

In the Stars

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In the Stars

"For you I could steal the stars- but I can also get them by legitimate means, if that impresses you more."

I leaned forward, an eager, confident gleam in my eye. I could see they were tempted by my proposition; finding an unclaimed *Ilnuum* was a path to wealth seldom found, finding a rogue, on the other hand, a precarious endeavor. A betrayal to Aktwe could mean death.

Starlight could only be harnessed by Ilnuum; those born with the gift were taken and taught in the city of the First Star. Our people's beginning had been prosperous. As our history tells it, our fortunes caused us to forget those great Spirits whom we owed our happiness. Aktwe the Spirit of the Sky, was angered by the greed and bloodlust that had turned brother against brother, destroying the light of one's soul. Because of this wickedness, he withdrew all light for many days and unleashed calamity: the darkness was so great and terrible it could be felt; cities were drowned in the sea, buried in earth, and consumed in fire. The survivors mourned not for their deeds, but for this punishment. It was the Great Lady who humbly raised her eyes to a sky she could not see and wept for her people; she begged Aktwe to spare them, to grant them his light again.

Aktwe could see her light, which shone brightly in a world darkened by iniquity and was moved by it. He taught her the ways of light and commanded that she and her descendants ensure that the light of life was never tainted again. She gave her promise, and upon this she was forever sealed to the power of Aktwe. This responsibility would ensure that man would forever cherish the light of life. The Great Lady taught this duty to her people and children, restoring light to each broken city.

I have never truly known if our history is true, but Aktwe was foolish to trust one woman's goodness as a guarantee for others'. The magicians of supposed descent from the Lady of Aktwe, practiced the art of catching starlight, of building devices which could hold it, direct it, and use it. Starlight, *ilnuu*, powers the great cities, heals wounds, cures disease- even prolongs life, and it is a deadly weapon. None can hold the sun, Aktwe's greatest light, but the stars were ours, and to *Ilnuum Sel*, the moon also.

I was born in the outskirts of the city Aktwe, a mote of dust surrounding bright light. When they came for me, my parents were glad. Our family could belong to a society of health and full bellies; their daughter would be their salvation. I left to the temple of the First Star, expecting my family would be looked after, compensated for their miraculous production of an *Ilnuum*. But starlight cannot change a name. My family was given no privilege, no elevation from their place in the dust. I haven't seen them since, and in my time as an *Ilnuum* of Aktwe I had few friends. The others knew I was not like them, my gaunt face and dirt-covered limbs marked me a stranger in their midst upon my arrival. I came a young girl of 13 and left at 15 wanting never again to return to that city.

My frustration soon became rebellion. I administered starlight to the people without permission, a crime against my nation. The men before me didn't share my intentions to give starlight to the poor or to save lives, but they would profit and distribute the precious resource further than I ever could.

I had started small, and by 19 I was a smuggler. I knew I would be discovered eventually. There was a reason it was so difficult to give starlight without sanction: without a device to contain it, it could only be given directly, and even an *Ilnuum* can only bear the strain of so much. These devices were controlled and guarded by Aktwen government. The black-market had

a few, but their crude substitutions were often fragile and unstable. There were others like me, Ilnuum who were giving starlight as they could. A time of change was coming. The hearts of the people called for that divine right to Aktwe's light. A revolution was beginning, a revolution I wanted to be a part of.

I soon encountered a man, bearing a name known throughout all Aktwen, the nation of our people. Milnah. The most powerful family of the First Star. He was called Tobek, a catcher of moonlight. His presence and political ties over the years of our struggle legitimized the people. He was our voice.

My first encounter with Milnah Tobek had struck fear in my heart. Surely if Aktwe had sent a punisher, it would be that Ilnuum Sel, but he passed me by, and entered the secret place that I had just left! I could not help my suspicions. I went back. I saw him before the “distributors” handing off starlight. The brightness was breathtaking. He sensed my presence and stopped immediately, striking out. I caught the deadly beam. For fear of spies, our identities were rarely known to each other in the rebellion. Although I could not hold as much light as other Ilnuum, I could gather or cast it away in an instant. I was the fastest "shooting star" alive. I tossed the light into a canister. The exchange was silent. I nodded my head in respect, my message clear- "I am not your enemy nor a spy".

It had never occurred to me that this encounter had begged his curiosity.

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"For you I could steal the stars- but I can also get them by legitimate means, if that impresses you more." I turned instinctively toward the voice. "Iksen says those were your first words when you joined the rebellion, very bold words."

I glared at him, assuming he was mocking me. I'd been actively avoiding him since we met, and I realized my actions must seem cowardly. Yet now he called me bold. He must have been enjoying this game of chase- he *was* mocking, no, *provoking* me.

"What do you want, Milnah?" I could not presume to use his given name. "You are plaguing me more than my own shadow." He blinked rapidly. I had made my offense clear. He paused, clearly uncertain of how to proceed. Then it was my turn to be surprised.

"Anyet, or Tiksa?" My given name, or my family name. That was how one asks to use a given name. This had become awkward.

"...Anyet." My family name must have been in the Aktwe records, I had never shared it. Family names can be followed. "Do you... want for me to call you Tobek?" I was shocked that he wanted to be on a first name basis. We had never been familiar and had only the cause and ilnuu in common, and even then, he was far above me.

He grinned broadly, seeming relieved. "I would very much like to be called Tobek."

"Alright." I didn't know what to say next, or how to talk to this man. I found myself noticing how striking he was, how handsome. Then I worried how I must look. I took little care for personal upkeep aside from basic cleanliness and grooming. I wanted to leave but was stopped.

"Anyet, will you join me for a meal?"

I was being asked on a date by Milnah Tobek, I was either dreaming or having a nightmare. I didn't want to seem eager, and honestly in that moment I absolutely wasn't... but I

didn't want to say no. "At midday... tomorrow?" I suggested, but he had the face of the man who had lost, so I amended, "is that inconvenient?"

"No, it wouldn't be, but there is a place that serves a wonderful evening meal, I was hoping you might agree to join me."

"Where?" He'd said it, an *evening meal*; this was more than casual interest. I couldn't believe it.

"Well, it's not so much a place, as a gathering." He cleared his throat. "I'd like for you to attend the Aktwenori with me."

I was speechless, the Aktwenori was the anniversary of our nation, the greatest celebration with the most prestigious Ilnuum in Aktwen. "Tobek, I am not a suitable guest... are you... are you mocking me?"

"No, no! I need you for the mission!"

That was unexpected. "A mission?"

He went on to explain his plan. With all the Ilnuum gathered to celebrate, the city of the First Star would be vulnerable- we were going to steal the secret to storing starlight.

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That was our first adventure, in the wake of our victory we became the faces of the revolution, and in the passing of a year, we became husband and wife. There was a phrase we shared in our wedding vows: "For you, I could steal the stars."