

# 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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**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 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 around 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 denlammo 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. But when the Tohduat started slowly walking down the length of the bench where the younger children huddled, I tracked him as if hypnotized. Everyone did, while the room turned rancid with the stench of fear.

He paused several times—once in front of my father's brotherson, who was now reckoned my father's son ever since his own father had died and his mother had entered a new household. He even glanced at Linarme. I tamped down the wild fluttering in my stomach. My childhood betrothed was two full seasons older than I. The Behtalkat never took anyone past the onset of puberty, no matter how strong their Talent. Very rarely they took girls, to become pardaht—chalices to bear children to Behtalkat nobles or to the Melhuat himself, the Presence of Behtalka. But girls were needed to make more boys, boys harvested to become Tohduat, arrows in Behtalka's quiver as it aimed to bring all inhabited planets into its fold.

"Opinion?" asked the Tohduat abruptly in Dominant Mode Behtalkut, half-turning towards the Niregan. Asking for help—that marked him as low in Talent. But the quality of his harvest would win him favor with his masters in the council rooms and training yards of the Ksahtal, so he could afford to forego some pride even in public.

“You know I cannot tell reliably without touching them,” she replied in Common. “In any case, that’s not what I’m here for. Earn your keep, Tohduat, and let me earn mine.”

“If you expedite our task, I will ask that you be granted access to more Rescue Lists,” interposed the Behtalkat noble. The Niregan bore down upon us, her face a sealed door. As she passed me, I felt her focus on me like a heat-seeking Gan-Tem javelin. I went as cold as I’d been hot before, but she didn’t break stride. She brusquely pressed her hand against the cheeks of children the Tohduat indicated. Finally, she gripped a tiny foot protruding from Kunaldi’s coif. My father moaned when the Tohduat lifted the baby from her nerveless grip.

“Yours?” the Tohduat asked my father in lowland Veldire, holding my half-brother with surprising gentleness. So this was one of ours, used to better sense his own.

“The only son of my body,” whispered my father. “Can you not—” then his voice failed.

“We must visit the other households on our list,” the Behtalkat noble replied. “Kevrad tegri Durath will remain long enough to oversee the dam for the hydroelectric plant, as per your request for an engineer. Please see to her accommodations.” He beckoned the Tohduat and turned to leave.

“No!” wailed Kunaldi, straining after the bundle. The Tohduat’s face hardened and he touched his misedraht. He didn’t need to unsheathe it: we had all seen the fireflowers unfurl from these weapons, flaying skin, charring flesh, scoring bone.

“He will be content in the Ksahtal,” he said, reverting to Dominant Mode Behtalkut. “He will see things he would have never seen.” His eyes raked us. “As I did, instead of spending my life planetbound here because the Voices so decree.” And then they were gone. While my father was trying to comfort Kunaldi, I went up to the Niregan.

“Why didn’t you pick me?” I said as evenly as I could in my middling Common. Rudeness to a guest...but my mother was too busy calming the children to notice my lapse in manners. Too, I was angry for her sake. Now my father would have to try for another son or make his brotherson heir to our hold, keeper of our keys and parchments. The Niregan’s greenish-yellow eyes narrowed.

“I should have. You’re the strongest Talent by far in this hall.” My heart somersaulted. “To me it was obvious enough, even if you managed to elude that low-ranking Tohduat. The infant is barely Level Three, but he’s so young he won’t pine for his mother. He will know only the Ksahtal, where they raise them, train them, put them to war, put them to stud. Whatever it takes to ensure that Behtalka keeps ruling its client planets. Whereas you have fully formed dreams about your future...and that boy,” and she pointed to Linarme. I dared not look at him, though his anxiety was



pinging me like hard hail. I'd need strong shields against the Niregan. Her nostrils flared. "Don't worry about the sanctity of your mind—I'm not Behtalkat."

\* \* \*

Next day, Kunaldi could not be found. My father went to look for her but came back alone...and with mingled dread and anger I saw that his eyes were swimming. Every hold member who could be spared was pressed into search parties—even the women.

"I will go with you," Kevrad tegri Durath told me, placing a polarizing band across her eyes. I recalled that Nireg's sun was orange, compared to our yellow-white one. She strode silently beside me, occasionally stopping to examine a boulder here, a bush there. Finally, when we were following the stream that supplied the household cisterns, I couldn't contain myself.

"Why be part of this search? What do you care for us Veldiri?"

"I don't. But if I'm to be effective in my task, I must understand you as much as I understand the local materials. This young woman, she is...?"

"My mother birthed only me; my father is an eldest son, and a Voice besides. In such cases, a man can adopt a younger brother's son—or ask another family for a favored. If the favored gives him a son, he keeps the child after he's weaned and she returns to her family rich in gifts." Her eyebrows came together, a dark line of cirrus over the aurora of her eyes.

"Surely you're taught basic biology? It's up to him to give himself a son. A simple centrifugal separation will do it." I felt my cheeks grow hot.

"We're taught biology. It is forbidden to influence such matters—one of the Voices' duties is to ensure we abide by the laws, so my father could hardly flout it. Do all Niregan customs make sense?" Her teeth flashed, and this time the smile almost reached her eyes.

"You're taut, little string." She paused so long I thought she would say no more. When she finally did, the strain was palpable. "No, I cannot claim that for Nireg. We have our full share of stupidity. But what if the favored births a girl?"

I was trying to frame an acceptable non-answer when I sensed her attention swerve. I followed her gaze. Something bright was fluttering on the branches of a thornbush by the stream...Kunaldi's son-gift coif, now muddy and tattered. Kevrad tegri Durath picked it up, slowly turned it over in her hands.

“Ah,” she murmured. “I would drag this stream if I were your father.”

They found Kunaldi’s body wedged in the rocks of the rapids, several stones still in the pockets of her tunic. My father would have to pay her family because he had registered the birth—but he still had no son of his body to write the family parchments, to reach decisions with other hold heads and Voices. Voices, like my father was, like Linarme would become...and as wife to him I’d help him shape Drige. Maybe even shape Veldir, make it strong against its adversaries.

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