

*Spirits of Kita-mura*  
Scott Walker

*a short story set in the world of Runes of Gallidon*

Sora surveyed her small sleeping room, and - seeing that nothing was missing or had been moved in the middle of the night – decided it might be a good day.

A few feet away, her sister, Aneko, continued snoring. Their sleeping room sliding door was still closed, and there were no sounds of cursing or falling from the rest of the house. Yes, it might be a good day, indeed. Sora offered silent thanks to Na'naat, changed into her day clothes and made her way down the small hallway to the large receiving room at the front of her home. The receiving room held both a sitting area and the kitchen, and, as Sora found, this morning it happened to hold her father as well. Oku sat on a small, round cushion at the head of a large, low table. A stack of papers, an inkwell, and a few brushes covered the lacquered surface in front of him. Oku was sipping tea and reading a scroll, his robes hiding. Sora saw no empty sake bottles to be found.

Sora noted Oku's dark cheeks and chin, forgave him for not shaving, praised him silently for at least having a warm breakfast ready.

*Perhaps this would be a good day, after all.*

"There's some pickles and rice and soup if you're hungry." Oku never looked up.

"Thank you, father."

Sora could see the embers from a small fire in the recessed cooking pit across the room. Above the embers, a black pot hung suspended from a chain, and the table next to the fire had various ceramic pots and wooden boxes on it. From the smell alone, Sora figured the fire was keeping some miso soup warm, and that was a lot more appealing this morning than cold pickled vegetables, even with the summer heat.

Sora made a small breakfast - the faster she ate, the sooner she could leave - and sat down at the table as far from Oku as she dared. She managed to finish and was cleaning up when her father spoke again.

"You were talking in your sleep again."

"I'm sorry to have woken you, father."

"Nightmares again?"

Sora nodded, hoped Oku would not pursue the matter. He didn't.

Oku rocked himself into an upright position. "I'm going to visit Tafari and Lisha. Let's go."

"Yes, father."

Sora saw several people moving about the village, but only a few stopped to acknowledge Oku. To those, Oku grunted a word or two of acknowledgement. A few traded small talk about the overcast weather and if it might rain today and wouldn't it be a shame if the planting preparations were spoiled by rain and good morning, Oku, it's good to see you.

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Sora caught sight of Shinju, offered her a wave and a smile. Shinju returned neither, pretended not to see her.

When they reached Tafari and Lisha's house, Oku knocked loudly on an outer post supporting a covered entrance to the house. Presently, a man much older than Oku slid open the door. He offered a nod and a small smile to Oku, but his smile widened when he saw Sora. From across the covered entrance, he motioned for them to enter.

"Please, come in out of the sun!"

Oku heaved his body up the small steps and through the door. "Did I wake you, Tafari?"

Tafari's head swiveled back and forth. "No, no, I have been bonding early this morning. My apologies for not getting to the door sooner."

Tafari's sitting room was similar to Oku's, with a recessed cooking pit and a low table. A portable wall of cloth and bamboo was set up between the sitting area and the kitchen. Oku and Sora seated themselves at the table while Tafari moved the portable wall to a corner of the room and worked at getting a fire started.

Oku sat down at the table, gestured for Sora to sit next to him. "Good news on the bonding, I hope."

"I was so busy I forgot to start the tea this morning. Please forgive my forgetfulness while I prepare the pot."

"Lisha's in the fields today?" Oku asked.

"Yes, she offered to help with transplanting the seedlings."

Oku nodded. "That's very generous of her. I would have expected her to be working with you today."

The first wisps of smoke curled off the twigs and sticks under the cooking pit, disappearing almost as soon as they took shape. Tafari blew softly on the fire, urging it on until the sticks caught, then placed a few pieces of larger wood on the growing fire before turning his attention to the teapot.

"Lisha offers her humble skills to Ishi and this village, however she may be helpful."

Oku ran his finger down the worn edge of the lacquered table. "Yes, she does, as do we all, though to varying degrees, I'm afraid. Happily, you and Lisha have served Kita-mura well for many, many years. It's been almost three decades since you became our spirit bonders, yes?"

Tafari filled the pot with water from a small barrel in the corner of the room and placed it on a hook hanging over the fire. "Yes. I'm honored you find our service satisfactory."

Oku nodded enthusiastically. "More than satisfactory, Tafari. You and Lisha have been a blessing to this village, and your ability to deal with the local spirits has brought us good crops and weather. And on a personal note, I am in your debt for the kindness you have shown Sora. It's been a hardship for her."

"Nariko was a blessing to this village, Oku. Your loss is shared by all of Kita-mura. Besides, any debt that may exist has been repaid many times over with your generous wisdom and leadership. Sora is welcome in our household any time. Lisha in particular enjoys her company."

Oku straightened, adjusted his robes, tugged at his sleeves. “Yes, well, that’s not the purpose of my visit this morning, Tafari. I’m here to see if you’ve made any progress on the spiritual disturbances.”

Tafari sat down across from Oku. “Lisha and I remain devoted to calming the local spirits. I think of nothing else. The current disturbance is unlike anything I’ve been trained for or have seen. The spirit that preys on this village eludes us, refuses to identify itself or acknowledge the bonding. As you know, there are limits to what a spirit bonder can do.”

Oku frowned. “I’m aware of the limits and with how spirit bonding works. I’ve met members of the Kaday family, some of them close relatives of yours. I’ve seen their work. I’ve even met a Greater Ravan before the Destruction.”

Tafari’s cleared his throat. “Ah, well...of course. I didn’t mean to imply your ignorance in these matters. I only meant to point out that this particular spirit does not seem to be responding to the normal bonding requests as practiced by my house. As a bonder, I have tried every approach I know to reach this spirit. So far, I’ve been unsuccessful, something I believe indicates this is not a native spirit. I am coming to the conclusion that a stronger approach may be in order, perhaps one from a Greater House.”

Oku frowned. “There are no longer any houses, Greater or Lower. The empire is gone, along with the nobles.”

“Of course, Oku.”

“Kaday, Ishi, and Vanth have established their own kingdoms. The North Realm and High Hills sit in stagnation, and the Isles...well, who the hell knows what goes through the minds of those water-logged island-frogs. In the Illuminated Peaks, there is Na’naat, there is Ishi, and there is Ishi’s people.”

Tafari nodded.

Having made his point, Oku continued. “Are you suggesting I request help from Kaday?”

“Well, even if I were able to contact the spirit, there’s no guarantee it would heed my requests. Kaday is limited in its ability to command the spirits. Ravan, however, has the ability to communicate and command the spirits and souls.”

Oku held up a hand in protest. “Tafari, Ishi has banned Kaday and Ravan members from traveling unescorted in the Peaks. A request to bring in Ravan would not be well received at all in Korihana, and I seriously doubt it would be granted. Surely, this is simply a matter of you finding the right ritual?”

“Perhaps. I mention it only to help speed the resolution of this issue. I did not mean to question your wisdom, Oku.”

Oku sighed, his eyes sliding to Sora. “Tafari, something must be done, and soon. Things are worsening, and the planting is nearing. We must be assured of a good harvest, and that begins with making the spirits happy.”

Oku rose, made his way to the door. “Please report to me before sunfall.”

Sora stood but remained by the table. “Father, may I stay?”

Oku stopped, turned back. “Some other time.”

From Tafari’s porch, wind chimes tinkled.

Tafari cleared his throat. “Actually, Sora could be of a great help today. I have some preparations for a ritual later tonight, and Sora has proven very useful to me and Lisha.”

Oku looked at Tafari for several seconds, then to Sora, then back to Tafari. “Be home for dinner, Sora, then you can return to assist with the ritual.”



Sora helped Tafari for an hour before he shooed her out of his house.

“It’s best if you spent some time with others your own age. Besides, you’ve helped with everything you can. The rest falls to me.”

Tafari held firm in the face of Sora’s protests, and she eventually complied. Wandering through the village, Sora looked for Akio, but couldn’t find him. She was about to head down to the fields when she heard Hana calling for her.

“Sora! Hey, I’m glad I caught you. I’ve got something I need to talk to you about. Want to go down to the Lands? My dad said I didn’t have to help with the planting today.”

“I bet it was more like, ‘why don’t you keep Sora away from the planting?’”

Hana smiled. “Actually, he said, ‘do whatever you want, but don’t let her near the planting.’”

Sora glanced down the slope, watched the villagers working in the terraced fields cut into the side of the mountain. The seedlings were almost ready to be moved to the muddy fields that had been flooded in preparation for the planting. “I’m tempted to run through the seedlings in my bare feet just to see the look on his face.”

“That would be a sight, but then we’ll both be in it for sure. Come on, forget about all that. If we hurry, we can explore the ruins and still make it back before dinner.”

Hana held up a small bag. “Besides, I already have lunch for us.”

The young women made their way down the mountain, the well-worn path leading them to within eyesight of Empty Lands border. The ruins were barely noticeable from a distance. A few dozen partially-buried boulders, barely poking out of the ground, but squared and cut, their placement anything but random. Sora believed they were part of a magnificent castle from a thousand years ago, and she and Hana spent many hours digging around the stones. They once found a silver Imperial, which was more than enough to lure them back repeatedly in hopes for more, despite Tafari and Lisha’s warnings. The women had yet to see anything to support the rumors of cursed souls or evil beasts.

Hana sat down on a boulder, looking out into the Empty Lands. The flat, moorish scrub fields of the Empty Lands were a perfect counterpoint to the lush, green mountains of the Illuminated Peaks, and while Imperial Law had forbidden anyone from venturing into the Empty Lands, there was very little reason for anyone to break that law. Crops refused to grow in the Empty Lands, and rumors had

long filled it with ghosts, monsters, and creatures of all manner of evil.

“Have you helped with a ritual lately?”

Sora shook her head. “Not in a few days, but I’m going to help them tonight.”

“I wish my father would let me help. He says we’re really lucky the spirit masters moved here, but lately he’s been saying they’re losing their power. Something to do with the Destruction.”

“That’s not true.”

Hana shrugged. “His words, not mine. But he’s not the only one in Kita-mura who thinks that. And the way the rest of the village talks...”

“What do you mean?”

Hana looked back over her shoulder at the mountain range. “Just that a lot of people are worried Oku isn’t fit to be village head and that you...that you’re...”

“The curse of Kita-mura?”

Hana sighed. “Something like that.”

Nodding, Sora said, “Maybe I am.”

Hana turned back to her friend. “No, you’re not. There’s nothing wrong with you. Akio finds you well enough.”

“He’s just a boy in love. He’d believe I could walk on water if I told him that.”

Hana shook her head. “Just because he’s in love doesn’t mean he’s blind. I don’t think you’re cursed. Akio doesn’t think you’re cursed. Tafari and Lisha certainly don’t. It’s important you believe this. Especially because of what my father...Sora, I can’t believe this is happening...my dad is calling for a village meeting tomorrow. He’s going to ask that you be banished from the village.”

“What...why? No, wait...I mean, he can’t do that! Only my father can banish someone.”

“If my father convinces enough people, the village could take the matter to Korihana and present their case to the administrator. Given what’s happened...”

Sora played out the village meeting in her head. She saw Riku stirring the rest of the village into ousting Oku. Heard Akio and Hana being shouted down by Riku, Hinata and Shinju. Listened as the village voted to take the matter to the local administrator.

*So much for this being a good day.*

A spotlight of sunshine fell though the clouds, putting the two women in a bright island.



Hana and Sora spent the rest of their time in relative silence, each in their own thoughts. They wandered around the ruins before making their way back to Kita-mura, and it was after dinner before they stepped into the village.

*The Great Drift, part 10*

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Sora alternated between worrying about the village meeting and whether Oku would change his mind or forget that he had agreed to let her help with the ritual. Her plans to warn Oku of the impending village meeting fell apart when she found Oku passed out in the sitting room, his clothes stained with food and wet from spilled sake. Previous attempts to assist Oku had taught Sora to let him fall asleep in that condition. Sora ate what leftovers she could, figured she could get a proper meal later.

Pulling the sliding door to her sleeping room aside as quietly as possible, Sora saw Aneko was already in bed. Sora checked her room, found her hairbrush had been moved to her pillow. She put it back in the wooden box that held her handful of personal possessions. Aneko rolled over, sat up.

“I’m sorry, Aneko. I tried to be quiet.”

“It’s all right. I’m awake. Where were you today?”

“With Hana.”

“Down in the Lands, again? It’s dangerous out there, haven’t you figured that out yet?”

Sora ignored her, found the hairpin she was looking for and used it to pull her long dark hair back. “How is the planting coming along?”

Aneko examined her hands, wrinkled her nose at the dirt she never fully managed to scrub out from under her fingernails. “It’s awful. My hands still smell like muddy water.”

“I know it’s hard work, but I hope it goes well. I wish I could help.”

“No, you don’t. Besides, if Riku catches you any where near the planting, he’s going to run you off, daughter of a village head or not. He’s told everyone to keep an eye out for you.”

“Yeah, I heard. He doesn’t have the right. He’s not the village head. He isn’t even in charge of the planting.”

“Perhaps. But he’s starting to convince a few that he’s right.”

“What do you think, Aneko?”

The silence opened up enough to give Sora her answer.

“I think you should stay away from the planting. In fact, I think you should stay inside as much as possible.”

“You think I’m cursed, don’t you?” Sora’s voice was soft, without a trace of judgment.

Aneko looked away. “It’s not for me to say. I’m not a spirit master.”

“No, you’re my sister. I would hope you wouldn’t need a spirit master to tell you whether I’m cursed.”

Turning back to Sora, Aneko’s eyes met her younger sister’s with an emptiness that surprised Sora as much as the words she heard next.

“Yes, I think you’re cursed. I think you’re the reason mother is dead, and I think it’s clear you’re the reason why the spirits are causing so much trouble. Things were fine until you started wandering off into the Empty Lands to do whatever it is you do there. I think you brought back something that’s haunting Kita-mura.”



## *The Great Drift, part 10*

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A loud crack startled both women, causing them to look up at the ceiling. The wooden frames of the house popped again. Sora felt it through the floor.

“You’re a danger to us, Sora, you’re a danger as long as you stay in Kita-mura.”

Sora stood, left without saying a word. She managed to hold back her tears until she fell into Lisha’s open arms.



Tafari lit the last candle, nodded to Lisha. Despite the darkness outside, there was enough light in the ritual room for Sora to read the scrolls spread out in front of her.

Lisha nodded to Sora, who handed her a small metal bell and a striking stick. Tafari and Lisha sat in the center of an intricate design painted carefully on the floor of the ritual room. Sora sat outside the design, handing them various objects when requested. She took care not to step on or over the design, having received numerous and strong warnings from the spirit bonders about the dangers of doing so.

“Spirits aren’t people, Sora. They predate Gallidon, and some say they existed before Na’naat. Communicating with spirits is often difficult. They don’t think like we do, provided they even think at all. In many ways, they are both more primitive than us and also far beyond our comprehension. These wards on the floor protect us when we bond with spirits, but they also create a space where we can communicate with them. Intruding on that space during a ritual can be deadly.”

Lisha repeated this warning or a variation of it every time they began a ritual where Sora was assisting. Sora nodded, paid attention, and tried to hide her annoyance.

Lisha struck the tiny bell five times, its clear rings filling the room. In a low voice, Tafari began to chant. The steady drone of his voice was broken only by his need to inhale. After a few minutes, Sora felt the expected chills on her arms and the pressure at her chest. A spirit - maybe more than one - was nearby, possibly already bonding with Tafari and Lisha.

Tafari’s eyes were closed, but while Lisha’s were open, they were unfocused. Sora remained as still and quiet as she could. For several more minutes, the only sound Sora heard was Tafari’s chanting. Then Lisha began to speak.

“By the will of Na’naat and in the name of Gallidon, I bind you, spirit, and command you to share your name.”

Whatever Lisha heard, it was for her and her alone. Sora heard nothing but Tafari’s chanting.

“You are now bound, spirit, until I release you. Please tell me what you know of the disturbances in Kita-mura.”

More minutes passed, and Sora struggled to ignore the itch on her neck and the growing pain in her knees. She put her attention to Tafari’s chanting instead, tried to lose herself in its rhythm.

Sora felt a weight over her entire body. She gasped, and the weight lifted. She looked at Lisha and found the woman’s eyes on her.

Lisha looked confused. “The child? How can she...?”

*The Great Drift, part 10*

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A chill blew across Sora's face, and she shivered. Sora felt cold except for the charm on her necklace, which her robes held tight against her chest. The charm grew hot, and Sora was about to reach inside the folds of her clothes to pull it away from her skin when Lisha spoke again.

"Na'naat's mercy, she was with child?" A pause, then, "And Oku's hand delivered it? I see. Thank you for your assistance. You are released."

That signaled the end of the bonding. Tafari's voice trailed off, and he opened his eyes. He and Lisha rose to their feet, stepped outside the design. Sora's charm no longer radiated heat, and she knew the spirit had departed.

"What happened?" Sora looked from one bonder to the other.

Tafari moved to the receiving room of their house. "It's not right. It can't be right."

Sora turned to Lisha. "What? What is it?"

Three of the candles in the room went out by themselves.

Lisha put her arm around Sora's shoulder, and steered her out of the ritual room. "Something that troubles my heart but also gives it hope. Regardless, none of it's fit to share in here, child. Come into the sitting room with me. I want to talk about your mother."

When Lisha was finished speaking, Sora found herself smiling through tears.

*Yes, today turned out to be a very good day, indeed.*



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