

# Desert Winter

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A short story set in the GreenSky universe  
Set at no particular time in the series

I come from a land of green and shade, where the rustle of the leaves never ends, where the sky ripples above me, where the ground is lengths below and we float through the treetops. I come from a land of warmth, and golden light, and green leaves.

Darkness stretches around me. I cannot hear anything; my ears strain until my head aches.

Now my world is white, and black, and barren. Empty.

And I am cold.

The chill bites into my bones, gripping me with its teeth and shaking me violently. I can still feel, that is the horror of it. I know how cold I am. My heart is still beating, but it is wrapped in ice.

“You should come inside.”

It is only the third thing he has said to me since I arrived a month ago.

I just sit, wrapped in my cold.

Usually he just watches and then goes, leaving me alone. But today – tonight – he steps forward and sits down next to me.

“Long ago, when the stars were first cast into the sky.” His voice is low, with a desert burr. “There was a woman. She used to sit out in the desert, and night after night she would sing to the stars.”

We don’t often see the stars in Taderah. They are hidden behind the rustling leaves, flicking in and out of sight. They are tricksters, hidden by our wooden walls and sap-filled branches. We would not sing to them.

“She sang with such purity and such beauty that one night, the stars sang back to her.”

I think of the clear notes that would be lost in this endless darkness. It would be throwing your voice to the indifferent world.

“But they were apart. The star was tied to the sky, and the woman was tied to the earth.” And then his hand unfolds and points to one bright star, set above our heads. “And so they sang to each other. And sometimes, you can hear their voices in the air.”

I would dearly love to believe that there is some warmth in this lifeless place. But all I can feel is the emptiness around me, the night dwarfing my tiny warmth and the darkness sucking at my eyes. The stars are just a torment that reminds me there used to be something above me.

I am silent.

After a while, he leaves, and I am alone again.

I was sent here, to this barren desert, because I am not anything. I am not useful enough in my family to form a line with any Taderah family, but not useless enough to discard to a profession. And so when one of the night tribes offered trading rights, offered the chance to form a new line...I was sent. It was not my choice, but I did not object. I thought I had more future here than in the loneliness of my homeland.

But it turns out that all I have here is loneliness, and cold.

He sat with me again, a few nights later. This time he told me of the desert foxes, whose feet are silent on the rock and sand, but whose yelps of play and victory can sometimes be heard in the still air. His speech is slow, and thoughtful. I wonder if there is a word he says that is not considered and deliberated.

The light of the singing star is enough that I can see him when he turns his head to me. His eyes are the black pools of the night dwellers, unearthly in his pale face, and his hands are white on his knees. He lets me watch for a minute, studying me in turn. And then, with the careful slowness that he adopts in all things, he nods and stands

I listen to his footsteps recede.

And then silence returns, the cold.

I am invited into her room as the light begins to fade through the skylights. I have not entirely got used to the day-night swap; the sunlight for me is still welcome, and I enjoy the brief glimpse of evening light in what is their morning.

But I am summoned, and so I go.

The ritual is as strange as it ever is; I have not got used to the formality of the coupling. Something that had such passion and emotion in Taderah is reduced to stiff bodies and the quiet gasps as seed spills into her...and then I am dismissed.

I miss the flashes of life. I miss the passion, the beauty, the grace. There is nothing here but the darkness wrapped around me, and I flee to the outside world.

His hand is lifted, tracing the flicker of the bats against the stars. I am beginning to see the life here; he points out the scuffs of the foxes in the sand beneath our feet. There is more life here than I had expected.

But the stars are not singing tonight.

Eventually, he leaves me again.

He comes to me as the light rises, at the end of their day. “We ask that you accompany me on a mission.”

That would be the tribe’s request. I hesitate, although I have no reason to, and then nod. It is a change. They are waiting to see if she is pregnant, and therefore can risk sending me off to collect fleeces from the city. I am not needed until her next fertile cycle.

I am already dressed for the cold of the night, but he hands me thin strips of fabric as we collect the two-wheeled cart. “Tie it over your eyes.”

As we step out into the light, I understand why. My eyes are adjusting to the constant darkness of my night-world, and even this thin morning light hurts. The fabric is thin enough to see through, and I am grateful for it as we wheel the cart away from the outcrop of rock that serves as the doorway to my current home.

The daylight burns.

The world of the desert is as harsh in the day as it is in the night. It is as endless. White stretches out ahead of me, behind me. The shimmers of the heat mark the boundary of my vision, behind the black of the veil that shades my eyes.

I can feel the sun burning at my skin, trying to get inside me.

I do not know how long it is, but at some point during the nightmare of heat and light, he halts. I watch as he pulls the cart over to the side of the track, and shuffles the wheels down into the sand a little. Then he kneels, and crawls under it.

I join him, and understand. The shade is as close to the darkness as we can get, and offers a desperate relief from the burning sun. We will spend the heat of the midday under here, in our tiny refuge of darkness.

He binds another strip of the cloth over his eyes, and then ties mine more firmly. "Protect your vision."

I nod. But as he lies back and closes his eyes, I keep mine open. The desert is light; it is a moment of home, even if it is given with fury and indifference. But I miss the leaves, and the flicker of the shade. All that I have here is emptiness and the gentle wavering of the heat on the dunes.

We stop for the night - our day - in another outcrop, tucking the cart into one of the larger crevices and lifting ourselves into higher caves. It seems strange to sleep through the darkness, and I wake from fitful dreams to see his eyes open and glinting in the faint starlight. He has no stories, and he does not sit with me tonight; instead, we shift in restless sleep.

We meet the trader on the second day. We have reached the trading road, where the carts trundle past in their convoys. Our contact is there, waiting patiently, and nods her head as we approach. "Good journey?"

He just nods. I have learned that to open your mouth in the desert is to lose water; and in the heat of the sun, that means death. They exchange sacks of fleeces for a bag of trading tokens, and I help load the cart. And then we turn, and head back out into our world.

The journey back is a nightmare of heat and dark. It takes both of us to pull the cart; the recent sandstorms have left a fine layer of dust over everything, and the wheels stick constantly. We are grateful for the brief respite of the midday sun as we roll under the cart and sleep, but I wake to find the light lower than we had expected.

He wakes at my touch, and nods. Together, we pull the cart back onto the road, and continue our weary trudge.

It is fully dark, and the rock caves are just ahead of us. We have lost time, but we have been stumbling; the darkness is easy to see in but not so easy to travel in. The cart wheels still stick, and the dust-puddles hide themselves in the shadows. It is with grateful relief that we reach the crevice and pull the cart in.

My muscles are aching, and I slip as I try to climb up to the caves. He glances down, and then carefully climbs back down. I am grateful for his help as he pushes me up, and crawl into the small cave with a weary relief.

We sleep.

It is dusk by the time we reach the settlement, tucked into the outcrop of rock that stands out from the heat-sodden dunes. The cool of underground is a relief, and I manage to help him unload the sacks while my legs are still working.

When we have finished, he places a hand on my shoulder, and nods. "My thanks."

I stumble to my room, shake the dust from my clothes, and fall onto my pallet with his words still ringing in my ears.

The Healer finds me the next day. "She is with child. You have been successful."

My mouth feels as dry as the sand outside. “Will it survive?”  
She shrugs, and smiles. “She is strong, and you did well in the desert. I don’t think there will be a problem.”

Something inside me loosens. I have passed the first test of this new place, and I think I passed a second out in the desert. I am learning.  
I am not useless.  
And I am free.

The night - my day - has passed with celebration from the tribe. It is as if something broke in them as well as myself; I have had smiles, laughter, embraces. They still do not speak much, but someone brought out a pipe and some of the older tribesmen danced. The night was warm again, and friendly, and for once - for once I belonged.

Towards the end of the night, I walk out to greet the stars. The desert is still lonely, and empty...but I can hear the faintest trill of music from behind me as the pipe-player finishes her final song. The tribe has opened itself to me.

And he crouches down beside me.

“Do you desire another?” he asks the emptiness ahead of us.

The darkness starts to lighten ahead of me.

“No,” I whisper. “Only you.”

We are silent for a while.

“Listen,” he says. “They are singing.”

It is a low, mournful hum; the song of one who lost, a song to fill the emptiness and darkness ahead of me. It was fitting for this barren world that somehow contained a multitude of life; it fitted a world where the sun burned all it touched and the night froze it, and yet - somehow - the tiniest flowers blossom on the edge of the rocks, and fox cubs play in the dunes.

And as the song faded, as dawn began to stain the sky and light blossomed across the edge of the desert, he took my hand and led me to his bed.

His skin was rough, the legacy of one who cannot avoid the sand; but his tongue was gentle and his hands were sure as he gripped

my hips, holding me steady as I arched against him. I convulsed under him as his tongue and fingers drove into me, tears staining my cheeks and my unused voice cracking as I spoke his name. He kissed my cheeks and pushed into me, and then I broke again with his cool skin on mine and my hands gripping the blankets above my head, unsure if my weeping was pleasure or pain, unsure if I was being broken or healed.

And when I woke again, it was not so cold.