

# REBORN

## Worlds in Flames

By

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Umschlaggestaltung: Connor William Dodgson  
Lektorat / Korrektur: Stacey Goitia

Druck und Vertrieb im Auftrag der Autorin/des Autors:  
Buchschniede von Dataform Media GmbH  
Julius-Raab-Straße 8  
2203 GroÙebersdorf  
Österreich

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ISBN:  
978-3-99192-183-7 (Paperback)  
978-3-99192-037-3 (Hardcover)  
978-3-99192-182-0 (E-Book)



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## Chapter One - Light of the Ancestors, Kotoran

As for every beginning of a new time cycle, the Kotori, the inhabitants of the planet Kotoran, gathered around their ancient sacred site in the midst of what they called the Great Green Ocean, a seemingly-endless forest spanning most of the supercontinent. The hub itself was a tranquil glade with meagre vegetation alongside dried-out grass, shrubbery, and shrivelled-looking trees.

Most of the plants appeared to consist of silicon with varying shades of green, red, and brown. A pond was nestled amid the clearing, surrounded by some rocks of various shapes and sizes. On one side of the pond, a narrow dirt path with its roots somewhere in the forest meandered through the grass, ending in front of a feeding trough next to the pond. The trough was decorated with partially-weathered, overgrown symbols, patterns, and carvings of deer-like animals scattered throughout.

Kotori from different tribes from far and wide gathered at this site at the same time each year, laying down all means of harm and dispute to bring forth their offerings to the Soul of the Great Green Ocean, which was one of their gods, the Silver Stag, Ovanya. The gathering could last for several days as the stag had its own will and was the one to introduce the beginning of the new

year with his mighty roar. While all Kotori present waited for Ovanya's first call, there was time to trade, exchange stories, and meet possible mating partners from different tribes.

To avoid disturbing Ovanya's walk of life, the camp had to be set up on the opposite side of the pond, where the stone trough was located. The Kotori themselves stood about one metre tall and were avian beings with broad, short, down-curved beaks. Most of the time, they walked on two shorter legs with two talons pointing forward and one pointing backwards, while their upper limbs were slightly longer and had an additional claw that bent back. Their upper limbs served as arms most of the time and only as extra legs when they needed to move fast to escape danger.

The tiny wings located on their backs only provided them with the ability to fly for short distances since they were too underdeveloped to handle longer intervals. They wore simple clothes made of local, plant-based fabric, which varied in appearance across tribes and among individuals of different ages. Female Kotori feathers were primarily dark brown or grey, with some exceptions of lighter colours. At the same time, their male counterparts were bright in different colours and various patterns scattered all over their plumage. Their eyes were fully-coloured in either crimson red or olive green.

For a few days, there was a colourful hustle and bustle among the trees and forest floor behind the pond as thousands of Kotori set up their camps and engaged in various activities together. Ntori, a dark grey-feathered member of one of the southern tribes, was chosen to lay down their offering in front of the Silver Stag this year. Being allowed to do so was a lifetime opportunity which she held in high regard. At the age of five, she

had just become an adult earlier that year, and it was the second gathering she had been a part of.

At the last meeting, a young male of her age, just beginning to develop his vibrant colours and patterns, caught her attention, and she has not forgotten him since. Ntori spotted him right after she arrived at the gathering, and since he would also soon be an adult, she was ready to start a fight for their lifelong bond. For Kotori males, it was usual to flaunt their feathers and dance in the rain of life for the females at the gathering, who would then choose their lifetime partners and, if necessary, fight over them. It was why only unbound males were allowed to take part in the gathering, as there was the possibility of already-bound males being robbed from the female Kotori who had claimed them.

On the fifth day of the gathering, Ntori grew impatient and wanted to claim her future partner before the ceremony even began, but her shy nature kept her from even getting near her desired male. Over and over, she tried to hop over to his tribe's campsite and make a move, but ended up sitting in the thicket close beside it, observing him. Her best friend, Anglu, noticed her struggle and took her place next to her, shoving away some branches to clear the needed space.

‘You do remember that you are not allowed to claim him until the ceremony, right?’ Anglu lectured in a quiet but sharp voice. ‘You could get the entire tribe into trouble.’

Ntori winced as she realised she was not alone. ‘Why are you following me?’ she replied, upset. ‘He and I will join a newly-established tribe anyway, where I will become the matriarch one day.’

‘I never doubted that, and I will follow you, but at least for now, you still have to honour the traditions!’ Anglu answered with a concerned voice.

Ntori, who was now letting her gaze wander across the night sky, did not seem to agree with her. The light of the stars reflected in her green eyes. ‘Not all of them. Some of them are just holding us back.’

A questioning look from her best friend met her. ‘What do you mean, Ntori?’

‘Look up into the sky and tell me, what do you see?’

Anglu did as she was told, and through the scraggy leaves, a clear night sky spanned her field of sight, filled with the gleam of countless stars shimmering in the far distance. ‘Our ancestors, watching over us and guiding us wherever we go.’

‘That’s what we are expected to believe, but don’t you think there could be more behind those lights. I, for my part, want to see what lies beyond the lands we know and explore places which the lights, whatever they are, might lead me to.’

‘You have always been a dreamer, Ntori.’ The slightly older Kotori girl glanced back at her friend and smiled. ‘But that’s why I like you so much. Let’s get back to our camp, it’s getting late.’

Anglu’s red eyes were still fixed on Ntori while she waited for a reaction. Minutes passed, and Anglu’s dark brown feathers started vibrating slowly while she wondered what was going through Ntori’s mind. Finally, Ntori got up and led her friend back to their camp, oblivious to what was happening around her.

Two more days of waiting passed until one morning, a deep, long roar could be heard echoing through the forest for



several minutes. The Kotori climbed onto the trees surrounding them to get a better view of the glade. The only ones to stay on the ground were those chosen to bring forth the offerings.

After another short period of waiting, a majestic stag with black-dotted silver fur, beautifully-formed large antlers, four intense, amber-coloured eyes, and a height at the shoulder of at least two metres appeared between the trees, making its way along the dirt path. Steady, with graceful motion, it approached the trough until it stopped a few steps ahead of it. It observed the Kotori sitting in the trees for a while until it made a second, shorter roar.

For the Kotori, this was the sign to slowly come forward, one after another, and place their offerings in the trough. Tribesmember after tribesmember brought down either crafted goods or food of the various regions of the continent before their god. Just as Ntori provided the scrumptious fruits from the south from her own tribespeople, the stag began moving closer.

Scared, Ntori did not know what to do. She just stood there, rooted to the spot. Ovanya made a halt right in front of her while still examining her closely.

Both of them stared at each other until the stag retracted one of his forelegs and bowed to Ntori. Cautiously, she reached for Ovanya's head and started petting him. At the very moment Ntori's and Ovanya's bodies touched for the first time, the stag's eyes commenced to glow in a teal sheen while cohesive smoke began emitting from beneath them.

In a trance, Ntori could not stop looking into the magical eyes. The longer she gazed into them, the clearer it became to her what she glimpsed. In the midst of the solely teal eyes, a spiral

nebula formed, presenting its details in different shades of blue and green to her. Losing control over her body, she sank to the ground, her sight still pointed at the eyes of the stag. Ovanya lay down beside her, shoving her onto his chest so she would not lie on the floor.

The rest of the Kotori did not know what was going on and started mumbling to each other. Some of them climbed down from the trees and slowly moved closer towards the unusual happening. For Ntori, the time seemed to have slowed down until she could no longer feel her body. As her breathing grew ever faster, a deep but friendly voice addressed her in her mind.

‘Stay calm, my child,’ said the voice. ‘There is nothing to be frightened of. Let me show you the secrets you want to know so dearly.’

With these words, Ntori drifted off to sleep. For a few moments, silence lay over the treetops until a third, longer roar echoed through the wood. The trees trembled, and the very ground beneath them began to shake. All over the continent, birds emerged from the canopy and scattered in all directions.

The vibration in the environment grew more intense by the minute, and the trampling of thousands of hooves getting ever closer was heard. The Kotori knew what this meant and hastily ascended back onto the trees to get to safety. Moments later, a herd of countless yellow-golden, glittering deer, each of them slightly smaller than Ovanya himself, dashed out of the thicket. They began to run in circles inside the clearing, dashing between the trees around it.

During this act, the deer shook their bodies, releasing the glitter from their fur and spreading it into the night sky and into

all directions. Shiny golden clouds formed above the forest, slowly expanding over the entire continent until it was the deer's time to end their dance again. This time, they would not stop and leave, but all of them calmed down and started grazing around the Kotori, who did not dare to get back down from the trees.

Only when the last of the deer lay down as Ovanya had done before did the Kotori join them and sit beside them. They watched the cloudy sky and waited for the yearly display of their world's beauty. The New Year's rain began to fall slowly, growing heavier over time, until the trees surrounding the meadow straightened, growing to three times their original size and losing their wrinkles.

Various plants and flowers not be seen before grew instantaneously all over the glade, the forest, and beyond its borders. Every piece of vegetation shone in vibrant colours, brightening up the night and causing the starlight to fade. The Kotori started their annual celebration, feasted, and kept dancing and singing long into the night while the deer had already fallen asleep hours before.

For the Kotori and the entirety of their homeworld, this was the most important event of the year, as it would only rain for this one night. The rainfall provided the vegetation with the pollen brought by the herd and the nutritious water it would need to sustain itself for the whole year. The only one of the Kotori who did not join the celebration was Ntori, who continued to sleep beside Ovanya, dreaming of distant worlds and stories lost in time.

While sitting on Ovanya's back, Ntori felt free like never before. They travelled across the stars for aeons, traversing the

borders of entire galaxies. She wished their journey would never end as she gazed at all the wonders the universe had to offer. Believing she had seen it all after every stop, Ovanya surprised her with something new every time. He showed her civilisation's rise and fall from a distance. She even saw the birth and death of stars. Only during a certain period did it seem like everything they passed was blurry and distorted. Like someone had erased all the knowledge from that time.

When she asked Ovanya if he knew what was going on, he had no answer. He only understood whenever he seemed to get a grasp of what had happened, he immediately forgot it again, and his head started to hurt. The further they travelled, the sparser their surroundings got. When they had left behind the last sources of light for ages, a glow began to become visible in her line of sight, which was more beautiful than anything she had ever seen.

As they drew closer, the intensity grew and a warmth filled her body, making her feel loved and safe. When they finally reached the light source, Ovanya reared before it and bowed. He greeted it, calling it the Ancient One, and began to speak in a language Ntori could not understand, as if to an old friend.

The Ancient One answered with a soft voice, asking Ovanya who his friend was. After Ovanya had finished introducing them, he galloped away, leaving Ntori far from home. She looked out for him, questioning how she would get home now. The mild voice of the Ancient One could be heard, and her body slowly spun around to face them.

'Ntori, my dear. Ovanya has told me that he foresaw you leading your kind to the stars, which you call your ancestors. Do you feel ready for this task?'

Ntori looked at the Ancient One, confused. ‘I would love to, but I don’t know how. Will you tell me how to do so, Ancient One?’

A soft laugh could be heard, making Ntori smile, slightly embarrassed.

‘No, I will not. Every species has to find its way on its own, but Ovanya has sensed an opportunity to get closer to achieving the goal set by him.’

Excited, she opened her eyes wide. ‘What kind of opportunity? Will our wings grow strong enough to carry us beyond the sky?’

Amused by her innocence, the Ancient One smiled. ‘I would celebrate in your name for outdoing physical evolution in such a short amount of time. In all my time as the Everlight, I have not seen such a rapid development of biological bodies. Be patient, my dear. You will see soon enough. Now go forth and make Ovanya smile on you.’

Ntori started to extend her claws in excitement. ‘But I can’t do so yet! I am meant to lead a newly-established tribe. Additionally, I must first plan how to bring the love of my life under my wing. And I can’t just ignore our traditions, I have to honour them. Some of them, at least.’ Her head sank, disappointed by her own words.

A string of radiating light arising from the Everlight straightened her head again. ‘Chained to ancient beliefs, tormented by thoughts, and limited by duty, a spirit is never untethered to blossom like a flower in spring. Do you know what happens to flowers that do not bloom?’

Ntori shook her head, waiting for the answer.

‘They die.’

With these words, Ntori got dragged back. Slowly, she drifted away from the Everlight, giving her some time to think about what was to come. Ideas began to swirl through her mind about what could happen so that her people would travel to the stars. Her pace increased as she travelled past all the wonders Ovanya had shown her before. Glancing at everything once more made her realise that some of the places had changed in the meantime.

Some of the planets Ntori had seen before seemed to be inhabited now, star formations had changed, and black holes swallowed entire parts of galaxies. Ovanya appeared beside her, matching her speed with ease. His eyes were shining brighter than before as he galloped next to her in complete silence.

The voice of the Everlight appeared in Ntori’s mind once again. ‘Trust in Ovanya’s wisdom as he is the one who travels between the ages, have faith in your people’s strength, but most importantly, believe in yourself, Ntori. You will find your destiny among the stars, which carry the light of all that ever lived.’

Her body slipped onto Ovanya’s back, where she stayed without holding onto him. Still filled with the Everlight’s warmth, Ntori’s body grew tired, and she drifted off to sleep, looking forward to seeing her friends and family again. Even though Ntori’s soul had left her body just moments ago, it had travelled through the millennia of the universe’s existence. Ovanya had shown Ntori his secret of eternity, and she would never again forget about all the beauties the universe had to offer.

Ntori woke up as something tugged on her feathers. Opening her eyes, she realised she had slept far longer than usual,

as Urtha, the goddess of light, and her little brother, Ortha, were already smiling down on her from way up in the sky. All the vegetation had lost its glimmer colours again and would not retrieve them until the following year's rain.

Instead, it varied in different darker shades, ranging from green to brown and even red, while the stems of the plants always had a lighter tone of the same colour. Just when she started to look around, she noticed a Ronkle sitting in the grass beside her, trying to catch a bug crawling onto her with its tiny trunk. Ronkles were small mammals with black eyes and ears, which were a quarter the size of their spherical bodies. Their tail matched the length of their trunk, but was way thinner. They mostly hopped around in open spaces on their slim legs, which ended in paws of the same length.

The little creature gasped and jumped away when Ntori started moving. The Ronkle straightened its trunk in Ntori's direction, making warbling noises and clearly demanding the insect still sitting on her shoulder. Ntori lay down on the ground to give the little animal a better chance of catching the bug and chuckled as the Ronkle sucked in its prey and started dancing while spinning its trunk above itself.

Ntori sat up again and leaned back against Ovanya, who immediately snuggled up to her. The Ronkle hopped on Ntori's legs and started squirting at Ovanya from its trunk, making her fall over from laughter. She gestured to their new friend to join them and named him Notu. In the meantime, the other Kotori of her tribe were already gathering their belongings and newfound partners to leave.

Some Kotori of the other tribes had joined hers after witnessing what had happened the day before. Ntori realised she had missed the dance of colours and, thereby, the chance to claim her preferred partner. She rushed to her tribespeople, searching for Anglu. When she finally found her friend between the trees, she stopped in front of her, out of breath. ‘Did he get chosen by someone?’ she asked nervously.

Anglu turned around, her feathers vibrating momentarily as she saw Ntori. It took her some time to realise what Ntori was speaking about. ‘He was one of the first ones to be claimed,’ she answered cautiously

‘And what about you?’ Ntori continued, visibly disappointed. ‘Have you claimed an adventurous chosen one?’

Anglu tucked her beak into her feathers, so Ntori had a hard time understanding her. ‘None of interest, not at the dance this year.’

‘Don’t worry. There will be one next year for sure, and then you can claim him,’ Ntori encouraged her friend, scratching against Anglu’s feathers slightly with her claws.

Behind Ntori appeared Ovanya and Notu standing on his antlers. Notu started bouncing and squirting at Anglu with his trunk.

While Ntori laughed and tried to tell Notu to stop, Anglu took a step closer. ‘It seems you have found not only one, but two new friends, Ntori,’ she exclaimed, squeaking.

Ntori nodded and began to tell Anglu about what had happened, but Ovanya seemed to get nervous. He bumped into Ntori repeatedly and tried to push her to different groups of Kotori. Slightly annoyed, she tried to go back until she finally



realised why he acted the way he did. ‘You are right. I have to make up for my promise. Can you help me reach everyone before they are too far away?’

With a swift motion, Ovanya grabbed Ntori with his mouth and swung her on his back. Just as Ovanya started carrying her to the first group, dashing through the thicket, Ntori turned her head towards Anglu. ‘I’ll tell you what’s going on later. Take care of Notu until we are back.’

Anglu looked around and found Notu lying on his back, squirting everywhere in anger. ‘You must have fallen off Ovanya’s antlers. Are you hurt?’ She picked him up and started patting him, which resulted in him stopping to squirt as he snuggled in her arms.

In no time, Ovanya took Ntori to the first group so she could explain to them what she had seen. She asked the group to join her tribe with all their people and described to them where they would have to go to find their village in the south. They decided to follow her call, as even Ovanya trusted her. After they had said farewell to the other Kotori, Ntori leaned forward to pet Ovanya.

‘Thank you for helping me, Ovanya. Let’s get going. We still have a lot of other tribes to inform.’

Ovanya rushed through the forest, carrying her to all the Kotori groups, even those who had already left early in the morning. They succeeded in convincing all the tribes and subsequently caught up with Ntori’s twelve tribespeople. The journey back to their village took them more than a month, during which they roamed through forests and across meadows.

Ovanya helped them carry their supplies and wares over every river and even defended them when their camp got attacked by wild animals in the middle of the night. A herd of about fifty deer followed them on their entire way and, in the end, settled down near Ntori's home village, which was located on the edge of a forest near a river. Ntori's tribe celebrated her return on the back of the silver stag.

The travellers were happy to return to their village of wooden stilt houses, which looked like big Ronkles without a trunk or tail. Due to the permanent presence of the deer, the tribe's crops grew bountiful and extensive, resulting in supplies that far surpassed the needs of the few hundred Kotori. They knew they would soon have a lot of Kotori to feed, so they decided to store most of their harvest in their granaries.

Over the coming months, the tribe worked hard to expand the village so that all Kotori who would join them would have houses waiting. They even constructed a theatre with enough space to fit a thousand Kotori. To inaugurate the newly-built construction, they celebrated with a play and music under the night sky.

Every month, they harvested more crops, filling their granaries to the brim, and constructed an increasing number of houses. They were well prepared when other tribes began to join them. After two-thirds of all tribes had arrived, Ntori was declared the matriarch of everyone.

It was at this time that Ovanya spoke to her again in her mind with a calm voice when she was taking him out for a ride. 'You have united most of your people already. I am proud of you, Ntori. Many of them wanted to leave when they saw that their

enemies were also here, but you stood your ground and managed to bring peace to your world.'

Ntori chirped happily at his words and started to stroke him. 'Thank you, Ovanya. I couldn't have done it without you.'

Ovanya threw his head back in delight. 'I want to share some technology with you that other civilisations around the universe use at your stage of development,' he continued. 'You just have to let me enter deeper into your mind.'

Ntori could feel Ovanya's aura washing over her and gave in to him. He showed her how to build simple irrigation systems, produce enhanced tools, and some other information he deemed necessary for their future. She slowly regained her senses. 'Where do you know all this from?' she asked cautiously.

'I have travelled the universe countless times,' Ovanya's voice appeared in her mind once more. 'I have seen civilisations rise and fall over the course of the ages. And during these excursions, I have learned a lot, as you can imagine, after our little detour.'

'Really? You must be very old then, or even faster than I have seen you travel. Please, tell me more about your adventure.'

Ntori could not stop her excitement, so Ovanya had to restrain her. 'I will do so, my child. Just not yet. You have much to learn first. This brings me to the last gift I will give to you. A portion of my power. It will serve you well, Ntori.'

The teal smoke emitting from his eyes formed a thin thread and entered hers. Ntori jumped off his back, feeling charged and energised. Slowly, she looked at him, excited. 'Does this mean I will be able to run as fast as you now?'

Ovanya shook his head.

‘Does it mean I will be faster than before, at least?’ Ntori continued questioning.

Ovanya walked around her and pushed her from behind so that she would start running. After a few metres, her eyes flashed in a silver light and for a split second, she moved faster than light, allowing her to traverse a few metres in an instant. Ntori gasped. It took her a moment to realise what had happened. She turned around to look back at him. ‘Thank you, Ovanya. I love it!’

He just nodded in approval and kept observing her while she played around with her newly-gained time skip ability, blinking over the far meadow, one skip after another.