

## **Immortal Snake** by Rachel Pollack

Rachel Pollack is the author of *Godmother Night*, *Temporary Agency*, and *Unquenchable Fire*. She is the author of several Tarot decks including a surreal deck, *See of Logos*, that is due to be published soon, along with a new collection of short stories entitled *The Tarot of Perfection*.

In her blog at [rachelpollack.wordpress.com](http://rachelpollack.wordpress.com), Ms. Pollack said recently that a lot of people use the word “myth” to refer to old stories that have no reality, but she prefers to use the word to mean “a story that has an inner truth that cannot be put into simple explanations.” You’ll find that definition, and an awareness of the power of story, at play in this gorgeous new fantasy.

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Long ago, in a time beyond memory, Great Powers owned the land, the water, and even the air. Of all these empires, the strongest was a land called Written in the Sky. The soldiers of this land, who called themselves the Army of Heaven, traveled in rolling multi-level engines covered in sheets of black glass so that pillars of darkness moved across the earth.

And yet, despite the strengths of its forces, the true power of the country lay in the wisdom of a group called Readers, priests trained to follow the tracks of heaven known as God’s writing in the sky. The priests lived in an observatory called the Kingdom of God, high above the palace of the country’s ruler. Every night they watched and calculated the slow movements of the stars, and the swifter movements of the planets. If any clouds dared to obscure the night, the Readers let loose their white bulls, whose bellows of rage cleared the air of rebellious vapors.

Through their perfect knowledge the Readers could tell the Army of Heaven where to strike, or the owners of mines where to dig for copper or gold, or the creators of spectacles what grand images of beauty and desire would entice audiences to love them and long for them.

Most of all, however, the Readers studied the sky for the greatest of all messages, the secret that caused the finger of heaven to stroke Written in the Sky with power—the death of its ruler.

Though the merchants and slave traders managed the empire’s wealth, and the Army commanded obedience, all power officially belonged to the ruler who lived in a palace in the central circle of a city called The

Nine Rings of Heaven and Earth. The name of this man was always the same, no matter who it was that sat on the Throne of Lilies. They called him Immortal Snake.

During the time of his reign, each Immortal Snake enjoyed more delights than any single person could imagine. Whole teams of people worked beyond exhaustion to devise new pleasures for him to experience. And everyone loved him. Every house contained portraits of him, and figurines to set above the bed, and there were statues in even the smallest towns. Children were taught to write letters to him, grateful for his love and protection. In every wedding the bride swore love to Immortal Snake and then her husband, who in turn declared himself a stand-in for the beauty and devotion of the ruler.

And yet, all of it, all the adulation and the pleasure, could end at any moment. For as the Readers insisted, it was only the willing death of the Snake—the “shedding of the skin”—that convinced God of the country’s worthiness.

No one knew when it would happen, but a night would come when all the stars and planets locked into place. Then the Readers would put on their purple hoods and march through the city, blowing copper trumpets blackened by age, and driving their herds of white bulls maddened by loneliness, through the streets of The Nine Rings of Heaven and Earth. All through the city people doused their fires, even the lanterns in their kitchens, and then locked themselves in rooms without windows or chairs.

At the beginning of his reign each Immortal Snake chose a male and female “companion,” two people who served only one function. They died first. The Readers alone knew the exact manner of their death, but their hearts and lungs and genitals went into a dish cooked in a stone pot. Every Immortal Snake knew something very simple. If he wanted to live he must resist the food the Readers brought to him. It was so easy. But lights flashed in the bubbles of steam; and the smell excited tiny explosions all up and down his tongue; finally, like every Immortal Snake before him, he would tell himself that just a taste, just a drop, could not possibly harm him.

When he had eaten the entire dish he would begin to vomit. All his insides would pour out, even his bones, which the food had turned to brightly colored jelly. When nothing but the skin remained the Readers would drape it over a wooden cross they then would carry through the city back to the vaults underneath their observatory. And then, from the directions written in the sky, they would choose a new Immortal Snake. And everyone would celebrate.

In front of the Kingdom of God the Readers would hoe a small patch of earth, into which the new Immortal Snake would plant a seedling tree. As the tree grew the people would take seeds from it to plant in their own villages, a promise that they would never go hungry. When the new Snake in turn would shed his skin the priests would uproot the tree, then prepare the ground for the next planting.

So it happened once again, after so many times. The man who had ruled for a span of years and months that no one was allowed to count (for according to doctrine there was only one Immortal Snake, and his reign was eternal) vanished into a torn skin flapping on sticks. A new ruler emerged, a young man called Happier Than the Day Before. When the Readers came to tell him of his ascension he shouted with joy, for he could hardly imagine all the gifts and pleasures that would pour into his life at every moment. When they left him he stood on tiptoe, stretched his arms out to the sides, and spun around until he fell down laughing. "Immortal Snake," he said out loud. "I'm Immortal Snake. I'm the ruler of the world!"

And indeed, over the next weeks countless marvels and delights arrived from all the lands that owed tribute to Written in the Sky. There were carpets woven from the wings of butterflies. There were bottles of wine sprinkled with the tears of old women remembering the kiss of the first person who'd ever loved them. Performers and teachers from every level came to entertain and instruct the new ruler. Hermits who'd sealed themselves in caves for half a century reported on what the shapes of stalactites taught them about human longing. People marched in and announced they'd committed atrocities just so they could come to The Nine Rings and recount all the details to Immortal Snake, who laughed as he pretended to cover his eyes in horror. Poets who'd been torn apart by wild dogs and then brought back to life as babies floating on the sea arrived to solve any riddle anyone had ever devised.

The spectacle lasted fifteen days, and in all this time only two things wounded the Snake's pleasure. The first was his minister, a man with pinched features named Breath of Judgment, who insisted that Immortal Snake consider his duties, a subject that did not interest the new ruler in the slightest. As far as Immortal Snake could tell, these duties consisted primarily in choosing his male and female companions. And *that* was a subject he did not want to think about at all.

The second annoyance was his sister, an unpleasant young woman named More Clever Than Her Father and Everyone Else. Even before her brother's glorious rise the woman had always done everything to make him

feel impure and trivial. She would never go to any of his parties, never laugh at his jokes, never accept the boys he chose for her. She ate only the simplest foods, drank only the smallest sips of wine, and spent her days studying ancient texts, or writing poetry, or designing elegant furniture, or filling the walls of her rooms with murals depicting the mysteries of Creation. She wore long dark dresses buttoned to the neck (though they always contained streaks or panels of intense color), and shoes made of flat soles and worn leather straps that wound round and round her ankles. When her brother and his friends staged elaborate parties, More Clever Than Her Father would trace her way through the Nine Rings until she emerged into the desert. There she would spend hours watching tiny creatures scurry back and forth to no purpose.

And now that her brother had ascended to his glory, the woman strode into the throne room, rudely ignored all the acrobats, contortionists, and life-size wind-up giraffes, and simply demanded that he use the power of Immortal Snake to raise the lives of the poor and helpless.

Her smugness made him want to jump off the throne and tear her hair out. But then a better idea came to him. With a smirk he turned to Breath of Judgment. "Good news!" he said. "I've chosen my female companion."

More Clever stepped back. "No!" she said. "Don't say it. There's still time. You can stop."

Slowly, her brother shook his head so that his wide grin swept all across her. He said, "I choose my sister, More Clever Than Her Father and Everyone Else, to accompany me through all the worlds as my female companion." And then, because it sounded so good, he added, "Blessed forever is Immortal Snake."

More Clever said nothing, only marched out past the laughter of all the courtiers who hoped to become the ruler's special friend. She went to her bedroom, where she pulled out a small wooden trunk from under her bed. Shaking, she took out the strands of hair from her first haircut, done at her name enactment, along with the pale blue dress she'd worn, and the black doll in a gold dress her mother had given her as a present after the ceremony. She put these in a basket and took them to the farthest ring of the city, where a small stone building inside the walls housed the Temple of Names.

The Name priests, who all wore oversize masks carved with letters from alphabets nobody remembered, feared she might produce a dead baby from inside that basket and demand they give it a name. But the new

companion to Immortal Snake only dumped her relics on the rough stone floor. "My name no longer belongs to me," she said. "I want you to take it back."

The priests tried to talk her out of it. To go without a name, they said, meant that no one could bless her when they cast stones into the Well of Life. Even her dreams would not be able to find her. She suspected what really troubled them: the enactment to remove a name required the priests to inscribe the offensive words on inedible cakes that they would have to eat so that the name would pass through their bodies and be expelled to oblivion. She said, "I don't intend to go without a name. I've found a new one. My name now is Broken by Heaven."

Sitting on the Throne of Lilies, Immortal Snake (once known as Happier Than the Day Before) continued to applaud his parade of gifts. He'd begun to open some of the rarer bottles of wine, and when the minister would ask for a decision on the male companion, the Snake would hold out the bottle as if to offer it, then take a long swallow.

At last the great show came to an end. Only one figure remained, a slave by the look of his knotted hair, his clothes that were little more than a binding cloth and a tunic tied at the waist with a red rope. But he was tall and graceful, with deep eyes and long hands, and a wide strong mouth. Immortal Snake glanced at the sheet of gifts prepared by his Office of Numbers, but all he could see at the very bottom was "slave." He said, "Where do you come from?"

"Great Lord," the slave said, "I come from the Emperor of Mud and Glory." Immortal Snake smiled. The Land of Mud and Glory was a rival of Written in the Sky, but even they could not deny him his gifts.

He said, "And your name? Does your emperor allow you a name?"

"Great Lord, my name is Tribute of Angels."

"Wonderful," the ruler said. "We're making progress. Now. Tell me what treasures you bring me from Mud and Glory."

Tribute of Angels cast down his eyes. He said, "I bring no treasure, Great Lord. I myself am the gift."

Snake half rose from his throne. "A slave? Has he lost his imperial mud mind? Would he like his cities filled with the Army of Heaven?"

The minister touched the ruler's arm. "Lord," he said, "perhaps the slave carries some treasure inside his body. The formula for gold written on his bones, or a treaty hidden in his belly."

But the slave shook his head. "Your forgiveness, Great Lord. My body contains nothing more precious than blood."

The minister, fearful his ruler might order a slave's blood poured out onto the sacred floor, said quickly, "Then some talent? Some wondrous skill? What can you do, slave? What knowledge or power do you bring us?"

Tribute of Angels raised his eyes. Their dark light shone into the face of the world's most beloved and hated man. "Great Lord," he said. "I tell stories."

There was a long silence and then Immortal Snake laughed loudly. "Stories!" he said. "Wonderful." And then the Living World of Heaven inserted an idea into his head. A joke. He turned to his minister and said, "You want me to choose a companion? There. Tribute of Angels will be my companion."

"Lord!" Breath of Judgment cried. "The creature is a slave!"

"Ah, but he can tell stories. On those long boring nights when you and all the others are off making lists, or whatever you do, my *companion* can tell me a story." He laughed again. "What better companion can a snake have than a storyteller?"

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In the Land of Written in the Sky there was no recording of time. Immortal Snake was the Living World's extension into the world of death, a finger from the Great Above stroking the Great Below, and just as the Living World was forever and unchanging, so was Immortal Snake. He existed always, only shedding his skin when God's writing in the stars and planets told the Readers to bring the Snake to renewal. Immortal Snake was forever, and there was no before and after.

Still, time passed, or at least turned, and lesser creatures grew old and died, and the seasons replaced each other, and the Sun would return after a number of days to the same place in the sky. Though the years were not numbered their length was understood, 360 days, just like the 360 degrees of the circle, for wasn't Immortal Snake, like heaven, a great circle without beginning or end? In between the years there were five extra days,

placed there by the Living World to allow people a moment outside their duties. Every four years there would be another day before the Sun could return to its place, but nothing that happened that day was ever written down, and so it did not exist.

In this manner of counting, three years passed, 1080 days plus fifteen extra, plus one that no one would remember. Through all this, Immortal Snake celebrated his power. Every night he hosted elaborate parties, with teams of competing chefs from countries conquered by the Army of Heaven. Sometimes the parties featured dramas of the Snake's glory, or paeans to his sexual potency. The guests, who often included heads of state, were given costumes to wear, or assigned various comical tasks, such as the imitation of farm animals.

During the days Immortal Snake usually slept late, and when awake would sometimes fidget, or yell at his slaves or advisors. In the early days he liked to stare at the crowns and jeweled swords presented at his ascendancy, or play with the puppets or mechanical animals given along with the more traditional gifts. Over time, however, these things began to bore him. He even tired of the slave girls' adoration and turned, to everyone's surprise, to his ministers, and the dry voices he used to ridicule. He began to ask questions and every now and then make suggestions. Then, at night, satisfied with his contributions, he would give himself to parties.

In this same period Broken by Heaven stayed almost entirely within her official rooms in the second ring of the Nine Rings of Heaven and Earth. She'd painted gray paint over the murals that once filled the walls, she'd removed the lacquered tables, the carved chairs, the gold and enamel plates, the bed that had stood high in the room under a canopy painted with clouds. Heaven had broken her and she'd ordered the bed destroyed, replaced with a simple mattress on a low wooden platform. She would eat only the plainest food, boiled vegetables and rice without sauce, served on lumpy white plates.

Every morning the young women who attended her laid out elaborate dresses for her in hope that some heroic god might have entered her dreams to drive away the demons who had possessed her ever since her brother had become Immortal Snake. She ignored them and dressed only in white, the color of emptiness.

And Tribute of Angels? The storyteller who was simultaneously slave and companion to the Ruler of the World spent his days alone, in a small chamber at the edge of the slave quarters. No work was assigned to him,

hardly anyone spoke to him. Sometimes at evening, the slaves who collected rainwater from the cisterns on the roof would see him standing on the edge of the world, his face as empty as the sky.

Three years passed, and then one night the Living World placed two thoughts in the head of Immortal Snake.

The first was this: *I'm going to die*. The trumpets would blare in the night, the people would lock themselves in their windowless rooms, the bulls would run through the streets, and then the Readers would feed him that stew of death that no Immortal Snake had ever resisted.

He looked around at all his splendor, the ornamental swords he had never learned to use, the jeweled mechanical lions and butterflies, the two beautiful nameless women asleep in his perfumed bed. Useless. All his ministers, useless. The terrible Army of Heaven, useless. They too would hide their faces, they would shut away their black engines of war, for when the Readers declared that God's writing in the Sky demanded the skin of the Snake, nobody challenged them.

That was the first thought. The second one was this: *That storyteller. My companion. Maybe he can distract me.*

Though the Snake could not remember the storyteller's name, he knew it would be listed as the final gift from the Emperor of Mud and Glory, and of course, as his official companion into death.

Should he summon the slave now? He could wake up his steward, who would wake up the Chief Minister, Breath of Judgment, who would do something or other. No. He decided he wanted to enjoy the story in the proper setting. He went back to bed where he pushed aside the two women so he could stretch out and fall asleep. When he awoke he ordered Breath of Judgment to prepare the storyteller, for that night the gift of Mud and Glory would entertain the Snake and all his court.

It took some time to locate the gift and companion, but at last Tribute of Angels was brought to the inner rings, where the Wardrobe Minister for the Snake's Amusement bathed, oiled, and dressed him. It was a challenge; the minister was not used to dressing men, at least for this version of Immortal Snake. Happily, the slave simply did whatever was asked of him, with a look on his face that was not exactly empty, yet impossible to read. He would say only "The Living World wills it." The minister did his best, and by evening Tribute of Angels was ready to perform his task.

The storyteller arrived in the great Hall of Precious Happiness at the beginning of the feast, when the slaves were about to bring the first dishes and pour the first glasses of wine. Music announced him, reeds and drums and flutes. According to tradition, God gave these to the first musicians when Immortal Snake descended from the Great Above to the Sad Below. Since then, countless musicians had lived and died, servants of the eternal song, for a musician is nothing more than a body in this world of suffering and death, while music itself, like Immortal Snake, is unending, the voice of the Living World. There were no trumpets, however. These belonged to the Readers.

The Snake looked at his Companion and was startled to see how beautiful he was as he stood among the torches. Tribute of Angels was taller than the Snake remembered. His hands were long, with tapered fingers. His hair had been tied in a slave knot the only other time the ruler had seen him; now it was brushed back and decorated with tiny purple stones. Its color was a coppery gold, but there were black strands as well, dark streams in a river of light. His face was both strong and delicate, as if angels flowed into his body. He wore a tunic of yellow and blue silk, perfectly fitted yet not too ostentatious for a slave.

For a long time the Snake just stared at that graceful body, that serene face. But then the smell of lamb cooked in figs returned him to his feast, and he laughed happily. "Come," he said, and patted a cushion near his feet. "Come tell us your story."

"Great Lord," his slave and Companion said, "your command is my blessing." He sat down, his back straight, his hands in his lap. Immortal Snake raised his wine glass, painted with peacocks and lions. All the guests raised their glasses at the same time, for it was impolite to drink before Immortal Snake, who waited for the opening words of the story before that first cup of wine would delight his mouth.

Tribute of Angels began to speak, his voice soft yet somehow touching every ear, like perfumed smoke. They listened and closed their eyes, and slowly they put down their glasses and leaned back in their chairs. The slaves stopped serving and sat down on the floor; there was no harm, for no one was eating. The musicians set down their instruments, and everyone closed their eyes and smiled. Tribute of Angels's voice wound through them like the river that once flowed from Paradise until it became lost in the dark woods of human suffering.

It was a tale of a boy and girl who swear their love for each other, only

to be separated just as they are about to kiss; separated first by the boy's uncle, for there was no dowry, and then by demons jealous of their beauty. At last, after decades of trials, they find each other in old age and discover that their long-delayed first kiss restores them to the perfect moment of their youth.

Immortal Snake, and all his guests, and his slaves and his musicians and his dancers and his cooks all closed their eyes, and smiled, and floated away. When they opened their eyes again, thinking that a few moments had passed, they discovered it was morning. All the food was cold, and all the wine was dull. It didn't matter. Each one got up and silently left the room, leaving Tribute of Angels on his cushion at the feet of the Snake, his legs underneath him, his back straight, his head slightly bowed, his face serene. For a long time Immortal Snake looked at him, then the Snake too got up and walked alone to his bed.

The next evening the ruler once more summoned his companion to the Hall of Precious Happiness. "Ah, but tonight," he said, and waved a finger, "you will tell us your tale *after* we have eaten. Otherwise, all our food will rot and we will all become as skinny as slave children taken into the Army of Heaven." He laughed at his own joke and waved his companion to a red cushion at his feet.

"As you wish, Great Lord."

They ate, but quickly, and sipped their wine without the proper intervals to allow the alcohol to flow lazily through their blood. It made no difference. If they were drunk, or dyspeptic, or agitated, or sleepy, that all changed the moment Tribute of Angels began to speak.

He told of the Lover of Wheat, an ancient Goddess who ruled over all the plants and animals that feed the world. The Goddess had a daughter who every morning played among the flowers that sprang up at her approach. One morning the girl saw a shadow on a rock wall, and she found that she could not help but stare at it, until a breeze stirred the flowers, and the movement of color distracted her. The next morning there was the shadow again, and this time it took the form of a man, handsome and tall. Lover of Wheat's daughter stared at him a long time, her face dry and hot, her fingers trembling.

The morning after that she ran outside without eating. Frightened, Lover of Wheat followed her, but the daughter was swift, and by the time the mother reached the field the daughter had taken the hand of Shadow and walked into a darkness in the rocks.

The girl found herself on a stone stairway that went deep into the Earth. When they reached the bottom, Shadow put his arm around her, and stroked her face with long fingers, and touched her shoulders, and her back, and finally her lips. She trembled, and closed her eyes, and let him hold her, and kiss her, and when he whispered, "Be my bride," she whispered back, "Yes. I am your bride."

While she stood there, and gave herself, soft voices gathered all around them. When she opened her eyes she discovered she was in the Land of the Dead. Great crowds of shadow-people surrounded her. "Shining in Darkness!" they shouted, and when she looked at her arms she discovered it was true, light pulsed from her with every breath. She turned to Death, her dark husband, and turned back to look at the hungry faces who already longed for the joy only she could bring them. That was when she knew, she would love her husband deeply, but she would love the dead as well.

In the world above Shining in Darkness, her mother, Lover of Wheat, wailed and waved her hands. At first the Gods tried to soothe her, but then they grew angry. "Why should you complain?" they told her. What better husband could there be than Death, for he was always constant, and his subjects endless?

Lover of Wheat would not be consoled, only cried louder until the King of the Gods, whose name was Voice in the Sky, ordered her to stop that terrible noise. She fell silent then, but only for a while. She found the empty shell of a dead turtle and attached to it the neck of a swan who, like the turtle, had gone down to dwell with her daughter's husband. Next she attached long sinews of the muscles of dead cats. Now she strummed her lyre, an instrument born out of death, and she began to sing.

Down below, Shining in Darkness lay next to her great and terrible lord, when suddenly she felt a shock in her heart. A song was riding over her, verse after verse, a song of her return and the world's joy at greeting her. "All the lions will stand roaring ... all the owls will fly in moonlight ... all the trees will wave their branches ... six black horses will come running ... *all the dead will rise up singing....*"

"No!" she cried, and Death woke up to stare at his beloved. "Help me," she begged, for the song was pulling her. Already she could feel herself fading from darkness. Her husband tried to hold her, all the dead crowded round to protect her. They shouted to drown out the song but it was no use, the melody filled her and lifted her, she pulsed between

shadow and light. "Six white horses...."

At the last moment, Death reached into his own body and took out his heart. The dead rushed up to it and it opened like a pomegranate of darkness, with a thousand seeds. Just before she vanished, while her fingertips still touched her husband and their endless tribe, Shining took three seeds and swallowed them.

An instant later she stood again in the breezes and smells of life, in a field of flowers, so bright with such an excess of color, she could not bear to look at them. Her mother stood there, tall and strong. Lover of Wheat dropped the lyre and held out her arms, but when she saw her daughter's face filled with grief she whispered, "What have I done?"

Shining in Darkness said to her mother, "As you are to the Living, so I was to the Dead."

"Oh my blessed child," Lover of Wheat cried. "I have done a terrible thing." They wept together, and at last the Daughter embraced the Mother, for sorrow had overcome her anger. When they stepped back, Lover of Wheat said, "Now tell me. Did you eat anything in the Deep Below?"

Shining nodded. "Yes," she said. "I ate three seeds of my husband's heart."

Her mother smiled, with love and sadness. "Then you are free to return to him for one third of every year. In the season of the lion and the season of the swan you will remain with me, but in the season of the serpent you may join your husband and all your children."

This was the story told by Tribute of Angels on the second night of his service to his master, Immortal Snake. All those who heard it never knew exactly when the story ended, for they floated down strange and glowing rivers until finally the dawn came and they discovered themselves back in the Hall of Precious Happiness. Silently they left the room, careful not to look at each other until only the Snake and his companion remained.

Tribute of Angels sat with his hands in his lap, his eyes cast down. The Snake whispered, "Come again tonight."

"As you wish, Great Lord."

"No. Not my wish. My life. Your voice is my breath. Your stories are my blood. I was dead and you have brought me alive."

Tribute of Angels raised his head now, and for the first time his eyes met the eyes of the Snake. "Yes," he said. "I will come again this evening."

"Thank you," said the ruler.

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That afternoon, four women dressed as deputy ministers came to the slave room of Tribute of Angels. Their disguises were not very good, really, despite their false beards and mustaches, and hair pinned up under a minister's three-cornered hat. They giggled when Tribute of Angels inclined his head and said, "My lords. How may I serve you?"

In a deep breathy voice the one who wore the highest rank announced, "We have come to take you to your new quarters."

Tribute of Angels stood up. "As you wish."

They marched from the outer to the inner rings of the Nine Rings of Heaven and Earth until they came to a wide set of rooms with high ceilings. There were subtle tapestries on the walls, and carpets that mimicked a summer lawn. Lacquered chairs and tables were draped with clothes, from shimmery robes with striped collars to shoes with long toes that turned up in spirals. In the inner chamber a large bed was piled high with pillows and blankets of every color.

The minister smirked as she waved a long graceful hand whose fingers were each painted a different color. "Do you like it?" she said.

The storyteller said, "It is all very beautiful."

"Our lord Immortal Snake ordered that we prepare these rooms for you."

"My gratitude is beyond words."

They giggled again, nearly overcome at the idea of anything beyond the words of this blessed being. The minister said, "I chose the clothing myself." She inclined her head sweetly toward the inner chamber. "For you and for the place of rest. And pleasure."

Tribute of Angels bowed his head. "Your taste is exquisite. I hope you will not consider me ungrateful if I ask for a small change."

“Of course. Our lord said to give you whatever you desire.” She smiled, and the others stared at the floor.

“I have only one need. A smaller bed.” As the women stared he said, “I am a slave. My only joy is the service of my lord. I will live here, and wear the clothes Immortal Snake wishes for me, but I would sleep in a slave’s bed, narrow and hard.”

She tried another smile. “Ah, but what if you desire company?”

“In that case, my lord, I am sure the proper setting will reveal itself.”

The imitation ministers left without further comment. In a short time workers came to remove the bed that would have housed the storyteller and all four of the women. Tribute of Angels was not there, and gone were the bed linens and most of the clothing. He had taken them to the outer rings, to distribute among the slaves and the poor.

That night his story was a sad one, about a woman who gives birth to a phantom. Those who heard it found themselves under a gray sky, with only streaks of rose and violet colored lightning to guide them. Though the listeners blinked open their eyes at dawn with the belief that they had wept for a hundred years they still sent rings and paintings and marvelous toys to the storyteller’s bare and lavish rooms. He gave away everything but one painting, a miniature of a black and yellow bird perched at the top of a golden tree.

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During all this time, the three years that were officially the same moment in the never ending life of Immortal Snake, his sister and companion, Broken by Heaven, remained in the small empty room she had chosen for herself. Her servants lived more lavishly than she, for they were ladies of the court, and she had given them her gray-washed rooms and moved into the servant’s room. Despite the pleas of her young ladies, who longed for romance and intrigue, she refused to go anywhere or see anyone. There was no point, for at any moment the trumpets might sound and the white bulls trample the stone streets. And then the Holy Readers would cut her throat, and cook her into their poisonous stew.

So she sat quietly, often just staring at the wall, or occasionally writing poetry, in complicated forms, in a large leather book that had once belonged to her grandmother, using very black ink to write over the

supposedly wise and sacred teachings that covered the pages. Should she kill herself? It would end the terrible waiting, and if nothing else it might disrupt the calculations of the Readers. Just for that reason, she knew they would never allow it. Along with the chattering ladies two men stood guard at her doorway. They told her that the Snake had sent them to protect her, but she knew why they were there, and whose orders they followed.

Sometimes the young ladies teased the guards and pretended to seduce them. Oddly, Broken by Heaven never seemed to mind their silliness. In the days when she was More Clever Than Her Father she detested such women, whose heads contained nothing but powder and kohl. Now, however, she enjoyed their laughter and their whispers, their heartbreaks that never seemed to last more than a few days, even their occasional pouting. They were alive, and eager, and no one was waiting for the right moment to murder them. They were all she had, and she loved them.

So it was that one day, after noticing them even more breathless and twittery than usual, she asked what had so excited their interest. One of them, a bright young lady named Flower of Her Brothers, clapped her hands and said, "Oh mistress, last night we went to hear Tribute of Angels. It was so marvelous. You must go." The others joined in, "Yes, please please go."

Broken by Heaven smiled at her. "And what exactly does this Tribute of Angels do? Is he a singer? A love poet?"

"Oh no," Flower said, and all the ladies laughed at the thought that there was anyone, anywhere, who did not know of this wonderful man who was a very gift of God. She said, with a certain pride, "Tribute of Angels is a storyteller."

Broken by Heaven closed her eyes. She remembered now. She had heard how after she'd walked out on her wretched brother he had taunted his ministers by choosing a storytelling slave to be his male companion. Soon—at any moment—she and this slave would bubble and cook together in a bowl of death. She said, "I would like to hear this man. Do you think he will perform again tonight?"

The girls jumped up and down with excitement. "Yes, yes," they proclaimed, "he tells his marvels every night. There's a feast beforehand. We can dress you and—"

Broken held up a hand. "I think the storyteller will be enough for me.

What time does he begin?"

She entered the Hall of Precious Happiness just as the guests finished the final glass of wine, the last dates coated in exotic jellies. She wore a white dress, cut too large and made of thick cloth so that it appeared she had no body, only a head riding on clouds. She might as well have worn burlap from head to toe with only an eyehole for all the difference it made. Or, for that matter, a dress of light spun from the mouths of stars. Tribute of Angels's head rose up as if pulled by wires the moment she entered the room. She saw him and staggered backward. After that neither moved, but only stared with frozen faces, as if they would hold that moment forever.

Immortal Snake took no notice, only said, "Well? We're done eating. We're ready. Blessed God, you haven't run out of stories, have you?"

Tribute of Angels lowered his eyes. "No, Great Lord. The well of stories is inexhaustible, for every moment more stories are born than anyone can tell."

"Well, then you better begin."

"The fulfillment comes before the wish."

That night Tribute of Angels told of a king, an alchemist, who had discovered that he could live forever by drinking the blood of young women. He had no shortage of sacrifices; he was rich, and powerful, and the poor offered their daughters to him. But he was also alone, and he longed for a queen who could rule alongside him. One day he heard of a woman more beautiful than the birds, more perfect than the morning star. He sent his nephew to bring her back for him. "Tell her," he said, "that she will never die, for I will not take her, but instead we will share our blood, and together we will drink the milk of paradise."

The king lived on an island, and so the nephew sailed away in a marvelous round boat guided by songs; he would sing to the sea, and the currents would carry him. When the woman heard the king's message she agreed to go with the nephew, for all her life she had never allowed herself any pleasure or desire, fearful that a fever or a random arrow or a hungry beast would take her away from whatever happiness she might possibly find. She traveled with him, and they were in sight of land, when a whale breached against the side of the boat, pitching them against each other. The nephew had his mouth open and it happened that his teeth fell against her neck, so that he, and not his uncle, was the first to taste her blood.

Nothing sweeter had ever flowed down the throat of any creature, human, or angel. And for her, the puncture of his teeth was like the burst of a bubble that had hid from her all the glory and wonder of the world. He told her that if she joined with him she would give up immortality, for only his uncle knew the secret of turning blood into life. It made no difference, she said. Quickly he bared his neck, and she bit him, and they were bound together.

The tale went on to tell of the king's rage, the lovers' flight, how they found themselves, after years of hiding in caves, in a lost sanctuary known as the Garden of the Two Trees. Once, in the early days of the world, this garden had been a sheltered place, but now the roots of the Trees had withered, and all the leaves had turned to stone. Here they would die, they said, for above them they could see the king's ravens and knew he would be upon them in days. They had reached the end, and no longer wanted to run.

Long ago, the Living World had sent an angel with a flaming sword to guard the entrance to the Garden. As the Trees withered, however, the angel had fallen asleep, and now when the king arrived, he found the sword lying on the ground. He picked it up and raised it over his head, eager to destroy his traitorous nephew and the woman who had turned down immortality for the life of a fugitive. The two made no attempt to hide, but only sat in peace, ready for the blow.

As the king lifted the sword, however, it struck a stone wall, and sparks of fire scattered on the ground. The sparks burned a hole into the earth and out of it came the ghosts of all the women whom the king had killed. In moments the ghosts surrounded him and pulled him down into the Land of the Dead, where he still remains, the only living being among the shadows of Death.

The nephew and the lover were free. When he kissed her, then bit her neck, two drops of blood fell onto the roots of the great Trees. They heard a sigh, and then, slowly, the roots filled out, fresh leaves grew on the branches, and light and fragrance filled the air.

When the story ended everyone had fallen asleep but the Snake's two companions. Broken by Heaven walked through the scattered bodies, never looking down, never missing a step, drawn to Tribute of Angels like a shooting star pulled down to Earth. The storyteller stood with his body tilted toward her, then stepped toward her so that they were both moving at the moment they met, like butterflies mating in the air.

They kissed until the end of the world, until the Readers all died out and their observatory crumbled, until her brother and all the Immortal Snakes had wandered off into caves to meditate and dream, until the Moon and Sun merged together. So it seemed, but when she finally let go and opened her eyes she saw it was still night, and her brother and all his guests and servants and slaves still sat in their chairs, or lay on the carpets, or stood propped against pillars of marble and onyx—and every one of them asleep.

Tribute of Angels said, “I have no place.”

“I know of one,” she told him, and took his hand. She led him through rooms and corridors until they came to a mahogany door that opened into the bed chamber of Immortal Snake. They spent the night there, deep in each other’s bodies, until just before dawn when they returned to their places in the Hall of Precious Happiness. Soon everyone awoke and left the room.

\* \* \* \*

That day, Broken by Heaven surprised her ladies by asking for color in her clothes. After several consultations and dashes to seamstresses they presented to her a violet dress shot through with swirls of yellow and green. Their suggestion of a special haircut was met with a single upraised hand, so they settled for taking turns brushing her hair, ten strokes each, with a silent prayer for their mistress’s happiness at the start of every stroke.

The dress fit so well, and her hair shone so brightly, that Immortal Snake did not even recognize her until his eyes had followed her halfway into the Hall of Precious Happiness. When he realized this was his sister he blushed, then made a face, thinking she had come to lecture him for wasting his time with stories. He braced himself for a fight, lining up in his mind all his recent efforts to persuade his ministers to help the poor. When she said nothing, only smiled (he could hardly remember the last time that had happened), and took a seat at his right, not far from the storyteller, he was surprised to discover he was disappointed. He almost wanted her to scold him so he could show her how wrong she was.

The tale that night was like a drug, a smoke or an oil that first delights the senses, and then carries one away down a river of color and sound, and wave after wave of pleasure. It was not really sleep it brought, and not really a dream, but in a short time they were all gone. All but the storyteller himself, and one of his listeners. Broken by Heaven stood up, and Tribute

of Angels rose beside her. They kissed a long sweet time, certain that no one would disturb them. Then once again she took his hand and led him to the wide bed of the ruler of the world.

They continued this way for a week until one night, as the dawn approached, and Tribute of Angels began to gather his clothes to return to the Hall, his love began to cry. He said nothing, only kissed the flow of tears on her face. Finally she looked at him and she said, "I don't want to die."

"No," he said.

"They will come today, or tomorrow, or next week—Do you know what they will do to us?"

"Yes."

*"I don't want to die."* He held her now, his arms and legs around her, his head on hers, as if the force of his love could shield her from heaven and earth. Then, to his astonishment, she laughed. When he unwound from her it was like unwrapping a present. "I have an idea," she said.

That afternoon the female companion to Immortal Snake, dressed in the simple clothes of a minor lady of the court, made her way through the intricate streets of the Nine Rings to a hill beyond the edge of the city. There were no trees on this path, only the single fig tree at the top of the hill, that her brother had planted when he became Immortal Snake. Here and there crosses stood alongside the road, hung with tattered clothes like pieces of skin. Broken by Heaven knew what they were, of course, the symbols of the dried out skins of all the Immortal Snakes who had gone before her brother, and whose actual skins remained in the vaults underneath the observatory. Beyond the road, in large black pens, the white bulls snorted and scratched at the ground, as if they themselves were only waiting for the moment when they could tear her to pieces. She stopped a moment and stared at one of them, his shoulders like earthquakes, his eyes like tornadoes. He stamped the earth and she almost lost her balance but she held fast, and when the bull looked away, the female companion of Immortal Snake laughed and continued up the path.

The Kingdom of God was a large square building with a glass roof. There were four doors, one for each season. At dawn on the equinoxes and solstices the Readers of God would step out the door of that time of year and sound the trumpets, as if they themselves commanded the sun to show itself. Broken By Heaven took a breath and entered the gray door of winter.

A consultation was taking place, and Broken by Heaven stayed back while the Reader told a jewelry maker the best day to open a new shop in a colony city. When the jeweler had placed the proper fee in a toad-shaped box made of gold and jade, and then hurried out (for no one stayed longer than necessary in the Kingdom of God) Broken by Heaven stepped into the light of the wide room.

At first the Reader allowed shock to open his face, for it was no secret what the Snake's companion thought of the Readers and their sacred duty. Quickly he recovered and crossed his arms over his chest as he inclined his head. "Mistress," he said, "how may this servant of God help you?"

She looked around. The ceiling was high, and painted with stars, and animals running through the sky. Along the walls stood more of the tattered effigies on crosses but now the rags were made of gold leaf. Broken by Heaven said, "I've never been here before."

"No, Mistress."

She smiled to see his nervousness. Though he wore the yellow and purple robe of his office, the fabric looked a little thin, the snake amulet around his neck made of bronze instead of gold. She said, "I wonder if you might ask the head of your order if he wouldn't mind talking with me a moment. I have a question I would like to ask him."

"Of course," the man said, and hurried away, eager to let someone else answer her questions. They could not deny her. The Snake's companions into death were due every honor, every request granted but one.

The master was a larger version of the underling, broader, thicker, with gray hair grandly swept back, a bushy beard with eyebrows to match, a thick nose and scarred hands. Broken by Heaven had heard he was once a wrestler. His robe was thick and luxurious, his talisman almost large enough to be a breastplate. Gold, it depicted a snake wound around a tree whose fruit was stars. "Great light of our heart," he said. "You fill this hardworking temple with joy."

"Thank you," Broken by Heaven said, and nodded. Then, "Lately I find myself awake at night, curious beyond curious with a single question."

She could see his shoulders tense, the head tilt down slightly.

Carefully he said, "My lady, some things we cannot know in advance. All we can do is give ourselves to the sacrifice when God reveals the moment."

Broken pretended to be startled, amused. "Oh no," she said. "I would never—that would be like cheating, wouldn't it?" She smiled sweetly at him.

"Please forgive me, mistress, I wasn't saying—"

"To be honest, my question is not practical but philosophical." He said nothing. "Tell me. What is God's greatest gift to the world?"

He laughed. "What you ask is too easy. Certainly God's greatest gift is the writing in the sky. Through this one benevolence we know everything—when to plant, when to harvest, when to attack or defend, when to build homes or compose songs, when to dig a well or begin a marriage—everything."

She nodded. "What you say is of course true. But God has given Tribute of Angels the power to tell stories in a way that has never been equaled."

For a moment he stared at her, outraged. Then his breathing calmed and he said, "You are not suggesting that a storyteller can surpass God's writing in the sky?"

"No. I am saying that this life on Earth is a greater wonder than all the calendars of heaven. And the voice and stories of Tribute of Angels are the doors to understand this."

"Forgive me, Lady, but what you say is nonsense. God's writing lasts forever." He did not add, "And the voice of the storyteller ends the moment we kill him."

She said, "The writing in the sky, the moon and the stars, you know these things. Have you listened to Tribute of Angels?"

"Of course not."

"Then how can you judge? Only come tonight, you and all your brothers. Come this one time, and then you may decide."

The old battler crossed his arms. "We will be there, but I warn you, we will not stay. God's writing is a gift that renews itself every evening."

“Thank you,” she said. “I look forward to your presence in our company.”

When Broken by Heaven returned to her room she wrote a short note on a piece of blue parchment, sealed it with a stamp of a boy and girl holding hands in a garden, then gave it to Flower of Her Brothers, the least frivolous of her servants. She said, “Take this to Tribute of Angels.”

The storyteller bowed his gratitude to the breathless young woman, then waited till she left before breaking the seal. “They come tonight,” the note said. “Be ready.”

When he first saw the Readers enter his Hall of Precious Happiness, Immortal Snake jumped from his chair as if he would outrun them. The guests too rushed to the side of the room, expecting bulls to charge in and trample the ruler. They soon realized that no trumpets had sounded, no orders had come for the people to hide themselves in their houses. And look, there were the Snake’s companions, and neither of them had panicked. Carefully the guests returned to their seats.

“Great lord,” the Master said, with all his crew, some twelve of them, from boys to old men, clustered behind him. “Your sister, who is beloved of heaven, took pity on our loneliness and came to speak with us.” Immortal Snake stared at his sister, who looked down at her hands in her lap. He glanced back at the Reader, who did not seem to find such modesty unusual. The Readers, however, had not known her all their lives. Suddenly interested, Immortal Snake leaned back in his chair and said, “My sister is a kind and generous woman.”

“She told us,” the Reader said, “of the wondrous stories told every night by your blessed companion, Tribute of Angels.”

Now the Snake looked to his other side, where the slave too sat modestly. The remains of his panic flowed out of him now, and he raised a palm, as if in gratitude to God. He said to this man, who some day would feed him poison and mount his skin upon a stick, “The Living World honors us to have given us such blessings as Tribute of Angels. And of course my sister.” He waved a hand to the slaves, who rushed forward with chairs and cushions. “Please,” the Snake said. “Come sit with us. Would you like some roast pork? My cooks have stuffed it with dates and fennel.”

“Forgive us, Lord,” the head Reader said. “Our time is limited. The stars have already begun to show themselves, and the planets to move among them. When the moon rises we must go with it.”

“Of course,” Immortal Snake said.

“So if we leave before the end of the story, you will understand that we are only following our duty.”

Immortal Snake noticed that his sister had abandoned demureness and was now smiling warmly at their guests. A strange excitement stirred his spine. He said, “We understand.” He turned to his slave companion. “You had better begin if our guests will have to leave early.”

Tribute of Angels said, “Your wish creates my voice.”

That night Tribute of Angels told a story of the first people. In the beginning there was only mud and stones, and the bright sky, and trees as thick as houses, and flowers in colors no one remembers. Then there were lions, and spiders, and squirrels, and nightingales, but no people. One morning a leopard came home from hunting all night to discover that an eagle had killed his wife. The leopard had no idea why the eagle would do this, only that his wife’s body lay in pieces on the dirt. He roared and wept and begged her to come back to him but it was no use. After a day of sorrow he flung his wife’s remains on his back and left the open fields and woods that had been their home.

The leopard walked for nine days and nights, frightened to sleep lest crows and jackals and ants take away more pieces of his wife. Finally he came to a desert, and a dream of an oasis. There was nothing there, really, but if the leopard closed his eyes he saw bright trees, and a waterfall, and herds of antelope who had never heard of leopards. He set down his wife’s body alongside what he imagined was a pool and lay down next to her. Then he wept and wept until there was nothing left of him but spotted skin over a pool of tears. The tears changed the dirt to salty mud, and out of this mud the first people stood up, naked and frightened, with no idea of how they would live.

For generations people traveled from desert to forest, from islands to mountains, frightened, stealing whatever food they could from the animals, hiding in caves or the tops of trees. They traveled from the north to the south, from the east to the west, and everywhere they were hungry and helpless and hunted.

One night a woman with three sons hid in a muddy hole in the Earth, a place not much different from any other except that the walls flickered with black and yellow light. Though she did not know it, she had found her way

back to the cave of the dead leopards. That night she dreamed of the sky.

Usually her dreams were of running, and the teeth of wild beasts, but now she dreamed that she sat upon a rock high on a mountain and looked up at a sky that flowed like blue water over the peaks of the world. In all her life she had never dared to stare up like that—what if a pack of dogs attacked her children, what if the other women picked all the roots before she got to them? But here, in her dream, she stared and stared, and the more she looked the more she could glimpse a different world on the other side.

She woke up with sorrow in her throat. All day she thought of the dream, while she dug in the dirt for worms, while she searched for bubbles of rainwater that would not make her too sick. That night she rushed to feed her sons so she could return to sleep. Lying there on the mud floor, her body sighed with pleasure as she found herself safely back in the dream.

This time she saw creatures in the world beyond the sky. Some were two-legged like people, except that they had beaks like birds, and sometimes wings that flashed out from their shoulder blades. And they stood upright, their backs straight, unafraid. There were other creatures, brightly colored bulls and horses. They looked solid yet they also seemed made of music and light.

That morning she woke up in tears and wept all day long. As evening approached she did everything possible to avoid falling asleep, for she could not bear to visit that world and wake up in this one. She could not help herself, she fell asleep before the moon rose.

Instead of sorrow, however, she found hope, for this time the dream was different. She was not alone but stood in the center of a crowd of people. Under her command the people constructed a stone pyramid that allowed them to climb close to the sky world. With stone knives painted with pictures of the sky creatures they slashed their arms and flung the blood above their heads. Hawks and eagles raced for the blood, and as they fought for it their beaks and wings slashed open the sky.

The creatures of light and music poured down into the world. They raised up the people and fed them sky food so that the people would live forever and never be hungry. They showed the people how to make buildings out of songs, graceful houses where everyone could rest comfortably, temples that spiraled up into the sky so the people could meet with the sky creatures and praise them and receive their blessings.

When the woman woke up she jumped to her feet, summoned her boys, and began a journey to tell everyone her dreams, and what they all should do to open a door for the sky people to enter their world. At first no one believed her. They chased her with rocks or tried to take her sons away to make them dig for food. Slowly, the woman's insistence began to convince people, first one or two, then larger groups. Soon she had several hundred people, enough to build a pyramid to open the sky.

Everything happened just as in her dream. When they climbed the pyramid they could see the thinness of the sky, see and hear and even smell the world beyond. They cut their arms and flung their blood upward with great drama and energy. Sure enough, there came the birds, and they fought each other in their hunger, and the claws and beaks tore open the sky, and the creatures of light and music entered through the gash. Soon the Bright Beings stood on the pyramid, towering over the people.

And then it changed. Instead of giving instruction and blessing, the creatures of light and music began to snatch up the people and lift them to their mouths, where teeth like icicles broke them in pieces.

The people screamed and knocked each other down as they tried to run or just tumble down the pyramid. Some jumped off, for they'd rather crush themselves on the rocks, a death they understood, than be swallowed in dark ice.

The woman who had brought this disaster was in fact one of the few who escaped. She reached the ground and ran as hard as she could, slipping on blood, weaving between pieces of bodies. She kept running until she came to the shelter where she'd hidden her three sons.

If life was hard before, now it was much worse, for as well as animals and cold and sickness and hunger the people had to hide from the Bright Ones.

Time passed, and the woman did little but wail and wave her hands, so that her sons had to carry her on their backs as they moved from one hiding place to another. Finally the oldest son said, "Enough! We need to fight back." On their travels he'd seen how a certain kind of rock was changed with fire to become hard and shiny, with sharp edges. Now he found some and took it to a bubbling volcano where he could heat it and then work it with other stones. Then he cooled it in the evening rain. He did this during the new moon, when power becomes strong. When the weapon was ready he stood up in an open field and challenged the Bright Beings, thinking if he could cut open just one or two they might respect the people

and keep away.

It was hopeless. They broke his shiny weapon like a toy, then tore him apart, sounding laughter through the hills.

The second brother decided that the first had been a fool to challenge the Powers. He climbed a hill with his head down like a submissive dog, making sweeping gestures with his arms as if to clear away his unworthiness before he even took a step. When he reached the top he threw himself face down on the ground and called out, "Great Ones! Creatures of music and light. Spare me and my family and I will show you where the people are hiding."

The red and black horses shook their manes. The golden bulls stamped their feet. The one with the head of a hawk said, "Why do we need you? We can smell humans whenever we want them." And then the second brother too was torn apart.

The youngest one had heard and seen what happened to his brothers. Now he slipped quietly down to where his mother was hiding. The mother shrieked and hit the flats of her hands against the sides of her head when she realized two of her sons were gone. The youngest grabbed her wrists and leaned forward until he could feel her breath. "Be quiet," he said, "or I will cut your throat." She stared at him, then cowered silently against the wall. When he told her to give him her clothes she immediately obeyed.

With his mother's clothes under his arm the boy went to a deep cave he had discovered at the foot of the pyramid where the people had opened the sky. Using mud and ochre he painted great pictures of the bulls and horses and the bird-headed creatures. Next he found a tree that had fallen and been hollowed out by termites. He carried this with him to the cave, where he took the skins of people who'd thrown themselves from the heights and sewed them together, then stretched them over the ends of the hollow tree to make a drum. Finally he took a leg bone, cleaned it and polished it, and set it aside as a striker.

Now he put on his mother's rags and rubbed mud on his face, and went outside the cave where he hit his hands against his face and cried out, "Oh! Oh! Oh! I am the most wretched woman who has ever lived. My babies are eaten, no one will help me, everyone hates me. Oh! Oh! Oh!"

The Great Ones laughed and came charging at him as he ran into the cave. When they got inside, however, they forgot all about him, for they saw the pictures and became entranced. Excited, they rushed into the scenes

on the walls.

Immediately, the boy jumped up and pounded the drum. "Brightness of sky," he chanted. Bam! "Hardness of earth," Bam! "Don't leave these walls." Bam! "Through death and through birth." Bam!

The Great Ones struggled and twisted but it was no use. They were trapped in the paintings and would never get out. Once more the boy chanted and hit the drum. "Trapped in stone." Bam! "Trapped in dirt." Bam! "Feed our hunger." Bam! "Heal our hurt." Bam!

Ever since that day the people could compel the Creatures of Music and Light to help and teach them, but the Bright Ones could never escape to enslave or eat the people ever again.

\* \* \* \*

This was the story told by Tribute of Angels on the night the Readers of the Sky traveled down from their observatory in the Kingdom of God to Immortal Snake's Nine Rings of Heaven and Earth. The story began at evening but no one knew when it ended. Around the time of the moonrise a few of the Readers shuddered, and pain flickered through their faces, but they did not leave their places. When morning came, and the guests and servants and slaves shook themselves awake, the Readers hurried from the hall.

That afternoon Broken by Heaven once again climbed the hill to the Kingdom of God. The chief of the Readers met her at the door, his arms folded, his feet firm on the ground. They stared at each other a moment, then Broken by Heaven said, "Which is greater? God's writing in the sky, or the stories of Tribute of Angels?"

"We were not ready," the Reader said. "You did not tell us." The sister of the Snake said nothing. "We will come again tonight."

Broken by Heaven bowed her head. "Your wisdom is great," she said.

All that day the Readers chanted and burned pieces of paper with prayers for strength. They tethered a young bull in their courtyard, walked around it seven times, one for each of the planetary spheres, and then slaughtered it, first cutting its fetlocks so it would topple forward, then the throat. They let the blood drain into the earth, then cut out the heart, which they burned so that the fire might carry the dead bull to the Living World. There, they hoped, the bull would tell of their devotion, and the angels

would buoy them up to resist this man who claimed to be the angels' tribute.

The Readers came to the Hall of Precious Happiness that evening wearing their formal robes, with black vertical stripes cutting through the purple and yellow. They wore their bull masks, and each carried one of the crosses with tattered rags. When those symbolic skins entered the room, Broken by Heaven looked at her brother. She was pleased to see that he only cringed, and just for a moment. The Readers set their burdens against the walls and sat down with folded arms. None of them spoke. After a few silent breaths Immortal Snake turned to his left, where Tribute of Angels sat on a cushion. "We seem to be all here," the ruler said. "Why don't you begin?"

The story that night was a simple one, about a boy who falls in love with the moon. Every month, as the moon wanes, he offers parts of his body to the wolves so that he might dwindle with his love until, at the dark of the moon, he lets them tear out his heart. But the moon has changed his heart to white quartz, so that the wolves cannot swallow it, and every month squirrels find it and place it in a dirt mound, and add twigs and nuts and dung to it, so that slowly it takes the shape of a boy. Finally, the light of the full moon brings him alive for he and his lover to be united for three precious nights.

The story was short, but all who heard it drifted away from the Earth, carried beyond the houses and treetops, beyond the mountains, far into the region of the evening stars. Soon they were cast into a deep sleep from which not even a storm could have stirred them. All but Broken by Heaven and Tribute of Angels, for they were in the trance of love, and that is deeper even than stories.

They spent the night wrapt together in the bed of Immortal Snake. When they returned to the hall the guests were just starting to awake. Once again the Readers hurried from the room, not looking at each other, even leaving behind their effigies of cast-off skins. Immortal Snake pointed to the tattered crosses and said to a pair of slaves, "Take those things away and burn them." Broken by Heaven stared at her brother.

She did not visit the Readers that day. Instead she lay on her bed while her young women darted all around her, and she thought about Immortal Snake. He was the weakest part, and therefore the most dangerous, of all her plans. Would he be ready when the time came? She had learned to expect so little from him, but he seemed different, stronger. Had the stories of her beloved Tribute changed him? Could they have rearranged his brain and heart? She smiled at the thought. A month ago

she might have said it would take a miracle to change her brother. But wasn't Tribute of Angels exactly that? She closed her eyes so that her body might remember his voice, his lips, his hands, his body pressed against her, inside her. He was, she thought, the breath of God speaking through the harsh words of humans.

The next night the Readers came without announcement or ceremony. They sat in places already reserved for them, they listened and slept, and when morning came they hurried away.

So it continued. Every evening the Readers slipped into the hall, their eyes down as if they did not want to see each other, or pretend that if they did not look no one could see them. Every morning they hurried away, like a man who has a vision of God in some unlikely place and is embarrassed to let anyone know but he will make sure to come back.

A surprise came to Broken by Heaven on the day she went to her brother to suggest he think about his responsibilities to his people. She expected ridicule, or just petulance. Instead he asked her to help him, to tell him what to do. They began to work together, for the poor, the merchants, the fishermen and farmers. They even punished those who took bribes and cheated the people. They talked together sometimes for hours, and made plans to use the Army of Heaven to help people in faraway lands. What Broken by Heaven did not tell her brother was that all this work, all this change, was in fact preparation. For she was waiting for a certain event, or rather a moment, and there was no way to know exactly when that might happen.

The moment came at the beginning of Spring, when the first flowers broke through their buds to offer color to the sky and to the eternal glory of Immortal Snake. Broken by Heaven was surprised it did not happen sooner, and while she was grateful for the time to prepare her brother, she had become anxious, and had taken to staring at those early buds, or the birds annoying the sellers in the market, thinking "Too much time has passed. It should have happened by now."

Then, on a cool morning with clusters of clouds low in the sky, a man walked the path up to the Kingdom of God. He was ordinary, this man, short, fleshy, a spice dealer. It could have been anybody. He entered the temple, glanced around nervously, then placed his hands together and inclined his scraggly beard toward the lower level Reader who had come to greet him and take his money in exchange for the usual blessing or amulet.

The request, however, was more substantial. "Wise one," the man

said, "my daughter is getting married and of course she cannot do so until after the middle day of the Spring Festival." The reader nodded; any marriage begun in the weeks prior to the Day of Cuts would never see a single child. He nodded, but his face was strangely pale. The spice dealer continued, "I have not heard any announcements of the Festival. Can you tell me, please, when it will happen so we may plan the wedding?"

The Reader stood silent a moment, then said, "Please wait."

Inside, in the meeting room, he found the majority of his friends and superiors, some playing the game of Chase on a board of red and blue triangles, others sipping tea, or reading. He thought, *they're waiting for evening*. "A man asks the time of the Spring Festival," he said. "What should I tell him?" Everyone looked around the room. "Who has been studying the night sky?" Now they all looked down. "Has anyone written down the progress of the moon and planets?"

One of the Readers jumped up. "Follow me," he announced. They did so eagerly, grouped behind him as he marched past the statues and wall carpets to the private chamber of their leader. Through a half-open door they could see him standing by the window, like a man caught in a memory of a dream. He was turned in the direction of the Hall of Precious Happiness.

Fury rose in him when they told him their dilemma. "This is absurd," he said. "All we need to do is consult the book and give the man his answer." No one answered him, and when they had all climbed up the tower to the records room just outside the glass-roofed observatory, and the Master slammed open the giant gold-bound book, he too fell silent. No one came close enough to look; they all knew what they would find, blank pages since that first evening they had gone to hear Tribute of Angels. For weeks they had been using old calculations for the minor questions presented to them, but the Spring enactment was of a different order.

Finally the oldest among them, whose robe was so worn the colors had run together, spoke softly. "We were enchanted. A spell has taken us away from God's writing in the sky. Now we cannot say when the seasons call their festivals. We no longer know when to shed the skin of the Snake."

The High Reader clenched his fists. "Tribute of Angels must die."

The old man said, "If the Living World has sent him it is the will of God. But if he does not come from God he must surely die, for no creature can resist him. I have looked, and even the insects cease their flight to

listen to him.”

The master answered, “God taught us that the sky is a living book, with words written every night. Tribute of Angels has taken us away from that wonder of wonders. How could he have come from God?”

“Then he must die,” the old man said.

They turned back to the stairs. Softly, the young Reader who had begun it all asked, “What should I tell him? The man who asked about the Festival?”

When the master didn’t answer, the old man said, “Tell him to be patient a short time longer, until the will of God shall reveal itself.”

All that day and night the Readers built up their power. They cut the throats of three bulls, they cut their own arms and legs, they burned parchments with prayers, they burned the clothes they’d worn when they went to hear Tribute of Angels. In the morning they marched down the hill to the great city and palace of Immortal Snake.

A single figure stood at the gate. Broken by Heaven stood motionless in a long white dress, with a white jewel set upon her forehead.

The Master Reader crossed his thick arms on his chest. “Mistress,” he said, “please step aside. We come as messengers from the Living World.”

Broken by Heaven said, “When we spoke weeks ago I told you that God’s greatest gift was not the writing in the sky but life on Earth, revealed in the stories of Tribute of Angels. Now, today, tell me if I lied or spoke the truth.”

The Reader answered, “Tribute of Angels desecrates the will of Heaven. Now he must die.”

“And who will kill him?”

“That is the province of Immortal Snake, beloved of God.”

“Tribute of Angels is the companion of Immortal Snake. Is it time, then, for the Snake to shed his skin?”

“We will speak with Immortal Snake directly.”

“Of course. God dwells in my brother. Come with me.” She turned and opened the door that led to the royal pathway of the Nine Rings. Though her skin and all organs trembled, she walked with a firm step, never looking back.

They found the ruler sitting alone in his petition room, on a chair carved with lions and swans. Broken by Heaven had told him to wait there; now she was pleased to see the formal air he struck, as if indeed the Living World would speak through his mouth.

The High Master of the Readers spread himself face down on a carpet depicting Immortal Snake raising the dead. “Great lord,” he said as he rose to his feet. “Speak to us of the slave, Tribute of Angels.”

“My companion in death.”

“Yes, lord.”

“Then I shall speak. God sent me first the terror of my dying and I was frightened as a naked child. God then sent me the memory of the slave who had come to me as a gift, by record from the Emperor of Mud and Glory, but in truth from the Living World. His voice and his spirit made me happy, and so I gave him gifts, beautiful clothes, statues, gold. He gave it all to the poor, and the people love him. He has given me something almost as precious as his tales. He has taught me to serve my people, and for this I would kiss the tips of his fingers.”

The Reader said, “He will destroy everything. His stories cover God’s writing in the sky. Without that we cannot know when to hold the festivals, we lose the length of days and the order of the nights. We will not know when Immortal Snake must shed his skin. Yes, I speak of that too, for without the sacrifice the Living World will take back its blessing, and nothing will remain but death.”

“I once cared for my life,” the ruler answered, “but now I care only about my people.”

“Good. Then for the sake of the people destroy Tribute of Angels.”

Immortal Snake closed his eyes, and his sister held her breath. He looked again and said quietly, “Since we agree that all we do is for the life of the people, the people will decide.” The Readers stared at him. “Come tonight to the Plaza of Celestial Glory. Then you will tell your fears to all who

wish to hear them.” And with that he stood up from his chair of lions and swans and left the room.

The Plaza of Celestial Glory celebrated Written in the Sky’s triumph in one of its many battles with the Empire of Mud and Glory. Formed by the facades of the palace and various ministries, its huge open square flashed with gold, rubies, sapphires, and emeralds, the colors of the sun, blood, the sea, and the plants, so that all of heaven and earth would honor Immortal Snake.

Soldiers cleared away the beggars and street merchants who usually clogged the sides of the plaza, then workers built platforms for the Readers to address the crowd, and booths for honored guests. Meanwhile, heralds traveled all up and down the Nine Rings, and beyond to the villages and farms, calling out the message that that evening Tribute of Angels would tell his stories to the people.

That afternoon, Broken by Heaven once more traveled to the Temple of Names. At sight of her the priests cringed inside their stone masks of forgotten alphabets. They still remembered the day she demanded they take back her childhood name, and they recognized the basket she carried. She’d already used it to discard her original name relics, the strands of hair, the black doll. When she turned it over this time it held only an oversize white dress of coarse cloth. “My name no longer belongs to me,” said Broken by Heaven, who once was More Clever Than Her Father and Everyone Else.

The priest said, “Mistress, the Living World does not like it when a woman—”

“My new name,” she said, “is Wiser Than Heaven.”

They did the ceremony as quickly as possible and purified themselves as soon as she left.

Thousands gathered, from farmers to ministers, beggars to generals. Even the deaf were there, for word had spread that the stories of Tribute of Angels could heal the sick, including those beyond hearing. At first no one was sure which way to look but then a great snake banner unfurled from a low palace balcony and everyone knew that that would be the source of “the Voice of God,” as some were calling the Snake’s companion.

Before that voice, however, there came another sound, and if the crowd had been capable of movement they might all have panicked and

tried to run inside the buildings. Trumpets. The great copper horns of the Readers sounded in the evening air, and people covered their eyes, for the sound was the signal for Immortal Snake to shed his skin, a ritual no one must witness. They cowered down as best as they could, trying to hide among their neighbors, wondering when the white bulls would trample them.

Instead, they heard voices, amplified through speaking tubes. “Arise, blessed ones. The champion of heaven and earth calls upon you to watch, and to listen.” Still frightened, they nevertheless dared to look up. And then a great cheer surged up from the plaza, for yes, there were the Readers, terrifying in their masks and robes, and look, they carried no effigies this time, but the very remains of previous rulers—but above them, on the royal balcony, Immortal Snake opened his arms to his people. He wore a robe of blue silk streaked with red, the colors of sunrise, and his face was painted golden, and on his head he wore a golden crown in the shape of a coiled serpent with eyes like the night sky flashing with stars.

“Beloved,” Immortal Snake called out, and his voice carried across the square to bounce off the sides of the ministries. “Tonight you will give your judgment of what is true and what is false, what is above and what is below. Listen now to those who have served us through all our past glories, the Readers of God’s Writing in the Sky.”

The Master Reader stood at the front of the platform, with the skins of the past rulers lined up behind him. “You believe,” he said, “that Tribute of Angels has come to you from the Living World. This is a lie. He and his stories have risen up from the Abyss. If this man lives, God will abandon us and all our joy and glory will fall to dust.”

As soon as the Reader finished, Immortal Snake spoke again. “Now hear the voice of Tribute of Angels. And then decide if he shall live or he shall die.”

From inside the palace the storyteller stepped onto the balcony, wearing only his slave cloth. “I am a servant of God,” he said. “All hatred in the human heart is a violent strike against the Living World. Therefore, I ask only that no one seek violence. I call for no man’s death, but offer only a story. For Immortal Snake has asked that I tell a simple tale, and there is no greater joy than service to Immortal Snake.”

In later years scholars would ponder and explore the stories of Tribute of Angels. They would write them all down, both forward and backward, and then add up the number values of all the words, and chart the shape of the letters, and search for phrases that appeared first in one

tale and then another. But no one ever talked about the story told on the night the Readers called for the death of the teller. No one wrote it down, and everyone who was there would claim they had no memory of what he said.

He spoke softly, without the speaking tube, yet each one heard him like a whisper alongside the face. It seemed to each that he or she stood alone in a dark world, and the only light was the glow that flowed from the lips of the storyteller. In the beginning the tale was a sweet dream, soft and quiet. Then a wind came, and swept them into a storm of fire.

He talked through the night, and as the world edged toward morning his voice rose, and the story shifted wildly, one moment as joyous as the hidden doorway to Paradise, the next a lightning bolt of terror. As the first edge of dawn approached, his voice cracked open their bodies and shattered their bones.

At last it was over. The sun had not yet risen but the people discovered they could open their eyes, look around them for the first time in many hours. There, at the feet of the platform, on the mosaic tiles depicting the glory of victory, the Readers lay, every one of them face down in a great wash of blood.

In the plaza the people stared in confusion and horror. Many looked up at the sky, frightened the stars would fall to earth and crush them. On the balcony Immortal Snake had to steady himself as he looked down at the blood, so much of it, he thought he would drown in it. Alongside him, Tribute of Angels stood motionless, his head down, his arms held low, the hands clasped together.

Only his lover was able to speak. Wiser Than Heaven took the arm of her brother. "Now," she whispered, "before they can run away. Look for the white horse tethered just inside the gate. Go!" Immortal Snake stared at her a moment then he seemed to come awake and hurried inside to the stairs. Wiser Than Heaven turned to her beloved. "Walk alongside him," she said. "I will follow."

She watched him as he glided down the stairs, then she stepped onto the balcony. "Children of Immortal Snake," she cried. "Beloved of the Living World. The Angel of Death has stepped among us tonight. God's will has revealed itself. Look up, look up! Do you see? The stars have not vanished, they shine so brightly you can see their faces. The stars cry out with joy. They shine for you, and they shine for Immortal Snake, who has descended from heaven to live on Earth. And now, children of God, behold your ruler.

Your servant. Your father. Immortal Snake comes among you!”

With that the great doors of the palace flung open as if by the hands of angels, and Immortal Snake rode forth on a white horse, its mane braided with diamonds. The people fell back, frightened, but they could not keep away, for he was beautiful, far more than the idealized portraits and statues. It was the beauty of a man who has ridden on the boat of stories, traveling beyond the sky night after night. The storyteller himself stood beside him, and the people bent down to kiss the dirt around his feet. Soon Wisier Than Heaven joined them, and slowly, with the Snake’s male companion to his right and his female companion to his left, they moved up the hill to the deserted observatory known as the Kingdom of God.

When they reached it, they saw that the young tree, which the Readers had planted when the new Immortal Snake ascended to the Seat of Heaven’s Grace, lay uprooted on the ground, its branches withered and dry, as if it had lain there for years. Wisier Than Heaven took a small gold-handled hoe which she had attached to the saddle and gave it to her brother. “Hoe a small place on either side of the tree,” she whispered, and was thankful for the grace and elegance with which he did as she told him. Next, she and Tribute of Angels both took a handful of seeds from a green silk pouch she wore around her neck and dropped them into the hoed dirt.

“Children of the Snake,” she called out to the huge crowd. “Now you must close your eyes with holy dread, for no one may witness what is about to happen.” All up and down the hill people put their hands over their eyes and crouched down and buried their faces in their arms. A strange faint sound drifted through the air, the softest whisper of a breath, a scratch on the wind. Tribute of Angels was telling a story to the seeds. When at last Wisier Than Heaven called to the people to open their eyes two fully grown fig trees stood at the top of the hill. And behind them vines and flowers covered the walls and doors and windows of the Kingdom of God.

Thus ended the long rule of the Readers, who worshipped the sky and ignored the Earth. No longer would they kill the Snake’s companions, no longer would they lure him to shed his skin. From then on, each Immortal Snake would serve his people for the length of his life.

\* \* \* \*

Far to the east, in the Land of Mud and Glory, the man whom his subjects called Emperor of All the World stood in a small dark room with the seer of the imperial court. Though the Emperor was a short man and the seer was long and bony, the Emperor rose high above the diviner, for

he stood on stilts covered by his long robe painted with the night sky. His face was painted green and his hair was braided and waxed to stand out from his head like the rays of the sun.

Very old and thin, and dressed in a shapeless robe the color of mud, with long white hair, the seer might have been a man and might have been a woman. Not even the Emperor knew, or cared.

The two of them stared into a small three-legged cauldron where the remains of an ancient tortoise bubbled in a dark broth. "Now?" said the Emperor.

"No," the seer said. "Not yet."

The Emperor sighed. "Then it will not come in my lifetime."

"Perhaps not even in the lifetime of your son. But it will come."

"Then all is good."

\* \* \* \*

Immortal Snake ruled seventeen years, dying finally after he went out in a storm to command a tornado not to attack his city. The tornado turned aside, but the ruler became ill and his lungs filled with water and he drowned in his love for his people. During his reign, with his sister and Tribute of Angels beside him, he became the living breath of compassion and wisdom. And power. The Army of Heaven extended its rule over countries and provinces and peoples no one had even known existed. Every year the other Great Powers sent money and treasure to the Nine Rings, while their young men and women imitated the styles and speech and art of the land of Immortal Snake, which was no longer Written in the Sky, but had been renamed, under the direction of the ruler's sister, Mirror of God.

Tribute of Angels no longer spoke every night, but four times a year, at the beginning of the seasons, people gathered at sunset up and down the hills to the south of the Nine Rings. Tribute of Angels would sit cross-legged on top of the hill, wearing the slave clothes in which he'd first come before Immortal Snake. He spoke softly, yet each would hear him as if the Teller sat alongside and whispered in their ears. When morning came, the people would walk away slowly, their faces empty but their eyes lit with a secret fire, like someone who dreams that he has passed through the seven spheres and come upon the hidden throne of God.

When Immortal Snake died, panic rose up in the land. People burned their crops at night, for fear the sun had gone out and they would never be warm again. When day came others jumped off their roofs in the belief that divine messengers would lift Immortal Snake to heaven and they would be carried along. The world must end, they thought, for no Immortal Snake had ever died a natural death, and now there were no Readers to appoint a new one.

Soon, however, joy replaced terror, for the word went out from the Nine Rings that the people themselves would choose their ruler. As for the choice, no one even had to discuss it. Tribute of Angels became the new Immortal Snake. In a ceremony designed by his beloved, he lay face down on the Plaza of Celestial Glory. One by one the ministers, heads of the noble families, and even village leaders sprinkled him with rose oil, calling "Rise up, beloved of God. Rise up." Finally, Wiser Than Heaven herself took the body in her arms, like a mother sheltering a dead child. "Rise up, rise up," she said. "Awaken to your people. Rise up, Immortal Snake!" Now he opened his eyes, and kissed her, and the celebrations began.

Under the rule of the new Immortal Snake the land of Mirror of God became even more powerful, more loved and admired. Its empire now stretched across the world. When drought or locusts destroyed crops people everywhere suffered, except in Mirror of God, for they had taken the best of every nation's plants and livestock and spices.

For twenty-two years Immortal Snake, who had been Tribute of Angels, ruled his people. And then the sun hid his face, for the Snake became ill.

Day after day Wiser Than Heaven sat alongside him. He lay now on the same narrow bed he'd requested for his quarters so long ago. When she joined him, there was more than enough room for both of them, for it was as if each had vanished and a single being replaced them. It had always been like this. In their glory days it was as if a star came to lie among mortals. Now it looked like the union of light and shadow, for the great storyteller was nearly gone.

She was sitting alongside his bed on the tenth night of his illness when he turned toward her and whispered, "Can you see the sky?"

"Yes, of course," she said as she glanced up at the high window above the bed.

“Tell me what is written there.”

She began to cry, the first time in days. “I’m sorry,” she managed to say. “I don’t know.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he whispered. “It was all decided such a very long time ago.” He managed to turn his head and look at her. His voice so soft she had to bend close, he said, “I should never have come here. I should have thrown myself into the sea.”

“No!” she said. “Don’t say that. Please.”

“I thought of it. The night before I arrived. I couldn’t do it, even then I could feel you calling to me.”

“I don’t understand.”

Instead of answering he closed his eyes. His breath seemed to flutter in the air just above his mouth. Wiser Than Heaven cried out and pressed her mouth down on his, as if she could trap him inside his body. Too late. Tribute of Angels, who was now Immortal Snake, had returned forever to the world of story.

Wiser Than Heaven stayed with the body for three days. When they finally pulled her away she returned to the small room where she had lived before she met her storyteller.

Across the land, people rubbed their faces and even their entire bodies with ashes. Many refused to eat, while they stopped all work and recited stories from the authorized collections. There was no panic, however. It was God’s will, they reassured each other, and waited for the moment when the ministers and wise men would choose a new Immortal Snake.

Only—who would they choose?

Wiser Than Heaven had three sons. The oldest said, “I am the first born. By right the land and all the power should go to me.”

The middle son said, “My brother only cares about himself. I have served the people all my life. The power should go to me.”

The youngest said, “I was my father’s favorite. All power belongs to me.”

Each one appealed to Wiser Than Heaven but she refused to speak with them, or to the ministers who begged her for a decision. Each of the brothers gathered allies, spread rumors, made promises. The factions began to battle each other, first through rumors, and then assassinations, and soon armed crowds were fighting each other.

Battalions from the Army of Heaven rushed home, supposedly to stop the fighting, but even before they arrived their commanders had chosen one side or another. Civil war flashed across the land. Finally, Wiser Than Heaven realized she must do something. She summoned her sons, only to have them refuse to be in the same room with each other for fear of assassination. So she saw them separately, and pleaded with each one to give up the fight for the sake of the people. Each one explained that too much had happened, that when he began the struggle he did so for his own glory, but now he continued for the good of the nation.

The conflict was never decided. In the second year, with bodies clogging rivers, and whole cities burned, and dead children tossed into the branches of trees, an even greater calamity fell upon the people. From all sides, from the sea, the mountains, the desert, a great army invaded Mirror of God, formerly known as Written in the Sky. Made up of soldiers from all the countries Mirror of God had conquered or dominated, the Grand Coalition was led by a young Emperor of Mud and Glory. He stood on a boat with black sails, his face radiant, his body raised up on stilts, and beside him, in an ancient robe thickened with dirt, stood a bent figure who may have been a man or may have been a woman.

The Coalition slaughtered the last remnants of the once terrible Army of Heaven. They killed half the women and almost all the men, and took the children as slaves. In a short time all three brothers were executed in the Plaza of Celestial Glory. Their mother disguised herself as one of the old women who tend the fires of the dead, and threw herself on the flames of her youngest son.

The soldiers tore down the Nine Rings of Heaven and Earth, they smashed every building, every statue, they burned down farms and villages. Then they plowed salt into the cracked earth so that nothing could grow there. At the very end, the Emperor of Mud and Glory stood among the blood-soaked ashes and proclaimed, "God has cursed this place forever and ever."

That was the end of the land of Written in the Sky. Once it was the most powerful of all the world's peoples. Now nothing remains of it but sand

and misery and a hatred whose origin no one even remembers—that, and the secret traces of a storyteller who was both its glory and its destruction.

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### Author's Note

The story of *Immortal Snake* was inspired by a very old tale, published early in the twentieth century by the mythographer Leo Frobenius. Known as “The Ruin of Kasch,” the story describes how a mysterious storyteller slave overthrew the age-old power of the priests. As with *Written in the Sky*, Kasch became rich and powerful under the rule of the storyteller, only to plummet to destruction in the next generation. Its enemies cursed the land and the people, so that forever after they would be plagued by barrenness, war, and the hatred of their neighbors. Kasch was an actual place in the ancient world, its location in Africa precisely known. The modern name for the land of Kasch is Darfur.