

Of Gods and Men

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## Introduction Essay

The first half of my senior project is a collection of myths and folklore of a fictional East African country, The Third Kingdom called Que-Som Kadesh in universe. The collection is framed as an anthology by the professor Owe Osango, a religious history professor at their royal university. While Osango tries to give each tale its due credit, he focuses on the ones heavily colored by his own relationship with his faith and history especially now as his endeavors to anthologize these tales go unsupported by much of his people. In particular, his father.

It took me some time to really find my footing for The Third Kingdom, even naming it was hard. The Third Kingdom having been a placeholder name until I could make up a proper name. But after figuring out the framing device for the myths and folktales, and the man presenting them as fact, I decided to lean in on the struggle between father and son, past and present, Owe vs. his society. In the world of The Third Kingdom, their history and religion are steeped in a deep oral tradition, to the point where it is considered taboo to write them and Owe is doing just that. His father, never appearing in the text but remaining an ever-present figure to the professor, was the village Orator in Owe's youth. He respects him, he is inspired by him, and he has brought shame to him. Owe's work became his way to deal with that, because he has no intentions of stopping what he started.

The Third Kingdom is geographically inspired by Ethiopia and Eritrea, with some cultural inspiration to. Specifically, the food and the clothing. I would have taken some inspiration from the religion, but Ethiopia, my initial framework for the modern understanding of The Third Kingdom, converted to Christianity in the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE and very little is left of those pre-Abrahamic religions that were once practiced by the people of D'mt/Damot and the Aksum Empire. So, I had to make a lot of stuff up. Using the geography as the jumping off point, I gave myself a key question to answer, "What would a people in these surroundings some one thousand or so years ago, believe

about the world they live in?” The first god, called Waas, that I made was the god of volcanoes and death inspired by the Gateway to Hell in the Danakil Depression.

Outside of the struggle between Owe wanting to help the next generations vs staying true to his elders’ wishes, there are some common myths that I wanted to touch on. Such as the descent into the underworld, an explanation on the why the seasons are the way that they are, and rightful rulers being restored. Initially, I was going to create a religion similar to the Greek pantheon as I’ve had the most exposure to it, but I wanted to challenge myself with this.

The second half of my senior project is the novella, *Any Way the Winds Blows*, that I started in The Art of the Novella with Professor Lewis in the Fall 2021 semester. It was inspired by the musical *Hadestown* and my love for winter as a setting and plot device. As well as the Great Blizzard of 1888. The novella follows Oliver, a poet turned train station manager with a history of abandonment and Amara, a wanderer just trying to make it to the next day. Amara enters Oliver’s station looking to buy the cheapest ticket she can afford, which happens to be his hometown. They’ve got a six hour wait until the next train and keep each other company. Because they’re the only ones there, they end up talking about their pasts. Oliver even tries to assure her that Harmon is a nice place, despite the hardships caused by the economic depression. Before the train can come though, they’re hit by a blizzard and die.

The original story was going to have a pretty similar premise, except they met on the train and ended with Oliver convincing her to go home with him and giving her his mother’s coat. I felt like that story was only interesting to me and would imply some not-so-great things about Oliver, which is why I ultimately scrapped it. Now, the story explores their journey through the afterlife and their fears of being forgotten by those living on earth. Oliver, a poet who never made it bigger than his patron allowed, and Amara, someone who actively chose to leave her family behind and now has no one left to care that she’s gone.

To save their souls from the fate of the forgotten, they have to appease Oliver's former patron, the goddess of life and death, Donna Bella. In doing so, they get heavily involved in a disagreement between the gods that will continue to kill a lot of humans if someone doesn't stop them. They don't really want to make any enemies, especially not of the gods, but if it means they'll be remembered, they're willing to do it.

The novella doesn't have a specific real world setting and I don't want it to. There is a specific year though, 1932. And there's a lot of focus put on train travel, taking into consideration its evolution, its impact on the economy, and the economic collapse's impact on it. Oliver's adoptive father and boss, Mr. Hughes, owns the rail company he works for. Mr. Hughes plays a major part in their world's afterlife but I am not sure how major of a part he's going to have in the story. Most of it takes place in the afterlife, Dur. So, I focused my research on how the afterlife was portrayed throughout different polytheistic religions. The one that stood out the most to readers during workshop, was the references to Dio de la Muertos with Dur's cheerful skeleton officials and their painted skulls who help new souls find their place in the afterlife. As well as the significance of being remembered by the living. There's also still that Greek influence in that souls need to pay a toll to move on to the next life.

Oliver and Amara have one major thing in common, they're both half-muses. Muses in this world are the embodiments of seasons and they've got a lot of kids to help make up for the fact that there's only four Muses. Oliver is unique in that male half-muses are rare. An addition I made to the story during revisions that makes a lot of sense in hindsight was turning the titular wind into a character. The wind causes a lot of conflict and loves to mess with Oliver and Amara, but it is also the reason the two meet.

It was a hard decision deciding to deviate from my original plan of just doing the myths and folklore for my senior project. I felt like I was giving up. But after talking with my advisor Professor

Lewis, she made me realize that it was okay. That I wasn't expected to have the full story finished in a year. I really do love the novella I am working on and the pantheon I've created for the Third Kingdom. Polytheism has always been so appealing to me because there is no one set interpretation and no one god that everyone worships. It has been a fun and informative journey figuring out how humanity developed polytheism.

## Religion and Folklore of the Third Kingdom

Introduction by Owe Osango

I would like to preface this collection with some awareness. These are oral tales collected from across the Nine Great Regions, *Nin-Aloté*<sup>1</sup>, by me and my associates for the purposes of this anthology. Our kingdom has a rich oral history that we hold dear and this history is not often welcome to outsiders. But the world is changing, my associates and I understand that. We know that families and the young people are moving to farther reaches of the world. We know that sometimes history is forgotten. I believe the best way for those of us who leave home to keep it close, is to have something physical for them to look back to. We make this for them.

Many of these tales I relate to you, songs and poems, are told communally by the orators of each village. My father was one such orator. You, if you are not from Nin-Aloté may be surprised to know that he does not support this venture of mine, relating me to the sorcerer and his Aun-Wo. We will get to that tale in time. The elders and orators believe that writing this piece of our heritage down is taboo, and an admittance that the world is no longer for us. I disagree. This is just another way to tell a story. Some of my fondest memories are of gathering with my village in the center, listening to my father tell the tales of our ancestors, our gods, and their feats. He has always been a great inspiration to me. Without him, I would not be doing this. Nevertheless, I will speak no more of my father here. Nor will I dedicate this anthology to him. He will be ashamed enough to know he is mentioned in it.

We of the Third Kingdom, *Que-Som Kadesh*<sup>2</sup>, see our history as greatly touched by our faith. Ask anyone on the street here what caused the Great Quake of 1717 BCE and they will tell you it was Inati's stomach pains, or Moti's anger. They will tell you that the sky is often blue because it is

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<sup>1</sup> The Nine Great Regions in Ale, the language of the Third Kingdom

<sup>2</sup> Literally Translates to Home of Three Kings or Land of Three Kings

Misaha's favorite color and that if you have good luck, it is because an Aun visited you. We are not a people without our gods. We call them *Waas*, *Waasi* for plural. The younger ones are called *Waasu*, though the usage is fading. It is impossible, or rather, was impossible, for a child of Nin-Aloté not to know all the names of the Waasi and the history of our people.

#### A Brief History of Que-Som Kadesh:

First, we were Kirar, the instrument of the Singer King that started the First Kingdom. Back then the regions were just Gwe, Kinte, Arat, Erta Ale, and Sesso. Over time, Arat and Sesso are absorbed into greater Kinte. Then we were Ashlar, in honor of the great builder that rebelled against the Tyrant King and restored order. We were without a king—without a name, for one hundred years under the rule of false monarchs and their ideals, under threat by invaders. They tried to take away our language, our songs, our gods, but we persevered. We will continue to persevere. The Third Kingdom was formed in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, after uniting the Nine Great Regions under a common banner. Another reason we are writing this is that it appears The Third Kingdom is nearing her end.

The Third Kingdom, now inland, rests on the Horn. A tropical country, a majority of her water comes from the Nahal river and its tributaries, especially during the dry season. There is a line of volcanoes and a great valley that splits the country, but we are still one. To the north, there is a deep depression miscredited to be the entrance to Moti's<sup>3</sup> dominion. There are a number of myths and folktales that believe such. Our closest neighbors and trading partners are Kemet, further up the Nahal, I-Bahr, northeast, by the sea, and directly east, the seaside country of Ma'ona. The historical trading partner across the Gulf of Nimen, Khisba, also plays a big part in shaping what came to be Que-Som Kadesh. Though many of these countries were known by different names at the time these myths were made, we have done our best to mark the changes.

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<sup>3</sup> The Waas of Death. Husband to Chayim.



It is important to remember that the history of our country, of all countries, starts before any man puts a name to place. Thus, this anthology shall start with the creation of the life. We differ from our neighbors and many, more popular ideas about creation, in that there was no great nothing before the Earth and Sky. There was always an Earth and Sky and they are sisters, forever embracing, yet, forever quarreling.

### Creation: The Feud of Earth and Sky

This song is sung in three parts, ending with the earth we are accustomed to. Surprisingly enough, this song is agreed upon throughout the Nine Great Regions, though the how and why have never been clear. Perhaps our ancestors just thought it best not to question it. Regardless, at the start of existence there were two Waasi, in an eternal embrace. But such close quarters breeds hostility and Inati, in her youth, was the most hostile of all.

Inati, Mother Earth so young  
kept her lands boiling—barren.

Everywhere the eye could see  
red hot lava spewed

Inati, the volcano queen  
obscured herself from view.

Misaha in turn  
kept herself cold.

The chilling embrace of  
the empty sky fueled  
the rage of the blistering earth.

Blinded by volcanic ash  
Misaha made, upon her skin  
an eternity of stars  
to pierce through

the killing dark. Jealous  
Inati, in display of godly  
power, made from fire

and earth, Moti,  
the Mountain King.  
Moti raged and raved  
swore curses to the stars  
and sky. Misaha, just to  
prove she could, made two  
new gods of her eyes.  
Aapo, the burning sun  
and Badr, the glowing moon.  
“For everyone you make,”  
said Misaha “I can make  
two better.” The vengeful  
Inati formed horrific  
warriors of stone and lava,  
commanded by Moti  
their very existence was  
dedicated to blocking the sky.  
No weapon or magic thrown  
could ever pierce Misaha’s skin.  
Nevertheless, Inati’s anger she  
returned. Hurling spears of ice  
and meteors down to the boiling surface.  
And this is how it stayed,  
a battle between sky and earth.

Monsters of lava and stone,  
of obsidian and ice, fought between  
the Sun and the Mountain King.  
Until, Misaha, tired, called forth  
a great storm to flood the earth.  
Inati, near drowned  
fell into a deep sleep. Thus  
ended the first era of Waasi.

This story frightened the children of my village, especially the floods, as we lived near wetlands. Back then I was convinced that the earth would flood again and feared every storm. But that is not the takeaway of this song. At least, not according to the Orators. When these stories were first told, it was to make sense of the dry and rainy seasons. Explain the volcanoes that dotted the country. An eruption was the Mountain King's anger, always bubbling below the surface. There were frequent earthquakes when I was a child, my parents would always tell us that Inati was waking. When she slept, she was calm and when she awoke, she trembled with rage, ready to start the fight all over again. Because this is what the earth does. And they weren't wrong, my ancestors.

The Great Feud of Earth and Sky was the catalyst for much of creation. For the chaos they created, led way for order. No matter how bad things get, there is always someone who will be able to take charge and pick up the pieces. This is where Chayim comes into play. The being born of chaos.

From Misaha's storm came the ocean  
where Moti and his mother's creations  
waited forlorn at the bottom, sunken  
like stones. But Aapo's light did not reach

the ocean floor. So there, the Mountain King remained. No one knows how much time had passed. Only that, there, before Moti and his army formed a woman from the sand. Her hair tall and wild, her skin as dark as the depths. Her eyes were luminescent. To Moti they were brighter than the sun and the moon combined. He did not hate them. He opened his mouth to speak, filling his lungs with water. Panicked, the Mountain King flailed, unable to pull himself from Misaha's wretched revenge. This woman, Chayim, spoke freely in the ocean. She told the waters to recede, and they obeyed. She told the mountains to rise and they did so. She laid Moti down upon the sandy shore and kissed him. The water left his lungs, "Will you stay with me forever," he asked, when he could speak again. She laughed. "I will," she said. They were married, witnessed by the sun and the moon.

But Chayim was not created to be  
Moti's wife. She came from the sand  
and the sea to bring life to the world.  
And once the sun set on their wedding  
she returned to the sea to start her endless  
toil. She was the Waas of life, of order.  
After the battle of Earth and Sky  
Existence was a wretched mess.  
By her words and gentle touch,  
she shaped every creature in the sea  
her eyes the only light in those  
dark depths. There she shaped  
coral and kelp, fish and lobster.  
Every manner of sea life  
molded by her hands.  
Moti, his anger abated  
waited at the shore, watching.  
Once the last creature of the sea  
was formed, Chayim rose up.  
"Badr, I gift this to you," said Chayim.  
"The ocean and all its splendor."  
The ocean was wild—  
unpredictable. It rose higher  
when Badr neared it, raged

without reason.

Chayim, born from it

ignored it. There was

life to be made on land.

But; Moti found the shore

shrunk more and more

as water broke through

once solid land. He bid

that something be done

before the world was drowned

again. So, Badr made a god,

called him Bahr.

Bahr, unlike Moti and Aapo

could not be so easily angered

and dragged into petty fights

he danced whichever way

Badr bid him. He kept the ocean

in his conscious sway.

Chayim would make a river

breaking the land up

and Badr would name those waters

forming Waasi to aid in order.

This is how it went,

until the earth shook again.

### Inati and the Creation of Humans

Here is the third part of the original creation song, split off and made into its own. We could not find an exact reason or timeframe for this decision. Perhaps it is because Inati and Misaha as they once were, changed.

Scholars disagree on the length of time between Chayim's reconstruction and Inati's awakening. But scholars also disagree on the presence of time. Is time measured by humanity and therefore dependent on our existence, or has time existed as long as the sun? This myth will not be answering that question. However, my personal stance on it is the latter.

This myth does delve into the topic of us and our creation. Chayim's reconstruction rejuvenated Inati, enough for her to open her eyes again. Enough for her, as the old orators tell it, to want to do something kind, if only for her son and his wife. A gift for a gift if you will. In her awakening, she trembled.

Inati, Mother Earth

in grand splendor

awoke to find her body

green—half submerged in

ocean blue. With the taste of salt

and sulfur in the air.

In her surprise she shook

and shivered, scaring even

the great Chayim.

“Mother, Mother,” Order cried

“Be still, be still, you will not die.”

“Daughter? Daughter?”



A daughter you *must* be?

What is this? And what have you done  
to me?"

She [Inati] stretched her fingers,  
curled her toes, lifted her head.

Everywhere she looked  
and everywhere she felt  
something leafy, soft, and different.

"A gift," was all Order said.

"A gift," repeated Inati  
lowering her head.

The world around her  
buzzed and bubbled  
teeming with creations  
she did not know.

She shut her eyes and breathed  
shifting the plates of the earth

"Where is Moti?"

"Drowned?"

"No. He is on his way.

I will wait with you."

Moti<sup>4</sup> rode to them  
on the back of a black lion  
wrapped in a white toga  
at his waist was a dagger  
ready for the second coming  
of his mother's war.

He moved passed Chayim,  
squeezing her hand.

Then he kneeled in the dirt.

“Mother. I am here.”

Inati, Mother Earth  
looked upon her son and  
his wife—the world they had  
made in her absence.

“Tell me,” she said.

“What has happened in my slumber?”

Moti told of his drowning  
of the endless darkened sky  
of his great wife who filled the sea  
and grounds with life.

The Mountain King spoke  
in such a gentle tone

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<sup>4</sup> Early depictions of Moti show him with the *asdago* afro, wearing a white to pale gray toga and an obsidian dagger. More modern depictions give him the *dayta* hairstyles, to reflect the human invention of ghee.

one could be forgiven  
for forgetting  
that he is the *Waa*s of fire  
and death.

When Inati heard  
all he had to tell  
she shut her eyes  
and did not speak.

In her silence  
the thump-thumping  
of her heart  
filled the air and sea.

They say if you stand  
in the ravine between  
the Twin Mountains  
and let your mind rest  
you can hear the beat  
of Inati's heart.

From where Chayim stood  
and Moti kneeled,  
they could hear a second beating  
a thumping not so gentle  
but neither was it violent.

Sunlight broke through the clouds

the golden rays

like arms reaching out.

The sky brightened—

a brilliant blue.

Moti shielded his eyes,

Chayim bowed her head.

The air echoed with laughter.

“You are awake,” said Misaha.

“I am,” said Inati, gazing up.

Surely, every living thing

in the world

could hear their words then.

“What will you do,” asked Misaha.

Inati shut her eyes. “Create.”

Inati, Mother Earth so vibrant

returned a gift with a gift

Her son was married

and she alive.

So, she made them a show

of her approval.

First, she molded life from clay.

Small, and pliable, with signs of Earth

We call them the Aun.

Their eyes are stones,

their hair leaves. They live

to aid the Waas on Earth.

But they were not what she wanted.

Next, she made life from stone.

Cold and heavy, large and loud

she knew what she was doing with stone.

But they were not what she wanted.

The ever present blue

that made up Misaha—

laughed, frightening the birds

from the sky for they heard

cracks of thunder

“What are you trying to make,” said Misaha.

“I’ll make something better.”

Inati shook every branch of every tree in annoyance.

“If I cannot make it, then neither can you,” said Inati.

“Then perhaps I am just better. Whatever it is,” said Misaha,

“I will make it.”

She started with stone.

Sending meteors hurtling down  
one by one, to display her prowess.  
But they were pebbles by the time  
they touched Inati's skin.

She tried with ice.

Dropping storms of hail  
that littered Moti's  
domain on the surface.  
But they did not last.

“Ha, you are no better than I,” said Inati.

“You don't even know what you're making,” said Misaha.

“I know enough. I know better than you,” said Inati.

“May I suggest,” said Chayim,  
conducting the sun's movement  
below the horizon  
“that you make this new thing together.  
Whatever it will be, surely you both  
can make it.”  
They did not agree  
and Chayim said nothing more.

Inati would not try a fourth time alone  
and her sister would not admit defeat.

Misaha, in petty rage, dropped  
all manner of celestial bodies  
crushing the creations of Chayim  
and flooding the keepsakes of Badr.

“Mother, Mother,” begged Badr.

“Whatever you do, do so gently.

My rivers are flooding, my lakes  
freezing. Ease now your temperament.”

And Chayim said,

“Mother, Mother, I beseech you  
act, lest the heavens drown the  
world again.”

“Sister, Sister, stop your madness,” cried Inati.

“Or I will blacken the air again.”

“I will drown you then,” said Misaha

but there was no bite to her words.

She was tired, turning pale.

“Let us make this thing together,” said Inati

“and be done with it.”

Chayim and Badr watched on  
holding their breath, they

stilled the air.

“What will we make,” said Misaha, at last.

“Something better,” said Inati.

Inati made the frame

and Misaha rained materials.

With careful hands and

divine expectation,

the first humans were made.

They looked like the Waas

they were made for.



### The Singer King and the Rise of the First Kingdom

This story starts in a town dependent on the Nahal, where they worshipped the river god of the same name, and Chayim, for who they owed their schedules to. This story starts in a valley of Gwe, where the Aun and man alike, could not finish their work.

...

In the little valley where the Nahal runs a finger through, there worked many Aun and many men, carving a temple into the rock. They were given a task of great importance, to make a home for a Waas so dear. But the sun beat murder onto the stone, and the heat was too much to bear. Aapo meant no harm, he is as nosy as he is curious. Yet, harm he made. Seeing their plight, the Waas of Rain, Zenabu, covered the valley in dark clouds and rained for days on end. There was no sense of seasons then, the Waas moved as they pleased. Zenabu, having nowhere else to be, stayed to keep the workers, company. But his presence had its consequences, for the finger of Nahal rose by day and soon, by the hour. The valley was flooded. The villages drowned and their villagers fleeing.

Zenabu, unable to see his error, thought only that the sun would shine too brightly, where the clouds did not sleep. So, he spread the rains throughout the north, from the highlands to the Gateway to Hell, even the twin mountains were drenched. It rained and rained with no end in sight. The people pleaded to Badr, “Mother Moon, Mother Moon, work your magic, stop this madness.” And so, she did, collecting all the clouds into one great ball and lifting Zenabu from the world. The people rejoiced, they drained their homes, and could return to work once the mud had dried.

But it was not long, before a new problem arrived. For, when Badr removed Zenabu she removed the rain. The Nahal, once flooded—dried. Crops failed and cattle died. Drought was upon the land.

A young musician on the border of Gwe and Kinte, wishing to free his village from their starvation, sought the help of the Aun. He made an altar, giving to them his last bowl of *kinche*<sup>5</sup>, for he was without meat, and some cactus for water. He prayed. “Oh, kind and mighty Aun, deliver us from this terror. Plead with the Waas of Order, or wake Mother Earth herself.”

The Aun came from cracks in their earth, their leafy hair dried and brittle, their clay skin hard and fractured. They see his starved, skeletal frame, see the damage done to the villages and the land, and take him to the Gateway to Hell. He took with him only his *kerar*<sup>6</sup>, for it was all that he could carry in his dizzy, dire state. There, Chayim appeared. She touched his forehead, to ease his dizziness. She touched his lips, to ease his thirst.

“Who are you,” she asked him.

“Daga,” said the musician.

“And what have you come here for?”

“There is drought in the land of men, and famine. The rain is gone and will not come back.”

She looked to the Aun, they assured her, his words were true.

“I will speak to the rain and the river.”

She took young Daga with her, carrying him on the wind to the where the Nahal passed through the Great Rift. Upon the sun’s setting, Badr appeared with Zenabu.

“Nahal, why did you flood the Gwe Valley,” asked Inati.

“Because Zenabu would not stop raining,” said Nahal.

“Zenabu, why did you rain so much?”

“I am the god of rain. I saw the people needed it, so I brought it,” he said. “Tell the sun not to shine so brightly.”

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<sup>5</sup> Porridge

<sup>6</sup> Sometimes called the kirar, it is a five to six stringed bowl-shaped lyre.

“Your job is to bring ring, not to block the sun,” said Nahal. “And not to flood the world.”

Zenabu responded in anger and an argument broke out.

Daga, seeking to end their conflict, played them a song on his krar. He sung about how thoughtful and kind Zenabu was, how resilient the Nahal, and how caring Badr was. When they were quelled with their importance, Chayim spoke again.

“The Gwe Valley cannot be flooded again,” she said. “It will be the site of my great temple.”

“Now hold on. The Gwe Valley is a site of my flowing,” said Nahal. “It relies on me. It should be the site of my great temple.”

“All of the Horn is your great temple,” insisted Badr.

“No, all of the Horn is where I flow,” he said. “If all the Horn is my temple, then all the sky would be yours.”

And again, they argued. And again, Daga sung for them. He sung that the Nahal was dependable and expansive, agreed that the river Waas deserved a temple. He promised to sing his praises so great that the men would build him one.

Once night turned to day, and Aapo joined the fold, it became clear that Daga would not be leaving any time soon. Every time the Waasi argued, he would sing for them and play his krar, and when he lost his voice, he just played. While the Waasi had their fights, the Waasu, the Aun, spread themselves in great numbers across the Five First Regions, bringing food and water to everyone that needed it without their usual payment of beef or porridge. When asked why they helped so without the offering of prayers, they told of Daga who had given his last to save them. “He is singing bow for the Waasi.” They told his story to everyone who asked, those who listened retold to everyone that didn’t, until all the villages in all the land knew the tale of Daga and his singing so sweet, it quelled divinity.

It came to be, that upon Daga's return, many people gathered in the heart of Arat. They built him a home of solid bricks, and asked to hear him play. "Play the songs that quelled the gods, or singer king of a thousand words," they would say. And he did, so they crowned him king.

For his compassion and dedication, Chayim blessed him with a long life and many children. "When you enter my husband's domain, you shall rest in abundance<sup>7</sup>," she told him.

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<sup>7</sup> Depending on the orator, they will say that Daga gets to rest, making up for his time with the Waasi. Or they will say that his afterlife is filled with many riches, no matter the offerings from the living.

## The Rise of the Second Kingdom

The Keeper of the Dead, Moti, went through his list of important deaths and mentioned to his wife that the first kingdom would soon fall and its king, Axl<sup>8</sup>, would die because of his second son Yaakov. A loyal servant of said king who had recently passed, overheard the news and sought out the king's deceased father to warn him<sup>9</sup>.

On the shortest day of the year, when the souls of the dead visited their families, the old king appeared. Udom in his oldest state, a broad-shouldered man in a decorated robe surrounded by meat, coffee, and melon, among other offerings for the dead. His son kneeled before him.

“Raise your head, Axl,” said Udom.

“As the afterlife serves you well, I welcome your return Father,” said Axl as he obeyed.

“Your wife is pregnant; you will have a son.”

“This is wonderful,” rejoiced Axl.

Udom shook his head. “He will kill you. And destroy our empire.” With that, Udom left. The candles in the offering room went out and everything he was given were gone.

Bewildered, yet unwilling to ignore his father's words, Axl sought help from his five advisors. They all agreed, the second son must not be allowed to live.

“It is lucky you have Tsegaye, greedy as he is,” they said.

“Then I must live awhile longer, to train him better. But I will not harm my wife. When the boy is born, take him away and be done with it. She must never know.”

The advisors understood and made their plans with the knight they had chosen to carry out the dark deed. However, just outside the meeting room played Princess Tseday<sup>10</sup>. Hearing the plans to kill her brother, she rushed to her mother and told her the news. Queen Kelemi prepared to

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<sup>8</sup> Pronounced Ash-*el*.

<sup>9</sup> Only a person's ancestor can contact them from the afterlife. Hence why the servant cannot do it themselves.

<sup>10</sup> Pronounced *Sub*-day

runaway in secret, taking her little daughter with her. She prayed to the Aun to hide her tracks and prayed to the Nahal for a gentle journey upstream. They hid away in a little village in the highlands of Gwe, where they told of their plight and the message from Udom. The village elders responded in turn, “Any man or king who kills his son becomes neither man nor king.”

Queen Kelemi named her son Yaakov, cementing his destiny to overthrow his father. On his tenth birthday, Aun gave him a box he could never open. But, while the queen and her children hid, the kingdom dealt with Axl. He lived in terror of his missing son, growing strong to one day kill him. Axl sent his knights and mercenaries throughout the land, in search of a boy and then a man, with the queen and princess. He gave permission to search every home and stable, leave no stone unturned. He had cut all travel outside the kingdom, in case they tried to flee past the borders. If anyone was suspected of harboring the escaped royals, they were severely punished. Villages were raised in attempts to smoke them out. The people suffered greatly.

A mason by the name of Zewdu, fed up by the constant fear of the king, and his strangle hold on the regions because of it, confronted Axl.

“King Axl, you bring shame to your father’s spirit. Why do you treat your people so? Why, have you set every boat near our shores aflame?” said Zewdu.

“I bring shame to my father’s name. No, I am doing thing *because* of my father,” said Axl, incredulous.

He told him what the specter of the former king had said. Zewdu, coming to the same decision as the elders in the highlands. With his hammer, he killed Axl, leaving the throne to Tsegaye. The prince turned king, cared not for his father’s fears and declared the search for Queen Kelemi and her youngest children over.

Tsegaye opened the ports, and sent his soldiers south, to the lowlands. To him, Axl had wasted precious resources in a fruitless search. He ordered everyone who could to aid in his

expedition to claim the lowlands for his kingdom and everyone who disobeyed he sent to mine. For ten years it went on like this, warring with the lower regions. Zewdu, guilt-ridden for his hand in this, went in search of a better king, asking help from the Aun.

On this twentieth birthday, the young prince Yaakov, kind and strong, was at last able to open the box the Aun had given him. Inside was a magic hammer that fixed whatever he hit with it, from stone walls to broken bones. One day, it pulled him down the mountains to meet the mason, Zewdu.

“You,” said Zewdu, “you are the prince to whom this land belongs.”

“I am a prince, yes,” said Yaakov. “But I have earned no such land.”

“Come with me, and I will help you earn it.”

Bidding goodbye to his village, Yaakov went with Zewdu all about the land. Where the highlands had been safe in their seclusion, the rest of the Horn suffered greatly. Yaakov had never before been exposed to starvation and war, nor the backbreaking labor of his brother’s mines. Wherever they went, Yaakov would try to help. Using his hammer, he would fix broken bones, rebuild walls to protect villages, fight off enforcers to free the miners. He became a man of reckoning. Now Tsegaye sought to kill him and the feeling was returned, but Yaakov was not a man who could kill.

Before Tsegaye could send men to kill him, Yaakov and Zewdu were at the capital. Yaakov plucked his brother from the throne and threw him out on the steps.

“You are no king,” he declared.

The people of the capital pounced on him, sending him down the Nahal to the lower regions where he was never seen again.

...

I have been told that it is strange that Zewdu kills Axl. Foreigners, when they hear this tale, ask why it was not Yaakov. But we have said already, Yaakov was not a killing man, he was never meant to be. Zewdu kills Axl because it is the role of every person who walks this earth to right wrongs. Zewdu saw that Axl's fears were ruining the kingdom, so Zewdu assuaged his fears by killing him. When he saw that the prince, he left behind was a tyrant, he thought it would be best to find a better king. For he could make a better kingdom with his tools if they were used correctly.

This tale is told quite differently in the lower regions.



### The Wizard's Folly: Birth of the Aun-Wo

This piece of folklore originates in the Second Kingdom, hailing from the northwestern Highlands. It is told and retold by the Kinte people for generations, to remind us why we fear the *Waasi*. A sorcerer thought himself so great, that even the *Waasi* were below him. For his hubris, the Aun paid him a visit.

Alimayu<sup>11</sup> was a talented young man of great renown. He had studied under the great healers and soothsayers of his time, such as Dejen and Hawi<sup>12</sup>. But he fell into the dark arts and spat on the name his parents gave him. He wanted to be the greatest of all, Ali, a wizard even the *Waasi* would fear. And what was the greatest act of the *Waasi* if not creation?

Ali shut himself up in his workshop for weeks, tinkering and toiling. The villagers whispered about him. “That man who wishes to be Highest of All,” they said. “He will be the death of us.” Ali, a man so sure of his own greatest, let their words roll off his back. With the clay of the earth, he molded man in his own image and breathed life into it. When he was sure the creation was complete, he introduced it to the village.

“Look upon my greatness and praise, for I have created life,” he cried.

All those who gathered saw a small, shambling creature made of clay. Two dark holes were its eyes, and a thin curving line made its mouth. It had a slow, lurching walk. When it moved, its limbs clicked together, sounding like the tapping of a pot.

“It’s an abomination,” said the villagers.

“It is an Aun-Wo,” said Ali.

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<sup>11</sup> Ethiopian boy name meaning “In Honor of God”

<sup>12</sup> From “Dejen and the Prince” and “Hawi of the Highlands”

“Even worse,” they said. “You will attract the ire of the Aun. You have spit on sacred names.”

“No,” defended Ali, “I have elevated myself. I am more powerful than the Waasu.”

They sucked their teeth at him. They called him a fool.

Ali, unwilling to be scorned, to have his work go unnoticed, made more Aun-Wo and sent them out to others of his ilk. These were made from clay, or wood, or wool stuffed with straw. They could speak, echoing his words.

The Aun-Wo said, “I am Aun-Wo, the creation of Ali the Great. I live and breathe. I obey. I am an Aun, but greater.”

He sent them to every sorcerer, soothsayer, wizard, and healer. Not just to them, but to leaders, and elders of the region. He had amassed an army as he wasted away in his workshop, breathing life into his blasphemy. The unwilling recipients of his creation sent back his Aun-Wo with words of their own and payment to their pleading.

“To the Great Ali, please, never again send this unsettling thing to me. I have given it a wool for you. I have given it gems. I have carved a staff befitting you. So please, never again.”

The villagers watched them return in fear, with each return, they heard Ali cackle and rejoice. It was not long before they all packed up their things and moved, leaving the sorcerer in an empty village with his machinations.

“Something must be done about Ali,” agreed the villagers.

“The Waasi must have their hands full, or else surely, they would have cursed him by now,” they believed.

“We must plead to the Waasu, then,” said the village elders. “To the Aun themselves.”

All the villagers, even the little children, nodded in agreement. They prayed, making altars of stone and headcloths, offering *kinche*<sup>13</sup> and dried fruits as they were lacking *otka*<sup>14</sup>.

“Oh, Aun, kind Aun,” they pleaded, “rid our village of this menace who takes your name and distorts its meaning. Free us of him so that we may return home. Or show us the way to a new land.”

Once their prayers ended, the land shook with the arrival of the Aun, rising up from the shrubbery and through gaping cracks in the earth. They clawed and crawled, terrifying in their anger<sup>15</sup>. They ate their fill, took the cloths from the makeshift altars, and made their way to the village, feet soft against the soil. Slipping in among the Aun-Wo, the mighty Aun took Ali’s breath from each of them, storing the life he gave his abominations in calabashes that they carried from ropes around their waists. The Aun dragged the husks behind them. Without their bits of Ali’s soul, the Aun-Wo fell apart. The wood, waterlogged and moldy. The cloth, tattered and broken. Those few that remained were made from clay, their shambling bodies lifeless, held up by the will of the Aun.

The Aun piled their ersatz counterparts around Ali’s workshop. And they said, “Sorcerer, sorcerer, look what we’ve brought. You wanted us, now you’ve got us. Face what you’ve wrought.”

The Aun sent the remaining Aun-wo to drag Alimayu from his workshop. He had wards up against them so only his creations could enter. They dragged him out and pulled him down into the cracks of earth where the Aun reside. The villagers in the distance could hear Ali’s screams, ordering his creations to unhand him. But they did not listen.

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<sup>13</sup> Porridge

<sup>14</sup> Spicy beef cubes

<sup>15</sup> Though some accounts insist it was their hunger, as the people of the Second Kingdom had been doing quite well at the time.

When they tell of the sorcerer of their village, they tell of his deadly pride. They burned down his workshop and built a temple to the Aun.

## Any Way the Wind Blows

### Chapter One: The Singer

The East Wind breezed through the countryside carrying her wicked whispers of failed crops and dust storms from down south. Nowadays you didn't even have to wait for the paper to learn the news, if you heard the wind, you just knew. And things weren't much better here.

Harmon was a farming town first and foremost. All around them the crops were failing. Famine had been declared the previous summer. Nothing came of the fall harvest. Folks were forced to slaughter or sell their animals for food. Every able-bodied person had gone off elsewhere for work, like the sawmill in Fennick or the textile factory in Caldon. And if Oliver was a farmer's son, he'd probably be looking to the sawmill or factory too. Anything to put bread on the table.

Except, he wasn't a farmer's son.

He was the son of the Muse Messis. Raised by the God of Travelers and Tricks.

He should feel lucky.

Dawn had yet to break as he stood outside in the freezing cold, wrapped in his old overcoat. It had been a gift from his patron. She'd let him keep it before he was—before she left. There had been other gifts, definitely better ones. But the overcoat had proved the most useful of the ones he still had.

Autumn had been short, he was ill-prepared, and his supplies were lacking. He could go to Mr. Hughes, of course. But Oliver had his pride. So, he would rely on his mother's old method. Or try to. He'd never been able to do it before. Not without help.

With his guitar strap over his shoulders, he gripped the neck. When he was growing up, he'd been told stories about the gods. All of them, even the minor ones. He was raised to sing their praises and of the gifts they gave. His mother was a gift. And he was gifted.

Not in the way he wanted to be. Not in a way that could help. Not really.

But to mortals he was gifted. A poet, a singer, a musician.

He cleared his throat, strumming the G-chord. “Oliver. . .Hughes, ‘Song of Autumn’ by the Muse Messis.” He liked to introduce himself. It reminded him of the early days of his career, up on stage, before he was discovered.

He breathed in the chill morning air, the sweet scent of sugar maple and fading autumn. Dead leaves crunched beneath his feet; he closed his eyes. He sung his mother’s song in an old language that only gods spoke now. He’d sung it dozens of times before and he knew the outcome it was supposed to have—an exuberant burst of life. The air would grow warm, the trees would shake in brilliant reds and golds, the harvest would grow. He was surrounded by a dead grove and if he could just grow *one* apple. . .then he’d be happy.

It was still cold around him though. He knew before he even opened his eyes that his singing had done nothing.

His mother had blessed the entire town’s harvest when he was younger. But muses couldn’t be everywhere you wanted them to be.

He pulled his cold fingers away from the strings, brushing against the bark of the apple tree he’d planted. It hadn’t bore fruit since the year he left for the city. Sighing, Oliver turned his guitar around to rest on his back. The wind picked up. Their laughter rushing through the bare trees.

“Half a muse with half the talent,” they said. Eurus, Goddess of the East Wind, mocked him. Old branches creaked in their snickering.

“Be still you wretched wind of winter days,” he said, gripping the strap of his guitar. “I cannot damn a god but I will curse your name.”

Eurus spun around him, knocking hair in his eyes and twisting his overcoat. “Sing for me, oh poet of death. Sing the song of dying leaves and harvest moons.”

The sun was rising. His alarm would go off soon and he was hardly ready.

“Another time,” he told the wind. “I’ve got to go.”

“What a pity,” they said, voice faint as they moved on.

Nothing really lasted for long these days.

He stepped inside the abandoned boxcar that his mother had made a home. He’d always found it weird that his mother with her high standards of luxury, chose an old boxcar used for the overnight workers, as her home. Of course, it had only been temporary for her. She left behind temporary things. A stole made from undyed rabbit fur that he didn’t know how to care for. Bottles of perfume shaped like orange slices that he had no one to give to. And him.

Temporary.

He changed from his nightclothes into the station master uniform Mr. Hughes had had made for him. Oliver worked at Tremont station. It was new and old all at once. Out of the way and barely busy, not enough to warrant remaining open but Mr. Hughes bought it and he would not close it. It was quiet, the perfect place for a failed poet.

He pulled his overcoat back on, grabbed his bag, guitar, and empty lunch pail, with seconds to spare before his alarm went off.

Mrs. Fennick, the closest thing he had to a neighbor on the outskirts of town, waited at her mailbox with a cup of tea. She waited there every morning, weather permitting, because he passed by every morning.

“Morning, Oliver,” she said with a cheerful trill to her words.

“Morning, Matilda,” he said, coming to a full stop.

“Off to the station again,” she asked, playful.

“Well, you know, they’re hopeless without me,” he joked.

These little chats with Mrs. Fennick were the most social interaction Oliver had throughout his day. He tried to stay jovial for them.

Nodding, she sipped her tea. "Well, I'd best let you get to it. Stay warm, Oliver."

"You too, Matilda."

He moved on, Mrs. Fennick watching him go before the cold got too much for her.

Harmon was a ghost town by this point in winter. Barren cornfields covered by mulch. The twisted skeletons of apple trees. No one but him walked the streets. All the young and able-bodied had moved on to try and find better work. Aside from the others at the station, he wouldn't see anyone else.

He stopped by the ticket booth at the station, just to say hello to Mrs. Mulder, to see if Mr. Hughes had sent word for him. She gave the usual responses. A good morning. A sorry shake of the head with "No, not today." She gave him his lunch and sent him to his train.

He kept his eyes on the window as the empty fields rolled past, blending into shantytowns with hollow faces.



## Chapter Two: The Vagabond

Hollow faces with sunken eyes peered at her through darkened windows and from dirt stoops. Amara was no stranger to shantytowns. They started popping up a few years back when springs got short, but every day, it felt like there were more of them. She tightened her duster against the biting chill of the trop, kept her eyes on the ground so she didn't accidentally fall into someone's home. She was just passing though, following the train tracks in a desperate appeal to the god of travels and tricks. She thought it'd be safe to fill her canteen with the river water until she realized which river she'd found herself by. The Onegada. And well, it just wasn't safe these days. The murky brown water rushed past, taunting her. Children walked with buckets of the stuff for boiling, having to pour it through sieves just to get all the muck out.

She needed a place to stay the winter and maybe make some cash. She hadn't counted in a while but she knew she only had a few Stags left. She was saving those for something worth it, like getting her farther from Dayton. She hadn't left the city in the best of terms.

*Maybe I should go back home,* she thought, watching a mother rock her coughing child. *If there's anyone left.*

Amara bit her lip. She was just like her mother, never still. She could use a muse right now. Who was she kidding? *Everyone* could use a muse right now.

She stopped to pull her map out of her carpet bag. A little girl kicking a can bumped into her. The girl had her hair in two thick braids and watery brown eyes like the river.

"Sorry," she said, looking up with those big, watery eyes.

Amara thought they would freeze in her sockets, turn into glasses in this unwelcome winter. "It's okay," she told the girl.

The girl kept staring.

"Need something?" said Amara, quickly marking ST on her map and putting it away.

“Got anything to eat?”

She did not. The only thing keeping her going was water and dandelions, and even then, she had to grow the dandelions herself. Her mother could certainly do more. But she was not her mother. Still. . .

Making a fist, Amara hummed to herself, digging her nails into her gloves as if she'd sown seeds between the stitches. Slowly, she opened her palm to reveal a blooming cluster of marigolds, their roots coiled around her hand. The little girl's face brightened, until someone called out to them, startling Amara enough that she stopped humming and the marigolds withered.

The woman that called out to them hurried over, as Amara crushed her dead flowers and dusted off the roots.

“I know you. I've seen you,” spat the woman, fury wrapped in gray streaked hair and faded clothes. She hadn't even put on her coat, if she still had one. “Back in Dayton,” she continued. “The Goddess of False Spring.”

Amara winced, stepping back from the woman and the girl.

“Don't you have any heart, bringing your trickery around here?” said the woman, advancing on her.

Others had picked up what the woman was saying, crowding around them to direct their anger at the world to her. They told her to go away. Told her she was cruel. Called her a devil. Panicked, Amara ran, breaking free from the shouting crowd of sunken faces. The wind whipped at her back, pushing her forward.

Once she was further upstream, she stopped to catch her breath, leaning on her knees and panting. “Fuck,” she told herself. “Fuck!” Her throat burned. She wasn't a runner, not physically anyways. Her mouth filled with the sour taste of disappointment and indignation. She spat on the frozen earth as the wind laughed at her. She shouldn't have done that. But it was what she was born for.

As a girl, she used to sing her mother's songs, thrilled in her ability to grow dandelions as she walked. With every step, a new clump sprouted up beneath her feet, invigorated by the muse in her. Everything died when she stopped humming. She didn't have the same powers of permanency as her mother did. Still, it had been spring then and she'd been a girl. Pretty flowers were welcome while they lasted.

Cackling, Eurus swirled around her. "And now you're a maiden in winter. Half a muse with all the heart," they sung. "Just another flower left to wither. After all you've played your part."

"Shut up," said Amara. She could see their wide grin forming between dead leaves.

They pulled the frosted breath from her words, conducting an illusion. "Imagine if you'd have stayed? Spent all your days singing in vain. Imagine all the good it'd do. How worthwhile, for someone like you."

Amara was expecting to see the Shantytown, its people circling around her until she was buried in their anger. She wouldn't put it past Eurus. Instead, they showed her Dayton, in all its desperate glory. Skyscrapers with their stainless-steel spires and sun ray windows. Obsidian and chrome in perfect symmetry. Amara tried to look away, until she saw herself in that black and silver robe de style that Eddy had bought her for their night shows. He'd gone on and on about contrast and color theory and how she'd stand out.

Huffing, Amara pulled back and Eurus changed the vision. There she was, with Eddy, trapped in their high rise with someone banging down the door and folks screaming from the sidewalk below. They had signs reading "Death to the False Goddess" and "Bring Back Spring". Someone even had a doll of her tied to a stake, like she was some witch they could burn.

Amara shut her eyes. This was not her fault. How could it be? She was just some half-muse, a daughter of Vernal.

Eurus, delighted in her reaction, blew on, their laughter fading with them.

Amara just needed to find someplace quiet to work at, make enough money for a room somewhere and wait out winter. Life was easier to manage in spring. She picked up her carpet bag and kept following the train tracks.

### Chapter Three: The Station

Bent against the wind was the lonely little station of Tremont. Built in a hurry to meet the demands of a nation in need of speedy travel, and a town desiring tourism. The station was nothing more than a wooden shack with three rows of benches and a simple wood stove. More was meant to be added. The scaffolding of such endeavors having been recycled into a cover from rain with the help of sheet metal and tarp. Despite the sorry state, the rail line still bought it, adding Tremont to the list of stops. Much of the day, the station was empty. Only three trains stopped there, six hours between each other. It had two employees. Mr. Dent, whom Oliver arrived to relieve two hours after the 6 AM train, and Oliver himself.

Oliver did not have to be there until 11, but he hated spending hours alone in his boxcar house, taunted by the wind and the bare trees that he couldn't magic back to life. He'd much rather spend hours in the sorry station, listening to the rattling of the rails as trains from more prosperous towns headed to more important places. All Tremont had to offer for prosperity was its station, otherwise its working class had to walk or rely on their neighbors with cars to get to their jobs outside of town. Oliver himself had to walk from Kingston three miles south. It wasn't so bad, he'd bought himself a treat at the station, a round tin of shortbread.

There wasn't much Oliver needed to do. No one would be there until the noon train. Mr. Dent had already stacked the wood rack for him and there wasn't anything in need of fixing. Oliver made himself some tea. They kept a tin of assorted tea bags below the counter in the ticket booth. He sat across from the stove and practiced, a blanket loose over his shoulders.

He still wrote songs for his patron. He was nothing if not devout.

"We sing praises to our Mother Earth. Sing and toil to earn our soil. And when we've earned it, she will take, our every bitter suffering away," he sung.

She'd found him on stage down in Dayton, years ago when he dreamt of fame. He'd been wonderful. Or at least, he thought so. But then she'd left him without reason. Abandoned by divinity again.

He had to assume it was his fault. And so, he would make her something great to compensate. The isolated silence of the station meant he had all the time he needed.

Once the noon train pulled away and the station emptied again, he returned to his spot by the fire. “Worship in song, or worship in work. Full of life or dead inside. It matters not to Mother Earth as long as you abide—” he was cut off by all the shutters bursting open, sending his half-written sheet music flying.

“Eurus!” he snapped.

They cackled. If Oliver focused, he could see them leaned against the windowsill.

“Don’t let me stop you, keep singing,” they said. There were less leaves around the station for them to make a face from. He could hear the mischievous smile in their voice.

“It’s freezing,” he said, shrugging off his guitar and setting it flat on the bench.

“I like it.”

Taking a deep breath, he went around the station and shut every shutter, barring them. Eurus twisted around the building, rattling the wood.

“I’m not letting you back in,” he called, picking up his papers. “You’re a menace.”

Once he’d sat back down, a glass paperweight keeping his pages in place, the front doors burst open. He had a customer.

“Please tell me this is the train station,” said the woman, dark curls spilling out from her old wool beret. A duster wrapped tight around her as she gripped a faded floral carpet bag. Behind her, Eurus slipped in, picking up maps and pamphlets from the rack by the door, sweeping a cloud of dust and the sharp scent of winter through the station.

“Yes, please, close the doors,” he said, shooting out of his seat. Thank goodness he hadn’t picked his guitar back up.

“Oh,” she said, and struggled to push them closed. Eurus taunting her all the while.

Oliver moved to help, swearing under his breath at the goddess.

“Sorry about that,” said the woman, a sheepish smile at her lips. “It’s um, really dark in here now though.”

The lanterns had gone out when she opened the doors. Did Mr. Dent restock the oil? He hoped so. The firelight didn’t spread very far, blocked by the seats. Oliver walked around, relighting the mantle lamps. The woman blew into her gloved hands, rubbing them together for warmth as she scanned the pitiful station. Oliver added more wood to the stove and went over to the ticket counter. He didn’t recognize her. He knew everyone who used the Tremont station.

“Oh,” she said, when she noticed. “You work here?”

“I’m the station master,” he said. “Where ya headed?”

Keeping hold of her bag, though they were the only ones here, she rummaged in her pocket for banknotes. “Um...” she set down two crumpled leaves of pink and blue Stags, a two Stag-note and a three Stag-note. “How far will this get me?”

He unfurled them, glancing at the copper kettle out of her line of sight. Did he have enough water in there? “Not far, I’m afraid.”

“Hold on,” she said, digging through her other pocket and adding three fivers, the silver five-cent coins that were better spent on strawberry bon-bons. Judging by her pleading brown eyes, she knew it probably wouldn’t make a difference.

Oliver shook the kettle, there wasn’t enough water for two cups. He’d have to go to pump. “The cheapest ticket is three sixty-nine, it’ll take you to Harmon.

She gave a short, bitter laugh, “So I’ll have forty-six cents left to my name. Great. Is there work in Harmon?”

“The bar’s always hiring. Ms. Singer would be happy for the help and it comes with room and board.”

“Let me guess, above the bar?”

“Yes.”

“Nothing else in Harmon?”

“Just the bar. Unless you wanna work for the station. Hours are long though.”

Drumming her fingers against the counter she asked, “I’m looking for something less permanent. Don’t really want to be trapped in a metal box for hours.”

He chuckled. “Of course not.”

“If I tried to sneak on the train, would you stop me,” she asked coquettishly, entwining her fingers and flashing an off-white smile.

It had been a long time since Oliver had been flirted with. His patron hadn’t allowed for—fraternization. He was trying not to laugh. Leaning against the counter, he propped his chin in his palm. “Mm, probably not. But you still wouldn’t get very far. Besides, you’re better off walking to Kingston.”

“Why?”

“The next train won’t be here until six.”

“What!? But I just saw a train headed this way when I was coming here. Don’t they run every hour?”

“Sure, in Milltown and Kingston, even Creek.” He paused as a passing freighter enroute to Bayford shook the station. “That was a freighter,” he explained, and then pointed to the slightly smudged chalkboard where he had written the train schedule for Tremont over a year ago. “Only three trains stop here.”

She shut her eyes and let her head drop to the counter, groaning.

“Apologies for the confusion.” He hadn’t eaten his shortbread yet. If she stayed, he could share. “Would you like some tea?”

“Thank you,” she said, not lifting her head. “That would be very kind.”



Nodding, Oliver slipped out the office door, kettle in hand. He threw on his overcoat and went outside to the pump.

Collecting her money, Amara made herself comfortable, sitting at the other end of the bench the station master had been at. It was the closest to the fire. He had a guitar on his seat. And she was resisting the urge to play it. She didn't actually know how; Eddy had always hired someone to play for her. But she liked the feel of the strings and the taste of power that an instrument lent to her magic. To distract herself, she picked up the paperweight, stroking her thumb along the smooth glass surface. It looked like there were dandelions inside, when they were in their apomixis phase of life.

Outside, Eurus called for a song. They normally didn't hang around this long.

Setting the paperweight aside, Amara indulged in her nosiness and read the half-finished sheet music the station master had written.

"Praises, by Oliver Hughes. Oh, he's a singer." She hummed the melody to herself. She stopped hearing Eurus outside, ignored the three leafed clovers popping up from the dirt packed floor of the station. "As long as you abide. Abide, abide by what?" She drummed her fingers against the bench, humming the melody again. "As long as you abide her every word. For her will is the law of the world. So..." Red and white clover flowers began to wither. Her dandelions let loose their seeds in a forlorn attempt at staying alive. "So, sing your praises and hope and hope, that to Mother Earth is where you go. Lest you end up in the dark and cold, with the rotten, nameless, forgotten souls."

Around her the air was full of dandelion seeds and they all rushed out the door when Oliver returned, apologizing for the delay. Everything died at her feet. The blank pages fluttered over to the stove. Amara grabbed at them frantically.

"Miss?" he said, pushing the doors closed. They only opened together and weren't usually this much of an inconvenience. He probably ought to insist that Mr. Hughes send him the money to replace them.

“Yes,” she squeaked.

“Are you alright there?”

“Perfectly fine.” She pushed her beret from her eyes.

He set the kettle on the stove, noting his papers in disarray, and hung his overcoat up. “Would you like chamomile or lemon?”

“Chamomile.”

She pulled from her bag a bronze lined tin cup, wiping it with her handkerchief. He gave her a tea bag and set the tin of shortbread between them. She nibbled on one, glancing at him as he cradled his guitar.

“Would you like to hear it,” he asked, a sly smile along his lips.

“Oh sure,” she said, trying to pretend like she hadn’t already read it. At least she hadn’t written on it, that would have been worse.

So, he played, singing along. And because she was half a muse, or at least, that’s how she rationalized it, Amara sung with him. A mezzo-soprano, singing in alto.

Mentally—mentally Oliver was screaming. He knew there were other half muses, but for all their flights and their flirtations, he’d never actually met another one before. They were supposed to supplement the fact that there were only four true muses. He was effectively useless as one, but the woman sitting in front of him...

The room filled with vibrant spring, citrus sweet and green. Red poppies and golden dandelions. He kept playing and she kept singing, adding in her lyrics where his left off.

“As long as you abide her every word. For her law is the will of the world. So, sing your praises and hope, and hope, that to Mother Earth is where you go. Lest you end up in the dark and cold with the rotten, nameless, forgotten souls.” In front of the stove, a seedling grew to a sapling, shooting up to a tree with pale pink blossoms. “Sing and sing, to earn her care. For the love of life rewards a peaceful death. And

with it—eternal happiness.” Apples ripened and dropped, rotting as they hit the ground and she stopped to catch her breath.

“You have a beautiful voice,” he said.

The kettle whistled.

He poured their tea. She pointedly refused to look at the ground.

“Sorry for the mess, Mr. Hughes,” she said.

He stiffened at the name. “Please, call me Oliver.”

“Okay.”

“And don’t worry. No one’s around to mind.”

“Well, you’re here,” she said, pushing dark locks behind her ears.

“I’ll clean it later.”

She nodded, not meeting his eyes. There wasn’t much to look at in the station though, just the walls and old posters advertising the many journeys one could have with the HTC.

“You’re a muse,” he said, to break the silence.

“Only half,” she said, defensive.

“My mother was Messis.”

Now she stiffened, tapping her nails against her mug.

Oliver took a biscuit, stirring his tea with it.

“Vernal,” she said at last. “My mother was Vernal.”

“What an honor to be in the presence of a spring muse,” he placed one hand over his heart and bowed his head, for the dramatics.

She chuckled, “Half a muse. And not really, there’s a lot of us. Though I’ve never met a male muse before.”

“I imagine there’s some divine reason for it.”

She smiled, meeting his eyes now and for as long as her smile held, Oliver felt the warmth of spring.

She held out her hand, "I'm Amara, just Amara."

He took it. "It's nice to meet you."

The wind rattled the shutters and the walls groaned against the pressure. Amara kept her coat buttoned up. He offered her the blanket. He could feel the air changing outside, it was getting darker. Less light slipping through the cracks. If a storm came, the station was no place to weather it.

But there had been no reports of a coming storm.

"So," she said slowly, rolling her mug between her palms. "Who's the song for?"

He drew more staves onto the page, marking out the notes. "My patron."

"Divine or wealthy?"

"Both."

Eurus was singing.

"So, this is literal," she pointed to his sheet music. "You're welcome to use my lyrics. You can never be in too much favor."

"Mhm," he nodded.

"Why's a poet of the Mother out here in the middle of nowhere, working in a train station no less?"

"My mother was a friend of Mr. Hughes."

"A friend?" she arched a brow.

"A friend," he insisted.

She mouthed 'okay' and sipped her tea. "So, he put you to work on your off days?"

"Well, I was raised on the HTC."

"What?"

He pointed to the fading posters with his pencil. "Hughes Traveling Company."

"Ah, of course."

She helped herself to another shortbread biscuit, watching him write. She realized she was counting his freckles and groaned. "Oliver, it's barely been an hour. What do you do here all day?"

"Write songs."

"For six hours?"

"My shift starts at 11 actually."

"Fine, seven then."

"What do you do all day?"

"Walk," she said, pulling her feet up beneath her. She'd taken her boots off.

"That explains the boots."

She rolled her eyes. She'd need new shoes soon. She'd need a lot of new things soon. "You can't spend all your time here. What did you do before?" She drummed her fingers against the bench.

"I worked in the city."

"Me too...but," she stammered, "probably not the same city."

He shrugged. "I was in Dayton, about five years ago. Granted, I wasn't one stage for long. I imagine you would have lasted a while though."

Her laughter was fluttery, nervous. "I didn't sing in the city. I worked as a bartender, then a laundress, and then whatever I could get. It's tough out there. Tougher now," she added. Not a complete lie, she had done all those things, just not all in Dayton.

Oliver nodded, "Well, for what it's worth, I think you would have been amazing."

She placed a hand to her heart, "Aw, that means a lot coming from a professional."

He chuckled, an appreciative smile on his face.

She leaned her head back against the bench, letting out a sigh. "I'm still bored, just so you know."

“I know there’s not much to see, but you could walk around a bit.”

She deliberated this, staring up at the cross beams of the rafters. Most stations she’d been too would have something hanging there to make it look pretty. Flags, fake flowers, or paper lanterns. The big station in Dayton didn’t have the rafters exposed at all, instead, the ceiling was painted with stars. When she’d first gotten to the city, and stepped off the train into the terminal, she had craned her neck up in wonder. When she first met Eddie, he was living in the station’s attic.

She stood up, walking around the tiny station in her thick wool socks, crushing the dead four-leaf clovers beneath her feet against the dirt floor. There was a clock over the ticket counter. The chalkboard hadn’t been cleaned in a while; the text smudged. She traced Oliver’s crooked handwriting with her eyes. Three sets of numbers written in white chalk against the green background: 6 AM 12 PM 6 PM. Maybe if she’d been here sooner, she’d be on her way to Harmon, a few Stags poorer. But then, she probably wouldn’t have met another half-muse.

There were posters along the wall, advertising all the places one could go on the HTC line. The illustrations were all in the same style, she recognized the artists from magazines. They showed the beautiful, glittering train stations of the previous decade when spring lasted long and there was money to go around. Women in their dusters and cloches with men carrying their luggage, men in suits checking their watches or smiling off into the distance at their waiting families. The sun rayed tiered spire of the Caroler Building. Amara had never managed to get inside; she’d always wondered what it was like inside the spire.

She skimmed through the pamphlets on the rack by the door, spinning it and pocketing a map for later. Oliver didn’t notice, or if he did, it didn’t matter. None of the windows had glass. She could hear the wind outside, loud, insistent—like a pack of wolves in the distance. The olive-green paint on the shutters were chipping. She could hear rain outside, too heavy to make out the individual plinking against the sheet metal awning she’d seen on her way up. She half expected the roof to leak.

Amara checked the clock. It would have her believe that the time was 12:03pm. But she'd gotten here just after noon. "Hey, Oliver, this clock is broken."

"Has been since the crash," he said. "Not worth getting fixed."

"Well, what time is it then?"

He pulled up his sleeve, glancing at his watch. "A quarter to 1."

She could cry, she thought she would.

She dropped down in her seat, forlorn and resigned.

Oliver offered her another biscuit.

The building groaned.

## Chapter Four: The Snowstorm

Eurus should be long gone by now, but they wanted to stick around the station, teasing their favorite duo of half-muses while their siblings, Boreas and Notus, danced across the northeast. Winter clung to the north, rain turned to snow, the temperature plummeted, and it was beautiful. They were trying to coax the two half-muses outside to bear witness. It wasn't every day a mortal could see something so life changing, so divine in its creation and carnage.

"Come out, come now, from your little wretched hovel. Feel the wind on your skin as the rain turns to ice," they sung. "I thought you were *worshippers*. Come witness Her will. This storm you feel coming, it's and ire so divine. Come out, come now, while you've still got the time."

They rattled the shutters and knocked at the doors, twisting around the building in a whirl. Their laughter was a song in the air as sleet hit the wooden roof and the sheet metal awning. They'd tugged the tarp away, hoping to annoy Oliver just enough to get him outside. The wood groaned at their insistence.

They could break it. Tear the soaked planks from their shaky foundation. Rip away the halfhearted scaffolding that made up the awning. They were a force to be reckoned with, even more so now, that they were allowed to run wild. Twisting higher up to beckon the dark clouds further, Eurus turned the sleet to hail and shot themselves at the station.

The floor turned to mud at their feet. Amara pulled her pulls back on, dropping all politeness to keep her feet up on the bench. Oliver packed away his work.

"It wasn't supposed to rain today," she said. She'd kept track of the predicted forecast, had, when she was still out there, checked the sky and made her own predictions. Clear weather, that's what they all agreed. Clear skies and a blessedly forgiving winter. That was the hope anyhow.

It was not supposed to rain today. Nor was it meant to hail.

"Well, the weather is a cruel mistress," said Oliver.



“And if it gets worse,” said Amara, hugging her carpet bag.

“Then the train will be delayed. But there’s still time,” he assured.

Water dripped from the roof. He covered the firewood with a length of canvas. Standing on his toes to lessen the mess, he strode over to ticket counter and held the door open.

“If you’d like, there’s a wooden floor in here, no stove though.”

“I’ll prioritize dryness over warmth.” Amara shot up from her seat, clutching her things and hurrying over. “Believe it or not, I hate rain.”

“Oh, but rain makes your flowers grow,” he teased.

She huffed, “*I* make my flowers grow. Rain has got nothing to do with it.”

Laughing, Oliver retrieved his blanket, guitar, and briefcase.

He let Amara have the armchair, she’d already taken it anyhow, and sat on the hassock Mr. Dent had stolen from his previous employer. The meager employees’ room was a marked improvement from the rest of the station. From the upholstered seats to the wooded floor, there was even a bookshelf filled with Mr. Dent’s mysteries and knick-knacks he’d gotten on the line. Employees got their tickets for free. Amara had pulled down the shades that separated the ticket window from the rest of the station, and turned on the gas lamp. Leaned back in the green chair, staring up at the portrait of Mr. Hughes.

“Is that—,” she asked.

“Yes.”

“And he’s your...?”

“Boss, adoptive father, only benefactor left to this poor and abandoned poet? Yes.”

She nodded.

Mr. Hughes was an old man, wrinkled cedar skin and silver hair, a sharp suit and humorous smile. To Amara, it looked like he was laughing, it even reached his eyes. She glanced at Oliver. He was looking everywhere but the portrait, his expression a cross between embarrassed and dejected.

“I can’t help but notice that there’s no phone in here,” she said.

“Hm?”

“How are you notified of delays? What do you do if something happens?”

“Well, I can guess when there will be a delay, but there are still only three trains.”

“Which is why it is all the more important that you’re able to contact them.”

He chuckled. “I suppose so. The lines don’t come this way though. I’m sure the good people of Tremont meant for phone lines to be set down here, it just never happened. Besides, I don’t have anyone to call.”

“Your d—boss. You could call your boss and demand some repairs on this place. Heaven knows it needs it.”

“The nearest phone is at the post office.” He snapped his fingers. “If you stay in Tremont, you can work at the post office.”

She shook her head. “No. I don’t think I’d like to stay in this town. Maybe I’ll just head further north once I’ve got the funds.”

“Then what will you do in Harmon?” He rubbed his hands together, the chill setting in.

“Probably the bar. Though, I’m not keen on the idea of living there.”

“Well, I don’t use my place a lot and since we’re practically kin, you could…stay with me.”

She didn’t know why it surprised her. Maybe it was just that it had been a long time since she’d had someone that she considered family. Amara hoped she wasn’t tearing up, convinced they would freeze in her eyes. She swallowed, smiling gratefully. She hoped it was grateful. “Thank you,” she said.

“You’re we—” all the shutters flew open and a loud crash came from outside. “Stay here.” He buttoned up his overcoat, hurrying outside.

“Oliver, wait it’s—” the wind filled the tiny station, knocking her down.

“Close the door, I’ll be fine!”

She had to force the door shut, Eurus was doing their damndest to knock it off its hinges like they did the shutters. “Fucking Eurus,” she swore.

Oliver trudged out into an alarming amount of snow, halfway to his knees, with winds that threatened to knock him over. He had to fight for each step, Eurus calling him ever forward. They’d knocked the scaffolding down. In lay in a collapse heap of wooden beams, tarp, and sheet metal.

“Eurus,” he howled.

“Oliver,” said Eurus, rejoicing. They swirled around him, creating a protective wall from the forces that was their siblings. “You made it.”

“Eurus, Mr. Hughes will have words with you,” he seethed.

They laughed. “Come, listen.” They beckoned him further away from the station and the protection provided by the god travelers and tricks. “You sing you praises to Mother Earth,” they sung. “And in return she welcomes thee. Now bear witness to her rage, her power and severity.”

The wind pushed him ever forward, even as he stumbled. Whipping at his clothes, wicked, and wrathful. A storm brought on by divinity. He’d only ever heard of them from Mr. Hughes, and yet, here he was, caught in one.

“You sing you praises to Vengeful Earth, hoping her good graces, you’ll deserve. You’ve sung your life away. And without her, there’s no reason to stay.”

Oliver hit something. He couldn’t see it, couldn’t take his eyes off the sky, to whatever it was, buried in the snow, that knocked him down. He had a fleeting thought that it might have been the pump, but he hadn’t been walking in that direction. His head hit something, the ringing in his ears freeing him from the thrall of Eurus’ singing. His world went dark.

The pulldown shades flapped into the employees' room. Amara had forsaken it to make an attempt at fixing the shutters. The wind fought against her, pushing her around in the little station. Because she could move and sing at the same time, she hummed to herself, trying to calm it. Roots grew around her hands as she picked up the wooden panels and the boards Oliver had used to bar them, pressing them against the windows and into their slots. The station had five windows, three along the wall with the stove and two flanking the doors.

Her teeth chattered as she worked, looking out each window for signs of Oliver. She saw the destroyed scaffolding, but not him. Realization dawned, trying to stay calm, she relit the lamp outside, and braved the wretched snow. The clouds loomed dark and unforgiving overhead. Above the drumming in her ears, she could make out the Chorus of Death on the wicked wind.

“Oliver!” she cried, tasting the cold of the air. “Oliver!”

She could not see him the heavy white of winter. Could not decipher which mound of snow was a person or the debris of scaffolding. Before she was willing to move any further from the station, she had to know where she was going. Taking a deep, shuddering breath, Amara sang her mother's song of spring.

The wind stopped to listen.

She shivered, even in the warming air. Snow waited, suspended before her, as she sang them away. She couldn't see any of her flowers through the snow, it was up to her knees. It didn't even melt as she sang. She kept going, taking one careful step forward, fully aware that she'd break the spell if she stumbled and knowing she would not find him if she stayed.

*If only she had the lungs of an opera singer, she thought, gasping for air, or the skill.* The storm came down on her, heavier now from her interruption. She had to move slowly, knowing only that she needed to go past the debris, or at least, where she remembered the scaffolding to be. There weren't any footsteps or long tracks in the snow, even her own were filling up fast. Her teeth chattered. “Oliver,” she screamed.

She made the mistake of looking back, just to see how far she'd gone. She was not far at all. Yet, she had this dreadful sense that she still had more to go. Rubbing her arms up and down, she sung her mother's song, willing her flowers to break through the snow. Mentally, she ran through every plant that could survive the cold, remembering the Moseri trees that grew in the mansion yards of Dayton. Amara pictured their spring green, long dense needles, the conical shape of the tree. She saw them shoot up from the snow in her mind, aging ten years to reach their full height. Then, she saw them before her, rising from the snow. As soon as she paused for air, their needles grew gold. Huffing, she fought through the wind and three feet of snow, grabbing onto her tree. Her body won't stop shaking, she couldn't warm herself up.

"J-j-just a b-b-bit m-more," she said.

Swallowing hard, she pictured a line of these trees leading her to Oliver, or at the very least, leading her to a depression in the snow. She called his name one more time and sang.

He awoke, buried in the snow. Lips cracked and dry, teeth chattering, skin so pale he was almost blue. If he wasn't half an autumn muse, he'd be frozen solid.

Breathless, he pushed himself up, shoving mounds of snow away and ignoring the ringing in his ears. He had to get someplace warm, but the only place available was the station. Once he was in a sitting position, he scanned his surroundings. All dark sky and walls of white snow. He couldn't even see the gaslights of the station.

Wiggling his toes, he swallowed hard. "F-f-fuck."

Why had he followed Eurus? He knew they were wicked, mischievous in that way that only gods were. Mortals were playthings to them, even him. He thought he heard his name on the wind. Thinking it was more games from Eurus, he ignored it, and forced himself to stand on shaky legs. He had to get back to the station.

*I could survive this*, if I still had my patron, he thought. *If divinity still looked on me kindly, I could survive anything*. He had to keep himself moving, even if it meant thinking about things he shouldn't. *It was my fault, probably*. Lifting his legs above the snow was a chore that grew worse with each, unsteady step.

Again, he heard his name sung on the wind.

With chattering teeth, he stuttered out curses to Eurus. Every time he spoke his breath froze against his lips.

He could not remember the symptoms of hypothermia.

Then he heard singing. Saw the wind and snow rest to listen. Felt a flush of warmth run through him as the snow on his clothes melted away.

Collecting himself, he turned until he could see the station's roof. And there, just ahead of him, was Amara, eyes closed, singing. He stumbled towards her, forcing his cracked lips to part so he could call out. "A-Amara."

She heard him.

In her relief, she stopped singing and the snow was on them again.

He stumbled towards her, calling her name, grabbing onto the little golden trees she created for support.

When the wind slowed and he saw her shivering figure again, he knew he was on the right track.

Amara laughed, breathless and shaky, clinging to her Moseri. She could see him; he wasn't so far now. It didn't feel like such a journey when the snow was still and the wind rested. But when she stopped to breathe, miles were between them again. This was the wrath of the gods, this uncaring cruelty her mother had sung of. The dark sky loomed above them, she could hear the Chorus of Death on the wicked wind, creeping ever closer as it ripped at her coat. They needed to get inside. She couldn't keep singing and

stopping like this. *And what happens when he reaches you, how are you getting back to the station?* she asked herself, chewing the inside of her lip. *We'll just have to keep ourselves in the right direction,* she decided.

She sung again the song of spring that her mother taught her. Oliver half lurched and half strode to her as best he could with the starting and stopping of the storm. He practically fell into her once the distance was closed.

“Th-th-thanks,” he said.

She nodded, still smiling in her relief that he was alive. “Let’s...get inside.” She pointed to the direction she’d last seen the lanterns glow. “That way.”

They held hands so as not to lose each other. The wind pushed against them, determined to knock them down and let the snow bury them. It rose above her knees. Her mouth was dry, nose stuffed, she couldn’t make another sound even if she wanted to. Oliver squeezed her hand in the darkness and she squeezed back. The Chorus of Death sung on the wind.

When at last they made it to shelter, following her trees, they fell through the station doors, snow piling in the entryway. Forcing his limbs to move, Oliver slowly rose up from the dirt floor and barred the double doors closed. Amara hobbled over to the woodstove and relit the fire. They sat right in front of it, hands outstretched, until their teeth stopped chattering.

Oliver checked behind the counter for something else to wrap up in. Amara dug through her carpet bag, it was an old, old thing, from when her mother was younger. It was the only item that her mother had left behind and Amara had taken it when she ran. It wasn’t like her half-siblings needed it. Her whole life was in there now. A change of clothes, her toiletries. Every failed relationship, every almost-home. She was living through hard-times before hard-times hit everyone, and this bag was the record of it, faded and sturdy.

Oliver came back with his blanket and Amara produced one of her own. They stayed close, wrapped up, praying the shutters would hold though they hadn't before. Eurys was a menace, but neither of them could hear their taunts. Perhaps they thought Oliver dead and so, their job done.

The two watched the fire, letting it lull them from their exhaustion. Oliver tried to stay awake, in case something happened, but the near-death experience had drained him.

They were both asleep when the fire died and cold crept in, holding them tight in a frigid embrace. They were frozen, even before the roof caved in.