

The Fifth Season



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF N. K. JEMISIN

N. K. Jemisin was born in Iowa and raised by her mother in Alabama and her father in New York City. Growing up, she was close with her cousin W. Kamau Bell, who is now a comic and CNN host. Jemisin went on to study psychology at Tulane University and counseling at the University of Maryland, and has worked as a counseling psychologist alongside her writing career until 2016, when she raised funds through Patreon to allow her to write full-time. A member of several writing groups, Jemisin published her first novel in 2010, *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, which was also the first book of her award-winning Inheritance trilogy. All three novels of her Broken Earth trilogy (of which *The Fifth Season* is the first) won Hugo Awards for Best Novel, making her the first Black writer to win in that category. Jemisin received the MacArthur Genius Grant in 2020, and continues to live and work in Brooklyn, New York, writing novels, short stories, and articles.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Fifth Season takes place in an entirely invented world, but the novel's themes draw from many cultures and events throughout history. Perhaps most notable is the comparison between anti-orogene oppression and anti-Black racism in America, with its long history beginning with the Atlantic trade of enslaved people from the 1500s to the mid-1800s, all the way through the Jim Crow laws beginning in the late 1800s and contemporary issues like mass incarceration. The frequent apocalyptic "Seasons" of the Stillness (some of them caused by orogenes) also relate to human-affected climate change on Earth, which largely began with the Industrial Revolution was first recognized in the late 1800s. Many experts believe that global climate change will fundamentally affect, and is already affecting, our survival on this planet.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Fifth Season is the first novel of the Broken Earth trilogy, followed by *The Obelisk Gate* and *The Stone Sky*, which follow the same characters and plot line. Much of Jemisin's work also shares many themes with that of Octavia Butler. Butler was a pioneer of Black speculative fiction, and her novels *The Parable of the Sower* and *The Parable of the Talents* particularly relate to *The Fifth Season*, as both are set in apocalyptic worlds facing crises of racism, climate catastrophe, and economic collapse. Other notable figures in the Black science fiction tradition are Samuel R. Delany, author of *Dhalgren* and *Babel-17*, and Nalo

Hopkinson, author of *Skin Folk* and *Brown Girl in the Ring*. Despite its fantastical elements and multi-culture and species characters, Jemisin's work (like Butler's) is often also grouped into the Afrofuturist genre, which includes works like Nancy Farmer's *The Ear, The Eye, and the Arm* and Ta-Nehisi Coates' *The Black Panther* comics.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Fifth Season
- **Where Written:** Brooklyn, New York
- **When Published:** 2015
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Speculative Fiction
- **Genre:** Speculative Fiction, Science Fantasy
- **Setting:** The supercontinent called the Stillness and its surrounding islands
- **Climax:** The Guardian attack at Meov
- **Antagonist:** Jija, the Guardians, anti-orogene oppression
- **Point of View:** Essun's sections are written in the second person and Damaya and Syenite's in the third person, all of them from the perspective of a first-person narrator

EXTRA CREDIT

Inspiration. As part of her research for the Broken Earth trilogy, Jemisin took a volcano tour of Hawaii, wanting to experience first-hand a landscape and society frequently disrupted by seismic activity.

Pioneer. Jemisin is the first author to win the Hugo Award for Best Novel three times in a row—once for each book of the Broken Earth trilogy.



PLOT SUMMARY

The Fifth Season is set on a supercontinent called the Stillness that is constantly rocked by seismic activity, some of it devastating to civilization and causing an extended winter referred to as a "Fifth Season." The story is split into three separate narratives. One, narrated in the second person, follows a middle-aged woman named Essun from a small town called Tirimo. The other two are narrated in the third person and follow a young girl named Damaya and a woman in her early twenties named Syenite. Eventually, these three characters are revealed to be the same person at different stages of her life, though the chapters rotate between the three and are all narrated in the present tense.

An unnamed man and a mysterious being called a stone eater

look out over Yumenes, the largest city on the Stillness. The man is an orogene, which means that he can draw energy from the earth and other living things and use it to manipulate seismic events—yet orogenes are also classified as non-human and are violently discriminated against. The man uses his power to break the Stillness in two, beginning a new Fifth Season.

In Essun's first main section, she comes home to find her young son, Uche, beaten to death by Essun's husband, Jija, who is now gone along with their daughter, Nassun. Essun shuts down in her grief and sits with Uche's body for two days, in the meantime sensing the massive earthquake from Yumenes passing by and diverting it away from her town using her orogeny. Essun knows that Jija probably killed Uche when he discovered that the boy was an orogene. She resolves to leave Tirimo before the townspeople kill her as well, but as she heads through the gate, one of the guards fires a crossbow at her. Letting her rage and grief consume her, Essun uses her orogeny to kill everyone around her and destroy part of the town. Then she sets out to find Jija and Nassun, hoping that her daughter is still alive and planning on killing her husband. Soon she encounters a strange child who introduces himself as Hoa and who starts traveling with her. Somehow Hoa seems to be able to sense the presence of orogenes and to know where Nassun is, and Essun decides to let him lead her to her daughter.

Damaya's narrative opens with her family trying to get rid of her, having just discovered that she is an orogene. Soon, a man arrives whom Damaya thinks is going to buy her as a slave. However, he reveals himself as a Guardian named Schaffa who has come to take Damaya to Yumenes, where she will be trained at the Fulcrum—the home of all official orogenes. On the road to Yumenes, Schaffa explains that Guardians exist to protect the world from the orogenes' terrible power. Damaya argues that she can control her own power, and to test this, Schaffa breaks the bones in her hand. She is able to refrain from using orogeny despite the terrible pain, and Schaffa tells her that he only hurts her because he loves her, and because it is necessary.

Syenite is a young orogene at the Fulcrum who has achieved the rank of four rings out of a possible ten. She is assigned to travel to the coastal town of Allia and clear their harbor of a coral blockage, but also to conceive a child with Alabaster, the only living ten-ringed orogene, who will be accompanying her. Alabaster has been forced to father children with other orogenes many times. Though he and Syenite immediately dislike each other, they set out on their journey, having sex every night. As they travel, Alabaster questions everything that Syenite has been taught at the Fulcrum: about orogeny, the history of the Stillness, and the "**stonelore**" that everyone in the Stillness is taught as the knowledge necessary to survive Fifth Seasons. One evening, Alabaster senses an impending volcano hundreds of miles away and uses his orogeny to quiet it, while also dragging Syenite along with him. Immediately

afterwards, he insists that they go to the "node station" above the hot spot—node maintainers are orogenes spaced out throughout the Stillness to quell seismic activity within their range. When Syenite and Alabaster reach the node station, they find everyone inside dead, and Syenite learns what node maintainers really are: orogenic children who have been mutilated and sedated so that their orogeny constantly works to quiet earthquakes nearby, but who have no free will or consciousness of their own. This particular node maintainer was awakened for the sake of someone's sexual fantasy, and in its suffering, the child caused the spontaneous hot spot to appear. Alabaster suggests that the node maintainer was also one of his children, whom he has never met.

Essun and Hoa travel together for a while until they encounter a strange woman named Tonkee, who seems to be a kind of scientist, and they are attacked by a kirkhusa—a large animal usually kept as a pet but that turns violent during a Fifth Season. The kirkhusa bites Hoa and he transforms the animal entirely into stone, killing it. After this, Tonkee starts traveling with them. All the while, ash has been falling from the sky, and refugees keep flowing in from the north. Everyone starts to realize that a Fifth Season has begun. Hoa tells Essun that he can sense a place where many orogenes have gathered, and that Nassun might be there.

Syenite and Alabaster reach the town of Allia. On their first night, Alabaster is seemingly poisoned and about to die. But then Syenite feels him drag her orogeny along with his own into a mysterious environment filled with crystal light, which Alabaster uses to find the contaminant within his body and vomit it up. The next day, Alabaster is still recovering, so Syenite goes to clear Allia's harbor herself. But she discovers that under the obstructing coral is something massive that she cannot perceive at all. Allia's leaders decide that she should move the obstruction anyway, but when she does, a huge crystal **obelisk** suddenly rises from the water. It is shattered at its middle, and there seems to be a dead stone eater trapped inside it. Afterward, Alabaster tries to explain that they are in danger because others now know that Syenite can make contact with obelisks. As they are trying to speak discreetly, a Guardian named Edki appears. He somehow negates both of their orogeny, stabs Alabaster, and then moves to kill Syenite. In her panic, she sends her orogeny into the nearby broken obelisk, which shatters.

Damaya is now living as a "grit" (a young, untrained orogene) at the Fulcrum. Her new life is rigidly structured, and the grits are often physically punished. The other grits bully her, but Damaya is able to find the original culprit, a girl who she thought was her ally. A year passes, and Damaya excels at her studies while also using her free time to explore the grounds and buildings. One day, a strange girl slips in among the grits and introduces herself to Damaya as Binof: she isn't an orogene and is, in fact, a member of one of the most powerful families in

the Stillness. But she has snuck into the Fulcrum to try to discover something hidden in its central building. Damaya agrees to help her, and together they find their way to a massive chamber with a six-sided pit at its center. Binof tells Damaya that this is supposedly where the obelisks were first made. A Guardian quickly discovers them, however. She separates the girls and then seems to be taken over by another identity when she is talking to Damaya. Schaffa enters and kills the Guardian, tearing something out of the back of her head. He tells Damaya that if she is to survive, she needs to immediately take the test for her first ring as an orogene. Damaya agrees to do this and says that she has chosen a name for if she passes: Syenite.

After a long journey, Essun, Hoa, and Tonkee reach a town called Castrima, where the orogenes have all gathered. At first it seems abandoned, but then they meet its leader, an orogene called Ykka who has a mysterious power to call other orogenes toward her. Stone eaters have been drawn to the place as well. It seems that Jija and Nassun aren't there after all, and Essun briefly breaks down and almost loses control of her orogeny. Ykka then brings them underground, where the real Castrima exists inside a massive geode. It is ancient and beautiful, built among the geode's enormous crystals, and its systems of air and water somehow run on orogeny. Settling in, Essun soon realizes that Tonkee is actually Binof, who has continued studying the obelisks, and that Hoa is actually a stone eater who has somehow made himself look and act like a human. Alabaster is in Castrima as well, and he's asking for Essun.

Syenite and Alabaster wake up on an island called Meov, a hundred miles off the coast of the Stillness. A stone eater named Antimony, whom Alabaster knows, brought them there to save their lives. They soon discover that when the obelisk shattered at Allia, it caused a massive volcano that destroyed the city and killed everyone nearby. Syenite and Alabaster meet the people of Meov, who live communally, make their living by piracy, and celebrate orogenes, making them leaders instead of killing them. Syenite and Alabaster soon begin a polyamorous relationship with one of Meov's leaders, a massive, charismatic orogene named Innon. Syenite gives birth to Alabaster's child, whom they name Corundum, and they live happily on Meov for two years, with Innon acting as a second father to the baby. Eventually Syenite grows restless and asks to join Innon on one of his raiding missions. At sea, they rob a cargo ship, and Syenite uses her orogeny to assist in the mission. Afterwards, she asks that they sail near to Allia. The city is now just a massive volcano, but in a powerful display orogeny, Syenite seals up the hole where the broken obelisk punctured the earth's crust.

Syenite returns to Meov, and three weeks later, Guardian ships attack the island. Alabaster uses his power to stop them for a while—but when they fire cannons at him, Antimony drags him down into the earth, and he disappears. Despite Syenite, Innon,

and the Meovites' best efforts, the Guardian ships eventually break through and attack, and a Guardian gruesomely murders Innon. Schaffa appears and tries to take Corundum from Syenite, but in her rage and grief she smothers the baby to death and uses a nearby obelisk to cause an explosion of stone daggers to burst forth from the ocean floor, killing nearly everyone. Syenite and a few Meovites survive and make their way to the Stillness, where Syenite eventually joins the town of Tirimo and takes a new identity as Essun. Here, the narrator reveals himself as Hoa, who was drawn to Essun after she used the power of the obelisk and watched over her until he joined her on the road.

In Castrima, Essun is reunited with Alabaster. She realizes that he is the one who broke the continent and caused the new Fifth Season. She also sees that he is slowly turning into stone, which itself is being eaten by the stone eater Antimony, who still accompanies him. Alabaster requests Essun's help and asks if she has ever heard of something called the "moon."



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Essun/Damaya/Syenite – The protagonist of *The Fifth Season* is first introduced as three different characters—a young girl named Damaya, a young woman named Syenite, and a middle-aged woman named Essun. Eventually, they are all revealed to be the same person at different stages of her life, even as their narratives happen simultaneously in the book. After discovering that she is an orogene, Damaya's parents give her away to the Guardian Schaffa, who takes her to the capital city of Yumenes to be trained. There, Damaya comes to think of herself as a weapon that must be honed, but she also longs for the autonomy that older ringed orogenes have. After passing her first ring test, Damaya takes the name Syenite. As a four-ringer, she is assigned to conceive a child with the ten-ringed Alabaster. Syenite also finds that she has the rare ability to connect with the mysterious **obelisks** that float above the Stillness. Later, on an island called Meov, she enjoys a brief time of peace, having a child named Corundum with Alabaster and enjoying a polyamorous relationship with Alabaster and Innon. When Guardians attack Meov, Syenite chooses to kill Corundum rather than let him be taken as a slave. She then creates a new identity as Essun in the town of Tirimo, where she marries Jija and has a daughter and son, Nassun and Uche, both powerful orogenes themselves. These three personas show Essun's change and growth as she experiences various traumas and transitions. Overall, she is a fierce woman with a dry sense of humor and a sharp tongue, who closes herself off to most people and is often considered unlikeable, but who feels deeply and has experienced great pain. At the same time, she is an extraordinarily powerful orogene, and she develops a keen sense of the injustice of the world, sometimes letting her

resultant rage flow through her orogeny, which causes great destruction. At the novel's end, Essun is in a transitional state, still hoping to find Nassun but also reunited with the dying Alabaster and beginning to find a home in the underground comm of Castrima.

Alabaster – Alabaster is an incredibly powerful, ten-ringed orogene who becomes Syenite's mentor, reluctant lover, and friend—though the two constantly bicker and never directly admit their closeness to each other. Alabaster is described as tall and thin with extremely dark skin, and is in his 40s when he first meets Syenite. The Fulcrum instructs the two to conceive a child together as they travel to Allia to unblock its harbor. Alabaster is the highest-ranked living orogene at the time of the novel, and as he travels with Syenite, he performs feats that she never knew were possible, such as drawing power from **obelisks**, using her orogeny to aid his own, and manipulating the molecules within his own body. While she is awed by his power, Syenite is also constantly irritated by Alabaster and his unwillingness to maintain the polite facades of the Fulcrum. Instead, Alabaster is direct about the fact that orogenes are all essentially slaves, no matter how much autonomy and respect they are given. Alabaster also questions everything that Syenite has been taught, most dramatically by showing her what node maintainers really are—not orogenes condemned to a boring life, but his own incredibly powerful children who have been lobotomized to serve whoever is in power. He also reveals new details about **stonelore** and the story of Misalem and Shemshena. While he is gifted with incredible power, what Alabaster seems to want most is to live a normal life where he can be treated as a human being, fall in love, and have a family. He briefly finds this with Syenite and Innon in Meov, and has several relationships with men before this (other than the 10 Fulcrum-mandated relationships that he had with women in order to conceive children). But this is destroyed when the Guardians attack Meov, and Antimony, the stone eater who is especially fixated on Alabaster, drags him into the earth. Later, Alabaster is the one who breaks the Stillness in half, causing the current Fifth Season that will last for thousands of years. His motivations for this are left mysterious, but are at least partly born of the fact that his society's treatment of orogenes is fundamentally evil and the Sanzed Empire deserves to be destroyed. At the novel's end, Alabaster reunites with Essun in Castrima, and after his destruction of the continent his own body seems to be turning into stone, which Antimony is slowly eating.

Hoa – The narrator of *The Fifth Season*, Hoa is a stone eater who somehow makes himself look and move like a human child—though a very strange one, with extremely pale skin, hair, and eyes. He is especially fixated on Essun, and seems to transform himself so that he might travel with her and because he wants her to “like him.” As *The Fifth Season* begins, Hoa emerges from inside a geode as a small figure who slowly

begins to move and walk, and then breaks off other white and red crystals from the geode itself and begins eating them. He gathers the rest into a bundle and carries throughout the novel as his sustenance—though they are not just food for him, as he claims but does not explain, but also part of his identity and how he is able to take on a human appearance. Hoa seems to genuinely care for Essun, as he protects her from a kirkhusa by turning it into stone and also defends her from other stone eaters at Castrima, but like the rest of kind his origins and true motivations are left entirely mysterious in *The Fifth Season*. At the same time, Essun cannot help seeing Hoa as a kind and curious child, even though she knows that he is a potentially dangerous being who is probably thousands of years old. At the novel's end, Hoa reveals himself as the story's narrator, referring to Essun in the second-person and describing how he, like many other stone eaters, was first drawn to her when she drew power from the **obelisk** at Meov.

Schaffa Guardian Warrant – Schaffa is Damaya's Guardian who first comes to take her away from Palela and to the Fulcrum to be trained. A tall, sinewy man with pale skin, long dark hair, and pale “icewhite” eyes, Schaffa always wears the burgundy uniform of the Guardians and exhibits their many mysterious traits such as frequently smiling while also being ruthlessly violent. Schaffa seems to genuinely care for Damaya even as he physically hurts her, and she loves him as a father-figure for years despite the fact that she also fears him. Like all the Guardians, Schaffa is an enigmatic figure in *The Fifth Season* whose past and true motivations are unknown (though further explored later in *The Broken Earth* trilogy). At the Fulcrum Schaffa seemingly saves Damaya's life by getting her to immediately take her first ring test after being caught breaking into a forbidden chamber—thus proving her use to the Fulcrum so that they won't kill her—but he also joins the other Guardians in their attack on Meov, and tries to take Corundum away from Syenite to make the child into a node maintainer. Syenite finally turns against Schaffa in this moment, cursing him and reaching to the nearby **obelisk** for the power to destroy everyone around her—presumably including Schaffa himself.

Innon Resistant Meov – Innon, the second-in-command but de facto leader of Meov, is a massive and gregarious man who is also a “feral” orogene. The captain of the island's main pirating ship the *Clalsu*, Innon is extremely tall and broad, with his hair in braids and always wearing garish clothing. He has a booming voice and loves to boast and tell stories, but is also kind and wise and seemingly beloved by all in Meov. Upon their arrival, Innon is clearly attracted to both Syenite and Alabaster, and soon the three begin a polyamorous relationship, with both Syenite and Alabaster primarily being directly sexual with Innon but also all sharing a bed and eventually co-parenting Alabaster and Syenite's child, Corundum. As a relatively untrained orogene, Innon's powers are crude compared to Alabaster and Syenite's, but Syenite is extremely glad that he

was never taken to the Fulcrum, as the place would have robbed him of all the outsized humanity that she loves. Innon is brutally murdered by a Guardian in their attack on Meov, as a shirtless Guardian turns Innon's orogeny inward and tears him apart.

Tonkee/Binof Leadership Yumenes – Binof Leadership Yumenes is a member of one of the Stillness's most powerful families, but she rejects her family's way of life and is eventually disowned for it. She first meets Damaya at the Fulcrum, when Binof sneaks in among the other grits to try and find out more information about a secret hidden at the center of the Fulcrum—where the **obelisks** were originally built. In the years after the two girls are separated, Binof breaks the Yumenes Leadership's traditions both by wanting to become a geomest and because she is a trans woman, and so her family sends her to the prestigious Seventh University and quietly disowns her. Binof then takes the name Tonkee, continues her studies of the obelisks, and eventually tracks down Damaya (now called Essun) once more because of her connection to the obelisks. The two meet again on the road as the Fifth Season begins, though Essun doesn't recognize Tonkee at first. Tonkee decides to travel with Essun after seeing Hoa exhibit his strange powers, and they journey together all the way to Castrima, where Essun finally recognizes Tonkee as the girl from her youth. Overall, Tonkee is presented as extremely intelligent, curious, and talkative, fascinated to learn everything she can and lacking in social subtlety. At first very naïve about the world because of her privileged upbringing, in her middle age Tonkee lives as a commless (essentially homeless) woman and seems to have no perception of her own hygiene, as Essun frequently notices her odor and matted hair.

Lerna – Essun's friend and neighbor in Tirimo, Lerna is a younger man who leaves the comm for a while and returns trained as a doctor. Lerna is the only one besides her own children who knows that Essun is an orogene, but he never reveals her secret to anyone else in Tirimo. Lerna has a crush on Essun growing up, and it seems to still have lingered even when they are reunited in Castrima. A man of integrity throughout the novel, Lerna starts out polite and relatively shy but is hardened by life traveling during a Fifth Season, and seems much more world-weary when Essun meets him in Castrima.

Nassun – Nassun is Essun's daughter with Jija, born in Tirimo. She never appears in person in *The Fifth Season* (though she features heavily in later books of the trilogy), having been abducted by her father just before the events of the novel. Jija spares Nassun (a powerful orogene like her mother) for unknown reasons even after he beats Uche to death when the toddler's powers are revealed. The driving force in Essun's life after Uche's murder is to find Nassun, and she desperately clings to hope that her daughter is still alive.

Jija – Jija is a man of the Resistant use-caste who is Essun's

husband in Tirimo, and the father of her children Nassun and Uche. Jija never actually appears in person in *The Fifth Season*, but he is described as a likeable, honest man who was never violent and seemed to love his wife and children. Despite this, the novel begins just after Jija has seemingly beaten his two-year-old son Uche to death and fled with Nassun after learning that his wife and children are orogenes. Essun spends much of her plotline pursuing Jija, wanting to confront him about Uche's death and then kill him in retribution.

Uche – Uche is Essun's two-year-old son with Jija, born in Tirimo. The novel begins just after Jija has murdered Uche, presumably after the toddler accidentally revealed himself as an orogene. Uche is described as a happy, giggling child who was also an incredibly powerful orogene, apparently drawing an **obelisk** to himself even before he could speak.

Rask – Rask is the elderly headman of Tirimo, Essun's comm. When she reveals to him that she is an orogene, he admits that his sister was one as well, and was murdered as a child. He decides to personally lead Essun through the town gates so that she might leave safely, even though this will surely diminish his standing as a leader. When one of the town's guards tries to kill Essun, however, Essun kills Rask along with everyone nearby in her rage and grief.

Antimony – Antimony is a stone eater who appears as a woman with pale skin and black and dark-red hair and eyes. She is especially attached to Alabaster, occasionally visiting him for several years before saving him and Syenite from the destruction at Allia by bringing them to Meov. When Meov is being attacked by the Guardians, she drags Alabaster into the earth against his will, presumably to save his life once more. Antimony is present as Alabaster destroys Yumenes and also when Essun finally reunites with him at Castrima—but she has seemingly been eating Alabaster's limbs as they slowly turn into stone.

Corundum – Corundum, or "Coru," is Syenite and Alabaster's son, who is born on Meov and co-parented by Syenite, Alabaster, and Innon. An incredibly powerful orogene even from birth, Corundum started quelling all the micro-earthquakes in the surrounding area when he was only one year old. Desperate to save her son from being captured by the Guardians and made into a node maintainer, Syenite smothers Corundum to death before using the **obelisk** to destroy Meov.

Damaya's Mother – Damaya's mother is unnamed in the book but of the Strongback use-caste. Partly introduced as an example of the general public's attitudes toward orogenes, Damaya's mother turns against her daughter when she learns that she is an orogene, locking Damaya in the barn and giving away her things. She's even willing to sell Damaya to Schaffa when she thinks that he is there to kill Damaya. Later, Damaya realizes that her mother actually feared her more than she hated her, and did better than many other parents of orogenes

by at least reporting her and keeping her safe from murderous mobs.

Feldspar – Feldspar is an older woman and a five-ringed orogene who is Syenite’s “assigned senior” at the Fulcrum. She gives Syenite the assignment to travel to Allia with Alabaster and, though Feldspar doesn’t say it directly, to conceive a child with him. As she gives Syenite this mission, she reveals that she herself has six children, all of them presumably by the order of the Fulcrum.

Misalem – Misalem was a powerful orogene born thousands of years before the novel’s present day, who is used by the Guardians as a cautionary parable for young orogenes. Supposedly Misalem decided for no particular reason that he wanted to kill Sanze’s Emperor (Anafumeth), and murdered thousands of innocent people on his way until Shemshena, the first Guardian, was able to stop him. Misalem is thus used as a bogeyman to show that orogenes are dangerous monsters who need to be controlled by Guardians. Alabaster tells Syenite that there is more to the story, however, and that Emperor Anafumeth was a cannibal who was responsible for the murder of Misalem’s family—*this is why Misalem wanted to kill the Emperor.*

Shemshena – Shemshena was the Emperor Anafumeth’s bodyguard according to legend. She studied orogeny and figured out how to rob Misalem of his power by clearing the city of Yumenes of all its people and destroying everything that he might draw energy from. She then killed Misalem as he tried and failed to kill the Emperor. Shemshena is seen as a hero in the Stillness, and the first Guardian.

Emperor Verishe – First known as Warlord Verishe, she was a Sanzed leader during the Madness Season. In this Fifth Season the years of darkness led to a rise of mental illness in the populace, and Verishe exploited this by using psychological warfare to conquer many comms. When the Season ended, she declared herself emperor, beginning the Sanzed Empire.

The Node Maintainer – The nameless node maintainer at Mehi is one of Alabaster’s children, whom he never was allowed to meet. Like other node maintainers, he has been essentially lobotomized, sedated, and strapped into a wire chair so that he constantly uses his incredibly powerful orogeny to quiet earthquakes while having no free will or control of his own. When he is awakened from his sedation for the sake of someone’s sexual fetish, the extreme pain that the node maintainer feels causes him to kill everyone around him and create a spontaneous seismic event beneath the area.

Asael Leadership Allia – Asael is a deputy governor at Allia. She’s a very tall, dark-skinned woman who immediately scorns Alabaster and Syenite upon their arrival to the comm, treating them like servants rather than experts come to save her city’s livelihood. It takes several arguments and a subtle power struggle between her and the orogenes to finally make her

realize that the way she treats them is dehumanizing. In this way Asael is another example of how most people in the Stillness view orogenes, and how hard it is to make them understand that their views are dehumanizing and harmful. Along with the rest of Allia, Asael is killed when Allia’s **obelisk** shatters, pierces the earth, and causes a spontaneous volcano.

Maxixe – Maxixe is an older grit at the Fulcrum, originally named Arkete. One day at lunch, he joins Damaya and starts a one-sided conversation with her. She is initially wary but eventually opens up to him some, as he is likeable and gregarious. After this, however, the other grits begins a campaign of bullying Damaya, and Maxixe is involved.

Galena – Galena is one of Damaya’s instructors at the Fulcrum. When the other grits give Damaya liquor and she accidentally gets drunk, Galena discreetly takes her to his quarters to let her sleep it off. By doing this he saves her from a much harsher punishment or even death, as orogenes are strictly forbidden from drinking alcohol.

Selu/“Crack” – One of Damaya’s fellow grits at the Fulcrum, Selu is a girl whom the other grits nickname “Crack.” She is deeply unpopular and her orogeny also seems especially harsh and dangerous, as if she’s constantly on the verge of losing control. Damaya enlists her help when the other grits start bullying her, but soon it’s revealed that Crack was actually behind it all—she wanted to divert the instructors’ attention from her own struggles, and Damaya was a star student who she assumed wouldn’t be punished too harshly. It’s also suggested that Crack is addicted to alcohol, perhaps explaining the wild quality of her orogeny. After she is discovered by the instructors, Crack is taken away and never heard from or spoken of again, deepening Damaya’s distrust of the Fulcrum.

Jasper – Jasper is one of Damaya’s fellow grits at the Fulcrum. He takes part in Crack’s plot to bully Damaya, but is also seemingly sexually assaulted by one of the workers in the Fulcrum as part of a deal to get liquor for Crack and a letter for Jasper from his mother (which would otherwise be forbidden). When this is revealed, Jasper breaks down weeping in front of the other grits, and later is taken to a satellite Fulcrum in the Arctic.

Heresmith Leadership Allia – Heresmith is the lieutenant governor of Allia, an elderly woman who arrives to apologize to Syenite for Asael’s treatment of her and Alabaster. Heresmith has a dry sense of humor and treats Syenite like someone deserving of dignity and respect, and Syenite cannot help immediately liking her. Heresmith dies along with the rest of the city when the **obelisk** at Allia shatters, pierces the earth, and triggers a volcano.

Edki Guardian Warrant – Edki is a Guardian sent to assassinate Alabaster at Allia. He appears shirtless on the town’s boardwalk, ready to use the touch of his skin to turn Alabaster’s orogeny inward and destroy him. When Syenite

reveals that she was the one who actually raised the **obelisk** from the harbor, Edki turns on her instead, first stabbing Alabaster with a specialized knife to negate his orogeny and taunting him for his foolishness. In her panic, Syenite draws power from the obelisk, presumably killing Edki along with destroying the entire city of Allia.

Ykka Rogga Castrima – Ykka is the leader of the underground comm of Castrima, an untrained orogene who has given herself the use-name “Rogga.” An intimidating woman with Sanzed features and fierce eyes, Essun immediately notes that Ykka is wearing dark eyeliner even in the middle of a Fifth Season, as she is the first to confront Essun, Hoa, and Tonkee when they reach the comm. Ykka is able to use her orogeny in a mysterious way that draws both fellow orogenes and stone eaters to her, which is why so many of both have been converging at Castrima. Ykka has the difficult job of both leading a comm during a Season and adapting to Castrima’s unique environment, but she is clearly a strong woman and though Essun doesn’t yet trust her, she does respect her.

Timay – Timay is the Guardian who discovers Damaya and Binof when they break into the Fulcrum “Main” building’s secret inner chamber. As she confronts Damaya afterward, Timay’s voice changes and she seems to be possessed, ranting about Father Earth being angry and cutting Damaya’s hand with her own fingernail. Schaffa then appears and tears something out of the back of Timay’s head, apparently killing her.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Damaya’s Father – Damaya’s father, unnamed in the book but of the Resistant use-caste, goes along with his wife’s treatment of Damaya once they learn that she is an orogene.

Muh Dear – Muh Dear is Damaya’s great-grandmother. She doesn’t appear in person, but the scratchy, ugly blanket that she made for Damaya becomes associated with the young girl’s idea of home.

Chaga – Chaga is Damaya’s brother, of the Resistant use-caste like their father. He and Damaya were relatively close growing up, but like the rest of her family he thinks of her as a monster once they discover that she is an orogene.

Zab – Zab is a boy at Damaya’s school in Palela. One day, he asks to cheat off of her on a test; when she refuses, he pushes her into the mud. Reacting instinctively, Damaya almost “ices” Zab with her orogeny, thus first revealing her power.

Karra – Karra is a Strongback in Tirimo who guards the town’s gates once the Fifth Season begins. As Rask is escorting Essun out of the comm, Karra tells another guard to shoot her. Essun reacts by killing the woman, Karra, and everyone else in their vicinity.

Marcasite – Marcasite is one of Damaya’s instructors at the

Fulcrum, who is especially complimentary of her work.

Carnelian – Carnelian is a senior six-ringed orogene and one of Damaya’s instructors at the Fulcrum. He’s a large bearded man whom the grits respect and fear. He is the one present when it’s revealed that Jasper stole Damaya’s shoes but also that Crack was the one behind the bullying.

Guardian Leshet – Leshet is Alabaster’s Guardian. She doesn’t appear in person in the novel, but Alabaster did something unexplained to her to make sure that she was “no longer a threat.”

Hessionite – A ten-ringed orogene, Hessionite was one of Alabaster’s mentors at the Fulcrum, and it’s implied that the two were in a romantic relationship as well. A Guardian murdered him in front of Alabaster, using the touch of Hessionite’s skin to turn his orogeny inward and tear him apart.

Harlas – Harlas is an older man who is the official headman of Meov. He’s an untrained orogene who helped raise and teach Innon on the island.

Emperor Anafumeth – Anafumeth is the name of the Sanzed emperor whom Misalem tried to kill. Anafumeth reportedly practiced cannibalism and ordered the slaughter of Misalem’s family, causing the orogene to want revenge.

TERMS

Comm – Short for “community,” a comm is any official self-contained town or village in the Stillness. Members of the comm have their own use-castes and take the comm’s name as their own last name. “Commless” people are those whom no comm will accept. Large cities may also contain smaller comms within them.

Fifth Season – A Fifth Season is an apocalyptic period or “extended winter” that is usually caused by seismic activity or another drastic change to the environment in the Stillness. **Stonelore** and most of the cultures of the Stillness are based around surviving Fifth Seasons, though centuries might pass between them. The history of past Seasons is often obscured, but they are rumored to have begun with the “Shattering Season,” when Father Earth turned against his creations and the earth’s crust first broke in two. There have been many Seasons since then, most of them caused by earthquakes or volcanic eruptions. *The Fifth Season* describes the beginning of a new Season, one that will seemingly last for thousands of years, when **Alabaster** breaks the Stillness in half at the beginning of the novel.

Geomest – Geomest is the usual term for a scientist in the Stillness. Because the people of the Stillness focus so much on surviving Fifth Seasons and the movements of the earth, geomests generally focus on fields related to seismic activity, including the study of orogeny.

Grits – Grits are orogene children brought to the Fulcrum to be trained, before they have earned their first rings. At this point they are seen as being like grit: small pieces of rock ready to be polished, or at the very least ready to polish others and be destroyed in the process.

Guardian – Guardians are members of a mysterious order said to be founded by **Shemshena**, the **Emperor Anafumeth's** bodyguard who was able to defeat the powerful orogene **Misalem**. Guardians are assigned to watch over orogenes, but also to control them and kill them if they deem it necessary. Children of orogenes who cannot use orogeny themselves are made into Guardians via an operation on their sessapinae, which allows them to negate other orogenes' power and even turn it against the orogenes' own bodies. Few answers about the Guardians are revealed in *The Fifth Season*, but they are all presented as exceptionally skilled, dangerous, and also usually smiling.

Kirkhusa – Kirkhusas are dog-like creatures that resemble large otters, usually kept as pets or guard animals throughout the Stillness. While they are generally herbivorous and friendly, during a Fifth Season they undergo a change that makes them carnivorous and sometimes violent towards humans.

Nodes – Nodes are various points spread throughout the Stillness that Fulcrum orogenes have decided are most efficient for stabilizing hot spots and earthquakes across the continent. At each node is a node station, inhabited by an orogene node maintainer whose job is to quell any seismic activity within their range.

Orogeny – Technically, orogeny is the process in which changes are made to the earth's crust and mantle. In *The Fifth Season*, these changes are the result of direct action on the part of people called orogenes, who have the power to affect such processes themselves. Orogeny is not fully understood even in the Stillness, but in general it involves the orogene drawing kinetic energy from the earth itself or life in the "ambient" around them (within the limits of their torus), amplifying this energy, and then manipulating it to cause or quell seismic events. All of this can usually be done without any physical movement on the part of the orogene. Orogenes have larger and more developed sessapinae than other humans in the Stillness, and orogenic parents often give birth to children who share their skill. Even from birth, an orogene has incredible power and reacts instinctively to seismic events, and it is only with intensive training that they can focus and control their power. While orogenes are feared for their strength throughout the Stillness, they are also hated and treated as non-human, and when children are discovered to be orogenic, they are often murdered. Even at the Fulcrum, where the practice of orogeny is legal and supposedly exists only in service to the rest of the Stillness, orogenes are still treated as expendable and less than human. Many questions about the nature of orogeny remain by the end of *The Fifth Season*, such as

its relationship to the **obelisks** and to the origin of the Fifth Seasons themselves.

Rogga – Rogga is an offensive term for an orogene. Though it's generally considered a slur, it's widely used throughout the Stillness. Some orogenes try to reclaim the word for themselves as a use-caste name, while others believe that it is the only appropriate term for them, considering the fact that they are still technically considered non-human and essentially treated as slaves.

Runny-sack – A runny-sack is a bag containing necessities for surviving an emergency or the beginning of a Fifth Season. Most people in the Stillness keep a runny-sack hidden in their homes, so it's ready to be grabbed at any moment.

Safe – Safe is a drink made from a plant that reacts in response to any foreign substance. The drink is thus traditionally served at diplomatic meetings, as a formal way of signifying that neither party is trying to poison the other.

Sanze – Sanze was originally a nation and racial group beginning in the Equatorial regions of the Stillness, thousands of years before the events of *The Fifth Season*. Over the course of several Fifth Seasons, they conquered other comms and grew into an empire, calling themselves the Sanzed Equatorial Affiliation and increasing their power throughout the Stillness via warfare, rape, and cannibalism. Though the empire officially ceded its power to local control after centuries of domination, most comms in the Stillness still adhere to Sanzed imperial and cultural systems at the time that the novel takes place. The Sanzed race is also still considered the physical ideal by which all other human beings are measured. Sanzeds are supposed to be tall, bulky, and bronze-skinned, with "ashblow" hair, or hair that is thick, kinky, and gray-colored. All of these features are supposed to help them survive better than other races during Fifth Seasons.

Sessapinae – Sessapinae are organs that can sense seismic movements, and are located in the brain stem of all human beings living in the Stillness. Sessapinae are larger and more developed in orogenes, and a mysterious operation is performed on some children of orogenes to make them into Guardians. The verbal form of using the sessapinae is to "sess," or sense the movements of the earth.

Stone Eaters – Stone eaters are a mysterious race of non-human intelligent beings in *The Fifth Season*. Little is known about them and few humans have seen them, but they are described as looking like stone carved into the shape of a human being. Their mouths don't move when they speak, and they have frightening, faceted teeth. They also can move through solid rock as if it were air, though they are incredibly slow when moving through the actual air. **Hoa** is a stone eater who somehow has made himself seem more human so that he could travel with **Essun**.

Torus – A torus is essentially a donut-shaped form, which in *The*

Fifth Season is used to describe the area around an orogene when they use their orogeny—the orogene is in the center of the donut, and the torus forms around them. Within the torus’s limits the orogene draws power from the “ambient,” meaning anything alive or containing energy. This also means that everything within the torus is “iced” as the orogene drains it of its kinetic energy, meaning instant death for any living thing. Skilled orogenes can control their tori and even send them outside of themselves, as when **Alabaster** creates a brief torus to break open the gates of the node station.

Use- caste – Use-castes are ways of dividing people into how useful they will be during a Fifth Season. For example, members of the Resistant use- caste are supposed to be better at surviving famines, Breeders are selected for being healthy and having desirable physical traits, Innovators are meant to be intelligent problem-solvers, and Strongbacks are used for heavy labor. Even outside of a Season almost all citizens of the Stillness use their use- caste as a second name, inheriting it from their parent of the same sex, as useful traits are supposedly passed down most successfully in this way. **Damaya** is born a Strongback, then is referred to as Orogene at the Fulcrum, and when she becomes Essun she takes the use-name of Resistant.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



HIERARCHY, OPPRESSION, AND PREJUDICE

N.K. Jemisin’s science fantasy novel *The Fifth*

Season takes place in a world that often experiences

apocalyptic periods called Fifth Seasons. These “Seasons” can be separated by hundreds or even thousands of years, and most are extended winters caused by massive seismic activity of some kind. The inhabitants of this volatile and dangerous world live on a single massive continent called the Stillness, which is ruled by the remnants of the Sanzed Empire and is rigidly divided into various “use-castes” and other systems of ranking. Among these divisions are the people called orogenes, who have the power to affect seismic activity by manipulating energy, yet are also officially considered non-human and harshly discriminated against. Throughout *The Fifth Season*, Jemisin shows that such rigid hierarchical systems have negative effects on everyone that takes part in them, ultimately leading to oppression, prejudice, and the denial of other people’s humanity.

In the Stillness, privileged groups perpetuate the hierarchies and divisions that keep them in power, most notably through the example of non-orogenes treating orogenes as less than human. **Stonelore**, the ancient laws that are indoctrinated into every child in the Stillness as a means of preparing them for Fifth Seasons, holds that orogenes are monsters to be feared and despised, the children of “Father Earth” who hates humanity and punishes the Stillness with earthquakes and volcanoes. Because orogenes are classified as technically non-human, other people feel no compunction about mistreating and even killing them. The Guardians are also an order specifically formed to keep orogenes in check. As soon as young orogenes are discovered, Guardians teach them that they are dangers to society and that the Guardians have the right to hurt or kill them if it will protect others from the orogenes’ power. It is a rite of passage for a Guardian to break a young orogene’s hand as a test of how well they can control themselves, as the Guardian Schaffa does to the young orogene Damaya. Yet orogenes are obviously human, as Alabaster reminds his mentee Syenite—the fact that they are classified as non-human is just an excuse for their power to be exploited by others.

Even beyond the distinction between orogene and human, the Sanzed use racial classifications to keep the populace divided and rank each other in terms of value and desirability. Essun frequently judges people based on their physical characteristics when she meets them, and she always notes how they would seem to the average “Equatorial” (someone from the ruling cities near the continent’s equator). As Essun notes to herself, “everyone is measured by their standard deviations from the Sanzed mean,” meaning that the physical qualities ascribed to the Sanzed are seen as ideal, and any difference from those is seen as inferior. However, Alabaster reveals that it was only when the Sanzeds first took power that they started to elevate their own race above others, and they justified this with the idea that Sanzed traits are better suited to surviving Seasons. This worldview keeps the members of the general populace competing with each other rather than questioning why certain racial qualities are considered superior and others inferior.

Despite being presented as traditional and necessary, this stratification of people is directly connected to murder, rape, and genocide. Jija, Essun’s husband, kills their young son Uche as soon as he finds out that Uche is an orogene. Many orogenic children meet similar fates, Schaffa tells Damaya, and she is lucky to survive when everyone considers her kind to be dangerous monsters. Alabaster also reveals the source of the present-day idolization of Sanze: Sanze used to conquer other comms (towns), cannibalize them, and spread their own genes throughout the continent via rape, all while referring to others as lesser races deserving of their fate. In the novel’s present day, these racial hierarchies are seen as commonplace and

natural, but they are rooted in systemic violence. Similarly the word “rogga” is commonly used as a slur for orogenes, but its dehumanizing nature is based in a system that tacitly condones the murder of orogenes like Uche.

As in the real world, in *The Fifth Season* these issues must be dealt with on both an individual and structural level. Alabaster and Syenite must make arguments for their humanity in the city of Allia, noting how they are treated far differently from other guests even though they are there to save the city’s livelihood by clearing its harbor. The deputy governor who first meets them even calls Syenite a “rogga,” exposing her own deep-seated personal prejudice beneath the veneer of a diplomatic meeting. While the orogenes eventually do get some of the respect that they fight for in Allia, the novel suggests that more drastic changes need to be made to society, as well. Alabaster tells Syenite that stonelore itself has been changed over the centuries, as history and law are written by those in power and thus could be rewritten once more. This kind of drastic change often requires massive upheaval, such as changing laws and traditions like stonelore or the political hierarchies that keep Guardians in total control of orogenes. Alabaster’s “Rifting” of the continent is the most extreme possible example of this kind of upheaval. He tears the land in two and sends the capital city of Yumenes plunging into magma, literally overturning all the hierarchies that Sanze has built up over thousands of years. Though this action leads to the deaths of millions of people, the novel also questions whether or not the destruction of a fundamentally evil society is a tragedy or not.



DISASTER, VIOLENCE, AND SURVIVAL

The Stillness, the supercontinent that is the primary setting for *The Fifth Season*, is a world constantly in danger of disaster. The complete collapse of civilization is always possible due to the apocalyptic conditions of its periodic “Fifth Seasons,” which could come at any time. This reality has led society to prioritize survival above all else—and violence is generally seen as a necessary aspect of that equation, as during Seasons, only some can survive while others inevitably perish. In general, *The Fifth Season* condemns violence when it is used cruelly or to oppress others, but also suggests that violence is sometimes justified and necessary in the name of surviving disaster or fighting oppression.

From the start, the novel creates a sense of constant danger and instability in the world of the Stillness. The opening description of the continent describes the earth itself as constantly shifting like an old man in a restless sleep. To survive, the peoples of the Stillness have learned not to trust even the ground beneath their feet, as at any moment a “shake” could upend their entire lives. Most people keep “runny-sacks” full of emergency supplies stored in their homes in case they need to suddenly flee. Essun’s pragmatic and pessimistic inner dialogue also highlights the way that the people of the Stillness think

about their world—anything could collapse at any time, and their society is constructed around this fact. This makes many people desensitized to violence, as it is easily justified in the name of survival.

At the same time, the novel condemns violence in the name of maintaining power or oppressing others. The Guardians are introduced as explicitly using violence to teach orogenes that they are dangerous and second-class citizens. When Schaffa takes the young orogene Damaya away from her home to be trained, he purposefully breaks her hand—as a means of testing her control over her orogeny, but also as a lesson that she is to accept violence from her Guardian if Schaffa decides that it is necessary. Despite the practical “lesson” that Schaffa teaches through this abusive act, the narrative also highlights how Damaya is scarred by this trauma for life. In an even more horrifying example, Alabaster’s powerful orogenic children are lobotomized and made to live as machines in constant pain as node maintainers, using their orogeny without any free will of their own to still earthquakes across the Stillness. Though they are technically using their powers to prevent seismic disaster, in the process these children are brutalized beyond belief.

While *The Fifth Season* clearly condemns this kind of violent exploitation of the oppressed, the novel is more ambiguous about violence waged solely in the name of survival or fighting oppression itself. **Stonelore**—which the novel acknowledges as flawed, but which also contains knowledge that has helped humanity survive Fifth Seasons for centuries—assumes that people will turn against each other in a Season, and that the strong must survive while the weak perish. One unnamed rule is that comms (towns) will accept those people with skills useful to them, and send the rest out into the wilderness to fend for themselves—effectively a death sentence during a Season. Orogenes especially are often forced to use violence to protect themselves. As Essun is leaving the town of Tirimo, the guards attack her and she is forced to fight back to defend herself. At the same time, the novel doesn’t deny that Essun reacts disproportionately in this scene, as she kills not only the guards who tried to murder her, but also many of the townspeople, including the headman Rask who had gone out of his way to help her leave safely. Her actions are not justified, but only explained, as Essun lets her rage and grief take over and her own vast power run amok, set off by an act of simple self-defense. On the opposite side but showing similar moral ambiguity, even the people killing young orogenes usually think that they’re protecting themselves from dangerous monsters and helping their own communities. There are no clear heroes in Jemisin’s narrative, as violence is often presented as necessary or understandable but rarely moral.

Similarly, the novel’s central act of violence—Alabaster breaking the continent into two and starting a Season that will last for millennia—is neither explicitly defended nor condemned in the work. Alabaster’s words before his “Rifting”

of the Stillness, as well as his life experiences as laid out in the rest of the novel, imply that he acts in response to a broken world that is truly evil in its treatment of orogenes, and that to some degree deserves to be violently destroyed. The Rifting is an act of righteous anger and vengeance, but also the result of a society that has trained someone like Alabaster to wield such great power while also oppressing him at every turn. At the same time, Alabaster's actions cause the deaths of millions of people, many of whom have nothing to do with the ruling hierarchies of the Stillness. (The details of Alabaster's motivation are also left vague in order to point to more revelations in future books of *The Broken Earth* trilogy.) In *The Fifth Season*, his destruction of the world is mostly presented as a shocking act, one whose repercussions cannot be escaped but also have yet to be fully understood. From the start, however, the Rifting raises the novel's central questions about when violence and destruction are justified in a broken world—though Jemisin ultimately offers no easy answers.



FREEDOM

The hierarchical society of the Stillness limits the freedoms of many of its citizens in various ways.

Nearly everyone is divided into “use-castes” that determine from birth the roles that they are assigned to within their communities, and orogenes are denied their humanity and only allowed to use their abilities under the control of the Fulcrum, a self-contained order policed by the deadly Guardians. While conceding that some structure is necessary for the sake of a functioning civilization, the novel emphasizes the importance of allowing freedom on both an individual and societal level, and in the most extreme cases the book suggests that it is better to die than to live entirely without freedom.

The most obvious example of a group whose freedoms are continually denied is the orogenes—and because the novel's protagonist is an orogene, readers are made to intimately feel the injustice of this system. Under the Fulcrum's control, orogenes are placed with a Guardian who essentially has the power to decide everything about their lives, including whether they live or die. Only after years of training and earning several rings (signs of rank at the Fulcrum) are orogenes allowed any autonomy. At the same time even Alabaster, the highest ranked orogene alive, recognizes that there is essentially no difference between him and his children, the node maintainers, who are lobotomized and forced to act as orogenic tools to quiet earthquakes across the Stillness. He recognizes that the freedom granted to him and the other ringed orogenes is largely a facade, as he is still treated as an entirely expendable orogenic weapon, and the Guardians are quick to try to assassinate him when they worry that he will step out of line. At first, Syenite longs for the freedom that she sees in higher ranked orogenes like Alabaster, but she later comes to realize that Fulcrum orogenes are made to pursue this vision of

autonomy as a means of keeping them in line. By the novel's end, she has not found any real freedom at all—the best she could do was on the island of Meov, which was soon attacked by Guardians, and in Tirimo where she was forced to hide her true identity as an orogene. This, the novel implies, isn't freedom at all—but it is all that is available in an inherently oppressive society.

Further, rigid social hierarchies and prejudices restrict everyone's freedom, even those who benefit from other privileges of such systems, because restrictive roles cannot account for the full range of human expression. In the Stillness, each person is bound to a use-caste that determines their role in life. Strongbacks, for example, maintain security and do heavy labor, never able to rise above their station, while Leadership families remain in power almost no matter what. Though these castes are meant to assign people to necessary jobs during a Fifth Season, they are also maintained outside of Seasons, with castes being passed down from parents to children regardless of their actual skills and desires. Because of this, everyone in such a system lacks true freedom—even members of upper-caste families like Binof. She is born into the privileged role of Yumenes Leadership, but her desire to study, and the fact that she is a trans woman, make her unacceptable to her use-caste, so she is eventually disowned. Her caste ensures that she is rich and well-fed, but it also denies her humanity and freedom.

In contrast to the Stillness, societies like the island of Meov encourage more freedom on a societal level, providing a better life for their people. Though islands are considered extremely dangerous because of the risk of tsunamis, the citizens of Meov are willing to take this risk for the privilege of being free from Sanze and its hierarchies. They do not kill or demonize their orogenes, but rather put them in charge of their comm so that they might protect the island of their own volition—not as the forced servants of non-orogenes. It is also on Meov that Syenite finds the most individual freedom of her life, in both her orogeny and in her romantic relationships—again a result of a non-judgmental and non-hierarchical society. This is because Meov also has little structure or prejudice about how families and relationships should function. Most children are raised communally, sex is openly discussed, and Syenite is able to find happiness in an undefinable polyamorous relationship with Alabaster and Innon, Meov's second-in-command. This is in direct contrast to the relationship that she was forced to have with Alabaster, as the Fulcrum ordered them to conceive a child together. When Syenite and Alabaster are allowed freedom in their relationship, however, they choose to remain close, forming a nuclear family with Innon and their child Corundum. This suggests that it is easier to find personal happiness and real human connection when one is not limited by restrictive social structures or oppressive outside forces.

The most extreme example of the contrast between freedom

and enslavement comes at the novel's climax, when the Guardians invade Meov and Syenite chooses to kill her son Corundum rather than let him be made a slave, as he would surely be turned into a node maintainer like Alabaster's other children. In the moment of crisis, then, Syenite decides that death is better than slavery, choosing to smother Corundum and hope that she dies herself as she draws on an **obelisk's** power to destroy the enemies around her. There is no "right" answer in this horrifying situation, and the book neither condemns nor justifies Syen's decision. Further, this idea is carried over into Syenite's next identity, as Essun stands vigil over her son Uche's body and realizes that only now is he truly free, as before he was constantly forced to hide who he was. In such a corrupt and oppressive system, the novel suggests, true freedom is only found in death—at least until more drastic changes can be made.

The Fifth Season deals with characters who wield deadly power and also live in a world of constant instability and potential disaster. While situations like this lead many to find comfort in division and structure, the novel shows that such systems can easily lead to more suffering than they prevent, and the desire for freedom is a central aspect of the human experience—one that should be celebrated in all its messiness and nuance rather than constrained in the name of safety or order.



POWER AND CONTROL

In the science fantasy world of *The Fifth Season*, certain beings wield incredible physical power over others through their inborn orogenic power.

Orogenes are able to manipulate and enhance kinetic energy to affect seismic activity, setting off or quelling earthquakes and volcanoes or drawing life from everything around them within a certain radius. The fact that certain members of the population possess these abilities and others do not raises the immediate issue of when such power should be controlled, and to what degree. On one hand, such raw strength needs to be limited lest it lead to destruction and abuse, but on the other hand forcefully attempting to control people from the outside can lead to oppression and the restriction of freedom—like the way the Fulcrum and Stillness society in general treats orogenes. Through its presentation of orogenes and their abilities, *The Fifth Season* ultimately argues for a nuanced approach that recognizes that those who might abuse their power should be limited and controlled, but such limitations do not need to cross the line into oppression or dehumanization.

Orogenes are presented as inherently powerful beings that are born with great strength and must spend the rest of their lives learning to control, focus, and enhance that strength. Several times it's stated that a newborn orogene can move a mountain or quell an earthquake, but it takes a trained orogene to move something small and precise (like a single stone) without destroying everything around it. This suggests the benefits of

control over raw power; unchecked, such power can cause more damage than it prevents, but with focus and training it can be a positive and useful force. This is exhibited in the contrast between the "feral" (untrained) orogenes at Meov and the Fulcrum-ringed orogenes Syenite and Alabaster. The untrained Innon is able to sense and divert major seismic activity, but he cannot perform any of the controlled and more effective actions that Syenite and Alabaster do to protect and aid the comm, as when Syenite assists the group's raiding mission by creating a fog to disguise them and, at another time, breaking an enemy ship in half.

At the same time, the narrative condemns the Fulcrum's methods of control for orogenes as overly harsh, dehumanizing, and restrictive of their freedom. These methods begin at a young age, when Guardians purposefully break young orogenes' hands as a first test of whether or not the child can control their power. When Schaffa does this to Damaya it does indeed teach her a lesson about the harsh realities of their world, but it also inflicts great trauma that she will carry for the rest of her life, and ingrains in her the idea that she is a dangerous weapon to be feared. Throughout their time at the Fulcrum, grits are punished physically or even killed if they are unable to maintain control of their power, and are taught to think of themselves as something other than human—monsters that the rest of humanity must be guarded against. While orogeny itself has high stakes because of the massive amount of power involved, the Fulcrum goes so far as to treat its students like the monsters that society believes them to be, and in doing so lets society's fear of orogeny strip them of their very humanity.

On a societal level, the book suggests that no group should have unlimited power over any other, but also that no group should have unlimited control over another's power. The true ruling classes of the Stillness are left mysterious by the end of the novel, whether they be the Leadership families of Yumenes, the Emperor, the Guardians, the Fulcrum, or some other force behind them all—but whoever is truly on top, they appear to be in total control of Stillness society. This is made apparent when Alabaster tells Syenite that the node maintainers—his own powerful orogenic children who have been lobotomized and turned into living tools—have the capacity to actually spy on people by subtly sensing the vibrations in the ground, meaning that whoever controls the node maintainers can potentially listen in on any conversation in the Stillness. Combined with the mysterious powers that the Guardians hold to negate orogeny, this means that even the most powerful orogene is subject to violent external control, while the Guardians themselves seem to have no limits placed on their power.

The stakes are high in a world where some people are born with the power to move mountains, but the current system in place in the Stillness is continually shown to be corrupt and harmful to all involved—an example of how fear of a certain

group's power can lead to violently oppressing that same group. As the first of a trilogy, *The Fifth Season* offers few clear answers about the true nature of orogeny or the Guardians' power, but overall it suggests that while power in general should be controlled from both without and within, such means of control should never overstep into fearmongering and oppression.



HISTORY, STORYTELLING, AND KNOWLEDGE

The society of the Stillness is shaped by its perception of its own history, which is mostly passed down through the Sanzed Empire's own records and also through **stonelore**, the ancient commandments intended to help society survive through Fifth Seasons. Although most of the citizens of the Stillness consider such knowledge as true, timeless, and literally written in stone, it is revealed throughout the novel that stonelore is, like any human document, actually subject to revision and distortion. Indeed, the novel shows that ideas of history and knowledge are mutable and can change depending on who is in power—instead, they are more like storytelling, which itself shapes how a society functions.

One way that stonelore gains credibility with the population is through its supposedly immutable nature: it was originally written in stone, so it presumably hasn't changed over time. But this turns out not to be the case. The novel reveals this via Alabaster, who tells Syenite that certain parts of the original stonelore might have been destroyed if they contradicted current Sanzed doctrine, and that entire tablets have been lost or kept secret from the public. This is shocking to Syenite, who has believed in stonelore in good faith for her entire life, but who then begins to realize that the worldview she was taught is not necessarily logical or true. Ancient documents like stonelore should not be held as infallible and eternal, the novel suggests, because they too are written by fallible and easily-influenced human beings, and are also able to be changed by those in power to fit the status quo that they desire. Again, as the first book of a trilogy *The Fifth Season* leaves many mysteries unsolved in this regard, but the book implies that stonelore and Sanze's official history of its own past are heavily edited in order to keep the powerful at the top.

Stonelore and "history" lessons like the story of Shemshena and Misalem are designed to reinforce the perception that orogenes are dangerous, non-human monsters that must be strictly controlled at best and killed if necessary. Because Guardians tell the story of Misalem and Shemshena to their young orogenic wards, they ingrain in them early on that the young orogenes themselves are the Misalems of the world, requiring their own personal Shemshenas to guide them and protect the world from their power. Similarly, the various use-castes of the Stillness cling to the stonelore that divides them, even those who are kept at the bottom of the hierarchy. It is

easier to believe a predefined story about one's current position in life than to question everything and seek to redefine that story altogether, the novel implies.

Further, Jemisin shows that even though "history" might seem to be factual and objective, it's actually much more like storytelling—that is, a story being told by those in power in order to justify their own place in society's hierarchy. The quotations at the end of each chapter help build up this narrative that the Sanzed Empire is telling to itself, with its specific histories of past Seasons that serve to glorify its own existence. It is only through Alabaster, who himself gets his information from unknown outside sources, that Syenite ever learns anything different from the Fulcrum's prescribed teachings. In *The Fifth Season*, then, Jemisin builds up an entirely new speculative world—which the reader experiences through the protagonist's perspective—while also questioning the reality of that world. This questioning of history and knowledge through the medium of speculative fiction highlights how history and knowledge are their own kind of narrative in the real world as well.

As a story itself being told to its own protagonist, *The Fifth Season* immediately questions ideas of what is reliable and what is not, and especially what kinds of knowledge can be used by the powerful to maintain their status. By giving concrete examples of history being rewritten, *The Fifth Season* makes literal the idea that a society's idea of factual knowledge is often subjective and beholden to whoever is in power and might want to interpret such knowledge for their own benefit.



IDENTITY AND NAMING

The major structural conceit of *The Fifth Season* is that the protagonist is initially presented as three different characters, each with her own plotline, and only towards the novel's end is it made explicitly clear that all three characters are actually the same person—Damaya as a young girl, Syenite as a young woman in her twenties, and Essun as a woman in her forties. She takes these new names after experiencing a major traumatic life change, as she essentially tries to assume a new identity and become a different person to leave behind the pain of the past. While Essun might choose her own new names, however, she also has other identities thrust upon her from the outside as an orogene and as a member of the Stillness's system of use-castes, and she cannot ever really escape these "names" or aspects of her identity. Her own new names are a form of self-actualization, but her identity as an orogene is used to oppress her. Through the protagonist's character, then, the novel suggests that identity is a fluid concept—that a self is made up of many experiences and labels, and that many of these can be used for either dehumanization or empowerment.

On one hand, identity and naming can be used as a means of

pigeonholing and prejudice—literally pre-judging someone based on a stereotype of their identity. In *The Fifth Season* this mostly occurs regarding orogenes, who are almost universally discriminated against throughout the Stillness. Notably, the moment that a person is discovered to possess orogenic power, they are no longer even labeled as a human being. They are now an orogene, a “rogga”—an offensive but very common slur for orogene—and even their entire past identity and whatever relationships they might have had previously are affected by this change in public identity. In Allia, Syenite tries to argue with the bureaucrat Asael that she and Alabaster deserve polite and respectful treatment just like anyone else, and in the heat of the moment Asael finally blurts out, “but you’re a rogga.” Though Asael had previously been hiding her prejudice behind a thin veneer of politeness, her use of the slur shows how she really feels—that Syenite and Alabaster are not human at all, but just “roggas.”

However, this concept of identity as pigeonholing is more fluid when it can be co-opted by the very people being stereotyped and instead used for their own empowerment. As is the case with many targeted groups in the real world, some orogenes try to reclaim the word “rogga” as something positive, embracing the identity that the world has thrust upon them. The most notable example of this is Ykka, the leader of the nontraditional comm of Castrima, taking “Rogga” as her public use-caste name, refusing to hide who she is but also attempting to take the pain out of the word itself by making it a self-chosen name. Alabaster also uses the word rogga instead of orogene, but for different reasons than Ykka does. Alabaster doesn’t use the slur to reclaim it for his own empowerment, but rather as a despairing reflection of the harshness of reality. After Alabaster shows Syenite what the node maintainers really are—his own lobotomized children—he makes it clear to her that to those in power, all orogenes are nothing more than slaves and weapons, no matter how highly ranked or superficially celebrated they might be. Upon fully realizing this, Syenite feels that “there’s no point in dressing up what people like Syenite and Alabaster really are,” and that calling them orogenes is an insult when they are really treated like roggas. As a symbol of one kind of identity, names like “rogga” change depending on the context of their use.

Any person has a core self, the novel suggests, but it is fluid and made up of many parts—and for *The Fifth Season*’s protagonist, this means many personal names. She is born as Damaya Strongback, the name that her parents gave her and the use-caste that she was born into, an identity that she has no control over. After almost dying at the hands of a Guardian and passing her first Fulcrum ring test to save her own life, she chooses the name of Syenite (as Fulcrum orogenes take the names of minerals), a new identity that she is able to decide for herself to a certain degree. She has experienced great trauma and wants to leave behind the Damaya that she sees as naïve and weak,

but her new name Syenite also means that she has at least temporarily decided to go along with the Fulcrum’s way of life, to strive to excel within the very system that oppresses orogenes. Finally, after the Guardian attack on Meov and the death of her son Corundum, Syenite wanders the Stillness until she assumes a new identity as Essun, of the Resistant use-caste. This last identity is wholly self-constructed, but it also means hiding a crucial part of her true self: her orogeny. None of these identities make up the whole of the protagonist’s self, the novel suggests—she contains Damaya, Syenite, and Essun, but also the experiences that bind these identities and that led her to change names in the first place. Ultimately, Jemisin paints a picture of her protagonist as a complete and complex woman, and shows the many ever-changing aspects of her identity: the categories that the world places upon her, her own chosen names and labels, and the sum of all her experiences.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE OBELISKS

The obelisks in *The Fifth Season* represent the human tendency to ignore things that they do not understand, and also the way that those in power suppress information that might question the status quo.

The obelisks are mysterious crystalline objects, sometimes miles across in length, that float above the continent of the Stillness. As products of a lost civilization that no one seems to remember, the obelisks are generally seen as pretty but useless—they’re another reminder of past cultures that failed to survive Fifth Seasons and so are “not to be admired.” This idea largely comes from **stonelore**, which prioritizes survival and following its own prescribed tenets in order to make it through a Fifth Season, and works its way into the general mindset of the Stillness populace. Even Syenite, an orogene, barely notices the obelisks at first.

Over the course of the novel, it’s revealed that some special orogenes can actually use the obelisks to wield incredible power. This is what Alabaster does when he quells the node maintainer’s hot spot from hundreds of miles away, and what Syenite does to destroy the Guardians at Meov. Therefore, the Guardians and whomever they might answer to (whose true identity is still a mystery by the end of *The Fifth Season*) keep this information about the obelisks secret, letting the mindset of stonelore guide the populace instead. They keep the pit where the obelisks were created completely hidden behind a secret door at the center of the Fulcrum, and when they believe that Alabaster will discover an obelisk and use it (not knowing that he already has done so in the past), the Guardians try to

assassinate him. Thus, the Guardians try to suppress information about the obelisks, fearing that orogenes will become too powerful if they learn what they are capable of and become upset that the Guardians control the status quo.

The history of the obelisks' creation is still a mystery even by the novel's close, though Alabaster, Essun, and Tonkee have gathered more pieces of the puzzle over the course of the book. The way that the obelisks are perceived by the general population of the Stillness, however, shows that most people will ignore things that don't directly affect them, no matter how fascinating or inexplicable they may seem. At the same time, ruling classes are usually willing to suppress information and alter history to keep themselves in power.



STONELORE

Stonelore, the passed-down wisdom about how to survive Fifth Seasons, symbolizes the limitations and mutability of human knowledge and history. In other words, it reflects the idea that history can be literally rewritten to suit those in power.

According to Stillness tradition, ancient people originally inscribed stonelore in stone tablets, and stonelore's teachings have been passed down for millennia as the wisdom necessary to survive a Fifth Season. That it's written in stone implies that it's permanent and unchangeable, and there are many stories told about people who ignore stonelore and suffer for it. Stonelore is taught to all children in the Stillness, and its authority is seemingly never questioned.

Eventually, Syenite and the reader come to question the truth of stonelore's unchanging nature. Alabaster tells Syenite that ancient tablets have been discovered that completely contradict what is accepted as the current stonelore text, and that the prohibition on changing stonelore might itself be a recent addition to its commandments. Nothing is ever truly written in stone, the novel implies, and history and the law are written by those in power at any given time. This suggests that the ruling classes would feel no compunction about destroying or discrediting stonelore that might go against their current policies, or rewriting history to make ancient laws seem to support the current hierarchy. Only a few fragments of stonelore are directly quoted in *The Fifth Season*, but many of them deal with orogenes, and the compulsory learning of stonelore is a central reason that people throughout the Stillness hate and fear orogenes so much. If stonelore itself might be misinterpreted or have even been altered, then it is because a group in power wants people to keep hating orogenes, and for orogenes to continue to feel themselves less than human. This then invites the novel's characters and readers to question everything that might be accepted as universal knowledge, particularly when it benefits those in power and keeps the oppressed at the bottom.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Orbit edition of *The Fifth Season* published in 2015.

Prologue Quotes

●● And then he reaches forth with all the fine control that the world has brainwashed and backstabbed and brutalized out of him, and all the sensitivity that his masters have bred into him through generations of rape and coercion and highly unnatural selection. His fingers spread and twitch as he feels several reverberating points on the map of his awareness: his fellow slaves. [...]

So he reaches deep and takes hold of the humming tapping bustling reverberating rippling vastness of the city, and the quieter bedrock beneath it, and the roiling churn of heat and pressure beneath that. Then he reaches wide, taking hold of the great sliding-puzzle piece of earthshell on which the continent sits.


Lastly, he reaches up. For power.

He takes all that, the strata and the magma and the people and the power, in his imaginary hands. Everything. He holds it. He is not alone. The earth is with him.

Then *he breaks it*.

Related Characters: Alabaster

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

This dramatic passage comes from the opening chapter of *The Fifth Season*, describing Alabaster (though he is unnamed at this point in the novel) at the moment that he breaks the entire continent of the Stillness in two, killing millions of people and causing a Fifth Season that will last for thousands of years.

Although this passage is highly lyrical and ambiguous, giving no specific names or information, it introduces many of the main ideas of *The Fifth Season*. One of these is the concept of orogenes as incredibly powerful beings who are simultaneously powerless slaves: for example, Alabaster has the strength to destroy an entire continent, but he is also the victim of all the trauma and oppression described in the first paragraph. Physical and mental abuse, generational violence, and forced "breeding" are all hallmarks of slavery,

and the fact that he thinks of his “fellow slaves” in his moment of destruction drives home this point.

Here the novel also introduces the unique concept of orogeny—the ability to manipulate kinetic energy to affect seismic events—illustrating the nature of Alabaster’s power with highly descriptive language. Physically he isn’t doing anything at all, but his orogeny acts as its own moving and tangible force that Jemisin’s prose brings to life on both a personal and continental scale. His act of breaking the Stillness also highlights the novel’s motif of disaster and apocalypse, using an interesting narrative inversion by beginning the story with the “end of the world” and working forward from there, so that everything takes place in the shadow of apocalypse. Finally, the passage makes a few obscure references that will later be made clear—Alabaster’s “fellow slaves” are the lobotomized node maintainers, and the power that he “reaches up” for comes from the mysterious floating obelisks.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☝☝ If the problem is that ferals are not predictable...well, orogenes have to prove themselves reliable. The Fulcrum has a reputation to maintain; that’s part of this. So’s the training, and the uniform, and the endless rules they must follow, but the breeding *is* part of it too, or why is she here?

It’s somewhat flattering to think that despite her feral status, they actually want something of her infused into their breeding lines. Then she wonders why a part of her is trying to find value in degradation.

Related Characters: Essun/Damaya/Syenite, Alabaster

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

Syenite has just met Alabaster, the ten-ringed orogenic master with whom she is supposed to bear a child. Part of the Fulcrum’s system, the reader now learns, is “breeding” its orogenes together to both maximize and control their power, and Syenite has now been told by her superiors to play her part in this system. In this passage, then, she tries to justify her assignment to herself, but also calls herself out for “trying to find value in degradation.”

As a Fulcrum orogene, Syenite has decided to work within the rigid hierarchies of the Fulcrum’s system, meaning that she tries to excel and rise in the ranks by following the rules,

controlling and mastering her orogenic power, and doing what her superiors want her to. In this passage, however, she starts to realize how dehumanizing this system really is, while at the same time continuing to believe that the current hierarchy is the only one that really works. She still clings to the idea that orogenes are the ones that must prove themselves valuable and “reliable” to non-orogenes, rather than expecting her oppressors to change themselves. If this system is the right one, though, she must also accept that the forced sexual union she is now taking part in must be necessary as well—something that she can’t quite do. If the “breeding” is immoral, however, then everything else about the Fulcrum and the way that the Stillness treats orogenes might be immoral as well.

This passage also brings up a distinction between Fulcrum-bred orogenes—those born out of forced unions like that between Syenite and Alabaster—and “ferals,” or orogenes that come from non-orogenic parents and whose powers appear seemingly at random. Ferals are implied to be inferior in their powers, but their very existence also implies that the existing hierarchy is deeply flawed. The Fulcrum doesn’t really understand the nature of orogeny at all, the novel suggests, but still seeks to control it by whatever means necessary.

☝☝ But this is what it means to be *civilized*—doing what her betters say she should, for the ostensible good of all. [...] With the experience and boost to her reputation, she’ll be that much closer to her fifth ring. That means her own apartment; no more roommates. Better missions, longer leave, more say in her own life. That’s worth it. *Earthfire* yes, it’s worth it.

She tells herself this all the way back to her room. Then she packs to leave, tidies up so she’ll come home to order and neatness, and takes a shower, methodically scrubbing every bit of flesh she can reach until her skin burns.

Related Characters: Essun/Damaya/Syenite, Alabaster

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

As in the previous passage, here Syenite tries to justify her forced relationship with Alabaster to herself, listing all of the practical perks that she will receive if she continues to rise in the ranks by following her superiors’ orders. She is pushed to the edge, however, when they expect her to

participate in what is essentially a two-way sexual assault, as neither she nor Alabaster want to be having sex with each other, but they know that there is no other option.


Syenite doesn't really have any freedom or control in this situation, but to preserve her sense of self-respect she *pretends* that she does, or at least tells herself that she is making a necessary sacrifice for civilization's sake.

Everything that she has been taught says that the current structure is the only one that works within the harsh and apocalyptic world of the Stillness, and so she must go along with even the darkest parts of that structure if human civilization is to survive. She has never been allowed to consider that there might be other ways of organizing a society, and especially that there might be other ways of treating orogenes rather than breeding them like animals and controlling them like deadly weapons.

This passage also shows how the Fulcrum dangles the ideas of freedom and autonomy in front of its orogenes, making them want to excel within the very system that also dehumanizes and abuses them so that they might achieve at least a modicum of comfort and sense of self-respect. While Syenite is still ostensibly committed to going along with this system in pursuit of the freedom she so desires, her physical action of scrubbing obsessively at her skin after having sex with Alabaster suggests that she feels deeply conflicted and disturbed by what the Fulcrum is asking her to do.

“Tell them they can be great someday, like us. Tell them they belong among us, no matter how we treat them. Tell them they must earn the respect which everyone else receives by default. Tell them there is a standard for acceptance; that standard is simply perfection. Kill those who scoff at these contradictions, and tell the rest that the dead deserved annihilation for their weakness and doubt. Then they'll break themselves trying for what they'll never achieve.”

Related Themes:      

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

Each chapter of *The Fifth Season* ends with a passage from stonelore or some other historical document, and the quotation here comes from Erlsset, the twenty-third Sanzed Emperor, speaking “at a party, shortly before the founding of the Fulcrum.”

This passage essentially puts into words the mindset of many hierarchical societies, whether based on race, religion, gender, or any other kind of divide. The emperor advises that those in power (like himself) should make their society seem like a meritocracy, which would then suggest that the oppressed classes are on the bottom because of their own failures. It would then follow that these oppressed people could reach the top themselves if they just work hard enough and follow all of the rules perfectly—but the emperor explicitly states here that this will always be impossible. The system is designed to keep the oppressed (here implied to be orogenes) on the bottom, all while keeping them striving to excel *within* their prejudiced society instead of questioning the unfair system itself.

As in many such hierarchies, the oppressed class here actually wields great power—not because they are the numerical majority or control the means of production, as is often the case in the real world, but because they physically wield great power through their orogeny. It is then in the best interests of those atop the hierarchy to keep this potentially dangerous group weak and divided, struggling amongst themselves and even within themselves.

Chapter 5 Quotes

“Because everyone's starting to realize what the shake and the redglow and the clouded sky all mean, and to be on the outside of a community's gates at a time like this is—in the long run—a death sentence, except for a handful who are willing to become brutal enough or depraved enough to do what they must. Even those only have a chance at survival.”

None of the people at the roadhouse wanted to believe they had that in them, you saw as you looked around, assessing faces and clothes and bodies and threats.

Related Characters: Essun/Damaya/Syenite

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

This passage highlights the novel's theme of disaster, exemplified by the ever-present threat of an apocalyptic Fifth Season. Essun has been traveling in pursuit of Jija and Nassun, and she observes here that the other people on the road are beginning to realize that a new Fifth Season might have begun with the big earthquake in the north. Centuries of stonelore and history have taught everyone about the horrible things that occur during a Season, but no one is yet

ready to accept that they will now have to live through such times themselves.

This constant threat of disaster and apocalypse raises the question of when violence is justified, and in a Season, traditionally it almost always is. It is assumed that people will have to do terrible things in order to survive—leaving others to die, actively killing people, and even resorting to cannibalism—and so Essun automatically switches into that harsh and brutal mindset here, assessing the people around her as “threats.” *The Fifth Season* is often a violent story, but Jemisin also creates the kind of harsh world where the characters often believe that violence is necessary and justified, and the reader must ask the same questions as well.

Chapter 6 Quotes

“Never say no to me,” he says. The words are hot against her skin. He has bent to murmur them into her ear. “Orogenes have no right to say no. I am your Guardian. I will break every bone in your hand, every bone in your *body*, if I deem it necessary to make the world safe from you.”

Related Characters: Schaffa Guardian Warrant (speaker), Essun/Damaya/Syenite

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

Schaffa has just broken Damaya’s hand in a brutal exercise to test how well she can control her orogeny in the face of extreme pain. As he threatens to further crush her hand, Damaya instinctively tries to stop him by saying “no,” and he responds with this quotation.

Schaffa makes it clear that he considers Damaya to be a potential Misalem—the murderous orogene of legend—and himself as a Shemshena—the first Guardian, who killed Misalem and became a hero for doing so. Through both his violent actions and his words here Schaffa is teaching Damaya that she has no basic rights: she is a tool, and even a monster that he must protect everyone else from. Because the world sees orogenes as such destructive weapons, people like Schaffa feel justified in using violence against them, and even against a young child like Damaya. Even worse, he tries to teach her that she should not question this worldview either—she should see *herself* as a monster too, one that needs to be controlled through fear and

violence. This is one way that people at the top of a hierarchy try to keep others oppressed—by convincing them that they deserve their place on the bottom.

“I have to do what you say or you’ll hurt me.”
“And?”

She closes her eyes tighter. In dreams, that makes the bad creatures go away.

“And,” she adds, “you’ll hurt me even when I do obey. If you think you should.”

“Yes.” She can actually hear his smile. He nudges a stray braid away from her cheek, letting the backs of his fingers brush her skin. “What I do is not random, Damaya. It’s about control. Give me no reason to doubt yours, and I will never hurt you again. Do you understand?”

Related Characters: Essun/Damaya/Syenite, Schaffa Guardian Warrant (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

After Schaffa has broken Damaya’s hand and then reset the bones to heal, he makes a fire and cooks dinner for her as she stands in a daze. Finally he asks her what she has learned about him through her ordeal today, and she answers with the quotation above.

Damaya is a strong-willed and independent person, but here she is forced to accept that, as her Guardian, Schaffa has total control over her. Even if she does everything right and never slips up, he will still hurt her if he thinks it is necessary. Furthermore, he makes her feel that it is up to her to maintain control over herself. Damaya wields great power as an orogene, but Schaffa makes it clear that this power must be controlled from both within and without—through her own personal discipline, but also through the external threat of his violence. Schaffa is in the process of breaking Damaya down to see herself as a monster and teaching her to constantly be wary of her own nature. This is then another example of both how oppressive hierarchies maintain themselves and an exploration of ways that power can be controlled both internally and externally.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☞ He's not just small but stocky, as if his people are built for a different kind of sturdiness than the ideal that Old Sanzed has spent millennia cultivating. Maybe his race are all this white, then, whoever they are.

But none of this makes sense. Every race in the world these days is part Sanzed. They did rule the Stillness for centuries, after all, and they continue to do so in many ways. And they weren't always peaceful about it, so even the most insular races bear the Sanzed stamp whether their ancestors wanted the admixture or not. Everyone is measured by their standard deviations from the Sanzed mean.

Related Characters: Essun/Damaya/Syenite, Hoa

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

The strange child Hoa has joined Essun on her journey in pursuit of Nassun and Jija. Totally covered in dirt when she first finds him, Hoa finally bathes in a river. Essun is shocked by his physical appearance when he emerges, leading to her thoughts here.

Essun's musings in this passage gesture at the racial hierarchies that have existed in the Stillness for centuries. Hoa's skin, hair, and eyes are all totally white, and this combined with his other features leads Essun to assume that he has no Sanzed heritage at all—but then she immediately questions this idea, believing it to be impossible because of the nature of Sanzed power in the Stillness. Over the past several hundreds of years, the Sanzed have consolidated their power not only through military conquest but also through the forced admixture of their genes into the peoples that they conquered. Over time, this has come to mean that essentially everyone in the Stillness has some Sanzed ancestry. Furthermore, general society considers Sanzed traits to be the most attractive and desirable, so that the more Sanzed ancestry one has, the better.

Throughout *The Fifth Season*, characters judge each other based on their racial characteristics and their "standard deviation from the Sanzed mean." This passage, however, shows how the current seemingly harmless system of what is considered attractive or desirable is actually based in centuries of rape and genocide. This is often the case in the real world as well, whenever certain racial characteristics are seen as superior to others.

Chapter 8 Quotes


☞ "They kill us because they've got stonelore telling them at every turn that we're born evil—some kind of agents of Father Earth, monsters that barely qualify as human."

"Yes, but you can't change stonelore."

"Stonelore changes all the time, Syenite." He doesn't say her name often, either. It gets her attention. "Every civilization adds to it; parts that don't matter to the people of the time are forgotten. There's a reason Tablet Two is so damaged: someone, somewhere back in time, decided that it wasn't important or was wrong, and didn't bother to take care of it. Or maybe they even deliberately tried to obliterate it, which is why so many of the early copies are damaged in exactly the same way."

Related Characters: Essun/Damaya/Syenite, Alabaster (speaker)

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

Syenite and Alabaster are traveling together towards Allia, and in the early stages of getting to know each other (though they are also expected to have sex with each other every day). They have this conversation one morning, just before Alabaster senses the massive hot spot at a nearby node.

At this point in her character arc, Syenite is still very naïve about the history of the Stillness and the nature of the current hierarchies and systems that she takes for granted. The people of the Stillness are taught that following the teachings of stonelore is the only way to survive Fifth Seasons, that past civilizations all failed (no matter what incredible things they might have built), and that Sanzed habits and physical traits are superior because they have managed to endure for so long—and Syenite generally believes all of these things at this point.

Here, however, Alabaster begins to question Syenite's perception that history and stonelore are unchangeable and objectively true. Instead he suggests that stonelore is not as permanent and ancient as its name replies, and that all history is necessarily written by flawed human beings, meaning that history itself is often biased to favor the powerful. This applies both to the current Sanzed hierarchy and the idea of orogenes as dangerous monsters that

should be killed or controlled. Neither of these concepts are necessarily true, Alabaster implies, but have rather been created and upheld by certain people for their own benefit.

This conversation essentially begins Syenite's questioning of the general knowledge that she has been taught her entire life, and also serves to alert the reader to the unreliability of supposed facts about the Stillness that the protagonist might describe. Even as readers learn about this new world through the experience of the protagonist, the protagonist is learning that what *she* knows about the world is likely flawed, making her an unreliable narrator to a certain degree.

☝ “You think you matter?” All at once he smiles. It’s an ugly thing, cold as the vapor that curls off ice. “You think any of us matter beyond what we can do for them? Whether we obey or not.” He jerks his head toward the body of the abused, murdered child. “You think he mattered, after what they did to him? The only reason they don’t do this to all of us is because we’re more versatile, more useful, if we control ourselves. But each of us is just another weapon, to them. Just a useful monster, just a bit of new blood to add to the breeding lines. Just another fucking *rogga*.”

She has never heard so much hate put into one word before.

Related Characters: Alabaster (speaker), Essun/Damaya/Syenite, The Node Maintainer

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

Syenite has just learned the truth about the nodes and node maintainers that dot the Stillness and act to quell seismic activity within the range of their power. They are not in fact low-ranked Fulcrum orogenes assigned to a dull life, as Syenite thought, but rather children who have been lobotomized and imprisoned so that they use their natural orogenic power without having any choice of their own, in great pain unless constantly sedated. Syenite is stunned by this horrifying revelation, as the knowledge that Alabaster presents to her continues to overturn the worldview that she has always been taught.

In this passage the bitter and jaded Alabaster compares himself and Syenite to the dead node maintainer before them, suggesting that they are all the same in terms of how the world thinks of them. An orogene like Alabaster wears rings to show his high ranking, lives in fancy lodgings, and is

given a certain degree of autonomy, but at the end of the day he is just a slave and a tool like the mutilated node maintainer—he is only given his privileges because those in power find it more convenient, not because he has any real freedom or power of his own. The node maintainers’ orogeny is controlled externally through physical mutilation and captivity, while Alabaster and Syenite are expected to control their own orogeny through self-discipline and training (though of course if that discipline fails the constant threat of violence from the Guardians or the general populace is there to control Fulcrum orogenes as well). It is this potential for self-control that makes Fulcrum orogenes valuable to those in power in their current state, Alabaster suggests, and is the only reason that they too aren’t lobotomized like the node maintainers.

It is also notable that Alabaster uses the slur “rogga” to describe himself and Syenite, rather than the more polite “orogene.” Syenite has often wondered why Alabaster calls orogenes *roggas*, but here she (and the reader) understands: it feels insulting and fake to be called something polite while being treated like a monster and a slave. Alabaster isn’t trying to reclaim the slur as something empowering, but rather he is being despairingly realistic about their status. His use of the slur asserts that if they are going to be thought of as “fucking *roggas*” by the general populace and those in power, then to be called an “orogene” or anything denoting respect or value is nothing but a lie.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☝ Alabaster smiles, though the muscles of his jaw flex repeatedly. “I would’ve thought you’d like being treated like a human being for a change.”

“I do. But what difference does it make? Even if you pull rank now, it won’t change how they feel about us—”

“No, it won’t. And I don’t care how they feel. They don’t have to rusting like us. What matters is what they *do*.”

Related Characters: Essun/Damaya/Syenite, Alabaster (speaker), Asael Leadership Allia

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 159-160

Explanation and Analysis

Syenite and Alabaster have finally arrived in Allia, only to be greeted coldly and curtly by the minor bureaucrat Asael. Alabaster immediately pulls rank and complains about their treatment, eventually getting him and Syenite nice lodgings

at a nearby inn and a day off before their work begins. Syenite here wonders why Alabaster even bothered arguing with the clearly-prejudiced Asael, when it won't change how she thinks about orogenes at all.

This passage shows another aspect of prejudice and oppression: the daily microaggressions present in personal interactions that build up to form a constant burden for the targeted person. On its own this would be a minor incident, but it is part of a much larger pattern of prejudice that is based in real violence and a history of trauma. Alabaster, as usual, is cynical about the state of the world and certainly doesn't expect to change a bigot's mind by arguing with them, but he is also an emotionally fragile person who wants, like anyone might, the basic creature comforts that a master of their trade should enjoy. Alabaster just wants to feel human and get some decent treatment, no matter what the people providing that treatment might be really thinking. Syenite doesn't quite understand this yet, but she is also much younger and hasn't experienced all the decades of prejudice and dehumanization that have worn down Alabaster.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☝ You think, maybe, you need to be someone else.

You're not sure who. Previous yous have been stronger and colder, or warmer and weaker; either set of qualities is better suited to getting you through the mess you're in. Right now you're cold and weak, and that helps no one.

You could become someone new, maybe. You've done that before; it's surprisingly easy. A new name, a new focus, then try on the sleeves and slacks of a new personality to find the perfect fit. A few days and you'll feel like you've never been anyone else.

But. Only one you is Nassun's mother. That's what's forestalled you so far, and ultimately it's the deciding factor. At the end of all this, when Jija is dead and it's finally safe to mourn your son...if she still lives, Nassun will need the mother she's known all her life.

Related Characters: Essun/Damaya/Syenite, Uche, Jija, Nassun

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

Still on the road with Hoa in the midst of a rapidly worsening new Fifth Season, Essun here considers her own

identity and wonders if she should try to remake herself in order to better survive her current situation. Ultimately she decides not to, instead sticking with her current less-than-optimal identity because it is the only one bound to Nassun, her daughter whom she still hopes to find and rescue.

This passage is one of the novel's most explicit explorations of its theme of identity, as Essun actively considers herself as being able to pick and choose between what kind of self she will inhabit. Throughout her life she has changed names twice, first after passing her ring test at the Fulcrum and becoming Syenite, and then after the disaster at Meov when she became Essun. This second name change was much more purposeful and thorough, as it involved actively hiding her past identities and orogeny and trying to change her personality to be more inconspicuous and accommodating. If she were to change her identity again it would be in a similar manner, but this time to become someone better able to survive the Fifth Season. This suggests that to a certain extent identity is something that one chooses and controls for oneself, depending on one's external circumstances.

On the other hand, there are aspects of herself that Essun cannot control, like the fact that she is an orogene, and no matter how much she might try to hide or change this, the outside world will always consider her an orogene first and an individual human being second.

Another aspect of identity, the passage suggests, is a person's relationships to those around them. It is this idea that Essun uses to define her current self here, choosing to retain the part of her identity that is Nassun's mother as a way of staying sane and hopefully reuniting with her daughter once more.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☝ *You are representatives of us all*, the instructors say, if any grit dares to protest this treatment. *When you're dirty, all orogenes are dirty. When you're lazy, we're all lazy. We hurt you so you'll do the rest of us no harm.*

Once Damaya would have protested the unfairness of such judgments. The children of the Fulcrum are all different: different ages, different colors, different shapes. [...] One cannot reasonably expect sameness out of so much difference, and it makes no sense for Damaya to be judged by the behavior of children who share nothing save the curse of orogeny with her.

But Damaya understands now that the world is not fair. They are orogenes, the Misalems of the world, born cursed and terrible. This is what is necessary to make them safe.

Related Characters: Essun/Damaya/Syenite, Misalem

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis

Damaya has been at the Fulcrum for several months now, and has already been ground down to generally conform to its cynical worldview. She knows that she doesn't like the way the Fulcrum treats its grits (young orogenes), but as is stated here, she believes that the harsh system is necessary to keep them safe in a world that hates them.

The first part of this quotation illustrates a specific kind of burden that individuals from oppressed groups must often bear: being constantly seen as a representative of their entire group. When a non-orogene does something wrong, they are judged only as an individual, but when an orogene does something wrong, people will use their behavior as an excuse to declare that all orogenes are bad. This is another kind of prejudice that is less overt than outright violence, but that makes targeted individuals work twice as hard just to achieve the baseline of expectations for everyone else.

The Fulcrum is brutal in its treatment of its orogenes, breaking down their identities as individuals and forcing them to conform to impossible standards, all so that they are seen as "safe" by the rest of society, as so flawless that they cannot be used as excuses for bigotry. While this pressure takes a terrible toll on the children personally, Damaya also believes that it is necessary to keep the grits safe from the rest of the world. After the violence and hatred that she has experienced, she feels willing to conform to an oppressive system if it is the only way to survive—which of course makes her and other orogenes easier to control.

☝ What Damaya sees in them is something she does not understand at first, though she wants it with a desperation that surprises and unnerves her. As those first weeks pass into months and she grows familiar with the routine, she begins to understand what it is that the older orogenes display: control. They have mastered their power. [...]

If to achieve this Damaya must endure a few broken bones, or a few years in a place where no one loves her or even likes her, that is a small price to pay.

Related Characters: Essun/Damaya/Syenite

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 196

Explanation and Analysis

As part of their daily routine, the young grits walk through a garden where the older ringed orogenes spend their leisure time. Damaya longs to be among these black-clad professionals one day, idealizing their mastery of their power and the freedoms that they are (seemingly) allowed.

This passage shows Damaya further accepting the Fulcrum's oppressive system as a necessary evil, not yet believing that any other way of life might be possible. This is how the Fulcrum continues to uphold itself, similar to many oppressive hierarchies—by grinding down those at the bottom and making them believe that if they work hard enough and do everything right, they will be rewarded with a place at the top.

However, as other passages from *The Fifth Season* have shown, the supposed freedoms that the ringed orogenes enjoy are nothing but a façade, and their power is still controlled externally by violence as well as by the discipline and self-control they have been trained to develop. Damaya is not yet Syenite, though, so for now she feels willing to sacrifice her childhood and even her sense of herself as a human being worthy of love for the sake of achieving the only goal that currently seems possible: excelling within the system and becoming a ringed Fulcrum orogene.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☝☝ "What do you want? An apology? Then I apologize. You must remember, though, that most normal people have never seen an orogene, let alone had to do business with one and—" She spreads her hands. "Isn't it understandable that we might be...uncomfortable?"

"Discomfort is understandable. It's the rudeness that isn't." Rust this. This woman doesn't deserve the effort of her explanation. Syen decides to save that for someone who matters. "And that's a really shitty apology. 'I'm sorry you're so abnormal that I can't manage to treat you like a human being.'"

"You're a rogga," Asael snaps, and then has the gall to look surprised at herself.

"Well." Syenite makes herself smile. "At least that's out in the open."

Related Characters: Essun/Damaya/Syenite, Asael
Leadership Allia (speaker)

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 216

Explanation and Analysis

Even after Alabaster shamed Asael and forced her to provide them with better service, the bureaucrat is still extremely disrespectful to Syenite the next day. The two women have the argument quoted here, in which Asael finally lets her politeness slip and uses the slur “rogga” to refer to orogenes like Syenite.

This passage shows how all prejudice is related, and that even what seems benign or innocuous is essentially based in the same hateful worldviews that connect to histories of violence. This is represented here by Asael’s use of the word “rogga,” a symbol of all the crueler and more overt kind of prejudices that orogenes (or any targeted group) might face. Despite her coldness, Asael has previously retained her official demeanor with Syenite and Alabaster, but when she lets slip the word “rogga” she shows that beneath this politeness is an oppressive mindset, one that finds orogenes to be less than human. It is necessarily hurtful to Syenite to be called this slur to her face, but she also finds it at least more honest than Asael’s previous false decorum, as the unspoken bigotry is now out in the open and they can progress with their business from there.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☝☝ The young man has a sash around his waist that is soft and peach colored and there solely for decoration, as far as you can tell.

Except it’s not really decoration. You notice how they look at you when you walk up: a sweep of the eyes, an inspection of your wrists or neck or ankles, a frown as you are found wanting. The impractical cloth has one very practical use: It is the marker of a new tribe in the process of being born. A tribe to which you do not belong.

Related Characters: Essun/Damaya/Syenite

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 236

Explanation and Analysis

Traveling along the road during the new Fifth Season, Essun starts to notice patterns among the refugees coming from the ruined cities in the north: some people wear a piece of ornamental cloth for seemingly no reason other than decoration, despite the apocalyptic conditions that leave no room for anything but the strictly practical.

What Essun is observing in real time is the way that hierarchies are formed and how power naturally consolidates itself. As she notes here, a “new tribe” is being born, as the people with ornamental cloth are those from wealthy Equatorial cities and who are already used to power and privilege. They then use the cloth markers to find each other and join together, maintaining their sense of superiority over others while also gaining real power simply through numbers and a sense of common cause—even if that cause is only to maintain whatever privileges they can during a Fifth Season.

This behavior is also connected to ideas of racial superiority, as such wealthy Equatorial families are likewise those most concerned with their Sanzed heritage and characteristics. So the consolidation of power in this new ruling tribe is also based around physical traits, which are themselves rooted in the Stillness’s history of racial violence.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☝☝ She scrambles backward again, tries to get to her feet again, tries again to reach for power, and fails in all three efforts. Even if she could succeed, though—he’s a Guardian. It’s her duty to obey. It’s her duty to *die*, if he wills it.

This is not right.

“You need not understand,” he says, with perfect kindness. “You need do only one thing.” And then he lunges, aiming the poniard at her chest.

Related Characters: Edki Guardian Warrant (speaker), Essun/Damaya/Syenite

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 261

Explanation and Analysis

The Guardian Edki confronts Syenite and Alabaster by Allia’s harbor, and when he learns that Syenite is the one who raised the obelisk from the seafloor, he attempts to assassinate her in this intense and cinematic scene.

Even in the face of imminent death, Syenite cannot help instinctively reverting to what she has learned through all her past experiences, particularly when Schaffa broke her hand, but also the entirety of her time at the Fulcrum. She has been conditioned to believe that orogenes are inherently dangerous and that Guardians are necessary to keep the rest of the world safe from their power. Guardians may act with total impunity, the Fulcrum teaches, as they know what is best and are the only means available to

control orogenes. It is this belief that Syenite immediately turns to here—that if the Guardian wants to kill her, it is her duty to die.

Then she makes a fundamental shift, however, stating to herself that “This is not right.” At several climactic moments of the novel, the protagonist faces the reality of the current oppressive systems in the Stillness and either despairingly accepts them or makes an internal stand like that which is illustrated here, declaring that these systems are fundamentally immoral and that she should fight against them. Syenite is still in the process of growing and questioning everything that she has been taught, but this is a major step in rejecting the current hierarchy of Sanze and the Fulcrum, as she stands against a Guardian for the first time and prepares to fight back.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☝☝ You’ve always known better. How dare you expect anything else? You’re just another filthy, rusty-souled rogga, just another agent of the Evil Earth, just another mistake of sensible breeding practices, just another mislaid tool. You should never have had children in the first place, and you shouldn’t have expected to keep them once you did [...]

Related Characters: Essun/Damaya/Syenite, Nassun, Uche

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 271

Explanation and Analysis

Essun has just learned with relative certainty that Nassun and Jija are not in Castrima, the strange new comm that Hoa has been drawn to for months now and where Essun was hoping to find her journey’s end. Struck by this terrible knowledge, Essun has the self-dialogue quoted here, cursing herself for ever daring to hope that she might find her daughter or even deserve any kind of happiness at all.

Essun has a pattern of suppressing her true thoughts and emotions, likely as part of her self-created identity that involved changing her personality and hiding her orogeny. This trait usually allows her to function despite experiencing great trauma, but it also means that when her suppressed feelings break through, they do so with extreme intensity. Combined with her incredible orogenic power, losing control like this makes her a danger to herself and others. In this moment of trauma she also returns to all the darkest parts of her past, most especially the deeply-ingrained belief that as an orogene she is nothing but a monster, a “rogga”

who has never had any value outside of being a weapon and has certainly never deserved happiness. Despite all that Essun has experienced and knows intellectually, the crushing weight of a world that hates orogenes returns here in her moment of vulnerability, showing again how oppressive systems continue to wound targeted minorities no matter how resilient or exceptional they might be. In her despair she breaks herself down, just as the world has been trying to break her down all along.

Chapter 16 Quotes

☝☝ There’re so *many* ways to die in this place. But they know about all of them—seriously—and as far as I can tell, they don’t care. At least they’ll die free, they say.”

“Free of what? Living?”

“Sanze.” Alabaster grins when Syen’s mouth falls open.

Related Characters: Essun/Damaya/Syenite, Alabaster (speaker)

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 294

Explanation and Analysis

Syenite and Alabaster have been taken to the island of Meov, where Syenite is shocked to learn that a thriving community exists. Stonelore and conventional Stillness wisdom teach that islands are death traps, extremely vulnerable to earthquakes and tsunamis, so she never imagined that people might build a permanent settlement on one. After talking more to the locals, however, Alabaster explains here why the Meovites have decided to take their chances with the elements: to be free of the oppressive Stillness society, ruled over by Sanze and the Equatorial cities.

Despite everything that she has experienced—most notably Alabaster’s revelations about stonelore, the horrifying truth of the node maintainers, and the Guardian trying to assassinate her—Syenite still clings to the accepted wisdom that she has always been taught. In this she continues to act as a translator for the reader, building up the details of Jemisin’s invented world and its people’s beliefs even as she herself finds those beliefs questioned again and again. This is then another example of Alabaster showing both Syenite and the reader how conventional wisdom and accepted history are not infallible, but often exist to protect the status quo and help those in power maintain their position. The people of Meov have bucked this status quo, however,

and it will soon be revealed that a crucial aspect of this resistance is the way that they treat their orogenes—celebrating and elevating them rather than treating them as monsters or tools.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☝☝ (Friends do not exist. The Fulcrum is not a school. Grits are not children. Orogenes are not people. Weapons have no need of friends.)

Related Characters: Essun/Damaya/Syenite

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 297

Explanation and Analysis

Damaya has lived at the Fulcrum for a full year now, and this passage shows how during this time she has tried to fully absorb the order's perspective. She has learned to think of herself as the Fulcrum does: as an inhuman weapon with no need for friendship, affection, or innocence.

This passage is another example of how members of oppressed groups can internalize the prejudice that surrounds them, believing that they deserve their treatment and position in society and discouraging them from thinking outside of the hierarchy itself. The fact that grits are all very young and impressionable makes the Fulcrum's strategy all the more insidious and effective, robbing orogenic children of their freedom at an early age and teaching them that the Fulcrum's system is the only way that they and those around them can be kept safe.

Also notable is the tone of Damaya's internal dialogue here, as she tells herself that she doesn't deserve to experience a normal childhood or receive love or friendship. This internalized self-hatred and self-dehumanization will resurface even decades later when she is Essun, still conditioned to instinctively believe that she doesn't deserve happiness.

☝☝ He *does* understand. She bites her lip and feels fresh tears threaten. It isn't right that she loves him, but many things in the world are not right. So she fights off the tears, and makes her decision. Crying is weakness. Crying was a thing Damaya did. Syenite will be stronger.

"I'll do it," Syenite says, softly. "I'll pass the test for you, Schaffa. I promise."

"My good girl," Schaffa says, and smiles, holding her close.

Related Characters: Essun/Damaya/Syenite, Schaffa Guardian Warrant (speaker)

Related Themes:      

Page Number: 331

Explanation and Analysis

Damaya and Binof are caught breaking into a forbidden chamber at the center of the Fulcrum, and Schaffa then rescues Damaya from a Guardian who seemingly went rogue and might have killed her. Schaffa then asks that Damaya immediately take her first ring test to become an official Fulcrum orogene, and Damaya realizes that this is so she might prove herself useful and survive, instead of being killed as an orogene incapable of self-control.

Various incarnations of the phrase "this is not right" appear throughout *The Fifth Season*, particularly during climactic and traumatic moments in the protagonist's life. In her youngest incarnation here (as Damaya), she recognizes that "many things in the world are not right" and also that her love for Schaffa—who has brutally abused her—isn't right either, but she feels that she has no choice but to follow her feelings and to do what the only family-figure she has left asks of her. This then leads to her temporarily buying into the Fulcrum's worldview, trying to excel within the organization that oppresses her and threatens her with death if she should fail, and continuing to respect Guardians as absolute authorities.

At the same time, this transition from a child longing for love and safety to a young woman who feels that crying is a weakness marks the protagonist's identity change from Damaya to Syenite. The narrative even echoes this change, referring to the protagonist as Syenite by the end of the passage, even though she hasn't passed her ring test or been confirmed as a Fulcrum orogene yet. She has essentially taken on a new identity already: one that accepts her own unhealthy connection to Schaffa, that rejects any kind of emotional weakness, and that is determined to excel within the Fulcrum's hierarchy. This is the Syenite that readers met back at the novel's beginning, determined to earn more rings and willing to bear a child with a man she doesn't know.

Chapter 20 Quotes

☞☞ And what do they even call this? It's not a threesome, or a love triangle. It's a two-and-a-half-some, an affection dihedron. (And, well, maybe it's love.) She should worry about another pregnancy, maybe from Alabaster again given how messy things get between the three of them, but she can't bring herself to worry because it doesn't matter. Someone will love her children no matter what. Just as she doesn't think overmuch about what she does with her bed time or how this thing between them works; no one in Meov will care, no matter what. That's another turn-on, probably: the utter lack of fear. Imagine that.

Related Characters: Essun/Damaya/Syenite, Innon Resistant Meov, Alabaster

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 372

Explanation and Analysis

On the island of Meov, Syenite and Alabaster develop a unique polyamorous relationship with Innon, an orogene and the island's second-in-command. Alabaster and Syenite have a child together as a result of their Fulcrum-decreed relationship, but afterwards they build the impossible-to-describe relationship hinted at here, aroused by each other mostly by way of Innon and all sharing a bed and parenting duties.

After the restrictions of Stillness society and the even more restrictive forced relationships of the Fulcrum, Syenite and Alabaster find freedom on a personal level in Meov. Not only are they temporarily safe from the Guardians and all of their past responsibilities and actions, but the society of Meov is itself much more communal and accepting, offering a very personal kind of freedom that allows both characters to blossom and find happiness. As stated here, their child will be cared for even without a nuclear family, and no one will judge them for their non-conventional relationship. It's also notable that Syenite and Alabaster remain together when they aren't being forced to have sex by the authorities. Under duress they find each other entirely off-putting, but when allowed the freedom of choice, the connection between them can adapt to what works, which is this sexual-by-proxy three-way relationship that brings them both great joy.

☞☞ “Heh.” Innon sounds odd, and Syenite glances at him in surprise to see an almost regretful look on his face. “Sometimes, when I see what you and he can do, I wish I had gone to this Fulcrum of yours.”

“No, you don’t.” She doesn’t even want to think about what he would be like if he had grown up in captivity with the rest of them. Innon, but without his booming laugh or vivacious hedonism or cheerful confidence. Innon, with his graceful strong hands weaker and clumsier for having been broken. *Not* Innon.

Related Characters: Essun/Damaya/Syenite, Innon Resistant Meov (speaker), Alabaster

Related Themes:      

Page Number: 386

Explanation and Analysis

After Syenite performs an incredible act of orogeny by quieting the active volcano at Allia, she and Innon have the exchange quoted here. Seeing such power makes Innon almost wish that he had gone to the Fulcrum, because his orogeny pales in comparison to Syenite and Alabaster's. Syenite assures him that any extra power he might have gained wouldn't have been worth it, however, and thinks sadly of how different Innon might have been had he grown up in the Stillness.

This exchange highlights the complex trade-offs of control and power. The Fulcrum trains orogenes to control and focus their abilities, enabling them to do things like Syenite just did in quelling the volcano (which likely prevented a new Fifth Season and saved thousands of lives), but in the process it breaks down the humanity of innocent children and perpetuates a system based on the hatred and dehumanization of orogenes. The novel ultimately suggests that this trade-off isn't worth it, as shown here by highlighting all the beautiful parts of Innon that would have been broken by the Fulcrum. When power must be externally controlled, that control should never cross the line into dehumanization and torture. As is the case with many of the themes that *The Fifth Season* raises, there is no easy answer here, but Syenite's thoughts in this passage prove that the Fulcrum goes too far in its oppressive system, which crushes and imprisons children all for the sake of refining and controlling their power.

Chapter 22 Quotes

“All the accounts differ on the details, but they agree on one thing: Misalem was the only survivor when his family was taken in a raid. Supposedly his children were slaughtered for Anafumeth’s own table, though I suspect that’s a bit of dramatic embellishment.” Alabaster sighs. “Regardless, they died, and it was Anafumeth’s fault, and he wanted Anafumeth dead for it. Like any man would.”

But a roggga is not any man. Roggas have no right to get angry, to want justice, to protect what they love. For his presumption, Shemshena had killed him—and became a hero for doing it.

Related Characters: Alabaster (speaker), Essun/Damaya/Syenite, Emperor Anafumeth, Shemshena, Misalem

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 418

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage Alabaster continues to challenge everything that Syenite has been taught, here reframing the legendary tale of Misalem and Shemshena, the original orogenic villain and the first heroic Guardian. As he explains here, Misalem had good reason for his murderous tirade, as Sanze was at the time an entirely genocidal, cannibalistic state responsible for the murder of Misalem’s family.

To her credit, Syenite no longer immediately disbelieves Alabaster just because his story goes against the history that she has been taught. At the same time, though, she takes no comfort in this new information, instead recognizing the harsh reality that is current Stillness society and the history that has formed it. Misalem might have been entirely justified in his anger and vengeance, but orogenes have no right to such feelings in the world of the Stillness, Syenite now knows. This is what the Fulcrum taught her as well—that orogenes must always be perfect, for any imperfection will give people an excuse for their anti-orogene bigotry. This is yet another example of how members of oppressed groups are not only the victims of prejudice, but must also control themselves on a personal level—to the point that they restrict their own humanity and access to the full range of emotions—in order to not draw punishment on their entire group. Misalem is an easy scapegoat because he allowed himself to be angry and seek vengeance, and all orogenes since have paid the price.

“Freedom means we get to control what we do now. No one else.”

“Yes. But now that I can think about what I want...” He shrugs as if nonchalant, but there’s an intensity in his gaze as he looks at Innon and Coru. “I’ve never wanted much from life. Just to be able to *live* it, really. I’m not like you, Syen. I don’t need to prove myself. I don’t want to change the world, or help people, or be anything great. I just want...this.”

Related Characters: Essun/Damaya/Syenite, Alabaster (speaker), Innon Resistant Meov, Corundum

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 422

Explanation and Analysis

Syenite and Alabaster have made a life for themselves on the island of Meov, co-parenting and living in a three-way romantic relationship with Innon. After two years of relative peace, however, Syenite is still restless, and she and Alabaster have the conversation quoted here.

Alabaster has been worn down by a life of horror and oppression, and despite his incredible orogenic power, he never really had the ambition that Syenite still does. His greatest desire was just to be a free and comfortable human being, with a family and a quiet domestic life—but because he was an orogene, and an orogenic prodigy at that, this desire was always impossible for him. He has now found this quiet freedom on Meov, and so is satisfied. Syenite has not been broken down like Alabaster has, however, and she also retains her own fierce and individual personality. Freedom means different things for different people: for Alabaster, freedom means the simple happiness of fatherhood on Meov, but for Syenite freedom means the ability to go where she wants and to change the world for the better. Neither idea is superior to the other, the novel suggests, and all kinds of freedom are valid depending on one’s experiences and needs.

●● *Promise*, Alabaster had said.

Do whatever you have to, Innon had tried to say.

And Syenite says: “No, you fucker.”

Coru is crying. She puts her hand over his mouth and nose, to silence him, to comfort him. She will keep him safe. She will not let them take him, enslave him, turn his body into a tool and his mind into a weapon and his life into a travesty of freedom.

[...]

Better that a child never have lived at all than live as a slave.

Better that he die.

Better that *she* die. Alabaster will hate her for this, for leaving him alone, but Alabaster is not here, and survival is not the same thing as living.

Related Characters: Essun/Damaya/Syenite, Innon Resistant Meov, Alabaster (speaker), Schaffa Guardian Warrant, Corundum

Related Themes:      

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

In this brutal and climactic passage, Syenite faces off against Schaffa, who has come for her child Corundum. At the moment of truth she finally says no to Schaffa—who once told her that she was never allowed to say no to him—and decides to kill Corundum and herself rather than let the child be taken as a slave and turned into a node maintainer.

This passage shows Syenite finally turning against the Fulcrum and the entire hierarchy in which she has previously attempted to live and excel. In its most extreme incarnation, this means choosing a free death over a life of enslavement, as she does here for both herself and her child, who cannot choose for himself. This horrifying decision, made necessary only because of a horrifying system, echoes that of the character Sethe in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, who is herself based on the historical person of Margaret Garner, a formerly enslaved woman who chose to kill her own daughter rather than see her daughter become enslaved herself. There is no easy answer in such a situation, but only the choice between two evils, and Jemisin illustrates this as akin to a choice between “survival” and “living.” In the apocalyptic world of the Stillness, survival is always held as the ultimate good, but in disaster situations survival often means sacrificing one’s morality and humanity. Jemisin presents all the complications of both sides of this argument, but ultimately suggests that truly living means retaining one’s humanity, morality, and freedom, even if it means dying earlier.

Chapter 23 Quotes

●● “After Meov. I was...” You’re not sure how to say it. There are griefs too deep to be borne, and yet you have borne them again and again. “I needed to be different.”

It makes no sense. Alabaster makes a soft affirmative sound, though, as if he understands. “You stayed free, at least.”

If hiding everything you are is free. “Yes.”

[...]

“I understand why you killed Corundum,” Alabaster says, very softly. And then, while you sway in your crouch, literally reeling from the blow of that sentence, he finishes you. “But I’ll never forgive you for doing it.”

Related Characters: Essun/Damaya/Syenite, Alabaster (speaker), Corundum

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 446

Explanation and Analysis

At the novel’s end, Essun (Syenite) and Alabaster have finally been reunited in the underground comm of Castrima. After incredible trauma and years apart, the two meet in this passage and discuss the deep wound that still binds them: the loss of their child, Corundum.

In a society like the Stillness, there is no true freedom for orogenes, as Essun shows here. In Tirimo, she was free to a certain extent, in that the Guardians never found her and she was able to create an entirely new identity, but she also had to hide a crucial aspect of herself by keeping her past and her orogeny a secret. In another sense, though, this hidden part of herself was “everything [she is],” and so she wasn’t really free and hadn’t really created a new identity at all. There are many aspects to a person’s identity, the novel proposes, and some can be changed while others can only be hidden or suppressed.

This passage also addresses *The Fifth Season’s* climactic moment—Syenite’s decision to kill her son rather than let him be enslaved—but still refuses to pass judgment upon it. Within the confines of the Stillness’s violent and hierarchical system, there is no clear right or wrong in such a situation. Similarly, Alabaster understands Syenite’s act, but he cannot forgive it. There is no redemption, no higher good to be found in a mother murdering her own child out of love. There is only wrongness—a wrongness that implicates the entire social structure that made that choice a necessity—and out of that wrongness comes the desire to make things more right in the future.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE: YOU ARE HERE

“Let’s start with the end of the world, why don’t we?” the narrator says. But first, he describes a more “personal ending” as an unnamed woman sits beside the corpse of her young son. Her own world has ended with his death, but the narrator says that this is not the first time that the woman’s world has ended in this way. The woman realizes that her son was never free until now.

The narrator is unidentified at first, but from the start has his own personal voice and seems to have a specific audience in mind as he speaks. The first sentence immediately introduces the idea that The Fifth Season will be concerned with disasters and apocalyptic situations. These global catastrophes are then connected to a disaster on a personal level, as a mother loses her son and feels like her own individual world has ended. Her thoughts about the boy’s freedom also introduce the tragic idea that when one is living in an oppressive society, sometimes death is the only chance for true freedom.



The narrator then describes the world ending on a continental scale. The continent he describes is enormous and frequently unsettled, like an old man stirring in his sleep. Ironically, its inhabitants have named this land “the Stillness.”

This description introduces the world of The Fifth Season as one of constant danger and instability. The peoples and cultures of the Stillness have developed in response to this looming threat in ways that are different from most societies in the real world.



The city of Yumenes is the oldest, largest, and wealthiest city in the Stillness. Most Stillness towns never get a chance to grow into cities because of the earth’s frequent movements, but Yumenes has survived and grown for thousands of years. It is the only place in the Stillness where people build with “bravery,” assuming that they will never experience an earthquake and therefore constructing precarious structures like balconies. At the center of Yumenes is an enormous pyramid called the Black Star, where the emperor lives. The narrator then notes that “none of these places or people matter, by the way.”

This passage further clarifies how precarious life is for most people in the Stillness. In contrast, the people of Yumenes are unique in that they have come to expect wealth and stability— they’ve even built up a ruling class out of that stability. In most narratives, the emperor and the continent’s capital city would seem like important things to know about, but The Fifth Season immediately undercuts readers’ expectations by instead beginning with “the end of the world” and asserting that “none of these people or places matter.”



The narrator introduces an unnamed man who “will matter a great deal.” The man is standing on a hill outside the city, looking down on Yumenes. With his “sessapinae,” he can feel all the delicate movements of the city’s millions of inhabitants. He speaks aloud about how “stonelore” was originally written in stone so that it couldn’t be changed. The man’s companion is shaped like a human woman, but she looks like she is made of stone and moves incredibly slowly—she is a “stone eater.” The man asks her what she will do “when it’s done,” and if she and her kind will take over the world. The stone eater says no, because humans will still be around.

Several new terms are identified in this passage, like sessapinae: people in the Stillness have special organs at the base of their brain stems that are sensitive to seismic movements. This man’s sessapinae are incredibly sensitive, as he can “sess” even the footsteps of people miles away. The stone eaters are a non-human species whose true nature is left mostly mysterious in the novel, first introduced here without explanation in order to fully draw the reader in to this alien world. Both characters seem to anticipate the imminent end of the world.



The man on the hill suddenly longs for silence and an ending to everything, and he reaches out with his orogeny—using all the skill “that his masters have bred into him”—to feel all the people of Yumenes and even his “fellow slaves” far outside the city. He knows that he cannot save them, but he can at least make their pain have meaning. The man then uses his orogeny to take hold of all the life within the city and the magma beneath it, and to grasp the entire tectonic plate on which Yumenes sits. Finally, he reaches upwards, “for power.” He holds all this in his “imaginary hands,” and then he breaks it.

As a result, the entire continent of the Stillness cracks in two. The crack runs in a straight line from east to west across its equator, beginning at Yumenes, and magma wells up into the earth’s “wound.” In geologic terms, this injury will heal quickly—but in the meantime, ash will blot out the sun, causing a winter that lasts for thousands of years and during which millions of plants and animals will die. The inhabitants of the Stillness are always prepared for disaster, but never for anything like this.

The narrator then notes another aspect of this world: there are enormous **obelisks** floating above in the atmosphere, moving very slowly and appearing to be made of crystal. No one knows what they are or what they’re for; they are assumed to be a relic of another long-dead civilization, as there are many other “grave-markers” like this in the Stillness. People are taught not to admire such things, because the people who built them were too weak to survive.

Now the narrator returns to the woman whose son is dead. She is far to the south of Yumenes, in a small “comm” (community or town) called Tirimo. Tirimo is simply constructed, designed to survive earthquakes, and would be mocked by the people of Yumenes. Many of the houses are essentially roofed holes in the ground, and one of these belongs to the woman, who is introduced as Essun. She is 42 years old, and her dead son Uche was almost 3. Essun knows that Uche’s father is the one who has beaten him to death.

Here, the unnamed man is revealed to be an “orogene”—someone who can manipulate energy to affect seismic activity. He wields incredible power, but the narrator claims that the unnamed man has also been treated as a slave his whole life, even having been “bred” like an animal. His reach upwards “for power” is left purposefully ambiguous here but will be explained later in the novel.



The narrative shows its sense of cosmic scale and heightened stakes as it zooms out from humanity’s perspective and takes a geological view of time. The man has killed millions of people and essentially destroyed the world, but the fact that his society has slaves living in constant suffering also complicates what might otherwise be seen as an entirely evil action.



The description of the obelisks here is an example of how the book mingles fantasy with acute descriptions of humanity. The presence of the obelisks makes the landscape seem especially eerie and alien, but people’s reactions to them are mundane and realistic—they don’t wonder about them or even usually notice them, instead relying on the practical wisdom that they are taught as children.



The opening chapter introduces many mysteries at once: here, it finally names its protagonist at a moment of incredible trauma but leaves that trauma largely unexplained. Essun’s young son has been murdered, but the narrative doesn’t yet say why the boy’s father would commit such a horrifying act. The description of Tirimo contrasts with that of Yumenes and suggests how most people in the Stillness live: in constant preparation for disaster.



The narrative shifts back to the day after the continent breaks in two. The land is devastated and filled with death except for a perfect circle several miles wide, with Tirimo at its center. The townspeople know that this means a “rogga” is in Tirimo, as their **stonelore** tells them to “Look for the center of the circle.” Hearing some of the rumors coming from the North, Tirimo’s “headman” sends out scouts to collect all the dead animals that they can find to preserve their meat. Some of the scouts pass by a strange object at the bottom of a newly broken cliff, but they do not notice it. The object is an egg-shaped boulder, the size of a human and colored differently from the other rocks around it. It smells like rust and blood and is warm to the touch.

Suddenly the object splits in two, and from the crack, a liquid-like substance spills out onto the ground. Days pass, and something in the rock pushes it apart and emerges. The being crawls a few feet, collapses, and stays still for another day. The object has now cooled, and its inside is lined with white and red crystals and a mysterious fluid. The figure that emerged from the geode—who resembles a human boy—slowly gets up. He walks to the geode, breaks off a few of the crystals, and starts to eat them. Then, he breaks off more crystals and gathers them in his arms. Slowly his movements grow more natural and humanlike. When he seems satisfied, he sets off toward Tirimo.

Now speaking in the second-person, the narrator reminds the reader that the world has ended before. But the planet has always survived, and new civilizations have replaced the old. However, the narrator says, this time is different—“*this is the way the world ends. For the last time.*”

CHAPTER 1: YOU, AT THE END

Still speaking in the second person, the narrator says that the “you” he is addressing is Essun, the orogene whose son Uche is dead. Essun has lived in Tirimo for the last 10 years, working as a teacher at the local “creche.” Her husband is named Jija, a member of the Resistant use-caste. Essun has two children, one who is now missing and one (Uche) who is dead. Devastated by the memory of coming home to find Uche’s body on the floor, Essun tries to stop herself from thinking altogether. In this dazed state, she sits with Uche’s body for two days, only moving to use the bathroom and get water.

“Rogga” is a slur for orogene, though this term takes on multiple layers of meaning as the book progresses. This passage also introduces the contradiction at the heart of society’s treatment of orogenes: they both need orogenes and hate them. An orogene has saved the town of Tirimo from certain destruction, but people are then told via “stonelore” (ancient wisdom about how to survive Fifth Seasons) to use this as evidence to find the orogene and presumably kill them. In sending out the scouts, the town leader immediately begins preparing for a disaster situation.



This passage introduces another alien aspect of this world that is left unexplained until later. The book presents a universe that is entirely strange yet vivid, and it seems visceral and real. The woman at the beginning of the book was described as a “stone eater,” and the way the figure eats the crystals suggest that he might be a stone eater as well. At the same time, he seems to be learning how to be human. The figure also has great patience and a different sense of time than human beings, as it moves at the pace of days rather than hours or minutes.



The narrator often uses the second-person perspective, but who he is and whom he’s addressing are two more mysteries introduced in this opening chapter. The book begins to build a fantastical world of tragedy and disaster and sets the scene for the world to end “for the last time.”



From now on, Essun’s sections are narrated from the second-person perspective, as she is seemingly the personal audience that the narrator is addressing. A “creche” is something in between a school and a daycare, depending on a community’s resources, and “use-castes” are how people are divided according to their ostensible skills in the world of the novel. Essun’s story begins with her reaction to devastating trauma, as she actively tries to shut down her thoughts and avoid the reality of Uche’s murder.



Finally, someone knocks on the door. When Essun doesn't answer, the visitor breaks the glass on the door and comes in: it is Lerna, a friendly young man who lives nearby and works as a doctor. Lerna sees what has happened and gently leads Essun away from Uche's body, saying that she can rest at his house. Essun can barely speak, and she lets herself be led away. At Lerna's house, she gets into bed and sleeps for a long time. At one point, she dreams of Jija killing Uche, with Uche laughing and wiggling even as his father murders him. Essun wakes up screaming, but eventually she falls back asleep.

When Essun wakes again, Lerna tells her that there has been a big "shake" in the north, and that the roads are full of refugees. Essun then remembers two days earlier, when she was sitting with Uche's body and felt an enormous earthquake coming their way. Without even thinking, Essun used her orogeny to create a barrier around Uche, and the shake "split and flowed" around Tirimo, leaving the town unharmed and going on its way.

Lerna is the only one besides Essun's children who knows that Essun is an orogene. Lerna now tells her that Rask, the town's headman, isn't letting anyone enter or leave Tirimo. Essun quotes something from **stonelore**, and Lerna asks her if she really thinks the situation is that serious. Essun knows that it is, but also that she can't explain the truth to him yet.

Lerna then brings up Uche, and Essun says that she knows Jija is the one who killed him. According to Lerna, the big earthquake destroyed everything nearby except for a perfect circle around Tirimo, and Essun immediately admits that she is the one who caused this to happen. Soon she gets lost in thought and allows herself to think of Jija and the children, and she starts to retch.

When Essun is able to speak again, she tells Lerna that she wasn't the one who revealed Uche's orogeny to Jija—the child must have done something that gave himself away. Essun asks Lerna if he's going to tell Rask that she's an orogene, but Lerna angrily responds that he has kept her secret faithfully so far and will continue to do so. He explains that the townspeople assume that Uche was the orogene who stopped the earthquake in Tirimo, and no one has yet figured out that the timing is slightly off (as Uche was killed before the quake). Lerna leaves to find the head of the Resistant use-caste (which Essun has claimed to be a part of) to tell her that Essun is all right.

Essun has tried to avoid the traumatic reality of what happened to her child, but she cannot escape it forever, and Uche's murder now appears in her nightmares. This is the only way that she is able to deal with the disaster at this point, however, and Lerna reveals himself to be a good and caring friend to let her process her grief in her own way by offering her a safe place in his home.



The big "shake" (which is Stillness slang for earthquake) in the north was the man breaking the continent in half at Yumenes—yet to Essun, this literal "end of the world" was just a distraction from her own personal apocalypse. Notably, Essun is here revealed as a powerful orogene and also as the person who saved Tirimo from destruction—yet the very fact that it was saved means that the townspeople will now be hunting for her.



The invocation of stonelore—ancient commandments intended to help humanity survive—means that a new apocalyptic period has indeed begun, which Lerna is not yet able to accept. As an orogene, however, Essun can sense the break in the planet's core and recognize that a truly disastrous era has begun.



Essun still sees the larger disaster of the earthquake as tangential to her own personal tragedy, and she's only beginning to even be able to acknowledge the trauma of what has happened.



Here, it becomes clear why Uche is dead: he was an orogene, and when he somehow revealed his power to his father, Jija beat him to death. This horrifying fact immediately drives home just how hated and feared orogenes are in this society. At the same time, the treatment of orogenes seems contradictory to the role that Essun has actually played in Tirimo thus far, as she saved the town and all its people from certain death. But now, she must fear for her own life because of this heroic act.



After Lerna leaves, Essun washes her face until the tap water turns brown and trickles to nothing, meaning that a pipe has broken somewhere. Speaking to herself in the mirror, she wonders aloud where her daughter Nassun is. Essun knows that she needs to leave Tirimo, as the townspeople will figure out that she's an orogene and come for her soon enough. The chapter ends with a quotation from a tablet of **stonelore**: "The shake that passes will echo. The wave that recedes will come back. The mountain that rumbles will roar."

Though Essun has saved Tirimo, she knows that she will be the next to die once the townspeople figure out her secret. This fact illustrates the extreme discrimination that orogenes face in the Stillness—Essun is never allowed to feel safe or free to be herself, lest an angry mob kill her. Most of The Fifth Season's chapters end with quotations from stonelore or other historical texts from the Stillness's past, all of which hint at future events in the plot and also build out the world of the novel as a whole.



CHAPTER 2: DAMAYA, IN WINTERS PAST

A young girl named Damaya wakes up to the sound of voices. She has been asleep in a pile of straw in the loft of a barn, and the warm, scratchy straw reminds her of an old blanket that her great-grandmother Muh Dear once sewed for her. That blanket is still in Damaya's bedroom, while Damaya herself is now locked in the family's barn. She hears her Mother and a strange man enter. The man's voice is accented and sounds "smart," and she knows that he must be a child-buyer here to take her into slavery.

The narrative is now told from the third-person perspective, though with the same narrator's voice as before. The book is purposefully hesitant in revealing details here, building the mystery as to why Damaya is locked in her family's barn instead of in her own bedroom, and then why she is seemingly being sold as a slave to a mysterious man. It also soon becomes clear that Damaya's timeline is not parallel to Essun's, as no apocalyptic event has begun in Damaya's world.



Damaya hears the strange man comment on the corner of the barn that she has been using as a bathroom, and he subtly reprimands Damaya's Mother for not even providing her a bucket to use. Damaya almost laughs aloud to hear this, thinking about how much she hates her parents. The man next comments about how cold it is in the barn, and Mother sullenly defends herself again. As they approach, Damaya notes that she cannot "sess" the footsteps of the strange man, though this is something she usually can detect, and has been able to for years.

The man is ostensibly here to buy Damaya as a slave, yet he already seems more concerned for her welfare than her own mother is. The mention of Damaya "sessing" something (that is, using her sessapinae) suggests that she is an orogene. This is implied to be the reason that she has been locked in the barn to be sold, as the novel gives more examples of the discrimination that orogenes face—they are mistreated even by their own parents. That Damaya can sess human footsteps speaks to her power even at this young age, but the fact that the strange man is undetectable to her also suggests that something is fundamentally different about him.



The strange man starts to climb the ladder to Damaya's loft, though Mother angrily calls for her to come down. The man tells Damaya (using her use-caste name, "Strongback") that she doesn't need to be afraid, that he has come to help her, and that he won't let her mother hurt her anymore. At these words, Damaya finally emerges from the straw and examines the man. She can tell that he is not from Palela (her own town): he is very tall, lean, and muscular, with extremely pale skin and long, straight black hair. Damaya tries to decipher where he is from using these traits, but they make no "racial sense" to her. The most noticeable thing about him is his eyes, which are pale silver in color, or "icewhite."

The name of Damaya's use-castes, Strongbacks, implies that people in this caste perform manual labor. Damaya has decided that her mother is an enemy, and so she is more likely to trust the man when he seems to defend her from her mother. Damaya's examination of the man is the first of many examples that show how people in the Stillness are racially classified. Their features are supposed to show their geographical origins and also how desirable their traits are according to the ruling classes, thus immediately placing them in the Stillness's complex social hierarchy. Even at a young age, Damaya has learned to classify people in this way, so she is confused that she cannot discern the man's race and status from his features.



The man smiles at Damaya and offers his hand to her, asking if she will join him. Damaya knows that she has no choice whether or not to go along, but she likes that he at least tries to make her feel like she does. Finally, she takes his hand. The man then presses two of his fingers to the base of Damaya's skull, holds them there for a moment, and lets go. She asks what this action meant, and he says that it was a "ritual" that will make it easier for him to find her if she should ever get lost. Damaya is confused by this, but the man tells her that she will be leaving with him.

Damaya follows the man back down the ladder, where the man asks Mother to give Damaya some food, clothing, and a coat for their travels. Mother is flustered and says that they gave away Damaya's coat. The man sighs and finishes Mother's explanation for her—she believed the myth that orogenes don't feel the cold, and she thought Damaya must have been lying when she complained about it. Damaya then briefly remembers the day that she was revealed as an orogene: she came home to find her mother weeping angrily, accusing Damaya of being a monster masquerading as a child.

The man says that Damaya will still need protection from the cold on their way to Yumenes, and Mother seems surprised that he really is taking Damaya there. The man then comments that Mother would have given Damaya away even if she thought Damaya was going to be killed, and again Mother tries to defend herself, saying that she was just doing her duty as a good citizen. Turning to Damaya now, the man tells her that he is taking her to the "Fulcrum" at Yumenes to be trained. Damaya now understands that she isn't being sold—she's being given away—and that her family actually *fears* her.

Damaya realizes that the strange man is a "Guardian," and he affirms that he is now *her* Guardian. Mother leaves to get a blanket for Damaya, and then the man, who is dressed in an all-burgundy uniform, takes off his short cape and wraps it around Damaya. He introduces himself as Schaffa Guardian Warrant and explains that Damaya will be trained at the Fulcrum to use her orogeny to serve the world. He says that she is now the sixth orogene under his care, and that he finds his wards in various ways. Damaya's parents reported her to their comm's headman, and the news eventually made its way to Yumenes and to Schaffa.

The man presents himself as gentle, caring, and respectful of Damaya's freedom, and she is immediately drawn to him as a parental figure in place of her own mother, who has seemingly turned against her. The "ritual" that the man performs here is unexplained, but it likely has something to do with Damaya's sessapinae, as these organs have already been described as being located in the brain stem and would be accessible through the base of the skull.



The man's conversation with Damaya's mother reveals more of the myths about orogenes and the way that most people in the Stillness think about them. Damaya was treated as a normal child until her mother discovered that she was an orogene, at which point her mother suddenly began to see her as a hateful monster. The small cruelties of giving away Damaya's coat or not even leaving her a bucket to use as a toilet highlight the harsh realities of this kind of discrimination, not to mention the trauma of a young girl being imprisoned by her own mother.



The Fulcrum will be more fully introduced later, but at this point it is at least understood by the characters to be a place in Yumenes where orogenes are trained to use their power to serve the Stillness. The depth of Damaya's mother's prejudice is revealed again here, as the man makes it clear that she would have given Damaya away even if she thought the girl would be killed. Damaya's mother's response then shows how people are taught to think about orogenes—she doesn't really want her daughter to die, but she has been indoctrinated to think that orogenes are monsters and that she is doing the moral thing by treating Damaya as she does.



Guardians are a mysterious group whose origins and motives remain ambiguous throughout the novel, but as a "use-caste" they are understood by others to be the people who control and look after Fulcrum orogenes and are distinguishable by their burgundy uniforms. Schaffa's introduction also shows how the Stillness's naming system works: people have a unique first name, followed by their use-caste name and then the name of the comm that they belong to. This system is another way of immediately organizing people according to their supposed roles and rankings.



Schaffa says that Damaya is actually lucky that her parents reported her and kept her isolated, as many orogenic children end up murdered by mobs after they reveal their powers. Damaya wants to know why she couldn't just stay at home and keep hidden, and Schaffa explains that it is illegal to harbor an unregistered orogene. Furthermore, without training, she will be unable to control or repress her powers and will only cause great danger to herself and others. Orogenes react instinctively to the earth's movements, he says, and this can lead to disaster and death.

The day that Damaya discovered she was an orogene, she was sitting with two of her friends after lunch when a boy named Zab approached them and asked if he could cheat off of her work on their test that afternoon. Damaya didn't like Zab, and she refused. The next thing she knew, Zab had pushed her onto the ground. Realizing that she was all muddy and that her uniform was ruined, she became suddenly enraged and "grabbed the air."

As Damaya remembers this, Schaffa continues speaking, describing Damaya as "firemountain-glass" and a "gift of the Earth." But he reminds her that "Father Earth hates us [...] and his gifts are neither free nor safe." Back in her memory, Damaya recalls the air going suddenly cold, ice forming on the grass around her, and the look of terror on Zab's face.

Schaffa reassures Damaya that none of this is her fault, and she shouldn't blame herself or her parents. Damaya realizes that he is right and starts to cry, but Schaffa takes her hand and tells her to stop—she must never cry where others can see her, because it isn't safe. She doesn't understand, but she makes herself stop anyway. Just then, Mother returns to the barn with the blanket, along with Father. Neither of them will look at Damaya, and Father speaks tersely to Schaffa about the journey ahead of them. Schaffa says that they will travel a long way on the first day, and he hints that this is because they must outrun anyone from Palela who might try to find and kill Damaya.

Schaffa's talk with Damaya gives the reader more information about the nature of orogeny, and how people in the Stillness view orogenes. An orogene's power over seismic events is instinctual even as a baby, and it is only through training that they can learn to control and focus this power—until they do learn such control they can be dangerous, which explains to a small extent why other people fear them. The way that Damaya's mother has treated her seems cruel, but Schaffa explains that it could have been much worse considering the laws of the Stillness and the violence that she might otherwise have faced.



Damaya's memory here gives an example of how orogenic children might accidentally discover their abilities. They are clearly not monsters disguising themselves as children, but simply children surprised to find that they have powers they didn't expect. By showing this from the orogene's perspective, the book highlights how the Stillness's treatment of orogenes is actually based in fear and lies.



Orogenes can draw energy from the life around them to use it as their own, but this means "icing" a region around themselves and killing anything within its borders. This is what Damaya inadvertently did in her anger, and nearly killed Zab by "icing" him. The people of the Stillness personify "Father Earth" as a godlike figure, yet one that hates humanity and tries to destroy it through seismic activity. In this passage, orogenic power is explicitly linked to Father Earth, offering more information as to why other people hate and fear orogenes so much. "Firemountain-glass" is likely obsidian, a kind of stone that is beautiful, incredibly sharp, and created by volcanic activity.



In order to survive, orogenes must adapt to many harsh realities, even from a young age—there is no comfort for Damaya as she is taken away from the family that now rejects her, and she is not even allowed to cry as this happens. It later becomes clear that this is because people fear when orogenes show emotion, as it might mean that they will unleash their power without self-control. Schaffa's comment about escaping Palela again highlights the violent discrimination that orogenes face, as even her former neighbors might murder Damaya once they learn the truth.



Schaffa hands Damaya the blanket that Mother brought, and Damaya realizes that it is the one Muh Dear sewed for her. Damaya wants to cry again, but she remembers Schaffa's warning and keeps her face expressionless. As Schaffa leads her away, Mother and Father say nothing, and Damaya sees her brother Chaga peek out through the curtains for an instant and then disappear. Schaffa lifts Damaya onto his horse and tells her to not look back as they ride away. She doesn't, but later she will wish that she had. The chapter ends with a brief and partially obscured quotation from a tablet of **stonelore**: "[obscured] the icewhite eyes, the ashblow hair, the filtering nose, the sharpened teeth, the salt-split tongue."

Damaya now understands a little better why her family treats her the way that they do: they fear her power and don't understand it. They also fear what their neighbors will do to her and to them if they treat her too kindly. Similarly, the fact that Damaya's mother gives her Muh Dear's blanket shows that she does indeed still care for her daughter on some level, though she is afraid to show it in public. The stonelore quotation at the chapter's end is obscured, introducing the idea that this ancient wisdom (which is supposedly the foundation of all civilization in the Stillness) might be fallible or open to misinterpretation.



CHAPTER 3: YOU'RE ON YOUR WAY

Essun is deciding what to do next and who to become. The self that Essun has inhabited lately "died with Uche," and it doesn't make sense for her to try to be that woman anymore. She considers letting the villagers come kill her, but she decides that she must first try to find wherever her daughter Nassun is buried, if Jija even buried her. By now, the rest of the people of Tirimo will have recognized that something truly catastrophic has happened up north—and in their fear, they will search for scapegoats.

The beginning of this passage makes it clear that Essun's current identity is one that she has largely created on her own, and that she has inhabited other identities in the past. For now, the only thing about her true "self" that she can cling to is her identity as Nassun's mother, so finding her daughter gives her a purpose and a reason to survive. Essun is practical, and she recognizes the harsh reality that in times of crisis, people will often turn on one another and look for someone to blame. And because orogenes are already seen as dangerous non-humans, the other people will likely try to kill her if she doesn't leave town.



Essun resolves to leave town immediately; she makes herself eat something and then gets the family's "runny-sack" from a cache beneath the floor. It contains extra clothes, some money, and a knife. Essun decides that Jija's boots can be traded away— if she ever finds him, she will question him about Uche's death and Nassun's whereabouts, and then she will kill him. Leaving the house, Essun briefly thinks about her past with Jija and is struck by a wave of overwhelming anger. She stops and calms herself, and briefly uses her orogeny to sense that there are no open vents in the earth nearby.

In another example of how society in the Stillness is built around the constant threat of disaster, most people keep "runny-sacks" with them full of emergency supplies, in case they should need to leave in a hurry. Essun also finds a sense of purpose (and a way of dealing with her trauma) through clinging to her anger at Jija and trying to avenge Uche's death by finding and killing Jija.



Essun walks through the town, which has probably been locked down and is mostly empty. In times like these, everyone has pre-assigned tasks, and some are already at work. No one pays any special attention to Essun, as they haven't yet made the connection that she is the "rogga's mother" and might even be an orogene herself. Looking for the headman Rask, Essun goes to his office but finds his second-in-command there instead, talking to some people who are probably shoring up the town's well, as **stonelore** advises. Essun knows that if he's not here, Rask will be at the library, so she heads there.

During an apocalyptic event, everyone's use-caste becomes their primary role in their comm, as they go into survival mode according to the dictates of stonelore. Essun knows that the townspeople are already thinking of Uche as a "rogga" rather than a human child, and that once they figure out her own identity, she will just be another "rogga" to them as well: someone to be hated and feared.



Tirimo's library is merely a shack filled with books and scrolls, but Rask goes there for privacy. Essun finds him asleep on his cot at the back of the structure. As he wakes up to see Essun, she observes him connect the dots and realize that she is likely a "rogga" herself. She immediately tells him that she won't hurt anyone, and she asks if he knows where Jija went. Suspecting what happened, Rask asks Essun if Jija killed Uche. Essun cannot say "yes" aloud, but she nods. Sighing, Rask says that no one knows which way Jija went, but some people saw him load up their horse cart and leave with Nassun—who was still alive. Stunned to learn that her daughter might have survived, Essun starts shaking with suppressed emotion.

Rask asks if Jija was ever violent before. "Never," Essun replies, but she thinks that maybe it would have been easier if he *had* been, so that she could blame something else besides her own "sin of reproducing." Rask asks if Essun is going to go after Jija, and she nods and asks for a pass to go through the town's gate. Rask warns her that if she leaves, she can't come back, and then he reveals that his own sister was an orogene who was kidnapped and likely murdered as a child. Rask offers to walk Essun to the gate. She tries to dissuade him, as this will draw more attention to her, but he insists, and she feels like he wants to protect her as he could not protect his own sister.

As they walk together toward the town gate, people start to whisper and stare. At the gate, Rask calls for one of the guards, a Strongback named Karra, and tells him to open the gate. Karra and the other Strongbacks are clearly suspicious of Essun and are reluctant to open the gate—they even refuse to do so until Rask gets angry. Rask then apologizes to Essun about Jija and wishes her luck on her search. Essun feels strange leaving Tirimo, which has been her home for 10 years now, but all of her neighbors' suspicious glares now make it easier to go. She also knows that Rask has "damaged himself" by showing himself as a public ally to her, and she is grateful.

Nodding farewell to Rask, Essun heads toward the opened gate. Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye she sees Karra nod to another of the guards, and the woman draws a crossbow and points it at Essun. "Everything happens too fast to think"—especially because Essun has been purposefully trying *not* to think for the past few days—and so she reacts instinctively, using her orogeny to draw energy from the air and freeze the incoming crossbow bolt so that it explodes into dust. Karra screams at the woman to shoot again, and Essun feels an earthquake begin to rise beneath her feet.

Essun hadn't yet dared to hope that Nassun might still be alive. But with Rask's information, she now allows herself to do so and is subsequently overwhelmed by emotion. It was easier to let herself be driven by hatred of Jija than love of Nassun, as now she has something else precious to her that could potentially be taken away. Here, Rask shows that not everyone reacts with immediate hatred and fear in the presence of an orogene.



The fact that Jija was never violent in any other capacity shows just how strong the hatred of orogenes is in this society. Essun blames herself—she feels like she condemned her children to death just by giving birth to them in the first place, knowing that they would likely be orogenes and thus never safe or free in this world. Rask has more sympathy for orogenes than most because of his sister, as the ingrained prejudice of stonelore is countered by his own personal experience with a loved one. This shows how prejudice can sometimes be combatted on an individual level.



Everyone immediately turns against Essun when they begin to suspect that she is an orogene, and they even turn against Rask as well, just because he treats her like a human being. Essun has felt like Tirimo was her home for 10 years, but the way that her neighbors suddenly turn on her shows that she was never truly free and safe here—she could only imagine herself so while hiding under a false identity.



Essun's emotions are raw and sensitive because of the severe trauma that she has recently endured, and so she lets herself lose control and use her orogeny in this dramatic scene. She reacts instinctively to save her own life, but this power grows as it feeds on her own suppressed emotion. This scene also clarifies how orogeny works: Essun is able to "ice" the crossbow bolt by drawing energy from the air, but then this energy is redistributed into the earth and creates an earthquake.



As the guardswoman loads another arrow, Essun stands in the center of a circle of frost, suddenly letting her anger take hold. Rask realizes what is happening and tries to stop her, but Essun rages to herself, blaming Rask and all the people of Tirimo for Uche's murder. Suddenly the earth splits open, buildings collapse, and a rockslide takes out part of the comm's wall. Deep underground, Essun feels the walls of the aquifer break and knows that, in a few weeks, all the town's wells will run dry. Now the circle of frozen air around her expands, catching Rask and killing him immediately, then overtaking everyone else who tries to flee along with every other living thing in its radius: grass, trees, and birds.

The destruction continues as Essun lets herself fully feel the pain of Uche's death, and she sees the entire town of Tirimo as if it were Jija himself. What finally stops her rampage is hearing the cry of a little boy as his father carries him out of a collapsing building. Essun suddenly realizes what she has done, and the earthquake quiets. She recognizes that *she* is the one who killed Uche, just by being his mother, and she starts to cry. Walking away from town now, Essun thinks that she can never escape death, because she herself is death. The chapter ends with a brief line of **stonelore**: "Never forget who you are."

CHAPTER 4: SYENITE, CUT AND POLISHED

A young woman named Syenite sits drinking safe at a meeting with her "assigned senior," an older woman named Feldspar. Syenite has just been given an assignment—which involves shattering a coral reef—that she considers to be "shit" and beneath her skills. She doesn't say any of this, and both she and Feldspar speak delicately and politely despite knowing the reality of the situation. Syen (Syenite) thanks Feldspar for assigning her a mentor, and though Feldspar knows that Syen isn't actually happy about this at all, Feldspar assures her that no one will think less of her—especially because this new "mentor" is a "ten-ringer." Syen herself wears four rings.

According to Feldspar, Syenite will be traveling with the "ten-ringer" to a town called Allia, where the quartent governor has requested that they do something about a blockage of coral in the harbor. Syen can tell that Feldspar has been annoyed by the governor's insistence, but as a Fulcrum orogene, she has learned to always be polite and never show strong emotion, lest she make the "stills" nervous and afraid. Syenite wants Feldspar's job for herself eventually, and so she knows that she'll need to work on her own professionalism.

Essun's attack here is a reaction to her own great suffering, letting herself surrender to all the rage and grief that she has been trying to suppress since Uche's death. The narrative doesn't justify her violence, but it does try to make the reader understand and empathize with Essun. She first reacts in self-defense, but then she sees the townspeople's hatred of her as just another aspect of the prejudice that murdered Uche, and she lets her emotions run wild. But because of her orogenic power, this means that she inadvertently kills everyone around her. In this way, the book uses the fantasy genre to make reactions to tragedy and oppression larger-than-life and cinematic.



Often, a key part of oppression is internalized prejudice, as Essun still thinks of herself as a monster and thus blames herself for Uche's death—just because she gave birth to him, making him a monster as well. Again, the book uses the fantastical elements of the story to make Essun's processing of her grief something deadly to others, to the degree that she thinks of herself as an embodiment of death—something that she has also been conditioned to believe about orogenes.



Syenite's story is also in a different timeline from Essun's, as she is not experiencing an apocalyptic event. The fact that Syenite has been assigned to shatter a coral reef implies that she is also an orogene, and it seems that the particular group she's a part of shows their rank by wearing rings, with one ring being the lowest and ten rings being the highest. As Syen and Feldspar speak, they don't speak of harsh realities—it seems that they've been taught to hide everything behind politeness and formality.



"Still" is a somewhat derogatory term for a non-orogene, used only by orogenes among themselves. The Fulcrum's policy about orogenes remaining polite and non-emotional contrasts with the dramatic scene of the previous chapter, when Essun let her emotions run wild and killed many people in the process. Syenite herself seems to have trouble remaining polite and proper, though she knows that she is supposed to if she wants to keep ascending the ranks.



Syenite asks about the ten-ringer, and Feldspar says that he is in his room in another part of the Fulcrum. He was asked to attend this meeting, but he might be tired after traveling alone. Syen is surprised to hear that he was traveling alone at all, and Feldspar explains that five-ringers and above do not need a partner or Guardian to accompany them outside of the Fulcrum—at that point they are considered “stable enough in [their] mastery of orogeny” to be allowed some freedom. Feldspar confirms that it will just be Syen alone with the ten-ringer on their journey to Allia, as they have “found that arrangement to be most effective in circumstances like this.” Syen prepares to go see the man, and as she gets up, Feldspar tells her that she herself has six children. Syen finishes her safe and leaves.

Syenite walks through the grounds of the Fulcrum, which is itself like a city contained within the walls of Yumenes. As she crosses the gardens, Syenite sees other ringed orogenes, as well as young “grits” who haven’t yet passed their first-ring test. She also sees a few Guardians, dressed in burgundy as usual. Syen briefly goes to her own room before heading to “Shaped Prominence,” the building where the ten-ringer is housed. At the top floor, she is pleased to experience something rarely allowed to her: silence and solitude. She realizes that the man has the whole floor to himself, and that this (along with the autonomy that Feldspar mentioned earlier) is the reward for achieving such a high rank. Syenite wants this more than anything.

Syenite realizes that she knows very little about this man except that he has achieved the highest rank possible for a Fulcrum orogene, and that he will have total power over her if he wants to. She sighs and knocks on his door. The man who answers is younger than she expected—in his forties, while Syen is in her twenties—and he looks grumpy and tired, not even wearing his ten rings. He snaps at her and starts cursing in another language, and then he says that he told Feldspar that he wasn’t to be disturbed. He tries to send the shocked Syen away several times, until she finally forces her way in and angrily says that she’s here to “fuck [him].” The man finally quiets and lets Syenite into his room.

Neither character says it out loud here—they are being polite and subtle, as is the Fulcrum way—but Syenite is actually being assigned to bear a child to the ten-ringer. While this assignment is wreathed in formalities and Fulcrum tradition, at essence it is a policy of breeding human beings like animals, a sinister hint that even the most powerful Fulcrum orogenes are still treated as slaves. Notably, the person assigning Syenite this task is also an orogene who herself has been forced to bear children. In this way, the Fulcrum feeds its own dehumanizing policies from within, with orogenes making other orogenes continue to participate in the systems that oppress them. At the same time, the Fulcrum encourages orogenes to continue to move up the ranks so that they might earn a small amount of freedom like that enjoyed by the ten-ringer, who is at least allowed to travel without a Guardian.



It is the nature of oppressive systems to keep their participants struggling for something that they can never achieve. Even as Syenite prepares to be bred like an animal, she also longs for the solitude and autonomy that a higher-ranked orogene enjoys. Yet notably, even the ten-ringer is being forced to have children against his will, showing just how shallow his façade of freedom really is. As a city within the walls of Yumenes, the Fulcrum’s structure also shows how orogenes are always kept separate from “stills” and are expected to be wholly self-sufficient even as they are made to use their power to help the world at large.



Syenite knows that she is totally powerless in this situation, but this is a condition that she has come accept as a reality of life for an orogene, and she must simply make the best of it. She is used to the formalities and euphemisms that are common in the Fulcrum, and so she’s surprised into her own outburst by the man’s irritability. Neither of them is especially good at the tightly-controlled demeanor that their peers encourage, and this makes them immediately feel antagonistic to each other.



The man seems nervous now, and he purposefully sits as far away from Syenite as possible. He says that this isn't the first time that he's had to do this, but he didn't expect it to happen again so soon. He also admits that the first few times, he thought that the women were genuinely interested in him. For her part, Syen now allows herself to accept the reality of her mission: she is supposed to have a child with this man. She starts to undress, and though the man protests that they don't even know each other, she states straightforwardly that she wants to get things over with. The man tries to back away, and Syen is almost relieved to see that he is the powerless one in this situation, despite his high rank.

The man now says that as a ten-ringer, he can refuse, but Syenite tells him not to—she knows that for her, this is a best-case scenario, and she would be killing her future career if she angered her higher-ups by failing this assignment. The man still seems tormented and won't look at her. Syenite is confused—she knows she's not especially attractive, especially by "Equatorial standards," but neither is he. The man has exceptionally dark black skin and is very lean, exhibiting none of the "physical superiority" associated with Sanzed ancestry.

The man stewes silently to himself, and when he looks up, Syenite sees hatred in his face—but not directed at her. He says that Syenite must not be from Yumenes and reveals that he himself was "bred to order," a product of careful orogenic breeding. Syen, on the other hand, is a "feral." Syen has never heard this term, but she assumes that she should be offended by it, and the man clarifies that it's what "they" call her.

Ferals are frightening to the rulers of the Fulcrum, because they are proof that orogeny is unpredictable and not subject to all of their rules and science—rather, it can pop up anywhere. Syenite lets herself think about this for a while, first feeling somewhat pleased that she was found worthy of breeding with a ten-ringer even as a "feral," but then catching herself "trying to find value in degradation."

The man finally sighs and agrees to get the deed over with. They go into his bedroom and have perfunctory sex, neither of them enjoying or wanting it. Afterwards, the man asks for Syenite's name, but she cuts him off before he can tell her his. They tersely make plans to leave the following day, with Syenite having to remind him of their "bullshit mission" to clear Allia's harbor of coral.

As a ten-ringer, the man wields incredible orogenic power—but as a human being, he's powerless in this situation. He admits that he has been made to sire many other children before, again showing how he, too, is a slave in the Fulcrum's orogene-breeding system, even if he's the highest-ranked slave of all. Syenite again shows her tendency to dispense with politeness and get right to the point.



The man is given another semblance of freedom with the "privilege" that he can refuse this mission—but he and Syenite both know that, realistically, he cannot do so without consequences. Like seemingly everyone in the Stillness, Syenite judges people based on their racial characteristics, but what is notable here is the reference to the Sanzed race's supposed "physical superiority." Sanzed traits have been deemed superior and are thus supposed to be attractive and desirable.



Syenite had assumed that this man would be like other Fulcrum leaders, carrying out even unsavory tasks without criticizing the system or naming the darker realities behind them. But the ten-ringer clearly is willing to speak the truth, which is that he was bred like an animal and is now expected to continue to father more children with partners specifically chosen for their orogeny.



The nature of orogeny itself remains mysterious, as here it's explained that it can be bred for genetically but also can appear at random among the children of stills. Syenite "trying to find value in degradation" is a tragic but typical side-effect of many oppressive systems. The oppressed can operate only within the hierarchy that dehumanizes them, and so they naturally want to better themselves even within that hierarchy.



Syenite doesn't even want to know the man's name, as she is determined to keep their sexual relationship entirely impersonal. She also recognizes that the long journey to Allia to clear its harbor is just an excuse to make her travel with the ten-ringer and keep trying to get pregnant.



Syenite leaves, dreading the coming month on the road but also trying to justify it to herself as a necessary sacrifice for civilization. She won't have to raise the baby once she gives birth, and it will be a necessary step on her way to her fifth ring and being allowed more freedom. Back in her room, she packs up and showers, scrubbing her skin until it burns.

Syenite is still buying into the mindset that the current system is the best possible one, and so she sees her enforced pregnancy as necessary for her own future and the maintenance of civilization itself. Despite her attempt to justify it to herself, however, she cannot help feeling physically violated and unclean because of what she is being forced to do, suggesting that this action she is being forced to take isn't something "civilized" at all.



The chapter ends with a quotation from a Sanzed emperor thousands of years in the past. Referring to an unnamed group of people, the emperor says to "tell them they can be great someday, like us. Tell them they belong among us, no matter how we treat them. [...] Then they'll break themselves trying for what they'll never achieve."

This quotation is a crucial one: the emperor speaking here is presumably referring to orogenes, but it could be applied to almost any oppressed group that is kept separate from those in power yet made to believe that they can "belong" if they just work hard enough or do everything right. This is why orogenes like Syenite are willing to uphold their own oppression, as they are made to hope that if they sacrifice enough, then one day they will actually be free. The quote is about establishing a false meritocracy as a way to coerce those within it to act in the ways that the actually powerful people want.



CHAPTER 5: YOU'RE NOT ALONE

Essun is exhausted after her deadly display of orogeny at Tirimo's gate. Most of the effort she expended was actually in controlling the raw power that she took in from her surroundings and then amplified. Night falls and Essun considers making a fire, but she decides against it. As the sky darkens, she can see a red glow to the north, and she knows that it must be coming from the massive break in the continent. Essun must head south, she decides, as that's the only "sane way to go" and so must be where Jija is as well.

Even as Essun lets her rage and grief flow, she still maintains control over all the power she's wielding—if she hadn't, she could have caused a spontaneous volcano to erupt or massive earthquake to occur instead of just a small quake and a torus of ice. She now heads out into an apocalyptic landscape that's lit by the glow from magma in the continent's break—her former domestic life at Tirimo is fully gone.



Essun stops to eat and drink, having recently refilled her water at a roadhouse on the way. The other people there all shared a look of "slow-building panic," as everyone seems to be realizing just what has happened up north and what they might be required to do to survive in the coming years. The people at the roadhouse just looked like refugees, not yet ready to accept that they might be living in the apocalyptic times that **stonelore** warns about.

Essun knows the truth because of her orogeny, but other people are still reluctant to accept that a new apocalyptic period might have begun. The dictates of Stonelore are often harsh and frightening, and no one looks forward to having to fulfill them—but they surely must if they want to survive.



Essun is falling asleep while leaning against an old post when she suddenly realizes that someone else is nearby. She opens her eyes and sees that it's a small boy, six or seven years old, entirely covered in dirt. He sits cross-legged while staring at her, and he finally says hello and introduces himself as Hoa. Essun is suspicious, assuming that he must have a comm name or use-caste name and also that he probably isn't alone, but the boy says there's no one else with him and asks if he can sleep near Essun. As explanation, he says only, "I like you."

Deciding to risk it, Essun tosses Hoa a bedroll and decides to make him leave the next morning, but she allows herself to "be human for a little while" in the meantime. The chapter ends with a quotation from "A Treatise on Sentient Non-Humans," describing an unnamed race that is "arcane" and unexplainable in the same way that orogeny is, and that can appear to be human but also take on other shapes.

It's suggested that this mysterious boy is actually the figure that crawled out of the broken geode in the first chapter, meaning that he isn't human at all and might even be a stone eater. At the same time, he is immediately drawn to Essun and may have been looking for her specifically. His simple name—notably also missing a use-caste or comm—also marks him as different.



Essun sees her kindness toward the boy as something "human" in comparison with her murder spree at Tirimo and the monster that everyone (including herself) considers her to be. She has hardened herself emotionally so many times that she finds relief in letting herself trust a stranger for a little while. The quotation at the end of the chapter seems to be about stone eaters, supporting the idea that Hoa might be a stone eater taking on a human-like form.



CHAPTER 6: DAMAYA, GRINDING TO A HALT

Damaya and Schaffa first arrive at the town of Brevard. Damaya has never left her hometown of Palela before, and she is fascinated by everything she sees, even the buildings and oil lanterns of the town. They stay at an inn that night, and Damaya is awakened in the middle of the night to see Schaffa having a nightmare and thrashing around in his bed. Worried about making him angry, she quietly wakes him—but when he asks what he was doing, she just says that he was snoring. The next day, Damaya feels less awed by Brevard, realizing that it's just like a bigger version of Palela.

Schaffa and Damaya ride for many hours until they come to a place near a fault line. Suddenly Schaffa tells Damaya to stop what she's doing—she's been inadvertently using orogeny and "listening to the earth," noticing how much more active it seems here than in Palela. Somehow Schaffa can tell what she was doing, and he tells her that, without training, she'll have no control whenever she is so close to an active earthquake spot. To distract her, he offers to tell her a story about Shemshena. Damaya says that she has never heard of Shemshena, and Schaffa laments the state of education in small comms.

Thus far, Schaffa has seemed to be always calm and in control—but his nightmares reveal secret trauma that he is suppressing or hiding. Meanwhile, Damaya continues to consider him a kind of parental figure, treating him as she would her own father and fearing to anger or disturb him.



Here, Schaffa reveals that Guardians can sense when someone uses orogeny. He also begins to teach Damaya the worldview that she will inherit at the Fulcrum: that orogeny without training is raw and wild, and that it needs great focus and skill to control it. The "creches" of small comms can't afford real education for children, so they are only taught stonelore and practical skills needed to fulfill their use-caste roles. But this poor education has also to an extent protected Damaya from the anti-orogene propaganda that is embedded in traditional schooling in the stillness.



Schaffa begins his story: 1,200 years ago, before the Fulcrum was established, a powerful orogene named Misalem tried to kill the emperor. Before the Fulcrum, orogenes had no real training, but Misalem had still managed to master his orogeny to a great degree and used it to kill thousands of people. Damaya is horrified to hear this, realizing that she too is a “rogga” like Misalem. She asks why Misalem would do such things, and Schaffa says that no one knows—he might have been insane, or just evil.

Schaffa says that Misalem came to Yumenes and demanded that the Emperor come out to meet him, or else he would destroy the entire city. The Emperor agreed and came out with his bodyguard, Shemshena. Shemshena was a skilled warrior of the Innovator use-caste who had studied orogenes and the way orogeny worked. Before Misalem arrived, she had evacuated the entire city and destroyed every living thing that she could within Yumenes’s walls. This, Schaffa explains to Damaya, is because orogeny works by drawing kinetic energy largely from other sources. This kinetic energy comes from “earth power” during an earthquake, but from living things when there is no energy coming from the earth. This is also why orogenes sometimes “ice” the things around them, sucking out their energy and killing them.

Shemshena knew at least this much about the nature of orogeny, and so she tried to clear the city of everything that Misalem could possibly draw power from. When Misalem faced the Emperor, then, he reached for the power to destroy Yumenes but realized that it wasn’t there. In an instant Shemshena struck him with a knife, distracting him, and then she killed him with her other knife. This ended Misalem’s great threat to the Sanze Empire.

This story thrills Damaya, but Schaffa isn’t done. He explains that Shemshena was the first Guardian. The Fulcrum is the order of orogenes, he says, but the Guardians are those that watch over the orogenes and control their “terrible power.” Damaya now realizes the truth—as an orogene, she is not like Shemshena, the hero of the story, but like Misalem, the murderous villain.

Schaffa describes how the Guardians train just as Shemshena did, learning to neutralize the threat of any orogene that might become like another Misalem. Now that Schaffa is Damaya’s Guardian, he says, it is his job to ensure that she remains “helpful, never harmful.” Damaya falls silent, no longer liking the story and realizing that Schaffa didn’t actually want her to like it.

This story introduces Misalem as the original bogeyman orogene, the villain that used his power to murder innocent non-orogenes. Damaya is horrified to be identified with this figure, but as orogenes, they are perceived as a single group or unit rather than as unique individuals. It will later in the novel be revealed that there is more to the story than Schaffa tells here, as this is the official Fulcrum version used to teach young orogenes to fear their own power and themselves.



Shemshena is the hero of the story, and her heroic action involves protecting stills from an evil orogene. Schaffa uses this story to explain more to Damaya (and the reader) how orogeny works, but also to show why orogenes are treated as villains, descendants of the evil Misalem. Anti-orogene prejudice is rooted in the history of the Stillness—and, even more importantly, in the stories that the people of the Stillness tell themselves about their own history. Of course, it is also worth noting the old saying that history is a story told by the victors—so this “history” may not just be objectively true, and may have been written to serve particular ends.



Shemshena emerges victorious, and because of the way that Schaffa presents the story, readers (and Damaya) are encouraged to cheer on this victory. This is essentially propaganda, using an altered historical tale to further a specific worldview—one meant to support the current hierarchy in which Sanze are considered good and orogenes are considered evil.



Damaya was previously caught up in the story, but now she begins to realize what Schaffa intended by telling it—that she should know her place as a potential Misalem. Schaffa is then the Shemshena-like hero in this story, protecting people from orogenes who might turn bad or lose control.



The Guardians don’t really guard orogenes so much as they guard people from orogenes, using any means that they deem necessary. Damaya is chilled to realize that Schaffa intended for her to come to these conclusions after hearing the story, as she naturally doesn’t like thinking of herself as a potential genocidal monster.



Schaffa and Damaya keep riding through empty plains, and Damaya notices ruins of old civilizations as they pass, and an **obelisk** floating overhead. She thinks about how, even though some comms have survived Fifth Seasons, Sanze is the only *nation* to survive a Season—it has survived seven—and that is “because the people of Sanze are stronger and smarter than everyone else.” They’re presumably even smarter than the people who built the obelisks.

Schaffa asks Damaya if she is still thinking about the story, and he seems to know that she doesn’t like seeing herself as the villain Misalem, someone needing a Shemshena Guardian to control her. Damaya admits that this is true, and she says that she wants to be able to control her own power and to be responsible for herself. Schaffa says that this is an admirable desire, but the nature of orogenes means that she will never be able to fully control herself. Suddenly angry, tired, and frustrated, Damaya yells, “I don’t need you to control me. I can control myself!”

Schaffa stops the horse. He asks if Damaya really can control herself, and he says that this is the most important question of all. He then asks how she was discovered to be an orogene, and Damaya admits that she reacted as she did with Zab because she was angry and afraid. Still sitting behind her atop the horse, Schaffa now places his hand over Damaya’s hand, which is resting on the saddle’s pommel, and holds it in place. He explains that the orogenic power in her reacts instinctively and doesn’t recognize matters of degree—it will neutralize an attacking bully the same as it will an erupting volcano. He says that Damaya was lucky, even, as many orogenes only discover their power when they accidentally kill a loved one.

Schaffa’s grip on Damaya’s hand now steadily tightens, and she starts to whimper and struggle. Calmly, Schaffa tells her that he is about to break her hand. He does so, and the sudden pop and jolt of searing pain make Damaya scream. Through the pain, her mind immediately dives down into the earth, finding comfort in the cool stone beneath the horse’s feet. Schaffa releases her hand and Damaya keeps screaming, now partly at the sight of her own broken fingers, and the earth beneath her seems to offer comfort and relief. She almost reaches into it with her orogeny, but then she hesitates, remembering that she is supposed to be controlling herself.

Damaya’s internal dialogue here shows more of what children in the Stillness are taught about history—that Sanzeds are superior to everyone else, and that surviving Fifth Seasons is the highest goal a civilization can achieve. This means that even the people who built the obelisks were failures and inferior to Sanze.



Every word that Schaffa speaks is carefully controlled, as he leads Damaya to her own conclusions and doesn’t shy away from the harsh reality that she is about to enter as an orogene. She will never be able to have true freedom and responsibility, he says, which she naturally lashes out at.



This is Schaffa’s first real test for Damaya, as he explains that the most important skill an orogene can have is self-control. He describes orogenic power as something foreign and willful that Damaya herself must learn to focus and reign in, lest she cause great harm to other people.



The sinister mystery of Schaffa’s character deepens as he continues to speak mildly and gently even as he’s suddenly violent toward Damaya. He has given her a sense of the high stakes of her power, and now he forces her to really experience those stakes and practice the self-control that she claimed to have. Orogeny does offer her relief from pain—but she doesn’t want to disappoint Schaffa, so she doesn’t let herself surrender.



As Damaya struggles, Schaffa whispers into her ear, saying that she could kill him right now if she wanted to, and then maybe she could even find a new comm and live a normal life for a while, though it wouldn't last. Damaya doesn't speak, and she continues to suffer through the searing pain. "Very good," Schaffa finally says, and he praises her ability to control herself through great pain, something that not many untrained orogenes can do.

Schaffa now takes Damaya's hand again, gently this time, and tells her that it will heal if it's set properly, but he could also crush it further and it would never heal at all. "No!" Damaya cries, and Schaffa leans close again, saying that she must never say no to him. She has no right to say no to her Guardian, he whispers, and he has the right to break every bone in her body if he deems it necessary to protect the world from her. Shivering, Damaya asks why this is. Now stroking her hand gently, Schaffa tells Damaya that he loves her. He hates that he has to hurt her, but he says that it is necessary and that he must hurt her so that she won't hurt anyone else.

Damaya's hand continues to burn, and the earth beneath her continues to beckon to her. But now she knows that she cannot kill Schaffa, as he is "the last person in the world who loves her." Schaffa then reveals that ever since he began to break her hand, he has been holding a long knife pressed against her heart, so that he could have killed her in an instant if she had lost control. He shows her this, he says, to prove that he will never lie to her. Then he tells her to brace herself, and he sets the broken bones of her hand, causing Damaya to scream in pain once more. When this is done, Damaya is dazed and barely conscious, and Schaffa urges the horse forward.

When night falls Schaffa makes camp as Damaya sits nursing her hand. Finally, she says, "I want to go home." Schaffa tells her that she no longer has a home, but that in Yumenes she will have a new one, and a whole new life. He asks if she is afraid of him now, and she admits that she is. Schaffa says that this is good, and he makes her state aloud what she has learned today: that he will hurt her whenever he thinks it is the right thing to do. Schaffa assures her that his actions are not random, and that if she never gives him a reason to doubt her control, then he will never have to hurt her again. He then makes Damaya look into his eyes and affirm that she understands this.

Schaffa acts like a tempting demon here, offering Damaya everything that she wants while also making her realize that she will never be able to truly have it. (But notably, this hypothetical life is similar to Essun's life as a hidden orogene in Tirimo.) Damaya passes the horrific test, and Schaffa praises her, keeping her dependent on his approval.



In this crucial passage, Schaffa delivers more ultimatums to Damaya that she must meet if she is to survive as an orogene. She must accept that she is totally under her Guardian's power and that she always has the potential to be another Misalem, such that the world must be protected from her. She doesn't even have the freedom to say "no" to Schaffa but must do whatever he says. Schaffa then shifts from these sharp words and his own cruel actions to an avowal of love and care, which Damaya cannot help believing. Schaffa is essentially grooming Damaya through propaganda, pain, and love to not only make Damaya completely dependent on him, but to make her believe that she deserves to be put in this position of complete dependence.



Damaya is totally alone, and though Schaffa has just hurt her deeply, she clings to him now with a desperate love, since he's the only person she has left. He also reveals that she never even had the ability to kill him and free herself, as he would have killed her in an instant had she reacted with her orogeny. In all aspects, then, Schaffa seems to be chillingly in control of himself, and of her.



Schaffa continues to deliver hard truths to Damaya that she has no choice to accept if she wants to survive. Most important is that she must always remain in control of herself and her emotions, or else Schaffa will hurt her to stop her from hurting other people. As an orogene, she doesn't even have the luxury of avoiding these realities for a moment, as Schaffa forces her to accept what she learned this day.



Schaffa gives Damaya some soup, and they lie down to sleep on their single bedroll. Damaya dreams of earthquakes and pain, and finally Schaffa wakes her up, saying that she was making a noise. She asks if she was snoring, and Schaffa pauses and then says that yes, she was just snoring. Damaya thinks about how her entire life has been upended, but that Schaffa is the only person she has left to love, and she relaxes beside him as they fall asleep again.

The chapter ends with a description of a past Fifth Season, this one called the “Boiling Season.” It was caused by an underwater eruption that sent acid rain over part of the Stillness, but because much of the continent was unaffected, some historians still dispute that it was a “true” Fifth Season.

Damaya now has her own traumatic memories that wake her up at night. But Schaffa is treating her gently again, and she finds comfort in that. Her relationship to him is complex and clearly unhealthy. But at this point in her life, he is the only kind of stability and family that she has, which is of course exactle as he wants it because it gives him control.



Passages like this give more context about the history of Fifth Seasons and the reason that the societies of the Stillness maintain their current structures. Notably, a “true” Fifth Season must affect most of the continent—more localized disasters are not considered especially important.



CHAPTER 7: YOU PLUS ONE IS TWO

Essun wakes up and starts walking again, this time with the strange child Hoa accompanying her. She tries to ask him about himself, but he is very reluctant to give any answers and doesn't seem to have a comm, parents, or a use-caste name. Essun assumes that he is lying, but he also seems too young to be lying so effectively. Thinking about him briefly makes her remember Uche, and she purposefully has to steer her thoughts away from her dead son.

Essun continues to examine Hoa and try to figure him out. He is very small, but he acts like he's about ten years old. He is naked underneath his layer of filth, and he has “icewhite” eyes that make him look somewhat inhuman. He's also strangely upbeat and innocent about everything, and he smiles openly at Essun when he first sees her in the morning. This is what has made Essun decide to keep him around, at least for a little while. When they pack up to leave, he carries only a mysterious bundle of rags clutched to his chest.

Essun and Hoa pass by a few travelers on the Imperial Road, and ash is now falling from the sky, though in large enough flakes that masks aren't required to filter it out. Starting to feel ashamed of Hoa's nakedness and filth, Essun decides to find a creek and clean him off, then hopefully drop him off at a comm on the way to the salt plains, where she thinks Jija might have stopped. They leave the road and head toward a creek, and at one point Hoa falls and rolls down a rocky slope. Essun offers to help him up, but he uneasily avoids her hand and hurries to collect his dropped bundle of rags.

Essun is distracted from Hoa's strangeness by thoughts of her own son, whom she is still purposefully trying to avoid dwelling on. Hoa's lack of a use-caste and comm name again marks him as someone foreign to the usual Stillness way of life.



Hoa has “icewhite” eyes like Schaffa, connecting their characters in their alienness and mystery, but Hoa acts like a real child and seems to genuinely like Essun. The bundle of rags that he's carrying might be the crystals from inside the geode where Hoa first emerged.



The ash constantly falling from the sky adds to the sense of apocalyptic doom, as a new Fifth Season has begun, and everyone is trying to find safety as quickly as possible. In such an environment, extreme actions are possible, and violence is more easily justified. Meanwhile, Hoa's seeming immunity to the fall he suffers and reluctance to let Essun touch him should be suspicious to her, but she still has other things on her mind.



Hoa realizes that Essun wants him to wash himself, and he seems confused until she sarcastically shows him how to use soap. He wades into the creek and cleans himself as Essun keeps watch and looks for an extra shirt that he can wear. When Hoa emerges from the water, she is shocked once again. His hair is long and of the coarse “ashblow” texture that the Sanzed prize. But it is pure white, just like his skin—whiter than anyone Essun has ever seen. His features also seem entirely foreign, lacking any Sanzed characteristics—even though Essun knows that “every race in the world these days is part Sanzed,” whether voluntarily or not. “Everyone is measured by their standard deviations from the Sanzed mean,” but this boy’s people must have somehow avoided this fate.

Still in shaken by Hoa’s appearance, Essun curses and then is even more surprised when Hoa smiles and says that she’s “weird.” She helps him get dressed, but this action makes her think of Uche, and she has to go away by herself for a while to recover. When she returns, Hoa acts like nothing strange has happened, which Essun appreciates. They keep walking together, and Hoa doesn’t complain despite still being barefoot.

At one of their rest breaks, Essun tries to tell Hoa that he can’t stay with her, and that she’ll try to find a comm for him on the way. Almost offhandedly, he comments that Essun is looking for her daughter, which makes her freeze up and ask him how he knows that. Hoa says he’s not sure that it’s her daughter that he can sense, but there are a “bunch of you” in the direction he’s going. Essun knows that what he’s saying is unbelievable, but she fixates on the fact that Hoa seems to know where Nassun is.

Essun asks Hoa how he knows these things, and he just shrugs and says that it’s something he’s always been able to do. Essun can tell that he’s not an orogene—and even orogenes can’t sense each other’s presence from far away, like he seems to be doing—but she decides to trust him. He might be strange, unsettling, or even crazy, but she is willing to go along if he can really lead her to Nassun. Preparing to walk again, Essun offers Hoa some food, but he says that he doesn’t eat very much. The two break camp and continue heading south.

This chapter ends with a quotation from a “Lorist recitation” about the “age before the Seasons, when life and Earth, its father, thrived alike. (Life had a mother, too. Something terrible happened to Her.)” Father Earth created clever human beings, but soon they turned against him, and he has hated them ever since.

This passage reveals more about the way racial hierarchies work in the Stillness. The ruling race of the Sanzed judges everyone else according to their own characteristic traits—and during their time as conquerors, they forcefully spread their genes around the continent by committing rape and genocide. Despite this cruel history, it is considered normal for everyone to elevate Sanzed traits above others in terms of desirability and attractiveness—an echo of how racism and colorism work in the real world. The fact that Hoa seems to have zero Sanzed ancestry, however, marks him as someone wholly alien or perhaps older than Sanze itself.



Essun continues dealing with the trauma of Uche’s death in the only way that she can think to, which is generally to keep it to herself and try to maintain control of her emotions and thoughts. Hoa again shows his strangeness by not seeming to notice the pain of walking barefoot for miles on a hard road.



Hoa continues to say and do strange things, but Essun chooses to look beyond them and instead focus on the only thing giving her life purpose right now: finding Nassun. The fact that Hoa can seemingly sense orogenes again speaks to his alien nature, but it also suggests that he might have purposefully found Essun—perhaps to lead her to her daughter as Essun hopes, or perhaps for some other reason.



Hoa tries to keep his power and identity mysterious, and Essun is willing to let this go as long as he can take her to Nassun. This is part of her attempt to maintain her humanity and identity as Nassun’s mother, the only thing keeping her going in this apocalyptic landscape and after the personal catastrophe that she has endured.



This myth is increasingly built out throughout the Broken Earth trilogy, but it shows the basis of much of stonelore and the worldview of people in the Stillness. In essence, the myth holds that Earth itself hates humanity because of something terrible that ancient people did, and this is why the planet punishes humans with Fifth Seasons.



CHAPTER 8: SYENITE ON THE HIGHROAD

Now on the road toward Allia with her new “mentor,” Syenite finally learns that his name is Alabaster. As they travel, he often falls asleep in his saddle, and he snaps at her when she points this out, reminding her that they still need to have sex every night. Syenite wonders about his constant tiredness until about a week into their journey, when she notices that Alabaster is constantly quieting all of the tiny unnoticeable earthquakes in the area around them. Syenite is confused by this, as the Fulcrum has taught her to redirect the earth’s energy, not halt it altogether, lest the “microshakes” lead to something bigger in the future.

Syenite thinks about this mystery for a few days as they travel along the Yumenes-Allia Highroad, an old Imperial Road that is safe and efficient but that she also finds incredibly boring. Any travelers they meet avoid speaking to them when they notice Syen and Alabaster’s black Fulcrum uniforms, and every night the two have sex for a few minutes and otherwise spend the time in silence. Finally, one night, Syenite asks Alabaster why he is quieting the microshakes, and he is surprised both that she can sense him doing it and that she hasn’t asked before. The two bicker some, and then Alabaster reveals that he’s doing it to give the “node maintainers” a break from their work.

Syenite thinks of what she knows about the node maintainers: nodes are outposts placed at certain points across the Stillness that have been deemed important as hot spots or as being near fault lines, and a Fulcrum-trained orogene is assigned to each outpost. Their job there is to keep the surrounding area stable from earthquakes. Syenite doesn’t know of anyone who has been assigned to be a node maintainer, but she imagines that it must be an incredibly boring job. She says this to Alabaster—that maybe he should let the node maintainers do their jobs to keep them from dying of boredom—and then it takes her a moment to see that he is staring at her with hatred.

Alabaster asks Syenite if she has ever been to a node, and she responds that of course she hasn’t. Alabaster says that every “rogga” should visit one. Syenite is surprised to hear him casually use this word, which is usually an insulting slur. Alabaster also says that if Syen can sense him quelling the microshakes, then she can probably do it as well. At first, she questions why she would ever want to do this, but then she agrees to help, at least as something to pass the time. Alabaster then says that there is a node station two days away, and that they will go to visit it next.

From the start, Alabaster questions the Fulcrum’s teachings and Syenite’s own expectations. His questioning indicates to the reader—if not yet to Syenite—that he understands at least to a degree the nature of the Fulcrum’s role in the larger Sanzed abuse of orogenes. Nonetheless, his understanding doesn’t give him a way out: he, too, has seemingly accepted the reality of their situation—that they will bear a child together according to the Fulcrum’s wishes—though he isn’t happy about it either.



Orogenes rarely leave the Fulcrum, and when they do, they must identify themselves with their black uniforms. Other people purposefully avoid them, then, considering them non-human and something to be hated and feared. This society always makes sure to identify orogenes as an “other.”



The nodes are an example of how orogenes use their power to protect the Stillness, keeping everyone safe from earthquakes across the continent—and how despite this, they are still treated as enemies and slaves. Syenite doesn’t know much about the nature of the nodes, however, and Alabaster’s look of hatred suggests that she might have spoken too flippantly.



Alabaster doesn’t shy away from the harsh truth of this world and society, and in this vein, he uses the word “rogga” instead of the more polite “orogene.” He is not trying to insult himself or Syenite, but he implies that if they are going to be treated like something inferior then they shouldn’t try to gloss over this fact in their language. Clearly, he thinks that seeing a node is something very important, as he is willing to go days out of their way to do so.



Syenite is enraged to hear this—as it’s significantly out of their way—but she also knows that her hatred of Alabaster is irrational, and that she should be trying to get on his good side, as he is by far the highest ranked living orogene. At the same time, all of the tricks of flattery and politeness that she’s learned at the Fulcrum don’t seem to work on Alabaster at all, so she finds herself being honest with him—which means being angry. She snaps at him and then they go to bed. As she reaches for him to have their usual perfunctory sex, he stops her, reminding her that her period is late but also saying that this doesn’t necessarily mean anything yet. Syen is embarrassed to realize that he has been keeping track and waiting for a break from having sex with her.

The next morning, the two have sex, and afterwards Alabaster asks Syenite why she seems to hate him so much. Syen knows that if he were a usual Fulcrum elder, she would lie and be polite, but instead she says, “I just do.” Alabaster then suggests that she doesn’t really hate *him*, but rather the world and the way that it treats orogenes. Syen tries to argue that the way things are is the only possible way, but Alabaster goes on, saying that other empires besides Sanze must have been successful, and there must be other ways of treating orogenes besides their current system of either slavery or murder. As an example, he gestures to a nearby forest, where an ancient ruin rises up beyond the trees.

Syenite argues that those other civilizations failed, and so they must have been wrong, but Alabaster counters that “survival doesn’t mean rightness.” He suggests that society could instead let orogenes be in charge of things. Syenite scoffs at this, but Alabaster says that people only hate and fear orogenes because centuries of **stonelore** have taught them that all orogenes are evil monsters. Syenite says that stonelore can’t change, but Alabaster says that in fact it changes all the time: Tablet Two, for example, has been damaged seemingly on purpose. Furthermore, other tablets have been excavated from a dead city that contained stonelore very different from what society now teaches. Even the rule against changing stonelore might be a recent amendment, Alabaster says.

Syenite is shaken by this, but she still tries to cling to the idea that “**stonelore** is as old as intelligence” and that anyone who tries to go against it inevitably fails. She asks Alabaster where he heard about the ancient, excavated tablets, and he says that he has been going on missions outside the Fulcrum for 20 years and has friends all over the continent. Syenite can’t believe that an orogene would have friends beyond the Fulcrum, especially people willing to talk about heretical things like this.

Everything about Alabaster confuses and irritates Syenite at this point. Nothing that she has learned at the Fulcrum seems to work on him, and he doesn’t act like the highly ranked master that he supposedly is. He even seems to actively dislike having sex with her. This does at least allow Syenite to be more honest in expressing her emotions around him, though these emotions are usually negative ones.



A major conflict in the book is whether “the way things are” is really the best way for everyone or just for those in power. After years at the Fulcrum, Syenite has come to assume that the Sanzed system is the best one—but Alabaster questions this at every turn and brings up historical facts that Syenite was never taught. Unlike others in the Stillness, he even seems to notice things like the obelisks and ancient ruins that others have learned to ignore. He also makes the point that Syenite isn’t really angry at him, but at the fact that he points out what the real wrongs are—things she has learned to suppress her anger about.



Alabaster continues to upend Syenite’s ideas of history and what she believes to be literally set in stone. This echoes arguments about scripture in the real world, and ancient discoveries like the Dead Sea Scrolls that might corroborate or contradict what is accepted as truth in the present day. Alabaster suggests that history is written by those in power, and that it can be changed and manipulated in order to uphold whatever status quo the powerful want to maintain. Even the Sanzed idea that “survival equals rightness” serves to uplift the powerful and condemn the powerless.



Syenite is also blinded by the idea that orogenes and stills fundamentally cannot mix, though Alabaster has apparently made friends with people not officially sanctioned by the Fulcrum. She tries to compare stonelore to human intelligence itself, but Alabaster’s arguments have at least planted a seed in her mind—that stonelore and knowledge itself are subjective and open to manipulation.



Syenite starts to ask Alabaster another question, but then she notices that he is suddenly distracted. She follows his attention and realizes that there is about to be a massive earthquake beneath the town of Mehi, which is about 200 miles away. Alabaster falls to his knees, and Syen can feel the force of his orogeny speeding off into the distance, toward the hot spot. Suddenly Syenite feels her own orogeny being “grabbed” by Alabaster’s and dragged along toward Mehi. She tries to resist and break free but cannot, and soon they reach the hot spot, which is truly massive. Alabaster begins diverting the force of the magma and earth, using Syenite’s power to help him.

Suddenly Alabaster uses his orogeny to make a kind of “punch,” and Syenite can feel all the pressure of the magma bubble release. Alabaster then pulls them out and back to the surface of the earth, and suddenly she feels like “his strength is at her disposal,” and she uses it to complete the work of ensuring that no small earthquakes destroy anything and that a fault line isn’t created at this spot. With Alabaster’s power, she can see the earth better than ever before, and the work is easy. As soon as Syen is done, she finds herself back in her body, with Alabaster curled up next to her and a circle of frost surrounding them.

Shaking, Syenite crawls over to Alabaster to see that his body is clenched, but he is alive. Syenite tries to understand what just happened—enormous hot spots like that don’t just spontaneously explode. Further, it’s supposed to be impossible for two orogenes to work together, as the weaker one will burn out—but none of that explains what Alabaster just did.

Syenite sits gathering her strength and then gets some food out and waters the horses. She crawls back to the bedroll and falls asleep beside Alabaster for a while. When she wakes, he is awake too, and he says that they have to go the node station immediately. Syenite argues that they’re too tired, low on supplies, and shouldn’t ride in the dark. Alabaster curses to himself and gets up, suddenly urgent about the need to leave right now. He says he’ll go without Syen if he has to and gets angry when she tries to stop him again. Syenite feels like something is wrong with Alabaster, or he’s gone crazy, but she finally manages to convince him to wait until morning.

Orogenes are not supposed to be able to work together in unison, so what Alabaster does to Syenite here is inexplicable to her. This is the first time that his true power is revealed, as he immediately shifts from a hypothetical argument about history to performing feats that Syenite considers miraculous, like sending his powerful orogeny off hundreds of miles in the distance and dragging her own along beside him.



Jemisin manages to make orogeny feel visceral and real even though everything happening here would be invisible from above ground, and Alabaster and Syenite aren’t doing anything with their physical bodies to make it happen. Alabaster uses Syenite’s power to quell the hot spot, but then he allows her to use his power to finish the work—he has incredible control over his strength.



Alabaster has questioned Syenite’s ideas about history and the role of orogenes—but in his actions here, he also upends everything that she has been taught about the limitations of orogeny. This also raises the question of why Fulcrum orogenes are taught to limit themselves so much.



Alabaster frustrates Syenite by rarely explaining his reasons for acting as he does, and this passage is no exception. She cannot understand why he suddenly needs to get to the node station so urgently when it seems like a suicidal endeavor.



Alabaster stops his preparations and gazes off into the distance for a while, still seeming agitated. Finally, he explains why he feels the need to get to the node immediately—as Syenite already thought, hot spots like that never come out of nowhere, and the center of the big one in Mehi was the node station itself. Syen finally realizes that he means that the node maintainer himself must have set off the hot spot. Using so much power also must have iced the entire town, she realizes, but she also has no idea why the node maintainer would do such a thing.

Alabaster plans for their trip—they'll leave before dawn, he says, and push the horses as fast as they can, but he at least agrees to rest for the remainder of the night. Before dawn they saddle up and head toward the node station. On the road, people actually seem relieved to see them, as even “stills” could have sensed the disaster that almost took place and they are grateful to see Fulcrum orogenes now. That night, Syenite and Alabaster stop and sleep for a few hours before setting out again. The next day they finally reach the node station, which consists of a large central pyramid, three smaller ones, and a flimsy metal wall.

Alabaster immediately notes that no one has come out to meet them, and he can't hear anyone inside. Syenite asks who usually lives at a node station, and she is surprised to learn that node maintainers don't have Guardians but *do* have live-in doctors. She assumes that everyone must be dead from the “torus” of ice but also realizes that the surrounding forest should be iced as well, and it isn't. Alabaster rides up to the gate and somehow creates a torus with a center outside of himself—something that Syen had no idea was possible—and uses it to freeze and break open the gate. He dismounts and immediately hurries inside.

Syenite ties up the horses and then follows Alabaster, though he's out of sight by now. Beyond the gates, everything is silent and seems abandoned—until Syenite sees a horse shed and looks inside to see three dead horses, all of them completely frozen. She heads toward the central pyramid, assuming that Alabaster and the node maintainer will be there. She lights a lamp and goes inside, and soon finds the frozen bodies of several soldiers and workers. At the center of the pyramid is the node chamber, which is large and empty except for what seems to be a chair made of wires and straps, with the node maintainer inside.

The mystery of the node maintainers deepens, and it becomes more important than ever that Syenite visit a node for the first time. This is another reminder of the awesome power that orogenes wield, as a single node maintainer almost set off a volcano and likely a new Fifth Season.



Previously, the stills on the road avoided Syen and Alabaster—but when they need their power, the stills look grateful. In this way, the orogenes are treated always as weapons or tools—sometimes useful or lifesaving ones—but never as human beings.



Syenite assumes that the node maintainer must have created a huge torus to draw in the energy needed to create the hot spot, which itself would have killed everyone in the area. Alabaster's comments about the node maintainers continue to confuse Syen, as she suspects that all of her assumptions are wrong. Alabaster again exhibits power that Syenite never knew even existed according to her Fulcrum lessons.



The node maintainer did indeed make a torus, but it was much smaller than Syenite expected and only iced the immediate vicinity of the node station rather than the surrounding town. What she finds here is like nothing she anticipated.



Syenite approaches and examines the chair, noticing that Alabaster is there as well. When she realizes what she's actually seeing, she curses to herself. The body of the node maintainer is small, naked, and attached to a series of pipes and wires. She understands what the node maintainer really is—an orogene kept alive but entirely "immobile, unwilling, indefinite." A shelf nearby is full of medicine, which Syenite assumes must be necessary to keep the node maintainer alive. She lets herself truly understand that the node maintainer is a child—a child with Alabaster's features. In an emotionless voice, Alabaster explains that sometimes a "rogga" can't learn proper control, but "Mother Sanze can always find another use for them."

Syenite is shocked and horrified. Alabaster shows her something else—a scar at the base of the node maintainer's neck. Orogenes' sessapinae are larger than other people's, he explains, and the node maintainer has been operated on to remove its self-control but keep its instinctive orogenic power. Syen knows that even a baby orogene can quiet an earthquake, so the system is horribly ingenious. She wants to vomit.

Alabaster explains that the problem must have been that someone let this node maintainer wake up. He says that some people have a fetish for the node maintainers and pay to have access to them but want them to be awake and aware of what's happening. The node maintainers are normally kept sedated because using orogeny causes them pain, so when they are allowed to wake up, they experience terrible suffering—this must have led to the sudden creation of the hot spot. Hearing this, Syenite finally stumbles away and vomits.

Alabaster says that this is why he was so insistent that every orogene should see a node in person. Syenite says that she had no idea about any of this. Alabaster's voice is cold and full of suppressed hatred as he says that "they" would do this to every orogene if they thought it was more useful. They see all orogenes as just weapons and monsters to be used, just like the node maintainers—all just "fucking roggas" in the end. Syenite lets this sink in and realizes that he's right—orogenes like her and Alabaster are just "dressed up" versions of this tortured and mutilated child.

Alabaster and Syenite make camp in the node station's courtyard. They sit beside the fire for a while, staring into the flames in silence until Alabaster starts to speak. He says that he thinks he has 12 children in all, but he doesn't know where most of them are. Syen remembers that the node maintainer looked just like Alabaster. She tentatively asks about their own future child, and Alabaster says that it might become a node maintainer, but it also might be trained by the Fulcrum and become a successful orogene.

This horrifying discovery is a turning point for Syenite, the harshest blow yet to her sense of the way world works. Node maintainers aren't bored orogenes given bad jobs, but lobotomized children made into thoughtless slaves of "Mother Sanze." Syenite's perspective goes from detail to horrible detail, also noting that the child looks like Alabaster—implying that it might be one of the children he was forced to sire. She is learning quickly that the entire Fulcrum system of rings and assignments is really just a façade for the enslavement and genocide of orogenes.



There is a highly scientific aspect to this fantasy world as well, as people have clearly experimented on orogenes in horrible ways to discover this monstrously efficient system. Orogeny is directly connected to the sessapinae in a mysterious way, and the sessapinae are physical organs that can be manipulated.



Reality grows even more disturbing as Alabaster reveals the whole truth here. The node maintainer almost killed thousands of people, but in actuality, it was just a child reacting instinctively to a horrifying situation over which they had no control. Syenite's body finally cannot handle this barrage of traumatizing facts, and she vomits.



This is why Alabaster calls orogenes "roggas"—if they are going to be treated like roggas, then they shouldn't be referred to as something more polite. Syenite now realizes that even oppressive systems that seem humane and necessary—like the Fulcrum—are usually rooted in more horrifying realities such as the treatment of the node maintainers.



There is little to say in the face of the awful things Alabaster and Syenite have seen this day and the reality of the world that they must endure. Alabaster knows that the node maintainer was likely his own child, yet there is nothing that he can do about it—for all his power and decorated status, as an orogene he has no real freedom or choice.



Syenite, now using the term “rogga” because “orogene” feels like a falsehood to her, says that they could also have a “still” as a child, and then it could grow up to be seen as a real human being. Alabaster says that he still wouldn’t want a non-orogenic child. No comm would accept them, he says, assuming that they still carry the curse of “Father Earth”—instead, they would be made into a Guardian. After saying this, Alabaster suddenly looks up and tells Syenite that she has to forget everything she saw today. When she makes her report, she should refer to the node maintainer as nothing more than a resource, and she must affirm that it existed for the good of the world. Now angry and cursing at Alabaster for this callousness, Syenite considers killing him in his sleep. Then, Alabaster starts laughing.

Alabaster’s laughter lasts a long time, to the point that Syenite can feel the earth moving with the rocking of his body. She realizes that what Alabaster really wants is to destroy the world, and that he is probably capable of doing it. When his laughter finally dies away, Syen asks him where his Guardian is. Alabaster says that she’s not dead, but he did something to her to make sure she was no longer a threat to him. Seeing the terror in Syen’s eyes, Alabaster apologizes, smiles sadly, and then gets into their sleeping bag.

After a while Alabaster speaks again, saying that he knows he’s crazy, but that Syenite will become crazy too if she stays with him and sees and understands more things like she did today. He tells her that she would be doing the world a favor if she killed him. Syenite thinks about this for a long time and then gets into the sleeping bag as well. As she drifts off, an **obelisk** floats by in the distance. The chapter ends with a proverb saying that after Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall, Death is the fifth season.

INTERLUDE 1

This section is narrated in the second person, addressing “you,” who the narrator says should be noticing certain things missing. For example, no one in this world speaks of islands or other continents besides the Stillness. Similarly, no one pays attention to stars or celestial objects, instead focusing only on the earth. Because of this, they do not notice “what’s missing” in the sky, as it is something they have never imagined was supposed to be there. So, the narrator says it’s fortunate that “there are more people in this world than just humankind.”

Alabaster hints at the origins of Guardians: they are the children of orogenes who are not orogenes themselves, and then have something mysterious done to them that makes them into Guardians. For years Alabaster has known everything that Syenite learned today and he has had to quell his own anger and sense of injustice, even referring to his own children as mere resources to be exploited. For Syenite, however, this is all very sudden, and she lashes out at Alabaster once more in her anger at the unjust world.

Alabaster laughs to keep from going mad because of all the horrors that he’s seen and experienced. But the laughter also makes him seem unstable and dangerous to Syenite, especially now that she has seen his extraordinary power firsthand. Her thought that he wants to destroy the world hints that Alabaster might have been the unnamed man at the novel’s beginning, who used his orogeny to break the continent. If this is true, then Syenite’s storyline is taking place before Essun’s.



Alabaster seems to recognize his own instability and how dangerous that is when combined with his great strength and all the injustices that he must bear daily. The proverb here seemingly gives the source for the term “Fifth Season”—it is the season of death, which exists outside of the other four seasons.



This “you” is presumably still Essun, but it also seems directed to the reader who is still being introduced to this foreign world. Just as the people of the Stillness ignore the obelisks and ruins of ancient civilizations, they’ve also learned not to pay attention to the sky at all, or to lands besides their own. The line about something “missing” in the sky is an early hint that the moon will play a role in the story in the future. The other people besides humans might be stone eaters, who remain mysteries at the edge of the narrative for now.



CHAPTER 9: SYENITE AMONG THE ENEMY

After another week of traveling, Syenite and Alabaster reach Allia, their destination. At the outskirts of the city, a young man starts following them, but he gives up after a while and they stop at the next available inn, where they pay an exorbitant price for what they're offered. Alabaster trades out his horse, who has been injured, and they get a good sleep in a real bed. The next day, they reach the gates of Allia, which are flashy and metal, though Syenite knows that metal gates are far less effective than stone ones. Based on their appearance, she assumes that Allia has a lot of new money and not much experience with Seasons. A guard waves them through when he sees Alabaster's 10 rings, and Syenite is annoyed that he doesn't even glance at her own fingers.

Alabaster and Syenite arrive at the governor's mansion, which is similarly ornate and not especially sturdy. They are met by a woman who leads them inside to a small parlor room. Sitting down at a desk, she immediately chastises them for taking so long to arrive and asks if they are ready to clear the harbor immediately. Alabaster suddenly stops her and asks who she is exactly, and she introduces herself as Asael Leadership Allia, a deputy governor. Alabaster says that he expected to be met by the governor himself. As the woman seems to be getting angry, Alabaster becomes sarcastic, talking about how he and Syenite have come all this way to save Allia's economy and that they should be grateful to be met by such an important minor official.

Going on, Alabaster says that he can see the coral obstruction in the harbor already, and that they must have paid a huge amount of money to the Fulcrum to get him to come out here—he and Syenite are Allia's entire future. The least Allia's leadership could do, then, is offer them some hospitality and friendliness and treat them like notable officials who have traveled a very long way. Asael freezes in response to this, but she finally nods and says that she will request the governor's presence, and that she's sorry they are disappointed by their usual protocol. Alabaster points out that this surely can't be their usual protocol for notable guests. Finally, Asael apologizes and says that she wasn't thinking.

Syenite's perspective again gives the reader more information about people in the Stillness—they are taught to trust stone more than metal, for example. The man following them and the innkeeper cheating them are more examples of how people discriminate against orogenes in ways both mundane and potentially violent. Syenite immediately becomes annoyed that people ignore her because she is ranked so far beneath Alabaster, which again attests to her continued investment in the "meritocracy" set up by the Fulcrum.



Alabaster continues to risk being impolite in order to get his point across. At first, Syenite thinks that he is just being rude for no reason, but soon it becomes apparent that he is asserting their humanity to the official. If they don't argue that they deserve respect, then no one will give it to them—and Alabaster at least has the status and influence to make things happen, even if he is still under the Fulcrum's control.



Alabaster isn't trying to change people's minds about orogenes or make any major systemic change here—he just wants them to be treated like human beings with dignity, especially because they are experts who have traveled a long way to perform an extremely important task. Asael still doesn't seem to understand this, so she clings to her formalities even in the face of Alabaster's anger.



Alabaster then requests that he and Syenite stay at the (expensive-looking) inn they passed nearby and meet again the next day. Asael looks worried—Syenite assumes that she has no authority to request funds for their stay at the inn—but she agrees, seemingly defeated. As they walk away, Syenite notes that Alabaster still seems angry, and she asks why he had to act like he did with the woman. Alabaster says that he knows nothing can change the way people see orogenes, but he still wants to be treated like a human being and enjoy luxuries sometimes.

At the inn, Alabaster takes a bath, and then the two of them order food delivered to their room. Noticing how skinny Alabaster is, Syenite puts some of her own food onto his tray. Alabaster explains that he rarely feels hunger anymore, or other human sensations—he spends so much time in the earth with his orogeny that it feels closer and more real to him than his own body. Nevertheless, he eats everything Syenite gives him. That night, Syenite dreams of falling upward through a shaft of crystal light.

Syenite suddenly wakes up to the feeling that something is wrong. She looks over at Alabaster and realizes that he is paralyzed and panicking, while she can feel the strength of his orogeny gathering within him. Panicking herself—Alabaster could cause untold destruction if he loses control of his power—Syenite pushes him onto his side so that his drool can leak out, as he can't even seem to swallow. He draws in a breath, and the room shakes. Syenite tells him to control himself and she'll find a doctor, but suddenly she feels herself seized by his orogeny again, just as she was during the hot spot on the road.

Her orogeny now bound to Alabaster's, Syenite can feel him flailing about and searching for something with his eyes, but she doesn't know what. She remembers how on the highroad during the hot spot he had turned in a specific direction—not entirely toward the node station—and now he seems to be searching for something with his eyes once again. Alabaster looks out the window, and Syenite suddenly feels like he has found it. In an instant, she feels herself seized by his power again, and in a totally different environment. It's like the dream she was just having, where she is surrounded by flickering, crystal-like light or some kind of mysterious amethyst liquid.

Alabaster makes clear his reasons for acting as he did—he knows it won't make any long-term difference, but he nonetheless wants to live like someone worthy of respect. Syenite still doesn't fully understand and fears that the Fulcrum will punish her if Allia complains—but there is nothing that she can do about it now.



Alabaster frequently irritates Syenite, but she also wants to protect him. She learns here that he is only tenuously connected to his own body at this point, and is instead mostly lost in his orogenic awareness. Syenite's dream will become extremely important.



Syenite doesn't understand what is going on at first, and the details of the situation are spotty, but soon it becomes clear that Alabaster has been poisoned and is paralyzed. He's trying to use his orogeny while he's ill, which could lead to disaster if he loses control.



Alabaster's actions in this scene are left unexplained but will become clearer later in the novel. His need to face toward something in the sky is noteworthy, as is the presence of the place that Syenite was just visiting in her dream—a world of crystal light. This time, Alabaster is there too (they are both there only in terms of their orogeny, not physically); he has seemingly brought them both to this place.



Alabaster drags Syenite up through this faceted world of light, and then she feels a sudden throb of power and has the alien thought “a contaminant.” All at once, she is back in her body at the inn, and Alabaster is vomiting—he’s partially sitting up and no longer paralyzed. Syenite then realizes what happened—the “contaminant” was in his own body, and he found it and expelled it. She is amazed, as she never imagined something like this was possible. Alabaster laughs weakly and says that it’s all a matter of focus and control. These are basic Fulcrum tenets, but Syenite never imagined that someone could have so much control that they could seess and move microscopic substances within their own body.

Still dazed, Syenite gets Alabaster some water and props him up in the bed, then sits down and asks him how exactly he’s been doing what he’s doing. He says that he can’t tell her yet, as she doesn’t have the control to try it without dying. Quickly drifting off, Alabaster quotes something that he says is from **stonelore**, but a tablet that Syen has never heard of. He then says that he’s been using her orogeny like an ox in a yoke. She doesn’t like this analogy, and she asks him how it’s even possible, because orogenes can’t work together. Alabaster just shrugs at this, sending Syen into a rage. She yells that he must never do that to her again, but he is falling asleep again, and he mumbles his thanks to her for saving his life.

Calming down now, Syenite realizes that Alabaster has just been using whatever means he has at his disposal to save himself tonight, and to save thousands of people and his own son on the night of the hot spot. She now lets herself think more about what just happened with the actual contaminant, remembering hearing how dented jars of food contained something deadly, something that causes paralysis. This must have been what poisoned Alabaster—and it’s very unlikely that it was an accident, especially because she herself wasn’t affected at all. Hoping that she’s just being paranoid, Syen stays awake the whole night. The next morning, she notices that an amethyst **obelisk** is floating in the sky outside—and its much closer than it was the day before.

CHAPTER 10: YOU WALK BESIDE THE BEAST

Essun is considering what kind of person she should be in this situation. She has been different people before, and her current self as Essun isn’t particularly equipped to live through a Fifth Season. But Nassun still might be alive, and Essun is Nassun’s mother, so Essun decides that she needs to stick with this identity for now.

Jemisin’s language in describing this mysterious environment hints at what is actually happening: Alabaster is drawing power from something huge, crystalline, and faceted. He uses this power (along with Syen’s own orogeny) to manipulate the molecules of his own body and find the poison inside him. This is another example of Alabaster performing feats that Syenite never knew were possible, and that she was never taught to even consider.



Syenite is again angered by Alabaster’s unwillingness to explain himself, but she also recognizes that he was in an emergency situation and had to react quickly. He quotes from stonelore that Syenite has never heard of, once more suggesting that what she has been taught as infallible history and law is actually mutable and subject to manipulation.



It’s suggested that the poison was the bacteria that causes botulism, which exists in the real world and is similarly deadly—a telltale sign of it is a bulge in the packaging of canned food. Syenite often lets her anger at Alabaster explode in the moment, and only in hindsight does she understand why he acts as he does. The sudden appearance of the obelisk—and most notably, that it is an amethyst obelisk, the same color as the crystal light from which Alabaster drew power—suggests that Syenite and Alabaster were just somehow inside the obelisk using their orogeny. In response, it has moved physically closer to them.



Essun thinks of herself as inhabiting multiple identities at once and actively having to choose from among them. The only identity that currently gives her any sense of hope or purpose is her role as Nassun’s mother, and so she decides to remain herself. This passage is also a major hint that the other identities that Essun has inhabited might, in fact, be Damaya and Syenite at different times of her own life.



Essun and Hoa are sleeping near a roadhouse for the night, with many other people camped nearby, when they are awakened by the sounds of fighting and screaming. Essun immediately grabs her runny-sack and Hoa and turns to run, along with seemingly everyone else around them. After running for a long time, Essun has to stop; Hoa, who doesn't seem out of breath at all, asks what happened. Essun admits that she didn't see, and she asks Hoa if he fell asleep—he was supposed to be keeping guard. He maintains that he was awake, but he also didn't see what happened.

As Essun catches her breath, she says that they will have to go back to the roadhouse for the rest of their things and to refill their water containers. Hoa suggests that instead, they could go back to the creek where he took a bath. Essun knows that this would be much safer, but she's also reluctant to lose two full days on Nassun. She decides to risk the roadhouse even though it might now be inhabited by hostile people—she has enough faith in her strength as an orogene to defend herself.

As Essun and Hoa walk through the falling ash and approach the roadhouse, everything seems abandoned. Hoa watches how Essun walks in order to keep her footfalls silent, and he imitates her. Cautiously, they enter the roadhouse building to see another woman filling up canteens of water. She's filthy and smells terrible, and Essun assumes that she must be commless. The woman notices Essun and Hoa, assesses them, and tells them to "have at" the water pump. Essun assures her that they don't want any trouble, and the woman says she doesn't either, though Hoa is suspicious.

The woman helps Essun pump water, and they talk cautiously to each other. Essun notices a scientific contraption among the woman's water canteens and realizes that she's not commless after all. The woman talks about the big earthquake up north and its strange wave pattern, and then she says that the contraption is something to test for contaminants in the water. It's made from the same plant as safe, but it works better. Essun argues that safe catches everything, but the woman argues back, clearly knowledgeable about the subject. "You're a geomest," Essun says. The woman denies this, saying that she's at least smart enough to avoid the University.

On the road during a Fifth Season, Essun must live with extreme caution if she wants to survive. This is the reality of life on the Stillness in a Season—no one trusts anyone else, violence is rampant, and survival is the highest law.



Finding Nassun is the only thing giving Essun a sense of purpose, so she would rather do something risky than make a safer choice that would also make it harder to catch up with her daughter. Survival is the law for everyone around her, but Essun has already considered her own death many times and so is less fazed by that danger than by the prospect of losing the hope of finding Nassun.



"Commless" people are outcasts and generally treated as criminals or inferior in some way (similar to the discrimination that houseless people experience in the real world), so Essun is immediately wary of the commless woman at the water pump. In a Season, everyone treats one another with suspicion.



"Safe" is a drink that reacts to any foreign substance, and so is used to find contaminants and poisons. "Geomest" is the general Stillness term for scientist, but like most aspects of life in the Stillness, science focuses mostly on the earth and its movements. The woman is clearly intelligent and well-educated but also fiercely independent and proud.



Packing up, the woman lets Essun have a pack that someone left behind. Essun asks if she saw what happened to make everyone flee, and the woman says that it was probably an animal attack, as nature adjusts to a Fifth Season much faster than people do. She warns Essun not to follow her, suggesting that she might be going back to a comm full of cannibals. Essun fills the pack and gives it to Hoa, and they prepare to leave—but the woman freezes as she steps out the door. In front of her is a kirkhusa, a large dog-like creature that people keep as pets. Kirkhusas are usually friendly, easily-trainable, and herbivorous, but during a Fifth Season, they immediately become dangerous meat-eaters. Essun can hear more of them nearby, eating something.

This kirkhusa clearly used to be a pet, and it paces back and forth as if fighting between its two contradictory instincts. Essun prepares to kill it with orogeny, but suddenly Hoa steps toward it. Essun tries to grab him but finds him incredibly solid and immovable, and he continues forward. He puts out his hand to the animal. At first it seems cowed, but then it suddenly attacks Hoa, lunging forward and biting his arm. Panicking, Essun tries to focus her orogeny, but then everything goes silent, and she looks up. The kirkhusa stops moving and then seems to transform, from its skin out to the tip of each its hairs—it has been turned into some kind of stone or crystal.

Essun and the woman stare in awe at this, and then Essun hurries to Hoa's side. He seems ashamed of what just happened, and he says that he hadn't wanted Essun to see him do something like this. She tries to ask him what exactly he *did* do, but he refuses to explain. Meanwhile, his arm is still stuck inside the kirkhusa's mouth and dripping with blood. Essun offers to help him get it free, but Hoa just flexes his arm, and the kirkhusa's head shatters. Hoa won't let Essun tend to his wound either. He just says that they should go quickly, as the other animals are still nearby.

Now realizing that Hoa is something extremely dangerous, Essun considers what to do. Finally, she is convinced just by the sight of his face—he looks miserable and ashamed, like a real child. Essun knows how to deal with children, and also with “children who are secretly monsters.” She offers him her hand, Hoa gratefully takes it, and they start walking. The commless woman follows them close behind. The chapter ends with a quotation from **stonelore**: “Beware ground on loose rock. Beware hale strangers. Beware sudden silence.”

Like people with their stonelore, wild animals have also adapted to endure Fifth Seasons, abruptly changing their usual behavior to better survive the conditions of an extended winter. The kirkhusa are a deadly example of this, with their sudden violence echoing the way that people often turn on one another in times of crisis or survival situations.



In this tense and cinematic passage, Hoa reveals an entirely new kind of power: the ability to turn a living thing into stone. Essun has already recognized that Hoa is a very strange child, but now she cannot avoid the fact that he is likely not a human being at all.



Hoa seems to be mostly unhappy because Essun saw him turn the kirkhusa to stone, and now he worries that she will think differently of him (as she surely will). At the same time, he is unwilling to explain his abilities further. Hoa, like Essun, is protecting his identity and trying to have some autonomy over how he is perceived.



As an orogene, the line between human and monster has always been a blurry one for Essun, so she is able to see the humanity in Hoa and empathize with him in this moment—even seeing her own children, whom society also sees as monsters, reflected in his face. The science-minded commless women seems to want to know more about Hoa as well.



CHAPTER 11: DAMAYA AT THE FULCRUM OF IT ALL

Damaya is now living at the Fulcrum and slowly adjusting to an entirely new way of life. She is a “grit” now—the term for all the young orogenes before they get their first rings. Her daily routine is rigid and strict, as the grits must rise with the dawn and keep their possessions extremely neat and clean for daily inspections. Anyone who isn’t properly dressed and groomed, or has left their bed unmade, is punished, sometimes by being struck with a switch. The instructors make it very clear that the grits must represent all orogenes—if anyone is dirty or lazy, then all orogenes are seen as dirty and lazy.

The children are from all over the Stillness and very different, and it seems wrong to make them conform so harshly, but by now Damaya knows that this is the way it must be. The world hates orogenes, and “this is what is necessary to make them safe” in the eyes of others. Damaya always follows the rules.

After their inspections, the grits have lessons from their various instructors, learning things like the history of the Sanze empire and mathematical equations involving orogeny. After the lectures or exams, the children have lunch in a courtyard. Damaya enjoys everything they are served, and much of the food is foreign to her. Lunch is her favorite time of the day, though she sits by herself, as many of the grits do.

After lunch, they walk through the Fulcrum’s Ring Garden in neat lines, past the older, ringed orogenes. Watching them, Damaya longs to have their sense of control and mastery, and she also admires their sleek black uniforms. Damaya decides that to be like them, she is willing to endure a broken hand and years as a lonely student. In the afternoon, the grits practice actual orogeny, and Damaya throws herself into these lessons. They focus on control, never actually moving anything with their power. After these lessons, they have dinner, then a free hour, and then bed. Six months pass for Damaya in this way.

Just as Schaffa broke Damaya’s hand to force her to exercise control over her orogeny, the Fulcrum grits’ entire lives revolve around order, obedience, and control. Since this is taught to them in every aspect of their day, it will surely exhibit itself in their orogeny as well, which is the Fulcrum’s main goal—to make orogenes safe and useful in the eyes of stills.



Damaya now recognizes that this harsh way of life is a necessary adaptation to the reality of the discrimination that orogenes face. As is common in racism and other kinds of prejudice, orogenes are not seen as unique individuals but as representing their group as a whole. This means that they all must be held to the same rigid standards—an idea that echoes the quotation at the end of Chapter 4 about making oppressed groups think that they can earn their rights just by working hard enough.



Early on, many of the grits learn to be solitary and untrusting. They are treated more like soldiers or tools than schoolchildren, and so they don’t allow themselves the luxury of friendship and fun. The lessons about Sanze history are surely heavily biased, as evidenced by how much of Syenite’s Fulcrum teachings have been shown to be false.



The walk through the Ring Garden is specifically designed to make the grits want to earn their rings and, by extension, the sense of freedom and power that their elders seem to wield. As the book has shown elsewhere, however, this freedom is entirely illusory, and the Fulcrum keeps its orogenes striving for more rings as a way of keeping them in line. As with their other lessons, in applied orogeny the grits focus always on control first and foremost.



One day a tall, handsome older boy comes over to sit with Damaya at lunch. He introduces himself as Maxixe. Damaya is immediately suspicious, but she lets her guard down as he jokes with her and talks about “lorists” who don’t teach **stonelore**, but rather perform plays just for fun. Maxixe seems bitter about their life at the Fulcrum, and as they talk more, Damaya even starts to like him, though she still doesn’t trust him. Finally, they stop talking, and Maxixe leaves to join a group of his friends.

The next day, the other grits start treating Damaya differently. Someone purposefully bumps into her in the shower, and when she gets out, she sees that someone has stolen her shoes—she is punished at inspection for this. At dinner that night, someone puts alcohol into her juice, and she doesn’t realize what is happening until an instructor named Galena notices that she’s drunk and pulls her aside. Orogenes aren’t allowed to drink alcohol at all, and she could be harshly punished, but Galena instead takes her to his own room to sleep it off. In the morning, he tells Damaya that she needs to figure out what’s going on and deal with it, because otherwise it’s going to get worse, and she’ll be punished severely by someone less understanding than Galena is.

Damaya takes Galena’s words to heart and decides that she needs an ally. There is one girl who is even more of a loner than most, and whose orogeny seems especially harsh and dangerous. Her name is Selu, but the other grits have started calling her “Crack.” Damaya decides to make Crack her ally and approaches her at breakfast the next day. Crack immediately understands why, and Damaya realizes that she has been bullied too and is angry about it. Damaya outlines a plan to deal with their problem, and Crack agrees to help.

Assuming that Maxixe must be somehow involved, they decide to target him first. One morning while he’s in the shower, Damaya claims that someone has stolen her shoes again. She confronts a boy named Jasper, who says she must be lying. They start to argue until a senior instructor named Carnelian intervenes. Damaya repeats her claim that someone stole her shoes again, and she says that she knows it must have been a boy because it happened during the girls’ shower. Some of the other grits make fun of her, but Damaya insists that they search the boys’ chests.

Maxixe’s visit seems out of the blue, but he also gives some interesting information about culture in the Stillness. As usual, most comms focus only on the practical knowledge needed to survive, and things like dramatic plays are considered luxuries that places like Palela (Damaya’s hometown) cannot afford. This leads to a lack of imagination in people, as they are taught to cling to a single way of thinking and never inspired to question it.



Orogenes are never allowed to drink alcohol because it would lower their inhibitions and might make them lose control of their power, which could be disastrous—and even more importantly, it would make them seem wild and frightening to non-orogenes. The source of the other grits’ sudden antagonism is baffling to Damaya, but it seems connected to her encounter with Maxixe the day before.



Crack’s orogeny might have already been uncontrolled, but being constantly bullied certainly hasn’t helped her get any better. The Fulcrum’s idea of control is a rigid one, and anyone that cannot comply with it is treated mercilessly.



Damaya plans to make the other grits reveal the original culprit who stole her shoes the first time—but to do so, she must plant a trap. She is taking a risk here considering the harsh nature of punishments at the Fulcrum, but she believes that it is necessary to survive and return to her previous level of independence in the Fulcrum.



Carnelian agrees to do this, though he says that Damaya will be punished if she's wrong. The boys open their chests, and Damaya's shoes are inside of Maxixe's. He's clearly confused, and Damaya follows his eyes as he immediately looks at Jasper—in this way, she deduces that it must have been Jasper who stole her shoes the first time. Carnelian seems to have realized this too. He confronts Maxixe, who immediately says that Jasper was the one who stole the shoes.

Jasper denies it and then starts panicking, and when Carnelian turns to him, he suddenly points at Crack. He says that she sold Damaya's shoes in exchange for liquor. Damaya is shocked. Crack erupts at Jasper, cursing at him and claiming that he let one of the cleaning workers "feel him up" in exchange for getting the liquor and a letter from his mother. She insults and mocks him, and Jasper starts to cry. Everyone in the room is horrified, and they start whispering to one another as Jasper continues to weep.

Finally, Carnelian intervenes again and instructs Maxixe, Jasper, and Crack to come with him immediately. As Crack is leaving, she looks at Damaya and says, "better you than me." Crack knew that she herself was constantly in danger of punishment, but Damaya was the perfect student that the instructors all adored. So, Crack believed that if Damaya got in trouble, nothing really bad would happen, and it would take some of the scrutiny off of Crack. Having explained her plan, Crack finally leaves with Carnelian. Two other instructors come in and search through Crack's belongings, finding a bottle of liquor under her mattress.

When the instructors leave, the tension in the room dissipates, and one of the girls apologizes to Damaya for pushing her in the shower. After this, the other grits don't bully Damaya anymore. Jasper is sent to a satellite Fulcrum in the Arctic, and no one sees Crack again. The chapter ends with a description of a Fifth Season called the Fungus Season, when volcanic eruptions darkened the skies and caused a fungal bloom that wiped out a staple crop and caused mass starvation. Because the comms of the Sanze Empire fared so much better than others, when the Season ended, many comms voluntarily joined the Empire and began its "Golden Age."

Damaya's plan works, and the instructor figures it out as well. The grits live in a harsh and competitive world that discourages close relationships, and so they turn on one another quickly.



What seemed like a relatively straightforward case of bullying takes a very dark turn here, as Crack reveals herself to be the original culprit and Jasper as a victim of sexual assault. Left unspoken here is the fact that grits aren't allowed to contact their families at all, and Jasper endured assault so that he might receive a forbidden letter from his mother. The Fulcrum seeks to totally sever orogenes' connections to the outside world, and tragedy results.



Damaya hadn't thought of herself as being an antagonistic force to the other grits because of her talent, but clearly it has made her a target to those like Crack. Crack didn't particularly dislike Damaya, but she tried to do the most rational thing to save herself, even if that meant sacrificing someone else in the process—a common mindset in the unstable world of the Stillness. Crack also seems to be addicted to alcohol, which would help explain the dangerous and uncontrolled quality of her orogeny.



Crack's sudden disappearance is sinister considering the high stakes of life at the Fulcrum, and especially what Damaya has learned from Schaffa about Guardians. It seems likely that Crack was deemed too much of a threat and killed by her Guardian. The quotation at the chapter's end shows how Sanze used the disaster situations of Fifth Seasons to consolidate their power. People exhausted by the struggle to survive chose stability over freedom, willingly submitting to Sanze.



CHAPTER 12: SYENITE FINDS A NEW TOY

The day after Alabaster's poisoning, Syenite returns to the governor's mansion alone, telling Asael that Alabaster is sick. Asael is clearly skeptical that Syen will be capable of unblocking the harbor on her own, but Syen forces herself to be polite and explains how difficult her past missions have been and how she excelled at them. Asael quibbles about having to pay for two orogenes if only one is doing the work, and Syen explains that Alabaster is powerful enough that he'll be able to feel everything she's doing from his room. And furthermore, he has been quieting all the small earthquakes in the area since their arrival, as a courtesy.

Asael still seems uneasy, and Syenite knows that it's a Fulcrum orogene's job to make sure that "stills" feel safe and at ease. She has done the opposite of that with Asael. Syen asks about seeing the governor again and decides to double down on Alabaster's demand to meet him—she now understands "why Alabaster is such an ass about this." They will be delayed until the governor can find time to meet with them, she insists. When Asael accuses Syen of being petty, Syen turns the situation back on her, asking if their places were reversed—if Asael were a skilled expert assigned to perform a duty crucial to the town's survival—if she would accept the total lack of hospitality. Asael hasn't even shaken their hands, Syen notes.

After a few more analogies, Asael seems to understand why Syenite and Alabaster are so angry. She offers a weak apology but also says that orogenes mustn't expect "normal" people to know how to deal with them. Syenite says that discomfort is understandable, but rudeness isn't. Finally, Asael blurts out, "you're a rogga." Syen says she's glad that this is out in the open now and turns to go. As an extra barb, she thanks Asael for their rooms at the inn, especially complimenting the food. Asael finally stands up and says that she will go and speak to the governor.

After a long while, Asael returns with an older woman who introduces herself as Heresmith Leadership Allia. She shakes Syenite's hand and has a solemn but likeable air about her, which Syen appreciates. Heresmith apologizes that the governor really is busy but says that she is lieutenant governor and assures Syen that Asael will be censured for her rudeness to the orogenes. She even offers to make Asael provide them a free tour of the city, but Syen declines, just wanting the trip to be over already. Now pacified, Syen says that she'd like to take a look at the harbor. She is surprised that Heresmith is coming too, but the older woman reminds her that Allia's future does depend on Syen's work after all.

Even after Alabaster's arguments of the day before, Asael still treats Syenite more like a servant than an honored guest. Syenite continues to resent the fact that people don't respect her just because she doesn't wear as many rings as Alabaster, judging her talent entirely on her official ranking as an orogene.



Only by being somewhat patient with Asael and explaining just how badly they've been treated does Syenite begin to make the woman understand her own rudeness and prejudice. Like Alabaster and seemingly unlike Fulcrum protocol, Syenite is not willing dehumanize herself just to make stills more comfortable.



The prejudice behind all of Asael's actions reveals its true face here as she blurts out the slur "rogga." This might be a turning point for Asael personally, having been convinced that she acted wrongly and also perhaps finally seeing herself as the prejudiced person she is, but it has come at the expense of Syenite's labor and energy. Prejudice can be combatted on an individual level, the passage suggests—but it's important that the responsibility for the actual work involved falls on the oppressor, not the oppressed.



Heresmith seems to genuinely respect Syenite's humanity and position, or at least is a much better diplomat than Asael is. Syenite can't help liking her straightforward nature and willingness to apologize.



At the harbor, Syenite immediately meets a strange obstacle that she's never encountered before. She can see the coral on the bottom of the harbor, but she realizes that it has actually grown up on top of some large object. Whatever that thing is, it's made of a substance that Syen can't see it at all—she's never experienced it before. The obstruction is long and straight, blocking most of the harbor, and it's clearly heavy, because Syen can feel the compressed earth beneath it.

As Syenite senses all this, she closes her eyes and moves her hands around—this is unnecessary to her orogeny, but she knows that it makes non-origenes more comfortable if they can see her physically doing something. She then tries to explain to her companions—Heresmith, Asael, and a group of men who look like clerks—what she has discovered. If she clears the coral off of the object it will just grow back in a few decades, she says, so she needs to move the object itself, but she has no idea what it is. She demonstrates with her hands how the object is positioned in the harbor.

The group talk among themselves, trying to figure out how long the coral might have been growing there, and they decide that it must have been only a hundred years. This means that clearing it without moving the object beneath will mean doing the same work again in a century, and the Fulcrum's fee is already a huge burden to Allia. So, the leaders suggest that Syenite should just move the object. She tries to dissuade them, saying that it could be something dangerous. Instead, she suggests commissioning a study with some geomests to figure out what the object is, and then using orogeny only as a last resort.

Heresmith and the others debate among themselves, considering the city's finances as well as the potential danger of moving the obstruction. One of the men is suspicious of Syenite's motives, but she retorts that if she were trying to cheat them, she wouldn't have told them about the mysterious object in the first place and instead just cleared the coral. She then suggests that they could do *nothing* about the problem—send Syen and Alabaster back to the Fulcrum and get most of their money refunded, then use the extra time and money to relocate Allia to somewhere else. This suggestion horrifies Heresmith, and all the leaders agree that it's impossible.

What was supposed to be a straightforward and easy job suffers a setback here, as Syenite senses something entirely unfamiliar to her. The work of clearing the harbor was always an afterthought compared to the mission of bearing a child, the crisis at the node station, and then Alabaster's poisoning. But now, it takes on its own importance as well.



Syenite's attempt to describe her orogeny echoes the book's task in making invisible processes like orogeny seem vivid and real to readers. The obstructing object is something long and perfectly straight—much like the obelisk that Syenite and Alabaster were inside of—and it's made of a substance that Syenite has never encountered before.



Syenite is genuinely trying to help Allia's leaders do what is best for their city, especially as she recognizes that she is dealing with something entirely inscrutable to her.



Allia's leaders let their anti-orogene prejudice get in the way of their jobs until Syenite manages to set them straight—again having to use her own arguments and energy to do so. Her final suggestion is perhaps a practical one, but it seems totally impossible to anyone with an attachment to a certain place as one's home. But during Fifth Seasons, such difficult decisions sometimes need to be made.



There now seems to be an agreement among Allia's leadership that Syenite should go ahead and move the obstruction despite the risks. Asael asks if she is really capable of doing this, which sounds like a challenge to Syenite—one she accepts. She tells the group to stand away from her, and then she “stabs the fulcrum of her power into the earth,” looking for some kind of heat to draw power from. She does this instead of using the town itself, which is full of life that she could use if she needed, but that would mean icing everyone around her.

As Syenite searches around the ocean floor with her orogeny, she encounters the obstructing object itself and suddenly feels herself drawn into an entirely different environment, surrounded by a power that is not her own. It feels similar to what happened with Alabaster the night before, but she can't sense Alabaster's presence at all, and the place she's in now is dark and cold instead of full of crystal light. More foreign power floods into her, and she feels overwhelmed with strength, just barely maintaining control over whatever is affecting her.

Syenite uses this rush of power to lift the foreign object from the seabed, and then to immediately quiet all the waves displaced by its movement. Having such strength coursing through her feels amazing, until she realizes that the object is now moving beyond her control and continuing to rise up through the water—she had intended for it to just be pushed to the side. The object is clearly moving upwards of its own volition, and suddenly Syen finds herself back in her body on the boardwalk, weak and shaking. Everything around her starts shaking too, sirens go off, and Allia's leadership immediately flee, leaving Syenite behind.

Finally, something massive rises from the water, shedding the last of the earth and coral that had covered it in the seabed—it's an **obelisk**. This one is different from the amethyst of the night before: it's garnet-colored, around a mile long, and seems to be cracked in the middle. Some kind of foreign black substance seems to have seeped into the cracks, and Syenite can feel a stutter in the obelisk's energy where it has been damaged.

As Syenite continues to study the massive **obelisk**, which hovers above the harbor and begins to rotate, she sees a figure caught among the shattered part of the crystal—a human trapped inside. She looks closer and realizes that it's not a human, but a stone eater, and that it's dead. Overwhelmed, Syenite tries to process everything that has just happened. The chapter ends with a quotation from **stonelore** saying that Father Earth never sleeps, and he never forgets.

Syenite finally acts after feeling like Asael is doubting her power, which perhaps makes her more impulsive than she would be otherwise. Syen is now performing orogeny in front of a group of stills, which means that she must remain calm and controlled at all times.



If Syenite and Alabaster were somehow inside an obelisk the night before, then that might be what Syenite is accidentally experiencing now—except that it is an obelisk that's somehow dead or lacking its crystal light. It is still filled with power, however, as Syenite feels herself overwhelmed and strives to stay in control.



Nothing is going as planned—Syenite has managed to control the power now surging through her body, but the object itself is now acting of its own free will apart from her own. Fearing an earthquake or tsunami, the people of Allia immediately go into lockdown—and they abandon Syenite, who've they've tasked with this job despite her objections, as someone entirely without value.



Unlike the amethyst, something is wrong with this obelisk, which is why Syenite experienced no light when she entered its environment. This is also, presumably, why she was able to access its power without dying. This is another cinematic and vivid scene as the massive alien object rises from the water.



Syenite doesn't understand anything about this, and at this point, neither do readers. All that has become clear is that there is much more going on in Allia than there seemed to be initially. In the quotation, Father Earth is again personified as a godlike figure full of anger and long memory, an enemy of humanity.



CHAPTER 13: YOU'RE ON THE TRAIL

The commless woman now joins Essun and Hoa on their journey, introducing herself as Tonkee but not giving a comm or use-caste name. She claims to have joined them just because Hoa is so interesting to her, and from hints she has dropped Essun is now pretty sure that she used to be a geomest at the most prestigious university in the Stillness. The first afternoon after the kirkhusa attack, Tonkee leads Essun and Hoa to her home, which is a cave inside of a stone hill filled with books, contraptions, and random things that she's scavenged. Tonkee uses all the water she collected to bathe, and they all sleep on their own bedrolls that night.

The next day the three set out south again, with Essun still trying to figure out what exactly Hoa is, because he doesn't seem to be human (although orogenes aren't technically considered human either). When she asks him about the kirkhusa he refuses to explain, saying only that he wants Essun to still like him. As they travel, the falling ash gets worse and worse, and they start wearing masks. Passing other travelers, everyone seems faceless and anonymous, which Essun appreciates.

As many of the people on the road have returned to their comms (if they have them) by now. The remainder are growing groups of people from the Equatorial regions to the north, closer to the site of the earthquake. Essun notices that many of these people wear some article of clothing that is strictly ornamental. She realizes that this has become a kind of marker for a new tribe that might be forming as the Fifth Season begins, comprised of those who came from cities and used to be rich.

Essun asks one of these Equatorial women what happened in the north. The woman says that she was at a concert in the town of Alebid when she saw a line of red light stretch across the horizon, and then a cloud of ash followed. Essun knows that Alebid is far enough north that it should have been destroyed by the shake, so she is sure that an orogene—likely a node maintainer—saved it. After hearing more stories in the same vein, Essun observes that none of the refugees come from further north than Alebid—no one is from Yumenes or anywhere along its latitude.

Tonkee's journey from a highly-ranked geomest to a commless wanderer must be an interesting one, but she keeps her past secret and retains only the insatiable curiosity of a natural scientist. Tonkee seems to have been living like she's in a Fifth Season since even before the Season began.



The general mood of disaster intensifies as the ashfall grows worse and everyone on the road becomes anonymous to one another in their masks. They seem less like fellow human beings and more like faceless and potentially sinister creatures. Hoa remains inexplicable to Essun and still seems primarily concerned with her continuing to like him and think of him as a human child.



New hierarchies are being formed in real time, as the ruling class at Yumenes has been totally destroyed and others seek to fill the power gap. In doing so, they reach for old markers of power and privilege—the Sanzed racial traits that mark Equatorial people and the wealth that urban upper-classes enjoy. Even in a time of total apocalypse, people cling to small signifiers of rank and hierarchy.



Again, orogenes save stills, but the stills offer them no gratitude or respect in exchange. Essun deduces that the rift in the continent must run along Yumenes's latitude, and that anyone too close to that part of the continent—the Equatorial region, which was previously the safest and wealthiest part of the Stillness—must have been immediately killed.



The group sometimes stops at comms along the way to trade, and Essun notes that different comms accept different kinds of currency, whether money or bartering for other useful items. The three of them split a night watch and share food, although Essun is now sure that Hoa doesn't eat at all. At one comm, she is surprised to see Tonkee produce a compass—a priceless item during a Fifth Season—and trade it for two pairs of boots, one of which is for Hoa. Tonkee then remarks that there are other ways of finding their direction, and Essun suspects that she knows about Essun's orogeny.

Their long and weary journey continues, following only Hoa's instincts about where Nassun is. They pass through one shortcut that saves them a lot of time but means traveling near a hostile comm that shoots arrows at them. As weeks go by, Hoa seems less sure of himself, however. He tells Essun that "there are a lot of you in one place now," which makes it hard to single out Nassun. Essun thinks about how it should be impossible—and also unwise—for orogenes to be gathering like he says they are.

Hoa again refuses to explain how he can sense all of this, but he is sure that Nassun at least passed near to the place with all the orogenes, if she's not still there. Essun decides to focus on getting to this spot, and just hope that she finds Nassun. The chapter ends with a quotation from **stonelore** about everyone being judged for their usefulness, ending with "a few strong backs to guard them all."

CHAPTER 14: SYENITE BREAKS HER TOYS

Syenite and Alabaster are in their room, having just had their usual daily sex, when they receive a telegram from Yumenes. It says only "REMAIN AT LOCATION. AWAIT INSTRUCTIONS." Syenite paces around the room—a smaller one than before, as a week has passed since the **obelisk** appeared and Allia is no longer funding their stay—frustratedly wondering aloud what the telegram means. Alabaster shrugs off her questions and suggests that they at least enjoy themselves while they're here, and Syenite admits to herself that staying on the coast has been very pleasant.

This section shows how society adapts in times of disaster and crisis, turning to different economies and systems of bartering. After 10 years in Tirimo and Uche's death, Essun is extremely wary that anyone might find out that she's an orogene. Essun, Hoa, and Tonkee are all hiding core aspects of themselves from the rest of the world.



Some comms try to barter with travelers, while others attack them. Everyone reacts differently according to what they think is the best way to survive during a Fifth Season.



Essun clings to the single purpose of finding Nassun and is willing to trust even Hoa's vaguest guess if it keeps them moving forward. The stonelore quotation seemingly explains the origin of the use-castes that divide people in the Stillness, ending with the lowest-ranked Strongbacks, whose job is labor and security.



Even though everything else about their assignment seems to have been upended, Syenite and Alabaster continue to fulfill their responsibilities to the Fulcrum by having sex every day. Syenite doesn't understand what's been going on or what the Fulcrum's intentions are now, but she has at least been allowing herself to enjoy a few mundane pleasures at the seaside.



Alabaster says that it's likely the Fulcrum wants Syenite to stay in Allia so that she can meet with geomests and maybe get more business for the Fulcrum in the process. Indeed, geomests and every other kind of scholar have been coming to Allia ever since the **obelisk** appeared, and many have already interviewed Syenite. The politics of the Fulcrum don't make sense to her, though, and she's uneasy that no Guardians have contacted them yet. Early on, Alabaster had warned her not to tell anyone that she can make a connection with the obelisks—not even him. He explained that she is to say that the object rose up on its own when she shifted the coral. Syenite doesn't understand this extreme secrecy, but she goes along with it.

Still frustrated and confused, Syenite says she's going for a walk. Alabaster invites himself along, though she clearly wants to be alone, as he notes that someone has already tried to kill one of them here in Allia. Syenite remembers his poisoning—she prefers to believe that it was a result of incompetence in the kitchen, or at worst Asael getting back at the man who humiliated her. The two leave the room and walk toward the harbor. The sun is setting, and Allia is beautiful in the golden light. Children play on the beach nearby as Alabaster and Syen stop to admire the view.

The **obelisk** is still hovering over the harbor, and both Alabaster and Syenite can sense it emitting occasional weak pulses of energy. Alabaster suddenly starts acting like he's bashful and flirting with Syenite, and he uses this as a cover to talk discreetly. She catches on and takes his arm, also realizing that no one else can sense the pulse coming from the obelisk. Alabaster says that something is wrong with it, and that it's tilted to one side as well. They start walking again, still talking quietly to each other. Syenite notes that people here actually nod to them as they pass—no one in Yumenes would ever acknowledge a rogga.

Alabaster continues, saying that it's too risky to speak in their room. The Fulcrum is keeping them in Allia because Syenite raised the broken **obelisk**, and they are surely concerned about controlling the orogene who can control the obelisk. Syenite then realizes that Alabaster can connect with the obelisks as well, and that was what he was doing on the night of the node maintainer's hot spot and his own poisoning at Allia. Alabaster admits that this is true, but that no one else knows, and Syenite must act like she doesn't know either.

Alabaster's explanation makes sense on the surface, but when combined with his earlier warning, it seems that he might be purposefully misdirecting from what he really thinks is going on. His serious warning to Syenite is reminiscent of how he told her that she must speak about the node maintainer. Something about the obelisks is important, and it will be better if Syenite pretends to have nothing to do with it.



Syenite is reluctant to connect the dots, but it now seems likely that Alabaster's poisoning was related to the presence of the obelisk in the harbor. The dangerous situation is then contrasted with the idyllic setting of the harbor at sunset.



Alabaster seems to fear that someone could be listening in on them even when no one is nearby, so he fully commits to an act to disguise their true conversation. Even as they discuss something that is seemingly very secret and dangerous, Syenite can't help but be pleasantly surprised that the people of Allia treat her and Alabaster like actual human beings, even in the most casual way. Alabaster confirms that something is different about this obelisk compared to the amethyst nearby—something is “wrong” with it.



Syenite now understands a bit more about how Alabaster has been performing such incredible feats of orogeny: he's able to harness the obelisks' power. Syenite previously had no idea that the obelisks had anything to do with orogeny, and that seems intentional—especially because Alabaster is now acting like it's crucial that no one know about their ability to connect with the obelisks.



Syenite asks why Alabaster is being so cautious about speaking when there's clearly no one else around. He explains that a skilled orogene can pick up vibrations through a building's foundations in the earth, and even parse them into words. Syenite feels like this must be impossible, but Alabaster says that *he* can do it, and Syen herself probably can with more practice. He then notes that most of his children are probably as powerful as he is—and Syen realizes what he's saying. None of Alabaster's children were allowed to grow up at the Fulcrum. They were all made into node maintainers, and they have the potential to listen in on any conversation almost anywhere in the Stillness.

This revelation horrifies Syenite. Alabaster then tells her that it's really the Guardians that they have to worry about, not the Fulcrum. Syenite wonders, as she has before, who exactly the Guardians are and who they answer to. Syen and Alabaster have now reached the boardwalk along the edge of the cove. Syenite notices a shirtless man sitting on the railing nearby, first because he is extremely attractive and then because he is staring directly at them—and finally because he is wearing the burgundy uniform of a Guardian. Alabaster whispers that it's not his Guardian, and then he warns Syenite to not let the Guardian touch her with his bare skin.

Alabaster greets the Guardian, who jumps down from the railing and introduces himself as Edki Guardian Warrant. Edki knows both of their names, and comments on how busy they've been here in Allia. Syenite notices Alabaster tensing up beside her. Edki scornfully comments on Alabaster's work with the **obelisk**. Angry that she's being condescended to even now—as people assume Alabaster must have done everything—Syen says that *she* was the one who did the job. She immediately realizes that this was a mistake, as Alabaster hisses. She feels him drive his power straight down into the earth, even to the magma beneath the earth's crust, clearly preparing to fight the Guardian.

Edki mentions Alabaster's old Guardian, Leshet, and says that they have found her and need to talk about what Alabaster did to her. Syenite then notices that Edki is now holding a short, stubby black "glassknife." Syenite starts to speak, but suddenly Alabaster knocks her to the ground. She gets up angrily to see that Alabaster is on the ground as well, choking for breath and trying to scream, though no sound comes out. Edki stands over him, taunting him for miscalculating and thinking that he would attack Syenite rather than Alabaster himself, and Syen notices with horror that the Guardian has a look of pure delight on his face. She also sees what is wrong with Alabaster—the short knife is buried in his shoulder.

The horror of the node maintainers increases even more here, as Alabaster suggests that not only are his lobotomized children forced to quiet earthquakes, but also to spy on anyone within their range using their incredibly sensitive orogeny. This explains Alabaster's extreme secrecy earlier, and it also reveals another method that the ruling class (whose true identity and nature grows ever more mysterious) uses to keep others in line.



Syenite has been primarily concerned with the Fulcrum and her own standing there, but Alabaster tells her that the Guardians are the real enemy—and at that moment, one appears. The complexities of the Stillness's hierarchies remain a mystery to Syenite (and to the reader), but each new revelation brings her closer to the truth. Alabaster's warning about the Guardian's touch is more new, sinister information.



The only other Guardian in the novel thus far has been Schaffa, and Edki seems far more arrogant and antagonistic than Schaffa was. Syenite finally lets her resentment get the better of her and tries to claim credit for what really was her work—but this only means that she is the Guardian's new target for assassination. She has no idea what is going on, as everything that she's been taught tells her to obey Guardians without question. But now, she watches her mentor prepare to use his orogeny to fight the Guardian that has confronted them.



The Guardians use of the glassknife makes clear that they have more tools at their disposal than just knowledge and fighting skill, and they've have grown far more powerful than in the days of Shemshena. The joyful smile on Edki's face feels especially evil to Syenite, as Alabaster's power is immediately negated, and the Guardian seems to rejoice in his suffering. Schaffa portrayed Guardians as having no choice but to control orogenes, but Edki's demeanor suggests that exerting this control is also something that the Guardians enjoy.



Edki know draws another knife, this one long and thin and familiar to Syenite. She backs away and tries to use her orogeny, but suddenly realizes that she cannot. She has heard rumors about this, that Guardians can mute an orogenes' power, and that some are specially trained only to hunt down rogue orogenes. Syen feels sure that Edki is one of these, and he's about to kill her now. Syen speaks, trying to delay the inevitable, but also remembering that it is "her duty to die, if he wills it." But then she feels that "this is not right." Edki lunges with the knife.

Time seems to stop. Syenite still cannot sense anything, and she can see Alabaster convulsing in agony nearby. Suddenly she becomes incredibly angry, feeling that it's not her duty to obey the Guardians at all, because what they do is fundamentally immoral. Then her attention turns to the nearby garnet **obelisk**. With Edki's knife still traveling toward her heart, Syenite sees Alabaster silently warn her against what she is about to do, but Syenite's rage and sense of injustice takes over and she feels herself drawn back into the obelisk.

This time Syenite feels like she is not in control of the **obelisk** at all, and as she passes through its broken parts, she herself feels shattered and screams in agony. Finally, she stops, hovering before the stone eater trapped in the garnet—all while her physical body is still lying on the boardwalk, about to be stabbed. The stone eater looks like a young man made of marble, but he's cracked all the way through. "Are you all right?" Syenite wonders, though she is sure that the stone eater is dead. But suddenly, the stone eater moves—it looks at her and says, "I'm fine. Thank you for asking." Then, the obelisk shatters.

CHAPTER 15: YOU'RE AMONG FRIENDS

Essun, Hoa, and Tonkee have finally reached the place where Hoa could sense all the orogenes gathering, but at first glance it seems like an entirely abandoned comm. The road fades away as it approaches the town, which is unwallled and its buildings are constructed in wildly different ways. The three of them walk through the empty place, Tonkee now holding two knives that she produced from somewhere. Hoa assures Essun that this is the right place. A comment from Tonkee makes Essun realize that they've been traveling for two months.

The long knife recalls the blade that Schaffa held against Damaya's side while he broke her hand, offering another hint that the novel's three protagonists might all be the same person at different stages of her life. Schaffa's lesson—that she is to obey Guardians without questions—challenges Syenite's own sense of morality and justice here. And ultimately, justice wins out in her heart. No matter what she has been taught, she suddenly feels that the system in which she lives is fundamentally "not right."



In conflict with the existing culture of oppression is Syenite's personal anger and sense of justice, which finally overcomes the conditioning she has received from the Guardians' in a moment when she is attacked unjustly by one of those Guardians. This passage is especially cinematic, as one piece of the action takes place in slow-motion while Syenite sends all her anger and orogeny into the nearby obelisk, seeking power to undo the great injustice that she sees before her.



Syenite suffers great pain in order to destroy her enemy, whom she sees as the face of the entire corrupt system that she must live in. At the same time, even in the midst of her suffering, she finds empathy and humanity, speaking to the stone eater without pretensions and asking if he is okay. This rather surreal moment is revealed to have major repercussions later in the Broken Earth trilogy.



After two months on the road during a Fifth Season, the group has learned to be wary of anything and everything that they come across. If Hoa's instincts were wrong in leading them, then Essun may have traveled all this way for nothing—a devastating prospect.



Suddenly, a door of one of the buildings opens and three women come out onto the porch. One is holding a crossbow, though not pointed at them—she is white, blond, and small, and Essun internally judges her according to what the “average Equatorial” would condemn about her breeding. The woman next to her looks Sanzed and is very intimidating: she’s wearing dark eyeliner and a thick fur vest, and her eyes seem especially fierce and piercing. Essun can also sense immediately that she is an orogene, and that she recognizes Essun’s orogeny as well.

The intimidating woman introduces herself as Ykka Rogga Castrima, and Essun and Tonkee are both surprised to hear “rogga” used as a use-caste name, considering its negative implications. Tonkee, clearly fascinated by Ykka, also comments that Castrima is not a recognized comm name. Ykka then looks at Hoa, and Essun realizes that he is glaring with hatred at the third woman on the porch. Essun finally examines her: she has red hair and is clearly a stone eater. This woman seems to smile, and Hoa hisses and smiles in return.

Essun now realizes that Hoa has never showed his teeth before, and though they are the color of human teeth they are faceted like crystals. The woman’s teeth look similar but are transparent. Ykka suddenly steps forward and addresses the stone eater woman, telling her to stop. Essun then realizes that the woman and Hoa weren’t smiling at all but baring their teeth in a kind of threat display. Both of them close their mouths at Ykka’s words, and then Ykka invites them all inside. Both Tonkee and the blond woman with the crossbow suggest that this might not be a good idea.

Essun thinks of the real reason she is here and asks Ykka if a man and a nine-year-old girl who resembles Essun have passed through here. Ykka seems surprised at the question and says no, they haven’t, and by her transparent confusion Essun can tell that she isn’t lying. Essun is suddenly struck with emotion and falls to her knees. She really has been expecting to find Nassun all this time, she realizes, but now she curses herself for daring to hope when she’s “just another filthy, soul-rusted rogga” who never should have had children at all. She feels Tonkee pulling at her arms and realizes that she is weeping and screaming. Essun feels that she should be dead instead of her children, and that she should have died before ever having them.

Again, Essun’s perspective shows the reader how people in the Stillness are immediately judged by their racial characteristics and appearance. She cannot help internalizing the prejudices she has been surrounded by her entire life, even when they lead her to dehumanize herself.



Ykka taking “rogga” as a use-caste name suggests that she is trying to reclaim the slur and show that her orogeny is something to be proud of, not a source of shame. Every comm and use-caste is supposed to be officially recognized, so the fact that both “rogga” and “Castrima” are unfamiliar to Tonkee suggests that they are now dealing with a group living outside the usual hierarchies of the Stillness.



Apparently, there are divisions among the stone eaters as well, as Hoa and the mysterious woman immediately react as if they are known enemies to each other. The display of their crystal teeth highlights just how little Essun and the reader actually know about the stone eaters and their true nature. And if they don’t understand anything about the stone eaters, how much can they understand of their entire world



Essun has still been trying to keep herself from fully thinking about and processing the reality of her situation, and so here she is struck by the bad news all at once and overwhelmed by emotion. In her grief, she lashes out at herself, turning to the familiar idea that she is an evil monster because she is an orogene, and that all of this must therefore be her fault. This internalized prejudice causes her great suffering and self-hatred. At the same time, because of her orogenic power, losing control like this could mean danger for those around her.



Suddenly Essun feels a wave of some kind of orogeny sweep past her, and it reminds her of the day she quieted the massive shake from the north to protect Uche's body. This seems to dispel her rising panic, though, and Essun looks up to see Ykka standing in front of her—she is the one who just did something to stop Essun from destroying them all, using a kind of orogeny that Essun has never felt before. Ykka asks if Essun is okay now and warns her not to lose control again.

Ykka now turns to Tonkee and Hoa and again invites them to come into Castrima, but she warns them that this is a comm unlike any other. If this Fifth Season is short, then Sanze will surely destroy them soon enough, but she doesn't believe that the Season will be short. Ykka looks at Essun, who reluctantly confirms what she's known all along—that this Season will probably last for thousands of years. Ykka says that there are currently 22 orogenes in Castrima, and more keep coming. Tonkee, who was first horrified to hear Essun's prediction, immediately becomes fascinated by this and declares herself totally willing to live beside orogenes.

Ykka then turns to Hoa and tells him that there are other stone eaters here as well, and Hoa says that there are more than even Ykka knows. Ykka tells him that he isn't to fight with the other stone eaters, and that if he disobeys her, she will tell everyone what his kind is "really up to." Hoa seems to deflate and agrees to Ykka's rules. Ykka continues, saying that since the Season began, they've been taking in people from all over, as long as they've been able to prove their worth. Essun decides that she wants to meet these people and hopes that Jija and Nassun really are here but in disguise, or that someone here has at least seen them. She must cling to any hope she can. Ykka tells them to follow her.

CHAPTER 16: SYEN IN THE HIDDEN LAND

Syenite wakes up to a cold wind, the taste of dirt in her mouth, and the feeling that her whole body is bruised. She opens her eyes and looks around, trying to figure out where she is—somewhere next to the ocean, and near to Allia but much colder and rockier. She tries to sesh the tectonic plate beneath her but finds that she can hardly feel anything. Then she notices Alabaster curled up nearby, alive, and a white-robed woman standing beyond him, looking away.

This will be further explored later on, but here Ykka shows that she can use her orogeny to do things that Essun has never seen before—like helping to calm her down—even though Ykka is much less powerful and skilled than Essun is in general. Ykka has recognized the danger that Essun poses when she loses emotional control and implies that if she does so again, Ykka will not be so gentle next time.



Essun hasn't admitted what she knows about the length of the Season to anyone else yet, but here she finally says the horrifying truth out loud: this Fifth Season will last for thousands of years, so there is essentially no hope of humanity surviving it. This is the ultimate disaster, and once this fact becomes clearer to everyone else, it will lead to an existential crisis about how to live in a world without hope for the future. Meanwhile, Castrima immediately reveals itself to be unique in that orogenes and "stills" live alongside each other there.



Castrima's population jumbles the usual divisions and hierarchies of the Stillness, as orogenes, stills, and stone eaters all live together in one place (though it's not yet clear if they do so peacefully or not). At the same time, Ykka has been forced to maintain some of the usual restrictions necessary for survival in a Season, like turning people away (and thus likely condemning them to death) if they don't have anything valuable to offer the comm. After her breakdown, Essun tries to find another spark of hope to give her a reason to keep going.



Syen is entirely confused about what is going on, and she cannot even rely on her orogeny to situate her in the aftermath of the Guardian's attack.



Syenite speaks to the woman, who doesn't turn to face her. The woman says that they are on an island a hundred miles off the eastern coast of the Stillness. Syen is terrified to hear this, as she has been taught that islands are deadly places, constantly in danger of tsunamis. She stumbles to her feet and walks closer to the woman to see that they are atop a cliff over the ocean, with no other land in sight. The woman says that she brought them here, and Syen turns to her angrily only to fall silent in shock. The person next to her is more like a block of stone carved to look like a woman, entirely pale with black and red hair and eyes—a stone eater.

Behind them, Alabaster groans, and Syenite asks the stone eater why she brought them to this island. She responds that she did it to keep Alabaster safe. Alabaster now slowly wakes up, cursing in another language, and when he sees the stone eater, he immediately seems to recognize her. He asks her what she's done now, and she says that she saved his life. The stone eater then points westward, out to sea. There is nothing on the horizon but a single point of reddish glow and smoke. This is Allia, the woman says.

As Syenite and Alabaster recover their strength and examine the island further, they find that there is a village carved into the face of a cliff lining the island's harbor. They discover a set of stone steps leading toward it and begin to walk in that direction. As they walk, Alabaster tells Syen that the stone eater doesn't have a name, but he calls her Antimony, which she has agreed to answer to. She has now disappeared, but Alabaster says that he knows she is nearby. Syenite asks why she brought them here, and Alabaster admits that no one knows a stone eaters' motives, though Antimony has been visiting him for the last five years. She tells him only that she is "here for him."

Alabaster says that the stone eaters can move through rock as if it were air—Antimony is back in the earth right now—and that this is also how she must have brought him and Syenite to the island and away from Allia. Syenite doesn't like thinking about this. She finds the existence of stone eaters unnerving, something that defies reason like orogeny or the **obelisks**. She then tells Alabaster about the stone eater in the obelisk and says that she saw it move and speak. Alabaster pauses, and then says that what Syenite did with the obelisk should have killed her, and it would have if the obelisk hadn't itself been broken.

The stone eaters now start to take a more prominent role in Syen's story as well. Syen immediately turns to the knowledge of stonelore that she has been taught her entire life, which says that islands are deadly places and no one sane would ever live there. The "Interlude 1" chapter also noted that most people on the Stillness never even consider that there might be islands other than the single continent itself.



Whatever Syenite did when she reached into the obelisk's power seems to have caused a major catastrophe in Allia, likely killing everyone in the city. Syenite is dealing with power that she doesn't understand, and when she cannot control it, it can be catastrophic in its destruction.



If Hoa is indeed a stone eater and has attached himself to Essun, it seems that Antimony has similarly taken an interest in Alabaster, though she has not made herself seem human for his sake. The existence of the carved village seems to indicate that the general belief that no one lives on islands is just one more incorrect thing about what is accepted as fact among the people of the Stillness.



Antimony carried Alabaster and Syenite through the earth beneath the ocean in order to save them from the disaster at Allia and bring them to the island. Jemisin deepens some of the novel's mysteries here, adding further complexity to the world she has created with hints about the stone eaters and the obelisks. She also reminds the reader that orogeny itself isn't understood either, even by the people who have seemingly mastered its power.



Still frustrated and confused about everything, Syenite asks Alabaster to explain what happened with the Guardian back at Allia. Alabaster admits that he doesn't have all the answers, but he can tell her his best guesses. He thinks that a mysterious "someone"—likely a faction within the Guardians—knew about the **obelisk** in Allia's harbor, and suspected that a ten-ringer like Alabaster would be able to find it. Syenite is surprised to hear that there might be divisions among the Guardians, but Alabaster reminds her that this is the case in any group. He continues, saying that this is probably why they tried to have Alabaster killed, and then tried to kill Syen when they learned that she was the one who moved the obelisk.

Thinking again about how Alabaster used the **obelisk** to remove the poison from his body at the inn, Syenite asks him if anyone knows what he's really capable of. He says that even *he* doesn't know, and that at some point, he had to move beyond the Fulcrum's teachings and into uncharted waters. If anyone else knew what he could do, Alabaster says, the Guardians would have killed him long before. Syenite questions him further, and Alabaster admits that he even doesn't know whom the Guardians answer to—some think it's the Emperor, or the Yumenes Leadership families, or the Fulcrum.

Alabaster goes on, explaining that Guardians are all children of roggas but not roggas themselves, and there is an operation performed on them where something is implanted into their sessapinae. This gives them the ability to negate others' orogeny, among other things. Hearing this, Syenite's hand hurts in memory of an old injury. She asks about the knife that Edki used to stab Alabaster, and Alabaster says that it was another Guardian specialty, designed to negate an orogene's power. He then assures Syen that both of their orogeny will come back in a few days.

Syenite asks why Alabaster warned her not to let the Guardian's skin touch her, and he falls silent for a while. Finally, he goes on: at the Fulcrum, he was trained by another ten-ringer named Hessionite. He implies that they were in love and says that one day, they were looking for privacy when suddenly they were confronted by a shirtless Guardian. The Guardian grabbed Hessionite, grinned in delight, and then murdered him in a horrible way—somehow a Guardian's skin turns an orogene's power inward, Alabaster says, forcing all that incredible strength back on the orogene's own body. His story trails off here, and Syenite doesn't ask him to continue.

Alabaster continues to expand Syenite's limited worldview, as she has never even considered that there might be hierarchies and divisions among the Guardians (or the stone eaters). Clearly, the power of the obelisks and their connection to orogeny is something that the Guardians badly want to keep secret, as they are willing to kill anyone that might even get close to the truth. This also means that Syen's ability to connect with the obelisk is something that threatens whoever is in power.



This question of whom the Guardians answer to—essentially, the villainous force behind the current social order in the Stillness—is left unrevealed in this first book of the Broken Earth trilogy. Even Alabaster doesn't know exactly who the enemy is, but he does know that the system itself is cruel and oppressive. He also knows that the Guardians are willing to kill anyone that might threaten that system in even the slightest way.



Syenite's memory of an old hand wound connected to the Guardians is a hint that she might actually be an older Damaya, whose hand was broken by Schaffa. The Guardians have been perfectly designed to be able to control orogenes, but how or why is not explained, as more of the Guardians' secrets are revealed in the trilogy's second book.



This is another incredibly traumatic experience that Alabaster has lived through and that has shaped the person he is today—someone bitter against the world and its cruel treatment of orogenes. Orogeny is not understood even by orogenes themselves, and the Guardians can apparently affect it in even stranger and more horrible ways.



After a moment, Alabaster suggests that they continue on to the village and Syenite reluctantly agrees, despite their currently negated orogeny. As they approach, Syenite thinks about how the village might survive tsunamis, and she notices several boats docked in the harbor below, though their design is entirely foreign to her. People are working on the docks, and others have already seen Alabaster and Syen—a large group has gathered to meet them at the first of the village’s cavern entrances.

Syenite greets the villagers, but none of them respond. Examining them, she thinks that they are “Eastcoasters,” tall and dark like Alabaster. A man who seems to be the leader approaches and speaks in an unfamiliar language—the same one that Syen has heard Alabaster use on occasion. Alabaster responds to the man, and everyone seems to laugh and relax. They continue to speak, with Syenite standing by in frustrated silence as Alabaster translates when he can. The comm is called Meov, he says, and the headman he’s talking to is named Harlas. They make their living by piracy.

Later the people of Meov have invited Alabaster and Syenite into their comm, and Alabaster continues to explain to Syen everything they’ve told him. Piracy is the only way they can survive, as nothing grows there. The entire village exists within the cliff, some of it carved by ancient and unknown methods. Alabaster and Syen have been put up in a “guesthouse” cavern, where Syen now watches Alabaster tend to his wounded shoulder and continue to talk. The Meovites have nothing to trade with the mainland, he says, so they attack vessels on trading routes or extort coastal comms for protection from pirate attacks, even though *they* are the pirates all along.

Syenite asks why anyone would live on an island, and how they’ll survive if there’s a Fifth Season. Alabaster says he doesn’t know, but the Meovites are aware of all the dangers and choose to stay here where they are free of Sanze. They claim that Meov and some other island comms have been around for thousands of years, since even before the Sanzed Empire began. Sanze doesn’t know or doesn’t care about their existence, and they were never annexed into its empire. Syenite can’t believe this, and she still thinks that anyone would be crazy to live here.

Alabaster says that part of how the Meovites have survived is because life in the ocean doesn’t die out during a Season the way that land or rivers does. But the main reason, he says with a grin, is that the Meovites don’t kill their roggas—instead, they make them their leaders. The chapter ends with a quotation from **stonelore** saying that “the stone eater is folly made flesh,” and to “learn the lesson of its creation.”

As is usual for someone from the Stillness, Syen’s first thought on coming to a new place is how it would fare in the case of a natural disaster. The island town seems especially vulnerable, and its very existence goes against the stonelore’s traditional wisdom.



Alabaster has not been to Meov before, but he does know their language and seems immediately more familiar with the townspeople than Syenite is. He’s also more willing to question accepted knowledge and consider viewpoints other than those he has been taught.



In the Stillness, everyone survives as best they can, and the people of Meov have found that piracy is their only real option. The fact that the village is seemingly ancient suggests that people have lived on the island for a very long time, however, so it might not be the death trap that traditional wisdom makes it out to be (which once again raises the question of the accuracy of traditional wisdom in the Stillness, or the way that traditional wisdom is used to control the people).



Meov’s existence goes against the accepted wisdom of stonelore and Sanze’s history of itself, so Syenite—who continues to cling to the knowledge that she has been taught—is naturally skeptical of it. It seems like things have always been the way they are, but Alabaster tries to show her that the world is larger and older than Sanzed society—and that some people are willing to risk their lives just to be free of that society.



This is a further blow to Syen’s worldview—killing and oppressing orogenes isn’t the only way that a society can function, and the proof of that is Meov itself. Orogenes are not just treated as human beings here, but as especially valuable ones.



CHAPTER 17: DAMAYA, IN FINALITY

A year passes for Damaya at the Fulcrum. She is lonely, but she comes to think of herself not as a student but as a weapon—someone who doesn't need friends or fun, only training and refining. Eventually she starts using her free hour after dinner to explore the Fulcrum grounds. There is little supervision of the grits during this time unless they enter the forbidden Ring Garden, so no one gives her any trouble as she wanders the miles of pathways, training areas, and landscaped grounds. She also explores the administrative buildings, which include practice chambers where ringed orogenes move around huge blocks of basalt as practice. Sometimes Damaya sees them doing this and longs to be like them.

Damaya is most intrigued by “Main,” the massive central building of the Fulcrum campus. This is full of offices for the orogenes to take care of their own internal business—as they can't use any of Yumenes's resources—and a wing for the Guardians as well. Damaya avoids this part and avoids Guardians whenever she sees them, as she begins to notice a strange and unpleasant sensation whenever one gets too close. In Main, there are also sections that are totally abandoned. After discovering one of these one night, Damaya preps the day before and then begins to explore it.

Making her way through the dark rooms, Damaya finds that the abandoned wings echo the structure of the other parts of Main, with its series of offices and meeting rooms. In them she discovers old books and clothes, and she tries on some of the ornate dresses that she finds. She also comes to rooms full of contraptions that she doesn't understand. Every night now, she explores these abandoned parts of Main, and though she sometimes sees her teachers on her way to and from the building, none of them bother her. She enjoys having this private time to herself, seemingly secret from the universal order that is imposed on all the grits of the Fulcrum.

One day, however, a girl entirely unfamiliar to Damaya joins her group of grits on their march through Ring Garden. They have just finished their Applied Orogeny lesson, during which Marcasite praised Damaya's work and told her that she would be ready for her first ring test soon—a year before anyone else in her age group. Damaya is so pleased by this that she almost misses the strange girl, but it also seems that she is the only one who notices her. The girl sees Damaya staring and winks at her, and Damaya becomes too flustered to say anything to the instructors.

Like a piece of “grit,” Damaya's sense of freedom and childhood innocence is ground down by life at the Fulcrum. She even internalizes the idea that she's not a human being at all, but a weapon that deserves any harsh treatment she might receive in the name of becoming more useful. At the same time, she longs for what she perceives as the freedom and mastery that the older orogenes enjoy. This is exactly what the Fulcrum wants, however—Syenite's story has shown that even the highest ranked orogenes are still essentially slaves, but the Fulcrum is designed to make its members keep striving and hoping to be rewarded with freedom and autonomy.



Readers now know that what Damaya is experiencing with the Guardians is the negation of her own orogeny. She still totally trusts in the established order, however, believing that what the Guardians do is necessary—exactly as Schaffa so brutally taught her. Robbed of friendship and other formative childhood experiences, Damaya expresses herself by exploring whatever she can within the walls that keep her trapped.



Damaya finds a sense of freedom and even identity in her private explorations, as they are the only thing that she is allowed to have for herself alone. The Fulcrum has taught her that she is just another grit, a non-human weapon to be sharpened. But when she is exploring, she can briefly be Damaya, a real human child.



The book doesn't show much of Damaya's actual schooling, but it's apparent that she is an exceptional student, especially because she has now fully accepted that she cannot have a normal childhood and must adapt to the oppressive system around her. This system's routine is then disrupted by the appearance of the strange girl.



When they return to the barracks for Free Hour, Damaya confronts the strange girl and asks who she is. The girl is very talkative and goes on about how she's surprised that no one else has noticed her, and only when Damaya threatens to yell for the instructors does she introduce herself as Binof. Damaya starts asking her many more questions about what she's doing here, but Binof hushes her. She tells Damaya that she's here to look for something strange within the Fulcrum. She can't describe it, but in trying to do so, she makes a hexagonal shape with her hands.

Though this seems nonsensical at first, Damaya actually knows what Binof means: the massive building of Main is circular in shape, but over time she has sensed and deduced that there is a large, hexagonal empty space in its center, around which all of the wings are built. Damaya calls it "a room without doors," and Binof excitedly anticipates that this must be what she's looking for.

More serious now, Damaya asks again who the strange girl is, and now she offers her full name: Binof Leadership Yumenes. Slowly, Damaya realizes what this means: Binof is not an orogene and is rather a member of one of the most powerful families on the continent. All Binof asks is that Damaya not give her away until she can find the room she's looking for. Damaya asks why she's doing this, and Binof says that she can't tell her, but she's looking for something that only Leaders know about. Binof seems confident that nothing will happen to her if she's caught, but Damaya knows that she won't be so lucky, as she's not even a human.

Damaya again threatens to call an instructor, and in a panic, Binof offers her money and then privileges for the next time she leaves the Fulcrum. Cursing her, Damaya tells her that she has no need for money and is never allowed to leave the Fulcrum—she's here, she says, because "it's the only place we can be safe from people like you." Damaya gets so angry at Binof and her privileged naïveté that she almost loses control and uses her orogeny. Binof notices this and isn't afraid, but only more energetically curious than ever. Finally, she asks sincerely if Damaya will help her find the secret room, and Damaya reluctantly agrees, now very curious herself. Binof says that she's seen some old architectural drawings of Main and has an idea where the secret entrance might be—it's in one of the used parts of the building.

It's lucky for the girl that Damaya is the only one to notice her, and even luckier that Damaya has spent so much time exploring the Fulcrum recently. At the same time, the fact that no one else seems to notice or care that there is a strange girl in their midst shows just how deadened and cut off from one another the grits feel.



The mention of a giant hexagonal shape is an early clue that this secret room might have something to do with the obelisks. But like most people in the Stillness, Damaya has grown up almost entirely ignoring the obelisks, so she doesn't think to make the connection.



The Leadership use-caste is the highest ranking of all, and the Leadership families of Yumenes are suggested to be the richest and most influential people in the Stillness. This means that Binof is coming from a radically different place in the hierarchy than Damaya is. Her privilege means that she doesn't fear any major consequences for breaking the rules, while Damaya knows that as an orogene she can easily be killed without anyone caring at all.



Binof's carefree curiosity enrages Damaya, who no longer has the privilege of childhood innocence or even the illusion of safety. In this way, the book shows how privileged groups don't even recognize their advantages until they are pointed out to them, instead accepting them as the norm and assuming that others have the same experience. This means that it's easy for members of marginalized groups to react bitterly or angrily in response, which can then make privileged people feel attacked.



As Damaya leads Binof toward Main, she notices more adults looking at her than usual. At first, she thinks that they are suspicious, but then she realizes that they are actually quietly pleased that she—who they see as a lonely, wandering girl—has finally found a friend to join her. As they walk, Binof comments on how odd it is that the adults allow children such freedom, as they might hurt themselves, and Damaya stops her and reminds that they aren't children: they're grits. No one cares if they get hurt, and Binof needs to start acting like this if she's going to pretend to be an orogene.

The two girls enter Main, and as they head toward the spot that Binof thinks contains an entrance to the secret inner room, Damaya grows uncomfortable because they're now close to the Guardians' wing. Binof says that, as an orogene, Damaya should be able to figure out where the hidden door is using her power. Damaya first scoffs at this but then realizes that she actually can do this to a certain degree. She tries it now, applying all the control and skill that she has learned over the last year and feeling her way along the inner walls of the building, finally finding a place where there is a gap.

Damaya now starts walking down the corridor until she comes to the place where she sensed the gap in the inner wall—it's inside what seems to be a closed office building. Knowing how risky this is, Damaya knocks first, then tries the door but finds it locked. Binof now takes a tool from her pocket and begins to pick the lock. After a while Damaya gets frustrated, worried about being discovered, but finally Binof manages to get the door open. Inside is an empty office, though it seems grander and more ornate than others that Damaya has seen, and the lanterns inside are lit.

Continuing to search, Damaya opens a closet in the room. It seems like the right place, but she can sense that there is a missing gap beyond it, between the closet and the inner wall of the building itself. Binof searches the wall with her hands and finds a loose brick, which she removes to find an iron latch. Overwhelmingly curious now, Damaya tells her to open it. Binof does so, and the whole wall swings free, revealing a tunnel beyond. Damaya asks what Binof was hoping to find here, and when Binof is evasive, Damaya again threatens to turn her in.

Damaya must remind Binof again that their experiences are nothing alike, and that to really fit in, Binof must start to think of herself as a non-human whose safety and desires are entirely irrelevant. Binof is allowed to be a child, while Damaya is forced to be a grit. Damaya doesn't want Binof to have to experience the same oppression, but she does want to have the same privileges that Binof does.



Damaya goes outside her Fulcrum training here at Binof's urging, thinking outside the box and using her orogeny in a specialized new way. Though it has robbed her of humanity and childhood, the Fulcrum's harsh and brutal training has given Damaya incredible power and control even at such a young age.



The girls are now in entirely unknown territory and in constant danger of being discovered by the Guardians. This will only mean a scolding for Binof, but likely injury or even death for Damaya.



Damaya finally allows herself to experience genuine curiosity in this adventure instead of just constantly looking over her shoulder in fear. However, she still recognizes the risk of exploring forbidden places like this and treats Binof accordingly, as Damaya knows that she herself could be hurt or killed if a Guardian discovered them.



Though she says that only Leaders are supposed to know this information, Binof finally relents. She tells Damaya that she's learned that there's some kind of mysterious artifact in the center of the Fulcrum. It is connected to a gap in history itself—after one Fifth Season that took place thousands of years ago, warlords took over as they usually do, but no one settled where Yumenes now is, even though it was the perfect place to build a city. This is because “*there was something here.*” Binof says she doesn't know what that thing is, but it's what she's trying to find out now.

After this Fifth Season was the Madness Season, during which Warlord Verishe founded Sanze and became the first Emperor. Verishe built Yumenes around the mysterious artifact that everyone feared, and centuries later, the Fulcrum was established on top of the thing itself. Binof says that this is the mystery she's trying to solve, and Damaya now silently agrees to continue helping her. Together they enter the tunnel.

Binof blunders ahead in the dark, and Damaya warns her to be careful, sensing that there's something heavy and pressed down ahead—some kind of big hole. Suddenly lights activate around them, coming on to illuminate the way forward and then spreading outward to reveal a massive hexagonal chamber. The walls and floor are of plain stone, but there is an enormous pit in the center of the floor, itself also hexagonal. Both girls stare in awe. Damaya can sense that the pit is incredibly deep, and tapers to a point at its bottom. She also feels sure that no one dug this pit, but rather that something punched downward into the earth and left the hole as an impression.

Crouching and looking closer at the hexagonal pit, Damaya sees that its walls are lined with iron needles. As the two girls continue to wonder at what they've found, a voice suddenly speaks behind them. Damaya jumps in surprise and suddenly feels like she's going to fall into the pit, and counterintuitively she even relaxes, feeling like her body is overwhelmingly heavy and ready to fall in. Binof catches her arm, and Damaya realizes that she wasn't especially close to the pit's edge at all—there's no reason why she should have felt that falling in was inevitable. As she wonders at this, the source of the voice appears: it's a Guardian.

The history of the Stillness itself is shrouded in secrecy, as only Leadership members are supposed to know certain things. This heavily implies that whatever this privileged information is could be detrimental to the current status quo if it became common knowledge. History and knowledge are thus weaponized by those in power in order to maintain their status.



Notably, this secret history is intimately tied to the founding of Sanze. This suggests that whatever it is must go against the narrative that the empire tells about itself.



It now seems very likely that the pit is connected to the obelisks, since it seems to mold around their shape, and Damaya can even sense that something huge and heavy sat within it. This furthers the idea that the obelisks are actually incredibly important, since those in power want to keep their history and potential so secret.



Something about the pit or the iron needles calls to Damaya in a strange way, and she almost gives in and lets herself fall. All these mysteries will be explored more in the second and third books of the Broken Earth trilogy. Of course, this secret place is guarded by a Guardian—after all, it is the Guardians who try to assassinate Alabaster and then Syenite when they learn that the two orogenes can connect with the obelisks. It seems that they guard secret knowledge as much as they guard people.



The Guardian is a short-haired woman who seems older than Schaffa and is smiling in the same strange way that every Guardian seems to. The Guardian calls Damaya by name and says that Schaffa will be disappointed in her. Binof then declares that she is the one who ordered Damaya here, and it's her fault. In a new and serious voice, she introduces herself as Leadership and apologizes to the Guardian. The Guardian's smile fades, but she greets Binof in a pleasant voice. Binof says that her parents surely know where she is by now, so the Guardian can speak to them directly. Damaya realizes that this is a wise move on Binof's part.

The Guardian smiles again at both girls and tells them to come with her, out of the chamber. As they leave, the lights go out behind them, and the Guardian locks the office's door. In the Guardians' wing, the woman stops Damaya and leads Binof away. Binof looks back, but Damaya avoids her eyes, feeling that the strange girl has already caused her enough trouble. Damaya waits there until the woman returns and leads her into a large new room, saying that she has sent for Schaffa, who is currently in Yumenes. This room is full of people, some wearing black uniforms, some burgundy uniforms, and some civilian clothes, and Damaya stares until the woman puts a hand on her head and turns her away, ushering her into a small office.

Damaya sits down and immediately apologizes to the Guardian, who sits down as well. Smiling again, the Guardian starts asking her questions that she doesn't understand—if she touched one of the “extrusions” in the “socket,” and if it called to her. The Guardian's smile has suddenly disappeared, and she is now speaking in an entirely different voice than before. She takes Damaya's hand and starts to stroke it, asking her more questions about an unnamed thing that she says is angry and afraid, and “readying, for the time of return.”

It's as if someone else is speaking through the Guardian's body, and as the woman continues, she starts to press her thumb into the bones of Damaya's hand that Schaffa broke a year and half ago. The woman keeps speaking as her thumbnail now cuts into Damaya's skin, describing the unnamed thing that “did what it had to do, last time” and “made them a part of it.” Damaya finally yells at the Guardian that she doesn't understand what's happening. She knows that she is supposed to obey the Guardians, but what this woman is doing makes no sense according to the order of life at the Fulcrum.

The Guardian likely would have killed both girls without a second thought if Binof were not from such an influential family, and if Binof herself didn't make it clear that she would be missed. Damaya can only hope that Binof's privilege will protect her as well.



Damaya gets a brief glimpse of the Fulcrum's inner workings here. The mix of burgundy and black uniforms suggests that the Guardians and upper-level orogenes are working together, and those in civilian clothes might be undercover operatives. As usual, everything is kept secret from those outside of this inner circle of power.



The Guardian seems taken over by an external force—or, as is revealed in later books, by the very object implanted in her sessapinae—and delivers an ambiguous sort of prophecy that creates a sense of dread and raised stakes. The overarching antagonist is still unknown to the characters, but the Guardian's behavior here suggests that it's something beyond humanity itself.



Damaya has accepted the order of life at the Fulcrum because it gives her a small sense of stability and security, but the Guardian's behavior here goes against everything that she has learned. Guardians are inscrutable and terrifying, but they always maintain complete control of themselves—this Guardian, however, has entirely lost control and become an agent of chaotic violence. The upending of the established order is just as terrifying to Damaya as the rogue Guardian's actions are.



Suddenly Schaffa enters the room and addresses the woman, whom he calls Timay. She continues to drone on, however, and Schaffa sighs and stabs his fingers into the back of her head. Suddenly she jolts forward and blood flows from her neck, and Damaya begins to scream. Schaffa continues, tearing something small out of the back of Timay's skull. Timay slumps forward, another Guardian enters, and Schaffa gives the bloody object to the man, who leaves. At Schaffa's terse request, two other Guardians enter, remove Timay's body, and mop up the blood where she fell.

Schaffa then takes Damaya's hand and examines where Timay cut her. He smiles sadly at her and says that she saw something she should not have—Guardians undergo a procedure where something is implanted, he says, and sometimes it must be removed. A Guardian's connection to their orogenes can help them, but Timay had not maintained such connections. Damaya then remembers that when she first met Schaffa, he pressed his fingers to the back of her skull. She asks Schaffa what Timay was talking about, what was the angry thing she mentioned. Schaffa says that it was "Father Earth," and that this is "a common delusion." Schaffa then apologizes to Damaya again, and he seems so sincere that she starts to cry.

After a while, Schaffa picks Damaya up and lets her weep into his lap. She cries for a long time, not just because of the night's trauma but because she feels like Schaffa is the only person who loves her, if in his own frightening and inexplicable way. When she finally stops crying, Schaffa says that he needs her to do something for him: to go down the hall and pass her first ring test. Damaya quickly understands that this is her only opportunity to prove herself useful and survive in light of the other things that have happened tonight. Schaffa asks her again, saying that his life is full of too much death, and he needs her to live.

Damaya thinks again of all the mysteries of the last year—what the "socket" is, where Crack went, and she feels suddenly that the Fulcrum's way of life is "not right." But Schaffa asks again, and she knows that she loves him too, however wrong that might be. She tells him that if she passes her test, she has picked a rogga name: Syenite. Schaffa says that he likes it, and Damaya resolves that she will indeed pass the test for Schaffa's sake. The chapter ends with an obscured verse of **stonelore**, ending with "They are not masters of themselves; allow them no mastery of others."

Alabaster has referenced the Guardians having something implanted into their sessapinae as children to give them their powers. Here, Schaffa appears to tear that object from Timay's body, killing her in the process. All of this deepens the mystery and shows again how violent and powerful the Guardians are—but it also suggests that they have no qualms about killing one of their own.



Schaffa tries to downplay Timay's words, but it appears that she really was overcome by a separate consciousness talking about "Father Earth" as if it were a real and malevolent entity. This is a hint at the kind of forces the novel's characters might be up against in the future. Nothing is yet explained, but this mystery seems intimately connected to something in the sessapinae of orogenes and Guardians (who are themselves the "still" children of orogenes, as Alabaster explained).



Damaya has not let herself show fragility or true emotion in a full year, and she lets all of those repressed feelings out here. Schaffa frightens her, but he has also become the only person she can now think of as a friend or family member. And despite his abuse and whatever sinister force he answers to, Schaffa does seem to genuinely care for Damaya and want her to survive, as he tries to keep the other Guardians from killing her by proving that she is useful in passing her ring test. Once again, the orogenes are judged not by their intrinsic value as human beings, but only on their usefulness and ability to control themselves.



This is the end of Damaya's storyline in the novel, as it is finally revealed in plain terms that she is Syenite (and therefore, it's likely that Syenite later becomes Essun as well). On her last night as Damaya, she recognizes that the society around her is "not right"—but she's not yet ready to go against it, instead continuing to cling to Schaffa and the order of the Fulcrum. She will pass her test and become the ambitious young woman of Syenite's storyline, trying to climb the ranks of the Fulcrum and purposefully working within the system that oppresses her—until Alabaster arrives and upends her worldview.



CHAPTER 18: YOU DISCOVER WONDERS DOWN BELOW

Ykka now leads Essun and the others into the house where the three women first emerged from. Inside is a stairway leading down into the earth, apparently shaped by an orogene out of solid granite. Ykka says that this and other entrances have been there for centuries, built by other people who were seemingly smarter about using orogenes than Sanze is. Essun disagrees, and Ykka asks if she was trained at the Fulcrum, since all Fulcrum orogenes seem to talk like this. Essun admits that she was. As they go down the steps, they encounter three people guarding what seems to be a drafty cellar, and Essun realizes that these are the comm's gate guards: the abandoned town on the surface is just camouflage, and the actual comm is below.

Ykka leads them on, into a tunnel that appears to be an old mine shaft. After walking for a long while, Essun asks where the red-haired stone eater is, and Ykka implies that she prefers to travel through stone, rather than walking. But then Ykka looks at Hoa, who is walking down the steps with them, and seems surprised. They then enter another tunnel, as Tonkee wonders aloud at the ancient nations that must have built these mines and passages. Tonkee then says that the big earthquake up north—which Ykka says they've been calling the "Yumenes Rifting"—should have destroyed this place, but Ykka responds that she didn't let it. And in the future, she declares, there will always be other orogenes to do the same.

Tonkee, who has still been asking questions and looking around in wonder, now asks Ykka how she's been getting all the orogenes to gather here. Ykka says that it's something she discovered that she could do years ago, and she now demonstrates it: Essun suddenly feels like she's slipping downhill, toward Ykka herself. Ykka stops and then confirms that only roggas feel this, along with stone eaters, as she discovered later.

The group continues walking, and Essun estimates that they are now at least a mile below the earth's surface. As they start to hear and smell people ahead, they fully appreciate what Castrima is: an entirely underground comm. Essun and Tonkee are disbelieving at first, until they finally enter and fall silent in awe. They are inside a massive geode, with crystals the size of buildings jutting out from its walls, and a city has been built among and into the crystals themselves. It's incredibly beautiful.

Even after all that she's experienced, Essun still defaults to the traditional wisdom of stonelore and the Fulcrum, assuming that the current system is the only one that works. This seeming character incongruity might be a result of the novel's structure. The protagonist has three different identities, but because their storylines take place simultaneously, the book cannot give away too much information and spoil the novel's mysteries. So, Essun must learn the same kinds of lessons as Damaya.



Castrima is clearly another comm—like Meov—that goes against the established wisdom of stonelore and Sanzed history, but that also has its own ancient and mysterious history outside of the Sanzed narrative. Just as Antimony brought Syenite and Alabaster through the earth to Meov, so the red-haired stone eater travels with greater ease through solid rock than through the air. This highlights how different Hoa is from other stone eaters, as he moves around like a normal human child.



The Fulcrum taught orogenes like Syenite and Alabaster incredible power and control, but there are other aspects to orogeny that it seemingly ignored (whether purposefully or not), like the ability that Ykka demonstrates here. This also seems to further the idea that stone eaters are drawn to orogeny or to specific orogenes.



It has seemed clear from the start that Castrima must be an underground comm, but for people like Essun and Tonkee who are so steeped in the reasoning of stonelore and the Stillness, this is such a radical idea that they don't consider it until they see it for themselves. The book creates another fascinating alien world here: an enormous geode with a city built inside it.



Ykka admits that they have only built the latest additions, and they still don't know how past people hollowed the crystals into buildings without breaking them. There are all kinds of systems in place that they don't understand, she says: pumping out bad air, diverting an underground spring in for water, and creating electric power with a turbine. Most of it was built before the Sanzed Empire began. Tonkee notices that the crystals themselves are glowing, and Ykka says that this is another thing they have no explanation for.

When they first discovered this place, Ykka explains, it was full of ancient skeletons. Because of this, no one was willing to live there for a long time, and they only used it as a cache for supplies. During the last Season, however, the aboveground comm of Castrima was burned to the ground, and the survivors had no choice but to hide underground. This failed, as well, because none of the mechanisms worked in the geode, and generations passed until Ykka's orogenic great-grandmother figured out why. Shocked, Essun now realizes that all the mechanisms run on orogeny. Ykka says that it seems so, but still, no one is sure why or how.

After taking all of this in, Essun finally introduces herself, giving only the name "Essun," which itself is a lie, she thinks. Tonkee and Hoa introduce themselves as well. Ykka then welcomes them to Castrima and says that their comm is just trying to survive like everyone else, but that they're also willing to innovate to do so. Essun immediately asks if they'll be allowed to leave. Ykka smiles but doesn't answer and instead directs them onward. The chapter ends with an Innovator's quotation about sessapinae, saying that they are sensitive to seismic movements but also many other things, including other people's emotions and celestial objects.

CHAPTER 19: SYENITE ON THE LOOKOUT

Alabaster and Syenite have now been in Meov for three days. Syen still hasn't learned any of the language, which is called Eтурpic, and Alabaster has convinced her that they can't return to the Stillness. As they walk together on one of the cliff-tops one day, he argues that it would be suicidal to return to the Fulcrum without knowing exactly why the Guardians are trying to kill them. Syen also realizes that everyone probably already thinks that they're dead, destroyed in the massive eruption that used to be Allia.

The novel's world continues to expand, both in terms of fantastical settings and the acknowledged history of the society that the characters inhabit. Castrima becomes another place that seems to exist entirely outside of stonelore and Sanze. Both the societal structure of this comm and the physical structure of the space go against and undermine the established knowledge of Sanze society and beliefs.



This is another example of how orogeny does not need to be treated as something monstrous and deadly, but potentially as a special skill to be valued and elevated. The current societies of the Stillness maintain the Sanzed worldview, but it becomes increasingly clear that other past civilizations treated orogenes in very different ways.



Here, the narrative drops a clear hint that Essun is probably the older version of Syenite and Damaya, as she thinks to herself that her current name is a false identity in some way. The passage that ends this chapter looks forward to the rest of the Broken Earth trilogy, in which the true nature of orogeny is further explored—not just as a power to affect the earth's movements, but to sense and alter other celestial bodies and even people.



In a society that is as brutal to orogenes as the Stillness—and particularly the Fulcrum within it—Alabaster suggests that he and Syenite will find true freedom from oppression only through death. The fact that no one knows they survived Allia's eruption should then offer them freedom that they would never be able to achieve on the continent.



Alabaster seems delighted to finally be free of the Fulcrum, even if it means staying on Meov. He assures Syenite that neither of their Guardians can find them unless they manage to get near enough, and that back on the Stillness, he and Syen are surely wanted criminals, with one or the other made out to be the new Misalem. Syen realizes that he's right, as the destruction at Allia contradicts everything that the Fulcrum is supposed to offer, so the orogenes of the Fulcrum will need to make them scapegoats or else risk being murdered by mobs themselves.

Syenite still feels guilty, though—she can now see further than before, oddly, and so can appreciate just how terrible things are in Allia. The broken **obelisk** has seemingly buried itself all the way down into the earth's mantle, leaving a gaping hole of magma behind that has destroyed everything. Because of this, Syenite feels especially angered by Alabaster's apparent joy. He again assures her that their Guardians can't track them, because of whatever he did to his and because when Syen's orogeny was negated, her Guardian lost his connection to her until he touches her again.

Syen continues to be angry, and Alabaster then reminds her how many times they've had sex even though neither of them wanted to. Her rage grows, forming a torus of ice that Alabaster immediately blots out with his own. He apologizes and says that he was just trying to make a point, but Syen already knows what it is—that roggas are slaves with no control over even their own bodies. She feels like she hates Alabaster because he gives voice to these terrible truths—truths that every orogene at the Fulcrum chooses to ignore so that they might remain comfortable and safe.

Glaring at each other but then walking together again, Syenite and Alabaster head back down to the village, where a large ship called the *Clalsu* arrived two days previously. Its captain, Innon, is technically second-in-command to the headman, Harlas, but he is clearly a leader and beloved by all. A huge, dark man with an outsized personality, Innon is a "feral" orogene like Harlas, and Syen feels herself entirely confused by him.

Syenite and Alabaster's supposed deaths allow them to make a hard break from the Fulcrum, something they would never be able to do otherwise. The Fulcrum's way is essentially respectability politics—as described in the quotation at the end of Chapter 4—which relies on its oppressed minority always exhibiting their best behavior and then demonizing those who go against the status quo.



It's suggested that Syenite's orogeny has grown stronger after connecting to the obelisk. Meanwhile, Alabaster is bitter toward the world, and so he sees the deaths at Allia as collateral damage, but Syen still considers those people valuable, no matter how much they might have hated orogenes or been complicit in an evil system. Alabaster implies that Schaffa has finally lost his connection to Damaya (now Syenite).



The reality of life for orogenes is essentially horrifying and hopeless, so Syenite still prefers to avoid this reality as much as she can in order to maintain her sanity and humanity. She knows that Alabaster is right, but she also feels that acknowledging the whole terrible truth at all times would rob her of any chance of happiness or satisfaction in the present moment.



Meov's society is arranged in an entirely different way than the rest of the Stillness. Not only are orogenes respected and valued, but there are seemingly no other strict castes or predefined roles for people.



As Syenite and Alabaster enter Meov's caverns, they can immediately hear Innon's booming voice where everyone has gathered for their evening meal. He greets them both and loudly invites them to sit by him—he is a huge man, with his hair in braids and wearing garish clothing. Syenite can't help smiling as they join him. As he continues to talk, Syen thinks about what is confusing about Innon—he clearly desires her, but he also seems to want Alabaster, who appears to be interested in Innon as well. After flirting with both of them, Innon launches into a story in Eturnpic, dramatically telling the tale using his entire body.

Alabaster translates Innon's story some for Syenite, and finally asks her directly if she wants Innon for herself. She asks him if he wants Innon, and Alabaster asks if she would really back off if he asked her to. When she is silent, Alabaster leaves the story circle. When Innon's tale is over, Syen leaves to go find Alabaster. He's in their shared room, sitting on the floor in the dark. Syen snaps at him, and he finally asks her if she ever just wants to be a human being. Syen responds that roggas aren't human, and Alabaster fiercely says that they are—their classification as non-human is just a justification for the way people treat them.

Syenite says that Alabaster can have Innon if he wants him. Alabaster recognizes that Syen wants Innon too, but he says that he can't be as unselfish as she is. Sadly, he tells her that it's been so long—and she knows that he means since he had a lover that he really wanted. Syen asks if Alabaster wants her to go get Innon for him, and after a long while he nods and thanks her.

Syenite leaves and finds her way to Innon, who leans against the wall beside her. She quickly admits that she likes Innon, but she says that she's here on Alabaster's behalf. Innon asks if they mean to share him, which throws Syen off until Innon shrugs away the suggestion. He tells Syen that she is a good friend, and the stronger of the two—Alabaster has been broken and is barely holding himself together, he says, while Syen is bruised but still intact. Innon then kisses her and promises that he will look out for her, and he leaves to go find Alabaster.

Syenite stands looking out at the sea, now that her bedroom is occupied. She remembers one of Meov's women explaining to her that they all survive only because of orogenes. The woman then suggested that Alabaster and Syenite should have a baby and give it to Meov so that they don't have to steal one from the mainland. Syenite doesn't like this idea, but she does prefer it to their child becoming a node maintainer.

Syenite is baffled by and attracted to Innon and the total freedom of his existence, bearing none of the shame and fear that she learned at the Fulcrum or through a lifetime of stonelore indoctrination. He is free and proud to be an orogene, and this sense of freedom extends to his sexuality as well, as he is open in his desires and seems to feel no shame in them. This is an alien idea to Syen, but she is immediately drawn to it.



Alabaster starts to open up emotionally more to Syenite, though she is still prickly toward him. He has been worn down by so much trauma that he just wants to feel like a full human being. This emotional low point then leads him to state directly what they both know but that has been denied to them their whole lives—the fact that orogenes really are human beings, and that other people label them monsters just so they can justify continuing to treat them poorly.



Syenite knows that she can handle being alone for a little longer, but Alabaster's loneliness is truly breaking him. She continues to be outwardly standoffish with him, but her actions show how much she really cares.



Syen has never considered the kind of relationship that Innon casually assumes would be an option, as she has never experienced the freedom that Innon takes for granted. Innon is clearly very emotionally intelligent, as he recognizes both Alabaster's brokenness and Syen's reluctant strength in giving up her own desires for the sake of her friend and mentor.



Meov values and elevates its orogenes, but it still does treat them like something "other" to be used. This is a less harmful system than the Stillness, but it still means a subtle kind of dehumanization that Syenite now recognizes.



After a few hours, Syenite goes back into her room where she can hear Alabaster crying very quietly. She passes through the curtain that's been put up for privacy and sees Innon holding the weeping Alabaster, both of them naked and clearly having just had sex. Innon beckons to her, and to her surprise Syenite finds herself undressing and getting into bed with them as Innon continues to hold Alabaster. Eventually she falls asleep beside them until the next morning, when she wakes up, vomits, and realizes that she is pregnant.

Syenite opens up here too, becoming vulnerable with both Alabaster and Innon at a moment when Alabaster is at his most fragile. In the relative safety of Meov, Syenite can let herself find her humanity once again. This kind of new life is then made literal with the realization of her pregnancy. The Fulcrum's plans for her to bear Alabaster's child have come to fruition, but now it seems possible that the child will actually escape the Fulcrum's grasp.



INTERLUDE 2

This chapter, narrated in the second-person, describes a brief time of happiness for the “you” who's being addressed. The narrator offers it as a reminder that not everything has been painful, but there has been peace as well. At the same time, the narrator says, while “you” and “she” rested, other factions—including the Guardians, the Seasons, the stone eaters, and Father Earth himself—have gathered for war.

This brief section about Syenite's pregnancy and early years of motherhood on Meov essentially confirms that Syenite will later become Essun, as the “you” of Essun and the “she” of Syenite are conflated here. After so much grief and trauma, Syenite does at least get a brief period of peace and freedom on Meov, but the world at large continues to move, and the facts of Essun's life make clear that the time on Meov is going to come to an end in some way.



CHAPTER 20: SYENITE, STRETCHED AND SNAPPED BACK

Two years have now passed since Syenite had her baby, and she starts to feel useless and bored in her life on Meov, so she asks Innon if she can join his crew. The baby, Corundum, is mostly cared for by Alabaster and other mothers in the comm—as everything in Meov is communal—and Syen now feels like she can leave him for a while.

In the almost three years since their arrival on Meov, Syenite and Alabaster's lives have changed dramatically, as they have flourished in the island's communal, non-structured society. But although they are free from the Fulcrum for now, it's significant that Alabaster and Syenite still name their child with a Fulcrum name—its influence on them will always remain.



On the docks, Syenite argues with Innon, saying that she's bored. He reminds her that Alabaster is happy to stay quietly in Meov, either with Corundum or alone, but Syenite says that she's not Alabaster, and she knows that Innon can use her skills in his raiding ventures. They both know that this is true, as a Fulcrum-trained rogger can perform acts that Innon cannot, even subtle things like raising a fog to surround the ship. Innon then reminds her that on the ship, she will have to obey everything he says, and they won't be lovers or even friends at sea. Syen reluctantly agrees to this rule.

While Syenite and Alabaster have been happy and safe here, Syenite has also grown bored with domestic life and still has her old ambition and restlessness. Alabaster, on the other hand, has been forced to lead a life of violence and trauma when all he really wanted was domestic happiness like this, so he is perfectly content to stay on the island and raise Corundum.



Finally, Innon asks if Syenite even loves Corundum, given that she wants so badly to leave him. Syenite knows that she loves her child, though she only reluctantly admits it, but she also doesn't want to spend her entire life in his presence. Innon finally relents, but he says that Syen will have to tell Alabaster that they will both be leaving him. Pleased, Syen goes to find Alabaster. Eventually she finds him atop the island's cliffs, along with Corundum, or "Coru."

Alabaster already seems to know what has happened, and he asks Syenite if she will ever come back to Meov once she leaves. He says that she has her freedom now, since Innon has his rogga child, and Alabaster will always stay to train Corundum better than anyone else could. Syenite is irritated, but she recognizes that what Alabaster is really trying to say is "don't leave me."

Syenite assures Alabaster that she will come back, and she explains that she's not being useful on the island at all—she's noticed that he's been quieting even the smallest earthquakes ever since they arrived. Alabaster shakes his head, though, and nods at Corundum—it's the baby who's been doing this for the last year, he says. Syen finally realizes just how powerful and skilled Corundum is, even at two years old. Finally Alabaster storms off with Coru, telling Syenite to just leave on her ship already.

Syenite lingers for a while, wondering how she ended up in this situation, and then she goes back down to her room, which now has a bigger bed to accommodate Innon as well. Alabaster is there with Corundum, and Syen gets into bed and holds Alabaster, who apologizes to her. Again, Syen assures him that she's coming back, but she says that she's restless. They both know what she really wants—to make things better back on the Stillness. Alabaster tells her that nothing can change the current world besides destroying it and starting anew. Syen argues that Corundum deserves a better life, but Alabaster seems resigned that he won't have it and they will find their greatest happiness here on Meov.

Syenite falls asleep and wakes up to the sounds of Alabaster having sex with Innon. Syenite finds them "beautiful together" and is aroused herself, and Innon then shifts over to have sex with her as Alabaster watches. This is the way their relationship has been for almost two years: Syenite and Alabaster have sex with Innon but not each other, yet they are especially aroused by watching Innon having sex with the other. Syenite wonders how to describe this relationship: something like a "two-and-a-half-some," and also just love between three people. Falling asleep again, she wishes that such a thing could last.

Syenite still keeps up a standoffish exterior even with her own child, but as usual, her actions prove the love that she doesn't even like to admit to herself. She and Innon both know that Alabaster is still fragile, though, and will be upset that they are leaving him together.



Despite his incredible orogenic power, Alabaster has always been emotionally sensitive and easily hurt. Freedom for him means this kind of domestic bliss, but he knows that Syen wants more and has grown restless.



Corundum is everything the Fulcrum wanted from Alabaster and Syenite's child—he's already incredibly powerful and skilled even as a baby, exhibiting not just raw strength but also focus and control. Such ability in a child also implies that the Fulcrum's brutal methods of training are unnecessary for gaining orogenic skill, and instead is primarily designed to turn oregenes into tools.



At the end of Damaya's storyline, she felt that the world was "not right," but she still did what Schaffa asked and accepted her role within the Fulcrum. That sense of injustice has grown over the years, however, and Syenite still maintains some hope of effecting change in the world. This is a dream that Alabaster lost long ago. He has resigned himself to the state of things and assumes that they will never have a better situation than this one on Meov. At the same time, his comment about destroying the world and starting over is another hint that he is the one who broke the continent at the novel's beginning.



Outside of traditional social constraints, Syenite and Alabaster have found a relationship that is impossible to define but that works and makes them both happy. This kind of sexual and emotional freedom is something Syenite has never experienced before. Notably, the Fulcrum initially forced Syenite and Alabaster to become sexual partner, but when they are given the freedom to choose, they still remain close and even romantically linked, though through the medium of Innon.



The next day Syenite sets sail with Innon and his crew on the *Clalsu*. Days pass, and she is fascinated to see whales beside the ship one day and to look at the stars at night, something that she has never especially cared about before, as “astronomy” is officially considered a pseudoscience on the Stillness. After a week of sailing and scouting out shipping lanes, the crew settle on their target: a large vessel accompanied by a smaller attack ship. The presence of the smaller armed ship implies that the larger one has something worth stealing.

As they prepare to attack, Syenite raises one fog around the attack ship and another one between the *Clalsu* and the cargo ship. The *Clalsu* then sweeps in and attaches itself to the cargo ship, Innon’s crew leap aboard, and the fighting begins. Syenite is ushered belowdecks for this part, but she emerges after a few minutes to find the crew of the cargo ship being held hostage and Innon’s crew carrying goods onto the *Clalsu*.

Suddenly there is an alarm, and the attack ship appears, barreling out of the fog and toward the other two vessels. Syenite is still full of power that she has drawn from the ocean and she reacts instinctively, drawing up a spike of stone from the seafloor to pierce the attack ship immediately and halt its disastrous approach. The crew of the *Clalsu* cheers, and even the cargo ship’s people seem relieved. On its present course, the attack ship would have sunk all three vessels.

When the cargo ship’s hold is emptied, Innon finds Syenite. She expects him to be angry with her, but instead he seems awed by this demonstration of her power. She says that she shouldn’t have let the stone rise up so high, and Innon nods and understands that her display has made it plain that the pirates have a skilled orogene on board. As they prepare to sail away victorious, Innon stops them and then tells Syenite to sink both the cargo ship and the attack ship.

Syenite has promised to obey Innon’s orders, but she is reluctant to kill so many people just because of her own mistake. Innon tells her that it is for Alabaster and Corundum’s sake, and Syenite agrees to do as he asks. Syenite tells Innon to move the *Clalsu* away, and then she draws the spike of stone down from the attack ship’s hull, leaving it to start sinking immediately. She then sends the same column to pierce the cargo ship and break it into two, and the cries of the drowning follow them as they sail away. That night Innon makes an exception to his rule and lets Syenite share his bed. Later she declares that she wants to see Allia. Innon assures her that she doesn’t, but because he loves her, he follows her request.

The narrator previously noted that the people of the Stillness rarely concern themselves with the sky or anything other than the movements of the earth. The people of Meov do not have such limited imaginations, however, perhaps as a result of their much less structured and oppressive society. It’s also suggested that Sanze has actively suppressed the study of celestial objects, just as it has made most people believe that the obelisks are things to be ignored.



Syenite is able to use all the control she learned through her Fulcrum training to help those she loves to survive. However, she is now using her orogeny as a skill because she wants to, not because she has been forced into it.



Syenite’s power and control have only grown in the past years, and her skills are incredibly useful to the people of Meov, as she is finally able to prove here. It is again notable that her power has grown now that she has been freed from Fulcrum control and rigid training, suggesting that the purpose of such training is not in fact to maximize all facets of orogenic skill or power.



The freedom of Meov’s society comes at a price—they must protect their secrecy at all costs. This means that Syenite must actively murder people who would otherwise have lived, all because they will now know that the pirates have a powerful (and thus likely Fulcrum-trained) orogene on board.



Syenite was able to use her power to help Innon and the people of Meov, but the fact that it led to so many deaths makes her feel like a monster or a weapon all over again. This then makes her think of the destruction at Allia, which she also sees as her own fault. The novel presents many acts of violence, some committed by its protagonist, but leaves the reader to pass judgement on whether they are justified or not. Syenite kills people here to protect her family—she feels guilty about it but also believes that it’s necessary.



Syenite remembers everything she can about the old myths: Father Earth didn't always hate life, until people started to destroy the earth and finally destroyed his "only child." No one remembers what this means, but everyone agrees that after it happened, the earth broke open and almost every living thing died. This was the first and worst Fifth Season: the Shattering Season. Syenite wonders what really caused this first Season. Even every living orogene working together couldn't break the earth's crust like that, so orogeny can't be to blame for the Seasons. But she finds it incredible that humanity survived the Shattering Season—especially if it was anything like Allia is now.

The *Clalsu* now passes by what used to be Allia, which is now just a haze of ash and magma. Everyone who lived there is surely dead, and the hot spots keep growing and spawning new vents. Standing beside Syenite, Innon tries to reassure her that many people on the outskirts of Allia managed to escape, but she finds herself consumed only by rage and sorrow. Drawing from all the earth's power before her, she creates a torus in front of her. She declares that she can't leave the place like this, as she knows that it will only get worse and kill more people or set off a Fifth Season.

Syenite stabs her power into the volcano, letting herself feel all the rage and sadness that comes with the destruction of Allia and what she feels was her own mistake. Drawing strength from the burning earth itself, she slowly calms and seals off the vents of magma until, finally, every crack is sealed. She then wakes up in Innon's arms, with the *Clalsu* bucking against enormous waves. Everyone aboard seems terrified at what she just did. Syenite realizes that she has forgotten about how her actions would affect the water, and she tries to explain to Innon what he needs to do to keep the ship from sinking, as she herself is too weak to act now.

Unable to make Innon understand in time, Syenite despairs until suddenly an external force arrives and calms the gathering waves. It's Alabaster, using his orogeny even a hundred miles away. Afterwards, the volcano that was Allia is dark and quiet, and the ash above it already begins to clear. As they sail away, one crew member approaches Innon and makes it plain that Syenite should warn them next time before she decides to seal up a volcano. Innon then tells Syenite that he never imagined she could do such things, and that she is surely as powerful as Alabaster. Syenite laughs and says that she does what is possible, but Alabaster does what is impossible.

These myths will become more important as the Broken Earth trilogy progresses and Father Earth becomes more of a concrete entity in the story. Syenite's thoughts about orogenes destroying the earth are seemingly contradicted by the man at the novel's beginning (presumably Alabaster) who was able to break the planet's crust and cause a devastating Fifth Season. At the same time, people have used the myth of orogenes causing the first Season as a justification for their oppression.



The book vividly describes the destruction in this passage using both figurative and scientific language. It's unclear why the Fulcrum would allow this open vent to continue to exist at Allia, especially because it poses the risk of starting a new Fifth Season. Syenite's sense of injustice takes physical form here, as she draws on her rage and grief to fuel her orogeny.



This massive display of orogeny feels like an act of atonement for Syenite, as she is at least able to seal up the damage she caused with the obelisk and prevent more people from dying. She is able to channel her anger and sorrow at the injustice of this destruction to perform a truly extraordinary feat.



*Alabaster has been using his orogeny to "watch over" Syenite and Innon all along, it seems, and so now he is able to save the *Clalsu* from the consequences of Syen's massive seismic disturbance. As a "feral," relatively untrained orogene, Innon is awed by what Syenite can do and cannot even imagine what Alabaster is capable of (as Syenite previously couldn't either).*



Innon seems somber and says that sometimes he wishes that he had gone to the Fulcrum, so that he could have power like Syenite and Alabaster do. Syen assures him that he doesn't, and she grows sad imagining how the Fulcrum would destroy everything about Innon that she loves so much. She then glances back at Allia and freezes, because she sees someone on the side of the caldera. She thinks then that the Fulcrum wouldn't leave such a disaster as Allia's volcano to keep growing unless they had been ordered to do so—and the figure she saw was wearing the burgundy uniform of a Guardian.

Syenite acknowledges that the Fulcrum taught her to control and hone her power, but those skills came at the expense of great trauma and the degradation of her very humanity. While Innon might envy her power, she finds it tragic to even think of how his wild and free spirit would have been broken by the Fulcrum. Meanwhile, this moment foreshadows an ominous turn in the story: if the Guardian on the shore saw that the orogene calming the volcano was on the ship, then they would have a better sense of where to look for Syen and Alabaster.



The chapter ends with an old folk song from before the Sanzed Empire, saying that the Earth is angry because he is alone.

The narrative continues to build the idea that Father Earth is a real entity, and that whatever was stolen from him is what caused him to begin the Fifth Seasons.



CHAPTER 21: YOU'RE GETTING THE BAND BACK TOGETHER

Essun and the others have been put up in an apartment inside a crystal. Amid her tiredness from the overwhelming day, Essun suddenly realizes that she actually knows Tonkee, and she says this—Tonkee is Binof Leadership Yumenes. Tonkee seems cowed and says that she didn't think Essun remembered her. Essun now realizes that it wasn't a coincidence that Tonkee started traveling with her, and finally Tonkee admits that this is true: she's had people following Essun for years now. They lost her 10 years ago, but then were able to find her again.

This further confirms that Essun is both Syenite and Damaya—she has essentially changed her identity twice over the years, but she still remembers Damaya's experiences at the Fulcrum with the young Leadership girl Binof.



Learning this, Essun grows angry and demands an explanation. Tonkee apologizes and tries to explain: she is a geomest and did go to the Seventh University, though that didn't go well for her, but she has spent her life studying the “socket” that she and Essun found at the Fulcrum. Essun tries to change the subject, but Tonkee declares that this matters, and Essun is one of the only people who can “make it matter.” Tonkee then declares that the socket is where the **obelisks** were built, and also where “everything went wrong.”

The mystery of the obelisks comes to the fore again, as Binof was seemingly unable to let go of their discovery in the Fulcrum (while Damaya was mostly grateful to have survived the ordeal) and has pursued her insatiable curiosity for decades. She suggests here that the building of the obelisks had something to do with the original Fifth Season and everything that has gone wrong with the world.



Backtracking, Essun learns more about what happened to Binof, who now prefers the name Tonkee. She disappointed her Leadership family by rejecting all their acceptable professions, and even more by being a trans girl, as the members of the Leadership use-caste “breed among themselves” via arranged marriages. Her family finally decided to “bury” her at the Seventh University and give her a new use-caste, thus disowning her without a scandal. Tonkee has since spent her life studying the **obelisks**.

Tonkee's privileges kept her alive, safe, and even well-educated despite the fact that she went against her use-caste in every conceivable way. Yet while she still has some of her old naïveté and obliviousness, she has also been living as a commless woman, devoting herself entirely to her studies and rejecting any of the comforts that she could easily possess.



Tonkee says that she wasn't obsessed with Essun on a personal level, but mostly had her followed because she thought that Essun might be someone who could control the **obelisks**. Essun bitterly points out that she went so far as to die to escape the Fulcrum, but still couldn't escape Tonkee. Tonkee says that she's been tracking the obelisks themselves, as well, and has noticed that they move very slowly toward certain skilled orogenes. Two were moving toward Tirimo, and that was how Tonkee found her—further, one of the obelisks was the amethyst that had to travel all the way from the eastern coast. Tonkee says that she only tried to actually reach Essun after the Rifting happened in the north.

Essun says that there should have been only one **obelisk** headed toward Tirimo, the amethyst, but Tonkee insists that there was another one, and it had picked up speed in the last two or three years. Uche was almost three, Essun thinks, so the other obelisk must have been heading for him. At this thought, she shuts down inside and tells Tonkee to leave her, then sits in silence for a long time.

Hoa comes into the room, and Essun prepares to talk to him. He admits that he is a stone eater, but Essun is still confused—unlike other stone eaters, he has real hair, skin that bleeds, and he can move about at the speed of a human being. In response, Hoa unties the little cloth bundle that he's been carrying ever since Essun first found him. Inside is a collection of white and red chunks of crystal. Hoa picks one up and then starts to eat it. Essun asks if that's his food, but Hoa gestures at the rocks and says, "Me." In some way, he implies, he is the crystals, and eating them allows him to look human.

Essun is still confused, and she asks Hoa why he would want to seem human when he could just travel through the earth. Hoa just says that he wanted to travel with Essun—because he likes her. He seems just like any other child as he says this, and Essun has to remind herself that he's probably thousands of years old. Hoa assures her that he won't hurt her, and Essun is surprised to realize that she never thought he might. He then tells her that it isn't safe here in Castrima. Essun answers sarcastically and then remembers that in her persona as "Essun," she isn't supposed to be that way; she's supposed to be calm and gentle. But she isn't *just* Essun anymore, she knows.

Essun reiterates the point that she had to essentially die in order to find freedom from the Fulcrum during her time at Meov. As a geomest and member of the Leadership use-caste, Tonkee has access to far more knowledge than the average Stillness citizen—but fortunately, she has used this not to exploit others but rather to pursue the mystery of the obelisks. The obelisks seem to have a personal connection to particular orogenes, as one followed Essun all the way from the region near Allia and Meov.



Once again, the weight of her grief makes Essun completely shut down emotionally, as the trauma that she has experienced during her life is too much for any one person to bear all at once. Instead, she is forced to compartmentalize, to divide her very self into separate identities.



Hoa doesn't clearly explain what he has done to make himself seem more human, but it is now fully made clear that he was the figure that emerged from the geode in the first chapter. He confirms that he is a stone eater, but everything else that he says here only deepens the mysteries about him.



Hoa apparently changed his physical appearance entirely for Essun's sake, and he seems to have an overarching purpose for their interpersonal connection. Now that it's clear that Essun is actually Syenite, she begins to return to the same sarcastic and prickly mindset that defined her younger self—whereas when she was Essun, she had carefully crafted an identity that was more docile and unassuming.



Essun asks Hoa about the other stone eaters in Castrima, and he tenses up again, saying that they aren't like him. Essun is exhausted by now and tells him that she needs to sleep. Hoa says he'll keep watch, as he hardly ever needs to sleep. Essun goes to bed. She wakes up next to Hoa, with Tonkee asleep in the other room. Essun has no idea how long she's been asleep, or what time of day it is aboveground. She leaves the apartment and tries to make her way back down to ground level, though this means navigating a maze of hanging walkways stretched between the crystals.

Finally, Essun finds the communal baths, which are heated and continuously refilled by a mysterious system of pipes. Essun undresses and starts to wash herself when someone approaches her: she's shocked to see that it's Lerna, her friend and ally from Tirimo. He tells Essun that he thought she might end up here, and it seems like fate that they would end up in the same place. Recognizing that Essun is still naked, he turns away to let her finish bathing. Essun is still almost speechless at the sight of him, but she is pleased that he continues to treat her like a human being despite knowing what she is.

The other people at the baths seem to look more kindly on Essun after her encounter with Lerna, and Essun wonders if Ykka tries to hide her orogeny from the public, or if they know she's a roggga and still choose to follow her. Only one other time in her life has Essun lived somewhere that treated orogenes like that, she recalls. When Essun is done washing, she joins Lerna again, who takes her to his apartment. He is clearly filling his role as doctor here in Castrima, just as he did in Tirimo. He and Essun sit down, and Lerna starts explaining how he got here.

Lerna says that he left Tirimo the day after Essun did, as the town was already falling apart, and everyone was suspicious of everyone else. Besides, as Essun's friend, Lerna knew he wouldn't be safe for long. First, he thought about going to a town where he had family, but he also considered trying to catch up with Essun on the road. There is a pause, and Essun recognizes an unspoken thing between them—Lerna has always liked her, and though she assumed that he would grow out of his crush, it's now clear that he hasn't.

Lerna continues, saying that he snuck out of Tirimo and walked with the flow of refugees for a long way until he got lost. Eventually, he joined two others, a man and his teenaged daughter. They were attacked by bandits one day and the older man sacrificed himself so that Lerna and the daughter could escape. Later the daughter left Lerna, calling him a coward for abandoning her father. Essun tries to comfort him, as he is clearly still upset about this.

As Alabaster had suggested, there are likely warring factions and hierarchies even among the stone eaters, as alien as they might appear to human beings. Hoa seems to continue to place his connection to Essun above all else.



Lerna's appearance is a sudden reminder of her life in Tirimo and the identity that she had built as Essun. But he is also the exception in that he doesn't condemn her as a monster despite her orogeny (and the fact that she destroyed much of their town when she left).



The previous place where Essun lived as an orogene among stills is implied to be Meov, though her experiences since then have made her wary and secretive about her identity once more. Her own sense of the need for secrecy makes her assume that Ykka must also be hiding her orogeny, no matter how direct and open Castrima's leader seems to be.



Essun has experienced her own traumatic journey, but her actions have also had serious consequences for those around her, as evidenced by Lerna having to flee Tirimo simply because he was known to be her friend. The romantic aspect of Lerna and Essun's relationship has not been explored yet, but it is more fully introduced here.



In a Fifth Season, everyone has their own story of what they have been forced to do to survive. Lerna acted courageously in one sense and cowardly in another, and he's tormented by this ambiguity. It's implied that he had no good choices to make, however—in this apocalyptic world, one can only choose the lesser of two evils.



Lerna continued on alone and realized that he, too, was extremely vulnerable, just like the daughter who was now on her own. Essun silently agrees, and she physically assesses him—he's not tall or bulky like the Sanzed Equatorials prefer, and he is too mixed racially for them to find him attractive, but “by Somidlats standards he's a looker.” Lerna says that about two weeks ago, he found his way to Castrima, which seemed abandoned. He slept there one night, and when he woke up, he was surrounded by people. When he told them that he was a doctor, they brought him down to the real comm.

Lerna and Essun fall silent for a while, and then Lerna tells Essun that Nassun definitely isn't here—he's met all the other newcomers in Castrima by now. Again, Essun is struck by a sense of failure and aimlessness, even harder now than when she lost control in front of Ykka. Again, she chastises herself for daring to think that she mattered, but she also remembers how much she mattered to her children. Three times in her life, she has lived with a man who truly cared about her, though the last time—with Jija—was built on a foundation of lies. Lerna tries to comfort her, and Essun starts to weep.

Lerna suggests that they go to Essun's apartment, and Essun manages to control her tears once more and lead Lerna away. As they walk through the comm, Essun notices strange new chambers containing objects that she doesn't understand and carvings of what seems like writing in a foreign script. As they ascend, Essun realizes that Lerna is afraid of heights, but he continues on with her.

Essun again feels like it's insane to build a comm in the middle of these ruins, as the people who lived here before were unable to survive. She can't help feeling that Castrima should have just done things as **stonelore** says to do, instead of gathering stone eaters and roggas into a single underground chamber. Finally, they make it back to Essun's chambers, where Tonkee is eating in the living room. Lerna introduces himself to her, and they are cautious with each other until Lerna mentions testing the people of Castrima for vitamin deficiencies, and then Tonkee is immediately eager to talk to him.

Essun continues to see people through the lens of Stillness society, examining their racial characteristics and factoring in how the ruling class would judge them. She herself clearly finds Lerna to be a “looker,” but she also can't help judging him by Sanzed standards. Castrima found Lerna useful as a doctor and so brought him into the real comm for its own benefit.



Essun's disparate identities come together more as the novel draws to a close, and she lets herself remember Alabaster and Innon and the brief experience of freedom that they shared on Meov. She found a different kind of love and freedom in Tirimo, but it also meant hiding her true identity as an orogene, which ultimately led to the disaster of Uche's murder. Still, Essun has internalized her society's anti-orogene sentiment and so blames herself for everything that happened to her children—simply because she dared to try to have a normal life.



Like Meov, Castrima seems to have origins outside of and older than the Sanzed empire, again showing how much of the Stillness's history has been lost or suppressed.



Despite all that she's been through, Essun still instinctively returns to the worldview that stonelore has taught her and assumes that roggas, stills, and stone eaters cannot live together peacefully. (Though this is also another example of the character seeming to have forgotten her past experiences in order to maintain the narrative.) Tonkee's insatiable curiosity remains undiminished, as she is immediately drawn to others with a scientific bent.



Hoa enters the apartment and first glares at Lerna, but then seems to visibly relax. He turns to Essun and says that there's someone here from Yumenes who wants to see her. Essun is surprised, claiming that she doesn't know anyone from Yumenes, but Hoa says that the man asked for her and wanted to "see if you can do it yet," though he didn't clarify what "it" is. Hoa says that the man is like Essun—not just a rogga, but something else. The man also said that Essun owes him, for Corundum's sake. Essun freezes and realizes that it's Alabaster. Hoa confirms this and says that Alabaster is dying.

This moment explicitly ties Essun to Syenite, confirming once more that all three protagonists are actually the same woman at different stages of her life. The fact that Essun and Alabaster have ended up here—without their child Corundum—then raises the suspense surrounding what happened to them on Meov. Hoa's vague description of Alabaster and Essun's likeness probably means that they are similar in that they're both able to connect to the obelisks.



The chapter ends with a description of a Fifth Season called the Madness Season, during which a series of eruptions blanketed the Stillness in darkness for 10 years, leading to mass starvation but also a rise in mental illness. The Sanzed Warlord Verishe used psychological warfare to conquer many comms during this time, and she was named the first Emperor when the Season ended.

This excerpt from Sanzed history shows how power often begins—through violence and oppression. The Sanzed race has since built up a society that assumes its own superiority, but its origins are in the psychological terrorism of Verishe. In the harsh world of the Stillness, violence is often necessary. But it is also used as a justification for the powerful to remain on top, as they assume that survival and strength mean that they're inherently superior.



CHAPTER 22: SYENITE, FRACTURED

The *Clalsu* has now returned safely to Meov, bringing back many valuable spoils for the island. The Meovites hold a massive party to celebrate, but Syenite has been in bed ever since she got back. She feels like they are celebrating all the mass murders she's committed, both in Allia and with the two ships. Alabaster has stayed with Syen during this time, telling her that he understands what it means to feel like this, and she believes him even though he won't give her details. Alabaster then offers her a gift: he has made her two more rings to signify how skilled and powerful she has become.

All the death that has resulted from her orogeny makes Syenite feel like she really is a dangerous monster, just as she has been taught for her entire life. The fact that she really is responsible to some degree, because of her great power, complicates the situation. Alabaster has presumably killed people in the past as well—whether by accident or on the Fulcrum's orders—so he understands what it's like to feel this guilt that has no answer.



Syenite rejects them, insisting that they are free of the Fulcrum now, and so they don't need rings or uniforms anymore. Alabaster says that one of them will eventually have to train Corundum, but Syenite suggests that they just let him learn the basics. Alabaster strokes her hair and reminds her of the story of Misalem and Shemshena, and that the orogenes will always be the Misalems of the world. Syen says she's heard the story, but Alabaster tells her that there's also more to it than the Guardians will admit.

Syenite wants to be free of the Fulcrum altogether, even its system of ranking. Alabaster hates the Fulcrum as well, but he also believes that they can never truly leave it behind, and they will eventually have to use some of its training methods on their own son. Alabaster seems resigned to the way that the world views orogenes, but he also continues to question Syen's own conceptions of history.



Alabaster says that the story took place soon after the Fifth Season called the Season of Teeth, and the emperor at the time was called Anafumeth. Syenite interrupts to ask Alabaster how he knows this, and he says that because he was so far ahead of his age group at the Fulcrum, he was given freedom to explore the library. He also learned things from an “archeomest” on his first mission away from the Fulcrum, shyly implying that they had a relationship.

Alabaster continues: during the Season of Teeth almost everyone in the Stillness starved, and the Sanzed comms started working together to attack others. This is also when they started calling other people “lesser races.” Syenite assumes that they just raided the other comms’ supplies, but Alabaster says that no one had supplies at the time—the Sanzeds took people to eat. Even after the Season ended, the Sanzeds maintained their cannibalism, raiding the comms of other races. Misalem was the only one to survive one of these raids, and his whole family was taken to be eaten. Justifiably, he wanted to kill Anafumeth in revenge.

Syenite thinks about this: Misalem’s rage was certainly justifiable, but roggas aren’t allowed the luxury of rage, and Shemshena was made a hero for killing him. Alabaster presses the two new rings into her hands, telling her that orogenes are what built the Fulcrum and made the Sanzed Empire so powerful, even if they did it as slaves who also enslaved their own kind. Orogeny is a gift, he insists. Essun says that it’s a curse instead, but she still takes the rings. Alabaster replies that it’s a gift if it makes them better and a curse if it destroys them, and he kisses Syenite on the forehead. Syenite then tells him that she thought she saw a Guardian at Allia. Alabaster is silent for a while, and then he declares that he will “tear the whole world apart” if the Guardians hurt them again.

“The world ends” three weeks after this. It is a beautiful day, and everyone in Meov decides to go up to the clifftops to enjoy it, bringing food and blankets with them. Innon brings a musical instrument, Alabaster carries Corundum, and Syen brings a terrible but enjoyable novel from the looted cargo ship. When they reach the clifftops, Syen tries to place her blanket away from everyone else, but the Meovites purposefully move closer just to tease her—she has realized that they still see her and Alabaster as something foreign and amusing and enjoy messing with them. Alabaster clearly likes all the human contact, and Syen does too, though she will never admit it to anyone.

Like Syen, Alabaster first tried to find freedom within the confines of the Fulcrum and its hierarchy. His success in his training ironically led him to knowledge that changed his worldview and made him question the Fulcrum’s system.



The Sanzed Empire’s history of itself is an altered and sanitized version of reality. They didn’t survive Fifth Seasons and gain power because they were smarter and better adapted than everyone else, as they claim—they were just more powerful and ruthless than other races, combining cannibalism with psychological warfare and racial supremacy. The fact that Syenite had no idea of the reality shows how those in power can use history and accepted knowledge to maintain their status.



Misalem represents oppressed people everywhere: they are not allowed to express rage at injustice or react to violence with violence, lest the oppressor try to claim the moral high ground. The question of whether orogeny is a gift or a curse is an important moment in the novel. On one level, it questions whether or not something like orogeny—or any other immutable characteristic—is something to be ashamed of on a personal level, and to be degraded or valued on a societal level. The book implies that, ideally, these things should be accepted as simple facts of life—they should not determine how a person is perceived and treated. Alabaster again shows his willingness to use his power for drastic upheaval in the name of justice.



The novel began with one world ending, but this is another, as things come full circle and the narrative continues to illustrate different kinds of disaster and apocalypse. To raise the suspense, the book builds up the idyllic scene here on the clifftops. It’s the first time that Syen really feels like she has a family and community, but this sense of contentment is framed by the foreshadowing that it will all be taken away soon.



Looking around at the Meovites, with Innon tossing Corundum into the air as Alabaster looks on nervously, Syenite feels like she might really love these people. Alabaster then starts reading Syen's novel and grimacing at it. Their eyes meet, and Alabaster teasingly asks her if she still dislikes him—but he also asks if she would want to have another child, maybe this time with Innon. Syen shuts this idea down, saying that she still wants her freedom. Alabaster agrees, but he says that when he really thinks about it, all that he ever wanted from life was a family like this—he never wanted to be great or to fix the world like Syen does. They lie down together on either side of Innon, and Syen drifts off into a contented sleep.

Syenite wakes to see Innon holding Corundum and looking worriedly at Alabaster, who is on his feet and tensed, clearly sensing something in the distance. Syenite sends out her own orogeny and feels nothing—but it's a nothingness that is strange, because the earth is never really still to a skilled orogene. Corundum suddenly starts to cry and struggle, and Alabaster seems to recognize what is happening and takes off running. Some of the Meovites rush up to a nearby ridge to check for danger, and Syenite and Innon join them. To the west, Syenite sees four ships approaching. As they get nearer, she sees that some of the people on the deck are wearing the burgundy uniform of the Guardians.

Syenite explains this to Innon, who tells her to give Corundum to someone else, as they will need Syen's help. Syen tries to hand Coru off to another woman—but when she does, the baby starts screaming and kicking, and the entire island shakes with his tantrum. Syen takes Coru back—he immediately calms—and runs to catch up with Innon again, thinking that this is all her fault and that everything that she touches inevitably dies. Today, Syen had put on her six rings to show Alabaster her appreciation, and she now resolves to use whatever new power she has to defend her home from the Guardians.

Syenite reaches the comm level, where everyone is arming themselves and loading up their boats. She makes her way to the *Clalsu* and suddenly feels a pulse of incredibly powerful orogeny. Then, a wall of rock rises up out of the sea, sealing off the harbor so that none of the ships can leave. This is obviously Alabaster's doing, and Syen sees an amethyst **obelisk** approaching in the distance, which he must be using to wield all this power. Innon and Syen feel that he is being overprotective, though, and that they should be able to sail out to meet the enemy.

This is the last real moment of contentment and feeling of freedom that Syenite experiences (in her identity as Syenite, before she becomes Essun). She is free from the Fulcrum and has a child and a family, but she also has her own personal independence because of the communal parenting in Meov. Tragically, the very existence of Essun's storyline shows that this life cannot last.



The nothingness that Syenite feels is the negation of her orogeny that accompanies the presence of Guardians, as her sense of peace and freedom is broken by the inevitable hand of the social hierarchy. Those in power will never allow those who threaten the established order to live peacefully. Alabaster and Syenite pose no danger to the Fulcrum or the Guardians anymore, but they are condemned to die anyway.



Corundum's orogenic power is so great that he must be kept calm, or else he might destroy the entire island—it is true that orogenic power can be dangerous. Syenite again blames herself for bringing death to those around her—and tragically, she's partly right. The Guardians probably never would have bothered Meov if they hadn't figured out that she and Alabaster were there. Syenite has been trained by the Fulcrum and even wears the rings of her Fulcrum ranking today, but now she vows to use all that power and skill to fight the oppressive system that created her.



*Alabaster raises the wall of rock to keep the Guardians out, but also so that the *Clalsu* cannot sail out and fight them at sea. He is trying to protect everyone in Meov, but at the same time, he's taking away their freedom to act as they see fit in response to this threat.*



With his orogeny Innon breaks down a section of Alabaster's wall, but more rock immediately replaces it. Meanwhile Syenite has to carry Corundum and also control all of the waves being created by these eruptions from the seafloor. She has learned from Innon to draw power even from the ocean, and to likewise manipulate the minerals and sediment in the water itself. At last, they see Alabaster high on the cliff top, using both the **obelisk's** power and the life within the icy torus surrounding him. Syenite worries about him, remembering his emotional breakdowns of the past, and she gives Corundum to Innon and hurries up to find Alabaster.

As she gets higher, Syenite can see that one of the four ships has boulders piled on its deck and is now sinking—Alabaster must have been dropping rocks onto it. Syenite tries to destroy one of the other ships with a spike of stone like she used to break the attack ship during their raid, but she finds that her orogeny cannot get too close, as there must be a Guardian on this ship as well. That's why Alabaster has had to hurl rocks from a distance, she realizes. Syenite resolves to find her own way around this problem. She's still too cautious to use the **obelisk** without Alabaster's help, but she can draw strength from the rock of Meov itself.

Getting on her hands and knees and focusing the torus of her orogeny, Syenite sends a thin line of ice down into the rock, splitting it just as one of the ships passes by. A massive column of rock breaks off from the cliff and lands directly on the Guardians' ship, breaking it apart. Syen sees a burgundy uniform in the water and curses the Guardian, grinning to herself. Then she gets up and continues on toward Alabaster. As she gets nearer, however, something suddenly explodes all around him—Syenite realizes that it's a cannon, a new invention from the Equatorials. She runs forward through the smoke.

Syenite reaches Alabaster and can tell that he's hurt. She lingers at the edge of his torus for a moment, worried that he'll ice her if he doesn't know she's there, but then rushes forward. As she crouches beside him, he asks her to promise that she won't let the Guardians take Corundum. Syenite is confused, as Alabaster seems battered but relatively unhurt. Only then does she see what's happening—he is struggling, but his hands and legs are being drawn down into the earth. Syenite realizes that the stone eater Antimony must be dragging him down.

Because of his upbringing and life on the island, even the untrained Innon has discovered a way of using orogeny—seizing the power of the ocean—that is unfamiliar to Syenite, again showing that the Fulcrum way is limited in its scope. Syenite knows that Alabaster is still emotionally fragile, and that fact combined with his incredible orogenic power makes him potentially dangerous even to those he's trying to protect.



The Guardians' ability to negate orogeny makes them a difficult foe to fight, but Alabaster's orogeny is powerful and focused enough—and he is determined and creative enough—that he is able to work around even this obstacle. Syenite knows she doesn't have the strength yet to use an unbroken obelisk, so she reigns in her ambitions even as she's willing to try anything to protect her home.



The book again creates an intense, cinematic action scene that keeps the reader on their toes. Syenite uses all her resourcefulness and strength to attack the Guardians, and she takes a fierce pleasure in fighting back against those who she was once taught to submit to. Unfortunately, the Guardians have technology and resources on their side as well, maintaining and increasing their power through superior military strength.



Alabaster is strong enough to kill thousands of people at once, but he is also still a human being that can be wounded by weapons. Just as Antimony drew Alabaster and Syenite into the earth when Allia was destroyed, the stone eater again takes Alabaster when his life is in danger. The difference is that now he's actively resisting her—he wants to stay and keep fighting for his family. Antimony seems to prioritize his physical safety over all else, however—she doesn't care about the same things that he cares about.



Syenite grabs Alabaster and tries to pull him up, cursing the stone eater and sending her orogeny down into the earth, but she is unable to fight the heaviness of the mysterious thing she encounters there. Still struggling, Alabaster again begs Syenite to promise that she won't let the Guardians take Corundum, as they both know that he will be mutilated and made into a node maintainer. Now sobbing and cursing, Syenite promises him, and then she sees Antimony's hand emerge from the ground and gently pull Alabaster down until he has entirely disappeared. Syenite kneels weeping over the rock.

Suddenly Syenite feels the presence of Guardians nearby, startling her from her sorrow. She looks back over the harbor and sees that the Guardians must have an orogene with them, as ice is now spreading across the ocean's surface, stopping the ship with boulders on its deck from sinking. Clearly the orogene is drawing in a huge amount of power, and then Syen realizes what they mean to do—bring down Alabaster's wall around the harbor. She can sense the rogga's attack on the wall as she runs back down to the docks where the *Clalsu* and Innon are still there, getting ready to sail.

As Syenite reaches Innon and Corundum on the deck of the *Clalsu*, a section of Alabaster's wall finally breaks apart. Innon tells Syen that they're going to sail out and fight so that the rest of the Meovites can evacuate. As soon as the wall breaks, a Guardian ship enters, firing its cannons at the *Clalsu*. The first shot misses, but another blast strikes the ship. As the enemy craft approaches, Syenite sees three Guardians and one Fulcrum orogene on its deck. Then a third cannon strikes the *Clalsu*, breaking its mast, which falls onto the deck and starts to drag the ship down while also separating Syen from Innon and Coru. The Guardians' ship approaches and Syen tries to use her orogeny against it, but she feels her power negated by the Guardians' nearness.

The Guardians' troops—clearly professional soldiers—start boarding the *Clalsu* and murdering everyone aboard. Surrounded by screaming and death, Syenite goes belowdecks and finally finds Innon and Corundum in the captain's cabin. Innon tells her that he has to go back up and fight. Suddenly a shirtless man—a Guardian—appears behind him and grabs Innon's head, grinning. Syenite can then feel as Innon's orogeny, along with everything about him that makes him the person she loves, is turned evil and forced inward upon himself. In the end, Innon is just a pile on the floor, and the Guardian stands over it, covered in blood and still smiling.

Alabaster and Syen face the tragic situation of a parent whose child now risks becoming enslaved. They both know that if the Guardians are able to get their hands on Corundum, then he will be turned into a node maintainer—a fate that is arguably worse than death. And now that Alabaster has disappeared, Syenite may have to make that choice—slavery or death for Corundum—alone.



The Fulcrum orogene fighting along with the Guardians is another example of the oppressed working alongside their oppressors, trying to improve their personal situations by excelling within the very system that dehumanizes them. With Alabaster now gone, Meov has lost its greatest defender, but the rest of the Meovites now have a chance to fight as they see fit.



The Guardians' attack on Meov builds up to the climax of the novel, as here the action comes to a head in another dramatic series of events. The Guardians have superior technology and manpower, and use their military advantage without mercy.



In this horrifying scene, Innon dies in the same way that Alabaster's old mentor and lover Hessionite did at the Fulcrum. The Guardian acts like the Fulcrum itself—taking all of Innon's freedom and individuality and making it something evil that destroys him. The Guardians' constant smiling is especially terrifying in a context like this. The oregenes have been taught to see themselves as monsters at the Fulcrum, but these moments make clear that it is the Guardians who are monsters.



Syenite then hears a familiar voice, and Schaffa appears. She grabs Corundum and backs away as he approaches. Schaffa sees the baby and asks if it's Alabaster's, and then he asks where Alabaster himself is. Instinctively answering whatever Schaffa asks, Syen tells him that a stone eater took Alabaster away. Schaffa looks surprised to hear this, but he quickly recovers, starts smiling again, and says that Alabaster's child will be a "more than worthwhile replacement." Syenite feels once more like the little girl leaving Palela, with no one to trust but this man "whose love comes wrapped in pain."

Corundum is wailing now, and Syenite starts to say "no" over and over again, but Schaffa reminds her that she is never to say no to him. Moments seem to flash by, as Syen thinks of Innon and Alabaster at their last moments. She puts her hand over Corundum's mouth and nose, vowing to keep him safe from a life of slavery and suffering. Schaffa tries to speak to her and Syenite explodes, cursing at him, and then she "cracks." Feeling that it's better for them all to die than to live as slaves, she reaches up to the amethyst **obelisk**, which is still hovering above as if waiting for this moment to arrive. In a single moment, she disappears into its crystal world. As Schaffa leaps toward her, her own hand presses down over Coru's face, and then she "tears the world apart."

The narrator remarks that this is the moment that one of the islands off the coast of the Stillness dies, but that some of its inhabitants will survive. The amethyst **obelisk** sends out a pulse of power and massive spines of rock surge up from the ocean floor, piercing all the ships outside Meov and extending in a line, like a spined land bridge, all the way to the mainland of the Stillness. When the ocean finally calms from this eruption of rock, there is a woman who is alive and a child who is dead. The woman will join other survivors and make her way back to the Stillness, the narrator says, where she will wander for years.

This is the point at which the narrator finds this woman, for many of his kind are drawn to the pulse from the **obelisk** and the person who caused it. He was the first to find her, and he fought off the others. He watched her join a comm called Tirimo and guarded her until she finally left, 10 years later. Referring to the woman now in the second-person, he says that she is special, and that when he finally met her, he introduced himself as Hoa.

Syenite was happy to fight the other Guardians, but she still feels a deep connection and obligation to Schaffa because of their history together. Everything that she has learned and experienced suddenly abandons her at the sound of his voice, as she seems to become Damaya again, recognizing that her love for Schaffa is wrong but loving him all the same. There is an aspect of her relationship to Schaffa that is akin to that of a child to an abusive parent.



*This passage is the climax of the novel, as Syen makes the choice to kill her own child rather than let him live as a slave. This moment is perhaps a nod to Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, in which a formerly enslaved woman makes a similar decision to kill her child, herself based on the real-life example of Margaret Garner in the mid-1800s. At the same time that Syenite makes this devastating choice, she also finally turns against Schaffa and thus the last remnant of the abusive and oppressive system that she has tacitly accepted up until now, acknowledging that "this is not right" and finally taking drastic action to fight against this injustice. While this choice is tragically relevant to the real world, the book also uses the fantastical elements to illustrate the deep trauma and suffering that Syen is experiencing at this moment. Her personal world has ended, but because of her orogeny and sudden decision to connect to the obelisk, she tears the physical world apart as well.*



As he did in the first chapter, the narrator here shifts from a figurative personal apocalypse to a more literal, large-scale one. Syenite has just been forced to make the most horrifying decision that any parent could imagine, and her response to this can only be described on a seismic scale. Notably, after this event, the protagonist is no longer referred to as Syenite, but merely a nameless woman wandering alone—someone who will eventually take on the new identity of Essun.



Hoa finally reveals himself as the novel's narrator, suggesting that he is personally telling this story to Essun herself. Why or when Hoa is telling this story about Essun to Essun is not revealed until the end of the Broken Earth trilogy, but the overarching idea is that Hoa is essentially explaining the different aspects of Essun's own identity and history to her. The narrator has always been his own character with his own unique voice, but now there is a familiar face behind that voice as well—though his long-term goals are left entirely unclear.



CHAPTER 23: YOU'RE ALL YOU NEED

Essun and Lerna make their way down to Castrima's infirmary, but at the door, Essun silently warns Lerna to stay back, and she enters alone. First, she sees the stone eater Antimony, who looks exactly the same as she did when Essun saw her 12 years before. Antimony says to come no closer, but Essun then realizes that she is talking to Hoa, who has followed her. The two stone eaters glare at each other and then declare themselves only interested in their respective humans: Antimony with Alabaster, and Hoa with Essun. Essun shakes her head and keeps walking. Atop a pile of cushions and blankets, she sees Alabaster.

Alabaster greets her as Syenite, and she replies that her name is Essun now. Alabaster says that he always knew she had survived, but he had his own problems and his own work to do before he could find her. He lifts his arm, and Essun sees that much of his body is now gone—it's turned to stone, and that stone has been broken off, seemingly gnawed by teeth. Essun thinks of what she saw when Hoa and the stone eater bared their diamond teeth at each other, and she looks over at Antimony, realizing now what kind of stone the "stone eaters" like to eat.

Alabaster asks about Essun's life, and she says that after Meov she needed to become a different person. Alabaster asks if she stayed free, and Essun says that she did, though she knows that she had to hide her true self to do it. Briefly she tries to explain Jija, Uche, and Nassun, but her words trail off. Finally, Alabaster tells her that he can understand why she killed Corundum, but he can't forgive her for doing it.

Essun tells Alabaster that he can kill her, but he has to wait until she kills her husband first. Alabaster says he doesn't want to kill her, and he couldn't even if he wanted to. Then he asks her if she can use the **obelisks** now; he knows she did it at Allia and Meov, but he wonders if she can do it at will by now. Essun doesn't understand, and then she sees something next to Alabaster's bed: it looks like an enormous knife made of crystal, and as Essun stares at it, she feels herself start to be drawn into a world of light, just as she was with the obelisks. Alabaster smiles and says that this one, the "spinel," is his now. He asks if Essun has made any of the obelisks her own.

The internal quarrels among the stone eaters remain mysterious even as the novel closes, but they will be further explored later in the Broken Earth trilogy. Jemisin purposefully places this moment of Essun and Alabaster's reunion immediately after the traumatic scene of their separation on Meov, even though years have passed in the meantime. All that the two characters have experienced now divides them, but the fact remains that the last time they saw each other was during the Guardian attack, facing the dilemma of how to best protect their child.



Essun still clings to her current identity—as stated before, it is the only identity that is also Nassun's mother—and doesn't let Alabaster call her "Syenite" for this reason. For his part, however, Alabaster has drastically changed in the physical sense. The gnawed-away stone of his body makes the stone eaters suddenly seem much more sinister than they were previously.



The nature of freedom for orogenes in this society is still blurry and complex. In her identity as Essun, the protagonist stayed free of the Fulcrum and even lived a relatively normal life with a normal family, but she was also forced to hide her true identity and to make her children hide their own. There is no redemption or peace in Corundum's death, and Alabaster acknowledges that—he understands and even may intellectually with the choices that led to Corundum's death, but he cannot forgive either Essun or himself for the actual fact of the death of their child. Most of all, he rages at the world that forced such a choice to be made in the first place.



Spinel is a kind of crystal, implying that Alabaster has somehow made an obelisk shrink down and answer to his own personal command. Essun hasn't been interested in controlling the obelisks ever since Meov, but clearly Alabaster—like Tonkee—considers her connection to them of the utmost importance. Alabaster has sacrificed his orogeny and even his personal bitterness for the sake of something larger, which he now tries to explain to Essun.



Essun now realizes that Alabaster is the one who tore the continent in half and started the Fifth Season. Alabaster admits that he did, using the **obelisks** and also all the node maintainers across the Stillness, who are now at peace. He says that he needs Essun's help next, though, and she asks if she is supposed to help him fix the damage. Calling her Damaya, Syenite, and Essun, Alabaster tells her no—what he wants is for her to make things worse. He leans forward and asks Essun if she has ever heard of something called the moon.

Alabaster is finally revealed to be the unnamed man from the novel's beginning, who broke the continent in two and began the new Fifth Season. In that scene when he reached upward, "for power," he was drawing strength from the obelisks. While initially his destruction of the continent might have seemed monstrous, everything that he and Essun—who is now named fully, with all her identities combined into one complex person—have seen and experienced better justifies (or at least explains) his action. As he has stated before, in a truly corrupt world, sometimes the only reasonable agent of change is to entirely destroy it and start over from scratch. The novel doesn't wholly support or condemn this idea yet, however. Alabaster ends the book on the cliffhanger here, implying that there is more to his plan than just destruction. His reference to the "moon" suggests a geologic body more massive than any on earth, and therefore a tool or weapon that an immensely powerful oregonite might be able to use. The fact that characters in the stillness haven't heard of the moon even further makes clear the wrongness of the current situation in the Stillness—the moon is not only missing but forgotten!—which in turn harkens back to the story of Father Earth and what he lost.



APPENDIX 1: A CATALOG OF FIFTH SEASONS THAT HAVE BEEN RECORDED...

This appendix describes the Stillness's past Fifth Seasons. Most recent is the Choking Season, caused by a volcanic eruption. Before that was the Acid Season, caused by an earthquake and tsunamis, then the Boiling Season, the result of an underwater eruption. The Breathless Season was caused by human activity, as a mining accident resulted in underground fires and an eruption.

The Season of Teeth, also caused by an earthquake and eruption, took place 900 years after the previous Fifth Season, so most communities were unprepared for it. The Fungus Season involved eruptions resulting in a fungal bloom that wiped out a staple crop. In the Madness Season, an eruption blotted out the sun for ten years, leading to increases in mental illness. During this time, the Warlord Verishe used psychological warfare to conquer many comms and named herself Emperor when the sun returned. This was the official founding of Sanze.

Before the Sanzed Empire, the Fifth Seasons were not as well-documented, and many of their causes are unknown. The appendix names these as the Wandering Season, the Season of Changed Wind, the Heavy Metal Season, the Season of Yellow Seas, and the Twin Season.

This appendix maintains the voice of official Sanzed history, relating past Fifth Seasons and their general causes—almost all of them seismic in nature. Here, one results from the earth's volatility and another from human activity.



This passage repeats the ending of Chapter 21, describing how the Sanzed Empire began. The Sanzed race didn't attain power because they were uniquely intelligent or moral—they were just more ruthless and physically strong than other races. What was initially military dominance is then passed down over the generations as racial superiority and a supposedly natural hierarchy.



Before Sanze, history is obscured, though other more advanced civilizations have clearly risen and fallen in the history of the Stillness, as the existence of the ruins and the obelisks show. This appendix is written in the style of official Sanzed history, however, so these older Seasons become the stuff of legend rather than fact.





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