

WISPS OF SPIDER SILK

FIRST THREAD



BY ATHENA ANDREADIS

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TWO LINKED SCIENCE FICTION STORIES

BY ATHENA ANDREADIS



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An abbreviated version of “The Wind Harp” first appeared in *Crossed Genres*.

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TO HEATHER, KATHRYN, AND MARIE

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The two linked stories you're about to read are wisps of a vast nebula. In this universe the Minoan civilization partly recovered from the Thera explosion and some of its descendants eventually took to the stars. This is the universe of "Dry Rivers" and "Planetfall" which appeared in *Crossed Genres* in 2009. An abridged version of "The Wind Harp" appeared in *Crossed Genres* in 2013. For those who have read "Planetfall", Antóa Tásri-e of "The Wind Harp" is the unnamed narrator of its last section ("Nightsongs") and, at that time, the head of the prominent Sóran-Kerís hearth on Koredhán.



THE STONE LYRE

We were in the midst of the morning meal when Linarme came running to the long hall. “They’re here,” he cried, his gaze straying in my direction as usual. Kunaldi, my father’s favored, hastily wrapped her baby into the end of her son-gift coif and made for the door to the private quarters. She had almost gained the threshold when my mother stopped her.

“They look at the birth records before they come,” she said flatly. “And their machines will find you, no matter where you hide.” Kunaldi subsided on the corner of the children’s bench, wiping the smears the baby had left on the coif’s embroidery with unsteady fingers.

My mother smoothed her tunic, then cast a glance over the household children who had stopped eating and were waiting, shivering like denlamo cornered for branding. Some had started to cry. “Quiet,” she said, raising her voice to be heard above the din. “Do not shame this hold.” She went down the table, pulling a collar here, straightening a cap there. And then they were in the hall followed by my father, who kept his voice even as he bid them sit at the bench reserved for honored guests.

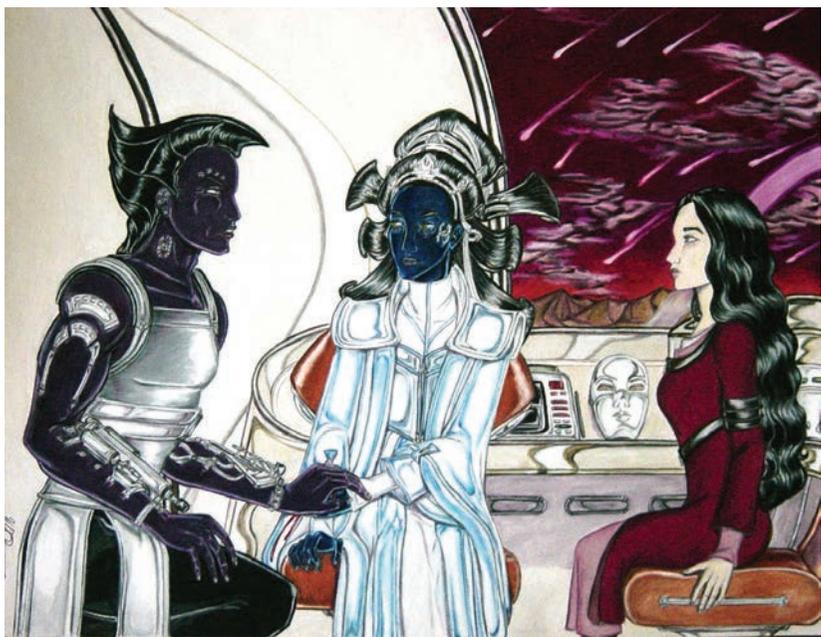
The gleaming Behtalkat ships had come five times in my sixteen season turns. Until I saw one of their shuttles hovering over Drige like an enormous honeyeater, I had thought

they were scary stories to keep us obedient. The people that emerged from them looked like us. Almost. They spoke reasonably and calmly of Behtalka's need for more Talented, of the duty of all its client planets to supply them. The town next to Drige shot down one of the shuttles. The crater was now filled with wildflowers—at least the Behtalkat hadn't used Idri bioweapons. We had erased the town's name from our records and our tongues.

There were three of them in the empty space that suddenly yawned around the guest bench. One was at least minor nobility—you could tell by his artificially whitened skin, as pale as the interior lip of shells I found on the lake shore at low tide. Another wore the tight-fitting charcoal gray clothes that outlined his body almost indecently. The sole color note was the stud that glinted in his left nostril and the occasional tiny flame tongues from the *misedraht* sheathed along his left forearm. A *Tohduat*. No bribing or begging one such as he, no matter where he had been born before the Behtalkat had claimed him and shaped him into the weapon he was.

The third one...we often heard of the unyielding Niregan who would not bend to Behtalka's rule, even as its star fortresses orbited their ringed planet. I had glimpsed Niregan representatives in newscasts, darkening the edges of high-import ceremonies on Behtalka. But I had never seen one in the flesh before. *Veldir* did not merit delegation visits from other systems—Drige, a provincial capital at the edge of hill country, even less so. The Niregan's rusty-iron hue was a sharp contrast to the Behtalkat noble's pallor. She was broad-shouldered but lean, like the *gvemandi* that harvested our *denlamo* herds. The shoulderblade-length untidy braids framing her craggy face were bluish-black. So were the two *curlicues* on her cheekbones, which looked like stray strands until you looked closer.

She caught me staring and flashed white teeth at me without smiling. I felt myself flush—I could almost hear my mother scold, *You are shaming us, Nifar!* Angry at being jangled, I pinned my gaze on the flagstones in front of me.



THE WIND HARP

When Némi Ferái Kámi-o sent me a formal summons, I took more than usual care with my appearance. Not that it would matter to him—his retainers, conscious of the length and renown of the Kámi-o lineage, constantly complained about his informality. Besides, he had seen me in all states of dishevelment ever since he had taken me as his fosterling, after my parents...

I walked down the flagstone colonnade, forcing myself into calm by watching the ketúo fronds sway and murmur their pleasing harmonies. It would not do to arrive early. The late morning bells began chiming when I entered the pavilion whose opalescent roof refracted Kánri's light.

Ferái smiled at me as I bowed. The low oval table by his side was covered with datacrystals, tablets and commlinks. A light robe and loose trousers billowed around his neat frame and his gleaming black hair was held back by two combs of polished shell. Despite a smudge of ink on one high cheekbone, he still looked the epitome of elegance. I felt distinctly overdressed.

"What does Némi Ferái Kámi-o wish to share?" I asked, using formal address.

"Food, to begin with," he answered in affectionate mode, gesturing towards the breakfast tray. I took a few bites but I

might as well be chewing pebbles. And between his Talent and his training, little escaped the founder of the Confederation's diplomatic corps.

"I will be plain with you," he said softly. "You are the best Sensor yet born on Ténli and your intelligence matches your Talent. No, no false modesty," he forestalled me. "The other members of the Circle think you are too young but I would like to entrust you with a mission. A difficult and dangerous one." He placed his hand lightly on mine. "Please refuse if you think it is beyond you, Antóa."

Refuse? I'd rather die than disappoint him. Nor would he have asked this of me if he thought I had no chance of success.

"The Kem-Fir tower has a new ruler," he continued, absently rubbing his close-cropped beard.

"I thought Dor-Nys Nir-Vad was at her prime."

"We all did," he agreed ruefully. "The official word from Behtalka is that she fell unexpectedly ill—and refused to let any Confederation healers see her."

"After all the Confederation efforts to create stable links with the Gan-Tem towers..."

"A loss for her people, first and foremost," he said gently. "But Serkadren cares little what happens on Gan-Tem as long as their weapons flow smoothly in his direction." His eyes turned as hard as the agates they resembled. "I am not endangering your life to further the ambitions of the Melhuat of Behtalka. As is common with the Gan-Tem, the neighboring towers attacked Kem-Fir during the transition. Kem-Fir prevailed, but its water reservoir was damaged."

"And I assume that Melhuat Serkadren dispatched a starship to the jump point, with instructions to supply Kem-Fir with water but only if the new Dor-Nys asks. And since such an action would fatally undermine her authority and the tower's autonomy..." He gave me a long glance.

"Indeed, she has not asked. To our knowledge, Kem-Fir has only two small starships. Neither is equipped to fetch water from the system's asteroids, even if they could evade Serkadren's patrolling fortress. They are feverishly trying to

reconstitute the ducts connecting the reservoir to the aquifer. They may get attacked again. In the meantime –”

A Whittling... I guessed, letting the thought float unguarded. Ferái nodded.

“Officially you are there as an observer. Your true mission is to persuade the new Dor-Nys to stay her hand. If we can turn a Gan-Tem tower into an ally for Ténli...” He hesitated but I heard his thought clearly enough. Now it was my turn to touch his hand.

“I know you want Ténlin influence to be as great as possible in the Confederation, Némi Ferái.”

“To the Behtalkat, the Talent is a weapon. But Serkadren is gentler than his sire. If we can guide him, the complexion of the Confederation may change.” He stood, raising me along with him, and formally pressed my hands between his. “Pronounce, Antóa Tásri, Erúe’s hope, Kandéi’s joy.”

For the mission, Ferái gave me the access codes to his own starship, the *Sedói*. After stuttering my thanks for the extravagant gift, I suggested it would be best if I went alone. He disagreed. Reaching accord on all other aspects of the mission, we argued calmly but stubbornly over this point till Kánri dipped below the horizon, leaving the sky awash in lavender and gold.

“All the risk and all the glory?” he finally asked. I felt my cheeks grow warm. He smiled, the amusement laced with sorrow. *The image of Erúe—her calm bravery, her love of strange skies...but the slate-green eyes and the ability to gaze deeply into people, those are Kandéi’s.* Then he turned as smoothly opaque as his hair combs.

“You will be on your own. We cannot override the Behtalkat jamming devices without triggering alerts. Only Kem-Fir’s Dor-Nys knows the full writ of your mission. We will decide what to disclose when you return.” I smiled at the *when*. He smiled, too, and brushed the back of his hand fleetingly on my cheek, releasing me to my task.



ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

ATHENA ANDREADIS (AUTHOR)

Athena Andreadis was born in Hellás and lured to the US at age 18 by a full scholarship to Harvard, then MIT. She spent her academic career conducting basic research in molecular neurobiology, focusing on mechanisms of mental retardation and dementia. She's an avid reader in four languages across genres, the author of *To Seek Out New Life: The Biology of Star Trek* and the engine behind *The Other Half of the Sky* and *To Shape the Dark*, highly acclaimed anthologies of evolved space opera with women protagonists.

Athena writes poetry, speculative fiction and non-fiction on a wide swath of topics. Her work can be found in *Harvard Review*, *Belles Lettres*, *Strange Horizons*, *Crossed Genres*, *Stone Telling*, *Cabinet des Fées*, *Bull Spec*, *Science in My Fiction*, *SF Signal*, *The Apex Blog*, *World SF*, *SFF Portal*, *H+ Magazine*, *io9*, *The Huffington Post*, and her own site, [Starship Reckless](#).

HEATHER D. OLIVER (ILLUSTRATOR)

At an early age, Heather Oliver discovered a love of art, especially art inspired by SF and fantasy and she's been drawing and painting ever since. She improved her craft through self-teaching and a range of formal courses, earning a Bachelor's Degree in Fine Arts at the University of Connecticut.

She works with traditional media including colored pencils and graphite, and Photoshop, and her current artistic endeavors are inspired by daily life, film, literature and artistic genres, from classical Art Nouveau to the many diverse styles of contemporary fantastic art. An archive of her work can be seen at <http://iartiste.jimdo.com>.

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