

1-Invocation

Marki tightened her grip on the shovel and struck the drought-parched land as hard as she could one more time.

Nothing.

With a frustrated grunt, she launched the shovel across the garden where it clattered on the dry earth beside the withered bean stalks. She slumped to her knees and wiped the sweat and tears from her cheeks. The air felt stifling. Nothing stirred without effort. In a few moments, her sister Isbi would be back from the well in The Village with the water for the day and find that the grave was still not dug. Her consolation was the knowledge that Isbi would not be angry with her for failing.

Her gaze slipped to the shadowy heap where her parents lay dead, still holding each other as they had when hunger overtook them. With dull eyes, Marki looked back across the garden to the solid stone and mortar home her father had built when he was the chief cutter at the quarry. Wiping her hands on her sleeveless tunic, she walked across the garden retrieve the shovel.

A piercing shriek filled her ears and a shadow passed over her. The black wings of a buyu spread wide and beat the air until, with a thud, the giant bird landed and hobbled awkwardly toward the bodies.

Fear and rage exploded within Marki. Wielding the shovel over her shoulder like a club, she rushed at the bird. “No-o-o!” she roared, striking the buyu fiercely. “Don’t touch them! Get away!” The bird turned to fend off her attack, but Marki brandished the shovel in front of her, ready to jab if the buyu came closer. With enormous talons, it grasped the handle and lifted into flight. For a surprising moment, Marki grappled to stay grounded. Then she leaned and tugged at the shovel. It splintered and broke in the clutches of the buyu, and she tumbled backwards. Lying on the ground, she felt the wind of the buyu’s wings as it descended upon her like a black cape. She could no longer see the grey dawn sky.

“Marki!” Isbi’s scream distracted the bird long enough for Marki to thrust the broken handle into its chest like a spear. The blow struck high, near its neck and, with a terrifying caw, the buyu faltered, and then flew away.

Breathing heavily, Marki lay back flat and closed her eyes in relief. When she opened them, Isbi was kneeling over her, tears streaming down her face. “You could have been killed!” She held her sister tightly and shuddered.

Marki simply stared at the corpses. “We need to get them buried or the buyu will be back.”

“It’s my fault,” whispered Isbi. “I took eggs from its nest by the well.”

Marki stared at her sister in alarm, and then shrugged. “We have to eat something. The food barrels are empty now.”

Isbi nodded and sighed. Then she looked west across the plain and began to invoke a blessing of the Ancients. Marki rolled her eyes and stood. But instead of returning to the house, she paused and listened. The faint whispers brushed Marki’s ears with hope.

“...Ancients...come now and guard us...we know you are kind...help as you will...”

Marki did not understand Isbi’s love of the Ancient lore, but she agreed that the stories brought a feeling of peace. As long as they were whispered far from the ears of the Realm’s soldiers.

Marki ran her fingers through her dark curly locks and waited for Isbi to finish. Isbi’s honey-colored hair was pulled into a loose braid, revealing a delicate face despite the shadows of fatigue under her eyes. When Isbi’s invocation ended, Marki asked, “Will the Realm take our home?”

“I don’t think so. I’m of age.”

“Only just,” countered Marki.

“Old enough to marry,” said Isbi with a wistful look.

“But the Villagers might drive us out so they can take—”

“There’s nothing to take.”

Marki nodded her reluctant agreement. “Only a few of Grandfather’s carvings. Please don’t sell those, Isbi.”

“I won’t,” promised Isbi. Grandfather’s sculptures remained inside on the table and in the windowsill, hinting at a more elegant time before the drought had laid so much of Cadeven to waste.

Isbi sighed. “It wasn’t always like this. When the Ancients—”

“Do you think Vontu would help us?” interrupted Marki.

Isbi blushed and nodded. “We’ll go to the Hill and see if he’s there. He was leaving for Abduran today, but we might still find him.”

Vontu looked down the slope of the hill to the Nopeki Plateau’s sero grasslands, dotted with idim brush and the occasional withered shade tree. Below him, The Village nestled itself against the quarry, a crumbling bowl in the ground marked with grey, black and white patches that revealed its mixed lode. Dirt roads webbed through the thatch-roofed stone homes and faded to footpaths that separated the dying crops.

Two figures approached. Wary, Vontu stood. He had received enough threats from Villagers that he was ready to leave the town far behind him, but he pulled windblown hair from his hawk-like face and peered at the climbers. Immediately, he relaxed and smiled.

Isbi waved. “Leaving without saying good-bye?” she accused gently.

He blushed and studied the ground, weighing his answer before looking up at her. A rippling breeze lifted her hair, and her eyes locked with his for a heartbeat before she spoke again.

“Please, we need your help.” Her face became serious. “Our parents...I found them dead at sunset.”

“The drought,” said Vontu, tired by the commonness of the news.

“No!” blurted Marki. “No, Vontu. I did it.”

Vontu blinked.

“Marki,” said Isbi, in a warning tone.

“But I did, Vontu,” said Marki. “You heard what they said to you. How Father told you to stop all the talk about the Ancients. We argued, and I was so angry that—that I wished them dead.” With clenched fists and trembling lips, she said, “Don’t you see? I wished them dead—and they died!”

Vontu smiled sadly. “We all wish things like that when we’re angry, Marki. But you can’t *wish* people dead.” He tousled her hair and questioned Isbi with his eyes, but her face held no expression, and an awkward silence fell. Picking up his satchel and canteen, he looked at Marki with empathy, knowing the loneliness of orphanhood. “Come,” he said, putting his arm around her, “Show me where they are. I guess you’re going to need some help digging.”

As they walked back down the hill toward The Village, Isbi stole a glance at Vontu. “You’ve come to The Village at a good time. The winds have started again. Especially up here. It’s been years since I felt them, and they cure so much of the heat.”

Vontu cocked his head at her curiously. “Is the Nopeki usually still?”

“Very.”

He considered this remark. “I’ve come here before and didn’t notice. It seems as breezy as any other part of Cadeven.”

Marki squinted up at the sky. Drifting high above, heavy clouds sped westward. “Maybe the wind blows from one town to the next chasing away the rain so it never has time to fall.”

“True. The clouds never stand still,” agreed Vontu. “And the rain never falls.” He reached into his satchel and pulled out three strips of dried meat. “Would you like some tanat? You must be hungry.” He offered each a portion and took a bite of his own.

“You killed a tanat?” asked Marki, wide-eyed.

“No, I think the buyu must have gotten it. It was already dead when I found it. I just cooked it over the fire.”

Marki’s nostrils lifted as she inspected the piece more closely. “Do you think it’s safe?”

“Safer than starving.” He flinched as the words left his mouth and looked at Isbi for her reaction.

She showed no emotion, but murmured, “Mother wanted to be buried near the sea.”

Vontu slowed to a stop as her words sank in. “The sea is days away. It would be a long, hot and dangerous journey. Did she really--?”

“I thought we could take them to the cliffs overlooking the desert,” she said. “They say you can see the water from there. In the distance.”

Relieved, Vontu asked, “Is there a cart we can use?”

“Father’s old quarry hand cart,” said Marki. “It should hold together if we’re careful.”

“It may take us many days to get there and back,” said Isbi apologetically. “We’ll be keeping you from Abduran.”

“Only for a little while,” he said cheerfully.

“We’ll go quickly,” promised Isbi. “Thank you so much for helping us. I’ll feel much safer if you’re with us.”

Vontu’s mouth folded in a shy smile. “Of course.”

People walking in The Village did not readily yield to the cart when they saw that Vontu and Marki pushed it. However, when they recognized Isbi, they murmured a greeting and let them pass. In the marketplace, Marki ran ahead and peered into the deep crevice which constituted The Village's well.

"I can't see any water," said Marki.

Isbi knelt beside the gray tree and reached for the rope tied there. It had been patched many times to add length as the water had withdrawn further into the earth. Her hands moved skillfully to tie her bucket and lower the rope, and soon her knuckles whitened. With easy strength, she pulled the full bucket to rest beside Marki.

"How do you do that every time?" asked Marki.

"I just know it's in there. I imagine there's a whole lake under the Nopeki."

Vontu smiled and poured the water into a large barrel in the handcart. As he turned back, a heavy foot kicked the bucket from his hands. It rolled to the edge of the well and tumbled in, dragging the rope with it.

"You!" snarled a dusty man with a wide sero hat. His fist flew, catching Vontu on the jaw. "You come here and drink our water and give it to her!" He pointed at Marki. Punctuating each word with a hard shove, he growled "Don't feed Death!"

The ground gave way beneath Vontu's feet, and he felt his stomach lurch with the fall. He crashed against the uneven walls of the crevice in a series of stabbing, wrenching flips. When he came to a stop, his right knee was painfully wedged on an outcropping, and his arms flexed hard against the narrow opening. Below him, the shadows swirled with dust. Above him, harsh voices shrieked.

The rope dangled near, and Vontu searched with his loose leg for something to push against. Finding a point of leverage, he heaved himself forward, and the weight of his body swung the rope in a spinning pendulum, pounding his back against the jagged rock. He swallowed twice to quell a surge of nausea until he hung still again. And then, with strong, laboring arms, he pulled himself up the rope.

When Vontu reached the top and fingered the well's mouth, a wailing form flew past him. He felt something clawing at his back before arms closed around his waist, and he looked down to see Marki's panicked face. Bracing his feet against the walls, he tugged her up to where she could hold him around his shoulders. Shouts and rocks flew down at them, one stone sharply grazing him above the eye, but he pulled himself again to the well's edge.

Looking out from under his bleeding brow, Vontu felt rage swell within him to see that a crowd had assembled. Isbi knelt cowering a few paces away, but no one moved to help. With a grunt, he lifted himself and Marki out of the crevice on mighty haunches and roared an oath at the onlookers.

An eddy of dust swirled up and tore through the circle, and the people pulled back, shielding their faces from the biting debris. The wind settled, and from the stillness came Isbi's soft voice. "Gerunt, please. We're going to bury my parents by the cliffs. We need water for the journey."

The man who had knocked Vontu into the well shifted slightly and his back straightened. Something about the lines in his face softened.

"They starved, Gerunt," said Isbi. "Like your sister, Nadel, and all the others." She stood and searched the face of each spectator in turn, and their heads dropped in shame. With strength that showed no animosity, she turned back to Gerunt and a heavy moment pressed on them before he turned and pushed his way through the crowd. Slowly, the people walked away in tight clusters of muttering fear and spite.

The three beside the well looked at one another. Marki's voice rang hollow. "I'm not coming back." She looked at Vontu. "I'll go all over Cadeven with you and never have a home, but I'm not coming back to The Village again, ever."

Vontu held her in a protective embrace, and together they ached and bled silently. Beside them, Isbi murmured, "*Ancients who once walked the earth...come now and help us as you will...*"

A breeze blew with them, cooling their muscles and their grief. They took turns pulling the cart, heavy with the corpses, provisions, and the last of their memories of home. When the night blackened and the stars winked open, the suffocating heat dissipated. Vontu built a small fire of

idim brush, and Isbi prepared tubers to boil. Marki could think of nothing to do, so she sat by the cart with her knees folded under her chin, staring blankly at the shadowy outline of her parents.

Over the sound of the snapping fire, she heard Vontu whispering, “But why do they hate her? Why did he call her ‘Death’?”

Marki held her breath and picked at the scrapes on her arms, listening to how Isbi would answer. The reply came carefully.

“She has been unfortunate throughout her life in that death seems to follow her bursts of temper. She blames herself—says she made the people die, but she’s never hurt anyone. She only throws words.”

“She made them die?”

“That’s what she believes...and so do others in The Village. Gerunt, especially.” Isbi searched for a better explanation. “Once she fought with a neighbor and that night, the woman had a bad fall, and—”

“—And they blamed Marki for the accident.”

“Yes, even though she was nowhere near at the time. And when a man came to our home and criticized Grandfather—she loved Grandfather very much—Marki was furious. In the morning, the man was found dead on the road, half-eaten by buyu.”

“And now your parents die of hunger after years of drought, and she thinks it’s her fault because they argued last night,” said Vontu.

“Yes.”

“Those are sad coincidences, but that’s all they are.”

“I know. But it hurts her. Gerunt has made her an outsider in the eyes of the Villagers. She’s been very alone.”

“More than I am,” said Vontu. “When we’ve buried your parents, why don’t we go to Abduran and settle there? People there aren’t so superstitious, and it’s far from the Realm.”

“I don’t know.”

“Many people there still speak openly of the Ancients,” he added.

Marki tensed, knowing what he said would tempt her. Her eyes flickered with suppressed excitement when he pressed further. “It has a lake and the Klume River. You won’t suffer any more with the drought.”

“Is it safe to be so close to Lam’s Forest? What about the tanats? Don’t they attack people? I’ve heard their bite can break a man’s leg.”

Marki closed her eyes and listened to the silence that followed. Vontu cleared his throat and said gently, “Isn’t it safer to be near a tanat or two than to have Gerunt kicking Marki into wells?”

Isbi’s voice came as a quiet gift: “Yes. Yes, we’ll go with you to Abduran.”

Grateful, Marki leaned against the cart and, though her stomach felt tight, sleep overcame her.

All her life, Marki had known only the Nopeki Plateau, with the low Hill as its only remarkable feature. Now, with the sun rising behind them, their shadows sprawled through the swells of sero grass to where the land fell away sharply. Below, rocks and scrubby plants marked the dusty plain, and in the distance, the hint of a shining silver ribbon met the sky.

Vontu placed his hand on Marki’s back and pointed. “Somewhere between here and the sea is Drandsil. It’s deserted now, but the Council of Ancients once lived and governed there.”

“Like the Regent Maid?” asked Marki.

“Not like the Regent Maid,” said Vontu emphatically. “They ruled the elements and the creatures, not the people. They *helped* the people.”

Marki tore at the tall sero grass absently. “Grandfather talked about Drandsil sometimes. He’d been there.” Her forehead dimpled in doubt. “But why would anyone build a city in the middle of all that nothing?”

“There was a river before the drought,” said Vontu. “The wide Lingori. And all this was covered with lush meadows before the rains stopped. It’s said that the first Ancient, a man named Rodi, was born there.”

“How do you know so much?” asked Marki in awe.

Marki combed her fingers through her hair, trying to release the knots, and fixed her dark eyes on the horizon. “Where are the Ancients now?” she asked. But he had moved to unload the cart and did not hear her.

Isbi dropped to her knees and felt the earth with her hands. “We may be able to do this before it gets too hot,” she said, reaching for a small garden spade she had brought. Vontu set to work, using a flat rock to dig. Marki held a small stone bowl, carved by her Grandfather, which she had retrieved from the cart. She cupped it to her face, breathing in its soothing smell, and traced the graceful lines of the figures with her fingers. For a moment, she was entranced by the artistry. Then she sighed deeply and turned it over to scoop the earth.

Before the sun reached its zenith, they laid the unwrapped bodies of Mother and Father in their final bed. Then they sat at the edge of the cliff, sharing the view with the mortally departed and feeling relief from a light wind that blew up from the desert.

“Should we... say something before we cover them?” asked Vontu.

Isbi looked pensively at the faces of her parents, now rotting slightly. She showed no distaste, only peace. After a moment, she raised her arms to the sky and said in a sincere voice,

*“Ancients, who once walked this earth,
Who governed the heavens and gave us birth,
Who watered our fields and turned the seasons,
Who filled bodies with food and minds with reason,
Come now and guard these souls!
Come now and make them whole!
We know you are kind and remember them still;
Come now and help as you will!”*

They each sat motionless and Marki felt the familiar words sink with new significance into her heart, and into the earth, and into the sky. Though she did not understand how Isbi found hope in death, she could not ignore the blooming courage within her. She leaned over began to push the mounds of earth to cover Mother and Father until she could see their faces no more.