

Conversation Pieces
Volume 60

Feed Me the Bones
of Our Saints

Alex Dally MacFarlane





Published by Aqueduct Press
PO Box 95787
Seattle, WA 98145-2787
www.aqueductpress.com

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
ISBN: 978-1-61976-142-1

Cover illustration, “Body of the Book,” courtesy of Erzebet Barthold, erzebetbarthold.com

Original Block Print of Mary Shelley by Justin Kempton:
www.writersmugs.com

Printed in the USA by Applied Digital Imaging

Publication History

The stories were originally published as follows:

Feed Me the Bones of Our Saints: *Strange Horizons* (2012)

Iddad Library Catalogue of Surviving Foxes: *Gigantic Worlds* (Gigantic Books, 2015)

Written on the Hides of Foxes: *Beneath Ceaseless Skies* (2014)

Out They Come: *Shimmer* (2013)

O Fox Confessor, Your Mouth is as Powdered Turmeric:
original to this collection

Fox Bones. *Many Uses.*: *Beneath Ceaseless Skies* (2012)

Teeth, Tapestries: *Beneath Ceaseless Skies* (2016)

Inari Updates the Map of the Rice Fields: *Phantasm Japan*
(Haikasoru/Viz Media 2014)

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Feed Me the Bones of Our Saints

Jump up! Take arms! Bare teeth!

We fight for these sands.

Sink iron knives and white teeth into their scented flesh, their soft city flesh, those stealers of our homes. This is our city now, this desert with its winds that scour our cheeks, its dunes that join us in song, its rare springs that we lap at so gently. We once gulped rivers of rubies and pearls; now they do, and we will never be able to claim them back. We will not let them take this final city of air and graveyards from us! Jump up!

We fight for these sands with everything we have, and sometimes we forget the feel of a sister's shoulder beneath our heads, we've been so long without sleep—but today will be remembered for more than this.

Today we retrieve the bodies of our Saints.



Nishir and Aree the Courageous, Nishir and Aree the Fierce, Nishir and Aree the Kind. We write their names on every rock we pass, because we fear that one day we will all be killed, and then who will tell their stories? We imagine a foxless woman hundreds of years from now deciphering the desert's rocks and holding them close to her heart like a newborn child and kit.

It pains us to imagine a future where the suns cross and no child and kit are born onto the hot sands. No other people are born like us.

We buried Nishir and Aree only fifty years ago, when we still numbered in the hundreds, when we still inhabited cities and slept under ceilings of scuffed gold.



Jump up!



We send our bravest, brightest daughters for this most sacred task. Jiresh and Iskree first perform the dawn mourning, barking ten times into the wind the names of our most recently lost sisters. We cook their breakfast. A feast: mice and snakes in neat rows, roasted cactus flesh, crushed agari petals and rare kurik stamens. They take small bites, and then Jiresh holds out the plates to the rest of us, smiling. “Eat, sisters. We must all be strong.” Iskree licks her dye-whorled tail as we share the food. We help them prepare. Fifty years ago we still hung so much silver from our ears that the flesh stretched, hanging around our shoulders, and we still dusted our faces with the powder of sapphires. Going into battle, we used to gild our nails and claws and fit ourselves with mail that shone like small suns, like our mothers. Now we anoint Jiresh and Iskree with shattered knives. We bind the triangles to their foreheads with leather, and the jagged edges draw small beads of red. For each drop of their blood, we think, may a thousand fall from our enemies.

One by one, we embrace them.

Dutash holds Jiresh last, and whispers, “Stay safe, stay safe. I will dream of you every night. Bring me back dates, if they still grow there.”

“I will,” Jiresh whispers against Dutash’s lips, holding her lover close, “I will, I will.”

Iskree and Tounee inhale each other’s scents, snout to snout, to carry close to their hearts.

And then Jiresh and Iskree walk into the desert, woman and fox, toward bold Barsime, the city whose walls threw themselves to the ground when we were forced out.



Few of us remember our cities’ glory.

Mere villages, our enemies say. But we were never so numerous, never capable of filling each city with thousands upon thousands. What need did we have of numbers when our cities were so beautiful?

We know Onashek: how could we not? We held onto it the longest, Onashek of cinnamon, carved into such beautiful houses. Even when crowded with refugees, it failed to lose all its luster beneath their detritus. It made the sweetest fires; its smoke scented the tears that covered our faces as we fled.

We know Eriphos of our well-scribed stones. We launch rare raids into its remains, pillaging the stones that are covered in our stories, in the script our enemies call crude, simple. A child masters it so quickly, they say, surely it is only a plaything, like scribbles of the suns. We only want our human sisters to learn quickly. They need to fight—it is a remnant of our luxury that we also want them to write, just as we make dangerous journeys to

the places where indigo grows, so that our fox sisters can harvest leaves and dye their tails with their traditional shapes, denoting histories.

We know Barsime of the green sarcophagus, where Nishir and Aree lie under a heavy lid. Our oldest sisters tell of the sarcophagus's unforgettable beauty.



The way to Barsime is long and dry, but Jiresh and Iskree are used to hardship. They walk together, barking and singing in poor harmony, chasing lizards, seizing animals that emerge at night. The stars point a path from oasis to oasis, so that they can fill their leather water-bags and with careful rationing keep their tongues wet.

They find rocks covered in our human script, and Jiresh stops to read out every story. Young as she is, she has heard only a few of them.

Once, we knew more stories than there were stars to follow and admire at night. We wrote them in the desert for fun. What we have lost since that time is immeasurable.

Jiresh and Iskree cross the desert, walking the dotted line on Jiresh's map, until they reach the triangle of Barsime.

They almost miss it.

The sands have swallowed the city's remains, so that Barsime is only a strange pattern of small rises in the ground. Jiresh, tired and thirsting, walks blindly among them, stepping on and off the fallen walls. It is only because of Iskree, who never tires of digging for lizards, that she doesn't walk on to the salt flats and die looking.

It is the first sun's dawn. As warmth covers Jiresh's body, she sighs in relief. The night is always so cold.

Iskree finds worked stone.

Her barks draw Jiresch back. “Barsime,” Jiresch says. “Then there must be an oasis, or a well.” But they cannot find water. The date palms are gone, torn down and burnt. The careful irrigation system is lost. The desert has claimed back the land once held by our city. There will be no dates for Dutash. “Maybe there’s still water underground.”

The oldest among us recall that the sarcophagus is buried, and told them so before they left.

In the early morning’s shadows, Jiresch and Iskree decipher the pattern of Barsime’s fallen walls, and by the time sweat is soaking their bodies under two high suns, they stand in its center. Iskree digs. Jiresch helps her, on hands and knees, sweeping aside the sand until they reveal a door, leading down.

Its jewels and bronze decorations are gone.

Nauseated, Jiresch pushes the stone door completely off the hole. Iskree, who sees better in the dim, leads the way down the cool stone steps. The temperature is a relief. They smell damp and feel renewed hope for a well—and there it is, in the middle of the subterranean road. There is no bucket. Jiresch unhooks the bucket she carries on her back and lowers it on some of her best rope until it strikes liquid.

The water is perfectly, beautifully pure. She sets the bucket on the floor so that she and Iskree can both drink.

When they and their leather bags are full, they walk on.

There is enough light for Jiresch to see that the walls’ decorations are also gone, prised off.

Jiresch wants hope. She wants it like she wants fine food and perfume and a house with windows of stained

glass: it is a thing she knows that others possess and think nothing of, while she only has an emptiness that wants to hold it.

At the end of a long corridor, she and Iskree step into a small chamber.

The pedestal is swirled with blue like a tail and engraved with lines of letters, declaring in both scripts: *Here is the final sleeping place of Nishir and Aree, who taught us all to be strong.*

That the pedestal is bare of its green sarcophagus and sacred bodies doesn't surprise her.



Our enemies say that our stories are all lies, that we never were born each time the suns' paths crossed, we never were, that we were just women who went mad, who raped men to get their daughters, killed sons out of the womb, who tamed foxes with meat and bestial sex.

They say we never lived in those cities they filled with locks and guns and foxless people.



Iskree whines as if wounded.

“Why have you taken them if you think we're worthless?” Jiresch shouts to the empty chamber. “Why can't you just leave us alone?” She falls to her knees, sobbing. “You've won. You've already won. Why can't you stop stealing from us?”



When we later hear this tale, we will keen for their pain and wish we were there to press against them and stroke their fur and hair.



“We only want to honor them,” Jiresch cries. “We want to bury them in a place far from our enemies, where they’ll be safe and we can always return to make offerings.”

She lies on the floor, too tired to consider walking.

Iskree licks her cheeks and barks—it’s not yet time to give up.

“We don’t know where they’ve been taken,” Jiresch says.

Iskree barks and barks, reminding Jiresch that yes, they do.

She and Jiresch are considered brave for more than their willingness to stand and fight while their maimed and younger and more fearful sisters flee an attack. They were once captured and taken to an enemy town, a place where our people die as easily as cacti under a blade. In their cell, as they planned an escape, they overheard the guards talking. One, a woman, said that she hadn’t even believed the fox-fuckers to be real until she took her current job. She’d thought the exhibits in the Museum of Caa were hoaxes, like the skeletons of dog-headed men from the far North. Iskree and Jiresch happily killed all the guards several hours later.

Now they give thanks for being slowly, tediously taught the enemies’ language as children.

“If they collect our artefacts in Caa,” Jiresch says to Iskree, and the words taste foul as suns-turned meat, “then the bodies of Nishir and Aree will be the museum’s finest display.” Iskree barks agreement.

The concept of museums is strange to them, even after seeing one of the enemy’s towns. A life under roofs,

in a house that is safe, full of children, full of food and copper pots that bubble over with meat and spices—they dream of such things. They feasted on the bowls of plain rice in that cell, ignoring the guards when they laughed, when they asked if Jiresh would fuck her fox and could they watch.

Caa is even further away than that town—but it was once one of our cities, so it is on Jiresh’s map.

Iskree barks and Jiresh nods, determined. “We will not fail our mission. At dusk we’ll begin walking west.”

They sleep near the base of the steps to the subterranean part of the city, until they sense the darkening of the day, wake, drink further from the well, and depart.



They cross the western desert, and it tries like the drammik of legend to kill them. The land is truly plantless, the water scarce, the sun unrelenting, though they find deep cracks in the ground and curl in them during the day, pressed to the earth in a desperate sleeping search for shadows. They sleep nose-to-nose; Jiresh has liked waking with hers wet since early childhood. They pine for Dutash and Tounee. Sometimes when they are tired, they lie under the stars, Iskree on Jiresh’s chest, barking a rhythm in time to Jiresh’s fingers drumming on the hard ground.



They sit on a stony ridge, where agari flowers grow, and watch the city of Caa. Its old walls are tiled in emerald. Its old roofs gleam silver. Our walls. Most of the city is newly built of sand-brick, full of so many people.

Iskree can already smell their food, and her gut cramps in longing.

Numerous times she and Jireshe have leaped into hiding as merchants leave the city, on their way to another of the enemy's cities. In this place, the fertile land is riddled with old rock formations that make easy hiding places.

"You have to hide," Jireshe says to Iskree.

Iskree growls.

"You have to. I can pretend to be one of them, poor and wild-haired, and they'll kick me a little, but they'll let me in. I can steal their clothes, even, and find a stream to wash in, and bind up my hair, and they might let me right into the museum. If I walk in with a fox..."

Iskree snaps her teeth.

Jireshe buries her face in her hands, moaning softly. In truth she cannot bear the thought of separation from Iskree.

She remembers that she has seen women and men carrying large woven baskets of goods.

"I have a plan."

It is a long wait.

For this, Jireshe convinces Iskree to stay hidden. Jireshe too is out of sight, among rocks—among badly scratched, defaced stories of how we raise our sun-born young—until finally the wait is over. A woman approaches, with corn poking from the top of her basket. Looking at the quality of her jacket, its colors in patterns so fine that Jireshe thinks surely they're a figment of her imagination, Jireshe assumes that she traded cloth for food in the city. But how she got the food and basket matters little.

As she passes, Jireshe leaps out from her hiding place and strikes her on the head with a heavy stone. The

woman crumples with a groan and lies on the road, twitching. Only when Jireshe has dragged her into the rocks and stripped her of her fine clothes, untangled strings of beads from her beautifully combed hair and taken her basket, does she slit the woman's throat. The blood gathers in dips in the rock, like soup in bowls. Jireshe and Iskree feast on corn and small packets of raw meat from the basket.

Jireshe wants to wear the jacket but fears someone will recognize it as belonging to the dead woman, so she dons only the dress underneath—and cannot resist the belt, on which bells jangle like a continuous song. There she hangs her knife. She reluctantly unbinds her feet from their worn, tattered dark cloth and puts on the woman's boots. Her long wild hair she winds into a knot at the back of her head, fastening it with silver pins taken from the woman's head. She removes the knife-shards from her forehead and hides their small cuts with beads.

She worries that she will be instantly recognized as an imposter.

She uses the jacket and remaining corn as a cushion and concealment for Iskree, who gives her a long look before curling inside.

“You know I wouldn't do this if there was another way.”

Iskree licks her paws: she is unhappy, but she understands.

And so Jireshe, born under the crossed paths of two suns on a bed of hot sand, raised in the shells of old cities and under temporary canvas, walks into the thriving stolen city of Caa carrying Iskree on her back.



It is unimaginably big. She must keep walking. It crowds her: the voices, so loud and numerous, speaking that language not so different from her own. The colors of the clothes. Oh—the fruits, the powdered spices in pyramids, the smell of cooking meat. She drools and has to wipe and wipe her chin. Iskree buries her snout in the jacket to muffle her whimpers. “I know, I know,” she hears Jiresch whisper. “Shh.” They want to leap on the vendors and steal their food. Jiresch tries not to stare at women with big breasts, at men, at people of all ages who don’t show their bones on their skin. The buildings are so tall, several times her height. There are so many children. There are no foxes. There are men.

There are so many styles of clothing that her unfinished theft of an outfit is complete next to others. There are so many kinds of faces that her darker, wind-scoured one is not so unusual. People look at her, and her shoulders are torsion-tense, and the worst they do is eye her apparent poverty with disdain, concern, wariness.

She thinks: We are just a story to you, a folktale or highly questioned part of history, and you might not believe me if I said I’ve walked weeks in the desert to reach here, and I’ll steal our Saints’ bones back or die trying.

Even though she has seen some of this before in the enemies’ town, it is too much, too different, and she is barely across the market at the gates when she wants to run back into the desert and sit under the sky’s horizon-wide stretch, with the rocks and the agari flowers growing like little banquets.

She clenches her fists on the straps of her basket and walks on, up a major street, toward the distant roofs that sparkle in the suns' light.

When she walks in the remains of our old city, she must fight the urge to cry, to shout and rail against the theft of these walls. It's all so wrong! So full of intruders. Fists clenching ever tighter, Jiresch follows the winding pattern of the streets but cannot find the museum. Increasingly uncomfortable under clothes and corn, Iskree turns and turns. She hears Jiresch begin talking in that ugly language. She imagines a whole city full of foxless people and nearly keens aloud for Tounee.

"I'm looking for the museum," Jiresch says to a vendor, who displays small, intricately detailed statues carved of bone on a bright red mat. It draws her attention even as she tries to carry out a conversation. Bone and blood, and under it dusty stones. Simultaneously familiar and wrong—a keen bundles in her throat like fabric.

Jiresch hopes the woman thinks her accent only distant-strange.

"Which one?"

"Um." Iskree circles again. Jiresch wishes that she could whisper apologies. What a fine city this is, with so many museums like gemstones on a necklace. "The one with the desert people in it? The women and foxes?" She doesn't know their non-derogatory terms for us.

"Sorry," the woman says, smiling, "but I don't actually know where that one is. You'll have to ask someone else."

"Oh. Thanks." Jiresch cannot smile back, and stalks off to find someone who cares enough about our people to know where our Saints are kept.

A man in a brilliant blue tunic overhears her question to another woman. “I know where it is,” he says, with a smile as warm as tea. He is tall and broad, like a wall. It’s like talking to an inscription on Barsime’s subterranean walls; even as more words pass between them, she can’t imagine that she is doing this thing. “Do you want me to show you?”

“Yes.”

Jiresh follows the man through the winding streets, with the walls only sporadically flashing green in the sunlight. They have faded in the seventy years since Caa was taken, and many of the tiles have been removed. She wonders how far away these people have taken our city. How many distant men and women admire their tile of green, perhaps scratched with a word or a cutter’s careless tool, with no idea who gathered the emerald from the desert and turned it into a home?

“What’s your interest in the fox-women?” her guide asks.

She glares at his back. “Their Saints are here. In a sarcophagus.”

“Ah, the sarcophagus. It’s the museum’s greatest artefact, a perfect example of traditional burial practices and the veneration of important figures—”

“It’s been stolen from its proper place,” she says—the first thing that falls off her tongue—just to stop him from hearing Iskree’s growls.

“There are some who argue that, but I believe this would have otherwise been lost. It’s important to retain such artefacts. But I’m the curator’s son, so of course I’m biased.”

His smile is warm again. Jiresh imagines cutting off his lips and feeding them to him. Iskree thinks more simply of his throat.

They pass through an archway of tarnished silver, embossed with a story that Jiresh yearns to stop and read.

Inside the museum is cool, like the underground passages in Barsime. Barely anyone is visiting. “Do you want a tour,” the man—Tulan—says.

“Yes. But I want to see the sarcophagus first. Please.” She belatedly remembers being told that a brusque attitude is rude to these people, so richly burdened with the time to adorn their words as prettily as their clothes.

“All right.” Yet again that smile.

So Tulan leads her past a collection of minor objects of our people—some that she doesn’t even recognize—coins, cloth, crafts, knives, presented alongside paintings and sketches of our cities in their various states, occupied or ruined or remembered. There’s a small story-stone. Jiresh runs her fingers over it, tracing words that don’t belong in this cool, plain-walled room with a smiling man in blue. There’s a tail, and Jiresh retches at the thought of these people cutting apart a sister for their wall.

“And here it is,” Tulan says with a flourish, oblivious to her hatred. “I’m awed by it every time.”

The sarcophagus stands on a pedestal in the middle of a wider room at the end of the corridor. Another man stands on guard, so large that Jiresh could fit herself three times into him. A woman and a child browse the items on the nearest wall.

It is beautiful. It catches Jiresh, so bright a green and covered in the tales of Nishir and Aree, carved in the shapes of stone-stories and tail-stories. Its lid is half off.

She steps forward. Inside—she could reach out and touch them—lie the mummified remains of Nishir and Aree.

Jiresh turns and draws her knife, fast as a dust storm, and slashes Tulan so deep across his stomach that his guts fall over his tunic before he can move his hands to the wound. *Jump up!* Iskree struggles free of the basket's contents. The giant moves, quicker than Jiresh expected. The woman and child scream. Jiresh throws her knife and the giant falls, crashing, and she darts forward to retrieve her knife as Iskree leaps from the basket, growling, teeth bared. *Jump up!* The woman is sobbing, begging, "Please, please, don't hurt my boy, please."

"Don't stop me."

"I won't, we won't, oh..." Her next words are lost in her sobs. The boy hides his face in her clothes.

Jiresh holds her knife between her teeth and reaches into the sarcophagus. Our Saints are stiff, brittle. Shouts, heavy feet—more guards. Iskree waits for them at the room's entrance. Cursing, Jiresh puts the remains of Aree whole into her basket. She needs her hands to fight. She cannot carry Nishir. So she snaps Nishir into pieces. "I hate them, I hate them," she hisses, with tears gathering in her eyes like dew. Saints should not be treated this way.

Iskree barks at the six approaching men.

"Stop!"

"Stop!"

Voices like rocks falling.

The pieces of Nishir fit into her basket, and she gets the beautiful jacket over them, holding them in place, before the men are grabbing for her. She darts away, while Iskree leaps forward, tearing at their heels through their fine boots. One man cries out and goes down.

“Slow and stupid and *fucking thieves!*” Jiresch screams, knife back in her hand. Who to strike first? Soon they’ll use their little guns. “We won’t let you take them from us!”

The leader of the five remaining men raises his gun, and Jiresch throws her knife. They both dodge the other’s weapons. The bullet shatters something behind her.

“I hate you!”

Iskree is too quick to be kicked. Jiresch reaches over her shoulder and grabs corn and throws it, confusing them, and she runs to a wall where she pulls away a knife with small emeralds embedded in its blade. Another man screams as his heel is torn open. His blood runs over Iskree’s teeth, and she runs at the next. The little guns are making noise. Jiresch feels one, two, three bullets strike the basket as she leaps for cover behind the pedestal.

They are blocking the way into the corridor—until Iskree tears at shins, breaking their attention. Jiresch runs at them, slashing with the knife. One of the men grabs her arm and yanks away the knife, growls, “Hold still, little bitch.”

“Never!”

She bites his hand and he cries out, lets go, and the others don’t have time to stop her from running past.

More bullets strike the basket. Something fire-hot grazes her thigh, but she keeps going. Iskree follows, heart beating fast at the sight of blood on Jiresch’s leg.

Jiresch shouts wordlessly with triumph, even though she knows there is a whole city to escape.

Another gunshot. Agony. Iskree screams.

No. And another. “No!”

Jiresch turns and the man fires again. A bullet slams into her shoulder. She sees Iskree lying on the floor,

bleeding too fast, lying in a growing pool of red like that woman's bone-covered mat. "No, no, no..." She crumples to her knees, tears like a flash flood. Iskree is already dead. Not even a final bark.

The men are reloading their guns. Soon they will kill her, as they have killed Iskree.

"No." The basket is heavy on her shoulders, full of Saints. Either she can die avenging Iskree or she can take Nishir and Aree from this vile place, the task Iskree died trying to complete. She wants to do both. She wants to tear out every throat in this city. "I will avenge you."

She is quick enough to dart forward, grab Iskree's body—twitching, death's last movements—and clutch her sister to her chest, and then she runs from the museum, full of hate.



The sight of a woman bleeding, weeping, holding something small and furred and dead is so strange that it is watched by hundreds. A few reach forward, as if to grab, and Jiresh dodges them. She runs until she's back in the desert, back among the labyrinthine rocks outside the city, far from a path this time, and there she hides, weeping.

Even when her chest and throat hurt as much as the wound in her shoulder, she weeps.



In Barsime, she leaves Iskree on the empty pedestal.



In Barsime, almost blind with tears, unable to climb those stairs and leave Iskree, she is not quite blind enough

to read a story inscribed on the wall of the Saints' chamber. It sets her jagged, broken thoughts ablaze.



“Feed me the bones of our Saints.”

We stare at Jiresh, our skinny, blood-stained, foxless sister with bones and flaps of skin in her arms.

“They will kill us like they killed Iskree. Every year their weapons are stronger, every year we are hungrier. They will kill us all, and we will be completely forgotten. Our rocks will be scoured by the sand-heavy winds until future historians can only sigh into their notes and say that some old culture lived here, but too much is lost now to say who we were. How brave and strong we were. Jump up.” She speaks our battle cry, and it is raw as a wound. “Jump up. Let me tell you a story I found in Barsime. We have forgotten what we carved into stone only fifty years ago. Let me tell you about bones.”

Some of us, old enough to remember the construction of that subterranean chamber, know this story and begin to grieve, knowing that we cannot stop this; and some begin to imagine a victory.

Jiresh stands with those bones in her shaking arms and says, “Once, over five hundred years ago, when two more sisters were born *every* time the suns' paths crossed, there was fighting. We and another people competed for a great region of gold, where even the most pitiful bushes were said to shine with the brightness of it in the soil, and two of our sisters were especially honored for their skill in combat and were agreed to be Saints. Eventually they were killed, in one of the bloodiest battles of all. Their lovers feared that their bodies would fall into the

hands of the enemies and so consumed them entirely, hiding in a gully. When the lovers returned to the field, they felt the weight of the suns like a heavy knife in its sheath upon their backs. They wielded it, and that is how we won the fields of gold, to build the first of our cities that was stolen in this century.”

We stare.

Some of us know that she did not finish the story. Did not say, *And the destruction so horrified them that it became one of the great sins of our history. No one has ever used this power since.*

Fifty years ago, we still thought we might survive. We carved our history into that burial chamber and imagined writing about our victory, or our remaining cities becoming more beautiful than ever, or our tentative peace with the enemies—something that was not hunger and death in the open desert.

“We can wield the suns,” Jiresh says. “I don’t know what it means, exactly, but it’s a weapon. It’s... I think it’s an end.”

“For whoever wields it, too,” Dutash whispers.

“Yes.”

Jiresh cannot quite look at Dutash.

The wind gusts between us all, mournfully.

“Will anyone come with me?” Jiresh says. “In case...”

In case anyone else wants to watch Caa consumed by fire. In case anyone wants to join this vengeance.

And, hidden in her words: Jiresh doesn’t want to die alone.

One of our oldest sisters snarls her disagreement, and another takes up the sound—and another, womanless Koree, jumps at them with her teeth bared. Tounee and

many others join her. Dutash looks away, less certain than Tounee. Foxless Lizir stands up and says, “I will come with you.”

“And I.”

“I want to.”

Voices young and old, human and fox—but this is not a quick argument.

“It will be brutal,” an old sister says. “You must know that.”

She is laughed at. As if the war hasn’t been brutal.

“This is not a battle,” our old sister persists, “where two sides are equal. I know that is how this entire war has been waged. I know. I understand. But you must know that you are planning to join them in sin. It is not a decision to be made lightly.”

“I’m going to do it,” Jiresh says softly. “I crossed the desert alone. It took weeks. I carried these bones, and I never stopped thinking about it.”

“I know, sister.” There is nothing more she can say.

We cook our dinner, comb the children’s hair and fur, set up tents for the night, murmur lullabies to the single pair of babies—they are so fragile in their early months, so easily killed by the desert—and the argument goes on, too complex to be sewn into the finest enemy jacket.

We touch our Saints’ bones, one by one, with snouts and lips.



We cannot all agree.

We decide to separate, permanently, and it pains us more than the fall of every city combined.

Jiresh consumes the bones, pounds them with one story-covered stone onto another, making a plate of a battle tale. “I will make a finer tale than this,” she chants. “I will make a finer tale than this.” She scoops handfuls of dust and pours it down her throat, and her lips are stained pale. Though she coughs and chokes, she keeps eating it, periodically licking under her fingernails and scraping the stone’s incisions and scratches free of powder. She whispers, almost too quiet for anyone to hear, “I didn’t think it would taste so horrid.”

A whisper for a fox that no longer lives.

She stands, still coughing, and massages her neck with one hand. “We should go,” she says. “Gather your weapons.”

No tremendous change has overcome her.

“Have faith,” she says, with a sly smile that curves her lips like the word for victory.

We make ready.



Jiresh gives the skulls of Nishir and Aree to those of us who will remain in the desert. “Bury them together,” she says softly, “with every rite we still possess, with every song. Bury them touching, as if they are just sleeping side-by-side.”



We who remain in the desert mourn as they leave.



We cross the desert without song, the suns hot on our backs. Dutash walks with us—the only sister to stop and score our story on rocks, lingering at each one as if she

might not have to continue. She wants us to be remembered, what we do to be known—even this. Tounee's desire convinced her not to stay at the place where Jiresh consumed our Saints. Jiresh's determination drags her, hurts her.

"Jump up," Jiresh says as we grow nearer to the city. "Jump up. Jump up."

She rarely speaks without repeating. Only at night, as we curl together in a far smaller pile of skin and fur than we are used to, does she murmur single sentences, confused and painful, into Dutash's hair or Toree's flank or the sand, cooling against her cheek.

"Jump up."

Caa reveals itself, large in its gentle green valley.

We feel the suns, now.

"Jump up."

"Jiresh," Dutash says, reaching forward to touch her lover's arm—hotter than silver poured into its mold. Dutash yelps and snatches back her finger and sucks on it. The suns' heat intensifies. "Jiresh," Dutash says again. "Jiresh."

"Jump up!"

Jiresh runs fox-fast along the road to the city and takes the suns with her.

Knives in hands, teeth bared, we yell. *Jump up! Jump up! You can't forget us! We'll burn you from your homes! We'll set you all ablaze! We'll slide teeth and silver into the last throats!* As we run toward the city it bursts into flames, swallowing Jiresh in a flare like a blink.

The fire spreads quicker than a dust storm, covering the entire city in minutes. The air is full of roaring and cracking and screams. People cannot move—they are

burnt to their bones, their blackened, broken bones that crunch under our feet. The houses fall.

Jireshe's voice carries through the flames. *You took my sister! You! See how your arteries singe off my teeth like hair.* We hear her laughter. We hear her screams.



We who remain in the desert hear her, whisper soft, unstoppable as the sun's light, which glows so bright in the northwest.



Her fire-body is pain, is power. Is everything she dreamed, in that long, lonely walk from Caa to Barsime with Iskree in her arms, to the camp where sisters lived in fear of more deaths to bark at dawn.

You will never forget us! she screams with every part of her body.



We scream.

We don't die. The fire licks our bodies tenderly as tongues, so that Dutash, following Tounee into the emerald-walled—black-walled, wall-less—city-heart, thinks the fox could be caressing her.

"Jireshe!" Dutash cries into the fire.

Not every person in Caa is immediately consumed. In the minutes before the fire spread, some fled through the seven open gates. Some of us chase them. We laugh as the fire leaps after them, thrown like knives—Jireshe roars triumph as each one falls—and we finish whoever we find beyond the fire's reach.

We jump back into the flames, cradled by our burning sister.

“Jires!”

Dutash’s feet crunch over blackened bones, which crumble away like cheek-powder in the wind.

Another sister cries out, “Here, here, there are more of them!”

Our enemies hide in underground chambers and caves, in places where running water keeps them cool. Dutash sees them cowering and thinks: How many times have we done this, hiding in fear? Thinks: Some of them are too young to have ever attacked us. She doesn’t want to make this decision. She cuts their throats. None of them survive. None of them will kill us.

She imagines those who lived in the fields, who fled or hid when they first saw women and foxes running along the wide road into Caa, finding these un-burnt bodies amid the wreckage above and knowing how well we learnt not to show mercy.

You will never forget us! You will never look at a fire without remembering Caa! You will never look at emerald or silver without remembering how it all fell into dust and you will never, never take another of my sisters from me!

As blood soaks her feet, she staggers up the rocky steps.

She can’t see walls through the flames. She can’t see Tounee. She shuts her eyes and runs.

“Jires! Stop!”

Tounee climbs blackened steps into the streets, where the fire surrounds her like Dutash’s arms. Where is her sister? The fight is over.

The suns are getting hotter.

Tounee runs and Dutash runs and there are no sounds of life, only fragmented city-pieces and bones under their feet.

You will remember us!

Jiresh's voice is fainter now. The suns are hurting Dutash, who stumbles. Sisters across the city fall. "Tounee!" Dutash gasps. "Tounee, where are you?" She weeps, and the fire burns away every drop. She longs for the desert and her sister and a time when—she cannot think of a time she wants. But each memory of Caa is an agony. Fire and bones and our enemies' blood running over her hands for the first time in her life.

She wishes she hadn't followed Jiresh. "Tounee." Like her sisters, she falls.

A murmur from the flames: *They'll never forget us. Never.*

"Never," sisters whisper and bark across the city, as the fire blisters their skin. Some still have the energy to run. Some almost make it to the gates.

Jiresh feels her sisters in the flames and presses against them, finally afraid of her death, seeking comfort.

Never.

Tounee, who turned away from the killing to follow her reluctant sister, reaches the place where a great arch once stood, and doors of wood and bronze. Through the flames she sees a horizon. She sees Dutash, fallen on the ground, too fire-blind to see the way out. She barks in joy. Nothing. She bites.

"Tou..."

Tounee grabs onto Dutash's elbow and begins dragging her, though the fire is burning her eyes and her body.



An hour after Tounee drags Dutash into one of the streams feebly running between burned, bone-covered fields, the fire dies down. Black dust remains. For months it blows through the desert, and there is no one who does not know its source.



Two sisters walk with the wind at their backs, blind, lost.



We find them. We who went to Caa to find the remains of our sisters bring them slowly back to the place where we have buried Nishir and Aree. As the wind speckles our skin with black, we wait—afraid and determined, angry and grieving.