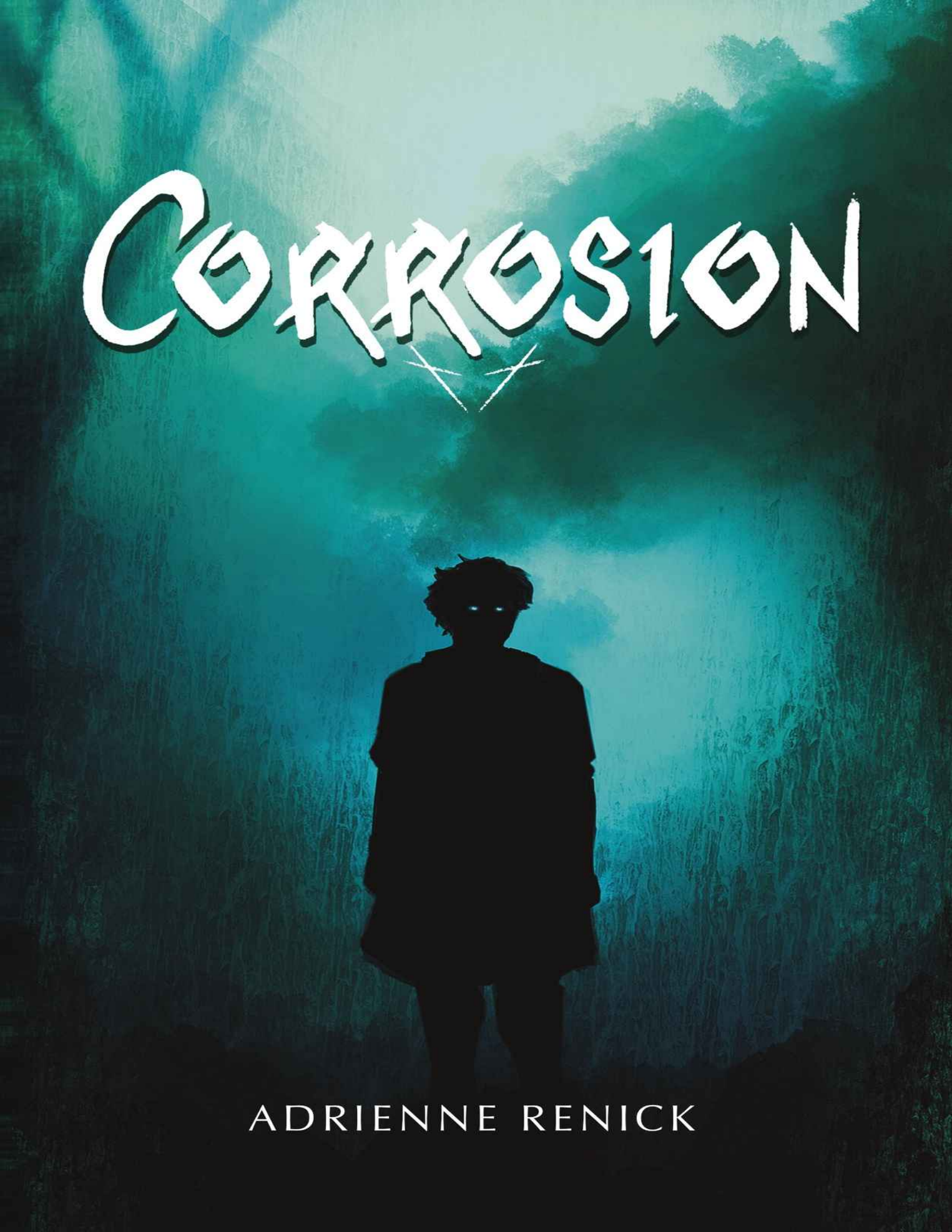

CORROSION
ADRIENNE RENICK

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Eli:
To the years you spent by my side,
painting me with wings before I knew I had any.

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1

FAREWELL

I wake to restless voices. Below my room, Mother and Father bicker in whispers, their tones rising and falling with each breath. Rubbing my eyes, I roll onto my side and scratch the stubble on my jaw. The floor groans as my weight shifts.

I strain to listen.

It isn't anger that carries their words. Worry darkens Father's voice, and anguish fills Mother's. With slow blinks, I stare through the darkness of my loft. My eyes fall on the stale morning light creeping from behind thick curtains.

I overhear Mother. "We have to go as soon as we can, Sul."

Father coughs, his lungs expelling a bout of the incense Mother likes to burn. "The farm will suffer. Jen and Chol—"

"Will be fine on their own," Mother chides. "Chol has proven himself again and again this season. Give him a chance."

Silence washes over our house, and tension knots its way through my shoulders as I wait for more insight. I don't realize how far over the edge of my bed I'm leaning until I knock something onto the floor. Before I can catch it, it lands with a *clang* and rolls out of reach.

The squeak of chairs breaks my focus, and I flatten myself onto my back as Father's footsteps rumble through the house. The familiar squeal of the loft ladder resounds, growing closer until I feel him peering across the room toward my bed.

I clench my eyes shut and wait for the feeling to go away. Just as I assume Father has retreated downstairs, his deep, rusty voice spills through the unnerving quiet. "How much did you hear?"

Defeated, I force myself upright and scratch my hair, grimacing as my fingers tangle in the black waves. I shrug. "Where are you going?"

Father looks down from his perch on the ladder—I guess Mother is standing at the bottom. “Your grandfather has died,” he says without so much as a note of remorse.

There’s a pang in my chest. The kind that swallows your heart and forces it into your stomach, but only because of the word “*died*.” I didn’t know my grandfather well; with the farm, there was never much time to visit. The news of his death feels like anything else you might hear in a day. *Inevitable. Predictable.*

I feel worse about not feeling anything, but the wave of sorrow doesn’t hit until I come down from the loft.

Mother’s dark eyes are silken with teary remnants, but she’s dried them on her sleeve long before she knew she would face me. Still, I can see the pain written in her ageless face. Somewhere between receiving news of her father’s passing and my waking up, she’s put on a dark robe embroidered with the golden patterns of Northern peafowl. Grandfather gave it to her a few years before, but she’d never worn it for fear of ruining the delicate fabric. Now, it’s wrapped tight around her shoulders like a final, stolen embrace.

My heart sinks again, and I hug her. A brief sob convulses through her as she rests her face against my shoulder, and then she steps back. Her small, pale hand brushes my cheek as if I’m the one crying. “You have his eyes,” she tells me.

“Then you’ll see him every day.” It feels awkward to say, but poetic enough that it could be something Mother told me. She gives me a soft smile, struggling to stifle tears.

Father clears his throat. We turn to find him leaning against the doorframe, burly arms crossed. “Where’s your sister?” He nods to me, and I shrug. I hadn’t thought anything of it until now, but she hadn’t been in her bed across from mine.

“She must have been up early,” Mother says. “You don’t think she heard the messenger, do you?”

Father shakes his head, reading his wife’s concern. “Jen is your child.”

Mother cocks her head, almost in challenge.

“Tender in heart, but strong in spirit,” he offers, breaking his stance. “Chol, go find her.”

“What about Grandfather?” I ask, wondering what their argument had been about.

Although I’m looking at Mother, she replies with nothing more than a morose expression before motioning to Father. He brushes his hands against his pants and grunts. “We need you here. This fire season has been especially hard, and I need you to see it through to the end. If any rot shows up before the shifting, we could lose too many crops.”

As if to answer the question on my face, he goes on. “We won’t be back by then, so I’m leaving you in charge. Think of it as... your rite into manhood.” He seems to juggle those last words.

I don’t know what it is about the way Father speaks, but his voice sends something up my spine and has me squaring my shoulders. I give a firm nod. What should be a weight on my shoulders feels more like wings on my feet, and I try not to look too excited.

This is my chance to prove myself. Not only as a worthy farmer, but as *Chol Sul*.

Mother interrupts my thoughts. “Find Jen. You may give her the news, but please tell her I want to speak with her.”

I nod, worried that anything I might say will betray me. I want Father to know I won’t let him down; not think he’s just handed his entire life’s work to a child.

I bind my sandals to my feet and hurry out the door. Fresh air whips through my choppy hair, and I take a deep breath, drinking in the world with new purpose.

From our front porch, I can see the whole of the valley below us. Already, the sun is climbing the peaks of the western Shaorok mountains, turning them from jade to gold. Impenetrable jungle borders most of our farm, split only by our very own Shaorok mountain ridge—Aéha, Father calls it—*heart of the sky*. Our fields lie in Aéha’s shadow, a basin of green tucked into the jungle.

I head down the stone path leading from our door. It dips through a grassy knoll before turning into steps that lead to the neatly stacked farm Father has kept his whole life. Rows of green carve through the fields in lazy serpentines. I remember running down the lines as a child, a bucket of water in my hands as Jen and I made games of what little work we had. Now, I find myself measuring the time it will take me to inspect each row.

Father's crops yield some of the largest profits around when we take them to market. His buyers always say things like, *'Have you tried one of Sul's vegetables? I hear it gives you the strength of a bear.'*

More than an exaggeration, but we've never lost a customer.

Father's secret lies beneath the soil—most farmers would waste their time reworking the dirt before planting, but every Sul heir knows that needless tilling is the opposite of what our plants need to flourish. Our soil is rich with the same kor that feeds the jungle, vibrant veins of our planet's light that branch into everything: riverbeds, forests, and mountains alike. To plow a field the wrong way before planting could set our land's fertility back a whole generation.

I mull over the endless barrage of instructions Father has given me over the years as I weave my way downhill. Luckily, all I have to worry about is preparing for harvest. The crops are almost at full height, just over my head as I pass green and golden stalks. I won't have to do much more than water the abundance of dry spots.

I'm grateful for what little shade is offered this fire morning. Sweat is already dripping down the back of my shirt, so I stick to what shade I can: the shadows cast by our Ankori guardians, enormous creatures of rock said to have once roamed Aér before falling asleep for good. Though they stand like us, they don't look quite like us. They have no faces, and their only features are the kor veins that grow along their stone torsos and dome-shaped heads.

We have six Ankori stationed around our farm. Father says they were here long before our ancestors established themselves, and Mother says they were once great protectors, *alive*. Why they would want to protect us, I'm not sure.

The legends are easy to believe as I pause to shelter beneath one as large as our house. As though it was grown from a seed, moss-covered kor veins jut up its stone legs and across its whole frame in angled grooves. Each Ankori touches the ground, but their appendages are disjointed, connected only by thin strands of glowing kor that lead to an ambient, fire-gold light behind their stone façades. Our guardians feel like they could spring to life at any moment, but I know better.

Shaking my head, I set my sights on the rock shed opposite the fields. It stands out against Aéha's dark angles, its bright, red roof angling upward.

The shed’s walls are made of lacquered timber from the jungle, a graceful frame in comparison to the rickety wooden door Father and I installed two fire seasons ago. One of the hinges has already fallen off, and I huff, wondering if anyone will ever bring themselves to fix it. Grunting, I heave the door open and slip inside, finding myself in the dark.

The familiar wall of equipment greets me. Muddied plows and rusted ironware rest in their places, waiting to break soil. The place looks and smells like dirt, and I swat the air as a cloud of dust stirs from the door opening.

A draft through the shed betrays the back wall's fortitude. I follow the breeze to the corner and run my hand across the splintered wood paneling.

When we were children, Father brought Jen and me to the rock shed. At first, we’d assumed it was for another boring lesson about farm equipment, but then he had told us to place our hand on the third panel from the right wall.

As it turned out, the shed was as useful as it was secretive. Just behind the third panel is a tunnel our ancestors carved through the mountainside. It leads downward and two miles south, into the forests that wrap around our land. I had been terrified of the darkness that clustered below, but Jen had faced it with bravery. When she convinced me to explore it a few moons later, we discovered a small chamber within.

Although her visits are rare, I know she’s gone to her hidden pocket of the world where the low ceiling can hold her together.

I realize this is the first time I’ve gone through the tunnel alone. Clearing my throat, I shake off my nerves. If Father wants to put me in charge of the farm, I can walk down a dark tunnel.

By the dim light of a swaying lantern, I head into the corridor. My heart beats loud, and I pay close attention to my footing. Every now and then, a gold streak of kor runs along the walls, splaying into angular spirals before vanishing back into the rocks.

I reach for the polished stone necklace resting against my collarbone. The roughness of the twine helps me focus on reality, and the kor woven through the pendant matches the patterns in the walls. I’m reminded that this tunnel is as much a part of home as the fields above.

It doesn’t take long to find the entrance I am looking for. The kor illuminates the tunnel brighter than my lantern can, and I follow its twisting

branches into a smaller tunnel. The stone floor slants up beneath my feet, and then I emerge from a hole in the ground.

The sky is a ceiling of rocks, bursting with golden kor veins. They pulse, glimmering like comets blurring across the night. A deep pool of clear water laps against a gravel shore, and in this lifeless room, I see Jen.

She spots me too, and she kicks her bare feet through the gravel beach, creating a cacophony of echoes through the stone room. The water glows with the vibrancy of kor, creating thousands of ripples as pebbles shatter the surface.

“I’m not going back,” Jen says, flopping onto her back. Her lantern is next to her head, and its flame has gone out.

“Not without matches,” I say, approaching her side. She stares up at me and lets out a dramatic sigh. Her dark eyes are puffy, and her tan face has turned a gross shade of red. When she reaches up to smear something away from her nose, I realize she’s been crying.

Squatting, I rest a hand on her shoulder. “Why are you crying? We didn’t know him that well.”

Jen’s expression grows jagged as she glares straight at me. “He was *family*.” She wriggles out from under my hand. “Can you just leave me alone?”

I settle in the gravel and pick up a smooth stone. I concentrate on its shape, pretending it’s the most interesting thing in the world.

Jen sits upright, and I watch as bits of crushed gravel fall from her long hair. She shakes the remnants out and then sets to work braiding it with muddy fingers. The tangles are mesmerizing, and I’m caught up in the braid until she reaches the end and has nothing to tie it with.

I think about giving her the twine from my necklace, but she has the same stone around her neck. She can do it herself if it matters that much.

But it doesn’t. Her shoulders fall forward as her dark hair unravels, and she rakes her fingers across the rocky beach. “I didn’t know him, but he was part of who I am.”

“What are you talking about?” I try not to sound annoyed. It doesn’t translate.

Jen rolls her eyes and scoots away from me to find her sandals. “He was our *grandfather*, Chol. I don’t know how else to get that through your thick skull.”

I huff. “Don’t overreact. We’ve seen him maybe once—twice—since we were little.”

“Do you remember how he would tell us stories? He would always wait until you’d almost nodded off, and then he’d raise his voice so loud it scared you awake.” She lets out a soft laugh.

I grunt. “He talked so-o-o slow. I don’t even remember his stories.”

The corners of her lips smooth out, not quite sad, not quite satisfied. Annoyed, if anything. We take a moment to stare across the water—if Jen wants me to be silent, I’ll be silent before she figures out a way to bury my body in this cavern.

She slouches further forward, brushing at dried tear remnants around her dark eyes. “You’re still here,” she says.

I reach for her lantern, tipping its wick toward mine and relighting it. “Mother wants to talk to you.”

“What about?” Jen doesn’t meet my eyes.

“I don’t know, but they’re leaving soon. Don’t make them wait.”

This touches a nerve. She erupts from the ground, gravel raining from her after leaving impressions all over her skin. She snatches her lantern and heads toward the tunnel.

I’m not fully awake. I sigh and dust myself off, following her through the tunnel. Jen takes off running, and I no longer care. I have to act my age, especially with the task at hand. I have three moons until the shifting, with or without her help.

I’m not sure what they talk about. Whatever the exchange, both Mother and Jen are left in tears, hugging and crying. I’m torn between assessing the work that needs to be done or helping Father load the wagon with his and Mother’s things. I don’t get to choose before Father waves me over, stroking his beard as he scans the crates he is packing.

“You remember what must be done?” Father asks as I approach.

“Yes, sir. Check the soil and make sure there are no issues. Leave veins of kor alone so they can feed the crops.”

“Good.” Father doesn’t seem as proud as I assumed he would be. He barely glances at me, ignoring how lost I look as I watch him return to the house to retrieve the last of their things.

I feel Mother's hand on my shoulder. "He does love you," she says like she's reading my thoughts. "He deals with crops. Not emotions."

"I used to hate him," I say, and my throat clenches. For the first time in several seasons I can remember, tears burn hot in my eyes. "I do everything he asks, and he never acknowledges it. How am I supposed to continue our legacy if I don't know if what I'm doing is right?"

Mother's hand stiffens, and then she places both on my shoulders. She ruffles my unkempt hair. "He *is* proud of you, Chol. His worries sound selfish, but he cares. I promise."

I hang my head.

"If you weren't doing something right," she insists, "you would know."

I can't look at Mother anymore. She has a way of working the darkness out of people, but I'm not ready to let go of mine. I step back, and she folds her hands, studying my face.

Father is finished loading the wagon. His eyes are black with scrutiny as he squints at me and Jen, and I watch a reluctant sigh overwhelm his body before his shoulders relax. "Let's go, Saia."

Mother swats at her skirts and casts a forlorn look at our house. For a moment, I borrow her eyes and take a glance. I've looked at this house every day since I could first remember, and I've never understood what was so special about it until now.

Clay shingles spill down the roof, framing walls made of stone and a thousand memories. I know Mother hasn't lived here her whole life, but Father has, Jen has, and I have. It wasn't handed to her, and she didn't earn it. This is the place she determined to be her home, and she actually wants to return.

This is the life she chose. One day, I will have to choose mine. Father wants me to carry on the legacy of our ancestors, but I'm not convinced I want to. Maybe this is how I will find out.

This whole morning has been one long goodbye, so our farewells are swift.

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2

RUMOR

Even though Jen and I make the most noise of anyone in the family, without Mother and Father, the house is silent. The fireplace rolls with flames as Jen makes tea. The windows and front door are open wide. It makes no difference in the temperature.

I fan myself with the broad tea leaves resting on the table, and Jen reprimands me with one look. She takes them from me and sticks out her tongue before tossing them into the boiling water.

Mint flavors the air, pushing the remnants of Mother's incense out. I came inside to take a break from the heat, but the room is boiling in rhythm with the kettle. Sweat dribbles from my forehead to the tip of my nose, creating dark circles on the wood of the table.

"Who drinks tea when it's this hot?"

Jen points her ladle toward me. "People who need to relax."

"You really know how to calm things down," I tease, and she goes back to her kettle.

Before long, Jen has poured herself a cup, and then she pours me one, too. I don't know why she likes it. I take a short drink, and the bitter flavor shocks my tongue. Jen laughs as I sputter. "Take a longer sip," she tells me, and I try. This time, the flavor spills through my mouth, the minty taste cooling my senses in a way no heated liquid should ever be capable of.

Between sips that leave my tongue dryer than sand, I watch Jen's face. She stares into her tea, shoulders sagging as her lips twitch.

"What?" I ask.

She raises an eyebrow, a familiar twinkle of mischief glimmering in her eye. "You know how Mother makes this sometimes?"

I shrug.

Jen clicks her tongue and whips around the table, taking a dramatic whiff of the stewing leaves at the base of the kettle. "I just knew something

was always about to happen. Guests would come over, or Father had made a great sale, or we were about to go to school for the season. It always lines up."

My eyes roll before I can catch them. Mother always makes tea before a special occasion, sure. I never drink it unless Jen pulls me from the fields or the loft and forces me to. And no matter how many times I say "no," a cup always ends up in my hands.

It's always annoying. This time, it's borderline enraging. She knows I have a lot of work with our parents both gone—and a tea break takes longer than I have time to accommodate.

I must be making a distasteful expression. Jen's face twists as spitefully as I feel.

"What happened to us?" she asks, and the tightness in the room disperses. "Ever since last year, you've been cold. Like I'm not important anymore."

The tea turns to swill in my mouth, but I swallow anyway. I set down my cup with a clink and watch the stained water ripple. "That's not true," I say. I mean it, but the words aren't on my side. "I just don't have enough time for this."

Jen sulks, hair piling up on the table as she leans forward. "You used to be my best friend. We could talk about anything, and now you're so full of yourself you don't even care that I exist."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I mean you started acting all high and mighty the moment you hit eighteen. You don't talk to me anymore, and you don't listen to anything I want to talk about. And even *now*? I'm supposed to help with the farm too, but you barely let me have any say in it. Just because Father put you in charge—"

"I grew up, Jen." I can't let her batter me like this. "I have to start building my own life, now. It has nothing to do with you."

She sours, and her stare traps me. "Growing up isn't a free pass to be the worst person ever."

Before I can stop her, she heads for the door. That's how all of our conversations have been ending as of late. All I can do is follow.

Jen pours into the heat of the afternoon, storming across the fields and ignorant of what she might trample. I chase with my eyes. From a distance,

I can see her heading toward her favorite of our Ankori guardians: the one standing forty feet tall. After a couple of centuries of standing still, its enormous limbs are cluttered with vines and moss. She scales its legs first, her weight ripping some of the tangles away from its stone formation. Golden veins of kor shine through each patch that falls apart. At last, she reaches its shoulder and leans back against its dome-shaped head. If it had eyes, I'm sure it would be rolling them.

When we were smaller, we loved to play at the Ankori's feet, imagining they'd come back to life just as Mother told us they once were. Now, all they're good for is being glorified perches for my sister to mope on.

I make my way to the foot of her chosen Ankori. Jen named it "Pebble," I remember. Fitting, given it's the tallest of the six. When I look up, Jen appears to be squeezing her fingers together, like she's sizing me up now that she's forty feet high.

"It would be the best moment of my whole life," she calls down, "if Pebble woke up and stepped on you."

Part of me wants to snap back at her, but that would be childish. I glare at her and clench my jaw. "What were you saying about helping with the farm work?"

Crossing her arms, Jen peers back over the edge of Pebble's shoulder. "I'd rather not—that's your job, anyway."

It would be the best moment of *my* life if Pebble came to life and flicked Jen off his shoulder.

"It is my job, and I'm telling you to help me."

"Go away."

This argument isn't worth my time. If what Mother says about being born during different seasons is true, it's no wonder I have such a hard time getting along with Jen. I was born during the season of mist, a season all about cooling the world and preparing it for the season of frost. Jen, on the other hand, was born during the season of fire and seems to be all about heating people up with her stupid temper.

Temper or not, there is work to do.

I can't help but glimpse at her from over my shoulder. She won't move from Pebble any time soon. In fact, she's working on weaving some of the moss into a sort of braid against Pebble's stone surface.

I smile.

Jen used to braid my hair when we were little. During the winter, it would get overgrown. We'd sit in front of the fire while Mother sang, and Jen would braid little silver threads through my hair to keep it from making my neck itchy.

With a sigh, I head for the first field I need to check for weeds. It'll be time for harvest soon. As the heat dies down and the season of fire crawls closer to the shift, Antok Village will have already started prepping for the Fire Festival.

Of the four seasonal festivals, the Fire Festival is Jen's favorite. This is the festival where we celebrate the dying of the heat. Impassioned people bid the season farewell by releasing their anxieties through an aggressive amount of feasting and dancing. In the center of Antok, they build large bonfires for dancing around and tossing in written letters of the past year's tribulations. It signals the beginning of the end for a lot of things, but Jen is especially excited because it will mark her fifteenth birthday.

That's it, I think. *I'll offer to take her this year*. Typically, Father has us leave early due to harvest starting the next morning. This year, we won't have to worry about Mother and Father breathing down our necks for straying from their sides. Even better, I can ride the winds of Fire Festival excitement far away from this petty argument, and maybe Jen will see that I'm not such a stick in the mud.

When I find Jen at the table the morning of the festival, she is scrawling black letters on a heavy piece of paper.

"What's that?" I sit beside her to tie on my sandals.

She clutches it a little closer to her chest, irritated that I noticed at all. "It's nothing," she murmurs.

I eye her, and then I lunge forward, reaching for the parchment. She yelps in surprise, ducking away just in time.

"Let me see!" I shout.

Again, she runs. She scurries across the clearing in front of our house, and then she clambers atop the closest Ankori, the one we named "Rok." Jen knows I am terrified of heights, but this Ankori is only seven feet tall. I

heave my way up after her, amazed the Ankori does not tip at both our weights. Jen kicks at me, but I laugh and reach for the paper.

“Just tell me what it is!” I don’t know what’s gotten into me. Perhaps it’s the thrill that comes before the festival but, for just a moment, I feel like a kid again.

Jen groans in anger. “It doesn’t matter!” she wails, holding the paper as far from me as her arm can reach. I tumble over her as I grab the paper, and we both collide with the ground.

She pouts, but I’m too busy poring over the words. It’s what I thought: the paper she wants to burn at the festival.

To my surprise, I’m not the star. This looks more like a letter than a list. I see “Mother” written half a dozen times, and I force myself to slow down.

‘Mother told me she won’t be here for my fifteenth fire. She told me she loves me, and she knows that I will blossom into the woman she has always hoped for in due time.

I don’t know how to make her happy, but I don’t know if I want to. Mother tells me tradition and carrying on our legacy is important, but I’m scared. What if I don’t want to leave the way she left her home? What if—'

Jen pulls the paper from my fingers. In the process, it rips in half, and each of us is left holding one part of the whole.

“Leave?” I tilt my head, but she doesn’t hear. Red colors my face. I’ve embarrassed us both.

Jen starts crying. Her fingers tremble, and then she crumples her half of the page.

“Hey, don’t do that,” I croon, sitting upright. She doesn’t look at me. “There are things that scare me, too.”

But she’s too busy drying her eyes to listen. Something in the air has changed, and my heart sinks. “I’m sorry.” I can’t speak above a whisper.

Jen shakes her head and grabs the other half of her writing from my loosened fingers. “It’s about time,” she snarls.

“Wait.” I reach for her as she stands. I’m expecting her to run off, but she hesitates. “Can we please stop fighting?”

In her dark eyes, I see conflict. “You never listen to my side,” she mutters. “You just want to win.”

My shoulders tighten. She’s not entirely *wrong*, but I can’t form the words to make my case. “I want to work together again.”

Her face is hard, but she focuses her anger at the ground, kicking up dirt. Veins of kor break apart as she disturbs their path, but I hesitate to stop her. I’m not sure what good it would do at this point.

“Let me take you to the festival—you can stay as long as you like, as long as I can be back before the shifting.”

“Why aren’t you staying?”

The air leaves my lungs. “I have to make sure it goes smoothly…”

Jen’s face darkens, and audible rage spills from her chest. “All you care about is getting Father’s approval!”

“Oh yeah?” I bark. “And you’re better?” I nod at the torn writing in her hand.

Jen’s face wrinkles. I wait for her to bolt off again, but she stands her ground. For a second, I’m intimidated by her fierce demeanor, wishing she would run. The orange hues of the aging morning have colored her fearsome, and the breeze curving through our valley tangles her hair into a storm. “At least I care about *anything*.”

“I do care,” I spit.

Jen puts her hands on her head, elbows pointed at the sky. “Name one thing you care about, besides yourself.”

I glower at her, my eyes tracing through the dirt as I think. “The farm,” I say. “It’s our livelihood; we have to—”

She laughs.

“What’s funny about that?”

The side of Jen’s face ticks. “You wouldn’t care about the farm if you didn’t have to. You don’t want to be here; you don’t want to take care of it or us.”

“How do you know?” My words are laced with venom, but the way my heart stands still has me believing Jen knows something more.

Jen goes calm. “You haven’t been … *here*. Not since Father started giving you more responsibility.” She looks me dead in the eyes. “Do you hate it?”

I stammer.

Until last year, chores were just chores. They weren't proof that I was worth my weight. Weren't painful or burdened with expectation. I never had to take care of this place with such fear of what I could do wrong. Never had to think about where food would come from or if the roof over my head would fall apart. It's just always been *here*, with or without me. A place that exists around me but isn't *really* mine. Not until I choose it back, and I think it might crush me before I get to pick.

Jen relents. "I'll be ready to go before sunset." Her voice is soft.

As she heads toward the house, I lay back in the dirt. Rok's form lingers above me, forever frozen.

"Got any advice, buddy?" I huff.

As expected, Rok doesn't respond.

Frowning, I dust myself off. I'm positive Jen will have cooled off by tonight, but even if she hasn't, I'll be leaving early enough to avoid her wrath.

As I hoped, Jen is back to her lighthearted self. Dusk has fallen over the valley, and our spirits are high as the atmosphere tingles with the winds of change. We each carry a fistful of fire branches—their spindly points will be lit in the bonfire and spew harmless sparks as we celebrate the evening.

"I feel so unworthy." Jen drags out *unworthy*, exaggerating with a curtsy.

We step to the side as a pair of children runs past us, waving masks and unlit fire branches. For a moment, we watch them sprint down the trail through the fading light. The trees are so dense that it feels like we are in the tunnel beneath the mountain all over again.

I shake off my fear of the dark and turn to Jen. "What are you talking about?"

"You know," she muses. "This." Her hands gesture to everything in one swoop, and I groan.

"You mean me coming?" One of my eyebrows goes up. "It was your idea."

"Like you didn't have all these laying around waiting for tonight," she teases, waving her bundle of fire branches in my face. I swat them away.

"You know I'm only staying for a few minutes."

“That’s what you think. But then you’ll smell all the food, and next thing y’know, you’re not home until well after the shifting.”

“Not tonight.”

Jen pouts, but she can’t stay angry for long—not with the promise of the festival just a couple miles away.

Behind us, we hear the bushes rustling, and we step aside to let whoever’s coming pass by. We stand for half a moment without thinking, and then both glance down the trail.

No one is there.

Jen shrugs, and we continue along.

“I can’t believe you’re letting me go off on my own,” she giggles, and I exhale a short breath.

“I figured since it’s your fifteenth fire,” I say, “but don’t tell Mother or Father. They’ll use me as fertilizer.”

She chortles at the thought and then shoves me with a laugh. My feet go flying in the wrong direction as I try to regain my balance, and I stumble into the bushes. As I land, my head hits something hard.

Branches shake behind me, and it sounds like I’ve scared off some sort of creature. I feel discombobulated from the tumble, but then Jen is laughing her head off, grabbing my arm and dragging me to my feet.

I glimpse back where I’ve fallen, peering through the trees. Although my vision is unfocused, I see two golden shimmers coming from behind some brush. I frown and squint, but the glow is gone. It must’ve been a vein of kor, glowing extra bright before the shifting of the season.

We continue on our way, hearing the festival and smelling the smoke long before we arrive.

The Fire Festival has been ongoing for a few days now, all building up to tonight. It’s no surprise that we arrive during the peak of the events. Jen and I are swept up in the commotion. Fires light the dark in every corner, and music laden with heavy drums pulses through the air. Red, orange, and gold lanterns swing in the breeze, promising warmth instead of malice. I see merchants in makeshift booths all around, several of which are selling kor-filled jewelry. There are even people getting the familiar pattern painted on their skin. Left and right, acquaintances and strangers mingle. So far, I don’t

recognize anyone as more than just a friendly face, but I've got my sights set on something else.

Charred and smoky flavors catch my attention from a mile away, and I follow their promises to a stretch of tables. My stomach growls, and I find myself picking through meats and vegetables that have already been grazed over.

The multitude of crackling fires pop through gaps in dozens of simultaneous conversations, and my head starts to spin. A smiling woman offers to pour me a mug of something stronger than the average ale—I recall Mother refusing to let me drink it once, but she's not here. I take the offering and heat instantly creeps through my face and into my bloodstream.

I nod to the young woman, who blushes before she's joined by a couple of other girls. I raise my mug to her with a grin and then look over my shoulder to search for Jen.

"What did I say?" Jen screeches. She's in the middle of a rapid dance, her arms interlocked with the arms of strangers. They form a circle around a large bonfire, and she calls for me to join. I recognize a couple of people on the other side of the dance.

"Say about what?" I stand just outside the circle, watching the intense movements as people kick their legs up and move toward and away from the flames.

Before I have a chance to protest, Jen lets go of one of her partner's arms and loops her arm around mine. The mug drops to the ground as I lurch forward. I yelp in surprise, but I've been locked into the dance and have no choice but to follow the rhythm.

"I knew you'd want to stay." She beams.

I haven't told Jen I'm still planning to leave early. I give her no chance to see the face I make, putting all I've got into the frantic beat of the song. It's more drums than music, and it adds to the fire within my soul. The circle breaks apart for ten seconds, ten seconds where we all howl from our cores and spin in stupid circles. What seems like discordant screeching blurs into one melody, a surge of a thousand villagers releasing everything they can't control into the night air, and then the world falls silent. Without missing a beat, the music starts again, driving us all forward into our carefree celebration.

Jen and I grin as we reach for our fire branches. We stick them into the fire and pull them back, shrieking and whooping as sparks shoot off in every direction. Together, we wave them in circles and paint the empty air in front of our faces. Someone brings me another mug, and Jen gets one, too. We clink the wooden containers together and take deep drinks, hardly tasting the sweet flavor as our mouths fill with bubbles from the foam.

"Mother would kill you if she saw me with this," Jen laughs.

"Why me?" My eyes bulge.

"You're supposed to be taking care of me."

I grimace as she takes generous sips. "You're fifteen now. You can take care of yourself."

"But Mother will still kill you."

I roar with laughter at the idea. It's the first time I've been free in such a long time. Maybe I won't worry about the shifting after all—the kor never seems to fail our crops.

If I have one more night to just be me—not Chol *Sul*—not a farmer destined to spend my life in the dirt before I'm buried beneath it—it's this one.

I'll take every last drop I can get.

I don't know how much time passes or how many songs trill through my ears. With all the liquid sloshing around inside me, I'm out of breath. Jen had me doing high kicks around the fire, dragging me by the sleeve of my tunic when she could.

I break away from the circle and take several paces toward the edge of the woods. From here, I can see most of the excitement, but it's easier to breathe. My focus sways as a dark figure starts to approach me, and I look up just in time to see one of my oldest friends heading my way.

Ben—I haven't seen him in a season, but he looks exactly as he did the last day we had school together. Like me, his father owns a well-renowned farm. Unlike us, their farm is vast, and they trade beyond Antok year-round.

Ben's lanky figure is enough that anyone could guess he's never worked a day in the soil; never had to lift a bag of grain or steer an ox. His skin is unsunned compared to his dark hair and eyes, causing them to look like sinkholes as the moonlight reflects off his face.

He gives me a wave and a grin before settling in the grass beside me. "I thought you weren't going to show!"

“Well, I can’t stay for long,” I say, slouching forward and holding my head. “There’s still work to be done before the shifting.”

“You’re going to miss it?” Ben seems as appalled as Jen, but he isn’t angry. Just surprised.

Shrugging, I pluck some blades of grass and weave them between my fingers. “News didn’t spread around here for once?”

“Well, yeah,” Ben sniffles. “I’m sorry to hear about your grandfather, by the way. I guess I just expected you’d be glad for a night like this.”

I’m rigid. Everything is a reminder that I’m not where I’m supposed to be right now. Of course, I’m happy about the Fire Festival, but I didn’t come just to think of all the reasons why I couldn’t stay. And everyone wants me to be sentimental—but the fact of the matter is, no matter how hard I try, I can’t.

I think about the look in Mother’s eyes before they left. The tears Jen has spilled over a fragment of a memory. The hardness in Father’s face; a sharp edge with no room for grief, no time to mourn.

I’ve felt none of it.

Am I broken? I’ve asked myself more than a handful of times. All I have to hold onto is my work: keep us looking strong in the face of pain.

I glance back to Ben. “Thanks,” I sigh, “I just have to make sure nothing happens to the farm. It’s not like I’m not going to miss the shifting.” I take note of his relieved expression. “Besides—how many chances do you get to watch the shifting alone?”

Ben shudders, and I see a wave of fear flicker across his face. “I wouldn’t want to be alone. Not when everyone’s here.”

“I prefer it.” I mess with the kor pendant around my neck. I stare straight ahead, letting myself become mesmerized by all the bonfires. The deeper my drink sinks, I feel like I am floating, and everything is warm.

I’m eager to leave, but I’d be content to curl up on this hill for the night.

“No, that’s not what I meant.” Ben gets up and swats at his backside, ridding his trousers of grass. “I mean with all the rumors floating around.”

“Rumors?” I tilt my head.

Ben gives me a look like I’ve missed some kind of detail while my nose has been in the dirt. “Yeah. You haven’t heard?” He stops himself. “I guess not if you’ve been working all season.”

“Okay…”

It’s as if the noise from the festival has dulled, and all I can hear is Ben prattling on. He’s calm, but I can tell by the way he sways back and forth that he’s playing down a hint of fear. “Earlier this year, this girl—Lynn—swears she saw someone in a mask running through her family’s rice fields. She said the eyes stood out the most—the way they glowed. And then a few other people reported something similar, but no one was ever able to figure out who it was.”

Ben quiets, looking over my shoulder to stare into the woods. I get goosebumps, and I hold a little tighter to my pendant. “Glowing eyes?”

Ben ignores me and reverts to his old self, laughing and smiling. “Anyway, no one’s said anything in a while, so it’s probably fine. Just a rumor.” He looks back toward the bonfires. “I’ll catch up with you later, okay? My girl is waiting for me.”

I watch Ben run back toward the festival, joining a girl I don’t recognize. He waves at me, and then he disappears into the crowd. I’m dizzy.

Frowning, I head back toward the festivities. It’s warmer there, but I feel icy. Jen is nearby with a group of her friends, so I walk over to her and inject myself into the conversation. Their welcomes turn into jagged stares as I pull Jen out of the circle.

She sputters. “What’s your problem?” She seems more irritated than concerned with my dark expression. “I was talking to them.”

“We need to go home,” I say. I know I’m being paranoid, but Ben’s story is unnerving. Besides, my head has begun to swim—whether from the fall in the woods or the drink, I’m not sure.

She scoffs. “Really, Chol? We just got here.”

“And now we’re leaving.” I hold her arm as I start toward the trail home.

Jen grunts and leans back, struggling against my grip. “Chol!” she barks, fighting me. She weighs hardly anything and is easy to pull along. But then my ears burn with shame as I notice how many people are watching the scene unfold.

I let go of her arm and she jerks back, clutching the white that has colored her wrist from the pressure.

My jaw tightens, and I can't think beyond humiliation. This is no place to correct her, and I'm not sure it is my place, as frustrating as she is. But I can't help myself.

"If you want *anything* you put in that letter about Mother to be true, you'll come with me. Now."

Jen sharpens, chin jutting forward in protest. "What does that mean?"

The stares persist, so I lower my voice enough they won't be able to make out the harsh whispers through my clenched teeth. "It means you'll listen to me"—I restrain myself from grabbing her wrist again—"because I am in charge. If you don't listen to me, I'll make sure Mother and Father know you can't be trusted."

Jen's chest rises and falls. In the light of a dozen fires, I watch tears spill from her large eyes. But there is no hint of sorrow behind those tears, and all I can picture is a blazing inferno whirling inside her. "Are you joking?"

Her rage bleeds like a gutted animal, but I ignore it. "Watch me," I say.

"You don't care about anyone but yourself." Her mutter is hollow.

I almost laugh, searching the sky as if the resolution to this festering argument will land upon us. "Do you know how selfish *you* are?" I prod. "You accuse me of not being there for you; of putting too much on your shoulders. But you're really just a brat, aren't you?"

She furls her fists. Her jaw loosens like she has something to add, but she doesn't. When her eyes hit the ground, I know I've landed the blow.

"Stay if you want," I growl. "But don't expect me to do anything else for you."

I feel the heat of the festival and a hundred stares boring into my back as I leave.

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3

SHIFTING

As the moon rises from behind the distant Fire Festival's plumes of bonfire smoke, the farm is serene. Already, the air is turning cold. I sink my shovel into the dirt, chopping up the same patch I've been working for the last ten minutes.

Everything blurs together, and I'm nauseated. I understand now why Mother never let us drink, but it's not so much that as the anger I've been trying to filter out that pervades me.

I've seen Jen mad before, but never like that. At the moment, my retort felt like the right thing to say.

Now, I feel as childish as she acts.

Everything I do is for her, if not just for the sake of this stupid farm. As the eldest, I pave the way. I set the standard for what comes next. I'm the shadow meant to quell her insatiable ambition—to show her what it means to be a Sul.

How's that turning out?

My shovel lands in the dirt a final time—a ring of metal as the head slices through a vein of kor. My stomach sinks as the severed end of the vein fades to something colorless, another one that the shift will never touch. The waning golds of this fire season already tremble. Not every vein has survived all the way to the shift, but those that have will bloom deep in just a few moments.

I scan the horizon.

The fields smell rich with moisture as mist spills into the valley. In a world painted starlight blue, the clouds themselves seem to rest on the ground. It shrouds my view, and I can no longer see more than twenty feet. The only sign of light is the candle I left in the window of the house.

I'm drenched with a layer of moisture. The dirt beneath my feet goes cold, and as I work, I spot more veins of kor.

A sigh of relief parts my lips.

I have to remind myself: one severed isn't the end of the road. It's room for something new, something different.

The veins of kor running up and down the crop rows pulse, and the plants around me crackle as they quiver in the wind.

Against my collarbone, my pendant burns hot. It breathes in rhythm with the rest of the world, and I know the shifting is here.

The air thickens, but I'm light on my feet. Lighter than after drinking for the first time.

I lean against the handle of my shovel and squint, watching as the kor illuminates brighter and brighter, blindingly slow. Fire-gold threatening to spill beyond its confines, a river of magma that scorches deeper than flesh. As the moon reaches its peak in the sky, the kor dims.

The fog begins to lift, and I spin in a slow circle to drink in the shift.

To my sides, the forest's edges glow. The surrounding mountains echo the vibrancy as color returns to Aér—golden colors swirling before my eyes before blanching into a jade-blue. When I look at my pendant, its veins have turned the same jade color.

My heart races as the world trembles, and then the air cools and the heavy feeling is gone.

The wind picks back up, a blustering howl through the waist-high grass I stand in.

I look to the eastern horizon, framed by two of our Ankori. Their kor has shifted to jade, that ever-present reminder that, maybe, they are only asleep.

I smile to know the season of mist has arrived, and the fields are just fine.

Harvest will begin at first light, but I'm too exhausted to think about it.

The mist-jade is brilliant, but it isn't as bright as fire-gold. I pick my way through the tilled earth, dragging my shovel behind. It makes a grating sound in its wake, but this is drowned out by the crashing I hear in the underbrush near the path at the edge of the farm.

I squint through what remains of the fog and make out the red of Jen's shawl as she stomps up the path. She drank more than me, evident as she staggers back and forth; still, her demeanor is stormy. I'm not surprised by the way she tries to rip the front door of the house from the hinges, and I

can hear the poor wooden thing slam into the frame from all the way down the hill.

I sigh. If she's trying to prove a point by saying she missed the shifting just to get home *"for my sake,"* I don't want to hear it. I march up the hill. "Jen," I call, the sour feeling returning to my stomach.

She doesn't respond.

Why would she?

I put my back to the house and survey the fields from my new vantage point. Bathed in moonlight and the glow of rejuvenated kor, our farm looks peaceful. It's bursting at the seams with perfect, healthy crops, and quiet swallows the land. Still, I don't feel proud of it. Sure, I got it to this point, but it's still not *mine*.

Harvest will be well underway by the time Mother and Father return, and that's when I'll know if it was all worth it.

All the animosity, sweat, tears, and struggle. Giving myself to the land and giving them what they want to see.

Sullen, I make my way to the rock shed to put my shovel away. Even with the tunnel closed off, I still feel small each time I enter this place. Especially in the dark, it holds fear close to my chest.

As fast as I can, I put my shovel back and hurry outside.

The mist has alighted back over the field, and I could fall asleep where I stand.

I'm halfway to the house when I hear the familiar rattle of the door to the rock shed. That rusted, broken hinge, squealing a taunt as the wind ignores my poor latching job.

But the world is still—the crops aren't bobbing up and down with any sort of breeze.

I wish I had my shovel.

I pivot and stare up the hill to the shed. From here, I see the door yawning wide, the dark leaking from within. It rocks back and forth—but it shouldn't be able to do that. Not with one hinge broken.

Before I can decide if it's worth the journey back, the white swirls of mist thicken further and obstruct my view. I hunker down in the crops, trying to see *anything.*

Did I latch it?

I decide to make my way back to double-check the perimeter, but I'm sick with nerves.

The wind picks up, nipping at my heels as I hurry along. It tosses the door against the shed with a clatter, which ricochets across the valley.

The crops around me rustle with the sudden gust. The chill going up my spine spurs me forward at a stumble. *Have to close the door. Have to close the door.*

All my senses fire off at once, screaming *run* as I tremble in the darkness. I have nothing to protect myself, and I have no courage to find out why my instinct is reeling in alarm from a gust of wind.

Peering through the stalks where I'm hidden, I look in the direction of the house. I can barely see it through the layers of fog, but the candle glows in the window, a golden glint against the darkness without a care in the world.

It splits into two, moving down the hill.

Jen's bringing a candle out to look for me, I tell myself, but I'm too shocked to be completely convinced. *Jen's bringing two candles*…

Then, the two lights stop, floating in place. The mist thins for just a second, and it's the most terrifying second of my life.

'She said the eyes stood out the most—the way they glowed.'

Ben's words ring through my head, bouncing off the walls of my skull as fear consumes me.

Up on the hill, within reach of the house, stands a person I don't recognize.

At least, they look like a person. They're covered in black from head to toe, and golden eyes flare brightly against the head covering. The mouthpiece is made of metal, and it's got strips lit with the same gold going vertically across.

The mist conceals them once again, and I nearly die where I'm crouched. *Did they see me?* The wind carries multiple low voices across the field—a language I've never heard—and I shudder. The masked being is not alone.

In turn, more haunting, glowing eyes appear. They're so round and lifeless, my knees lock and my tongue dries.

I have to get Jen, I think, shaking like mad. They're converging on the house, slipping within yards of me without even spotting me. Some of them

carry large packs, and others hold large, metal objects in their arms—some sort of tool. From within, their strange tools glow as golden as their eyes. To my horror, these glows flicker between gold and jade, like kor trapped between phases. Disconnected from Aér, still alive.

Ben said nothing of the raiders harming anyone. They seemed more like pranksters than anything from his description. In the dead of night, their presence is nothing less than nefarious.

"H-hey," I call out. My voice cracks.

When they snap their necks my way, dread ricochets through my core like the buzz in the air right before lightning strikes. They don't speak to each other, but they don't move away from the house, either.

One of them readjusts their strange tool, tilting their head to see me better. Between the mist and the high crops, I don't think they can pinpoint my idiotic call.

Air hisses through my teeth. I shuffle forward, pushing through the fields as if I could sneak up on one of these strangers. A moment too late, I spot one. They've pushed their strange kor tool through the green, the energy inside crackling loud in my ears. The masked stranger's breath rasps through the metal grate of their mask.

My throat sticks to itself. They tilt their head, those huge orbs going through my center. *Like they're studying me.*

When they nudge their tool forward, I feel the heat of the kor spike—almost like it wants to jump to my pendant. A connection it can't have. My ears ring and my heart thunders in place.

The masked stranger's kor trap angles, ready to prod my locked chest.

But one of their compatriots calls out, a dismal instruction that has them looking over their shoulder. They shift within the confines of their leathery outfit, those… *eyes* lingering on mine.

A flicker of red and orange catches my eye. Another masked stands several lengths away, lighting a torch. Every fiber in my body clenches with terror as they pitch the blaze into the closest field, and lashing flames begin eating through a year's worth of work.

I spring into action, clawing for the hem of the stranger's coat. The stranger balks before breaking into a run. They trip, dropping their kor trap as they scramble out of view.

Two sides of myself split apart. One side—angry and desperate—longs to pursue. Capture the stranger who distracted me and rip them apart with my bare hands. The other side—curious and dazed—pins me in place, my feet all but nailed to the soil as I stare at what they've dropped. Frantic and alive, gold and jade kor dances within.

I reach toward it, ignoring the tingle in my callused fingers.

A jolt goes through my body as what's trapped within connects with my skin. I hear the way it writhes, no veins to contain its fury before its confines shatter and it's pulled into the ground. The shock expelled is a pulse of fire-gold that shouldn't be here. It burns through any jade veins in its wake, a small ripple turned tumultuous across the whole farm.

My insides are on fire, as is the valley.

Through the smoke, I watch the trickles of gold kor. It hits the guardians, but their kor is unaffected.

Jen.

The strangers are preoccupied, at least half a dozen of them watching their mess like it's one of the Fire Festival bonfires. I curse and pick up my feet.

Have to get to the house.

We'll get no help tonight—anyone who sees the smoke will think it's what remains of someone's personal celebration.

Have to get Jen.

I'm halfway up the hill when someone screams. My stomach twists the same as my neck.

Down the hill, a figure is struggling—held at arm's length with one of those menacing kor traps aimed at them. Bile hits my tongue.

Jen left the house.

Her silhouetted figure holds what I can only assume is our iron kettle. She cracks it over the head of one of the strangers. It's not enough—they're bigger than her; stronger.

The glows of their eyes reek of eerie fascination as she shrieks, anger lacing her shouts that carry up the hill. My chest threatens to explode.

"Chol!" she cries out, a pained sound that scratches my ears.

I swallow, holding my breath.

Jen thrashes like a wild animal. The masked stranger gripping her arm is thrown off-balance, and she pulls herself away. She sprints my way.

“Jen!” I shout, and her eyes go wide.

I open my arms to catch her, but we’re both hurtled through the air.

Now I know what their horrible kor traps can do. From all the way down the hill, they’ve loosed one’s power. It’s thrown us off our feet, and all they had to do was point.

Jen picks herself up. She turns to the strangers, hands shaking.

The raiders approach. I call for her, but she doesn’t even glance over her shoulder.

She holds her ground like she can thwart them with the same venomous glare she’s always had for me.

When they grab her, she tries to fight. But they raise their nightmarish weapons her way, and her face goes pale in the light of the fire.

Her eyes fix on mine, a silent breath parting her lips. I duck, knowing they haven’t seen me. She confirms this with a pained glance; a desperation to cry out.

But she doesn’t.

My head pounds. I should be bolting to her side. I should be unleashing every last ounce of fury I have at how their gloved hands dig into her arms. The agonized grit of her teeth as she’s dragged away.

But I can’t.

My feeble fingers clutch at the dirt. I can’t breathe. I can’t move.

Maybe I’ve slipped into shock, but I swear Aér trembles. Veins I thought were dead pulse across the valley, jade washing through them as vibrant as the moment of the shifting. As the kor brightens, the ground itself becomes alive and hot. In the near distance, the atmosphere darkens. The air thunders, echoing through the valley as if to split it open.

Bright, mist-jade light blanches the farm, blinding me as it pours through the fields. I can barely see where it’s coming from. The masked shout in terror, and I force myself to stand.

In the depths of the valley, massive silhouettes move like predators through the pitch dark. The ground quakes as living mountains move, and my beating heart threatens to break my ribcage.

Oh, *oh sky above*. Oh, Aér below.

The guardians are awake.

I’m frozen like a deer before a hunter. My fingertips itch, and the rest of me shakes. The masked disperse in confusion, and I watch in awe as one of the Ankori grumbles to life. Its enormous arms go skyward, the light of its kor flowing like a river through its terrible physique. No one has time to react before it brings its rock fists crashing down, and I hear a sickening crunch as it pummels its unfortunate, masked victim into a person-shaped grave.

I go rigid, eyes wide.

All hell breaks loose.

Billowing smoke and screaming strangers. Massive, timeless creatures shaking the valley with every step and moving at speeds unfathomable.

I force myself into the fray, blindly searching for Jen. I call her name, choking on smoke as the fire spreads. The crops were too dry—they caught rapidly after the kor veins were destroyed, and the inferno around me has become a maze.

I cover my mouth with my collar, but it’s no use. My eyes are too filled with the sting of smoke, which now rests heavy in my lungs.

I sputter for air, making my way to the edge in time to watch the fire snake up the hill to the house.

There’s no surviving this. I fix my eyes on the edge of the jungle: the path to Antok, promising escape.

My path is cut off as a massive Ankori steps in my way. It doesn’t seem to know I’m there, so I drop to the ground to avoid having my head caved in by its terrifying footfall.

I have to get up. Have to find Jen, *then* escape.

My brow furrows at the path to freedom, away from the heat and the horror.

The footfall of the Ankori rattles the ground. Struggling to maintain my balance, I stagger back toward the house as it lights with flame. Is there anything I can salvage? Maybe, just maybe, Jen got free and had the same idea.

That’s when the first explosion throws me forward.

It feels like a chunk of the world has died, and I feel it deep within my soul as I spin around. My shoulders rise at the sight of one of the masked, kor weapon angled at one of the guardians. I shout, but it’s consumed by the roar of our farm, ablaze.

The Ankori is already falling back when another blast from the device shatters through. All at once, the veins of light filtering through its stone form go dim, and it drops to the ground with a resonant crash, no more than a pile of rocks. My jaw drops.

That's impossible.

More shouting fills my ears, and I watch two more Ankori go down with a mind-splintering cacophony. There's nothing I can do but stare.

The raiders fire their weapons again.

Hope abandons me like a ghost, and I lose feeling in my limbs when Pebble is shattered into a million pieces. The fiery pummels from the weapons are unrelenting. Our guardians can't walk forward.

As their forms are broken—their cores eviscerated to nothing—they fall. Their light dies as they crumble, and so does the valley.

When the last one splits apart and the ground no longer quakes, the raiders—I counted six—remain. With a backdrop of flames, they check over their weapons, nodding to one another and stepping over the fresh rubble they've made.

My eyes are bleary, the image before me running as the masked vanish from sight. Six gone and more missing. Only one I know of is dead, the corpse ravaged by flame.

Jen could be dead or alive. She could be unconscious amidst the fires surrounding me, or she could be at the whim of a stranger.

I am hollow.

I stagger through the fields, avoiding the flames and choking on endless smoke. I feel nothing as I stumble toward the rock shed, and then everything goes dark.

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4

REMNANT

The burn of my eyes is what pulls me back into the land of the living. If this isn't a hangover, I don't know what it is. When I look at my arms, they're covered in soot. It takes all of one minute to remember what happened.

I sputter, bolting upright. Saliva dribbles down my chin as I cough up dirt and ash. Under the scrutiny of daylight, it hurts to keep my eyes open, but I smell the destruction before I understand it.

All that remains of us—our rows of green and life; our days of sun and laughter; our home of wood and stories—is rubble.

Little fires still feast at the edge of the rainforest, and heavy clouds of smoke linger overhead. As I bring myself to my feet, I comprehend what has happened.

It's all gone.

A violent judder consumes me, and then I collapse, fingers curling into the dirt as heavy sobs take over my body. "Jen?" I scream, desperate to hear her answer. Even if she came up just to kick me in the ribs, I would be happy.

I gather myself and scour the area. My leather sandals are torn to shreds as I run, trampling burnt crops and tripping over hardened patches of dirt. I want so badly to look up and see Jen perched atop Pebble.

The emptiness hits me like a wall when I see the house.

I fold over where the frame of the front door once stood, and I rock back and forth. It doesn't help.

I'm not sure how long I sit in the old doorway, but when I dare to look up again, the sun sits in the middle of the sky. Fresh fear sprouts in my lungs.

I’ve lost a night and half a day of searching, and no one has come to our aid.

If the raid was timed during the Fire Festival’s firebursts…

Panting, I stare straight ahead. With nothing left within the valley, the mountain opposite our home is all too close.

As if the sky is listening to my weakened heartbeat, thunder drums across the clouds. Before long, rain dribbles downward, softening the ground. I inch backward, thinking I can somehow dodge the rain, and then my back presses against something hard.

Jade light covers me before I can turn, and my heart stops.

An Ankori.

Of all things—Rok kneels behind me, leaning toward me. His arm is suspended in midair, and I’m too startled to notice what’s dangling from his stone fingers.

I could laugh, though it would be from hysterics. How long has he been there? It’s like he’s been waiting for me to notice him.

Rok has nothing to convey any sort of emotion other than the glowing streak of kor across his “face,” where I always imagined eyes would be. Still, I get the inkling that he can sense my emotional duress. Even more so when he gives a slow nod, raising his hand a bit higher.

I wobble at the sight of Jen’s pendant wrapped around his fingers. Its kor is still glowing, tried and true. I snatch the twine from Rok’s hold and cling to the pendant.

Unlike the kor that feeds through the ground, the rainforest, and the mountain ranges, the kor in our pendants remains aglow. Mother told us it was special. Its own source of energy, much like that which keeps—*kept*—our Ankori suspended. Disconnected from Aér but as resilient as anything else.

In the palm of my hand, Jen’s jagged pendant of pale green and gold is like holding a piece of her. Alive and well, waiting for me to find her.

I expect Rok to remain a statue; to stop being sentient at any second, and then he falls into a sitting position.

I tilt my head, and so does Rok.

“You all died,” I say.

Rok doesn’t move other than to turn his head a bit. I sense that he is surveying the fields behind me—at least, what’s left of them.

For some reason, I laugh. At first, it's soft, and then it pours out in waves. I scream into the wind. "You were supposed to protect us!"

All these years of not believing that Ankori could come to life. And when they do, every single one of them fails.

I kick the ground, sending a spray of gravel into flight. "My sister is gone. My life—everything—gone!"

When I turn, Rok is standing. He towers over my head, but I don't care. I shove everything I have left against him, pounding my fists against his chest until my skin breaks. My hands ache as I pummel them, and blood begins to smear from my palms onto Rok's kor-laden surface. The next thing I know, I can't move my arms. The Ankori's stone fingers are wrapped around my wrists.

Tears overwhelm me, washing away the grit that has covered my face. When Rok lets go, I sweep my hands over my eyes and shout in anguish one more time.

"She's not gone," I wheeze. "She can't be. I'll find her."

I pace back and forth, and I can just feel Rok watching me. I don't know what he thinks, let alone if he thinks, but I don't care. I have to prove this one thing to myself.

Before Mother and Father return.

"Ben—Ben might know more about the raiders." I don't know who I'm talking to. Can Ankori hear? Do they understand anything?

Would Pebble, were he still alive, try to squish me like Jen always wished?

Sky above, I feel so much pain at once. I feel like the fire is back, scorching me like it scorched everything else. And yet, I want to hurt. It's refining me and driving me to the edge of insanity, where I find one last grain of a will to live.

As long as this pendant still glows, I tell myself, *Jen is alive.*

I'd like to imagine that's how it works. It's got to be connected to her in some way. After all, I've heard stories of kor pendants that stop glowing when their owners pass away. Something ridiculous like that.

Seeing as I have nothing to pack—no shoes left to replace my shredded sandals—I march across the field, fist curled around Jen's pendant. If I find Ben, I can figure out where the rumors started, and I can figure out if there's anyone who knows more than they let on.

They didn’t come—the village didn’t come.

How would they have known? I think. It’s better that they don’t.

I nod to no one.

Until Jen is safe, I’ll disappear. Our valley—the Sul legacy—doesn’t end with me.

I won’t let it.

I need a weapon. My best bet is the rock shed. Thanks to its nesting place within the mountain, it hasn’t lost so much as a shingle.

The door is still wide open from last night, and I wonder if that was the first part of the raiders’ attempt to lure us out. Perhaps they had seen me well before I had been aware of them, and I’d gotten lucky.

Then again, I feel terrible. If I’d just been there with Jen instead of cowering against the hill, maybe none of this would have happened.

I think of their weapons. The deafening percussion of each blast they released.

It wouldn’t have gone well for us if we’d been stuck together at the hip.

I make my way to the shed and peek inside, shutting the wobbly door behind me. As expected, it drags across the ground with as much difficulty as usual.

A gust of wind howls overhead. I check the false panel on the back wall. It’s untouched, which means there’s no way the masked knew about it. I wonder if they thought I was still inside the rock shed and were attempting to ambush me last night, but I’d already stepped outside before they could reach me.

I thank the season of mist for its timely arrival.

My heart lurches. I have an inkling to head down the tunnel and into Jen’s kor chamber, but I know she won’t be there.

Instead, I assess the tools we have. If I’m going to confront these raiders, I need more than my wits. However, weapons are in short supply in our shed.

There’s an iron hoe, a spade, and a rusty pitchfork, but none of those are any match for what I’m up against. I spot something leaning against the corner—Father’s old fishing spearhead. It has two prongs, one of which is longer and more pointed than the other.

An idea forms. I weigh the different farm tools, seeing which handle is the sturdiest. I settle on the pitchfork's handle—it's made of a long marsh reed. The once-green color has faded, and it's been polished and coated with resin to protect it from rot. It's not going to break anytime soon.

I don't realize that I'm biting my cheek until I taste blood. Even so, it's hard to focus on the task at hand.

I need to bind the pronged spearhead to the handle so it won't fall off, but I can't find the parts I need to make it work. After digging through crate after crate, I find some sort of metal cylinder. It fits the staff and the spearhead well enough, so I bind the parts together with strips of fabric.

Somewhere during this strange weapon's development, I get the idea to tie Jen's pendant around the spearhead. It's fitting, and it makes this rudimentary job look like a true weapon of revenge.

I test it by jabbing the air. When it doesn't fly apart from the sudden movement, I decide it's ready.

My stomach growls.

Ben should have food and, hopefully, answers. I can probably bargain for something to eat before setting out. I might have to explain why I'm hauling a giant spear around, but that's the least of my worries.

As I exit the rock shed, I'm surprised to run smack into Rok. I stagger backward, but the stupid stone creature remains unfazed. I'm more surprised that he followed me over here; after all, I'm not sure what determines the difference between an Ankori acting like a statue or a lost pet.

"What do you want?" I groan, shoving my way past him.

Don't know why I expected an answer.

Irritated, I cross the field. Without shoes, my feet dig into the fresh mud and create ugly holes all around. The mud suctions and pops every time I take a step, and I try not to think about why there's so much more than usual. When I stop to catch my breath, I hear more mud pop behind me, and I look over my shoulder.

He's still following me.

"Rok," I plead. "Go away."

Of course, he doesn't move.

Rolling my eyes, I make it to the edge of the farm where the grass hasn't been burnt to a crisp. I sense him still behind me—it's not like a giant

made of stone can be subtle, after all.

This may pose a problem.

Everyone I know of is familiar with Ankori guardians. But until last night, I'd never heard of a guardian that moves, and I'm not the only one. If I get too close to the village with Rok following me, I'm going to be swarmed.

Besides, what good did he do, anyway? He stood idle while the others were destroyed—while Jen was taken.

Rage consumes me, and I whirl around, releasing a battle-worthy cry.

My spear slams forward, bouncing right off Rok's chest. He looks down, and he reeks of disenchantment. Once again, I lunge forward, but the spear is deflected.

"Go home!" I shout, and Rok looks at me. "If you don't, I'll make sure you can't follow me."

Just threatening him makes me nervous, but I can't let him know that. I stare at his center, where his upper half floats inches above his lower half. There's a bright orb of energy holding him together, and I need to aim for that.

The spear slips right through his middle but does nothing. I gawk for a moment, noting how ineffective the spearhead is as it passes through the center.

How did those weapons take down our Ankori…?

I grit my teeth, ready to shove the spear back through his center when every joint in my body protests. The spear has stopped halfway. Straining, I glare at Rok, who grips the staff and stares at its residence within his core. As if I'm a pesky fly, he waves a hand to shoo me away. I grimace as I'm rendered weaponless by my own Ankori.

With both hands, he flips the spear horizontally and weighs it.

"Hey!" I frown as he unwinds the cloth from around the spearhead. As I feared, the whole thing falls apart. Before I can intervene, Rok holds the pieces and puts them back into place, and then all I can do is watch in awe.

He wraps his stone fist around the two disjointed parts, and the jagged veins of kor in his forearms begin to flow. His kor makes sporadic branches—a growing vine of light that trails to his fingertips.

My eyes go wide as the kor transfers onto the hilt of my weapon. It wraps all around the reed handle, reforming it and binding each piece. The

spear melds cohesively together, and the cylinder meant to hold the parts together stagnates in place, covered with intricate kor patterns.

Rok nods to Jen's pendant, which still dangles from its fraying twine on the reed staff. I'm not quite sure what he means, but I'm a fan of his recent work. I shrug to impart some form of acknowledgment, and he squeezes his hand around the stone, holding it taut against the middle of the spearhead.

I reach forward, afraid he's going to shatter her pendant. To my relief, he releases it, and my mouth hinges open at the sight. The twine has been burned away, leaving the pendant unscathed. Ever-vibrant with kor, it rests within the prongs of the spear. Its veins shimmer like constellations, casting an incredible glow against the metal points.

Rok checks his work over, spinning the staff before proffering it my way. Speechless, I take it. It feels like an actual, balanced weapon. Not to mention it looks like the work of a professional weapon master.

I stammer. "Thank you."

Rok gives a single nod, and then he braces himself, planting one leg back and bending where his knees would be.

"No, no, I'm not going to try to stab you again." I laugh nervously. He returns to his normal stance and, of all things, gives me a thumbs up.

So… The rock pile has a sense of humor.

For what Rok has done, I'm going to come up with another plan—one that involves him by my side. It's best he stays hidden, this much I know. How I'm going to do that this side of Runerok, where everyone is a gossip… we'll have to play it by ear.

It takes the better part of an hour to stay away from the roadways and get close to Ben's house. Rok and I have already taken a shortcut through the thinning woods, and we certainly aren't planning on using the front door.

Ben's family comes from generations of wealth, so it's no surprise most of the journey to his home is following the perimeter of his father's land. Their house stands tall in the middle of the farm, and several workers are harvesting the fields.

I take one look at my hands and assume they're what the rest of me looks like: tattered and filthy. Even my ripped tunic smells of smoke. Grimacing, I try to think of an excuse for my appearance, but thought escapes me. If Ben is my friend after what little time we've spent together since our school days, he'll be less concerned about the way I look—and smell—and more interested in helping me.

Now, all I have to do is make sure Rok knows to stay behind.

"How's your vision?" I ask. No response. "Can you just… watch me from afar?"

I test the waters by walking a few feet. He doesn't follow, but I'm not holding my breath, either. I check over my shoulder every few paces. The further I get, the more he seems to crane from the tree line.

I'm almost to the back door of Ben's house when I get the urge to turn around. To my horror, Rok is shambling through the fields, a whole head higher than the tallest of the crops.

I panic, jumping in place. My arms make wide motions over my head. "Go back! Go back!"

If he hears me, he lets it bounce right off that thick head of his. I hold my hands over my eyes as he gets closer, praying none of the workers spot him. I don't even know what kind of chaos it would spell if someone noticed—just that it would be a headache to explain why an *Ankori* is *walking.*

I feel faint. I'm two feet from the back door when it swings open—Ben stands at the threshold with a basket of bread and smoked meats, presumably for the farmhands. I act just as surprised to see him as he is to see me.

I wait for Ben to exclaim something about the giant Ankori following me like a dog, but his proclamation is directed at how dirty I look. "What happened to you?" He looks me up and down, readjusting his grip on his heavy basket.

I'm trying not to drool on myself at the heavenly smells filling my nose. I rack my brain, glancing around the fields surrounding his house. Rok is nowhere to be seen—only workers, pulling up crops and tossing them into various carts. "Harvest, you know. It gets messy."

"Did you walk here without shoes?" Ben asks, eyes rounded at my feet.

I can’t hide them, so I shift with a nervous snort. “Mostly?”

Shock is replaced with scrutiny, and then Ben lets go of it all with a laugh. “I don’t know why I’m surprised. You always took off your shoes, even when we had to walk uphill.”

I let my tension loosen into a laugh, but it comes too abruptly. “Yeah, mine finally fell apart. I’m waiting for my parents to come back before asking for more.”

“That must be brutal,” Ben says, frowning. “Here.” He sets down the basket of food, and then he strips off *his* shoes and hands them to me. He must notice the look on my face, so he grins and waves his hand. “You see where I live, right?”

I gaze up at his three-story house. Its intricately carved walls remind me of rivers, snaking toward the ocean. The sloping, white roofs might as well be made from real opal. Even the kor patterns on the walls have been formed to intertwine with the delicate designs of the house—a master technique lost to our generation.

“Yeah, which is why I don’t feel bad doing this, either.” I reach toward the basket and grab a piece of bread and smoked meat. Ben laughs as I take huge bites, and then he bends down to retrieve the goods.

“We had so many leftovers from our family feast last night, Mother told me to take them to the field hands. Please take some for Jen, too.”

At the mention of Jen, I prickle. Still, this is the first good thing that has happened today. I eat as fast as I can, tying up my new leather shoes between bites.

“Why are you here, anyway?” Ben catches me with a huge bite of bread in my mouth.

I swallow, remembering my mission. I’m not as hungry anymore, so I pack the rest of what I grabbed into the satchel I brought.

I could just tell him. He’s known me for so long and just given me the shoes off his own feet—which is why I’m surprised when I lie.

Well, half-lie.

“I want to know more about the rumors.”

Even in broad daylight, the question rattles Ben. He tosses his head. “I don’t know, Chol. They’re just rumors, anyhow.”

He heads down the path, slipping into the fields to approach the nearest worker. I follow, scanning for any sign of Rok. He’s nowhere in

sight.

I persist. “Sure, but you mentioned the name of the woman who first spotted one.”

“Yeah?” Ben stops to swat at a fly that has taken interest in his basket. “So what?”

“So,” I rack my brain for an excuse, “I’m just looking out for my family’s best interests. You know, while my parents are gone.”

“I don’t think it’s anything to worry about,” Ben replies. “Besides, if it were really bad, my parents say the Ankori would step in.”

I let out a hysterical laugh. Ben gives me a peculiar glance as my face twists.

“I’m going to level with you.” I push my luck. “My father is counting on me to keep the farm in good condition—more than normal. I have to be prepared for everything, including shooing stupid pranksters out of the crops.”

Lying is already getting easier. Game-like, almost.

“Well, if you’ll stop bothering me about it, you can ask Lynn Shiro. She lives in South Kankora. I’m”—his face grows red—“engaged to her sister.”

I guess the past few hours of trauma have given me those Antok ears for gossip. “You’re *engaged*?” A year ago, I would have teased Ben over this, but right now, I’m thrilled. At least something good is happening.

He’s cautious, but pleased with my reaction. “Yeah. I asked her during the season of rain. Over by the peach blossoms.” He nods up the hill to his family’s orchard.

I catch a glimpse of Rok all too close, and my mouth goes dry. “Listen, I’d love to stay and talk, but I have to get going.”

He doesn’t have a chance to reply as I prattle on. “Thank you for the shoes and the food, and congratulations! Invite me to the ceremony.” I break into a sprint. I feel like a thief.

I sweat, despite the cool air already pooling across the atmosphere. My opportunity to ask for help is fleeting, falling away as I make haste. But I can’t bring myself to do it. I can’t ask Ben—no one will want to leave their homesteads at the news of raiders. No one can afford to waste these precious days of harvest or the chance to defend their own livelihoods.

I’m on my own.

But so is Jen. I recall the exact moment she chose to stop calling for me. The pain in her eyes—the way she struggled until she was out of view. Is she fighting now? Does she believe I'll just let them take her?

As I run, I try and fail to push these thoughts down. I hear the underbrush snap as Rok trails fast behind me. I don't look back. There's no time to rally help—not without explaining myself. Not without coming out worse off than I am, now.

I have to get to Kankora. If the rumors started there, there's a chance the masked raiders are close.

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5

PATH

I go over my plan for the umpteenth time. I'm going to have to ask around Kankora as to where I can find Lynn Shiro, and I know Rok isn't fond of letting me out of his sight. I've thought of everything—telling him to leave, tricking him, covering him with branches—they're all bad ideas. I'll have to come up with something more convincing.

For now, the dense cover of forest foliage works to conceal us both. I follow the main paths, and if I hear anyone coming, I move us deeper into the woods. After just a couple of hours, I've had plenty of time to rehearse what I'll say if Rok is seen. So far, we've been lucky.

As jade and emerald woods surround me, mist swirls through the air. The shade is chilly, but I'm moving fast enough to fend off the cold. Sky forbid I slow down—I'm ill-prepared as is, and I don't have more than a couple of leftover coins from the festival to trade for any gear I need.

My stomach rumbles—I'm already hungry again.

I've been to Kankora once. Father likes to visit the marketplaces in the surrounding villages, and he took me one year to see how he approaches competition. Normally, I'd argue that competition was stupid—of course Father's produce should be the most popular. But this is the first time I've ever *really* been hungry.

I'm beginning to understand why Father is so determined to keep our farm strong. Part of me wants to blame him for leaving, but I have no idea what would have happened if they'd been home. I shudder.

The first question I want to ask Lynn Shiro is why the masked did what they did. I'll have to refrain from revealing too much. I know she won't have all the answers, but I'm aching to know what other dangers they might pose. I'd rather find out now than when I'm face-to-face with one of their kind.

When I reach the part of the trail that opens up to a valley below, the sun has begun to rest behind thunderheads in the distance. I'm not sure if they'll reach me anytime soon, but the wind seems set on proving me wrong.

From my view on the ridge, Kankora rests at my feet, glittering with red and gold lantern light against the marshland. Antok pales in comparison, mud paths traded for wooden boardwalks. Low bridges arch over small streams, where riverboats tread lazily through the swamps. In the heart, the town rests on its own rise, soggy but solid land holding the majority of the shops and restaurants Kankora is known for.

Through the last of the golden light coloring the world, I see puffs of smoke below. At first, I'm overcome by the sight, and I feel myself panicking. It takes a second to remember that these are controlled fires.

With that in mind, I motion for Rok to follow me down the path. I've given up on the idea of hiding him. If anything, no one will recognize me anyway, so I'm not worried about a barrage of questions. I can ditch him if I must.

As twilight hazes the streets, we make our way into the village. At the mercy of the judgmental "pose" I've decided Rok has, I've snatched a large, burlap canvas that was hanging over someone's fence. We find a broad, straw hat atop a scarecrow too—it's a disguise right out of a children's story. But at this dark hour, when the only people out are bustling home from the town center, I tell myself no one will notice. There are a few people out, as expected, but they breeze on by, disregarding the tall, covered stranger shambling a few paces behind the anxious looking farmboy not wearing enough layers for a mist night.

I'm well south of my own farm, so a sign with the word '*Kankora'* etched neatly into softwood is a welcome sight. Kankora isn't too far that Ben wouldn't be able to make trips to meet up with his betrothed, but it also isn't close enough that I know it well.

For the first time, my world feels small. This place is just as familiar as anything else, but I don't recognize a thing. Back home, I don't have to worry about stepping in a bog each time my feet slip. And the music here is strange—a stringed instrument plays a haunting melody with no rhythm.

The strumming is beautiful—it comes from a glowing window above me, painted shingles carrying the staccato notes to the humid streets. I

realize there is a rhythm after all: the song follows the loud chirp of the water bugs, melodic squeaks coming from the swamp grass against the roadway. As if in answer, the oncoming gale trickles through a crudely crafted wind chime at the base of the house. The reed plates clink against each other over the instrument's forlorn warble.

I could get lost here, somewhere, sometime.

Rok's shadow falls across me. He's somehow more menacing in his rudimentary disguise, and I jump. I could curse reality, but I can't stop myself from yawning. "You're right, you're right. Find Lynn."

Someone rushes up the path, pulling a small cart as they go. Possibly a merchant, trying to get home before the storm blows through.

"Excuse me," I call. He waves me off without so much as a look back. *So much for asking for directions.*

There's a tavern nearby. Warmth echoes from the lighted entrance. Lively voices and laughter bluster into the street, followed by clunky music more familiar to home. I have Rok hold my spear before the chill of the oncoming night pushes me through the doors. He waits outside, and I duck beneath the low porch awning.

Cacophonous music hits me before the smoke of a dozen pipes. To my dismay, every eye in the building fixes on me. I almost shrink back through the swinging door before the band picks up again, the thrum of the melody sweeping everyone right back into what they were doing before a grody farmer boy caught their attention.

I've never been inside a tavern, but the counter on the back wall is a welcome sight. A few ladies are working behind it, and one old man with a tobacco-stained beard and a pipe stuck between his lips is wiping dishes dry.

"You lost, boy?" He singles me out, the pipe never leaving the space between his teeth.

Squaring my shoulders, I walk up to the counter. I hope my nerves don't translate as I deepen my voice. "I found this place, didn't I?"

A couple of gentlemen sitting at the counter chuckle, burying themselves in their dark-colored ales. My nose wrinkles at the fermented scent. Last night's lightheadedness is not a feeling I want to revisit anytime soon.

“I s’pose you did,” the bartender says. “Folks like you, marching in from out of town, they aren’t much welcome.” He leans in, and I can smell the nasty tang of his breath. “You looking for something?”

“I am.” I clear my throat, nodding thanks as one of the women hands me a cup of water. After downing the whole thing, I look the bartender in the eyes. “I need to find Lynn Shiro.”

“You think I know e’r bloke this side of Runerok?” He glares right back, and I shrivel. The old man laughs and dislodges the pipe from his lips to talk. “Lighten up, kid. It’s an old tactic to scare no-good young’uns away.”

Tension lifts from my shoulders. One of the ladies comes back with a floral pitcher of water. It has lemon-scented leaves floating around the top, and she is careful not to let them fall into my cup as she refills it.

“Now, then.” The bartender puts away the dishes he was drying. “Must be your day. Lynn is the daughter of one of my favorite customers. I’d hate to see anything happen to her, so I’d like to know what you want, first.”

“Just some answers,” I say. “I’m trying to connect some dots.”

“What kind of answers?” He’s skeptical. “No offense, but you look like a load of trouble.”

I reach for my face. I haven’t had a chance to shave for a couple of days, I can feel my eyes sinking in place from the size of the bags beneath them, and my skin is slick with sweat and soot.

If I had to guess, I look insane. But I have to try. “Trouble’s what I’m trying to avoid.”

He reels back at this, so I stammer over my next words. “I mean, I’ve had some bad things happen to my family, and I think Lynn Shiro may know something about the people who… hurt… us.”

While he keeps his guard up, sympathy pools in his gray eyes like he can tell there’s truth to my story. He nods toward the entrance. I look over my shoulder and balk at the sight of Rok peeking through the gaps.

“That yours?” he asks.

“He’s a servant,” I retort.

“I ain’t *blind*, boy. That’s a guardian if I’ve ever seen one. Pretty short, though.”

Is this going to ruin everything? I slouch forward at the counter. It’s the first time I’ve sat down all day. I grab a nearby menu to fan myself and

nearly drown in my cup of water.

“Relax, kid,” the bartender chuckles. “People don’t care much for Ankori here—wouldn’t know one if it slapped ‘em in the face.” He stops to twirl his pipe. “Why are you trying to hide it, anyway? Trouble must be real bad if it’s awake, eh?”

Swallowing the tightness in my throat, I nod. As scattered as I feel, I don’t know if I should trust anyone with what’s happened. To my luck, the bartender doesn’t seem too interested. He probably has plenty of drunken villagers who won’t shut up as the night wears on, and he must be relieved I don’t want to talk much.

“Listen. You’ll find Miss Shiro if you keep heading south. Her family lives by Old Red Bridge.” He grumbles at the confusion that blankets my face and scratches his throat. "Listen close, now. You reach an old, red bridge covered in red lanterns, take it. Right to her doorstep, hear?”

I stand to leave, and then I give it another thought. “Thank you,” I tell him, but he waves me away.

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6

LEAD

Just as the old bartender said, Rok and I find “Old Red Bridge.” I’m annoyed enough by his insult to my intelligence—sure, it’s a red bridge, but nothing about it looks old. It makes a beautiful, clean arch over a stagnant pond of lily pads. Fish chase fireflies from beneath the water, creating little ripples when they surface.

As rain clouds fill the sky overhead, a gentle breeze rocks the red lanterns strung along the wooden railing. Their soft lights gleam on the surface of the water, and I spot a handful of the frogs contributing to the symphony of chirps that fill the air.

The further up the path I get, the more my view is obstructed by hanging moss and ticklish willow leaves. Rok’s jade glow helps me see where I’m going, and soon, a small cottage stands in a clearing ahead. We stay on the path, keeping an eye on the brush and swamp water. I’m sure this family wouldn’t live in a predator-infested swamp, but I don’t want to find out I’m wrong.

The cottage is illuminated by more lanterns. It has a cozy, thatched roof, and rounded stones make up the walls. Small windows filled with yellow glass beckon me, and I take a deep breath.

I remember how I must look right now. My heart beats faster and my head spins. I don’t care what these people think of me. I just need an answer. A clue. *A path to Jen.*

I use the brass knocker. From behind the wooden door comes muffled voices and the screech of a chair. Rok has remained back among some of the low-hanging trees, and it’s the first time I wish he was beside me.

The door swinging open steals my breath, and I’m met by a short, middle-aged man. He frowns at the sight of me. “Can I help you?”

Behind him, I see a table set with a modest amount of food, and three women watching with big eyes.

“I…” I don’t know how to do this.

Then, one of the girls stands. She’s wearing a blue, silk robe, embroidered with hundreds of white flowers. Her dark hair is piled atop her head and held up by emerald-encrusted pins.

“I saw you at the festival—you’re Ben’s friend!” she exclaims, a grin on her porcelain face. Then, she falters. “Is everything all right?”

The short man, her father, sighs and steps aside to let his daughter hog the door frame. I give a slight nod and furrow my brow. “He’s fine. I just saw him this morning. Actually, I was here to talk to… Lynn.” I look past her into the room.

Disappointment colors her face, but the other girl, an older version of her, perks up. “Who is it, Lily?” Lynn says, getting up. She’s wearing the same robe in green.

“I don’t care.” Lily rolls her eyes as her sister makes her way out onto the porch. The door closes behind her.

“Are you another suitor Mother has lined up?” Lynn gags. “I’m not interested.”

I don’t know their family history, and I don’t want a part of the drama. Before she can go back inside, I clear my throat.

“No, actually,” I say.

She turns, animosity replaced by intrigue. I take it as an invitation to continue. “Ben told me the rumors. I wanted to hear it for myself.”

Her face loses color, and her hand flies to fiddle with the kor pendant at her neckline. “Who are you?” she asks, tone dripping with malice. Her feet shuffle, angling toward the front door, but she’s leaning toward me at the same time. “I don’t know what I saw. If you’re just here to make fun of me—”

I can’t lie the way I did to Ben.

“The masked destroyed my family’s farm.”

Her lips form a straight line as her amber eyes pour into mine. She wants me to flinch—to crumble. But at this point, nothing can shake me.

“I need to find them.”

“Seriously?” Her voice lilts with a frightened laugh, and then her face darkens when she understands my earnest intent. “The masked?”

“So, you do know.”

“Everyone thinks I’m crazy. They were making up stories of their own just to mock me. But you’re dead serious?”

“Why would I come here after dark looking like this?” I gesture to myself—my ripped tunic, my mud-soaked work trousers—and she shrugs.

After a moment filled with wailing frogs and the cry of some lonesome waterfowl, she lets out a tense breath. “Come inside, please.” She holds her robe a little tighter against herself. “I don’t like to be out here after dark.”

I look to where Rok is supposed to be. Lynn doesn’t follow my gaze, for she’s too busy heading inside. Feeling awkward, I step inside. I have to duck through the entrance.

Lynn nods to her parents and her sister, who are in mid-conversation. “Mother, Father, this is…” She hesitates, embarrassment flourishing on her cheeks.

“Chol. Chol Sul,” I offer, folding my hands and giving another slight bow.

“Sul…” Her father squints, lost in thought. “Ah, yes. Sul owns a valley north of here. Beautiful, rich harvests.” He raises one eyebrow at his wife, who purses her lips and gives a broad grin before taking a long drink of her tea.

Mr. Shiro motions to the empty chair next to Lynn’s. “Please, join us.”

“Father,” Lynn groans. “I must insist he washes up first. Don’t interrogate him over dinner. Let him bathe and then eat when he’s ready.”

“Lynn!” Lily gasps. “You know better than to boss someone around!”

I try to interject, but my face turns bright pink at the only thing I can think to say: “I like a strong-willed woman.” Better to play into this charade of being a suitor if I want the hospitality to continue.

Mrs. Shiro nearly spits out her tea, and Lynn laughs so hard she snorts.

“Very well.” Mr. Shiro seems tired. “Wash up. I’m sure there’s something around here that will fit you,” he sneers, the gears of judgment beginning to whir.

Lynn leads me to their bathhouse as fast as she can without breaking composure—it’s connected to their cottage by a narrow hall. “Sky above,” she mutters when we’re out of earshot. “For the record, I am *not* interested.”

I scoff. “Sorry. I couldn’t think of anything else to say. Besides, I’m not interested in gold-diggers.”

“I beg your pardon?” Lynn whirls around. “I am *not* my parents.”

“I’m glad.” I grin at her. I’ve never thought of my family as rich—but when we own a valley, whereas most villagers have no more than their own homes… “They wouldn’t get much, anyway.”

That much is painfully true.

We stop at the edge of their bathhouse. Through the reed door lies a pool ready to be heated by stones from the firepit.

Lynn grunts in irritation, crossing her arms as she lets me inside. “Douse the flames when you’re finished. There are flower petals for scent, and soap over there.”

I make my way to the fire, reaching for the tongs to pick up some stones. Lynn remains in the doorway to stare daggers at my back, and I raise an eyebrow. “Are you going to stay?”

Her face goes red as a beet. “I don't even know why I let you in.”

“Sorry.” I tense. “It was a bad joke. And I’m sorry. For what you’re dealing with.”

“Sorry?” She tilts her head, and I wait for a tongue-lashing. “Why would you be sorry for me?”

“Because you have every right. No one believes you, and that’s upsetting. Or maybe you’re upset your parents don’t want you to marry the person you really love.”

Her mortification confirms my suspicion. While Lily’s hair donned ornate, gem-encrusted pins—no doubt gifts from Ben or her parents—Lynn wears only one: a wooden pin with a silk lotus that doesn’t match anything else in this home.

She stills.

“Your pin.” I nod. “That’s not from anyone random.”

Lynn reaches for her ink-black hair, shame flashing across her face. “Please don’t tell anyone about it—I won’t tell them about your farm, either—sorry.”

I nod. If her parents find out I have nothing to offer, they’d kick me out before I had a chance to learn more about the masked.

Once Lynn leaves, I strip down and sink into the heated bath. I’m sore from head to toe, and the mint leaves I find next to the edge of the water do wonders to seep into my aches and relieve them. Still, even with the gentle lull of rain against the clay roof, it’s hard to relax. The idea of what Jen is

going through resurfaces. I don’t know if she’s dead, being tortured, or being kept somewhere. I don’t know if she’s hurt, hungry, crying, or what. I know nothing, and I feel powerless.

I sputter to life at the sound of voices beyond the reed door. I choke on water as I surface from the pool. I sank too far down, and while I’m no longer filthy, I feel like a drowned rat. Shaking the water from my hair, I take deep breaths. My ribs hurt with anxiety.

I find something to dry off with, leaving footprints all over the stone floor as I pace. Before I douse the flames, I peek outside the door.

Someone left a pile of clean garments there, so I sweep them up and put them on. The tan pants are baggy but have strings at the knees and a cloth belt to tighten them. There’s a teal, sleeveless tunic with a V-shaped collar. I’m not sure who in this house ever wore it, but I’m grateful it’s there.

The last thing they’ve left is a long, dark coat. It doesn’t fasten in the front, but it has broad sleeves, a hood, and most importantly, two sizeable pockets.

Refreshed, I tie on my sandals and douse the flames, but not before feeding them my old outfit. When I make my way back to the common area, most of the lights are out. The only person is Lynn, stretched out on a couch as she messes with the lotus pin between her fingers.

“Oh, good. I was worried they wouldn’t fit.” She doesn’t look at me.

“You haven’t even seen them.”

“I don’t think you would’ve left the bathhouse without them.”

“Fair point.”

I settle onto the couch beside the one she’s sprawled on. It’s rather low to the ground, but it makes the ceiling feel much higher than it is. “You mentioned food?” I say. I don’t mean to overstep, but hunger is a powerful drug.

She points to the table where a single plate waits for me, covered by a clay lid. Not wanting to offend her any further, I decide to eat at the raised table like a proper adult.

“My parents are letting you stay in my brother’s old room,” she says. “So, before we never speak to each other again, let me tell you everything.”

I dive into the delicious plate of food. It’s true the further south you go, the more spices folks like to use—nearly choking helps me pace myself

before I remember to listen.

Lynn picks through words she's already been battered for. "You already know I saw a masked person, but I didn't tell anyone that I followed one."

I sputter. "You followed one?"

"Yeah," she says. "My father would kill me if he found out. If he believed me in the first place."

Her brow knits as she recounts the event. "So, I followed one. Pretty deep into the marshes, too. I could tell they weren't from around here. Instead of going around the reeds altogether, they were hacking them down. Didn't know you have to sever them at the base if you want to get through __"

I clear my throat.

"Anyway, next thing I know, there are a dozen more of them, and they have these tools and weapons with—with kor in them. But… it wasn't… natural. It looked like the kor had been forced into their tools."

"Yes," I pipe up. "Exactly."

She's addled by my sudden response, so I elaborate. "They used those weapons to destroy my farm. I've never seen kor used like that—they took down our Ankori."

This peels back a whole new layer for Lynn. It's like she's confirmed a ghost story was real. "Your Ankori?"

My stomach sinks. "Yes."

She's pensive, squinting at her lotus pin and picking at a fraying thread. "When my brother last visited, he mentioned something about his travels. I didn't think anything of it at the time, but he said something about a weapon master… maybe just a craftsman… in Sun Lao City. One who was developing new uses for kor."

"You think that has something to do with them?" I forget my food. Sun Lao is far, but I could make it in a few days if I leave straight away.

Lynn shrugs. "That's all I know."

"But it's a clue." I jump up, eyes set on the door. "Thank you."

"Chol," she says, sitting up. "Farms can be rebuilt. If those weapons are anything like you say, don't go by yourself."

"It's not that simple." I grow cold, and my stare must unsettle her. She cowers back, gnawing one of her cheeks. My hand finds the doorknob.

“It’s raining,” Lynn points out.

“They took something from me. More than my home.” It’s the first time I’ve gotten close to admitting it out loud, and it stings more than it did keeping it in.

A strange calm smooths over Lynn’s face. Her lips form a somber “oh.”

“I have to find them.”

“You need help—let me tell my father.”

“No.” I glare at her. I shouldn’t go further, but I do. “You said it yourself. No one will believe us.”

“But if they see your Ankori, your home—”

“They can’t.”

Her expression says everything, and I bring myself to give her a nod before she sinks back into the couch.

“*If* they come back,” I try, clenching my fists. But there is no end to that sentence. There is nothing any of us could do against those weapons; those glowing masks and grating breaths.

My throat hitches at the sight of Lynn’s eyes, round with worry.

“I’ll find them. And I’ll make sure they don’t hurt anyone else.”

She says nothing, already lost in thought amidst the floorboards.

“Thank you for your kindness.” At that, I press through the door and into the rain.

The icy torrent soaking my new clothes feels like the punishment I deserve for the brash-headed idea that I stand a chance. I shouldn’t be so stubborn—I should just face the facts and petition as many people for help as I can. But the uncertainty of any response drives me to silence.

Who would believe me? After the way I made a scene of trying to drag Jen home, the village must think I’m a cruel, older brother to a poor, helpless sister. Would they think I was hiding something worse? That, somehow, the annihilation of our home and the disappearance of my sister is my fault; I caused the fire, cursed our land, and caused the Ankori to crumble?

I haven’t made any friends besides Ben in years. Antok knows me as “that Sul boy.” The kid who played stupid pranks on the village elders with his rapscallion friend before his father found out and grounded him for an entire season. That boy who ran home the moment school was no longer in

session and never set foot beyond the border of his father's farm if he didn't have to. That boy who will never live up to anything good the Sul family has ever produced.

But Jen is popular—she frequents the village. She has friends whose names I never cared to learn, no matter how often they filled our home with laughter and gossip. Surely they would fret over her disappearance. Surely they could see past my faults and flaws to help save her.

But anyone I know would rather believe a superstition than a Sul whose own father barely thinks of him as a man.

As I march across the bridge, the water erupts with life. I jolt to the side. Rok emerges from the murky water, algae and moss falling from him as he joins me.

"What were you doing down there?" I ask, picking up my spear from where I'd stashed it.

Rok extends an arm, holding a fish that jerks about. The image is so comical—I can't help but forget my woes. "I'm not hungry anymore, but thanks."

If Ankori could sigh, I'm sure Rok would. He lets go of the fish, and it flops around before spilling back into the pond.

"You're no guardian," I tell him. "You're an oversized babysitter."

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7

GIRL

I regret not taking up Lynn’s offer to stay. My legs are leaden, and the immovable tangle of woods only makes it harder and harder to carry on in the darkness.

I need sleep.

The rain has let up after a couple of hours, reduced to trees emptying their leaves of water in dribbles. I find shelter via sheer luck, a crag in the sloping landscape’s façade to offer solace. After poking through the darkness with my spear, I determine it’s a good place to set up camp.

Rok proves useful yet again as he moves pesky boulders aside and helps me build a firepit. Once we find enough dry kindling, he offers me his arm, and there’s an understanding between us. I strike the spear against it a few times before sparks break loose. Before long, the fire is rolling and I’m able to lie down.

If Rok sleeps, I can’t tell. The perpetual, slow pulse of kor running across his body gives no indication between waking and statue. He leans against a broad tree trunk, facing the fire to watch. At least, I think he’s watching.

We both watch the rolling flames. My heart refuses to quit galloping for a while, but soon I’m warm, and the memory of what fire meant two nights ago begins to fade.

I wake to pitch black. The fire is no more than embers, and soft patters of rain make their way from the heavens once again. Rok’s glow has dimmed, though the pulse remains. Perhaps he does sleep.

The forest moves beyond my bleary eyesight. Shadows dance around our camp, and the trees lean inward like massive hands corralling us. As I

doze off again, the bushes rustle. Out of the corner of my eye, a shadow moves irregularly.

I dry my face of drool. The rainforest is devoid of life this stormy night—no critter song, no moonlight. I tell myself the sound was just a branch falling through the undergrowth, amd I lay back down and try to go back to sleep.

But it‘s impossible to shake that creeping feeling.

We’re being watched.

I bolt upright. My movement startles something in the bushes, and I shout at the sight of a hooded figure scrambling to get away. I find my spear and pursue.

“Stop!” I demand, swatting at the thickets the stranger’s plight thrusts into my path.

The stranger is much shorter than me, covering less ground as their cloak catches on the brush. All I need is a good angle for my spear—a solid throw should do the rest. *Pin the threat to the ground.*

My focus narrows as I sprint. The low-hanging boughs of the forest can scratch me all they want—I won’t let this menace get away with whatever they were planning.

Right as they’re within range of my spear, the stranger vanishes from view and I tumble forward.

Moss and mulch break my fall. I tuck and roll down the ridge they slid over. They’re already back on their feet, so I haul myself upright and thrust every ounce into the chase. Closer. *Closer*.

The stranger trips, flying forward and letting out a grunt. I hear a crunch as they land, and then I’m on top of them raising my spear as they roll over and their hood falls back and—*it’s a girl.*

She gulps in air as she stares at me, eyes wide as she glances between my face and the glow of my spear. She looks to be my age—young for a bandit.

“Who are you?” I demand, pressing her shoulder into the ground. She cries out in pain, raising both hands to protect her face.

“Wait!” she shouts, eyes squeezing shut.

My stomach twists with a pang of guilt. I relax my hold and let my spear fall to my side.

My mistake.

Her fist hammers into my cheekbone, and she kicks me with a force no one that short should possess. As I fall back, she staggers to her feet and swats her long cloak out of her way. I'm not sure how she got so far in such a billowing getup.

I stand my ground, readjusting my hold on the spear as I point it toward her. She thrusts her arms out as if to egg me on, and the cloak forms a wingspan around her before she points.

"Why do you have an Ankori?" she exclaims, disinterested in the tip of my spear. Her accent is unfamiliar.

My lungs steady as I watch her. I've never had to hurt someone before, but she's bold now that we're face to face. It almost makes my knees knock at the concept of defending myself.

She laughs, awkward and loud. "I scared you, didn't I?" Somehow, it's not a taunt.

Regardless, I don't move. Not even to brush the hair out of my eyes. "What do you want?" I manage. It's a miracle my voice doesn't crack.

The girl's hands fall to her sides. As her cloak swishes, I catch the glint of two daggers fastened around her legs—one on either thigh. She must realize I've yet to lower my spear, for her voice flattens with persuasion. "I don't mean any harm. I'm just interested in the guardian."

"He won't go with you." I shake my head.

"No—I know—I just wanted to look at him," she insists.

I frown. "I don't know you. You might be a thief. I could've killed you."

She huffs. "I'm not a thief. And"—she nods to my trembling hands—"I don't think you could."

My guard comes back up like hackles. Then, the stranger reaches for her daggers, slow enough that I go still. She tosses them into the bushes.

"Does that help?"

I say nothing, but I lower my spear. She presses her lips together, squinting past my shoulder through the night.

"Just one look, please." Her voice is fragile, dark eyes pouring into mine.

I shake my head. "N-no," I say. "I don't know you."

She nods in agreement, turning to retrieve her daggers. As she stoops into the underbrush, she runs a hand through her black hair so it will stay

out of her round face. It's choppy, layered like someone didn't know what they were doing. "Sorry I disturbed you," she mutters.

The moment she finds her knives, she covers herself with the hood of her cloak.

I lean against a tree. "How long were you following us? I have to ask. You know, in case someone else tries."

The stranger grins and crosses her arms, which I notice are bound by white fabric all the way up into her sleeves. "Worried someone will see your guardian prancing around? Supposed to be asleep, right?"

"Someone might *actually* be a thief." To reemphasize my point, I angle my spear ever-so-slightly her way. "Or keep trying to follow us."

The girl shakes her head, cheeks rosy in the glow of Jen's pendant. "I didn't follow you long… What about you? Why are you so far out here?"

"Um," I falter, "camping?"

The woods behind us rumble to life. My skin prickles as something crashes through the growth, and then Rok is towering beside me. He seems to look me up and down, and then he notices the stranger. My stomach knots as Rok angles himself her way, kor flaring brighter as he starts toward her. But then she raises her hands in a gesture I've never seen. To my astonishment, Rok calms and reverts to a less imposing stance.

"What was that?"

She shoots me a look. "Nothing—just a hello."

I roll my eyes and follow her. Rok lumbers behind me. "I'm not an idiot. Rok was going to beat you to a pulp until you did that."

"Rok?" She's amused. "Clever."

"Look, I've got to name him if he's planning to follow me everywhere." I'm not sure why I tell her this. "Seriously, what was that?"

"A peace signal," she says. When I don't respond, she stops to look at me. "Is this really news to you?"

"I just tell him what to do."

"He's smart enough to know what you're saying, but he's also smart enough not to listen to everything." She invites herself to rest a hand on Rok's arm, and he leans toward her. "Ankori are more intelligent than you'd think."

"Ugh." I give Rok a disgruntled headshake. "You like her?"

He nods enthusiastically for a rock beast. But what do I know?

I groan. “We don’t even know her.”

“I’m Alo.”

I run into her extended arm. With a disgruntled look, I take her hand. It’s soft. Her parents must not make her do much.

“Usually, you say your name back.” She smirks, and I realize I’ve been holding her hand more than shaking it.

I want to punch that rounded little face square between the eyes.

“Chol,” I say through clenched teeth.

“And why, Chol, are you following me?”

Sky above and Aér below, *I’m following her?*

Rok turns his head to me. His face, as always, is featureless, but the extra glint in the kor streak tells me he’s giving me a look.

I defuse by letting all the hot air out of my chest and kicking the ground. “I’m not following you—”

“We’re about a hundred paces from your camp, and you definitely didn’t make it here by yourself.” She shrugs.

I think of a dozen terrible names but can’t bring myself to call her any. “You know why.”

“It was nice to meet you, then.” She waves her fingers, and then she heads into the foliage. “That was a signal for goodbye, by the way.”

My face is hot.

I can’t take this. She’s under my skin, but she knows about Ankori. Rok’s already proven himself the most useful part of my trip, but if there are ways to get him to do what I ask—*like squish irritating people for me*—I need to know.

“Wait.” I squeeze my way through the narrow thickets. Her cloak is already caught on a branch, so she has no choice but to hear me out. “I’m sorry I tried to spear you, earlier. Okay?”

“Unsuccessfully.”

I brush off the insult. “But you know stuff that I don’t even know. About him.” I pat Rok’s arm. “He likes you, and he’s good at knowing who to trust. That much I do know.”

“Okay…” She drags the word out. “So what do you want?”

“A guide. I think.” *I don’t know.* “Answers, mostly.”

“A guide.” She might as well have laughed in my face. “What makes you think I have time for that?”

She breaks free from the branch's hold on her cloak, but she's not about to break free from the accusation I'm about to make up. The accusation that, hopefully, sounds convincing.

"First of all," I turn her words on her, "you're not from around here, either. Your accent gives it away."

Just as I hoped, she goes pale. I continue. "You don't know the jungle well enough to not wear that dumb cloak. You're not a thief… a traveler?"

Her fingers fly to her temples. "I mean—"

"Ha! You are!" I dance in place. "Where are you going?"

Alo wrinkles her nose. "Fine. I have business in Sun Lao," she admits.

My arms go skyward. "I knew it. Not the city part, but I knew it."

"And this matters because...?"

"I'm going there, too. We could go together, and you could teach me what you know about Ankori. How *did* you know that hand signal, by the way?"

"Um…" I've rendered her speechless. "I used to study Ankori."

"Where are you from?" I follow her. "Up north? That's what it sounds like. You look young to be traveling alone."

"Mhmm," she answers quietly. *One more score for me.*

Then, she faces me. "Listen, Chol. It's almost dawn. I'm sorry I disturbed your sleep—it was rude of me to sneak around like that. I was just interested in your guardian. That's all."

I brace for the other foot to fall.

"Maybe we should go our own ways? I'm trying to get to Sun Lao quickly—I don't always stop to rest through the night."

We've arrived at another camp. This one has a proper setup, and the fire is still lit. A couple of large bags hang from a low branch, and Alo makes her way toward them. She opens one and riffles through the contents, indifferent that I'm still watching her.

"I knew this was a bad idea," she says to herself. She struggles to reach high enough to pull the whole thing from the limb.

I walk up behind her, and she whirls around with her hands up like she could lay me out flat. I step back.

"Whoa, just trying to help." I reach up and remove the bag for her, and she groans as I pass it her way. "Just like I can help you if we go to the city together...?" I have to try.

She doesn’t respond. Instead, she ducks into the cloth tent she’s set up, and I sigh in defeat. “No?”

“I want you to stay out of my way,” comes her abrasive answer.

“Out of your way on our way to the city?”

Exhaustion coats her words. “I don’t care. Just out of the way.” Her head pokes out of the tent flaps, and I see that her short hair is ruffled. “I need *some* sleep right now, so please start by being quiet. I don’t want to hear anything else until the sun is up.”

My mouth seals shut, and I shamble backward until I’m opposite the dying campfire. *Sky above*, I’m starved for conversation that doesn’t involve trying to figure out what’s happened to Jen. I almost miss the way she berated me all fire season—I even miss Father’s disapproving lectures and Mother’s gentle excuses.

Just this unfamiliar girl scolding me brings me that much closer to home, and it’s easier than I expected to drift off.

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8

LOST

I'm torn from a peaceful slumber by icy water splashing across my face. Sputtering, I sit up with a gasp.

"What was that for?" I cough, swiping water from my forehead.

Alo stands over me, her hand angling a leaf over my head. As soon as we make eye contact, she whips her hand away, releasing the leaf and allowing it to spring back to its natural position. Even more water pelts me.

"We're losing daylight."

Groaning, I pick up my spear and try to keep up as Alo starts down the path. Rok joins my side, taking sweeping strides behind us. From the looks of it, he's been up for a while, watching Alo pull the camp apart. I'm jealous that Ankori don't seem to tire. I can't blame Rok, though. If I'd been standing still for a couple of centuries, I'd never stop moving.

Alo is so set on her destination that I have nothing but trust in her ability to get us there. It's the burn in my legs that concerns me. We've been traveling up an incline for so long that I think I might have to start dragging myself, especially when she makes me take a turn carrying "our" supplies.

I decide to worry less about the path ahead and focus on the surrounding forest. I recognize most of the plants—mostly from years spent beating back the jungle so it won't consume our valley. Even as the season grows cold, the rainforest remains verdant, enveloped beneath a warm canopy. Within, the jungle's arms are heavy with fog. Sunlight bursts through scant openings and streams through the whirling mist, highlighting spanning ferns of every kind and flecks of pink and gold flowers.

I've never felt so small in my life. If we're not shouldering our way through thickets and brambles, we're staring up at the heights of the trees covering the ground. Their grand stature boasts jumbled roots and kor veins

along every path, and their vine-strangled trunks stretch so far skyward that my neck hurts from looking up.

The fresh scent of rain pervades us. A chilled breeze drifts by, plucking monstrous leaves from their thrones to reunite them with their fallen brethren on the mossy floor. Rot creeps through toppled logs, coating tree carcasses with colorful mushrooms and plush moss. More than the living kor veins, the empty ones amidst the decaying forest floor fascinate me. Their webbed patterns remain long after their light has gone out, and the hollows they leave hold an eerie resonance as I run my fingers along a few.

As the storm front builds to the east, I feel like I'm being hugged by a damp breath. Every now and then, warbled cries fill the woods as birds call to one another. The magnitude of this landscape consumes me. In this forest of moss and mist-jade, I'm at peace for the first time in days. The wind could pick up and whisk me into the branches spreading above, and I'd gladly leave everything to stay.

Alo stops, planting a palm on the bleak bark of a vine-covered tree. "You wouldn't happen to have a…" She bites her cheek. "Never mind. It wouldn't matter, anyway."

"A map?" Against my will, my head tilts. "Are you lost?"

She rubs her forehead, shutting her eyes as she leans against a tree. "Not lost. Just a bit turned around."

"How is that possible?" I spread my arms. "We've been walking uphill for more than an hour." My breath betrays me, and I pant with exhaustion. I'm used to farm work—not endless trotting up steep inclines.

If Alo feels the same wear and tear, she doesn't show it. She crosses her arms and scans the surrounding forest, drinking in every bit before speaking to me. "I do know the way," she says. "I just... have to find it first."

A solid groan leaves my body. I'm dizzy. "Why would you lie about something like this?" I pinch the bridge of my nose.

"You're the one who thought it was a good idea to follow me," Alo jabs. "I never invited you in the first place."

"I thought you knew what you were doing," I say. "Besides. You can't deny there's something nice about traveling in a group."

I mean it. Though we've hardly spoken, I've had more than enough time to consider the ramifications of going alone. Besides, she has supplies I would be dead without within a couple of days.

Other than rolling her eyes, she doesn't respond.

I swallow the tightness in my throat as she leads the way, deciding it's better not to bother her.

After a while, the forest thins. We're faced with steeper inclines than I'm ready to tackle, and the mossy ground has turned into the stone face of a mountain. The path offers a few ledges, and we stick to these as we work our way up. As we climb, the alcoves we use to lift ourselves grow narrow and unstable. Too soon, we're above the trees, and Alo is several measures above me.

A curious look alights in her expression, and a smile broadens across her cheeks. "Come look at this!"

Huffing, I heave myself up further. My stomach swaps places with my lungs when I look down. The sky is too close, and the ground is a distant memory.

I shudder. The way up felt like nothing—our only option was to climb, and the branches of the forest would catch us if we fell. Only now do my arms threaten to lose their strength. Save for a ledge or two to bounce off, there's a good drop of nothing between us and the forest floor.

Alo laughs, almost hysterical. "I knew this would work," she shouts. My chest tightens like her loudness might throw us both over the side.

"What would work? Luring me up here so you could push me off?" I hold firmer to the sharp rocks jabbing my ribcage.

"No, idiot." She rolls her eyes and nods west. "See those mountains?"

I hate her so much right now. My legs, ready to buckle at any second, wobble beneath me. And she expects me to climb *higher*?

I dare turn my back to the drop below, but not before sucking in what could be my last breath. My callused hands guide me along the ridges, and I'm able to pull myself up another few feet. Now, I see what she's talking about. We're braced on a narrow peak jutting out of the overgrown canopy, higher than I realized.

From here to the horizon, thick jungles plague the landscape. The world undulates in mesmerizing waves of sifting treetops. Mist shelters the world below, and the wind whistles past my ears. It's gentle enough to paint

all before me in a shade of calm, but harsh enough for me to feel like I could blow right over the edge.

Even so, I see what Alo is so happy about. In the distance, mountains clutter the line between sky and soil, taller than we stand now, taller than any of the Shaorok rises back home. Their ridges are burdened with the faint outlines of city walls, and while it's too far to see in detail, I recognize these mountains as the Shál-Sun range—the cradle of Sun Lao.

I can't help but let out an excited yell, which echoes down the other side of our perch. Alo gives me a strange look, but all I can do is grin.

A cold blast of wind shakes me back to reality. Clamping to the rocks holding me, I let my weight bring me to my knees. A look down shows that Rok is waiting for us—I don't think he'd cushion my fall well.

Alo is quick to climb down. Near the bottom, she lets herself slide the rest of the way before jumping and landing next to Rok. As nerve-racking as that was to watch, she's fine.

My climb down is stiff and terrifying. I slip more than once, but no one makes fun of me for taking a minute to catch my breath each time. By the time my feet are on solid ground, I could cry.

Alo smacks me on the back in congratulations. I could choke on my embarrassment. "Yeah, yeah," I say, and she laughs.

Now that we know we've been going in the right direction, we have to make our way around this hill. Darkness falls just as we reach the other side of the viewpoint.

The trees have masked what lies between us and the city, but after scaling a cliff like that, I feel like I can do anything. It's easier to keep up now that I know for sure which way we're going. With newfound confidence, I match Alo's stride.

"So." I clear my throat. "Why are you going to Sun Lao?"

To my chagrin, her brow knits. "I already told you."

"To settle some things," I recall. "Like... what?"

She grunts and walks ahead of me. "I also told you to stay out of my way."

"I don't see how making small talk is getting in your way." I press my lips together.

"Because"—she whirls around—"I'm trying to concentrate. I don't know what's out here, but it could be anything. And I'm not inclined to

being underprepared when we’re ambushed.”

She matches the irritation plain on my face. “Just... shut up and let me focus.”

I glance to Rok for reassurance, but he shows no hint of anything. *Ambushed*?

My fingers wrap tighter around my spear, and I glimpse into the deepening shadows night brings. I guess it makes sense, but I can’t imagine being attacked. I’ve heard stories travelers have brought of their ventures in deep woods, but other than the occasional kygawari attack—feline creatures with massive fangs—I’ve never heard of anyone being ambushed.

Alo must sense my unease. She gives a flat sigh and readjusts her pack. “Just stay alert. Okay?”

I nod, mostly to myself. *Think of Jen*, I repeat in my mind. But the idea of what she’s going through stills my heart and seizes my anxieties, shattering any peace I may have found.

My throat closes and my breaths become shallow. Everything in my world has changed, and I think the wall of what’s happening is hitting me. Brick after brick flies toward me, slamming into my consciousness and rattling my perception of reality.

I’m falling apart. Shaking. Gasping for air. Clawing at nothing as I cling to myself, trembling in wave after wave that floods me.

My eyes snap open as my foot catches on a root. I’m flying through the air, tumbling beyond all reach of light. My body aches as I fall, shredded by thorns and brambles that tear at my skin and hair and clothes. And then my memory blinks.

“Chol!” a voice echoes through my subconscious. “What happened?”

I can’t grasp anything. My vision is unfocused, and there’s a bright hum in my head as I try to understand how I fell.

The world is black as I resurface from this overwhelming spiral. My arms and legs throb with cuts and bruises, but they’re being cushioned by branches and leaves. Through the darkness, someone approaches. They’re blurry, and then Alo is up close, standing over me with fear flickering across her complexion.

“Are you all right?” she exclaims. I feel her cold hands gliding over my face as she shakes me.

“I’m fine.” Dirt sprays from my lips. I roll over, eyes wide as I stare at the ground.

“How many fingers am I holding up?” She holds up three. I’m too embarrassed to answer, so I sit up.

Soreness hits me like a bull, and I hold my head in my hands as I groan. I can make out my surroundings well enough. Steep walls shoot up from the ground all around me, and exposed roots trickle down the slopes above. There’s running water inches from my feet, babbling over smooth river stones as it goes. When Rok appears over the rise, I put two and two together. I detached from reality, and it sent me plummeting into an actual ravine.

You’d think with all the hair I have, I wouldn’t have hit my head so hard. I don’t even remember hitting my head—all I know is that it hurts, and the side of my face is burning with scrapes. The shock has passed, and now I’m just dizzy.

“Sorry,” I spit out with some grass.

Alo picks herself up and swats dirt from her hands. “I told you to stay alert,” she barks, “and you fall off a cliff not even ten minutes later?”

I don’t blame her for being irritated. “We need to keep moving,” I wheeze.

“No.” She’s furious. Panicked, even. “Not now. I knew I shouldn’t have let you come.”

“Alo,” I plead from my seat on the ground. “I’ll be more careful. I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

“You have to look where you’re going if you want to stick with me.”

I laugh. Maybe I’m hysterical, maybe it really is funny. For some reason, Alo starts laughing too, but hers are more like bursts of pain.

“This isn’t funny.” She collects herself and runs a palm against her brow. “I—I’m sorry I’m angry. I’m just trying to get to Sun Lao as soon as possible, and I really can’t afford any more distractions.”

“So am I,” I argue. To my relief, I can stand. The disoriented feeling washes away after a moment. “It’s all I have.”

“*Why*?” I watch her oversized cloak whip about as she throws her hands out. “Yesterday you didn’t even know how to get there. Why is it so important that you follow *me*? Why should I trust you?”

“Because I need help.” My arms unfold, and my eyes begin to burn. “I need all the help I can get. This is the only chance I’ve got.”

She squeezes her eyes shut. “Are you... trying to ‘find yourself’ or something? I read a study about that once—”

“No.” *Find myself?* I shake my head. but if more is what she wants, I’ll give her enough. “I’m... looking for something that was taken from me. And right now, the only clue I have is in Sun Lao. A master weaponsmith.”

Alo’s eyebrows go up as she scrutinizes me. On the bright side, it’s a familiar face. Then, she exhales, and I can feel the tension leaving her soul. “Sun Lao is a big place. There’s more than one highly praised weaponsmith.”

“This one should be easy to find,” I protest. “They work with kor.”

She falters, her voice a hum of lackluster enthusiasm. “Don’t they all?”

I shrug. “I guess, but this one is special. Rumors of their… *techniques* made it all the way to my village, after all.” Another half-truth. And I’m not sure why Alo cares all of a sudden.

She’s pensive—maybe it has to do with her interest in Ankori. “What kind of techniques?” she asks, and I’m glad to tell her. Especially if she’s truly interested in mine.

I glance at Rok. “This weaponsmith… they designed an Ankori-killer.”

Alo goes pallid, and I can practically hear her mouth go dry with the breath she drinks in. She runs a hand through her black hair and stares directly ahead. “I heard rumors too—last time I was there. I… may know how to find them.”

What she says doesn’t fully register. I manage to croak, “You do?”

Nodding, Alo begins to climb up the side of the ravine. Desperate for more answers, I follow her to the top. “Who is it?”

“He’s…” she trails off, eyes darker than night, and then she lets out a laugh. “You know what? I have my own business, you have yours. I’ll point you in the right direction when we get there. You’ll find him in no time.”

Biting my lower lip, I study her as she prattles on. “Are you hungry? We should stop for the night.”

I’m starving, but I’ve been so set on our destination that this is the first time I’ve felt it.

We get to work on a fire. Alo sets up her little tent, and then she disappears inside. When she emerges, she’s no longer wearing her cloak.

Instead, she's changed into a coat like nothing I've ever seen. It's soft and pillowy, with white fur lining the hood and sleeves. The most interesting part is the lack of buttons. I don't have a chance to see how it works, but there's an intricate metal mechanism holding it together in the middle.

I can't help myself. "Is that from your home?"

She tilts her head, blinking softly from across the fire.

"Up north," I correct myself.

"Oh." Alo pats her sleeves as she holds herself. "Yeah. You know mining villages. Always coming up with new ways to stay warm."

As Alo heats salted meat over the fire, I rub the back of my head. No thanks to how well I paid attention to the path, I have a headache. To take my mind off the low throb in my skull, I tug a fraying thread from the base of my tunic. A few minutes later, I've clumsily added a small braid to the back of my shaggy hair. It's not useful in any way—my hair's not *that* long—but it reminds me of the ones Jen always gave me.

Alo passes me a meager serving. Her eyes drift to the rat-tail of a braid jutting from the right side of my hair, and her face twists. I can't help but smile. She smiles, too.

When I finally decide to ignore my aches and get some sleep, I don't think of Jen. I think of Alo—alone in the woods; guarded, but dragged from her goals over my Ankori. Part of me wonders if the raiders found her, too. Maybe they originated in the north. The border along Aénar and Runerok is desolate enough; it would make sense for the raiders to drift south and wreak their havoc along the way.

As consciousness becomes harder to grasp, my thoughts muddle between real and imagined. All I can think as I fall asleep is what might have happened to Alo. What is she trying to do in Sun Lao? Better yet, *what* is she running from?

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9

SANCTUARY

If either of us slept through the night, it doesn't feel like it.

On the bright side, the first of our daily worries don't begin until the middle of the afternoon. This whole time, we've been following the patterns of the ground as it rises and falls, and then we realize that we've gone in a huge circle. It's not anyone's fault—we simply lost track of our path, and it's forced us to make a detour.

"We have to move faster," Alo groans, and I agree. However, I'm not ready for the pace she sets: running.

"Alo, we're going to run out of steam." I jog behind her, swatting at dangling branches.

"We've lost time," Alo says. To my relief, she stops running, but we're still moving fast. I might have the calf muscles I've always wanted when this is over.

Luckily, she's more interested in getting to Sun Lao than asking anything else about the kor weapons. I don't feel like telling anyone else I've left behind a perfectly good patch of land, and I don't want to tell anyone that I am truly, deeply alone right now. Even if it's only a stranger who hears it, word can't get out that I'm a curse to my family's legacy.

As the sun climbs, the jungle tangles thicker than seemingly possible. Our pace grows sluggish as we carve through the overgrowth. It's no shock that a couple of daggers and a fishing spear aren't pro-forging. Worse yet, I think we're lost again; we'll be right back where we started. But then rock formations I don't recognize appear on the horizon.

At long last, the forest begins to dwindle, and we can both breathe freely. However, an unsettling lull lingers over the trees. Mist rapidly clouds our vision, a different foe that could twist our ankles as easily as a root could.

When the mist finally dissipates, the world is covered in jade. The sunlight that filters through has left flecks of gold scattered across the forest floor. Enormous trees arch over us, their leaves shading the ground to near-black. The rock formations become more and more concise, and the kor patterns that cut through the forest appear to follow a new pattern. A buzzing trill fills the back of my mind as we near the patterns. It's serene and frightening all at once, and I have the faintest feeling that something is singing. Close as we are, the shrill notes deepen into something ethereal—*ancient*. The hum calls me through the forest, awake and alive as my heart pulses in rhythm.

Alo exhales a breath of awe, and she makes a slow circle. She glances all around the forest. "Wow," she says, and I'm caught up in her wonder. "I know this place."

The feeling is suddenly gone, replaced by an endless hollow in my chest as I crave the unknown. "What is it?" I try not to speak above a whisper, but I can't help it.

"Well, I've never been here, but I think it's a kor sanctuary."

The phrase sounds familiar, but I'm not sure I know what she means. Still, I can't look past the veins of kor that spiral around us in purposeful formations. It's nothing like the wild patterns that splice through the rest of the world. These are beautiful and controlled, running along the trees and soil and weaving toward one destination.

"I knew it!" Alo gasps, and I follow her toward a boulder poking out of the ground. Its surface is smooth and as full of kor as the rest of this place, but some of the kor is angled to form runic patterns. Ancient symbols, a mere echo of what I can understand. Deep within, words dance on the tip of my tongue, but they're so foreign I can't understand them. Alo stands beside me, brow knit in concentration before her face lights up.

"This is the Half-Moon Sanctuary," Alo reads, voice full of reverence. As she looks further down the trail, she clasps her hands together like she's just found the perfect wedding garment. "It's beautiful."

My throat hitches when I see it. Where the ground dips through moss-covered rock formations, an enormous stone sanctum sits against the rainforest. The trees themselves bend around it, kor and nature alike working together like a ribcage to a heart.

The resounding sense of peace this place gives me is magnetic—I could be struck by lightning and I wouldn't feel it.

Not an inch of this place was left without some sort of masterful design. Each clay shingle of the roof is perfectly aligned. Ancient woodwork lifts the frames of the open entrance, and mist-jade kor mixes with marble throughout the structure. Even the windows are crafted with translucent stones, which cast rainbows of color all about the stone steps.

The walls burst with greenery, untouched and untended over countless decades. I can't help but place a hand against it. It's almost as though the hum in the back of my mind intensifies, and I pull back.

"Chol, have you been here before?" Alo sets down her pack before dragging me by the arm.

My mouth hangs open as we head up the steps. "I don't know what this is," I admit, but I know it's important. At my feet, I've never seen so much kor congregated before. The veins are so close to touching, the whole thing may as well be made from the stuff.

When I glance upward, I notice two Ankori posted outside the entrance. They're so laden with moss, they blend right into the architecture of the sanctuary. At first, I'm afraid we might be trespassing, but then I see that all the light has gone from their veins. My heart pangs softly as Rok stares up at them. It's been a while since I've thought to check on him—he hangs far back as we travel.

Keeping guard, I imagine.

Now, his simple gesture of acknowledgment carries palpable admiration for these lightless Ankori. He bows to each of them, and then he returns to my side.

"I can't believe the state of this place," Alo's voice echoes through the awning of the entrance. Intrigued, I follow her inside. "This place should be filled with people."

It's as though we've stepped into a cavern—almost like Jen's hiding place inside the mountain. Unlike hers, this one is built from the ground up, not carved from the earth. Its angles and formations are purposeful, elegant in their design.

On the far side of the sanctum are two doors, but the massive chamber we stand in is the main attraction.

In the center of the tiled floor is a massive, circular pool. Drawn to its edge, I settle on the polished floor. The water is a deep blue-black, and its dark surface reflects the ceiling. When I look up, I can see the patterns more clearly: the image of a half-moon, miraculously carved out by branching, spiraling kor. *That would explain the name of this place.*

Alo's footsteps echo with pleasant clicks as she makes her way around the pool. She's enchanted by the gently lapping water, but her steps are slow and hesitant.

I frown. "What's wrong?"

Her eyes darken with tears, and she takes a juddering breath. "It's more beautiful than I ever imagined... but no one's taken care of it in ages."

I gaze at the starry reflections in the pool. This ruined sanctuary is as gorgeous as it is frightening. Maybe it's the exhaustion; the awful luck; whatever. But the idea of an entire past held within these walls brings tears to my own eyes, and I set my jaw as I try to ward them off.

"What is this place?" I finally say. "It feels familiar."

Alo licks her lips and sits on the opposite side of the pool. "You don't know?"

I shake my head.

"It's—"

There's a sharp whistle through the air, followed by a wooden twang as something pierces the pillar beside Alo's head. For half a second, neither of us can fathom what just happened. We blink at the arrow that just perched too close for comfort. Then, Alo flattens herself, and I scramble to my feet. We shout incoherently to each other before deciding to make a break for one of the doors. As we run, we cover our heads.

"Were we followed?" I shout as more fly overhead.

We make it to a side room. In the main chamber, arrows skid across the tiles a few feet from where we now stand. The impact rattles across the room and shouts fill the entrance.

In the next moment, Rok is in front of us, shielding us so we can find an exit. More arrows sail our way, but they bounce and snap as they hit Rok's back.

"Bandits," Alo guesses. "They must have a camp nearby." She reaches for her daggers and spins them—a bit too expertly—like she's dealt with this before. She bolts forward.

“What are you doing?” I clench my teeth.

Two large men dash to meet Alo. She screams something fierce, and then she slides underneath one of the bandits before slicing the back of his leg. He screams in pain and hobbles to the side. There’s a whoosh in the air as the second bandit tries to hack her head off.

From my hiding spot behind Rok, it’s like watching a play. Alo knows what she’s doing. She’s lightning fast—the heel of her thick boot digs into the second attacker’s shin. The impact forces him backward, giving Alo enough time to clamber upright as the first bandit rushes her.

She rolls left as the bandit swings past her. When she gets back up, they begin to move in a circle, bodies angled low. The bandit lashes with his curved blade, but she dodges and slices his arm. With a cry, he drops his knife and clings to his wrist. Alo wastes no time plunging a dagger into his shoulder. Dark blood spatters the tile floor, and I bite my cheek hard.

As if things couldn’t get any worse, even more men run up the steps, shouting in a southern tongue I barely recognize.

“Alo!” I try to alert her, but she’s too busy with her first opponents to hear. One of the new bandits grabs her. She thrashes wildly before biting his arm.

He doesn’t let go, not even when his blood smears Alo’s face. I’m terrified I’m about to watch her die when she finally manages to break free and slash at her captor. The sting of her blade is enough to give herself some distance.

But it’s not over—an arrow grazes her arm. She takes it like a champion, right back to her deadly dance. For every strike she dodges, she lands double her own.

Still, it’s not enough. One of the burlier men lands a solid blow to the back of her shoulder with nothing more than their fist, and she falls forward.

If ever there was a time to act, it’s now. My fear finds a hiding place of its own, and I pour from the shadows, spear raised. It doesn’t last—a sharp jolt pulls me back as my own shirt wrangles me. Rok holds me by the collar.

“Let go!” I scream. “She needs help!”

Rok doesn’t listen. He all but throws me behind him, and my eyes widen as he sprints toward the bandits. There’s a horrible crunching sound

as he runs full-on into a large one, and I watch the poor attacker go flying backward and slip down the stairs.

While the bandits orient themselves, Rok kneels. His hands flatten against the floor, and I need a minute to understand what's happening. The kor surrounding him glows, bright and angry and desperate. Then, in an explosion of color, the floor tiles ripple and shatter. Shards fly in a thousand different directions—several of the bandits scream as their skin is ripped clean through. Most of them fall.

I hear a cry from nearby. Alo was clear of the destruction, but she's been attacked from behind with a club. She goes down hard, and I hear a thud as she lands. I gather my bearings with a wince. Before I can act, Rok lifts himself up and moves to her side. She shakes herself off and puts her back to Rok's. Together, they face the brave vagabonds left to fight.

The bandits are still strong in numbers. From my Rok-assigned hiding spot in the side room, I watch them surround my friends. My fingers go white from their death grip on the doorframe.

A shadow falls over me before I can see what happens. An imposing giant of a man sneers at me, and I back into the corner amidst several large clay pots and manuscripts that have been ripped apart. At this moment, my spear is my greatest ally, and I point it his way.

Even though he's weaponless, the bandit looks prepared to tear my head off. If my fear has a smell, he looks hungry for it.

Use it, I tell myself, but my spear remains locked to my fingers.

There's no way I'm winning this with cold feet. I narrow my eyes as if a stern look will intimidate him, but something glowing behind the bandit's head catches my attention. Runes, same as those scrawled all about the sanctuary. Unlike the others, they're faint. I realize they bend with the light from my angle. Maybe they're not even there at all—

The bandit's not here to read. He lunges, knocking the spear from my hands. Rather than protect myself, I scramble after the weapon. This gets me a hard kick to the back, and sharp pain jolts up my spine. My fingers curl around the spear, and I manage to pick myself up and hold it back out. He grabs the handle with the intent to disarm me.

It's now or never.

I shut my eyes, plunging forward with a yell. I feel the exact moment the spearhead bites, my arms shaking as metal sinks into flesh. The bandit

does nothing more than gawk, a hushed wheeze leaving his lips. Bile pools in my throat at the sight of red spilling down his arm.

Before I have time to react, he wraps one fist around the spear and rips it from his bicep. I fall back—it didn't work—I'm going to die.

The nausea that precedes death knots with time, shifting my perception of my fleeting existence to something slow. So slow that I have time to see what's happening in the inner sanctum. Rok lifts a heavy-set bandit into the air. He swings them violently, and their body comes flying through the doorway and smashes into my executioner. My jaw hangs open as the pair crashes into the back wall, pottery shattering unkindly at their weights.

Swallowing hard, I stare wide-eyed at the two. They don't get up.

I take this moment to dry-heave a disgusting amount of spit.

It takes a minute of shaking and sweating for my head to clear, but when it does, I'm on all fours creeping toward the broad doorway. Rok and Alo are still fighting to keep the group of bandits at bay.

This moment is oddly quieter than I ever imagined a fight to be. There's no ominous thundercloud shrouding the room. No one makes a sound unless they are attacking. Even then, each movement is deliberately swift, over before I have time to process what I've seen. Other than the swish of clothing and occasional grunts, the sanctuary is as silent as ever—but my friends are cornered.

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10

LISTEN

They're going to lose.

So, when Rok lifts Alo above his head, she and I are equally startled. She begins to shout for him to put her down. But his plan is working. Unable to reach Alo, the bandits target Rok. Their knives are useless against his stone façade. *An Ankori tactic if I ever saw one.*

Then, Alo lets out a gasp as Rok arcs her over the bandits, aiming for the pool. A tremendous splash echoes through the chamber, and she sinks.

Rok kneels. Only a couple of the bandits have chased after Alo, and the rest remain set on bringing Rok down. He goes completely still.

Sweat rolls down my face as two scenes unfold. Alo flounders beneath the water, and waves spill over the edge of the pool as she desperately tries to surface. Large men I don't know if I can take encroach on her, weapons drawn.

Rok continues to kneel. For a moment, I'm afraid he's gone stagnant, then veins of kor pulse wildly around him. Rok glows so brilliantly I can hardly look at him. Kor shoots from his fingertips, joining their sanctum brethren and cracking the walls. This expulsion of power is more violent than before. The already-shattered tiles dance on their ends, and then they turn to dust. Not a second later, the ground explodes.

The shockwave hits me immediately, and my soul leaves my body as I crunch into the wall behind me. But I've already bruised myself—I can handle getting back up.

I choke on dust, crawling from my hiding spot toward the pool. I can't see Alo, but the remaining bandits have been hurtled far away.

I push myself to my feet and break into a run. Time is against me as I rattle forward, closer and closer to the edge of the water.

I dive into the black.

The second I pierce the surface, my world starts to tremble. My arms and legs feel like they're on fire. Down here, the kor spreads in branches. It glows all around me, making one never-ending spiral to depths unheard of. My pendant burns hot on my chest. I struggle to swim downward, further and further until I think my ears will pop. Alo floats near the bottom, eyes closed.

All remaining air spews from my lips. As the pressure begins to build, I grab her, and then I'm kicking violently, heart pounding as I make the swim up. The edges of my vision darken as I swim, and there's an impossible headache building in my skull.

There are no words to express the gratitude I feel when I emerge. Ravenous for air, I breathe in until I'm dizzy. Rok stands over the pool. He lifts Alo from my arms and sets her on what's left of the tiles, but she doesn't wake up. All I have left is to pull myself from the water and begin to apply pressure to her chest in bursts. To my relief, she coughs, choking up what may as well be pitchers upon pitchers of water.

I scan for any remaining attackers, wary of the few who pick themselves up. They take one last glimpse of Rok, and then they run away without so much as a threatening word.

Alo stares at me, gasping like a drowned fish. Her pupils are dilated, and it takes several minutes for her to refocus.

"I can't swim," she manages. "You saved my life."

"Rok saved both of us."

Alo smiles, pulling soaked hair from her face as she looks at him. "You did incredible," she says. He settles just a bit.

"We should get out of here." I nod to the Ankori, and he nods back. Before Alo can protest, he scoops her up and then carries her down the steps of the sanctuary. I follow, but not before casting an estranged look at the pool. I can't shake the feeling that there was something in those waters —something I would have seen if I'd made it to the bottom.

Even as we put a hurried amount of distance between ourselves and the sanctuary, that ghost of a feeling persists.

With a few hours until nightfall, we set up camp. Rok stands guard over Alo as I pile rocks around a firepit. She's ripped her coat sleeve open and is

tending to the scrape left by the sting of the arrow. Her ivory skin is paler than normal, and one of her eyes is swollen with a bruise.

I find some mint leaves in her pack and set to work brewing a pot. She watches through her one good eye, though she acts more interested in the ground between us.

Since escaping, we haven't spoken a word to each other—I think we're both in shock.

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry," Alo breathes as I hand her a cup of tea.

I take a long sip, contemplating what she possibly has to be sorry about, but then she continues.

"I told you to stay out of my way, and now I'm the one stalling us."

My shoulders sag as I stare at the tea leaves in my cup. I shrug. "There's nothing stopping us from moving in the dark. We've got a giant glowing rock to light the way, after all."

She smiles softly, watching the steam curl from her own mug. "Why are you so desperate to get there?"

I choke on mint tea. "I… I told you why."

Her lips purse to one side. "I'm trying to get there as fast as I can, you know. What does it matter, though? The weaponsmith will still be there."

My mug falls to the ground as I stand. "I don't think it's any of your business," I snap. Maybe I'm overreacting, but I find my spear and head into the bushes.

I need to clear my head.

Rok follows me, and I groan.

"What was *that*, anyway?" I turn to him. "Can all Ankori do that? Why didn't you use your powers sooner?"

He stares at me, expressionless. It's getting old.

I march further on, thinking of Jen. Thinking of what Mother and Father will say. Thinking of the inevitable disaster that is going to be my legacy. No one will give me the time of day after all this. I'll be an outcast, and there are probably plenty more shoddy campsites in my future.

But my chest hurts—a pain not in my heart, but deep within my bones. A throb I can't reach or fix. Welling turmoil that tells me this search is futile; I'm grasping at threads that aren't strong enough to pull me to my feet.

As cold sweat slicks my brow, I turn back to the Ankori. “You’re useless, you know? You’re not a real guardian. You should have stayed asleep.”

I’m digging trenches in the dirt where I walk, and then the bushes rustle. I halt and hold out my spear, but it’s just Alo. She clutches her shoulder where the arrow grazed her skin. White bindings cover her arms from her wrists up to her elbows. A bit excessive, but maybe it was worse than I thought.

“I said I was sorry, Chol.” Her eyes are clouded, but she holds her head high.

I huff, crossing my arms. “There’s nothing to apologize for.”

I don’t want to admit it, but I should be the one apologizing. She risked her life, and I stood in the shadows like a moron. *Why am I acting like this?*

Alo presses her lips together like she’s taking notes. I raise an eyebrow, and she sighs. “You know Rok can understand every word you say, don’t you?” She glances his way, though there’s nothing abnormal about the Ankori’s composure.

“That’s what I’m hoping,” I mutter.

She smiles sadly, and then she goes over to the Ankori and taps her fingers against his arm. “He speaks, too. In tones, like waves. You and I—we’re not able to hear them.”

My shoulders unknot, and I clench my fists at my sides. “What do you mean?”

Alo keeps her eyes on Rok, who seems to watch her as well. “Every living thing gives off a type of sound. Vibrations our ears aren’t able to hear.”

My nose wrinkles. “Who told you that?”

Alo tilts her head to the side and makes a circle around Rok. “It’s just the scientific explanation.” She notes my dissatisfaction. “Part of my training about Ankori.”

I snort. She’s saying whatever she can to get me to stop being so angry. *And it’s working.* I wonder what the scientific explanation for that is.

“Hmm.” Alo looks thoughtful. “Where I’m from, we learn this early on. There’s a lot more to it, I swear. Even if it sounds crazy.”

“Sure,” I scoff. “Where you’re from. Up north.”

“What do you want me to say? That I’m from a magic mountaintop where the Ankori roam free?” Alo grunts. “I thought you wanted to know more, anyway.”

This is too much. I push myself away from the tree I’m resting against and head campward. “Hand signals and stuff, sure. What else is there?”

I don’t know why, but this sets Alo off. Her face sours, and then she faces Rok and lifts her hand. Her fingers flit about in a set of motions, and Rok stands to attention. One of his arms shoots toward the trunk of a nearby tree, and I watch his fingers plant themselves amongst the kor in the silvery bark. Then, his other arm waves over his head before he stoops to the ground, one arm digging into the earth and the other against the tree.

The kor ripples, waves of light flowing back and forth as the *jungle* shifts. With a crisp, crackling sound, the bark peels and reforms, and the massive tree over our heads looks like it’s rotating in place. Twisting roots spill from the ground, and I hobble backward, astonished as they slither along. The tree is growing. Its mighty branches elongate, writhing as leaves split from new boughs and bloom by the thousands. The tree stretches further and further over as kor flows through it, and then it curves into another tree. Its kor splinters across the pointed leaves over my head, transferring to the second tree’s branches. Now, both trees shimmer with equal ferocity, and I watch jade trail from the ground to the leaves and back down again in an enormous, whirling circle.

Finally, the roots of the second tree burst from the forest floor and tangle with the first tree’s roots. As I move further back, my mouth hangs open. When the motion stops, the trees are bound together in a perfect, circular arch.

I’m numb.

Alo crosses her arms, and then Rok towers behind her, looking at me.

“He’s not useless. And you don’t deserve him.”

I stammer. “I—I had no idea—”

Alo saunters toward the campsite, and I follow.

“What—how—what *was* that?” I exclaim. “That was incredible. You have to teach me.”

“I was *trying*.” She gives me the side eye. “But you don’t have half a brain to listen.”

I stare over my shoulder at Rok as he stays close. “That was amazing. I had no idea Ankori could do that. I didn’t even know Ankori could do... well, anything. I’m sorry.”

Alo starts packing up camp. “Why don’t you tell *him* that?”

“What are you doing?”

“We’ve rested long enough. It’s time to move.”

“But we haven’t—“

Alo snarls. She cuts across the distance between us, jabbing a finger in my face. “Let’s get one thing straight,” she says. “At this point, I’m only letting you tag along because Rok saved my life today. And contrary to what you’d like to believe, he’ll follow you to the ends of Aér before he lets anything happen to you.”

I rub the back of my neck, but she’s unrelenting.

“Call him one more name. Get in my way one more time. I should have never”—she falters, stumbling back as her tone lowers to something uncertain.

Then, her eyes lift to mine, remorseful and heavy. “We’ll get to Sun Lao together. But don’t think for a second that I’m your friend. I’m not some sage guide on your vague quest, I’m not—”

“I got it.” The throb in my chest has returned. A slow, burning pummel trying to rework my innards into a hardened version of themselves.

We quench the fire, and we move out.

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11

LINES

Even though he can't respond to anything I say, Rok becomes my best friend for the next leg of the journey. For the most part, all I can do is tell him how sorry I am. I like to believe he's a forgiving creature.

I don't know much about Alo, but I'm under the impression that she's got a lot more right now than she did a few days ago. Headcount: one incredible Ankori bodyguard and one idiotic farmboy to fuel her desire to get to the city in record time.

Alo's way of seeing Aér has me studying nearly every rock and leaf we pass. For the first time, I'm mesmerized by kor as more than just a pretty-looking light source. It moves everything this world is, and Rok can move it. With hundreds of questions at the tip of my tongue, it takes everything within me to refrain from asking Alo if she knows the answer. I have to regain her trust, and maybe, just *maybe*, she'll talk to me.

Not that I ever had it.

When we make camp in the deep hours of the night, it feels as good a time as any to make amends. I brew another pot of mint tea, but she doesn't take my offering. I leave it near her feet, holding mine as I settle across from her.

She eyes me as I inch closer to her, but she doesn't balk.

I clear my throat over the crackle of our fire. "Listen," I say as gently as possible, "I said some things I shouldn't have."

She rolls her eyes. "Understatement of the century."

"Can I just say I'm sorry?"

She lets out a short laugh. "You've said that so many times to Rok today, I don't think you know the meaning of the word."

I grimace, trying to lighten the mood. "And it's like talking to a wall, but I meant each one. *Really*."

Her face stays flat. “Your apology means nothing, Chol.” She leans toward the fire and sets to work preparing food.

I fold my hands, watching the golden light flicker off her face. I have no clue what she wants—her only interest lies with Rok, though she’s kept her distance from even him today.

I drink in a long breath of air. “Would you please help me? With… hand signals… and stuff.”

She glances my way.

“… I was wrong to act that way. I’ve got a lot on my mind, and it’s making me someone I’m not,” I stammer. “At least—I think. I don’t want to be.”

I guess the pitiful desperation in my tone gets to her because her cold expression finally lifts. Resignation flashes across her face, and her next breath is heavy. “I think we both have a lot on our minds.”

We watch the fire roll.

It wasn’t the answer I was looking for, but she hasn’t retreated to her tent, either. I take it as an invitation to continue. “I’ve been awful and ungrateful. It’s a coincidence we’re both going the same way, you know? But it means something to me. At least, it does now.”

When I look up again, she’s watching me with a soft expression. Her eyes drift to the wayside. “You don’t know anything about me,” she whispers. It’s nearly lost in the snaps of burning logs.

I lean back, straining to catch glimpses of the stars beyond the crowded foliage. “I’d like to.”

Alo is silent. The jungle matches our quiet.

I settle against my makeshift bedding of moss and leaves, and I’m nearly asleep when Alo scurries to her feet. “Watch,” she whispers.

Bleary-eyed, I watch her approach Rok. His head tilts as she moves her arms, then he lumbers toward a tree. I brace myself as he places his hands on the bark, and then the kor brightens.

A roaring wind passes through, prying through the branches and tousling our hair. I’m caught up in the view overhead. There’s no explosion—no malice to the kor that shoots into the soil and trees. To my delight, the canopy above clears with a great rush of creaking limbs and shifting green, and the stars gleam through in full splendor. My heart races. When Rok’s hands leave the tree, the trees remain parted.

Alo and I fall asleep beneath an ocean of starlight.

The taste of open air has never been sweeter. We're not quite out of the jungle yet, but we already feel the breeze sweeping down from the Shál-Sun mountains as the underbrush becomes sparse. At these ancient gates of wood and bark, some of the trees are wide as houses; a final barrier before the land becomes rock and ocean.

We're halfway through some thickets when I decide to ask Alo my next question: "How is Rok able to use kor like that?"

A million different ways to approach the subject have been bouncing around in my head for the past few hours, and it took all that time to muster that.

Alo goes a bit bug-eyed, and then she shrugs. "Ankori? *Kor*? They're symbiotic."

I stare blankly.

"Oh, come on!" She scowls. "Kor is *in* the name!"

"*R-e-ally*?" I roll my eyes, giving the most exasperated gasp I can. "I never would have guessed." My sarcasm gets me a glare from Alo, and I have to remind myself that this is the same girl who plunged a dagger into a bandit's shoulder less than two days ago. Daggers are not my ideal way to measure Alo's patience.

"Seriously, though. Where did you learn to fight like that? Are your parents rich?"

Air whistles as she sucks through her teeth. "You could say that."

I follow her with a newfound curiosity, brow furrowed in question. "I mean, I already knew you could protect yourself, but that was insane."

"Did you really think I was planning on running around the countryside by myself just to see what would happen?" She tosses me a look.

I ignore her. "And the way you can get Rok to do stuff—it's incredible. I knew I was wrong, but *boy*, was I *wrong*."

Alo huffs and, before I can react, scales a large boulder beside our path. "Will you shut up if I teach you something?"

I nod.

Alo forms an upside-down triangle with her empty hands. Immediately, Rok's attention goes to her, and I'm just as captivated.

Her hands shift from a triangle to making two short circles in the air. "Since we can't actually speak Ankori, these motions are very basic—rudimentary enough to get a message across, but not an entire conversation.

"Because kor is organic, its language is unique and brief. Ankori can understand what we say, but they respect the energy of kor like no one else. So, you may think of these as hand signals, but I'm essentially following kor patterns that spell things out."

"What do you mean?"

Alo smiles but immediately smothers it with a sharp look. "You don't see it?" Her hands fall to her sides, and she drops from the boulder to kneel in the dirt. "Study the lines."

She grabs my wrist and pulls me to her level. Her index finger runs along a bright vein of kor, tracing the angular movement. When I look closer, I notice the kor branches are squiggly and sporadic, like they could go anywhere.

Alo hops to her feet, pulling me toward a tree. "Now, compare the ones in the dirt to those in the bark." She grabs my hand without permission and slaps it onto the rough surface of the trunk. The bark crumbles as I trace the lines, and then my jaw slants to the side when I catch on.

The kor here follows the same branching pattern, but the way it branches is far more *rounded* than anything else. When Alo brings me to a rock covered in kor, I spot the difference immediately. These veins are angular spirals with sharp edges.

I have no clue how I never noticed before.

"The details get more and more intricate, wherever you look," Alo continues. "Leaves, grass, flowers, and even some wildlife. You can see shapes and patterns when you search for them. Those are the movements our hands follow to form words."

"But what do they mean? What did you do to keep Rok from attacking you?"

Lips curling, Alo places her hands back in the triangle formation. She moves her right hand away from the triangle, holding up two fingers and creating three different spirals in the air: one jagged, one wavy, and one

round. “These are the three main movements. The triangle opens to let the lines of earth, growth, and stone be formed. That means ‘*harmony*.’”

Astonished, I turn to Rok and form the triangle with my hands. A chill goes up my spine when he stands to attention. “What does the triangle mean?”

“It means ‘listen,’” Alo says, “in the politest way possible.”

Holding my breath, I form the half triangle and the three spirals. Rok’s arms go up, and he repeats the motion back to me. I can’t stop grinning.

Alo is equally ecstatic. “Whenever you need Rok to listen, you start with the triangle.”

“How do I make him do what you did with the trees?”

She puts her hands on her hips and laughs. “That’s where the language starts to get more complicated—less how we talk, and more how they *understand*.”

I try to plead with her, but she gives me a stern look and a smile. “Another time.”

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12

CITY

Within the next hour, we find our way to a common road, delicately paved through the forest. Alo pauses to bask at the details engraved in the stones at our feet. When we finally move on, she keeps her breath still as her eyes graze over the vast plateau of the road before us.

"My father told me about this road," I tell her. "The Widow's Path. It carries on for so long, you start to wonder if you're all alone in the world, or if you'll ever see another soul again."

She laughs. "It can't be *that* long. Besides, I don't feel lonely." I eye her, and she cackles deviously. "Rok is excellent company."

Annoying.

For once, I'm the one who takes the lead, shuffling down the gravel road with my hands stuffed in my pockets. Alo catches up. "You're not the worst traveling companion."

Despite everything I've done to keep myself in check, my chest swells. "Neither are you." *And that's that.*

An echoing silence follows our trek along this forever-stretching road. Widow's Path carries a somber greatness, shouldered by enormous trees as it splits the jungle in two. In legend, the path was forged by a lonely wife, separated from her husband by war and desperate to reach him. As the story goes, the wife spent several seasons having the trees felled and the path constructed, only to receive word that her husband had been killed on the front lines of battle. Just like that, the path's progress was cut short, forever frozen in time as nature slowly reclaims it.

As we move faster, Jen's pendant glows faintly within my spear. *That doesn't mean anything, right?* My breath comes out shaky, and my grip on the spear falters. As it topples, Alo catches it. She's wary as she presses it into my hands.

"Are you feeling all right?"

I square my shoulders. “I’m fine.”

We march on, listening to the sound of Rok’s heavy, rhythmic steps against the stone path.

Alo perks up again. “Because, if you need to talk about anything—”

I add a bit of *oomph* to my steps and shrug. This road isn’t going to walk itself, and I’m betting we can get to Sun Lao by tomorrow afternoon. Without arguing, Alo matches my pace.

She looks sheepish, so I give her a questioning look. Her hands go into her pockets, and I don’t know if it’s the nippy air or what, but her cheeks are pink. “I don’t suppose Rok would let us piggyback the rest of the way,” she jokes. It’s followed by a deep laugh that I’ve never heard from her, and I suddenly can’t remember the last time I really listened to laughter. It’s music, and Alo’s is a symphony.

My heart is heavy, but for just a second, it’s held up by a hand that isn’t my own. I force a grin that becomes real as I laugh with her. “Why don’t you ask him?”

Alo beams at me and pivots so that she’s walking backward. “What do you say, huh?”

To our surprise, Rok holds his hand out, palm spread in a pleading “*don’t.*”

Alo and I chorus with laughter, and the Widow’s Path soon becomes an afterthought.

At the end of the path, I’ve never been more elated to know I have to walk up another mountain.

The joy must be contagious; Alo is the bubbliest I’ve seen her. We all but race each other across the tree line, and when we break free, we stop to survey where we’ve come from. The jungle stands like a prison. A million bars ready to drink us back in—but we’ve got to keep moving.

Our next obstacle will be the easiest one: a four-mile climb into the mountain range before we hit the main path up. Sun Lao City waits above, strung along the peaks and ridges like art along massive walls. We can already feel the chill of the atmosphere dancing down our spines. Despite our aching legs, we press forward.

However, the closer we get, the less enthused Alo seems. When we're almost to the golden gates of Sun Lao, her face is stony. I try not to let her concern distract me; after all, Sun Lao is known to be one of the most beautiful cities this side of Aér.

Our biggest obstacle is what to do with Rok. Our path through the jungle and up the unfinished Widow's Path was a good choice—most people travel along the coast to reach Sun Lao. Even with the scant amount of interest in our living Ankori, Alo and I briefly bicker over whether he should hang back or not.

Rok, however, seems set on staying by my side. Alo can't get him to respond to her hand signals, so we settle on disguising him—it's laughable, but it worked before. Alo's cloak does an okay job, as long as no one looks at his stone ankles.

The streets are packed. There wouldn't *be* a chance for a stranger to notice Rok, lest they get trampled by the sheer amount of rolling carts and bustling pedestrians. We balk as the crowds threaten to swallow us—we haven't been around people for a while, let alone *this many.*

Alo's stressed tongue clicks and scowls are contagious. I catch myself double-checking every corner once we find a rhythm in the street.

Should I be worried? If the raiders are still here, how would I know? I certainly wouldn't recognize one without their horrible mask.

Could I even face one?

This is it. The lead I chased across half of Runerok to *maybe* have a chance at finding. And what if I actually find what I came for—would it be the answer to finding Jen?

Another spiral of thoughts twists my innards. What if she's *here*? What if the weaponsmith is one of the masked, ready to kill me for asking too many questions? I'm so nervous I feel sick, and for the first time, I'm grateful Alo hasn't had much food left to offer.

A hand touches my arm. My first instinct is to shrug it off, but the grip hardens. I look back—and up—at Rok, who peers at me past his shaded hood. He nods, shifting to face the city. Alo stands a few measures ahead of us, rocking back and forth on her heels. Her choppy hair swishes as she drinks in Sun Lao. I take it in, too.

For the first time, I'm seeing a side of the world I didn't realize existed. I *knew* about it, but it never felt real. The stories Father told us

about this city are tangled with age, dim in comparison. Sun Lao exceeds every single one of those expectations to the point where I'm convinced I might be hallucinating.

Alo motions to follow.

Each street is stacked with houses, restaurants, shops, and more. Shapes that shouldn't fit and colors too bright to bring back to Antok. I can't help that I'm entranced by all the strange buildings. What strikes me most about Sun Lao is how little kor is present. As I search for any signs of it, Alo is forced to grab my arm and pull me across each intersection so I'm not run over by an oxcart.

Merchants and entertainers crowd every street corner, shouting above the fray. It's easy to spot residents; most are dressed from head to toe in gorgeous silk patterns. This city screams its wealth to travelers and tourists, and it's difficult not to get caught up in the enchantment. But still, no kor.

Jen would love this place. I'd never be able to keep track of her, but it would be fun to feel that energy again. I can just picture it: running down the streets and pressing our hands against the windows of every colorful shop.

I miss her so much.

I'm back, pulled from the whirlwind of the street and grounded by Alo's grip on my wrist.

Her path is set. She leads us through the crowds and past the tantalizing smells and views without stopping. She moves so quickly, I'd be upset if I wasn't on a mission.

Without warning, Alo stops dead in her tracks. I slam into her, but she's too busy scanning our surroundings to care. I have to grab her by the shoulder to shake her back to reality.

"What's going on?" I ask.

She furrows her brow. "Let's get something to eat. I know a good place."

While I'm starving, my sense of urgency is almost at capacity. Jen could be anywhere, moments from discovery.

Alo manages a smile. "Listen," she says. "We've been rushing around so much that we're going to stress ourselves to death. Don't you want to catch your breath?"

I bite my cheek and squint at her. My stomach answers for me, and Alo smirks before turning away. Once she steps into the crowd, she's nearly impossible to follow. She keeps me on my toes as she shoves her way through the hubbub.

At last, we stop. Before us, a stack of housing and shops leans into the street. It's painted blue from top to bottom, and red window frames give us a sneak peek of what's in store. A chime rings when we step through the door. Savory aromas have me drooling immediately. The heat from the kitchen promises spice and smoke, and my eyes water with hunger.

"I really can't afford this," I say. It would somehow be worse to admit I only have two coppers.

Alo shrugs, and then she pulls a small coin purse from her pocket. She presses several silver coins into my hand, and I stammer. "I can't take this."

"I think you can."

Grimacing, I roll my eyes and pocket the money. With just one of the coins, I'm able to get a meal bigger than anything I'd ever make myself back home. A server brings us smoking hunks of peppery meats and mounds of steamed vegetables mixed with rice. Every bite is the best bite I've ever had, and I'm embarrassed by how fast I eat.

When I finally look up, Alo has hardly touched her food. She uses a knife to shovel bits around her plate, staring longingly like it's the face of someone she knows.

"Alo?" I try.

Alo sits up straight, stabbing at her fish fillet. "I'm okay," she says, and then she takes a large bite.

I want to press her, but I don't. Instead, I take in the interior of this restaurant. It's crowded with wooden tables and hungry patrons. There's a large mural of an elk on the far wall. It's painted in a shade of icy blue, and kor patterns trace through its broad antlers—but not real kor. The lights dangling from the ceiling are paper lanterns, swinging back and forth each time the door to this place opens.

I could fall asleep in my chair, but the stark cold of the city calls my name.

When we finally step outside, I have to tie my cloak at the waist. Alo doesn't wait for me.

"C'mon, really?" I call after her. "I need to find the weaponsmith."

“I know,” she says, but her voice is drowned out by the crowds.

I catch up, hardly able to see her face.

When Alo grabs my arm and drags me into an alley, my stomach flips. Her eyes are wide, brimming with panic. I tug her hand from my arm. “What’s going on?”

She pulls away, too busy checking the perimeter to respond.

“Alo.” I reach for her. “Are you all right?”

Just talk to me. The weaponsmith can wait a few more minutes.

Alo doesn’t calm down. Instead, she paces back and forth. “I—I’m fine,” she stammers. “This will all be fine.”

“What’s wrong?” I try to hold her still, but she ignores me. She shakes me off and keeps pacing.

“I shouldn’t have come back.”

“Come on, you’re okay,” I croon, though I may as well be lying.

Alo finally halts and looks me dead in the eyes. “Chol”—her voice is no more than a whimper—“I need to leave.”

“But the weaponsmith—”

She points down the alley, to a rotting wood door against a decaying wall of stone.

As my view narrows on that daunting entrance, I feel like I’m back in the sanctum pool again. Tunneling down and deep and dark toward an answer within grasp. An answer I don’t know if I want anymore.

“I told you,”she says, voice quivering, “I knew where to find him.”

I catch her arm as she turns to leave. When she finally dares to look at me, her dark eyes are filled with tears.

“Just like that?”

She trembles. “This is it.”

I grow still, and something sings in the back of my mind. This isn’t right. None of this is right. The alley constricts around us, cold wind slicing through any wound it can find inside or out.

“You know more, don’t you?” I lean toward her, my hold tightening.

She tries to jerk away, biting hard on her lip. “This place,” she breaks, “I can’t—I don’t want to be here.”

“Are you afraid of something?” I let go, and she draws back, keeping her eyes on the ground.

I’m torn between persuading her to stay and barging into the room at the end of the alley. Torn between letting her run off and finding out what she’s hiding.

But I don’t have to choose. Alo nods toward the door, refusing to meet my gaze. “See for yourself.”

My heart thunders and my palms grow clammy. With bated breath, I force myself down the alley. It’s like I’m walking in water up to my waist, trudging along as the current strengthens. The decaying wall shadows me as I approach the door, and the noise of the city dissolves into nothing.

I’m cold as I turn the handle. The door opens with a rusty squeal.

It’s dark until Rok stands behind me, vibrant with kor that illuminates the dusty room. As my eyes adjust, the inside looks empty.

This falls apart fast.

Broken furniture lines the walls. The floor is cluttered with parchments and manuscripts, and every surface has been ransacked. I can barely walk through this mess without stepping on something, and glass crunches beneath my shoes as I move.

Rok stays outside. His kor brightens, helping me sort through the desolation.

I continue through the mess, riffling through papers and broken models on the ground. There’s a pile of ashes near one of the walls where several documents have been burned. The fireplace is cold, the only indication of life being the whistle of wind through the chimney.

As I delve further into the shop, I push open a door on the back wall, partially hidden by a shelf. It leads into what must have been a secret forge. Tools are scattered across the stone floor as well as strange parts I don’t recognize. The shelves are crammed with glass vials of liquid and clay pots of powder that smell like the aftermath of a fireburst. But no sign of anyone.

When I turn around, I go still.

The wall behind me is spattered with blood, but there are no bodies. Just the lingering scent of musty air and smoke stains. I gape at the color on the wall. Unnatural and spewing and dark.

As I head toward the door, I step on a rolled parchment. As I reach down to unroll it, Rok’s light falls across rough sketches. My heart patters to a stop.

The weapon that destroyed my farm—it's here, scrawled hastily across this blueprint and surrounded by cautionary messages.

My eyes flash across the page, and I stumble toward the front door.

Alo is still in the alley. As I emerge, she hangs her head, and then she turns the corner. I stagger into the middle of the busy street after her. People swear as I run into them, but I ignore the stares.

My heart pounds—I feel disconnected from myself with every ringing beat. There's nothing to hold to as I limp through the streets, scanning every alley and every corner I can find. The pressure in my chest is so great, my breaths turn to rasps.

Another heated wave of nausea crashes through me. I left my spear in the alley—not that I need it, right? But Alo—*who is she really?*

Frantic, I head back to the weaponsmith's forge. I load my arms with as many manuscripts as I can carry, and then I barrel back through the city. *I have to get out.*

The sun is setting when I collapse. My tongue is dry and my head aches. Any strength I have left falters as I drop the parchments I retrieve.

I'm being lifted by something rough. The world rocks below me as I'm raised from the dirt, and the last thing I see before I pass out is Rok's face.

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13

TRUTH

When I come to, we're outside the gates of Sun Lao. I'm lying on my side in the grass, and my breath tastes rancid.

Spitting, I sit up. Wind drifts down the slope of the mountain, where I'm sitting on an expansive ledge overlooking the valley jungle below. Stars fill the darkness before me, and tears trickle down my face as I watch them burn.

Nearby, Rok kneels in the tall grass beside my spear, his palms hovering over wildflowers that bob in the breeze. He shifts his gaze to me, and I slouch forward.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. There's the grinding sound of gravel as Rok's limbs knock against each other, and then he settles beside me. The grass around us tickles my legs as I sigh.

"Thanks for sticking by me."

I'm a bit startled as Rok's fist lightly nudges me, and then I laugh painfully.

A moment later, the towering guardian stands to his feet. My eyes widen as he retrieves something from within Alo's cloak, still draped around him. He offers me the scrolls I dropped.

I can't make heads or tails of the scrawling without better light. When I stand, the first thing I notice is a lone edifice against the indigo horizon. Carts parked outside and a swinging sign beside a glowing lantern. *An inn.*

Worn to the bone, I drag myself across the distance and through the door. There's a rolling fire in the hearth, and the innkeeper is reading behind a counter. With the rest of Alo's coins, I rent a room.

Rok hid outside, so I stay close to the window of my room as I unroll page after page of salvaged weapon plans. By candlelight, I stay up until early morning, desperate to find any clues that might lead me to the masked.

There are dozens of weapons listed, and they all work with kor. This weaponsmith figured out how to incorporate it into their technology, much like how Rok seems to operate. The downside of their discovery is that the kor is unstable, causing combustion-like reactions that go way over my head.

It's not hard to see that this weaponsmith was a genius, but they're no good to me dead.

I crumple the parchment. Nothing makes sense anymore—I have no new leads, no clue as to where the masked may be... and *Alo*. Alo knew something. Something that's been eating me all night, tangling and terrible.

Furious, I kick the bedpost. It's supposed to shake things up and get some of this anger out of me, but all it does is cause me to fall to the ground in agony.

From my spot on the floorboards, I stare at the ceiling.

My spear glints as sunlight filters through the window. With a groan, I pick it up and study Jen's pendant.

The light still glows, and I notice a gentle, subtle rhythm to its pulse. A small comfort as the edges of my eyes grow damp.

But without the weaponsmith—without Alo or some miracle—I have nothing.

My dream wakes me. A stupid idea, but worth a try. The spear falls from where I was holding it in my sleep, clattering as it hits the ground. I sweep it up and polish the pendant on my tunic, mulling over a new possibility.

Footprints—the masked wore heavy boots, and the ground was soft after the first mist of the season. They would have left footprints.

But it rained shortly after—lighter in Antok, harder in Kankora. If that southern storm made it to our farm, the trail will be gone.

Still, another hope pulls me to my feet. What if I run into the masked on my way home? Better yet—what if Jen escaped—what if she's in Antok, thinking I'm the one who's lost?

I gather my spear and the scrolls, then barrel toward the entrance of the inn. “Rok, let’s get home!” I call.

He emerges from behind the inn, and then something else catches my attention. I stop in my tracks as my mouth goes dry.

“Chol.”

Alo stands beside Rok, hands behind her back.

My jaw clenches.

“What are you doing here?” I eye her hands. She waves them in front of herself to prove she’s not going to stab me with anything, and I take a deep breath.

She lowers her hands. “I—”

“Did you find what you came for?” I clutch my spear, holding it like a staff at my side. She watches the prongs flash in the sunlight.

Alo hangs her head again, and her lower lip trembles. “I did, and I didn’t.”

I take slow steps toward her. She tenses, but she doesn’t move back. “Who are you, really?” I demand.

When she doesn’t answer, I press on. “Why did you run away?”

There’s a horrible, empty silence where I can feel the pulse in my own throat. Then, Alo says, “Because I know what happened to the weaponsmith.”

My blood runs cold, but I wait for her to continue.

When she meets my gaze, her black eyes are crystal with tears. “They killed him. They got what they wanted, and they killed him. I was there for the whole thing, and I couldn’t stop it.”

“Who killed him?” I ask. “The masked?”

“The *masked*?” she echoes, confused. “I’m talking about my… *friends*. The people I ran from.”

I stare at the ground, wishing I could tear through her for answers.

She shoves disheveled hair from her face. “I wanted to see if they came back to Sun Lao. To talk things out with them—see if they might change, but there was no one here. And I should have known they wouldn’t be.”

I shake my head and begin to pace. “But you knew about this.” I reach into my coat and wave the plans I found in front of her. “You knew about these plans, didn’t you?”

She goes slack, staring at the drawings without so much as a reaction. “He was supposed to burn this.” She reaches for the drawing, but I yank it from her grip.

“*No*. You don’t get to touch this,” I snarl, pulling back. Her hands shake, and it’s too much for me.

“Who are your friends?” I prod. “If they killed one man, have they killed more? Have they destroyed and stolen other things, too? *Have they ripped anyone else’s lives apart*?”

She’s trembling wildly now, and she covers her face with her hands, stammering as I shred the weapon plans to pieces.

“You’re one of them, aren’t you? Does this look familiar, too?” I tear another plan from my satchel—plans for a leather mask with metal grates over the mouthpiece and glowing, soulless eyes.

She shrinks back and into Rok, who holds an arm out to keep her from going further. “Chol,” she tries, but I cut her off.

“No. You’re a *murderer*. Your ‘friends’ destroyed my farm. They destroyed our Ankori. They *kidnapped* my sister. Or”—I shout at the top of my lungs—“did they do more than that? Is she dead?”

Alo shudders violently, fingers twisting through her hair. She finally gasps for air. “I didn’t know they would go that far—”

I spin in a circle with my arms out. “You were there.”

“What?”

“That night. You *held* one of those weapons. You were with them.” I laugh incredulously. How could I have been so blind? All the question dodging. The knowledge of the weaponsmith. Shutting down any time I got too close to an answer.

I raise my spear to her throat. “Where are your friends, now?”

She swallows dryly, holding her ground. “I swear, Chol,” her voice is low. “I ran the moment they gave the command. I’m *still* running.”

“You didn’t even try to help us.”

She stutters. “I thought the Ankori would—I thought the mission—”

I keep my spear level with her chest.

“I didn’t know,” she pleads, shoulders convulsing as her breaths turn to rasps.

For a moment, I see past the veil of my anger. Rok isn’t stopping Alo from running. He’s keeping her upright as her legs threaten to buckle. She’s

shaking madly, but she isn't trying to defend herself.

My spear is inches from piercing her, and my grip is white.

I can't do it.

I throw the spear to the ground and rub my temples. "My sister could be dead." It's the first time I've said it out loud. It hurts more than anything else.

She cries, falling to her knees with her face to the dirt. "I promise you, Chol. I swear on my life—they didn't tell me how they would use them. They told us the Ankori would respond to it; they would come to life, not that they were able to destroy things like that. And when you were there, and they gave the command"—she chokes back a sob—"I ran."

My legs fail me. I sit across from her, staring at the ground as my head spins. "But still—you didn't try to fight back."

"How could I have?" she snaps. "You're right—I should have fought back. I should have known when to stop playing their game, a long time ago. But I couldn't—not after I watched my father die, Chol. My real friends too, executed for speaking up. I watched them murder the weaponsmith when he asked the wrong questions. No remorse, *nothing*."

Alo takes a ragged breath and looks skyward as her voice hollows out. "And I was left. To pretend our path would change for the better. But how could I have said to anyone? How can I speak when a hundred voices are shouting?"

The space between us is a void, endless and echoing.

All we know is the wind sweeping up the slopes and rushing over us. The morning has begun to heat, and we take deeper breaths beneath the sunlight.

Empty as I feel, I have to know. So, I ask again, "Who are you?"

Alo takes a long look around. While we're at the outskirts of Sun Lao, we're still in public. No one has approached us, but we've certainly caught the attention of a few bystanders.

She picks herself up and dusts herself off, and then she holds one of her hands out. As I take it, I see that some of the bindings around her arms have unraveled. There are unfamiliar, darkly colored runes etched all over her skin.

"I'll tell you," she says, "and I'll help you find your sister."

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14

MARKS

Maybe she needs time to spin her story. Maybe there's nothing more to say, and I'm falling for another lie. Regardless, Alo's silence as we reenter the jungle has my nerves in a knot.

We take a different route this time, and Alo leads at a hurried pace. I convince myself that Rok would step in if this was all a trap, but I have an uncanny feeling that she might have him in some sort of trance.

"Alo," I speak flatly. "If you're hiding anything else, I…"

She slows a bit, shoulders rising. "I know."

"What's the goal here?" I wave my hand as we draw deeper into the forest. "Do you have a plan?"

"I'm thinking," she says, mildly annoyed.

I huff. "You know everything about me, now. The only reason I came to Sun Lao was to find the weaponsmith. I thought if he was one of you—"

Alo stiffens. "I-I'm sorry. And I'm sorry about your sister."

"Don't apologize unless you've got something to do with it."

A few quiet minutes later, we find ourselves beside a river. It spills through the mossy wild, crashing and deep as the jungle reels it in. Our path continues downward, steep in some places and slick in others. We take extra caution as we work our way along the roar of the water. I'm anxious about the lack of conversation, but I figure it would be difficult to hear over the rapids.

Further down the current, the world opens up below us. We're at the edge of a great cavern in the ground, where the river tumbles over the side. Clear water rests far below, and my stomach churns.

Alo taps my shoulder and gestures to a stairwell carved into the stone wall. Rok stays behind as I follow her down, careful of where I place my feet. The sunlight fades the deeper we go, and then all at once, the walls are curving over us, glowing with kor designs.

We duck beneath the waterfall, angling along the surface of the pool. I spot dozens of colorful fish, and my heart skips a beat when some of the rocks move. At first, I'm terrified that there's some sort of horrific creature lurking in the water, but then one of the beasts surfaces. A soft muzzle wiggles and gentle eyes peer at me before the creature dips back below the surface, its large, paddle-like tail gently lapping the water as it dives.

Alo lets out a puff of disbelief.

On the opposite side of this cavern, the rocks form a long, arching tunnel. The river crawls through the mouth of this opening, turning dark green in the shade. It must continue beyond this enormous cavern, which would explain why there are such large creatures swimming lazily below.

"River grazers," I think aloud—a recollection from a children's story. Alo tilts her head toward me as we perch on a stone ledge hanging over the water.

I return her glance, trying to hide the fact I'm still rattled from Sun Lao. My eyes dart to the water, and I twiddle my thumbs as the grazers make slow circles at the bottom of the pool. "Why are we stopping here?"

"I can think better when it's calm." For a moment, the world feels as she says—serene and closed off—safe, even. It lasts no more than a second before Alo darkens. "You *will* die."

Ice descends to sting at all my edges. "What?" I cling tighter to my spear.

"Trying to save your sister may not end well."

"So, you're a prophet now?" I set my jaw. "You said you would help me."

Alo takes a hissing breath, staring across the massive cavern. "Chol, I know these people. I know exactly what they're capable of. And now they're a hundred times more dangerous. Okay?"

"I know," I retort. "I saw the weapons. I saw everything they did. But they didn't kill Jen." *At least, not by any evidence I found.*

She softly repeats Jen's name as she stares at her hands. Then, she runs her fingers over the runes on her skin where they poke through her bindings. Alo hesitates, bristling at my gaze.

"They branded us," she answers my silent question. "These"—she brushes her hand over jagged glyphs, sharp and linear—"are my roots."

Then, she holds her wrist toward me, palm-side-up. “This is my name.” Three characters I’ve never seen before, followed by her name in my language. “And this...” she trails off, dropping her arms to her lap as she stares at the countless, inked scars. “… is my purpose.”

“I can’t read them,” I say.

She laughs sadly. “You wouldn’t be able to.”

I can’t help it—I reach for her arm, feeling the raised skin where something sharp cut and bled something new.

Alo smiles. “It isn’t your language, and it isn’t mine.”

“What do you mean?”

“The people you call the masked,” she says, “they’ve been here for decades. Learning; waiting. And the ones who you think took your sister are the latest arrivals.”

The walls of the cavern hold us hostage, echoing with the remnants of her voice and the waterfall thundering into the pool. My heart beats rapidly. I’m as intrigued as I am afraid of what Alo has to say.

“Chol.” Alo pulls away to face me. “You need to understand one thing, first and foremost. These people—my people—aren’t from *here*.”

I nod slowly, though I’m confused. “You said you were from up north.”

Words form on her lips, but she can’t get them out. Then, her eyes lift to the heavens, and she almost laughs. “Way north. Beyond every star you could ever hope to see.”

I glance up, waiting for the punchline. But Alo is dead serious. “What, like gods?”

Alo groans. “No. From a world like Aér, but different. I know how it sounds.” Her face turns red.

I exhale sharply.

Alo stands to pace the ledge. The way her feet slip against the rocks makes me nervous, and I reflexively hold out an arm to catch her in case she falls.

She doesn’t.

“Everything beyond the atmosphere is called space,” she starts. “And space is just the name we gave the emptiness between our worlds. It’s full of things, but mostly nothing at all.”

Is there a word for understanding something and being completely lost at the same time?

“When my people first discovered Aér, they set up a base. That would have been around two hundred Aérian years ago. Roughly one-hundred and fifty for us.”

“Earth,” I roll the word over my tongue. “You named your world after dirt?”

“You named your Ankori after stone.”

I shrug, but she’s already on another tangent. “It takes years to travel here—longer than most people have time for. But there’s a way to stop people from aging before they arrive. They put them in a deep sleep, so the journey doesn’t go by so slowly. It sounds bad, but they just... wake up one day, the same as when they left.”

She’s so nonchalant about it. She picks up some smooth stones, and then she skips them across the water.

I try to laugh, but I’m having trouble wrapping my head around it. “Why here?”

Her last rock sinks without bouncing.

“A whole different planet…” I say. “That sounds crazy.”

“So did your world when I first heard of it.”

“Our world,” I muse. “Aér.”

She nods, walks to the very edge, and then spins around to look at me. “If I’d never left Earth, I’d be sixty-four right now.”

My eyebrows go up. “How old *are* you?”

“Nineteen. Youngest in the program.” A bout of pride blossoms on her face.

“Program?”

“Oh.” Alo scratches her arm. “My purpose. My father was a scientist recruited to teach everyone about kor, but before he left, he made copies of all his work. I wanted to follow in his footsteps, and I worked day and night for two years to memorize as much as I could. I completed the training, and I was asked to join the mission here as a researcher.

“By the time my crew made it here, there were decades worth of data to go over, so I was holed up on the ship to keep studying and learning the language. Until—”

All right. Now I’m completely, hopelessly lost. “Ship?”

“Yes, until I was asked to go on my first field mission.”

I stare blankly.

She lets out a deep sigh. “Our information was outdated. We knew kor was important to Aér—something we couldn’t use like the natives. But things have changed since we first discovered the planet. Aérians don’t use kor like they used to, Ankori don’t move like the legends said… and so on.

“I was put in charge of learning what happened to the Ankori. But there was so little documentation of Runerok’s history, and we didn’t have the resources to go overseas or that far north. All we had were scraps of stories to understand what happened to the Ankori—until you and I found the sanctuary.”

I brighten. She’s skipped a lot, but I’m fascinated. Fascinated that someone would travel across the stars to understand our legends, fascinated by the idea of another world… but I have to keep up with her, so I concentrate.

She beams, though stops before it becomes something tangible. “But—back to the weapons. That night was not my first mission, but it *was* my last.” She teeters dangerously close to the ledge.

“In Sun Lao, we were supposed to find someone who still worked with kor—another thing I don’t understand about Aérians, but that’s beside the point. They told me not to go into too much detail about what we were doing.” A tear drips down her cheek. “I guess I did. I didn’t know we were asking them to build a weapon. It was meant to be a device that used kor to communicate with the sleeping Ankori—and I thought, ‘I can be useful; I can finally ask an Aérian about the Ankori; I’m finally doing something right.’”

Her hair falls into her face, and I want nothing more than to push it aside as she sinks further into remorse.

But then Alo trips, flying into the water.

I plummet after her, arms outstretched.

The water shocks me with cold. Still, I swim down and wrap my arms around her, heaving us both upright. Rok didn’t follow us into the cavern, so I’m on my own. On the bright side, Alo is still conscious, and she mimics my movements, kicking rapidly to stay afloat.

We climb back up the rocky ledge, where we gasp for air and lie on the narrow beach. Relieved laughter escapes us before we roll on our backs and

stare at the hazy sky.

“You have *got* to learn how to swim,” I sputter. Then, I lower my voice. “What happened to your father?”

Alo takes deep breaths, grinning as she shuts her eyes. “My father was brilliant. He believed we could do so much with kor for our people… but his research wasn’t turning out useful to the overall mission. It was the whole reason anyone came here—to understand how kor could possibly help Earth. He was doing better at understanding how it worked for Aér.”

Her fingers sift through wet gravel. “So, when he discovered that we would never be able to harness the power kor holds… the captain was furious. He demanded that we change the experiments, but my father refused.” Her knuckles turn white as she grips a fistful of pebbles. “He didn’t just refuse. He tried to do something about it. And I don’t know why—I don’t know when our crew leaders became so vicious. It wasn’t the first execution, if you could call it that. They beat him within an inch of his life, but he didn’t survive the recovery.”

I crane my neck to look at her. “Alo,” I falter. “I’m…”

Though she doesn’t return my look, her hand finds mine. She squeezes it, and we stay there for a while.

It’s twilight when we find Rok. We throw together a makeshift camp, grateful for the fire to finish drying us off. Silent minutes pass as we steal all the warmth we can, huddled together beneath Alo’s cloak.

“Alo?” I whisper to her as the fire crackles. “When this is over, I’d like to know more about everything.”

She picks at a scab on her wrist.

“But do you know what they want with Jen?”

She shifts my way, eyes heavy with exhaustion. “They wouldn’t kill her.”

“But all the people you mentioned…”

“My father’s fault. My friends’ faults. My fault—Jen is innocent.” She’s icy.

I bite my cheek.

After a while, Alo falls asleep against my shoulder. I carefully remove my share of the cloak and wrap it around her. She's light—it's easy to guide her sleeping form to the cushion of leaves beside the fire. I move to the opposite side of the fire, but I don't look away.

After the river, Alo removed her bindings. Either to dry or because she has nothing left to hide—I'd like to believe the latter. I study her marks from afar, turning her words over and over in my mind.

A death mission.

But we're not turning back.

Alo shakes me awake. "We need to go." She's got the hood of her cloak up.

"What?" I pry my eyes open. "What's wrong?"

Alo grunts as she douses the fire. A bit of the water she uses splashes my face, and I lurch upright. Rok is scanning the jungle around us, and I rub my eyes as I try to piece things together.

"If we plan on getting into the base to find Jen, we need to go back to the sanctuary," Alo finally says. I realize she's not panicked—she's excited.

"Are you crazy?" I tie my coat. "What if the bandits are still there? Do you want to die before the actual rescue?"

"Not as much as you." She shoves my shoulder, then ducks her head. "Sorry. Poor timing."

"What's at the sanctuary?"

"Answers for both of us."

I roll up my sleeves to help pack supplies. "Look, Alo, I'm grateful you want to help, but isn't this dangerous for you?"

A broken, unspoken truth lingers heavily between us.

"It's all fresh." Her eyes stray. "I think we both know the consequences… but I can handle whatever comes next."

She sets back to work. Alo's right—we both know the consequences of facing the masked. So much of our fight is similar, but she's got even less to fight for. *Or maybe more, somehow.*

I find my spear.

"Really," she insists. I guess she took my silence as skepticism. "And I will help you find Jen if it's the last thing I do."

“That’s not your problem.”

“Still”—she runs a hand through her hair—“my crew did this. I know them better than you. It’s possible that…” She trails off like I might fill in the blanks.

It’s better if I leave her to her thoughts, so I keep my mouth shut. Alo’s right. Her knowledge of her crew is the advantage I need.

We pick our way through dark woods. With the stars hidden behind heavy layers of fog, it’s harder to progress without tripping. Rok’s glow only travels a few feet ahead, and we find ourselves huddled together as we trek through the underbrush.

More times than I’d like to admit, I jump at the sight of my own shadow. I like to think that, if we were being stalked by a predator, it would have a hard time getting through the twisted roots and foliage surrounding us.

“What sort of answers are at the sanctuary?” I ask. It’s mostly an attempt to keep my heart from beating out of my chest.

Alo goes still for a moment, and I bump into her. She stammers as she regains her footing. “A lot of the inscriptions I saw referred to kor. I was more focused on learning about Ankori, but studying my father’s work taught me a lot.” She laughs to herself, shaking her head. “But they don’t tell you what you risk when you go under. Most of what I remember from his work is like sorting through fog. They said there must have been something wrong with a valve, but that’s not important.”

“When they put you to sleep?”

She nods. “I’ve forgotten a lot about that time before I got here—it’s part of why I was so out of the loop on what was going on when I arrived a few months ago. I’ve been revising and training. But I’ve learned a lot more from you and Rok in just a few days than all those months.”

I watch her closely as we pry through some low-hanging branches. “What about how well you fight?”

The odd way her mouth shapes tells me she doesn’t want to answer, and red flushes her cheeks. “Our whole operation was never meant to intertwine with any Aérians. But there was always the risk of being caught and seen as a threat. We all went through combat training—a lot of which I’ve discovered is muscle memory.”

“Then why the attack on our farm? If you really thought you were about to learn how to bring an Ankori to life after all the violence you’d seen among your own people?”

“Trust me,” she groans. “I was in heavy denial. I’m a scientist, not a soldier. I know that means I should have been more observant, but they made it easy to look the other way.”

“Look the other way from what?”

Alo holds her arm out to keep me from walking forward, and we take a moment to detour around a steep drop in the trail.

She clears her throat while our nerves settle. “I don’t know the full picture. I do know that sometimes my peers would talk about where some of the items we studied came from. Scouts poking around places they shouldn’t and bringing in stolen items when they were only supposed to scavenge. But it was more helpful to my research than not, as much as I hate to say it.”

My nose wrinkles. “Wouldn’t it have been easier to ask us for help?”

“Things were different on Aér two hundred years ago, when Earth first received any information,” Alo says. “Runerok was experiencing the end of a war. The Ankori were still moving, and all Aérians were focused on clearing out any threats, so the first landers didn’t get much of a chance to establish a proper base. It was better for Earth to send small groups after that—and forty-five years of travel means high costs and low yields of information.

“The last team that arrived was the largest group by far. I’m not sure about the politics behind why we weren’t to make contact or establish ourselves. But now our information is outdated, and we still don’t fully understand your world and how it can help Earth. It was a botched mission from the start. I’m just lucky my crew left so soon after my father’s—and that I got to see him again. We were the last they were going to send until better results were returned.”

We find a small glade that isn’t so cluttered with overgrowth, so we pause to take some deep breaths.

“Why are your people so interested in Aér?”

She smiles, a strange sparkle in her gaze. “Kor. Its energy and the way it fuels your entire world. From our understanding, before whatever war it was that divided the people, kor was much more *revered*. There was

evidence of people using it regularly, though it was scarce in our reports to find actual users. It was starting to be more common for only Ankori to—”

“Back up,” I say. “What do you mean, ‘using it’?”

She eyes me to see if I’m being serious, and then her expression melds into mild surprise. “You know? Bonding?”

I cock my head.

“Wait. You’re telling me you’ve never heard of bonding?”

“I had a favorite dog when I was little,” I offer.

Alo laughs incredulously. “What happened to Aér?” she breathes, and then she walks ahead of me. “I had a suspicion… but this is interesting.”

“Alo, *no secrets*,” I remind her. She huffs.

“I sound like an idiot,” she says. “This is what I meant when I say I’ve learned more from you than just reading about it.”

I throw my hands out. “I still don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She goes on like she doesn’t hear me. “All this time, I’ve been studying your history, only to actually meet *you* and find out nothing I know is true anymore.”

I block her path. She crosses her arms, and I continue. “I want to know what you know. Maybe I can fill in the blanks.”

She rubs her forehead. “It’s over a hundred years old. If you don’t even know the term, what’s the point?”

“Everything! Everything is the point,” I plead. “Until a few days ago, I didn’t even know Ankori could do anything. And where I’m from, nobody ever talks about kor outside of the shifting of seasons or how well it grows vegetables.”

“The shifting?” Alo’s eyes brighten. “You still know about that?” I see gears turning as she focuses her thoughts.

“It’s hard to miss.” I wave at the mist-jade veins that fill the overgrowth.

Alo’s attention shifts to Rok. “Has Rok always been awake? It’s first instance I’ve seen of one—”

“None of our Ankori ever moved before that night. It’s like they just… woke up once we went under attack.”

Her jaw slants like she’s piecing something together. “I can’t believe it.” Alo exhales. “They *did* want them to come to life. But only to see if

they were still a threat. If an Ankori can’t be brought down, then they can’t expand the base.”

“Expand?”

Alo doesn’t respond. She’s too busy talking to herself, her pace quickening like she’ll reach a breakthrough if she moves fast enough.

“How long has it been?” she says.

My lungs burn as I catch up to her.

“Aér was a secret to humans until a few years ago. Well,” she corrects herself, "more than a few years. I’ve been asleep for most.”

“Humans?”

Of course, she ignores me. “To our knowledge, Aér was a place of great power. The people had abilities like nothing we’d ever known; the strength to shape their very world, in a sense. And mountains—mountains *served* them. At least, that’s what the training said.”

I mull over her words. “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

She laughs. “Yeah.”

“But what power? The Ankori?”

“Sort of.” Alo is bewildered. “The bonding. If it’s still true, Aérians have the ability to manipulate kor. That could be exactly what we need to go up against them.”

Even though I can’t wrap my head around half her words, I feel an uncanny excitement toward these new, strange puzzle pieces. “Manipulate kor, like Rok? With the trees?”

“I have a hunch. In my studies, I read about the sanctuaries. It’s why I was so excited to see one. And if what I read on the walls has anything to do with *how* the bonding works…”

The sanctuary. For a minute, I’d forgotten that was where we were going. And now, I’m not afraid of the potential bandit camp nearby. I’m afraid of that feeling—that silent call that drank me in and tried to drown me.

“There’s something more to kor than energy, Chol,” Alo tells me. “It’s not just part of Aér. It *is* Aér. And, even if you’ve only heard of it in legend, I think that connection could still be somewhere inside of you.”

My existence feels like the faintest of echoes in a dying void. My rapidly beating heart is the only sensation within me, and I shake in the cold of the night.

“I felt something,” I finally say.

Alo looks intrigued, her gaze urging me to keep speaking.

“At the bottom of the pool.” I take a staggering breath. “I thought I would drown. Like the feeling down there would take over, and I wouldn’t be able to save you.”

Her face softens and our steps slow.

“Do you think the answer is down there?”

Alo takes a steady breath. “We’ll know soon enough.”

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DEPTHS

I don’t think it’s possible to find the sanctuary again. With all the twists and turns of the jungle, it becomes a labyrinth. But this labyrinth has no dead ends—only paths that span for an eternity.

Sunlight has broken over the ridges of the world, and exhaustion slows our every step. Alo and I scan the jungle with what little focus we have left, though it feels hopeless. Rok strays several times, and Alo has to signal for him to return to us.

“What’s gotten into him?” I scowl. “Maybe Ankori do get tired.”

Alo yawns and rubs her face. “We’re close, though. I can feel it.”

“You can?” I perk up, and Alo raises her brow.

“We just have to keep moving.”

“But you said you could feel it.”

“Not literally,” she says. “Sometimes you have to lie to keep up morale.”

I give Alo a smile, but my stomach churns.

That echoing pull of the sanctuary haunts me like nothing else. It’s a strong, instinctive sensation that crawls through my bones, and I want nothing more than to rip it away from myself. The memory is so visceral, I could easily believe we were near the sanctuary.

The feeling isn’t real, I tell myself. But this whole thing makes me uneasy—Alo’s not even from here, and now she’s dragging me back to a place that scares me more than the farm’s tunnel beneath Aéha based on a hunch.

Alo watches me curiously, and it takes her stare for me to realize we’ve settled beneath the haven of two massive trees. Their roots envelop us like giant arms, and I nestle against the base of one.

“You’re acting weirder than normal,” Alo says. “Is something wrong?”

“Thanks,” I sneer. “The area near the sanctuary gives me a strange feeling. Not just the pool.”

Alo nods, taking mental notes. Her scrutinizing glares since we first met now make sense.

Right now, it’s getting on my nerves.

“I bet it’s the kor,” she says. “My father theorized it had its own language.”

“Sure.”

“But Rok is clearly sentient.” Alo gestures to him. He stands at the edge of our resting spot, facing the forest. “His life source *is* kor. And he understands us. Remember what I said?”

Alo’s probably correct, but I don’t know what gives her the right to make all these assumptions. “The vibrations.” I can’t help but scoff.

She puts her hands on her hips. “I thought you would care more about this.” I sharpen my gaze, clenching my jaw as she continues. “I’m trying to teach you something that could save us.”

I get to my feet, towering over her as I seethe. “You don’t know *anything* about us—you said it yourself a dozen times. This isn’t your world, Alo. Stop acting like you know everything.”

She gawps at me, almost laughing as her dark eyes simmer. “Are you serious? What is your problem?”

I don’t have time to answer before she heads deeper into the forest.

My head spins. “Where are you going?” I shout after her.

“To the sanctuary,” she shouts back. I follow the sound of her thrashing through the woods, and my anger begins to blur into regret.

“Alo, wait!” I call. I grow frantic, panting as I barrel through the brush. Branches scratch my face and hands as I run, but I don’t pay attention.

A bird cries through the forest, and I brace myself against a tree. When I look around, I have no idea where I am. Alo is gone and Rok is nowhere in sight. My heart thunders as I glance skyward. The pale sun is hidden behind dark clouds, and I see lightning flash to the east.

“Alo!” I yell, but the only answer I get is my own echo.

What’s wrong with you? I think, holding my head in my hands. I clutch at my hair, feeling my lopsided braid. Jen was right. Alo is right. I’m cold. I’m stubborn. I’m angry.

I’m so angry.

I kick the ground, sending a blast of mulch across the forest floor. My fists harden, and my legs want to buckle but, somehow, I stop. Stop myself from crumbling to the ground.

Straightening, I inhale all the tears and rage I want to let out, and I hold them inside. My anger pounds at the walls of my chest like a storm ready to break loose. But I don't let it go. Instead, I swallow every last drop of air I can, and then I exhale everything with all the control I can muster.

And suddenly, I'm not angry anymore.

I'm not ready, either. But for once, my head is clear, and my heart beats steady.

I didn't make it this far alone. And even in the middle of this jungle, unsure of where I'm going or what I'll find when I get there, I feel... together. Like everything is falling into place, and I'm going to make it.

I'm going to find Jen.

To my relief, Rok is where we left him. Cautiously, I clear my throat. "Rok?"

He turns, and then lumbers to my side.

"I need your help," I sigh. "I've made a lot of mistakes—and you've seen most of them, I'm sure."

He doesn't move, and I laugh softly. "But you've been more of a friend than I could ask for."

Rok's hand rests on my shoulder, and I feel warm inside. Like everything is settling. I know it's a stretch, but at the same time, I won't know unless I ask. "Do you remember where the sanctuary is?"

Rok faces the direction he was so adamantly watching before. He moves at a surprisingly swift pace, and I can barely keep up at just a walk. *What have we been missing out on?*

We've been moving for several minutes when nausea seizes me. I'm dizzy and frazzled, and a low hum fills my ears.

A chill goes down my spine. It's the feeling from before, magnetic and deep. Rok steps aside, and I follow the sensation like a hound. Thunder rattles the jungle as we move, and I hear rain trickling through the forest long before it reaches us.

We’re caught in the downpour before we know it, running as the call reels me in. At the top of the next rise, I come to a stop. Hands on my knees, I gasp for air, and then I spot the Half-Moon Sanctuary in all its glory, glimmering in the storm.

I bluster through the doorway with the next breath of wind, slowing only to take in the chamber. My heart is racing, and I can barely catch my breath. The feeling has never been stronger.

In the corner, I spot Alo. Even with the pounding of the rain on the roof, I know she heard me come in by the way her shoulders go up. Her attention stays locked on the walls as she studies the runes.

Memories of the fight within these walls hit me as I step over debris. I swallow the tightness in my throat as I approach Alo.

Destruction aside, this place should be peaceful. *So why am I afraid?*

I clear my throat. I want to tell Alo I’m sorry, but I can’t. It doesn’t feel like the right thing to say.

Alo doesn’t look at me. She doubles down on the runes, pressing her fingers along their lines and murmuring to herself.

I follow her, sidling against the wall. She pauses for a moment, but she still won’t acknowledge me. I see how stiff she looks, and I sigh.

“I shouldn’t have snapped. But I did, and I can’t take it back.”

No reply.

“Still, it was wrong. This may not be your world, but you know more about its history than I ever did. I’d argue that you belong here even more than I do.”

Finally, she looks at me, jutting her chin out. “Don’t let this go to your head, Chol. But… I’m jealous, all right?”

When she averts her eyes, her large teardrops fall and form dark spots on the floor. “You have *all this* at your fingertips. I spent so many years learning about something I wanted, I never thought about what I already had.”

“What are you talking about?” I tilt my head, wishing she’d look at me.

“I wanted to be a part of something bigger than myself, and this whole mission felt like the perfect opportunity. I left my world. My comforts.” Her hair falls over her eyes.

“Sure, my father was here, but that doesn’t make any of this mine. Even if I know a lot about Aér…” She gathers herself. “I still don’t belong.”

Alo holds herself for a moment, sniffling as she stares at her feet. Holding my breath, I move closer to her, and then I extend my hand.

Apprehensive, she meets my gaze. There’s darkness in her eyes unlike anything I’ve seen, and it streams in rivers. Her doubt shifts to question, and then she takes my hand.

“I don’t know how it is on Earth,” I say, “but here, when you leave something, it never leaves you. So, wherever you go”—I soften my voice, considering what Mother would say in this situation—“you take it with you. You don’t just belong where you came from. You belong where you go.”

Alo’s eyes glisten as she blinks at me, and her jaw quivers. Then, she squeezes my hand and smiles. “Thank you, Chol.”

I nod, surprised when Alo hugs me. “You’re still a stubborn idiot,” she says. I laugh.

When she lets go, we take a deep breath. Outside, the rain flows in torrents. We’re both chilled to the bone, but it doesn’t shake us. Alo goes back to reading, and Rok and I get a small fire going.

Before long, the flames are warming us and we’re both studying the runes. Most are still over my head, but I keep trying. Alo is doing much better than me, so I decide to return to the room where I hid before.

The runes remain, their quiet glint ever-present. By far, it’s the closest to my language I can read.

“Alo,” I call, “these *are* instructions. I think.”

She pokes her head through the doorway. “It’s old Aér speak. I can read it,” she replies, and her eyes brighten. “Wow. This answers so many questions.”

“Like what?” My heart rate picks up.

She waves me away. “One second. I need to go over it again.”

I watch her lips as she reads to herself in an unfamiliar tongue. The suspense is killing me, and I shuffle back and forth across the floor. I can understand *some* words, and ‘kor’ comes up a lot. Then there’s the rune for ‘bonding,’ which piques my interest.

Waiting for Alo to finish is the most stressful minute of my life.

“This is incredible!” she finally exclaims, pivoting to look at me. She puts her hands on her head and grins, dancing in place. “Chol!”

“What?” I try to match her excitement, but I have no idea what she’s found.

The next thing I know, she grabs my arm and scans the room. “Aha!” she yelps, stooping over to pick up a shard of broken pottery. Then, she pulls me into the main chamber.

I follow without resistance, though I’m lost. “What are we doing?”

“Sorry,” Alo says, letting go of my arm. “It’s just so much to take in. I don’t know where to start.”

“From the beginning?” I smile through clenched teeth, wincing as she relents her hold of my arm. She has sharp fingernails.

“The bonding; it all happens *here*, and it’s amazing.”

“I still don’t know what that means,” I remind her impatiently.

Alo paces back and forth. She holds the pottery shard like it’s one of her daggers, and I’m a little nervous about it. Still, I listen to what she has to say.

“In ancient times, there were no Ankori. Only kor and people. The kor moved the world, but people discovered how to control it. Over time, people began to abuse it, and it began to result in conflict... which, ultimately, led to the war I mentioned. The resolution to the war was the banishment of kor use. I’m sure there’s more about that somewhere.”

“But what about the bonding?”

We lock eyes, and she grins manically. “The runes weren’t instructions—they were a warning.”

“And that’s exciting?” I’m shaky again.

“Well, yes. It explained how bonding works. And it’s going to help us find your sister.”

I suck in. “*Sky above*, Alo. Spit it out before I have a heart attack.”

She jumps in place, and then she shies back so abruptly that I look around the room for fear of being attacked. Her eyes are stuck on an inscription somewhere above the pool.

I give her a moment to read, though I’m hollow with worry.

Alo rubs her eyes. “There are six points in all of Aér where the energy of kor breaks loose from the world. These sanctuaries were built to contain them.”

I glance around the room, scanning from the ground to the ceiling. My eyes rest on the half-moon pattern arching over our heads, and I take it all

in.

“I learned about these sanctuaries in my studies, but I never knew what they were for until we came here. But because the kor flows freely here, you… *should* be able to bond to it.”

In the back of my mind, I hear the edges of the pool lapping at the walls that hold it in. Suddenly, I know exactly what lies within that darkness —why the kor spirals outward from those depths and branches across all that I know.

It’s a deadly source of power. Coveted by no one and revered by all.

“Should?” I go still.

Alo nods, and then she holds the broken clay shard out. “There’s a chance that it could take you, not the other way around…”

We stare at each other a solid minute, Alo’s eyes large and my chest pounding rampantly.

“It’s up to you,” she whispers.

I take a step back. “Will it help us?”

“People who could bond had power, Chol.” She looks at me. “More than even the Ankori.”

“That’s impossible,” I say.

Alo hangs her head, and her voice warbles. “When the first of us to arrive found out about bonding—they didn’t know how it was done… just that it was possible. It’s why they kept sending more of us.”

I observe her carefully, and she goes on. “They learned they couldn’t have it, Chol. Generations of new soldiers and scientists sent in as small crews to learn—it wasn’t ours to take. They wanted to turn to other methods.” Alo clouds over. She rubs her arms, fingers twitching across the ink in her skin. “Methods that meant people got hurt.”

“The weapons,” I guess, and she nods.

“I thought I could be smarter than those of us who did try to say something, but I wasn’t careful enough. I got the weaponsmith killed, and then I ran away the night they attacked your valley.” She takes a shaky breath. “But now that I’m on the outside... they can’t see us coming.” She waves toward the pool.

I’m pallid. “Just because we have access to power like this doesn’t mean we should use it.”

“But it’s a suicide mission without it. You saw firsthand what they did. It’s going to happen again, and again, and again. They’re going to take over before your world even knows what hit it.”

I press my lips in a firm line, grim as I watch the slow-moving surface of the pool. The breeze turns our way, bringing rain into the sanctuary as we stand at the water’s edge.

I have to make a choice.

“How do I know you’re not lying? That I’m not just some experiment for you to prove something to yourself?” I give Alo a stern look.

She doesn’t balk at the question. In fact, her look matches mine. “People I loved died trying to stop this, and I won’t stand to see anyone else fall.”

The wind howls through the sanctuary, picking up the tail ends of our clothes and whipping our hair into our faces. I bite hard on my lower lip, tasting how chapped and gnawed it is.

“What do I do?” I ask.

Alo guides me to the pool. She points to the wall she was studying and raises her voice to be heard over the storm winds. “Those inscriptions tell exactly how it works. You’re going to swim to the very bottom, first. Then”—she raises the pottery shard to me—“pick a place where the energy can bond.”

I freeze, my voice cracking with nerves. “A-anywhere?” I try to laugh.

Alo gives me a gentle look. There is no hint of betrayal, but my rapid heartbeat refuses to calm.

“You can do it,” she tells me, and then she joins Rok’s side.

My vision narrows as I stare into the heart of the water. Kor illuminates the walls with welcoming serenity, but there is no comfort any form of light could bring me at this moment.

Now or never. I take the deepest breath of my life and plummet forward.

Immediately, the shock of cold water hits, and it’s a struggle to keep my air in. As I kick downward, the call I was afraid of covers me from head to toe. I could detach from myself—I’m floating in an endless sky and my body is the anchor holding me back.

But it’s only the call of what lurks beneath. I force myself to refocus and continue to push. The pressure builds against my skull the further I go,

and the dizzying feeling grows into a whirlwind, beating at me and screaming in my ears.

Still, the pool deepens. There is no light anymore; there is no end. My lungs burn and my eyes see nothing. The depths are eternal, and I am alone.

All at once, a blinding light flares in front of me. There is no up or down. The world below pulses and my body shudders violently.

I'm out of time.

Black creeps through my edges, eating at my insides and corroding my reality.

But I press on, and even though I'm on the verge of passing out, I drag the pottery shard against my palm and watch blood trickle across the light.

I'm consumed in brilliance, and my palm flares with so much pain I can't help but cry out, the rest of my precious breath stolen away.

As I scream, all I feel is an immense weight drive into my chest.

I'm dying.

I inhale, but it isn't water that fills me. I try to scream again but there's nothing left. If I hadn't dropped the pottery shard, my hand burns with such pain I would consider sawing it off.

The walls continue to spin—or maybe it's me—but I'm not gone yet. I'm in agony, but I'm still here.

Somehow, my feet hit the bottom of this hell. I kick up.

In response, the kor around me glows, lighting my way back to existence. The tunnel is ending.

I breach the surface. I can't even gasp for air as I heave myself over the edge.

Alo jolts to her feet.

I can't hear her—only the waves slapping the side of the pool and a piercing wail in the depths of my imagination.

Then, the ringing fades, and it's dark.

"Chol!" Alo sobs. "Chol, please wake up."

I sputter as my lungs pump back to working order. My left arm is numb, and I strain to check my fingers through blurry vision. The skin is icy blue, but there's a white mark of light across my palm. I wheeze and roll onto my side, throwing up more water than I ever care to see again.

"Chol." Alo is back in view. "I'm so sorry, Chol. I shouldn't have made you go down there."

I want to tell her it’s not her fault, but I can’t catch my breath. My body convulses at the first lick of air that I get. Before I know what’s happening, Alo tackles me. She sobs against my neck, holding me so tight that I may as well be underwater again.

“Alo,” I choke. “It’s okay.”

“No, no it’s not,” she cries. “You were down there for almost an *hour*.”

“What?” I try to move, but I can only tremble.

Rok stoops beside me and lifts me from the ground. I feel heavy as a mountain until he sets me next to our fire. Steadying my breath, I stare at the flames.

Alo has followed us over, and she’s pacing back and forth. Then, she thinks to retrieve her cloak for me, which she tucks me under. “I thought for sure—”

“That I died?” I finish her thoughts. “And ruin our chances?” Despite the ache in my ribs, I give her a reassuring grin.

She laughs through tears, though uncertainty shrouds her expression. She’s just as terrified as I am.

I don’t know what happened in those waters, and I’m positive I shouldn’t be here. If a doctor had been there to declare me dead even after I made it back to the surface, I wouldn’t have argued.

But I’m not dead. I’m in pain, sure, but I’m not dead.

“What happened down there? Do you remember?” Alo’s eyes widen.

Silent, I lift my hand from under the cloak. It’s the last thing I remember.

Sure enough, the proof is seared across my palm. A jagged scar stretches across the surface, filled with mist-jade kor that branches along the patterns in my skin.

Taking a deep breath, I turn my hand to Alo.

Her jaw goes slack. She crawls over to me and grabs my hand, turning it over in her own. She spreads my fingers and runs hers across the gash.

“I can’t believe it.”

“You didn’t think it would actually work,” I reply.

“If it hadn’t, that would have been worse.” She shrugs politely. “How does it feel?”

I smirk. “Like I died and deserve double rations for dinner.”

She smacks my palm—which hurts enough that I shake my hand and wince. “Careful; we don’t know how this thing works.”

Alo is thrilled. “We’ll find out soon enough. But eat now and get some rest.” She presses a cluster of nuts and dried fruits into my unscarred hand.

Soon enough, we’ll find out if this is a blessing or a curse.

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WEIGHT

The storm may have lulled me to sleep, but I don't rest. My darkness is filled with flashes of color, lights sparkling against a vast plane of nothing. I'm freezing, shuddering feebly as I hold myself together. All I see is kor. It twists through my vision and crawls through my skin.

I wake in a cold sweat. The rain has ceased, replaced by a cool breeze drifting through the chamber. Our fire is no more than embers.

My chest throbs. I draw in a raspy breath before pulling myself upright, wincing as pain shoots up my left arm. It covers my shoulders and ricochets through my body, and I bite my tongue to refrain from groaning.

The kor is no longer blinding to look at, but it holds the same glow as what fills the walls, the ground, and my pendant. I watch the pulse of jade in my skin—something so natural, now in me. But I don't panic the way I probably should, so I flex my hand. The light vanishes when I close my fist and then blooms through the darkness when I extend my fingers.

Alo rests nearby. I've hardly seen her sleep this whole journey, but I can tell she's not going to wake up any time soon. She looks peaceful.

A sharp pain in my palm has me hissing through my teeth. *This can't last forever, right?*

Carefully, I pull myself from the floor. Every muscle in my body is stiff.

I peer past the entrance of the sanctuary. The forest is alive without us; crickets sing to one another and frogs chirp happily about the muddied jungle.

Rok rests near the entrance. His gaze is fixed somewhere amongst the treetops. I don't want to disturb him, so I sneak through a side exit.

Under the cover of darkness, I move through dense foliage, stars lighting my way. It's quiet. So quiet, I falter until I realize why: the feeling

that haunted me is no longer filling my head. The only *hum* left comes from the tingle in my palm.

Let's see if I can do what Rok did.

I double-check my surroundings. Away from the sanctuary, I am totally alone. I steady myself and set my sights on a nearby tree. It's more isolated than its brethren, small enough that, whatever happens, I might be successful.

Jittery, I approach the rain-soaked bark, and the world goes still as I place my hands on the trunk. Rok made this look easy.

I furrow my brow and narrow my eyes at the tree. Dirt and bark press into my palms, crumbling and dirty.

Inside, I am hot. Irritation or concentration—I'm not sure. My skin dampens with sweat as I strain, and I imagine I am pushing all that heat toward my fingertips.

Fiery pain shoots up my arms, and my skin goes so pale that I can see the blood vessels webbing through my fingertips. I feel sick at the sight of my inner workings, but then both my hands glow blanch white. The next thing I know, kor splinters from my fingertips. My jaw drops as it translates onto the tree before me.

Aér below. I gasp as the heat increases. My arms tremble in protest, but I'm stuck.

The kor on the trunk grows brighter than I can bear to look at. It spans across the width of the tree, and then a vibrant, high ring fills my head.

I scream as I fall to my knees. *Agony* and *fire* and *pain.*

There's a horrible, burning smell the moment I fall back. With no connection, the kor fizzles into the sky. What was left in the bark is erratic, spiraling through the dying tree. Wood creaks and splinters, and then white light bursts from within the trunk.

The tree groans as it splits in a hundred different places. Dirt sprays as winding roots rip loose at the base, and then the whole thing topples with a resounding crash.

The uncontained energy burns through the wood from within. I cough at the smoke, unable to look away as massive branches shrivel to ash before me.

I tremble madly. Everything hurts.

The grinding ring fills my head again. *I messed up*; *I'm unworthy.* The kor will strip me to the bone before it leaves my body. *We won't find Jen.* I stumble backward, waiting for the energy to drain from my soul.

But it doesn't.

The scorched jungle remains my only consequence, smoking as the loose energy filters out.

I did this, I repeat to myself, breaking into a run. I hope no one heard. I hope no one—

I slam into a wall. When I regain my focus, I shudder at the sight of Rok leering over me.

Another screeching sound fills my head. I snarl, covering my ears. Nothing helps.

Rok reaches toward me. Ashamed, I lift my hand to take his, and when our fingers meet, I shatter.

Everything within me spins until it feels like Aér is over me and the sky is under me. Chills flood my body as the horrible scraping sound continues, chorusing over and over, but then Rok's hand envelops mine.

A frightful cacophony resonates through the universe, but the longer Rok's hand holds mine, the more it comes into focus.

You shouldn't have done that.

The ringing in my head dims, and the world returns to its usual rhythm. I spin in a circle, searching the trees for any evidence of what just happened.

In the distance, a bird cries, low and forlorn. I take in a juddering breath, and then Rok pulls me to my feet. I brace myself against his arm.

"My head." I hold my temples. "What did I do?"

I turn to Rok. My head rings again. It's just as jarring as the first time, but it's no longer painful.

You are untrained.

"I—" I stare at him. He doesn't move. "Did you just *talk*?"

The Ankori merely nods. I bite my knuckle.

"*What*?" I shout. My arms fly around as I try to fathom what's happening, and then reality sets in.

"Rok," I breathe. "I thought that—"

That I'm useless?

My stomach sinks. “No—I shouldn’t have said that.” I pace back and forth. “I didn’t…” I trail off as Rok leans toward me, and I find myself shaking. Why did I ever think it was a good idea to insult a seven-foot-tall creature made of solid stone?

I can’t be insulted. Rok’s deep, reverberating voice shakes my core. *Not by a bonehead like you.*

I think I’m laughing. Maybe I’m crying. But it certainly turns into laughter. And then my laughter turns to silence. Resilient awe.

What do you say to a being that is centuries old? The being that watched your entire life, right up to the point where everything you loved was torn away?

“Rok, I’m so sorry—”

You have said this many times.

Incredulous, I gawp at him. “You really could understand me?” This guilty feeling is a new low. No wonder some people used to worship their Ankori. I should be groveling at his feet.

I should apologize to you.

“Why?” I’m exasperated.

He doesn’t respond for a moment, then I swear his stone shoulders sag. *I did not fulfill my purpose. For this, I owe you a great debt.*

“A debt?” I speak faintly, heart pounding in my ears. “They killed the others. They took Jen.”

Rok only looks at me, and I’m afraid I’ve imagined all this. Then, he shifts as casually as anyone might in a normal conversation. He *is* watching me—it’s no longer an idea. It’s a reality.

Insides swimming, I feel lightheaded from a dozen different things. My breaths shorten and my shoulders knot. “You were supposed to help. What were you doing the whole time? What were you doing when they took her?”

Rok goes on. *Aér commanded that I stand down.*

My voice cracks, and tears sting my eyes. “You did *nothing*. I never saw you fight—I never saw you try. Jen is *gone*.” I choke, bile in my throat as my blood boils. “You did nothing while everything fell apart.”

As I sob, the low pressure accompanying Rok’s voice returns.

Even as we were broken, Aér told me to protect only you.

“*Aér*?” I glare at him. “But you could have tried to help. I wasn’t the one who needed you.” The heat returns to my fists as I shudder. My teeth chatter with rage, and everything within me burns.

Before I can think, I rear back in anger and hurl my fist forward. It lands against Rok, but this time, there’s give. My fist glows white, and I hear the crunch of stone as a small fissure forms in his sternum.

He remains stoic, looking down at the impact of my fist.

My throat is tight, and my jaw quivers as I stare at what I’ve done. He’s not falling apart, but there’s a noticeable mark on his chest. The kor there flickers, and then the light goes out, leaving lifeless engravings where my fist made contact.

Horror floods me.

For once, I wish the world could drown me out. I could become an afterthought, and nothing else would matter.

But this is real. I’ve *damaged* an *Ankori*. All the silence in the world weighs me down.

Rok breaks through my thoughts. *We could not have known what would happen that night. I could not have chosen a different path.*

He goes silent.

“I wish you could have,” I whisper. But not through malice or resentment. Ankori—for all their years of hibernation—do not choose their masters. But if Rok *had* chosen to fight that night…

My hands no longer glow, but the kor gash persists within my palm. My knuckles are scraped from contact with Rok. “I’m sorry,” I finally manage.

He doesn’t reply.

“Please, Rok,” I try. “Accept my apology and… go. Or stay. Just let it be your choice. You’ve more than repaid any debt you think you might owe.”

Silence.

I could be sick. Resigned, I make my way back up the steps of the sanctuary. Alo is still asleep, so I rekindle the fire before settling.

Sleep doesn’t come. Restless minutes stretch into hours, and as my heavy eyes peel open, sunlight spans across the sanctum.

Rok stayed.

I don’t know what he feels, whether it’s anger, grief, or peace. Maybe it’s nothing at all.

Still, the wound rests permanently against his surface, and the idea of my rage—endless and untamed—clouds me like a blanket.

Jen would have never done something like this. For all her tenacity—mornings spent running off so Father couldn’t make her get her hands dirty; the time she purposely tore her new dress and Mother made her wash all the linens as punishment—she would have never gone this far.

There’s fire to her, controlled chaos. She, unlike myself, knows what she wants. She knows she’d rather spend her days in the village, doing odd favors for the elders and befriending everyone she meets. She knows she’d rather make up new stories about far-off places and colorful characters than complain about chores.

And, for all my own self-righteous, stuck-up, older-sibling tendencies, she knows she wants to be my sister and my friend.

My heart lurches, and the filth on my face is suddenly wet with tears.

My little sister. Carefree and headstrong.

Gone.

I study her pendant. She used to say it didn’t match her—the pale green with fire-gold flecks.

But I think it’s perfect. Fire in a garden, smoothing over something that needs to be reborn.

As I repeat this over and over, I began to drift somewhere far from the sanctuary, far from my mess. Before long, “I have to find her,” becomes “I will find her.”

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17

BROKEN

I no longer remember the last time I woke up calmly—but at least I was asleep.

The guilt of last night hits me with ferocity. Especially when I see Alo across from me, packing up our things.

Without a sound, I sit up and hold my breath. I scan the room for Rok. He's still posted at the entryway, and Alo is oblivious.

My head spins. From here, Rok has no sign of injury. But I know it's there, waiting to remind me every day for the rest of my life that I took my rage too far.

I watch Alo work, twiddling my fingers. Before long, she notices that I'm up. "Good morning," she says, calm as ever. "How do you feel?"

I stifle a groan as I pull myself to my feet. "Not great."

She purses her lips. "I imagine it'll take some getting used to." She nods to my hand.

Self-conscious, I pull it toward my chest and fold my fingers together. Alo doesn't stop staring. To her, it's as if I'm holding the most precious object in the universe. And, in a way, I am. I clear my throat.

She turns red and looks away. "Sorry. It's just—this is one of the most amazing things I've ever seen."

I shrug awkwardly, keeping my palm tucked away. Alo's perception of what I've become is unblemished.

It only took me an hour to discover what took my ancestors a war to determine: our history must have been buried for a reason.

The tight feeling in my chest sticks as I reach for my spear. Eating is the last thing on my mind, and Alo seems concerned when I don't reach for the food she offers. Thankfully, she doesn't press me. She puts it back with the supplies, and then we leave the sanctuary. I wonder how long it will be before she notices what I've done to Rok.

By way of some miracle, Alo is more worried about the path ahead than scrutinizing the Ankori. An air of heaviness shrouds us as we walk. Our journey has finally boiled down to this revelation—the only thing dividing me from Jen is distance.

Nevertheless, we keep our heads high. Alo is the only one who knows where we are going, and I have no choice but to follow her strange way of maneuvering through the untamed jungle. I don't know if it's because I'm exhausted, but the world bobs up and down with each shifting breeze, pushing in and out and urging me along.

The longer we go, the more my insides knot. Finally, I lose my breath.

Alo hasn't noticed my duress, so I fall back as we pick our way through the brush. I try to focus on our surroundings like I might spot something familiar, but everything is the same—ever-sprawling forest and ever-winding kor. Sometimes, shimmering noises fill my head, and I have to press a hand to my ear in an attempt to focus on our path.

Alo breaks the silence first. Her shoulders go up as she released a stifled breath. "Feel any different?" It's a simple enough question.

There's pure energy flowing through my hand that could destroy something at any second.

"I guess."

"We should probably test it out—*before* we're in over our heads."

"No." I go cold. She gives me an estranged look, and I stammer as I reiterate. "We don't know anything about what this can do. Rok's powers are one thing, but mine are... another."

Alo doesn't follow. "That's why we should test it." She squints.

I bite my tongue, adrenaline filtering into my bloodstream. My fingers twitch. She has no idea what I can do, and I don't know if I want her to find out.

A low hum breaches my thoughts, and I let out an icy hiss. I don't understand how only *I* can feel these soul-stirring vibrations as Rok speaks to me.

I will help.

My lips move to form words, but Alo will think I'm talking to myself. Besides, she has no idea that I can understand Rok now. I'm not sure I should share this with her just yet; I can hardly think beyond what's going

on inside me let alone form a cohesive response to what I know will be a multitude of questions.

"What should I do?" I manage. It's a question they can both answer.

Alo is quiet for a moment. "Maybe," she says, motioning to a vein of kor at our feet, "you should start by placing your hands on it?"

Might as well. I kneel, flattening my palms to the earth. Soil fills the prints of my fingers as I curl my fingers through its murky textures.

I know the next step, and Alo is standing too close.

"Say this works, but it goes wrong, and everything explodes. Do you think I'll land in that tree over there, or against that boulder over there?" I nod my head in both directions, and Alo lifts an eyebrow.

"Why would it explode?"

"Just asking."

My fingers already feel hot. I stall for time, pretending to study the branches of kor below me.

"Maybe if you just…" She leans forward, placing her hands over mine. She guides them across the ground, toward a particularly broad streak of kor. "… focus on it."

"And do what?" I say. "Make things blow up?"

She sits back, annoyed. "I don't know, Chol. This is why you're *testing* it."

I give an exasperated sigh. I don't want to find out what else I can do, but if making things spontaneously combust can save Jen, maybe it's worth it.

I glare at the ground. My hands clutch at the dirt, forming fists as I focus on the patch.

Your focus is driven by fear, Rok tells me, and I grunt.

I try to push the world away from myself. My fingers burrow further into the dirt, and an all-too-familiar buzzing sensation passes through me. Sharp pain tears through my chest, and I gasp. Sweat beads on my brow.

Alo is too close. She stares at my hands, watching what the energy does to my skin. There are white streaks of light jutting from my fists all the way up my arms, and my whole upper body is on fire.

I want to tell her to get back, but I can't form thoughts or words. The ground surrounding us begins to shake, and I feel that grinding sound in the back of my mind. I think Rok is trying to say something, but it's drowned

out by an incredible force of energy that shoots through me and stabs the earth. In the corner of my eye, he drags Alo from the scene. The world goes red and white, and I'm flung backward as an invisible wall pummels me.

When I open my eyes, I'm several measures from the impact. There's a fresh crater in the dirt, and clods of soil are raining from the sky. I crawl on my hands and knees toward the epicenter. I'm filthy, and the kor around the disaster zone is pulsing madly around the hole in the ground.

"Alo?" I choke on dust, swatting the air.

She pokes her head out from behind a tree, followed by Rok as they approach the clearing.

"Okay," Alo says. She sweeps a hand across her own mud-spattered face. "There are still a few kinks."

"A few?" *She's insane*. "We're covered in dirt." Dust falls from my hair as if to emphasize my point.

Then, Alo starts laughing. And then I laugh, too. I have to brace myself to catch my breath.

"It was a good first effort," she finally says. "Messy, but good. Any notes, Rok?"

Alo looks at Rok, and everything within me clenches as her hand brushes against his chest. Her face is stony when she whips around.

Alo hisses something in a foreign language—most likely a curse. The damage is more obvious than ever, and my heart hammers as I watch her run her fingers against the dead kor veins. "What is this?"

I stammer.

I could lie and say it happened just now. Rok would never be able to defend himself.

I could tell Alo what really happened, and she could never forgive me.

"Chol, what happened?" Her tone may be reined in, but I can tell she's ready to scream.

I sweep dirt from my arms. "I made a mistake." *No going back*. "I already tried to test it."

"So you tested them on Rok?" she snaps.

"No," I protest. "That was an accident. I—" I look at him, but it's not like there's a look on his face to go by.

"You hurt him. An *Ankori*." She's seething.

Shame creeps through me as I await judgment. I'm almost glad her people can't take on kor energy; otherwise, the crater I just made would also be my grave.

She needs the truth, Rok hums.

He's right. I take a deep breath, and I bring my voice down a notch. "I got angry… and I didn't know I could hurt him. But he forgave me."

She stares at me like she's waiting for the punchline. When it doesn't come, she lets out a sharp grunt. "What do you mean he *forgave* you?"

"I can understand him now." Heat bubbles inside when I raise my hand. "This isn't just a weapon, Alo."

An itch forms in the back of my mind as I start pacing. "It's changing me. I hear new things, and I feel things I can't explain. *I can understand Rok*." I suck in. "I got angry, and I made a mistake. So yes, it's my fault."

I feel like I'm steaming, and something I've said must have had an impact on Alo because she's gone still. She's stepped back, and she looks… afraid.

I halt, trying to control my ragged breathing. It's then that I realize I'm shuddering from head to toe, and my fists are burning hot. Around me, the forest warbles in rhythm. Energy ripples around me and whispers through the trees, swelling with my very breaths.

I unfurl my fists, and it stops.

"Chol," Alo says.

Again, I'm afraid of what this is. *Of what I am*. When she moves toward me, I hold a hand out, terrified that my very existence could kill her.

She speaks calmly. "You were onto something just now."

My shoulders slouch forward.

"I'm sorry—I believe you—but this is uncharted territory." She runs a hand through her hair, taking slow, cautious steps toward me. "You just controlled kor without trying. That was incredible."

"Are you crazy?" I eye her as she continues to approach. "I could kill someone."

She says nothing as she approaches me, biting the inside of her cheek. Finally, her hands wrap around my left one, and she raises it to study the scar on my palm. "You can do this, Chol."

I draw back. "I don't want this."

Her expression is pleading. "But we need this."

“Why?” I ask. “There are other ways. And we have Rok, remember?”

She groans. “Rok *will* help us. But he’s not as agile, and he follows commands.”

“He protects me,” I argue. “He’d do anything to keep me alive.”

Alo shrugs and lowers her voice. “Maybe. But you”—she looks up at me—“you’re the only person who knows *exactly* what you want.”

I’m hot and cold at the same time. Fear rattles up and down my spine as I watch Alo. A day ago, my temper was enough. I could have yelled, threatened, or anything, and it would have been meaningless. Now, every thought I have, every inkling of emotion—is tied to the bright energy flowing through my existence.

The next logical step is to become a hermit.

Alo has more faith than I do. She watches me carefully, her expression wrought with concern as she studies my every move. “What can I do to help?” It’s like she’s finally come to terms with the fact that neither of us has any idea what we’re doing.

This lifts a world of weight from my back.

“First of all,” I retort, “stop looking at me like a caged animal. I get it—your people have never seen such a perfect species before,” I tease her. She rolls her eyes before laughing.

The air stirs with a new color. The eerie jade of the kor forests surrounding us seems to shift into something comforting, and for a moment, our fears are put to rest.

“You got me there.” She smirks.

Quiet seeps through the woods, covering our tracks as we begin to move. All around, cold wind whistles through the trees and ushers us onward. The season of mist is finally bringing more than just rain, harshening with every fading hour of the day. Any remaining sunlight has grown pale behind the fog, and there is no warmth left for our bones.

I figured moving would help us keep warm, but it isn’t long before our feet and hands are numb with cold.

“Maybe we should stop for a while,” Alo says. “This could give us time for you to practice blowing more stuff up.”

I have no energy to respond to her snide remark. I groan as we set to work finding dry kindling. Before long, there are flames rolling in the pit

we've made, and we're both perched on nests of leaves we scraped together.

"Rok can speak," Alo finally blurts out, like she's been holding it in since the moment I brought it up. "I mean, all creatures have their own languages, yes. But think! An entire language right beneath our noses, and this is what it took to hear it."

Tired as I am, I'm startled awake by her sudden excitement.

"What kind of stuff does he say? What does"—she pauses, clasping her hands to her face—"what does he sound like?"

I can't help but smile as I scratch the back of my head. "When he's not ridiculing me, he actually has some good advice."

Alo is speechless. Her broad grin speaks for her.

"Honestly, I don't know how to describe it. It's a feeling deep inside… like distant thunder, stuck in your mind."

"So… he really *can* understand us?"

I glance over to the Ankori. He's facing away from us, gazing into the endless forest, but I know he's listening. "Every word."

"I bet you had a lot of apologizing to do." Alo snickers, keeping her eyes on his stone form. Then, she softens. "It must be lonely to not be understood."

The world slows around me, and I take a deep breath.

For the thousandth time, I trace the pattern the kor has made in my palm. Rok lost everything, too. He stood by while the others were destroyed —maybe it was Aér, maybe it was the others who commanded him to keep his distance. But I don't know if he can feel the way we do. Grow attached. Mourn.

"Do you think… they spoke to each other before the masked came?"

Alo wraps her cloak around her torso and caves toward the fire. "The *masked*."

"I'm sorry," I stammer. "That's just what they are to me."

"I know," she whispers, squinting as the flames claw the air.

I would ask Rok myself, but part of me is afraid of the answer.

When silence is all that fills the space between Alo and me, I head toward my bedding and settle for the night. But same as the rest of this cursed journey, I can hardly keep my eyes shut.

There’s an inferno against my neck and burning in my chest. I can lie here all I want, but my beating heart betrays me with its erratic pace. I focus on the red of the fire, forcing my breaths to slow. I shift my gaze to Alo. She stares into the flames, too, her worried expression similar to mine.

I can only imagine what she’s thinking about.

The masked made an enemy of me long before I knew what they were, but Alo? They’re all she had. They began on the same path, and they’ve shared the stars with one another. To lose everything in spite of all she’s worked for—even *I* feel empty thinking of it, and I’ve only tasted the idea.

The fog thins overhead, and I take the opportunity to roll onto my back. From here, I watch the glow of a billion stars, their light burning through the darkness and seeping into my consciousness. The forest canopy seems to bow to their multitudes. In this night, there is no end or beginning to the sky. It binds all within its reach, from one world to the next.

In this moment, I can understand the desire to chase something far beyond the stars I know—but I wouldn’t be chasing anything, I’d be running away.

Alo’s focus has turned to sharpening her knives. A breath escapes me, and I feel like a massive hand has reached into my chest and torn the anxiety straight out. Of every place she could be, she’s *here*.

As if she can hear my thoughts, Alo stops what she’s doing and furrows her brow. She searches the ground at her feet, eyes following an invisible string. When her gaze rests upon mine, the confusion melts from her expression and she softens. Then, Alo blinks rapidly and lets out an embarrassed laugh. She gestures to the ground.

I sit up. When I look at what she’s motioned to, my heart stills. Around us, the kor in the ground makes a grand spiral, slowly brightening and dimming in a silent rhythm. It’s circling us, moving in gradual circles as it flows.

Alo is at the center.

I tear my hands from the ground. My fingertips feel prickly, and veins of kor dance through them. Holding my marked hand to my chest, I stammer. “What was that?”

Alo smirks as the kor stops flowing toward her. “You know, if you want to get my attention, just say something.”

“You’re saying I did that?” I’m clammy. “Strange.”

She raises an eyebrow.

“Well, I *was* thinking about you,” I say, and immediately regret it. “Like… how you got here. Trying to wrap my head around it.”

Alo nods, though her lips quirk mischievously. “I have to pinch myself sometimes.”

I have no clue how else to cover my tracks. Thankfully, she crawls into her bedding and looks away from me. “I never thought this was where my life would end up—not even in the same star system as I was born.”

There’s a haunting edge to her voice. I know she has so much more to say, but the silence is louder. I sigh heavily, rolling onto my side. “Alo?”

“Yes?” she finally replies, sleep dragging her words to a lull.

“Are you scared?”

The hairs on the back of my neck stand when she looks my way.

“That’s a dumb question.”

“I know it is, but I wanted to ask.”

She takes a deep breath, staring at the ink in her arms as she considers her answer. “I don’t have anything left to lose, Chol… but I’m terrified.”

Something inside of me lurches. I draw my knees to my chest and hold them there, starving to reach for her and share her wounds.

I can’t bring myself to do it.

“We don’t have time to complain,” Alo finally says. I know she’s right.

I manage to pull myself together and let my body melt into the ground. Tonight, the ground is warm to the touch—or maybe it’s just me. When I flatten my palms against the mulch, the sensation spreads to the rest of my limbs.

As I drift off, I hear a gentle crackle of leaves. The world beneath us sighs, and I think I’m sinking down. When I open my eyes to see what’s happening, I try not to make any sudden sounds. The grass I’m lying on has further unfurled from the earth, and I’ve been pulled into it like it’s an actual nest. Kor flickers around me, and I hold my breath.

As I poke my head out of whatever this reaction is, I glance over to Alo. She hasn’t stirred, but even in her sleep, she’s tense. Sick with nerves, I crawl over to her and plant a hand to the ground. My heartbeat alone could wake her, but I concentrate. And then, everything I feel pours toward the ground.

Guilt, sympathy, concern.

I’m taking a major risk in doing this—every ounce of me pangs with fear at the destruction I could cause. I refocus.

The ground trembles, and for a moment, I’m afraid I’ve caused another catastrophe, but it’s only Rok. *The pull you feel is Aér,* he rumbles. *All of Aér serves to be your arms.*

I swallow the tight feeling in my throat.

Closing my eyes, I concentrate on the warmth at my fingertips. The energy is working beyond me now, and I nearly choke when I open my eyes. All around, kor hums through the forest, flowing toward my hands and Alo. The ground shifts beneath her and the forest floor sprouts with greenery, cushioning her head and raveling around her. The grass weaves together, blanketing her unconscious form, and the trees around us dip down, shielding us with their enormous framework.

When I let go of the energy, tears are streaming down my face. I’m in too much shock to dry them.

Rok’s hand rests on my shoulder as I kneel in the dirt. He doesn’t have to say anything for me to understand—I’ve finally done it right.

Shaking, I return to my own bedding. This doesn’t feel real, and I’m afraid I’m going to lose it. I shut my eyes again as my heart pounds against my ribcage. The forest sighs in unison, slowing as I fall asleep.

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18

OTHERS

We awake in tangles. Actual tangles. I startle as I come to, flailing my limbs as I struggle to break free. Brush and vines have wrapped their spindly arms around me, pinning me to the ground as I thrash.

“Chol!” I hear Alo screech from nearby. “Wake up!”

Through the bursting foliage, I can barely see her. Our campsite is unrecognizable, covered in a layer of heavy jungle.

“What’s happening?” I shout. I kick up dirt, and the brush shrivels away as I dust myself off.

“Hard to say,” she groans sarcastically. “I woke up, and the jungle was trying to eat us. Get over here and help me.”

I pant, swatting at relentless underbrush as I make my way toward her. The kor filling the plant life chimes in a harmonic hum as I wave my arms at it, and it quickly disperses. Alo is still under the grass tapestry from last night, but there are also winding tree roots holding her hostage. I could laugh and cry at the same time.

“Rok, what is this?” I look at the guardian, who seems perfectly content with all the thin vines draped around his torso.

He leans forward, and the green ropes immediately snap and meld into the ground as he approaches us. *I had forgotten*, he says. *Sleeping near kor brings danger for one untrained.*

“Oh, you *forgot*?” I glare.

“What is he saying?” Alo tilts her head and tries not to struggle as I near her.

“I guess Ankori don’t dream,” I grunt, trying to will away the growths that pin Alo to the ground. They don’t budge, and she squirms. The blade of one of her daggers glimmers through the grass, and she nods her permission for me to take it.

“So, your dreams tried to strangle me?” She glowers.

“I woke up in the same situation,” I hiss, setting to work on the vines. The moment the knife touches them, they slink away, and I feel the buzz of kor as it retreats from danger.

Alo sits up and snatches back her blade. She cuts her ankles free. “I’m glad you woke up at all.”

I scratch the back of my neck. “Sorry.”

Her gaze flits to the grass blanket that falls away from her. My face turns red as she picks it up and runs her fingers along the strands, and I panic when she looks at me.

“Did your dreams make this?” she asks, extending it toward me.

I falter. “Probably?”

She picks herself up and studies my handiwork with narrowed eyes. “Nearly being smothered aside,” she says, “great work.”

I try to rub the red off my face as I scan the campsite. Our firepit has been replaced by a mound of dirt, and the jungle has completely overrun everything. We have to pick around the area to find our belongings, and I’m relieved when I discover my rampant dreams haven’t touched my spear.

“What’s with that, anyway?” Alo nods as I pick it up. I glance over the familiar weapon—it’s a bit late to be asking that question.

“It’s supposed to stab people,” I joke, unsure of what she means.

She scowls. “No, really? I’m talking about the jewel in the middle, you melon,” she huffs.

We begin back on our trail toward the masked, and I study my spear from the shaft to the point. “Jen’s pendant,” I say.

She gestures toward the matching pendant that dangles from my neck. “Why do you wear them?”

“It’s tradition.” I rest a hand over the stone. When my fingertips meet the cool surface, there’s a fuzzy feeling from the kor within, drawn to what’s in my bloodstream. “In legend, the pendant protected the wearer from misfortune. Nowadays, it’s just a common accessory.”

“There’s something to it, huh?” Alo says. “Obviously, you can’t stop bad things from happening, but the energy—its properties are so unique, I wouldn’t be surprised if they aided in the usage of kor.”

“I think”—my heart sticks in my throat—“my grandfather mentioned a story about it, once.”

Alo smiles, already lost in whatever whirlwind of thoughts has swept her away. We carry on in silence, falling back to a slow pace.

It doesn't take long for the weight of our path to take over any happy thoughts.

For the first time in several hours, Alo breaks the silence. "We're close," she says. My blood runs cold.

All this time, I've been puffing my chest out and holding my spear tightly, thinking I could take on anything. But the longer time stretches on, the less I know. The less I know, the more I fear.

When Alo's pace slows to a creep, my pulse hammers in my ears. She crouches low, keeping her body close to the ground as she pushes aside palm ferns and underbrush. I follow her steps, eyes up as we creep along.

"We're here?" I breathe, hardly able to get it past my tongue.

She looks back at me, forehead scrunched with focus. "Not far, but there should be a patrol unit around."

I glance back at Rok, whose glowing veins and stature are suddenly his worst enemy. *What's the hand signal for 'stay out of sight, you big brute'?* I could use it right about now.

He remains in place, head turning toward me. I wonder just exactly what he can see, or if it's similar to the way the kor affects me. My eyes have been opened, but I perceive nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing more than feelings that press at the back of my mind and, even then, I'm not sure if it's paranoia or a real shift within.

I study the branching mark of kor that bleeds through the lines of my palm. I flex my fingers, trying to sense something that I can latch onto—intuition, voices in my head—*anything*. The only thing that reaches me is the ongoing chorus of birds within this jungle. That, the wind through the trees, and the bad feeling oozing through me.

My jaw sets as I kneel beside Alo. She's ducked under some dense brush, staring directly ahead. I scan the woods where she's fixated.

"What should I look for?"

Alo reaches into her satchel and pulls out a strange, handheld device, which she holds to her eyes. Her finger rolls against a wheel in the side, and

she sucks in.

“We’re on their weakest side,” she says. “The base is so out of the way that we never expected any issues from natives, so security is fairly lax.”

She hands me the device, which she calls ‘*binoculars*.’ I blink as everything is suddenly too close. After a second, I adjust, and I’m able to see through the trees. There’s a small clearing in the valley below. A wall made of logs sits there, each post sharpened to a point like some crude fortress.

I’m struck by how real this suddenly is. Jen is only moments away.

When I hand Alo her binoculars, she loops them around her neck and dusts herself off. “This is it.”

We stand in the cold, holding ourselves as we gaze down the ridge. I take hold of my spear, and Alo keeps one hand next to a dagger. Her face is paler than usual, and I don’t know how to take it. “Do we just… storm in?” I ask.

Alo shifts from one foot to the other. “No. Whatever happens, they can’t know we’re here,” she huffs. “I know my way around the base, so just stick with me.”

I nod, and then I’m following her down the hill. Normally, I’d be worried about my footing, but adrenaline has consumed every inch of me. Each time I misstep and slide a few feet forward, I hardly notice. My eyes stay fixed on the wall.

I can tell this place has been here for quite some time—it’s overrun with vines and moss. This deep in the jungle, you’d have to know exactly where you were going to find it.

I snap back to attention when my coat snags on some thorns. Alo is moving away fast, and it’s too much of a commotion for me to rip it loose. I’m forced to leave it behind—the chill in the air couldn’t bother me any more than my own nerves, anyway.

I glance back up the rise. I’m relieved to see that Rok is still at the top, overlooking the valley like a true guardian. I rejoin Alo at the edge of the wall.

We study the splintered posts like they’re art.

“Just as I thought.” Alo kicks the base of one. “Rotting. That’s what happens when you try to blend into a place you know nothing about.” To my surprise, she steps back and then butts her shoulder against the post. The

wooden fixture loosens just a bit from its muddy seal. I cringe, waiting for hordes of masked people to spill from the trees, weapons ready to slaughter us on the spot.

Sweat trickles down my neck as seconds turn into agony, but nothing happens.

“Chol, could you give me a hand?” Alo says. She steps to the side, and I place my hands on the post, concentrating on its rough surface.

Alo sees my hands beginning to glow, and she takes in a sharp breath. “No, not that!” she hisses. “Just need someone with human strength for this,” she says.

There’s that word again. *Human.* That must be what her people call themselves.

She has me reach as high as I can, and together, we tug the wooden pole back. The mud that holds it gives a nasty, goopy sound as the defense falls, and then we have an opening in the wall.

“Did they really expect that to work?” I put my hands on my hips, though I’m still shaking.

“It’s more of a warning than a defense,” she says, “which is why we can’t get caught.”

I nod, bracing myself against the safe side of the wall. “Would they kill us?”

“Or worse.”

Worse?

Alo pokes her head through the opening. Her grip is white around her dagger. She shoulders her way through the narrow gap, crouching once she’s inside. I take a deep breath and force my way inside, and then Alo grabs my arm and pulls me down.

The overgrowth didn’t end outside the fence. There are still a few large trees and several shrubs to cover us from view, and we angle ourselves alongside them as we move.

My heart pounds. I’ve never faced anything like this without Rok, and now he’s out of sight. I’m sure he wouldn’t disobey orders to stay behind and risk discovery. But Aér’s command—whatever that means—always seems to overrule his loyalty. In the interest of what or who or why, I’m not sure.

Alo grabs my hand, and we move through the brush.

There’s no warning that we’ve found the base—it finds us.

It’s buried so well in sprawling overgrowth; I can’t tell how far it extends. What I can tell is that it’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before. Its walls slope upward—not sharp, but too much that we couldn’t scale them. The entire exterior is made of slippery, dull metal, so perfectly smooth that no person could have crafted this by hand.

On top of that, there aren’t any windows or doors. Without a way in, I fear I’ll have to find a way to make a hole in the side.

I place a hand to the building, and a shock of cold goes up my arm. Unlike anything else I’ve felt—crackling bark, warm soil, singing rocks—this surface is dead to the touch. I bite the inside of my cheek, eyes narrowing at this hideous structure. It’s not a base. It’s a prison.

With none of the masked in sight, I lunge forward. Alo grabs my shoulder. “Easy,” she whispers.

“I know what I’m doing.”

She groans. “Chol. I can’t believe I have to reiterate how easily they could kill us.”

I know she’s right, but there’s a bitter rage swelling within me. My hands throb, and I try to hold onto that feeling—whether to unleash it or to keep it from making another crater, it’s hard to tell.

Alo steps back somewhat, keeping a close watch on me.

Her caution is contagious. The power within me is just as dangerous as the masked, and in Alo’s own words, even more so. I take deeper breaths and sink back.

Alo resumes scanning the perimeter.

“I don’t get it,” she says. “There should be guards posted outside. No sign of a patrol unit, either.”

Maybe I’m biased by the lack of feeling I got from the base, but this place does seem like a ghost town.

“Move toward that door.” She nods further down the wall, and I tilt my head.

“Where?”

She points at one of the slats in the wall.

“There’s no handle,” I tell her, and she rolls her eyes.

“It’s automatic, but we need to take out the sensor.”

I have no idea what she's talking about, let alone what the word *sensor* means. She points above the alleged door. There's a black rectangle positioned above it, and a red light blinks behind glass. *Definitely not kor.*

"What is that thing?" My stomach churns as if we're being watched after all.

Alo rolls up her sleeves and reaches for one of her daggers. "It's part of their security—a *camera*. It detects movement and displays it to whoever's watching. Think of it as a window to another part of the world you can't reach."

I jump a little as one of her knives whistles through the air. It smashes the glass, and the red light dies.

She motions for me to follow her across the short clearing to this so-called door. Alo grabs at the base and asks me to help. It is a door, but it's heavy. We heave upward—it must be a pulley system—and it all but disappears into the side of the building.

We slip inside.

The moment we're sealed in this metal edifice, something within me lurches. I check Jen's pendant, and I'm momentarily relieved to see that the kor is still glowing. At the very least, I have that.

Alo grabs my attention again, and I whirl around. My skin prickles with chills as I stare down the corridor behind the door. The passage is perfectly rectangular, and there are dim, glowing lights carved into the ceiling. They hurt my eyes to stare at, and Alo lets out a sigh of frustration as she smacks my arm.

"We're not here to sight-see."

"What are they?" I'm unable to peel away from their stagnant glow.

"Fluorescents." Another made-up sounding word. "Let's move."

I frown and focus ahead. There's a blind spot burned into my vision, but it was fascinating. I've never seen lights like any we've encountered. Dismal, but steady. There are no dancing shadows. Only stark *fluorescents* to guide our way.

"It's like it's dead."

Alo ushers me onward. "Keep it down."

We keep to the walls. The halls feel endless and claustrophobic, but I can tell we're moving downward. It's as familiar as any tunnel, where the only place you could possibly end up is below the surface.

“Where would they be keeping her?” I whisper, and Alo stops moving to brace herself against a wall.

“I can’t say for sure,” she answers. “There are a few rooms we used for storage…”

We reach a crossroad where the tunnel splits four ways. There are doors in the hall straight ahead, and no sign of anyone nearby. I notice blinking lights over each path, labeled by foreign letters. My lungs tighten when Alo steps into the crossing, and then she waves me over.

“Something’s not right,” she says once we’re in the next hall.

“What do you mean?”

“There’s no one—”

Before she can finish, a loud, grating sound wails through the building, and red lights flash all around us. My heart seizes with fear, and Alo and I stand back-to-back.

“Run!” Alo shouts, and then she breaks away from me. I sprint after her, holding my spear at the ready.

Behind, the horrible sound ricochets through the corridor and pierces our ears. Alo dives to the floor and screams for me to do the same, and we crawl on our hands and knees further into the darkness. The next thing I know, Alo has pulled open a wooden door, and we cram into a small room.

“We’re not getting out without a fight,” she tells me. I’ve never heard her so frantic before. “We need weapons.”

“What about these?” I motion to our gear.

She shakes her head. “They have *guns*—projectiles—stuff that can cut right through you without ever touching you.” Her head whips around as she digs through the containers in this room.

“I don’t understand,” I pant. Outside, a voice shouts in a language I don’t recognize, and the alarms are still blaring through the corridors.

“Stay close,” Alo tells me, and then she dares look into the hall. She waves me toward her, and then we’re back in the fray, keeping low to the floor.

With each new door we open, it’s becoming more and more evident that Jen might not be here.

We make it to a dead-end with only a few more doors, so Alo tells me to stand guard, using the last one we tried as a shield.

Sweat beads on my brow as I wait for her to call me to her side. She opens the last of the doors and mutters under her breath, but she still hasn't found Jen.

There's another ear-stinging sound—a whistle through the air before something splinters the door I've opened to shield myself. I leap back, gaping at a rounded hole in the wood beside my head.

Alo curses. She makes for the door and shoves me into the room. I search her face for answers, but she holds a finger to her lips.

We crouch low, eyes locked on the door handle. Alo holds both her daggers with a firm grip. "Keep your guard up," she whispers.

The door whips open. I freeze in place.

Our enemy looks like no one I've ever seen. They wear no mask, but their skin is pale, and their hair is paler. Their eyes flash and their jaw squares, and they tilt what I can only imagine is the weapon—the gun—that's been targeting us.

"Alo," they say, and that's about all I recognize. Alo and I rise, backing up as the stranger approaches. His boots click against the metal floor with each calculated step.

Alo begins speaking in his language, and by the tone of things, it's not going well. The stranger furrows his brow in thought, but I can tell by the twitch of his fingers that he doesn't trust her.

Alo may know what he's saying in his calm tone, but I can read every movement he makes. None of it is good.

My suspicions are right. We barely dodge the projectile that flies from the gun. It causes my head to ring all over again as it pings off a metal shelf, and then Alo ducks forward, letting out a cry as she slashes at the man's torso.

They roll over one another, and I step back fearfully as they fight over the gun. It skids across the floor and Alo lunges for it, but not before the man jumps on her and digs his knee into her back.

There are tears in Alo's eyes as she struggles to reach the gun. The man climbs over her and grabs it, and it explodes again. I want nothing more than to cover my ears and cower.

I have no choice but to move.

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PLAN

The gun aims every which way as Alo locks into battle with her ex-crewmate. I skirt around them with my spear, but I'm afraid I'll miss.

Alo swipes at him with a dagger—he catches her wrist and drags her forward. She writhes wildly, struggling to shove his arm away so he can't fire, but he's stronger. The weapon bursts again. I've never heard a scream as desperate as the one Alo lets out. Her left arm falls limp and red spills from her shoulder.

I charge. My blood feels like it's curdling and heat tears through me, and the last thing I see is a bolt of white light flood the room as my spear leaves my grip.

There's a sickening sound as the metal end pierces flesh. I drop to my knees.

The stranger's blue eyes widen. He gives a short, mangled grunt. As the gun falls from his grasp, he lets go of Alo.

Alo clambers to my side, clutching her arm as she gasps for air. She lets out a single sob, grimacing with a strange mix of pain and remorse.

I could pass out at the scene before me.

My spear slid beneath the man's shoulder, right under his arm. His breathing is horrifically ragged, and blood drools from his lips as he lies on his side.

I stammer, unable to process what I've done.

Alo buckles forward. She wraps her hands around the man's face and makes him look at her. Tears spill from his glassy eyes, and his breaths turn to rasps as his pierced lungs collapse.

She begs him for something, but he can hardly even mutter. Still, I think she gets the answer she needs.

He dies.

"Alo, I—" I try again. I'm trembling.

She stands, and her knees wobble as she towers over the stranger's corpse.

"We were friends," she says. "We all were, but…"

I close my eyes as she reaches for my spear. I try not to listen to the sound it makes as metal is pried from flesh and bone.

The next thing I know, I'm battling the urge to retch. I struggle to regain my sense of self, feeling the weight of Alo's stare on my neck.

"He was going to kill you."

"I know." There's a haunting edge to her tone.

"Your arm—"

"*Bullet*. Barely grazed it." She grits her teeth. The blood leaking out from shredded tissue says otherwise, so I turn to the containers for something to stanch the bleeding.

Alo extends my spear. I don't want to take it. The spearhead and Jen's pendant are covered in red, and I'm queasy all over again.

She notices the way I eye the gore. "Was it not designed to kill?"

I'm hysterical; I nearly laugh. "For fish." The idea I could protect myself with such a thing—I don't believe the reality of it has crossed my mind until now. Not even after I stabbed the bandit at the sanctuary.

Protect myself. *Protect* her. That's exactly what I've done.

Now I know what I'm capable of, but I'm not sure I am strong enough to bear the pain it brings. Enemy or not, someone is dead at my hands.

Alo holds her arm, wincing as the initial shock wears off. "Jen's not here."

"What?" I lose my voice.

She passes me the gun, stepping past me to find her own bandaging. Ducking into a storage room was pure luck—infirmary supplies are in abundance within the first container she reaches for.

Alo swats me away when I try to help with the binding. "There was another guard on rotation with Miles." She gestures to the fresh corpse. I keep my eyes on his boots, away from most of the blood. "The rest of them moved further east, closer to your valley."

"Where's the other guard?" I drag my eyes from the fallen soldier.

"Either here, or on their way to the new base."

I'm not sure I like how curt she's being, but I can't blame her for her coping methods. I take a deep breath. "I don't want to have to do that

again.” I angle my spear toward the ground.

“But you want to save your sister?” Alo snaps—then, she quiets. “I’m sorry it’s come to this.”

We return to the corridor. The alarms have been silent for a minute now, but red lights sweep the halls.

One person. I killed one person—one person who didn’t know me, *knew* Alo, and still wanted us dead. I can barely handle this stress, and I’m not sure how I’m supposed to face even more soldiers the closer we get to home.

“Will the new base be bigger than this?” I ask.

“If they’re using the ship…” Alo mulls her thoughts over. “I know it better than this place. I’ll come up with a better plan.”

She keeps saying “ship,” and I keep having no clue what she means. Based on everything she’s told me and what I’ve seen already, there’s no way I can expect to find a huge wooden sea vessel in the middle of the jungle.

I shiver, trying to push the fresh feeling of death aside. My fingertips are seized up, and I stretch my hands in an attempt to calm the tense muscles.

“Stay alert,” Alo whispers harshly. “If the other guard hasn’t already left, they’ll be prepared to shoot us on sight.”

“Do we have to kill this one?” I shudder.

“That’s for them to decide.”

We halt when a feminine voice calls from up ahead. “Miles?” the stranger shouts, and I look at Alo. She’s unreadable.

“Anastasia,” she mumbles. I watch her place both hands on the gun’s handle, aiming it groundward as she ducks down.

“Another old friend?” I say.

“Less so,” Alo grimaces.

We stay low, listening as light footsteps patter through a nearby corridor. I’m relieved our opponent isn’t trying to be stealthy. As a matter of fact, she calls out again, and Alo’s expression flits from worry to surprise.

“She thinks Miles tripped the alarm by accident,” she says. “From the sound of it, he’s done it before.”

We’re not ready for Anastasia to round the corner.

Anastasia's wearing a dark suit, similar to what Miles wore. It covers her from her neck to her ankles, held together by what Alo told me was a zipper (much like the one on her own strange, not-from-the-north jacket). Anastasia wears leather boots, and a thickly padded vest is strapped across her chest. Of all the strange things about her, what strikes me the most is her fire-colored hair and large, green eyes that bulge at the sight of us.

Alo aims her gun. Anastasia raises her hands and moves slowly forward. Her eyes betray astonishment, but she seems to know not to react accordingly.

It sounds like they're talking things out, borderline casually. Unlike Miles, Anastasia bears no sign of trickery. She's genuinely terrified, pallid enough that she could fall over in the wind.

For a moment, Alo sounds sad, and I steal a glance at her.

Then, Anastasia nods at me, and I'm petrified as I become the subject of their conversation.

She now stands a short distance from us. Alo waves the gun at her. Anastasia turns around, puts her hands behind her head, and kneels. Immediately, Alo begins stripping the tools and weapons from her utility belt. Anastasia seems to direct Alo on what to find as she searches, and then Alo lifts a small, round device from one of the belt's pouches.

Keeping her gun trained on Anastasia, she rotates to me and extends the small device.

"Chol, put this behind your ear." She taps the back of her own ear, and I tense.

I take the little gray object and study it. It's smaller than a coin, and it feels metal. A white light blinks on the side, and for once, I'm not sure if I trust Alo on this one. She nods for me to hurry, so I swallow my apprehension and do as I'm told.

Nothing happens, and I'm holding it there like an idiot.

"Press the center," she tells me, going back to watching Anastasia.

I do as she says and then gasp as sharp, needle-like ends pierce deep behind my ear, almost into my jaw. The device melds to my skin, and I groan angrily as I scratch at the burning sensation.

"What is this?" I snap at Alo, desperately trying to pry the device from my skin. It doesn't budge.

“Calm down, Chol,” Alo says, but it’s in an unfamiliar tone. Her voice is the same, but her words… they’re new, and they feel garbled for a split second before they reach me.

“Can you understand me?” she asks. There’s a buzz in my ear, and then her words are smooth as ever. Still, they don’t match her lips. I can’t bring myself to speak, and she gives me a grim smile. “It’s a translator. Now you can understand what everyone is saying.”

I note the patch of skin hidden behind Anastasia’s own ear. She has one of her own.

“I don’t like this,” I say to Alo. “Nothing you say is yours.”

She sighs, and then her words match her lips again. “Okay. I guess it doesn’t matter since everyone else wears one.”

“But you don’t.” I motion to her neck.

“Perks of learning multiple languages.

Anastasia’s voice suddenly ripples through my consciousness, and the clarity of her words jolt me back to the moment. “What are you going to do with me?” The translator carries the fear she breathes in her shifted language.

Alo hesitates, and then she tells Anastasia to stand back up. Anastasia obeys warily before facing us. With no weapons to reach for, her arms slowly return to her sides.

“You’re not like this,” Alo says. “The Anastasia I know wouldn’t stand for theft and murder. All this pain... it’s not who you are.”

Anastasia lets out an indignant huff. “You know well as me why we came. And don’t—don’t pretend you’re better than us.”

Alo scowls, keeping her grip on her gun the way Miles did before it would go off. My shoulders knot in anticipation of the deafening burst, but it doesn’t come.

“I came because of my father,” Alo seethes, “not to hurt anyone.”

Anastasia glowers. She takes a step forward, and Alo’s gun clicks. “Don’t take another step, Ana,” she says. “Please.”

Anastasia backs off, lifting her hands in defense. “I didn’t come to hurt anyone, either.”

“Then why stay?” Alo barks. “When you know better?”

She nearly laughs. “You really think I could have gotten away?” Her shoulders rise and fall rampantly, and tears spring to her eyes. “They knew

exactly what they were doing when they rounded us up. They picked the ones who had nothing to lose, and they gave us everything. We're all the same, so don't act like you're better than any of us."

"I chased all I had to this planet," Alo screams, and she lunges forward. I shrink back as she raises the gun, poised to strike Anastasia with the blunt end.

"It wasn't Aér that killed my father. It was *all of you*. Too afraid to disagree with anyone, too blind to know what other options we had—we all knew we would never see our homes again, but that doesn't mean we had to make this one a *living hell*."

I press against the wall.

Anastasia glances at her scattered weapons.

"Alo!" I shout, but I'm too late. Anastasia barrels right through her, diving toward her equipment. I dive too, holding my spear out and then flinching as my strike is deflected. My spear flies out of range, so I go tooth and nail at Anastasia. She drops whatever weapon she managed to pick up, guarding her face as I swipe at her.

Alo picks herself up and shambles toward us. She cracks the weapon over Anastasia's head. The force is enough to knock her out.

I gulp in air. "I *know* that's not how you're supposed to use that," I say to Alo.

Alo rolls her injured arm back, keeping her glare on Anastasia's unconscious form. "Like I said: *Somewhat*." She stoops to remove the older girl's belt, which she tightens around herself. It takes her only seconds to pocket the items Anastasia had dropped.

"We can't just leave her," I say. "If she wakes up, she could make it to the others before we do."

Alo agrees, so we find what she calls 'cabling' and tie one of Anastasia's wrists to a pipe in the wall.

"Sorry, Ana," Alo says as we work. "I'll come back to see if you've changed your mind."

Anastasia lets out a groggy moan.

I have an idea. "We could use her to bargain."

Alo shakes her head. "Too risky—besides, I know something that will work."

I eye her cautiously as we pick our way out of the base. When we reach the exit, Alo struggles to open it. It's sealed.

"What's your idea?" I ask her.

She stands back. "Right now, we need to focus on getting out of here."

I swallow. This is as good a time as any to test the kor, especially since an explosion is probably what we need right now. *If I can even connect with any.*

I'm about to place my hand on the surface when a loud crunch from outside has us scrambling for our weapons. We brace for an attack.

With a clatter, the door caves toward us, and sunlight pours through. When the dust clears, we're greeted by Rok, whose fist is still straight out from where he punched through the metal door.

I heard a scream, he says. *I assumed it was yours.*

I glare. "Thanks, buddy."

Alo asks what he said, but I refuse to tell her. Rok signals something, and she keels over laughing.

And then she's sobbing, falling to her knees. I grab her arm and try to hold her upright, but she convulses.

"Alo, it's all right. We're all right."

She collapses against me, her tears soaking through my shirt. I wrap my arms around her and stroke her hair. Before long, her sobs turn to muffled whimpers.

Rok stands over us, arms spread like he wants to scoop us both from the floor. He kneels, and I watch him plant one palm on the ground.

Before our eyes, the jade glow of kor leaks into the corridor. The floor cracks and shakes as branches cut across solid metal, and then they reach Rok's hand. I'm captivated as their ethereal glow rises from the ground, and the form of a flower takes shape in the air.

Alo leans forward as Rok plucks the creation from the fissures in the ground. She tries to take the flower from him, but it remains as unchanging as daylight, going right through her fingertips each time she tries to hold it. I feel her tremble.

I reach past her for the flower, amazed as its glowing roots creep across my skin.

Now, I'm holding this impossible figment, mesmerized by the way it shifts in the breeze flowing in from the outside. I wish Alo could hold it.

I thank Rok with a look and extend the flower her way.

She places her hands in my cupped fingers, and together, we close our fists around the flower. Jade light trickles around my knuckles, warm and soft. My fingertips hum, and when we unfurl our fists, the kor flower is gone.

Alo blinks in awe, studying her hands. *Did she feel it, too?*

But then she draws back, drying her eyes as if nothing happened.

"You don't have to do this," I tell her.

"I was going to come back, with or without you."

A pang of remorse thrums in my chest. "But…"

"This is how they would have treated me on my own. If I came as a stranger, I'd be dead. If I came in surrender, they might not have shot."

"What do you mean?" I watch her.

She pulls herself to her feet, clenching her fists and staring toward the open door. "My new plan—I have to approach them peacefully, Chol."

I tilt my head.

"It'll be a distraction. I'll be a fugitive returning for salvation, and you'll be sneaking right past."

"What if it doesn't work?" I join her.

She frowns. "There's no other way. We got lucky here."

Fear creeps up my spine and puts me in a chokehold. She's right, and I know it. What we faced today was one of the worst moments of my life—and there were only two people.

Maybe it was what we needed. We know now that we have no choice but to react. No room for a single thought of uncertainty.

We head east.

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UNBOUND

We've had more than enough time to stress over what we're doing, but I can't stop. My mind is filled with the flash of my spear as its prongs vanish into flesh. As we push through the jungle, my insides twist. Between the graphic memory and the direction in which we're traveling, the idea of running away is starting to tempt me.

Our every step brings us closer to the Shaorok mountain range—closer to home.

I debate on asking Alo if she's certain we're going the right way, and then a sharp jolt burns from my stomach to my jaw as I peer through the canopy of the trees. A familiar peak rises above the forest.

The shield of our valley. The heart of the sky.

Aéha.

I stop to gaze upward. Every bit of blood drains from my face, and my throat tightens with fear.

"What is it?" Alo's voice rings through my head, and I'm brought back to reality.

I stammer, unable to form a coherent thought. "This is my home."

She glances at the peak ahead, but she doesn't react like I do. "Is there a town close by?" she asks.

I nod.

"I don't think they would've moved too close to any civilians," she says, rubbing her forehead, "unless they've completely lost it."

Sucking in, I shake my head but not the pit in my stomach. *Is this why they attacked our farm?* Bile hits the back of my throat.

"Is it possible that…" I mumble, catching Alo's attention. She darkens, a bit too knowingly for my taste. But we're running blind at this point—all I can do is hope.

Mother and Father.

What if they've already returned, unarmed and defenseless to these ravagers? I've lost track of time—how many days have I been gone since the shifting?

I must look the way I feel because Alo's face wrinkles. We pause amidst the brush, and she rests a hand on my shoulder. I can't read her expression very well, but her eyes swim with worry and anger.

Worry, I understand, but *anger*?

"Listen to me, Chol," her harsh tone catches me off guard. "I know what you're thinking; I think so, too. Which means we have to change our strategy."

"Change it?"

"If they're in your valley… they're too close for comfort." She paces back and forth. "Especially since you live near a village. My people aren't stupid, though. They would have anticipated running into Aérians with such a large move."

"What do they want?"

"It's an integration initiative. They don't want to destroy Aér, but they've never had what they needed to successfully integrate before."

"Integrate?" I scowl.

She bobs her head, and then her stare goes icy before she locks eyes with me. "Chol, I need you to listen to me—and I need you to trust me."

My heart thunders and my fingers twitch, but I listen.

"This isn't just about you anymore. This isn't about revenge, and it's certainly not the end to your story, either." Alo seems so sincere I think she might cry. "This is the moment you have to *really* decide. Do you want to find your sister?"

"Yes." I'm bewildered.

"Do you?"

"Yes!" I shout, and she backs off.

My fists burn white, and my breaths turn to all but snarls as my shoulders rise and fall.

"Then you can't keep letting fear guide you." Her jilted tone melts. "Not anger, not uncertainty. It has to be something stronger, or you'll fail. And we *can't*, under any circumstances, fail."

Her head tilts forward and her silky hair drapes over her eyes as tears spill, but I say nothing. Alo's ink-patterned hand flies to her face to dry them, and then she looks up at me.

"It doesn't matter why we came—Aér is at stake. But this fight? It has to be for her, Chol. Not anyone else. *Believe me*."

Right now, I don't even want to understand what she's spouting. I shift back and forth, holding to the heat that crawls up and down my arm, but all I feel is weight. Tension across my shoulders and chest.

Anger swept me from home to the edge of the jungle, and anger brought me back. Now, it holds me so tightly I think I might break. I grit my teeth. "So why are you here now, Alo? I know you'd have torn them apart from the inside if you could have."

Shameful acknowledgment glimmers in her eyes, and Alo takes a juddering breath.

"I do want justice." Alo is mellow. "Revenge, too. But…"

"So why can't we be angry?"

Deep down, I don't think Alo understands her own reasoning either—just that it might be the only thing that will save us.

A phrase Father used throughout my childhood rips itself from the catacombs of my memory: *'We fall only as many times as we refuse to land.'*

Alo wants to fall.

And she wants to justify it, but she can't. I see it now; this whole time, she's been helping me to prove something to herself. Prove she's not the scared little girl content to sit in the corner and bide her time. If she'd been the one holding the torch that night, she would have burned them all and more to prove it.

They took everything from the two of us, and they'll take even more if we don't do something. So, I can't believe she expects me to hold back—not when we're so close to the end.

But as Alo's stare deepens, I see further beyond that flickering layer of wrath and retribution: something else to fight for. Aér is Alo's home now, whether she wants it or not. I see the lost little girl who followed her father to a strange world. The little girl who wanted so deeply to understand why she couldn't even hold the very thing her father poured his life's work into.

Her path was always going to wind up here—and because of that, when the masked are dealt with, there will truly be nothing left for her to lose.

And myself?

Everything is at stake. I *know* Jen is with the masked. Mother and Father will be returning, too, if they haven't already. I'm the only one equipped to rectify things.

Losing everything was never my fault, was it?

What *was* my fault was believing I never needed anyone. Never needed Jen. *Aér save me,* she's the one who didn't need me. I wouldn't be surprised if she's charmed her way into the ranks of the masked. This quest is for naught; it's good I'm gone; she's already saved herself and Aér on her own.

For just a moment, I want to believe that I'll pass the mountain and the farm will be there in one piece to greet me. The fields will be freshly sifted in time for the frost, and the Ankori guardians will be stationed nearby, silent as ever. Smoke will be rolling from the chimney, and the smell of Mother's famous sweet rolls will have scented the whole house.

But, real as Alo is standing across from me, I know the pain and the desolation that awaits.

I uncurl my fingers. The heat vanishes from my fingertips, and I exhale.

"Maybe it doesn't matter," I tell Alo.

She looks a bit relieved, but then she hardens once again. "Maybe it does." She tosses her hair back and parades onward. "They'll have what's coming to them, one way or the other."

Just like that, we're back to the strange version of comfort I've grown familiar with. Despite all we've left behind and all we've yet to face, I smile.

Still, for every step that brings us closer, my confidence takes another step away. Alo shares my anxiety, for we begin to slow, taking our time through the jungle brush.

When we stop again, Alo's shoulders rise and fall in a huff. "I think I should scout ahead," she says.

I go cold. Sending someone alone feels even more like suicide than what we've already planned to face. We'll have no way to communicate, and I'm worried that we could get split up for good.

Or worse.

She shoves her hands in her pockets. “I know these people. I know their habits. If it’s just me poking around, we’re less likely to get caught. Okay?”

“Should I do anything?” I ask, knowing I can’t hold her back.

She ponders this, then nods. “Practice. And try not to draw too much attention to yourself. We don’t know how close they are.”

“Wait,” I say, and Alo turns to look at me. “There’s a tunnel into the valley.”

She seems confused, so I continue. “Our farm was protected by the mountain we’re heading toward. Our ancestors constructed a hidden tunnel through it, and it might be our best option for slipping in.”

“What if they’re not actually in the valley? How long does it take to get through?“

“Just under an hour.”

She chews her bottom lip, then nods once. “I’m going to check the perimeter so I won’t miss anything. If they *have* taken over, then we can use your secret tunnel.”

Before we can discuss anything further, Alo slips into the brush. I’m left alone to stare up at the ridges that guard the Sul legacy.

I turn to Rok, who straightens. He watches me, but I ignore the sensation as I sit in the dirt. Long tendrils of greenery cave toward me, grasses and shrubs brushing against my arms and fingertips as I focus on the ground. Kor veins streak through, glimmering gently through the fog that has settled here.

Alo may have only a partial strategy. What is your plan? Rok rumbles, and I grunt.

“To find Jen, first.”

Rok shakes his head. *You will have to fight.*

“I was useless back there,” I retort. “There wasn’t any kor to draw from. Why would there be on their ship?”

Rok’s stone head tilts, and the ground shakes as he closes the distance. Stone grates as he crouches to my level, his floating fingers wrapped around his knees like he has to brace himself. *What then*—he leans forward, grabbing my arm and pulling it forward—*do you think this is for?* His index

finger traces the scar in my palm. I jerk back, holding it like I've got to protect it.

"To draw energy."

He recedes to full height, and I strain my neck to look up at him from my seat on the ground. Rok crosses his arms and monitors the forest around us.

"Am I wrong?" I get up, swatting mulch from my backside.

The cool rumble of his sigh simmers within my chest, and I spread my arms in question.

There is much within you, Rok finally speaks, his words resonating through my head. *Yet, you fail to look further.*

I clench my jaw and turn in a slow circle, scanning the area. "I'm going to practice. But I can only do so much."

He doesn't respond. It leaves me feeling heavy.

As the shadows of dusk begin to stretch across our resting spot, I lean against a tree and grumble. So far, my only success with kor has been when I gave Rok a dent, and then when I brought the forest together to comfort Alo. Neither of those ended well.

I'm no longer certain what *success* means for the stuff streaming through my blood. I'm supposed to stay levelheaded when I use it—*intentional*. I'm not supposed to think about how much I really, *really* hate the people who took Jen. *Hurt her*. Did who-knows-what to her.

When I think about that rage—that venomous beat in my chest—I feel something unnatural. The heat of the world boils up and filters through me, curling through my fingertips and straightening my spine. Tightens my grasp on the end of the rope and pulls me forward as hard as it drags me down.

I don't feel enlightened. I feel like a blistering world on fire.

At the first itch of sweat trickling down my forehead, I pull a hand down my face and try to ignore the burning sensation in my skin. The world swells around me and pushes against my eardrums, silencing anything that isn't my rampant heartbeat.

And then Rok's hand is on my shoulder, and he's standing over me like the guardian that he is. I feel him usher me away from the tree I'm leaning against, and then he wraps his hands around my wrists and squeezes.

Look further, Chol, he says.

I swallow the tightness in my throat, but I feel like I might choke.

I try to look further than rage, but it's like going in circles. There is nothing linear about emotion, no back and forth. Only spiraling—around and around until you feel like you've gone insane.

As late evening falls, I drop to my knees. I can't do this. There's nothing left for me to try.

If it were meant to be easy, Aér would be broken. Rok's voice overpowers the thoughts spilling from my head into the empty forest around me.

I go still.

My voice catches in my throat, and I stare at the ground like I can see all the way to the other side of the world. My fingers rake through the dirt, tensing as I lift my hands. The kor in my palm throbs, and streaks of white light race up and down my arm in new patterns.

Before I know it, I'm standing. I don't know what it means to look beyond rage—but I wouldn't feel this way if it didn't hurt so much in the first place. It hurts to be mad at Jen one moment, and then want so desperately for her to be all right. Hurts to spend every night awake, wondering what nightmares my little sister is facing, then hurts to remember the way she… loves to get a rise out of people. Hurts to… *love.* The opposite of rage—the *beyond* worth carving a path through an untamable jungle for.

And I don't know where the boundary between the two resides.

Maybe there is no boundary. Maybe they are synonymous, tangling together and up and down and winding and braiding and spiraling until they form something so constant, so firm, it can't be broken.

I hate the masked. I love Jen. And both singularities are so matched in strength, they bind something common together. *Determination*.

Determination leaves no room for either side to speak—which makes it just as lethal as the anger I need to push through the barrier.

I take a step forward through the dark, fists furling as I move. Then, I brace myself, setting one foot back.

While Rok watches, I aim both hands toward a massive tree that stretches into the fire-red sunset. Its leaves jitter as my fingers tense, and the

air around me goes as silent as a last breath.

I test the invisible wall before me, straining against all the strings that hold me back. Light form at my fingertips, and slow streaks of energy pour from my palms. They ripple through the air like lightning, and then they collide with the tree.

The jungle resounds with an ethereal echo. All around, the grass and underbrush shake violently as skewers of light breeze through them. The mighty tree before me is tangled in the light of the kor, and I watch as new veins splinter through the bark. Dark pieces begin to break off as the veins span upward and jagged patterns slice through.

As I focus on the energy spewing from my arms, I'm weightless.

With a single glance down, my stomach flips when I realize I'm barely touching the ground. Jade energy flows upward and melds into a white heat that spirals around my limbs, holding me up. The tail ends of my clothing whip in a manifested windstorm, and my hair thrashes into my eyes. But I persist, dizzy as I leave the ground.

I don't know how high up I am or if I'm even conscious. The tree crackles, light bursting from its newly carved patterns, and then the kor continues upward, wrapping around branches and glancing off leaves.

As the tree is overtaken by the energy, I tighten my fingers into fists. I feel the pressure that encompasses the foliage before me, like the universe itself has begun to drag inward on this one point in existence.

I release my hold.

The tree creaks beneath the weight of the energy, and then it shatters, spraying across the jungle with a deafening burst. I lift my arms just in time for the explosion of light, and a wake of soft energy barricades me from the carnage. My back jolts with pain as I fall to the ground, but the kor continues to shield me.

When I glance up, I'm unscathed, but the forest around me has flattened into a crater larger than any I could have accidentally created.

My first thought is Rok. Panic floods me, and I glance around, half-expecting to find a crumbled Ankori at my side. To my relief, his arm is raised before him, and a glowing shield of energy guards him. He lets it dissipate, and then he picks himself up and nods.

I'm incredulous. I controlled kor energy—something more powerful than I could have fathomed over a thousand lifetimes.

Thirsty for air, I give Rok wide eyes. Then, I laugh hysterically.

“Do you think anyone heard that?”

It is possible.

I roll my eyes.

Stars blink overhead. Exhausted, I collapse and stare up at them. A shiver goes up my spine.

This new feeling—it’s restless.

I looked further than I should have. I’m not afraid of what’s ahead anymore.

I’m afraid of losing control.

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REALITY

Daylight is leaking from the canopy when I'm shaken awake. I startle, gasping for air like I've been locked away for centuries. I blink rapidly at the blurry sight of Alo. She's kneeling over me, an irate look on her face as she stops shaking me.

I sit up, rubbing sleep from my eyes, and then Alo lays it on me.

She motions to the destruction around us. As she does, a branch breaks and falls to the ground from a half-standing tree. She groans. "What happened while I was gone?"

I yawn, slumping forward and grinning at her. "You told me to practice, so I did."

"By causing an *explosion*? There aren't other ways?" Alo shakes her head, and I smirk. She looks ready to smack me.

I drag myself to my feet, stiff from sleeping on the ground. "What do you expect? I'm supposed to put up a fight. Not perform tricks."

She huffs, conflict racing across her face. "Sure. But can you control it?"

I nod, but I don't think she believes me. She nervously runs a hand through her hair, and as it's pulled from her face, I notice dark circles under her eyes and a bruise on her cheek.

"Whatever we're going to do, we need to do it quickly," she tells me. She notices how I'm staring at the bruise. "I had a run-in with someone, and…" She hesitates, rubbing her arms as she shudders. "… I didn't take off their mask. Didn't want to know."

It takes me longer than it should to react. I heard what she said, but it went in one ear and out the other. I stutter, forcing sympathy. "I'm sorry."

Alo doesn't respond. Instead, she puts her hands on her hips and turns toward the mountain.

We're both drained.

“We were right,” her voice cuts through the quiet. “They’re in the valley.”

A jarring shiver shoots up my spine, and I shake my head as fury threatens to take over. *Not now,* I tell myself, biting the inside of my cheek. My fingers twitch anyway, and I shove them in my pockets as I join Alo’s side.

Alo takes a deep breath. “Where’s the tunnel?”

A good question—I only know from a map Father showed me once. But if we’re on the northern side of Aéha…

I gesture southeast. “I’m not as familiar with this side, but I’ll know it when we get there.”

We head off, angling ourselves along moss and stone. Until now, I never realized just how wide the sheltering span of ridges was around our farm. I can see why it took an entire night for Alo to get around. This sliver of the Shaorok range is where the rises begin to wane, not tall enough to qualify as mountains, but still a long journey.

Now that Alo’s confirmed my fears, I feel strangely calm.

“How many are there?” I ask.

She hisses through her teeth. “Three total crews… already got camp set up… I’d say almost eighty if they’re all there. Sixty-eight soldiers with Anastasia and Miles out of the picture, eight scientists if they haven’t murdered anymore.” She mutters that last part. “Handful of scouts and commanding officers. Minus one patrol officer.”

She’s being distant again. I want to reach for her. Tell her it’s going to be all right. But we’re so close that it would be pointless—and nearly eighty strangers living in my valley.

It’s easy to forget Alo used to be friends with most of these people.

There’s no winning side here—if we find Jen, I don’t know what comes next, and I don’t think either of us wants to address it.

At long last, I begin to recognize certain eaves and curvatures in the landscape. Gnarled, moss-covered trees dot the terrain, and a thick mist settles over our path. Before long, it’s almost impossible to see more than

ten feet ahead. The brooding storm clouds covering daylight certainly don't help.

Despite the mist, instinct pulls me closer to the foot of the mountain. I notice kor veins running along the ground like a pathway. When the ground below suddenly opens into a grassy overhang that burrows into darkness, I'm elated. I put my hand out for Alo to stop, and we nod at each other.

I drop down first, then reach up to help Alo down. She ignores me and lets herself fall to a crouch at my side, scouring the opening to the tunnel like it's a trap.

Rok is next. The tunnel isn't very tall or wide, but the Ankori acts unbothered. The tunnel echoes as he drops in, and pebbles rain from the ceiling as the ground shakes at his weight.

As we gaze into the darkness ahead, there's a prickling sensation on my neck. I whip around to see what I've sensed, but it's just Alo, standing with her arms folded and staring at her feet. She shakes just the slightest, and for a brief second, I know what she feels.

"I'll go first," I offer. "I know the way."

She nods subtly, and then I slip through the narrow beginnings of the tunnel. I really don't know how Rok is going to fit. He takes up the entire gap behind us, and I'm afraid we're going to have to split ways.

My mind spins with a thousand things I want to say; plans to meet up on the other side; some form of goodbye I'm not ready for—

Rok places his hands flat on either side of the tunnel walls, and the kor pulses to life. To our astonishment, the walls widen around the Ankori, and he shoulders through the opening with inches to spare. Behind him, the tunnel narrows with a residual groan, and it's like he was never there. The pale light from his center pours through the darkness, casting wild shadows in every direction.

There is too much dust for you to keep your mouth open, Rok tells me. I slam my mouth shut.

"I can't believe this," Alo stammers, unable to look away.

With every step Rok takes, the tunnel shifts and re-forms around him.

"I mean, he comes from the ground, so it makes sense," she continues, though her voice is small.

When her breathing goes ragged, I turn. She's completely rigid, drawing her shoulders up to her cheeks as we move through the tunnel.

Alo is more claustrophobic than I am.

“Take a deep breath,” I whisper, and she tries. Despite the cool atmosphere of the tunnel, the air is stifling. Dirt and moisture have stagnated here for decades, and it’s pooling in our lungs. Alo coughs. Her eyes flicker back and forth as she verges on the edge of a panic attack.

I keep my voice low. “It’s not much further.” I take one of her hands. The touch causes her to jerk, but it pulls her back to reality.

Her shoulders break loose from their tension, and she’s back to taking deep breaths as I lead the way.

“How long is this tunnel?” she asks. It’s not often I’ve heard her voice tremble, but this is one of those times.

“It widens toward the end.”

“That doesn’t answer the question,” she snaps.

I tighten my hold on her hand, and her nails dig into my palm. I wish there was a way to transfer some of the confidence the kor gives me to her. The best I can do is focus on our path forward.

“Chol,” Alo says. At first, I don’t acknowledge her, but then she tugs on my hand. “*Chol*.”

When I look back, I’m mildly surprised to see that my hand is glowing. Gentle waves of kor light circle around our shared hold, lighting the small space between us.

“Could you make that brighter?”

I purse my lips in thought, and then my eyes wander to my free hand. The light glints along my fingertips, but when I flex my fingers, it brightens like a lantern. As it shines along the walls, we’re able to see what lies ahead. It’s not much to look at, but at least Alo’s breathing has calmed. She lets go of my hand and relaxes to her usual state.

For several stretching minutes, our conversation is muted to slow breaths. Even with the kor patterns along our way, the dark is endless, in front or behind. To speak right now would be like emptying the contents of our souls into a blank eternity—but that’s just how this inky black makes me feel. Besides, I’m not intent on bringing up what lies ahead.

But we’re close. I can tell because the tunnel has opened a bit, as I promised.

We’re nearing Jen’s chamber.

The walls are slick with moisture as the tunnel curves upward. I hear the difference before we reach the exit—the closer we get, the longer our footsteps echo. From up ahead comes the sound of water dripping into an underground pool.

The tunnel splits, one way ascending toward fate, the other toward a moment frozen in time. I stop to catch my breath. I have to see it.

Alo lifts an eyebrow in question as I break away. I can hear her and Rok hustle behind me, and then I duck into the side tunnel, clambering through the narrow opening into the chamber.

Cool air chills me to the bone as I pull myself into the stone room.

Immediately, I'm calmed by the familiar sight of thousands of kor veins stretching to the ceiling. The crystal pool is still here, its surface shattered only by water droplets that fall from above.

My eyes trail along the kor veins, going skyward as I follow the stalactite patterns overhead. They seem to crowd one spot at the very peak of the ceiling—and for the first time, I notice the slightest crack in the mountain. It blends in so seamlessly with the light from the kor, it's no wonder I never noticed that this chamber isn't complete. The promise of sky overwhelms me, and the familiarity of this chamber pours through. I sit in the middle of the ancient cavern, staring at the pool.

Then, Alo's head appears through the tunnel, and she pulls herself up, taking in the room in all its majesty.

"This was Jen's favorite place," my voice echoes across the chamber. Alo nods slowly, eyes wide as she studies the walls.

Finally, she makes her way to my side and settles beside me.

We both watch the surface of the pool as it ripples.

"Is." Alo smiles softly.

"What?"

"This *is* Jen's favorite place."

I study the side of her face as she gazes ahead, then exhale a small laugh. "Is."

We say nothing for a few minutes before Alo sighs. She shudders, stands, and then dusts herself off before extending me a hand. "Let's go get her."

I take her offer and follow her back through the tunnel. Rok is waiting for us, and together, we move toward the shed.

When we finally reach the false panel, Alo and I lean against the wood surface. From our view, the shed appears untouched, and—*thank Aér*—that trusty, bane-of-a-door is shut.

Alo checks over her gun and its ammunition. She riffles through the gear she took from Anastasia, and then she catches my eye. “How far from the farm is this shed?”

I inhale sharply. “We’re on a rise. We’ll have to be careful exiting—won’t be much cover without the crops.”

If that makes her nervous, she doesn’t show it.

“They’ve set up a few rows of makeshift bunkers outside the actual ship. As long as we’re smart, we shouldn’t have an issue getting you inside.”

“What does the ship look like?”

“You won’t miss it.”

We push the panel back all the way and crawl into the shed. It’s a tighter squeeze for Rok, but he makes it through and fills the darkness with his glow.

Alo and I put the panel back, and then we creep toward the door. We hold our breath, and then we open it just an inch. Alo lets me peek out first, keeping her gun cocked.

I’m consumed by both fear and awe at what I see. The farm *is* overrun—but not in the way I expect. It’s like a small, organized village of rounded tents. But those aren’t what leaves me speechless.

In the midst of this strange camp sits what I can only assume is the *ship*—a massive structure like nothing I’ve ever seen. It stretches front to back across at least half the valley, casting a dark shadow where Jen and I used to play in the crops. I understand how it’s supposed to be some kind of vessel, but there’s not a sail or anchor in sight. Only metal hulls and sharp angles.

This so-called ship’s anatomy baffles me. It stands taller than any of our Ankori ever did, to the point where I’m positive it could qualify as its own mountain. Its nose is smooth and rounded, and the fins jut out sharply like razor-thin wings. A ramp goes down the back of it, and hundreds of dark windows speckle the sides. Alo points out the ship’s ‘thrusters,’ and she briefly explains how it uses them to get off the ground. I can’t imagine

anything that heavy ever moving but, apparently, with the right tools, it's possible.

"They don't have enough fuel to get off the planet," Alo says. "It's partly why they're so desperate to acquire kor technology, now that they know it can be manipulated without human contact."

"Then why move here?"

She gives a mild shrug. "Maybe they thought this location was safer; maybe they thought the amount of Ankori had something to do with the volume of kor they could unearth… no telling what they're thinking after they've lost their two top experts." There's pride in that last statement, well-deserved. These moss-suckers *should* be suffering in every way.

We huddle in the corner near the hidden panel just in case. "How would kor even work for their ship?" I ask.

Alo nods toward my hands, which are glowing again.

I wave them around and the heat goes away, but not my nerves. "Your people can't use kor energy at *all*. Right?"

She nods. "We can't bond with it, but now we have a workaround. It's dangerous—highly combustive—but they're here to take risks at the cost of Aérian help."

I feel sick. "So then… what did they need Jen for?" If it's anything like to do with the weaponsmith…

Alo bites the tip of her tongue. She scours the floor like she can summon an answer from the dirt.

"E-experimentation," she finally says.

My mind goes blank and the back of my throat stings. I have no time to think about what I'm doing when my hands fly forward and—

"*What*?" I seize Alo. She tries to pull away, but I hold her there. "Have you been lying?" The edges of my vision creep in. "What else haven't you told me?"

Alo cries out. She tears from my grip and scrambles backward, her face wrought with pain. Only then do I feel how scalding my hands are. Red, blistered marks color her skin where my hands touched.

I shake, planting my hands in the dirt as if I can conceal them. "Alo—"

"Save it." She shakes her head. "We have bigger problems."

I don't deserve to cry. But tears fill my eyes regardless, and I hold my arms to myself, hollow. "I can't… can't stand the idea that…"

When Alo turns back at me, her dark eyes swarm with angry tears of her own. It's a jab to the heart, and I can't look away.

"It's a possibility we have to be ready for, Chol."

She bows her head to her knees, voice muffled. "I wouldn't lie to you about this. I don't want to believe it, either. But I have been thinking about it for a while."

I grit my teeth, simmering with rage and dread. It's pulsing through me again, and I know I have to get a handle on it. I drink myself inward, letting the cool air seep through me and guide the feelings back into my chest. Then, I clutch at my scarred hand, glaring at the kor. I *will not* be what ruins this.

Alo dries her eyes. She lights up a bit at the sight of Rok—the way his head tilts at an odd angle in the cramped shed—and she manages a smile. Then, she scoots to the other side of the shed and cozies up to the wall.

"We'll wait for nightfall," she tells me, and then shuts her eyes.

I don't want to disturb her, but I don't know how she can possibly sleep when we're at the mouth of the beast. Somehow, I don't think she really can.

Gently, I settle against my side of the shed, taking deep breaths and closing my eyes.

I need to focus.

Darkness takes an eternity to arrive, and I realize that I dozed off when Rok wakes me. He remains silent, merely nodding to signify that it's time.

My jaw tenses. I look at Alo.

Scattered rays of moonlight stream through the cracks in the walls, draping over her sleeping form. I almost don't want to wake her, but we hardly have a choice. The idea of running is tantalizing, and I'm ashamed as I let my thoughts wander back down the tunnel.

But what if it only gets worse? What if the masked figure out what they need, and they don't stop there? Alo has already made it clear.

This is no longer just a rescue mission.

This is the end to a war that hasn't even started.

I gather myself before moving across the narrow space. Alo is breathing smoothly, and it hurts me to kneel beside her. I'm just about to place a hand on her shoulder when she stirs, and her forehead knits as she pulls herself awake.

"Good morning," she sighs, sitting up and massaging her temples. "Do you think this is our last night sleeping on the ground?" Alo rubs her injured arm—she's definitely earned a proper bed.

Any humor in her words is immediately dampened by the silence that sets in. We exchange a look—mostly brave—and then we climb to our feet.

Alo carefully unbars the door, and we brace ourselves as she opens it. When she peers out, her shoulders relax. "So far, so good." She pulls herself back inside and looks at me. "The ramp is still down but, no doubt, there will be some guards patrolling the camp. We'll head for the tree line. You and Rok can hide while I approach the guards stationed near the ramp."

"How do you know they will be?"

"It'd be stupid if there weren't. Otherwise, I'll have to invite myself in and hope I can still pull it off."

I nod. "So, you'll distract them. Then what? Won't there be more inside?"

"If they're conserving fuel, most of the soldiers will be in the bunkers. The second the ramp guards have me, you can slip in and find the lab. Worst-case scenario… that's where Jen will be."

"Lab?"

Alo crouches, drawing a symbol in the dirt. "Look for this symbol over the doorways. They'll get you there."

I can't help but tremble. Alo looks at my hands as another pulse goes through, and she shakes her head. "You can wait, Chol. I know you can."

I swallow and shove them in my pockets. The idea I can somewhat conceal their unnatural glow is a bit reassuring, and my blood pressure starts to come back down.

"When will we meet up?" I manage.

Alo glances back to the door. "When you find Jen."

I start to ask where, but Alo pushes the door open and the night air rushes inside.

We keep low to the ground and move out, clinging to the perimeter. Rok's footsteps lightly shake the ground as we hasten along, and the idea

that a giant glowing rock creature is following us makes me nervous.

But the camp remains placid, and we go unnoticed.

We're out of breath when we make it to the tree line and bury ourselves in the foliage. "Rok's too visible," I pant. "Even with all the kor in the area, they'll notice him moving."

"Do you want to leave him?" Alo frowns.

I shake my head, eyes narrowed. But bringing him aboard the ship will be too dangerous, especially if we're supposed to sneak past guards up a metal ramp.

Rok's focus knowingly settles on me. *You will find Jen,* he says.

I stutter. This is really happening.

His resounding voice fills me again. *I cannot always protect you, but when the fight reaches the ground, I will be ready.*

"You've done enough." I rub my face. "I don't want—I don't want them targeting you immediately."

He nods. *Maybe they will, but this is my purpose.*

My gaze flits between where I've decided his eyes would be and the marks that circle Alo's arms.

Purpose.

Something I've chased since the first time Father patted me on the shoulder after I worked a field past sundown. Chased down crop rows and dirt paths, through jungles and strange villages and cramped tunnels. Chased for days-turned-seasons, seasons-turned-years.

All the way back here.

I laugh shortly, though it's washed over by the ache in my chest. Alo doesn't protest when I take her hand first, and then Rok's. We meet in the middle, the heavy shroud of uncertainty lifting for just a moment as we share a grasp.

This. *This* is certain.

"Thank you." I look at them both. "For everything."

Alo nods with a quivering breath, her fingers tightening against mine. Rok bows his head, thrumming from deep within.

I think we’re all a bit colder when Alo turns.

She picks her way through the underbrush, short hair flowing behind her in the breeze. Silence fills the edge of the forest as she steps into the clearing.

I move forward at a crouch, and Alo signals for me to take cover behind one of the nearby bunkers. It’s one of the most stressful seconds of my life, cutting across the clearing until I can plant my back against a canvas wall.

Meanwhile, Alo strolls boldly across the camp, straight toward the lit ramp entrance.

Just as she said, there are two guards standing watch. They’re in the middle of the ramp, but they haven’t seen her yet. They hold large guns—not the kor kind or the small one Alo has. I’m clammy just thinking about what they could do to her.

What if they don’t recognize her?

I can feel the pulse in my throat. Sweat pours down my back as Alo nears the edge of the ramp, and then I hear the click of the guards’ weapons.

I bite the back of my tongue, sucking in as Alo stalls in her tracks.

“State your business,” one of the guards says in a husky voice, “and don’t move another inch.”

Alo’s tone switches back to the foreign accent that my translator picks up. “Alo Ming reporting, sir.”

The guards exchange muted words, and then one of them moves down the ramp, their heavy boots clomping against the metal surface.

“Hands behind your head,” the guard commands. She complies as he reaches for her sides and pats her down.

He removes her weapon and her satchel and passes them to the other guard. I hear strange frequencies chirp in and out from a black box one of them holds, and distorted voices ring through the night.

“We’ve got a code forty, over,” the guard keeping his gun aimed at Alo says, and the voice box speaks again.

I don’t think my translator is broken, but I don’t understand why it won’t work for the strange device. Either way, this treatment doesn’t sit right with me. I don’t know what I would do if the situation were reversed—but this version is still hard to stomach.

“A code forty,” the guard’s voice cuts through the air again, annoyed. “Was I the only one who paid attention in the briefing? We have a rogue asset at the edge of the compound. Alo Ming, yes.”

My stomach flips, and I keep my palms flat on the ground. There’s something about doing so that helps me feel like I’ve got a handle on things. Like I can tell the rampant emotions I feel not to flood through my fingertips—like I can feel what’s coming. *Something like that.*

The voice box sings again, frantic; confused, even. I hold my breath, waiting for Alo to give me any kind of signal.

She remains still, keeping her gaze on the guards.

“We’ve got a situation over here,” the female guard says.

Alo and I both look at the satchel in the guard’s hands, where she’s picking through the items. Alo clenches her fists, and she stiffens so subtly that only I catch it.

Both guards glare at her as they pull one item from the bag, and I see tension knot through Alo’s shoulders.

My heartbeat picks up as I strain to see. *Bad.*

“Anastasia’s badge?” The woman’s tone shifts to accusatory, and I grimace. *Really bad.* “Didn’t she fail to report in, Kruger?” she speaks into her voice box, and the box speaks back.

Once the frequency ends, Alo doesn’t skip a beat. “She couldn’t.”

Both guards raise their weapons, but Alo goes on, unshaken. “I stopped by the old base first. Their system had gone down, but I found Ana. She gave me her badge—we’re old friends—as proof that I’m not a traitor.”

The female guard cocks her eyebrow.

If Alo was able to hide so much from me, which most people would agree was the same as lying, I wonder what her reputation was before she became a ‘rogue.’ But these guards have different orders—as decent as her story was, it’s not convincing.

I’m helpless as Alo is kicked to her knees. She hisses in pain, jutting her chin toward her captors.

“You’re telling me Anastasia failed to follow procedure over an old friendship? I don’t think so,” the woman barks. “Guessing that’s where you got your injury?”

I wince as she brings the butt of her gun down against Alo’s bad arm. Alo cries out, and then she buckles forward as the male guard pulls her

hands behind her back and drags her to her feet.

"Kruger, send a dispatch to ground zero, over," he says into his voice box, and it sings back. The next thing I know, Alo is being led away from the ship. She glances in my direction as she's pushed along. But she portrays nothing that might entail she wants me to rescue her. She did say I needed to get onto the ship—I just didn't think it would be at the cost of her dignity.

But this is still part of the plan, isn't it?

"Where are you taking me?" Alo asks rather loudly. My back goes rigid—she still wants me to hear.

"If I had to guess, you'll be tried for treason within the hour."

"I came back in surrender." She spits.

"I bet Anastasia would disagree," the guard says.

I'm frozen in place. How *did* Alo overlook Anastasia's badge?

As Alo is dragged away, I look back at the ramp. The female guard is still at the entrance, stationed like she's not planning to move. I swear under my breath, and then an idea forms.

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TRAPPED

From behind the bunker, I can't see the guard, but she can't see me, either. I brush my fingers over the dirt. Dormant veins of kor shimmer like unearthed roots at my touch. With a flick of my wrist, I send a wave of energy across the ground. Kor lights up in a line all the way toward the trees.

The guard's leather boots creak as she shifts, but nothing happens.

I try again, focusing harder. The kor pulses more vibrantly this time, and I can feel the rush of energy as it scorches the dirt and hollow veins are briefly restored.

This field was full of life before *they* destroyed it, and it still belongs to me. These people deserve what's coming to them.

Her gun clicks. "Stupid planet."

Smirking, I direct the energy toward the trees. Just as I hope, it washes through the brush, rustling them enough to draw attention. My heart nearly jumps out of my chest when the guard is suddenly next to me, oblivious to my figure pressed against the bunker.

She glares through the trees and aims her gun at nothing.

One more burst of energy toward the tree line rattles the forest. It's enough movement that one might think a kygawari was charging—the guard crouches, keeping her gun trained at the jungle's edge. *Smart.*

Praying she doesn't turn back, I spring into action. I make it to the ramp and peer up its length, gaping at the rectangular entrance overhead. With bated breath, I hurry up and into the ship.

Other than a few dull, round lights, it's fairly dark inside. I let my palm glow, but it's not helpful in this immense chamber. At first, I think I've run into a wall—but then I realize this holding area is storage for bizarre, metal machines on huge wheels. They look like closed-in methods of transport,

and the wheels smell so unpleasantly harsh and unnatural that I back away until I hit the actual wall.

Red light creeps from overhead; eerie, not-kor letters on a sign above a staircase. I make my way up, wincing as my steps ring against the steel footing, but no one is here to notice. I take deep breaths.

I hate the way these people make doors. It takes me far too long to realize there's a door at *all*, right at the top of this walkway, and then longer to realize it opens in the middle, not from the bottom. I manage to pry it apart and am met by the sickly white glow of fluorescents.

I look for the symbol. It was a strange one, shaped like a rounded insect wing, but I don't see it anywhere. There are dozens of symbols strung together, but the one I'm looking for isn't supposed to be attached to anything else.

As I move further in, I find a large archway leading to some stairs. It has a symbol on it—not the right one—but at least it's a standalone symbol. I head toward it.

I'm in the belly of the beast.

The lights are on, but they're extremely dim. Some even flicker, making short buzzing sounds over my head. It's like these people had to make everything from scratch, and now it's malfunctioning.

My heart races as I move through a narrow hall. I don't see anyone, but that means nothing if there are cameras. A dozen people could be watching me right now, and I'd never know.

I'm about to round the corner when a strange sensation churns in my stomach. I stop in my tracks and flatten myself against the wall just as someone walks across the intercepting hall. They don't see me, and I have to pinch myself to realize that I'm not dead yet.

I peek into the hallway intersection. I have to suppress a gasp of relief as my eyes land on the symbol I need. There's an arrow pointing up beside it, so I head forward.

The symbol and the arrows take me up a few stairs and around some bends, but I have yet to run into anyone else. That's one perk of doing this at night—people like to sleep.

After what feels like an eternity, I reach a final wall with the symbol overhead. There are no more arrows, and I twitch with nerves as I face what I assume is a door.

Like the door at the first base, there's no obvious handle. A glowing panel sits on the wall beside it.

It shifts to red when I reach for it, but then makes a sizzling sound as my palm flattens against it. Glass cracks as I try to connect with the energy on the other side. To my surprise, something hot flashes across my skin and singes me.

I swear, reeling back and flapping my hand. *Definitely not kor*. A small puff of smoke comes from the strange device's shattered surface, and it stops glowing. To my right, the wall slides open, and I'm able to walk through.

As a tight feeling ties me together, I step into the darkness. Lights blink on overhead, and I back up against the wall.

Before me spans a room of tables and strange machines, but there are no people. It's a ghost town.

"Jen?" I whisper, peering around the room. There isn't much here, but there is a metal door with an actual handle across the room. Desperate, I make my way around crowded tables, ignoring how they scrape against the floor when I bump into them.

The door has a window in it, but it's clouded over.

I try the handle, but it doesn't budge. "Come on," I mutter, trying harder.

I punched an ugly bruise into Rok's chest. Why can't that same strength break a lock? Bracing myself, I try for the shoulder method: taking a few steps back and then ramming into the door.

All I get is a sore shoulder.

I stare at the handle and groan. *If Jen isn't here.…*

My hands twitch. As I plant one against the door, I remember the tree. I didn't have to touch it to tear it to shreds. It could have had nothing to answer my call inside, and I still would have found the strength to shatter it.

Rok is right.

With my fingers pressed against the surface, kor transfers from my palm to split through the metal surface. The door sears red at my touch, and steel peels away as the kor scorches it.

The metal makes a terrible grinding sound, and the frame bends as the door snaps in half. The crash is loud, but I don't care. I rush through and am

caught by surprise as I immediately run into a wall lined with shelves. A strange-looking broom falls against me.

“Jen?” I pant, spinning around. I climb out of the closet I managed to break into, panic flooding me.

I don’t know what I expected. *Cages? Cells?*

If this is just a giant ship for transportation, where would they keep prisoners? I rack my brain, but nothing comes to mind.

Distraught, I head toward the door. I’ll tear this ship apart if I—

I had the wrong one. More symbols cover the wall beyond the door, opposite to what I would have noticed without turning around. They’re similar, but now I see what I’m looking for.

My heart sticks in my throat. I press forward.

This doorway leads through another corridor, narrower than any I’ve previously faced. Not all the lights come on as I move down the hall, and my shoes make soft echoes on the metal floor.

I don’t know if it’s just the odd hum of the mechanics within this ship I hear, but the further I go, the more a deep, unnerving pressure builds in my head. It starts in my ears, then slinks down my spine and into my gut. Even my arms start to tingle—it’s like the sanctuary’s call, but it’s dark and distorted.

I don’t want to find it.

I want to run.

The hall turns.

I massage my temples and peer into the darkness. This place is much larger, dropping a level down and sprawling across what I can only imagine is the bottom of the ship. The lights don’t come on overhead, but they line the walls with their abnormal, golden glow. It’s as if all the power within the ship is here.

Large pipes skirt the walls, and massive equipment churns before me. Some machines look like arms and claws, and some hold intricate tools. As I hurry down the stairs, I duck behind a row of pipes and take in the enormity of the room. With the sheer amount of whirring equipment, someone could already be in here and I’d never know.

The nagging pressure persists. I’m ill as it pulses through me. A sudden release in the feeling pulls me in one direction, and I keep myself low to the metal floor as I follow an invisible current.

It takes me all the way to one end of the room, where there's a large curtain drawn. A soft glow radiates from within.

Heart beating faster, I glance around before making my approach. When I pull the curtain back, the light is so brilliant I have to shield my eyes.

Before me is an enormous glass container, suspended above a table. Raw energy sparks all around the inside, ricocheting off the sides and splintering in every direction. The pressure hits me with full force, and I feel sick.

It's kor—loose and frenetic.

My eyes drift to the base of the container and the large pipe that extends from it. The pipe juts up against the side of the glass and over, where it conjoins with a large, metal machine that ends with something spear-like.

What are they doing? I place a hand on the glass. Immediately, I regret it, because the kor in my palm *shrieks* to the kor trapped in the container. There's a violent pulse in the room as all the energy in the container pummels against the meeting point, and the massive container shakes violently enough that the glass might break.

I rip my hand back, biting my tongue and trying not to scream. Even without my flesh making contact, energy tears from my arm as if whatever's behind the glass is trying to absorb it. Curling my fist, my bicep tightens as I try to pull it back. I've never felt like I could actually touch the energy before, but right now, it's like pulling a thousand ropes at once.

It takes every ounce of strength I can muster, but I manage to disconnect from the container. It recedes weakly into my palm.

I gasp for air.

The trapped kor continues to bluster within its confines.

Voices echo through the room. Scrambling backward, I hide behind another machine.

Two people in white coats enter the room, and I stare at them as they make their way down the metal stairs.

"It's just spiking again, Ron," one says.

“Yeah, but I thought I heard a scream. Like a person, Tom. An actual person,” Ron says, voice thick with nerves.

“Like you’re not used to that.” Tom’s voice drips with sarcasm.

I sink to the floor, plotting my escape route. If Jen was in here, I would have found her.

The only life in this room is the kor—the memory of the connection frightens me as I realize it’s not my own emotion I’m remembering. It’s something sentient, ripped from its natural habitat and forced into containment. My hair stands on end when I recall the feeling I got from the kor weapons—even before I was able to host the energy.

It pains me to leave it trapped in here.

I shake off the feeling and creep toward the stairs.

“There’s something weird going on,” Ron finally breaches the silence again. I pause, bracing myself for a light to shine over me—for someone to catch me and do who-knows-what.

“You heard about Alo, too?” Tom responds, and that’s when I know I have to stay put.

Ron shifts around. “I still don’t think it’s right. She’s practically a kid.”

“If you count forty-five years of cryo as still a kid, sure.”

“You know what I mean. Treason, though? She was scared, and for good reason.”

“What are you saying?” Tom’s tone shifts to hostility. “Careful what you say. Especially right now. They’re on pins and needles.”

“They can’t shoot us all. We’re the only ones left who know what to do with most of this, anyway.”

“Define ‘only ones,’ Ron—we all have the same access to Yulong’s research.”

My heart stills at the name. *Alo’s father.* These strangers are correct; Alo was right to be scared. *How recent was all of this?* It could have been days—months, even—before she realized she had the strength to run.

Ron breaks my path of thought. “You know what I’m talking about.”

The two scientists make their way toward the curtain, and it grates as they pull it back along its metal rod. “Readings are definitely showing a sudden increase in output.” Tom stops, and then I hear him groan. “Ugh, Ron. Is this your handprint on the glass?”

There’s a squeaky noise as someone polishes away the evidence that I was there, and I sigh in relief.

“Check the cameras. See what was going on when I heard that scream sound.”

My blood runs cold. As I look up, I’m locked in place by the sight of blinking red lights in every corner of the room. *They* have *been watching.*

Tom yawns, and one of them draws the curtain. “The footage will be there in the morning.”

I crouch as their footsteps pass the machine I’m hiding beside. “I’m going to poke in on the hearing, anyhow. It’s a shame, isn’t it?” Tom speaks again.

“Yeah,” Ron sounds defeated.

I only hear one person move up the stairs. When Tom is gone, Ron shuffles back toward the captive kor.

I creep toward him, taking shallow breaths. Ron is talking to himself, fully unaware of my existence. Every hair on my body prickles as I watch. He draws the curtains back again, and I watch him hover over the panels near the table. Strange lines move up and down before him, and he takes out a writing tool and begins to jot on some paper.

“Don’t you worry, we’ll find you a home soon,” he finally says, turning to the kor. For a second, he looks like he’s going to reach toward it, but then he has second thoughts and pulls his hand back, scouring the ground.

I bite my cheek. Then, Ron’s face shifts from puzzled to mortified. “No one can touch the glass without gloves,” he mutters to himself. “The field is too…” He shifts his glance up the stairwell, and I freeze. “Tom?” he shouts, sprinting toward the exit. My heart hammers as he goes. “Tom, I think—I think someone was here!” The doors slide shut behind him, and I’m left alone to the cold of the space.

I have to move.

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POWER

I race up the stairs and into the hall. Neither scientist is anywhere in sight, so I take the opportunity to get out. By some miracle, I make it to the entrance of the ship, weaving around the metal machines stationed on the floor.

At the opening of the ramp, I'm relieved to see that the guard is still gone.

But time is running out. Alo will be tried for treason, and I have no idea where Jen is.

The pulse in my hand returns, that scalding touch satiated only by release. White-hot energy trickles down my arm, wanting for something to burn through. I should tear this place to the ground for everything they've done.

But I close my fist, forcing that ice-and-fire sensation back into my bones.

My head spins as I make my way down the ramp, indifferent to whoever might see me. I sprint through the camp, pivoting as I search the area. There aren't so many bunkers here that I would get lost, but I could be caught at any second, with or without Jen and Alo.

A gut-wrenching sequence of explosions fills the distance—guns.

"Alo!" I shout. I careen toward the origin of the shots, growing hot as I haul through the camp.

"Stop!" someone commands—a guard, I'm sure—but I don't. I keep moving, ignoring the torrent of bullets that sail past me.

I drop to my hands and feet, grasping the dirt. Already, my fists are glowing. There's a whistling sound as a projectile nearly grazes my ear, and I whip around, glaring at the soldier who fired it.

They remain focused on me, and a red light lands on my chest.

“Don’t move!” the guard screams. The moment he reaches for his voice box, I raise my arm and lunge forward. Hot energy splinters from the dirt below, juddering upward and seizing his gun. The metal bends and snaps as kor overtakes it, and the soldier staggers forward as the gun is torn from his hands.

I aim my other arm, and another wave of energy pours from the ground and curls around his legs. He screams as it burns through his clothing.

With cautious steps, I approach. “Where is Alo?”

He pants madly, desperately swatting his skin as the energy scales his frame. The kor—it isn’t meant for them. The kor—it devours his flesh.

Exactly the way I wanted it to happen.

He screams again before he tries to writhe. But the kor is unrelenting, winding around him and tightening as it burns through. My eyes widen at the sight—I release the tension in my fingers, but a moment too late. There’s a snap as energy fully seers through something. An unsupported joint, buckling the wrong way. The soldier falls forward in agony. He curls in pain and gasps for air.

I tremble.

This power is real, and it’s terrifying.

Dropping to my knees beside him, I place a hand on his shoulder. He shrieks and covers his face.

“Wh-where’s Alo?” I stutter.

He winces, but he points straight ahead to the source of the gunfire.

I’m lightheaded.

Before I leave, I kick his deformed weapon to the side. It’s hard not to look back as I move, but I can’t stop now.

“Over there!” Someone new shouts, but I’m not about to get in the same predicament.

I continue forward, moving faster and faster until I’m running blind. More bullets zip past me, skewering the earth in my path. The spray of dirt reminds me of what will happen if I stop or misstep, driving me onward.

Two figures step in my way so abruptly, I almost crash into them. They wear both full-body suits and those masks—soulless eyes and metal mouths.

Both carry kor weapons.

The color drains from my face, and I’m unable to drag my eyes from the kor flashing within their guns. A horrible sound fills my head. The energy is screaming, anxious for escape. My chest heaves up and down.

The masked don’t aim at me, but they move closer.

“Don’t,” I warn, raising my hands.

Kor dances along my fingertips, threatening to pour toward them. They take aim.

I’m thrown back several measures as a concussive blast rams me. The air is knocked from my lungs before I hit the dirt, blind and dizzy. Through blurred vision, I gaze back their way. Where I stood now rests a crater, smoking like the end of their guns.

Although I’m still in one piece, everything within me feels scattered; just as desperate as what’s in those weapons to find some sense of belonging. My head pounds and my ears ring. The masked pulse in and out of existence as my head stays fogged over.

They approach, slowed by the weight of their gear. Any sound that tries to enter my head is drowned out by the rampant beat of my heart while I lie here in shock.

Then, the warmth of kor shoots up my arms and into my chest, and the world resumes at its usual pace.

I bolt, crashing through the camp and running for my life until I finally get enough headway to duck down. The masked run past my hiding spot before splitting up.

Sweat streaks down the filth on my face. I could easily hunt at least one of them down. Their masks are like blinders, and using their kor weapons makes them slower.

I can outsmart them.

Their breaths, filtered through the metal grate, are louder than their footsteps, and it’s easy to find one.

An image of the soldier screaming on the ground flashes through my mind, but I shake it off. White heat crackles around my hands and sweat drips from my body to the dirt. Just a few more seconds, and I can go back to finding Alo.

As I close the distance between myself and the masked soldier, the screaming pitch fills my head again. I grit my teeth in agony at the sound,

fingers twitching as that cold connection between what's mine and what's imprisoned starts up again.

I clench my fist, and there's a spark in the air. The masked straightens as their weapon jolts in their hold, and my eyes widen.

I can free the trapped energy.

I slam full force into their back. They shout as they're knocked off their feet. The kor weapon slips from their grasp, sliding ahead of us.

Their groan is muffled beneath their mask as I crawl over them.

I'm shaking as I get to my feet. I pick up the weapon, and then darkness shatters through me as the wrath of weapon fire grazes my flesh.

Darkness and pain.

Everything is numb as I crumble, then pain shreds through me. It's sharper this time, and I can no longer hear.

On my back, I open my eyes. The world is red and black; warm and silent.

It's like I'm absorbing the kor they fire my way—but it isn't happy about it. It's strange and manic, no longer something natural. I wonder, briefly, why I am not torn to ribbons, shattered like an Ankori.

My hearing rushes back first when the heavy weight of a boot digs into my ribcage. I sputter from the blow, trying to pick myself back up. The heat of kor sparks through my fingertips, but it's no use to me if I can't figure out where to direct it. With a cry of anguish, my palms flatten on the ground at my sides, and I hold still.

Shouting draws my attention just as my vision returns.

Flames billow around me. One of the bunkers has caught fire. My breaths rasp, and I peel myself from the ground. To my right, I make out one of the masked—they're lying face down. I startle at the sight, only to realize they're not moving.

Their weapon is still in their hand, and the screaming energy fills my head as I pry it loose. Pain seizes me again, but it only lasts a moment as I aim my open palm at the weapon. A deafening shockwave knocks me back as the gun breaks apart. The kor within the weapon splinters like lightning in every direction. Then, it dissipates, and with it, the pain.

I slump forward.

Pressure squeezes me again. I whip around I time to catch sight of the other masked. They aim their weapon toward me, and I hold my hand out,

daring them to fire.

Before I can stop it, kor ripples from my fingertips and dances around their weapon. The masked soldier is yanked forward, and we both struggle as kor goes up against manpower.

I slam one hand to the ground. My arm, pulling the trapped kor, feels like it might tear out of its socket, and it takes all I have to summon the strength to prevail.

The next thing I know, the second kor weapon is shattering in the air, and the burst sends both me and the masked flailing backward.

I swipe blood from my forehead. The nearby fire is spreading fast, but the masked doesn't get up.

Alo. I gather my bearings and move.

I follow the shouts—the others haven't noticed the fire yet, but they're gathered on the opposite side of the camp where the tents are larger and there's enough commotion to have drowned out what I did to their soldiers.

My heart hammers in my ears as I take cover just out of view. In the midst of the fray is Alo—curled on the ground and surrounded by guards clutching guns. She's shaking, and I notice that her leg is bleeding.

My stomach flips.

A large man draws my attention. He stands a head higher than the others, his uniform glinting with a gold medallion that distinguishes him from the rest. He's talking to Alo, holding a gun in her direction.

"I'd hardly call murdering a fellow crewmember *friendly*, Alo," the man is saying. I lean in to listen, catching the tail end of Alo's sob story.

"It's a misunderstanding, Captain," she says as if her own father wasn't *murdered* at these people's hands.

"I'd come to make amends, and that's when we were ambushed. I escaped, but I learned a lot from my time out there—more than we ever could in the lab," she pleads. "I can show you."

The air escapes me. *Ambushed?* I don't remember this part of the plan—drag *me* through the dirt.

"Untie her," the captain commands. "We'll keep her in the holding cell until morning. But I want this native found and interrogated."

"Sir, we've received word that he's been spotted," one guard says meekly. "He's dangerous, and we think he may have—"

“*Found* and *interrogated*!” the captain barks, a vein popping out of his forehead. His underlings resound in compliance, and several of them run off in different directions.

Meanwhile, he clamps a hand around Alo’s arm and pulls her along. She submits, but then she glances around the camp as she’s dragged forward. I know she sees me because her look hardens. It’s not the reaction I expected after what I just overheard.

I need Rok.

This isn’t at all how we planned for this to go—I was supposed to find Jen with Alo’s distraction, but she’s already been battered by the looks of it, and now she’ll be imprisoned.

It doesn’t stop my blood from boiling at what she said.

I make my way to Rok’s hiding place.

Surely, *surely* it was part of the plan. She didn’t *really* give me away; she just used me as an excuse. If Alo wanted me dead, she would have told them where I was.

Maybe she did, and I wasn’t there to hear.

My mind races and my hands are so sore from all the energy they’ve expelled that I start to shudder. When I miraculously reach the safety of the jungle, I fall forward.

If Alo was right about one thing, I finally understand.

This is a death mission.

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CARELESS

By the time I find Rok, I can't breathe. He's stooped low beneath a cluster of trees with drooping branches to conceal his surface. He doesn't startle at my arrival—simply turns toward me.

Overhead, leaves shake as rain begins to fall, gently pattering through the calm of the forest. I swat droplets from my eyes and take shorter breaths, staring up at the Ankori beast. He stands upright, and I'm unable to form the words I need.

In the near distance, we hear shouting. The rain masks enemy footsteps, but I can see lights sweeping across the brush as they encroach on our position.

"Alo's in trouble," I spit out, "I think."

You think she betrayed you, Rok hums. I suck in cool air and squint at him. It does nothing for the heat brewing within me, but he's right. Alo left something out.

"Did you know anything about this?" I mutter.

Rok and I crouch, slowly moving parallel to the searchers combing the jungle. He doesn't reply, and I huff, swiping more rain from my face. "They know I'm here."

You were not silent in your attacks.

I grunt. "But she—"

Your anger took control.

"What, she knows some stupid hand signals, and all of a sudden you take her side?"

To my annoyance, he goes silent.

I'm about to prod him further when his arm blocks my path. I halt to scan the trees ahead, and then clam up when an armed guard slips right past. At first, they don't notice Rok. Then, they take a closer look at the strange rock formation.

That’s when the Ankori springs into action. The guard all but has a chance to shout as Rok shovels his hands through the soil. Kor veins sprout into vines that tangle around the guard and gag him. We bury his gun out of view, and then we press forward, leaving him tied to the ground.

Shared language does not mean shared loyalties, Rok, at last, responds.

My heart is racing so fast, I barely remember what I asked. Still, I nod, and we continue toward the camp.

When we reach the edge of the trees, we stay hidden. There are guards posted in several places, each scrutinizing the brush.

To my left, Rok hunkers down. I watch as he connects to a kor vein and sends a pulse down the line. He looks at me as the kor swivels up a tree nearby, and I shield myself as the tree explodes. Immediately, the guards hurtle toward the commotion. Rok and I duck as they run right past us, and then we take off, barreling into the camp.

I need to find Alo first.

The ship seems like their most secure location, so I’m positive she’s there. There was so much I didn’t have time to explore—I walk faster at the idea of finding Jen, too.

Chest swelling, I bolt forward. Rok is right behind me, taking slower strides as we move. He’s almost tall enough to see right over the peaks of the bunker tents, so I assume he’ll know when to take cover. Just as I thought, he pulls me off my feet and we cower behind a canvas wall as several guards jog past the row.

We make it to the ramp. With every soldier set on scouring the woods or trying to control the fire, there’s no one left to stand guard.

Boldly, we head up the ramp. From my vantage point, I scan for any of the masked, but all I see are uniformed guards. There’s no time to care if we’ve been spotted.

I gasp as a field of light abruptly shifts around us. Radiant patterns spiral overhead, and I glance at Rok. His arms are raised, his energy filtering from his fingertips into the air to create a barrier.

He puts his back to mine, using the energy to deflect the sudden spray of bullets that pummel toward us. We make it to the top of the ramp, and I hold my breath.

Rok’s energy barrier keeps us unscathed. He commands me to move deeper into the ship, then he places one hand on the metal ramp.

The next thing I know, a wave of light flattens everything. I’m thrown forward, and all the guards are thrown back.

I will hold them off, Rok says. *Find Alo.*

Sweat trickles down my neck. “Be careful,” I tell him. He nods, and then I’m scampering into the ship once again.

As I move toward the stairs, a bullet grazes the back of my leg. I curse as I stumble, barely managing to pivot. Hot energy flashes from my fingertips, sweeping the shooter off his feet. He crashes into one of the wheeled machines stored here, and then slides to the floor with a pained groan.

I clutch the floor, feeling the heat as the metal tiles peel back from the kor veins that form. They seize the gun and crush it, and I hope that’s enough for the guard to get the idea.

I move further into the ship. My leg stings, but it’s not enough to keep me down. This time, I don’t hold back, indifferent to who might see me or chase me. In a flurry, I burst through doors and crash through the halls.

Two guards rush me at the first intersection, but I lift my arms in time to create a shield of energy. When I uncross them, the energy swipes to the ground in a sprawling motion. It bashes the guards and throws them to the ground.

They scream as they burn.

I don’t look back. But I’m slowly succumbing to the exhaustion welling in my chest.

Finally, I find stairs. At the top, the lights are equally dim. Quiet engulfs me as I shamble through the halls.

There’s a soldier in a nearby wing, poised at the ready but facing the opposite direction. Tense as ever, I slip past and into a narrow corridor.

At the very end, I see a glass wall—a cage.

Alo sits in the corner, hands folded as she stares at her feet.

“Alo,” I whisper.

She peers up at me and manages a sullen smile. “About time you showed up. Do they know you’re here?”

Something still feels off. “You tell me.”

Her gaze hollows, and she rubs her lips together. “You started *killing* people. Loudly! What was I supposed to do, let them shoot me?”

I flatten my palms on the thin window, seething as heat drips from my fingers to create kor patterns in the glass. “I didn’t find her. What was *I* supposed to do?”

“I *had* a plan.” Alo grits her teeth before standing.

I let the anger I feel melt into the window. The glass can’t bear the energy any longer, and it shatters with a groan.

Alo carefully slips through the opening, keeping an eye on me as she does so. Hands on my hips, I watch her for any sign of dishonesty.

“I had a plan. It didn’t go the way we needed it to. But I wasn’t trying to get you killed. You were supposed to wait for me—”

“And how was that going to work out with you behind glass?”

She scoffs, throwing her hands out. “I guess it doesn’t matter. We’re together now.”

My insides ache in a new way. The backs of my eyes burn with tears, and I have no choice but to swallow them down. I’m furious and I’m terrified and there’s still more to do.

Alo blinks at me, her brow wrinkled. Then, she grabs my hands, unflinching at the heat beneath my skin. “I’m sorry.”

“I am, too.”

We freeze when shouts echo down the corridor.

“They put my gear in that room over there,” Alo whispers.

I dash for the door in question. It’s unlocked, so we push inside and bury ourselves in the darkness. Alo riffles through metal drawers and breathes a sigh of relief when she finds her daggers and the gun.

“It’s unloaded,” she says, but we’re out of time.

The door swings open, and an armed guard aims at Alo.

I lunge forward, but I’m too late.

Alo barely ducks in time as a round of fire blasts in her direction. I hear her scream, and then she’s crawling on the floor toward me. I knock the guard off his mark, and blind fire ricochets around the room, whizzing past us and tossing up our hair.

In the madness, Alo manages to swipe the guard off his feet. He hits his head on the table as he falls.

Alo grabs my hand and scoops up his gun, and then we move down the hall. I try to run, but she lags, keeping me from moving quicker. Her breaths begin to strain from behind me. There's blood staining her right side.

"Alo?"

She shakes her head, gulping in air. "I'm fine."

"You're bleeding. A *lot*," I tell her like she has no idea.

"Shut up, Chol," Alo snarls. "We need to go."

I stammer. "But your arm!"

She shoots me a piercing glare. I swallow tightly, and then we focus ahead.

Two more guards round the corner, and I jump as Alo lays her finger on her trigger. Rapid-fire bullets scatter ahead, and both guards go down. I can't see their faces from behind their masks, but it's better this way.

We step over their bodies.

Alo presses her lips in a firm line. "When this is over," she rasps, "I'm going to be a linguistics professor."

She's trying to lighten the mood—this incredibly dark mood where we can't see the end of the tunnel. I don't have time to answer before she fires the gun again, downing another unlucky soldier. My ears ring.

As we limp down the hall, several more footsteps clatter along the metal floor. Alo and I press ourselves against the wall, and I grab her arm. She flinches, then looks at me in question.

"I'm going first," I say. She's skeptical, but then her eyes widen as I cross my arms in front of me. Kor energy wells up and forms a barrier like the one Rok made, and then I step into the fray.

These soldiers have heavy shields. From behind them, another wall of soldiers stands, heavily armed. The hall is so perfectly narrow that they can't miss, but the kor holds strong.

Bullets fire, deflected by the field. My shoulders rise as I breathe faster and faster, stressed by the pull of the energy and the fear of what lies beyond.

I *can't* fail.

The universe laughs at me as bullets rain against the energy. For just a moment, my confidence flickers, and I stagger back. Thankfully, the energy holds, but now there's added weight to each metal casing that hits it.

We're being pushed back, toward a dead end.

I feel Alo grab the back of my shirt with one hand like she's afraid she'll lose me. My hands twitch, and the hold I have on the kor seems to shake. A single bullet zips through the barrier, right past our heads, and I hold my breath, trying not to let fear overtake me.

The next thing I know, we're up against a wall and the soldiers are closing in. My jaw sets as they abandon their shields, focused on cramming us further back.

Before I can react, Alo unleashes a battle-worthy cry and ducks below my arm. I let go of the barrier as fast as I can so she doesn't walk through a wall of burning heat and, the next thing I know, we're in a one-way death tunnel. Alo goes down on her stomach, shutting her eyes as she holds down the trigger of her gun. Her shoulders shake as the gun rattles, thundering through the corridor straight at our attackers.

She's vulnerable—her gun will stop firing, and their weapons will tear her apart.

Something swells in my chest, and the world seems to explode as I scream. Strands of kor flood from my palms. They consume the hall with a brilliant ripple and shroud the guards. The walls and floor swarm with wild patterns, scalding to the touch and threatening to pull the corridor inward on itself.

"Fall back!" someone shouts. The soldiers fire as they retreat, and then there's a high-pitched screaming sensation as the hall is overcome by the kor. I plant both my hands on the paneling at my sides and let out another cry, and we're completely absorbed in light.

The hall warps to my command—it collapses and burns, and so do the soldiers.

I pant for air. It takes me a minute to realize the grave meaning of the crushed hall. I am the heaviest I've ever felt.

My gaze fixes on Alo as a choked cry leaves her. She crumbles with a sob, the gun sliding out from under her.

"Are you all right?" I drop to my knees.

Alo stares up at me, her dark eyes full of tears. She hesitates, and then she nods as I help her to her feet. I give her a minute to recoup as she clutches her side, and then we move on.

We're almost to the loading area. There are more shouts coming from ahead, so we find cover. The voices fade, and so do the footsteps running

amuck.

“I’m sorry for doubting you,” I finally whisper. She looks up at me, eyes still hard, but they begin to soften as she focuses on my face.

“I could have been more honest. From start to finish,” she says.

We watch one another in silence, and I can’t help but let out a laugh. “Thank you for sticking with me.”

She lets out a shaky laugh of her own, and I lift her chin. “Promise me you’ll stop getting hurt?”

Alo nods, letting herself grimace as she clutches her side. I don’t know how bad it is yet, but we need to find something for the wound.

Heavy steps interrupt us as someone comes around the corner. The metal floor rattles, and we hold our breath.

Then, Alo and I spring from hiding, she with her gun and me coursing with energy that consumes our view.

We catch the soldier by surprise. His gun thrums violently as his finger holds the trigger. Bullets pound through the hallway, and I scream as I throw a flurry of energy in the guard’s direction. It ricochets through the corridor, blanching the color from everything before the dust can settle. The guard is thrown several measures back, and I smirk.

Alo collapses.

I dip to her side, my hands shaking as I try to pull her upright. “Alo?”

Alo pants, hands and feet slipping as she steadies herself against the wall. She holds the side of her head, eyes flickering furiously as though she might suddenly understand why she’s falling. She meets my gaze, and the confusion widens into fear.

Then, red streaks down her neck, and my heart stops in my chest.

“Alo.” I reach for her hands.

Her arm drops to her side, and she sinks further to the floor.

I pale.

Her skin is branded—just as it’s always been. But the letters have been scrawled over by familiar, jagged patterns. They trail up her sleeves through the ink in her arms, and they crawl up the side of her neck.

I swallow tightly, mind racing.

Alo grabs my hand. She scans me frantically. All I can do is lean into her, arms wrapping around her and holding tight.

“No,” I whisper.

She judders, lips trembling as she tries to say something—anything.

I can hardly breathe. “Did… did I?”

Alo closes her eyes and shudders violently. I shake her just a bit, and she opens her eyes once again.

For a moment, her forehead knits, and her lips part. I think she’s going to speak—and then I watch a drop of blood spill from her lips and gloss down her cheek. I can hear the choke of her breath.

I rake my eyes over the patterns in her skin, nauseated. Their trails cut deep, and my heart hammers as my insides plummet into oblivion.

“Alo?” I try.

All I hear is gunfire and shouting ahead. She grips my hand, but her hold is so weak, I can’t help it as my eyes brim over.

“Chol,” she finally manages.

I blink away tears at the sight of what I’ve done. She stares back at me, frightened and anxious—trying to focus—and I start to hyperventilate as her gaze drifts away from me.

“It’s okay,” she rasps. “Now end it.”

Then, she relaxes, the distance in her eyes dissolving into something else. Her breath falls still, and her fingers go slack.

“*Alo*?” I shake her, but she doesn’t respond.

I lay my head on her chest.

I can’t hear you.

There’s nothing there.

This isn’t how it’s supposed to go.

The air around me becomes white noise. Tears blind me as my heart lurches. I hold Alo’s face, wanting to jostle her like it will wake her up. But there’s nothing. No response.

My lungs are so flat that I can hardly draw anything in. I wrap my arms around her and muffle my cries in her hair, which falls from her face. Now, I see what happened—the crippling wound at the base of her skull—careless, scorched spirals with roots too deep.

I don’t let go of her.

Not yet.

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25

MONSTER

Something sinister takes control. My breathing turns to fire, and my limbs to steel. Alo in my arms, I stagger to my feet and face the ramp.

As I thunder down the slope, everything moves in slow motion. I am numb as I walk. Rain pummels the world at the end of the ramp. Fire flares and gunfire sparks all around, and little remains of the campground.

Rok stands in the shelter of the ship, holding his ground as enemy fire comes from every direction. His masterful displays of kor splinter into the sky and destroy each stray soldier with such beauty and chaos, I almost forget what I'm doing. Then, I find what I'm looking for—the masked, lined in a row where the jungle folds into the mountain. Their revolting guns are clutched to their chests as they watch the mayhem unfold; yet they do nothing as their companions face the wrath of my guardian.

And now they will burn.

I feel nothing as I move into the skirmish. Soldiers shoot at me from the safety of the trees, but it's pointless. The ground ripples at my every footstep, and waves of kor energy spiral away from my form. They spike into the air before stretching forward to cast my attackers to the wayside.

My eyes lock straight ahead. The masked show no signs of movement, lifeless eyes watching my every move from the edge of the valley. They're complacent, eager to see the way our power picks their fodder apart.

From behind me comes the reverb of Rok's voice.

Alo.

If I had known how Ankori mourn the night Rok lost his brethren, I think I would have broken to pieces with the rest of the fallen. But when Rok lets that part of himself into my mind, a pressing, pained warble felt only through our connection, it becomes every part of me as it is every part of him. The ground pulses between us, sorrowful as even the valley cries.

Our shields amplify, jade and white that whirls around each of us and renews something deep within.

I did this, is all I can think. My throat aches with the want to sob, but Rok interrupts.

If anger guides us now, he says, *there is enough of it in the world that we will tear it apart.*

That's all I want right now. *An end to this suffering.* But he's right—Alo was right. Anything I do next has to be for Jen. For my parents. For my village, my people, my world.

I steel myself and kneel. My tears for Alo burn away before they can even surface.

Thunder rattles the valley, and lightning strikes Aéha's peak. Rok has done an excellent job of leveling the fields, and my view of this muddy, bloodied battlefield is clear. With a single sweep, my arm directs energy through the ground. Amidst the torrential rain, dirt showers us as shockwaves push the remaining soldiers back.

The ground shakes as Rok moves to my side. I focus on Alo. The rain washes the blood from her skin, trickling red dissolving until all that remains is her. I run my thumb against her cheek, swallowing tightly.

"Be calm. Sky hold you, Aér guide you." I press my forehead to hers.

All around, kor veins vibrate with energy. They circle us, and the next thing I know, arms of dirt are climbing across Alo. I gasp, trying to reach forward and pull her back to the surface, but Rok's hand falls on my shoulder. All I can do is watch as she vanishes into the soil and bright blossoms of kor radiate through the valley. I'm hot and cold at the same time. My fingers twitch, and my shoulders tense with insatiable rage.

When we look up, the masked have begun their approach. They form a wall as they walk, hands on their weapons that crackle with stolen energy.

I close my fists and rise. My focus narrows on them. *I'm not supposed to be angry*. But it's insatiable—Alo is gone, *really* gone, and I still have no sign of Jen. I flicker between anger I'm not supposed to feel and hurt I can't quell.

Rok's stone fingers wrap around my arm as I march forward. His feet sink into the earth, and there's a grating sound as I manage to drag him forward.

Do not let your rage become your wrath, he says. The tone of it is drowned out by the swarm in the back of my mind.

I won't break this world apart; I'll just give the ones who tried what they deserve.

Chol, he beckons.

The world feels like it is boiling as I march toward the masked. They do not attack, and they do not move quickly. Then, they split from one another, and I stop, observing how they break formation.

From behind them, someone new appears. They wear a black suit like the others, but their hands and arms are exposed. Long, dark braids spill from behind their mask, waving in the storm wind that encompasses us.

I squint, trying to understand. My fingers twitch, itching to unleash fury on those who dare challenge me, and my chest heaves up and down with heavy breaths.

I stand my ground, watching as this stranger takes their time approaching. Her own hands are poised with tension, and I watch as she aims a flattened palm toward the ground. Before I can react, hot energy erupts—golden and sharp and scalding. The ground shakes, and I'm tossed through the air as the kor turns on me.

I land hard, unable to breathe.

Led by this nightmare, the masked continue their advance. She walks stiffly, unchanging in pace. Her arms drop to her sides, and then she tilts a cupped hand. I watch as the fields shift into what looks like an ocean of dirt, pouring toward me in billows.

I've barely had the chance to catch my breath from the last blow before the air is knocked from my lungs again. Rok's solid arm wraps around my torso and we start to run.

Listen to me, he rumbles.

I claw madly at his arm, thrashing around. "Let me fight!" I shriek, finally breaking free. I land with a thud, and then I glare back at him.

You still fight with anger, he reprimands as we're pursued by a vortex of loose energy and dirt.

I thrust my hands out and grit my teeth. "It's the only thing I can control."

He simply looks at me, expressionless as he is, but I feel an immense weight from his mere presence. *You've had only days to practice. We must*

find another way.

"Just stay out of this!" I tell him, scooping my arm through the air. As I hoped, jagged rocks full of kor split from beneath the surface, blocking his path. I hurtle forward, charging the enemy user.

A flicker of fear washes over me as I abandon Rok, but I push it aside, continuing my plight through this windstorm of earth, stone, and rain.

I wave my hand and shield my eyes. My own energy cuts through the blinding curtain, and for just a second, I see her commanding the whirlwinds.

With an opening, I send a slice of energy her way. It speeds through the air like a whip, but before it can land the blow, she steps to the side. Her attention fixes on me, and I yell as a collision of mayhem sends me soaring.

Unable to focus on which way is up or down, I flail as I fly backward. My hand reaches for the ground, and it's like a rope of energy rips from the planet to catch me.

At first, I'm grateful to have restored my connection, and then I see that *she* is holding the other end of the rope. She gives it a tug, and I'm dragged back down, slamming into the soil and seeing stars.

The wind and rain bluster around us as she closes the distance, and then I'm staring up at her. She lifts a hand, and I see that there are jagged incisions of kor traveling up and down her arms. They crackle unnaturally, but I don't get to look for too long as a splinter of kor pins me to the ground.

I scream, feeling like a hole is burning right through my chest.

But I would deserve it, wouldn't I?

I let them take Jen.

I killed Alo.

I have nothing to show for my mistakes. Nothing to prove that I deserve to live another moment.

My eyelids slope to half-mast as the air is squeezed from my lungs. I'm numb to the world around me while this user's kor twists around my waist and tightens. It cuts into my skin—scorches my edges—but I don't try

to stop it. I'm cast into the air, letting every scar and every bruise deepen to my bones. Blood coats my vision as I'm dragged about and battered, but I don't die.

Fight, a voice scratches. The ground reverberates around me, something dormant shaken to life. *Fight for yourself.*

I stiffen in time to be pummeled by a wave of dirt and buried alive. Clawing for the surface, I struggle to regain my breath. The energy that holds me stings, pressing against me and threatening to leave no more than bones.

My muscles strain to their limits as I fight to break free, and then I'm dragged deeper underground by veins of kor. I hold my breath as soil covers my face.

With a shout, I release a final breath. My hands heat as kor radiates, pushing back the dirt to form a crater. As I erupt from below, I'm floating like before, staring down at this stranger who dares challenge me. Her surprised backstep betrays her confidence as I rise.

I aim all I have at her, and the force of it pushes us both back. As I land on my feet, she rushes forward, dodging my next blow. A swipe of her energy pulls me off my feet. I bounce back, and we go at it tooth and nail before another jolt of loose energy sends us apart again.

I could snap in half at any moment, but I force myself upright. Blood and dirt spray from my mouth as I stare her down. "Go back to the hole you climbed out of."

She braces herself and raises her arms again, and I roll out of the way as kor climbs from the soil, sharp boulders rising around me. She's trying to block me in.

That's when I get an idea.

I bolt for the rock shed. Her wrath nips at my heels, but I'm one step ahead. I point my arms toward the shed, feeling the drain of energy as kor veins pulse underfoot. The ground tills itself toward the shed and, like an arm I didn't have before, breaks through that awful, wonderful, one-hinged door.

I left my spear inside. Jen's pendant, full of kor, *should* answer my call.

The rock shed explodes. Wood and shingles fly through the air and a wave of energy carries my spear to my hand. I hold it tight, grinning as the

kor in the pendant responds, lighting up the whole of the spear. My hand burns and I draw it back, ready to pitch it forward like a harpoon.

I'm knocked to the ground by a wall of stone. Rok crashes into me, and we go rolling.

I choke for air.

"What are you doing?" I scream.

He reaches for me, but a swipe of my energy is enough to stop him. *Do not do this*, he says.

Biting hard on my tongue, I ignore him and return to my current pursuit. The stranger stands her ground in a taunting manner, and then we charge toward each other.

I pour every last ounce of strength I have left in her direction, and as I hoped, a wave of energy knocks her far back. She lands on her back, sprawling and dazed by the blow.

I ready my spear.

Chol Sul. Rok lumbers after me. I raise my spear as I near the stranger, and that's when a scream of energy catches me off guard. From up on the rise, the masked are watching, weapons aimed.

A bolt of raging kor energy is already slicing toward me.

I'm shoved hard to the ground, head spinning as I land.

It's quiet.

Rain pools in the field.

My heart throbs in my ribcage and my lungs constrict. As my head rings, I try to look up. Everything is blurry, and all I feel is the cool of the rain as it cleanses the battlefield.

I manage to pull myself up, though I'm dragging my legs behind me.

That's when I see Rok.

Veins of kor thrum around him where he's fallen. His kor is fading, and the streaks of jade through his stone surface pulse too softly.

I choke, spewing hot air as I crawl toward him. "No, no no no *no*," I plead, finding his hand. The force that holds him together is weakening faster than I can find words.

He's dying.

His next rumble is filled with pain, like the prayer of a warrior as they drink in their final taste of air. *You are nearly there*, he says, his words swelling throughout me.

“No no no no *no*,” I gasp, shaking violently. “You’re fine, you’re fine —I can fix this, I—”

His hand reaches mine, stopping me before I can blubber anything else. *You were the first to show me I could choose my purpose.*

I cling to his stone fingers, shaking my head in resistance.

Some things are meant to be broken, Chol. He turns his head, and I feel his gaze shift toward the strange user, unconscious in the dirt. *And so, for you and for her, I choose this.*

I shudder, lifting his hand to my chest. “Rok?”

Hot tears spill down my face. My throat is sore, and when I try to sob, it comes in rasps. As I clutch his arm, his stone fingers crumble. I grab at them frantically. “No, no, no.”

When I look up, his kor has faded.

“Rok.”

I shiver in the downpour.

Weapons fire again—the masked, aimed toward me now that their soldier is down. Time is frozen as projectiles slide across the storm-filled sky like firebursts. I look at the girl, unmoving other than the way the wind tosses her long hair. As I stare, my rage is slowly replaced by confusion.

I cut across the space between us. The girl’s arms twitch as gold and jade kor fragments through her skin, pained and unsettled. I release a juddering breath as I reach her side.

The dark hair holds fire in the early light of day, and I blink slowly, not sure of what I’m looking at. As I shake, I remove the straps of her mask and hold my breath.

When I pull the mask back, I stifle a cry.

And then I sob.

Jen.

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26

AÉHA

To my relief, Jen is breathing, merely unconscious from the last blow.

I gaze at the masked as lightning forks across the horizon. One masked holds their hand up to cease their fire, but the others are antsy at the sight of me with their best weapon.

“Jen?” I jostle her gently. She stirs, but her eyes don’t open. I run my hands through her hair, searching for signs of injury beyond what they’ve already done.

Parts of her strange suit are torn at the back. There are large, purple bruises coloring her shoulder blades, and I’m afraid to look further.

Then, I notice something on Jen’s temple, concealed by hair. It looks like the translator, still embedded in my skin, but it has blinking lights. As I’m about to run my fingers over it, it suddenly flares, and heat escapes the pulse that wakes her.

As her eyes slide open, I lock up. It’s her, but she’s someone else.

The device on her temple now blinks a steady red. As she comes to, I grab at it. It’s melded to her skin.

“Jen,” I huff, and suddenly, her hands are around my throat.

I gasp, trying to pull her away, all the while tugging on the metal device.

It remains taut.

In one blow, she knocks my hand from her temple, seething at me.

“I’m so sorry, Jen,” I lower my voice. “The one time you needed me, I didn’t help you. But I’m going to fix it—they’re going to pay for this, okay?”

Shock overtakes me as something scorches my insides. I’m held in place as sharp pain erodes through me and Jen’s fingers glow white.

“It’s just me,” I try, gritting my teeth before I convulse. She rises, staring at me like a predator, indifferent to the pleas of its kill.

She looks at the masked, and I see that they are aiming their weapons toward me as they hurry down the ridge.

"*Stop*," I wheeze.

I don't want to hurt her. I need her to see that it's me. I need that device off her; need their lies out of her head. The pressure welling around me intensifies, and I recognize that I'm either going to be compressed or torn apart if I do nothing.

As the masked grow closer and my vision clouds over, I feel Jen's torment relent just the slightest. I jab my right arm into the dirt and scream as a tide of energy erupts. It sends everyone back, including Jen.

She pulls herself up, though it takes a few more seconds for the others to regain their balance.

It's all the time I need.

I run toward the mountain, where the tunnel entrance has become an aperture in the side. I have to do something, even if it means escaping before I can retaliate.

The closer I get to the mountain, the worse I feel. I gasp for air as I'm pulled by an invisible tension, reeling me toward the stone surface. One of the masked shouts, "Don't let him escape!"

My jaw hangs open as I crash against the base of the rocks. I'm leaden, unable to pry my bleeding hands from the surface. The energy within me throbs, and I feel the same agony as when I first bonded with kor. My hand feels like it's going to split open—bones and muscle working against one another in a struggle for relief. I scream for all I'm worth, trying to push myself to my feet, but I'm paralyzed by the pressure that holds me against the rocks.

Jen bears no emotion. The wind tangles through her loosened braids, and she becomes the fearsome storm I always saw her as. Unshakeable. Unstoppable.

Terrifying.

I could laugh as she heads my way. I'm proud of her; of course she's stronger than me. Her will is iron-forged—if she only knew what she was doing—this would be over in a heartbeat.

I'm only sorry I took it for granted.

She raises her palm. The scars in her arm brighten, and I brace for the scorching energy.

The masked run to her side, watching through soulless eyes in fascination. This is an examination for them. An experiment with their new monster.

If her kor wants to burn me, I don't feel it. It doesn't hurt the way it should anymore, as invasive as it is plowing through the fabric of my being and holding me still.

I'm able to leverage myself against the rocks at Aéha's base. The masked see that I'm able to move, and they shout at Jen.

They command her to pull me apart; to crush me; to bring me *down*, but she is hollow.

When one uses the end of their gun to strike her into submission, my jaw tightens. The kor holding me flares hot as it falters, but I have no choice but to watch Jen shoulder the pain.

"Don't touch her." I look them dead in their empty eyes. I'm surprised by the malice that laces my tone, but it catches their attention.

The masked readjust their weapons, daring to step closer as I'm pinned against the mountain. Jen's blistering hold returns, enough to bring tears to my eyes.

It's not enough to satisfy these demons.

Another one presses a device to her neck. She cries out as shock hits her—I feel it in the way her kor grips me and stuns my senses. The break is just enough time for me to pull myself upright, crossing my arms over my face to form my own barrier.

The valley rumbles. The tremors start in the ground, then a weight hits the mountain with concussive force. Jen—the masked—all of us are tossed sideways.

My head pounds.

Across the leveled field, the ship has come to life. It vibrates with incredible power, and the engines start to spin. The whole field turns into a dust storm as the thrusters heat up, and I fear the worst.

They're trying to leave.

The masked charge, weapons aimed. Their fire lands over my head, and I barely leap out of the way as immense rocks split loose and tumble down the mountainside.

They thunder as they fall—millions of kor veins are ripped from their anchors and fizzle out. A dissonant echo from Aér itself rattles through my

body, the same hum that drew me to the depths of the sanctuary.

I'm still stuck against Aéha, realizing the hum is what dragged me to its side in the first place. "What do you want from me?" I scream as if the kor can answer.

A vibration of its energy skirts up and down the steep rocks. My hands fuse to the wall, and I groan as I'm held there.

When I look up, my eyes widen. Aéha shakes, crevices forming as new kor veins carve through solid rock. It works like an outline, moving along as it cuts through the stone. I hold my breath, trying to pull one of my arms free.

There's a mighty rumble as I manage to tear a fist loose. It's not the only thing that breaks away—in tune with my movement, a boulder rips unnaturally from the rest of the mountain and smashes to pieces in the field behind me. *Am I doing this?*

An invigorating wave of strength pours through me, and I manage to drag my other arm free. In response, another part of the mountain crumbles.

My mouth hangs open. I can still feel the pull of the mountain—but I'm the one at the end of the rope.

My glare fixes on the masked. They've stopped shooting as if they expect the earthquake to swallow me.

I smile.

When I surge forward, the valley shudders. Behind me, the mountain roars, and thousands of rocks explode forth. I'm tempted to shelter myself, but the destruction that follows does not hit me.

Most of the masked flee, raising their arms to shield themselves as others are buried by stones larger than they are.

Jen doesn't move from her spot, and the rocks that sail her way fragment before they can touch her. Her eyes are blank, but the energy in her arms crackles and spills.

I feel her exhaustion.

In the near distance, the wings of the ship are tucking in for a vertical ascent, the heat from the thrusters charring the ground in its wake. The ramp begins to close as a few stray soldiers scramble aboard. And then everyone left on the ground halts, frozen in place to stare at me.

Above me.

A colossal shadow darkens my view, and I glance up as the atmosphere rumbles.

The glow of kor is vibrant over my head, but there are pillars and shapes like I've never seen before. I stagger forward, and when I look up, I nearly faint.

An Ankori.

The largest one I've ever seen. It easily out-scales any of our fallen guardians.

I stammer as I throw my hands to my head. The Ankori's hands also go to its head, and it wobbles back and forth, making the ground ripple with its enormity.

It takes me only a moment to realize it's mirroring my movements. I exhale with both laughter and disbelief. As I stand there gawking, the Ankori takes control of itself. It leans close—the size of a small mountain crashing upon me—arm extended.

I stagger backward. Every muscle in my body seizes up and then seems to fall apart, betraying my weariness. When I slump forward, one of the guardian's stone fingers pushes me upright.

There are a thousand questions I want to ask, but now isn't the time.

We're forced into action as several shots are fired against this new guardian. It's so big, the kor projectiles that hit it merely chisel at its stonework, leaving dancing energy against its surface as it dissipates. I take cover beneath its hand.

Its voice suddenly grumbles through me, a hundred times more jarring than anything Rok ever produced. *I thought you could use the help.*

I nod before leaping into its palm. Then, the wind whistles past me as I'm lifted several measures into the air. *At your command,* the Ankori hums as I'm deposited on its shoulder. There are bits of tree roots sticking out of its stone, and I'm able to grapple those as I stare down at the masked like they're insects. Now is a *terrible* time to be afraid of heights.

Jen's blank expression shifts to astonishment at the voice, just as I was when I first heard an Ankori speak. It's immediately whisked away by whatever controls her.

I point straight ahead to the ship and don't look down as we march forward. I cling to the roots until my knuckles turn white.

“How did you—where did you come from?” I shout as we move toward the ship.

You summoned me, comes the reply. My teeth chatter at every incredible step this new Ankori takes. I try not to think about how high up I must be. We’re nowhere near as tall as any of the surrounding mountains, but to fall would be devastating.

We sail right over the masked, who continue their fire. To my horror, a large portion of the Ankori’s left leg is broken off as restless kor burrows deep.

I cry out, grabbing for a hold of something as the guardian stumbles.

As we fall, the Ankori reaches for the ship. Its stone hands land hard against the siding, shredding through the metal side panels with ease.

A slash of energy bashes the Ankori’s other leg, and we’re falling again. I try not to scream as my stomach flies into my throat.

The Ankori raises both fists. I’m struck with awe as the massive creature brings them down upon one of the engines. There’s an ear-splitting explosion, then the rest of the ship catches, going up in a massive column of fire and smoke.

I’m launched from my spot atop my new guardian.

My soul leaves my body. As I spin through the air, it’s as though I’m watching myself and the Ankori sail back from the resulting blast. Its shadow covers the masked below as it topples.

Some try to run. Others keep firing. The valley shakes as the Ankori lands, forcing a ceasefire.

My consciousness is dragged back to my body as the ground rushes to meet it. Soul and flesh slam painfully into one another as reality sews me together, and my hands reach for nothing.

I land hard.

I blink between white and black and red. It’s too fuzzy to grasp.

I think I can still move. Blood dribbles from my mouth, hot and wet. I can’t tell if it’s because my lungs have caved in or if it’s because I bit off the very end of my tongue when I hit the ground. Regardless, the agony I feel is enough that I wish I was dead.

As it did for Alo, tendrils of kor stretch from the gravel to filter into me. They wash over me in waves, calm as the pool in the sanctuary. Cool as the lapping shoreline within the mountain.

I moan, straining to look up as my soreness dissolves.

The Ankori is still lying on the ground, but its great stone hand is reaching for me. Disjointed fingers align to pick me up. Everything aches as I'm drawn into its palm, and then it pulls me through the air toward its sternum.

There's someone in its other hand, and the Ankori brings us together.

I squirm, blinking rapidly at Jen. She's unconscious, presumably from the explosion. We're brought closer to the Ankori, and there's a familiar pang of sadness as we're deposited on its chest. I feel the energy within its core fade before the light goes out, one last hum filling my head.

"Thank you," I breathe, planting a palm against its stone surface. Then, I settle, overlooking the smoldering debris that covers our valley.

After I don't feel so fragile, I drag myself to Jen's side. She looks peaceful right now, and I sigh. With help from my kor, I slip my nail beneath the metal device on her temple. It comes loose, but it leaves a mark that sours my stomach. I reach for the edge of my shirt and tear the fabric, pressing it to her forehead to stop the bleeding.

In her sleep, Jen crumbles in my hold. I draw her close and rock her slowly, holding her tight.

As I cradle her, my gaze slips back to the destruction—the valley is unrecognizable, and even the surrounding jungle seems incapable of holding it together.

Sobs ripple through me. I hold Jen, crying softly as I slowly drift to sleep atop the fallen Ankori in the rain.

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LEGACY

Someone shakes me awake. I gasp for air as I shoot upright, half-expecting to find Alo. A wave of pain sweeps over me as I come to, and I blink back fresh tears. The rain has stopped, but the world is still overcast. Everything is out of focus, but there *is* someone standing over me.

I concentrate on gathering my breath. The distant voice that enters my head causes me to shiver.

"Chol, what happened?"

I rub my face and squint. Of all people, it's Ben.

"Chol?" He sits next to me, his usually cheerful face now twisted with fear. Before I can conceal the glowing gash in my palm, Ben's eyes jump to my hand in concern.

"Ben." My voice is hoarse.

"What is all this?" Ben jumps to his feet, waving his hands. "What happened? Are you all right?" His words trail off; he's in shock.

My head is heavy as iron. "I… Where's Jen?" Panic stirs me fully awake, and I look around before spotting her still asleep, a few feet away.

Ben stammers, unable to pick a topic. I can't blame him.

A familiar cry pierces my ears, and I go so still that I think I might start sobbing all over again.

"Jen? Chol?"

Mother's desperate voice cries out from nearby, and I scramble to my feet. When I peer down the slope of the fallen Ankori, I see her clinging to Father. She's wearing the same embroidered robe she left in, and for a moment, I'm right back at the edge of their cart, telling Father I know what to do and bidding them goodbye. That may as well have been eons ago. I swat tears from my eyes, unable to stop myself from smiling through the bittersweet memory.

The second Mother sees me, she bursts forward, arms outstretched as she weeps.

I practically fall off the Ankori, my feet scraping against the rocks as I climb down, and then Mother collides with me, squeezing me so tight I feel like my ribs might finally crack.

“You’re here,” I gasp as liquid streaks down my face. “You’re *here*.”

We sink to the ground, and as Mother sobs in my arms, I feel a rough, warm hand on my shoulder. Father peers down at me. His face is wrought with fear and anger, a feeling I know all-too-well. At the same time, I don’t fear his judgment. He has no idea what I’ve been through—what Jen’s been through.

My heart lurches, and I look back up the slope. Ben appears over the side, and he waves an arm. As I help Mother to her feet, Father climbs up the Ankori and disappears over the ledge. When he reappears, Jen is in his arms.

“What happened?” His voice is low and impatient.

My stomach churns. My fingers twitch.

But I take a deep breath. Losing control is the last thing I need.

“Father, I—” I try, but he merely grunts, turning his back as he holds Jen.

Mother picks herself up and hurries to his side, panic in her eyes as she runs her fingers across the wound in Jen’s temple. “Sky above, is she alive? *Sul*?” Tears brim her eyes again, and I feel myself caving to a shared feeling of worry.

“She’s breathing,” Father says, kneeling in the shadow of the Ankori and cushioning Jen’s head. He motions to her arms, and Mother goes pale. “Is that… kor?”

Father gives a single nod.

From behind us, there’s a thud as Ben jumps down from the Ankori. He joins my side and crouches, studying my face and pursing his lips. “You’re going to explain this, right?” he asked, his voice lilting as if he can lighten the mood. But he sees my expression, and he sits back.

My shoulders ache, and my jaw feels swollen. I run my fingers through the dirt and my shoulders sag forward. Exhaustion could kill me, and it takes every ounce of strength I have not to convulse with fresh despair.

No one would understand; not now.

Ben rests a hand on my back, and then he stands. He assesses our family's less-than-perfect reunion, and then he nods to himself.

He looks at me. "When you're ready to talk, you know where to find me."

I swallow cool air as he goes. Then, I join Mother, Father, and Jen.

"Father," I start, wondering how I'm going to explain all this. He casts me a stern look, and my mouth goes dry.

"We need a doctor," he says, staring down his nose as he stands up. "After you find one, we'll get to work out here."

I press my lips in a firm line as he stands to march off. My fists tighten, and there's an itch at the back of my neck.

"Sul Chun," I call him by his and his father's name.

He stops, shoulders knotting. Father whips around, eyeing me like I'm not his son but some sort of pest, and I bite the side of my cheek.

Mother's hand reaches for mine, but I don't take her hold.

I can't help but grit my teeth. "I protected my family."

I see his tongue run across his cheek as he fights back his own anger, and then he shakes his head. "Until we have a roof over our heads, do not speak again."

He cuts off across the field, heading toward what's left of the shed.

My heart sinks, but then it hardens, and I turn to Mother and Jen. Mother watches me with fear in her expression and question in her eyes.

I settle next to Jen, and I run my hand across her forehead. Scars of kor are still painted like fractures against her arms, and I shudder.

Father was surprised by the remnants of the intruders' camp, but he still refuses to let me speak to him. We found a tent that mostly withstood the chaos, and we set up our makeshift home in there.

Jen has since woken up. The first couple of days, she was violently ill and in a state of delirium.

Now, she just sleeps. She stirs sometimes, crying with nightmares. It happens to me, too. It's why I don't sleep in the tent if I can help it.

We'll have better housing in a few days. Father is in and out of Antok gathering supplies for a new home. Mother would never admit it when I ask, but I know he's also performing damage control of his own. '*Of course my son isn't dangerous*,' I'm sure he's saying. '*Our farm will recover. This won't happen again.*' Anything to hide how our lives were destroyed—anything to blame *me* without blaming *me*.

The third day Father won't talk to me, I can't take it anymore. I make sure Mother is all right to be left alone with Jen, who has finally woken up to try to eat something. We haven't spoken either—she's been in shock, unresponsive to most things, though she's been able to walk around a bit.

I think the best thing I can do for her is leave her alone.

Maybe I'm the one who needs it. These last three days have been a nonstop whirlwind of well-wishes from nosy neighbors and aches that won't stop, and the ever-present, all-consuming fear that Jen might not ever be the same again, and neither will—

I find myself in the entrance to Jen's kor chamber. I don't remember entering the tunnel, but I'm here now.

The silence takes my breath away when I pull myself inside. Even my thoughts go still for a moment.

I lie beside the pool, indifferent to the gravel that presses into my skin. The surface of the water is dark, and it gives me flashbacks to the Half-Moon Sanctuary.

My heart leaps into my throat and, the next thing I know, I'm crying, fingers outstretched as I reach for the glassy surface. A part of me wishes… wishes so badly that I'll look at my reflection, and Rok and Alo will be standing behind me, and it will be real.

And the hurt will be gone.

"Jen's still not safe," I whisper into my hands, rocking slowly back and forth. "She's sick."

The kor is hurting her. A soft voice creeps into my mind, and I exhale shuddery tears.

“Why?” I say. It must be the unnatural way they did it—the experiments, the suffering, the sharp pin at the end of that horrible glass prison.

It’s no good to sit here and think about it. *But what can I do?*

I pick myself up, brushing gravel off. It breaks the surface of the water, forming ripples as I stare into the darkness. I’m delirious. My hand throbs from the kor, and I groan, desperately scratching at it, trying to rip it out.

It’s going to be okay, the voice speaks again. I rub my eyes, and I peer back into the pool, watching my reflection as my head pounds.

A new silhouette forms behind me.

“I wish you were really here.” I bite my knuckles, studying how much I’ve changed. I look hardened, almost broken. I won, but at what cost?

The soft voice fills my head again, so clear I could swear she was beside me. I shut my eyes, trying to tune out the sound.

“Chol,” she says.

I shudder.

“Look at me,” she says again, and I shake my head.

And then two warm palms press against my face, and I’m startled. My eyes fly open as I fall backward, and I’m floundering in the pool. It’s deeper than I expected, and it takes me a moment for me to comprehend which way is up.

I gasp for air as I breach the surface, choking with fright as I hold to the edge of the pool. And then there are hands weakly grasping at my shoulders.

I shake as I look up. My vision is blurry, but I swear I see Alo, standing before me and trying to pull me out of the water.

I blink rapidly and let loose a sob, collapsing against the stone.

“Chol, please,” a weak voice says. I shake my head, refusing to look up. When I finally do, I’m overcome.

I force myself out of the water, listening to the echo of it splash all around the chamber as I kick my way free.

Warm hands wrap around my face again, and when I look up, it’s not Alo.

It’s Jen.

Her silken hair covers most of her face, but dark circles hang beneath her eyes. She tugs me forward, and I shudder.

“You’re okay?” I mumble. “You’re okay.”

She wraps her arms around me, but she doesn’t cry.

“I thought you were dead,” Jen whispers. “You weren’t there with me, and—I thought—”

I grasp her hand like she might slip away if I let go. “I wasn’t going to lose you. I would have searched all of Runerok, Aénar, and even Oernok if I had to.”

Jen’s lower lip trembles, and she finally bursts into tears. We hold each other for several minutes, listening to the water, calm as ever, lapping the shore.

“I’m sorry I haven’t spoken to you… I was so scared when I woke up,” she says. She feels feverish to the touch, and I look up and down her arms. The doctor stitched the edges around the kor, but it still glows harsh and twisted through the rough seams. My stomach flips at the thought of what she’s been through.

“I’m so sorry, Jen.”

She manages a smile, her gaze drifting to the sad little braid I’ve kept in my hair. Then, she laughs.

We both take juddering breaths before drying our tears. My heart feels like it’s slowly beating again, though pain wraps around it in unmoving chains.

I pretend to study the kor in the chamber walls. “Father isn’t speaking to me.”

Jen grows quiet, and her face sharpens. “I can help you explain as much as I remember.”

There’s so much that Jen doesn’t know—so much I’m afraid to tell her. Fresh memories that cut like a poisoned blade.

Alo and Rok.

Memories becoming figments faster than I want to admit; stories to anyone else I might share them with.

But I don’t think I can talk about them. Not yet.

I’m a million leagues away when Jen catches my attention. “It wasn’t your fault. I don’t think that could be any more obvious.”

“Some of it was.”

“Oh, shut up,” she laughs. “You’re not *that* good at messing up.” She smiles, though I can see the torment within her own eyes.

We’re rattled. Changed. Afraid. And I’m not sure how long it will take to unravel ourselves from these new bonds.

I go back to holding Jen, and I feel how hot her forehead is. “Mother let you leave the campsite?” I’m surprised.

“They don’t know I’m gone,” Jen replies, and I raise an eyebrow. I’m surprised Mother left her side at all.

“Why didn’t you tell them?” I say.

Jen’s shoulders dip forward. “I needed to know that you were still around.”

I frown. “You rascal. Mother will die if she finds you missing again.”

“She won’t.” Jen picks at a stitch in her arm, trying to smother the way she winces. “Besides, they were busy. Some stranger came up to the camp just as I was waking up, and they went outside to talk to her.”

“Her?” I narrow my eyes as a twinge of something shoots up my spine.

Jen nods. “She was asking for you. And I knew where you would be.”

I stand, my shoes scraping the rocks as I do. I hold my arm out to Jen, and she takes it. “Did you see what she looked like?” My heart pounds wildly.

“No. I slipped out the back.”

I drink in the cool air. *It’s not possible, right?*

Still, I sprint to break free of the tunnel. Jen and I emerge from the entrance together, shivering as we’re met by frigid evening air. It’s twilight, and the sky is shaded purple as the last of the light slips behind Aéha.

In the middle of the field, I can make out Father, standing near the tent with his hands on his hips. Mother is slouched over in worry, and a girl looks our way.

Jen heads down the slope as Mother calls to her, but I stand frozen at the top.

The wind picks up the ends of Jen’s hair as she turns to look at me, squinting in the daylight. “Are you coming?”

I stare at the girl, and she’s frozen too, staring right back.

I don’t know if it’s bile or anger that pushes itself up into my mouth, but I feel like I’m going mad. I hunch over, clasping my hands to my knees as a silent scream pours from my throat. *It’s not her*.

All I have left is what I wanted in the first place—but it’s different, now.

It changed before I had the chance to decide I wanted it.

With great strain, I straighten my posture. I swipe dirt and tears from my face, fingers trailing through the coarse stubble on my jawline. For the first time in a while, I truly hurt—physical pain beyond the loneliness that shrouds me, and I almost laugh.

I'm bruised and battered, and it feels like cool rain amidst the fires inside.

"Lynn Shiro." I take a deep breath, nodding to her.

She folds her hands and nods back, blinking slowly as she takes me in. "Ben told Lily how he found you." Her tone is unwavering, despite the worry in her eyes.

Her gaze shifts to Jen, who timidly ducks her head. Mother and Father look at me with question in their eyes, and words hitch in my throat.

"I'm glad you found her," Lynn goes on, her voice a whisper, "and that it's over."

A shudder drags through my body, pulled by an invisible string up my spine and through my teeth. "Me too," I murmur. If I'm any louder, I'm worried everything I've caged will spew forth. I don't think anyone is ready for that.

"What's the meaning of this?" Father's harsh tone rips through me, and I steady myself, fists clenched.

My eyes flicker at the permanent scowl etched on his face.

I can't hold it in anymore.

"Everything is gone because I *failed*," I manage. "I did nothing while they destroyed our guardians; I did nothing while they took Jen. I thought I could stop them—save Jen, and now I'm the reason"—my voice becomes a hoarse wail—"the reason Alo and Rok are dead. I'm the reason Jen is suffering."

The evening breeze slices through us, and we share a chill as no one speaks a word.

Jen continues to stare at the ground, trembling from fever and cold. Mother draws her near, and I watch as she runs her hand across the jagged lines in Jen's arms.

Father cranes forward, his face untwisted.

And right there, in the middle of our wasteland, I tell them everything. About the masked, the Ankori, the kor… and Alo. And then what I know

about Jen’s fate—how these strangers tormented her and made her their monster.

Jen’s eyes are wide as she listens to my retelling, but there’s a blank space in her stare where I know she’s forgotten most of it. To her, I’m telling a ghost story, and all she knows is that she’s hurting without reason.

For a moment, I think I’m spouting lies to the wind—it was all made up, and there’s nothing to prove that I’m nothing more than a demented, frazzled child.

But the kor remains with me, and it’s evident in the scars that wind around Jen’s arms and cut through my palm.

And I think this is what convinces them—Mother, Father, Lynn—that their world is changing.

When I’m done speaking, I kneel. “This farm—our home—may be gone,” I say, “but our lives will be different than that.”

I place my hand in the soil. The fear of what I’ve become swells in my chest, and I nearly cry out as familiar energy surges within me.

Everything I’ve done with this power has been through anger.

But I’ve seen it done differently.

Rok used it to protect us, but more importantly, he used it to comfort us.

So, as tears dribble down my cheeks and fall to the ground below, I let the kor emit from my fingertips. It latches to the surface and quickly warms my aching joints, and then the dirt begins to move.

I can feel the others in a way that’s more than watching them. I feel how they’re frozen in place, and I smile gently.

Quietly, the soil pulls back just enough to let a stream of light emerge. The energy blossoms as it departs from the ground, unfurling in the shape of a vibrant flower.

A gasp escapes Mother. When I look up, they are gaping in awe.

Everyone but Father.

His stare remains cold until I notice a tear, sinking down his angular face. He blinks rapidly, sucks in a sharp breath, and then stoops to my level.

He reaches toward the kor flower, scrutinizing it as his fingers slip right through its form. Once he’s done this a few times, he glares at me in silent demand.

Then, he blinks slowly, and it's as though he's grown years younger as the stern look unweaves from his face.

After a long silence, he leans back and places a hand on my shoulder. "You—" His throat catches. "You could never be a failure, Chol. Neither as a man or, more importantly, as my son."

My heart surges, and I bite my tongue to hold back the burn that threatens to shift into tears.

He clears his throat, meeting my eyes. "But when a father returns to their children… like *this*"—he gestures to the scar on my palm, then at Jen—"I was terrified. There was nothing I could have done if I tried."

"I tried to stop it," I said. "I wouldn't—I *didn't*—"

He closes his eyes. I wait for harsh words—maybe even shouting—but it never comes.

"I'm proud of you, Chol," Father finally speaks, just above a whisper. "Our family is lucky beyond reason to have a fighter like you. I only wish you knew when to ask for help."

I force my face to flatten as my chest seizes. And then Father begins to weep, pulling me into his arms. I can't hold back anymore, but I don't have to.

Jen forces herself into the embrace, followed shortly by Mother.

I laugh. We've lost everything—and now we can mend something new.

There's no reason I can only pick one path. Endless possibility awaits me, a myriad of opportunities that begin with one choice.

And so, I make my first decision.

I choose to heal.

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Epilogue

My eyes drift across newly tilled fields. Since the chaos two moons ago, grass has sprouted from the soil, and we've built a temporary house. It's imbued with kor since I helped build it—Father was wary of the new method, but it's sturdy enough to pass for good craftsmanship and puts a roof over our head.

In the midst of our valley, the fallen Ankori has already become a monument, watching over us and attracting curious village folk.

Rok's grave lies just beyond. I was finally able to bury him a few days ago, and I marked it with my spear. Jen's embedded pendant glimmers in the sun, firm amidst the destruction.

I don't think the wound will ever heal, but when the fading rays of sunlight land upon the pendant and bounce across the field, I can't help but feel a sense of peace at the sight.

Jen has recovered faster than I thought possible—or so she says. She'll always have scars that cut through her like lightning, but her cheeks are rosy again and there's a song to her steps. I catch her manipulating her newfound power all the time. If she feels any pain from the unnatural way it was bonded to her, she doesn't show it.

She spends her days helping Father with the farm. It's not the right season to plant, but she's figured out how to draw energy to grow things that should be dead. Thanks to her willingness to learn, Mother and Father don't have to worry about how to keep food on the table.

One day, I'll take Jen to the sanctuary. I'm not sure I'll ever be able to read the runes left in the walls, but even I know now that it runs deeper than that.

We may never fully understand what power we have. For now, I only have one burning question.

I don't know where Alo rests.

I hear her in my memory—my dreams—even my thoughts, these days. She is a clear voice in my mind, a gentle presence that appears when I connect with the kor in my palm. I've begun branching out in search of answers for this, but I've already learned our legends are marred by age and war.

Besides, everyone is more interested in what I am now. Most are afraid of me, averting their eyes and hurrying along when I appear. Some cave to their captivation, though, and I lose track of myself when they persuade me to recount some of the worst moments of my life. To cope, I tap into the ebb and flow of my patience by way of the scar in my hand, and that's usually when I feel Alo the most.

As time marches us toward the season of frost, I know I need to start looking beyond Antok for answers. I've outgrown our valley, and I've tasted only a breath of distant places where legend could still be alive.

There's rumor of a girl with fire-red hair to the north. Her speech is broken, and her face is sullen as a moon-dark ocean, but she's hard to track.

If anyone can find her, it's me.

Tonight, when the sun sets over the valley, I don't hear Alo. Whatever connection I have with her is distant and hushed.

Even the light in my palm dims, like it knows what comes next.

Don't worry, I think to myself—to the universe—to her.

We've already won.

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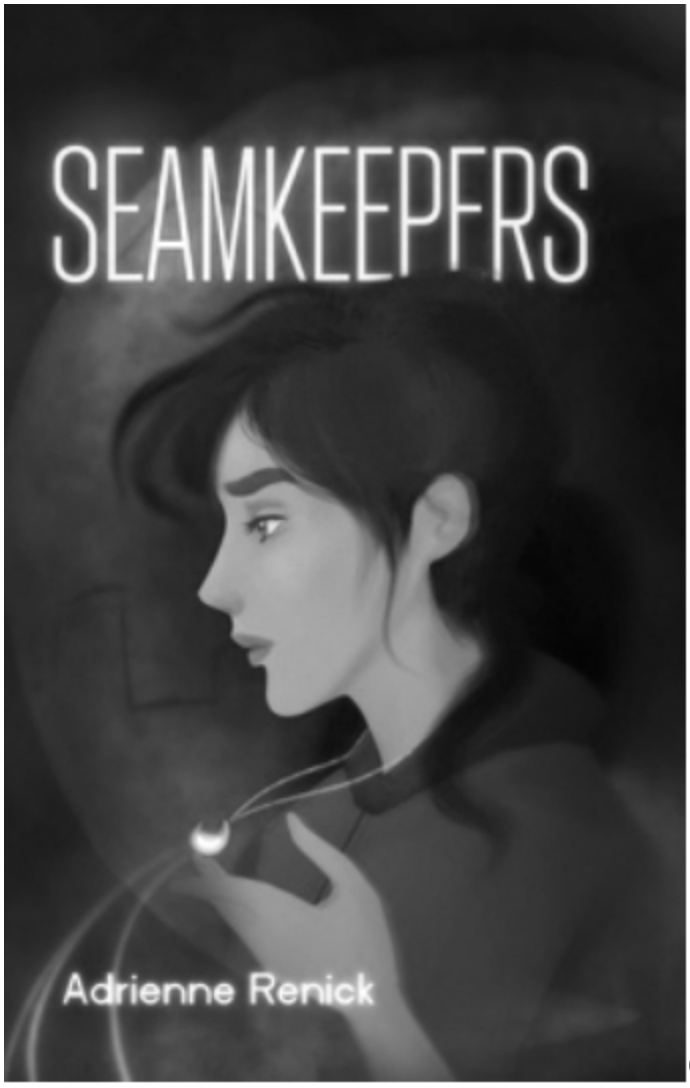
About the Author

Adrienne Renick resides in East Texas with her husband, a goofy dog, and an angry little bird. She spends her days eagerly planning her next coffee break and bouncing every idea or bad joke she's ever had off anyone in the room at the time.



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