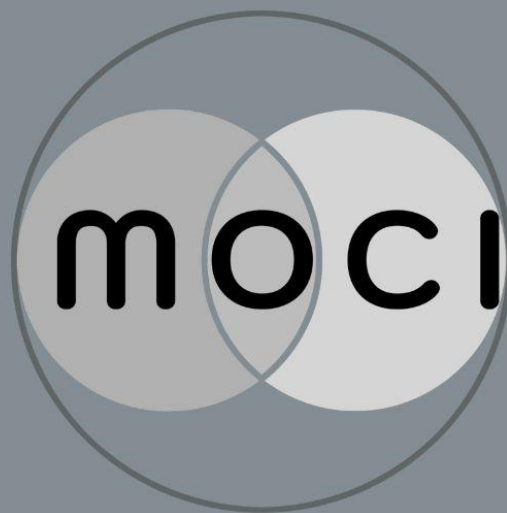


Sitara and the Lion



By James Mahu | E3 : S2

MOCI.life

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Sitara and the Lion

E3 : S2

The pale light, as they came closer, became the dynamics of a campfire, throwing its sparks and light in every direction the eye could see. If flames could dance, these were such flames — almost the same height as a human.

The man turned around to face his companions. They were still a hundred yards away. "I will go and inform them that we brought a guest. I don't want any surprises. Our people do not see outsiders here..." he paused, "...*ever*. Better to inform them and make sure they know why you are here."

"I never meant to intrude," the visitor replied, bowing slightly.

"They will understand," the man said. "It's just protocol. I'll give you a signal when you can approach."

"These are your people, right?" the visitor whispered to her driver-companion.

"They are relatives. Their ancestors were ours. But a hundred years ago we drifted apart, mostly because our territories went in opposite directions and as we each expanded we became more isolated. We'd have an occasional festival that would unite us, but a few times a year isn't enough to keep us...fully trusting."

"Hmm..." the visitor mumbled. "And Sitara, your beloved teacher, is part of this tribe, not yours, technically speaking?" Her words were spoken more as a statement than a question. "Why did you need to expand your territories?"

"Wood, actually. We needed to get into the highlands and gather wood for our fires, for cooking and warmth."

"Hmm..."

They watched as the man approached the encampment, and two men came out carrying rifles. They were too far away to hear what their conversation was, but the tone could only be described as: perfunctory. There were no friendly laughs.

A moment later, the man turned and came back, in a slow gallop with his camel. As he came close enough he pulled up and stopped. "They want to meet you."

"So, do we all go together?" the visitor asked.

"No." He shook his head. "They want to meet you, and only you."

"For what reason?"

"They're very protective of their teacher. They don't like strangers even knowing that Sitara exists. It's a secret to them. To us...not so much." He smiled, and slid off his camel, commanding it to kneel. "You can take mine."

"I've never driven a camel by myself."

"Amber knows the way. All you have to do is sit...*quietly*. She'll do the rest."

"Yes, I understand, and I'm not the least bit afraid, I'm only telling you so you know my level of experience is zero."

"I assumed as much," the man said, chuckling to himself.

She got off her camel and climbed up Amber's side, and they strode off without another word.

As the visitor got closer, she noticed that there were now three people waiting to receive her. As she got within twenty meters, they stopped chatting among themselves and they stood at attention. They wore different clothes than her companions. Amber came right up to them, and stopped with a slight shrug and soft grunt. The visitor released the reins. One of the men in the reception committee grabbed them, pulling Amber to the ground, allowing the visitor to slide off the camel onto a mixture of rock and hard-packed sand.

A relatively tall, hooded figure stepped forward. "I am Sitara. You have come to meet me?" She swept her arms wide. "Here? Underneath the stars in the deep desert?"

The visitor looked over her shoulder. "At the behest of my new friends, I am *here*."

"They say you are an animal-talker."

"Yes."

"I am, too, but we've captured a mountain lion and he will say nothing to me. Would you be willing to speak with him...at least try?"

The visitor nodded, and Sitara returned a slight bow and thin smile.

"Good, then follow me." Sitara strode away like a person on a mission.

"How did you capture him?" the visitor asked, running to catch up with her.

"He fell into one of our pits, which we then covered with a thick net. He cannot get out, so have no fear."

"Is he safe?"

"The lion?"

The visitor nodded. "Yes."

"As far as I know." Sitara looked surprised at the visitor's question.

They walked for a while silently, as if the two women were in their own worlds, yet trying to find the way into the other's.

"I have never met another animal-talker," Sitara said. "It's good to have that in common, because now we know we can trust one another."

"Why do you feel the lion would not speak with you?"

"Perhaps because he knows we kill lions if they take our food," Sitara replied.

"And did he take your food?"

"I believe we caught him before he could."

The encampment was larger than the visitor had expected. Large tents sprawled in every direction.

"How many of you are there?"

"Here, in this camp? Um, about 120, depending on the season."

"And water and food, where does it come from?"

"In this desert there is ample food and water for our people, but not one more," she bobbed her head for emphasis. "However, if you are indeed an animal-talker we would gladly welcome you."

"You mean stay?"

"As long as you'd like," Sitara said.

"Hmm..."

They kept walking, Sitara out ahead by a meter or so, leading the way to the lion pit. "What do you want me to say to the lion when we get there?"

"Tell him our food is not his food. And if his intention is to eat our food we will have no choice but to kill him."

The visitor stared at her new host with shock. "How can you be an animal-talker and say this?"

"I regard my people as my priority. Lions will have to take care of themselves. I can't do both when food supplies are so tight."

"And what are the lions supposed to eat?"

A growl could be heard in the distance. They were close.

"Rabbits, mice, deer, birds, they have plenty of food. It's just a lot harder to catch than a goat. And other than deer, they don't provide the quality or quantity of meat that a goat provides." Sitara stopped and turned to the visitor. "The goat is a feast. The rabbit...a light breakfast. The energy to catch the rabbit is simply restored with the consumption of the rabbit. Our goats are easy prey and provide a week or two of energy. And that is the difference."

"Hmm..."

There were two men sitting at the pit, rifles in hand, and both stood up as the women got closer. "Tell him to leave our territory or we will shoot him."

"I will do no such thing."

Sitara stopped and turned again, placing her hands on her hips. "Then what do you intend to say?"

"I don't know. I will ask questions, and then I will see what his answers call me to say."

"Yes, well, just remember that it is a mountain lion who can kill a human in mere seconds. And should not be treated as a human being. They are savage killers because survival requires them to be this, and so, we have no choice but to see them as an enemy and competitor. Even if I do not want to kill them, there are a hundred people in my tribe who would prefer us to exterminate them, so we no longer have to worry about our food supply diminishing or our children straying too far from our camp." She paused and then narrowed her eyes at the visitor. "This is not an abstraction to us. Do you understand?"

The visitor nodded. "This is your world and I am merely a guest. You have asked me to help you, and even while I am in your world, when you ask me for my help, I am obliged to follow my own conscience, my own sense of morality. Do *you* understand?"

"Hmm...I understand you are in a quandary," Sitara said, "and you haven't even started to speak with our belligerent lion." She chuckled to herself and walked the short distance to the mouth of the pit.

The pit was covered with a handmade net made of ropes. A few feet down were wooden rods with sharp points angled downward, making a climb up the side of the pit a very perilous, if not fatal, endeavor. On the bottom of the pit, perhaps four meters down, the visitor could see something pacing, but the light was so dim as to make it a vaporous collection of shadows, roiling like an angry cloud.

The visitor looked at Sitara. "I need you and the guards to leave."

"No," Sitara said. "I will stay." She looked at the guards and simply nodded. They walked away.

Sitara sat on the ground, pretending to be an immovable object.

"You are younger than I expected," the visitor said.

"Well, I will take that as a compliment."

"I was speaking to the lion..." the visitor said with a half smile.

"Ah, a sense of humor, I appreciate that. My people are very serious people. They have to be to survive in the desert. Humor is not one of our strengths. So you'll have to forgive me, as I am out of practice."

"I thought you were the teacher, and your people revered you? It sounds like you've had very little influence upon them," the visitor observed.

Sitara began to say something, and then stopped abruptly, as the mountain lion suddenly let loose a vigorous roar. The pit contained most of the volume, but it was still loud enough to affirm that the "shadows" below were both corporeal, powerful, and quite likely angry.

"I will begin," the visitor said. "Please close your eyes and imagine a peaceful solution for all involved. And when I say 'all' I mean just that, *All*."

Sitara looked up at the visitor who remained standing. She closed her eyes and brought her head back down. The visitor went to the far side of the pit, which was about three meters in width, roughly circular, and looked like the pupil of an eye staring up at the sky.

The visitor stooped down and picked up something cream-colored. "What is this?"

Sitara opened her eyes. "A bone of some kind. We find them when we dig the pits. We always leave them outside of the opening — whatever we find."

"It is from a mountain lion."

Sitara smiled. "Ah, you read bones, too..."

The visitor remained quiet for a while. She seemed to be tuning into something while she began to circle the pit, walking very slowly, yet deliberately. "You are a mountain lion in a pit in the middle of the desert. I am a human that is new to the desert. I respect you, very deeply. I would like to consider you a friend, and as your friend, I must tell you that we are in a difficult position. I am here to help on behalf of the people who trapped you."

"Then, you are their pawn," the lion spoke, yet only the visitor could hear him.

"Why did you come here?" the visitor asked.

"These people killed my mate. Right here in this very spot that I am now a prisoner." He looked up. "You are now holding her collar bone," there was a slight tremble in his voice.

The visitor clenched the bone in her hand a little tighter.

"I came to pay my respects to her, not for vengeance and not for food," the lion said, his voice softening from ice to water. "I am not ready to leave this place, and I know my vengeance would only cause my death."

"They fear that you will take their food and they are very possessive of their food."

"That is because they are too many in number."

"No, it is because they are exactly the number they should be. They simply have to be responsible to one another and protect their food and water. They are intelligent beings like you."

"I did not come to steal their food." The lion continued to pace, occasionally looking upwards to catch a glimpse of the visitor.

"When did your mate die?"

"I don't know how to answer that with any precision, perhaps five moons have passed since they killed her."

"And still you mourn?"

"I have time."

The lion finally stopped his pacing and sat down.

"What would you like them to do?" the visitor asked.

"Um, isn't that obvious...let me go."

The visitor turned around. "Can you see my arm? Can you see which way it is pointing?"

The lion moved back until he was touching the back of the pit. "Yes, I can see."

"I am pointing to a place that is about a five-hour walk. There is a lioness who lives on a rock outcropping. She lost her mate as well, though, unlike you, she doesn't know why."

"Hmm..."

"If I let you go, will you go there and then never come to this place again?"

"I will gladly go there."

"...And *never* come to this place again?" the visitor repeated, her tone slightly darker.

"Never is a long time," the lion responded cryptically.

"It is neither short nor long. It is absolute," the visitor said.

"Well, I'm not able to give absolutes, but I will certainly make every effort to avoid this place. It has proven itself to be terrible for both my physical and emotional well being."

The visitor remained silent.

The lion stood up and started pacing again. "So, how do you know there is a lioness five hours away...in that specific direction?"

"I spoke with her the same way I am speaking to you."

"How long ago?"

"About six hours ago."

"Hmm."

"Okay, I will agree with your absolute, but these humans must stay away from the area you mentioned. The agreement must be mutual so we do not have any incidents that could cause trouble. If their shepherds come within my audible range, then the absolute will not be honored. It is a mutual absolute with conditions. And I don't think you can speak for these humans. Correct?"

"What you ask for seems fair. Let me ask one of their leaders. I will be back to you soon."

"I will...wait..." the lion lamented, as he laid down on the floor of the deep and dark pit.

The visitor opened her eyes. She was standing almost opposite Sitara. She cleared her throat. "Sitara?"

Her eyelids flung open into the eyes of the visitor.

"I have negotiated an agreement," the visitor said.

"Excellent. Then tell me, what is it?" Sitara asked.

"The lion will leave and will never come back."

"Leave where?"

"It's a five-hour camel ride in that direction —"

"To the rock outcroppings..." Sitara said.

The visitor nodded.

"We hold those in high esteem."

"Why?"

"It's one of our holy places. There are rock formations there that look human-like. Our people have visited that place since time was created."

"He asked that it be mutual. If he retreats to the rock outcroppings, he believes you should never venture there. In this way, there can be no further incidents"

Sitara let out a long sigh. "I can't speak for my people, but I think those would be unacceptable terms. I'm sorry."

"What would make them acceptable?" the visitor asked.

"They would need to allow us to visit perhaps at certain times, for example, our people can visit during the time of the full moon."

"And what about shepherds?"

"It's not a place to graze a few sheep or goats. We will agree never to use that area for our herds."

The visitor closed her eyes and raised her index finger. "One moment..."

"I'm back," she said to the lion. "That site is a holy site to these people. They will not relinquish their rights to visit that area."

"Then we are at an impasse," the lion said, his voice distant like someone who is hopeless.

"What would allow us to move around the impasse?" the visitor asked quietly.

"Perhaps if they would consolidate their visits to a specific time...like..."

"Lunar cycles?" the visitor interrupted.

"Yes, that could work."

"And no grazing," the lion suddenly added. "Shepherds and their flock must stay outside of our audible range."

"Understood," the visitor nodded. "I'll be right back."

When the visitor opened her eyes, Sitara was by her side, looking down at the lion. "Do we have an agreement? Do I have your word that you will set him free, *now*?"

"He agreed to let us visit during the full moon?"

"Yes."

Sitara let out a sigh that seemed directed at the lion below. "I will."

The visitor closed her eyes. "We have an agreement, my friend. We will set you free, be patient."

"You will set free, now?"

"Yes, but it will take a little time to get you out of that pit. Be patient."

"I will."

The visitor opened her eyes. "Should we call the guards back?"

"It depends on how fast you want him free?"

"As fast as we can."

Sitara immediately fell to the ground and began wrenching one of the sharp rods out of the ground, with great effort. The lion watched from below, knowing exactly what she was doing. The visitor joined her.

"I'll go that way," the visitor said, pointing counter-clockwise.

"Just half will do," Sitara said.

After a few minutes, half of the rods were removed, and the two women stepped back.

"Are you sure he can get out now?"

"You do not know mountain lions like I know them," Sitara chuckled. "He'll get out."

A moment later the lion struggled out of the mouth of the pit, and came to a sitting position, facing the two women who were standing five meters away.

The visitor closed her eyes. "You are free to go," she said to the lion. She pointed again in the direction of the outcrops.

"Before I leave, I want to speak with the other human. They're in charge, correct?"

"Yes," the visitor nodded. "She is an animal-talker, you can talk with her directly."

"No, I just want to see her directly acknowledge our agreement. Ask her one simple question and then I want to see either a nod in agreement or a shaking of their head in disagreement. Do you understand?"

"I do. What is your question?"

"Do you believe in free will for all?"

"It is a good question, I will ask her."

The visitor opened her eyes, and turned to Sitara. "He has asked one question, to which he wants you to either nod 'yes', or shake your head 'no'."

"Okay, what is his question?" Sitara asked.

"Do you believe in free will for all?"

The lion watched as Sitara's face crinkled slightly, deep in thought, he presumed. And then, very slowly, her head began to sway up and down, getting a little faster with each cycle. A smile spread across her face, accompanied with a single tear, as she stared into the

lion's eyes. And with that, the lion turned and walked in the direction of his new home and new mate.

Sitara began to weep. The visitor put her arm around her. "Why are you crying?"

"He knows I had his mate killed."

"Why would you have done that?" the visitor asked.

"She attacked one of our shepherd's goats...so we built this pit to capture her. But once she was captured my people demanded the lioness should be killed, because she would only bring more mountain lions into our territory."

"And what was your plan in capturing her?" the visitor asked.

"I was planning to starve her into submission, coax her with food into a cage, and then have a small caravan transport her to a faraway place where we would never cross paths again. I swear, that was all I had planned, but my people insisted that it was too much trouble for a mountain lion who was intent on stealing our food."

Sitara paused to wipe her tears away. "I might have been able to convince them to release her, but I didn't resist. I felt afraid that I would distance myself from them if I tried. So, I foolishly gave into them, and I have felt guilt every day since."

"How do you know that he knows?"

"Because he refused to talk with me."

"I thought you couldn't hear him or he couldn't hear you?"

"He heard me, he just refused to speak with me."

"He told you this?" the visitor asked with new intensity. "That he refused to speak with you?"

Sitara nodded. "He asked me right away, and I told him the story I just told you."

The visitor stepped back and looked into Sitara's face. They were perhaps a hundred meters from the edges of the encampment. They were two women who stood beneath a blackness punctuated with unfathomably distant light, yet they could see one another perfectly fine.

"Are you really sad, or is your guilt seeking its departure?"

Sitara looked up, staring into the visitor's eyes. "You do not know me well enough to ask such questions."

"It is not whether I know you well enough, it is whether you wish to know me well enough that you cannot resist my questions."

"The man who introduced you to me," Sitara said, "you have only known him for a few hours, and yet he thought you were someone I should meet. That man has been my student for 26 years. I trust him. And therefore I trust you. Yet still, a few hours, does not mean I trust you with such questions and their accompanying answers."

"And why is that?"

"Because you are one of those people who remove the hundred masks."

"Hundred masks?"

"Ah, you have not heard of this story..." Sitara chuckled to herself, yet the visitor could hear.

"If it's not too long a story, perhaps you could share it with me..." The visitor bobbed her head and sat down. "Please..," she said, looking up at Sitara.

She sat down next to her. The two of them were both facing the mouth of the pit, which now seemed to be empty and forlorn, but a short time ago a mountain lion climbed out, and that magnificent presence somehow managed to remain.

"The hundred masks," Sitara began, "is a story about a prince who was destined to be king. The prince was a kind soul. He was powerful, yet forgiving. Intelligent, yet open minded. Strong, yet vulnerable. All of the qualities you would want in a king...or anyone, really." She paused and glanced at the visitor, who had closed her eyes, as if listening was her only purpose.

"I am listening," the visitor announced, feeling Sitara's stare.

"The prince was too good of a man to be king. They did not, after all, live in a utopia. There were other nations driven by ambition to wield power over all, and some of those nations had borders with the land of the prince.

"As the prince's father grew weaker and weaker with age, disease finally took him to his grave. One of his father's directives before he died was that the prince seek the advice of his father's wisest associate, The Counselor. The Counselor was the power behind the throne, and everyone within the Royal Court was well aware of it, even the servants.

"The Counselor could see that war was building, and he quickly ingratiated himself to the prince. He told the prince that he should meet with the king's of his neighboring rivals, and reveal that he would be the next king in a matter of months, if not weeks. That he was at least as shrewd and as cunning as they were, but he had more powerful resources, technologies, and friends in high places.

"In order for the prince to carry this out, the Counselor thought that the prince should wear a mask as he made his rounds to the neighboring territories. The counselor explained to the prince that his appearance revealed that he was too kind and gentle. These neighboring kings would see his weakness and wait for his father's death, and then attack. So, the Counselor convinced the prince to wear a mask. The mask also served the purpose that the prince would not be able to eat or drink while a guest of a royal family. Therefore, there could be no poisoning.

"So, the prince wore the Counselor's masks," Sitara continued. "Each time he met with someone he would wear a different mask. There was a royal mask maker who worked on behalf of the Counselor. And the Counselor would instruct the mask maker what kind of

a facial expression he wanted for a particular mask. There were subtle distinctions, like one mask would hold a look of *disdain*, and the very next mask might hold a look of *foreboding* or *wanderlust*.

"When the prince was finally crowned as the king, he wore a new mask, specifically designed for his coronation. And the words that the Counselor gave to the mask maker were: *concealed contempt*. The new king was killed by a coup, only three days after he was crowned. Naturally, because the prince had no siblings, the Counselor was asked to become the new king. And it was the counselor who, before all of his people, smashed the mask of concealed contempt, and swore that he would never wear a mask, as their new king. The people rejoiced."

Sitara paused for a long time, listening to the sounds of her encampment in the far distance. At one point, she thought she even heard the mountain lion roar in the pristine silence of that magnetic direction he walked.

"It is a good story," the visitor finally said, as she opened her eyes. "Though I fail to understand how I can be seen as the Counselor."

"It's a story that has been told for centuries among my people, for such a long time that no one tells the story any more except to children. And because of this, it has become, at least among adults, more of a shorthand phrase for someone who removes the masks of the outer self. Usually this process is reserved for only our closest friends, and sometimes for no one at all."

"And I am neither of those..." the visitor offered. Her words held an energy that was so subtle in their meaning that even Sitara, who could sense it, could not define it.

"You wept," the visitor said, turning to face Sitara. "I took this as an invitation. In my culture, when someone weeps openly, it is often a call to remove a mask. To move into intimacy...sometimes, even with a stranger, if the circumstances feel right."

Sitara took a quick glance at the visitor and then turned to face the stars. "I understand. You are right. I sense this is something you enjoy frequently." Sitara smiled.

"Being right?"

Sitara nodded, "Yes."

"I look at everything as opinions, and only opinions. Anything connected with words is an opinion, and nothing more. Opinions are neither right or wrong. They are indeterminate. Only facts can be right or wrong."

"Then what is a fact?" Sitara asked.

"It is overwhelming logic."

"Give me an example..."

"It is overwhelming logic to assume we are alive. That we have consciousness."

"Okay, what else?"

"That is it," the visitor said, standing to her feet. "I need to return to my hosts. They're probably wondering where I am."

"Isn't it a fact that you are here with me, a few meters from the lion pit? Isn't that a fact?" Sitara asked, as if she wasn't ready to leave their conversation in search of her hosts.

"It is an opinion," the visitor said.

"But our consciousness is informing us of this fact, and if consciousness is a fact, then how could this not also — if only by association — be a fact?"

The visitor sighed as she scanned the sky. "Do you see that star?" The visitor pointed to the North Star.

"The bright one?"

"Yes," the visitor said.

"It is our navigator in the clear darkness," Sitara said. "All of us know it well."

Sitara stood up and stretched for a moment.

The visitor paused, waiting for Sitara's attention to be gathered again. "Then you know its light helps us to navigate our world when the sun is gone. Yet, I can just as easily follow its light back to that star, as I can use it to find my way here. I am not here with you. I am...everywhere I choose to be. There is no fact in my positional whereabouts from one moment to the next. Everything in this world is a matter of appearances just like your story of the masks.

"I am not this body," the visitor continued, pointing to herself. "You could say that my human body is here, with your human body, and these bodies happen to be near an empty lion pit. That's as much of a fact as you can make of it. But no one speaks like this, and for good reason. It is impractical. Opinions are much easier to express, and that is their functional beauty.

"I could be in jail, but it is not a fact that I am in jail. It is an opinion. And this is because we cannot speak for the appearances of another's reality. Only our own reality, and even then, we must know that our understanding is limited to appearances, hopes, dreams, beliefs, desires, needs, and feelings as understood through human senses that are unique to us. Our humanness has never existed before and it will never exist again, and you know that, if you know anything. *That*, by association to our consciousness, is a fact."

There was a long pause and Sitara spoke first in a soft, whimsical voice. "Just a little while ago I thought I heard the lion roar in the distance..."

"His life is about to change —"

"Yes, yes, yes, that's it!" Sitara interrupted. "You're a *Changer*."

"A what?"

"A Changer. They're very rare. They're people who change spacetime. In our legends we had one of those whose name was Lasonia. She lived a long time ago, but she was our

Changer. Changers are philosophers of nature. That's what you are. You change the spacetime in which you live, and this means that anyone who comes into your orbit, they are changed. They follow a new trajectory."

"Everyone does that," the visitor said nonchalantly. "By that definition, everyone is a Changer."

Sitara shook her head. "No, they don't. Changers are not just changing things, they're reorienting things so they can be more themselves — that thing underneath all of the masks. They aren't changing things to make them different or to conform to anything. They're changing things for a single individual to be themselves again and again and again. and that's the irony of the title: *Changers*."

"No one really knows what another should do to become more of their inmost self, what I call the Sovereign," the visitor replied.

"Do you really think it would have been better for the lion to starve in that pit and die alone? What you did was to change the trajectory of that lion's life in spacetime, in such a way that the lion can be himself, more fully."

The visitor shrugged. "Your term for a Changer puts a name on someone who simply brings their imagination and intuition to all they meet, who operates with their mind and heart in partnership. Everything else is just words, labels, boxes, measurements to satisfy the pink matter of our brains. In that definition, I am correctly called a Changer, but I shall refute the use of the name at every turn, should you use it in the future in relation to me." The visitor bobbed her head for emphasis. "You understand?"

Sitara turned and began to walk away. "We should find your friends, lest they be worried about you."

The visitor quickly caught up with Sitara, walking side-by-side.

Sitara glanced at the visitor. "I noticed all this time you have held that collarbone. Why?"

The visitor handed it to Sitara. "It is a gift."

Sitara hesitated to take it. "For what?"

"To remember."

"What if I don't want to remember?"

"Then bury it in the sand." The visitor came to an abrupt stop, and held out the lioness' collarbone for Sitara to take.

"This is *your* gift?" Sitara asked, her arms remaining at her side.

The visitor shook her head. "No. The lion asked me to give it to you. It is *his* gift."

Sitara shook her head, staring at the ground. Then slowly, she looked up at the night sky. When she did, she took in a deep breath, and slowly released it, parsing it carefully between her lips. She took the collarbone with a smile. "I may do both."

“Both?”

“I may hold it for a while as a memory, and then, when that memory no longer haunts me, I’ll return it to the desert sands.”

The two friends walked together.

“I like you,” Sitara suddenly remarked. “I hope you will stay as long as you can. I will personally see to your comfort and care.”

The visitor suddenly stopped and held Sitara’s shoulder, who also stopped in mid-stride. “Did you hear that?” The visitor looked in the direction that the lion had gone. They were both silent for about five seconds. “I told him to roar one final time.” The visitor winked.

Somewhere from the dark depths of the desert, beneath a jeweled sky, a mighty roar came to their ears like the soft light of a giant star on the other side of a galaxy.

