

The Vigil Keepers

[When excerpted for print, this link to the full story can be printed: medium.com/@lucy-allen]

Not many remained after the Great Desiccation. When the lake dried up for good, the evaporation ponds did too, and the brine shrimp industry. That had all been expected. And when the wind that used to deliver fresh snowfall instead started dropping fine dust laced with arsenic into the city streets, people started picking up and getting the hell out of Salt Lake City. The families with young kids were the first to go. Best to stop asthma before it starts, before the air quality meters get into the purple range. The recently arrived tech worker class was next to leave. They'd come for the cheap housing, but arsenic exposure wasn't worth it. Idaho would be a better bet. The great valley ringed by mountains to the east and west didn't have a hold on them like it did for others. The skiers found other slopes, ones that were projected to still get real snow for another few years. The wealthy and important made it out sooner than others, as is usually the case. The senators and congresspeople who had spent the past decade ignoring calls to redirect water to the lake while they lined their pockets with lobbyists' cash fled to vacation homes in the mountains and out of state. Soon Utah legislative sessions were conducted virtually, with the designation of a new formal meeting place on hold until this whole "dust situation" was under control. We all knew it had gotten bad when the LDS church renamed Provo temple the main temple of the faith, adorning the Salt Lake temple with flowers before abandoning it in a show of ceremony.

Some think the Desiccation began with the genocide on the shores of the Bear River a couple hundred years ago. They say the river carried the grief down into the terminal lake in the bottom of this valley, where it's been sitting ever since. And when the first chemicals were dumped into the lake, they mixed dangerously with the grief. Or maybe our apocalypse began as soon as pioneers turned their faces from the lake, swearing that they'd make this desert blossom. Some say this is what unleashed the Desiccation.

Either way, here I am, still in what's left of Salt Lake City. Some of us—the vigil keepers, as we call ourselves—want to drop "Lake" from the name. Another group wants to get rid of the pioneer name altogether and call this place *Pi'a-pa*, after the Goshute name for Great Salt Lake. It's hard to find time for a formal discussion about it with all the things we need to do to survive. People need to eat, and the food-raiding subcommittee is having to go farther and farther to find abandoned food. We'll need to start working with farmers in the fertile regions upriver to grow our own food. New air purifiers need to be assembled and delivered. Rituals need to be held on the lakebed to heal the spirit of Great Salt Lake. And water needs to be delivered. This is what I found myself volunteering for a few months ago, and the job stuck.

A few times a week I pick up a reliable water truck and head up to the rivers. They're not full by any means, as climate change has really been hitting the annual snowpack, but there's enough there for the three hundred-odd of us in the city to get by. Today I had pumped our water from the Weber river, or *O'o-gwa* in Goshute, which has lately had a strong, clean, deep channel not too far from a good place to park. On my way back to the city, I pull off the highway at the rubble of Willard Reservoir, where the mouth of *O'o-gwa* kisses what was once *Pi'a-pa*. What little water remains of the lake lies in shallow pools scattered across the dry lake bed. The pools bloom like spots of blood, colored deep red by microorganisms that can withstand the extreme salinity. Some life still lives out there, even if it's a sign of sickness.

I hop out of the truck and slam the door behind me, disturbing a cloud of dust hanging in the still air. I walk out to what remains of the reservoir's walls and climb onto the highest piece of rubble. These chunks of concrete once imprisoned the waters of *O'o-gwa*, preventing them from reaching the dying lake. Most of the dams were blown a couple years ago in a part-planned campaign to release captive water into the watershed. An anonymous group posted warnings on social media before the first blasts. But the next ones were surprises, apparently executed by independent copycats channeling rage or love into improvised explosives. Only after the ball got rolling did a couple dams get demolished through legal avenues. Since then we've seen a bit more water reach the lake each year, though climate change isn't helping our case. I wonder where we'd be if it had all started sooner.

Looking out at the dry lakebed from my concrete perch, I remember the nights of celebration we'd had after each dam was hit. The first parties were in secret, but later we danced out on the edges of the reservoirs themselves, no cops left to arrest us for trespassing. Respirators tight around our faces, we ran and played on cracked cement above free-flowing rivers. The stars had seemed brighter those nights, probably a result of the dwindling light pollution as the Desiccation forced people away from urban centers. The rushing rivers, the glowing stars... Even in the dusty darkness of the Desiccation, I couldn't help but feel my joy return with the long-lost wild.

I back the truck into the driveway of one of the vigil houses just after lunchtime. This one is a mid-sized house in Marmalade, not far from the old capitol building. A meeting has just disbanded and a few are still in discussion over a sink full of soapy dishes. I shut the door quietly behind me and pull off my respirator.

“Come on Erika, you have to admit that we won’t survive here long unless they keep covering the lakebed.” Sam’s voice is exasperated and raspy with dust. Their face is lined with scruffy stubble, and short messy hair peeks out from underneath their old baseball cap.

“They’re only covering the lake so that everything can go back to how it was,” Erika replies, her voice prickly with frustration. “And once the people and the industry and the money are back, they’re just going to dry up this place all over again. We can’t survive another desiccation.” She slams a clean glass onto a shelf with a concerning amount of force.

The third vigil keeper, May, tentatively hands her another glass to put away. “We’re barely surviving as it is,” she counters. “You really wouldn’t take back some of what we had, if you had the chance?”

“You would?” Erika shoots an incredulous look at the other two. “We’re free here. We get to decide how we organize our community. None of us have bosses. We don’t have to pay for food or rent. Hell, they even decommissioned the prison. Dust or no dust, I’d choose this any day.” Her dark eyes are burning with an intensity she’s known for.

The air purifiers hum. May looks uncomfortable. “I mean, Erika, you’ve been a ritual holder for a while now... The other jobs aren’t easy. Maybe it’s harder for others to feel as comfortable here.” She casts a glance at Sam.

There’s a pause and Sam sighs. “It’s okay, really. We chose our jobs for a reason and if I wanted to be a ritual holder I could’ve. We just need to figure out what to do about the ritual site. Either we pick a new site away from the lakebed or we talk to the dust coverers today.”

“We can’t pick a site *away* from the lake. The whole point is to be close to it.” Erika’s tone suggests she doesn’t like explaining the obvious.

“Okay, so we’ll talk to the dust coverers.”

I’m starving, and I’d been waiting for a moment to interrupt their conversation to fill up a plate of food from the table in the kitchen. “I can talk to Ibrahim, if you want,” I offer as a sort of apology for barging in as I look for a clean plate.

The three of them hadn’t noticed me until then, or at least pretended not to. “Oh, hey Grey,” Sam greets me. They all look a bit tired, staring at the floor and avoiding my eye contact.

“Are they expanding gravel operations again?”

“Worse.” Sam motions to a flier on the kitchen counter. “Got this on the door this morning. They’re going to start treating the lakebed with chemicals to build a surface crust. Gonna take six months. They want everyone off the lakebed for the whole process.”

“Starting tomorrow.” Erika tosses her long black hair behind her shoulder as she turns to me from the kitchen sink. “They’re starting a six-month long project and only notified us the day before.”

Even for the dust coverers, that's messed up. "But they see you working out there every week!"

Erika says nothing, but shakes her head and turns back to the dishes in the sink.

Sam coughs. "You've been on water today?"

"Yep, still doing that." I'm a little annoyed that Sam forgot I've been on water for months. But it's hard to keep track of things around here; people change their volunteer jobs frequently. "I passed by Willard on the way back—remember the night after it came down? Your 'protect the sacred' tag is still out there on the concrete. No one's around to buff it, I guess," I say with a grin. That gets Sam's eyes to mine. A small smile has found its way to their mouth.

"No one's around to see it, either," they reply, but the smile doesn't leave.

"I saw it. Great Salt Lake saw it. The dust coverers probably saw it."

Sam looks at me for a moment, still with that unreadable smile, before drying their hands on a towel and grabbing a notebook. "I need to go check on the folks at the Olive." Now that's the Sam I know and love, always in action. Seconds later they're out the door.

I finish eating and pick up a sponge to help May and Erika with the dishes. "So you want me to talk to Ibrahim?" I ask them.

"Yeah, please," May replies.

In her version of a response, Erika says darkly, "I'm not moving the site again. I'm not going to fucking do it. How many billions of dollars are they spending on this plan? They *had* the money; they could have spent it on getting water to the lake when we still had time. I'm sick of this. I'm sick of them treating the lake like an object they can control, flying over it, fencing it off, taking the life away from it. There are other options, I know there are."

I head out to the driveway to rig the water truck's tank up to the filtration system. One of the vigil keepers, Momo, set up this really cool myco-filter last year, not long after I joined the group. The water runs through layers of living mycelium, straw, sand, and gravel. The mycelium essentially acts as a fine mesh, filtering out contaminants. But the mycelium also produces enzymes as it grows that chemically break down some of the toxins that might be in the water. I check the most recent contaminant tests, make sure they're looking good, and get some fresh water working its way through the system.

As it starts to trickle through, I look over the water sign-up sheets, calculating who's first in line for water based on how recently they last got a delivery and other factors like household size and age. Everyone in town can sign up for water from the vigil keepers. We've been a somewhat central force in infrastructure and distribution since the Desiccation, not that the vigil keepers can be said to have a center. We're sort of

a volunteer group—a semi-organized autonomous network. Some who meet regularly at the vigil houses don't call themselves vigil keepers, and others who've never taken on a shift love to identify themselves with the label. It's confusing for the reporters and the state. Some write that the vigil keepers are the only ones left here, but that we've been reduced to a disorganized mess of delusional homeless people. Others characterize the vigil keepers as a domestic terrorist organization with leaders and the names of members written down on a list somewhere. Neither characterization is true, of course.

The vigil keepers have been around since people first started noticing Great Salt Lake drying up. It started as an annual camp at Antelope Point, when the point was still Antelope Island. It was a place to pay attention, to meditate, to create in honor of the lake's life. They'd stay out there for the full legislative session each year and urge representatives to pass legislation to get water flowing into the lake. One year, frustrated by the sheer absence of action, the vigil keepers just refused to leave. A new vigor swept through the vigil keepers as the occupation became permanent. The state park issued notices and fines. The vigil keepers refused to pay. The cops evicted them and bulldozed their camper vans and tents. The vigil keepers came back in force two months later. An anonymous donor paid their camping fees for three months straight and they were allowed to stay, temporarily. After the three months they were evicted again, this time with tear gas. They returned again. Meanwhile, the exodus from the Salt Lake Valley was in full swing. Soon the police stopped harassing the vigil keepers. Not worth it anymore, everyone guessed. As the community in the watershed shrank with the lake itself, the vigil site moved closer to the city center and out of the thick of the poisonous dust to better support those who were left.

After some calculations and route planning, I top off a water truck marked “clean” from the cistern that the myco-filter empties into and get back on the road to deliver. This water truck is my favorite to drive. It's completely covered in murals of flowing water and riverbanks and vibrant blue words reading “WATER IS LIFE”. Today, the first stops on my route are some old Mormon folks in Millcreek and Holladay determined to live the rest of their days on land that speaks of home: Jerry, Susan, the Christensens, the Wheelers, and Theresa. They politely “thank you ma'am” me and call me a nice girl and I politely correct them. Next I drop water for some of the vigil keepers who can't transport it themselves: Saba, Momo (always interested in how the water smells), Anni and Taylor, Angelo, and Leigh. Then on to a central hub in the valley, the library, where a public school emerged this year. Up to South Temple to deliver to an elderly couple, the Ryans. They want to know where the water is from this time. “Big Cottonwood, way up near the pass,” I explain. “I'll bring you Weber River water in a few days.” And then to the settlement at the Olive, a luxury apartment building by the Rio Grande now occupied by the formerly unhoused. The collective memory of being violently displaced from the area for an urban

redevelopment scheme years back is still strong and painful, so they were the first to squat the luxury apartments across the street from Pioneer Park. Amy and Magnet come out to hook up their cistern to the water truck and tell me that Sam had just stopped by the Olive, as they do with all the bigger settlements, to bring them sign-up sheets for water and power and a few items they requested last time. My last stop is David and Angela, two who couldn't turn their back on their ancestors' land. They have a couple houses on a block in Rose Park for some other Indigenous folks who stayed. All along my route there are the stragglers, the ones who had nowhere better to go when the Desiccation came. They live in houses that were theirs for years or are newly claimed. Former transit drivers, programmers, city employees, academics, sanitation workers, inland port warehouse workers, birders, writers, baristas. People still trying to figure out where they fit into this new city among the scraps of the old one.

The only people I don't see on my route are the dust coverers. They're a separate community of sorts. When PM10 levels in the valley exceeded EPA air quality limits, the violation triggered a state implementation plan. Part of the plan funds the dust coverers, who keep the dust down with gravel and chemicals until the water comes back. Some see it as a genuine mitigation tactic to help those of us who still live here. Some see it as a half-assed apology for literally leaving us in the dust. And others, like Erika, see it as a strategy to get people and the economy back into the Salt Lake Valley in a few years' time. Whether that's good or bad is up for debate among the vigil keepers. Since the dust coverers are employed by the state of Utah, and there's no rental or market economy left in the valley, the state provides the dust coverers with room and board. They live in a repurposed apartment building on the west side of the city. Their food and water is trucked in weekly from Denver. They are self-sufficient by design—no need to interact with the rest of us, destitute and violent as the state presumes us to be. And so we rarely interact, except for glances on the street, and now these tensions out at the lakebed with the ritual holders. And there's Ibrahim, who responded with affirmative gratitude one day when I offered the dust coverers freshly cooked food foraged from the mountains and water from Bear River during my rounds through the city. Since then, Ibrahim has attended a few of our meetings and volunteered for a few shifts at the kitchen. I think he can sense that we have something more full and beautiful than what his employers give him. If the ritual holders want to keep their site at the lakebed, Ibrahim is the only one who might let them.

The dust coverers work on a rotating schedule to limit their exposure. Five days on, three days off. I'm hoping to catch Ibrahim on an off day at the dust coverers' apartments. I park out front and swing open the door. Some of the dust coverers, mostly men, are sitting in the common space watching TV. They must be on off days, since they're not in the usual workwear. I get a few looks in my direction. They all

have a slightly sunbaked, windbeaten look to their faces, despite the protections they wear on the lakebed.

“Anyone know if Ibrahim is around today?” I ask.

“Upstairs,” one of them replies. “In the library.”

I find him sitting at a table, leaning over a book. He sees me come in and waves. “Grey! How are you?”

Though his hair is graying and he must be in his fifties, the tan skin of his face is unlined.

“I’m good, Ibrahim, I’m good.” I’m distracted by the library. I didn’t know the dust coverers had one.

“This is a cool place you have.”

“Yes, we asked for it, and they sent us some books. They even gave us some money to buy books here in the city, but you know no one would take the money. The main library downtown actually gave us some books for free. They were cleaning out a room, for some reason.”

“For the school?” I venture.

“The school?”

“Yeah, they started a school in there this year.”

“Hmm, I didn’t hear about that. Some of the people here would probably be interested in that.”

“You should make the trip over there sometime, check it out. Maybe they’d even be able to expand to hold some classes here.”

“Maybe.” Ibrahim looks doubtful but curious. “So what brings you here today?”

“It’s the ritual holders. A day’s notification isn’t enough, you know that. Did you want to catch them off guard on purpose? Stop them from planning much resistance?”

He shakes his head. “Of course not. To be honest, I think everyone was busy with the planning and forgot about the rituals. This is a big phase of the playa treatment.”

“Listen, they’re not going to move the site this time. I think they’ll be out there as usual tomorrow. You’ll have to skip over them.”

“Ah, Grey, you know we cannot leave parts of the playa uncovered. This dust is nasty stuff! And besides, the surface crust solution will be sprayed from aircraft. There will be drift. We can’t guarantee the safety of anyone on the playa.”

“But the rituals need—” A tickle in my throat breaks into a cough. All this talking today has irritated my throat more than usual. The dust must be bad. Ibrahim gives me a “told you so” look. “—the rituals need to be on the lakebed itself. It’s something about a connection to the earth. And the lakebed is, what, two thousand square miles? The ritual holders only need a tiny fraction of that. What about covering the ritual site with gravel or water? Or planting trees as windbreaks?”

“I would prefer those, too. It would mean more jobs for us. But the state engineers developed the plan, and they have to work within the budget allocated by congress.”

I sighed. I'm tired of politicians determining our fate from their mountain homes. "I don't know what to tell you, Ibrahim. The ritual holders will put up a fight tomorrow. This is in your hands now."

I get up to leave. "I almost forgot—I have some water for you. From up in Big Cottonwood yesterday."

"I thought there wasn't enough up there?"

"I had to go pretty far up. And it's springtime," I say with a smile. "The sun brings the water back. What did you think all these rituals were for?"

Before sunrise, I drive up Big Cottonwood canyon. I had borrowed a pickup from work for the occasion. Well, borrowed would be an exaggeration, but I'll be sure to get it back to the playa before work starts for the day. The trip will be at least an hour and a half, especially with stopping every so often to look for a good spot. Forty-five minutes up from the apartment, forty-five back to pick up the others who are on today. That will get us to the playa by... eight-thirty. No problem.

Halfway up the canyon, the stream becomes a full rushing river. Grey was right; the spring runoff is actually happening this year. I pull over, shine my flashlight down over the side of the road, and scout out a good spot to gather. Then I grab some jugs and carefully climb down boulders to the riverside. This is not my terrain, no sir. I am much more comfortable out on the flat desert, flat that extends until you think it can't extend any more, at which point it hits distant mountain peaks. Flat that shows you just how far away the horizon is. Yes, that is my territory. Holding the flashlight with one hand in the predawn darkness, I submerge a jug into the water. It gurgles and bubbles until I remember to flick open the tiny stopper on top to let the air out. The water flows in smoothly, filling the jug until its weight threatens to sink it in the river. I replace it with another. My wet hands are turning numb and I remember that the water is fresh snowmelt. I bring a hand to my lips to taste it. Colder and fresher than what Grey brought me yesterday, but with a metallic taste that was missing from the treated water. I take my hand away from my mouth. I will have to settle for the treated stuff as long as the dust is in the sky.

Once three jugs are full, I carefully lug each one back to the truck. The sky has begun to lighten and by the time I reach the mouth of the canyon, pink light has begun to grace the canyon walls. With little snow on the peaks, light seems to take longer than usual to reach the quartzite slabs. But soon even the pines close to the road are taking on their full range of green and brown and white. Maybe I should come here more often.

My estimations were correct. By eight-thirty I am suited up and stepping out onto the playa with three others in white hooded jumpsuits. The white suits reflect away the sun, which even in early spring can be piercing. The suit hoods seal into a headpiece consisting of a visor, a polarized lens over our eyes, and a respirator. Cross-referencing a map on my phone screen with plastic survey flags poked into the playa, I take stock of our square-mile area for the day. We are divided into teams today: one to complete drone surveys of the playa before the spraying begins, one to ready the aircraft, and one to finish covering up one more dust hotspot with gravel before we lose access to the playa. I requested to be placed on the last team. Squinting to the south, I know I made the right choice. Not far from the old shoreline of Stansbury Ridge, I see a group of people beginning to gather. They are dressed not in the white suits of the dust coverers but in a range of colors. It's hard to tell from this distance, but I am pretty sure their respirators are all different from one another, not like the state-issued ones that we have on.

"Damn, are those the vigil people?" calls out one of the three white suits on the playa. It's Liam—young, blonde, immature.

"Yeah, no shit, Liam," replies another white suit. The annoyance tells me it's Dani.

"You know Luis is gonna make us deal with them, right?"

It doesn't take long. We have only just unloaded the gravel we need for the day when our walkie-talkies crackle with the voice of our boss, Luis. A drone has spotted the ritual holders, and since our team is the closest to their site, he wants us to remove them from the playa.

Liam shakes his head and starts for the truck. "We don't have time for this. Didn't someone tell them we'd be spraying the lake today?"

"Yes, someone did. But I hear they will be resisting," I share.

"It can't be that hard to remove them, though, right?" Dani asks, looking to me.

I reply after the four of us are all in the truck. "Remember, these are the people who set a police car on fire during the Antelope Island occupation," I caution from the backseat.

Our other coworker, Mariano, interrupts. "I thought that was a rumor."

To be honest, I don't know if that story is true. "Either way, I was told they would put up a fight. We should be ready for anything."

Liam turns to look at me. "Who are you hearing all these things from, anyway?" He's suspicious and demanding. "Ohhh, is it that girl who came in yesterday?"

"Grey isn't a girl."

Liam laughs a little. "Uh, what?"

I ignore his confusion. "Yes, I heard this from Grey. He said the ritual holders are not willing to move. We might want to prepare to compromise. As a contingency."

“Compromise how?”

“We could help them cover their site. Or give them a plot with low dust emissions. Build irrigation infrastructure, wind breaks, things like that.”

“No way. Sounds like a bunch of work, man. We’re just gonna go out there, tell them to obey the law, and remove them if necessary. Plain and simple.” Liam looks contemplatively out of the window for a moment. “We can always tell them we have a gun.”

Dani’s driving, but she whips her head around to glare at him. “Liam! We are not telling them we have a gun!”

“Okay, okay. No gun.”

“We don’t have a gun, right?” she adds tentatively.

“Of course not. Why would I bring a gun out here?”

I’m not sure whether to believe him.

Dani drives as far as the paved road will take us. She parks the truck behind a couple other cars. “We have to walk from here,” she says. “Should only be a quarter mile or so.”

We set out on a gravel path covered with footprints and bike tire tracks. The wind has picked up, thankfully drowning out Liam and Dani’s bickering. I pass them on the trail and peer ahead. The ritual holders are much closer now. They stand in a circle facing outwards. Around my feet, dust rises from the cracked gray lake playa and swirls into gusts in the strong winds. I start to smell burning sage. But that’s not right; I can’t smell anything through the respirator. Even so, there it is, the aromatic burning. And then I am suddenly dropped into stillness. The wind calms to a pleasant breeze. I feel a waterline encircling my ankles and my bare feet squishing into muddy ground. Brine shrimp tickle my skin. Suddenly there is no respirator and I can smell the unmistakable waft of burning sage, along with sweetgrass now, and salt, and decay, and clean air. White clouds, not brown ones, reflect on the water’s surface. And there... is that...? Yes, a flock of birds are reflected in the water, too, with white bellies and long black bills. I have never seen birds out here, though I hear they used to number in the millions. The birds head for Stansbury Ridge, which now looks like an island. But before they land, they blur into a mirage of dark shapes. “Come on, let’s get this over with.” Dani jogs past me on the trail.

I break out of someone else’s memory, and the dark shapes come into focus again: the ritual holders. The circle has turned inward and one person waves burning bundles in the wind. The water is gone, brine shrimp gone, smell of rot gone, white clouds gone. The sweetgrass and sage remains. Somehow the smell managed to make it through my respirator. I should check the seals. I pick up my pace and follow Dani. The state has been going about this the wrong way. Don’t they realize? They have been going about this the wrong way for generations. I break into a jog up the last hill before we reach the ritual site. Water

gone, brine shrimp gone, smell of rot gone. Water gone, life gone. Water gone, life gone. From higher ground, I can see the grid of gravel squares covering the playa. A new construction site to the north will control intentional flooding of one of the worst hotspots. I don't know how to feel about it. The treatments will keep the dust down so that what little life left here can survive. But it all feels like an extension of the apathy towards Great Salt Lake that drained water from its inlets, dug landfills into its shores, stole minerals from its salty pools, and dumped waste into its shallows. Suddenly it's all the same violence: the gravel, the stakes, the survey flags, the landfills, the evaporation ponds. I catch up with Dani and we crest the hilltop just behind the ritual site. A few of them turn to look at us. Oh god. What now?

Thankfully, or not, Liam follows close on our heels. "Alright everyone, I think you know why we're here." The rest of the group turns around. "We're spraying the lakebed for the next six months, and y'all gotta clear out."

The ritual group stands silently in the wind for a moment as they exchange looks with one another. I count them. Twenty-six. They're wearing a combination of professional and makeshift dust protection—goggles, sunglasses, scarves, masks, work gloves, rubber gloves, visors, and respirators. One of them steps forward. A black scarf dusted with lakebed wraps around their head and face. "We will not be leaving." Their dark eyes are piercing and intense.

"The state of Utah thinks differently," replies Liam. He's cocky. Overconfident. I know he must be nervous.

"The state of Utah doesn't have a great track record for decision-making," the one in the black scarf calls back over the wind, almost sounding bored. "We would all be standing knee-deep in salt water today if they'd made some better calls."

"Well, we're not. We're here now, and this dust is gonna choke us all if we don't spray over it. So how about y'all get moving?"

Another ritual holder speaks up. "I don't think you heard her. We're not leaving."

The one in the black scarf continues, "We have watched you treat this being like you own her for far too long. And you haven't even done a good job of it. The lake wants to live. We're healing her. What are you doing? Building more fences? Mining more gravel?"

Liam scoffs. "You really think you're *healing* it? By standing around and chanting things?"

"We don't have a four billion dollar budget. How are you enjoying all that taxpayer cash that we were asking to be spent on paying farmers to release their water?"

I wish I could open my mouth and tell them we would give them what they need. It's not much, is it? Suddenly anger takes over—at Liam, at Luis, at the engineers, at the politicians, at everything. And at myself, for not knowing what to do.

“This is ridiculous,” Liam mutters to himself. Suddenly he raises his voice. “Okay, this has been a fun chat, but everyone’s gotta go. We have the power of the state backing us. If you don’t leave now, we’ll call the police.”

“What police? They abandoned this place months ago,” black scarf says through a laugh.

“Then we’ll remove you ourselves. Come on, let’s get moving.” He moves towards a ritual holder closest to him and puts an arm on their shoulder, apparently to herd them towards the trail. Half of the group surges forward. “Don’t touch them!” someone yells.

Liam jumps back. “Woah woah woah, I didn’t hurt them or anything.”

Black scarf takes a step forward. “Maybe it would help for you to know that we’re armed.”

Liam freezes. “Fucking cult,” he breathes. Without another word, he turns around, walks past the rest of us, and takes out his walkie-talkie. I can barely hear his voice over the wind as he speaks into it. I exchange glances with Dani and Mariano. I guess he doesn’t have a gun.

When he returns, he walks straight past us to the ritual group. “Alright, you all can stay here for today. But next week you have to be on a new plot by the shoreline where the aircraft can avoid you. The planning team will send you the coordinates. You have to find your own ways to cover your plot and fund it yourself. We’ll be checking to make sure you’re keeping the dust down. And cover up all this dust you’ve been kicking up today.” He waves his hand to the ground around us and starts walking away. Murmurs travel through the ritual group.

The rest of us jog to catch up with Liam. Dani gets there first. “What happened?”

“I asked Luis if we could call in the state troopers, but he didn’t want it to be a whole thing. Better to just keep them satisfied.” Liam looks more embarrassed than angry. “Whatever. Let’s get back to work.”

I turn around to look at the ritual group, which has grouped back up into a circle. “I’ll catch up,” I say to my coworkers. They look confused, but I don’t explain. I head over to the ritual holders. I open my mouth and start talking, not to anyone specific at first. “Hi. Uh, I have water. For the ground. To keep the dust down. Maybe you want it for your ritual.”

I make eye contact with someone wearing a blue scarf around their face. “Yes, of course. Thank you for offering,” she says, clearly confused.

“It’s from Big Cottonwood Canyon. The runoff is good this year. Grey told me so I went up this morning to see. And I thought maybe I could help with the dust mitigation at your new plot. Plant some trees, build windbreak structures, help you with the gravel or controlled flooding...” I realize I am rambling.

“You brought this water all the way from the canyon?”

“Yes?” I’m worried I might have stepped over a line.

“What’s your name?” she asks.

“Ibrahim.”

“Ibrahim, thank you.”

The sun is high over the playa as the woman in the blue scarf helps me carry the last jug of water from the truck. The wind sweeps the scent of burning sage and sweetgrass across the desiccated land. The ritual holders are circling up again and quieting down, so I place the jug next to the circle and start to leave before I interrupt any further. But before I can disappear, the woman in the blue scarf stops me. “Do you want to join the ritual today?”

I look down the path. The truck sits motionless at the end of the path, and I know my coworkers are waiting for me. “Not today. But I would like to join one on your new plot one day.”

The woman smiles and gives me a nod before rejoining the group. As I start back down the path, I hear a clear, strong voice begin to speak. “Oh, great element Earth, we call upon you to bless this ceremony with your presence. We call in this earth as it is now, dried and cracked, filled with the memory of the lake that was, and the vision of the lake that will one day return...” I turn to look. One ritual holder stands with their arms raised while another walks in a circle, pouring river water from a jug. No, not a circle, a spiral. The one with arms raised is speaking. I pause to listen closer. “We call in the wind that traverses this valley, bringing dust storms and rain and snow. May your refreshing and invigorating energy inspire us to see the world with new eyes.” Meanwhile, the water slowly covers the entire area of the ritual holders’ circle. Droplets of muddy water splatter on the feet of those standing nearby. “We call in the memory of the fires of justice that liberated the rivers from the dams that held them back. May your passionate and transformative energy ignite our spirits...” The gray mud glistens in a way I haven’t seen since... since that vision. If you can even call it a vision. It was more like a memory. Or perhaps a premonition. “Oh, great element Water, this ceremony pivots around you. We wish for the harmony of the water and earth at the lakebed, the earth supporting you in humble embrace. We pray for the wind to once again be enlivened with water from the lake. We pray that the fires of justice continue to guide the vigil keepers in restoring the vital waters to Pi’a-pa.” The spiral of water reaches the center of the circle. I see one of the ritual holders kneel down to place their hands on the ground, and the rest of the group follows suit. Their gloved palms squish into mud where before there was only toxic dry earth. I am reminded of the feeling I’d had earlier of my toes sinking into mud at the bottom of a lake. This lake, I realize. This mud. There is still life here, life desperate to live. Or there will be one day. And we are the caretakers: ritual holders and dust coverers and vigil keepers and stragglers alike.

I turn and continue down the gravel path. The group has begun singing, but gusts of wind pull away the notes before they reach me. As I open the truck door, the gusts break just long enough for a few lines to make their way to me:

*May we cry our grief and praise
See our tears buoy this great body
To swollen shorelines*

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