The Way — Quincy A. Rock

A very long time ago on our world, there stood a kingdom of squirrels. It had taken them many generations and countless petty wars to join their arboreal villages into one vast empire. Once, they had huddled indoors and prayed to the goddess of the forest, Bor-Ki, to deliver them through the barren winter and to bring the blessed spring. Now, they knelt in temple courtyards before statues of Urshanhat, the god of the sun who burned away the winter to feed the forests of their youth and the farmlands of their children.

The squirrels rejoiced in Urshanhat's light, for they knew he was the true power behind their world. Urshanhat Life-Giver did more than raise up their crops: his light penetrated their minds, and they were opened. Some bold few who called themselves the Sun Priests claimed that the reason squirrels came to preeminence at all was from the meager beams of Urshanhat's light that had scattered through the ancient canopies. Bor-Ki hated the light, yet she needed it to sustain her dominion, and so she had enshrouded as much of the world as she could in darkness, to keep the squirrels from claiming their birthright. She had failed.

Most squirrels laughed at such a silly notion; Bor-Ki had been their protector, not their captor, or so the stories said. But all the same, an idea took root in their heart of hearts: this world was *theirs*.

And so it was. Great cities sprang up, and greater systems of trade and commerce sprang up alongside them. Acorns from the old oak forests of Queria, gold trinkets and finery from In-Zilu, lavish textiles from the artisans of Gol-Matan; all flourished within the bounds of the empire. "No squirrel had ever known such luxury in the days of Bor-Ki," the Sun Priests said, and fewer now spoke out against them.

As the Life-Giver himself smiled down upon them, their empire grew, and smoke from their forges and furnaces billowed upwards in thin, swift trails like the fumes of burnt offerings. Many brilliant thinkers—those "struck by the ray of Urshanhat," as the squirrels put it—were constantly innovating, designing cleverer and cleverer ways to delve, to organize, and to expand. The kings of the squirrels knew such wealth and opulence that they never wanted for anything.

One fateful day, a lone visitor was granted an audience with the king, Ateruk the Great. While she was not poor, her garments could not hope to match the luxurious vestments of Ateruk's court. The king had been curious about her purpose when he had been told of her arrival, for she claimed to be from the outskirts of the empire.

"What is your name, and what have you to say?" Ateruk asked after she had prostrated herself before his throne.

The visitor rose, her gaze wandering along the gilded marble columns and the rich cedar beams of the throne room. "I am called Kenax, lord," she replied. "I have journeyed far to tell you of a discovery my kin have made in Tel-Tohar."

The king motioned for her to continue, his paw weighted with bangles and rings.

"Below the earth, we have found a substance like the light of Urshanhat. It burns hot enough to melt tempered steel as though it were candlewax, and it is as fair to look upon as gold.

Many of my people wanted to keep this discovery to themselves, but I said that you, lord, should know of it so that it can raise the empire to new heights." Kenax bowed her head.

"If what you say is true," said Ateruk, "then we could indeed climb to new heights. Urshanhat's blessings be upon you, child, for you have shown loyalty to your king. I will send you home to Tel-Tohar with a delegation of my scientists and metallurgists, to honor your discovery. May you walk in light." What the king did not say was that behind them would come a company of soldiers, to secure the site and repay the kin of Kenax for their cowardice, or to punish Kenax herself if she were lying.

But what Kenax had said was true, for *shanin*—as they came to call this new substance—could do all that was promised, and more. Artists and architects coveted *shanin* to incorporate in their work, for its subtle radiance enhanced the beauty of anything it touched. Machinists fueled their sputtering engines with its raw power, and smiths craved the substance for its unparalleled ability to melt any metal they could think of. The Sun Priests especially desired *shanin* for their temples, and they hallowed it.

For her service to the empire, Kenax was honored, and made a member of great importance in Ateruk's court at his insistence. Some within the court gossiped of a tryst between her and the king, but most dismissed it as jealous rumormongering meant to smear the newcomer's reputation.

Tel-Tohar, the birthplace of *shanin*, became the largest mine ever seen in the whole world: the vast engines of the machinists belched vapors as they burrowed into the ground, houses were cleared to get at the precious *shanin* beneath, and trees—even oaks—were cut back to make way for the mining effort. The remaining population of Tel-Tohar had been relocated to other parts of the empire. The air around the mine was so thick that respirators were required for those who oversaw the machinery.

Ateruk, in his foresight, ordered core tests to be carried out across the entire empire, to search for more veins before Tel-Tohar ran dry. Dozens of other locations were found, and preparations were made for the mining crews to arrive. Once there was no more *shanin* left to be extracted, Tel-Tohar was abandoned, a blackened scar on the earth where *shanin* had once shone in the depths.

Near the end of Ateruk's lifetime, the empire of the squirrels had become a patchwork of glorious cities spread out among leagues of shattered rock and smog. The people of the empire worried that Ateruk's young adopted son Prince Ahlon was not yet ready to rule in his father's absence. He would need sound and trustworthy advisors by his side, and the court was wracked with vicious infighting over who could gain Ahlon's favor.

In the king's chambers, where only those summoned by the king could enter, Kenax asked how much more *shanin* they could hope to gather without annihilating the empire's vital infrastructure, and Ateruk considered this.

"My scientists have been able to use *shanin* to grow crops instead of the light of Urshanhat," he said at length. "They have constructed tiered farms within many cities, each tier powered by *shanin* that warms and feeds the crops. You know of these?"

"I do, lord," Kenax responded.

"We have found Urshanhat in the ground, and we can put forth his power in his absence," the king mused. "Why do we still need him in the sky?"

A shadow of terror swept across Kenax's face. "Lord, you cannot be suggesting what I think you are."

"The light of Urshanhat is *shanin*, of this I am certain," Ateruk replied. "We are no longer bound by the gods. The Sun Priests say that Bor-Ki held us captive? Well, I say that Urshanhat's chain was craftier and subtler than that. Let us break it, and rise above this world to our rightful inheritance."

Kenax bowed her head. She raised it, and there was fire in her eyes. "Old fool!" she hissed. "The only captor here is your ego, and the only chain your avarice. You would kill farmers to mine their lands and then have the gall to wonder why your people starve."

Ateruk was speechless, for no squirrel had ever dared to speak to him in such a manner.

Kenax leaned close to the king, who shrank away from the fury in her gaze. "I revealed the secret of *shanin* to you because I thought at some point you would come to your senses and realize what you were doing to our world. Clouds of toxic gases, smoke, and fumes all churn in the wastelands outside the bastions of what you call civilization. What if there is *shanin* under Lithili, the holy city? Would you evict the millions of squirrels there and strip-mine it for just one little core of *shanin*?"

Ateruk opened his mouth to reply, but Kenax silenced him with a glare. "There is *shanin* where your heart used to be. It is time to put an end to this madness." With that, Kenax dispelled the illusion that was her physical form, and before Ateruk loomed Bor-Ki herself, clad in dread raiment with flashing emerald eyes. The mere sight of her true and holy form seized Ateruk's heart and held it still. Within moments, the light went out of Ateruk's eyes, and he slumped in his seat.

Thereafter, King Ahlon went on to restore the lands his father had devastated: the forests of Queria were renewed, the orchards of fruit and farmlands of grain were remade, and the pits of Tel-Tohar cleansed. The people wondered at how Ahlon was so unlike his father, but then Kenax had raised the boy in the court: she was practically his mother. She was the true power behind the throne, some whispered.

The Sun Priests lost favor as public curiosity in the ways of their arboreal ancestors grew, since few now remembered any other home but a stone city lit by lamps of *shanin*. The empire saw plenty and prosperity as it had in the past, and the people brought Bor-Ki back into their worship as villages sprang up among the newly-planted forests. Yet they did not forget the god of their youth: many shrines to Urshanhat Life-Giver could be found opposite the shrines of Bor-Ki. Thin traces of *shanin* glowed in both, a far cry from the grandiosity of the *shanin*-slathered temples of the Sun Priests. In an answer to prayer, winters were easy to weather with the storehouses and granaries of the great cities; the best elements of the empire remained to feed the coming generations.

We tell this story to our children now to guard their hearts against the worst excesses of our forebears. Some say Bor-Ki is still with us, influencing rulers and dominions behind the scenes so that a king like Ateruk can never rise again. Whatever the truth may be, know that we may once again reach the heights of our ancestors, but we need not the irresponsible temptations of *shanin* to spur our progress.

Balance in temperance. May the light of Urshanhat guide you, and the shade of Bor-Ki protect you.