

## Procyon and Gomeisa

Gomeisa was an orphan, with parents unknown or long dead. She grew up ragged and wretched in the streets of a desert bazaar on ancient Earth. The town was small enough to remain without a name, simply a waypoint through an ancient land of arid gold. Gomeisa was unloved and unlovable. She was dirty and grimy, but she was also free. And that was very far from a given in the time in which she lived.

Food was a constant challenge and Gomeisa was hungry all of the time. Her nights were dedicated to sniffing out all opportunities to nab small morsels to eat, and her days were focused on finding safe roosts to nest in, away from the prying eyes of slave traders and salacious men.

The mostly itinerant population of the bazaar did feature numerous others without homes. They were men and women, boys and girls. The population constantly changed as armed soldiers periodically captured and shipped off any vagrants that they might be able to find. Where they went, no one knew for sure, but the rumors were of chattel slavery, bleak servitude, and often sexual depravity.

Only the owners of the few inns and taverns had sturdy roofs over their heads at night, yet small shanties extended out from the central street with prodigious disorder. The jumbled environment provided small Gomeisa with numerous hiding spots from soldiers and others who would look to capture her. And her malnourished, petite size was a massive aid in her ambitions to stay fed and unshackled. It also seemed to make the eyes of all see her as naught but a small child, when in fact she was well older. That led to occasional small acts of kindness extended from caring locals, like when a barkeep left her scraps of food, or a passing trader gave her some rubbish he did not want to haul any further.

Gomeisa knew that capture was inevitable. She didn't know how she had come to this point, or exactly why she had lasted this long. She was nimble and quick, but certainly luck had ever been on her side. Gomeisa thanked her lucky stars for that fortune, but it would not hold out for ever. It never did.

Her solitary friend, loyal Procyon, had also enjoyed a long spell of freedom. Yet he had been hauled away days before. Gomeisa had watched from behind the rattan screen of a stranger's shack as her blood smeared companion had been dragged bodily into a tumbrel wagon alongside numerous other poor residents of this village.

Not making friends, not cementing any sort of relationships at all, was key to survival here in this unforgivingly broken world and Gomeisa had always been a master in that skill. She was intentionally prickly. She was too small to win many fights, but determined enough that no one troubled her much, unless they wanted bite marks to adorn their bronze skin. And her eyes somehow had the wildness of the most irritable dromedary, rather than the tranquility that rich dark hues usually denoted. Procyon told her they were tinged with a deep and furious dark red. Gomeisa only cared that they kept people at bay.

That boy, Procyon, he had somehow battered through her defensive bulwarks with sheer kindness and initial ineptitude. He was fully helpless when they first met. Abandoned by his parents, he had never lived outdoors, never scavenged for food, never evaded authorities. He bumbled to and fro, a ripe and idiotic fruit ready to be plucked by whatever hostile fool chose to take him.

Gomeisa had seen him around the small town and had rolled her eyes at him begging in the main square as if nothing evil could ever befall him. She watched as he actually walked up to the front

door of an inn and then waltzed inside! As if he could do so as an urchin and not suffer a summary kick out of the door. Whenever she came across him in those first few days, he had seemed beaten and battered, and yet somehow brimming with more ignorant resilience than the other strays in the dusty bazaar. That refusal to break, Gomeisa respected, though the dolt had to learn to bend and blend in.

One dark night, Gomeisa had been prowling behind the alehouse for anything edible and yet remained empty handed. Her grimly growling stomach shot up at the sounds of a splattering splash and a muffled cry. Sensing opportunity, Gomeisa stealthily approached and found Procyon on his knees and sputtering at the base of the building, his body doused in what appeared to be gooey human excrement from the open window overhead. He looked up and locked eyes with her, sensing her presence somehow, despite the absence of noise from her bare feet.

Procyon's eyes were different from hers. She realized this immediately at the time of their encounter and it remained blazed in Gomeisa's steel trap mind from then on. They were the color of honey, soft and sweet, full of sadness, but not of fear. She reached out to him in that moment, and he recoiled, explaining that he was, in fact, covered in urine and feces. Gomeisa then laughed softly and instructed him to follow her. It was cute that it was his first time to be dumped on like that, but for Gomeisa, it was simply one of the more regular, yet minor, risks on her endless nights of skulking.

In the irregular maze of the shanties, some occupied and many now abandoned, the dark air shimmered with the stars in the heavens. There was a blank spot on that soul-dark canvas that

attracted Gomeisa's keen eyes. She looked back and noticed Procyon too gazing towards that gaping void.

Three collapsing huts enclosed a small triangular courtyard. Gomeisa climbed spritely over the remains of one of them and dropped into the open space inscribed by the houses. Procyon followed despite his slippery hands and Gomeisa was appreciative of his incredible quiet. A small, forgotten well occupied one obscured corner of the area, and she grabbed a roped bucket from under some rocks and dropped it gently into the silty water below. After drawing it up, she threw it over the frail looking boy and repeated until he was reasonably clean. Then she drew it up one last time, and they shared the cool water, attempting to use their teeth to strain out the sand, although that never really worked.

They had spoken then, introductions, but also details of their lives. Procyon wasn't shy and rapidly told her about his family leaving him behind. He assumed it was a mistake on their behalf. Gomeisa assured him it was not. She had seen it too many times and would not sweeten the story for this brave boy and yet his tears were brutally sad to behold. Without a second thought, she had given him a hug and told him that now they were family.

Days passed on those baking hot sands. Nights too, with their balmy breezes and endless stars. And Procyon learned, quickly in fact, from Gomeisa with all of her wiles. He was good at thieving, not quite up to her level, but Gomeisa knew that he would get there. And together, they were better than she had ever been alone. And that meant more food and the most minute bit of comfort.

Together it felt like they could steal anything, though their wants were in fact as small as their bodies. Distraction was the key tool in their arsenal. Their standard trick involved one of them

attempting to steal food from a traveler or tradesman and intentionally getting spotted, knocking food and valuables onto the ground. Usually this was Gomeisa's role. She would sprint away from the scene, with pursuers tight on her tail. Her fleet feet and her knowledge of the shanty town allowed her to evade capture without fail.

While Gomeisa was being pursued, sweet looking Procyon, with his eyes of gently woven gold, would wander respectfully over and aid the shopkeeper or traveler in regaining their belongings, surreptitiously pocketing a few items as he did so. His sleight of hand was deft, and he was so kind and trustworthy that often he was rewarded with additional goods from his unwitting victims. Gomeisa, with her eyes of fire, could never pull off such a thing.

Together, they spent years this way. Growing taller and gaunter, but never losing their wiliness or their kinship. For safety, they never settled in a single place. Instead, they had hideaways all throughout the bazaar, where they would spend their days snoozing together, their evenings purloining shopkeepers, and their nights exploring the streets for new hideouts or simply for pleasure.

Love was but a word to the two of them. It was clear that they were in it, though of what type they knew not and cared less. They both had feelings for each other, but they remained ever unspoken and unacknowledged. The one thing they frequently did vow is that they would never be apart. Never be separated. Yet even as they spoke it, both Procyon and Gomeisa knew it to be naught but a wishful prayer.

So Gomeisa had not been shocked to see Procyon shackled and chained. The wider world rarely infringed upon their small haven, but it was clear from the small armies of soldiers passing through, that times of upheaval were upon them all. Raiders and soldiers alike had been

trafficking more human souls from this small bastion of life and it was rapidly getting hollowed out. That made both thieving and hiding far more challenging than when this was a bustling crossroads of civilian traders.

Procyon had been caught in the midst of their usual method of deceptive theft. Gomeisa wasn't sure if the soldiers had seen him purloin the tasty flat breads or if they'd simply been grabbing any person without means and throwing them into the back of the wagon, but either way it amounted to the same thing. She was alone again, and all she knew was that Procyon had been hauled away to the East, with a small contingent of other men. She hoped he would not be turned into a soldier, although there were far worse options. It was just that he was still relatively small and exceptionally doe-eyed, and she suspected men like that tended to not last through many battles.

Years passed and Gomeisa remained fierce and free. She grew further, but not much. Her body remained lithe and little, and most saw her still as the child she no longer was. Without Procyon, she still ate, but not as well. And she still slept under the noontime sun, but not as deeply and always alone.

One day like any other, Gomeisa awoke to a spear at her throat, and three soldiers with unfamiliar regalia standing around her in her hideaway. She was no fool. She knew what happened to women in situations like this, and so she frantically struggled and was quickly subdued. And yet, in the broad daylight, she was mistaken for a scrawny man. After being dragged into the central square towards one of a few small rickshaws, she spoke for the first time and the military men realized their mistake, but simply bundled her up alongside the other men, women, and children in the small wagon headed West out of town.

Days of perilous travels and travails befell the small caravan of riders and captives, but they ultimately reached their goal. To Gomeisa's eyes it was a massive city of terracotta burnished almost to gold, but the reality was far more modest. All of the slaves were immediately forced to wash and scour. With skin gleaming as it never before had, she was brought to the center of this trading hub and put up on a raised platform with her fellow victims.

The day was hot and there was no relief from the noontime sun, yet Gomeisa felt cold at the thoughts of what lie ahead. The afternoon got even toastier, as many of her fellow slaves were bought off by what appeared to be wealthy traders or businessmen. The women wept as the purchasers insulted their naked forms, while simultaneously groping their breasts with rapacious hands. Yet she alone was left unmolested.

One debonairly attractive man, with ring adorned fingers, attempted to carelessly pinch her nipple and she bit out at him with bared fangs, barely grazing his knuckles. Gomeisa was struck suddenly in the back of the head and careened to the wooden platform floor. Blood dripped slowly down her short black hair and seeped into the knots and grains of the decking. She was pulled up by a large hand on her throat and found the frighteningly beautiful man staring back at her.

Gomeisa thought maybe a smile would redeem her, but it was rapidly undercut by her furious, feral eyes and the man gave a quick nod. Multiple hands grabbed hold of her and locked her in position. In a mercifully quick motion, a razor-edged saber cut through the four fingers on her right hand, midway up their length, leaving only her thumb intact. The gorgeous gentleman strode away with a quick turn of his heel and his henchmen followed closely behind, but

Gomeisa was unaware of all that. The blood was streaming out of her fingers and forming an iron red sea. It was mesmerizing.

She must have passed out, for Gomeisa awoke in a dirty hovel with a middle-aged man looking over her. Gomeisa instinctively backed away and attempted to aim a kick at his head, but was far too drained of life to do anything more than pull her knee slightly off the bleak floor. She saw that her destroyed hand had been cleaned and wrapped. When he saw her looking, the man nodded in acknowledgment. Instead of approaching her and taking what she assumed he must want, the silent shadow simply walked away. It might have been delirium, but Gomeisa could have sworn that as soon as he exited the house, he turned into an exquisite ibis and flew directly up into the night sky.

When she awoke, Gomeisa was alone in a strange shack in a town where she was an unwanted interloper. Even the men appeared not to want anything to do with the one-handed monster. That was okay, even with a single upper limb to fully articulate, she would figure out a way to steal. It was her trade, and she was an artisan. Her bandaged hand hurt less than expected and Gomeisa trundled away to locations unknown, prior to the rise of the warmth-bringing sun. She intended to remain free.

How long she stayed in the trading town, Gomeisa failed to keep track. Thievery was tough work in this place. The watchmen were far more vigilant and numerous than she was accustomed to and there were already skilled thieves in the area with a proper five fingers per hand. Pickings were slim, though not nonexistent.

Eventually though, Gomeisa found herself needing food more than she could bear. She walked to the only brothel in town and talked with the owner, who she was surprised to find was a kind



elderly man, whose hands never wandered in her direction. The caretaker told Gomeisa that she could ply the trade only if she brought in her own customers. She was responsible for that, and, for a fee, he would provide the walls for husbands to hide their nocturnal trysts behind. He instructed her on typical payments and suggested that she start much lower.

Wandering around at night was familiar comfort to Gomeisa, but this was different. She'd attempted to use ashes to rub around her eyes like the rich women with their kohl, but one brief glance at her reflection in a basin of water indicated a very different result. Gomeisa then spent the entire night trying to sell herself, eventually ending up in complete undress with utter desperation. The men she encountered did not mock her and did not want her. They politely said "no" in a fashion far worse than any mocking they could have thrown her way. That made her furious at the gods above for cursing her with this horrendous face with its vicious eyes.

Morning's bright sun emerged over the resplendent amber sands, to find poor Gomeisa alone and curled up at the base of the selfsame wooden platform where she had lost the ends of her fingers. Had she looked at the light wood, she would have found a large round spot permanently stained dark with her own lifeblood.

A covered palanquin marched through the square, leading a small parade of horses and carts on their way out of town. One of the escorting soldiers kicked out a boot at Gomeisa's sleeping form and she impulsively reached out and tried to drag him down into the dust with her. His companions roared with laughter at her unexpected success. She furiously drove her right fist down at his unhelmeted head, a horrendous mistake given the state of her fingers. It was Gomeisa and not the soldier that regretted the punch, and yet she had surprised and embarrassed him. With Gomeisa screaming in agony, the man stood and unsheathed his sword, to either chop

her to pieces or smash her with its flat side, she knew not which. A voice, soft and clear, rang out from the ornate, carried litter, bidding the soldier to stop.

Other hands grabbed Gomeisa and drew her to that slave born vessel. A quick word signified that she would be kept as this wealthy woman's slave, and she was thrown onto the back of a camel with a young soldier. They immediately left for the East upon a hard packed trade road, with no attempt made to bind Gomeisa in any way. The singing sands would take care of her if she attempted to run. She remembered precious little of the journey, only that water and small amounts of food were administered to her at regular intervals. At some point her hand was bound with fresh cloth.

Gomeisa finally awoke in longer stretches to discover herself ensconced in a sick bed. When, within a few days, she was able to walk, she found that she was trapped in a veritable Eden, a garden world unlike anything she had ever imagined. A mute serving woman took her to get proper clothes for the first time in her life and then escorted her to a formal meeting with her wealthy masters.

Immediately she recognized the seated man being cooled by servants with fronds of palm. He had taken her thieving hands away from her. Gomeisa would kill him if she could. She had never killed, never injured other than in self-defense, but this man, Gomeisa vowed she would murder. He laughed immediately at seeing her feral eyes and mutilated hand. Good. He too remembered.

His wife on the other hand, Gomeisa found far more interesting. She was undoubtably beautiful as well, though not nearly as much as her absolutely breathtaking husband. Yet there was something in her appearance, a timeless loveliness, that Gomeisa knew in her heart that she

herself totally lacked. Gomeisa would pay anything to be this woman, except then she'd have to be married to that amoral monster of a soon dead man.

Gomeisa was summarily dismissed by the fabulously wealthy owners of the villa and sentenced to toil in the garden rather than as a household servant. They did not want her horrendous visage anywhere near their own transcendent beauty, not even for contrast. Yet it turned out to be a blessing for Gomeisa. The work was hard enough, but she was left largely to her own thoughts, as long as her work got completed, and slept in a little shed outside with the non-speaking serving woman. They were rejected even by the other slaves, lower than low. And yet the garden loved Gomeisa and she loved it. Caring for the plants was a delight. She embraced the fertile soil with her hands and it cared not how mangled they were or how hideous her face was.

The serving woman turned out to be exceptionally kind. She would regularly bring Gomeisa extra food from the house and expected nothing in return. Once in a great while, Gomeisa would be able to sneak a lovely flower from the garden back into their shed and the her friend would stick it in her own hair with delighted giggles. Gomeisa was eternally grateful for this companion, even though they never spoke in words. And she suspected the feeling was mutual.

Working underneath the towering terracotta walls, one day Gomeisa heard a lovely song lilting over the tall barrier. It was a man's voice singing something in a foreign tongue that sounded like a melancholic lullaby, something devastatingly full of soul, yet plain and true. She desperately wanted to call out, but to interrupt that simple song felt like a profanity against all that was good, and so she held her peace.

For weeks, the song echoed achingly over the dividing wall, more often than not, and Gomeisa grew accustomed to its cadence and rhythms. She could hear too, the sounds of shovel and rake,

and assumed that her mysterious friend was a botanical worker as well. One fearless day, when no guards were to be seen, Gomeisa softly joined in the melody, not loud enough that the man would hear, but sufficient that she could hear her own voice follow along with the unknown words. She had never sung before and Gomeisa immediately realized that the gods had also not blessed her in that regard. Yet she tried nonetheless and, unbeknownst to her, Gomeisa started to sing louder every day when the watchers were on break. She badly wished she could turn into an ibis herself and fly over the sturdy wall, but wings she had not, nor means of escape.

The unknown gardener, on the other side of the edge of the world, must have been totally unaware of her existence for a time. Yet eventually during one of his melodies, he came to an immediate, abrupt stop. For one moment, Gomeisa feared that he'd been hurt and that she'd never hear the song again. Then a voice called over the barrier, telling her that she had a lovely voice and he had simply paused to listen. It was untrue she thought, but Gomeisa was flattered and flustered.

As the days past, they furtively sang together and even managed quick glimpses of conversation. Gomeisa learned that her hidden friend had been a manservant for years and had been relegated to the garden for attempting to steal from his foreign master. Only his right hand remained. She explained her own mangled appendage and they softly laughed, but were cut off by the passing of a guard on his side of the partition, and he burst back into song to obscure their conversation from wagging ears.

One day, the songbird gardener asked for her name and she duly obliged. A strange pause greeted Gomeisa then and she whispered her own one-word question back over the wall.

“Procyon?” A mournful, yet joyous, affirmative was replied, and stifled tears and sniffing would have been heard by anyone in the vicinity, but there was no one around.

The pair desperately want to see each other, to make themselves whole again. Knowing that the other was alive filled them with love and happiness, but one solid object stood between them, and it would always remain. Procyon and Gomeisa started chiseling at the wall, slowly and carefully, mixing the terracotta flakes in with the soil of the plants. Days went by, weeks even. Til one day, Gomeisa’s iron shovel made a metallic clank against one from the opposite side. Their holes had perfectly aligned.

On both sides, the hole was carefully hidden behind tropical plants of exquisite variety. It was hard to say whose master was richer given the plethora of amazing colors, but at this point that was all lost on the heart twins. They could finally see each other and what was more, they could reach their intact arms through and clasp hands.

Procyon had grown. Though Gomeisa would still classify him as small, he was broad chested now and fully a man. His one remaining arm had sinuous muscle that proved it was doing the work of two. And his face had matured as well. A dark, well managed beard crept across his visage. Those eyes, they at least remained the same. They were the glowing orbs of honey that had gazed back at her all those years ago, looking out gratefully from a fearless face in a dark and dusty bazaar, far, far away.

He called Gomeisa beautiful. The way he said it, she knew it wasn’t a pleasantry or a false kindness. It was true with every fiber of his being and every timbre of his symphonic voice. Gomeisa hadn’t truly known what blushing felt like until that moment. She returned the compliment, and he too turned a smiling shade of red. He then told her that her raging eyes of

fire were tranquility to him, since they signified the fierceness with which she would always protect him. It was hard for Gomeisa to even respond to that. Her heart tore out of her chest with warmth, because she knew what he said to be true.

The particular spots in their gardens nearest the hole became the most well-tended in the whole of the imperial capital. The plants grew rich and strong there, from careful cultivation and from exposure to the loving words being traded back and forth. The bounty on Gomeisa's olive tree against that wall was prolific, and Procyon cared for figs on his side that were beyond compare. Love flowed all around them and it influenced their surroundings too. Procyon's master even came by once and Gomeisa heard her heart friend graciously receive compliments and the promise of an extra food ration for his work, something nye unheard of.

Yet the lovers were doomed from the start. Eager to perform at the highest level for her delicate mistress, the silent servant had gradually noticed something strange in Gomeisa's behavior and near constant joy. She began to watch her glowing friend on occasion, from the humid shadows. The servant was too far away to hear voices, but once, when Gomeisa returned to the shed for the evening, the serving maid examined where Gomeisa had been standing and found the bore hole in the wall. And then it was all over.

That last day, Gomeisa and Procyon started their conversation early. They softly sang as one and talked of their times together and of idyllic shared futures if ever they could escape these earthen walls. They professed their undying love for each other and their deep, unendurable longing. And it was pure and good.

Fateful masters suddenly intervened, striding out of the massive main houses in concert.

Procyon and Gomeisa both immediately knew their deaths were preordained. So, they did the

only thing they could do. Gomeisa thrust her good arm through the hole to meet its only partner, and fingers immediately interlaced with the furious tightness of love. Procyon began to sing the awesomely sad lullaby and Gomeisa added her voice in redounding harmony.

Onlookers say that the two lovers continued to sing, even when their arms were cut off at the stumps. Blood sprayed like fountains and coated both sides of the balustrade and the plants around them. As the pair lay dying on the fertile ground with wall between, a blinding light sprung forth on both sides of the wall, and each soul shot forth into the heavens like a miniature comet. Only as the light disappeared did their mournful song stop and everyone, including their executioners, began to weep for its loss.

When the showers of tears stopped, the ground where they fell was left barren. No bodies remained, only two interlocked arms passing through the small hole in the otherwise unbroken wall. Getting the dead fingers unclasped required two strong soldiers pulling from each side of the dividing wall. Once separated, the arms too immediately became ethereal nothingness, only a small cloud of dust falling to the plant covered floor.

In the years since, their masters and their ancestors have tried to grow their crops and their bulbs in those same gardens of plenty. Yet nothing will grow. Seeds fail to sprout, seedlings wither and die, even full bushes and trees crumble quickly to dry desert dust. The land is cursed by the strongest of elements: love.

Yet in the sky, something new appeared that night. Two stars so near they can slightly touch, but never near enough to fully be as one, divided by many light years of space. Gomeisa and Procyon. Procyon and Gomeisa. The locals call them the lovers or the twin souls. On Earth one shines brighter than the other and on Ember it is the reverse, but the wisest among those ancient

people well knew the most important truth: that together they shine brighter than ever they could alone.