

*but you start again as if you had wings.*

The Minister of Culture is tired. He has been traveling for ten days now, ten days of standing and sitting and smiling and sweating as he visits one dusty, hot village after the other.

He liked it so much better when he was Undersecretary to the Minister of Culture, when his job was to fill out forms and send them along, to make sure the Minister had his schedule and knew when he would be traveling.

He was always traveling.

He had envied the Minister for being invited to one of Keran Berj's dinners, though. He had never been, of course, but heard the food was like something out of a dream.

He has been to one of those dinners now, and the food is wonderful, better than a dream because it is real. But there was and is a price to pay for being at Keran Berj's table. For being one of his Ministers.

The last Minister of Culture paid with his life. Keran Berj had turned to him after the hanging and said, "I know you'll do a better job. You look like a good man."

The Minister's wife used to say that. She does not anymore, but then he cannot blame her. She does not like being followed, although she knows well enough not to say anything about that. She simply goes and waits in lines like she always has, spends her days gathering what she can, and ignores the presents of food that arrive from time to time.

The Minister opens them, as he must, and eats the food in the office where everyone can see. He smacks his lips and smiles even as his stomach churns.

He has not been a good man for a long time.

This village is the same as all the others, small and primitive. Last night he slept on a pile of rugs by an open window and longed for his bed, for the small sounds his wife makes when she is sleeping. Sometimes he will touch her hair, the only comfort he dares allow himself to have. Tonight he fears he will be kept awake by villagers eager to tell him how Keran Berj has made their lives better.

He will listen and wonder if he sounds like them when he talks about his own life.

He will know he does.

But for now he just has to make his speech. The reading of the missives is almost finished, and the Minister hopes the Festival of Glorious Freedom has not yet been changed to something else. It is hard to get messages from his office so far from the City, and he worries he will miss something.

He knows the price he will pay if he does.

There, the missives are done, and now the request for money is being read. The Minister wonders what Keran Berj will do with his ice palace when it is built. He suspects it will sit there in the desert, unseen and glorious-looking.

The Minister had a daughter, once. She was twelve when she whispered to a friend that if one of Keran Berj's statues was melted down, she was sure there would be enough gold for every girl in the City to have at least two pairs of earrings all her own.

He and his wife removed every picture they had of her as soon as she was arrested. They do not speak of her.

On the anniversary of her death, they make sure they are seen out and about together, smiling and carefree.

His wife will not cry. She is afraid someone will hear.

The Minister does cry, though. Every year, after the long day that marks the moment when his daughter's life ended, he cries silently before he pretends to fall asleep, sobs that don't even shake the bed, that his wife closes her eyes and heart to.

And now it is finally time for his speech. He stands up slowly. The stage seems so far away, and the steps so very high. He makes it up them carefully, sweating and tired. The people are looking at him as they always do, and as he starts to clear his throat to begin, three little girls come on stage, their arms full of flowers.

They are so young and so happy to be on stage, to be the center of attention. He smiles at the sight of their happy innocence, and hope it never changes for them, that these girls stay here, in this hot and dusty village, and live long, dull, and safe lives.

One of the little girls waves at her parents, and the flowers in her arms dip, trembling.

People clap, and the Minister wishes he didn't have to speak at all. He wishes that this village's one moment of happiness could be all that is needed. That he could just leave and go home.

But of course that can't happen. The applause changes, turns more polite, turns toward him, and now everyone is looking at him, everyone is waiting for him to speak. Everyone is waiting to hear what Keran Berj wants them to do.

I'm sorry.

That's what he wants to say.

He will never say that, though. He watched his daughter die. He cannot bear the thought of having to watch his wife die as well, and knows that would happen if and when his time comes. He does not want to lose the only person left whom he loves and

who once loved him, even if it was long ago.

He opens his mouth, but nothing comes out. Instead, the entire world goes white. Not a soft, gentle white, but a harsh one, white-hot and burning.

He lets it carry him away, prays it takes him out of this world, and his last thought is: *Angel*.

They are supposed to be cruel, but this--this is a kindness.

When he wakes up in the City hospital, he starts to cry. He says it is because he is so happy he is alive.

He lies.