

REUT BARAK

SENYA

Senya **Reut Barak**

There was no need to escape the floods. They hardly happened at this time of year and when they did, Asim could usually sense that they were coming. It was the reason the men trusted him, despite his young age. Not that they let him rule them. That would have been out of the question. He lacked experience, and nobody was willing to forget that he was originally from another tribe, though no one could remember which. And that was fine, because he didn't want power. Power meant staying in one place, with a tribe.

He was not the kind of man to linger. He liked to meet people, he liked to talk, but he didn't like to stay. The wind carried him with it, wherever it went. He was a nomad; he was alive and he paid his dues to nobody. He was alone most of the time, traveling the deserts. That's how he could tell when the floods would come. Every grain of sand whispered it.

Still, the men liked him. He was nice to be around. He was funny, he had charm, he knew things they didn't know. It made sense to them that he must be searching for something. Guesses were made as to what, but he kept returning to the same places, traveling similar routes. Eventually, they suggested that he might be searching for a person.

She came with the early autumn winds, descending toward the tribe from the top of the canyon. She remembered nothing, and didn't know where she was going. She walked into their cave by mistake, not knowing that they would be there.

The men caught her before she fell unconscious and the women carried her in. They helped her out of the tough fabrics she wore and cleaned the wounds on her feet. Twice, she woke up and looked around her, examining them without fear or malice. Her eyes were bright and her skin was far darker than theirs.

They named her Senya, or perhaps it was something one of the children had said to her. Anyway, it caught. She would answer to it, though she didn't understand a word they spoke. They showed her what they wanted of her, demonstrating with their hands, and she understood most of the time. She didn't try to reply. At night, they would hear her mumble in her sleep in a language they hadn't heard before.

She came from another world. There was no doubt about it. She looked like someone who had seen things they could only dream of. Her eyes would sometimes focus on something far, as if a distant memory came to her, that she couldn't share with them. They loved her silence. It fit with their desert ways.

Asim met her when she was climbing down from the caves to the water pools. She wore the rough clothes she had arrived with and her face showed clear under a cowl. From a distance, he watched her intently with his eagle eyes. She seemed to walk with no real purpose, looking about her like a traveler would. She didn't walk or move like the desert people.

He was surprised when she turned to him and smiled. He half expected her to run, being as he was a stranger to her, but she held out her hand and looked at him, with the confidence of a person who had experienced the world. He felt himself drawn to her, absorbed in her gaze. He wondered at her dark skin, darker than his or all the desert people he knew. He asked her for her name.

For a moment, she looked at him, puzzled.

He pointed toward himself and said, "Asim."

Then she giggled, half to herself, and perhaps only to herself, because she wasn't looking straight at him when she finally said, "Senya."

It was the first time he tried to teach another person how to speak. Some had done a better job with parrots than he did with her, but he managed and the tribe women did the rest to help her talk. It was hard. She kept searching for names of things they didn't have.

"I see a city buried in the rock," was her first clear sentence. She said it to him when they sat together looking at the sunset over the caves. The floods were soon to come, he knew. The air was colder and sometimes drops would come down from the sky. He could tell when the rains were going to be heavy. It was his gift.

He tried to explain to her that he would soon leave. The tribes, too, would have to move to escape the water.

It was then that she said it, looking at him with her soft gaze, unconcerned: "I see a city buried in the rock."

She hadn't meant what she said. The city was not buried in the rock. People had created it. There was no word for that in the tribe's language, but he understood. He had stumbled upon ruins of places on his travels, and he'd often wonder at the people who had once been there.

And he had seen that city in his dreams. A place with man-made dwellings, in the rocks. Then, he would see warriors riding toward it on large animals, that weren't camels. And these warriors had colorless skin and carried strange weapons. In his dreams, there was a whisper of the city's name, a word he could not pronounce, but could not forget. She said it now.

"How far is your city?" he asked her one day, when they were on the move, walking with the tribe, traveling west before the floods would come.

"Very far," she said. "Farther than the sun."

She meant farther than the place the sun disappears at the day's end, but he understood. "Can we walk there?"

"I don't know. It's up to the spirit man." She looked past him when she said it, and he realized her memory opened up for a moment and she saw somebody, a clear image. She walked away from the tribe's people and took a stick in her hand. She drew a face in the sand and an arrow pointing north. Then she turned to Asim and looked at him with expectation.

"I don't understand."

She added lines and mountains.

“Here.” She pointed at her map. “The spirit man.”

~

The witch doctor sat outside his hut. It was still early for visitors. They usually came after the floods began. He didn't expect to see them yet, and so he hardly noticed the two travelers until they reached him.

The woman was the first to talk. She introduced herself and the man in words he couldn't understand and then suddenly switched to his own language.

“I'm searching for the path to Ankalah.”

He looked into her bright eyes when she spoke and knew he had seen them before in a dream.

“The path that leads to the city is blocked at several points by the rumbles of last year. If you are strong, you will still be able to make it. It starts over that hill.” He pointed, and she turned. The man looked at him, not understanding a word he said. He wasn't in the dream; only she was. The witch doctor was not used to meeting people he hadn't dreamed of, but the spirit of the man was that of a butterfly and was too light to appear in a dream.

They turned to leave, and he caught her shoulder, turning her around.

“You won't find anything there. Ankalah was destroyed. It was destroyed long before you were born.”

“I was born in Ankalah.”

“That cannot be.”

“I was born there, after the city was destroyed.”

~

They reached the opening in the canyon walls, and she led the way, knowing every step. He followed.

“How did you live here, all alone?”

“I didn't live here. I was born here, and then the colorless people took me away.”

“Where?”

“I don't know. I don't remember. All I remember is Ankalah.”

The ruins remained as they had stood after the battles. Senya had never seen them any other way, and the old walls that survived provided some shelter from the winds and rain.

Asim was sorry they didn't ask the tribe to come with them, but they wouldn't have listened anyway and he had no real power among them. That was why they liked him so much.

The floods that came were the worst he had seen. The water poured into the canyons, destroying the caves. High in the mountains, Ankalah survived.

In the spring, they had a daughter. She had Senya's skin and his eyes. They walked with her out of Ankalah and searched for the survivors of the tribe.

A moment before Ankalah disappeared from view, Senya turned and took out a knife. She wrote a few sentences in the rock, in the language he heard her speak to the witch doctor.

Years later, he would return to this place, with his daughter and the witch doctor. Senya would be dead by then and the witch doctor would translate her written words.

“The world is nothing but what you know of it. You know the deserts and Ankalah, and that is enough for you. Someday, the colorless people will come and take it away.”

Thank you for reading. For more about Reut Barak’s books, you can visit her website: www.reutbarak.com. To learn about her Evans Witches series: www.evanswitches.com