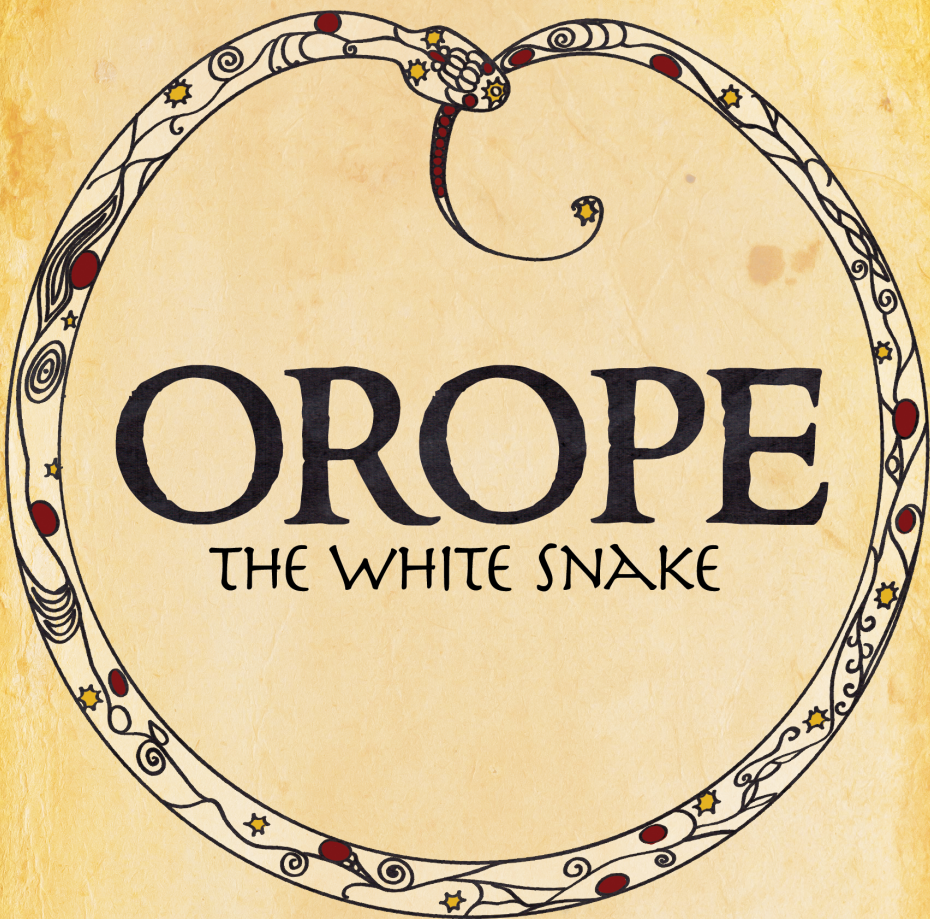




A NOVEL BY
GUENEVERE LEE



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NEW YORK

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OROPE

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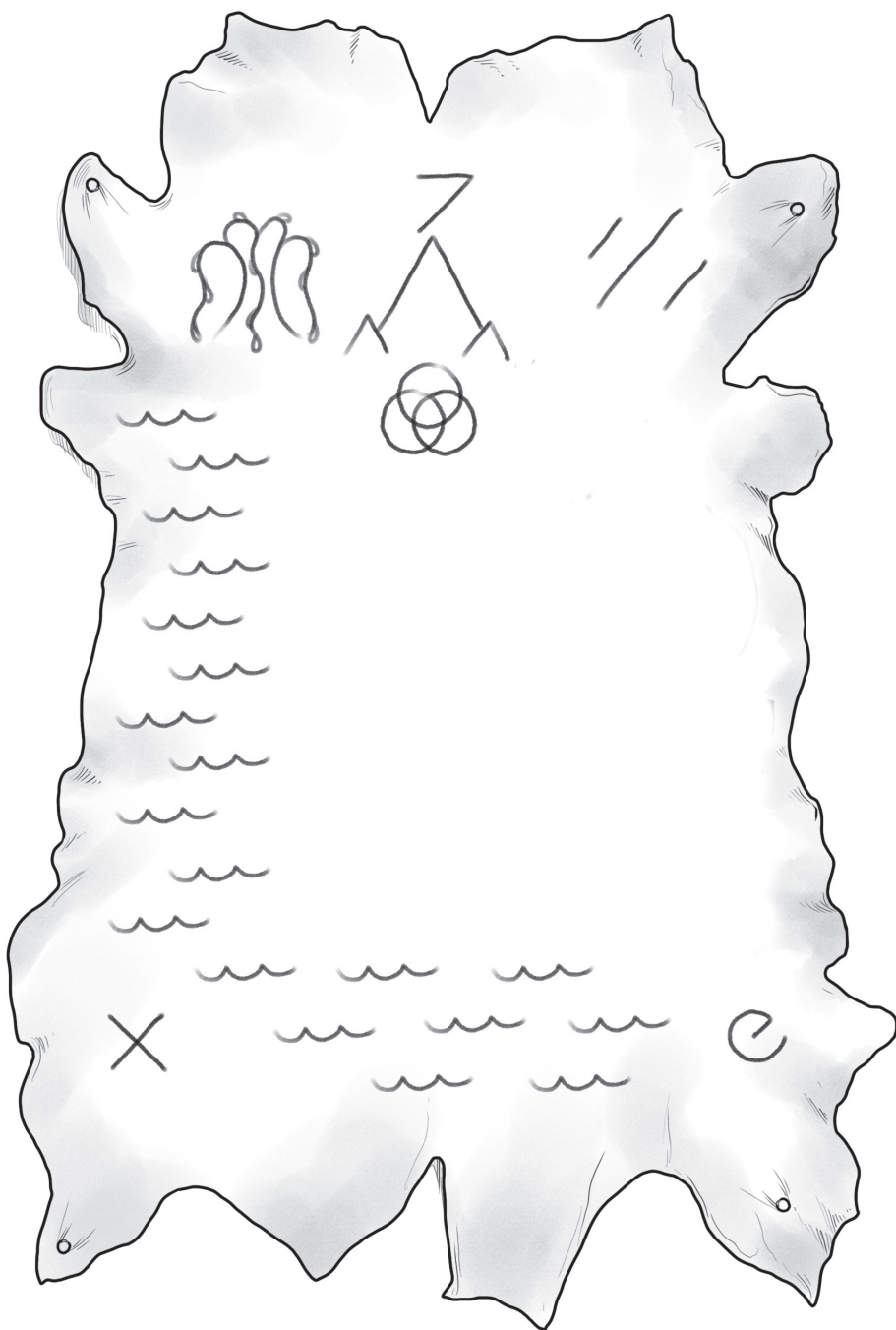
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To my mom,
and not because she gave birth to me,
or raised me –
though she did that too.
But because, when I was ten,
she told me to write...



THE WHISPERERS OF THE GODS

THE OCEAN SHALL RISE UP AND SWALLOW THE LAND

“**W**e were the first, and we will be the last.” Rashma Hal’Hotem scraped the sinew away from the bone. Her sisters chimed after her: “We were the first, and we will be the last.”

The three silver-eyed women sat on the ground, surrounded by sparks rising from the fire and the chanting of hundreds of women. In a small depression dug into the soft sand of the desert, the embers of the fire burned bright against the night.

The women’s bronze skin was painted with dark red blood. Their wild, dreadlocked hair was tied with the symbols of their position. They had removed their Ancestral Cloaks, the only clothes they ever wore, and sat naked. The hooded cloaks of skin and bones were placed carefully behind them, the bones facing up to the stars.

They announced themselves as the ceremony began. “I am Rekra Hal’Hashap, who speaks for Life.” Rekra wore a necklace of white feathers and claws, and dried water reeds were tied into her hair.

"I am Akrape Hal'Whata, who speaks for Rebirth." Akrape wore a necklace of pearls and seashells. Her hair was tied with the skin of snakes dried into circles so they were eating their own tails.

"I am Rashma Hal'Hotem, who speaks for Death." Rashma wore a necklace made from the skulls of lizards, and vulture feathers were tied into her hair.

The most prominent of the Gogepe, the Whisperers of the Gods, had layers and layers of bones strung to their Ancestral Cloaks, which would sometimes rattle together as the wind caught them. Rashma had far more bones on her cloak than either Akrape or Rekra.

The leathery skin of the Rhagepe had been tattooed with the signs of the goddesses, each one referring to a different achievement in their magic arts. They had just finished painting each other with the blood of the camel they had sacrificed, and the sticky symbols they had drawn still shined with wetness. Rashma, who spoke for Death, finished cleaning the first bone with her black stone fire knife and handed it to Akrape, who spoke for Rebirth.

Rashma looked at Akrape with satisfaction as the younger woman carved the sacred signs into the bone with a large piece of amethyst. This was Akrape's first calendar ceremony. She had only been chosen to be a Rhagepe in Rakeesh, the time before Orope. Of course she had, like all women with silver eyes, trained since birth to one day become a Rhagepe. There were only three Rhagepe to every tribe, and most women lived their entire lives without ever being chosen to speak for the gods.

She could still remember the day she had been chosen to speak for Death. She had been fairly young, but where most women had to spend years training themselves to receive visions, she had always been able to hear the gods while she slept. When Hotem, who spoke for Death, had died, Rashma had taken her place over many others, and became Rashma Hal'Hotem. Her first calendar ceremony she had been so nervous she couldn't stop her hands from shaking, but Akrape seemed calm, carving the symbols with a steady hand before passing the bones to Rekra, who spoke for Life.

"Kreesh tharlaum," Rekra muttered the words over each one as she threw them into the copper cauldron. Each symbol had a different meaning, and Rekra

knew them all in her heart. Rashma felt proud of her, of both of them. She wanted to tell them so, but to say anything other than the sacred words would break the flow of the ceremony. No, her praise would have to wait until the sun rose, and the gods returned to their slumber.

They were far from the lands they usually inhabited. The meeting of the Rhagepe took place at the southern edge of the great Kerlra Hal'gepe mountain ridge, the Teeth of the Gods. The mountains began at the north edge of the desert, growing high into jagged peaks and extending farther to the north than any Whisperer had dared to travel. They saw the mountains as steps to the gods, and so meeting at the base gave the Gogepe a stronger bridge to reach them.

Perhaps the Gods themselves had built the temple at the foot of the mountain. Rashma believed it so. Three large intersecting circles were all that remained. The walls, having crumbled over the countless cycles that had passed since its creation, now only rose as high as one's waist. If there had been a roof, it had long since fallen beneath the sand. The centre of the temple, where the three circles joined, was where the calendar ceremony took place. Twelve pillars still stood around the inner temple. A large tarp made of fine leathers and exotic skins donated from every tribe had been stitched together and hung from the pillars to hide the inner temple from sight. Only the Rhagepe would be allowed to enter.

Rashma felt a great lift in her heart whenever she visited the temple. It was as though she could feel the very breath of the gods on her face as she listened for their voices. She felt a connection to this temple she had never felt with another human, not even her fellow Rhagepe. The gods were the only friend or lover she would ever need. They gave her visions to guide her, to warn her of dangers, and in return all they asked was that the old ways be preserved. They filled her with comfort and gave her a place in this barren world.

The first time she had become truly aware of the Rhagepe, when she barely measured as high as her mother's hip, was when she saw one of the Rhagepe in her tribe perform the cloak ceremony. It could only ever be performed once in someone's life. It was the only ceremony by which the Rhagepe could speak directly with the gods, to ask them any questions and receive answers. It was the only ritual more sacred than the one being performed now. The greying woman had ground the bones of her Ancestral Cloak, and the cloak itself was boiled in

one of the copper cauldrons at the temple. The other two Rhagepe stood and watched, but they were not allowed to help. She sacrificed a camel, collecting its blood into the pot. The bone dust, along with the eyes of many animals, and the sacred herbs gathered from plants found in the depth of the desert were boiled in the blood and then drunk. A change came over the woman, she went into a trance. Rashma had watched wide-eyed in fear, as the woman raved long into the night, speaking words that sounded like gibberish, until finally settling into an uneasy sleep.

On the following morning when the Rhagepe finally rose she was calm and serene, and told everyone of her experience. Tears brimmed her eyes, as she spoke of how the gods had shown her wonders she could not now speak of, how the gods had given her wisdom and great secrets. The gods had even taught her a new spell, one that would curse a great enemy. From then on she was treated with great respect. It was as though she had transcended them all and become a god herself. When Rashma was chosen to be a Rhagepe for the Gopema tribe a full cycle later, she declared she would never know the touch of a man or the joys of a child. She would perform this ceremony one day. She would sacrifice her cloak and speak with the gods and hear their wisdom directly.

At the beginning of every full cycle, the time it took a babe to become an adult, and the time it took for the wandering star Zera to travel through the twelve constellations, they met there. Zera had just entered Orope, the white snake. The Whisperers brought gifts, like the skins for the tarp along with animals for sacrifice and jewels they had captured or traded for. They hoped these gifts would appease the gods into granting them a calendar free of evils. There were about two dozen groups of Rhagepe, one for each tribe, on the sand in front of the temple, each one collecting a cauldron of bones, members of their tribes standing outside the light of the fires, watching the rites being performed, the children witnessing this for the first time with wide eyes. Those who had witnessed this more than once, ground against each other, thrusting in time with the drumming that came from within the temple.

Rashma had finished scraping clean the last bone and, pulling on her Ancestral Cloak, began to chant, rocking back and forth in the sand. Other sisters who spoke for the Goddess of Death and cleaned the bones were also finishing,

and each one signalled this by joining the chant. The drumming surged. The chiefs, who wore the skull of their first kill on their heads began to dance around the circle of spectators at the edge of the firelight. The chiefs' Ancestral Cloaks rattled as they moved the practiced steps, their staffs clattered, feathers and claws hanging from their ends as they were held high above and swung around.

Akrape carved the last sacred sign and joined Rekra in the chant, taking it to a higher pitch. Their words were more frenzied. In every trio of Rhagepe, those finishing their tasks got to their feet and began to gyrate their naked bodies as they circled their copper cauldrons, the chant becoming louder, more fervent. Rekra and other Rhagepe who spoke for the Goddess of Life finished saying the sacred words over the last bone and trilled their tongues, leaping to their feet. The drums became manic, children joined the chiefs dancing in a circle, and those thrusting together arched their backs as they peaked. It was said children conceived on this night were given the greatest of destinies.

The Rhagepe, all cloaked once more, picked up their cauldrons by the three rings that hung on their rims. The pot was heavy but the strength of the Goddesses flowed through them now. The cauldrons felt as light as empty baskets as they continued to dance, carrying their bones towards the open entrance of the temple. They entered not through one of the large circles, but where two of the circles connected. The walls were narrow and lined by torches but grew wider as they reached the inner sanctum. At the mouth of the inner sanctum was the broken frame of what had once been a great door, now a path opening into the covered centre. The hides of golden leopards, black jaguars and sandy mountain lions covered the floors, and in the middle of the room a pit had been dug out and lined with slabs of rocks, smoothed out so it resembled a great bowl. As each group of Rhagepe entered the tent, they overturned their cauldrons, announcing their tribe as they dropped the bones into the bowl.

"We are of the Gopema," Rashma announced proudly. "We return to the gods to hear their words."

In the larger circles outside the inner temple, and able to look in, were the drummers. They were young girls training to one day become Rhagepe. In the three corners of the inner sanctum was a torch, giving light to the large space. As each cauldron was emptied the sisters continued to encircle the temple, until every set of Rhagepe was inside and all the bones were in the pit. They sat.

The drumming, the chanting, and the dancing all ceased at once.

“We were the first,” announced one woman, Karesha Hal’Harag, with sheer white hair. She was hunched over, her breasts drooping down to her belly. Her face was a labyrinth of wrinkles and swirling tattoos. Her Ancestral Cloak had three layers of rib bones, each layer tied crosswise onto the one below. Karesha and her mothers had led the Rhagepe during the calendar ceremony since they had first come to this temple. Her necklace was a snake eating its own tail, pearls in the place of its eyes, seashells hung in her dry hair. She spoke for the Goddess of Rebirth. Hers were the most sacred words.

“And we will be the last,” all answered back.

“Collect the first vision,” old Karesha ordered, pointing at Rashma. Rashma’s cloak had the second most bones, a third layer just beginning, and the knowledge of her desire to perform the cloak ceremony had raised her in the esteem of all, giving her the right to be the collector of visions during the ceremony.

Rashma pushed herself up from the ground. She crouched at the edge of the bowl, now filled with the carved bones. Reaching into the mix she pulled out the first one she clutched. All the most important visions that the Rhagepe had had over the past twelve constellations had been carved into these bones. Now it was time to find out which one the Goddesses feared the most, and which ones they would warn their people of.

“It speaks of famine,” Rashma read the finely carved symbols. There would be at least a dozen bones pulled out warning of famine. There always were. But there was always famine. Many of the Rhagepe nodded, murmuring, “I too have had this vision.”

“Sister Life,” the old crone pointed to another woman. Although she still had a glimmer of youth in her face, her hair was greying and one of her eyes was white and blank. She wore no necklace, but had fashioned a crown from seaweed and feathers. Her cloak had nearly two layers. “Check the blood.”

The crowned Rhagepe held a round slab in her hand, twelve figures carved into it, each one representing one of the twelve constellations they used to measure the passage of time. She took a long needle carved from a charred bone and pierced her lip. Blood pooled over her teeth and she spit onto the stone slab, hitting the image of Sakabe, the red scorpion, but the blood splattered on

many of the other images. “The famine shall be great. Beginning in Sakabe, and continuing on to the next coming of Orope.”

The sisters murmured their worry. They did not grow crops, but they still fed from the crops of those they traded with. And so the divining continued. If Rashma pulled out a bone and none had shared the same vision it would be tossed aside. If there was uncertainty among them, Karesha would decide if the vision would be added to the calendar.

“A ram shall give birth to five queens, and they shall be suckled by fire,” Rashma read, and all at once the women began to cry of their visions.

“I saw the mountain crack open and swallow five babes in fire!”

“I saw stones rain down on five mountains!”

“I saw two golden mountain lions eat five sheep!”

Karesha quieted them and began to strain through the dreams, picking up the important facts, and when the blood was checked no one was surprised that Apeko, the gold ram, was the only symbol bloodied. “In Apeko,” Karesha announced, “five great or powerful figures shall be slain.”

They continued, several more symbols of famine being removed, before Rashma picked one that made her pause. She looked up at Karesha and spoke with a quiet voice. “The ocean shall rise up and swallow the land.” The Rhagepe went silent. Then, one at a time, they began to hiss, trying to scare the bad omen away. Rashma had had such a vision, a great wall of water standing at the edge of the land, but had decided not to have it carved onto bone. She had tried to tell herself it hadn’t been a vision, but just a dream. Her mother used to tell her of the lands her people had come from before they had wandered the desert, the lands which had been swallowed up by water because the Whisperers had ceased to heed the old ways. They believed that so long as they continued to deliver the warnings of the gods, they would be spared such a fate from ever happening again. There was no use denying it now, if another Rhagepe had seen this.

“Who else has seen this?” Karesha’s voice snapped like a whip and the hissing stopped.

“I have had this vision, Sister Rebirth,” Rashma said slowly, hoping it would go no further than that.

“And who else?”

“I,” another of the Rhagepe spoke up, then more people spoke, their voices rising to a fervent pitch until everyone in the tent was screaming “I! I! I!”

Karesha held up her hand. “Check the blood.”

Another needle was procured, and the sister who held the stone, her lips swollen and red, pierced her flesh once more and spit. “Orope,” she said after a pause, but it was not the only symbol struck by blood, all of the animals had become spattered in red.

The drumming began again as Karesha walked from the holy structure, her arms held high above her head, everyone outside going silent and watching her intently. The other Rhagepe slowly streamed out of the tent after her, forming a circle around Karesha as she moved into the centre. Her arms fell and the drumming ceased.

“The calendar is complete!”

The tribesmen cheered, but Karesha would not let them rejoice.

“Silence!” And the crowd listened. “The wrath of the gods is being brought down on us! We must go to the kingdoms and demand they heed the gods, or else the world shall be swallowed by water a second time!”

No one spoke.

“The Goddesses demand we send one to speak for each of them! One for each kingdom! Those of you who wear the Ancestral Cloak! Those of you born in the time of Orope! Those of you who have not a single hair of grey – step forward!”

At first no one moved, then a man and woman from either side of the circle pushed through the ring of Rhagepe. It was clear this was their second Orope; they were both tall and strong. The woman’s charcoal hair was long and dreadlocked. The man had red hair and a beard cropped short. They had many tattoos, each representing a phase in their life; coming of age; making their first kill.

The woman had the tattoo of being joined with another and the sign of a mother. A man stood next to her, clutching her arm, his eyes wide with fear. She had to pull her arm away from his grip, and although he made no further move

to stop her, his hand remained reaching out towards the mother of his children. She wore a cloak of arm bones and ribs, the bones going down past her hips. Her face was one carved of stone, facing towards the Rhagepe and not turning back to the man she had been with.

The red-haired man had an unimpressive cloak, with rib bones and leg bones tied to the shoulder, the rest blank, marking him as the eldest son of a youngest son. His tribe cheered for him, some slapping him on the back with encouragement as he walked forward. He looked around with a dazed expression, as though looking for someone he couldn't find.

They stood before the Rhagepe uncertainly.

"No other?" Karesha's eyes went over every face in the crowd.

Finally, a figure pushed through, much shorter than the other two, and with a shock they realized he was half their age. This was his first Orope. But he wore the Ancestral Cloak, and his was two layers of rib bones. His hair was black and his eyes were silver. His skin was clean of any tattoo.

"You are very young." Karesha smiled kindly at him.

"That is why I have no grey in my hair."

There was a nervous laughter throughout the tribes.

"Do you understand what will be asked of you?"

The boy shook his head no.

"Bring the cauldron," Karesha called out, and three of the youngest Rhagepe came before her holding one of the copper pots that had been used to carry the carved bones to the ceremony. They held it up in front of the three born in Orope. "You must reach in and pull from it a skull. The skull shall decide your fate. The youngest may choose first."

The cauldron was held at the level of his eyes. He reached his arm in, having to go up on his toes so his hand could reach down and touch the smooth skulls. His fingers found an eyehole, and using that he managed to lift the skull up. He held it and stared into the empty space where its eyes had once been. It was long and thin, a sharp triangle where a nose should have been jutted from the skull, and its front teeth had a gap between them and the rest of the jaw.

“The horse!” Karesha called out. “You have been called to the land of Mahat! You shall speak for the Goddess of Life!”

The Rhagepe who had checked the blood, red droplets still falling down her chin, stepped forward and took her crown of feathers and seaweed, placing it on the boy’s head. It was slightly too large, and fell down his brow, threatening to cover his eyes. The sisters of Life cheered and the boy smiled awkwardly.

The man chose next, his hands pulling out a much smaller skull, though similar in shape. Its nose slanted not as steeply, and the front teeth curled back.

“The llama!” Karesha exclaimed. “The Great Jungle! You shall speak for the Goddess of Rebirth!” And Karesha took her own snake necklace from her neck and dropped it over the man’s head, and another cheer erupted.

The woman put her hand in last, pulling out the only remaining skull. It was larger than both, its nose ending in a jagged crack instead of the smooth slope of the other two, and at the top on its head were two round dark discs where the great horns had been hewn off.

“The ram!” Karesha finished. “You will go to Matawe! High into the Kerlra Hal’gepe! You shall speak for the Goddess of Death!”

At that Rashma stepped forward, removing her necklace of lizard skulls, collected over nearly four full cycles of life, each skull a slightly different shape and size, but all carved with the symbol of three intersecting circles. The crowd was quiet. No one cheered for Death.

Provisions were made for the chosen three. The finest and largest hides were found and placed in front of each traveller. The nearly two dozen tribes lined up and walked past the three, giving words of wisdom, and placing on their hides salted and dried meat, ringlets and fine items forged from precious metals, imbued with sparkling stones – trinkets they could trade along their journey. One chief gave the tall red-haired man a falcon he used to hunt with. The youngest of them had three Rhagepe who spoke for Life surrounding him, using long needled sticks to tattoo a line piercing a circle on his shoulder blade, the sign that he had become a man. They were to be given everything the tribes could spare, so that their mission would be successful.

“You must go to these lands! You must find their chiefs! You must find what corruption ails their land! You must warn the chiefs and the people! You must tell them of the flood! You must tell them of the gods’ wrath! You must tell them to heed the old ways!” Karesha’s voice sounded like a drum before her people. “Ours are the old ways! We were the first!”

“And we will be the last!” Every Whisperer yelled, and their answer was like a thunderclap in the dry desert.

On the morning, the messengers would set out, and the tribes would watch as they shrunk and were swallowed by the desert’s horizon.

It took Rashma and the Gopema tribe nearly two turns of the moon to reach the shores of the Hatmahe Sea, the land their tribe roamed when not at the Kerlra Hal’gepe. Hatmahe was the word they used for a burial place. When one of the Whisperers died they would carry what remained of the body after taking the bones necessary for the cloak here, dried out in salt to last the long journey, and feed it to the sea. The Gopema had not come here for a burial though. The fishing villages along the sea traded food for the predictions of the Rhagepe. They would live out the remaining cycle travelling along the shore, and return to the Kerlra Hal’gepe only when Zera entered Orope again, for the next calendar ceremony.

Rashma often thought of the three messengers who had set out on the journey the Goddesses had given them, but she would not discover their fate for a long time, perhaps not until all the tribes returned for the next calendar ceremony. She supposed the only way she would discover their fates before then was if they were to fail, for all would feel the gods’ wrath.

They made camp within sight of the sea. Fires were lit and children ran around in the wet sand as their parents began cooking the lizard meat that had been caught during the day. They had no tents; the starry sky was the only shelter they needed. Akrape and Rekra laid their cloaks out next to Rashma’s, the bones facing down, the soft, worn leather their bed. They always slept arm-in-arm, their closeness giving strength to the visions the gods sent them, but the three Rhagepe were uneasy, and had been for some time. None of them had spoken of it, but they hadn’t received a vision from the gods since before the calendar ceremony.

It wasn't unusual for the gods to be silent for a long period of time, but placing a flood in the calendar had put them all on edge.

Dreams and visions were different. When Rashma dreamt it was a flurry of images, places and people ran together like drops of blood and it was rare that she would even remember them when she woke up. A vision announced itself like the sun peeking over the edge of the world. All would be clear, would move slowly and with purpose, more often than not the vision would present itself as a tableau carved in stone, figures unmoving, frozen in action. As she fell asleep that night, nestled in the arms of her sisters, she knew she was falling into a vision. The sky was black, rocks sped past her in the place of clouds, and the Kerlra Hal'gepe mountain range rose up. Before her stood three naked, withered women, so thin they looked like skeletons, wisps of white hair falling in their face, their breasts shrivelled up and useless, their fingers ending in pointed nails, like the stingers of scorpions. They pointed down at five children set before them upon the sand.

"They shall all die," they spoke in unison.

The children all looked alike, chubby cheeks and fat limbs, good healthy children destined for a long life, swaddled in the skin of goats. The women pointed to the second child on the left, drops of blood falling from their nails onto its forehead. "This one shall drown," and a fist of water reached up from the ground and grabbed the infant. Their fingers moved to the right, to the child in the middle, another drop of blood falling on its brow. "This one shall burn," and flames erupted from its swaddling, though not a sound came from the writhing babe. They moved again to the right. "This one shall turn to stone," and from where the drops of blood had stained its forehead a darkness began to infect the child, and it became as the mountain. Their fingers reached the last child on the right. "This one shall starve," and it withered into a skeleton.

"What of the first?" Rashma looked to the child on the left.

It was not a drop of blood that fell on the child, but a stream, eternally flowing. "It was the first, and-

"Rashma!"

Rashma came awake, feeling fury rise in her throat. The gods had been speaking to her! Who would dare wake a sleeping Rhagepe? But the speaker had been Akrape, her hands on Rashma's shoulders, shaking her awake.

“What have you done? I was being sent a vision!”

Akrape looked down, shame on her face. “But the ground... it whispers.”

“What?” Rashma sat up, noticing there was life in the camp, dawn only beginning to dye the sky amethyst. People were muttering, there was a sense of fear and agitation in the air. Then she felt it, like she was being shaken hard, but Sister Rebirth had taken her hands off the speaker of Death. Now nearly everyone in the tribe was awake, and children were crying. Rashma remembered the five children in her dream, not a single one of them crying or showing any distress at their impending demise. More than that, she remembered the calendar ceremony, and all her sisters calling out their visions involving the number five.

The ground went still again. The chief was on his feet, wearing his leopard skull, the remains of his first kill, on his head. He calmed his people with his words, but the Rhagepe were not listening. They had their hands deep in the sand, trying to feel the movement of the earth, but it did not stir anymore. Long after the others had been calmed and the sky began to redden, they stayed with their hands in the desert.

Some time later, Rashma pulled out her hands and dusted them on her robes.

“The earth rose, a sleeper shifting in discomfort, and settled once more,” she decided.

“Sister, your vision,” Akrape began.

“Never mind,” Rashma smiled at the younger woman. “If the Goddesses deem it important, they shall send it to me again. Come, put your arms around me and help me to catch their whispers once more.”

Again they settled on their cloaks, holding each other tighter than before. Sleep would not come again, and soon after the three of them nodded sadly at each other in the ember glow of dawn. The Gods had gone silent once more. The Gopema were all denied sleep, stretching out on their cloaks, babies crying for milk, children wrestling in impatience as their fathers and mother made fires and began to skin lizards.

“Did we not camp closer to the waters?” Rekra asked as she climbed to her feet.

Some of the children had begun running towards the beach, which now seemed to be half a day's walk farther away. The sand revealed by the shifting water was littered with shells and seaweed. The children were delighted to pick up the hidden treasure of the sea. The sand sloped down a good distance and dropped off where jagged rocks and coral were normally nestled under the waves. Some of the adults were neglecting their fires, puzzled over the shift. They knew the tides of this place, and they had never seen the water recede so much.

"When the earth moved, might it have moved the water?" Akrape asked.

"And not move us?" Rashma shook her head. A sudden fear had seized her heart. In the distance, glinting in the early sun, there was something on the water – no, not something *on* the water, but the water itself. A great swell had raised the sea into the air. It seemed small at first, perhaps the height of a small hill, but still it came closer and closer, growing in size all the time. In a moment, they could hear the rush of the water, and soon it seemed the height of a mountain, and still the children were running towards it, pointing up in astonishment, as others began to cry out in alarm and run away. Mothers snatched their babes, men scooped up their cloaks.

Rashma stared at the wave in horror. The sky looked normal, the wind was calm and the sun shone down. There was nothing to hint that this was not reality, save for the sudden mass of water that was about to break onto land. They had all seen it in their visions, they had been told it would take place in this, the time of Orope, but she had thought they had time to change the minds of the gods. Surely the gods had not sent them this vision unless they had been giving them a chance to save themselves. *There must be some way to stop this!*

"Quick! The fire knives! We must entreat the Gods with our blood!" Rashma sat on the sand and her sister followed, each pulling out a black stone knife, the same they used to cut the meat away from the bones. The sisters held their left arms out towards the swell, and with their right plunged the knife into their wrists, pulling it along and opening their forearms, Akrape and Rekra giving a small gasp of pain as their flesh parted and streams of dark blood began to stain the sand beneath them.

"Stop!" Rashma screamed out to the gods, the roar of the water now so loud she could barely hear herself. She got to her feet, holding her arms out wide, the

greedy sand beneath her devouring her blood. The swell reached the water's edge and broke on the land, crashing down as a wave greater than any she had ever seen before. White tendrils of sea foam, like the tendrils of hair on the Goddesses' heads, rushed to meet her. Akrape and Rekra were screaming, tears running down their faces. The water reached the children, and a moment later the children were gone. Rashma called out.

“We were the—”, and the wave took her.