much as it interrupted their progress or portended a future failure to survive the demands of their work, it was this unending obsession with glass that allowed Sima to advance to the Doyenne stage, despite their inability to fully round out their education.

It was clear enough to Sima that they thought only about glass, at least, but others disagreed, saying they had mastered both the skills of glass and life. Sima understood

these two skills to be one. They knew that they were the sibling called when a hippa went too long without a pregnancy, or when a builder came to the academy after their second set of twins or triplets, anxious about their unmet obligation to bring a set of five to birth. Even a Doyenne did not yet have permission to enter the room where the rare living stones were kept, but they were old enough to consult, to take the would-be parent to the same outcrop where they knew Ruta and their siblings had been conceived. They offered only a guiding question, a construction that might answer it, some privacy, and the outdoor clearing. But trainers noticed that those whom Sima questioned returned with their problems replaced by new life.

At the final assessment, the trainers took much longer to approve Sima’s advancement than the others. This was just another imitation of helplessness, for the small glazier’s sake. It had been generations since they’d seen such a glassworker, and only the oldest trainers, those appointed when the teachers were given the maintaining stones themselves—an honor that made them equals more with the anointed dogs, than with their students, they knew—who had lived long enough to see windows like Sima’s, and they had no choice but to make a Doyenne of them. In the locked room, on the date of their 19th stage, they did not debate Sima’s qualifications, which everyone understood. Instead, they calculated the amount of time the students would assume one of them would waste arguing against their eligibility, and spent that hour planning how to keep the secret of the stones’ power. The academy relied on its charges not knowing their life was underwritten by Kalo’s healing properties, and to advance a student who was unknowingly testing those powers with self-starvation risked revealing certain facts too soon. After all, who wants to live forever?

## The Flood, Emoh and Etek

*K a l o  
and the sun watched the  
siblings as they wandered the planet  
with their people, their beings, breaking rocks,  
drudging them in mud, eating from their trees and  
their bushes until the surround, the sky, began to weep  
uncontrollably. This weeping continued and continued on and  
on and on and on and on and soon the water began to gather. The  
hippas could not walk, the dogs could not run, the spiders disappeared,  
the beetles took to rafts of leaves. Veridis called this whole time the flood.  
The siblings and their beings took shelter on the high mountain, Tibor. On  
the mountain they could see that even the great rivers had grown so much  
that they disappeared. Their whole home was water. Their beings were afraid.  
The siblings held hands, pressed their foreheads together, and considered their  
fate. Soon Jaffir began to sway, then Ayla, then Nani, then Veridis, then Chul.  
They began to form a small wind with their swaying, they slowly lifted into  
the air on to the blanket of their shared wind, they swayed and swayed,  
making their wind blanket larger and larger until the blanket stretched  
across all of Tellus and the siblings inhaled a great breath, hugging all the  
water into the wind blanket. Swirling it into a ball, they tied a knot  
from the wind and Nani began to spin once more, thrusting the large  
blue orb of wind and water into the sky. In relief, Veridis named  
this new blue being for their largest, most genteel lover,  
Emoh. The siblings had drained their home, but the only  
place they could not drain was the one from which  
they emerged, which is now filled with  
water: our calm, abundant sea,  
E t e k .*

## Big Buggy Prepares to Leave

“Sima, you’ll starve out there if you don’t bother to learn how to hunt better,” Shevek had said one day, sitting on the blue wall, watching Sima sketch the beginnings of another window of Kalo. At their feet, Sima’s light brown short-haired messenger dog, Ven, slept entwined with Shevek’s hairless, blue-grey Mori. Sima took pleasure in imagining Ven and Mori as two panes, needing their guidance in finding their way to form a full panel. At that moment, the space between their wrapped tails formed an aperture, through which Sima saw the development of whole atmospheres, refracting rays of cobalt via clouds and onto the glass formations they would build, destroy, reconstruct, and maintain. They tried to ignore their impulse to start planning how to render the fur of Ven’s likeness in glass, knowing they owed Shev at least a reply.

“I’ll be fine.” Sima continued their drawing, lightly edging in the purple tint of Kalo’s icy poles. Shevek rubbed their fingers on the blue stone, pushing away small green flecks of pollen from its surface. They paused their polishing to study Sima, whose perfectly circular oiled head glistened in the bright, slightly blue sunlight, their side braid, thin and curly, tucked behind their ear.

Shevek’s nostrils flared as they let out a long audible sigh, rolling up the sleeves of their linen garment. As they considered Sima’s slender hands, long nail beds, like spiders, they swallowed a thought: repeat themselves? They held their tongue. The birds spoke for them, and the light shifted. Sima felt the considered repetition anyway, and went on: “If I have four maintainers working together to make sure I eat now, what’s to stop me from finding others on my path?”

All the while, Sima could feel Shevek’s looking at them, could sense the tilting of their head to the side as though they were evaluating a messenger dog or a

hippa or a small child, which Sima suspected is how Shevek saw them, diminutive, defenseless, and not ready to cross the wall. At times, it felt like Sima had passed through different stages from their siblings, despite sharing the same time’s passing, and they began to whisper the number with each new rotation, starting at thirteen, one past twelve, trying to find the cause for the difference in their shape, in their size, in their calling from those with whom they’d slept the prior seven stages. Half the trainers held Sima above the others, awed by their perception. These were the more senior members of the academy, who knew that their intuition and their ability to shape were more important than hunting and foraging, practices, some whispered, that reduced the academy to a finishing school. The junior members, those tasked with leading students in the more physical lessons, tried their best to forget Sima existed, preparing themselves for what might have to become guilt, when they died on the road, by eschewing responsibility in advance.

Shevek and Sima went on like this for some time, listening to birds calling back and forth between one another in a slowly escalating chorus while Shevek rubbed the blue stones with their fingers until their hands were of the same sea. Sima, drawing, periodically looking up, their collar bone seizing as their neck swelled, thrust their head upward, straining to study Kalo, who was as close as they would be during this time in the current. Their eyes searched, darting from side to side, finding the small indentations of blemishes, craters, and marking them, not bothering to look down, in their sketch.

“We’ll cross the wall next current and I’ll go north while you’ll cross the first bridge.” Shevek’s voice seemed to break at this phrase, whispering the last syllable. They touched their shaved head, finding their braid, twisting it around their finger. The veins in Shevek’s neck pumped in worry, the light brown

stubble on their freckled scalp flexing under the weight of their blood.

Mori groaned in their sleep, scratching where a small insect had touched their ear. Ven did not wake, but one pup’s moan was enough to make both siblings turn their attention to the dogs, watching Mori’s eyes dart under closed, nearly translucent gray lids. Mori, like Shevek, seemed to be all one muscle, such that if one part of their body moved, the rest of it joined in a chorus of tension and release. Sima worried that Mori dreamt what their person hallucinated, some great harm falling to their sibling before they would even find their way as maintainers. They pled with Ven, as if they could hear their thoughts, to convince the creature it cuddled to dream of new smells, rather than departed friends. Losing interest, Sima turned their attention again to the planet.

Sima was too polite to offer suggestions to their trainers, but they often worried that their study of the planets focused too narrowly on the three visible from a vantage point on this land, looking up. They were fixated on Kalo, too, since they felt the pressure of the stones in their arm increasingly, as their skin stretched with each passing phase, and they appreciated, of course, the combination of light made possible by Kalo’s reflection joining up with Emoh’s and Utek’s. But their studies never focused on Tellus, the ground beneath their feet. Despite their perception, Sima experienced insufficient paranoia—they had no reason to believe this gap in their education was an intentional withholding—and felt it was a common problem of perspective. But as Shevek begged them to think more about their pending, permanent travel across the only planet whose properties of light had not been subject to their examination, they felt frustrated.

A moth flew hurriedly through the calm breeze, pulling Sima’s attention down, where they found Shevek’s still worried eyes. “Shev, I know that.”

The bridge was built in the old way, without mortar, endless arches stacked upon each other in five stories, one after the other, endless curvatures. From the Academy, the bridge was beyond the blue wall to the west, stretching so far into the distance that it did not seem to have an end. It spanned over the lands, through the hamlets with their tall ancient living buildings, and all the way through the calm sea of Etek. It ended in the city, Tibor, where approximately half of the planet of Tellus’s population lived.

Beyond Tibor, on the other side of the bridge, were more towns and hamlets. Every ten leagues, as was dictated by the ancestors, there was a Meeting House dedicated to one of the guiding planets. Each Meeting House was unique, always made on a foundation of heavily landscaped trees, carefully placed carved stones, large urns filled with recent rain and lit with colorful stained glass. Some Houses had many rooms, some had no rooms at all, and some were simply a circle of benches in a clearing with one tall sturdy ancient urn and a small stained-glass pavilion in their center. Some had been met by poor maintainers leaving a mess to be cleaned, sloppy work to be redone, messenger dogs sent back to the Academy to report a maintainer, aging or in need of retraining. Still others were the stuff of legend, spoken about at the Academy as though the finest places of worship, where the gods, Nani, Jaffir, Ayla, Chul, and Veridis, might still dwell with their lovers. As dictated by the ancestors, Meeting Houses could not be placed on any maps—either one knew where one was, whether from study or on the winds, or they happened upon it.

“Big Buggy,” Shevek pled, “little sibling. I am not asking you to change. Only to start to notice.” This was the art the Academy taught, after all: the great library held no tomes of the uncompleted maps to guide their labor. However often the faculty assessed their facility with arrows or kiln or hippas. The wisest trainers knew their assignment was bigger than these

small tasks, even if they evaded specific instructions. There was desire, time, and light, and the calling to notice and listen to them.

“I do notice.” For a rare moment, Sima let their gaunt face register the frustration. “Sometimes I think I notice more than we’re supposed to, even. I know how to maintain the windows. I don’t know how to maintain my balance.”

## Their Final Window

After exams, before leaving the academy for good, new maintainers were expected to complete the Pass. This final project took the form of a gift, one meant to ground younger students in their current location, helping them put off questions about the world outside the school—or their lives before admission—until they were sufficiently used to their roles to weather doubt. While the Pass officially started only after advancement to Maintenance, it still took place before new maintainers received their assignment. More cynical students presumed that poor performance led to being shuttered off to less desirable calls for healing or reconstruction.

Out of the earshot of trainers, Shona whispered a memory they had from stage four, still living on the shores of the Veridean sea with their parents. There, they built giant piles of wet, sandy mud and called them cathedrals, writing new verses for the mud people to incant while they waited for rain to come and decimate their temporary house of worship. Shona covered their own body with the ruins of the former church, reclassifying themselves as a shooar, wiggling their imagined curling shooar-tail and calling it a parent. They reformed the mud into five offspring, and enjoyed inventing more interesting ways to let each of their fabricated kids die.

Shona had gotten into games, they explained, because their elders always assumed one could not play and listen at the same time. Everyone seemed to speak more freely the louder Shona screamed, the faster they sprinted around the outskirts of some official meeting, the more detailed their narration of fantasy, the more macabre their songs. One day, they swore, they eavesdropped on a story about a maintainer, Lafar, famed for their laziness, whose Pass never took place at all. Shona had been crawling under the table, tying the adults’ legs in imaginary string, forming an unseen web that laid out an interpretation of Shona’s understanding of their interpersonal connections,

when one of their parents asked if anyone had heard how Lafar was doing.

Saad insisted this was only a dream, one that Shona had first dreamt when they had relocated, and that they never played the games they had invented in this retroactive nostalgia. They argued that, with four immediate siblings and many generations of twins, triplets, sextets living in the same space—and with their shared understanding that, as a quintet, they would lose access to these kin as soon as they reached the 5th stage—there was no space for the kind of solitude Shona imagined had enabled them to overhear rumors. But Shona insisted that Lafar was real, that their elders worried about them, and that, after their exams, Lafar had claimed to have unlocked a lost vision for light.

Lafar’s specialty was illumination, so they said, and after years of study, their excuse went, they began to see outside the spectrum of light that typically defined beings’ sight. Now, they could see colors unrepresented in the cathedral’s windows, shadows that failed to correspond directly to the shapes that stood in the light’s way, rays that could bounce off the most non-reflective surfaces, turning corners to brighten winding caverns. On the day they were to leave the academy, they presented their final work, which entailed hanging a small circle of plain glass from the ceiling of the meeting hall. Everyone waited for something to happen.

Though nothing apparently did, Lafar looked satisfied, even smug, as they took their seat and waited to be congratulated. At first, they refused to describe the work, insisting it spoke for itself. As the trainers pushed harder, and it became clearer to Lafar’s siblings that they risked their standing by refusing to offer more information, they began to explain. Lafar insisted that a prismatic pyramid was now arcing out from the small, swinging sphere. It was a permanent

installation, they added, a gift to future students, one that could be appreciated only once the trainers had learned to teach this manner of seeing.

Those in charge saw not a light show but a ruse. It was too late to rescind Lafar’s appointment, but it was not too late to revise it.

Like all maintainers, Lafar followed their own path across the bridge. Like most maintainers, Lafar was sure they were going their own way, since they were given only the roughest itinerary. If so, their way was one without light, since every village they came upon seemed to need maintenance underground, in webbed caves, in hollowed trees, in cellars, and always at night.

Shevek did not believe this story, though they always let Shona finish their retelling of it. “How would our elders even know what happened to Lafar? Are they supposed to have defected?”

Shona did not remember. Their refusal to lie, to make the story more believable by inventing plausible explanations for it, eroded a bit of Sohail’s distrust. They were not ready, though, to start distrusting the academy itself: “Maybe Lafar got what they wanted? Those places seem dark to us, but they probably look different to someone more trained in illumination.”

Saad resented their siblings’ commitment to optimism, arguing that, if the story were true, it would not surprise them. Things get broken in the dark all the time, and why wouldn’t a maintainer be called to fix them?

Sima was not concerned with faith, but with material. They were always pressing Shona to remember more of the story about the Pass itself, whether anyone had tested light in its area for unusual properties, if the circle had been moved, if any students in the intervening years had claimed to be able to see it, if it were a

true three-dimensional pyramid, or a simple triangle. The most information they were able to elicit, though, was that one trainer swore that when they locked eyes with Lafar, searching for a smirk that would give away their lie, they found a placid face with previously blue eyes now a hazy green. Sensitive to doubt, Shona mistook these questions for skepticism, and felt little motivation to learn more. They would storm off to hunt, or to daydream, if Saad was right, leaving Sima to work out the mystery of a sculpture’s wave-particle duality on their own.

Since they first heard this story, Sima had known that they wanted their own Pass to reveal Lafar’s. If it failed, it would at least be an act of kindness to their sibling, who might finally understand that Sima was the only one on their side. They also hoped to defend the stranger, Lafar, who was out there somewhere likely assessing the bacterial makeup of a rind that had gone wrong in some distant storage, who might or might not have given up on their work. More out of an impulse to prove themselves than fear of a bad assignment, though, they wanted to produce a sculpture that would function whether or not it succeeded at expanding the spectrum of visible light and revealing Lafar’s gift. Sima’s Pass, they hoped, would be beautiful enough that the youngest students would enjoy admiring it, like a mobile. It would be difficult enough that the trainers who resented their failure to learn to hunt or forage would have to acknowledge their talent. It would be conceptual enough that the trainers and doyennes who found craft, on its own, meaningless, would agree that it advanced the discipline, in some small, cognitive way. If it simply revealed Lafar’s invisible abstraction, that would be enough.

They began by collecting used garments, too worn to be repurposed, from former Doyennes, to use as molds. Sima placed the frayed dresses in a combination of clean sand, water, and minerals from Tellus clay. Rather than removing the linen, which would

have allowed them to cast glass in its empty place, they covered the cloth directly in colored glass powders, letting the combination sit before pouring layers of molten glass and glue. Once kiln-fired, the fabric and glue burnt away, leaving a shell of soot in the shape of the clothes of their former classmates.

These glass sculptures were sufficiently pretty, but the work did not feel related enough to the practice of maintenance. They were tasked with healing, with facilitating others’ creations and helping them go on existing, but the production of merely aesthetic objects was far from their charge. Until they learned Lafar’s secret, which Sima was certain was no hoax, this project would only confirm the rumors that they lived at too far a remove from their responsibilities. By creating these ghosts, though, Sima developed a solid excuse for their need to climb a ladder to the ceiling of the meeting hall, ostensibly to plan the least invasive hanging system for their life-sized sculptures. From there, they did what no one had thought to do in the intervening decades: they put their eye to Lafar’s small circular pane, and looked down. The sight of the light pyramid shocked Sima so much that they stumbled, grabbing the glass circle instinctively, since this small object was the only thing in reach, and found themselves sliding down the ladder’s steps with the lens in hand, praying it would not break before they had a chance to study it.

A few of the academy’s residents noticed Sima wandering, holding a handle-less looking pane of glass while Sima examined the coats of the hippas, the hair of their siblings, the rocks protecting the garden bed from unwanted growth, the bark of trees, and the shadows. With the help of Lafar’s lens, Sima quickly found that a small percentage of what appeared to be simple, abundant Tellus slate rock was, from their new perspective, an unfamiliar variety of iridescent stone. They repeated the sand-casting process, this time mixing in ground-up stones of off-spectrum colors,

and placing the dress-shaped panes into the walls of a greenhouse of stained glass. Hiding their discovery until the day of the Pass required Sima to work in the dark, so that when Shevek or one of the younger students came into their workroom by surprise, the sculpture’s strange surface found nothing to reflect.

Shona, though, they wanted to surprise in private. Sima spent weeks recreating what they were sure was the secret to Lafar’s work both on campus and abroad, a tiny pair of contact lenses that would permit Shona to see what they’d imagined since childhood. They knew this risked spoiling their final day, since others would surely notice Shona’s joy in the meeting hall, their new approach to braiding their hippa’s mane, their manner of running back and forth across the open field, chasing some invisible light. This was worth it to Sima, who wanted nothing but to prove their education was not a matter of mastering information the trainers already held, but of preparing to see what hadn’t been seen.

They were unsurprised to hear the rumors around the school that “the secret has finally been revealed,” or that “Sima knows what even the oldest trainers can’t imagine.” Always curious about changing shapes, though, they did pay attention to the faces of those receiving these gossip items, mentally tracing the squints, raised eyebrows, narrowed pupils, and asymmetrical grins that marked the expression of those newly in on a secret. During this documentation, they saw the face of Vetiv, the tallest and quietest of a quintet of siblings in their 10th stage, their 5th year at the academy, registering not the pleasure of new information, but absolute terror. Hearing that an unnamed secret was about to be revealed, Vetiv fled for their room, Sima following quietly, wondering why they assumed themselves caught up in whatever mystery was being revealed.

Vetiv darted through the pantry, down an alleyway separating the meeting rooms from the cathedral,

past the stable, around a few bends, eventually landing at the bedroom they shared with their four siblings. Since they were too young to face the blue wall, their window looked out into the school’s interior. While Vetiv packed, Sima could keep one eye on the courtyard outside of the meeting hall, where all the residents were coming in and out. In a few days, this garden would be overwhelmed with rumors of Lafar’s disgrace, their now certain vindication, theories on the spiritual properties of the prism’s expansion, and celebration of Sima’s discovery. Today, people were simply following their prescribed schedules: arguing over small bits of old texts; discussing new families joining the school; fantasizing about the future that awaited the new maintainers.

Sima saw nothing in the room that explained Vetiv’s panic. They held their new looking glass up to their left eye, looking for some secret they had not yet noticed. Vetiv’s stones looked more freshly polished than those of the average student in their year, but vanity was no great shame for their set. As Sima looked more closely, they noticed a thin powder collecting in the grooves of Vetiv’s nostrils and smile lines. They must be trying to mask their freckles, Sima reasoned, before remembering that Vorhail, Verat, Vivka, and Veagle all had skin uninterrupted by sunspots. When the resources were available—after a worker had labored by dipping a clean muslin cloth into a paste made of the softest wood, or in the same tree’s sap, then drying the cloth and repeating the process for a day, before turning it into a wick for an oil lamp, the soot from which, when mixed with Kippo’s butter, formed a soft, brown substance suitable for decorating the face—all were encouraged to highlight the green of their eyes, to draw attention to the cut of their jaw, to make their hair and arms shimmer as if a night sky. The academy did not teach the application of cosmetics designed to obscure the skin, though, but to highlight it.

Vetiv, weighed down with their makeshift bag, took a route out that was different from their tunneled path to the room. As they approached the academy’s center, they dropped their bag into a bush and ran towards Vivka, pulling them out of earshot of the students and trainers with whom their sibling had been speaking. Sima looked on, starting to understand, but not sure how to stop Vetiv from making their mistake. Sima watched Vivka’s face grow exasperated, saw Vetiv turn away from them and toward a trainer, and ran toward them just in time to hear the start of their confession: “There is something you should know about me,” they started.

Sima, approaching the trainer from behind, held their glass over their elder’s left eye, interrupting the conversation. “Vetiv,” they admonished, shaking their head fervently outside of the trainer’s view. “I asked you not to tell anyone until the formal show.” The trainer was halfway through their inquisition before their pupils adjusted to the temporary prosthesis, and they noticed something almost blue in the freckles showing under Vetiv’s powder, rays emerging from their stones as if their arm were a lamp. The trainer gasped. While they tried to pull themselves together, Sima grabbed Vetiv’s and Vivka’s linens, feigning a laugh, dragging them to the stables, shushing them until they could be sure they were alone.

“You’ve revealed your secret to me, and that’s enough for now,” Sima explained once they were alone. “There’s no need to risk expulsion if the only person who knows is leaving the academy next week.”

Vivka could not decide whether to panic further, to deny, or to express relief. They shifted their weight back and forth, almost dancing, becoming self-conscious about their mannered stress, and then trying to stand unnaturally still. “You know . . . what?”

“There’s no use in trying to be discrete,” Vetiv cut them off. “I’ve heard the whole school gossiping for days

now and I’m tired of pretending to fit in. I don’t fit in with four siblings who grew up without me. I can’t fit in at a school that would kick me out the moment they learned who I am, on an unfamiliar island,” they almost spat, “with people who believe one’s life is predetermined by the size of a litter.”

Sima paused, considering the set of five hippas from which they took Ruta, the set of five dogs from which they chose Ven, the set of five persons from which they emerged into their own room. Why did they need to start in fives, if they all wound up alone? Quickly, they remembered they had a panic attack to stop, and they explained to the two young siblings that their secret had not, in fact, been discovered: it was Sima’s own sculpture being whispered about across all ages and meals and meetings, and mornings, not these 12th-stagers.

“What do you heal?” Sima asked the child shining before them.

“I mend,” Vetiv said, gesturing to their green robe. “I make blankets, I upholster . . . I just redid all the curtains in the library with Trainer Reok, which was hard work, there was no clean edge to start from.”

“Mending is an important way to heal. And what’s your name?” “Sima, please, I’m Vetiv. You’ve known me for years.”

“But before I knew you, Mender. Before Vivka and Verat and the others knew you. What were you called by the people you loved?”

They did not answer, so Sima asked Vivka. “What is your sibling’s name?” “Their name is Vetiv.” “Yes. My name is Vetiv. But it is also Palit.”

“Palit, it is a pleasure to meet you.” Sima picked up the edges of Palit’s, of Vetiv’s, garment, admiring the care-

ful stitching, the unusual construction. “The school only admits siblings of whom there are five, because, the trainers say, only those born in the number of the gods are fit to heal.” They dropped the hem of Palit’s sleeve. “You have proven them wrong, being one of one, and a firm mender.” They looked to Vivka. “And you and your siblings have proved them wrong, too, being each one of four, each your own deme, or glazier, or feeder, or riparian.” They put their glass to their eye, pretending it revealed more than light. “If the academy is not ready for your proof, it is not time to reveal yourself. Trust instead that, one day, they will be ready for what you have shown them. When you leave here, come find me.”

They left the siblings who were not siblings to their tears and their embrace, and focused on finishing their sand casting.

By the time they were ready to present the work, Sima was indifferent to the praise for their accomplishment. They did not notice the worried looks of the strictest trainers, who felt any revelation was a sign of insubordination, a maintainer mistaking themselves for a god. They did not hear their siblings apologizing to Shona for years of doubt, or the new conspiratorial tones of younger students, who wanted to know more about Lafar and their gift. No longer a Doyenne, Sima was ready to stop looking around the Academy and start looking at Tellus itself, certain the stones were ready to talk, however closely they were guarded. This, they supposed, was the system they would spend their life maintaining.



## Their First Night

Sima sat in the tall grasses to the academy’s west, farther from the blue wall than they had been since they started school. They tried to think about the road instead of their new questions.

They had not been permitted to start their journey until all four of their siblings had met the requirements to become maintainers, and yet they were not permitted to travel together, either, despite there being hardly five directions to go on Tellus. Sohail would head north, along the Osi-Fluss, then winding toward the West Sea, before turning again to pass through the Royit mountains. Shevek would follow the Osi south to Sayif to begin a new Meeting House there. Saad had the clearest assignment: they would work on repairing the dams of the Fluss until they reached the Veridean sea, where a team of maintainers was gathering to construct a new waterway on the tip of the peninsula. Shona, a lapidary equipped with new vision, was circumspect when describing their plans, and everyone felt too guilty to push them for details.

Sima only knew to cross the Tibora bridge to Alzera Island. From there, they had been given no directions.

They tried not to think about Palit, now Vetiv, who would have to do so much work to pretend to complete their adopted siblings’ set. They still had years to keep convincing the trainers they belonged somewhere, and in that pretending, it would probably come to be true. They would come to know, if they did not already, the way Vivka’s hair circled across the pillow, the sighs Vorhail emitted when Verat put their arms around them in the night, the songs Veagle sung quietly when they stayed up later than the others. They would study this family’s personality long enough to master it. Once they started to believe their own story, they would have to prepare for the loneliness of a future of indeterminate length.

When there was only Kalo, the first day of their assignment, before the trading with Emoh, Sima and Ruta and Ven were able to focus on their route to Pielo. They parted the grass with clear eyes. Like the gods, they wandered and found water to drink. Though they could not fashion additional companions, or prospective meals, from the river’s clay, they still had plenty of food from Sohail, and they were pleased enough with the work they had left behind to convince themselves it was possible to leave their doubts, too, back with their installation. Sima beat the dust from their clothes as they neared Pielo’s bamboo woven gates. As they prepared to enter the town, they heard a voice from the dense cluster of trees lining the road. Quickly, Sima moved to hide, and then remembered they had not been told what to fear in their line of work, beyond dishonor. The call continued from within the woods, so they began to climb to get a better view. As they scrambled onto a middle branch, they found themselves face-to-face with a person who looked to have been sleeping until quite recently. Sima felt suddenly at home, and reminded herself, already out of practice at talking to others, that they had left the last place that would ever earn that title. The now familiar face smiled, and told them not to be so sure. “Let us not bother with the songs. I am Mala,” they explained, jumping down to the ground and looking up impatiently. “Are you hungry?”

Sima followed the Keeper into Pielo, a hamlet with a few earthen walls and huts. Mala led them to the open doors of the single room meeting house. No smaller than a hippa pen, the house had walls dotted with little glass windows and very tall, dramatic, ceilings sending shafts of light downward. As Sima examined the windows’ deterioration, noticing the condensation enabled by improper firing, a few residents of the village eyed them from a distance. They ran their hand over the tell-tale flaking of enamel, applied too thickly and leaving bubbles, and Sima wondered how

often maintainers passed through Pielo. The place was too small to warrant much attention, but it was also unavoidable on any Western route. Given the state of the building, Sima decided that whoever came to Pielo before them must not have stopped for long. It would take them weeks to remove the panes, clean them, redo their waterproofing, repair the wooden frames, before re-treating and repainting them, re-installing the glass itself, and adding new sealants.

“I am afraid our building, however badly it needs repair, will never be the Academy’s priority.” Mala offered this as an apology, as if they were the glazier and Sima the Keeper. Noticing Sima’s confusion, Mala explained that they weren’t there to fix the windows, but for a much faster gig: a would-be growing family needed assistance with fertility.

Sima kept their eyes on the glass, tracing the outline of Nani’s body, leaning into the glass river, with their finger. They wondered if they’d have time to at least clean the soot. They longed to show the rare, bright blue of the Fluss, more detailed than any they had seen at school, even if the glazier who created the panes had rushed through their enameling process.

“These lovers are Pielo’s best hope for the birth of future maintainers. All five have a family history of quintets, and they’re allegedly descended from ancient Verideans who settled in the area a few generations back.” Sima took their hand from the mental work they would have to abandon, just in time to catch Mala searching their face for a reaction. “It is rumored that one of those ancestors is still living, even, if you believe the winds.”

For the first time, Sima understood that, when it came to gossip, they knew less than the average resident of Tellus. The academy was protected from rumors. Sima did not want to start their life by admitting ignorance, though, so they simply nodded. The lovers

approached, each greeting Sima by flattening their palms against the stones in their exposed arm, and led them to their home.

Sima had helped give life before, but the academy’s isolation meant they normally had a chance to get to know the kippos or the dogs or the persons they assisted. They had, at least, always shared a meal before observing their charges’ sex. The people of Pielo seemed careful to avoid wasting Sima’s time, though, and it was with an air of self-conscious respect that in the dim light of the bijou house the five removed each others’ clothes and began placing their lips, as if in a premeditated order, on the inside of each other’s ankles, on their bellies, on their napes, as they shaped their fingers into wet, frictionless planes, curling at the edges before forming thoughtful fists, as they spat and rotated and began to focus their choreography on just one lover. One set of legs wrapped around their waist, while two pairs clamped around each of their thighs, and a fourth spread apart to hold down the left wrist. Now, Sima took their position, holding the stranger on whose efforts the lovers focused by circling their stoned arm around their neck. “You are ready,” they said aloud, “to grow the likeness of the gods’ number.” The person choked under the restraint, trying and failing to mutter their thanks. Sima wanted to ask whether they were enjoying themselves, but knew the answer from their own cold cheeks. It was hard for them to believe that life could start with such a sexless routine, but they repeated the process for the other four partners, as they had been trained. By the time their work was done, they were relieved the town of Pielo expected them to move on quickly.

## The Story of Utek

*There  
was always the sun,  
and then there was Kalo, and  
finally there was Emoh. They had  
seen each other across the dark. They met  
during the time when the people of Tellus wait  
for flowers, slipping on top of each other, produc-  
ing a being between them, purple and strong. Utek,  
they whispered together and so they lived, the small  
being always between them, circling Tellus, watch-  
ing the beings below. Over time, Utek grew larger,  
always voluminous, joyful, and then without  
warning, Utek became weak, their blood  
boiled up within their body. Kalo and Emoh  
watched in horror as their child slipped  
into a red state of ever death, their  
body drifting between the two  
lovers for all time.*

## The Beginning West

The western nut trees sounded like a running dog in a field. Listening, Sima let herself wake slowly to their rustling. Hammock swaying gently between the trees, Sima knew from their audible stomach that the sun had begun to lighten the skyline, Utek had begun to dim and the night's sparse meal had faded into their bowels. That familiar low rumble registered Sima's emptiness and in turn their self pity at their own incompetence. They still had some berries and oats, but those wouldn't last through the rest of the day. They resigned themselves to grass soup for supper. Kalo will keep me.

This particular day, the third in the cycle, the longest and always the most brutal, brought with it a new level of heat that Sima wasn't used to. They forced their eyes to stay closed, squinting inwards, tightened the linen rope of their hat, and tried to ignore the growing heat slowly creeping from their neck to their shoulder. The sun was up. Sima turned their mind to their siblings. Shona was likely smiling somewhere, their missing front tooth whistling as they pulled back their lips into that grin like a kippo, intertwined with the earth and the ground. They had probably found a large meeting house that needed new intricate stonework on its facade, Shona's favorite, and they'd stay there for many seasons. They hoped that Saad, with those Emoh eyes, had already found a lover on the roads. Sima let herself think of Saad's long thick black hair entwined with a shadowy other. Saad's hands were like lion paws, and between dreaming and waking, Sima felt their rough, lazy slip along their maintaining arm, rubbing small circles around each stone, Kalo, Emoh, Utek. Sima felt the cold tremble of the stones along their muscle and into their bone, and Saad was now in them and above them. A touch from Saad, Shevek's long adolescent braid in the grass like a snake and all that time in the field with Sohail and how they used to run their bony pinky along Sima's eyebrows. "I'll get closer," they always whispered, tracing, over and over, as Sima, like Emoh and Kalo before them, descended. And where was Sohail, Sima asked herself, if only to let herself forget the

fear of the answer: Sohail was in the mountains of Royit, where the people worship Utek alone. Maintainers had not been there for many stages.

The children at the academy would tell the story of Mangi, who had gone beyond the blue wall and was taken away by a Royit who came down from the hills, crossed the great river Fluss and shot Mangi with bright green arrows made from the poisonous yacht trees. It is said that Mangi froze on the spot, falling face first into a false death, only to be taken by the Royit, again across the great river, up to the hills to awake high above the Earth in a sea of beings wearing red and chanting to Utek. In their incantation, they tore Mangi limb from limb and feasted upon their small body. Thinking of Mangi sent Sima's skin to duck flesh, ignorant of the warm rising sun. Sohail was the strongest among them, but as the stories said, strength can always be depleted.

Sima began a small chant in prayer, calling on Kalo and Emoh to protect Sohail from the false death and the always inevitable red shadow of Utek. Putting pressure on their eyeballs, to help themselves see the red so Sohail might not, they began: Kalo, Emoh, Kalo, Emoh, Kalo, Emoh, Kalo, Emoh, Kalo, Emoh. They called the planets until they were all they could see and nothing at all. Satisfied, Sima saw Sohail in their mind. Their narrow shoulders embraced, welcomed warmly by the Royits, behind them the mountains, impossible, jagged Emoh rock, the Royits all in red, Sohail in their plain linen surrounded, encumbered, blissfully enveloped by red.

Satisfied with their prayer and idly touching themselves for comfort, Sima wanted to forget what they had suspected at the academy. It buzzed around in their thoughts like a gnat. What to do with these discontinuities? They hoped to find in Wooshi a beautiful but neglected Meeting House, a project that would require so much studying and practice that they would have no time to be tempted by rebellion. With the trading of the planets, though, their conscious thoughts always changed places

with those they had tried to repress. As they rode further, they began to worry their memory was off, and they set about telling the stories to Ruta, a great listener.

"We are taught," they recited, as if for a grade, "that the Kalo stones are rare, and that they must be saved for the maintainers and their animals, to ensure that maintaining keeps going." They bent down to scratch the stones in the thick muscle of Ruta's hind leg and tried to imagine their body less adorned. They remembered, in their life before the academy, that someone recommended, when they were anxious, to hold a stone tight in their hand. As they admired the first tree they had only seen in pictures, as they felt the thrill of possibly having gone the wrong way, they liked remembering they always held these stones.

## Emoh Milk

A few currents into their own journey, Shevek’s loneliness filled their mind with the academy, with images of their siblings’ bodies, now Shevek’s phantom limbs. In their place was the low hum of the Passus directing Shevek southward. The resonance filled their chest, and following the Osi made their journey at least physically easy. The south was more beautiful even than their memories of the sea. Somehow the golden cereal fields, the gentle yellow hills, felt alive and fertile. They looked almost like Hana’s body, rippling in Chul’s wind, brown mixing with orange and gold. They would fish along the banks, gathering berries, wild zucchini, emohkai, peppers, all of which had a flavor stronger than they’d known at the academy. The tastes came alive inside of them, and they would lie down and be warm. The south’s forests were scattered patches of trees, and in the evenings they’d hang their hammock between oak trees and wake to foggy hazes filling the valleys, only for the haze to lift by the time they and their beings set off again. The hum went on.

When two rivers split, it is often said that their power changes. They had been one, mingling, and at their juncture, they became two, distinct and different, heading elsewhere. In the case of the Osi-Fluss, its split was startling: the Osi became a slow, wide, and meandering river, placid, mirror-like, and the Fluss became mighty rapids racing across cream, tan, yellow, centuries-smoothed tellusian boulders. The relief of this contrast dawned on Shevek as they followed the slow, gentle trickle of the Osi down to Sayif at the southern tip of the continent. The Osi suited Shevek, it matched their pace, the calm quiet of their mind. To Shevek, it was fitting that it was Saad, beauty, speed, and danger who followed the Fluss, which could be described exactly the same way.

It was impossible for Shevek to think of Saad without thinking of the way Saad held Shevek’s neck before fucking, with the same grip the trainers always told

them to apply to the braided mane of hippas, loose and tight all at once. Saad held Shevek’s neck for the same reason, too, to signal your movements, your desires, your pleasures. They understood time differently from the others, Shevek felt, and it was this quality that made them a true Deme, somehow. Always, they could make time speed up or slow down at their will. They felt they could build a floor in an instant, but really it would take a whole trading of the planets, an entire cycle. This same time trick happened with Saad’s hands around their neck. They had lived for what felt like many currents with Saad’s hands on their neck, the blood flow so startling and intense, the faint feeling they could disappear into it, and it was often in this moment just before the others would join in, as Saad would signal their desire, that Shevek was most afraid of them. You could kill me, they always thought, and they could but they did not. It had been this way since they were very small, Saad always holding Shevek down, almost always somehow using Shevek’s neck to ensure their obedience, almost nearly to pain, holding them back from escaping, something Shevek would never do. But the miming, the pretending, that is what Saad wanted, and this ever game that they played was always goaded by the others, “Pin them!” Shona would shout and Shevek would think, but never say, please, don’t let me go.

As the sun began to head to the western edge of the horizon, evening was approaching, and with no hands around Shevek’s neck. They remembered they had not seen Mori for a long while, their body being easily hidden by the tall grasses and cereals. Where was Mori? Hana slowed and began to tremble like the rest of the landscape. Shevek, quieting, touched Hana’s side with an open hand. Their reply was deeper tremors, shaking Shevek’s legs.

Mori barked far in the distance, somewhere down river, and as soon as the sound hit their ears, Hana set off at a desperate run. Shevek automatically flattened

their chest against Hana’s bobbing neck, tightening their grip on their braids. Shevek’s thighs burst into a sudden agony as they squeezed, trying to keep hold of Hana’s midsection. Mori barked again, this time closer, and Hana huffed in anxiety, running still faster, leaving a wake of shocked flattened grasses sending pollen and dust in a small cloud behind them. Mori barked once more and then another sound, a scream maybe, or a yell. Squinting, Shevek could barely see past Hana’s ears, but Hana’s sprint had not slowed. One more bark from Mori, this time so near that Hana did slow, misdirected. Shevek squeezed Hana’s body gently, then waited, obedient, trembling again. They slid down from Hana’s back, but just as they were about to whistle for Mori, they appeared before them, panting, exhausted, shining with sweat across their shimmering body, their spinal line of black hair flattened by their perspiration. Between glances and yaps Mori communicated that there was something wrong and that Shevek and Hana should follow them.

Through the high grass, they followed Mori’s thin whip tail down a small hill to a circle of trees which hid a pond filled with milky white water. “Emoh milk,” Shevek whispered. This phenomenon, they recalled, was quite normal here in the south, where apparently the Emoh rock in the pools and streams would mix with the roots and branches of oak trees to create discharge. Foy had spoken about how intoxicating the Emoh milk ponds could be, and their eyes would roll back in their heads with pleasure at just the mention. Mori barked Shevek back to the present moment and pointed their nose towards the smooth surface of the pond, whose calm was punctured by a small triangle on the horizon. Mori continued to bark toward this small brown shape, and through Mori’s concern, Shevek realized this was a nose. It was likely attached to a person. As they hurried out of their linen outfit, the nose dipped slightly more below the surface. Shevek dove towards the nose, hoping to find an entire very intoxicated body.

Later, Shevek would say that they felt as though the sun had slipped down from the sky to fuck them. The depth of pleasure was fantastical, surreal, as though all of Shevek’s holes and appendages were both fucking and being fucked, as though they were being torn apart. It was as near to communing with the gods as Shevek had ever come, and as they stood up, realizing that the pond was only waist deep, against their will they let out a deep moan. Mori barked from the shore, goading Shevek into a hazy focus. Shevek felt as though they were being touched by hundreds of hands, at all paces and pressures, that the entire range of experience with another was somehow radiating through them. The nose sunk ever so slightly deeper as Mori’s barks from the shore grew fainter. Shevek pushed the emptiness of pleasure as far aside as they could, ignoring the somehow constant caressing of the water against their skin. Finally, they were close enough to see the dark shadow of a tall being beneath the pond’s surface. As they reached out and touched the other, they were immediately pulled below the surface.

Or that’s what they thought happened to them, since what they remembered was somehow living hundreds of physical lives, having wandered the hills and valleys of their own tremendous, grotesque, bombastic desires, having been fucked, bound. They were with someone, or someone was with them, a part of them, someone whom they had never known before, and it was the longest shortest time. Later, Shevek would describe what these two people did in the pond as fusing, because that is how the two felt to one another afterwards. Beside the pleasure, the next memory Shevek could recount was being dragged ashore by Mori and Hana, dog and hippa somehow finding a way to pull the two beings to safety. Shevek and their new companion would lie breathless on the shore for the few hours it would take for Emoh to be so close it filled the pond. An eye with lashes stared back at them, in the water.

On the shore, Shevek observed that their tall companion had eyes and body black as Kalo, with thick thighs dimpled with muscle, a face that looked like someone had tried to read the horizon and made a jaw instead. A small nick had been removed from their ear lobe and their smile appeared first in the center of their mouth. It opened to reveal a voice high like a small bird and a greeting Shevek did not understand, followed by a name they somehow already knew, Harthrem.

## *Veridis makes the Rules*

*The gods  
loved the early days of Tellus,  
when everyone was grateful for their names,  
their stones, and the lives that names and stones made  
possible. As Veridis spun Kalo into the sky, assigning them a more  
permanent home, the new planet rained debris kindly, only letting their  
pieces come into contact with intent. Here, a little hare, one now ageless ear  
flopped by its black decoration. There, a hippa, stone set in the ankle's bump. Every-  
where, communication, light bouncing off Etek's surface, dimmed by contact with its rocky  
seabed, then against the atmosphere, to return and be absorbed by the Kalo pebbles that had  
rained on the forest floor. All of the creatures of Tellus had a single stone, and all seemed content.*

*The gods, seeing this was good, took their turns imitating Veridis' work. Ayla found an underwater  
planet of their own, diving in the cool sea, wresting a shape from the current, and asking it its name.  
"Emob," they heard, just in time to toss it up, where it tried to push Kalo from its place in the sky. The  
pieces that rained down, when they found no creature to assign a second stone, dissolved into pools of water,  
forming Emob's milk.*

*Jaffir wanted to do the same, but no voice called to them from the waters. They searched the rivers, the ice mass-  
es at each pole. They put their ear to every puddle, trying to find a third. Finally, they heard Utek's names in the  
mountains, and looked up, only to find it already in the sky, purple and new, bouncing between the other planets in  
perpetual play. More stone rains came, and the creatures found themselves decorated with a third stone. In a row,  
blue and red and black, a lifeline.*

*Next came the days of the gods' unhappiness. The beings of Tellus, Nani warned, had almost as much power  
as their creators. The balance, Jaffir agreed, had been lost. The wind, Chul sighed, had little effect, blowing  
without upending life. Their siblings disappointed, Ayla missed the peace of their prosperity. Veridis, finding  
demand for neither fertility nor death, felt unneeded. They decided to restore their importance. The stones,  
they all settled, should become scarce.*

*Veridis walked from the mountains to the sea, swam to the little isle in its center, and plunged across  
again, gathering whoever had worked hardest to preserve the beginning's way. They showed  
these people how to build families, bridges, farms. They told them how often to meet, and  
what to say when they met. They showed them where to put their thumbs to produce  
pleasure, where to put their arms to produce offspring, where to put their students to  
reproduce the order. These are the rules. Maintain them.*

*From everyone else, they clawed the stones from their flesh,  
grinding them underfoot or skipping them across the  
surface of the water. These are the past.  
Forget them.*

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