

# OBELISK GATE

THE BROKEN EARTH: BOOK TWO

N. K. JEMISIN

#### orbitbooks.net

orbitshortfiction.com



#### **Begin Reading**

#### **Table of Contents**

#### A Preview of THE BROKEN EARTH: BOOK THREE

#### A Preview of WAKE OF VULTURES

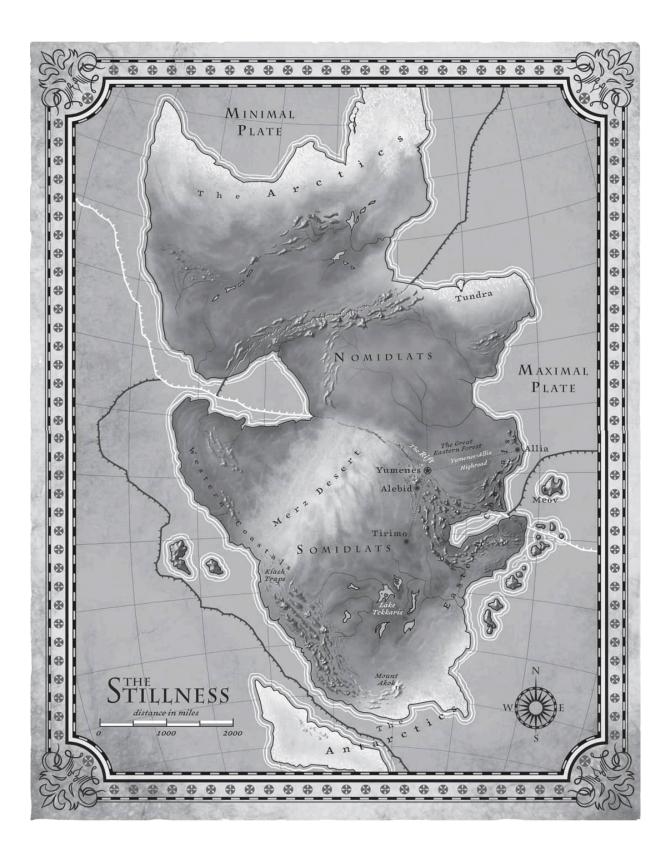
**Orbit Newsletter** 

#### **Copyright Page**

Hachette Book Group supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact permissions@hbgusa.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

# To those who have no choice but to prepare their children for the battlefield



## Nassun, on the rocks

 $\mathbf{H}_{\mathrm{MM}}$ . No. I'm telling this wrong.

After all, a person is herself, and others. Relationships chisel the final shape of one's being. I am me, and you. Damaya was herself *and* the family that rejected her *and* the people of the Fulcrum who chiseled her to a fine point. Syenite was Alabaster *and* Innon *and* the people of poor lost Allia and Meov. Now you are Tirimo *and* the ash-strewn road's walkers *and* your dead children... and also the living one who remains. Whom you will get back.

That's not a spoiler. You are Essun, after all. You know this already. Don't you?

Nassun next, then. Nassun, who is just eight years old when the world ends.

There is no knowing what went through little Nassun's mind when she came home from her apprenticeship one afternoon to find her younger brother dead on the den floor, and her father standing over the corpse. We can imagine what she thought, felt, did. We can speculate. But we will not *know*. Perhaps that is for the best.

Here is what I know for certain: that apprenticeship I mentioned? Nassun was in training to become a lorist.

The Stillness has an odd relationship with its self-appointed keepers of stonelore. There are records of lorists existing as far back as the long-rumored Eggshell Season. That's the one in which some sort of gaseous emission caused all children born in the Arctics for several years to have

delicate bones that broke with a touch and bent as they grew—if they grew. (Yumenescene archeomests have argued for centuries over whether this could have been caused by strontium or arsenic, and whether it should be counted as a Season at all given that it only affected a few hundred thousand weak, pallid little barbarians on the northern tundra. But that is *when* the peoples of the Arctics gained a reputation for weakness.) About twenty-five thousand years ago, according to the lorists themselves, which most people think is a blatant lie. In truth, lorists are an even older part of life in the Stillness. Twenty-five thousand years ago is simply when their role became distorted into near-uselessness.

They're still around, though they've forgotten how much they've forgotten. Somehow their order, if it can be called an order, survives despite the First through Seventh Universities disavowing their work as apocryphal and probably inaccurate, and despite governments down all the ages undermining their knowledge with propaganda. And despite the Seasons, of course. Once lorists came only from a race called Regwo—Westcoasters who had sallow-reddish skin and naturally black lips, and who worshipped the preservation of history the way people in less-bitter times worshipped gods. They used to chisel stonelore into mountainsides in tablets as high as the sky, so that all would see and know the wisdom needed to survive. Alas: in the Stillness, destroying mountains is as easy as an orogene toddler's temper tantrum. Destroying a people takes only a bit more effort.

So lorists are no longer Regwo, but most of them tint their lips black in the Regwo's memory. Not that they remember why, anymore. Now it's just how one knows a lorist: by the lips, and by the stack of polymer tablets they carry, and by the shabby clothes they tend to wear, and by the fact that they usually do not have real comm names. They aren't commless, mind. In theory they could return to their home comms in the event of a Season, although by profession they tend to wander far enough to make returning impractical. In practice, many communities will take them in, even during a Season, because even the most stoic community wants entertainment during the long cold nights. For this reason, most lorists train in the arts—music

and comedy and such. They also act as teachers and caretakers of the young in times when no one else can be spared for such duty, and most importantly they serve as a living reminder that others have survived worse through the ages. Every comm needs that.

The lorist who has come to Tirimo is named Renthree Lorist Stone. (All lorists take the comm name Stone, and the use name Lorist, it being one of the rarer use-castes.) She is mostly unimportant, but there is a reason you must know of her. She was once Renthree Breeder Tenteek, but that was before she fell in love with a lorist who visited Tenteek and seduced the thenyoung woman away from a boring life as a glass-smith. Her life would have become slightly more interesting if a Season had occurred before she left, for a Breeder's responsibility in those times is clear—and perhaps that, too, is what spurred her away. Or maybe it was just the usual folly of young love? Hard to say. Renthree's lorist lover eventually left her on the outskirts of the Equatorial city of Penphen, with a broken heart and a head full of lore, and a wallet full of chipped jades and cabochons and one shoeprint-stained lozenge of mother-of-pearl. Renthree spent the mother-of-pearl to commission her own set of tablets from a knapper, used the jade chips to buy traveling supplies and to stay at an inn for the days it took the knapper to finish, and bought many strong drinks at a tavern with the cabochons. Then, newly outfitted and with wounds patched, she set out on her own. Thus does the profession perpetuate itself.

When Nassun appears at the way station where she has set up shop, it's possible that Renthree thinks about her own apprenticeship. (Not the seduction part; obviously Renthree likes older women, emphasis on women. The foolish dreamer part.) The day previous, Renthree passed through Tirimo, shopping at market stalls and smiling cheerfully through her black-daubed lips so as to advertise her presence in the area. She did not see Nassun, on her way home from creche, stop and stare in awe and sudden, irrational hope.

Nassun has skipped creche today to come and find her, and to bring an offering. This is traditional—the offering, that is, and not teachers' daughters

skipping creche. Two adults from town are already at the way station, sitting on a bench to listen while Renthree talks, and Renthree's offering cup has already been filled with brightly colored shards faceted with the quartent's mark. Renthree blinks in surprise at the sight of Nassun: a gangly girl who is more leg than torso, more eyes than face, and very obviously too young to be out of creche so early when it isn't harvest season.

Nassun stops on the threshold of the way station, panting to catch her breath, which makes for a very dramatic entrance. The other two visitors turn to stare at her, Jija's normally quiet firstborn, and only their presence stops Nassun from blurting her intentions right then and there. Her mother has taught her to be very circumspect. (Her mother will hear about her skipping creche. Nassun doesn't care.) She swallows, however, and goes to Renthree immediately to hold out something: a dark chunk of rock, embedded in which can be seen a small, almost cubical diamond.

Nassun doesn't have any money beyond her allowance, you see, and she'd already spent that on books and sweets when word came that a lorist was in town. But no one in Tirimo knows that there's a potentially excellent diamond mine in the region—no one, that is, except orogenes. And then only if they're looking. Nassun's the only one who's bothered in several thousand years. She knows she should not have found this diamond. Her mother has taught her not to display her orogeny, and not to use it outside of carefully proscribed practice sessions that they undertake in a nearby valley every few weeks. No one carries diamonds for currency because they can't be sharded for change easily, but they're still useful in industry, mining, and the like. Nassun knows it has some value, but she has no inkling that the pretty rock she's just given to Renthree is worth a house or two. She's only eight.

And Nassun is so excited, when she sees Renthree's eyes widen at the sight of the glittering lump poking out of the black hunk of rock, that she stops caring that there are others present and blurts, "I want to be a lorist, too!"

Nassun has no idea what a lorist really does, of course. She just knows that she wants very very much to leave Tirimo.

More on this later.

Renthree would be a fool to refuse the offering, and she doesn't. But she doesn't give Nassun an answer right away, partly because she thinks Nassun is cute and that her declaration is no different from any other child's momentary passion. (She's right, to a degree; last month Nassun wanted to be a geneer.) Instead she asks Nassun to sit, and then she tells stories to her small audience for the rest of the afternoon, until the sun makes long shadows down the valley slope and through the trees. When the other two visitors get up to head home, they eye Nassun and drop hints until she reluctantly comes with them, because the people of Tirimo will not have it said that they disrespected a lorist by letting some child talk her to death all night.

In the wake of her visitors, Renthree stokes up the fire and starts making dinner from a bit of pork belly and greens and cornmeal that she bought in Tirimo the day before. While she waits for dinner to cook and eats an apple, she turns Nassun's rock in her fingers, fascinated. And troubled.

In the morning she heads into Tirimo. A few discreet inquiries lead her to Nassun's home. Essun's gone by this point, off to teach the last class of her career as a creche teacher. Nassun's gone off to creche, too, though she's biding her time till she can escape at lunchtime to go find the lorist again. Jija's in his "workshop," as he calls the offset room that passes for the house's basement, where he works on commissions with his noisy tools during the day. Uche is asleep on a pallet in the same room. He can sleep through anything. The songs of the earth have always been his lullaby.

Jija comes to the door when Renthree knocks, and for an instant she's a little taken aback. Jija is a Midlatter mongrel, same as Essun, though his heritage leans more toward the Sanzed; he's big and brown and muscular and bald-shaven. Intimidating. Yet the welcoming smile on his face is wholly genuine, which makes Renthree feel better about what she's decided to do. This is a good man. She cannot cheat him.

"Here," she says, giving him the diamond rock. She can't possibly take such a valuable gift from a child, not in exchange for a few stories and an apprenticeship that Nassun will probably change her mind about in a few months. Jija frowns in confusion and takes the rock, thanking her profusely after he hears her explanation. He promises to spread the tale of Renthree's generosity and integrity to everyone he can, which will hopefully give her more opportunities to practice her art before she leaves town.

Renthree leaves, and that is the end of her part in this tale. It is a significant part, however, which is why I told you of her.

There was not any one thing that turned Jija against his son, understand. Over the years he simply had noticed things about his wife and his children that stirred suspicion in the depths of his mind. That stirring had grown to a tickle, then an outright irritant by the point at which this tale begins, but denial kept him from worrying at the thought any further. He loved his family, after all, and the truth was simply... unthinkable. Literally.

He would have figured it out eventually, one way or another. I repeat: *He would have figured it out eventually.* No one is to blame but him.

But if you want a simple explanation, and if there can be any one event that became the tipping point, the camel straw, the broken plug on the lava tube... it was this rock. Because Jija knew stone, you see. He was an excellent knapper. He knew stone, and he knew Tirimo, and he knew that veins of igneous rock from an ancient volcano ran all through the surrounding land. Most did not breach the surface, but it was entirely possible that Nassun could by chance find a diamond sitting out where anyone could pick it up. Unlikely. But possible.

This understanding floats on the surface of Jija's mind for the rest of the day after Renthree leaves. The truth is beneath the surface, a leviathan waiting to uncurl, but the waters of his thoughts are placed for now. Denial is powerful.

But then Uche wakes up. Jija walks him into the den, asking him if he's hungry; Uche says he isn't. Then he smiles at Jija, and with the unerring sensitivity of a powerful orogene child, he orients on Jija's pocket and says, "Why is shiny there, Daddy?"

The words, in his lisping toddler-language, are cute. The knowledge that

he possesses, because the rock is indeed in Jija's pocket and there's no way Uche could have known it was there, dooms him.

Nassun does not know that it started with the rock. When you see her, do not tell her.

When Nassun comes home that afternoon, Uche is already dead. Jija is standing over his cooling corpse in the den, breathing hard. It doesn't take a lot of effort to beat a toddler to death, but he hyperventilated while he did it. When Nassun comes in, there's still not enough carbon dioxide in Jija's bloodstream; he's dizzy, shaky, chilled. Irrational. So when Nassun pulls up sharply in the doorway of the den, staring at the tableau and only slowly understanding what she sees, Jija blurts, "Are you one, too?"

He's a big man. It's a loud, sharp blurt, and Nassun jumps. Her eyes jerk up to him, rather than staying on Uche's body, which saves her life. The gray color of her eyes is her mother's, but the shape of her face is Jija's. Just the sight of her pulls him a step away from the primal panic into which he has descended.

She tells the truth, too. That helps, because he wouldn't have believed anything else. "Yes," she says.

She's not really afraid in this moment. The sight of her brother's body, and her mind's refusal to interpret what she's seeing, have frozen all cognition within her. She's not even sure what Jija is asking, since understanding the context of his words would require her to acknowledge that what stains her father's fists is blood, and that her brother is not merely sleeping on the floor. She can't. Not right then. But absent any more coherent thought, and as children sometimes do in extreme situations, Nassun... regresses. What she sees frightens her, even if she does not understand why. And of the two of her parents, it is Jija to whom Nassun has always been closer. She's his favorite, too: the firstborn, the one he never expected to have, the one with his face and his sense of humor. She likes his favorite foods. He's had vague hopes of her following in his footsteps as a knapper.

So when she starts crying, she does not quite know why. And as her

thoughts skirl about and her heart screams, she takes a step toward him. His fists tighten, but she cannot see him as a threat. He is her father. She wants comfort. "Daddy," she says.

Jija flinches. Blinks. Stares, as if he has never seen her before.

Realizes. He cannot kill her. Not even if she is... no. She is his little girl.

She steps forward again, reaching out. He cannot make himself reach back, but he does hold still. She grabs his nearer wrist. He stands straddling Uche's body; she can't grab him around the waist the way she wants. She does, however, press her face against his bicep, so comfortingly strong. She does tremble, and he does feel her tears sliding down his skin.

He stands there, breath gradually slowing, fists gradually uncurling, while she weeps. After a time, he turns to face her fully, and she wraps arms around his waist. Turning to face her requires turning away from what he's done to Uche. It is an easy movement.

He murmurs to her, "Get your things. As if you were going to spend a few nights with Grandma." Jija's mother married again a few years back and now she lives in Sume, the town in the next valley over, which will soon be destroyed utterly.

"Are we going there?" Nassun asks against his belly.

He touches the back of her head. He's always done this, because she's always liked the gesture. When she was a baby, she cooed louder when he cupped her there. This is because the sessapinae are located in that region of the brain and when he touches her there, she can perceive him more completely, as orogenes do. Neither of them has ever known why she likes it so much.

"We're going somewhere you can be better," he says gently. "Somewhere I heard of, where they can help you." Make her a little girl again, and not... He turns away from this thought, too.

She swallows, then nods and steps back, looking up at him. "Is Mama coming, too?"

Something moves across Jija's face, subtle as an earthquake. "No."

And Nassun, who was fully prepared to go off into the sunset with some

lorist, effectively running away from home to escape her mother, relaxes at last. "Okay, Daddy," she says, and heads to her room to pack.

Jija gazes after her for a long, breath-held moment. He turns away from Uche again, gets his own things, and heads outside to hitch up the horse to the wagon. Within an hour they are away, headed south with the end of the world on their heels.

\* \* \*

In the days of Jyamaria, which died in the Season of Drowned Desert, it was thought that giving the lastborn to the sea would keep it from coming ashore and taking the rest.

-From "The Breeder's Stand," lorist tale recorded in Hanl Quartent, Western Coastals near Brokeoff Peninsula. Apocryphal.

# <u>you, continued</u>

### A what?" you say.

"A moon." Alabaster, beloved monster, sane madman, the most powerful orogene in all the Stillness, and in-progress stone eater snack, stares at you. This has all of its old intensity, and you feel the will of him, the stuff that makes him the force of nature that he is, as an almost physical rider on that stare. The Guardians were fools to ever consider him tame. "A satellite."

"A what?"

He makes a little sound of frustration. He's completely the same, aside from being partially turned to stone, as the days when you and he were less than lovers and more than friends. Ten years and another self ago. "Astronomestry isn't foolishness," he says. "I know you were taught that, everyone in the Stillness thinks it's a waste of energy to study the sky when it's the ground that's trying to kill us, but Earthfires, Syen. I thought you would've learned to question the status quo a little better by now."

"I had other things to do," you snap, just like you always used to snap at him. But thinking of the old days makes you think of what you've been up to in the meantime. And that makes you think of your living daughter, and your dead son, and your soon-to-be-very-ex-husband, and you flinch physically. "And my name is Essun now, I told you."

"Whatever." With a groaning sigh, Alabaster carefully sits back against the wall. "They say you came here with a geomest. Have her explain it to you. I don't have a lot of energy these days." Because being eaten probably takes a toll. "You didn't answer my first question. Can you do it yet?"

Can you call the obelisks to you? It is a question that made no sense when he first asked it, possibly because you were distracted by realizing he was a) alive, b) turning to stone, and c) the orogene responsible for ripping the continent in half and touching off a Season that may never end.

"The obelisks?" You shake your head, more confused than refusing. Your gaze drifts to the strange object near his bed, which looks like an excessively long pink glassknife and feels like an obelisk, even though it cannot possibly be. "What do—no. I don't know. I haven't tried since Meov."

He groans softly, shutting his eyes. "You're so rusting useless, Syen. Essun. Never had any respect for the craft."

"I respect it fine, I just don't—"

"Just enough to get by, enough to excel but only for gain. They told you how high and you jumped no further, all to get a nicer apartment and another ring—"

"For privacy, you ass, and some control over my life, and some rusting respect—"

"And you actually *listened* to that Guardian of yours, when you don't listen to anybody else—"

"Hey." Ten years as a schoolteacher have given your voice an obsidian edge. Alabaster actually stops ranting and blinks at you. Very quietly, you say, "You know full well why I listened to him."

There is a moment of silence. Both of you take this time to regroup.

"You're right," he says, at length. "I'm sorry." Because every Imperial Orogene listens—listened—to their assigned Guardian. Those who didn't died or ended up in a node. Except, again, for Alabaster; you never did find out what he did to his Guardian.

You offer a stiff nod of truce. "Apology accepted."

He takes a careful breath, looking weary. "Try, Essun. Try to reach an obelisk. Today. I need to know."

"Why? What's this about a still-light? What does—"

"Satellite. And all of it's irrelevant if you can't control the obelisks." His

eyes are actually drifting shut. This is probably a good thing. He'll need his strength if he's to survive whatever is happening to him. If it's survivable. "Worse than irrelevant. You remember why I wouldn't tell you about the obelisks in the first place, don't you?"

Yes. Once, before you ever paid attention to those great floating half-real crystals in the sky, you asked Alabaster to explain how he accomplished some of his amazing feats of orogeny. He wouldn't tell you, and you hated him for that, but now you know just how dangerous the knowledge was. If you hadn't understood that the obelisks were amplifiers, *orogeny* amplifiers, you would never have reached for the garnet to save yourself from a Guardian's attack. But if the garnet obelisk hadn't been half-dead itself, cracked and stuffed with a frozen stone eater, it would have killed you. You didn't have the strength, the self-control, to prevent the power from frying you from the brain on down.

And now Alabaster wants you to reach for one deliberately, to see what happens.

Alabaster knows your face. "Go and see," he says. His eyes shut completely then. You hear a faint rattle in his breath, like gravel in his lungs. "The topaz is floating somewhere nearby. Call it tonight, then in the morning see..." Abruptly he seems to weaken, running out of strength. "See if it's come. If it hasn't, tell me, and I'll find someone else. Or do what I can myself."

Find who, to do what, you can't even begin to guess. "Will you still tell me what all this is about?"

"No. Because in spite of everything, Essun, I don't want you to die." He takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly. The next words are softer than usual. "It's good to see you."

You have to tighten your jaw to reply. "Yeah."

He says nothing more, and that's enough of a goodbye for both of you.

You get up, glancing at the stone eater who stands nearby. Alabaster calls her Antimony. She stands statue-still in the way they do, her too-black eyes watching you too steadily, and though her pose is something classical, you think there's a hint of irony in it. She stands with head elegantly tilted, one hand on her hip and the other upraised and poised with the fingers relaxed, waving in no particular direction. Maybe it's a come-hither, maybe it's a backhanded farewell, maybe it's that thing people do when they're keeping a secret and want you to know it, but they don't want to tell you what it is.

"Take care of him," you say to her.

"As I would any precious thing," she replies, without moving her mouth.

You're not even going to start trying to interpret that. You head back toward the infirmary entrance, where Hoa stands waiting for you. Hoa, who looks like an utterly strange human boy, who is actually a stone eater somehow, and who treats you as his precious thing.

He watches you, unhappily, as he has done since you realized what he was. You shake your head and move past him on your way out. He follows, at a pace.

It's early night in the comm of Castrima. Hard to tell since the giant geode's soft white light, emitted impossibly from the massive crystals that make up its substance, never changes. People are bustling about, carrying things, shouting to each other, going about their usual business without the necessary slowdown that would occur in other comms with the reduction of light. Sleeping will be difficult for a few days, you suspect, at least until you get used to this. That doesn't matter. Obelisks don't care about the time of day.

Lerna's been politely waiting outside while you and Hoa met with Alabaster and Antimony. He falls in as you come out, his expression expectant. "I need to go to the surface," you say.

Lerna makes a face. "The guards won't let you, Essun. People new to the comm aren't trusted. Castrima's survival depends on it remaining secret."

Seeing Alabaster again has brought back a lot of the old memories, and the old orneriness. "They can try to stop me."

Lerna stops walking. "And then you'll do what you did to Tirimo?"

Rusting hell. You stop, too, rocking a little from the force of that blow. Hoa stops as well, eying Lerna thoughtfully. Lerna's not glaring. The look on his face is too flat to be a glare. Damn. Okay.

After a moment, Lerna sighs and comes over. "We'll go to Ykka," he says. "We'll tell her what we need. We'll *ask* to go topside—with guards if she wants. All right?"

It's so reasonable that you don't know why you didn't even consider it. Well, you know why. Ykka might be an orogene like you, but you spent too many years being thwarted and betrayed by other orogenes at the Fulcrum; you know better than to trust her just because she's Your People. You should give her a chance because she's Your People, though.

"Fine," you say, and follow him to Ykka's.

Ykka's place is no larger than yours, and not distinct in any way despite being the home of the comm headwoman. Just another apartment carved by means unknown into the side of a giant glowing white crystal. Two people wait outside of its door, however, one leaning against the crystal and another peering over the railing at the expanse of Castrima. Lerna takes up position behind them and directs you to do the same. Only fair to wait your turn, and the obelisks aren't going anywhere.

The woman gazing out at the view glances over and looks you up and down. She's a little older, Sanzed, though darker complected than most, and her bushel of hair is ashblow with a slight kink to it, making it a frizzy cloud instead of just a coarse one. Got some Eastcoaster in her. And Westcoaster, too: Her gaze is through epicanthic-folded eyes, and it is assessing, wary, and unimpressed. "You the new one," she says. Not a question.

You nod back. "Essun."

She grins lopsidedly, and you blink. Her teeth have been filed to points, even though Sanzeds supposedly stopped doing that centuries ago. Bad for their reputation, after the Season of Teeth. "Hjarka Leadership Castrima. Welcome to our little hole in the ground." Her smile widens. You stifle a grimace at the pun, though you're thinking, too, after hearing her name. It's usually bad news when a comm has a Leadership caste that isn't in charge. Dissatisfied Leaders have a nasty habit of fomenting coups during crises. But this is Ykka's problem to deal with, not yours.