



THE FLOATING WORLD

NEW YORK TIMES—BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE GIRL WHO FELL BENEATH THE SEA

AXIE OH

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FEIWEL AND FRIENDS
NEW YORK



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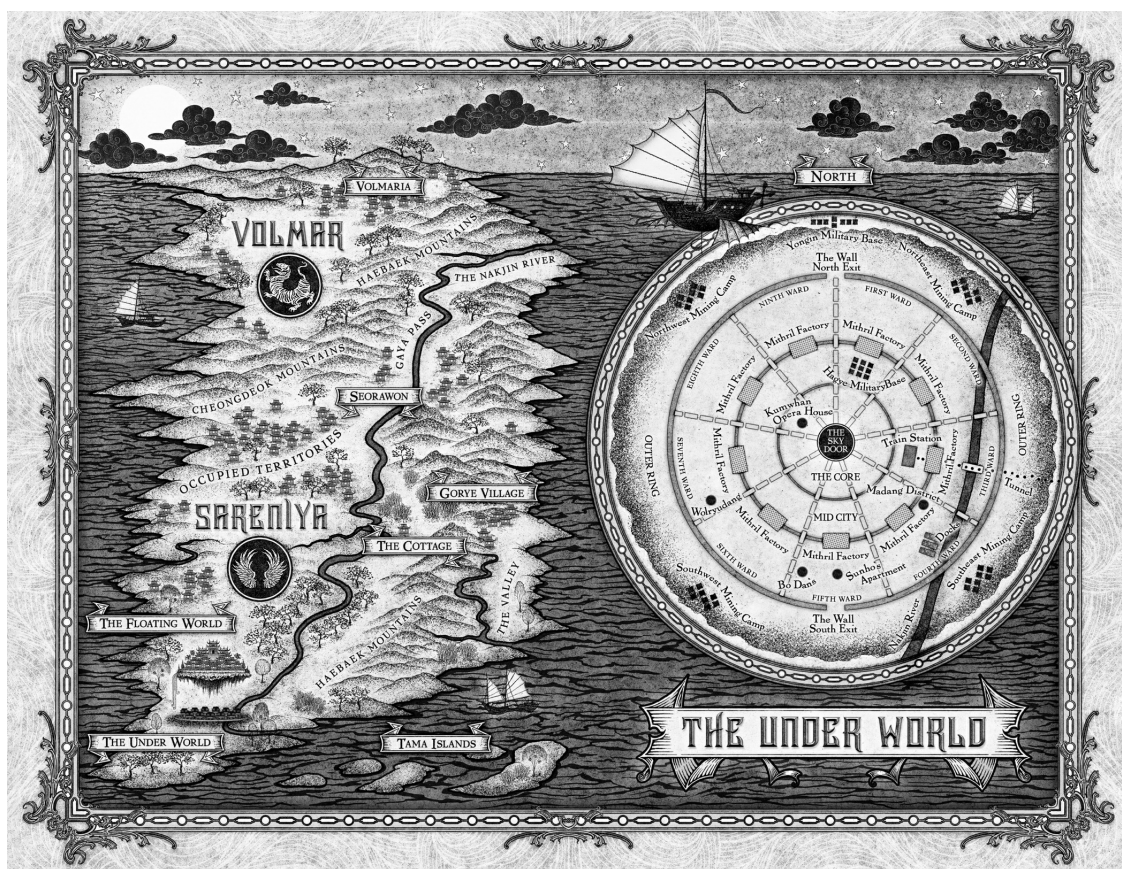
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For my dad, who has always given me wings



ACT ONE

A WORLD IN DARKNESS

CHAPTER 1

REN

East of the Haebaek Mountains

THE DRUM BEAT faster and faster as Ren tumbled into the center of the circle, cartwheeled into a handstand, and walked with her feet lifted toward the sky. Sensing her mask slipping from her chin, she quickly slid it back into place, careful to maintain the illusion that she wasn't a girl but a pink-faced demon.

Gales of laughter erupted from across the circle, where Little Uncle was sashaying his hips for the crowd, his chest bare beneath his short jacket. Like Ren, he wore a mask, though his was painted white with blue dots on the cheeks. With a flick of his wrist, he flipped open his paper fan, fluttering it coyly. A few older women yelled out bawdy comments while some of the young men blushed and jostled among themselves for a better view.

Ren began to make her way toward Little Uncle, hopping on one hand, then the other, swaying her legs to keep her balance.

The crowd was smaller than it had been the year before, but they made up for it in enthusiasm. Some of the villagers had rolled barrels to the edge of the circle and were smacking their palms against the sides, adding texture to the rhythm set by Big Uncle's drumming.

Her troupe had been performing for the past half hour; Ren would have kept on for longer, but the caravan had to depart at noon if they wanted to make it to Gorye Village by week's end. Big Uncle beat both sides of his hourglass drum in quick succession, a signal to hurry up and conclude the performance.

Ren sprang back to her feet, her gaze sweeping the crowd. She caught sight of a young girl, perhaps seven or eight, sitting cross-legged in front of a group of older boys. The girl paid them no mind though they bumped her from behind, staring at Ren with awestruck eyes.

Ren's heart stirred with recognition—she'd been the same way at that

age. When Auntie performed, she didn't want to blink, for fear of missing a single flick of her wrist or tilt of her head. With just her body, Auntie conveyed entire worlds and characters. She was a deer, racing swiftly through a moonlit forest. She was a sailor lost at sea, pulled beneath the waves. Ren would laugh when Auntie was a wily fox, outmaneuvered, running with her tail between her legs, and she would weep when Auntie was a widow on a mountain, crying out for a lover that would never return.

Through Auntie's storytelling, she lived a thousand lives, fought demons, and outwitted gods.

The girl looked at Ren as if she was capable of the same wonders.

Ren and Little Uncle were supposed to be pantomiming a story about a demon who tries to trick a nobleman, only to be thwarted, but they had lost the threads of the plot some time ago. They would need to regain it if they wanted to end the performance, but not before one final trick.

Running across the circle, Ren leaped onto the closest barrel. She turned to Big Uncle, but he was already waiting to see what she'd do next. He thwacked the left side of his drum twice with his mallet, letting out a staccato, thudding sound, then the right side once with his open palm.

A leap and turn in the air would be enough to impress the crowd, and yet ...

Ren closed her eyes. She could feel it—the Light that always lived there, like a perpetual flame that grew and diminished with the racing of her heart. She drew on it now, but only a spark, the heat of it spreading outward from her core, up her arms, before releasing from her fingertips.

It was a windless day, but the Light stirred the air. A strong breeze swirled beneath her, sweeping up the barrel and billowing her pants. She leaped backward, letting it lift her into the sky. She had a moment of panic—she was high, *too high*—but then she twisted her body in midair, somersaulting before landing on the packed earth.

A beat of silence passed, then the crowd burst into raucous applause.

Little Uncle rushed to her side. "You've really done it now," he said, but she could hear the grin in his voice.

"Do you think Auntie was watching?" Ren asked. The adrenaline had worn off, and now she felt anxious. Auntie warned her not to use her magic, and never in front of strangers. Ren could argue that she'd done it to invigorate the crowd—a happy audience was a generous one—but she knew

deep down that wasn't the truth.

"Let's hope not," Little Uncle said cheerfully. "Here we go!"

He grabbed the ribbon at her waist. Just like they practiced, he pulled while she spun out in the opposite direction. The ribbon unraveled between them, red from the safflowers Big Uncle had used for dye. She fell backward onto the ground, then lay still, limbs splayed.

Like when a rock is removed from a stream, the villagers poured over her, thrusting gifts of foodstuffs and coins into her arms. She jumped to her feet to accept them, laughing with the children tugging at her pants only to look disappointed when wind didn't leap from the seams. It was another few minutes before she was able to disentangle herself and go in search of Little Uncle.

She found him sitting on a wooden platform at the edge of the village, tallying the earnings from their performance. A pine tree bowed over him, as if peeking over his shoulder.

He'd removed his mask, revealing his handsome, flushed face. Though she called him "Little Uncle," as he was Auntie's younger brother—to differentiate him from "Big Uncle," who was her husband—he was only eighteen to Ren's seventeen years. *Almost* seventeen years. His hair stuck up in messy tufts, resembling a sprout. Ren resisted the urge to smooth them down, to fuss over him like Auntie would.

She sat beside him, slipping off her sandals and pulling her legs up onto the wooden platform. She added the items she carried to the pile—a covered basket of soybeans, a small pot of soy sauce, and a block of fermented bean paste. This village was known for its soybean production. She emptied her pockets of coins, tossing them onto the platform where they clinked and spun before settling.

Shoulder to shoulder, Ren and Little Uncle leaned over the assortment of goods and handfuls of coins. The offerings were meager, totaling less than a quarter of what they'd accrued in previous years. It had been the same in the other villages, though it was still a shock to see; Ren had hoped for more after the liveliness of the crowd.

"Well," Little Uncle said, following a lengthy pause, "I am quite fond of beans."

"There was a blight this past harvest," said a grave voice behind them, and Ren and Little Uncle both jumped.

Auntie had come soundlessly down the short path from the village—an impressive feat, as she had twisted her ankle two days before and was using a walking stick to move about. Strands of her dark brown hair fluttered about her severe face. Her gaze didn't linger but moved past them toward the empty fields. "Something is ill with the earth."

Ren shivered at Auntie's words. The people of the caravan had noticed the changes as they'd traveled first east, then north from the small villages that dotted the river valleys to the larger seaside towns scattered along the coast. It had gotten worse the farther they'd headed inland, west toward the mountains. Their hunters described too-quiet forests, where an arrow shot into a thicket wouldn't release a single bird, with lakes so still they appeared like glass, and withered glades where once wildflowers flourished.

The people who lived in the villages closer to the mountains were superstitious—a difficult harvest was blamed on disgruntled spirits, a child's sickness on the work of demons. Gorye Village, the last village on their trail, was the remotest of all, nestled at the foot of the largest mountain.

If it were up to Ren, they'd forgo their visit entirely. The people there were dour and ill-humored. But Auntie and the caravan leaders insisted they return every year. The Gorye villagers depended upon their trade, and there were rare plants that only grew deep within the mountains that the elders of the valley needed for their medicines.

Guarding the mountain is a difficult and thankless task, Auntie would say when Ren complained, as she often did. *We are honored to ease their burden.*

Guarding from what? Boredom? Ren would grumble.

It would take the caravan five days to reach the village, the Haebaek Mountains looming ever closer until they awoke one morning to find the daylight gone and the forest entirely engulfed in shadow.

"You disobeyed me," Auntie admonished, and Ren flinched.

Little Uncle looked up from where he'd been counting their coins for the third time.

"I asked you not to draw attention to yourself," Auntie continued. "I didn't think that such an unreasonable request."

"It was just a little bit of wind," Little Uncle argued, always quick to defend Ren.

"A wind at dusk is a storm at night. What if there are rumors?"

Ren dropped her head. "I'm sorry," she said. "It won't happen again, I

promise.”

Auntie’s gaze fixed upon her. “No, it won’t,” she said quietly. “In Gorye Village, you won’t act in the play. You’ll accompany Big Uncle on the flute.”

Ren gaped at her. “But that’s our last performance this year!”

When they returned to the valley, they’d have to prepare for the harsh winter months. No more performances—at least not like the ones on the caravan trails, with big crowds full of new faces. It didn’t matter that the people of Gorye were gloomy and humorless. She’d been looking forward to performing at least once more.

“It was one mistake,” Ren said, and she didn’t care that her voice had risen in pitch. “I don’t see why I must be punished for something so small!”

“But *was* it a mistake?” Auntie asked. Unlike Ren, she hadn’t raised her voice—she never did, except for when a performance called for it. Ren felt her words like a blade, cutting to the truth. She *had* called upon the Light, even though she knew Auntie had forbidden it.

“Just a little bit of wind...,” Auntie repeated. “On a day like today, it might only be that—when the sun is out, and we’re surrounded by friends. But the darkness can come down upon us swifter than breath. It’s not a punishment, Ren. I’m trying to keep you safe. All of us.”

“What about your ankle?” Ren asked. If Ren didn’t perform, then Auntie would have to.

“It’ll have healed by the time we reach Gorye Village.” Auntie let out a sigh. “Where’s Big Uncle?”

“He must have gotten wrangled into helping out the villagers,” Little Uncle answered. Ren didn’t have to look at him to know that his brow was knotted with worry.

“One of you go and fetch him. We need to leave soon.”

Ren stood from her seated position. “I’ll get him,” she mumbled, hurrying in the direction of the village.

She was upset, but not just because she couldn’t perform or because she’d disappointed Auntie, which she always took care to avoid. It was that Auntie hadn’t even *tried* to understand why she’d done it.

Ren had regretted her actions immediately and had apologized—why couldn’t Auntie yield, just a little? With a sigh, Ren kicked a pebble that went skittering into the underbrush, then continued with heavy steps down the path.

This village was similar to the others the caravan had stopped at on their travels, filled with thatched-roof homes and tiny dirt courtyards. The sound of knocking drew Ren to a small corner house where Big Uncle was using a rock to pound a wooden support beam into place. He was so large that he only had to lift his arms to reach the underside of the roof.

An elderly couple waited patiently beside him. When Big Uncle was finished, the taller of the men bowed deeply to Big Uncle, while his husband handed over a small parcel wrapped in cloth.

“Please accept this humble gift as payment,” the smaller man said. “We wish we had something of value to offer.”

“This is more than enough,” Big Uncle said, accepting the parcel with both hands.

As he turned, he caught sight of Ren and beckoned her over. She watched him fold back the cloth to reveal two flattened pancakes filled with honey and cinnamon.

“Hmm,” Big Uncle began slowly. “We could share them with Auntie and Little Uncle...” He waggled his eyebrows. “Or...”

“We could eat them ourselves,” Ren finished with grin.

Big Uncle winked. He handed Ren the larger of the two pancakes, and together they walked toward where their caravan had camped east of the village.

“Auntie is angry with me,” Ren said, nibbling on her pancake. Even upset she could still appreciate the sweetness of the dessert, chewy on the inside and pan-fried crispy on the outside. She didn’t have to explain to Big Uncle what she’d done to earn Auntie’s disapproval. “Was I wrong?”

Big Uncle didn’t answer for some time, though he finished his pancake before her. They were within sight of the wagons when he stopped to pluck a petal from the top of her head. Releasing it, he let the petal fall into a swoop of wind that carried it swiftly toward the mountains. Ren watched it for as long as she could, until the petal was only a speck on the horizon.

“Sometimes there’s a feeling inside you that’s too big to contain,” Big Uncle said, and his low, warm voice rolled over her like a gentle wave. “You need to let it out. There’s no harm in that.”

Hot tears pricked the backs of her eyes. That was the truth that Auntie couldn’t seem to understand. She’d warned Ren not to use her magic, but Ren sometimes couldn’t help herself. The feeling was similar to when she

performed; in those moments, she felt truly free.

“I have something for you,” Big Uncle said, “but first...” He leaned back to gaze down at her. “Let me see that face I love.”

For a moment, Ren blinked, uncomprehending.

She had forgotten she was still wearing her mask.

That wasn’t so odd for her. She’d sometimes wear one of her masks for days, only taking it off to wash her face. It was a habit from when she was younger—wearing a mask made her feel safe. With it, no one could tell what she was thinking, what she was feeling.

When Auntie first brought her to the valley ten years ago, she’d given Ren a mask that she didn’t take off for a whole year. Little Uncle, who was eight at the time, had teased her, *How can we be certain you’re a little girl and not a demon?*

Auntie had let her be. As for Big Uncle ...

He’d been the same size as he was now, but she’d been so much smaller. For a month, she’d tremble when he’d enter the room. And so, he’d kept away. She’d only known of his presence from the gifts he would leave her—acorns wrapped in leaves, flowers with odd-shaped petals, stones smoothed from the river. She’d find them on her pillow or next to her sandals. He’d built her a boat moored to the shore so that she could lie on her back and watch the stars. And a player’s satchel of tools so that she could mimic Auntie with her flute and paper fan.

The first person she’d shown her face to was Big Uncle.

She’d stumbled upon him sitting quietly by the stream behind their home. At the sound of her approach, he’d glanced up. He quickly turned away, but not before she saw the tears in his eyes. She hadn’t understood the source of his sorrow—later, she would realize it was the loss of a child, his and Auntie’s—she only knew that in his sadness, she felt an echo of her own.

Taking off her mask, she’d placed it over his face, to hide his tears the way it hid hers. But the mask was meant for a child’s face and only covered a portion of his, mainly his eyes and nose. He’d looked so silly that Ren had started laughing, and then Big Uncle had laughed. Afterward, he’d gathered her in his arms, and she’d never felt safer.

“This face?” Ren said, lifting up her mask. She stuck out her tongue.

“Yes,” Big Uncle said, and the love in his voice was as clear as it had been that morning by the river. “That one exactly.”

He gestured to a rock nearby. "Wait here," he said, before moving off toward the wagons. She did as he asked, sitting down and stretching out her legs. A few minutes later, he returned with a long parcel wrapped in a bamboo mat, dropping it onto her lap.

"A gift," he said proudly, "for you."

Eagerly she unknotted the string and pushed back the folds of the mat to reveal a paper umbrella. She knew immediately that Big Uncle had made it; the craftsmanship was exquisite. Gripping the smooth handle, Ren pushed the runner up. The hood of the parasol opened like a flower. It was a beautiful red color, with gold swirling accents.

"Give it a twirl," he said. She got to her feet and did just that, the gold and red blurring in the air like shooting stars; even the *whooshing* sound it made was lovely.

"I know your birthday isn't for another week..." Big Uncle said, rubbing the back of his neck.

Still holding the umbrella, she threw her arms around him. "I love it! Thank you."

He placed her gently on the ground. "Now, let's get back to the others before they're tempted to leave us behind!"

As she walked with Big Uncle, she felt her earlier frustration ease from her shoulders. Auntie was right to be angry; she was only concerned for Ren's safety and that of the caravan.

Between the use of her magic and her family's well-being, there was never a choice. Ren would always choose her family. If she had to suppress her powers to protect them, then she would.

And just *maybe* Auntie, once she saw Ren's determination, would change her mind and let her perform, after all—there were five days until they reached their last stop, enough time for Ren to prove her resolve, that she could bury the Light where it belonged.

That thought, and the realization that in a few weeks' time she'd be back home in the valley, with its cool winter days and star-filled nights surrounded by the people she loved, lifted her spirits. Twirling her umbrella, she raced ahead of Big Uncle, eager to depart for Gorye Village.

CHAPTER 2

SUNHO

The Under World

Outside the Ninth Ward Mithril Factory

SUNHO STEPPED BACK from the gates as the factory horn blared a warning, smoke unfolding from the great stacks like wings in the night. He raised his scarf, the red threads faded and fraying, higher over his nose. His movement jostled the sword sheathed at his back. For fifteen seconds the horn clamored, the stacks spewing enough smoke to fill the sky above the factory. When it was over, he turned away, only for his eyes to catch on sparks of blue in the fumes—mithril particles.

A pigeon warbled nearby. He followed the sound around a corner to where a boy and a girl lingered in the shadow of the factory wall. The boy was slight of build, with silver-white hair. *Tag*. Sunho remembered his name from when they first met. He was seventeen, same as Sunho. The whistling trill cut off as Tag lowered his hands. The girl, Yurhee, was a few years older; her hair—brown with streaks of red—was pulled back from her face with a butterfly clip. She'd been leaning against the wall with her knee bent but rocked to a stand at Sunho's approach.

"We weren't sure if you'd make it," she said. "The patrols are out in droves."

"I saw a few on my way over," Sunho said, recalling the pounding of feet and the bobbing of the lanterns in the dark streets. He'd kept to the shadows to avoid their light.

He'd come directly from a job in the eighth ward, as hired muscle for a raid. If he'd been caught without the proper papers explaining his presence in Mid City, he'd have been thrown in prison. Two big jobs in one night was risky, but Yurhee's missive that morning had promised a large payout.

"Sunho, you're hurt." Yurhee reached out a hand to his neck, and he took

a step back on instinct. He must have been nicked in the raid.

Yurhee lifted a brow, then drew her hand away. “Sorry. Habit. I have a soft spot for closed-off, emotionally inaccessible boys.”

Behind her, Tag lifted his brow, frowning slightly.

Sunho had met the two of them a month ago, when they’d hired him for a job pilfering cargo from a petty gangster. They only stole from *greedy bastards who deserve it, the bastards*, as Yurhee put it. Neither of them was skilled in hand-to-hand combat, which was why they’d posted a job seeking a sword-for-hire.

“I’ll check on the explosives,” Tag mumbled. Crouching by the wall, he shifted aside strands of ivy to reveal two canister bombs rigged to detonate on a timer.

Unease settled in Sunho’s stomach. His jobs up until now had been low risk—stealing from a Sarenian mithril factory was on an entirely different scale. If they were caught, they’d face far worse than prison.

Yurhee reached into her jacket and pulled out a scroll, unfurling it with a flick of her wrist. Sketches of buildings in a wide area were scrawled with notes on guard rotations and estimated travel time between marked locations. “We need to get from here”—she pointed to their position outside the wall at the northeast corner—“to here.” Her finger jabbed a point in the largest building at the back of the factory grounds, marked with an X.

“What’s there?” Sunho asked.

She winked, rolling up the map and tucking it into her jacket. “You’ll find out soon enough.”

There was still time to back out, but then he wouldn’t get the payment Yurhee had promised. Sunho adjusted his strap so that his sword, sheathed inside a bag slung over his shoulder, fell more securely across his back. He lifted his gaze upward to where the top of the factory wall was barely visible through the thick haze of smoke.

“Heads up,” Yurhee called. He turned in time to catch the grappling gun she tossed him. “You do know how to use that, right?” Without waiting for a response, she jumped onto Tag’s back. He aimed and fired—the hook pierced the wall near the top. Then he triggered the line, and they zoomed up and over.

Sunho aimed the barrel to the left of Tag’s hook and pressed the trigger. It split the concrete, and he braced his grip as he was yanked upward, landing

atop the wall in a crouch just as the factory horn let out another booming sound, smoke billowing out of the flues.

He rappelled down the opposite side, joining Tag and Yurhee behind a stack of tall crates. Yurhee placed a finger to her lips. Through a crack between the crates, they saw two security guards making their rounds, their lanterns casting grotesque shapes on the walls of the buildings they passed.

They wore smoke-filtration masks, standard-issue shortswords at their waists. Their voices carried, and Sunho picked up pieces of their conversation—a noodle shop had opened in the eighth ward and they planned to grab a late-night meal after their shift.

The guards passed by the opening of an alley, the light from their lanterns illuminating the narrow gap, before disappearing from view around the corner.

“See that?” Yurhee said. “We’ll cut directly across. It’s the fastest route.”

They moved silently from behind the crates, sprinting across the open space and into the alley. Here the smoke was thicker, funneled as it was between buildings. In front of him, Yurhee unhooked a mask from her utility belt, strapping it over her face. On either side of them were the refineries, where the mithril ore was purified into bars, the leftover material discarded as scrap. The alley was littered with piles of the metal, and he was careful not to kick one loose where it might skitter and alert the guards.

Even though he’d only glimpsed the map, Sunho had memorized the layout of the factory, with the refineries—six total, built side by side in blocks of three—at the front of the compound and the warehouse at the back, nearest the gate that led into Mid City.

At the end of the alley, they waited for the guards to pass, their bright lanterns giving away their positions. No one spoke, conscious now of the danger on all sides—paired guards circling all three refinery blocks made for a lot of passing lanterns. They were at the end of the last alley, almost in the clear, when a door opened in a recessed part of the wall. A guard wearing a filtration mask stepped out.

Sighting Sunho, he lashed out at him with a concealed dagger. Sunho dodged the attack. Lunging forward, he gripped the guard by the mask and slammed his head against the wall. The guard slumped unconscious to the floor.

Tag slipped through the open door, returning a short few minutes later. He

shook his head. No one else was in the building.

“If we’re lucky, he won’t be missed for a while yet,” Yurhee said, removing her mask. “Shit.”

Sunho followed her gaze to the emblem affixed to the shoulder of the man’s uniform—feathered wings, outspread, like that of a dove.

“What’s a Sareniyan soldier doing here?”

As Sunho stared at the symbol, a burning sensation raced across his collarbone, crawling up his neck. He quickly raised his hand to his scarf, relief sinking in when he found it securely in place.

“Should we abort the mission?” Tag asked softly. “There might be more.”

“No,” Yurhee said, after a short beat. A trickle of sweat slipped down her cheek. “It’s too late now.”

Sunho stood watch while Yurhee and Tag dragged the man back inside the building. He rolled his shoulders and stretched his arms to ease some of the tension gathered there. An inkling of suspicion had rooted in his mind, after hearing the word Tag used to describe what they were doing.

Not a job, but a *mission*.

The thieves stepped back into the alley, closing the door behind them. According to Yurhee’s map, it was now a straight path through the turbine field. She hadn’t marked any guard rotations in the area, so they slowed to a jog, guided by the lights of the warehouse in the distance. The space was wide and open, broken up only by the great turbines. Their rotor blades whirred ceaselessly, generating energy to power the factory. Their use was twofold—the rotors also pushed back the smoke that drifted from the stacks, away from Mid City and toward the Outer Ring. Sunho thought of clouds. Blue clouds, laced with poison.

He thought grimly, *Whoever claimed there were no clouds in the Under World was mistaken.*

“I thought the military was banned from having direct dealings with the mithril factories,” Tag said, keeping pace beside them. The smaller boy’s breaths were labored beneath his mask, but he didn’t let up in speed.

“My informant told me that the minister who owns this factory is corrupt, though that’s not unusual,” Yurhee said with a harsh laugh. “He might be pocketing money from the Sareniyan military in exchange for access to their mithril stores.”

Ten years ago, after the deaths of Sareniya’s queen and heir, the Floating

Council, the governing body of both the Floating World and the Under World, had been thrown into chaos. It was during that time that General Iljin of the Sarenian army rose to power, greater than when he'd served beneath queen and council. For seven years, he strengthened Sarenia's military, primarily through the use of mithril to power the fleet, and expanded the empire's border through a series of brutal campaigns; first, among the smaller neighboring kingdoms, and then against the great empire of Volmar, to the north.

The nobles who sat on the council, however, grew wary of the general's amassed wealth and influence and, three years ago, issued a law banning the military's unchecked access to mithril. Except for a fixed amount to power military aircraft, the distribution of mithril would belong to the private sector, for the use of pleasure cruises and private aircraft, which pleased the nobles, their sole interest being to line their own pockets.

If the ninth ward minister, a noble with a seat on the council, was conducting trade with the military, then he was in breach of the law and guilty of treason. Sunho didn't know what would happen if the minister was discovered, whether he—or the general, as head of the military—would be punished. Even with the council, the general's authority had never been tested; to do so would risk inciting a coup.

"None of that matters," Yurhee said, with a hard shake of her head. "Whatever the Sarenians are up to, it doesn't change what we've come here for."

Sunho's gaze tracked back to Yurhee, noting the way her voice had risen. What *had* the thieves come here for? If it were for coins, the mansions in the inner circle would be easier marks than a mithril factory. It wasn't mithril itself, either. They weren't equipped to transport the metal, which was poisonous to the touch.

Before he could ask, they entered the vicinity of the warehouse. It was gigantic, two stories tall, as long as an inner-circle block. Unlike with the refineries, guards were stationed in pairs at its four corners. Sunho crouched with Yurhee and Tag outside the lantern light of the nearest pair.

"We need to get past the guards without alerting the others," Yurhee said.

Sunho's scabbard dug into the ground, and he pulled the strap to tighten it.

"How long has it been since the factory horn went off last?" Yurhee

asked.

“It should go off soon,” Tag said. “What are you thinking?”

“See how far apart they’re spaced?” Thirty steps separated the guards at each corner. “They can’t see one another in the darkness. Only the lanterns indicate their positions. If we’re quiet about it, we should be able to take out a pair without alerting the others.”

“The horn only lasts for fifteen seconds.” Tag shifted closer, his mask hanging around his neck. “It won’t be as loud from this distance.”

Yurhee spoke fast. “So we act quickly. We only get the one shot. Sunho, do you—”

The horn went off.

They sprinted from the darkness, keeping low to the ground. The guard standing closest spotted them and started to pull his sword from its scabbard. Reaching him the fastest, Sunho grabbed his hand, then jabbed the guard in the throat just as he started to shout. Moving behind him, Sunho hooked his forearm around the man’s neck, twisting his wrist until he dropped his sword.

Beside him, Yurhee and Tag tussled with their guard, Tag’s hand around her mouth. Sunho watched from the corner of his eye as the lantern the guard held swayed, then dropped.

Sunho grabbed it from the air.

Holding the lantern steady with one hand, he tightened his arm around his guard’s neck until the man stopped struggling altogether.

Yurhee held a soporific cloth to the mouth of the second guard until her eyes rolled back in her head. Both guards slumped to the floor. The horn ceased blaring.

In the ensuing silence, they waited for the sound of an alarm. When it didn’t come, Yurhee nodded at Sunho. He was still holding the lantern aloft. “Nice catch.”

She moved to the door, inserting a thick pin into the padlock that released with a *click*. “One of us will have to stay out here to hold the lantern. Make it look like nothing’s amiss.”

“There might be more guards,” Tag said, taking the lantern from Sunho. “You two go ahead. I’ll stay.” He pressed his back to the door, holding it open for them. “Be careful.”

Yurhee stepped over the threshold.

“Wait,” Sunho said, and she turned back to look at him, the firelight

dancing in her eyes.

“What are we stealing, Yurhee?”

“Does it matter?” Tag asked. His tone was even, without judgment. If anything, he sounded curious. “You’ll get paid either way.”

Tag was right; it didn’t matter. He’d do the job regardless, for the money.

“I want to know,” Sunho said.

Yurhee stepped back over the threshold. She tilted her head to the side; her butterfly clip sparkled as it caught the light. “That’s the first time you’ve said my name, you know that?”

Sunho blinked. Was it? He was naturally reserved, and it was difficult for him to connect with others. He rarely took jobs with the same crew twice. Yurhee and Tag were one of the few.

“When we parted ways after that first job, I’d said to Tag, he’s just like us. A kid from the Outer Ring, trying to survive.”

Like them. Sunho felt an odd sensation at the back of his throat; it felt uncomfortable, almost painful.

“Screw survival. I want to *live*.” She grinned a reckless grin, one that Tag matched, though his was softer. “In a free world. Beneath a sky that isn’t filled with poison clouds but *real* ones.”

She sounded like she had before, when her voice had risen, passionate, a yearning that felt both foreign and *familiar*.

Because there was something Sunho wanted, too. Something that he yearned for desperately.

“We’re stealing a map of the mithril mines,” Yurhee said. “That’s what we’re after. And with it, we’re going to blow up their world.”

CHAPTER 3

SUNHO

The Under World

Ninth Ward Mithril Factory Warehouse

SUNHO'S EYES SWEEPED the warehouse floor as the door silently shut behind them, cutting off the light from Tag's lantern. Immediately he noticed the presence of large quantities of mithril; the air felt weighted, and there was a low humming vibration that raised the small hairs on the backs of his arms. Out of the darkness came a hazy blue glow emanating from hundreds of metal crates. Reading the labels on the nearest, he saw that most were headed to the Core, where merchants would resell the precious metal for profit. A few were marked for Yongin Military Base, the largest of Sareniya's military installations outside the Wall.

"Sunho," Yurhee called from halfway up a metal staircase. He joined her on the walkway at the top, where she was removing a grille from the wall. "This should take us to the foreman's office. Hurry, we're running out of time." Sunho had caught a glimpse of the countdown timer on the explosives, set for thirty minutes—at least half of that time had passed. But that wasn't the only factor putting pressure on them. There was the Sareniyan soldier they'd left unconscious who could wake up at any moment, and Tag was vulnerable.

Ducking his head, Sunho climbed into the vent, using his forearms and hips to shimmy his body through the narrow space.

"Left or right?" he asked as the chamber ended, splitting off in two directions.

"Left," Yurhee said. "It should be just below you."

His fingers slid between the grates of a covering, and he pried it open. Grabbing the edge, he dropped onto a table strewn with papers.

Yurhee landed beside him. "Damn it," she cursed. "It's pitch-black in

here. I can't see a thing."

"There's a switch," Sunho said, spotting it on the far wall. Jumping down from the table, he moved across the room to flip it. With a low buzz, a light bulb flickered on, casting a harsh yellow light over the cluttered table. Toward the back of the room was a large desk, beside which stood an eight-paneled folding screen and several filing cabinets.

Turning, he found Yurhee's gaze upon him, and realized his mistake.

The room had been in total darkness. It was the kind of darkness that was unique to the Under World as—apart from mithril—there was little to no natural light. Those who left the Under World only to return remarked that it had no comparison in the outside world. It was a darkness that felt like death. Sunho shouldn't have been able to see *anything*.

His mind raced with an explanation, something Yurhee could accept.

This was why he didn't work with the same crew twice. The longer he worked with others, the greater the chance they'd learn about his deepest-buried secret.

Yurhee turned away first. Sliding off the table, she went to the desk, riffling through the papers before opening drawers in the filing cabinets.

Maybe he'd imagined her reaction. More likely she was ignoring what she saw, focusing on the more immediate problem.

He would have helped her search for the map, except he didn't know what it looked like, and there were dozens of maps among the order forms and missives. Sunho let his gaze wander to one that spanned the length of the wall, a detailed rendering of the Under World. The circular city was split equally into nine wards. The Outer Ring was composed entirely of slums and was separated from Mid City by the factory compounds. There were nine factories total, located at the widest ends of the wards. As the wards tapered inward, another circle was drawn around the area where the nine wards converged—the Core, where the wealthiest citizens resided.

"It must be behind here," Yurhee said, moving to the folding screen. As she shoved it aside, Sunho's ears registered a sharp *click*.

"Wait," he said, as her boot snagged a tripwire. A door that had been hidden behind the paneled screen swung open.

Sunho reached for his sword. Grabbing it by the hilt, he unsheathed the blade from its scabbard.

He was struck by the similar pressure he'd felt before, when he'd entered

the warehouse—the strong presence of mithril.

From the doorway stepped a wolf.

Sunho had never seen one before, but he knew they roamed the plains outside the city's Wall. Those wolves were skin and bones. This one was lean, with corded, rippling muscles. A thick, sticky substance dripped from between its bared teeth as it released a low, reverberant growl.

Yurhee stepped back, hitting the folding screen, which rattled behind her.

"Watch out!" Sunho shouted as the wolf lunged. Yurhee sprang aside, tumbling to the floor, and it crashed into the screen.

As it tore through wood and paper, Sunho helped Yurhee to stand. "Are you all right?" She'd cut herself when she fell, and the copper smell of her blood tinged the air.

"I'm fine. What is that?"

A slight tremor coursed through Sunho's left hand. "I don't know, but I'm going to kill it."

He led Yurhee to the other side of the desk to lean against the wall, then moved to take position at the center of the room. He shook out his hand, bringing it to join the other on the handle of his sword. The wolf followed his movements.

Letting out a raw, animalistic cry, it leaped toward Sunho. He lunged to meet it, sliding beneath the creature at the last second and sweeping his sword beneath its body, slashing it from throat to navel.

With a grotesque groan, the wolf collapsed to the floor. Sunho approached where it lay dead in a pool of its own blood, the viscous liquid spreading like ink across the floor.

He stood riveted to the spot, staring at the blood that should have been red but was a deep, crystalline blue. His head felt foggy, as if he were underwater. His ears wouldn't stop ringing.

"Sunho, *Sunho*." He snapped out of his daze. Yurhee stood beside him. She must have been calling his name for some time. Her voice was high-pitched, urgent. "We have to go." She raced to the hidden room, reappearing seconds later with a folded paper. *The map*. Before she stuffed it into her belt, he caught sight of a symbol inked onto the surface—a black wing, folded in half. "Come on, hurry!"

They ran back the way they'd come, Yurhee stepping on Sunho's shoulder to climb into the vent. He leaped from the table to grab the edge,

pulling himself up after her. Tag was waiting for them around the corner of the warehouse, crouched in the shadows.

They escaped over the wall just as the canister bombs detonated—the explosion lighting up the sky.



THEY FLED TO the backyard of a teashop, several blocks from the factory.

“We scoped this place out last week,” Yurhee said, after catching her breath. “It’s abandoned. We should be safe here for now.”

A light sparked as Tag lit a lantern with a match, then latched it to a hook on the wall. As he turned, his eyes widened, catching sight of the cut on Yurhee’s arm. “You’re hurt,” he said, bending to take a closer look. “I told you to be careful.”

“You worry too much,” Yurhee chided.

Sunho left them alone to tend to Yurhee’s wound.

The backyard of the teashop was littered with the remnants of what appeared to have once been large clay pots, now in pieces scattered across the dirt. Like most courtyards, the roof wasn’t enclosed, and dust swirled around him as he walked toward the closest wall, leaning back against the cold surface and closing his eyes.

He didn’t have to wait long before he heard Yurhee and Tag’s approach, the clay shards breaking beneath their boots.

“Your payment, as promised.” Yurhee held out a double strand of coins. He glanced at her arm, where Tag had wrapped a thick bandage. Taking the coins, he dropped them into the inner pocket of his coat.

Yurhee tilted her head to the side, studying him. “Most wouldn’t have finished the job, once they learned what it was we were searching for. Whoever that map belonged to might send someone after us.”

Sunho thought of the symbol on the map—the black wing. He’d never seen it before.

“It doesn’t matter.” It didn’t matter if the map belonged to the foreman, the minister who owned the factory, or General Iljin himself. None of them had anything to do with him. “I need the money.”

“What for?”

“I’m searching for my brother,” he said.

Normally he wouldn't have told the truth, but it was late, and he was tired. It didn't matter, anyway. He would never see Yurhee and Tag again.

They already knew too much about him. Yurhee probably suspected he was different than other swords-for-hire. He could still feel the question in her gaze, when he'd seen the light switch in the dark.

Earlier, Yurhee had said he was *just like them*. For a moment, he'd almost let himself believe it.

"We were indentured as children to the Sarenian army," Sunho explained. "If he's still alive, that's where I'll find him."

At least, he believed that's where Junho was. He couldn't remember where he'd last seen his brother.

"So you need the money to free him," Yurhee said. "I can admire such a goal. I'd do the same for Tag."

Behind her, Tag's features softened, and his mouth quirked in a half smile.

"Well, I guess this is goodbye," Yurhee sighed. "I'll make it quick. Tag is sentimental, you see."

Tag's smile fell, clearly in disagreement.

"If you ever find yourself in trouble and need help..." Yurhee placed a gloved hand on her waist. "You can find us at Wolryudang. It's a teahouse at the edge of the seventh ward. Ask for the most beautiful girl in the Under World—you'll be sure to find me."

With a nod from Tag and a two-fingered salute from Yurhee, they took off, slipping through the back gate and disappearing from view.

Sunho could have left then, but instead he turned from the gate, heading deeper into the courtyard. His apartment was in the fifth ward of the Outer Ring, on the opposite side of the city. It would take him the rest of the night to get back, and that was if he didn't run into a patrol. They were out in greater numbers as more Sarenians flooded the city ahead of the Festival of Light.

As he wandered the abandoned courtyard, he was reminded of another.

Two years ago, he'd woken up beside the old mithril factory in the first ward, which had shut down years prior, without any memories—of who he was, of what had happened to him.

Except for one.

Though, even that memory was hazy, shrouded in pain and confusion.

From it, he knew his name, he knew that he had an older brother named Junho, and that they had been soldiers in the Sarenian army together.

There were other clues to his past. He moved his hand to the scarf that draped thickly around his neck, which helped to hide the tattoo that clawed up his chest, ending beneath his collarbone. It was because of this mark that he knew he'd served in the Sarenian army—all soldiers were branded with the marks of their units.

Then there was the Demon.

It was the first thing he'd noticed when he'd woken up. He knew the powers that set him apart from others—his ability to see in the dark, his incredible strength and endurance, his speed and accelerated healing—were because of it. He called it the Demon, though it didn't have a voice. It was a part of him, woven into his soul. And yet he knew instinctively that if he let it out, it would crush him, his consciousness, the parts of him that were human. And so, he buried it deep inside him, only drawing upon its power out of necessity.

His brother was the key. In his memory, Junho had known what he was. Sunho needed to find his brother—only Junho could release him from this darkness.

A soft whistle of wind caught his attention, and he lifted his face. High above, in the vast darkness, blue light glimmered.

It came from the veins of mithril in the mines on the underside of the Floating World. For an ordinary Under Worlder, the darkness was absolute, impenetrable. But for Sunho, whose eyes hadn't been ordinary for a long time, he could see it all. The gigantic scaffold Towers that reached up to the bottom of the mines. The small aircraft that dotted the sky, like pinpoints of light. Mithril was what buoyed and held up the Floating World, the bountiful country that floated above his own.

Unlike Yurhee and Tag, he had no desire to go there. He had no place in the sky. He was right where he belonged.

Even hours later, as sunlight filtered weakly over the Wall from afar, rendering the world in a hazy glow, Sunho remained standing in the abandoned courtyard, looking up at the mithril shining brightly in the distance like stars.

CHAPTER 4

REN

Haebaek Mountains

Gorye Village

REN LAY ATOP her family's cart, gazing up at the sky. This deep in the mountains, the forest was dense with little sunlight, but she'd managed to spot a break in the canopy where it peeked through, shimmering brightly. If she squinted, she could make out the shape of a cloud high overhead.

The caravan had arrived earlier that morning, and those with goods to trade had already started setting up their stalls in the village. Her family wouldn't perform until the evening, but Big Uncle always helped with unloading the carts. Before he could volunteer them, Little Uncle and Ren had claimed, loudly, that they needed to rehearse.

Now, her flute lay abandoned beside her, and she was sprawled on her back. She'd been there for the better part of an hour. In Ren's opinion, there was nothing greater than lazing about, ignoring chores, and today the weather was warm, a rare occurrence this late in the fall.

A shadow swept over the cart, plunging the forest into darkness.

"Again?" Little Uncle shouted.

Sitting up, Ren peered over the side of the cart to where he perched on the wooden steps. He was bent over the haft of the dagger he was crafting, painstakingly carving a character into the wood.

"You're not finished with that yet?" Ren drawled, in the voice she knew annoyed him the most.

"I would if those accursed clouds would stop blocking my light!"

A soft bleat interrupted his tirade.

"It's all right," Hwi soothed in a gentle voice from where she sat on the ground with the last of the caravan's ewes. They rested their heads in her lap, gazing lovingly up at her through long, thick eyelashes. "The sun will b-be

back soon.”

Hwi, the daughter of the caravan’s herdsman, was Ren and Little Uncle’s best friend—their only friend, really, as there were few young people in the caravan over the age of sixteen. She’d been melancholy as of late, knowing that when the caravan reached Gorye Village, she’d have to part with the remainder of her sheep. They’d begun their journey at the start of summer with a whole flock, which her father had bartered away, one by one.

Hwi’s father claimed his daughter was weak and cared too much. It made Ren despise him. There were *other* reasons to dislike Hwi’s father—his distrust of *her*, for one—but his inability to see Hwi’s kindness and empathy as strengths was, in Ren’s opinion, his greatest offense.

“I hope they’ll b-be okay here,” Hwi said, shivering as her gaze swept the surrounding forest. “It’s very dark.”

“They’ll be fine,” Ren said confidently. “And you’ll see them next year, when we return.”

Little Uncle cackled. “Unless the villagers eat them!”

Ren took off her sandal and dropped it onto his head.

He didn’t miss a beat, grabbing it off the ground where it’d tumbled and throwing it into the nearest bushes.

“Hey!” Ren climbed down from the cart, hopping on one foot to retrieve her sandal.

When she returned, Hwi was laughing, and Ren and Little Uncle exchanged a knowing glance, glad to have made their friend smile.

“You’re very good at that,” Hwi said, nodding at Little Uncle’s handiwork.

He sat up straighter. “Some of us are born naturally gifted. It’s unfair, really.”

Hwi giggled. “I always thought it was funny that even though Auntie is your sister, you’re m-more like Big Uncle.”

Ren couldn’t agree more, thinking of her birthday gift. The umbrella was wrapped in a blanket, tucked away with her other belongings.

Ren sidled up to Hwi. “Who am *I* like?” she asked, batting her eyelashes innocently.

Hwi’s eyes widened. “Like Auntie, of course.”

Ren grinned, pleased with the answer.

“You only asked her that because you knew what she would say,” Little

Uncle complained loudly.

Before Ren could come back with a retort, he tossed her the haft of the dagger he'd been working on.

"I finished it," he said as she caught it. "Take a look."

Ren hefted the sturdy hilt, which, when attached to the blade, would form a rather elegant dagger. It was light, shaped and filed for a smooth, even grip. She'd teased him, but she felt a swell of pride in her heart. For the past month and a half, as the caravan had moved from village to village, Little Uncle had worked on the dagger, first honing the blade, then whittling the haft from a piece of oak. After performances, he'd hole up alone, still wearing his costume, with a lantern precariously balanced on one knee and Auntie bemoaning that he'd burn their small cart to the ground if he wasn't careful.

Little Uncle had carved a single character in the wood. She brushed her thumb over the precise strokes, reading it aloud, "Protection."

"I need to tie the blade to the haft," Little Uncle said. "Do you think Mokjae has his tools with him?" He didn't wait for an answer, grabbing the hilt from her hand and springing to his feet in search of the old wood-carver.

"I should go, too," Hwi said with a sigh. The ewes bleated in protest as she stood. "I'm looking forward to your p-performance tonight."

Ren wrinkled her nose. "I'm just on the flute."

"And you'll p-play it wonderfully!"

After Hwi took her leave, Ren retrieved her flute from the roof of the cart, then ducked through the short doorway. On most nights, her family slept beneath the stars with the rest of the caravan members, but with the weather having gotten colder, they'd been sheltering inside—Auntie and Big Uncle by the entrance, and Little Uncle and Ren in the rear by the drums and chest of costumes. On a low shelf, a candle sputtered in a lantern.

Sitting on the floor in the middle of the cart, she lifted her flute, lining up the blowhole beneath her mouth. She blew, only to wince at the weak, airy sound.

She really should have been practicing earlier that morning, or better yet, the last five days. But she'd held out hope that Auntie would change her mind.

She hadn't called on the Light since Auntie had bidden her not to. Not that the request had been difficult, as her magic was tied to her emotions, and it wasn't exactly thrilling on the trail. But even when she felt the faintest

flicker of its presence within her, she'd been careful to stifle it completely.

But Auntie had given no acknowledgment that she'd noticed Ren's efforts. Ren had apologized and swore to never do it again. Why couldn't Auntie trust her?

She understood Auntie's fears. She'd shared the same ones for most of her life. But if those whom she'd escaped from ten years ago hadn't come for her by now, then it was—as Little Uncle and Big Uncle guessed—because they believed she was dead. No one was looking for her, not anymore. She was safe.

Grabbing the flute, she twirled it in one hand. Then tossing it to the other, she spun it around her back. Her heart started to beat faster, as it did whenever she was performing a trick.

She pitched the flute into the air where it hit the ceiling, then dropped to the floor, rolling beneath the chest of costumes.

She sighed. That was what she deserved for throwing her flute around. If it was broken, Auntie would have every right to forbid her from performing in the next several shows.

She moved about on her knees. It was darkest at the back of the cart, and so she picked up the lantern, placing it on the floor near the chest. It was in disarray—likely Little Uncle's doing—with clothing spilling out from the open lid. Clicking her tongue, she started to tidy up, folding the jackets and skirts and placing them inside.

As she reached for a jacket to fold, her fingers touched something hard. Pushing aside the cloth, she saw that beneath it lay a chest, smaller and flatter than the one that held their costumes.

She'd seen it before, though never without its fish-shaped lock, which now lay in pieces at the bottom of the chest. Ren might have suspected a thief, but the key—which Auntie kept on a ring strung to her belt—lay beside it.

She glanced briefly over her shoulder before lifting the lid of the chest.

Inside was a single garment. A robe.

She felt a tingling sensation in her hands. Could it be for her? A gift for her birthday? Auntie had never given her an item of clothing that wasn't practical. But perhaps she'd been saving it for when Ren turned seventeen.

Eagerly, she reached in and pulled out the garment.

Fabric spilled like a river over her arms. It was crimson in color, a red so

deep it was like fire.

As she held the robe, her breaths turned shallow, but it wasn't wonder she felt.

Dread curdled in her stomach.

Her body started to tremble violently. She tried to tear her gaze away, but the bright color spread over her vision, like ink dropped in water, until it was all she could see. Then suddenly it shattered, and she was seized by a flurry of fragmented images.

A feather, white as snow, drifting in the air. A boy who gazed at Ren with dark, haunted eyes. And a woman standing at the edge of a cliff, the crimson robe trailing behind her.

Out of a swirling darkness emerged a shadow. It had the body of a man but the face of a demon. It reached a clawed hand toward the woman. Ren screamed; her voice was snatched by the wind. Her mother turned as the ground gave out beneath Ren, and then she was falling, falling—

Ren sat back abruptly, dropping the robe to the floor. Her movement tipped over the lantern, the flame catching on the sleeve of a jacket.

She reached for her magic, sending a rush of air toward a half-filled jug of water, knocking the contents onto the fire and dousing it.

In the aftermath, she shook. Before she could process what had happened, she heard the steps of the cart creak. Quickly, she grabbed the robe, stuffing it back into the chest.

"Ren?" Little Uncle popped his head inside. "Are you all right? What happened? I smell smoke."

"I tipped over the lantern," she said, relieved when her voice came out steady. It had been years since she'd had a nightmare of her past, and she didn't want to explain to him why she'd had one now while she was wide awake.

He grinned. "Don't let Auntie know about that."

She nodded, feeling lightheaded. She wouldn't tell Auntie about *any* of what just happened.

"I was going to practice for tonight's performance," Little Uncle said. "For *real* this time. You want to join me?"

She nodded, reaching for her flute, which had rolled out from beneath the chest of costumes.

"Let's head down to the brook. Race you? Whoever loses has to buy the

winner rice cakes!”

“Wait—” But he was already gone.

The trembling had left her body. Whether he meant to or not, Little Uncle had banished her fears with a smile, as he had countless times before.

She burst from the cart in pursuit, leaving the robe, and the past, behind her.



THAT EVENING, REN and Little Uncle hurriedly made their way toward the center of the village, Little Uncle heartily devouring a rice cake. Ren could admit she was wrong for calling the villagers of Gorye dour. Lanterns hung from the corners of every house, and the air was redolent with the scents of doughy cakes, both savory and sweet.

Outside the headman’s house, Big Uncle had set up a perimeter with colorful sticks. Children had already gathered, seated around the circle with their guardians and neighbors bickering and laughing around them.

She felt a slight ache in her chest that she wouldn’t perform, but she quickly squashed the feeling. She would *gladly* play the flute, as long as Auntie never discovered that she’d used her magic *again*.

“I forgot to ask,” Ren said, catching Little Uncle by the arm before he could head over to Auntie where she stood at the edge of the circle, talking to the village headman, a squat, stern-faced man with caterpillars for eyebrows. “Did you finish your dagger?”

Little Uncle’s eyes danced. “I did. I’ll show you after the performance.”

He winked at her, then raised his hand to slide his mask down over his face.

Hurriedly they each took up their positions, serious now that they were about to perform. Big Uncle nodded approvingly at Ren as she sat cross-legged beside him at the edge of the circle.

Tonight, their little troupe was performing a popular story among the villages, about a rabbit that outwits a hunter.

Big Uncle placed his hourglass drum in his lap, and with the rounded mallets started to beat out a slow and steady rhythm. The crowd gasped as Little Uncle, playing the part of a hunter, jumped into the open space, brandishing a bow and arrow. Then Auntie tumbled into the circle to cries of

delight, her mask that of a hare, with long ears and white whiskers. Catching sight of the hare, Little Uncle nocked an arrow. He released it and Auntie twirled out of the way, the arrow lodging in the dirt.

Heat radiated throughout Ren's chest. Nothing gave her more joy than watching her family perform, besides performing herself. And even if she wasn't *in* the circle, she was still a part of the show. Taking a deep breath, Ren lifted the flute and brought it to her lips.

An eerie scream pierced the night.

At first Ren thought it was the wind, coming down from the mountains, but it sounded shrill, almost ... human. Big Uncle ceased his drumming. The crowd parted, faces peering down the trail that led into the forest.

A man was running down the path.

It was difficult to see his features; a few of the lanterns had gone out. But as he drew closer, a chill swept through Ren's body. His gait was unnatural, as if he'd broken several limbs, and yet he was running, sprinting. Then she noticed his teeth, incisors too large for his gaping mouth, his fingers that were claws, and his eyes that were entirely black, without the whites to make them human.

He leaped toward the nearest villager, a young woman, who let out a piercing scream before Mokjae pushed her to the side.

The wood-carver fell beneath claws and teeth, his jugular ripped from his throat, blood spraying like rain across the dirt.

CHAPTER 5

REN

Haebaek Mountains

Gorye Village

“DEMON!” SOMEONE SHRIEKED. As if released from a spell, the villagers began to flee in all directions.

Ren stood immobile, fear pinning her to the ground. She didn’t understand what was happening. Demons weren’t *real*. They were monsters that only existed in folktales and myths.

The demon was hunched over Mokjae. Wet, slurping sounds filled the air. Horror spread through her chest as she realized it was *feeding* on him.

With a jerking motion, it lifted its head. Ren followed the direction of its gaze to Little Uncle, who’d fallen onto the ground. He’d been knocked over by the weight of two children who clung to him in desperate fright.

The demon lurched toward them. Ren’s heartbeat raced, nearly exploding. She had to do *something*, or they would die. But she couldn’t move. The fear was like a vise around her arms, her legs. The demon drew closer to Little Uncle, to the children.

She brought her hand to her mouth, biting deep. Pain ripped through her, and she could move.

Taking off her sandal, she pelted it at the demon. It rebounded off the back of its head. Screaming, the demon raced toward her.

Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Big Uncle leading the villagers behind the walls of the headman’s home. Auntie appeared beside Little Uncle, helping him to stand while the children bunched around her.

The demon lunged at Ren, swiping its claws. She leaped to the side, tumbling across the dirt. The demon let out a gurgling cry, then circled back.

She didn’t think, trusting her body to react, avoiding every swipe of the demon’s claws. It was like the tricks Little Uncle and Ren practiced, with him

shooting blunt arrows while she dodged them—except this was life or death, the demon breathing down her neck, its claws inches from ripping her to shreds.

The demon's claws caught her braid, jerking her head back. Its weight bore down on her, knocking the air out of her chest.

She quickly grabbed her flute from where it was tucked into her belt and pressed it horizontally against the monster's neck. Hot, rancid breath stole over her as the demon gnashed its teeth, a hairsbreadth from her face.

Her arms shook from holding it back; gore dripped onto her cheek. She wouldn't last for much longer. Already she was weakening.

Suddenly the demon's weight disappeared.

Big Uncle had tackled it from the side, holding the monster down with his body.

"Big Uncle!" she cried out.

"Get away from here!" he shouted.

She shook her head, stumbling forward on the ground even as the demon slashed at Big Uncle, its claws leaving bloody trails across his arms.

"Go, Ren," he bellowed. "Now!"

Little Uncle rushed to her side, grabbing her arm; Auntie must have taken the children because he was alone. He pulled her to her feet. They couldn't go to the headman's house—the demon blocked their way, and so they ran blindly through the streets until they stumbled outside the village. The forest lay before them, wreathed in shadows. A great wind swept down from the mountain and the trees rattled, swelling like waves in a fierce sea. A keening howl ripped through the air behind them.

They plunged into the trees.

Branches appeared from nowhere, swinging down to block their path. Tears slipped down her cheeks and she brushed them away with the back of her arm. All her usual sure-footedness was lost, and she stumbled over roots and rocks.

They were moving at an incline. A tight pressure built in her lungs. Beside her, Little Uncle's breaths grew labored.

"Big Uncle," she sobbed.

"Don't look back," Little Uncle begged, his throat hoarse from crying. "We have to keep going."

The trees broke apart, and they stumbled onto a hard surface, Little Uncle

crying out as his ankle twisted beneath him. They were atop a rock face with large boulders as white as the moon. Ahead of them came a loud, rushing sound. As they stumbled across the flat, open surface, Ren realized what the source of the sound was. The boulders ended at a ravine where far below rushed a great river.

As she peered over the edge, she was gripped by vertigo. *A woman standing at the edge of a cliff, the crimson robe trailing behind her.* Ren's chest tightened; her breaths came in gasps.

"We have to jump!" Little Uncle was shouting, but she could barely hear him beyond the roar in her ears. *Then she was falling, falling—*

She trembled all over. "I—I can't!"

A branch snapped behind them. At the edge of the forest stood the demon. It rose to its full height, disjointed limbs lengthening until it was a head taller than any person she'd ever encountered. Its long arms stretched the entirety of its body, ending in claws that dripped with blood.

"Ren," Little Uncle pleaded. "We have to jump. If we don't, we'll die." He gripped her arm. "Please."

"I..." She took a step toward the edge, but then her legs gave out. This fear was different than when she'd faced the demon; it felt bone-deep, engraved upon her soul.

"I can't!" she cried. Why was she so weak?

A shadow fell over her and she looked up to find Little Uncle had stepped away from her, his legs shaking. He held his dagger. His trembling hand circled around the character he'd carefully carved upon the hilt: *protection*.

Howling, the demon raced across the rocks. With a mighty shout, Little Uncle sprang forward to meet it.

Ren screamed as the demon slashed its claws across Little Uncle's chest.

He fell to the ground, and when he didn't get back up again, her heart shattered.

No, no, no. Why was this happening? Only minutes ago, the children were laughing beneath the lanterns. She saw Big Uncle's gentle smile as he handed her the paper umbrella. Little Uncle as he winked, slipping his mask over his face. And Auntie, her hand held out to Ren. *Come with me,* she'd said, *I'll keep you safe.*

Ren had taken her hand. For ten years, Auntie had kept her promise. Ren would have stayed with Auntie, Big Uncle, and Little Uncle, happy and safe,

forever.

Ren rose to her feet, her fury a living thing. She *felt* it radiating from her core. This demon had hurt the people she loved, *her family*.

She reached for the power within her. As she touched the Light, it roared, answering her call. This time, when she released the Light, she didn't hold back.

A bright silver radiance enveloped her, the heat almost unbearable until it spread outward, bathing Little Uncle, the demon, the rocks, and the forest.

The last thing she knew before she fell unconscious was the demon's scream and a white-hot heat that burned inside her like a star.

CHAPTER 6

SUNHO

The Under World

Fifth Ward, the Outer Ring

“DID YOU HEAR the rumors? Three days ago, a light was spotted. In the east.”

Sunho stood in a crowd in the fifth ward of the Outer Ring. It hadn’t moved for several minutes—there was some sort of disturbance up ahead, outside the teahouse. Down the street, the bulbs in their lampposts flickered, then went out, plunging the world into darkness. A few seconds later, they flared back up again. Grumbles and muttered curses followed, complaining about the faulty electricity.

“It could be anything,” a man responded to the woman who’d spoken. “The empire’s army testing out new weapons, no doubt.”

“Whatever it was,” the woman said, her voice taking on a fervent quality, “they say it was beautiful. Even those at the Wall saw it—a bright, silver light.”

In front of Sunho, the crowd shifted, and he caught sight of what was causing the traffic. A carriage sat outside the front entrance of the teahouse, two destriers shifting the dirt beneath massive hooves. The double wings of Sareniya were emblazoned on the side of the vehicle. An envoy from the Floating World.

Sunho frowned. What was one of those doing in the Outer Ring? The Sareniyans who lived in the Under World rarely ventured into the poorest sections, keeping to the Core or Mid City.

While technically subject to Sareniyan laws, the Outer Ring wards operated as autonomous regions, with their own set of rules. Each ward had a governor, usually the biggest and baddest gang leader, who either had their own private army or enough coin to hire the most mercenaries. They levied taxes to fatten their own pockets and kept the ministers from enacting the

laws that were theirs by right, as the Outer Ring was part of the Under World.

Sunho was careful not to get involved with the gangs. For one, it would limit the jobs that were available to him, as the gangs were always in one feud or another. And he felt uneasy about a lot of their more unsavory practices.

Noticing the growing discontent, the two armed guards that flanked the Sarenian carriage drew their swords, causing outrage among those standing nearest. The commotion triggered a surge that rippled through the crowd. Sunho stepped back to avoid colliding with the woman standing in front of him. As he did, he felt a slight pressure against his side, where he kept his money belt.

Quickly, he snatched the pickpocket's wrist. The boy yelped and Sunho let go, looking down into a familiar, unapologetic face.

His young neighbor, a boy of about six or seven, shot him a peeved look, rubbing his wrist. Haru lived with his mother in the apartment below Sunho's. His story was a common one—after his father died from an accident in the mithril mines, his mother had turned to drink. Sunho didn't know what the boy did with the rest of his time, likely running with one of the many gangs of children who roamed the Outer Ring, pickpocketing crowds like this one.

"Just keeping you sharp," the boy said cheekily. "It's rough out here."

"You better not have been following me," Sunho said. Their apartment building was located in the centermost part of the fifth ward. It was a twenty-minute walk to the border to Bo Dan's, the teahouse where Sunho picked up his jobs.

Haru widened his eyes, blinking innocently. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Sunho began to shift his way toward the edge of the crowd. "Looks like a fight might break out. Could get dangerous."

"Maybe," Haru agreed cheerfully in his wake, "but you're really strong, aren't you? Isn't the safest place for someone like me next to someone like you?"

Sunho ignored the boy. Reaching the edge of the crowd, they emerged near the wall of the building next door to the teahouse. A few off-hour factory workers were smoking pipes beneath an overhang, blackening the low-hanging eaves.

“Why are *you* here?” Haru asked, coming up beside him.

Sunho held up the missive that had been delivered to his apartment earlier that morning. “Got a tip on a job.”

Haru kicked the ground with his worn sandal. “So you must be busy, then.”

Sunho was supposed to meet his broker, Bo Dan, in the next few minutes. “What’s up?”

“Nothing much. Stuff happened this week, thought I could tell you about it.”

Sunho leaned his back against the wall. “I’ve got time.”

“Everyone’s talking about that light, but I’m more interested in the other rumor. Apparently there’s a bear living in the sewer.”

Sunho closed his eyes as he listened to Haru’s chatter; he jumped from thought to thought, never lingering on a subject.

Suddenly Haru broke off in the middle of talking about Nochak, a boy who led the band of neighborhood children in the fifth ward. “Landlord was around again, picking a fight.”

Sunho opened his eyes to see that Haru’s head was downturned. Their landlord was a cruel man. He left Sunho alone, as he was never late on a payment, but gave Haru and his mother a hard time.

“I want to become strong,” Haru said, his small hand curling into a fist. “Like you. That way, Mom won’t ever cry again.”

“Not like me,” Sunho said automatically.

Haru glanced up at him, his eyes moving to Sunho’s neck, where his scarf was securely in place. Sunho reached into his pocket for a coin, balancing it on his thumb before flicking it toward Haru, who caught it.

Haru’s eyes widened as he opened his palm. “Really? I can have this?” he said excitedly. “I saw the almond vender on the way here. I’m going to get some and share them with my mom. Thanks, Sunho!”

As Haru turned, Sunho reached out and grabbed him by the back of his collar. “Wait, go that way,” he said, releasing him and pointing him down a different street, away from the crowd. It was getting rowdy, with people starting to take out their frustrations on each other.

He kept his eye on Haru until the younger boy turned the corner of the street, then he made his way to the back entrance of the teahouse. It faced a fetid alley, the ground wet with floodwater from the sewers.

He pushed aside the curtain of a back door and entered a small, dark hallway.

From somewhere within the building, he could hear distant shouts. A balding, middle-aged man popped out of the door to the right, carrying a tea tray.

“You’re late,” Bo Dan said. “Didn’t think you were coming.”

“I had something important to do.” Sunho didn’t elaborate.

He followed the broker through the kitchen into a narrow hall, passing by the main tearoom to a dark stairwell, the steps creaking beneath their weight. The cups and saucers rattled on the tray, somehow managing to keep upright.

The second floor was a long hallway with private rooms on either side. “You’re in luck,” said Bo Dan. “I called you here for a different job, but some big shots just arrived not a half hour ago. That rabble outside delayed them.” Sunho thought of the carriage, the white wings of Sareniya seeming to glow even in the darkness of the Under World. “They’re looking for swords-for-hire. Normally a nobody like you would never be considered for a job like this, but I think they’re desperate.”

Nobody. If Bo Dan meant to offend him, he’d misjudged Sunho. He’d rather be a nobody than someone with a reputation for killing. “How much for the tip?”

“I’ll give it to you at a discount. Fifty.”

That was cheap for Bo Dan, but Sunho had dealt with the broker enough times to know he never made a deal in which he didn’t somehow make a profit. Sunho unhooked a rope of coins from his belt and handed it over.

“You won’t regret it,” Bo Dan said eagerly, balancing the tray with one hand and pocketing the coins with the other. “These people are the real deal. One of them is a captain in the army.”

Bo Dan slid back the door. “Excuse my intrusion. I’ve brought some refreshments.” He shuffled inside, with Sunho following more slowly.

There were six people in the windowless room. Four were seated around a wooden table, facing the door Sunho and Bo Dan had walked through. The other two, a man and a woman, were to the right of the door, against the wall.

Bo Dan placed the tray with the tea set down onto the table, then turned, bowing low. “This is Sunho. The boy might not look like much, but he gets the job done.”

As far as recommendations went, it wasn’t terrible. The woman leaning

against the wall looked toward her companion. From where Sunho stood by the door, the captain was blocked mostly from view. All Sunho could see were his shoes—black leather, expensive. He must have given her a signal because the woman handed Bo Dan a string of coins. Bo Dan fled the room, backing away quickly while bowing.

After the door slid shut, the woman's gaze turned to Sunho. "Take a seat. We were just getting started."

Sunho approached the table, studying the individuals already seated. He recognized two from when they had been paired for jobs around the city. Mercenaries. They didn't acknowledge Sunho, so neither did he.

The third was an elderly woman who, from the white ribbon around her arm, was a bounty hunter, the fourth a man with burn scars on the left side of his face, likely from the fire that wrecked the seventh ward not a year ago.

Sunho took the single available seat in the corner. At this angle, he could see the woman's companion. He was young, only slightly older than Sunho, and injured—his arm was in a cast. When Sunho lifted his eyes, he found the captain watching him.

"Lower your gaze, Under Worlder," the woman said sharply. "The light is not for you."

Sunho immediately lowered his gaze. It was a version of a common saying, *Keep your eyes down, Servant of Sareniya. You are unworthy of the light.*

"That won't be necessary, Sana," the captain replied. His voice was low and devoid of emotion.

Who was this Sareniyan? A captain was a high-ranking officer. But the carriage outside hadn't been a military vehicle, which meant he wasn't here on orders from the empire, but for his own personal agenda.

The woman—Sana, the captain had called her—approached the table. Pushing the tray aside, she removed a scroll from within her jacket and laid it flat upon the surface.

"Three days ago, a light appeared in the east," she began. Those at the table leaned forward to take a closer look at the scroll. It was a drawing—the artist had used charcoal to sketch a portrait of a girl, her hair falling out of a loose braid. "We believe *she* was the source. Bring her to the Under World *alive* before the Festival of Light at the end of the month, and one hundred thousand coins will be yours." Sana kicked a chest beneath the table that

popped open, revealing hundreds of string-bundled coins.

Sunho stared at the coins, having never seen so many in one place.

The scarred man cleared his throat. "I was offered a similar deal, not two nights ago. Except we didn't have to bring the girl back alive."

"That's why we're paying you triple what was offered," Sana said through gritted teeth.

"Who is she?" asked one of the mercenaries.

Sana frowned. "That's not information you need to know."

"But if she's the source of the light," the elderly woman said, "then she must be in possession of some sort of weapon. Is it dangerous?"

"She's only a girl," Sana said.

The woman frowned.

"Why alive, though?" This came from the scarred man.

"Because she's more use to me alive than dead," the captain said tightly. Though he hadn't raised his voice, the warning was clear. "Does anyone have any *relevant* questions?"

"How old is she?" Sunho asked.

The captain's gaze locked on Sunho, his brow raising slightly. "Seventeen."

An unbidden thought flitted through Sunho's head: *We're the same age.*

Sunho studied the drawing. The girl was beautiful, with large, dark eyes and bow-shaped lips, and yet the drawing felt vague, as if the artist had rendered her from a description, from someone's memory of her.

"There aren't any identifying features in this illustration," Sunho pointed out. "Like a mole or a scar."

"You're right," Sana said. "We're not sure what she looks like. The light will be the most significant indicator of her identity. Go to the place where it originated. A train will take you to the river city, Seorawon. There, you'll take an airship east, over the mountains."

"He mentioned others." The old woman jerked her head toward the scarred man. "We won't be the only ones going after her."

"There will be others," Sana said simply. "Do what you need to do to get her back here alive."

Sunho understood. In order to protect her, they'd have to kill anyone who might try to stop them. How many others were being sent after her? Ten? Twenty? There were only five at the table, and it didn't appear as if they'd be

working together.

Sana dropped a bag of coins in front of each of them. “This should be more than enough to outfit you for the journey and expenses you might have as you go. The next train leaves at noon in three days.”

The captain stood and left the room, followed by Sana, who hefted the chest of coins. The others followed, murmuring excitedly to one another.

Sunho eyed the bag in front of him; clearly the captain had enough personal wealth that he’d risk paying them without a contract or proper agreement that they’d even take the job. Then again, the prize was a fortune; with that kind of money, they could leave the Under World, start a new life in the Occupied Territories. And yet, others would be after the same prize, would kill for the prize, would *kill the prize*.

He had three days to decide, but he already knew his answer. There was no point in taking a job he knew he couldn’t complete. He had his own skill set that he relied on, but protecting a girl from a bevy of hired killers would exceed them. His chances of success were little to none.

Of course, his chances would go up significantly if he were to call upon the Demon ... But that he would never do.

The tea set remained on the table, untouched. Lifting the kettle, Sunho poured the liquid into one of the porcelain cups. Steam rose from the surface. They hadn’t been in the room more than fifteen minutes. Taking the bag of coins, he left the cup without drinking it.

As he entered the hall, he immediately sensed he wasn’t alone.

The captain leaned against the wall a few steps down the corridor. To reach the stairwell, Sunho would have to pass him.

As Sunho drew near, the older boy spoke, “You served in the army.” His tone was cool, indifferent. Like in the room, Sunho noticed that he spoke without inflection. It made it difficult to guess his thoughts. “You’ve a disciplined way about you,” he continued. “What regiment did you serve in?”

“I don’t remember,” Sunho said. The captain’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t remember anything from before two years ago.”

The older boy raised a brow. “Intriguing.” When he didn’t speak further, Sunho stepped past him. “So you won’t remember *him*, either.”

Sunho stilled, a chill sweeping through him.

“You look like him,” the captain continued casually, either unaware or uncaring of the turmoil he’d wrought within Sunho. “It’s not obvious, but

there are enough similarities.”

“You ... you know my brother.”

“Knew him. We served together as foot soldiers in the Eighth Regiment.”

Sunho stepped closer to the captain, his hand tightening into a fist. “Where is he?” he asked with a shaking voice. He didn’t care that he sounded desperate.

The captain’s eyes slowly met Sunho’s. His expression, which until now had appeared impassive, transformed. Like a mask being lifted. The casual look in his eyes was gone, replaced with something else entirely.

Sunho knew what the other boy would say before he uttered the words.

“Bring me the girl, and I’ll help you find him.”

CHAPTER 7

REN

Haebaek Mountains

Gorye Village

THE DAY AFTER the attack, Little Uncle came down with a fever that lasted three days and three nights. Ren refused to leave his side as he lay on a pallet at the back of the cart. Not even to bid farewell to Big Uncle, who Auntie and the other caravan members buried with Mokjae in a sunlit clearing. Though a few of the villagers had sustained injuries from fleeing the demon, only they had died, in defense of other lives. Big Uncle wouldn't have had it any other way, and she *knew* that, but she still grieved silently in the darkness of the cart.

On the fourth morning after the attack, Little Uncle's fever broke.

Ren cried out for Auntie, who came rushing inside, braid askew, tendrils of hair falling around her wan face.

"I'll get the healer," she said, after taking one look at Little Uncle. Auntie returned with the older woman, both ducking into the cramped space. She was the headman's mother and the village's healer, who'd been asleep during the attack and had woken to a nightmare.

"The fever's gone," Ren said, anxious as the woman knelt beside Little Uncle, placing the back of her hand against his forehead. "Why isn't he waking?"

The healer plucked a fat leech from Little Uncle's arm and dropped it onto a plate, where it writhed grotesquely. With a thin knife, she cut deep into its flesh. Blood spilled from the wound, congealing as it met cool air. The smell of iron filled the small cart, and something else, something sweet. Ren stared at the blood, unable to comprehend what she was seeing.

The healer moved to the side, and the light from the window slanted into the cart, falling onto the plate. Ren learned forward, her heart racing in her

chest. Odd shards glittered in the coagulated blood, like a turgid pool with jewels hidden in the silt. The shards were *blue*. Not the blue of a river or the sky, but an otherworldly blue, like the heart of a flame.

The woman shuddered. “It’s not natural, this illness. There is no cure, at least not on this side of the mountain. I won’t pretend to be an expert on this, but from his current state, I would estimate he has three weeks left to live, maybe a month if he has the strength.”

Auntie bowed her head for several minutes, before lifting it and placing several coins in the healer’s hand. “Thank you for your wisdom.” The woman didn’t linger.

The cart was quiet, a state so unnatural it made Ren’s heart ache. She was accustomed to Big Uncle’s booming laugh and Little Uncle’s teasing chatter. Though it was Auntie who’d brought Ren to the caravan all those years ago, they were the ones who smuggled her into this family like expert thieves, stealing her heart until it was entirely their own.

Beside her, Auntie knelt with her back straight, her rich brown hair streaked with a single silver stripe. When Ren was younger, she wished her hair could be the same as Auntie’s, not the inky mass that would grow to the ground if she let it, as black as a night without stars.

“No cure on this side of the mountain,” Ren said into the silence. “What did she mean?”

Auntie flinched, as if she’d forgotten Ren’s presence, her eyes flicking to her, then away. “Nothing that concerns us.”

Ren picked up her player’s mask. It was her favorite, the one Big Uncle had fashioned for her, painted white with red dots on the cheeks. She traced its features with her fingers, comforted by its familiar grooves, the hooded eyes, the O for a mouth.

Little Uncle had been wounded while protecting her. Big Uncle had lost his life doing the same. Ren would rather Auntie yell and scream, anything but this awful silence. Her brother ... her husband ... She must be cursing the day she brought Ren into her home, to steal what she loved most. *Ren* was the thief.

Ren gripped the mask in her hands. Little Uncle coughed, a hoarse, chest-rattling noise. Auntie reached for the water bowl, but it was empty.

“I’ll get more,” Ren said, grabbing the wooden bowl from the floor and ducking outside. Ren was momentarily blinded by the sunlight, raising her

hand to block the powerful rays. From around a makeshift firepit voices rose, so she hurried down the steps and quickly weaved her way between carts, swinging her mask around her neck and tying the strings together.

She wasn't ready to speak to anyone, not yet. She could imagine the questions they might ask.

Who are you?

What are you?

Though most of the people of the caravan embraced her as Auntie's niece, there were a few who still considered her an outsider. While none but her family knew of her powers, there were those who viewed her uncanny speed and strength with suspicion, Hwi's father among them. What vile things had he said to her friend while she'd been sequestered in the cart? Hwi hadn't visited once, when for the entire summer, not a day went by when they didn't see each other.

The stream lay east of the village. Birds chattered in the trees, oblivious to the horror of only a few nights past. As Ren approached, she noticed woven baskets filled with bright vegetables submerged in the water. They were tied with string to stones on the bank, to keep them from floating away. Villagers had also wedged bamboo traps deep in the mud to catch small fish and freshwater prawns. A wooden boat bobbed like a duck on the unruly stream.

Kneeling by the bank, Ren brought the bowl to the surface, scooping up the crisp water. As she lifted it, her finger caught on a splinter. A sharp pain shot through her, and she dropped the bowl into the stream.

"No!" she shouted, springing after it, but the current was swift. Within seconds, it was gone. She stared after it, heat forming at the back of her eyes. When she went to brush the tears away, her already wet hands only made things worse. Giving up entirely, she sat down in the water. It was all her fault. If only she had jumped, then Little Uncle wouldn't be fighting for his life. The fear she'd felt that night hadn't been like anything she'd experienced before; it had been immobilizing.

"Crying in the village stream, how quaint. I'd p-pity you, if I thought it would do you any good."

Hwi! Ren turned to find her friend standing beside the stream. Hwi appeared as she always did, her hair braided neatly down her back. The only difference were her eyes. They were red, just like Ren's.

Stepping into the shallows, she reached out a hand. Ren took it, allowing

Hwi to help her to her feet.

“It’s all my fault, Hwi,” Ren said quietly when they were both standing on dry land. “Little Uncle was only injured because of me, and Big Uncle...” Ren dropped her head.

Hwi said nothing for a long time. Ren felt her heart sinking, like the rocks in the muddy streambed.

“How is any of what happened your fault?”

Ren looked up to find Hwi’s brow furrowed, her lips quivering. “From what I saw, you were the one who fought b-back against the demon. You and Little Uncle led it away from the village.”

Memories of the night flashed through Ren’s mind—the fight with the demon that was more like a dance, fleeing into the mountains, knowing that it pursued.

“You were the one who killed it.” Their eyes met. She didn’t say *how* Ren had killed the monster: *with your power*. “You are not to blame.” Hwi held her gaze, and the belief she saw there warmed her heart.

“Then who is?” Ren asked. “The demon? It didn’t have thoughts, Hwi. It was all rage and hunger and pain.”

“And so you blame yourself for what occurred? Without knowing where the demon came from, why it was in the village at all? I was sad. I *am* sad. But I’m also angry. Aren’t you?”

Ren felt as if her senses had been dulled, her mind foggy, and Hwi’s words were like a bucket of cold water thrown over her; she felt her wits returning. Hwi was right. Ren had been so lost in the pain of *what* had occurred, and the part she played in it, that she hadn’t thought of why a demon had even ended up in Gorye Village, from what horrible place had it originated.

Not on this side of the mountain ...

She grabbed Hwi’s hand, her legs eager to run now that her friend had shown her the path. “What happened to the demon? I don’t remember anything from after I fainted. I woke up the next morning inside the cart.”

“The caravan leader and a few others went to retrieve you and Little Uncle,” she said. “The villagers took the b-body of the demon. They’re keeping it in a shed b-behind the headman’s house.”

“Hwi, I need to see it. I need to see the body.” Perhaps it could tell her something about where it came from.

She nodded. "I'll go with you."

Hwi was right—it was better to be angry. Grieving was for times of peace. If Ren wanted to find answers, if she wanted to save Little Uncle, she needed to act.

They entered the village from the west and made their way toward the center. Ren placed her mask over her face, tying the strings at the back of her head. She didn't want anyone to recognize and stop her, should they see her. The familiar weight also brought her a sense of comfort, a barrier that guarded not just her identity but also her thoughts.

A stone wall encircled the headman's house; it was only a matter of climbing over it to reach the inside. Finding footholds in the rocks, Ren scaled it first, then reached back to help Hwi.

The shed was located at the back of the servants' quarters, beside the cookhouse. Crouching and sprinting from one hiding spot to the next, they managed to make it to the shed without being spotted.

"I'll keep watch," Hwi said, as Ren slipped through the door of the shed, closing it behind her.

Sunlight filtered through the slats in the wooden walls, sliding over piles of woven baskets and old farming tools. An awful stench stagnated the air—Ren brought her forearm up to cover her nose, glad for her mask that blocked some of the smell. It had already been four nights, and the body was decaying.

Someone had covered it with a straw mat, stained dark in places where the blood had seeped through.

Ren paused at the sound of footsteps on gravel outside, but Hwi gave no signal, and soon it faded away. Hurriedly she approached the body. Crouching beside it, she peeled back the mat, then flung it aside.

She stumbled backward, grateful for her performer's quick-witted training, otherwise she might have let out a cry.

The body was ... burned, its flesh tar black and peeling. It was hardly recognizable, so different from how it appeared in her memory.

The silver light did this. *She* did this.

As the shock dissipated, she noticed something odd. When she faced the demon, it had stood high above her, at least twice her height.

The charred body was smaller. One of its arms had been severed at the wrist. The other was tucked beneath its body. Grimacing, she nudged the

corpse with her foot, hard, and the arm flopped out. The fingers on the hand were rounded, not claws.

It wasn't a demon at all, but ... human.

Then she noticed what she hadn't when she'd first entered the shed, hidden by the shadows. Through the charred parts of his body, his blood shone through.

Blue.



AS REN RETURNED to the cart, she heard Auntie's voice coming from within. Had Little Uncle awakened? She rushed up the steps, only to recognize the rhythmic way Auntie was speaking: She was telling Little Uncle a story. Ren was so used to thinking of Auntie and Little Uncle as her aunt and uncle, she'd forgotten that Little Uncle was Auntie's younger brother.

Ren watched as Auntie gently shifted a strand of hair from Little Uncle's brow.

The story Auntie was telling was a popular one, though they never performed it: "The Woodcutter and the Celestial Maiden."

"A long time ago, there was a woodcutter who lived by a forest." Auntie's voice was soft and melancholy. "One morning, while he was out hunting, he caught sight of a deer swiftly running between the trees.

"With his great horn bow, he loosed an arrow, which caught the deer in the leg. However, when he went to kill the deer, it spoke. 'I know of a pool where celestial maidens take off their wings to bathe. I will lead you there so that you might take one as your bride.'

"He let the deer go, binding up the wound. As promised, it led him to a sparkling pool. Three celestial maidens bathed in the waters, having taken off their robe-like wings. The woodcutter, catching sight of the youngest and most beautiful of the maidens, stole her wings."

"How cruel," Ren interrupted.

Auntie didn't startle, as if she'd known Ren was listening all along. Her eyes met Ren's. She gazed at her for a long time, her expression inscrutable. At last, she said, "Men fear women who have wings."

"What happened next?" Ren asked, even though she knew the answer.

"Her sisters fled, but she couldn't return home. To the Floating World."

The Floating World. That name stirred up a host of images—meadows of wildflowers, lakes like glass that mirrored the clouds, a moon-white palace ...

A place of incredible beauty and of bone-aching despair. The place where she'd come from.

"We'll not speak of this again," Auntie said, rising to her feet. "Listen to me. The caravan will leave tonight. Now that Wook's fever has broken, he can be moved. The light will have been visible over the mountains. They'll have seen it. They'll come for you now."

Ren didn't have to ask who *they* were. The people who she'd fled from ten years ago. *Sarenians*.

"Tonight," Ren repeated softly.

Auntie's gaze dropped to the bowl Ren held in her hands, filled to the brim with water. After inspecting the body of the demon, Ren and Hwi had gone back to the stream to replace the one she'd lost. "I must go," Auntie said. "The caravan leaders are meeting with the village headman to discuss our departure. I'll be back soon. Watch over Little Uncle while I'm gone."

"I will," Ren promised, watching Auntie grab her walking stick before ducking from the cart. She counted twenty heartbeats before uncrossing her fingers behind her back. Erupting into motion, she removed her short jacket and skirt, the latter still damp from her dunking in the stream.

Rummaging through the costume chest, she pulled out the least colorful one, shimmying into billowy trousers that tied off at her stomach. The jacket was a matching color, a muted moss green. After she finished dressing, she grabbed a thick square cloth. Laying it flat on the floor, she started to pile items in the center of the cloth—underthings, her brush and hair ribbons. When finished, she took the four corners of the square cloth and tied them together tight at the center, then she attached the whole thing to the satchel that held her players' tools—her flute and paper fan. Lastly, she grabbed her red umbrella, her final gift from Big Uncle.

She leaned over Little Uncle, pressing her fingers to his cheek. She reached for her Light—similar to her influence over wind, she could soothe minor injuries—willing it to heal him, to wake him, but he remained asleep, just as he had the countless times she'd tried before. She couldn't rely on her magic, not for this. Tears heated the corners of her eyes, but she held them back.

“I’m leaving,” she said, quiet but determined. “I’m going to find out where that demon came from. And whatever illness afflicts you, I will find a cure.”

This was a promise she *would* keep, no matter what.

Outside, Hwi was waiting. She handed over a wrapped package.

“I gathered as m-much food as I could,” she explained. “It should last you at least a few days, if you also stop to forage.”

Ren accepted her gift, grateful that she had Hwi to see her off on her journey.

“I wish I was b-brave, like you,” Hwi said.

“I don’t feel very brave.” She was leaving to discover where the demon had come from, and to find a cure, but also so that whatever forces were now on their journey toward her wouldn’t endanger the caravan.

“But that’s why you are, don’t you see? Because you still fight when you’re afraid. You choose the path that is darkest, with the most brambles and thorns, because it is the right one.”

“Oh, how I wish I could choose the sunny path,” Ren lamented. “With lots of places to stop and eat and meadows to take naps in.”

Hwi giggled. “I will m-miss you, Ren. But not for long. We will m-meet again soon.”

“Farewell, my friend. Watch over them for me.” *Little Uncle. Auntie.* “Once I’ve found the cure, I’ll meet you in the valley.” *Home.*

Ren turned to face the mountain, looming impossibly large before her. The demon had come from the other side. The demon that was once a man. What could make a man a demon? Something unnatural. Something evil. She would have to face that evil in order to save the people she loved.

The immensity of that challenge made it difficult to breathe, let alone take a step forward. But she would, one step at a time. With a final glance at the caravan, she turned and slipped into the trees.

ACT TWO
LIGHT BREAKS

CHAPTER 8

JAEIL

The Under World

Third Ward Train Station, Inner Circle

AS THE TRAIN departed the station, Jaeil was left with the distinct impression that he'd made a mistake.

Not with the plan. It was the best he could do with the time allotted—less than a week since he saw the light and knew, like a bell struck in his chest, that the race had begun.

If it wasn't the plan that was faulty, perhaps it was the players. The five individuals he met at Bo Dan's were endowed with enough physical prowess, and presumably wits, to locate a girl and bring her back to the Under World, where he could ensure her survival.

He'd watched all but one of them board the train. The two mercenaries came as recommendations from one of Sana's more unsavory acquaintances. He'd invited the old woman himself, as she was a bounty hunter of some renown. The scarred man hadn't shown up, which surprised Jaeil, if only because he'd seemed the most eager to collect on the reward.

Lastly, there was the swordsman. Sunho had arrived so late to the station that Jaeil had presumed he'd had a change of heart. But as the train whistled its departure, Sunho had stepped from the darkness onto the platform, where the lanterns were brightest. Even then, he'd been almost undetectable; Jaeil had only noticed him because of his red scarf. He'd been the last passenger to board the train.

Across from Jaeil, his lieutenant slid a tray of tea and pastries across the table, a gift from the stationmaster upon their arrival.

"You couldn't have gone, not with that arm," Sana said, eyeing his cast. "I know you'd have given anything to be on that train. After all, there's only one way to ensure the outcome you desire: Do it yourself."

“What makes you think I could do the job any better?” Jaeil asked, curious.

Sana scoffed, taking a drink from her cup, though he doubted it was tea she was imbibing. She carried a tin of liquor in her jacket for just such occasions.

“Maybe it’s a good thing you didn’t go.” She sat so far back in her chair Jaeil was impressed she didn’t fall over. “There are around a hundred hired killers and mercenaries on that train.”

He grimaced. He’d watched them all board from this very seat. Jaeil had known the general would send people of his own, but even he was surprised at the sheer *amount*.

“Was that really the smartest choice, boxing them in like that?” Sana asked. “It’s a powder keg, waiting to explode.”

Jaeil shook his head. “It was the only way. The light came from the east, over the mountains. That’s a few weeks journey by horse, a month by foot. The train will get them to Seorawon within three days.”

He could have dispatched a military aircraft to the northern border where his soldiers were stationed, but he couldn’t risk it being intercepted.

“Why the kid?” Sana asked.

He glanced at his lieutenant, lifting a brow. *The kid* wasn’t much younger than himself.

“Oh, don’t make that face. You know what I mean. Why put your faith in a nobody from the Outer Ring? Bo Dan’s just an opportunistic bastard looking to make an extra bit of coin.”

Why, indeed. On one hand, coin wasn’t the issue; he could have hired a hundred mercenaries, but throwing bodies at the problem wouldn’t make a difference.

Sunho hadn’t been like the others. He wasn’t a career assassin, for one. Jaeil had a report drawn up on him shortly after their meeting. It had consisted of a few brief sentences, starting from two years ago. Any records of him before then were either expunged or never existed. There wasn’t evidence of him having served in the military.

But Jaeil had *remembered* his brother. That had been the truth. He’d fought alongside countless soldiers and couldn’t recall half their faces, but he’d remembered Junho because he had talked nonstop—a memorable, if insufferable, trait.

“He wants something, beyond the coin,” Jaeil said. “You take chances when you’re motivated by more than money. Fate intervenes, too. They favor those who have a story to tell, the reckless, the ones who take risks.”

“Then Fate favors you.”

“They have a funny way of showing it.” Jaeil picked up a teacup, swirling the contents before bringing it to his mouth. His arm ached. “It seems the mercenaries aren’t the only notable passengers to board today’s train. I don’t know if you noticed—”

Sana’s chair hit the floor with a thump. “I thought that was him! Though I wasn’t sure. Ministers tend to all look the same. Stodgy old men.” She shuddered.

Jaeil had arrived at the station to ensure those he’d hired made it onto the train, but he hadn’t accounted for witnessing the clandestine departure of a Sarenian nobleman.

Minister Jo, who oversaw the ninth ward, had boarded one of the first-class cars, traveling alone except for a single black-robed guard. It wasn’t his leaving the city that was notable—it was that he was leaving two weeks before the Festival of Light. During that time, Sarenian nobles would gather in the Under World to throw extravagant parties and partake in the general debauchery forbidden in the pristine, moonlit courts of the Floating World. Minister Jo would be expected to host his more illustrious clan members for the duration of their stay.

“He could have left for all kinds of reasons,” Sana said. “Maybe his lungs were troubling him, and he wanted to recuperate in the countryside. Or he has a lover in one of the Occupied Territories. That’s something you would know little about.”

“Ministers travel with retinues,” Jaeil said, purposefully ignoring her last comment. “He didn’t want anyone to know he was leaving.”

Sighing, he placed his cup on the table before leaning back in his chair and closing his eyes. Perhaps he was wasting his time thinking about the minister. He paid little attention to the actions of the nobility unless they affected the war.

His mother had been a noble, the unwanted ninth daughter of a weak and pitiable clan. Through her bloodline, he was technically one himself—a fact he tried his best to forget.

“He really chose the *worst* day to take a train ride,” Sana drawled.

There was a loud rap at the door. A man in the uniform of a Sareniyan guard stepped into the parlor, bowing at the waist. “Captain.”

Jaeil didn’t recognize him, but the branch of the military that maintained order in the city saw recruits come and go more than the others.

“What is it?”

“A thief broke into your residence. They were apprehended, but...” The recruit’s eyes darted to Jaeil.

“But what?” Sana prompted.

“There was significant damage done to your study, sir. A few of your belongings were destroyed. Books, artwork, and...” The man hesitated, as if he wasn’t sure of the significance of the last object. “A feather.”

Jaeil rose quietly to his feet.

Sana followed after him, patting the recruit on the shoulder. “You’d better come with us.”



JAEIL’S RESIDENCE WAS located within Hagye Military Base in the first ward. “Wait outside,” he ordered Sana and the recruit.

Within moments of entering his study, he knew that he’d been lied to. The great desk at the back of the room and the large bookshelf that took up an entire wall were as he had left them.

The door slowly shut behind him, sealing off the light from the foyer. It was a trap.

He’d guessed as much. He kept nothing of value in his residence, besides perhaps a few weapons, the most prizable of which lay on his desk where he’d left it—his grandfather’s sword. Most telling was the silence surrounding his estate. For a theft within a high-ranking officer’s residence, there was a distinct lack of military personnel present. Just the one recruit sent to fetch him, now cowering outside the door.

“Goddess, it’s dark in here,” Sana said from close behind him. “Can’t you turn on a light?”

His heart lurched. She’d followed him inside. He turned. “Sana—”

A head tumbled across the carpet, rolling to a stop at his feet. The face of the scarred mercenary stared up at him.

Jaeil turned toward the shadows in the corner of the room, where the

general of the Sarenian empire rose from a seat to his full, towering height.

Jaeil immediately lowered his gaze.

“You disappoint me, son. If you’re going to betray me, you should at least take care I don’t find out.”

Jaeil felt more than heard his father approach, the air shifting with his presence. Time seemed to slow, though he knew it was only in his imagination. General Iljin hadn’t any powers, even if his enemies might believe otherwise.

“Now,” he said, and he was so close that Jaeil felt his breath ghost over his face. A shiver swept through his body; he was always cold, but never so much as when his father was near. “I’ll have to punish you.”

Jaeil had been beaten enough times to know what pain to expect, and not by the general’s hands only. On the battlefield, he’d been stabbed, gutted twice with a sword, and most recently, his forearm fractured in two places.

Yet still, when his father raised his fist, and he felt that first rush of air, he flinched.

He heard a dull thud, and for a half second couldn’t comprehend what had happened—he hadn’t felt any pain. Then Sana hit the floor.

Jaeil was respected, admired, *feared* by many. Yet to the general of the Sarenian army he was just a boy, a son. Powerless.

He kept his gaze forward, sparing not a glance for Sana. The general despised displays of weakness.

As the general moved to leave, Jaeil said softly, “I believed you ten years ago, when you said she had perished. I would have continued to believe, had you not sent those assassins.

“Is it her?” Jaeil asked, and he hated the way the question made him feel like a child again. “Is she alive?”

“It would seem so, but not for much longer.”

Jaeil nodded. “How will you ensure you’ll succeed this time? Or that you’ll even find the right person?”

His father stared at him, unblinking. His gaze was eerily opaque. “What makes you think they’re after one person?” Jaeil knew immediately what his father had done. “Each mercenary on that train will earn a thousand coins for every girl that fits the description.”

Hundreds would be killed. It would be a *massacre*.

The general lifted a hand to the emblem on Jaeil’s shoulder, brushing it

softly with the pad of his thumb. “Captain. You’ve earned it. You’re strong, Jaeil, but you’ll never win with a soft heart.”

Jaeil waited until his father had left the room before approaching the desk.

“Captain?” Sana stood beside him. Blood gushed from her nose. “Are you all right?”

Funny that she should be the one to ask him that.

Footsteps entered the study. The recruit staggered forward, falling to his knees.

“Captain, forgive me,” he whimpered. “The general threatened my family. I didn’t have a choice.”

Reaching out his hand to his desk, Jaeil’s fingers lightly traced the blade of the sword laid across it. It was an heirloom, handed down by his grandfather, and his grandfather before him.

“You said a thief broke into my residence,” Jaeil said. “You weren’t mistaken.”

The recruit gasped, “Thank you, thank you—”

“My father is the biggest thief of all.” His hand wrapped around the hilt. “He stole a world.”

Sweeping the sword, he cut the recruit’s throat. The man fell to the floor, gurgling in his death throes; his blood soaked the rich carpets.

“Captain,” Sana chided softly. “He wasn’t to blame.”

“No,” Jaeil agreed. “He feared my father more than he feared me. Otherwise, he’d never have lied to me. The one to blame is me.”

After wiping the sword with a piece of cloth, he placed it back onto the desk. Then, turning, he stepped over the body of the man before striding from the room.

His steward stood quivering outside the door. “Call in the servants. I need a new carpet.”

CHAPTER 9

SUNHO

The Under World

Beneath the Border of Sareniya

THE TRAIN HORN blared, emerging from a tunnel on the other side of the Wall. It began to accelerate as it left the city behind. From his seat by the window, Sunho observed the landscape sweeping by, barren and flat, with a few sparks of light in the distance—small towns and settlements. Though it was late in the afternoon, the world outside the Wall remained in shadow, as the edge of the Floating World extended beyond the perimeter of the Under World for several miles. In the distance, he could make out a faint glow along the horizon—sunlight. He didn't stare for long. He'd be in the light soon enough.

Several miles outside the Wall were the mining camps. There were four total, located at the northeast, northwest, southeast, and southwest corners of the Under World. Here mithril ore was extracted, then later transported to the factories. The most dominating aspect of the camps were the Towers, massive structures reinforced with scaffolds that reached toward the lowest points of the mines on the underside of the Floating World. They were built with the purpose of hoisting equipment and machinery upward, as well as transporting the precious ore down to the surface through a series of pulleys and counterweights. Mechanical lifts assisted workers up the Towers, though they never ventured more than a hundred feet above the surface, their jobs primarily to oversee the transport of materials. Those who worked in the mines themselves traveled in aircraft specially designed to withstand great winds, as the airspace beneath the Floating World was tempestuous on a good day. From the rooftop of his apartment, Sunho would sometimes see the scaffolds sway, though they never did fall.

As the train continued past the mining camps, he leaned forward in his

seat to gaze up at the nearest Tower. Across from him, his seatmate—the old bounty hunter from the teahouse—snickered, likely guessing that he'd never been outside the walls of the city.

His cheeks heated and she cackled louder. Ducking into his scarf, he stood and headed down the aisle of the car, toward the back of the train.

He needed to concentrate. He was at a disadvantage from the others. Even if he had been outside the Wall before—and he must have, when he served as a soldier—he had no memories of what it was like, of what to expect. His lack of memories was frustrating on most days, but that it might prevent his success on the mission was especially annoying.

Shifting open the door of the car, he was met with a blast of wind, and he staggered back.

Three couplings linked the two train cars together. Beneath them, wheels turned violently against the track. One misstep and he'd fall off the train, then get crushed beneath the wheels. Quickly, he stepped over the gap and dragged open the door of the next car.

As he entered, he felt a dozen gazes upon him, appraising him. It had been like that in the previous car. At Bo Dan's, he'd guessed around twenty mercenaries would go after the girl, but he now suspected that those numbers were far greater.

Wooden benches on either side of a narrow aisle groaned and clacked together above the low rumble of the train. Sunho pulled up his scarf, moving warily down the aisle. He found what he was looking for in the second to last row. Unstrapping his sword, he slid into the empty seat. Affixed to the wall was a map of the train's route. Their destination was Seorawon, the northernmost city in the Occupied Territories, on the River Nakjin. The train's route would take them past the point of where the light had come, from the east. But he would make up the time on the airship, which, according to the map, would likely pass over the mountains at their lowest point, nearest Seorawon, and then head south.

An object rolled to tap the heel of his boot. Glancing down, he saw it was a small wooden toy. Carefully, he reached down to pick it up. The toy was a miniature of the train's locomotive, the smokestack painted red. Turning the train in his hands, he saw that it was missing a wheel.

A soft gasp came from behind him, and he turned to see a young boy clinging on to the back of his seat. For a moment he was reminded of Haru,

but the boy was younger than his neighbor, four years old, if he had to guess.

Sunho peered around his feet, spotting the missing wheel lodged between the wall and the wooden bench. Picking it up, he slipped the wheel onto the spoke, where it slotted neatly into place. He spun it once, the wheel turning end over end, then handed the toy over to the boy, who grinned, revealing a gap where he'd lost a tooth.

The rear door to the train car opened with a bang.

A group of thugs slunk down the aisle, leering at passengers, laughing when they cowered in their seats. While there was a significant number of mercenaries on the train, the majority were civilians. Sunho's breath slowed as he recognized two members of the group. Claw and Dagger. Uninspired names, but they were sadistic killers who belonged to the most ruthless gang in the Outer Ring.

Sunho hadn't given much thought to the identity of the girl, as it mattered little to him—he would go after her regardless—but now he wondered who she was. He'd memorized the drawing of her. When he closed his eyes, he could see her face. Dark eyes, with brows straight like arrows and lips curved like a bow. A nobleman's daughter? What had she done to inspire such hatred in someone that they'd send a hundred mercenaries after her? Though he supposed for the captain it had been the reverse—he'd sent them to save her.

Sunho's head hurt. This was why he didn't get involved in Sarenian affairs. They were messy and made little sense.

The group of killers continued forward into the next car, so he stood and exited in the opposite direction. The last car of the train was a luggage car. A single lantern hung from the ceiling over a couple hundred stacked crates, many marked with their destinations in the Occupied Territories.

He turned from the crates, heading toward the back of the car and opening the door. This time, he was ready for the wind that pierced his skin. He'd reached the end of the train. For a moment, he faced the barren landscape, everything a still, gray blue. In the distance, the Towers reached up toward the Floating World like the arms of a goddess.

Then the train, which had been moving in darkness, was suddenly in the light.

He winced, raising his arm against the brightness. Heart pounding, he lifted his gaze skyward.

The Floating World stretched the length of the horizon. A waterfall streamed off the edge on the eastern side, sunlight glinting off the water. From within the verdant green sprang watchtowers of red and silver.

Gazing upon that beautiful country, he felt an odd burning in his chest, a feeling that he recognized, though he couldn't place its origin—*you can erase memories from the mind, but not from the heart.*

What was this feeling? Like a knife through his chest.

A feeling like *hatred*.

CHAPTER 10

REN

Haebaek Mountains

AFTER LEAVING GORYE Village, Ren remembered a conversation she'd had with its healer, on one of the nights they'd kept vigil by Little Uncle's bedside, about a rumored entrance to a tunnel that wound through the mountains, with an exit on the opposite side. She found the opening between two great rocks, a hole so small she had to push her belongings through with her feet before shimmying through herself, dropping onto hard-packed earth.

She was in a tunnel, sealed from behind, but that stretched forward an interminable distance.

"Well, at least I'm not going *over* the mountain," she said, shivering as her voice echoed back to her, loud and ghostly. With her fear of heights, she wouldn't have made it far. The tunnel led into one more cavernous with great boulders that she had to climb over. She was grateful for Auntie's rigorous training as she leaped from the top to scale a short wall, grabbing the ledge and pulling herself to higher ground.

The tunnels were like a maze, testing her strength, dexterity, and endurance. There were places where she had to squeeze between large rocks that pressed against her back and chest, others where she had to crawl on her stomach, dragging her belongings behind her with a rope tied around her waist, unsure if there would even *be* a way forward. Sometimes there wasn't, and she had to backtrack and take another path.

She knew, had she wanted, she could use her magic to help guide her, conjure wind to lead her down the right tunnel, and yet ... she felt unease at the thought of using it. Her powers were tied to the past, and she feared that the more she used them, the harder it would be to hold on to who she was; she was already moving farther away from the life that she'd known, a safe, happy life, part of a family who adored her, and whom she adored in return;

she wanted to keep the thread that bound her to them for as long as possible so that, once this was all over, she could follow it back home again.

She needn't rely on her powers. Her family had provided her with everything she needed to get through this journey. Auntie's training had honed her body, her reflexes, and her ability to think on her feet. Because of Big Uncle, she knew which mushrooms and plants were safe to eat, supplementing the foodstuffs Hwi had packed for her.

And Little Uncle ... her spirit was strong because of him. She thought of all the things she'd tell him when she saw him next. The tunnels, she discovered, were connected by great caverns, which were the sources of the light that permeated the caves, making it possible for her to see. Vast and echoing chambers of great beauty, they were like halls to an underworld god, though she never saw any beings, creatures or *other* in the darkness. The light came from the sunlight that speared through the caverns' ceilings, like waterfalls of sunlight, pouring from the world above.

It wasn't the darkness that made the journey difficult, it was the solitude—she wasn't used to being alone. On the caravan trail, there was always someone near, asking for help with a cart that was stuck, or wanting to show her a particularly interesting pine cone. She found herself having conversations with Hwi and Little Uncle in her head. *Don't those stalactites resemble the horns of a ram?* she'd imagine asking Hwi, who would, of course, agree with her, while Little Uncle would scold, *Yes, but what are you doing standing beneath them?*

When her thoughts strayed to Big Uncle, her feelings growing too large for her chest, she would take deep breaths, remembering his gentle smile and reassuring presence. It helped that small things on her journey reminded her of him. Every mushroom she discovered felt like a gift, like he had left them there for her. And sometimes, when a rock fell in a distant cave, it sounded like the booming of a drum, and she imagined it was a sign from him, encouraging her to keep going.

One night, she ventured across a cavern that held a massive lake, open entirely to the sky. Silver fish shone through the clear water. When she dipped her hands beneath the surface, they darted away in fear, only to return to nibble curiously at her fingers.

She slept beside the pebbled shore and woke to rainfall on the lake, a great pattering that she felt deep in her bones. It was there, on the shore,

where she let herself weep for Big Uncle, for the life that, even should she return to it, would never be the same.

Afterward, she left her water jug in the rain, capping it once the water flowed over the rim.

Three days after entering the tunnels, she emerged on the other side.

It was midday. The cave opened into a deep valley, surrounded on all sides by the mountains. At the end, she could see a steep, grassy incline leading upward. She realized excitedly that from that greater height, she might be able to spot smoke from a village. Gauging the distance, she guessed it would take her the entire afternoon to reach the end of the valley.

She felt a tightening in her chest that she hadn't yet left the mountains proper but reasoned that at this point all she could do was move forward.

Sparkling brooks cut across bright late-autumn grass. Gorals grazed on hillocks, their black eyes tracking her movements as she stepped among abundant wildflowers, pink-and-white-petaled cosmos flopping against her wide pants.

As sunset approached, she stopped to finish up the last of Hwi's provisions, splashing her face with cool water from a brook before refilling her jug.

At last, she reached the end of the valley, huffing and puffing as she made the arduous climb. By the time she emerged over the rise, she was breathless.

As if drawn there, her gaze swept over grassy plains and dark forests covering low, sweeping mountains toward the horizon. She spotted it, then, looming in the distance.

Sareniya, the Floating World.

It was partially obscured by a gray cloud that every few seconds pulsed with silver illumination. Lightning—there was a rainstorm on the Floating World. The thought triggered a memory, a sensation of raindrops, cold like shards of ice against her skin.

Same as when she touched the crimson robe, she was spun into a memory—of her last night on the Floating World.

It came in fragments. A white feather, drifting downward.

The voice of a boy, calling out for her. "Ren!"

Her mother, at the edge of the cliff, and the man that was a demon, reaching out toward her with its clawed hand.

Then the feeling passed. She fell to her knees, trembling. She knew

memories like this would become more frequent as she approached the Floating World. They would pull her into the past, just as it pulled her closer into its sphere.

Shakily, Ren got to her feet. She refused to be drawn in.

She came for a purpose. She was going on this journey for Little Uncle. So that she could return to the valley, to the life that she wanted.

As she stared at the Floating World, she made a promise to herself. That world could pull her into its shadow, but it would never hold her. In the end, she would break free.

CHAPTER 11

SUNHO

West of the Haebaek Mountains

Occupied Territories

SUNHO WOKE TO a loud boom that shook the carriage. Overhead, the lantern dangling from the ceiling swayed. He remembered slipping back inside the luggage car, where he'd found a space between crates to wait out the rest of the journey. Slowly he rose to his feet, listening carefully. The roar he'd mistaken for the train's wheels barreling along the track was in fact rainfall, the sound that had woken him—thunder.

His heart started to beat faster in his chest. He'd never experienced rain; *weather* in the Under World didn't exist. He had the sudden urge to know what it felt like. Leaving his spot between the crates, he started to make his way to the door at the back of the car.

He was passing a crate when he noticed a symbol etched onto the surface, significant only because he'd seen it before, on the map Yurhee had taken from the ninth ward mithril factory—one half of a black wing. As he stared, he realized that a sound, almost imperceptible, was coming from *within* the crate.

Scratching, like fingernails upon wood.

A loud crash, followed by high-pitched screams, came from the direction of the passenger cars.

Sunho pivoted, moving swiftly back through the carriage. He wrenched open the door, wincing at the lash of rain against his face. He didn't have time to fully register the sensation before the next door opened and a dead mercenary fell through, the train lurching as the body tumbled onto the track.

His gaze swung back to the car just as another mercenary rushed at him, wielding an axe. He darted to the side, toppling over a crate. The back of his head hit the wall and pain shot up his neck, his vision blurring from the

sudden impact. Above him, the mercenary leered triumphantly with feral, bloodshot eyes before, suddenly, they widened. He fell forward, a blade in his back.

Sunho pushed the man off him. Rising to his feet, he shook his head to clear his vision.

He returned to the passenger car to see that the mercenaries were embroiled in a deadly free-for-all. Apparently the bounty was a big enough incentive to risk taking out the competition in close quarters.

A screeching wind blasted through the car where a blade had punctured the wall. The light bulbs flickered erratically over dozens of prone bodies. A few were hired killers, like the one who'd attacked him with the axe, but most were civilians caught in the middle of a bloodbath. Many had died violently. In the corner, a woman curled over a smaller body—neither moved.

Sunho felt the Demon turn over inside him. A tremor ran up his arm.

Spotting him, the mercenary who'd thrown the dagger leaped toward him. Sunho drew his sword, sliding a step back as their weapons collided. Sunho's arm rippled, and he caught the man's wrist in his. He snapped it and the man screamed; then, jamming his sword into his abdomen, he ran him into the wall. Sunho stepped back as the mercenary slid to the floor.

He clutched at his arm until it stopped shaking, taking deep breaths to quiet his pounding heart.

It wasn't bloodlust that fed the Demon, but his emotions. His anger. His fear. His guilt.

It would stay dormant as long as Sunho kept a cool head, though that was already proving to be a challenge.

He moved on to the next car. He didn't have a plan, so much as he knew there'd be fewer killers in the pricey first-class passenger cars at the front of the train.

In the sixth car, he found Claw and Dagger gleefully knee-deep in the fray, bashing their opponents with studded clubs. He felt a blade sweep toward him from behind and moved aside at the last millisecond. It slashed past, inches from his ear. The blade was attached to a chain that the woman who wielded it drew back, swinging it around her wrist before catching the blade in her hand.

"Oh?" The assassin blinked rapidly, seeming mildly surprised. "I missed."

Then a slow smile spread across her features. “How exciting.”

Loosing the chain, she began to swing the attached blade in a circle around her head. When she released it, the blade sliced the air, whipping toward him so fast that he hardly had time to dodge. She pulled it back, only to hurl it forward once more.

He wasn’t fast enough the second time.

Blood gushed from a wound in his side. It was deep, the blade having severed both his armor and the robes he wore beneath.

The assassin pouted. “Don’t tell me it’s over already?” She tapped her boot on the floor.

Sunho held one hand to his wound to stem the bleeding; with the other, he gripped his sword. He needed to figure out a strategy, or she’d finish him off with her next attack. Her chain whip was difficult to defend against; she could strike quickly and from a distance. And he’d lost his chance to close the gap between them, his speed now greatly reduced by his wound.

As she readied another throw, his eyes caught on a dagger lying by the foot of a bench several feet from him.

Letting go of his wound, he brought his bloodied hand to join the other on the hilt of his sword.

“You’re quite handsome, aren’t you?” the assassin said. “I’ll send you to the goddess tonight. Tell her you’re a gift from me.”

She launched the chain. The jagged-edged blade flew toward him. At the last second, he moved his sword, and it wrapped around the blade. Then, jamming it into the floorboards, he sprinted to the bench, sliding the last few feet to the dagger. Grabbing it, he flung it at the assassin.

She screamed as the dagger connected with her shoulder, and she dropped the chain.

The car jolted, and it began listing to the side. Sunho grabbed on to the leg of a bench as the entire carriage tilted almost ninety degrees, people sweeping out the broken windows—including the assassin—before righting itself once more.

Sunho stood, sensing a shift in speed, as if the conductor was aware of the disturbance in the back-end cars and thought he could outpace the carnage.

A loud clanking noise started ahead. Sunho wrested his sword from the floor, the assassin’s chain falling loose around it, before pushing forward.

The last car that separated the first- and second-class passenger cars was

packed with mercenaries scrambling to breach a doorway.

He stepped onto a seat to get a better view and immediately spotted the source of the clanking sound. A large man wielding a hammer was bringing the head down hard upon the couplings that held the cars together. A man attempted to jump across the breach but was shot with a crossbow bolt. Sunho caught sight of Dagger and Claw among the group blocking the rest from escape.

There was a loud crack as the first of the three links broke apart.

The civilians in the car screamed as the car jolted backward. The man continued hammering.

At this speed, if all three should break, the cars would go careening off the track.

Sunho turned back the way he came. In one of the cars, he came across the bodies of the mercenaries who'd been hired alongside him; there was no sign of the bounty hunter or the scarred man.

He was almost to the luggage car when he heard a soft cry. In the shadows beneath a bench, the boy from earlier trembled, the wooden train clutched between his fingers.

"Are you...?" Sunho began, trailing off. If his guardians were alive, they weren't with him now.

Sunho cursed inwardly. He didn't have time—the second and third links would break any second. Still, he found himself offering his hand to the boy, who, after a moment's hesitation, took it.

As they hurried toward the luggage car, he became aware of a terrible heat. Even before he slid back the door, he knew what he'd find.

The crates were on fire.

The lantern that had been dangling from the ceiling must have fallen atop them, igniting flames that were quickly spreading throughout the confined space.

The boy started coughing. Sunho unwound his scarf, wrapping it around the boy's neck and pulling it up so that it covered his nose and mouth. He then grabbed his hand again.

It was no longer a straight path to the back door. Most of the crates had fallen during the tumult. Fire licked at their skin as they clambered through.

Reaching the door, Sunho flung it open. Rain slashed against his face, cold and violent. He sheathed his sword, then crouched down, turning his

back to the boy. “Climb on,” he said. “Hurry.”

The boy wrapped his arms around Sunho’s neck. Sunho hoped he had a strong grip, as Sunho would need both his hands to climb. He held tight to the side of the train, using whatever he could as a foothold. Luckily the iron was cooled by the rain, though slippery.

Grabbing the edge, he pulled himself onto the roof, crouching to keep his balance. The wind whipped by him in powerful gusts that threatened to uproot him. Carefully he started to walk forward, fighting to keep his balance.

When he got to the break between the cars, he braced himself, then leaped across the space, holding the boy to his back as he landed lightly, skidding along the slick surface.

A loud crack jolted the car and Sunho almost slid off the edge, grabbing on to a protrusion on the side of the train.

The second link had broken.

“Hold on!” he shouted to the boy—hoping he had the strength to hang on—as he let go to pump his arms, sprinting across the top of the train and leaping over the gaps between cars without stopping.

With a loud *clank*, the final coupling link broke apart.

The train lurched to the side. Sunho hurled himself forward at the last second as the car careened off the track.

He landed, hard, on the roof of the first-class car as it pulled away from the rest.

The boy rolled off his back with a scream, the scarf whipping out behind him to disappear into the storm. Sunho grabbed the boy’s hand before he could get swept away, too, pulling him to his chest.

They crouched together as the rain continued to lash downward, the boy’s heartbeat featherlight against his own. They needed to get off the roof.

Standing, Sunho made his way farther up the train until he spotted the smokestack of the locomotive only a few cars away. Opening a hatch on the roof, he jumped down into a carpeted hallway lined with private rooms.

Sunho tried the handle of the closet. Finding it locked, he jammed it open with his shoulder. Inside, two men cowered, clutching their young daughter.

Sunho thrust the boy forward. “His guardian was in one of the cars that went off the track. Will you take him?” Sunho knew he must’ve appeared frightening—soaked to the bone, his clothing ripped in places, and blood

gushing from the wound at his side.

After a moment's hesitation, the older of the men nodded. "Yes, yes of course. Come here, child."

The boy at first resisted, clinging to Sunho. Again, he was reminded of Haru. Sunho got down on one knee, his hands on the boy's shoulder. "You'll be safe with them," he said gently. The couple was well dressed. More than that, their daughter was rosy cheeked, well cared for. She was already reaching out toward the boy's hand.

An odd ache settled in Sunho's chest, and so he stood. "Block the door when I leave," he told the couple, stepping outside and closing the door behind him.

In the hallway, several heads peeked out from the private rooms. Upon sighting him, they all drew back, slamming doors. Sunho heard the clinks of bolts sliding into place.

He entered the next car to find it empty, though not unscathed. It was a dining car. Tables were overturned and broken glass glinted from the thick carpets. It appeared that the remaining mercenaries hadn't yet ventured this far up the train. He caught his breath, grateful for the moment's reprieve. If he didn't bandage his wound, he'd bleed out before the train even made it to Seorawon. His eyes landed on a cloth napkin hanging off one of the tables and he stumbled toward it.

Across the room came a loud *thump*, and the sound of something heavy being hauled, accompanied by a low clicking, like claws against wooden floorboards.

A searing pain ripped through his head. It was agonizing, as if his mind were being split in two. A memory took hold—of a boy, not much older than himself.

"Sunho," his brother said, his face bloody, tears in his eyes. "You'll survive this. You're the best of us."

It was *his* memory, the single memory he'd woken with two years ago.

His blood began to burn. He looked down at his hands to see the veins pulsating, the blue thickening, *brightening*.

A black-robed figure filled the doorway across the room, its face hidden by a cowl. It was massive, inhuman in shape, with hunched shoulders from which sprouted huge, burdensome wings. The sound came from the protrusions as they dragged across the floor.

Demon, his mind supplied.

There was a roaring in his ears, his heart racing fiercely.

Then the monster was rushing toward him. He could neither move nor shout.

He caught a glimpse of black feathers. For a moment, he felt the gentle brush of a bird's wing, like a caress. Then it swiped one of its great arms, throwing him to the side.

He crashed through a window and into the night.

CHAPTER 12

REN

West of the Haebaek Mountains

Occupied Territories

REN SHELTERED FROM the storm in a small cave on the side of the mountain, emerging the morning after with new determination. The monster had come from somewhere west of the Haebaek Mountains, and so that's where she had gone. And yet, from her vantage on the rise, she hadn't spotted any signs of a village or settlement to ask the people there if they'd encountered a demon like the one that had attacked Gorye Village.

The healer had said Little Uncle only had three weeks before he succumbed to the illness, and she'd already spent half of one beneath the mountain. She was running out of time, to not only find a cure, but to *go back*.

She left the mountain behind her, setting a brisk pace. It was late morning by the time she came upon an enormous reed field.

Like a great, gilded sea, stalks of bronze and gold appeared to stretch endlessly onward. Birds looped patterns in the air, alighting onto stalks to chatter merrily. As she waded into the grass, the feathery plumes left dewy trails against her skin, like brushstrokes of ink.

However, after a few miles, the sunlight—which had been pleasant after the rain—turned grueling and harsh. The reeds were taller now that she was farther afield so that, even standing on her toes, she couldn't see above them. If it wasn't for the Floating World in front of her and the mountains behind her, she'd have lost her way entirely.

Feathery heads whacked her in the face as she trudged forward. The birds were in fact crows winging overhead, squawking their apparent delight at her situation. She put on her mask to scare them, but that only seemed to rile them up further, circling above to taunt her with their incessant cawing.

“Leave me alone!” she yelled when they got too close, stirring the reeds with their wings. She popped open her umbrella—the sharp movement, followed by the expanse of red, seemed to startle them for a short time, only for them to return a few minutes later, louder than before.

She hurried forward, keeping in sight the Floating World, hazy behind a bank of clouds. The crows grew bolder as time went on, a few winging down to scratch at her umbrella.

“Stop that!” she shouted. “Go away!” If Big Uncle hadn’t warned her of crows’ long memories and vengeful natures, she might have thrown rocks at them.

As she glared in their direction, she noticed they were making a strange pattern, circling above her only to swoop to another location, then back to her.

She climbed onto a large rock protruding from the muddy ground. The slight elevation brought her sightline above the reed fields. There was a disturbance in the reeds up ahead, about thirty paces to the west.

She stepped off the rock and hurried forward, letting the crows guide her now.

She pushed through the grass, her heart picking up speed as her feet did, rushing headlong through the stalks. She raced the last few steps and stumbled into a clearing.

For a moment she stood disoriented, momentarily blinded by the sunlight. The clearing was small, about half the size of a circle her troupe might perform in, and relatively dry, on a bit of higher ground from the marsh. Feathery reed stalks grew here, but they were crushed, many broken in half. The entire clearing was blackened—a fire must have caught the reeds, quickly doused by the storm. Lying amid the devastation was ...

... a boy.

She glanced behind her, as if someone might appear to explain why there was a boy lying unconscious among the reeds, but her only company were the crows. They had perched on a nearby tree, watching with their beady eyes.

“Is he dead?” she asked aloud. They didn’t answer, of course.

Where had he come from? She looked around the clearing for clues. Broken reeds. Trampled earth. But other than the path she’d taken, the reed fields were pristine in every direction. It was as if he had fallen from the sky.

The thought made her look up, and she immediately felt foolish. The crows squawked in derision. As one, they lifted from the branches of the tree, flapping their wings and cawing in a storm of feathers before winging off into the clouds.

Now it was just the boy and her, quite alone.

Cautiously, she left the edge of the clearing and walked toward where he lay on his back at its center. He didn't stir even as stalks snapped beneath her sandals. A few steps in, she noticed an object on the ground, covered by reeds blackened and charred from the fire. Crouching, she brushed them aside to discover a sword. The hilt was worn, though the blade shone like water.

She felt the back of her neck burn, the sun having reached its zenith, and she hurriedly brought her umbrella back up from where it had fallen to her side. She glanced from the sword to the boy. It must *belong* to him. Several paces away, a scabbard rested in a similar manner.

Reaching him, she knelt and lowered her face to his, relieved to feel the soft current of a breath. Faint, but there.

This close, she could see that he was around her age. The pallor of his skin was white; his black hair, cut short at the nape, appeared soft, like silk. She fought the urge to push it from his face, where strands had fallen across his brow. He had uncommonly long eyelashes.

He groaned, and she moved back, heat rising to her cheeks. When his eyes didn't open, she peered once more at his face. She felt embarrassed for ogling him as he lay unconscious, but she'd never seen anyone like him before.

He shifted slightly, and she noticed his brow was furrowed. Was he feverish? Then she saw sweat trickling down the side of his cheek. *The sunlight.*

Hurriedly she raised her umbrella to cover him.

The effect was immediate, his brow smoothing over, his lips parting in a sigh. She pressed closer to him, using her body to block the sun's rays.

Her gaze fell to his neck, where his robes had fallen askew, the vulnerable skin exposed to the sun. On instinct she reached out, thinking to draw his robes tighter, only to catch sight of something inked across his skin. She gently pushed his collar aside to reveal the topmost brushstrokes of a tattoo that extended from his shoulder to his chest, forming a single character.

She felt an odd, tingling sensation at the back of her throat. She'd seen

similar tattoos before, while watching the soldiers training on the military grounds of the Floating World. Every person who served in the Sareniyan army was required to have one, as the character indicated the unit they belonged to.

The boy was a Sareniyan soldier.

She stood up abruptly, taking the umbrella with her.

Exposed once more to the light, the sweat quickly returned to his brow.

But it wasn't just the light. He was having difficulty breathing, his breaths shallow, his chest hitched.

Frowning, she let her gaze rove over him until she spotted a rent in his clothes. Adjusting her umbrella so that it lay across her shoulder, she peeled back his robes farther, grimacing at the sight of a deep gash on the side of his body. His armor must have acted as a compress, otherwise he would have bled out hours ago.

Ren sat back on her heels. She should leave. Of her possible choices, that was the smartest. It was unlikely that he was traveling alone; there might be others.

She could hear Auntie's warning. *They'll have seen it. They'll come for you now.*

Sareniyan soldiers had tried to kill her ten years ago; there was a high probability that *he* would try to kill her if he awoke.

And yet, even knowing that, she couldn't leave him like this. Sareniyan or not, he was only a boy, who would die if she left him.

Cursing her foolishness, she reached for her magic.

She couldn't seal the wound completely; unlike her affinity with wind, her ability to heal was feeble at best, otherwise she'd have been able to cure Little Uncle.

She *could* slow down the bleeding though, long enough for whomever the soldier was traveling with to find him. That should be enough—it *had* to be.

Grimacing, she pressed her hands to the wound; she needed to have physical contact in order to heal him. His blood was warm and slick, spilling over her fingers. Closing her eyes, she concentrated on transferring her Light into the wound so that it slowed the blood flow. She didn't know if what she was doing would work, only that her magic had worked in similar ways in the past, the Light soothing what was hurt or injured. She sagged in relief when he began to breathe more evenly. He was out of danger, at least for now.

As she removed her hand, she frowned down at her fingers, coated in his blood.

Same as Little Uncle and the demon that attacked Gorye Village, the boy's blood was blue.

CHAPTER 13

JAEIL

The Under World

Fourth Ward, the Outer Ring

“THE TRAIN DERAILED a half day’s journey outside Seorawon.”

Jaeil looked from the window of the carriage to where Sana sat across from him, peeling an apple with her dagger. It was a large monstrosity of a fruit, grown in an inner-circle greenhouse. He shuddered to think what chemicals she was imbibing, though it was quite possible that was the appeal for Sana.

The buildings of the fourth ward were a blur, the horses cantering past them at a breakneck speed. The carriage hit a rut in the road, and the lantern attached to the ceiling swung back and forth, casting lurid shadows over the upholstered interior.

“The entire back of the train was lost,” Sana continued, the skin of the fruit spiraling around her calloused fingers. “The mercenaries didn’t make it. Not sure about the old bounty hunter. A certain scarred individual never showed up.”

Jaeil scowled at the reminder of his father’s visit. “And the soldier?” He peeled a piece of lint from his shirtsleeve, tossing it to the floor with a flick of his fingers.

“Likely killed in the crash.”

Outside, the streetlights went out, only to flicker back on a half second later. The horses didn’t let up. They were creatures bred in darkness; it held no fear for them.

The other nobles thought him a glutton for punishment, choosing to live in the darkness and the filth. They were wrong. The true filth was found in the light.

Finally, he said the words that he’d been thinking since the train departed

the station:

“I should have gone.”

“You’re injured. You would’ve been no use to anyone.”

He shot Sana a look of irritation, but he didn’t contradict her. She was, as usual, insufferably right.

But now there was no one—besides perhaps, the bounty hunter—going after the girl that he’d sent himself. It was likely that more than a few mercenaries had made it to the river city.

Of course, there was a chance, however small, that the soldier had survived the crash ...

The wheels of the carriage squealed as the coachman dragged on the reins. Jaeil didn’t wait for the carriage to stop before pressing open the door and jumping onto a wet street. It stank of piss, sweat, and fish. They were outside the fisheries. Sana handed him a handkerchief that he brought to his nose.

“Captain!”

A low-ranking soldier wearing the Sarenian uniform approached. Jaeil hadn’t a reputation of being friendly with those under his command, but he endeavored to remember their names. He’d met this one once before.

“Yumi,” he said, his voice muffled from beneath the handkerchief. “What’s this about?”

He’d received the missive only a half hour ago, when he was readying to leave for an assembly in the square. His steward had gaped at him when he’d informed the harried old man that he’d be delaying that trip in favor of this one.

Yumi’s eyes widened, seeming startled that he knew her name. “If you’ll follow me, sir.” She guided them toward a long dock, at the end of which shone a single lantern.

“Apologies for sending a missive on such short notice,” Yumi said over the low murmur of polluted water breaking against the rickety wharf, “but I was told to report anything of consequence.”

“You did the right thing.”

The soldier’s cheeks flamed beneath her dark skin. From Yumi’s other side, Sana waggled her eyebrows. Jaeil ignored them both.

She led them to where two fishermen were wringing their hands over a swollen mat. The smell was stronger here, mixed in with a new, fouler

stench.

Spotting him, both fishermen dropped to their knees, flattening their faces against the wood.

“Now, now, don’t stand on ceremony,” Sana said, looking down at her nails. “Truly.”

“What did you find?” Jaeil asked.

“Sir,” one of the fishermen whimpered, “it’s ... gruesome.” Jaeil noticed the way the old man trembled. His skin appeared brittle, as if made of paper.

Sana scowled. “Oh, I’ll just do it.” Reaching down, she threw the mat back.

A body lay beneath. The woman’s flesh was torn in several places and half her face was missing.

“Canal sharks, maybe?” Sana said. She shuddered, taking a step away from the edge of the dock.

“Perhaps,” Jaeil replied, though he was skeptical. Sharks would consume all of the body; this one was mostly intact.

The woman was naked, giving no clues as to her identity. She was likely from the Outer Ring, as she showed signs of malnourishment.

“These look like bite marks,” Jaeil said, crouching by the corpse. “But these...” His fingers traced five gouges on the woman’s arm.

“Scratches?” Sana asked.

“They’re too deep.” He pressed his gloved fingers into the gouges. They sank an inch into her flesh.

“That’s disgusting,” Sana said, taking a bite of her apple.

Jaeil stood. He nodded to the fishermen, who had come out of their bows only to cower by the lantern, then to Yumi. “You’ve done well, soldier. Have the body transferred to the morgue at Hagye.” He’d need a full autopsy report before he figured out what was going on.

She bowed, dropping her head low. “Yes, sir!”

Jaeil and Sana moved back across the docks.

“What do you think killed her?” she asked.

Jaeil removed his gloves, pressing them into his pocket. “Nothing good.”

He’d had a piss-poor morning, and the day wasn’t over. Sana tossed the core of the apple into the black water.

AS THEY PASSED through a gate from Mid City into the Core, the darkness receded.

Gas lamps illuminated the nine great avenues of the Core, each lined with dozens of mansions and shops—teahouses, confectioneries, apothecaries, and ateliers. Here, the wealthiest citizens of the Under World dwelled. As the carriage careened down cobblestone streets, appearing like burnished gold beneath the lamps, Jaeil thought of the fishermen trembling in the dark.

The fourth ward avenue opened into the main square, where all nine of the avenues converged. Jaeil was already late when the carriage pulled up outside the assembly hall, but that didn't stop him from pausing on the steps to lift his gaze skyward.

Somewhere above him was the Sky Door, the very center of the Floating World. He couldn't see it through the darkness, but in less than two weeks' time, during the Festival of Light, it would open. The square that day would be crowded with people, not just the citizens of the Core and Mid City but also the Outer Ring. Every year a few people were trampled to death, but that mattered little to those who wanted to witness the spectacle of the light flooding the city.

He felt Sana step up beside him, and together they approached the doors. The guards standing in front uncrossed their spears, moving aside to let them pass. Inside, floor lanterns illuminated a wide path to the assembly hall.

"Captain," a low voice crooned from the shadows. Jaeil signaled Sana to wait for him in the foyer. He turned to the owner of the voice, a young man with small, beady eyes and a thin beard. "You stink, Cousin," the man said, wrinkling his nose. "And you brought a rat with you." His eyes trailed after Sana, licking his lips.

Jaeil said nothing, waiting until his cousin's gaze had traveled back to him. When not sequestered on the Floating World, Yohan, along with the rest of their wretched brethren, spent most of his time in the brothels and gambling dens of the Under World.

Yohan was the first to break eye contact, looking away with a scowl on his face. "Uncle won't be pleased at your late arrival."

"I had..." Jaeil thought of the bodies by the docks, bloated with canal water. "An issue to take care of."

Yohan gestured Jaeil toward the chamber ahead. "Come, Cousin. Dearest Uncle should be addressing the assembly soon."

Jaeil followed Yohan through the doors. A council member was speaking from the podium at the front of the hall. Members of the council, as well as influential citizens from the Core and Mid City, sat in the long rows of tiered seats curving around the room.

The first several rows held the more prominent nobles from the Floating World, including his father. The general didn't acknowledge Jaeil's entrance.

"Cousin," Yohan said, "let's—"

Jaeil swept past the section with the nobles, choosing instead to climb the wooden steps. As he predicted, Yohan didn't follow. On the upper levels, non-council members—merchants and minor nobles—observed the proceedings with lazy interest, smoking pipes and murmuring quietly among themselves.

Jaeil headed toward the last of the rows. It was occupied by a single person, a man in a black robe. As Jaeil stepped past him, he noticed the man's clothing gave off an odd chemical scent.

A loud rapping noise drew Jaeil's attention to the front of the room.

"General Iljin of the Sarenian army will address the assembly," the council's secretary announced before bowing in the general's direction, then scuttling to his seat.

The chatter in the room ceased as the general approached the podium. Jaeil sat down, resting his fist on his thigh.

The general was considered a handsome man, tall and broad-shouldered. Jaeil was said to resemble him, though he was slighter of build. He was well-mannered, soft-spoken, though his eyes, many had remarked upon, seemed rather cold. They shared that in common.

His father spoke to the assembly at length about the war, key battles they had won, and territory gained. In the ten years the general had been in power, they'd forcibly annexed all the smaller kingdoms surrounding the Floating World and only now contended with their last and most powerful enemy, the great northern empire of Volmar.

The battles had become more vicious in the past few years; every day, the boundaries between the empires were redrawn. It was during the most recent one, a critical battle to overtake a mountain pass, when Jaeil had been thrown from his horse; he'd only survived because Sana had dragged him from the valley.

"... And so, I beseech you, noble lords and ladies, to once again

contribute to the greatness of Sareniya.”

Jaeil watched as below, the nobles shifted uneasily in their seats. While many took care to appease his father, they were united against him on one issue—the use of coin, *their coin*, to fund the war.

In the second row, an older man spoke up. “General, what is the purpose of continuing the war with the Volmarans?” *Minister Bak, the first ward minister*, Jaeil remembered. His presence at the assembly reminded him of Minister Jo, the ninth ward minister, whose vacant seat none but Jaeil seemed to take note of. “Should we not reach an agreement, a truce? I believe we should focus on building the necessary infrastructure in the territories we *have* gained rather than waste our resources in fighting against a mighty foe.”

“And if that mighty foe decides we pose a threat?” his father asked quietly.

“If that is the case, it would only be because you made it so, General,” Minister Bak said, just as calmly.

Jaeil was impressed. Minister Bak was braver than most. At least half the nobles present murmured their support.

The general seemed to consider the minister’s words for a moment. “When I was a young boy, I once traveled with my father to one of the neighboring kingdoms,” he began. “It has since been assimilated, but at the time, it was ruled by a king, though I can no longer recall his name.”

He spoke in a quiet voice, but that didn’t matter—the hall had gone silent.

“I remember standing with this king on the balcony of his castle,” the general said, “as he gazed upon the Floating World, when I happened to glimpse his face. What I saw there made my blood run cold. He was desirous. *Covetous*. His was a weak kingdom, and even then, he hadn’t the power to overcome Sareniya, but I never forgot that expression. It was one of the few times in my life I’ve ever felt truly afraid. It made me wonder about other, more powerful nations. What would stop them from seeing that beautiful land in the sky and taking it for themselves?”

The general had been looking out at the assembly, with no particular focus, but his gaze at once bore down on the first ward minister, making the older man flinch.

“You’re right, Minister Bak. In ten years, I’ve built Sareniya into a powerful empire, a feared one, through terrible sacrifice and the bloodshed of thousands, never wavering from one single, all-consuming purpose: to defend

it against those who covet the light.”

Jaeil shifted in his seat, uncrossing his legs and leaning forward slightly. His father had always been a charismatic speaker. The other half of the nobles, those who hadn’t vocalized their support of Minister Bak, cried out in favor of the general, the hall resounding with voices shouting over one another.

“But in order to gain more capital, we’d have to mine more mithril,” said a corpulent nobleman of obvious wealth and rank. “And if the rumors about the Floating World are true...”

“What rumors?” Minister Lim, the sixth ward minister, asked with a frown.

“That it’s...” His voice lowered. “Sinking.”

This statement sent a stir through the assembly.

“Then mining should cease at once!” someone at the back of the hall cried out—likely a merchant who, unlike the nobles, couldn’t uproot her family and business should a landmass happen to fall from the sky. And she was a woman with resources. By no means were any of the vast majority of the Under World’s population, none of whom were represented at this assembly, equipped for such a migration. “Mithril is what keeps the Floating World afloat!”

“We can’t stop mining!” a nobleman shrilled hysterically. “The economy would cease to run!”

Jaeil raised a brow at this statement. The cessation of mining would stop the flow of wealth into the pockets of the nobles, but the bartering of goods and exchange of coins would continue.

“Had the celestial maiden still lived, none of this would be a concern,” thundered a strident voice, silencing the others.

In the front row, a woman had risen from her seat. Lady Maya.

She was his father’s most powerful opponent. As a descendant of the first celestial maiden, she, along with her clan, carried the royal bloodline. “For a hundred years the Floating World had remained unharmed because of *her* protection. There was no power in any of the hundred kingdoms that was stronger than her Light.”

Jaeil could sense the building of his father’s anger, though it was likely he was the only one aware, having become attuned to it over the years.

“It is a tragedy what happened to your cousin, lady,” the general said

icily. “But even when she was alive, she had no true ... power.”

He let his words linger in the hall. Even if the direct descendants of the original celestial maiden had inherited her incredible powers, they’d become diluted over generations. The last queen of Sareniya hadn’t any magic at all.

“Sareniya’s strength is in her military, which brings me to my original purpose for calling this assembly today. I’ve told you what I need to win this war. However you obtain the coin matters little to me.”

The general nodded to the secretary, who leaped to his feet. “That concludes the assembly!” the man shouted.

The nobles were quick to disperse. The bench rattled as the man sitting at the end abruptly stood. As he turned, an object fell from the pocket of his robe.

“You dropped something,” Jaeil said, reaching down to pick up the object—a plunger with a long needle. *A syringe*. Jaeil had seen such instruments used in the medical tents.

“Thank you,” the stranger said, grabbing the syringe and stuffing it into his pocket. He wore spectacles, and Jaeil had the impression of dark circles beneath downcast eyes before he fled.

Jaeil hadn’t taken a dozen steps outside the hall before a voice called out to him. “Captain!”

He turned from Sana, who’d joined him in the foyer, and greeted Lady Maya with a low bow. When he straightened his back, he found her studying him, a calculating expression in her gaze that she quickly smoothed over with a smile.

“It is, as your father said, a tragedy what happened,” she said. “The general claims my cousin’s death the night of that horrible storm was an accident, that she fell while standing too close to the edge, dragging her daughter along with her.”

Jaeil kept his expression neutral.

“They say you were the princess’s closest friend, that she was quite ... attached to you.”

“Ten years is a long time,” Jaeil drawled. “I hardly remember.” It was a lie. He remembered every detail of that night, though it was almost a decade to the day. “And you’re mistaken. The princess and I weren’t close.”

He bowed to Lady Maya before she could reply, turning from her though she hadn’t formally dismissed him.

“Nobles,” Sana said as they exited through the great doors of the assembly hall’s entrance. “Why do I always want to kick one when I see one? Oh, wait, you’re a noble.”

“Let’s go,” Jaeil said, tugging at his collar to loosen it.

“Sir!” A soldier approached from where she’d been wringing her hands beneath a streetlamp.

“What is it?” he asked sharply, sensing her agitation.

“I was sent by Commander Su, from outside the Wall, sir. He said to come quick. Another body was found.”

CHAPTER 14

SUNHO

West of the Haebaek Mountains Occupied Territories

SUNHO SHIVERED AS he sat by the fire, watching the flames lick the night air. Above, the wind set the canopy to swaying. The eerie whistling sounded like the cries of restless spirits. He was hunkered beneath a thick coat, but even that couldn't block out the chill. The cold was in his bones.

Something soft plopped atop his head. Sunho reached up to pull away a scarf. It pooled like a thick ribbon in his lap.

"Ay, Junho, where'd you find that?" Across the fire, Rohoon snickered. "Did you make it yourself?" The bowman's voice was muffled by his own scarf. It was a gift from his grandmother, a fruit seller in the seventh ward. The others had already teased him mercilessly for it, and he took the jibes with a self-satisfied grin, claiming they were jealous of him because he even had a grandmother. He was right.

Sunho heard the crunch of rocks under boots. His brother crouched before him. Sunho looked into eyes that were like his own—dark, with thick lashes. They were always being teased for those lashes. *Like a girl's*, Rohoon and Heetae would say.

Junho took up the scarf and raveled it around Sunho's neck, his brow creasing slightly as he concentrated. It wasn't often that Sunho viewed his brother eye to eye. Junho was three inches taller, just as he was three years older. It had been that way since they were little, and sometimes Sunho wondered if he'd ever catch up.

As his brother adjusted the scarf, Sunho noticed the scar on the back of his hand, where a year ago he'd caught an arrow. It still bothered him, though Junho would never admit it aloud.

"You'll have to be strong," Junho was saying, and Sunho drew his

thoughts away from the scar to listen carefully. “I won’t be able to look out for you.” Tomorrow, Junho was moving to a larger regiment. The soldiers there would be older, not like Sunho and Rohoon, who were twelve, or Heetae, who was thirteen.

“It was just you and me for a long time.” His words conjured up memories of a childhood as orphans in a shantytown outside the Wall, tussling with the other children for scraps of food. In that world, as in this one, all they had was each other. “You’ll be all right.”

Sunho felt an ache swell up inside him. He turned his face away, not wanting his older brother to see.

“You’ll form bonds with these fools—” Junho continued.

“Hey, who are you calling a fool?” Heetae complained.

“I’d like to point out that I was the only one who knew how to start a fire.” This from Rohoon.

Junho ignored them. “And one day you’ll meet someone and have a family of your own.”

“What about you?” Sunho mumbled from beneath the scarf. A family was Junho’s dream, not his. Families were separated. Families never lasted.

“None of that is meant for me.” Junho got to his feet, leaning back as he gazed up at the sky. “It’s not written in the stars.”

“You can read the stars?” Sunho asked in awe.

“You can *read*?” Heetae cackled.

“The stars aren’t for people like us,” Rohoon grumbled.

“Maybe not for you fools, but Sunho’s different.”

The wind stopped; the trees stood still. Through a break in the canopy, the stars shone through. Innumerable. Winking in and out, like fireflies.

Sunho wondered what he looked like to the stars. *Do you think we shine as brightly?*

He didn’t realize he’d spoken aloud until the others laughed, Heetae falling off the rock he’d been perched upon. Sunho ducked his head into his scarf, but his brother only grinned, ruffling Sunho’s hair.

Sunho had been so cold before, but not anymore. The scarf was wound tight around him. But it wasn’t the reason for his warmth.

His brother was gazing up at the sky, but Sunho was gazing up at him. As he always had, as he always would. Junho was leaving, but only for a short while. They’d be reunited again, beneath a mithril sky.

He pulled the scarf up so that it covered his mouth.

Red. A vivid color. Junho's blood had bloomed red when he'd gotten hit by the arrow. Sunho's too, every time he'd gotten injured. They shared that between them, the color of their blood. Like a promise.

It was warm now, the scarf wrapped around him. A feeling of contentedness settled over him. Heat from the fire enveloped him. Sweat trickled from his brow.

The fire was close, too close. It was hot, unbearably so. He had to remove the scarf.

No, he wasn't wearing it any longer. He'd lost the scarf. On the train. It had been swept away into the night. A heavy ache settled into his bones. Junho had given him that scarf. His brother. Who was missing. Who he hadn't seen in over two years. Who he couldn't remember. He was searching for Junho, that's why he'd been on the train. He had to get up. He had to hurry. He needed to find him. But why was it so *hot*?

He cracked open his eyes. The sun bore down on him. Bright, too bright. He wasn't used to the light. He'd lived his life in darkness.

He felt as if he were suffocating in the light. Like it would wrap around him until he couldn't think, couldn't breathe. Then ...

A coolness. It washed over him like a balm.

Red.

An umbrella. The coolness came from the shade it cast over his body.

He squinted.

A girl held the umbrella over him.

Slowly he sat up, grimacing at the lancing pain at his side. His hands brushed against the rough stalks of crushed reeds.

The girl thrust an object beneath his nose. A jug of water.

He ignored the pain long enough to take the jug from her, raising it to his lips. He drank greedily, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand when he was finished.

The girl crouched before him. She was wearing a mask that covered her entire face, though there were slight holes at the eyes and mouth. "We need to get you out of the sun. Can you walk?"

He shifted to stand. "I don't need hel—" A wave of dizziness gripped him.

"Don't be stubborn," the girl said, her voice stern beneath her mask. She

sounded young, around his own age.

“I saw a house,” she said, “a few yards northwest of here. It looked abandoned, but they might have a well.”

He remembered the assassin on the train, her blade piercing his side. He needed to flush the wound and stitch it closed. It was a miracle that he hadn’t bled out entirely.

“Come on,” she said.

This time, when she moved to help him, he let her, wrapping his arm around her shoulders.

They stumbled from the clearing. He searched for the tracks of the train, but they were hidden beneath the reeds. As they walked, he tried to keep some of his weight off her, but it was difficult—he felt lightheaded, weak. With one hand, he held his wound, which had started to bleed again; the girl held tight to the other. He noticed that her fingers that gripped his were blue. With blood—*his blood*. She was the reason he hadn’t bled out; she must have stanching his wound. He was alive because of her.

Who was she? Why was she helping him? He didn’t know what to make of her. The mask was odd, but he’d seen odder behavior in the Under World. It was tied at the back of her head, the strings disappearing beneath her braid. Though the mask covered the entirety of her face, the back of her neck was exposed. Small wisps of black hair fell out from her braid, curling against the curve of her throat.

His mind was wandering, his thoughts jumbled.

“We’re here,” the girl said.

They’d reached what appeared to be an abandoned cottage. The thatching on the roof was worn and frayed, the papered windows torn in several places.

The girl pressed open a wooden gate, and they stumbled into a small courtyard. Here, the reed field had spread, stalks popping up around a low wooden platform.

They headed toward the front of the cottage, passing empty earthenware pots, tipped over on their sides. The girl forcefully shoved open the door, revealing a single room covered in dust and cobwebs.

She helped him to the leftmost wall, where he slid to the floor.

“Wait here,” she said, removing her belongings and dropping them at her feet. He held his wound tight, blood spilling from between his fingers. His movements must have counteracted whatever she’d done to stem the blood

flow. He could feel his life ebbing from his body, his vision blackening at the edges. He focused on the girl to keep himself from falling unconscious. She was wading through the contents of her bag, talking to herself as she did so. “No, not this,” she said, coming upon an item and tossing it over her shoulder. She did this several more times.

“Thank the gods,” she said with a gasp, holding up a sewing needle. “Hwi, you’re a lifesaver.”

Hwi? He wondered if that was a friend of hers.

She worked fast, gathering sticks and debris from around the room and piling them in the hearth at its center. She lit a fire with steel and flint, then placed atop it an iron pot filled with water from her jug. Even in his dazed state, he could appreciate her proficiency.

Grabbing the second of her sacks, she untied the thick knot at the top, the four sides falling apart to reveal neatly folded clothes. She didn’t hesitate, pulling an undergarment from the pile and tearing strips from the bottom. When the water boiled, she tossed the makeshift bandages into the water.

After holding the needle in the fire and cooling it off with a shake of her wrist, she finally returned, crouching beside him with the water jug.

First, she helped him take off his armor, her fingers untying the knots at the side, before pulling it over his head. Then she peeled back his robes.

He trembled as the cool air met his bare skin. He pressed his hand to his wound, having let go of it briefly to remove his clothes. She slid her blue fingers along his wrist, pulling his hand away.

The gash was gruesome, stretching from beneath his rib cage to his hip bone; the assassin’s weapon must have hit several organs. A normal person would have died hours ago, but he wasn’t normal. *The Demon*. As the girl gently poured the last of the water from her jug over the wound, he felt it stir.

His stomach tensed with panic. The Demon only ever awoke in battle. Did it sense his closeness to death? Would it lash out at the girl?

When she didn’t move, he glanced at her masked face.

“I—I’ve never done this before,” she said in a rush. “I mean, I’ve sewn up sheep, on the rare occasions they’ve managed to injure themselves, but ... you’re not a sheep.”

She was close enough that he could see her eyes behind her mask. They were dark and wide. When she continued to hesitate, he asked softly, “Do you want me to do it?”

“No, I’ll do it,” she said. “Hold your breath.” Though it was she who drew one in, as she pierced his skin with the needle.

The pain was excruciating. Halfway through, he blacked out.

He woke up several hours later, with the feeling that his head was being split in two. The girl was no longer in the room, but there were signs of her presence. The area had been swept clean, the items she’d tossed to the floor put back where they belonged. His wound was bandaged; strips of cloth were wrapped around his stomach and across his chest. As he sat up, his robe slipped from his shoulder, where the girl must have placed it over him.

It was an odd feeling for him to be so vulnerable in front of another person, especially a stranger. Of course, he didn’t have a choice. He was too weak to do anything *but* rely on her.

He didn’t trust people, and he didn’t let anyone get close to him. He thought of Yurhee and Tag, who, in their own way, had tried.

For two years, he’d avoided forming any relationships, knowing what lurked inside him, but there was a part of him that had wondered if he’d *always* been that way.

He knew now that wasn’t true.

He thought of the memory he’d had before waking in the reed field. He hadn’t had time to fully process what it meant. It wasn’t just that he’d *had* a memory—his first new one in two years—it was that he could remember *everything*, up until that moment. His childhood outside the Wall. His years in the army. Rohoon and Heetae, *his friends*.

The sound of approaching footsteps drew his attention to the doorway, where a few seconds later the girl appeared.

“Oh, you’re awake,” she said, sounding relieved. “I brought you your sword.” She placed it against the wall by the door. “I figured you’d want it close by.”

He was surprised by the kind gesture, and a warm feeling stole up his chest.

She still wore her mask. He wondered if she ever took it off. She must—to eat, to sleep.

“Are you a soldier?” she asked, gesturing in the direction of the sword.

“I...” He was about to tell her that he didn’t remember, but that was no longer the whole truth. “I was.”

She tilted her head to the side, likely wondering why he’d hesitated. “Are

you from the Floating World?”

“No.” This time, he didn’t hesitate. He wasn’t a Sareniyan. *They* were the reason he and his brother were in the army. Since Sunho was eight years old, he’d been forced to fight in the name of Sareniya.

She must have sensed his anger, because she was quiet for a long time.

His piercing headache eased somewhat, replaced with a dull, throbbing ache. He felt a chill sweep through him, and he shivered.

“Why is your blood blue?” she blurted out.

“I...” In the memory, his blood had been red, same as Junho’s. “I don’t remember.” He’d regained his memories from his childhood, up until that moment beside the fire in the woods—*twelve years of memories*—but nothing afterward. His memories were still blank, his mind filled with darkness. “Until today, I didn’t remember anything from before two years ago.”

He had a question for her, though he couldn’t recall what it was. It was an important question, such as, *Who are you?* or *Why did you save me?*

“Why are you wearing a mask?” he asked instead.

She tilted back on her feet, as if surprised by his choice of question. “Because it makes me feel safe,” she said, after a short pause. “I’m a troupe performer. I don’t want to forget who I am, where I came from. Where I’ll go back to.”

He could understand that. Even before he’d remembered the scarf was a gift from his brother, he’d sensed its importance. It was all that he had left of Junho. Though, he’d lost it, on the train ...

“Are you alone?” he heard her ask, though her voice sounded far away. “Will there be others looking for you?”

“I’m alone,” he said.

He had been for a long time.

A cool hand swept across his forehead, and he opened his eyes, though he couldn’t recall having closed them.

He didn’t know how much time passed after that.

His dreams were memories of his past, of the four years he spent as a soldier, the pain, the fear, the loss. Through it all was Junho. His brother was always with him, protecting him.

The memories should have brought him clarity, but they only led to more questions.

Junho would have done anything to come back to him, so why hadn't he? Something must have happened to him. Sunho needed to discover the truth. He needed to *find* him.

Every now and then, he'd surface from the delirium to find the girl beside him.

"Why am I here?" she'd muttered on one occasion. "I should leave him."

On another, she said, "But what if there's a connection? I *need* to know..."

And then lastly, "—wake up! There's something outside, I can hear it. I think it's—too late—it's coming—"

He woke up. Moonlight shone through the window into an empty room. He reached for his sword, ignoring the pain in his side as he staggered to his feet.

The door to the cottage was open. He squinted as he stepped into the moonlight. The girl stood at the center of the courtyard. Her back was to him, facing the reed fields. In her hands was the umbrella, held out before her like a shield.

He was about to call out to her when he heard a sound, like the scuttling of feet.

The reeds rustled and a creature rose from the grass. He thought of the demon on the train, but this one was different. It didn't have its hulking form, nor did it have wings. And though it wore clothes, they were shredded, hanging from its body in pieces. With a grotesque howl, the creature's jaw unhinged from its mouth, thick, dark blood seeping from between its jagged teeth.

Sunho reached for his sword, unsheathing it one motion.

The monster rushed forward, sprinting on two legs.

He waited for the girl to leap aside, but she seemed rooted to the spot, gripped by fear.

Damn it. He started to race toward her, but he knew he wouldn't make it in time. He was too slow, his body not yet recovered. The monster would rip her in half.

It leaped toward her with a scream, claws extended.

Sunho called upon the Demon.

It answered, and power flooded his veins.

With inhuman speed, he shot across the courtyard. Swinging his sword,

he severed the monster's head from its body.

CHAPTER 15

REN

West of the Haebaek Mountains

Occupied Territories

THE REEDS WERE silver in the moonlight. At Ren's feet, a dark pool of blood spread from beneath the demon's body.

It was dead. The same kind of demon as the one that had terrorized Gorye Village, that had taken Big Uncle's life, and left Little Uncle poisoned—

"Are you all right?"

She lifted her gaze to find the boy watching her, a slight furrow in his brow. For a moment, beneath the moonlight, she thought she glimpsed a gleam of blue in his eyes.

She blinked, and it was gone.

"I'm fine." She must have imagined it. His eyes were the same as before, a dark, earthy brown. "A demon like this attacked my caravan," she said, wrapping her arms around herself. "When it was coming toward me, I felt like I was back in that moment."

She hadn't been able to move. She'd tried—she'd wanted, desperately, to save herself—but it was as if the thread that connected her mind and body was severed. It had been the same on the cliffside. Why did this keep happening? Why couldn't she control her fear?

"I experienced something similar," the boy said, and her eyes widened in surprise. He'd dispatched the demon so swiftly, she wouldn't have thought him capable of such paralyzing fear. "I couldn't move, even though I knew that if I didn't act, I would die."

"What happened?" she asked.

"I ended up in that clearing."

Before she could ask him *how* he'd ended up there, a loud cracking sound emanated from the demon's body. It was changing, *transforming*, its claws

retracting.

“Have you seen anything like this before?” she asked him, shivering.

He shook his head, his expression grim.

There was a loud *snap* of bones breaking, and her heart started to beat fast again.

“Why don’t you wait inside?” the boy said, in a softer voice than the one he’d used previously. “I’ll bury it.”

She nodded. She wasn’t any use to him out here anyway. “If you find anything about where it might have come from,” she said, “could you let me know?”

He nodded. “I will.”

Gripping her umbrella, she headed back toward the cottage. She hadn’t known, before rushing outside, what had lurked among the reeds—though from the shrieking sounds, she’d feared it was another demon—only that she’d wanted to draw it away from the boy and thought she’d have a better chance of facing it out in the open.

Inside the room, it was the same as before she’d left, except that the pallet she’d made for the boy out of her spare clothing was empty.

She sank to her knees in relief. Somehow, after all that, he’d survived. It was almost too incredible to believe. There had been moments in the past two nights when she’d thought of abandoning him—his chances of survival were low, and she was running out of time to find a cure for Little Uncle—and yet she’d remained, cursing her conscience.

Though, she shuddered to think what might have happened had she been alone tonight.

Maybe she’d been meant to save him so that *he* could save *her* from the demon.

She took several deep breaths. Her heartbeat hadn’t yet slowed. On her knees, she shuffled to the hearth in the middle of the room. With a stick, she brushed aside a layer of ashes, uncovering the coals beneath, then added dried reeds and wood to rekindle the fire.

The previous owners of the cottage had planted a vegetable garden at the side of the house; she’d discovered it on her second day. It had been overrun with weeds, but she’d managed to salvage several onions, carrots, and potatoes.

With her small knife, she peeled and cut the vegetables, dropping them

into a basket of woven reeds. The routine comforted her. Back home, her family would take turns preparing meals, though some of them had more of a talent for it than others. Auntie was by far the worst, though none of them dared complain about her burnt and flavorless meals, except for maybe Little Uncle. He and Ren were passably proficient, sticking to the most basic of ingredients.

Big Uncle was the skilled one. On days when it was his turn to cook, they gathered around the fire early in anticipation. Oftentimes, Hwi would join them, bringing along with her a dessert, usually rice pudding or sweet rice cakes.

It was on those nights, surrounded by the people she loved, that Ren felt the most at peace.

She coughed; her throat was parched. She grabbed for the water jug, only to find it empty.

Outside, the body of the demon was gone; so was the boy. He must have dragged it away.

As she stood on the steps of the cottage, a strong breeze swept over the grass. It set the reeds to swaying, like a great swell in an ocean.

She hurried down the steps toward the back of the cottage, where a narrow path led to a stream. She'd discovered it the same day she'd found the garden. She dipped the jug beneath the surface, hugging her knees as she crouched by the bank, and watched as it slowly filled with water. Her chest felt weighted. Another day had gone by, and she was no closer to finding a cure for Little Uncle's illness. What if she never did? What if, even now, she was too late?

She closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. The boy was the key. His blood was the same color as Little Uncle's, same as the demons'. If there was a connection, he was the key to discovering it.

A half hour later, the pot of vegetables was boiling over the fire. The door opened and the boy entered the cottage. He must have made use of the stream because his hair was damp. As he took a seat opposite her, he winced, pressing his hand to his side.

"Your injury," Ren said, alarmed. She quickly got to her feet, grabbing the last of the makeshift bandages and kneeling beside him. "Let me see."

He didn't protest when she moved to help him out of his robe, sliding the thick cloth away from his shoulders.

As her hand touched his skin, she felt him tense beneath her fingers. Her eyes flicked upward to find his face turned from her. “Your fingers are cold,” he mumbled.

“Oh, sorry,” she said, blushing, though she didn’t know why. “I’ll be quick.”

She began to unravel the bandages. The movement brought her close to him, as she had to reach around his back. At last, the final layer of bandages fell away. She stared at the wound, uncomprehending.

It was ... healed. While still inflamed along the edges, the skin had sealed over completely. She wasn’t even certain if it would *scar*.

Her *magic* had done this?

The boy was staring at the wound as well. He didn’t look as astonished as her; in fact, he looked a little queasy.

“I’m going to change the dressing now,” she said, and he nodded, though he didn’t seem to be listening. With her knife, she cut the stitches, then began to wrap the wound with fresh bandages. When she was finished, she sat back on her heels, eyeing her handiwork.

Her eyes traveled from the wound to the character inked down the right side of his chest. Before, the tattoo had been covered—first by his clothing, then later the bandages—but now she could read it clearly.

“*Demon.*”

The boy’s eyes darted to hers.

“Sorry,” she said, realizing she must have sounded like she was calling *him* a demon. “Your tattoo ... the character reads ‘Demon.’ Aren’t Sarenian soldiers usually branded with the symbol of their units?”

“They are,” he hedged, and she sensed his wariness. She needed to tread carefully if she wanted him to open up to her. It couldn’t be a coincidence that both he and the monster had blue blood, that he bore *that* symbol on his body.

“You said you were a soldier, and yet you’re not a Sarenian...” She trailed off in confusion.

“It’s not only Sarenians who serve in the army,” he explained. He reached for his robe, pulling it back over his shoulder. “The majority are recruits from the Occupied Territories and the Under World. When I was eight, my brother and I were indentured to the army by the orphanage where we were living. We served for four years in a scouting unit.”

He lifted his arm and traced the black marks on his skin. “Our unit was called ‘Rabbit’ unit.” She peered closer. It was faint, but the character for *Rabbit* was inked beneath his collarbone.

“Then, when—?” *When had he gotten the other tattoo?*

“I don’t remember.”

She frowned, though she recalled he’d told her that the first night. *Until today, I didn’t remember anything from before two years ago.* At the time, she didn’t understand—he couldn’t have meant that literally. But it appeared that he did. There was no reason for him to lie to her, especially not that first night, when he’d been delirious.

She sat back with a heavy sigh. It didn’t matter if he had a connection to the demon if *he* didn’t remember what that connection was.

But she wouldn’t take out her frustrations on him.

Eight years old ...

When *she* was eight, Auntie was teaching her how to do backflips, and Big Uncle was taking her out on their rowboat to try her hand at fishing.

“How old are you now?” she asked.

“Seventeen.”

Her stomach fluttered. They were the same age. She’d never spent time with anyone her exact age before. Hwi was a year younger, Little Uncle a year older. It made her feel closer to the boy somehow.

“I am, too,” she said with a blush, glad for the mask that concealed her face. She brought her knees to her chest. “So, you have a brother?”

His guarded expression returned.

“I have a brother, too,” she explained. “Though technically he’s my uncle. He’s fifteen years younger than his sister—my aunt—who raised us. I’m here because of him.”

Ren took a deep breath. Until now, she’d been careful not to reveal too much about herself—though that hadn’t been too difficult, as he’d been unconscious for most of their time together. She still hadn’t any idea why he was in that clearing in the first place. He could be, as she first suspected, someone sent to kill her, like those that Auntie had warned her about, having seen her Light. Yet, she had her doubts. He’d *saved* her. Even if he didn’t know who she was, a cold-blooded assassin wouldn’t have risked his life to save a stranger. The boy was a protector, not a killer.

“He was scratched while defending me,” she said. “By a demon, like the

one outside.” The boy’s expression shifted at her words, a furrow appearing on his brow. “Soon after, he became ill. I left to find a cure, but I didn’t have any idea of where to search until...” *You*. “Until tonight,” she finished instead. She didn’t think it was the right time to bring up her suspicions that *he* was connected to the demon. “Did you find any clues of where it might have come from?”

The boy reached into his robe, retrieving a scrap of cloth from an inner pocket.

He passed it to her, and she took it carefully, turning the cloth in her hands. Embroidered in black thread was a folded wing.

She frowned. “I’ve never seen this emblem. Have you?”

He shook his head. “I’ve seen it before, but I don’t know what it means. It was stamped on a crate in the luggage car of the train I was on. It’s possible the demon was being transported within and escaped during the crash.”

Train. It was a word she hadn’t heard in many years. She’d glimpsed one, once, from the edge of the Floating World. It had threaded across the ground into the distance, like a silver river.

“This train...,” she asked. “Where was it coming from?”

“The Under World.”

He’d mentioned that name before. “I don’t understand. The underworld, like the place from myth?”

The boy watched her with a slight frown. “It’s a city. Beneath the Floating World.”

Ren was confused—she had no recollection of such a place. She’d been seven when she’d fled, but surely she’d remember an entire city. Or perhaps, she thought bitterly, her tutors had never taught her of its existence.

“I have to go there. To the Under World. Will you take me?” The boy might be a stranger to her, but he was a stranger who had saved her life, and he clearly knew how to fight. More importantly, she needed to keep him close to discover what his connection was to the demons.

A shadow fell across the boy’s features. “I have my own purpose for being here. I’m a sword-for-hire. About a week ago, I took a job.”

Ren frowned. “What kind of job?”

He hesitated, and Ren wondered if he was considering keeping the truth from her. “I’m looking for a girl,” he said finally. “I’m to bring her back with me to the Under World.”

Ren hid her shock well, holding her body still and giving no outward reactions. “A girl? Are you bringing her back to your ... client? What do they want with her?” She tried to sound casual, as anyone would when made apprised of an unusual situation.

“I don’t know his name. He’s young, a captain in the Sarenian army. I don’t think he means her any harm. He wants her brought back alive.”

A captain in the Sarenian army ... Ren hadn’t any idea of who he could be, or what he’d want with her. When she searched her memories, she couldn’t think of anyone who might desire to help her.

“What are you getting in return?” she asked, to satiate her own curiosity. She’d left her own world to save Little Uncle. What would motivate someone like him to leave his?

The boy’s eyes darted to her before shifting away. “What else?” He shrugged. “Money.”

Ren knew immediately he wasn’t telling the whole truth. She was rather adept at spotting a lie, from a nervous tic to the slightest change in an expression. For a whole summer she’d assisted the caravan’s fortune teller, who was a bit of a charlatan, and learned to identify the signs. The boy was easier to read than most; his cheeks had flushed a curious shade of blue.

There was something he wasn’t telling her, and until she figured out what that was, she’d have to be careful not to trust him.

“I see.”

She had so many questions, none of which she could ask him without raising suspicion. Were there others sent after her? How many? What did they think the source of the light was? Did they know that she had ... powers?

She’d predicted this would happen—Auntie had warned her—and the boy had confirmed what she already knew. She just had to keep to the plan.

“Where was the train headed?” she asked, and was glad for the steadiness of her voice.

“Seorawon.”

“Will there be another train there? One that will return to the Under World?”

“It’s possible, though trains don’t run often. Usually once every two weeks.”

She cursed inwardly. If there wasn’t a train, she’d find another way. There

had to be transportation that could get her there faster than walking would.

“That’s where you’re heading, isn’t it? Let’s travel there together.” The fact that she was the one he was looking for didn’t change anything. She still needed to keep him close to discover if his blood was the same as the demon’s. Perhaps there was something in his past, in the memories he’d forgotten, that could illuminate its origin. And he *had* been hired to protect her, as the mysterious captain wanted her alive—he would be doing just that.

He had no reason to suspect her of deceiving him. If he was chasing the light, he’d be looking for someone *east* of the Haebaek Mountains, not west.

“What’s your name?” she asked, regaining her spirits now that she had a plan.

“Sunho.”

It’s true that he hadn’t yet *agreed*, but Ren had always been persuasive.

“What’s yours?” he asked.

Sunho might be a terrible liar, but she was an excellent one. “My name is Hwi.”

CHAPTER 16

SUNHO

West of the Haebaek Mountains *Occupied Territories*

CLOSING THE GATE behind them, Hwi turned back toward the cottage and bowed. Sunho mirrored her movements, lowering his head.

“Guardians of this land,” she said, her voice strong and carrying, even from behind her mask, “we thank you for providing us food and shelter these past three days and nights. We leave here well rested and with more determined spirits. Please accept this humble offering.”

Sunho lifted his gaze to see her place a smooth stone onto one of the wooden posts of the gate. He lowered his head, touched by Hwi’s sincerity. When she’d told him her name, he’d had the vague recollection of having heard it before, but he couldn’t remember where or when. It must have been from one of the memories he’d recovered, most of which still felt a bit foggy.

Hwi rose out of her bow, and Sunho joined her. Together, they left the clearing.

Sunho took the lead. He’d told Hwi the evening before that he’d seen a map on the train of its route to Seorawon. From what he could remember, the city lay directly north of where they were now, on the other side of a mountain. If they followed the tracks, it would take them five or six days on foot, but if they cut through the mountain, it could take as little as three days. They’d both agreed to take the faster route.

Keeping the sun to his right, he waded shoulder-deep through the reeds, with Hwi close behind him.

As he trudged forward, he thought of the job as it stood now. Of the five mercenaries the captain had hired, it was possible three had survived the massacre on the train. He hadn’t seen either the scarred man or the old bounty hunter in his flight through the back-end cars, which meant either could be

alive. That left them, and at least a dozen hired killers—those who had broken away with the first-class passenger cars—after the girl.

It was possible the fighting had continued once they'd reached the city. The victors of that bout would have chartered an airship or found some other passage through the Haebaek Mountains.

He'd been in the cottage for three days. It would take that same amount of time to reach Seorawon and find an airship captain who would take him over the mountains. There was a high probability that even if he were to find the girl, he'd be too late. Still, he had to try. He had to move forward with the belief that she was alive. Otherwise, there'd be no hope of discovering what had happened to Junho. Having regained his memories, the urgency to find his brother was even greater.

Luckily, Hwi was as eager as Sunho to make up for the time they'd lost, and by midmorning they'd left the reed field behind, venturing onto a wide-open plateau. Though still a great distance away, the forest at the base of the mountain was visible as a dark line of trees.

He yearned for the relief of its shadows. The plateau was a barren wasteland, with little in the way of cover, the sun a fiery circle above them. As they walked, he felt its presence like a weight against his back. It wasn't so much the heat; he wasn't used to so much *light*. When he was a scout, he and the others were sometimes sent on missions that required them to move during the day, but usually they traveled at night. Rohoon and Heetae had been from the Under World, as well; none of them had been born to sunlight.

Rohoon. Heetae. His friends. How had he forgotten them? Since they were eight years old, they'd been together. First in the training camp, where they had fought with the other recruits for food and shelter, before being assigned to Rabbit Unit.

The sun beat down on his back; he felt as if he were falling, yet he remained upright.

What had happened to everyone? They'd spent every day together for four years, so then where were they now? Why was he alone?

Before, though he'd known he had a brother, he hadn't *remembered* Junho, what it felt like to have Junho beside him, to know that he was safe as long as his brother was near. He hadn't remembered the way Rohoon would complain at length to them *about* them, yet should anyone else so much as utter a word against his friends, defend them fiercely. The way Heetae

laughed with his whole body, his hands holding his stomach, tears in his eyes. They'd cared about him, and he'd cared about them.

Before, he hadn't felt the *loss* of them. Like a hole in his body that he hadn't known existed but had been there all along.

As he regained his memories, would this feeling worsen? The hole growing wider and wider until from within that gaping darkness the Demon spilled forth, swallowing him whole—

“Sunho.”

He looked up. Hwi stood in front of him, holding her umbrella.

“Take this,” she said, thrusting the hilt into his hand. “The sun won't set for another few hours. This should help with the worst of it.”

Another memory came to him—not one from his past, shrouded in loss and confusion, but a recent one, of waking to find her holding the umbrella over him. Now, as before, he felt an unfamiliar feeling. As if, for the briefest of moments, the weight he always carried—his amnesia, the Demon, his loneliness—was lifted.

He hefted the folded umbrella, examining it. It was lighter than his sword, though similar in length. He'd never used one before, but the mechanics appeared straightforward. He slid the runner up from the handle and the hood unfolded. As he brought it over his head, the relief he felt was immediate, like stepping beneath a cloud. When Hwi had first held the umbrella over him, he'd only registered that it was red in color, but he could see now that there were golden, swirling accents painted onto the lacquered paper.

A muffled sound caught his attention. He looked over to find Hwi's head downturned, her shoulders shaking.

“Is something the matter?” he asked, alarmed.

She waved her hand in the air. “You just ... with the way you're dressed, holding the umbrella like that ... You should see yourself.” She was ... laughing, but the sound was soft, not cruel. She was holding her stomach, her laughs turning to snorted giggles. “You'd make a more convincing noble than Little Uncle!”

He was struck by the sight of her. *She laughs like Heetae*, he thought. *With her whole body*. But unlike with Heetae, he couldn't seem to look away.

He felt his cheeks heat, and not for any reason that had to do with the sun. “Is that what you do when you perform?” he asked. “Dress up and pretend to be characters?”

“That’s right. We use props, like that umbrella and others, to playact different roles. I’ll show you.” Her voice was bright as she excitedly swung her satchel in front of her. Reaching inside, she pulled out a fan that she unfurled with a flick of her wrist.

“The fan is one of the props we use the most. It can be used to express all kinds of emotions.” She fluttered it close to her face. “Bashfulness.” Then she swept it downward, away from her body. “Annoyance.”

She folded it closed, hunching her back. “It can be a walking stick for an old man, or a sword for a young warrior.” She jumped forward, thrusting and sweeping it through the air.

He gasped when she pretended to trip backward over a rock, flailing her arms. She threw the fan up into the air, only to tumble backward, catching it with one hand.

He balanced the rod of the umbrella on his shoulder so that he had both hands to clap. “That was incredible.”

She jumped to her feet, tucking her fan into her waistband. “That’s just a little of what I can do,” she said, taking pride in her skills. As she should; he was a little in awe of her. “With an accompanist, someone playing the drum or flute, I can act out a whole story.”

“I’d like to see that,” he said, smiling at her warmly.

As he gazed at her, she shifted on her feet. He thought that she meant to speak, but she turned abruptly, walking away at a fast pace. Sunho had to jog to catch up with her.

As they walked, Sunho snuck glances in her direction, worried he’d done something to offend her. He’d never met anyone like her, not in the past two years in the Under World, nor the four he’d spent in the army. She was cheerful, but it was more than that. It was difficult to put into words; it was as if there was a light within her, not something he could see but a warmth he felt. He found himself wanting to know more about how she’d learned to do such tricks, what her life had been like with the caravan before the demon had attacked.

They’d walked several minutes in silence when she turned. “Can we share the umbrella?” she asked, and he was surprised to hear the cool tone of her voice. “The rays are the strongest at this time of the day,” she added, much softer, and he realized she was embarrassed.

He nodded and she came close to him. He shifted the umbrella so that it

covered them both.

“Can I ask you something?” she asked as they resumed walking. “The girl you’re searching for ... do you know anything about her?”

He thought of the night before, when she’d asked about his mission. He’d hesitated but ultimately decided to tell her the truth. It wasn’t really a secret—there were ninety-nine others with a similar aim—and she was harmless, a troupe performer on her own journey to save her uncle. The light had come from the east over the mountains, and she had discovered him in the reed field on the opposite side. He’d only kept the reason for *why* he’d taken the job from her, lying to her when she’d asked what he was receiving in return.

He felt wary of speaking about Junho—the night at the ninth ward mithril factory with Yurhee and Tag had been an exception, his guard slipping due to exhaustion. He believed Hwi was a good person, but he wasn’t ready to share about Junho. Not yet.

“Only that the girl has something to do with the silver light that appeared in the east,” he said, “and that she’s around our age. There was a drawing—”

“You know what she looks like?” Hwi interrupted, sounding startled.

“If she looks anything like the drawing, I should be able to recognize her.”

Hwi’s mask must have slipped because she lifted her hand to adjust it. “What if, when you find her, she’s happy? What if she doesn’t want to go with you?”

He hadn’t thought of that possibility. “I don’t know, but I’m not the only one after her. Five days ago, I boarded a train bound for Seorawon, along with about a hundred mercenaries, assassins, and swords-for-hire. I don’t wish her any harm. The same can’t be said of the others.”

Hwi shuddered. “And you ended up in that clearing,” she said, and he nodded. “What happened?”

“A fight broke out. My guess is that a few of them thought their chances of success would be higher with less competition. Even then, it would have been ... fair, even expected. Those of us who took the job knew the risks. But most of the passengers were civilians. Families, some with children. The mercenaries didn’t care. It was a massacre.”

“Did you kill any of them?” she asked softly.

“Two. A mercenary and an assassin. The one that gave me this.” He touched his side, where the assassin with the chained blade had sliced

through his armor. “Does that ... frighten you?”

It frightened *him*. For the two years he’d worked as a sword-for-hire, he hadn’t taken a life. The night he’d broken into the mithril factory with Yurhee and Tag, he’d left the guards unconscious. Yet he’d killed the mercenary and the assassin without remorse.

When he was reunited with Junho, would his brother recognize him? Or would he look into his eyes and see only the Demon gazing out?

“They were trying to kill you, weren’t they?” Hwi said, and he was surprised by the vehemence in her voice. “It was terrible what happened on the train, and I grieve for the innocent lives that were lost. But I’m glad *you* weren’t one of them.”

He felt his dark thoughts receding, and he realized that twice now she’d pulled him back with just her words. He found himself moving even closer, shifting the umbrella to his other hand.

The sun was setting by the time they reached the forested mountainside. Sunho returned Hwi’s umbrella, and she tucked it against her back. Reddish-gold rays pierced the canopy like arrows, striking the floor in pools of light. Hwi stepped through them as if they were puddles, kicking up her feet.

Birdsong lilted through the forest. Now that he was out from beneath the sun, with night approaching fast, Sunho felt his body relax. As they walked, he let his mind wander to the memory beside the campfire. He and the others had been sent ahead of the main army, with orders to scout north of the border.

The forest in his memory had been covered in snow, the trees taller, their trunks wider. The four of them had moved soundlessly through the darkness. Had they been caught, the plan was to pretend to be children of local trappers. Unlike Sareniya, the northern empire of Volmar forbade the use of child soldiers.

Sunho remembered trekking through the snow with the others, taking turns to cover their tracks. Junho had taught them how to heed signs of danger. *The forest will warn us*, Junho had said. *Listen*.

Sunho looked up. Hwi had climbed onto a log, balancing while holding her umbrella.

The birds had stopped singing. He scanned the darkening forest, searching for movement in the brush. All was silent.

He was about to call out a warning when he heard the *whoosh* of an arrow

whistling through the trees.

“Look out!” he shouted.

Hwi jumped backward, and the arrow missed, lodging in the trunk. Sunho stared at her in shock and felt an echo of the awe he’d felt earlier. She’d moved quicker than he’d thought possible. A second arrow flew toward her. She knocked it to the side with her fan, which she’d grabbed from her waistband.

“Behind you!” Hwi shouted. Sunho snapped to attention, unsheathing his blade. Twisting around, he dropped low in time to block the swing of a sword. His attacker was dressed in brown, her face covered by a scarf. Her eyes widened as he pushed off the ground, lunging toward her. He knocked her sword aside and shoved her, hard, and she fell backward into a small ditch.

“Sunho!”

He whipped around, his gaze finding the log. It was empty. His stomach lurched with panic.

Then he spotted Hwi. She had climbed a tree and was perched on its lowest branch. He hurried over, holding out his hand. She slid off the branch and he caught her by the waist, placing her firmly on the ground. Together, they raced through the forest.

He spotted a light in the distance, and they headed toward it, bursting into a small clearing. He realized his mistake the moment they’d stumbled forward a few steps.

A man stood on the other side of the clearing. He was accompanied by an archer, his bow already nocked. From the forest on either side, two more men stepped forward. A branch snapped behind them. They were surrounded.

The man across from them nodded at the archer, who raised his bow.

The Demon stirred. There were five of them. He could kill them all. *It would be easy. It would be quick.* He knew that if he unleashed the Demon, its power would flow through him, lending him its strength, its speed. None of those standing in the clearing would survive the slaughter. He’d move from one to the next, each perishing in a splatter of gore. The leader first—his head would hit the earth before his body. The archer he’d slice into pieces. The others would die before they had a chance to scream. The images sent a thrill through the Demon.

Fight. Destroy. Kill.

His senses heightened; his breath came out in a rush.

But what if he couldn't control it? What if it hurt *her*?

His heart stilled. He couldn't risk that; *he refused*. The Demon writhed within him, demanding he act. *Kill. Kill. KILL.*

His consciousness began to darken; he was losing control. Once the Demon took over, it would subsume him completely.

He felt a soft pressure along his arm. "Sunho, listen to my voice." *Hwi*. "It's going to be okay."

He wanted to believe her. Two years ago, he woke with a single memory and the knowledge of two irrefutable truths. He had a brother, and within his soul, there lived a Demon.

Sometime in the past, he'd lost Junho, though he didn't remember how, or why. There were nights, when his heart was weak and his mind was cruel, when he thought Junho must have abandoned him.

Not like the Demon. *It* had remained. And so he'd clung to it. The Demon wasn't what cleaved to Sunho, it was *he* who cleaved to it. Without the Demon, he had nothing. Without it, he was alone.

But that was before. His memories were returning—Junho wouldn't have forsaken him, and neither would Rohoon and Heetae. They were waiting for him, somewhere. And ...

He wasn't alone. Not anymore.

Hwi slipped her hand into his. He clung to it tightly.

"Trust me," she said.

The Demon's presence flared one final time, then diminished, letting go of its hold over him.

CHAPTER 17

REN

West of the Haebaek Mountains
Occupied Territories

REN FELT ANOTHER tremor go through Sunho's body; she gripped his hand even tighter.

He'd been ready to kill *all of them*. She didn't know *how*, as it seemed impossible—their attackers were armed, surrounding them on all sides—and yet, the Light within her had flared in response to a presence, something *inside* him. She didn't have time to think of what that could mean. All she knew was that if the fight continued, something terrible would happen.

The archer drew back his bowstring.

"Wait!" Ren shouted, her heart beating rapidly as her mind raced to catch up. "You've clearly mistaken us for something we're not."

The man beside the archer—presumably the leader, from the way the others deferred to him—raised his hand. The archer lowered his bow. "And what are you, if not Sareniyans?"

"I'm Hwi," Ren said, the lie falling easily off her tongue. "I'm an acrobat, and this is Sunho. He's a sword dancer." They weren't *entirely* falsehoods. She'd forsaken Sareniya as her homeland, and Sunho *did* have a sword. "We're troupe performers, on our way to Seorawon."

Though her body still thrummed with adrenaline, she found that she could think more clearly now that they weren't being immediately threatened. She studied their assailants. They didn't appear to be mercenaries like those on the train Sunho had spoken of—otherwise they wouldn't have stopped their assault. And they weren't Sareniyans.

Their clothing was worn, which meant they weren't warriors. Villagers, then?

"They're only kids," a voice spoke from behind them. Ren eyed the

swordswoman who'd grappled with Sunho earlier, her scarf now pulled down from her face.

"That doesn't mean anything," grouched the archer, who appeared to be the youngest in the group. "Sareniyans have no qualms about using children in their army."

"Fine, cut them down," the swordswoman said, though she wasn't speaking to the young archer, but to the leader. "Then see if you can face your own children when it's finally time to return home."

Sensing imminent victory, Ren let herself relax.

"I hope I don't come to regret this," the leader said with a sigh. "Take their weapons. Search them thoroughly."

Ren squeezed Sunho's hand before letting go. The presence from earlier had disappeared. It had felt like a shadow—no, that wasn't quite right, as it wasn't visible. She realized she'd felt it before, back at the cottage, when she'd removed Sunho's clothes to clean his wound. She'd chalked it up to her own fatigue and to the shock of her circumstances then.

The woman approached Ren to take her satchel, distracting her from her thoughts. Ren relinquished her umbrella and paper fan. As the swordswoman rifled through her belongings, Ren observed Sunho and the archer. The older boy snagged Sunho's sword from his grasp, sheathing the blade in its carrying bag, then tossing it over his own shoulder.

"Where are your things?" the archer sneered.

Ren stiffened. As troupe performers, and travelers, they should *both* have possessions; tools of their trade and provisions.

"He lost his bag," she answered for Sunho quickly. "We were beset by thieves on the road." Her explanation seemed to placate the archer—he grunted, continuing his search. Unlike the swordswoman—who, after finishing with Ren's bag, had stood to pat down Ren's arms and legs—the older boy wasn't as gentle.

Sunho winced when the archer struck his side. Ren felt her blood run hot and had to stop herself from leaping at the boy. She couldn't draw attention to Sunho's wound, as *that* would be difficult to explain.

From within the right inner pocket of Sunho's robe, the archer pulled out a long string of coins.

The swordswoman, raising a brow, stopped her search of Ren. For half a second, no one spoke, then the archer hissed, "The thieves didn't take *this*?"

Ren didn't think. She threw herself to the ground. "You've figured us out, all right?" she howled, pulling at her hair. "We're running away together. We heard Seorawon was a place where you can go if you wish to disappear, where you can be anyone you want to be. You're just like my parents, stopping true love!"

"Hey, quit that!" The archer grabbed her by the arm and hauled her to her feet. She was surprised to see a flush spreading across his cheeks, as if the thought of romance embarrassed him.

"Why are you wearing that mask?" he said, his eyes narrowing. "What are you trying to hide?"

"My face, Oh Smart One. Something you should consider."

She thought, briefly, that perhaps she shouldn't antagonize him, but she was still upset over the way he'd treated Sunho.

With a growl, the archer grabbed the front of her jacket, pulling her forcefully toward him. "Someone should teach you a lesson."

"Let her go."

Ren's breath hitched. Sunho's hand was circled around the older boy's wrist. Neither of them had seen him move. When the archer tried to break Sunho's hold, throwing his hand downward, Sunho only tightened his fingers. The boy yelped. "Fine, fine!"

It wasn't until the archer let go of Ren that Sunho released him.

Scowling, he rubbed his wrist. "Why does she wear the mask, anyway? Is she ugly?"

Ren was about to hurl more insults, but Sunho spoke first. "It doesn't matter why she wears the mask. It's her decision, so you should respect it."

From the corner of her eye, Ren saw the woman nod approvingly.

"And..." Sunho's gaze swept toward Ren. "She's beautiful."

Now it was Ren's turn to blush to the tips of her ears. She'd come up with the farce because it seemed the only plausible explanation as to why they were traveling alone, and hoped that Sunho would play along. But she didn't know he'd do it so *well*.

A loud guffaw burst from the center of the clearing where the leader sat beside a makeshift campfire that the others in his group must have built. "Come. Enough bickering. Leave the young lovers alone, Jinyoung. Let's share a meal and some much-needed entertainment. Troupe performers, you said?"

“That’s right!” Ren grabbed her belongings, hurrying over.

A few seconds later, Sunho joined her; his shoulder brushed hers as he sat down. She was distracted by one of the leader’s men, who was ladling generous portions of broth into wooden bowls from a large cookpot by the fire. The cook offered her the first bowl, which she accepted eagerly. Sliding the mask up so that it covered only her eyes and nose, she brought the bowl to her mouth. The broth was spiced with red pepper flakes, with pieces of wild onions and chunks of carrots. She gobbled up the contents of the bowl, licking her lips. When she lowered the mask, she glimpsed Sunho’s gaze upon her before he turned away to accept his own serving of broth.

When everyone had eaten their fill, the leader clapped his hands together. “Well, how about some entertainment? The boy first. Sword dancing, you said?”

Ren blanched, racking her brain for excuses as to why *she* should be the only one to perform.

Sunho rose to his feet. “My sword,” he said to the archer, Jinyoung, who scowled upon hearing his request.

Ren gaped at Sunho, though of course he couldn’t tell.

“How do I know you won’t try to gut us where we sit?” Jinyoung demanded.

“Oh, give the boy his sword,” the cook chided, perhaps having developed a liking for the two of them after they’d partaken so heartily of his humble meal.

The archer tossed Sunho’s sword back to him. He caught it, unsheathing the blade from its scabbard.

“I almost forgot. You’ll need music,” the leader said, further surprising Ren when he produced a flute from within his tattered coat. His thick fingers pressed delicately upon the carved holes as he blew into the mouthpiece. A melody like a slow wind drifted over the fire.

Ren’s heart stirred. She shifted her gaze to Sunho, where he stood with his eyes closed, gripping his sword with two hands. Slowly he slid his foot forward in the grass, bringing his sword down across his body. Then, in a smooth motion, he whipped around, thrusting it up, past his shoulder. He continued in this way, the music dictating his speed. He wasn’t quite *dancing*, yet his movements were graceful, controlled.

Ren was mesmerized. Her heartbeat, which had drummed in panic over

their discovery, now raced for another reason entirely.

The firelight played across his features, his straight brow and nose, his eyes, half-lidded, his eyelashes that swept across the curve of his cheeks.

He was coming out of a difficult sequence of movements when she realized the song had ended. The group of villagers clapped, even Jinyoung, albeit begrudgingly.

Sunho sheathed his sword, giving it back to the archer before returning to his place beside Ren.

She shifted closer to him. “Sunho, that was...”

He turned to her. It brought their faces within inches of each other. Her eyes widened, and from this distance, he could likely see them, behind the mask.

Neither of them moved.

He was looking directly at her. As he stared, a slight frown appeared on his face. Earlier he’d seen her mouth, and now her eyes. Was he putting together the puzzle of her, matching the pieces to the drawing he’d seen? She knew the drawing must be a rendering of how she’d looked when she was a child, perhaps combined with how her mother had looked when she was Ren’s age.

What would he do if he discovered the truth of who she was?

“Thank you,” she said softly. She was grateful to him, for being someone she could rely on, and for baring himself in a way that was likely uncomfortable for him. In their short acquaintance, she sensed he had a quiet soul. What he’d just done, putting himself before the scrutiny of others, must have been difficult for him.

She didn’t think he would reply. But then she felt a presence, the same as before—yet she was unafraid. There was nothing visible in the air, so she closed her eyes. There. She could see it clearer—a darkness, reaching out from him toward her. The darkness wasn’t frightening, but ... soothing. Like the shade beneath a great tree on a hot summer’s day or the darkness between stars. She held her breath as it inched closer and closer.

And for the briefest of moments, she felt the gentlest of caresses, as if the back of his hand brushed against the curve of her cheek.

“Oh, to be young and in love again,” the leader said with a sigh. Ren’s eyes shot open. She backed away, glad for the mask that hid her blush. Sunho also turned away, bringing his hand to his mouth.

“That was a long time ago for you, that’s for sure!” the swordswoman cackled.

“If that’s love, I’d rather never experience it,” Jinyoung grunted. “It’s nauseating.”

“Whose family was it that was against your being together?” the swordswoman asked.

“It was hers,” Sunho said, before Ren could answer.

“What do they have against you?” the woman said. “A handsome boy like yourself?”

The swordswoman had a point. Little Uncle would accept Sunho, just for that. And Big Uncle would have approved of anyone whom Ren chose herself. As for Auntie, Ren didn’t know what she’d think of Sunho. She never begrudged Little Uncle his lovers, but Ren had a feeling it would be different for her ...

“I have no family.”

Ren glanced at Sunho, though his gaze remained turned from her.

The villagers all nodded in understanding. A family came with protection, connections. To not have a family was to be truly destitute.

The leader tucked his flute away. Sitting cross-legged, he placed his hands on his knees. “I think one more bout of entertainment should suffice as a fair exchange for our hospitality and letting you walk free with your lives intact!”

Ren grimaced.

“Perhaps a story?”

She straightened her back. *Finally*, a task to which *she* could put her particular skills to use. “What sort would you like? A story of revenge? Redemption? Perhaps a moral tale?”

“The one that’s most famous in this part of the world,” the leader said. “‘The Woodcutter and the Celestial Maiden.’”

Ren’s mouth went dry. “But you must have heard it many times already. Why that one?” As the leader said, it was a well-known tale, even outside Sareniya.

“It’s been on my mind, as of late. All of ours.” He looked around the circle at his companions. “You might have guessed, but none of us are warriors, nor do we hail from the same homelands. The lands from which we came are now part of the Occupied Territories, ceded to the empire almost ten years ago. We’re outlaws, on the run for one reason or another, united by the

common cause of survival and a desire for justice.

“I’d stolen a bag of rice for my children after our lands were razed,” the leader said. “After being sentenced to death, I fled. Binna here wouldn’t give up her daughter to her village’s lecherous overseer.” He nodded at the swordswoman, who lifted her head, a defiant gleam in her eyes. “Jinyoung refused to fight in a war he didn’t believe in. The others have similar stories. Sareniya, for all her beauty, casts the longest of shadows.

“That tale is sacred to the Sareniyans. Mayhap there’s something within that can explain why we’re here in a dark forest, far away from our homes.”

Ren swept her gaze around the circle, lingering on each person. If she could, she would have avoided telling this story; it reminded her too much of the past. But she owed it to them to tell it—not because they were letting Sunho and her walk free, as the leader had said, but because even if she wasn’t directly responsible for their many hardships, the acts that the leader described were being done in *her* name.

Sareniya ... It was her legacy, and would have been her destiny had not the events of that fateful night occurred.

She closed her eyes, recalling the cadence of Auntie’s voice as she had sat by Little Uncle’s bedside. Her words had risen and fallen, as if they were a tide, calling him back to shore.

“A long time ago, there was a woodcutter who lived by a forest. One morning, while he was out hunting, he caught sight of a deer swiftly running between the trees.”

Ren told of how the woodcutter shot the deer with an arrow, only for it to speak to him, revealing the location of a pool beside a waterfall where celestial maidens came down from the sky to bathe.

“Having gone there, he stole the wings of the youngest and most beautiful of the maidens.”

She paused, remembering that this was the point in the story when she’d interrupted Auntie.

“And?” Jinyoung asked with a scowl, upset that he was so captured by the tale. “What happened next?”

“The woodcutter brought the celestial maiden to his home,” Ren continued. “She had no choice but to go with him, for she was alone. Together, they had two children, and for a time, they were happy. But as the years passed, the celestial maiden longed for her wings and the freedom they

once gave her.

“The woodcutter, having fallen in love with her, decided to trust that she would choose to stay with him, even with her wings. And so one night, he retrieved them from the place where he’d hidden them years ago. The moment he gave them back to her, she grabbed her children and, without looking back, flew home to the Floating World.”

Ren sat back, the story finished. She felt a sudden rush of lightheadedness and swayed. Sunho caught her, his hand secure around her shoulder.

“So?” Jinyoung said after a lengthy pause. “She didn’t love him?”

“You think of the woodcutter,” Binna said. “But what of the maiden, who finally returned to the home that was stolen from her?”

“Both can be true,” the leader said. “She could love the woodcutter and still long for her home. Oh, but the story has you fired up! This is what makes the Sarenianans so powerful. It’s not just their might or their world in the sky. It’s the myths surrounding them. Their rulers are descendants of a celestial maiden.”

“Not any longer,” Binna said. “The celestial maiden and her heir perished in that storm ten years ago. It’s the general of the Sarenianan army that controls the Floating World now.”

“And so he does,” the leader said solemnly, “with every one of his actions sanctioned by the Floating Council. Perhaps that is the truth that can be gleaned from this story, like the woodcutter who stole the wings of the maiden: The general stole her world.”

Ren felt cold inside, like she’d swallowed a shard of ice that was now caught in her chest. Usually after finishing a story, Ren felt invigorated. Tonight, she felt tired and small.

“We’ve exhausted our young guests,” the leader said, “and after they’ve entertained us so thoroughly. We should all sleep. Jinyoung, bring the ponies closer to the fire.”

Soon, the flames burned low, and the outlaws settled down for the night, with two standing guard for the first watch. Sunho and Ren were left alone on one side of the fire. They’d been given a single blanket to share.

“I’m not cold,” Sunho said, but Ren shook her head. It was late autumn; the nights were chilly.

“I’m fine with sharing, as long as you are,” she said.

She gave him her satchel and he placed it on the ground, then lying on his

side, he lifted the blanket. She slipped beneath, at first facing away from him, then turning toward him when that became uncomfortable.

They were meant to be lovers. They were keeping up appearances—that's what she told herself.

Her head fit snugly against his shoulder. He hesitated briefly before resting his chin atop her head.

There were times, in the past few days, when she'd wanted to remove her mask, especially at night—it scratched her skin and made it difficult to breathe—but never more than tonight.

Since donning her mask, this was the closest she'd come to taking it off, if only to feel the steady beating of his heart.

CHAPTER 18

REN

West of the Haebaek Mountains
Occupied Territories

THE NEXT MORNING, the outlaws gathered to bid Ren and Sunho farewell. The leader approached with a mare on a lead. “This is Gukhwa. She’s a reliable mount, sturdy. It’ll be faster on horseback. Once you’re in view of the city, release her, and she’ll find her way back home.”

She was beautiful, with a marking in the shape of a chrysanthemum on her forehead. Ren reached out both hands, pressing her fingers against the mare’s rough coat; Gukhwa snorted, blowing out a breath of hot air. Hwi would have adored her.

Jinyoung came over with Ren’s satchel and umbrella, tying them to the side of Gukhwa’s saddle. He handed Sunho his sword in its bag, and Sunho took it, swinging the case over his shoulder.

“Perhaps we’ll meet again one day,” Jinyoung grumbled. “Until then, try not to get yourselves killed.” He walked away without looking back.

Sunho turned to Ren, raising a brow. She suppressed a laugh—Jinyoung was unexpectedly soft of heart.

Placing his boot in the stirrup, Sunho swung his leg over the horse, then held out his hand to Ren. She took it, and he hoisted her onto the saddle in front of him.

“Thank you,” Ren said, her gaze lingering on each of the outlaws.

“The best of luck to you,” their leader answered in a surprisingly gruff voice. “Let’s meet again one day. Hopefully by then we’ll each have found a place we can call ‘home.’”

Ren pressed her knees to Gukhwa’s side, and the horse leaped from the clearing and into the trees.

Sunho shifted his weight forward as Ren did, his hands above hers on the

reins. Gukhwa galloped through the forest, splashing across a shallow river and into a sun-dappled wood. She could feel Sunho's steady heartbeat, echoing her own. They didn't have a path to follow, only the knowledge that Seorawon lay to the north, over the mountain. Before long, the terrain became uneven, with great rocks protruding from the mountainside. Ren pulled on the reins, slowing Gukhwa to a gentle walk. They entered a darker part of the forest as the sun rose higher; the trees here were thicker, with trunks wide enough to hide a person.

The forest was just like the one in the story. As they rode, she could picture the deer darting through the trees as it led the woodcutter to the pond where the celestial maidens were bathing.

"There's a path to the left of us." Sunho's voice came from right by her ear, and she felt a shiver go through her. His presence at her back felt more intimate than when she was facing him, front to front, with the mask between them. His hands released the reins, sliding along her waist.

She guided Gukhwa to the left. "What do you think they'll do?" she asked. "The outlaws."

"This morning, Jinyoung told me they have a camp. It's where Binna's daughter and the rest of their families are hiding. They scout the area in case of Sarenian patrols. That's how they found us."

Ren felt uneasy. "How long will a camp like that last?" she asked.

"Until the Sarenians find them, or they run out of food."

An uncomfortable feeling lodged in her chest.

She had just turned seven when she fled the Floating World, and had only thought of it as a place she wanted to forget.

She hadn't thought about what it meant for the general to have taken over. Binna and the others had suffered because of his wars, *Sunho* had suffered, he and his brother had been sold to the army, forced into battle.

It was easier to believe that none of what was happening had anything to do with her, when she was on the other side of the great mountains, surrounded by her loved ones. Though even that wasn't true. Gorye Village had been attacked by a monster from the Under World, and even before then, she remembered the villages their caravan had visited, with their empty fields and streams. *Something is ill with the earth.*

What if she was meant to fix what was broken ten years ago, by reclaiming her birthright, by using her magic?

Ren felt a chill sweep through her.

The path Sunho had found was narrow, edged on one side by the forest, the mountain wall on the other. As the sun began to set, the shadows lengthening, she closed her eyes. She needed to calm down. Guilt and exhaustion had confused her. She *had* a goal—find a cure and bring it back to Little Uncle. She would save him, only him. Then she could have the life she wanted, one that was peaceful, that was safe.

Still, the coldness within her persisted.

She thought she would only rest for a short while, but soon she nodded off into sleep.

The troupe performers were from the world below. She'd seen them arrive hours before on a rickety flying machine, tumbling out like apples from a barrel. Now it was evening. Lanterns cast a warm glow over a paper theater. The troupe was performing "The Woodcutter and the Celestial Maiden" with wooden puppets to a rapt audience of children and palace servants. Though Ren had heard this story told countless times, seen it enacted in a half dozen different ways, the tale of love and loss still delighted her.

She yearned to remain and watch the entirety of the performance, but there was somewhere she needed to be, something she needed to do. She dipped her hand into the pocket of her dress, relieved to find her treasure tucked away at the bottom, exactly where she'd left it.

Jumping to her feet, she tugged at the arm of her friend, who sat cross-legged on the grass beside her. "Let's go."

"What?" He tore his gaze from the stage. "Why?"

"I want to show you something."

He wrinkled his brow. "I don't know..." She smiled as, reluctantly, he got to his feet. "Last time it was a frog."

She grinned, remembering the incident, and the way he'd yelped and thrown the frog back into the pond where she'd caught it. "It's not a frog this time. I promise."

Together, they wound through the crowd, stepping over feet and earning peeved looks from the audience members. Ren glimpsed her nursemaid, Doona, dozing among a group of similarly occupied older people, and quickly slipped down the lantern-lit path that led deeper into the gardens.

The gardens surrounding the celestial palace were sprawling, spanning

over several hundred acres. Though her friend was a head taller, he matched her footstep by footstep.

They raced over curved stone bridges and past red and green pavilions with winged rooftops.

It was the Festival of Light, and the gardens were alive with music. They passed a lone pavilion where nobles lounged on silk pillows as a woman dressed in an elaborate gown played a zither, her hands sweeping over the long instrument, plucking the strings like she was an archer, the sounds like arrows released from a bow.

Finally, Ren found the place that she'd been searching for, near a high stone wall at the back of the easternmost garden. Here, beneath the shadow of a tree, she reached into her pocket to pull out her treasure.

Peering at it, her friend's eyes widened. "It's a feather," he said. Though it was more than that. It was the length of her elbow to her wrist, as white as an eggshell. Even in the darkness, it glowed, shimmering with a bright incandescence. And when she concentrated, she could hear a soft humming sound, as if the feather was singing.

"It was on my pillow when I woke up this morning," Ren explained. "Maybe it was left by a heron, or a crane, perhaps?"

Her friend reached out to touch it. "Careful," she whispered, and he drew back. "I want to give it to the queen." She was Ren's mother, but Ren was forbidden to call her that.

Queen. Maiden. Goddess.

Her friend pouted. "Then why are you showing it to me?"

Ren watched as her friend looked back toward the way they'd come, her heart lurching at his hollow expression. It had been appearing more and more often of late.

"Jaeil," Ren said.

He turned at the sound of her voice. "What is it? I have to go. I'm not supposed to be here. My father forbade it."

His father was the general of her mother's empire. Ren despised him, as he was the reason for those times the light left Jaeil's eyes.

"Ren?" He tilted his head to the side.

"Do you think she'll like it?" Her voice came out small.

Jaeil's expression softened. "She'd be foolish not to."

Ren giggled. "You just called the goddess foolish."

"She's not a goddess."

Ren bristled. "How dare—"

"If she's a goddess, then so are you," he said. "And if you're a goddess, then we can't be friends."

Her anger faded as quickly as it had risen. He looked so serious.

Jaeil sometimes said things that she didn't understand. She would have pressed him to explain himself, but he distracted her, saying, "I'll wait for you. We can go back together." That's right. She was on her way to her mother. She'd almost forgotten.

"Wait for me," she said hurriedly, "by the zelkova tree." He knew the one she meant. "I'll give this to my mother, and then I'll be right back. We can watch the fireworks together." The fireworks always ended the Festival of Light.

"Okay," Jaeil said, in a voice so quiet she almost didn't hear him. "I'll wait for you. Don't forget about me, Ren."

"What a silly thing to say," she said, already turning away. "I won't forget."

She pushed back the hanging strands of the tree to reveal a crack in the wall, low to the ground. Dropping to her hands and knees, she crawled through, emerging on the other side to a moonlit wood.

A white string was tied between the trees to mark the barrier.

She thought of Doona's warning as she ducked under the string. It's dangerous, little bird.

Her body trembled with fear, but she took a deep breath, gripping the feather tighter in her hand. It was more than a gift. The feather was a key, one that would unlock her mother's heart.

Lately her mother had been spotted coming out beyond the barrier. It was all the palace servants talked about.

She wanders, they'd said, as if she were a spirit, lost among the trees.

If she was lost, Ren would find her. She'd bring her mother back.

Thunder rumbled overhead. A storm was fast approaching. Ren sucked in a breath as the first cold droplets hit her skin.

A branch snapped in the woods. She whirled around to see great shadows lurking behind the trees, yet when the rain blurred her vision and she brushed her eyes to look again, they were gone.

Was this why Doona had warned her? Were there demons in the woods?

Between the trees, she spotted a glimmer of red, her mother's robe trailing out behind her like a ribbon.

She raced forward to where the stretch of trees ended abruptly. In front of her was the edge of the Floating World.

The queen stood at the precipice, her toes over open sky. Ren's heart lurched.

"Mother!" she cried out, stumbling forward. "Get back! You'll fall!"

The strong winds swept her forward and she reached out, wrapping her arms around a tree stump sticking up from the ground. "Come back, please!"

Her mother's crimson robe whipped out behind her, threatening to drag her into the sky.

"In the story, the maiden had wings." Her mother's voice carried across the wind and rain, and Ren felt it, like a thorn piercing her heart. "Where have my wings gone?"

Since Ren could remember, she didn't understand her beautiful mother. She was like a cold and distant star, far away, even when she was standing near. But that didn't matter. Ren loved her. She would give her mother wings. She would give her anything. As long as she stepped back from the cliff's edge, as long as she stayed.

"Your Celestial Majesty!"

Jaeil's father stood only a few short steps from her mother. Relief swept through Ren. She feared and hated the general, but he was sworn to protect his queen. He would take her hand and lead her away from the edge, toward safety.

Unlike her mother's cloak that whipped around her, the general's fitted armor didn't move in the wind; it was as unyielding as he was. One moment, he was steps away, and then suddenly, he was beside her mother.

Ren waited for him to coax her back, to beseech her.

Instead, he pushed her.

A stray branch swept toward Ren, and she flinched away. When she looked back, the general stood alone at the edge of the Floating World.

She screamed.

He turned in her direction, and he no longer had the face of a man, but a monster.

Turning, she ran and ran and ran. The thunder was so loud now, crashing all around her. In between the booms, she heard Jaeil's voice calling out to

her, “Ren!”

A hand snagged her robe from behind and she screamed. It was one of the shadows from before, though she knew now they weren’t demons, but the general’s soldiers. They converged upon her, hulking, menacing. The soldier was only gripping the back of her robe, so she slipped from the cloth, leaving it behind as she raced once more through the woods.

She didn’t stop until she reached the walls of the palace, her breaths ragged, her tears blending with the rain that fell down her cheeks.

That’s when she realized her hands were empty. The feather was gone.



Ren lurched awake. Her violent movements startled Gukhwa, and the mare reared backward, her forelimbs kicking the air. Ren felt the saddle shift beneath her. She clung to it, hanging momentarily suspended over a massive ravine.

She screamed. Digging her legs into Gukhwa’s side, she swung herself back onto the saddle. She then leaped in the opposite direction, landing hard on her bottom and scrambling backward until she was pressed against a rock wall.

Through her panicked mind, she registered that, while she’d slept, night had fallen and they had continued to journey up into the mountains.

“Hwi.” Sunho crouched beside her. She noted that he’d seen to Gukhwa’s safety first, securing her to the branch of a pine tree protruding from the cliff face. “What happened?” he asked, his voice gentle. “What’s wrong?”

“I-it’s not ... You wouldn’t understand.” She was trembling so hard, it was difficult for her to speak. Her heart still raced from the dream. *No, the memory.*

“Explain it to me.”

She shook her head. How could she tell him about that night, when she watched the general push her mother off the edge of the Floating World? The memory was embedded in her soul. It was the reason she’d frozen in fear on the white rocks outside Gorye Village, endangering not just herself but Little Uncle.

But she couldn’t explain this to him without revealing the truth of her past, and so she whispered, “We’re too high.”

She turned her face to the wall. Why was she so afraid? She'd thought maybe she'd get braver in the journey, but she was just as scared as when she'd started.

"Hwi, look at me." She lifted her gaze to his. Though it was nighttime, the moon was bright. The light fell on Sunho's face, and she was arrested by the sight of him. The outlaws had called him handsome, but he was more than that. His shoulders were strong. And though his face was pale, he had luminous eyes. "I won't let you fall."

She placed her hand in his, and he closed his fingers around hers. He crouched on the ground and turned his back to her. She wrapped her arms around his neck, and he stood. With one hand holding Gukhwa's lead, he continued up the mountain path. She didn't ask him if she was too heavy nor questioned how he could carry her uphill in the dark. Her mask dug into his back, but he didn't complain.

She didn't know how much farther they traveled, but not once did he falter.

She was still trembling when Sunho found a small nook in the cliff face, sheltered by a stand of trees. Depositing her in a spot farthest from the ledge, he tied Gukhwa to a branch before building a small fire.

She pulled her knees to her chest, staring at the crackling flames. A spark landed near her toe with a fizzle. She moved her feet back.

She felt Sunho sit beside her, pressing his back against the rock wall. "I told you that for two years I've only had a single memory," he said quietly. "The morning we met, I had another."

She looked over to where he gazed into the fire, the flames reflected in his eyes.

"I was in a forest," he went on, "seated by a campfire, like this one. It was winter. My brother was leaving the next morning to join a regiment of older boys, one that would take him closer to the fighting."

Ren could picture a young Sunho, maybe twelve years old, half the height he was now. He'd be awkward, without the grace he had now.

"I was worried for him. We'd never been apart. But also ... I was afraid. In our small regiment, I was the weakest. Junho protected me."

Junho. His name matched his brother's. "What changed?" she asked.

"It would be easy to say that I don't know because I can't remember, that in the three years between that night in the forest and when I woke alone with

only a single memory there were no clues to what happened to me ... but that wouldn't be true."

He drew in a long breath, letting it out slowly. "There's a darkness inside me. I can feel it sometimes, when I'm threatened, or when my emotions are heightened. Since leaving the Under World, the darkness has been rising more often, becoming harder to control. I'm afraid the more I lose control, the more I'll lose myself."

She wondered if the darkness he spoke of was the one she'd sensed before, first when she was healing him, and then again when they'd been threatened by the outlaws. She hadn't felt anything evil in the darkness, quite the opposite, but she could understand the feeling of losing oneself.

When she'd seen the Floating World again, she was afraid of how the journey might change her, and since then hadn't used her powers. He was the exception. She'd used her powers to heal his wound. And now, she must face the truth of what happened that night ten years ago, as well as the many atrocities the general had since committed.

Losing himself. It's what he feared the most.

Losing herself. She shared the same fear.

It came to her gradually that she was no longer trembling. That awful, cold feeling had disappeared. She realized, with complete clarity, what Sunho had done.

He'd revealed his fears to distract her from her own.

She could have predicted hundreds of possibilities of what she might encounter on her journey, but never could she have predicted him.

She didn't think she could have come this far without him. It wasn't just his physical strength that she relied on—it was his steady presence, his kindness, and, most of all, his friendship.

His eyes were downcast, his long eyelashes brushing his cheek.

"I won't let you lose control," she whispered. He lifted his gaze to hers. "And you..." In his eyes, she saw a glimmer. *Blue*. "You won't let me fall."

He smiled, a slight quirk of the lips.

It was natural for her to draw closer to him, resting her head on his shoulder, for her hand to slip into his, grasping it softly.

Her eyes fluttered closed, and if she had sorrowful dreams, she didn't remember a single one.

CHAPTER 19

SUNHO

*Seorawon, Port City on the River Nakjin
Occupied Territories*

SUNHO PULLED HWI out of the way of an oncoming vehicle, turning her in his arms so that his back was exposed to the rush of Seorawon's traffic—horse-drawn carriages and rickshaws barreling in seemingly haphazard directions down cobblestone streets. His heart pounded in his chest; this was the third time she'd been almost trampled since they'd entered the city earlier that afternoon.

"Sorry!" She peered up at him, her hand gripping his sleeve. "I've just never *seen* so many large buildings. Not like this." Her voice was breathless behind her mask. "Sunho, look!" Her hand found his, pulling him toward a street cart vendor selling fried dough flattened and dipped in sugar.

The vendor, an elderly woman, chuckled at Hwi's exuberance, her smile accentuating her deeply lined face. Sunho unstrung a coin from his belt and handed it to her. She then grabbed a thick cake, folding a piece of rice paper over the side before presenting it to Hwi.

As Hwi reached to lift her mask, Sunho turned to give her privacy. He *wanted* to see her face, more than he'd wanted anything in a long time, but not until she was ready to show it to him. His gaze landed on the clock tower in the distance, looming above the rest of the buildings. It was the tallest structure in the city. White doves winged across its bright face, the hands of which pointed southeast by west.

He was running out of time. He needed to charter an airship over the mountains if he wanted to reach the girl before the other mercenaries. Those who'd remained on the train would have set off toward the light days ago. There was still a chance he could find her before them, if he left now.

"Sunho?" Hwi's mask was back in its place. "The vendor said there's a

fountain near the bridge that's quite beautiful. Would you like to see it?"

If he chartered a faster airship, if the mercenaries had been waylaid or took the wrong path, he could reach the girl. Yet none of that seemed to matter, because he didn't *want* to leave. He wanted to stay, just a little longer. "I would," he said.

They left the congested area around the vendor's cart and headed toward the river. A wooden bridge spanned the entire width of it, connecting the larger part of the city with a quay of docks on the other side. Boats with bright sails floated along the serene waters, steered by standing oarsmen who cut great swaths in the river with their paddles.

"Make way!"

Hwi and Sunho stepped apart as a carpenter walked between them, carrying a large plank of wood. The same storm that had battered the train must have gone through the city. A part of the bridge that had collapsed was now being fixed up by a small army of craftspeople.

The entrance of the bridge was marked with a red-and-green pavilion, which was also currently under repair. Scaffolding had been temporarily erected to support the construction, and the crisscrossed structure of wooden poles and planks reminded him of those that stood outside the Under World.

The fountain sat in a small square directly in front of the pavilion. It had three tiers that varied in size, with the smallest at the top and the largest at the bottom.

Climbing onto the edge of the bottommost tier, Hwi began to walk around the rim. Though he had no doubt of her balance, Sunho mirrored her movements.

Townfolk had tossed coins and trinkets into the fountain's largest basin, and they sparkled like jewels beneath the water. At the top of the fountain was a marble statue of a girl with wings. Though the artist had kept the girl's features vague, indistinct, he'd rendered her wings in exquisite detail. They sprouted proudly from the arch of her back, and Sunho felt, though he couldn't know the sculptor's intention for sure, that the statue was meant to express joy.

"If I had wings, would you steal them?"

He glanced up at Hwi. Her face was turned from him. She didn't stop but continued to walk along the fountain's rim. Spray dewed the top of her head, catching in her hair like stars.

He knew she meant her question as a jest, yet he gave it serious thought.

They'd completed one turn of the fountain before he answered. "If you had wings," he said, with all the sincerity he possessed, "I'd want to see you fly."

She stopped then, turning toward him. The abrupt ceasing of movement caused her to lose her balance, her arms pinwheeling, and he reached out a hand instinctually, but she quickly regained her footing.

A stray wind swept the spray of the fountain toward them, dousing them both in water. His lashes were damp as he gazed up at her.

"My home," she said quietly, "have I—have I told you about it?"

He shook his head. He didn't know why she wished to tell him now, but he didn't question her, listening carefully.

"It's located in a great valley. You'll know you've reached it when you see a river that winds like a blue dragon. There's a small village nestled in the crook in the river. If you arrive early enough, you might catch the sheep in the pastures. Are you picturing it in your mind?"

It was a wonder how she could express herself; her hands had thrown wide when she'd described the valley. When she'd described the river, she'd swayed on her feet, as if bracing herself in waters up to her waist. Her body showed what her face would look like, every emotion flitting across her features, her expression alight.

"There's something I need to confess to you," she said. "It's about my home, why I didn't go back. It would have been dangerous for the people there."

He frowned. Dangerous?

"I haven't been telling you the whole truth. I've wanted to, but I'm afraid..."

She trailed off, and his expression softened.

"There's something I want to tell you, too," he said, to give her more time, and because he also hadn't been entirely truthful with her. "The reason I need to find the girl. It's not because of money."

"I didn't think so," Hwi said, and he could hear the smile in her voice. "You're not greedy."

His chest swelled with warmth at her words. "The captain who hired me, he knows where my brother is. Once I bring the girl to him, he'll tell me where he is."

She went very still. “Your brother...,” she said softly. “Junho.”

He nodded. “I’ve been searching for him for two years.”

She lowered her head, as if overcome with some strong emotion. Sunho had anticipated her confession, but now felt a churning in his stomach. Was she upset that he hadn’t told her the truth? He hadn’t known her well enough before to confide about Junho.

“I wish things were different,” she said, and there was a catch in her voice. She sounded ... regretful. “Just know, later, when you—” She broke off. “Just know that I believe you’re a good person.”

Sunho’s chest ached. *Was* he a good person? They were his brother’s words, from the only memory he’d had of him, before he’d met her. *You’re the best of us.* Though he hadn’t believed him.

“I have to go,” Hwi said.

He realized, with a sinking feeling, that she’d changed her mind. Whatever she’d meant to tell him, she wouldn’t now, knowing he’d lied to her.

“Wait,” Sunho said. “You’ll need coin for passage on one of the boats.” They’d checked the train schedule when they’d first arrived, and there wasn’t another one due to depart for at least a week. A boat would get her to the Under World much faster. He reached for the string of coins in his sash, twisting until it broke in two, and pressing the larger portion into her hands. “Take this.”

Her fingers circled around his. “Sunho, I—”

He wanted her to tell him what she had meant to tell him before. He wanted her to ask him to stay.

“Goodbye,” she said, letting go of his hands.

A hollow feeling spread outward from the pit of his stomach. “Goodbye, Hwi.”

He let his hands fall, turning from the fountain.

As he walked away, the warmth that was always present when he was with her dissipated. It was the light he’d sensed within her, growing fainter the farther he walked until, with a heavy heart, he couldn’t feel it any longer.



SUNHO CHARTERED AN airship to take him east over the Haebaek Mountains.

Its captain, a woman of indeterminate age who wore a large patch over her left eye, had set a strict departure, near sunset, and had only agreed to take Sunho on board when he'd given her the entirety of his remaining coins. They'd been meant to pay for the return trip, as well, but he decided to worry about that later.

The port was a short walk from the square where the clock tower was located. The vendor who sold Hwi her cake had been replaced by another, this one selling fruit dipped in sugar to a throng of eager children.

With evening approaching, crowds had flocked to the square. Groups of city folk hurriedly made last-minute purchases at carts that appeared to have tripled in number since the morning, selling not just food but sundry items—everything from hair trinkets to fish-shaped kites. Unlike earlier in the day, the people seemed rushed and less friendly now, bumping into one another, spewing harsh words, and casting baleful glares. Sunho stepped aside to avoid colliding with two men carrying a palanquin between them, catching a glimpse of the young woman within before she snapped her window closed.

Above the square, the minute hand of the clock was catching up to the hour. It was time for him to head back. Still, he found himself hesitating. His gaze wandered down the boulevard toward the river, which was mostly hidden from view by the tall buildings.

Had Hwi found a ship's captain who would take her on one of their boats? If she'd found one shortly after they'd parted ways, it was possible she'd already left the city.

The thought made the hollow feeling in his chest expand. It hadn't gone away since he'd left her at the fountain.

The feeling was similar to when he thought of Junho—like there was a void inside him that only his brother could fill.

But something had changed. Though he'd regained more memories, they were distant and hazy. They were of the past. His memories of Hwi were bright, close enough that he could feel them, like the glimmer of sunlight through her paper umbrella.

Standing beneath the clock tower, he couldn't see the fountain, but when he closed his eyes, he could picture Hwi as she stood on the rim, the outstretched wings of the statue of the celestial maiden behind her.

He hadn't known what to make of her when he'd first woken in the reed field to see her masked face staring down at him. But as they went on their

journey, protecting each other, confiding in each other, she'd become someone he trusted, a friend.

She'd been afraid to tell him something, but he'd wanted to reassure her. There was nothing she could say to him that would make him turn from her.

The world was a dark and endless night, and for a long time, he'd wandered it alone, lost. But Hwi was a fixed star. When he was with her, even the Demon was quiet. Since the night with the outlaws, he hadn't felt its presence at all. He'd wanted to find Junho because he believed his brother could rid him of the Demon. But maybe, staying with Hwi, he could learn to control it on his own.

It felt wrong, leaving her. So then why had he done it? To find the light?

The light that called to him was different now—it was the light within her.

A hand snatched at his shoulder, and he turned abruptly to find an old woman scowling up at him. He recognized the vendor who'd sold Hwi the cinnamon cakes.

"What are you doing here? It's almost sundown," she hissed, her eyes darting behind him. He couldn't be certain, but her expression appeared fearful. "Where is she? The girl you were with."

Sunho felt a chill sweep through him. "What's wrong?" he asked sharply.

"You need to get back to her." Her fingers dug into his shoulder. "She's in terrible danger."

Sunho didn't stay to ask more questions, tearing through the crowd. *The mercenaries*. Some must have stayed in the city. Hwi was around the same age of the girl they were searching for. It didn't matter that she wore a mask. The mercenaries would kill first before confirming whether they'd gotten the right girl.

Had the square always been this crowded? Hundreds of people moved in all directions, cursing and shouting at him as he shoved his way through.

If Hwi was still in the city, she'd be at the docks, on the other side of the bridge.

He had to reach her. He had to—

A piercing sensation ripped through his skull, like a nail struck through the bone. It was the same feeling as when he was on the train, when the monster had appeared. He dropped to his knees, gripping his head. The clock tower gonged, tolling the hour. The crowd broke around him, as if he were a

rock in a fast-moving stream. He felt like he was drowning, the pressure on his mind unbearable, like he was deep underwater.

Time seemed to slow as, in front of him, a man dressed in black robes walked by.

Sunho didn't understand. The monster had wings, claws, but this man walked out in the open; no one else seemed to take any notice of him.

Sunho stared as the man lifted a gloved hand to his black cowl, removing the hood. His back was to Sunho, but Sunho would have recognized him in any situation, in any place. He was dressed in odd clothing, his hair falling to his shoulders, but it was *him*.

"Junho!" Sunho shouted.

His brother kept walking.

Sunho struggled to his feet, ignoring the pressure that beat in his mind like wings.

Junho *was there*. The crowd surged around them, breaking them apart. He lost sight of his brother and was seized by panic until he spotted him again just ahead.

He scrambled the last few steps, shortening the distance. He grabbed Junho's shoulder. He turned. Sunho let go, stumbling back.

A stranger stared back at him. With a scowl, the man shrugged off Sunho's hand.

As the man disappeared into the crowd, the pain receded from Sunho's mind.

He hadn't been Junho. It had never been him. His brother was gone.

CHAPTER 20

REN

*Seorawon, Port City on the River Nakjin
Occupied Territories*

WITH SUNHO'S COINS, Ren had just enough to purchase passage on a small fishing boat. The captain was a surly old man who boasted an impressive beard braided with colorful amber beads. He reminded her of the peddlers the caravan would trade with while on the road, who were often eccentric and solitary—except the boatman was infinitely ruder.

“Come back in a half hour,” he crowed, shooing her away and sticking half of her coins in his beard, where she assumed he kept a pouch attached to a string around his neck. “If you’re late, I’m leaving without you!”

He shoved her off the boat onto the dock. “Can I leave my bags here at least?” she protested.

He harrumphed from his seat on an upturned pail, waving his hand in the air. She took that as permission and threw her belongings onto the deck, though she kept her umbrella tucked against her back.

“What are you wearing that mask for, anyway?” he grunted, clicking his tongue. “You stick out too much. Take it off.”

“Take off your beard first,” she rejoined, and got an apple thrown at her head.

She caught it with a flourish. “Thanks!”

The old man grumbled to himself but couldn’t hide the upward twitch of his mustache.

Ren leaned against the wooden railing of the dock. The boatman was right—she *was* conspicuous with her mask. When she was with Sunho, she’d seen a few children pointing and staring before their caretakers hurried them along. She wanted to blend in with the crowd, and *not* draw attention to herself, and so, slowly, she lifted her mask, first over her brow, then off

entirely. She laid it aside, relishing the feel of the brisk air. Lifting the apple, she took a large bite, savoring its tart crispness.

A stray wind swept over the river, loosening her braid and ruffling her short jacket.

From the dock, she watched as boats glided along the crystalline waters, their sails like bright wings. One of the larger vessels disappeared beneath the arch of the bridge, emerging on the other side a short few seconds later. Finishing her apple, she tossed the core into the water for the fish; then, laying her arms on the railing, she rested her chin in her hands.

A melancholic feeling stole over her, which was odd, seeing as she'd accomplished her goal of procuring a boat to the Under World.

A loud squawk startled her as a gull launched itself from the railing, winging out toward the city.

As she followed its flight, she thought of Sunho and whether he'd found an airship to take him over the mountain.

What would he think when he discovered the truth? That the light had come from a girl, *a troupe performer*, who disappeared shortly after the attack? Sunho would know then that *she* was the one he'd been looking for. Would he resent her for lying? *Hate* her? Ren's stomach churned at the thought.

She remembered his expression as he'd gazed up at her by the fountain, the trust she'd seen there. She'd almost told him the truth, then. Except he'd divulged to her the real reason he needed to find her. Ren had panicked. She couldn't reveal to him the truth of who she was and risk that he'd choose his brother and betray her.

Even as the thought entered her mind, she knew it was a lie. She was only telling herself this as an excuse because she didn't want to acknowledge the truth she'd known ever since she'd woken from her dream of the Floating World.

She wasn't afraid that Sunho would betray her. The betrayal she feared was her own.

To remember that night was to know that her mother had been murdered by the man sworn to protect her, who in one fell sweep had taken everything from Ren—her mother, her home, *her world*. Everything she had once loved, everything she had tried to forget.

Vengeance, and the desire for it ... The only way to be rid of it would be

to kill the man who'd murdered her mother and take back all that she'd lost.

The clock tower gonged in the distance, startling her. She released her hands from the railing, her knuckles white. She hadn't realized she'd grabbed hold of it.

She staggered back. *No*, that wasn't the path she'd chosen for herself. A path like that, a path of revenge, using her powers to take back her birthright, would change her, lead her farther and farther away from the people she cared about—Little Uncle, Auntie, and Hwi—and closer to the precipice.

She could see it, looming before her. The edge of the world.

She realized the memory of it had always haunted her, even as she tried so hard to forget. It was her fear that had immobilized her outside Gorye Village and stolen her breath at the ravine.

The fear had been so powerful, a maelstrom of dark images from her past she didn't think anything, or anyone, could break through.

Until Sunho.

I won't let you fall. With only his voice, he'd swept back the storm.

It wasn't just his calmness, or his certainty; it was that she *believed* him. If anyone could keep her from falling off the edge of the world, it would be him.

Lifting her head, she gazed up toward the bridge. Had he left yet? Was she too late? She started walking, quickly at first, her heart picking up speed, until she was running.

On the bridge, pedestrians jumped out of her way, cursing and shouting for her to slow down. A woman lost hold of a goose that squawked and flapped its wings in her face. Ren didn't stop to apologize, too focused on reaching the other side. There was still a chance she could catch up with Sunho, to tell him the truth. Loud bells pealed across the city, and she stumbled to a halt.

She watched as from behind the clock tower a small airship rose, careening alarmingly in the wind before righting itself. It headed east, sputtering a sparkling trail of blue.

East. Toward the Haebaek Mountains.

Her chest tightened painfully. Sunho was on that ship. She was too late. He was gone.

"Hwi?"

A group of carpenters carrying planks walked by in front of her. As they

passed, she saw Sunho standing by the fountain. Droplets of water had caught in his hair, glistening blue black in the sun.

She stood still, staring at him, uncomprehending. She'd taken a step forward when she realized ...

She wasn't wearing her mask. She'd left it on the railing by the docks.

He'd seen a drawing of her. She knew it wasn't a perfect likeness, a rendering composed of her girlhood appearance and her mother's features. Still, the resemblance would be enough for him to make the connection.

His eyes never left hers as she approached him. She couldn't read his expression to know his thoughts, his face carefully blank.

"I thought you'd left," she said, once she was near.

He shook his head.

His gaze finally moved downward, lingering on the parts of her face that had been hidden beneath the mask—her nose, her lips, her chin.

She'd never been so conscious of her appearance, aware that at any moment he might recognize her, that his face would twist in shock at her betrayal.

Unable to bear the scrutiny any longer, she blurted, "I'm sorry, I lied. I—"

"You're beautiful," he said.

She stared at him, her mouth slightly agape. Then her cheeks flamed and she attempted to collect herself. "How did you know it was me? Was it my clothes—ah, the umbrella." She wore it slung across her back.

"Even without them," he said, "I'd have known you."

The clock tower had ceased gonging long ago. Why hadn't he boarded that ship? Why did he come back?

The painful tightness in her chest was gone, replaced with something else—hope. She reached out her hand toward his.

"Sunho—"

His body tensed, eyes darting to the side. A man leaped from the fountain, spraying water. On instinct, Ren dropped to the ground. The air shifted above her head as the mercenary's blade swept the area where her neck had been. With a curse, he swung back around, but Sunho blocked his next attack, shoving the man backward. He fell into the fountain with a splash.

Sunho reached for her hand, and she took it. Together they raced toward the entrance to the bridge, arrows piercing the wooden planks around their feet. The crowd had scattered in all directions, screaming and panicking, with

those standing nearest the pavilion hiding beneath its wings and others leaping off the sides of the bridge into the water several feet below.

Jumping over an overturned cart, Ren and Sunho pressed their backs against bundles of hay.

“Is that one of the killers from the train?” Ren caught her breath. Though the train had crashed, a few must have made it to Seorawon. She’d assumed they’d headed east in pursuit of her, like Sunho had originally intended.

“Some of them must not have left the city,” Sunho said, his voice gruff. “The cart vendor from earlier knew. She warned me you were in danger.”

Ren frowned. “But she didn’t see my face.”

“I’m guessing the bounty wasn’t just for someone fitting your description, but any girl around your age.”

Ren shuddered at the cruelty of such an order. How many girls had died in the search for her? She knew it wasn’t her fault but the man who’d set the killers on their course. *The general.*

“Boy!” a loud voice boomed from the square in front of the pavilion.

Sunho and Ren both twisted, peeking their heads over the cart. A man with a bow and arrow stood between two others, similarly armed, as well as an old woman.

Sunho inhaled sharply. “I know her,” he said, nodding at the woman. “She was one of the mercenaries hired alongside me. A bounty hunter.” Sunho frowned. “She must have switched sides.”

He nodded toward the man who’d shouted. “That’s Claw, one of the thugs who was on the train.” He grabbed the hilt of his sword. “I’m going to see what he wants.”

Sunho stood, and Ren held her breath, only letting it go when an arrow didn’t sweep down to pierce his chest.

“She’s not the one you’re looking for,” Sunho said, his voice carrying across the now silent square. “There’s no reason for us to fight.”

Claw, the presumed leader, scowled. “Don’t mistake us for fools. We saw the girl’s face. Give her up and maybe we’ll consider sparing your life.”

Ren cursed her foolishness. If only she’d kept her mask on, then they wouldn’t be in this situation. *No, she decided, they would have come after me regardless.*

“Keep your eyes down, Servant of Sareniya. You are unworthy of the light.”

It was the old woman who'd spoken, without inflection, as if the words were seared into her bones. The words sounded repetitive; Ren had heard them before. An image came to mind of men and women kneeling before her mother as she stood on the dais of a great ceremonial hall, the celestial robe falling from her shoulders to pool around her feet.

"You know what that means, don't you, boy?" The woman addressed Sunho directly, her gaze never leaving his. "She's from the Floating World, and you're from the Under World. She'll use you, then discard you. To someone like her, you're expendable."

That's not true! Ren wanted to shout, but that would admit her identity.

"Do you know who they think she is? Their lost princess. The last of the celestial maidens. In her name, they will commit great horrors. As long as she lives, the bloodshed will never end. For the glory of Sareniya."

Frustration churned in her gut. This was all the general's doing. Ren would never have anything to do with a war that brought such suffering. Neither had her mother. Ten years ago, she would have been a young woman herself. She couldn't have condoned such acts.

No, it was the general. Though an uneasiness settled in her gut. The woman sounded so certain.

When she glanced up, she saw that Sunho's head was lowered. What was he thinking? He had every right to hate Sareniya. Her people had taken everything from him—his brother, his friends, his childhood ...

More mercenaries emerged from where they'd been concealed, joining Claw and the old woman.

"I saw you fight on the train," Claw said, the respect evident in his voice. "It's clear to me you're a worthy opponent. Let's stop this infighting. The Sareniyans aren't worth our blood."

"You didn't hear me," Sunho said, lifting his head. "I'm not giving her up."

Claw frowned. "You have a death wish? There's ten of us and you're alone."

"I'm not alone."

Sunho's eyes met Ren's, and she nodded. She grabbed her umbrella from her back. Together, they leaped from behind the cart, running toward the pavilion on the bridge.

She heard more than felt the shower of arrows, lifting the umbrella behind

them and popping the hood. Reaching for her magic, she sent a gust of wind toward the arrows, knocking them off course; a few clattered against the top of the umbrella harmlessly.

As they passed beneath the pavilion, Sunho pulled her behind a pillar. “There are too many of them.”

Ren bit her lip, her eyes darting around the empty structure; the people who’d initially taken shelter beneath the pavilion had fled. Pieces of wooden planks were left behind by the carpenters who’d been patching up the western side. She could see the large scaffold they’d been using through a break in the wall.

Turning quickly to Sunho, she said, “Do you think you can hold them off for a few minutes? I have an idea.”

Sunho gave her a quick nod. Raising his sword in a defensive stance, he turned to face their pursuers.

Ren sprinted toward the opening in the wall. Sliding her umbrella into her belt, she grabbed on to one of the wooden poles of the scaffold and pulled herself through. Then, removing her knife from her pocket, she placed it in her mouth before using both hands to climb.

At the top of the scaffold, she raced down a long plank, leaping from it onto the roof of the pavilion. An arrow whistled toward her, and she bent backward, narrowly avoiding it. Beneath her, she heard clashing steel—Sunho, engaging with the mercenaries. She moved quickly, grabbing the ropes that tied the scaffold to the pavilion and using her knife to saw through them one by one. The last rope snapped. Groaning, the scaffold began to fall. Ren jumped off the roof as it collided with the pavilion, collapsing together onto the bridge.

“Hwi!” Sunho called out from below, running to meet her. She reached for her magic again, using it to sweep herself into his arms. She couldn’t control her momentum however, and she toppled into him, his arms coming around to catch her as he fell backward, skidding across the bridge. “Are you all right?” he said, breathless, once they came to a stop. He raised himself up on his elbows. “That was incredible!”

“Wasn’t it? Come on!” She grabbed his hand, pulling him to his feet. Her heart sang with triumph. Beyond the bridge, she caught sight of the small fishing boat, still tied to the dock. They were going to make it.

A black feather fluttered in the air. Sunho dragged her to a halt.

In the middle of the bridge stood a man, his face covered by a large cowl. He wore diaphanous robes that spilled from his shoulders.

A great gray cloud cut the bridge in half, veiling the man's side in shadow, while Ren and Sunho stood in the light.

Ren recovered first from the shock of seeing him, and her mind strategized their next course of action. It was likely the newcomer was allied with the others. If he carried weapons, they were hidden beneath his robes.

He took a step toward them, and Ren was struck by the awful splintering sound of his approach, as if the wooden slats of the bridge were being ruptured with each of his steps.

As he broke from the shadow, and into the light, Ren glimpsed his face beneath the cowl. Her whole body seized with fear, unable to move, unable to speak.

His features were monstrous, grotesque: horns and gaping black eyes.

Demon.

Sunho's sword clattered to the ground as he cried out. He fell to his knees, gripping his head between his hands.

"Sunho!" Ren dropped beside him, grabbing his arm. "What's wrong?"

She let go of him with a hiss. His skin *burned*. She stared in horror as his veins began to pulse. *Blue*. He cried out again and tears sprang to her eyes. Whatever he was experiencing must be agonizing, a pain she couldn't imagine.

She looked up at a great roaring sound to see the demon charging straight toward them, its claws extended.

Then she felt movement beside her. Sunho pushed her aside just as the demon descended.

Its claws pierced Sunho's shoulder, the tips of it coming out the other end.

"No!" Ren screamed.

The demon pulled its claws from Sunho, blood spilling onto the wood. Slowly, he slumped over, unmoving.

Ren felt her heart seize with anguish, then it started to pound, hard and fast.

She reached behind her for her umbrella. Upending it, she stepped onto the canopy, snapping off the handle. She rushed at the demon, screaming a battle cry.

It easily dodged her attack, but she had anticipated this. Twisting her

body, she jabbed the broken end of her umbrella at its face; it pierced its skin, leaving a jagged slash.

It roared, its lips curling back in a snarl.

She only barely managed to avoid the next swipe of its claws. Then it came after her, faster and more vicious than before.

She deflected a thrust of the demon's claws with her handle, only for it to go flying over the edge of the bridge.

With a whiplike motion, the demon grabbed Ren's neck, squeezing the breath from her lungs. She dug her fingers into its hand, but it only tightened its grip.

Her vision started to darken, and her heart broke knowing she would never find the cure for Little Uncle in time to bring it back to him. She would never even see him or Auntie again. Nor would she laugh with Hwi or perform with her family, singing and dancing beneath the stars. That's all she ever wanted. To find happiness in small, shared moments with the people she loved most. Or at least, that's what she *had* wanted. Before she'd gone on this journey. Before she knew of the darkness that shadowed the world. She didn't know what she'd do about it, but now that she was aware of its existence, she couldn't go back to her old life, to the way things used to be.

Behind the demon, she saw movement. Sunho, reaching for his sword.

The Light was leaving. *No*. She felt its spark inside her, building, until it was as bright as the night on the mountainside.

Burn, it called out to her. *Ignite*.

Light burst from her hands. Howling, the demon released her. She fell to the ground, gasping as she pushed herself upright. She didn't wait to see if she'd killed it, stumbling to Sunho and helping him to stand. White flames licked the bridge as they staggered to the edge. With the last of their strength, they pulled themselves over the railing and jumped into the river.

CHAPTER 21

JAEIL

The Under World

Outside the Ninth Ward Mithril Factory

JAEIL STOOD OUTSIDE the gates of the ninth ward mithril factory, staring up at the silent smokestacks. The first order he gave at the start of the raid was to halt production entirely. Even the smallest inhalation of pure, unadulterated mithril was poisonous, and he wouldn't risk the soldiers in his unit. Through the shield of his filtration mask, he watched as a single mote of mithril dust drifted down from the sky above. He lifted his gloved hand, and it alighted on the tip of his finger, like blue snow.

"Captain!"

Yumi jogged from the compound, bowing to Jaeil as he entered through the gates. He was reminded of the day he met her by the docks, where the first body had been found. Five more had been discovered since then, bearing the same claw marks.

"The factory has been secured, sir," she said, her youthful voice muffled by her mask. "The guards and workers are ready to be taken back to the base for questioning."

The medical examiner at Hagye had categorized the murders as *death inflicted by wounds from an animal*. But there hadn't been any reports of rabid or wild animals in the Under World. Except for one rumor about a bear in the sewer. He'd sent soldiers to the fifth ward to investigate, but they'd come back claiming it was a false trail.

None of the higher-ups, except for Commander Su, even gave a damn about the murders—all the victims had been from the Outer Ring, after all. Violence and death were common among the dregs of society. Jaeil might have agreed, had the wound sites on the murder victims not been so *distinct*. Was it a murderer killing these people, an animal, *or something else?*

Besides the fact that all the victims were found in or around the Outer Ring, nothing tied them together, not their ages nor their occupations. And then an hour ago, three more bodies had shown up outside the sewers of the fourth ward, all wearing the uniform of the ninth ward mithril factory.

“I have a report of the contents of the documents confiscated from inside the factory foreman’s office,” Yumi said, her expression serious behind her mask. “It’s as you suspected, sir: Minister Jo fled the city by train. The exact reason for his departure we couldn’t deduce; however, we found documents tying him to many illegal activities.”

She went on, listing the minister’s numerous offenses, which included extortion. A muscle in Jaeil’s arm spasmed, and he rolled his shoulder, grimacing at the tightness there; he’d removed his cast that morning against the advice of Hagye’s on-base physician.

They reached the storehouse at the back of the grounds, and another of Jaeil’s soldiers held it open for Yumi and him to pass through.

“The most incriminating piece of evidence was a document recording sales of mithril to Volmar for the past two years, hidden as part of larger cargo of shipments to Sarenिया’s holdings in the Occupied Territories.”

Yumi halted past the threshold of the doorway. “I don’t understand, sir.” Jaeil glanced at his subordinate, noting the frustrated edge to her voice. “Why would the minister sell mithril to the northern empire when we’re at war with them?”

Jaeil raised a brow. Catching sight of his expression, Yumi lowered her head. “The obvious answer is that he’s a traitor, I *know* that. But why would he betray his country? He’s a *minister*.”

“Money,” Jaeil said simply. He’d had the misfortune to encounter Minister Jo several times and found the man incautious and highly self-interested.

“But he’s a *Sarenian*,” Yumi was insistent. “He’s giving them the means to destroy us.”

Jaeil studied the younger soldier’s flushed face. He’d forgotten how *passionate* Sarenians could be, especially those who hailed from Mid City, many of whom had never set foot on the Floating World. Maybe it was their perceived closeness to their counterparts in the sky—that having felt the light, even for the briefest of moments, they wished to guard it fiercely.

“You need huge quantities of mithril to power a fleet,” he found himself

reassuring her. “The amount that Minister Jo sold is enough to power two or three airships, at most.”

No, it wasn’t the threat of airships that concerned Jaeil. It was the connection with the killings that he was interested in.

Jaeil removed his mask, tossing it to the floor. Now that they were inside the storehouse, which was insulated from the mithril smoke outside, the toxicity of the air was greatly reduced. He left Yumi, climbing the metal stairs to the foreman’s office. Inside, it was clear that his soldiers had searched the room thoroughly. The drawers in the filing cabinets were removed, the chairs, tables, and desk at the back disassembled and pushed to the side. A large map of the city had been slashed to check for hidden apertures in the walls. Another door at the back of the room led into an empty storeroom.

The metal stairs clanked outside. A few seconds later, the door swung open.

Jaeil glanced at his lieutenant; he’d sent Sana to interrogate the factory’s foreman. “Back so soon?”

She sighed, clearly disappointed. “He talked right away.”

He walked to a window, cracking open the shutters to look down at the storehouse below. He watched as Yumi picked up the mask he’d tossed to the floor. “What did he say?”

“The foreman was getting a cut of the profits. He didn’t know the identity of the buyer, only that he claimed they were from Volmar. A different person would show up each time at the drop point, an abandoned shed at the back of Seorawon’s train yard. He never saw their faces; they were always covered by a cowl and each wore black robes.”

Jaeil’s eyes caught on pieces of a folding screen, shoved against the wall to the side. “What’s this?”

While his soldiers had systematically taken apart the furniture in the room, the folding screen was broken into pieces, as if something large had collided with it.

“Apparently some rebels broke into the factory a few weeks ago,” Sana said. “The foreman claimed it was unrelated to Minister Jo’s dealings.”

Jaeil frowned. “What was taken?”

“A map of the mithril mines.”

“Hm.” Jaeil filed the information in the back of his mind.

With most of the furniture pushed against the walls, he had an unobstructed view of the floor. There were the usual scuff marks and wear of boots, but among them was the distinct outline of claw marks.

“The foreman said Minister Jo kept a guard dog,” Sana said, coming up behind him. “A wolf.” Jaeil crouched down to get a closer look. “Maybe it escaped, and that’s what’s been leaving behind all those dead bodies.”

Jaeil shook his head slowly. “An animal like that would have been seen.”

Jaeil pressed his fingers into the grooves in the wood where the deepest of the marks had been carved. There were four of them. The marks on the victims had five claws. The wolf wasn’t the culprit.

As he raised his hand, he noticed debris had attached itself to the fabric of his gloves.

Sana peered closer. “That looks like blood.”

His gloves were dark, but that didn’t stop the dried fragments from glimmering in the light of the lanterns. Iridescent.

He thought of the mote, landing on his finger.

The color was the same. *Mithril blue*.

“Captain!” Yumi stood in the doorway, breathless. She’d removed her mask. “A telegram just arrived from Commander Su.”

Jaeil stood, taking it from her. He released the string that bound the scroll, unraveling it.

The general is addressing the soldiers at Yongin Military Base, Commander Su had written in bold calligraphy. Report immediately.



YONGIN MILITARY BASE was located north of the Wall, outside the rim of the Floating World.

As Jaeil’s carriage chased the shadow of the world, the air outside lightened, growing brighter and brighter until the horses leaped out of the darkness, whinnying as they were met with an imposing sight. On the northern plains, the Sarenian army had gathered. Ten thousand troops strong, campfires stretched to where the sun appeared to burn along the horizon.

Jaeil squinted against red rays glinting off the metal hulls of a dozen large airships that surrounded the camp. Each had the capacity to carry up to a

hundred soldiers. Smaller aircraft were scattered among the tents in varying sizes, the smallest rigged for a single passenger.

Pulling up outside the camp, he was surprised to see an imperial airship among them, recognizable by its elegant design—it resembled a white bird—and the winged symbol of the Sareniyan royal family.

He spotted Lady Maya standing among the officers who waited for his father's address. He wondered if she'd been invited by the general or, like Jaeil, had been informed of the general's plans through a third party. Behind them, the soldiers of the eighty-eight regiments that comprised the bulk of the army stood in unbroken lines. Their discipline, however, was tested with Jaeil's arrival. A stir ran through the low-ranking soldiers as he approached the line of officers, and one man in particular.

"It's good to see your reputation still precedes you," Commander Su said. While Jaeil's father had three commanders, his oldest—in age and acquaintance—was Commander Su.

Jaeil bowed to the older man.

"Captain," Commander Su said. "Jaeil." The commander had known him since he was a young boy, and though the older man showed him the proper respect due to his rank, Commander Su also occasionally lapsed into old habits. Jaeil didn't mind. "You took longer than expected."

"I wasn't at my residence when the telegram arrived but at the mithril factory in the ninth ward."

He informed his superior of what he'd discovered there. Unlike his father and the other commanders, Commander Su was aware of Jaeil's investigation into the mysterious bodies. He'd also been the one to discover the second victim. Unlike Jaeil, though, his interest wasn't strictly utilitarian—the commander was a good person. He cared about the deaths because they were exactly that: lives that had been lost.

"So..." The commander's face was drawn. "Minister Jo was a traitor. But that amount of mithril won't make a difference ... unless..." He frowned. "They're using it for another purpose."

"I discovered dried blood left on the floor of the foreman's office. It had particles of what appeared to be mithril," Jaeil said.

He then cleared his throat. What he was about to ask seemed far-fetched, even with the evidence. "Is it possible for mithril to be used to chemically alter an animal's anatomy? Or ... a human's?" As he said the words, he

immediately regretted them, realizing how absurd they were. Mithril was poisonous—in its solid state, it was tolerable; as a gas, it was highly toxic. A liquid form would be lethal.

“There was a program,” the commander said, and Jaeil looked up sharply. “The objective was to create a new type of soldier, one who was stronger than the average foot soldier, using mithril. It failed. The program was shut down two years ago.”

Jaeil’s heart rate sped up. “Could whoever was in charge have survived?”

“Perhaps. The head of the project was a scientist of some renown. He came to the Floating World when he was a boy, not much younger than yourself. He had an older brother, a soldier who was killed...”

“By my father?” Jaeil asked with a frown.

“No, by...” Commander Su’s eyes trailed toward where Lady Maya stood with her retinue. “It was a tragedy. He was touring the eastern gardens when he met Sareniya. They fell in love.”

Sareniya, the celestial maiden. Ren’s mother.

“I don’t understand,” Jaeil said slowly, though he did, in fact, understand. But he wanted to confirm his suspicions. “He was her husband?”

“No, this occurred before her marriage. He was a commoner, a soldier. He was from the Under World. When their affair was discovered, her family had him killed.

“The brother was spared. He was brilliant. His understanding of mithril and its components was uncanny. At the time, he was working on a serum that would counteract the poisonous effects of mithril, so that inhaling it wouldn’t be toxic. It would have been groundbreaking, had he succeeded.”

Perhaps he had. Jaeil’s heart beat even faster as he put the pieces together.

A scientist who hated Sareniya, who had access to mithril for years through Minister Jo ...

“We have to inform the general,” Jaeil said. His father was a tyrant, but he would protect the Floating World. Nothing mattered more to him.

Commander Su shook his head. “Maybe a few days ago he might have listened, but matters have escalated in a short period of time. The Floating Council, under the direction of Lady Maya, has been spreading rumors among the people, claiming the light in the east was a sign of the celestial maiden’s return.” Commander Su frowned. “It’s blasphemous.”

Jaeil studied his old mentor. Commander Su had been loyal to the queen,

not because he thought she was a better ruler than his father could be, but because he was *devout*. He'd believed Sareniya, with all her many faults, was a goddess.

While Jaeil believed his father had killed the Sareniyan queen the night of the storm—though he had no way to prove it—the commander did not. If he did, he could never have supported the general.

“The rumors have put your father on edge,” Commander Su said grimly. “It’s a clear indication that Lady Maya hopes to install a puppet on the throne, a *pretender*, so that she and the other royals can rule without restrictions from the Floating Council.”

Jaeil grimaced. The situation was worse than he'd thought. Cornered like this, he didn't know *what* his father might do.

From a pitched tent to the right of the field, Jaeil's father emerged and walked to a standing position before the line of officers. For several moments he spoke not a word, letting the weight of his presence press down upon the field of soldiers.

Finally, he spoke, his resonant voice carrying over the great distance. “There are rumors that the light in the east was a sign of the celestial maiden's return. Do not be fooled!” His voice boomed. “If there is a claimant to the throne, she is an imposter. It is a trick by the north to hinder our resolve and distract us from the true enemy.”

Jaeil studied his father. His face was composed, his stance rigid with his hands behind his back. He spoke with confidence, *conviction*. Had Jaeil not known any better, he might have believed him.

The general's gaze lowered to the line of officers—and to Lady Maya, who stood among them. “And should I find this imposter”—his voice turned low, menacing—“I will kill her, as an example of what happens to those who oppose the empire.”

At this, Lady Maya broke from the line, turning her back to the general. She boarded the imperial airship, followed by her guards and attendants.

Jaeil's father waited until her airship had ascended before turning once more to the soldiers. “For hundreds of years, Sareniya has relied on three things to keep her safe: the magic of the celestial maidens, its location in the sky, and mithril. But mithril is being depleted as we speak, and the Floating World is sinking.” His words caused activity among the soldiers, many of whom were unaware of the phenomenon. “And the celestial maiden cannot

save us. She perished ten years ago, and even then, her kind had lost all their powers.”

The general leaned forward, his eyes alight, his expression fervent, as if he were possessed by an emotion far greater than his body could contain. “The inheritor of the Floating World isn’t a pretender with magic tricks, but the people who have endured beneath her shadow. *We* are the ones who have bled, who have sacrificed; it is *our* children who suffer and die on the battlefield. For ten years, we have fought our northern enemies in the name of Sareniya and her idle, indolent nobles, who even now are paying the Volmarans to spread these vicious rumors, to confuse us, to weaken us.”

His words sparked outrage among the soldiers, shouts and cries of fury.

“The Floating World is *ours* to protect!” the general roared, his face red, veins straining at his neck. “And it is ours to *claim*.”

Jaeil’s body tensed. Beside him, Commander Su swallowed a shallow breath, as if the general spoke of plans that even he was unaware of.

“At first light, the day after the Festival of Light has begun, we’ll commence a full assault ... on Sareniya.”

ACT THREE

THE UNDER WORLD

CHAPTER 22

SUNHO

The Under World

Fourth Ward, the Outer Ring

SUNHO REACHED FOR the remainder of Ren's coins to pay the boatman, an eccentric grandfather with an extraordinary beard. He'd fished Ren and Sunho, unconscious, out of the water shortly after they'd jumped from the bridge. The River Nakjin was actually the most direct route between Seorawon and the Under World, except *from* the Under World it was entirely upriver. That wasn't the case from Seorawon, and they reached the Under World in three days, the boatman navigating the rapids and rocky parts of the river with impressive, if alarming, dexterity.

"Keep your coin," he said, his gaze moving toward the back of the boat. "You'll need it..." He stroked his beard, and several acorns hit the deck. "The celestial princess ... is it truly her?"

Sunho eyed the boat docked beside theirs, where deckhands were unloading cargo from a ship—out of earshot. "I'm grateful to you for bringing us here," he said. "And for what you did back in Seorawon. But it'll be a problem if you can't stay quiet." Sunho slid his hand to his sword, wrapped in cloth across his lap, his meaning clear. He wondered if he should feel more guilt, threatening an old man. But he'd do worse to protect Ren.

The boatman let out a bark of laughter. "I might have doubted you after your heroic but ultimate defeat on that bridge—"

Sunho scowled.

"—but never have I been more reassured by a threat!"

With a grunt, he stood, placing a hand on Sunho's shoulder. "Don't worry, boy. Your secrets are safe with me."

As the boatman left to finish unloading his cargo, Sunho stood. At the back of the vessel, curled atop a pile of fishing nets, Ren was sound asleep,

her arms circled around a woven basket.

She'd slept for most of their journey. It was as if the power she'd called upon on the bridge had drained her of energy.

The power. *The light.* When Sunho closed his eyes, he could still see it. That brilliant silver light that had filled the whole sky.

That was the light that had started all this, that had called him, and the others, from so far a distance, like a beacon. And she had done it again. There had been dangers before; from now on, it would only get worse.

He recalled a conversation they'd had the night before, in one of the rare moments she'd been awake.

"Sunho?" The boat rocked gently beneath them—they were on a calmer stretch of the river, the water glowing in the moonlight. "I'm sorry I lied to you."

He wondered if he should be upset that she hadn't told him the truth. He searched his heart for even a flicker of resentment, but felt only relief—that she was safe, that none of the hundred mercenaries, assassins, and killers had harmed her. Before, he'd told himself that there was nothing she could have said to him that would have made him turn from her. He had meant it.

"What can I do to make it up to you?" Her question was earnest. She must have felt overwhelmed with guilt—he needed to ask for something of equal value to her lie.

"Tell me your name."

She blinked. "It's Sareniya, the same as my mother's. But even when I lived on the Floating World, no one called me that. They called me 'Ren,' for short."

"Ren," he repeated. The name suited her. It was lovely, and steady, like she was.

She blushed. "That can't be it. There must be something else..."

"That's enough for me."

She looked to argue, but then she yawned, stretching her arms wide above her head before settling back onto the old fishing nets and falling asleep.

On the boat, Ren stirred, her eyelids fluttering before she opened them. She sat up groggily, rubbing at her eyes. He knew at once that she couldn't see him, a crease forming between her brows.

"Sunho?" Her voice was small, hesitant.

"I'm here," he said quickly, crouching beside her.

She reached out, her fingers curling around his sleeve. "It's so dark. I can't see a thing."

"It's still early yet," he said. "The sun hasn't risen."

"The sun reaches the Under World?" She sounded hopeful.

"Not like you're used to. But it won't be as dark in an hour."

She rose to her feet, still clinging to his sleeve. He guided her from the back of the boat down the rickety plank the dockworkers had set against the ship to facilitate the unloading of cargo. The water sloshed, inky in the darkness and thick with the stench of the sewers. As they neared the end of the dock, Sunho looked back to see the boatman on the deck, holding a lantern. He nodded at Sunho, glancing briefly in Ren's direction before turning away.

Ren didn't notice the exchange, her gaze trained upward, though it was unlikely she could see anything. Her pack slipped down her back, and she let go of his sleeve to catch it, fumbling in the darkness.

Reaching out, he grabbed her pack from her, slinging it over his shoulder. "Let's go," he said. He took her hand, threading his fingers through hers. "My apartment isn't far from here."

She kept close to him, occasionally bumping into his side. He regretted not asking the boatman for a lantern. Luckily the fourth ward sat adjacent to the fifth ward, and they reached his building without meeting anyone on the street.

The metal stairs groaned as they made their way to his rooftop apartment. Outside the door, he reached into an inner pocket of his robe, surprised to find he still had the key. Pushing it into the lock, he gave it a twist, shoving the door open when it caught at the frame.

His landlord had obviously been snooping around. He righted the single chair, then reached down to pick up the lantern heater, placing it on the small table. Striking a match, he brought the flame to the wick, and the lantern sputtered to life.

He picked through the containers on his counter, opening lids and sniffing the contents. A sound creaked behind him. He glanced over to see Ren had taken a seat on his small cot. He caught himself staring and looked away. He felt oddly restless, seeing her in the apartment he'd lived in for two years alone. He'd never invited anyone inside before. At the bottom of the last canister, he found a handful of dried tea leaves.

“Ren,” he said, and she looked up. He held up the canister. “Would you ... like tea?”

She laughed, a bright, startling sound in the quiet of his apartment. “Yes, thank you.”

He had to go back outside to retrieve water from the wall spigot, then, placing the teapot above the flame, he turned up the burner. A quiet settled around them as they waited for the water to boil.

“Your place is ... nice,” Ren said, gazing around the small room.

“It’s a dump.”

Her eyes widened, then she laughed. That sound again. Was it the quiet of the Under World that made it sound so bright? No, it had been bright from the beginning.

When the leaves finished steeping, he poured the tea into the cleanest and least damaged of his cups. He handed it to Ren, who took it between her fingers, blowing on the surface before bringing it to her lips.

He replaced the teapot with the lantern. Now that they were safe for a time, he could inspect the wound on his shoulder where the demon on the bridge had pierced him with its claws. He removed his robe and peeled back the bandage, wincing at the sharp pain. The boatman had done a thorough if uneven job stitching him up.

“Let me look at that,” Ren said, placing the cup on the floor and quickly moving to his side. Studying the wound, she shook her head. “I need more light.”

“Outside.” He stood, and she followed him from the apartment.

It wasn’t as dark as when they first arrived, though he wondered if she noticed. From the pinkish tint to the air, it must be close to dawn.

He led her to the raised platform in the middle of the rooftop.

“The house in the reed field had a platform like this,” she said, climbing up beside him after he’d sat down. She’d grabbed the teapot and a cloth from her pack before they’d left. Angling the spout, she poured a generous amount onto the cloth. “I would sometimes sit out there at night and look at the stars.”

He remembered that first night, when she’d cleaned and bound his wounds. Her fingers had been gentle. It was the same now. He closed his eyes as she pressed the warm cloth to his skin.

After a few minutes, she lowered her hand. “On the bridge, when the

demon..." She took a shuddering breath. "I'd thought you..."

He opened his eyes. She was staring down at the cloth, stained blue with his blood.

She shook her head. "*Before that*, something happened." He knew what she spoke of, the moment when he felt as if his head were being split in two. "I didn't know how to help you. Was it because of the darkness you spoke of?"

"I'm not sure."

She nodded, lifting the cloth to his wound once more.

"I'd have to go back to the beginning to understand," he said quietly. He drew in a long breath. What he was about to tell her, he'd never told anyone before. And Ren's opinion of him mattered more than he thought imaginable. He didn't want her to fear him. "Two years ago, I woke up without any memories, but I still knew I was *different*. I was faster, stronger. Minor wounds healed overnight. My senses were heightened, and I could see in the dark."

She blinked. "You can see in the dark?"

He nodded. He'd thought, briefly, that having spent some time in the sunlight, his ability to see in the dark might have dulled, but his senses were stronger than ever.

Ren seemed to consider *this* difference of his more than the others. "I wish I could do that," she said finally.

He raised a brow. *She* could wield celestial magic.

"Then there was my blood, and..." The most significant difference, the one that made him realize the new powers he wielded weren't a blessing but a curse. "The Demon.

"I called the presence inside me a darkness, but that's because I was afraid to name it for what it is. The demon on the bridge and the one that attacked your uncle, I'm no different than them, except this Demon lives *inside* me."

He pressed a hand to his chest. "The similarities are undeniable—the blood, the strength. If I were ever to lose control, I fear I would become the strongest monster of them all."

He looked straight ahead, afraid to see the expression on her face—fear, disgust.

"The spark of blue in your eyes ... is that the Demon?"

He frowned, unsure what she was referring to. “Any physical changes to my body are because of it, and only when I’m in the heat of battle, when my emotions are at their highest, or when I’m threatened.”

“Oh, really? That’s strange.” He felt her sudden nearness, and he was startled into looking at her. His eyes widened; their faces were mere inches apart.

Her brow was furrowed in concentration as she studied him. “It’s there now,” she said. “The light, I can see it. This place, this world, everything is in darkness. But there’s a light in your eyes.”

His chest ached, but it was different than any pain he’d felt before.

“Sunho,” she said, “you don’t look like a monster to me.”

Her eyes held light as well, though different than his, like the glimmer of sunlight on water. His eyes traveled to the curve of her lashes, to the bridge of her nose, to her lips. They looked soft, like the petals of a flower. When his eyes returned to her face, there was a flush to her cheeks. She coughed, turning her face to the side, and he wondered what he’d done to make her look away from him.

She picked at a loose thread on her sleeve, then she stopped, placing her hands in her lap. “I want to tell you the truth. And for that I also have to start from the beginning. I was born on the Floating World, and though I can’t remember much of my childhood there, I was happy. I had a nursemaid, Doona, whom I adored. And a friend—a boy, older than me by two years. I rarely saw my mother, but that didn’t matter. I loved her.

“The morning of the Festival of Light, I had woken to a feather on my pillow, and I wanted to give it as a gift to my mother. And so that night, I slipped away during the festivities, and I went to the place I knew she often liked to visit—beyond the wall of the eastern garden.

“But I wasn’t the only one who went in search of her. That night, I watched the general push my mother off the edge of the Floating World. Afterward, I was chased by his soldiers. They’d meant to kill me, but I got away. Auntie was the one who found me. She was a traveling performer, visiting for the festival. She saved me and took me home to her village. She raised me as if I was her own.”

Ren took a deep breath. “They may be searching for the lost princess, but that’s not me. Not anymore. I belong with Auntie, Big Uncle, and Little Uncle. I’m a troupe performer. No more, and no less.”

“You sound sure of that,” Sunho said.

She lifted her chin slightly. “I worked hard to be nobody.”

Sunho admired her conviction. “I’m nobody, too,” he said. “I have no wish to get caught up in some grand destiny. I just want to find my brother.”

Ren tilted her head to the side, peering at him intently. “So,” she asked, “what will you do now that you know the truth?”

He’d already made his choice in Seorawon, before he’d reunited with her by the fountain, before he knew the truth of who she was. For two years he’d felt restless, aimless, but in this he was certain. He would help her search for the cure to her uncle’s illness, and do whatever it took so that she felt safe again.

“The day we met, you sheltered me with your umbrella,” he said. “I am indebted to you.”

“There is no debt, Sunho.”

“I won’t turn you in.” The captain had said he wanted Ren brought back alive, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t hurt her or hand her over to the general.

Ren smiled appreciatively, then sobered. “But what about your brother?”

“I’ll find another way. Like I told you, the morning we met I regained some of my memories. Maybe, in time, I’ll remember what happened to him, and to me.”

“So we’re back where we started, with me looking for a cure for my uncle and you searching for your brother. But now we’re on the same side.”

Sunho smirked. “So not where we started at all.”

She laughed, falling onto her back on the platform. “I miss the open sky,” she said, gazing upward. “I don’t know how you can bear to live without it.”

He lay on his back beside her. “The sky here is beautiful, too.”

“Describe it to me,” she said.

“Above us are the mithril mines—” he began.

“Yes, but what does it *look* like?”

He considered his answer. “Like rivers,” he said finally. “Or a tree, with many branches of light. Mithril is bright.”

“Like your eyes,” she said sleepily.

“Like stars,” he said, “but not unreachable like those are. There’s a feeling that if you wanted, you could climb to the very top, and you could reach out, and touch that light.”

He felt the soft brush of her hair. He looked down to see Ren's head bobbing against his shoulder. "You're right, Sunho," she said, half-asleep already. "It is beautiful."

"Do you want to go back inside the apartment?" he asked. "It's still early."

"I'll just rest here for a few minutes. Like this, if that's okay."

She was asleep within seconds.

Sunho stayed awake a little longer, keeping watch over the stars.

CHAPTER 23

REN

The Under World

Fifth Ward, the Outer Ring

AT SOME POINT later, Sunho must have carried Ren into the apartment because she woke to the sound of the door catching against the frame. Sunho stepped inside, setting a paper bag on the small table.

He'd visited the bathhouse while she'd slept. His hair was swept back from his face, a few strands curling lightly over his forehead. He'd also changed out of his robes and now wore a loose white shirt and black trousers.

Ren rubbed her eyes as she sat up from the cot. "I would have liked to bathe," she said, pouting a little.

"Sorry." He ducked his chin. "I didn't want to wake you. You looked ... peaceful."

She immediately forgave him.

"I brought you something." He shifted open the paper bag. A fragrant aroma permeated the tiny space. She shifted toward the edge of the bed as he walked over, pulling a steamed bun from the bag.

It was still warm, and she blew softly on the surface before biting into the fluffy exterior. The rich, sweet filling of red beans exploded against her tongue.

"I could eat five hundred of these," she said, devouring the bun in several large mouthfuls.

"Help yourself." He took out one bun for himself and tossed her the bag with the rest.

She ate three more in the time that he ate his one.

"So," she said, licking her lips, "what's the plan?"

"We'll head to the seventh ward. I have a contact that—" He stopped with a frown, his eyes flitting to the door. It rattled against the frame as someone

banged loudly on the surface.

Ren reached for her satchel, but Sunho shook his head slightly, pointing to his ear—he could hear whoever was outside. He placed his sword against the wall next to the door, then opened it.

A sallow-faced man stood outside. “You’re back. It’s been two weeks. I thought you’d run off.”

“What do you want?” Sunho said.

The man’s eyes shifted over Sunho’s shoulder, narrowing as they caught sight of Ren. Sunho moved his body, blocking the man’s view of her.

He sneered. “You’re not paying rent for two. If the girl wants to stay, there’s a vacancy below.”

Sunho tensed. “Vacancy?”

“That woman and her brat couldn’t make rent. I reported them after you—hey!”

Sunho shoved him backward and he fell. Ren hurried to follow, jumping over the man, who was now cursing loudly from the ground.

She found Sunho on the floor below, coming out of an identical apartment. His expression was grim.

“What happened?” she asked, peeking behind him. The apartment appeared ransacked, the small bed frame in the corner overturned. She noticed a child’s wooden sword discarded on the floor. “Who lived here?”

“A boy,” Sunho said grimly, “Haru, and his mother. I saw him a few days before I left the Under World. He’d told me the landlord had been hounding them for rent. If the landlord reported them, it’s likely Haru was taken somewhere to pay off their debts.” He dropped his head. “It’s the same as when my brother and I were indentured to the army. I should have done something. Haru’s just a kid...”

Ren understood Sunho’s guilt. He might not have remembered what had happened to him, but she had a feeling a lot of the children in the Under World, at least in the Outer Ring, had a similar story.

“We’ll get him back,” Ren said. “It’s not too late. We can save him, like your brother, and my uncle. Let’s save him, because it’s the right thing to do. Because we *can*.”

That was the difference between when Sunho and Ren were children and now. They were older, they were *stronger*.

Sunho raised his eyes and she saw it again, that flash of blue.

“Okay.” He nodded. “All right.”

The landlord was still outside Sunho’s apartment, rubbing his backside.

“Haru and his mother,” Sunho said, his voice cold, “where did they go?”

“How am I supposed to know? I don’t keep track of pathetic dregs who can’t even cough up a coin to pay rent.”

“You kept track of Sunho,” Ren reasoned, “enough to know that he’d been gone for two weeks.”

“That’s different. He’s a mercenary. I want to keep my limbs intact.”

“And I’m assuming you *still* want that,” Ren said, waggling her eyebrows. The man scowled, but that didn’t stop him from shooting a fearful glance at Sunho.

“I don’t know about the mother,” the landlord said, “but the boy was taken by someone who works out of the Madang District. That’s all I know, I swear.”

Ren looked at Sunho’s troubled expression to see that wasn’t a good sign.

Back in the apartment, Sunho grabbed his sword while Ren fetched her satchel. Now that the landlord had seen her face, they wouldn’t come back here.

Outside on the landing, the sniveling man was nowhere in sight. Sunho led Ren down the metal stairs back onto the street. Without the sun, it was difficult to gauge the time, but it must have been closer to evening.

Old men smoked pipes on street corners, smoke drifting in lazy swirls. Most storefronts had lanterns hanging outside them, giving off enough light to see by. There was a bathhouse where steam puffed out from a crooked pipe. Next to it was a bakery that had a signboard outside depicting a variety of pastries and breads. A chime tinkled as a girl slipped through the door, carrying a covered basket in one hand, a lantern in the other.

Ren pointed to the shop. “Is that where you bought the steamed buns?”

Sunho nodded, though his attention was focused ahead of them. A group of boys around their age approached from the opposite direction, flinging themselves against one another in a rowdy manner. Ren felt a pressure on her arm, and she found herself being gently maneuvered to the side, Sunho taking the place she’d previously occupied. He’d positioned his body so that he was nearest the group of boys when they passed, one of whom knocked against his shoulder.

Ren looked up at Sunho, biting her lip to contain her smile.

Sunho raised his brow. "What?"

"Nothing."

From the fifth ward, they made their way through the sixth, keeping to the outskirts to avoid running into patrols. Sunho had explained a bit of the city on the boat, how it was sectioned into nine wards with the Outer Ring surrounding them, that if they were to keep walking, they could circle the entirety of the city, though it would take a while.

After passing the marker for the seventh ward, they left the wider street onto narrower and more winding ones, and Ren quickly became disoriented.

They were passing a pawnshop when Sunho stopped. "I'm going to ask for directions."

Ren nodded, and he entered the tiny shop, pushing aside the short curtain hanging over the doorway.

Ren pressed her back against the wall to wait for him. Across the street, a girl was selling flowers from a basket. They appeared to be cosmos, though Ren could only guess where the girl might have gathered them in a city without sunlight.

They weren't pink and yellow, like those that grew in the valley, but blue. They reminded her of Sunho's eyes. She approached the girl, reaching into her sash and pulling out the last of her remaining coins in exchange for the flower. She then brought it to her nose, inhaling its fragrant perfume. When she let out a sigh, they both giggled.

A few minutes later, Sunho stepped out of the pawnshop, glancing at the girl, who was already moving away.

"We're almost there," he said, nodding down a street that ran perpendicular to the shop.

Ren fell into step beside him. "You never finished telling me about this contact of yours." She tucked the flower in the pocket of her skirt, its blue-petaled head peeking out.

"There isn't much to tell. Before I left the city, I was given the name of a place to go to if I should ever need help."

"Yes, but *who* told you?"

He glanced at her, then quickly away, and Ren was surprised to see a blush rising in his cheeks.

Who was this contact? A friend of his? Though he'd mentioned Rohoon and Heetae, his friends from when he'd been a soldier, he'd never spoken

about anyone from the Under World.

An uneasy feeling lodged unbidden in her stomach, though she didn't quite know *why*.

The road they walked on turned into a series of alleyways. They wove in and around laundry left out to dry and climbed up and down narrow stone steps, pieces of which sometimes crumbled beneath their feet.

At the end of a particularly long alleyway, an old woman sat cross-legged on a large woven mat, plucking the tails off bean sprouts. Her fingers were large and knobby, and she pinched the tails with practiced efficiency.

"Excuse me, grandmother," Sunho said. "I'm searching for a place. It goes by the name of Wolryudang."

The grandmother lifted her head slightly, peering first at Sunho, her eyes narrowing at the sight of his sword strung across his shoulder, then at Ren. She seemed to come to some sort of conclusion because she raised one arm and pointed to a small opening between two buildings, barely discernible in the darkness.

"Thank you," Sunho said, bowing to her.

The opening was so narrow that they had to turn sideways to pass through.

"I think that grandmother might have been playing a trick on us," Ren said, grimacing at the close proximity of her nose to the wall.

At last, they stepped out into a wide, open space surrounded on all sides by tall buildings, though none of them appeared to have doors. If there were other access points, Ren couldn't see them.

They were in a courtyard, at the center of which stood a teahouse. It was two stories tall. Someone had strung lanterns from the eaves of the second story so that it glowed bright against the darkness. A sweep of stairs led up to the paper-lined doors, through which more lanterns could be seen glowing softly within.

As they approached the stairs, Ren noticed a large object at the edge of the courtyard, covered by a tarp. Her attention shifted away to a wooden signboard beside the teahouse, where the name of the establishment was written in elegant calligraphy.

"Wolryudang," she read aloud. *The Place Where the Moon Stays*.

Sunho pushed open the doors. Inside it was quiet, peaceful. Dozens of lanterns were propped on tables and against the walls on the floor. Ren's

curiosity about this place and Sunho's mysterious contact only grew stronger.

An elderly woman sat on a stool behind the bar at the back, sipping tea while reading a clothbound book. She peered over thin spectacles as they drew near. "Can I help you?"

Sunho took a deep breath, then said, "Yurhee gave me the name of this place. Could you let her know I'm here?"

Ren's gaze darted to Sunho. *Yurhee?*

"There's no one by that name here," the old woman said. She took off her spectacles, wiping the lens with a piece of cloth. With the state of the cloth and the glasses, Ren wasn't certain which was making the other worse.

"What about Tag?" Sunho offered.

The woman shook her head, placing the spectacles on the bridge of her nose. "I'm sorry, you've come to the wrong place."

A crease worked between his brows. There was a long pause in which Ren wondered what he'd do next. Then he leaned forward.

"I'm looking for..." He pitched his voice lower, mumbling something.

"I can't hear you," the woman scolded. "Speak up!"

Sunho looked pained. He took a deep breath, and said, all in a rush, "I'm looking for the most beautiful girl in the Under World."

The woman's eyes widened. Ren gaped at Sunho, who turned his face from her, a blush creeping up his neck.

The woman cackled. "That girl!" She slapped her book closed onto the counter and hopped off her stool. "She's always up to something. Wait here." She shuffled through a curtain behind the bar.

Left alone with Sunho, Ren didn't know what to say. This was an excellent opportunity to tease him, and yet she felt embarrassed herself. Clearly it was a passcode of some sort, but that didn't stop the unpleasant feeling curdling in her chest.

They didn't have to wait long. A door banged somewhere above them, followed by the sound of someone bounding down the stairs. The curtain behind the counter flung wide and a girl barreled through.

Ren's heart sank. Yurhee wasn't *just* beautiful, she was *older*.

"Sunho!" Rushing forward, she threw her arms around Sunho's neck. He took a few steps back, his hands going up to catch her waist.

"I can't believe you really showed up!" she exclaimed. Her voice was annoyingly pleasant. "Tag is going to be ecstatic!" She let go of him, though

she kept one hand on his shoulder. "This might come as a surprise, but he really liked you."

She smiled as she peered up at him. "You look different. Is that a hint of color in your cheeks?" She lifted her hand to his face, her fingers grazing his chin.

Ren had enough. She coughed. Loudly.

Yurhee turned, arching a brow. "Who's this?"

"The most beautiful girl in *all* the worlds," Ren declared, a little too loudly.

Now it was Sunho's turn to gape at her.

Yurhee dropped her hand with a smirk. "Oh, is that how it is?"

"Ay, Yurhee," a soft voice said before the curtain was pushed back to reveal a sleepy-eyed boy with light-colored hair. "You could have warned me before rushing off like that."

"Tag!" Yurhee squealed, spinning on her heel. "Look who dropped in for a visit!"

The boy's expression remained blank. "Sunho, isn't it?"

"Oh, he's such a tease. Don't play coy, Tag."

"If you're going to talk, sit down and have some tea at least." Having come back through the curtain, the old woman plopped a tea tray onto the closest table. She clicked her tongue as she walked away.

"Where are my manners?" Yurhee ushered them to take seats at the table. "My name is Yurhee. And this here is Tag."

"I'm Ren," Ren said, blushing furiously. She felt foolish now after her outburst.

"You're not from the Under World, are you, Ren? You don't have the look about you. Not pasty enough. How'd you end up here, and with Sunho of all people?"

Ren met Sunho's gaze, and he nodded at her. She'd only tell them information that was necessary for them to know. Sunho had come to them, which meant he must think they could help in some way. "It's a long story. My caravan was attacked by a demon, during which my uncle was severely injured. He contracted a fever for three days, and then his blood turned blue. The demon was from the Under World. I thought that if I could discover where it originated from, then I could find a cure. Sunho and I met along the way."

Tag frowned. "A demon?"

"What's in it for you?" Yurhee asked Sunho.

"I have my own reasons for helping Ren," he answered. His gaze then shifted to Tag. "We call it a demon, but it's not as simple as that. We killed one, and afterward it transformed *back* into a man. On his clothing was an emblem of a black wing, folded in half."

Tag and Yurhee exchanged a glance. "I think I'm starting to understand why you came looking for us," Tag said grimly.

"That night we broke into the mithril factory, you stole a map of the mines," Sunho said. "That same symbol was on that map. If there's something to discover that might lead us to a cure, I think it'll be there."

"I know you have plans to infiltrate the mines." Sunho met Yurhee's gaze, then Tag's. "Can you take us with you?"

Ren looked at Sunho in surprise. She hadn't realized *this* was his plan. "Aren't the mines...?" She pointed up.

He nodded. "We'd need something that can fly, an aircraft, but you have one of those, don't you?" His eyes flitted to the doors leading to the courtyard.

Ren realized he was referring to whatever was beneath the tarp.

"We are planning on infiltrating the mines," Yurhee said. "Tomorrow night, in fact. During the Festival of Light. At that time, hundreds of aircraft will flood the sky. We were going to use the commotion to slip by unnoticed."

Ren leaned forward with excitement. "That's perfect!"

Yurhee shook her head. "I'm afraid we can't take you with us. We've been planning this for a long time. You two are unknown factors."

"Won't you at least think about it?" Ren pleaded.

"I'm sorry, truly. We *want* to help you, but we can't take the risk."

Ren slumped back in her chair.

"There's one more thing," Sunho said. "I'm looking for someone. About two weeks ago, my neighbor, a boy of around six or seven, was taken to pay off a debt, by someone in the Madang District."

Yurhee cursed. "Bastards who traffic in children belong in another kind of hell."

"I have a contact in the Madang District," Tag said. "We can investigate in the morning. I have an errand to run in that part of the city."

“I’ll go with you,” Sunho said, and Tag nodded.

“I’m sorry we can’t be of more help,” Yurhee said, “but you’re welcome to stay here for as long as you need. You can have your pick of the rooms upstairs.”

Then she said the words that could make Ren forget, at least for a short time, her worries. “But first, a bath!”

CHAPTER 24

SUNHO

The Under World

Wolryudang, Seventh Ward

THE NEXT MORNING, Sunho joined Tag in the courtyard outside the teahouse, where he'd pulled away the tarp to reveal a small aircraft beneath. The silver-haired boy stood with his hands in his pockets, staring at the machine with a crease between his brows. It was squat and rather ugly with a blunt nose and propellers on either side. The patchwork hull on first glance appeared shabby, but Sunho noticed the careful welding of each of the parts, slotted into place like puzzle pieces. It looked like it could comfortably carry two people. Four would be overcrowded, but it wasn't impossible.

"Will it fly?" Sunho asked.

"In theory. After I get the last of the parts." Tag reached down to pick up a lantern, pulling at the strap of his satchel as he turned toward Sunho. "Are you ready?"

Sunho looked to the upper floor of the teahouse where the flame of a candle flickered in Ren's window.

He tore his gaze away to find Tag watching him, his brow lifted slightly.

"I'm ready," Sunho said, turning his face to hide the flush in his cheeks.

They exited the courtyard the same way Sunho and Ren had come through the night before. The grandmother on the mat was in the same spot, though she'd switched out the bean sprouts for a deck of red playing cards.

While Tag bowed to her, she didn't look up, moving a card from one pile to another.

As they passed the pawnshop where Sunho had stopped to ask for directions, he searched for the girl who'd sold Ren the blue flower, thinking to surprise her with another, but was disappointed to find the street empty.

Out on the main road, Tag slowed to a halt. A large crowd had created a

blockage through which Sarenian patrol guards shouldered, grabbing people at random and thrusting a scroll with a sketch beneath their noses.

Sunho knew without seeing the scroll who they were searching for. Cursing, he turned his back on the guards, only to find Tag studying him.

He hadn't told Tag and Yurhee the whole truth about Ren. He didn't think they would turn her in; as rebels, they would want to help whoever the Sarenian guard was after. But Ren's secret was worlds-altering—the risk in helping them might be too great, even for them.

“You two! Hold it right there.”

Sunho reached for his sword, but Tag stayed his hand with a slight shake of his head.

Two guards jogged over, one with a scroll that she quickly unraveled. “Have you seen this girl?”

The sketch was different than the one back at Bo Dan's. While that drawing had been a vague rendering, this was more detailed, depicting a girl with hair falling out of a messy braid and a heart-shaped face. *Ren*.

“No,” Tag said flatly. “I haven't seen her.” Sunho had to exert effort not to react to the guards, or to Tag. He must have recognized Ren; the likeness was almost a perfect match.

“What about you?” the second guard asked.

“I haven't, either.” Sunho winced at how unnatural he sounded.

The guard frowned. “She was seen in the company of a swordsman.” Her eyes darted to the shoulder bag that carried Sunho's sword.

“She's pretty,” Tag said, leaning closer to the drawing. His voice had lost that flat edge. He sounded curious, eager even. “Who is she?”

The guard's attention shifted to Tag. “None of your business.”

“Is there a reward?” Tag asked. “How much?”

Her expression turned to disgust. “One hundred for a tip, ten thousand if it leads to an arrest.”

“She's a criminal, then.” Tag reached out as if to take the scroll, and the guard snatched it away.

“Damn street kids,” she cursed. “Only interested in fleecing coins.” The guards turned from them, pulling new people to interrogate from the crowd.

Once out of earshot, Tag nodded at Sunho. “Follow me. I know another way.” They retraced their steps, turning down the alley behind the pawnshop.

Crouching beside a sewer hole, Tag lifted the plate. A fetid, hot breeze

wafted up from the darkness.

“I wanted to avoid this,” he said with a grimace.

Sunho climbed through first, dropping several feet and landing in murky, foul-smelling liquid that splashed up to his knees.

A few seconds later, Tag landed beside him. Holding his lantern aloft, he peered down at his compass. “We need to go east.” According to the compass, east led directly into a wall. “North, it is.”

They pushed forward through the murky water. Tag handed him a spare rag, which Sunho wrapped around the bottom half of his face to keep out some of the overwhelming stench.

Sunho had gone into the sewers once before for a job. The network of tunnels had no logical layout but branched off into seemingly random directions, many with dead ends. The Under World at least had order; the sewers were a labyrinth. If it weren’t for his ability to see in the dark, he might have turned back.

Tag, for his part, appeared unbothered. His gaze didn’t dart to the shadows cast by the lantern but remained focused straight ahead.

They’d walked for a few minutes in silence, when Tag said, “You’re a bad liar.”

Sunho grimaced. It was Tag’s quick thinking that had gotten them out of trouble. He’d managed to reduce them to street kids not worth a second glance.

Sunho caught Tag’s eye. “Thanks for what you did back there.” When Tag didn’t immediately respond, he added, “I didn’t think you could talk that much.”

Tag snorted. “When you hang out with Yurhee, you learn to talk your way out of things.”

Sunho laughed. He glanced at Tag to find him smiling softly.

Sunho hadn’t known what to make of Tag when they first met. He rarely interacted with boys his own age, and Tag was taciturn. But in their short time together, Sunho was starting to get the impression that the smaller boy had a protective nature, and that he was softhearted.

“We’ll have to be more careful,” Tag said, “now that we know Sareniyan guards are looking for your friend.”

“Aren’t you curious why they’re looking for her?” Tag was perceptive, a street kid in the most positive sense. He likely had his own theories but was

waiting for Sunho to tell him the truth.

Tag didn't answer Sunho for some time. They'd gone about a half mile in silence when he stopped, lifting his lantern. The warm glow illuminated the wall where someone had painted a mural onto the cement. The painting depicted a pair of white wings, outstretched on either side.

"The wings of Sareniya," Sunho said. He couldn't mask the bitterness in his voice. Those wings had symbolized unquestionable authority and unmitigated suffering for so many years of his life.

"On first glance," Tag said, "but look closer. The wings of the empire are separate. These are connected at the bottom."

Sunho followed his gaze to the base of the wings where a perfect sphere had been drawn, connecting the two.

"You can find these throughout the city," Tag said. "The people who leave them worshipped the celestial maiden as a deity and blame her death for the troubles that have plagued the Sareniyans and the Under World. In the story they tell, one day the heir to the Floating World will return, bringing with her magic that will heal both worlds."

He lowered his lantern, and they left the mural behind, traveling farther into the sewers.

"There's a rumor going around," Tag continued, in that same measured tone that seemed to be his natural way of speaking. "Mostly in the Outer Ring, though I hear it's reaching the ears of those in Mid City and the Core, that the light that appeared in the east was a sign of that return, that the princess who the general claimed perished in the storm is, in fact, alive and is on her way back to reclaim her throne."

"What do you think?" Sunho asked.

"I think ... the general must feel threatened by such a rumor, enough to send guards all over the city looking for a girl."

Sunho stopped walking.

Tag did as well, turning to face him. "I didn't make the connection until I saw that picture. Yurhee and I ... we have our own goals. Grand destinies aren't really our thing. But you don't have to worry about either of us getting in your way, and though it might not be much, we'll help as best we can."

Sunho experienced an odd, almost painful feeling in his chest, like his heart was expanding. "Why?" he asked.

"Yurhee has a soft spot for you," Tag said simply.

“Because I’m closed off and emotionally inaccessible,” Sunho said, remembering how Yurhee had described him outside the gates of the ninth ward mithril factory.

Tag chuckled softly, then he tilted his head, his expression thoughtful. “There’s a change in you. Yurhee and I noticed it last night. You’re ... softer, more open. If Ren’s the reason for the change...” Tag shrugged. “Then more cause for us to help her, to help you both.”

Sunho felt at a loss for words. If what Tag was saying was true, then Yurhee and Tag were sheltering them, protecting them *for him*. Because, for some reason, they’d taken a liking to him. It made Sunho feel humbled.

He could admit, though he was too embarrassed to say so at the moment, that he liked them, too.

“Though I am curious how the two of you even met,” Tag said.

“A Sarenian captain hired me to find her,” Sunho said. “Though I was never told who she was. I was supposed to protect her from those who’d been sent to kill her. The reward was ... considerable.

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” he said. “She doesn’t want anything to do with the Floating World. I don’t know about rumors or stories or grand destinies, but Ren only wants to save her uncle. It’s complicated, but I decided not to turn her in to the captain. I want to help her.”

“So,” Tag said, after a long pause, “you were sent after the prize but decided to keep it for yourself.”

Sunho frowned. “I just told you I wasn’t turning her in.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

It took Sunho a full minute to realize what Tag was implying. “It’s not like that,” he mumbled. “We’re friends. Like you and Yurhee.”

Tag’s voice was thoughtful when he responded, “I don’t think it’s like Yurhee and me.”

As they neared the fourth ward, a loud, scratching sound echoed from deep within the tunnel.

“Did you hear that?” Sunho asked, just as the sound stopped.

“Maybe it was a rat,” Tag said, though he didn’t appear to believe his own words.

They stood in silence, listening, but whatever creature had made the sound was gone.

“These sewers stretch beneath the entire city,” Tag said. “Sometimes

people hear strange noises from below. Let's go. We should be nearing the exit."

They left the sewers through a large pipe that trickled foul water into a ditch. Sunho unwound the rag from his mouth, grimacing at the tepid air, which wasn't much of an improvement.

Tag had already set off at a brisk pace, heading toward a blur of crimson lights in the distance.

"Who are we meeting?" Sunho asked, catching up.

"A woman Yurhee and I've known for a few years now. She trades in stolen machinery. Her crew breaks into Sarenian bases in the inner circle and strips them of parts."

Sunho shrugged his sword bag from his shoulder, pushing back its hood. He wanted the handle within easy reach. The Madang District had a reputation. Most of the mercenaries who'd been on the train had originated here. He'd never visited before, not wanting to draw the attention of the local gangsters.

Sunho's first impression of the district was how *red* it was. Crimson lanterns hung from the eaves of every building they passed. Sunho tensed as a group of guards walked by, but they paid them little attention, liquor sour on their breaths.

"This way," Tag said, stepping over the threshold of the largest of the buildings. As Sunho followed, he read the placard that ran across the top: *The House of Night-Blooming Flowers*.

It was a place for entertainment—that was clear as soon as they entered the first courtyard, where patrons seated on silk cushions laughed and caroused while thinly clad performers danced provocatively on a raised platform. From there, they traveled a short pathway to another courtyard packed with people gambling, roughhousing, and partaking liberally from tables spread with sweetmeats and gourd-shaped jugs of rice wine.

Tag's contact ran her business from a building at the back of the house. They found her seated on a velvet cushion behind a low wooden table. Smoke drifted toward them from the lit pipe she held in her hand, her elbow balanced on one bent knee, her skirt having slid away to reveal ankle-high socks. Her jacket was thrown across her shoulders like a cape.

"Well, if it isn't Tag," she said at their approach. "Where's Yurhee?" She sounded disappointed. "And who's your friend?"

“Yurhee couldn’t make it. You have the part?” Tag didn’t waste time, clearly impatient to get out of the fourth ward.

“Getting this wasn’t an easy task.” The woman looked down at her nails. “It’ll cost you.”

“I brought the amount we agreed upon.” He reached into his satchel, pulling out five strands of a hundred coins each.

The woman clicked her tongue. “I’m afraid the price went up since last we spoke. One of my girls was caught while stripping parts. She’s in the stockades now, won’t be out for another month.”

Tag scowled. “That’s not my fault.”

“Still, one less thief is bad for business.”

Tag ran a hand through his hair, clearly frustrated. “How much more?”

“Double.”

“Double!” Tag stepped forward, as did a woman who’d stood back in the shadows, reaching for a weapon at her waist. Sunho did as well, on instinct, though he didn’t draw his sword.

“You wouldn’t fleece Yurhee if she were here,” Tag growled.

“That’s not true,” the woman said, blowing out a smoke ring that perfectly blew past Tag’s head, clipping the tips of his ears. “She’s pretty, but I’m an equal-opportunity cheat.”

Tag stepped back. “Help me with this at least,” he said. “We’re looking for someone. A child.”

The dealer raised a single brow. “If you’re asking *me* where he is, then he can’t be anywhere good.”

“He was taken a few weeks ago, from the fifth ward.”

“What’s his name?”

Tag glanced at Sunho.

“Haru,” Sunho said.

“Haru, Haru...” The woman sucked her teeth. “Do we know a Haru?” she asked her bodyguard.

“Wasn’t one of the boys in the Small Ring named Haru?”

“Oh.”

“Small Ring?” Sunho repeated, his heart racing. He didn’t recognize the name.

“Follow the shouts.” The dealer blew another smoke ring. “You’ll find it soon enough.”

★ ★ ★

THE SMALL RING wasn't in the House of Night-Blooming Flowers. Heeding the dealer's words, they followed the noise to a courtyard at the edge of the district, what was once the grounds of an old textile factory, now abandoned.

Sunho understood what the Small Ring was the moment he heard the first pulpy thwack of fist meeting flesh, followed by a roar of jeers and shouts.

Men and women shouted from the sidelines, exchanging coins with a bookie who called out bets. Crouched around the ring were children, the girls in rags, boys shirtless, their backs splattered in red paint with a single character denoting an animal. *Rat, Ox, Tiger* ...

As Sunho took in the scene, a young boy was shoved into the ring, the character *Rooster* slashed across his back.

Haru.

CHAPTER 25

SUNHO

The Under World

Madang District, Fourth Ward

SUNHO SHOVED HIS way through the crowd, Tag right behind him. Reaching the center, Sunho sprang forward and grabbed Haru's shoulder. The boy flinched, cowering in fear. Sunho felt equal parts guilt and anger, that he hadn't been there for Haru when the boy needed him, that Haru had ended up *here*.

"S-Sunho?" Haru gazed up at him, wide-eyed. "It is you." Tears flooded Haru's eyes and he threw himself into Sunho's arms. "I knew you'd c-come."

Sunho bent his head over Haru's; beyond all the other emotions, he was relieved Haru was alive.

"I'm getting you out of here," he promised, then, grabbing Haru's hand, he turned from the circle.

"What are you doing?" a voice rang out. A weasel-like man scurried forth, flanked on either side by larger men carrying clubs.

Sunho's grip tightened on Haru's. "I'm taking him with me."

"He's indentured to the Small Ring until he pays back what he owes." The man—presumably the ringmaster—sneered. "With interest."

Sunho had to restrain himself from punching the man then and there. "How much?"

"It doesn't matter," the man said. "I need a body tonight, and the book's already out." He nodded to where a bookmaker was taking money for bets and balancing them in a stitch-bound ledger.

"You want a fighter?" Sunho let go of Haru's hand, pushing him gently back so that he stood behind him. "Let me fight in his stead."

The ringmaster arched a brow, then lowered his gaze, studying Sunho from head to toe. "The idea has merit."

“That’s not fair!” Across the circle, one of the speculators pointed an accusatory finger. “He’s clearly had training.”

“We’ll just have to make things a little more even, then.” The ringmaster nodded to a lackey on the sideline, who began yelling and waving her arms, motioning for the crowd to part. A few seconds later, a man stalked out into the ring. He was about twice the size of Sunho, in height and girth.

“How’s that even?!” Tag objected.

“What do you think?” the ringmaster yelled to the crowd. “Want to see this fight? The newcomer versus the Small Ring’s undefeated champion?” They roared with approval. “Place your bets. Fight starts in three minutes.”

“Wait,” Sunho said beneath the clamor of those squabbling to get the bookie’s attention, “I want to place a bet.”

The ringmaster eyed him. “Sure, assuming you want to bet on yourself.”

“If I win, you’ll release Haru and give me...” He glanced at Tag.

“Five hundred coins,” Tag supplied promptly.

“And if you lose, you’ll have to fight in my ring for a year. You *and* the boy.”

Sunho hesitated. He didn’t like that he’d have to bet Haru’s freedom alongside his own, but he couldn’t see another solution. “Deal.”

The man held his hand out and Sunho took it, gripping hard.

“The odds are thirty to one you won’t even leave this ring alive. Sweet dreams, kid.” The ringmaster walked away, shaking out his hand.

Sunho turned his back on the ring. Crouching down on one knee, he looked at Haru. The young boy bore new marks from the last time he’d seen him—a fresh cut beneath one eye and a bruise on his chin. And these were the ones that were visible.

Sunho bowed his head. “I’m sorry.” Haru was never meant to suffer, not like this. *Not like he had.*

“The others...,” Haru said quietly, “they had no hope. They knew no one was coming for them. Not me. I knew you’d come.”

Sunho lifted his head. “Why?”

“Because you’re Sunho. Because there’s no one stronger than you.”

But he wasn’t strong. He was weak. Of the four of them—Junho, Rohoon, Heetae, and him—he’d been the weakest. If he had any strength now, it was because of the Demon.

“You shouldn’t put so much faith in me.”

Haru was insistent. "But you did come, so I *was* right, wasn't I?"

Sunho laughed softly. "Yeah." He looked over Haru's shoulder to find Tag watching him.

Sunho rose to his feet. "This is Tag," he said. "He'll look after you during the fight. He's..." Tag raised a brow. "A friend."

"That's right." Tag placed a hand on Haru's head. "I'm strong in my own way, too."

"Thirty to one odds, huh?" Sunho's gaze met Tag's. "That's a fifteen-thousand-coin payout. After we get back, will you speak to Yurhee on Ren's and my behalf?" They hadn't agreed to take them on the aircraft, but once he'd gotten the coins, they'd owe him a sizable favor.

Tag shook his head. "Don't worry about that. Just concentrate on the fight."

Sunho's gaze traveled to his opponent, who stood waiting for him at the center of the circle.

"No weapons!" the big man bellowed.

Sunho grabbed the strap of his scabbard, pulling it over his head and tossing it to Tag, then walked to the center of the ring.

The big man had taken off his shirt, his biceps bulging. Hand-to-hand combat clearly favored him; his *whole body* was his weapon. Sunho opened his hands and closed them into fists at his sides.

"Let the match begin!" shouted the ringmaster.

The big man didn't hesitate. He was fast for his size, moving in with an uppercut that Sunho just barely managed to avoid, his fist clipping Sunho's chin. Then the big man's left fist flew at him, and Sunho lifted his arm to avoid a direct hit to his face. The impact felt like being smashed on the side of the head with a sledgehammer.

"You're making this easy!" the big man roared as Sunho stumbled backward. "First, I'll teach you a lesson, and then after, I'll beat the boy to a pulp. That'll teach him not to depend on the weak!"

The Demon stirred, but Sunho repressed it. He wouldn't rely on the Demon to fight this opponent.

The big man attacked, but Sunho was ready.

He ducked, throwing his shoulder into the big man's chest and jamming his elbow into his stomach. The man let out an *oof* before recovering enough to whirl around, kicking Sunho in the side. He went flying across the circle.

“Sunho!” he heard Haru shout, though the sound was muted through the ringing in his ears.

He struggled to his knees, wiping the corner of his mouth with his forearm. He tasted the salty tang of his own blood.

The big man raised his arms, eliciting a roar from the crowd. Sunho felt oddly removed from his body as he watched him. Memories flooded his mind—a crackling fire in a dark forest, and Junho looking up at the stars; his friends, serious Rohoon and laughing Heetae. Of the four of them, he’d been the weakest. They’d protected him, carried his weight, both physically and mentally. They’d *bled* for him, and Sunho had cried as he’d bound their wounds.

But that had been before. He had changed, and not because of the Demon, but because of *himself*. He’d wanted to get stronger, and so he’d trained, sparring first with Rohoon, then Heetae, then both of them at once. With Junho, Sunho would fall to the ground, only to get back up again and again and again.

He was strong because he’d made himself that way. Because he’d chosen to be.

For his friends. For his brother. For himself.

Sunho breathed in slowly. He heard the air scream as the man rushed toward him. At the last second, he shifted his body to the side. The man barreled forward, stumbling. Sunho was already on his feet. He brought his fist down as the man turned, smashing him into the ground. When he tried to get up, Sunho rained blows down upon him until the man stopped moving.

The muted sound dissipated, replaced by the violent cheers of the crowd.

“We have a winner!” shouted the ringmaster.

★ ★ ★

THEY LEFT THE Madang District as soon as Tag collected the part from the dealer.

“Thank you,” Sunho said. He didn’t elaborate; Tag knew what he was grateful for.

“Kids like Haru,” Tag said. “Like you. Like me. Every one of us has the same story. We have to watch out for each other.”

They took turns carrying Haru on the long journey back, not speaking to

conserve their strength. Until they located Haru's mother, he'd stay at Wolryudang, where it was safe.

As they walked, he noticed Tag stealing glances at his face, likely due to the blue blood that had clotted on his lip. But if Tag had questions, he kept them to himself.

They emerged from behind the pawnshop several hours later. Sunho immediately spotted the girl who'd sold Ren the flower, her basket tucked beneath one arm.

"Hold on," he said. Tag raised a brow but didn't comment.

After purchasing the entire basket from her, Sunho jogged to catch up to Tag. He found the silver-haired boy standing still in the alley that led to Wolryudang. The grandmother was gone.

"Something's wrong," Tag said. Crouching, he let Haru down against the nearest wall. "Wait here."

Sunho followed Tag through the narrow opening. He felt a strange numbness overtake his body. Together they burst into the courtyard to find the front door of the teahouse kicked in.

Tag sprinted up the stairs. Sunho followed, his heart beating erratically in his chest.

"Yurhee!" Tag shouted. Sunho spotted the older girl sitting at a table near the bar, her head between her hands. "Are you all right? What happened?"

"Tag." Yurhee's eyes were wide and teary, but not with fear. "They took her."

The feeling of numbness grew stronger. "Who did?" Sunho asked softly, though he already knew.

"They weren't wearing uniforms, but one of them said a name: Sana."

Sunho had felt anger before, back in the Small Ring, when he saw the abuse Haru had suffered.

This feeling was different. He dug his fingernails into his palm, hard enough to draw blood.

"Sunho?" Yurhee's eyes widened as she caught sight of his expression.

This anger was darker, out of control. He felt it, hot and thick in his veins.

This was *rage*.

And he had reached his limit.

CHAPTER 26

REN

The Under World

Wolryudang, Seventh Ward

Ten Hours Earlier

ON THE MORNING of the Festival of Light, Ren woke with the blue flower on her pillow. She'd fallen asleep clutching it in her hand and was amazed she hadn't squashed it in her sleep. She didn't know what impulse had driven her to exchange the last of her remaining coins to have it—it would wilt, soon enough—only that she'd felt a sense of peace upon holding the flower in her hand.

“Ren?” Yurhee knocked on the frame of her open door. Ren had already gotten out of bed earlier and dressed herself in the clothes Yurhee had lent her the night before, a white work shirt and baggy trousers. “I have an errand to run close by if you'd like to join me.”

“Yes, I'll be right down,” Ren said, placing the flower on the center of the pillow. Splashing water on her face from a shallow bowl on the side table, she rebraided her hair and hurried down the stairs.

She found Yurhee in the main room of the teahouse, sipping daintily from a teacup.

“Yurhee—” Ren began.

The older girl lifted a hand, stopping her. “I know what you're going to ask, but I haven't yet made a decision. I promise I'll give you an answer before tonight. Regardless, you'll need your strength. Here, have a steamed bun.”

Accepting the bun, she bit down into the soft bread, chewing obediently. There was no use arguing, and Yurhee did have a point: Ren *would* need her strength if they were going to break into the mithril mines.

“Where's Grandma Jin?” Ren asked, taking another bite of the fluffy bun

as she followed Yurhee outside. While in the baths, Yurhee had explained that the teahouse belonged to the older woman Sunho and Ren had met the night before.

“In the basement. She has a garden where she cultivates plants for her teas. That she’s even able to grow *anything* in the Under World is a testament to her skill.”

They didn’t have to travel far to reach the place for Yurhee’s errand. It appeared to be a pawnshop, the bland exterior no different than the other buildings they’d passed on their way over. “There’s a noodle restaurant around the corner that I’ll take you to afterward,” Yurhee said, opening the door to the tiny shop. Shelves of varying heights were stacked with an assortment of accoutrements: pots and pans, coin purses, woven balls, flying kites, and paper fans. Dozens of masks hung from the walls, and Ren admired a particularly ferocious one that depicted a snarling tiger.

Yurhee approached the shopkeeper, who stood reading a book behind the counter. “I’ve got quite the conundrum,” she announced loudly. “There are weevils in my rice!”

At this astonishing declaration, the man rolled his eyes and reached beneath the counter. He must have pulled a lever because a trapdoor opened in the ceiling and a rope ladder fell through.

“Come on,” Yurhee said, grabbing the rungs. Ren followed her into an attic room that was a mirror of the one below, except it held items that were clearly contraband.

While Yurhee went about gathering the equipment she came for, Ren walked slowly down the rows of shelves.

There were all sorts of weapons, but also bottles of what appeared to be fast-acting drugs and poisons. Ren shied away from these shelves, heading toward the back of the room. On the bottom shelf against the wall, she spotted an item that wasn’t like the others. It was a red tassel, about the length of her wrist. She picked it up, wanting to examine it closer. Above the tassel was a knot shaped like a chrysanthemum flower.

“What’s that?” Yurhee had come up behind her. The empty rucksack she’d brought with her was now full.

“It’s an ornament. For a sword, I think.” She thought of Sunho and blushed.

Yurhee eyed her knowingly. “Why don’t you purchase it?”

Ren shook her head. "I don't have any coins."

"You're a troupe performer, aren't you?" Yurhee turned to yell down the ladder, "Old man!"

A short scuffle later, the store owner popped his head through the door. "Could you keep it down? Also, I'm not that old," he grumbled.

"You're trying to sell those toys downstairs, aren't you? If she demonstrates them outside on the street, will you give her this?" She held up the ornament.

"If you can get five people to enter the store and buy a trinket, then I'll consider that a fair trade."

Ren nodded, smiling. "It's a deal."

While Yurhee made her purchases, Ren walked through the shop, pulling items from the shelves, as well as the mask of the tiger from the wall. It had been a long time since she'd performed, but it came back to her as naturally as breathing. In only a few minutes, she'd gathered a small crowd who cheered as she juggled woven balls and stood on her hands while flying a kite with her feet. She didn't have an accompanist, so she encouraged the crowd to clap, bringing a few of the children into the circle with her to dance.

After Ren procured twice the number of customers than promised, the shop owner presented her not only with the ornament but let her keep the mask and the woven balls, as a token of gratitude.

Ren lowered the mask once more over her face as she walked toward the noodle restaurant with Yurhee. "Do you think I stand out?" she asked, remembering the boatman in Seorawon.

"Maybe at any other time," Yurhee said, "but today is the Festival of Light. Lots of people dress up to celebrate. See?" She pointed to a girl wearing a mask just like Ren's, running while pulling her younger brother by the hand down the street.

When they arrived at the noodle shop, a matronly server was placing large bowls of thick noodles in steaming broth before patrons seated at low wooden tables.

Yurhee and Ren quickly took seats in the corner. The woman didn't ask for their order, instead dropping two generous servings of noodles in front of them before sweeping up the coins Yurhee had placed on the table into the pocket of her apron.

Lifting her mask to her forehead, Ren plucked chopsticks from a cup and

grabbed a whole heap of noodles, stuffing them into her mouth. The noodles were perfectly chewy, with enough spice in the broth to tease the tongue.

It occurred to her that she'd had quite a pleasant morning, shopping and eating with Yurhee, and hoped it had been the same for Sunho.

After they'd finished their meal, Yurhee pushed back her chair and grabbed their empty bowls. "I'm going to return these to the kitchen. Wait here."

Ren was reaching up to slide her mask back over her face when a voice spoke from nearby.

"Is she your relative?"

Ren met the gaze of a woman seated alone at a neighboring table. She was striking, with black hair swept back from her face in a tight knot, and rouged lips. Her slim, athletic body was clothed in elegant dark robes.

"No," Ren answered. "She's a friend of my..." She hesitated, unsure what to call Sunho. "Companion."

"They didn't feel like coming out for a meal?"

"No," Ren said, then found herself adding, "though he really should eat more."

"I feel the same way about my companion," the woman said thoughtfully, "though I guess he's more my boss."

"He didn't feel like coming out for a meal, either?" Ren asked.

"No," the woman said slowly, "though I think he'll be disappointed to have missed it." There was something about the woman's tone of voice that made Ren uneasy, as if she was laughing at Ren's expense, though her eyes remained friendly.

"It really was delicious," Ren agreed. "Well, it was nice talking to you." She reached for her mask, placing it over her face.

"Pleasure's mine," the woman said.

Ren felt the woman's eyes on the back of her head as she walked away, but when she glanced over her shoulder, the woman's attention was on her food.

"Ren, are you all right?" Yurhee caught Ren by the shoulders when she practically ran into her. "Did you see them, too?"

"See who?"

"Soldiers," Yurhee said quickly. "They're outside the restaurant. I think they're searching for you. Come on." They traveled a more circuitous route

back to Wolryudang that took them a half hour longer than before. Neither spoke, listening intently for sounds of pursuit.

As they neared the alley, Ren tugged Yurhee to the side. “What do you mean searching for me?”

Reaching into her jacket, Yurhee pulled out a scroll and handed it to her. It was a sketch, Ren realized, *of her*.

“I saw them passing these out in front of the restaurant,” Yurhee said. “I came to get you right after.”

Ren took off her mask, gaping at Yurhee.

“It’s fine,” Yurhee said, misunderstanding Ren’s expression. “You were wearing that. No one saw your face.”

“You could have turned me in. Why didn’t you?”

“What? Why would I do that?” Yurhee said, and she sounded genuinely surprised, as if the thought had never occurred to her. “Did you really think I’d turn you over to those Sarenian bastards for a couple of coins?” Throwing her head back, she laughed. The sound was joyous, unabashed, and for a moment, Ren was reminded of Big Uncle. Yurhee’s hands were on her hips, her shoulders shaking. Then she blinked, sobering. “Unless, of course, you *want* to be found.”

“No!” Ren shouted.

“Then, there you have it!” Yurhee grinned. She nodded toward the opening in the alley. “You go on ahead. I’m going to check the area to make sure we weren’t followed.”

Before Ren could reply, Yurhee had turned back the way they’d come.

Ren felt a little stunned as she slipped from the alley into the courtyard.

Yurhee might not have known *why* the soldiers were after Ren, but she’d protected her anyway. Sunho had been right to come to her for help. Yurhee was a good person, even if she *was* pretty.

Walking through the doors of the teahouse, she stopped short at the sight of someone sitting at one of the tables.

Yurhee hadn’t said she was expecting anyone, but this *was* a teahouse; they must have customers sometimes. One of Grandma Jin’s tea sets was laid out before him. She thought of putting her mask back on, but he’d already seen her face. As Ren walked by him, heading toward the stairs, his eyes rose to meet hers. Ren was struck with a sense of familiarity, which quickly passed. He appeared to be a little older than herself, handsome, if a little

sleep-deprived, and dressed in plain clothing, though they were exquisitely tailored.

“I’ve never seen you here before,” the boy said. She was surprised by the sound of his voice. It was quite lovely, smooth and low.

“I don’t come around often. I’m visiting from outside the Wall.” The lies fell easily off her tongue. It was just like telling a story, something she’d always been good at.

“Would you care to join me? I’m waiting for someone.”

Ren thought it a bit forward that he should ask her, but maybe the person he was waiting for was Yurhee. She didn’t want to be rude to one of her acquaintances.

She slid out the chair opposite him and took a seat. She was still holding her mask, so she placed it on the table.

“What’s that for?” he asked.

“I’m a troupe performer.” Ren demonstrated for him by juggling the small woven balls the shopkeeper had given her.

“Extraordinary,” he said, when she was finished.

“What about you?” Ren asked, making polite conversation. Why was Yurhee taking so long? “Do you live around here?”

“I don’t live around here.”

Ren blinked. “Oh, I assumed—”

“Though I’ve been here more often of late.”

Ren waited for him to elaborate. When he didn’t, she frowned. “What brings you here? Your job?”

“No.”

Was he purposefully being close-lipped? She glanced toward the doorway.

“Want to play a game?” He leaned forward. “If you can guess what my job is, then I’ll answer one of your questions to your full and complete satisfaction.”

Ren hesitated—she found this acquaintance of Yurhee’s to be a bit perplexing—but she *did* love games. She studied his exquisite clothing. “You’re a tailor,” she said.

The older boy laughed, the sound of which seemed to surprise him, because he cut it off. He looked at her, a slight frown on his face.

She noticed that he had elegant hands. “You’re an artist of some kind, or a

musician?” she said. “How many guesses do I get?”

He shook his head, amused. “I think you’ve had them all.”

A thought popped into her head, as if pulled from deep within her. “You’re a storyteller.”

He drew in a sharp breath.

She didn’t know where the idea came from. He hadn’t given any indication that he liked to tell stories, but it was like she *knew* the answer. It didn’t make sense. *Had* she met him before? She’d thought he was so familiar when she’d first seen him ...

She looked down at the table, feeling suddenly awkward, like she’d overstepped. She noticed his teacup, which he hadn’t drank from the entire time they’d spoken. “Your tea will get cold,” she said. “You should drink—”

Ren broke off, staring.

Floating in the tea was the blue-petaled head of a flower.

“Where did you get that?” Ren asked slowly, her heart starting to pound in her chest. That flower had been in her bedroom upstairs, on the pillow. The boy didn’t answer, though he watched her closely.

Yurhee should have come inside by now. And where was Grandma Jin?

Leaping from the chair, Ren sprinted toward the back of the teahouse. She stopped short when a man stepped through the door behind the bar. She recognized his uniform.

A Sarenian guard.

The front doors opened with a bang and Yurhee burst into the room. “Run!” she shouted.

Ren didn’t hesitate. She jumped onto the nearest table. Grabbing on to one of the low beams, she used the swinging momentum to smash her knee into the soldier’s nose. Her triumph was short-lived. More soldiers flooded into the room behind him and through the main door. Yurhee had gotten ahold of a leg from a broken chair, swinging it against anyone who got too close. Ren avoided a woman trying to grab her, springing off her back to kick the man behind her.

There were a dozen guards and only two of them, but it was possible to escape, if they could only reach the front door—

A knife embedded into the pillar behind her.

“Enough.”

The woman from the noodle restaurant stood beside the older boy, who

hadn't moved during the entire fight. He did now, sliding back his chair to stand.

"Who are you?" Yurhee spat. A soldier had come around to grab her by the arms.

The boy ignored her. "Sana," he addressed the woman. "Good work."

The woman—Sana—beamed. "Thank you, Captain."

Captain? Was he the one who'd hired Sunho? Sunho had said the captain hadn't wanted her harmed, but then why were his soldiers attacking them?

He nodded toward Yurhee. "We don't need that one."

"No!" Ren shouted.

She didn't see what happened next. A bag was tossed over her head, throwing her into darkness.

CHAPTER 27

REN

The Under World

THE ROOM THEY'D pitched her into was dark. Darker than the Under World was, even at night. She didn't know where she was or how far she'd traveled. They'd at least had the courtesy to remove the bag over her head. Holding her hands out before her, she rose to her feet. She'd done tricks blindfolded before; it wasn't not seeing that frightened her, it was that she didn't know what sort of room they'd tossed her into.

Her stomach connected with a low table. Grunting in pain, she fumbled her hands across its surface, knocking over an object. *A candle*. She swept her hands wide and found matches. Righting the candle, she grabbed the matches and lit one, bringing the flame to the wick.

The light of the candle slowly illuminated the space, enough that she could see she was in a study. A great desk sat against the far wall, adorned with thick candleholders and several scrolls stacked on a gilded tray. A curved sword was displayed on the desk, but it looked heavy, and she didn't think she could wield it effectively.

To the right of the desk was a bookcase. It was magnificent, taking up the entirety of the wall. The boxlike shelves were of varying sizes; some were tall and held neatly stacked side-stitched books and scrolls, others short and squat, presenting only a single decorative object. She found herself moving closer to the shelves, peering at each object. There were celadon vases and calligraphy sets, game boards, ink paintings, and miniature carvings of turtles and other animals.

A bead of hot wax slipped onto her skin. She flinched but didn't drop the candle. She needed to focus. There must be something here that hinted to the Sarenian captain's identity and what he wanted with her.

Perhaps he wished to undermine the general, or—she thought bitterly—

present her *to* him to gain favor.

She was surprised, however, that he'd left her in his study, assuming this study belonged to him. The room felt deeply personal, especially the bookcase. Peering at the contents was like having a glimpse into his mind.

Curious, she placed the candle onto the shelf to reach for the top book on a stack of them. After reading a few pages, she realized it wasn't a ledger or a recounting of military exploits, but a storybook.

Was that why he'd been surprised when she'd called him a storyteller? Not because he liked to tell stories, but because he liked to read them?

She noticed that the bottommost cabinet was slightly ajar. Poking her finger through the circular brass handle, she drew it open. Inside was a single item—a wooden jewelry box.

It was locked, and so she slipped a pin from her hair, inserting it into the lock and jiggling it around until she heard a distinct click.

As she lifted the lid, a soft white light filtered out, illuminating the room more brightly than the candle ever could.

Inside, placed carefully on a bed of red silk, was a feather.

Her heart started to race as she stared at it, uncomprehending. *It was hers.* The same feather she'd found on her pillow the morning of the Festival of Light. Ten years had passed, but it didn't matter—she would have recognized it at any time, any place. The feather was long, almost the length of her forearm. Like mithril, it was luminescent, appearing to glow from within. But more than all those things, she could *hear* it singing, a low, soft hum.

She didn't understand. She'd dropped the feather in the forest, believed it to be lost. What was it doing *here*? And why did *he* have it?

Slowly, she lifted her hand, her fingers grasping the stem.

A hand snatched her wrist back.

"What are you doing?" the captain snarled.

She tried to pull away, but he kept her in a tight hold. She'd been so enraptured by the feather, she hadn't noticed his entrance. Light flooded the room from the open door, cutting a path that ended where he stood, his face in shadow.

"Why do you have this?" Ren demanded. The feather glowed between them, pinched between her thumb and forefinger. "It belongs to me."

The captain's grip on her wrist tightened. His eyes were like black pools, without light, except for when he shifted his gaze to the feather, and then she

could see its reflection there, like a snowflake in winter. “It’s *mine*.”

Ren realized the feather *meant* something to him. But why? And how did it come into his possession?

She let go of it, forcing him to drop her wrist. He snatched the feather from the air, cradling it as if it were as fragile as a butterfly’s wing, placed it back into the box. He closed the lid, sealing off the light. When he turned to her, his face was devoid of expression.

“You’re leaving in the next hour,” he said.

Ren gaped at him. “What?”

“A train will take you south to the sea, where you’ll cross to the Tama Isles on a boat. My lieutenant, Sana, will escort you.”

“I’m not leaving.” She had to get to the mithril mines, where the symbol of the black wing led. She and Sunho had promised to find both his brother and the cure for Little Uncle. Together.

An odd look came over the captain’s face, as if he were piecing a thought together.

“At the teahouse,” he said slowly, “you looked comfortable, not like someone who’d been forced to stay there against her will. You chose to come to the Under World, didn’t you? Even knowing there were mercenaries sent from here to kill you. Why?”

“My uncle—”

“You don’t have an—”

“I do,” she interjected fiercely. Sareniya might not have had uncles—but *Ren* did. “He was attacked by a demon from the Under World. Afterward, he developed an illness. I came to find an antidote to the poison in his blood.”

“A demon...” For the first time since she’d met him, the captain appeared uncertain, but then he shook his head. “What was your plan? Or did you even have one?”

“I had a plan! Sunho and I—” She bit off her words. Why was she telling *him*?

“Sunho.” The captain had gone still. “The swordsman. So he survived after all.”

“He told me why he took the job,” Ren accused, “that you held knowledge of his brother over his head. I didn’t think anyone could be so cruel.”

“He must not care for his brother all that much if he forsook him for *you*.”

“He didn’t forsake him!” Ren shouted, furious on Sunho’s behalf. “His brother is waiting for him. Once he remembers—”

The captain’s eyes widened. “You’re healing him, aren’t you? He doesn’t need the knowledge I have, not if you can give him back his memories.”

Now it was her turn to stare at him in surprise. “What do you know about my powers? Who are you?”

He looked away. “I misspoke.”

When she’d found Sunho in the reed field, she’d healed his wound, but that was because it had been physical. His mind wasn’t something she could touch. But if there was a way to restore his memories ... She grabbed the captain’s arm. “What do you know? Tell me.”

He winced, though she hadn’t grabbed him hard. “You’re dangerous,” he said, stepping back. “Not just to yourself, but to the peace of both worlds. As long as you exist, there will be those who wish to use you.”

“Like you? Isn’t that why you were looking for me?”

He didn’t answer; he gave no reaction at all, his amber eyes almost like glass. There was something familiar about his eyes.

As she stared at him, a memory probed from the back of her mind—a boy sitting beneath a tree, his nose in a book ...

“Who are you?” Ren whispered.

“Captain!” They both turned toward the door. It was the woman from the noodle restaurant, Sana. His lieutenant.

She was panting, as if she’d run a great distance. “Your father’s soldiers were spotted in the Under World. They’re on their way here.”

Ren frowned. His father?

“You’re leaving,” the captain said, pushing her forward. “Now.”

“No!” Whoever he was, she didn’t trust him. He wanted to control her life. Not like Sunho, who listened to her, who gave her choices.

The woman had backed out of the doorway to let them pass. Ren dashed forward and swiped the dagger strapped to her waist. She sprinted into a great atrium, the pale marble floors illuminated by a lone skylight, where light from the lanterns surrounding the military compound shone through. She was halfway across when the captain grabbed her arm, twisting her around. She raised the dagger to his neck.

“Captain!” Sana shouted.

“Stay back!” he said, holding out his hand to stop her.

With the other, he grabbed Ren's wrist. He didn't force her to pull the dagger away but *pressed down* upon her hand so that the blade broke his skin. "Do it," he said. When she hesitated, his eyes darkened. In one swift motion, he drew the sword at his waist and brought it down across her shoulder. She raised the dagger, managing to block him.

He pressed forward, bearing down on her as she dropped to one knee.

She gasped, tears pricking her eyes, as her blade began to dig into her own shoulder, pinned beneath his sword. Warmth spread across her back as blood started to drench the fabric.

"You won't k-kill me," she said, though she wasn't certain. He'd attacked her at full force. If she hadn't raised the dagger, he *would* have. "Why would you put so much effort into saving me only to kill me?"

"If you don't think I'd kill you," he said, "then you don't know me at all."

Her arms shook from the weight of his sword. "I—" She faltered, the bite of the blade digging deeper into her shoulder.

Like the moon emerging from behind clouds, the memory that had been hidden from her revealed itself.

She was running across a meadow, the flowers tickling her ankles. He was there, waiting for her. Beneath the zelkova tree, like he promised. Jaeil. He was reading a book. It was his favorite thing in all the world. Sometimes he would read to her, while she weaved crowns from flowers. But more often, he would ignore her. This upset her. She wanted him to look up from his book. She wanted him to look at her. She had almost reached him when she tripped.

Before she could fall flat on her face, she felt arms circle around her.

"Are you all right?" Jaeil's voice was anxious.

That's when she saw it, his book, stuck in the mud. He'd dropped it to catch her.

She was slammed back into the present.

"Jaeil," she gasped.

The captain's eyes widened, and the pressure on her shoulder lessened.

Above them, the skylight shattered.

Sunho dropped through, his sword already drawn. Jaeil twisted around in time to block a blow that made them both go skidding across the floor.

Ren heard Sana curse, turning in time to catch the woman slipping a dagger from a holster. She flung it.

“Sunho!” Ren screamed.

Sunho jumped back and the dagger whizzed by, clattering against the floor.

He bore new bruises since Ren had last seen him. Her heart filled with anguish, then rage, that anyone should hurt him.

His gaze dropped to her shoulder where her wound was bleeding freely now. Something seemed to overtake him; his eyes flashed blue. He rushed at Jaeil with a roar. Their swords rang out as they clashed together.

“Sunho,” Jaeil said, and there was a laugh caught in his throat. “You found the girl ... but not for me.”

Jaeil fought with a viciousness that frightened her, holding Sunho back with his sword while whipping out a dagger in his other hand.

“Watch out!” Ren screamed as he sliced at Sunho’s chest.

Jaeil’s eyes flitted to her. In his distraction, Sunho kned him in the stomach. Before he could stand, Sunho’s sword was at his throat.

Jaeil spit blood onto the floor, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Ren expected him to make threats, as he’d done before, but his expression was serious as he gazed up at Sunho.

“She’s in danger,” he said, his voice intense. “As we speak, the general’s soldiers are on their way to this base. I don’t know how they knew she was here; he must have been tracking me. He means to kill her in front of the entirety of the army, claiming she’s an imposter, to send a message to the nobles and any who oppose him that the time of the celestials is over. That there will be a new world order, with *him* as ruler.”

Jaeil turned his gaze to Ren. “You’re the greatest threat to his goal. If you don’t leave the Under World tonight, he will kill you.”

Ren felt as if she was being torn in three different directions, between saving Little Uncle, saving herself, or saving the world.

But she knew which of the threads was strongest—it had been strongest from the beginning.

“I didn’t make this long journey just to run away.”

A rope dropped through the shattered skylight. Above, she could make out the shape of a vessel, hovering in the air. It was the small aircraft, the vague shape of Yurhee at the helm.

Sunho removed his sword from beneath Jaeil’s throat, placing his boot through a loop in the rope. Grabbing on to it with one hand, he held his other

out to Ren.

She went to him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

He tugged the rope, and it began to ascend.

Ren looked one last time at Jaeil, wondering if he'd move to stop them. His soldiers swarmed into the room, surrounding him, awaiting orders, but he remained standing, cradling his arm, his gaze fixed upon her.

She turned away, pressing her face into Sunho's shoulder as they were pulled from the compound and into the sky.

CHAPTER 28

SUNHO

The Under World

Beneath the Mithril Mines

“SHOW ME YOUR wound,” Sunho said, once Yurhee had maneuvered the small flying machine from the airspace above the military compound. They were safe, for now. Captain Jaeil would pursue them, but not for some time. While Sunho had gone after Ren, Tag had tampered with the aircraft in the compound’s hangar. It would take at least a half hour for a mechanic to replace all the missing parts.

“Please,” Sunho added softly, realizing his voice had come out harsher than he’d intended. He was still feeling the adrenaline that had begun coursing when he’d returned to Wolryudang to discover Ren had been taken. It had felt like an illness. When he saw Ren bleeding, he’d never felt so close to the Demon. He could have killed the captain if Ren’s presence hadn’t stopped him.

They’d made it, and just in time, too. Sunho had wanted to go after Ren immediately, but Yurhee had convinced him to wait for Tag to finish the aircraft, now that they had the last part. Whether Tag and Yurhee would help hadn’t been a question: Jaeil and his soldiers had wrecked the main room of Wolryudang, terrified its proprietor, and taken Ren after Yurhee had promised her sanctuary. Yurhee hadn’t needed convincing—it was personal.

The aircraft jolted, and Sunho braced himself against the hull. From the piloting seat, Yurhee lifted her goggles. “Sorry about that, caught a bit of a draft. No one fell off, I hope.”

“Not for your lack of trying,” Tag grumbled from where he slouched behind Yurhee, practically underfoot. The aircraft wasn’t meant to support more than two passengers. The materials they’d brought for their mission—explosives, mostly—were stacked in haphazard piles around them. Tag eyed

the boxes with a resigned sort of horror. At the rear of the aircraft, Sunho and Ren were bunched together. A thin rope stretching across the back of the open aircraft was all that kept them from falling off.

Sunho briefly glanced down at the third ward, where a locomotive was pulling away from the station, leaving behind a trail of smoke. Then Yurhee steered the aircraft upward, the pale lights of the city growing dim with their ascent.

Ren must have been in shock, Sunho decided, otherwise she'd have noticed how high they'd already gone. She still hadn't answered his question ... though he hadn't quite phrased it like one, had he?

"Ren," he repeated, and waited until her pupils dilated as they focused on his. It was dark, but she should be able to see. Though it gave away their location, Yurhee had risked a single guiding light at the front of the aircraft. Like a pebble dropped in a still pool, it barely seemed to pierce the darkness.

"Will you let me look at your wound?" he asked.

She nodded, and he felt the tension in his muscles ease a little. "Yes, sorry," she said. "I don't know what came over me."

She slowly rose and he shifted his body to give her more space. With shaking fingers, she untied the strings at the side of her shirt. When she moved to pull her arm through the sleeve, she winced, her brows forming a crease.

"Wait," Sunho said. "Let me help."

"I don't think it'll come off," she protested.

Carefully he tore the fabric apart. Beneath, the strap of Ren's undershirt was soaked in blood. He peeled it gently from the wound, letting it fall off the side of her shoulder.

She shivered, and he moved his body to block some of the wind.

"Does it hurt?" he asked.

She bit her lip, then shook her head bravely. "It looks worse than it feels."

He nodded, though her reassurance didn't stop the churning in his gut. He'd seen worse wounds than this, had borne them on his own body, but it was different seeing them on *Ren*. It made him feel similar to when the aircraft first launched into the sky—unmoored.

"Here, take this," Tag said, shoving a small box through a gap in the pile of explosives. Sunho lifted the lid to find an assortment of medical supplies. "And this, to clean the wound." He passed him a cloth and water jug.

Then, as if offering them a semblance of privacy, he moved a box to cover the gap.

Sunho looked back to find Ren watching him. She seemed to have recovered from her shock, her brown eyes clear. She was studying his face, her frown deepening as she spotted each of his newly acquired bruises from his time in the Madang District.

“You’re injured, too,” she said.

“I’m fine. They’ll clear up in a day.” Not like her wound. She was in too weakened a state to heal herself. Again, he felt that burn of rage.

“What happened?” he asked, to distract her from the pain, but also to distract himself, as he cleaned and dressed her wound.

“It was his lieutenant. She must have recognized me. I was out with Yurhee. I was so careless.” She wiped the palms of her hands against her eyes, frustrated with herself.

“Go on,” he said gently.

Taking a long breath, she recounted everything that had happened at the teahouse, the encounter with Jaeil, and the ensuing fight and capture.

“They put a bag over my head and dumped me in a room. Not the large one where you found me, but a study. I found something there, hidden away in a bookcase. It was *my* feather, the one I told you about, that had appeared on my pillow the morning of the festival. I thought I had lost it.”

Sunho frowned. “Then how did *he* come to have it?”

“I don’t know. He must have found it ... Sunho, he’s—” She broke off, closing her eyes as if the memory pained her. “Jaeil is the son of the general, but he was nothing like his father when we were little. He was ... kind. There was a meadow behind my home where I would meet him. He always had a book with him. He loved stories. Sometimes he would read them aloud to me. He was my friend.”

“He hurt you,” Sunho said flatly.

She opened her eyes and was quiet for a long time. “I think he was trying to prove something to himself,” she said finally. “That he *could* hurt me. That he wasn’t ... beholden to our friendship. Maybe it made him feel weak, I don’t know...”

He shook his head, frustrated. “I would never hurt you,” he said. “No matter the circumstances.”

Ren’s eyes met his. “I know.”

She blushed, and so did he. They both looked away.

"It's different for you, though," Ren said, after a short silence. "Your tie to your brother is what makes you stronger. Your bond is what carries you through all the hardships."

That might have been true before he'd met Ren. Then, he'd only had one memory, a single memory to fuel all his desires.

Sunho, you'll survive this. You're the best of us.

"Have you given any thought to what you'll do, after all this is over?" she asked. "Once you've found your brother, where will you go?"

"I don't know. I've never thought beyond finding him."

"You can't stay here."

"No," he agreed. There would be a lot of people unhappy with them, should they succeed. The general, for one.

"The house in the reed fields..." she said, "I think of it, sometimes. It was so peaceful. At night, there are thousands of stars. Of course, there's the problem of the sunlight, but maybe you'd get used to it, or your brother can make you an umbrella."

The sun *would* be a deterrent, but he liked the idea of staring up at a sky full of stars. Real ones.

"If you're there," she added softly, "I'd know where to find you."

He'd never thought about the future. For so long, he'd been so focused on the past.

"Then that's where I'll go," he said, "when this is all over."

His words seemed to please her because she smiled.

"Oh!" she said suddenly, reaching into her pocket. "Before I forget..." She withdrew a small tassel. "I got you a gift."

Sunho took the tassel between his fingers, admiring the decorative knot at the top. Carefully, he tied it to the handle of his sword.

"Thank you," he said. "I'll treasure it. I got you a gift, too." He pulled out the flowers he'd purchased earlier, though now they were crumpled.

Ren's eyes widened, and she beamed. "I love them!"

Taking the flowers, she buried her face in them, laughing. Sunho's heart beat faster as he gazed at her. She was beautiful, radiant.

"Ren," Yurhee shouted, "you're glowing!"

"Oh, well..." Ren lifted one hand from the flowers to press it to her cheek. "I don't get flowers that often..."

“No, I mean you’re *glowing*. There’s light coming off you.”

Sunho realized Yurhee was right. Ren’s skin was emitting a faint silver light. It appeared to come from *within* her.

“Sunho.” She looked up at him, trembling. “What’s happening?”

“It must be similar to when you fought the demon on the bridge.” Before she’d released the silver light, her body had glowed. Though a similar outcome in their present circumstances might prove disastrous. He glanced nervously at the explosives surrounding them.

“Hey, she’s too bright,” Tag said. “Can’t you turn her off?”

“Oh, wow, that sounded ... interesting.” Yurhee laughed.

Tag shrugged deeper into the collar of his jacket.

“Sunho, I’m afraid,” Ren said.

His focus immediately shifted back to her. “It’s *your* power, Ren,” he said gently. “You can control it.”

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. After several more, the light began to fade, her skin returning to normal.

“Did it stop?” Ren asked, opening one eye to peek.

Sunho nodded.

“Don’t give her flowers anymore,” Tag mumbled.

“We’re here,” Yurhee said.

Together Sunho and Ren lifted their gazes upward.

The mithril mines loomed above them, an endless wall of rock, like a mountain that had flipped upside down. Mithril glimmered from the stone like constellations.

“It’s beautiful,” Ren breathed.

He held her close as Yurhee took the aircraft even higher.

“There,” Tag said, pointing to an aperture in the rock, “you see that?”

Yurhee shifted her goggles back down over her face. “I see it. We’re going in.”

They entered the mines through the opening, the temperature dropping by several degrees. Back at Wolryudang, Yurhee had shown Sunho the map she’d taken from the ninth ward mithril factory, with the symbol of the black wing.

I’ve collected other maps of the mines, but this is the only one that notes this specific location, she’d said, pointing to a spot that had been clearly marked, deep within the network of caves. *Whatever’s here, it was important*

to the organization behind this symbol.

He had felt a stirring in his chest; it felt like a premonition. *Take us there.*

“Sunho,” Yurhee called from the helm. “Do you think you could come up to the front?”

“Really?” Tag grumbled, but he carefully got to his feet so that he could switch places and counterbalance the weight on the craft. He crouched beside Ren, circling his arms around his knees. He had a smaller build than Sunho and didn’t have to entangle with her to fit in the small space.

“You wouldn’t happen to know how to pilot an aircraft, would you?” Yurhee asked.

“I’ve never flown in one before today,” Sunho said. At least that he could remember.

“I figured, but I need to look at the map. The turns are going to be tight with the wind.”

As she spoke, a blast of air barreled through the tunnel. Yurhee placed her boot on the side of the aircraft, leaning in the opposite direction to hold the wheel steady.

“Ren!” Tag shouted.

Sunho twisted around to see that Tag had caught Ren by the arm where she was dangling off the back of the aircraft.

“Don’t move!” Yurhee bellowed, as Sunho was getting ready to lunge for her. “You’ll unbalance the aircraft. Hold on.”

She jerked the wheel forward and Ren came tumbling onto the aircraft, rolling on top of Tag, who fell into a pile of boxed explosives. They hadn’t had time before going after Ren to strap them all down.

“Oh, gods,” Tag said.

“Sunho, I need you!” Yurhee was shouting again. “Take the control stick!”

“What?”

But Yurhee had already let go. Sunho grabbed for the stick, righting the aircraft, which had begun to tilt sideways.

Leaning forward over its nose, Yurhee held the map to the guiding light, the paper fluttering in the wind. “Where is it? It should be here.”

They were deep within the mines now, the wind screaming in their ears. Broken pieces of rock and shattered mithril flew through the tunnels. Sunho winced as a shard scraped his cheek. He didn’t know how the rotor of the

engine was still intact. The wind seemed to lack direction. Currents of air swept over and around them.

Behind him, he heard Ren helping Tag move the explosives.

“What about this one I’m holding?” Ren said. “Is it okay to move this one?”

“No.”

“That’s it!” Yurhee shouted, grabbing the wheel and twisting it. The aircraft careened into a narrow tunnel, shuttling quickly through it before popping out on the other side. Here the wind cut off entirely. The rotor of the engine sputtered before giving out, plummeting them to the ground. The aircraft hit a ledge, then slid down a long, bumpy slope. It finally came to an abrupt stop at the bottom of a ravine, dust erupting like a cloud around them.

“Is everyone okay?” Yurhee asked.

“I’m okay,” Ren said, clutching a box of explosives like it was a doll.

Tag mumbled a response beneath a pile of them.

Sunho, who’d grabbed on to the side of the aircraft, bracing himself for impact, stood up slowly. A dim silver light emanated from a building on the far side of the cavern.

“You two go on ahead,” Yurhee said as she began to quickly unload the explosives. “We’re going to set these up around the perimeter. Afterward, we’ll warn anyone inside. Meet us back here in an hour?”

“Good luck,” Ren said, after helping dig Tag out from beneath the pile.

Sunho grabbed his sword from the back of the aircraft, and together they made their way toward the building glowing in the distance.



HE THOUGHT THEY’D be greeted by guards upon entering the building, but the outside door opened to an empty corridor. It reminded him of the halls of the train—narrow, with little room to maneuver. The halls weren’t lit by lanterns or electricity, but mithril. The stone glowed in sconces set at intervals along the walls.

Ren shifted closer to him, her shoulder brushing his arm. “Do you think we might really find a cure here?”

If it wasn’t here, he didn’t know where else to look. “We’ll find out soon,” he said grimly.

After a few minutes of walking, Ren shivered. “Where is everybody?”

“Maybe they’ve all gone down into the city for the festival,” Sunho said. Though even as he spoke the words, he knew they weren’t true.

There was something very wrong about this building. The halls were a labyrinth. Each corridor looked the same as the last. An eerie, creaking sound came from far off—the wind, flowing in from the outside.

Turning a corner, they entered a large chamber. Metal stairs led downward into a room full of strange equipment. There were tables littered with broken pieces of apparatuses he couldn’t identify, though they appeared to be used for taking measurements. Several metal cots, stripped of their bedding, sat at odd angles. A few had been tipped over. He noticed that all had metal restraints, as if to hold down their occupants. The sense of foreboding that Sunho had felt since entering the facility grew stronger.

“Sunho,” Ren called out to him, her voice echoing around the chamber. “What is this place? Are those...?” Against the far wall were rooms with bars surrounding them. They were empty, their doors open. Ren peeked her head through one of the doors. “Cages?”

While she entered the largest of the cages, Sunho approached the nearest table. He picked up a book, shaking it free of dust before opening it. Inside were notes on what appeared to be experiments, though they were written in a language foreign to him, likely a code.

He flipped to a drawing of a creature he recognized—the wolf from the ninth ward mithril factory. This laboratory must have been where it came from, where it was *created*.

When he turned toward Ren, he saw that she was outside the cell, holding something in her hand. A black feather.

“Where did you get that?” he asked sharply.

Her eyes widened. “It was in the cage,” she said.

His uneasiness deepened until it felt like a pit in his stomach. “Let’s go.” He dropped the book back onto the table.

From the chamber, they entered another long corridor. They’d made it halfway down before a sharp pain splintered his head.

“Sunho,” Junho said, his face bloody, his eyes in tears. “You’ll survive this. You’re the best of us.”

“Sunho!” he heard Ren cry from what felt like far away. “Sunho, what’s wrong?”

“I—I think I’ve been here before,” he said.

“What do you mean?” She helped him to stand. “You had another memory?”

“No, it’s the same one, only I hadn’t known where I was before. I was *here*. In this place.”

This was the last place he’d seen his brother, where his brother had spoken those words to him. What had they been doing here? What had happened?

He raced down the hall. They entered into another chamber like the last, the memory beating at his mind. *You’re the best of us*.

“Sunho...,” Ren whispered, her fear breaking through his haze.

They weren’t alone. In the middle of the chamber stood the demon.

Its black, diaphanous robes that had covered the bulk of its body on the bridge and the train were gone. Massive black wings sprouted from its shoulders to drag like chains across the floor. Except for its face, the demon was entirely covered in feathers, from its clawed hands to its taloned feet. Its horns curved upward like the tines of a crown and from its fangs dripped blue, viscous blood.

Sunho raised his gaze to meet the demon’s black, depthless eyes, and saw a flicker of something there, *something human*.

It didn’t move or take a step forward. It was almost as if it was ... waiting.

Spotting another hall left of the chamber, Sunho turned to Ren. “You go on ahead. Find the cure for your uncle.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I want to stay. We can fight it. Together.”

His gaze softened. He knew she meant every word.

He’d been alone for so long, he’d forgotten what it felt like to have someone who cared about him; he’d forgotten about how much comfort it could bring, how much strength it could give.

She’d stay to support him because she was his friend. That was enough.

“The demon that attacked your uncle,” he said, “and the demon in the reed field, they both transformed back into humans. I think...” He drew in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “I think *this* demon was once a human. And I think I know who it is.” He saw the moment she realized what he meant; her eyes widened slightly, and tears sprang to the corners. “This is my battle to fight,” he said softly.

She lifted her face, and he gently pressed his forehead to hers, closing his eyes.

“I’ll be waiting for you,” she said. “After...” She didn’t finish the sentence. *After you’ve fought the demon, after you’ve killed it.* “Afterward, come find me.”

“I will,” he promised. He didn’t like that she was going off alone. But he had to do this, just as she had to find the cure for her uncle.

He released her and she turned from him, racing toward the hall. He listened until he could no longer hear her echoing footsteps.

Only then did he face the demon. It hadn’t moved from where it stood in the middle of the room, so still, he could have mistaken it for a statue if it weren’t for the slow rise and fall of its chest.

It *had* been waiting for him. For two years, it had waited for him. And he for it.

“Brother,” he whispered, feeling as if his heart were being shattered into a million pieces.

Junho.

CHAPTER 29

REN

The Floating World
Inside the Mithril Mines

SUNHO SHE'D left him, but it was the only choice she could make. He needed to focus on his opponent, not on whether she was safe. She had her own purpose, one that had set her on this long journey to begin with—to find the cure for Little Uncle. Then she could go back to the caravan, to the way things used to be. *That simple path, lit by sunlight, with no pockets of darkness.* Even if she knew deep inside that was no longer possible.

It felt like a betrayal of her soul, to leave Sunho knowing he faced a dangerous enemy, one that threatened not only his body, but *his soul*, and yet she had to believe that he would come out on the other end whole. He was reliable in that way.

The corridor she raced down branched into another and then split into two identical ones, of which she chose the east-branching path at random. As she ran, she was reminded of the caves beneath the Haebaek Mountains. Except, while those left an impression of majesty and peace, this place felt *wrong*.

That room had held *cages*. Living creatures had been kept there, but for what purpose? This place, this *laboratory*, didn't make any sense. She needed answers.

She felt a shift in the air, a breeze. It gave her a direction to follow. Pausing at each junction, she waited for the touch of wind against her skin before picking which tunnel to go down. She started to run again as the breeze grew stronger.

The hall ended abruptly at a cavern. An obsidian floor spread out before her, smooth like a lake at night. A pale blue light emanated from the back of the room. She walked toward it, her footsteps echoing across the vast chamber. Slowly the light took shape until she could see it clearly.

It came from a tank, encased entirely in glass. The tank was filled with some sort of liquid, too bright to be water. She realized it was mithril. A liquefied form of it. The color mesmerized her. As she stared at it, something inside *moved*.

She stumbled back.

Something floated *within the mithril*. Something large.

“Sareniya.”

Ren jumped, twisting to see a man approach from the shadows.

He was unarmed, dressed in a worn black robe. Spectacles that were too big for his face shielded his eyes. He adjusted them from where they’d slid down his long nose. “I startled you. Forgive me.”

“What did you call me?” she asked sharply.

“Sareniya. It’s your name, isn’t it?”

“Not anymore,” she snapped.

“Ah.” He ducked his head, as if he was embarrassed. “I was mistaken.”

“Who are you?” He was the first soul she’d met since entering the strange facility, besides the demon.

“Shouldn’t I be the one asking you that question?” The man adjusted his spectacles, clearly a habit of his. He had longish hair that curtained a gaunt face. He might have been handsome in his youth, but time or perhaps stress had left him sallow and sunken-eyed. “This is my laboratory, after all. Though it’s curious that you should find it. Did anyone follow you here, by chance?”

Ren’s pulse leaped. “You’re the one who was conducting those awful experiments. It was *you* who created the demon that attacked Gorye Village. Do you have any idea what you’ve done?” Her voice raised in pitch, echoing around the room.

“Wait, slow down.” He appeared agitated. “What demon? A ... village?”

“I traveled here from the other side of the Haebaek Mountains after the village where my family was visiting was attacked by a demon from *your* laboratory. Why would you create such an abomination?”

“Oh dear, you’ve got it all wrong.” The man wrung his hands. “The mithril program was only ever meant to help others. When it became clear that mithril affected living organisms in dangerous ways, we shut the program down entirely. That was two years ago. The serum I created was never supposed to have left this facility. To think that someone has been

using what I created...”

Ren couldn't make sense of what he was saying. “Is there a cure?”

“An antidote? Yes, there is.” He scurried past her to a table she hadn't noticed before, distracted by the tank. It was strewn with loose papers and broken equipment. As she eyed the man, she wondered if he was in fact harmless. He had seemed genuinely shocked at what she'd told him. Sweeping aside junk, he uncovered a small, rectangular box. He unhooked the latch, opening it to reveal an odd, thin instrument tucked inside.

“What is that?” Ren asked as he removed the object from the case. It was as long as a rice plant's leaf, tubular with a sharp end point.

“A syringe,” the man said. “You stick the needle into the skin and press the plunger.” He mimed the action with his thumb. He then placed the syringe carefully back into the case. “Once you administer the antidote, the afflicted should recover in a few days.”

Ren reached for the case, her fingers closing around it.

“I need one thing from you in return. It's only fair.” She looked up to find the strange man leaning over her. The light of the tank reflected in his spectacles. A chill swept through her. She tugged, hard, but he didn't let go of the box. His other hand was in his pocket. She watched as he withdrew another syringe.

Unlike the one with the antidote, this one was empty.

He moved too fast for her to stop him, even had she let go of the box. She winced at the prick of pain as the needle slid into her wrist. He pulled back the plunger, and the tube filled with blood.

“Wh-what are you doing?” she stammered. She tried to wrest her arm from him, but for how weak he appeared, his grip was surprisingly strong.

After filling the vial, he let go of her, and she wrenched her arm back, rubbing her wrist. “What are you going to do with it?”

He tilted his head, as if her question perplexed him. “What does it matter to you? You're not here to claim your true name. You're going back to your village. Please don't think I'm being the least bit reproachful; I commend such simple desires. A quiet life, without pain, unhaunted by the past. If I hadn't been so deeply wounded, I might have ... But no...” He shook his head. “I am cursed.”

He seemed to have lost interest in her entirely. She stepped back from him, clutching the box with the antidote.

“You said you shut your program down two years ago,” she said slowly. “Around that time, two boys were brought here. They would have been fifteen and eighteen. They were orphans, brothers.”

The man looked up, and for a moment she could see his eyes through the glass of his spectacles. Oddly, though his glasses reflected the light, his eyes seemed devoid of it entirely.

“What happened to them?” Ren demanded. “After the ... experiment. The younger brother, he lived, but the older...?” She didn’t want to say it, though she feared the worst. “The older brother’s name was Junho. What happened to him?”

The man shook his head. “He’s gone. They’re all gone. The younger one, too.”

“But he’s not,” Ren said. “Sunho’s alive.”

The man went very still. “That can’t be true,” he whispered.

Ren frowned, not liking the way he sounded, as if he was horrified that Sunho still lived. “He came here, with me. He’s searching for his older brother.”

“No!”

Ren yelped as the man reached out and grabbed her arm, his fingers digging into her skin. “You must stay away from him. He is a *monster*.”

“Let go of me!” Her heartbeat raced. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You called my creations abominations. Y-you were right. He is the worst of them of all. Kill him, *kill him*, before he kills you!”

Ren wrenched her arm away.

The man fell to the ground. Whimpering, he cradled the vial of her blood to his chest.

“You’re wrong,” she said, standing above him. “The monster is *you*.”

The man didn’t look up but kept his eyes on the ground, mumbling words to himself. “Keep your eyes down, Servant of Sareniya. You are unworthy of the light.”

A great roar came from a distance, echoing down the halls.

Sunho.

Gripping the box with the antidote, Ren turned and ran from that desolate place.

She looked back one last time to see the scientist reaching his hand

toward the glass of the tank.

She couldn't be sure, but it looked as if something was reaching back.

CHAPTER 30

SUNHO

The Floating World

The Mithril Labs

THE LABORATORY MADE Heetae nervous. Sunho could tell because his left hand was shaking. It did that sometimes, usually before a battle, not stopping until either Sunho or Rohoon held it tightly. Rohoon reached out now, pressing his gloved hand to Heetae's arm.

For the past three years, they'd been inseparable. It was as if, the night he left, Junho had put a blessing on them. *You'll form bonds with these fools.* For Sunho, no one could replace his brother, but a bond *had* been forged, through pain, blood, laughter, and grief.

Shortly after Junho left, the three of them had been placed in a new regiment.

The Forty-Fourth. Their leader wasn't a soldier but a man with silver spectacles who claimed he was a scientist. *Call me Teacher*, he'd said, for he would teach them about the new world he was creating, where the light belonged not to a single group of people but to everyone; in this new world, *they* would hold the power. As orphans from the Under World, the idea had seemed like a dream.

But there was a risk they had to take to join this new world. To become strong, they would be injected with a special medicine. *Not everyone will be able to withstand the changes*, Teacher had said, *but those who do will be rewarded with all that their heart desires.*

Sunho understood what Teacher meant when he saw the medicine for the first time. He recognized the bright blue substance floating within the serum. Even diluted, and at such a small quantity, that amount of mithril would mean instantaneous death. Except that the soldiers of the Forty-Fourth weren't ordinary. They were from the Under World. They'd developed a natural

resistance to mithril. *Yours is a special regiment*, Teacher had said. The boys were all around twelve and thirteen years old, the girls a little younger. *The serum works best with adolescents.*

If anyone were to survive such an injection, it would be them.

There was something Sunho wanted more than anything—freedom to leave the army and rejoin his brother, and so he took the medicine alongside the others.

That first year had been difficult. Many died, but those who survived *changed*. They became incredibly fast and strong. Rohoon could shoot an arrow through a raindrop from across a field. Heetae's spear was like an extension of his arm, his speed rivaling lightning. And Sunho—it was as if the mithril called to him, singing in his veins. When he moved, time slowed, the world around him growing sharper, more beautiful in its minute details.

They were kept apart, *secret*, from the other regiments, fighting mostly deep in the northern country of Volmar, where they'd gained a reputation as demons. That's what their regiment was nicknamed, the "Demon Regiment," and it was a joyous day when they each received tattoos, for it meant they would always be together, a promise bound in ink and blood.

Sunho might have continued to fight alongside his friends for years, had they not been called by Teacher for the last and final stage.

On that day, Sunho, Heetae, and Rohoon had boarded an airship with the others from their regiment. They'd traveled through the day, packed like kernels of rice in a barrel, with Heetae in between Sunho and Rohoon, snoring lightly as he rested his head on Sunho's shoulder. A few hours after sunset, they awoke to a great roaring sound. Sunho craned his neck for a glimpse through the small porthole, catching sight of a massive waterfall. Thick, frothy water spilled over the edge of a cliff, falling through the clouds to drum upon the earth. Not a cliff, *the edge* of the Floating World.

He thought that maybe the airship was taking them there, but then it descended. They went underneath, into darkness.

The soldiers of the Forty-Fourth were quiet as the airship glided silently beneath the mines.

After it docked, they were divested of their weapons and taken through a series of rooms, poked and prodded—a few of them were taken aside—their numbers dwindling as they ventured farther, with only a handful of them remaining by the end.

The last room was the largest of them all, containing dozens of scientists. A few were arguing, their hushed voices discernible to Sunho's elevated hearing. "*The Sarenians are coming to shut us down. We must hurry.*"

"I don't think we should be here." Rohoon stepped closer to Heetae. "Why did they take away our weapons?"

Heetae fidgeted with the band on his arm—each had been given a different color, though they didn't know what they meant. Heetae's was yellow, Rohoon's was blue, and Sunho's was black. "Maybe 'cause there's nothing for us to fight?" He didn't sound convinced.

Out of habit, Rohoon reached for his bow, the one he usually carried across his back. He was never without it, just as Heetae was never without his spear, and Sunho his sword.

This place frightened him. Where was Teacher? He hadn't come to greet them when they'd arrived, and he recognized none of the scientists as the ones who had visited the camps to give them their injections—

Sunho blinked, unsure if his eyes deceived him: His brother stood among the black-robed men and women. "Junho?"

It had been three years since he last saw him, and Junho's hair was longer. He wore it unbound, down his back. And he was taller. But that was no matter; Sunho was taller, too.

"Junho!" Sunho called his brother's name, louder this time. Junho looked up. Their gazes met.

Sunho couldn't be sure, but for a moment, Junho looked ... stricken. Then his expression smoothed over.

"Sunho," he said, closing the distance between them. "What are you doing here?"

Sunho frowned. His brother wasn't dressed like a soldier, in the dark cuirass, with robes embroidered with the wings of Sarenia. He was wearing black robes, like the scientists, embroidered with a different symbol—a black wing, folded in half.

"Teacher summoned us," Rohoon explained.

"An airship came to our camp to get us," Heetae said. "What's happening, Jun?"

"Wait here." Junho left them, practically sprinting across the chamber.

"Sun, Tae..." Rohoon's voice was low, uneasy. Sunho followed his friend's gaze.

The others who'd come into the chamber with them were being led away, toward the tables spread around the chamber. When a girl protested at the iron cuffs clamped around her wrists, the scientist standing nearest soothed her. "It's like the injections you received," the woman said, petting the girl's hair. "It'll make you strong."

"I don't want to be strong," the girl said. Her voice had lost the tinniness of fear; now she sounded ... tired. "I just want to be free."

Sunho didn't hear the scientist's response, drawn to the sound of Junho's voice.

"I didn't agree to this!" He was shouting at a man with silver spectacles. *Teacher*. "You said he wouldn't be harmed. You *promised*."

"We don't have time to argue. Your brother's strong, remarkably so. He'll survive—"

"You can't know that!"

Teacher grabbed Junho by the collar, and Sunho took a step forward, the mithril in his veins heating in anger.

"The Sarenians are too strong. They won't stop until they conquer the whole world. The children of the Forty-Fourth were always the key. Can you imagine? Your brother is strong now, but with the full power of mithril at his fingertips, he'll be unstoppable. He'll be a *god*."

One of the Black Robes stumbled in from the corridor. "They're here!"

A scream issued from deep in the belly of the mines. Sunho felt his blood run cold. Something was wrong. The tortured cry didn't sound ... human.

"Hoon!" Heetae shouted. Sunho whirled around to see four of the Black Robes dragging Heetae to one of the tables.

"Get away from him!" Rohoon sprang forward, but he was held back by three of the scientists.

Screams tore the air. The scientists injected Heetae with a serum, but it wasn't like the ones from the camp.

The liquid was pure, undiluted mithril.

Heetae screamed, writhing on the table. Blue blood bubbled from his lips, slipping down his throat.

A few agonizing seconds later, he stopped moving.

"*Heetae!*" Rohoon ripped away from the scientists. His eyes flashed blue as he grabbed the syringe out of a scientist's hand, jamming it into her neck.

From the corridor came a rush of movement. A creature barreled into the

room. Sunho didn't understand what he was seeing. It was human, but ... not. Feathers covered its entire body. Grotesque wings sprouted from its back. *Demon.*

The room exploded into chaos, the demon attacking scientists at random, ripping out their throats.

Someone grabbed him. Teacher. His eyes were feverish behind the shield of his spectacles. He held a syringe. "This is the only way. Mithril is the answer."

As it came down, someone shoved Sunho aside. He watched in horror as the needle sank into Junho's chest.

As Teacher let go with a wail, his brother stumbled backward. The mithril spread out beneath his skin like the branches of a tree, glowing brighter and brighter.

"Jun..." Sunho couldn't breathe.

The demon from the corridor reached him, knocking him to the side. His head slammed against a metal table and then he knew only darkness.



SUNHO OPENED HIS eyes, the screams from his memory echoing in his ears. Heetae. Rohoon. The others. He'd forgotten what had happened to them, and for that, he might never forgive himself.

Across the room, the demon waited.

He knew who stood before him now.

He wondered if he'd always known. The demon had followed him, watched him. Watched ... *over* him?

Sunho removed his sword from his back. Holding it out before him, he slid the sheath from the blade. He then lifted his arms, sliding his foot back and gripping the handle with both hands.

The demon let out a harrowing scream, rushing toward him.

It was fast, as it had been on the train and on the bridge. But Sunho was different now. He had access to his memories, his *abilities*. He felt the mithril flow through his body, and he channeled the energy up through his arms, his hands. The demon's claws collided with his sword, and the burst of mithril energy scalded it.

The demon screamed.

Sunho leaped forward, arcing his sword down. It caught the blade, but Sunho only released one hand to slam the demon with his fist; it went tumbling against the wall. Sunho sprang forward, his eyes sparking mithril blue.

He would kill the demon. He would tear it apart.

He felt his head roar with sound. The mithril pealed in his blood, loud, louder still—

Do you think we shine as brightly?

The memory came so swiftly upon him that he gasped, his heart wrenching.

He felt a soft hand upon his head, ruffling his hair. Then Junho was kneeling before him.

Sunho turned away, embarrassed he'd asked the question aloud.

"Yes," Junho said. "I do. Though, I think, we shine a little brighter. How could we not? All this darkness surrounds us, and yet we still carry on. I think the stars, when they look down on us, see that spark in our hearts. It's our will to live.

"Remember that, Sunho. Even in darkness, there is always light."

"Junho," Sunho gasped. He held his sword above the demon. It lay still beneath him, bleeding from a dozen wounds. One strike and it would be dead. One strike and it would be over.

Sunho lowered his arm. The demon didn't hesitate, springing up to pin him against the ground. He only had time to lift his sword, the blade holding back the demon from tearing out his throat.

He couldn't kill Junho, even if his brother had become a monster; if he killed his brother, how could he hold on to the light? His death would snuff out Sunho's soul.

His arms were weakening; the monster's weight bore down on him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ren's charm, a spark of red, dangling from the handle of his sword. With renewed strength, he surged upward until he was face-to-face with the demon. Inside the mass of feathers and fangs, he met its eyes, his heart searing with recognition. He knew, with bone-aching certainty, whose soul lay trapped within.

With a cry, Sunho threw the demon back, surging forward to plunge his sword into its chest.

He slid the blade from its body, watching as it began to transform. Its

limbs shrank in agonizing slowness as the feathers molted off, leaving behind the broken body of a boy.

Rohoon.

Sunho sank to his knees, pressing his forehead to his friend's.

"Sunho," he whispered. "Don't cry for me." Though Sunho had a dozen questions, he asked none of them, wanting Rohoon's last moments to be peaceful, at last.

"You were always soft, but that's what made you strong. I won't ask you to seek revenge. In the end, I'm just glad it was a friend."

Sunho waited beside Rohoon for a long time. When his friend drew his final breath, Sunho dropped his head and wept.

CHAPTER 31

REN

The Floating World

The Mithril Labs

REN SPUNTED BACK the way she'd come. The corridor appeared longer, now that she was desperate to reach the end. After that initial roar, no other sounds had echoed down the hall. What if Sunho was hurt? What if the worst had happened? She gripped the box that held Little Uncle's cure. She didn't want to think about the blood she had traded for it. She couldn't shake the image of the scientist's gleeful expression behind his cracked lenses, or the liquid shifting in the tank behind him. She rounded a corner, her boots skidding across the ground.

"Sunho!"

He was leaning halfway down the corridor, with one hand pressed against the wall.

He was *alive*. He was safe. Then she noticed his blood-drenched torso.

She cried out and Sunho looked up. "It's not mine," he reassured her. "Did you find the cure?"

"I did." She hurried over, scanning his body for wounds, regardless. When her gaze finally lifted to his face, she saw that his eyes were rimmed in blue, as if he'd been weeping.

"What happened? Was the demon...?" She couldn't bring herself to finish the question.

He shook his head. "It ... he wasn't. The demon was a boy I knew, but he wasn't my brother."

Relief tore through her, and she threw her arms around him. She heard a thump as his sword hit the ground. And then his hands came up, sliding along her back to grip her shoulders. She felt a tremor go through his body.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, as he lowered his head over hers. A boy,

he'd said. A boy he'd wept for. Not his brother, but a friend. Her heart ached, knowing he was in pain. If only she could heal him, like she had his physical wounds. But this pain he had to bear himself—she could only be there with him.

He held her with such strength she could hardly breathe, but it didn't matter; she held him just as fiercely.

After a few minutes, he loosened his hold, though he didn't let go of her. She leaned back to gaze into his face. She saw the tracks his tears had left upon his skin and raised her fingers to trace them. He shuddered, closing his eyes.

Perhaps it was witnessing this terrible place, knowing the horrors that had been committed here, but a powerful feeling rose within her. "There is so much awfulness in the world," she said, and he opened his eyes, revealing that startling spark of blue—it was always there now. "But not when I'm with you. I feel like I can overcome anything, as long as you're by my side. I want you to be happy. I want you to have everything you've ever wanted."

He laughed softly. "I think you're just a good person."

"No!" she said, and his eyes widened at her raised voice. "It's you. I only *want for you.*"

This feeling was too big to express in words. It felt as large as what she felt for Auntie and Little Uncle, but different, a feeling she'd never felt before, one that made her feel reckless and afraid, yet joyous. Because whether the days ahead were full of darkness or light, Sunho would be there. He was in her heart, and she was in his, and nothing would break them apart.

"Come back with me," she said. Her limbs tingled, and she felt a fluttering of excitement in her chest. "You'll want to search for your brother, I know, but you need time to recover and figure out next steps first. Until then, come home with me."

"There'd be plenty of work for you there," she continued. "Though perhaps not what you're used to..." She glanced at his sword, which remained on the floor where he'd dropped it. "But you have other skills. I never asked, but can you hunt or fish? Never mind, you'll be well received regardless, especially by the village elders. It doesn't hurt that you look the way you do—"

"Why can't I be a performer?" Sunho asked.

She blinked at him.

His expression was wide-eyed. “I could do that job you gave me, when we were with the outlaws in the mountains. What did you call it? Sword ... dancing.”

“I mean...”

Sunho looked so serious. She didn’t want to hurt his feelings.

His lips quirked, and then he started laughing. “You should see your face,” he said, wiping tears from his eyes.

She would have laughed, too, except that she was caught by the sight of him.

He appeared as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. He looked lighter, and so handsome it took her breath away. She wanted to tell him, it wasn’t *just* that she wanted him to come back with her, she wanted him to *stay* with her, because she—

A massive boom shook the laboratory.

The explosives. She’d forgotten. Sunho picked his sword off the ground. She reached for his hand, and he took it, his hand wrapping around hers.

They raced back the way they’d come. How much time had passed since they’d parted from Yurhee and Tag? The two of them had warned Sunho and Ren they’d have an hour to get out before the explosives detonated. The ground rumbled, the walls crumbling around them, as rocks fell into their path.

“Ren!” Sunho shouted, his eyes darting upward. She let go of his hand and they both jumped apart as a massive boulder dropped from above, cleaving the ground in two. Skidding back, Ren hit the wall.

“Ow.” She rubbed her backside.

Sunho was beside her in seconds, helping her stand, and then they were racing off again. They entered the room where Sunho had fought the demon. Boulders poured like water from the ceiling. In the far corner, she saw the figure of a boy lying still upon the ground. She looked away, and together, they left the chamber behind them.

They ran until at last they found the corridor with the door they’d come through. They barreled toward it, bursting outside.

Light blared into their eyes. Sunho raised his arm, shifting his body in front of Ren.

A dozen aircraft loomed above the laboratory. Emblazoned on their sides were the wings of Sareniya. At first, she thought they were military aircraft,

but then she noticed the silver diadem above the wings. *Imperial airships.*

When her eyes adjusted to the light, she saw that a line of soldiers had already disembarked, waiting for them on a narrow platform.

A grunt of pain sounded from behind the soldiers, and they moved to reveal Yurhee and Tag bound and on their knees.

“Secure the boy,” said a uniformed captain standing nearby.

Sunho allowed the guards to surround him, his eyes darting toward Yurhee and Tag. They tied his wrists with heavy ropes and pressed him down until he was on the ground.

Ren was so preoccupied with the soldiers that she didn’t realize there were other people on the platform. They were dressed in elegant clothing, which seemed incongruous with the soldiers and ongoing destruction of the labs. Standing among them was a noblewoman with piercing gray eyes.

“My dear, do you remember me? I am your aunt, your mother’s cousin. My name is Lady Maya. My father was your mother’s uncle. We share blood, you and I.”

Ren searched her memories, vaguely recalling a line of brightly dressed people peering down at her over gilded, outspread fans. If Lady Maya had been among the group, she couldn’t remember.

Still, she had claimed they were family. “Please,” Ren appealed to her, “let them go. They’re my friends.”

But Lady Maya was already shaking her head. “I cannot. They are dissidents, rebelling against the empire—*your* empire.”

Ren wanted to scream. How could the empire belong to her when she wanted nothing to do with it?

“Beloved niece, allow me to escort you home.”

“My home...” Ren’s home was a village in a valley. It was with the people in the caravan, with Sunho—

“Your home is the Floating World,” Lady Maya said, as if reading her thoughts. She stepped closer to Ren, lowering her head so her next words were for Ren’s ears alone. “A queen is better equipped to make decisions than a renegade princess. Take back your throne, and you’ll have the power to make your own choices.”

Lady Maya’s eyes were sharp. Ren understood what she was saying. As Ren was now, she was at Lady Maya’s mercy, but as *queen*, she could protect the people she cared about.

"I'll go with you," Ren said, "but you have to release my friends."

Lady Maya held Ren's eyes a minute longer. "I will agree to those terms." She nodded at the captain, who moved to untie Yurhee and Tag. "Now, come with me."

"Wait, let me speak with them. Alone."

"Very well."

"Damn Sarennyans," Yurhee growled, rubbing her wrists as Ren approached. "I'm sorry, Ren. They followed us. There must have been a spy at Hagye—"

"It doesn't matter now. I have a favor to ask." She pressed the box into her hands. "This is the cure for my uncle. Go to my village and deliver it to him, please. I know it's a lot to ask—"

"Leave it to us," Yurhee said. "We'll make sure to get it to him."

"Take Sunho with you. If you explain how he protected me"—Ren swallowed hard—"how important he is to me, then they'll accept him as one of their own, I'm sure of it."

Sunho wouldn't know the words to express himself, but Ren could trust Yurhee to relay to Auntie and the others what had happened.

"He won't go," a soft voice said, with a cough. Ren's gaze shifted to Tag.

"Tag!" Yurhee hissed. "Could you refrain from ruining Ren's self-sacrificing moment?"

"He won't leave you," Tag said, ignoring Yurhee, and Ren understood that *he* understood Sunho.

"You'll have to convince him," Ren said. "You heard Lady Maya. She's related to me by blood. She won't harm me. Tell him I'll come to the village soon. I'll find a way."

Tag bit his lip, but he didn't argue further.

"Be safe, Ren," Yurhee said.

Ren nodded, turning away from them. She started to walk across the platform toward Sunho.

A hand shot out, blocking her path. "Not the boy."

Behind Sunho, a soldier raised the flat end of his sword.

"No!" Ren screamed as he brought it down upon the back of Sunho's head and he slumped over.

Ren whirled to face the noblewoman. "You promised not to hurt him!"

"It's for your own protection," Lady Maya said. "He's a criminal. He was

seen boarding a train with a group of mercenaries sent to murder you.”

“He wasn’t a part of them,” she cried out. “He *saved* me!”

But Lady Maya had already turned away. The captain grabbed Ren by the arms, dragging her toward the nearest airship. Once inside, Ren broke away, scrambling toward the railing.

She sobbed in relief when she saw Tag and Yurhee hurry across the platform, lifting Sunho by the arms and carrying him to their own aircraft, docked on the side. Tag must have managed to repair it in time.

All across the platform, explosions went off. She wondered, briefly, about the man in the spectacles, and whether he’d escaped. She leaned forward over the railing, straining her eyes for a glimpse of Sunho and the others, but the imperial airship accelerated, leaving the laboratory behind until it was only a bright flame in the distance. It was much larger and faster than Yurhee and Tag’s aircraft, moving through the violent winds with ease before shooting out of the mines into torrential light.

Ren squinted her eyes against the brightness. It didn’t make sense. Where was the light coming from? They should still be in the Under World.

Small and large aircraft floated in the air above the city, and Ren thought of Yurhee’s words the night before. *At that time, hundreds of aircraft will flood the sky.*

The Festival of Light had begun.

Gripping the railing, her eyes trailed upward. Moonlight flooded through a great aperture in the rock. Like a waterfall, it poured from the world above.

The ship moved toward the pillar, submerging into that silvery glow until the light was all around them, until it was all that she could see.

Slowly the ship began to ascend.

She was going back to that place she’d fled ten years before, a place of incredible beauty, with memories steeped in blood and tragedy.

She was going back to the Floating World.

ACT FOUR

THE FLOATING WORLD

CHAPTER 32

JAEIL

The Under World

The Core

THE LIGHT TORE down from the sky, spreading over the city like wildfire. The gates that separated the Core from Mid City and the Outer Ring had opened, and thousands of Under World denizens flooded inward. Guards had been deployed to the main capital area outside the assembly hall to control the masses, many of whom scrambled over one another to gulp in the light, as if it were air and they were drowning.

Jaeil observed the disorderly migration from beneath the shadowed eaves of one of the many taverns that lined the streets leading to the square.

A child had fallen onto the ground, wailing as the tides of people broke around her. She was about three or four, too young and witless to move out from danger. One of the red ribbons in her braids had come undone, her hair unraveling like a wilted flower.

“How pitiful,” Sana drawled, stepping out from the tavern’s doorway. He didn’t have to turn to know she’d snatched a wine bottle from one of the tables and held it dangling from her fingertips.

“The child’s guardians abandoned her,” Jaeil said absently, his gaze already moving elsewhere. “Probably to inebriate themselves in a tavern somewhere—a pastime you’re well acquainted with.”

“Oh, I wasn’t talking about the child.”

Sana leaned against the pillar opposite Jaeil. A festivalgoer walked up the short set of stairs between them and through the doorway of the tavern, not sparing either of them a glance.

“Tonight was exciting.” Sana’s eyes glinted, her lips peeling back to show her white teeth. “So that’s what rejection looks like. How does it feel? I’ve never experienced it before.”

“Shut up.”

She laughed, taking a swig from her bottle. “I did think that mercenary was quite handsome from the start,” she said. “It was your mistake for sending someone prettier than yourself.”

He pressed his fingers to his forehead, massaging the knot that had formed there. “You’re giving me a headache.”

“I don’t think that was me.”

Jaeil felt, admittedly, irritated.

He hadn’t thought the swordsman would succeed. He’d hired him on instinct, recalling an encounter he’d had with the boy’s brother. He hadn’t lied that he’d known him. They had served together, if only for a brief time, in the Eighth Regiment, before Jaeil was called back to the Floating World by his father.

By the time he returned, Junho was gone, and he assumed that he’d either been transferred or killed. Jaeil had a superb memory and would have remembered Junho even if he wasn’t himself memorable. He looked like his younger brother, his hair black, his eyelashes obscenely long.

But it wasn’t just his appearance that made Jaeil remember the soldier. He’d talked nonstop, even after Jaeil had made it clear he despised chatter. Junho was undaunted, unlike the others in their regiment, who cowered under Jaeil’s judgmental regard. He talked of the future he envisioned for himself, how he wanted to own a farm in one of the Occupied Territories, far away from the shadow of the Floating World. His younger brother would join him, and any family his brother might acquire.

It was clear he adored this younger brother, whom he’d had to leave behind to join their regiment. The others hadn’t the heart to tell Junho the truth, and Jaeil hadn’t the patience: Neither brother would ever live to see that farm. While paying out their indenture, they’d only accrue more debt to the army that fed, housed, and clothed them.

Perhaps Junho knew this already but still chose to fan the flames of hope a little longer.

It was Junho’s love for his brother that Jaeil remembered. He hadn’t felt affected by it, so much as curious. Jaeil had no siblings, and his cousins were vastly disappointing. What was it between these brothers that made their connection so strong?

When Jaeil met Sunho at the teahouse, he’d immediately remembered the

brother. Jaeil didn't believe in chance encounters.

And so he'd hired the swordsman, sent him with the others in order to find Ren. It wasn't a mistake. The other boy *had* found Ren, kept her alive. He would have delivered her to him, if his goal hadn't changed along the way. Jaeil tapped his finger on the banister. It wasn't a mistake, so then why did it feel like one?

"Captain."

A group of soldiers stood in front of the tavern, blocking the stairs. They'd disembarked from four large carriages that were now obstructing the street, creating more of a buildup in the crowd. A few drunken patrons came through the doorway only to scuttle back inside at the sight of them. The child, he noticed, was gone.

"Have you lost your way?" Sana said, cheerful-like, addressing the soldier who'd spoken. "Shouldn't you be in the square ensuring no fights break out? Keeping the peace and protecting the people, that sort of thing?"

The soldier shifted his feet, his eyes darting from Sana to Jaeil. "We have orders from the general. You're to report to the Floating World immediately. The nobles claim they've found the missing princess. They mean to install her as their puppet ruler and brand the general a traitor. Your father has gone ahead to stop this act of rebellion."

Jaeil sensed Sana moving closer to him, perhaps anticipating that he'd react negatively to this news.

So, Lady Maya had found her niece after all. But the noblewoman wouldn't be able to protect Ren from his father. She had no army. Whoever her allies were would flee in the face of the general's forces. It was as if they'd learned nothing in the past ten years.

His father would finish what he'd started, killing the last of the celestial maidens and installing himself as king.

"I'm to escort you to the base, where you'll gather your soldiers," the man continued. "An aircraft waits there to take you to the general's camp, outside the Sky Door."

Sana leaned forward over the railing. "An escort is a bit excessive, don't you think?"

"It's fine," Jaeil said. The soldier moved back as he stepped down the stairs. *The Sky Door*. Jaeil once more looked up toward the great opening in the Floating World. His father, at the moment, was almost directly above

him. How fitting.

“Jaeil, are you injured?”

Jaeil felt his body stiffen, recognizing the voice. He slowly lifted his gaze to find Commander Su among the soldiers, standing in the back. The commander frowned at the sight of the bandage on Jaeil’s neck. Sana had bound it, not gently, after stitching him up; the cut had been deep.

Jaeil cycled through the plausible reasons as to why the commander was in the Under World, and not the place Jaeil expected him to be, at his father’s side. Had he—after realizing the general’s intention to overthrow the nobles and take control of the Floating World—attempted to dissuade him, only to get rebuffed? Perhaps his father had sent the commander to escort Jaeil in order to get him out of the way. If there were others who disapproved of the general’s actions—many of the high-ranking officers hailed from noble families themselves, as did the commander—they would feel emboldened by the commander, who after the general, held the highest position in the Sareniyan army.

“If the captain *is* injured,” Sana said, her voice uncommonly serious as she locked eyes with the older soldier, “will the general let him go?”

After a long pause, Commander Su answered, “The general awaits his son on the Floating World.”

Jaeil stepped forward with Sana, and the soldiers moved to encircle them.

The crowd in the square had thickened during the few minutes they’d stood outside the tavern. The soldiers had to abandon the carriages to wade through it, spreading out in case Jaeil should decide to leave prematurely.

“Your father doesn’t trust you,” Sana said, stating the obvious. “Though you must feel flattered. A dozen soldiers as an escort—the general has paid you quite the compliment.”

It would probably only take a half dozen soldiers to subdue him at this point. He was tired, disgusted by the proximity of so many sweating bodies, and his neck hurt. They had to pass through the square to reach the parade grounds, and he regretted letting Sana provoke him into leaving the base. Like the rest of the city’s inhabitants, she’d wanted to celebrate the Festival of Light.

Sana shifted closer to him, so that only he could hear her when she asked, “What’s the plan?”

“There is none,” he said, grimacing as a slovenly woman spilled wine

onto the ground, flecks of which splattered over his boots.

“You heard the commander,” Sana said, glancing behind his shoulder before lowering her voice. “Your father is planning on capturing the princess. Will you not intervene in some grand manner to save her?”

“I tried to help her,” he retorted. “She refused to be helped.” Why were there so many people? *How* were there so many people? There should have been a checkpoint at the gates, barring more citizens from entering once the square had reached capacity.

“Ah, pettiness. This isn’t a side of you I often see. It’s charming, really.”

Craning his neck over the crowd, he looked toward the sidelines, where guards struggled to retain any semblance of order.

“She could die.”

He turned to look at Sana, who’d stopped walking, the crowd parting around her.

“So could we all,” he said.

“Yes, but some deaths matter more than others.”

Jaeil heard an odd keening in his ear. “Maybe it’s better if she died,” he said. “Then there wouldn’t be a choice.” Even as he said the words, he regretted them. He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. It’s not my concern anymore.” He was turning when Sana grabbed his wrist.

“It matters,” she said. Her grip was tight, her dark eyes glittering. Her voice, when she spoke, was thickened with some unnamed emotion. “Because her life matters to *you*, it could change the world.”

Jaeil had loved stories since he was young. In them, heroes prevailed, and villains were always punished. Villains like his father.

He thought of the meadow, the one he’d escape to, and the girl he’d met there. The night of the storm, he’d chased after Ren, searching for her in the forest. He hadn’t found her, but he had found the feather. He remembered holding it in the palms of his hands, the feeling of panic in his heart; he’d never held anything so fragile.

When did it become imperative for him to protect that feather? When did he start believing that if he could only hold on to it, then maybe the story he was living in would have a different ending than the one that was written for him, a long time ago?

A man lurched through the crowd, knocking against his shoulder. As he passed, a glass object fell out of his pocket. It hit the ground, shattering into

pieces.

“Hey!” Sana let go of Jaeil’s wrist to shout at the man’s retreating figure. “Watch where you’re going!”

Jaeil stared down at the object. It was a syringe; blue, pearlescent liquid clung to the pieces of glass. He jerked his head upward, locking eyes with the man as he looked back.

Jaeil *recognized* him. He’d come to the assembly hall to listen to his father speak.

“Wait!” Jaeil shouted. He knew the stranger had heard him because the corner of his mouth turned upward, in a cruel mockery of a smile. Then he turned and fled.

Jaeil sprinted after him.

“Captain!” Commander Su shouted, his voice drowned out by the roar of the crowd. Above, the Sky Door inched wider by several leagues. Moonlight poured through, deluging the light-starved masses.

The man turned to look back once more, but not at him. Jaeil followed his gaze to see a contingent of soldiers pushing through the crowd. Jaeil recognized their silver-and-red uniforms as belonging to Lady Maya’s household. *Imperial guards*.

When Jaeil swung his gaze back, he saw the man now gripped another one of the syringes in his hand. Jaeil’s breath left his chest. *What is he...?*

Grabbing a woman standing nearby, the man jammed the needle into her arm, depressing the plunger.

The woman let out a piercing scream that was cut off as she fell, writhing upon the ground. Her veins began to pulse with an eerie blue light that spread throughout her body. Then, she began to *change*. Her jaw unhinged from her skull, her limbs elongated, and her fingers grew into claws.

A guttural roar ripped through the demon’s throat. The people in the crowd who had stood in shocked silence erupted into movement, screaming and crying out in terror. The demon pounced onto the back of a fleeing civilian, tearing into her.

Another roar came from the direction of the crowd’s center, where the man must have injected a second person. Jaeil swore. *The head of the project was a scientist of some renown*. He knew, with certainty, the identity of the stranger. He was the scientist whose brother had been murdered by Sarenians. Whatever serum he’d injected into the woman had changed her,

transformed her. He could create as many demons as he had vials.

“Sana!” Jaeil called.

“I’m here, Captain.” Sana had caught up to him, along with the commander, whose soldiers quickly surrounded them, pushing at the frenzied crowd. “What should we do about the civilians? They’ll all be slaughtered at this rate.”

Jaeil took note of what Sana had already deduced. The monster that had first transformed was viciously killing people but not consuming them. It slashed its fifth and sixth victims, before pouncing on a young man, tearing out his throat with its teeth.

“They’re not our priority.” His eyes scanned the crowd for the scientist. There were too many people, unable to flee due to the sheer numbers in the square for the festival. “The scientist, did you see where he went?” he shouted to be heard over the screams and sounds of slaughter. “Bring him to me. If you’re faced with a choice, kill him.”

“Captain.” Sana hesitated, and Jaeil glanced at her. “Let me stay by your side,” she said, speaking fast. “You’re still injured. And I don’t mean the wound on your neck. Your arm hasn’t yet fully healed, and—”

“It wasn’t a request, Lieutenant.”

Cursing, Sana turned, breaking through the soldiers and into the crowd.

Jaeil searched the square for the imperial guards that had been in pursuit of the scientist, but they’d either fled or been absorbed into the throng. Though the center was thinning out as more citizens escaped toward the nine avenues, likely trampling one another in their desperation to get away.

“Captain,” Commander Su said, his voice calm despite the chaos, “it seems your suspicions were correct. The scientist is much changed, but his eyes are the same.” Jaeil was impressed at the discipline of the commander’s soldiers, none of whom fled, unlike the guards.

“I need your best archer,” Jaeil said, and the commander nodded to one of the soldiers standing at attention.

“Can you hit it?” he asked the older man who approached, carrying a bow and quiver of arrows.

The soldier considered his question. “I don’t know, sir. It’s moving too fast.”

His tone was even, but his trembling hands betrayed him.

“I’ll take that,” Jaeil said, not unkindly, and the soldier handed Jaeil the

bow with relief.

The demon *was* fast. It sprang from victim to victim, leaping sideways and vaulting over carts that had turned over on their sides.

Nocking an arrow, Jaeil followed the monster's movements. It would take a half second for the arrow to hit the target; he couldn't aim *at* the monster, or he'd miss.

It launched into the air, springing toward a group of cowering civilians. Jaeil calculated the demon's trajectory, releasing the arrow ahead of it. He didn't wait to see if the arrow found its mark, flinging the bow aside and unsheathing his sword.

He heard the thunk of the arrow; at the same time, the demon screamed. It hit the ground, skidding, the arrow lodged in its thigh. Jaeil was upon it within seconds. He buried his sword through its chest, wincing as a sharp pain splintered up his arm. He let go of the sword, stumbling back.

"Jaeil," Commander Su shouted, "watch out!"

He only had time to lift his arms before he was felled by a great weight.

Damn it. He'd forgotten the second demon. He held it back, twisting his head to the side as the monster snapped its teeth inches from his face, its breath hot and rancid.

"Don't shoot!" he heard the commander shout. "You might hit the captain!"

Shoot, he wanted to scream—he'd rather die by a hail of arrows than in the jaws of a creature—but the monster was on his chest; he couldn't speak, couldn't breathe. His left arm felt like it was on fire, then it rebroke with a *snap*.

The demon bore down on him, blood and saliva dropping onto his cheek. Then it reared back with a scream, a dagger embedded in its shoulder.

Sana.

The demon twisted around, raking its claws across her face. She fell back with a lurch.

With his right arm, Jaeil reached around the monster, prying Sana's dagger from its back. With the last of his strength, he shoved it into the monster's heart.

It collapsed on top of him, pinning him to the earth. He didn't have to wait long before the commander's soldiers lifted the demon's corpse. He waved away their offer of help, holding his arm as he crouched by Sana's

prone body. He felt the tension leave his shoulders as he saw her chest moving up and down. She was alive.

“Take her to the base,” he ordered the soldiers who surrounded him, his gaze shifting to the corpses of the demons. They had changed back to their original forms. The woman lay face up on the ground, eyes unseeing. Several feet from her was a man with short, cropped hair.

The soldiers hadn’t moved to obey his directive. He looked over to find them staring at him.

“What is it?”

“Sir, you’re—you’re covered. In blood.”

They were right. He was soaked in it. His clothing clung to his skin as if he’d been dipped in ink.

Blue ink. The color of mithril, the color of stars.

“You heard the captain,” Commander Su barked. “Get moving.”

The soldiers scurried away, bearing Sana back to the base.

Jaeil noticed how quiet the square had become. Besides the bodies of the fallen, he and the commander were alone. If he closed his eyes, he could imagine he was back in the meadow at night, when it was too dark to read. Then, all he could do was listen, and breathe.

“I’ll inform the general of what I witnessed here. This time, I’ll make certain he listens. Sareniya faces a far greater threat than her own people.”

Jaeil bowed to the commander as he moved to leave.

The commander paused. “I will await you at the base,” he said. Then he added, “Have the physician look at your arm upon your arrival.”

Commander Su didn’t have to reiterate his orders; Jaeil would still be expected to join his father on the Floating World, where it all began. And where it would end, one way or another.

After the commander took his leave, Jaeil raised his gaze skyward. The Sky Door was completely open, and through it, he could see the stars.

There was still so much he needed to discover, about the scientist and the far-reaching scope of his plans. But when he looked up at the sky, he thought only of the meadow—and the girl he’d met there—as he stood alone in the square, drenched in blood and starlight.

CHAPTER 33

SUNHO

The Under World

Wolryudang, Seventh Ward

“WE’RE LEAVING WITHIN the hour,” Yurhee announced loudly, though there were only the three of them; Tag and Sunho sat opposite each other at one of the few intact tables. Tag had brought over a tea set, and Sunho watched as steam curled up from the cup toward the ceiling.

The teahouse bore the marks of Jaeil’s visit, broken tables and chairs, though Grandma Jin had swept away the worst of the splinters.

“Our plan is to go to Seorawon first,” Yurhee continued. “From there, we’ll head east over the mountains and arrive in Ren’s village by daybreak of the second day, and we’ll deliver the cure to her uncle.”

Sunho knew the *we* Yurhee spoke of included him, and his chest warmed with gratitude for all they had done—but he wouldn’t be joining them.

Ren had given up her freedom so that they might escape. Maybe she thought her aunt could offer her protection, but it wouldn’t last. He and Ren both knew who awaited her on the Floating World.

“I’m not great at telling people what to do—” Yurhee began.

“That’s not true,” Tag muttered from where he was slouched in his seat.

“—so I’ll leave it up to you to decide whether you’ll stay or come with us, though I hope it’s the latter.

“Tag,” she said, directing her attention to the silver-haired boy, who eyed her warily. Leaning forward, she whispered in a voice only meant for his ears, “Talk to him. Convince him to join us.”

Then she sauntered past the counter and through the door.

Tag sank even further into his collar, his gaze focusing on motes of dust in the air. Neither boy spoke; the tea grew tepid. At one point, Yurhee returned through the door, caught sight of them, then left, sighing loudly,

grumbling about boys and their emotions.

Maybe it was the ease he felt with Tag, but Sunho was reminded of Heetae and Rohoon. It was always the three of them, after Junho had left; he remembered that now. They were never apart, eating, sleeping, and fighting side by side; they might have gone on like that forever, if it wasn't for that night.

The memory from the mithril labs felt hazy, but he could piece together what had happened. In an effort to create the ultimate weapon, the Black Robes had injected the soldiers of the Forty-Fourth with liquefied mithril.

Some hadn't survived. *Heetae*. The others, like Rohoon, became demons.

After Sunho had knocked his head against the table, he'd woken beside the old mithril factory. Had Junho brought him there? He still had hope that his brother was alive, that he'd somehow survived the transformation.

Sunho surfaced from his memories to find Tag watching him. "What will you do?" he asked, in his quiet way.

"I'm going after her," Sunho said.

Tag nodded, as if he'd expected that answer. "How will you do it?"

Sunho didn't have an aircraft, and he wouldn't ask Tag and Yurhee to risk their lives for him, again. There was also the medicine to consider. He wouldn't jeopardize the cure for Ren's uncle.

"I'll figure it out," he said.

Tag nodded again. "What are you going to do once you've reached her?"

It was a reasonable question. Sunho hadn't any idea. Even if he could find Ren, he had no way of escaping the Floating World.

"I'll figure that out, too."

Tag seemed to contemplate this notion, unblinking, then nodded.

"I can't believe what I just witnessed." They both turned to see Yurhee standing in the doorway. "*This* is how you two make plans?"

Soon after, they separated to make their individual preparations. While Yurhee packed provisions—they wouldn't return for some time—Tag finished repairs on the flying machine, which had managed to remain intact even after the events of the night. Sunho sat outside on the steps of Wolryudang, categorizing his wounds and self-administering aid to the worst of them. He had a head injury from his fight in the labs, various cuts from when he shattered the skylight on the military base, and a black eye and busted lip from the Small Ring.

He knew that he could endure more than others, but even his body would give out without rest. Still, he would hold on. For as long as he needed to.

He regretted that he wouldn't see Haru one last time. Since Wolryudang had been compromised, Haru was staying with Grandma Jin's nephew. He would remain there until their network could locate his mother. If, for some reason, his mother couldn't look out for him, he'd return to Wolryudang and stay with its proprietor.

Sunho, Yurhee, and Tag met for one last time in the main room. As Sunho took in the sturdy wooden chairs and soft lantern light, he remembered his first impression of the teahouse when he'd arrived with Ren, as if he'd stepped into a slice of heaven.

Grandma Jin stood by the bar, wiping down teacups, smug after winning an argument with Yurhee. The younger woman had wanted the older woman to leave. The captain's soldiers had threatened her; they could do so again.

If they haven't gotten me in the past fifty years, Grandma Jin responded, *they won't get me in the next fifty.*

Fifty years? Yurhee had gaped. *Grandma Jin, you're seventy now.*

Damn right! she'd said, cackling.

Now, Yurhee sighed, one hand on her waist. Sunho remembered that's how she'd greeted him at the mithril factory. "Tag and I are leaving soon. You're welcome to anything in the building, weapons, food. Whatever you might need."

"All I need is my sword," Sunho said, "and..." He thought again of that night, recalling the tool they'd used to scale the walls of the mithril factory. "A grappling gun."

Yurhee raised a brow, but she didn't question him, leaving the room and returning with her utility belt.

"Thank you," Sunho said, buckling the belt around his waist.

"Is this really the path you want to take?" Yurhee blurted. "Ren is the heir to the Floating World. A princess. There will always be someone after her, wanting to use her. Her life will never be easy. Nor will yours, should you choose to walk beside her."

Sunho understood what Yurhee was saying. As an orphan, then a soldier, then an experiment, he'd already walked a difficult path. He could choose to leave it.

Not like Ren could.

She'd been born a celestial maiden, with all that entailed. And yet, if there was a choice, he'd already made it.

Ren hadn't chosen her own destiny, but he'd chosen his.

"You're wrong," Sunho said quietly, and Yurhee lifted a brow. "She's nobody. A troupe performer. No more, no less."

A beat of silence passed, then Yurhee laughed, loudly, and Tag shook his head with a smile.

"When you reach Ren's village," Sunho said, "will you stay there?"

"At least for a short while. For all my worldly ways, I've never seen an open sky. And Tag probably wants to look at some sheep."

Tag said nothing to this, which indicated that he agreed.

"Then we'll meet again," Sunho said.

"Yeah." Yurhee grinned. "We'll see you again."



SUNHO DIDN'T WAIT long after Yurhee and Tag left before heading out himself. From the seventh ward, he made his way past his old apartment building, where he spotted his cot and other belongings had been thrown onto the streets, most of which had been scavenged.

From there, he headed toward the Wall. The checkpoint guard glanced briefly at his papers before waving him through. It was the Festival of Light—those entering the city had been accounted for, and those leaving were of little consequence. According to the flyers disseminated throughout the city, the girl the Sarenian army had been searching for had been arrested. She was an imposter and would face judgment for her crimes on the Floating World. Sunho lifted his boot where he'd stepped on one of these flyers, and it was picked up by the wind, fluttering behind him as he swept past the gate.

There were four mining camps, each a half hour outside the city walls by foot. As Sunho approached the southwest camp, he lifted his gaze, following the length of the Tower that extended upward at a height greater than even the Wall. Sunho jogged the last half mile to the mining camp. It was closed for the festival. The two guards who oversaw the equipment had drunk themselves into early stupors. Sunho slipped by them easily.

Inside the Tower, he entered the mechanized lift, shutting the metal gate behind him and pressing down the lever.

It ascended slowly, the frame rattling as it took him higher and higher.

He closed his eyes against the lights that flickered at every thirty-yard marker: *sixty, ninety, one hundred and twenty, one hundred and fifty ...*

Fifteen minutes later, the elevator jolted to a halt. He'd reached the top of the Tower. The screaming wind bit at him as he stepped from the lift. Here, the reinforced structure of the Tower ended; instead, scaffolds extended into the sky. He studied the puzzle of interlocking wooden beams that creaked and swayed. It was a wonder they hadn't collapsed. Above them were the quarries.

The lift had only taken him a quarter of the way.

The Festival of Light would culminate at dawn.

He thought again of Yurhee's question.

Is this really the path you want to take?

When he closed his eyes, he could see sunlight, but not the light that burned—the light as it appeared through Ren's paper umbrella.

Adjusting the strap of his scabbard across his back, he began to climb.

CHAPTER 34

REN

The Floating World

REN AWOKE TO a light probing at her eyes. It glimmered from across a dark room, through a thin gap between latched windows, poking and prodding, as if seeking entrance.

She quickly rose from her bedding, stepping from the silken blankets, and hurried toward the light. She lifted the latch and pulled one side of the window open by a brass ring.

A breeze swept into the room, and it was like being doused in a cool stream. She hadn't known until then how accustomed she'd grown to the smoke of the Under World. She breathed in deeply, letting the chilled air fill her lungs.

It was still early in the morning, the sun not yet risen. Her window overlooked a courtyard surrounded by elegant buildings with sloping rooftops. The light came from a lantern outside her window that hung from the branch of a magnificent plum tree. It was resplendent, with crimson blossoms that swayed in the wind like fire.

A light rapping sound came from the opposite side of the room.

"Princess, are you awake?" a voice murmured, before a door shifted open, and a woman entered. She stood on the threshold, her hand to her chest. "Am I dreaming?" she whispered. "Ten years have passed and while I've remained unchanged, you've transformed into a beautiful young lady."

Ren's heart surged, recognizing the woman immediately. Her nursemaid, Doona.

She raced across the room, falling into the older woman's arms. She hadn't imagined, in returning to the Floating World, she'd meet someone from her past whom she remembered, let alone cared for.

"Where am I?" Ren said, releasing Doona as she sat back, both having

slid to the smooth wooden floorboards upon their reunion. “This isn’t the palace.”

Though Ren had few memories of her early life, she would have known if she was *there*. It wasn’t because of the view from her window—the grounds of the palace were vast, no doubt there were similar views to be found—it was the silence. Even from within the palace walls, the roar of the waterfall was ever present, though muted; it became thunderous as one approached the cliffs.

Here there was no faraway rumbling. Her gaze traveled to the window, where a magpie had landed on one of the lower branches of the plum tree, chirping cheerily among the flame-like leaves.

“We are at Bright Moon Temple,” Doona answered, “a half day’s journey by foot from the celestial city.”

Doona took Ren’s hands in her own. Her voice was urgent as she spoke. “The general has amassed a great army. He means to seize total control of the Floating World.”

Ren grimaced. General Iljin, it seemed, was finally enacting the plan that he’d started ten years ago when he’d murdered Sarenia’s queen; he no longer needed the nobles’ wealth, nor their cooperation. He would take the Floating World with the strength of his army and become her first-ever king.

“You are safe here,” Doona continued. “This is a sacred place. The general wouldn’t dare bring his soldiers to the temple.”

While the general’s soldiers were loyal, many were also Sarenians, not just in background, but in *religion*. Desecrating the temple would only anger and create dissent among the pious in his ranks. It occurred to Ren that the general had deemed her an imposter for this reason, to incite his soldiers; impersonation of a goddess was the highest form of blasphemy.

Ren shook her head. “I can’t stay.”

A crease formed between Doona’s brow. “But you’ve only just returned.”

“Not by choice,” Ren explained. “Lady Maya...” She couldn’t bring herself to call her *Aunt*, as she hadn’t known of her until the evening before, and even if they shared the same blood, the noblewoman was a stranger to her. “She threatened the safety of my friends. That’s why I agreed to come back. I’m leaving as soon as possible. Is she still at the temple?”

“She is in the Hall of Slumbering Pines, in council with the other nobles who support your claim to the throne.”

Ren forced a laugh. It was ironic that the nobles who planned for her to take the throne hadn't bothered to invite her to the council where they plotted on how to claim it.

"I need to speak with Lady Maya," Ren said, rising to her feet. "Will you take me to her?"

Doona held Ren's gaze for a long minute. "Lady Maya bade me to attend you until the council had reached its conclusion," she said finally.

Ren felt a pang of disappointment, but she didn't blame Doona. She'd been a child when Doona was her nursemaid, but it was likely someone from the royal family had appointed her—perhaps it was even Lady Maya herself—so that they could control her.

Doona's answer, though, *did* mean Ren needed another plan. She could easily escape through the window. The branches of the plum tree looked sturdy enough to hold her weight.

"Your mother..." Ren looked back to find Doona gazing at the magpie on the tree branch. "She was the most beautiful person I'd ever seen, yet happiness eluded her. She was like a bird in a gilded cage, clipped of her wings."

Ren's chest tightened, as it always did when she thought of her mother.

Doona inhaled a deep breath, then, releasing it, she stood. "Come with me. I'll take you to the hall."

Relief flooded Ren as she followed Doona from the room.

The temple wasn't a single building but several dozen spread out along the slope of a mountain. From the courtyard with the plum tree, they ventured farther inward. Whoever had designed the temple had been careful to accommodate the mountainous terrain. Ren followed Doona up steep stone steps and over rickety bridges that spanned deep gorges, down which Ren was careful not to look.

As they walked, Ren noticed several large, rectangular buildings with the same sloping rooftops. Each were divided into small open-air rooms, where people of all ages lay on pallets, tended to by temple attendants.

"Bright Moon Temple exists as a place of worship, but it's also a sanctuary for those seeking solitude and convalescence," Doona said, following her gaze. "There are natural pools nearby that have healing properties. The sick and infirm are welcome here. No one is turned away."

After some time, they reached the Hall of Slumbering Pines, located at the

highest point of the temple grounds. The nobles were already leaving the pavilion when they arrived.

Spotting her, Lady Maya rushed over. She grabbed Ren by the arm and pulled her around the corner of the building, with Doona scurrying to follow.

"I ordered you to keep her in her room," Lady Maya hissed at the maidservant.

Ren frowned. "It was my doing. Doona was only—"

"Leave us," Lady Maya spat. "You're dismissed."

Doona bowed, sparing Ren a worried glance before slipping back the way they'd come.

Ren stared at her aunt. Had she wondered if she could learn to embrace her aunt as kin, that thought was shattered. "That was unnecessary," Ren said coldly.

"Sareniya."

"My name is Ren."

"Regardless, you bear the name Sareniya, like your mother, and her mother before her."

Ren gritted her teeth. Lady Maya was all that stood between her and the general—she couldn't risk antagonizing her more than she already had.

"What conclusion did the council draw?" Ren asked.

Lady Maya pursed her lips, and Ren thought at first her aunt wouldn't answer her. "We're sending an envoy at first light to negotiate with the general. If it's legitimacy that he wants, an arrangement can be made." Lady Maya scrunched her nose, as if she'd smelled something foul. "He has a son, I believe, though it grieves me to sully the bloodline with such a marriage."

Ren gaped at Lady Maya. She meant for Ren to marry Jaeil. Even if the general agreed to such a plan, Ren would never.

It didn't matter, anyway. It wasn't legitimacy the general wanted. It was restitution. What else could he desire after ten years of war? A soldier cared little for bloodlines.

"What if I told you that I don't want to be queen?" Ren asked.

Lady Maya lifted a brow. "You don't have a choice." She studied Ren, as if Ren were a creature from another world entirely, and ...

... she was.

"Don't you want to reclaim your throne?" Lady Maya asked, in a tone that was genuinely curious. "Take revenge on the general for stealing your

birthright? He murdered your mother.”

Lady Maya spoke of her mother’s death so casually, as if it hadn’t changed the course of two worlds, as if it hadn’t broken Ren’s heart.

Ren could feel the call of revenge in every shattered heartbeat, in the burning behind her eyes every time she thought of her mother; for so long, she’d buried her rage, confusion, and despair, not wanting to face what had happened at the edge of the world.

She thought she could let go of the throne, *her birthright*, if it wasn’t for that night, and it scared her, that she might give up *everything*—her home with Auntie and Little Uncle, of a life of peace and happiness and love—in exchange for immeasurable sorrow and pain.

“I came with you because I was worried about the safety of my friends,” Ren whispered, saying the words more to convince herself than for the other woman.

“You can bring your companions here,” Lady Maya said, “criminals though they may be.” She hesitated. “I’ll even overlook any *indiscretions* you might have.” When Ren realized what, *and who*, she meant, her cheeks heated. “The goddess knows it’s in your blood.”

That stopped her short, and she frowned. “What do you mean?” Ren breathed.

“Your mother had a lover,” Lady Maya sneered, “before she married your esteemed father. A soldier. After their affair was discovered, he was killed.”

Ren felt her head spinning, horror curdling in her chest. Her mother had once been in love, and they’d *killed* him. Had they murdered him in front of her? What would such an act *do* to a person? They’d broken not just her heart but her spirit.

A loud thunk from the roof of the pavilion startled them both.

Lady Maya frowned as a piece of tile slid from the rooftop and landed at her feet.

For a long moment, they stared at the large clay shard, then a clattering groan swept across the entirety of the roof as hundreds of tiles began to pour off the edge like water.

“Watch out!” Ren screamed. She yanked Lady Maya aside just as the side of the building collapsed. They tumbled to the ground, with Lady Maya landing atop Ren’s injured shoulder. Ren cried out as her wound reopened.

Dust coated the air. When it settled, Ren realized they were no longer

alone. A woman stood before them, dressed entirely in black except for the bottom half of her face, which was wrapped in red cloth.

“How dare you—?” Lady Maya sputtered.

The woman leaped at Lady Maya, drawing her sword in one quick motion. Ren grabbed behind her, her hand circling around a rock, and she hurled it in the assassin’s direction. It connected with her head, and she stumbled backward.

Ren didn’t wait to see the assassin recover; she raced to her aunt and dragged her to her feet. “Come on!” Ren shouted, pulling her toward the steps that led from the hall.

She heard the screams before she rounded the corner. From her vantage, she could see the entirety of the temple grounds. The sun hadn’t risen, yet the sky was red. *Fire*. The buildings were on fire; their beautiful wooden frameworks collapsed into heaps beneath the flames.

A large airship had landed outside the main gates, and dark figures poured onto the grounds, engaging in battle with the temple guards.

The chaos, the noise, the fear—it reminded Ren of the demon’s attack on Gorye Village, and for a moment, she couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe. In the distance, she could see the plum tree, its blossoms smoldering to ash.

“Let go of me!” Lady Maya screamed. She pushed Ren to the ground, rushing off into the darkness.

Ren felt numbness overtake her. She didn’t care that her aunt had just abandoned her. As she stared out at the destruction of Bright Moon Temple, her memories of the night at Gorye Village began to blur with the vision before her until she couldn’t tell what was the past and what was the present.

“Princess!”

Doona.

“Princess, what are you doing?” Doona wrapped her arms around Ren, helping her to stand. She guided Ren down the stairs and beneath the shelter of a pine tree. “Hurry, there’s a passage in the mountains that leads to the other side. I’ll take you there.”

Ren gazed at the woman’s soot-stained face. “You came back for me.” Ren almost choked on the words.

Doona’s gaze softened, and she lifted a hand to brush a strand of Ren’s hair from her eyes. “I looked for you that night ten years ago. I lost you then—I’ll never lose you again.”

Ren felt her strength returning to her. "The path to the cave is nearby," Doona said. "Hurry."

She bade Ren go ahead of her, pushing her forward. As Ren took a step, she heard Doona gasp. She knew what she would see even as she whirled around.

An assassin stood behind Doona, holding a bow, empty now of its arrow.

Ren felt her whole body stiffen, then she screamed, rushing toward the assassin, snatching a dagger from his belt and slashing it wildly at his chest.

She fought with all the ferocity she possessed. But it wasn't enough. She was trained to tumble and entertain, not to fight, to kill, and the assassin easily knocked the dagger from her hand, twisting her arm behind her back.

Tears pricked the corners of her eyes, from her wrist that was a snap away from breaking, the anger that felt like a knife piercing her heart.

"Unhand her," Jaeil's cold, hard voice rang out. "The general wants her alive."

CHAPTER 35

REN

The Floating World

Bright Moon Temple

IMMEDIATELY THE ASSASSIN released her. Ren rubbed her wrist as she looked up at Jaeil.

“Are you the one responsible for this massacre?” she snarled.

His eyes rested on Doona, and she thought she saw, for a moment, what looked like an expression of grief—he had known Doona as well—but then his face hardened. “I told you to flee when you had the chance.”

“Captain.” A soldier ran up, bowing to Jaeil. Ren frowned, noticing she was garbed in the Sarenian military uniform, unlike the assassins. Jaeil was similarly attired. Were the assassins part of a different group and not under Jaeil’s command, as she had first thought? “The assassins have torched most of the buildings. What are your orders?”

Ren staggered forward. “This temple is a sanctuary,” she said, not caring that she was pleading. “Most of the people here aren’t even guards, but the elderly and infirm. Please, they need help.”

Jaeil’s gaze flitted over her, briefly, before returning to the soldier. “Have the soldiers already on the ground remain. Consult the temple priestesses for orders. If the assassins resist, kill them. The rest will leave with me. We’ve gotten what we came for.”

“Yes, Captain.”

At Jaeil’s words, the soldier turned to the assassin who’d killed Doona, piercing him in the chest with her sword before he had a chance to react.

Jaeil stepped back, allowing for Ren to pass him. She spared one final glance for Doona, who lay still and serene beneath the pine tree, then turned, boarding the aircraft that awaited her. She wrapped her arms around herself as it ascended into frigid winds. Soon the bright flames of the temple were

lost in the fog.

She didn't have to ask Jaeil where they were going. *The general wants her alive.*

They stood alone at the bow of the aircraft. His soldiers had left her unbound. Either they didn't think she was a threat or trusted that their captain would defend himself should she attack him. She'd witnessed Jaeil fight and didn't doubt his capabilities, but he looked worse off than on the base. Besides the bandage across his neck, his arm was in a sling, and he was favoring his right leg. What happened to him since she last saw him? Ten years ago, she would have asked him, would have reached out to him, with gentleness, with concern. But he wasn't the same boy as he'd been in her childhood.

"What's going to happen?" she asked instead.

"I'm bringing you to my father." There was a long pause where Jaeil's face remained inscrutable. "He'll want to make an example of you."

"Don't these soldiers obey your orders? You could say that one of the assassins killed me. Leave me one of your aircraft. I promise you'll never see me again." She didn't care that she'd never flown one. She'd figure it out.

Ren realized now that Jaeil's unit was separate from the assassins his father had sent. She even suspected that the general hadn't ordered her to be brought to him alive, that Jaeil had once again gone behind his back to save her.

Jaeil turned to her, his expression opaque. "You're asking me to betray my father." He sounded more curious than offended.

"You've done it before."

"He won't let you go," Jaeil said flatly. "As long as you live, there will be those who support your claim to the throne. He *can't* let you go."

"So you'll bring me to your father and watch me die? Even after trying to save me? Even after what we meant to each other as children? You were my friend." He was her *only* friend.

"That was a long time ago. I've changed, and so have you. It's too late now."

Ren followed his gaze. They had left the mountains behind. Below was a great valley upon which stood hundreds, thousands of soldiers. In the distance she could see the horizon, though the sun hadn't yet risen.

Why had Lady Maya and the other nobles thought they could ever have a

chance against such a mighty force?

At the center of the army was a massive hole, a crack in the world itself. The Sky Door.

As the airship descended into the valley, Ren was struck with a realization.

“You’re right, I *have* changed,” she said, and she felt more than saw Jaeil turn toward her. “I used to be afraid.”

“What do you mean?”

“Since that night ten years ago, when I witnessed the general push my mother off the edge of the Floating World, I couldn’t bear the thought of falling from a great height. I’d look down from high places, and I’d feel panic. Terror. There were times I couldn’t breathe.” Ren closed her eyes, remembering that night on the cliff outside Gorye Village. It was because of her fear that Little Uncle had been injured.

“And now?”

“I’m no longer afraid.” Ren met Jaeil’s gaze. “I’m angry.”

“Good,” Jaeil said. The airship reached the ground; dust rose up, enveloping them. “I can’t save you,” he said, and his voice was urgent, his dark eyes intent upon her, “but you can save yourself.”

Before she could ask him what he meant, an older man boarded the airship. He bowed to Jaeil, who returned the gesture.

“Commander,” Jaeil said.

Ren vaguely recognized the man, though she couldn’t recall where she’d seen him before. Jaeil had addressed him as commander, which meant, in the Sarenian army, he was second only to the general.

“Did you speak to my father?” Jaeil asked.

“He said he’ll address the situation after things are taken care of here.” Ren eyed the older man curiously, noting the strain in his voice.

Jaeil growled, “It’ll be too late then.”

The commander appeared as if he was going to respond, but then he caught sight of Ren. A flurry of emotions passed over his features—shock, confusion, then wariness—before his features smoothed over. “Escort the imposter off the ship,” he ordered the soldiers who’d accompanied him on board. “Have you checked her for weapons?”

Jaeil didn’t spare Ren a glance. “She’s unarmed.”

The commander’s soldiers weren’t gentle as they pushed her down the

gangplank and through the crowd.

Ren looked over her shoulder to see that both the commander and Jaeil followed, his expression unreadable as the soldiers jeered and spat at her shoes.

“Imposter!”

“Traitor!”

Ren tried to imagine she was back in the reed fields, the gentle breeze rippling through the stalks. At the end of it would be the cottage, where Sunho would be waiting.

Her vision ended as the crowd parted.

The general stood at the edge of the Sky Door. Behind him, a white banner fluttered over the opening, embroidered not with the double wings of Sareniya but a white horse on a black field.

His head was covered in a great horned helm, and his left arm was entirely encased in a gauntlet with sharp claws for fingers.

It was absurd to think she wasn’t afraid. All her talk of fearlessness evaporated in the face of *him*, the demon in her memory.

On instinct, she reached for her magic, but felt only a cold emptiness where the Light had been. Panic seized her, and her heart started to race. Where had her magic gone, when she needed it most?

“All these years you were alive.” The general’s voice was surprisingly quiet, calm, his words meant only for her ears. “Did you expect your return to be like this?”

“No,” Ren said truthfully, “I never thought of returning. I was happy.”

In the valley and on the caravan trail with Auntie, Big Uncle, and Little Uncle, she’d been content. With them, she’d been loved unconditionally, her strengths encouraged, her weaknesses embraced. And maybe it was *because* of who they had raised her to be that she had to return.

Their niece would never back down against a tyrant.

“Then you don’t deserve the throne,” the general said, and he sounded *disappointed*, “and you were never a worthy opponent. I can see that now. But it doesn’t matter. There will always be those who want to use you because of who you are. Because of that, you will always be a threat. It ends here.”

The general turned to face the seemingly endless crowd of soldiers, raising his voice to be heard. “The girl is an imposter,” he shouted, his voice

booming, “sent by the Volmarans to divide us. But we will not be so easily fooled.”

The ground rumbled as the soldiers pounded their feet, many crying out in anger.

“That light,” the general’s voice roared. “How did you do it? Was it a weapon?”

As Ren gazed at him, she realized it didn’t matter that he knew the truth: It wasn’t himself that he needed to convince.

He was a performer. But so was Ren.

She stepped away from the general, hopping onto the thin metal barrier that bordered the Sky Door. She braced herself against the searing wind that blew up from the ominous darkness. One misstep and she would tumble backward into its great depths.

She was still afraid. Unlike with her fear of heights, she would *always* fear him, she knew that now. But even afraid, she could still fight.

She couldn’t face him as Sareniya, the imposter princess, but she could face him as herself—Ren—Auntie, Big Uncle, and Little Uncle’s niece, a troupe performer.

“You’ve gathered quite a force for an imposter,” she said, pitching her voice so that it carried. “It’s almost as if you believe I might be exactly the person you fear me to be.”

The general seemed taken back, his eyes widening slightly before he scowled. “Even if you were,” he said, “it doesn’t matter. The time of the celestials is over.”

“Is that what you believe? That if I am truly the last descendant of the celestial maiden, the guardian of the Floating World, that I should perish?”

From behind the general’s back, she saw the older man who’d greeted Jaeil upon their arrival—the commander—shift his feet. She couldn’t see Jaeil, but the crowd had quieted. They no longer jeered, standing silent and still.

“Call it forth, then,” the general boomed. “Show us the light.”

Again, she reached for her magic, but it eluded her. She wanted to shout in frustration. Why did the Light come on the cliff and on the bridge, but not now? Both times she’d feared for her life—what was different?

“How pathetic.” The general lowered his voice, so that only she could hear his next words. “You’re weak, just like your mother. She hadn’t any

magic, and neither did her mother, or her mother's mother before her. She was a bird without wings; it's why she went to the cliff that night."

Ren felt as if her heart was sinking, his words uncovering the secret fear she'd buried deep inside her.

Because even before the general had appeared, her mother had already been standing at the cliff's edge.

Ren remembered the desperation she'd felt that night, the white feather gripped in her hand—what she hoped would be the key to unlocking her mother's heart. She feared that her mother might leave her—she already had, in her mind, with her love—that she might *jump*.

But she hadn't. She *hadn't*.

The sun spread its wings over the horizon; dawn was breaking. It bathed Ren in its golden light.

"Have you ever heard the story of the Woodcutter and the Celestial Maiden?" she asked, keeping her voice raised for all to hear.

"A child's tale, nothing more," the general scoffed.

"Had you listened to the story, you would have known. She belonged in the sky, but she was trapped by human desire. If she was as you said, a bird without wings, then you should have given them back to her, so that she could be free."

Ren closed her eyes, remembering how she'd felt that night, staring at her mother—the fear, the desperation—and then the brief glimmer of hope, when *he* had appeared. "When you saw her standing at the edge of the cliff, you could have brought her back. You could have saved her."

Tears slipped down Ren's cheeks as she opened her eyes, not just from sorrow and pain, but rage. "You, who were sworn to protect her, betrayed her instead. And for that, I will *never* forgive you."

The general gestured to one of his bowmen, shouting, "Shoot her in the shoulder!"

As the soldier released the arrow, Ren bent backward—she felt the breeze of the shaft as it sailed over her—then righted herself, as if she were a tree that had bent with the wind.

"In the leg!" the general bellowed.

This time, she flipped forward over the arrow, landing with one foot in front of the other, teetering over the ledge before regaining her balance.

"This isn't a game," the general seethed. "Kill her now!"

Ren didn't think she could avoid any more arrows; her heart felt heavy, as if it were a weight pressing down in her chest. As she balanced on the edge, she wondered if this was how her mother had felt that night—like she was all alone, the despair so thick and overwhelming she wondered if she could ever see the light through the darkness.

"What is that?" a voice from the crowd interrupted.

Beneath the general's banner, hands had appeared at the edge of the pit. From *within* the Sky Door.

Ren watched in astonishment as Sunho pulled himself from the opening. He climbed over the wall and rose shakily to his feet. He tossed aside what appeared to be a hook, its prongs worn and flat. Ren realized he must have used that to *climb* the mithril mines.

The heaviness in her chest lightened and she was filled with joy, with hope. He'd come back *for her*.

He swayed on his feet. How long had he been climbing? His clothing was shredded, his hands bloody.

His eyes found hers, and for a brief moment, his hollow-eyed expression changed, and there was that blue spark she first saw on their journey together, that she had thought was the most beautiful sight she'd ever seen.

Then the general loomed over him, his great broadsword in hand. He swung it down upon Sunho, who barely managed to dodge the attack, rolling to the side.

He drew his sword as he struggled to his feet. He was exhausted, his strength greatly depleted, yet he continued to fight, raising his sword against the general.

With a roar, the general lunged at him. Sunho blocked his attack, skidding back. He then leaped forward, launching his own assault. He didn't have the general's brute strength, but he was more agile. He attacked swiftly, and smartly, his sword striking the most vulnerable parts of the general's body. When his blade breached his armor, slicing across his abdomen, the general screamed at his soldiers, "What are you waiting for?! *Shoot him!*"

An arrow whistled toward Sunho. At the last minute, Sunho jerked back so that it sped past him. But the movement had thrown him off balance.

With his gauntlet, the general grabbed Sunho by the throat, forcing Sunho to drop his sword.

He lifted him over the pit.

“No!” Ren cried.

The general met her eyes as he threw Sunho through the Sky Door.

Light exploded all around them. The general winced, lifting his arm against it as his soldiers cowered. But it wasn’t light from the sun, still rising over the horizon. The Light came from within *her*.

She could feel it spreading outward from her core, down her legs, and up her arms. A great wind swirled around her, lifting her hair, her jacket, but it didn’t knock her off balance; it steadied her.

She realized her magic didn’t come from fear, or even her will to protect the people she loved, it came from *belief* in herself, that within her was a power that was *hers*, one that she could wield to protect or ... to destroy.

She knew that within her she held more Light than on the cliff and on the bridge combined. It sparked at her fingertips, poised for release.

She could release it. She could kill the general and avenge her mother, for all that he’d taken from her, for all the pain and suffering and countless lives he’d destroyed, but then ...

She’d become no better than he was.

She thought of the night of the storm, cowering inside the hollow of a tree, and the warm hand that had touched her shoulder. *Come with me*, Auntie had said, *I’ll keep you safe*.

She thought of Big Uncle’s smile that day by the river, when she’d lifted her mask, as if by showing him her face, she’d given him a precious gift.

And she thought of Little Uncle, who, though his hands trembled and his legs shook, had stepped in front of her, to protect her from the demon. They’d *saved* her.

And now there was someone waiting for her, someone *she* wanted to save.

Turning from the general and his army, she faced the hole in the world and jumped.

CHAPTER 36

SUNHO

The Under World

SUNHO WAS FALLING.

Above him, he could see the hole in the world where the general had thrown him. It was growing smaller with every second that passed.

The wind was sharp. He thought of closing his eyes, but he wanted to see the sunlight for as long as possible, because that's where Ren was.

He hoped she wasn't too saddened about what had transpired. It wasn't that he believed he could have saved her—the odds were too great, and he'd been weakened before the climb, on the last of his strength when he'd pulled himself over the edge. He'd wanted only to be where she was.

There was a feeling in his chest he couldn't identify. He didn't know when it started—it wasn't a feeling that he'd known before he'd met Ren, but it was always there now.

A figure stood at the edge of the Sky Door. Even at this distance, with the light shining in his eyes, he recognized Ren. What was she...?

She jumped.

His heart, which had been beating at a steady rhythm, lurched as panic swept through him.

He could accept his imminent death, but not *hers*.

She was diving toward him, her arms and legs pinioned to her sides, as if she meant, unbelievably, to catch up to him. It was impossible, their distances were too great. Still, he spread his arms and legs out wide, fighting against the wind.

He'd been resigned to his fate, but he'd fight until the end for her.

He felt like he was falling faster now that it mattered. The air bore down on him, the pressure overwhelming. His arms and legs, stretched out on either side of him, went numb. The screaming wind intensified as he entered the

airspace above the Under World.

He felt fear then as he hadn't felt before, not on the battlefields of his youth nor in his darkest moments inside the laboratory; it devastated him, filling him with equal parts agony and longing. She wasn't going to reach him in time.

A burst of light erupted above him. It seemed to fill the whole sky, from one end of the Floating World to the other.

He was bathed in incandescence, the celestial sparks alighting on the bridge of his nose, the curve of his cheeks, his eyelashes.

As the light dissipated, the brightness remained, emanating from a single point—the source of the light. *Ren.*

Sprouting from her shoulders was a pair of glimmering white wings.

The rush of emotions Sunho had felt earlier vanished as an all-encompassing feeling of wonder spread throughout his body.

Ren was the true heir to the Floating World. A celestial maiden.

“Sunho!” Ren shouted. He snapped out of his daze. She'd caught up to him, her wings swooping behind her to bring her within reach.

She grabbed for his hand and their fingers touched before the wind pulled them apart, spinning her to the side.

“Ren!” he shouted back, trying to track her in the air, but it was difficult to turn his head. She corrected course, her wings beating the air as she fought to get to him.

This time, when their hands connected, he drew her toward him. They collided in the air, her breath against his neck, her fingers digging into his back. He held her just as tightly; his fingers brushed the feathery lightness of her wings.

They circled around him, a shining embrace. Bowing his head, he drew in a quiet breath. For a brief moment, the loneliness of the past two years, the painful losses of his friends, the uncertainty of his missing brother, diminished, and he felt at peace.

This was the feeling he hadn't known before Ren. She sheltered him with her wings. And before then with her paper umbrella. Under her shelter, he had never felt so safe.

He lifted his head as she opened her wings to their full span.

“Hold on,” she said, and he held fast to her as she lifted them upward.

Her wings were powerful, pumping up and down, cutting the air like

silver blades. They careened toward the surface, gaining speed. The light from above grew stronger, showering them in a golden haze. They swept through the Sky Door, into sunlight. Sunho closed his eyes, momentarily blinded.

When he opened them, the general's army was spread out beneath them; ten thousand soldiers gazed upward, arrested by the sight of a girl with wings.

He wondered if the proof of Ren's heritage would change anything—no one could deny that she was a celestial maiden now, descendant of the true rulers of the Floating World.

Ren didn't linger near the door but swept them away south. They'd only traveled a few miles before reaching a meadow dusted with a sprinkling of snow.

They had almost reached the ground when Ren's wings started to shimmer, growing translucent and breaking off into pieces like crystals. Soon, her wings disappeared altogether. They fell. Sunho managed to twist his body in the air so that she landed atop him as they skidded a short distance among the flowers.

They lay there for several minutes, her heart beating fast against his own. Then, Ren rose to a sitting position, and Sunho joined her.

"I think," she said slowly, "I need to work on my landing."

They stared at each other. A buoyant feeling rose in his chest, and he laughed.

"You have flowers in your hair," she said, reaching out to pluck one from the top of his head. He held still as she removed each one, her brow furrowed in concentration. She had petals on her, too, but he left them there.

"You carried me for a long time," he said. He was a head taller than her and weighed more. "Wasn't I heavy?"

She shrugged. "My wings are strong, I guess."

He leaned forward to look over her shoulder. Beyond the tears in her shirt and camisole, there wasn't any evidence of her wings; that, and the white feathers scattered around the meadow.

Lifting his hand, he slipped his fingers through the tear, trailing them across the soft blades of her shoulders. He didn't sense anything unusual. "They're not a part of your anatomy, then, but emerge when you transform, similar to putting on armor." He removed his hand.

"W-wings like a-armor," she said, her voice hitched. "I like that."

He frowned at the heightened color in her cheeks. Was she ill?

"I think I know how to call on my powers more fully," she said quickly. "I don't know how to completely control them, nor the entire extent of what I'm capable of yet, but I know at least how to activate them. I could heal you, more deliberately. Your injuries, your memories."

She didn't know yet that he'd regained his memories in the laboratory. He would tell her soon.

"Did you know when you jumped that this would happen?" he asked. It wasn't just that she had jumped, but she'd overcome her fear of heights. He'd have to ask her about that, too.

"I'm ... not sure. I knew that I had to save you, no matter what. I didn't know that I would have *wings*. Although..." She frowned, her brow furrowing. "I think I've manifested them before. The morning of the festival, the feather I found on my pillow ... I think, maybe, it was *mine*."

She seemed caught in her memories before shaking her head. "What about you? Did you know you could make that climb?"

"I think I felt the same as you. I didn't start because I knew I could do it, only that I had to try. Not that I was much help in the end."

"You helped," Ren said adamantly. "You were my motivation."

"I'll keep that in mind," he teased. "To get myself into trouble, the next time you need inspiration."

"It's not that." She shook her head. "You inspire me with your strength. You inspire me with your goodness. You never give up, even when the odds are against you. When I saw you climb out of the Sky Door, I knew you'd achieved the impossible and it made me believe that I could do the same."

"When I woke up at Wolryudang," he said, remembering the painful moment when he realized she was gone, "I knew, without Yurhee and Tag telling me, what had happened. You'd traded your freedom for our safety. Don't do that again, Ren. Don't sacrifice yourself, even if it's to protect me, or anyone else. We'll find a solution to the problem. Together."

"Then you have to make the same promise. Don't make rash decisions with your life, even if you think it'll help others. Don't think your life is worth less than anyone else's, because it's not. Not to me."

"I promise," he said.

"I promise," she echoed.

"Should we seal it?" he asked. It was a tradition his brother had started at

the orphanage. Promises were made, but neither party was bound to them unless they were sealed. And this was an important one.

Ren frowned, biting her lip. "What do you have in mind?"

"With Rohoon and Heetae, we would seal promises with blood." He held up the palm of his hand.

She wrinkled her nose. "I'd rather not."

He looked around the meadow, uncertain. He didn't have any other ideas. "Never mind. Our words are enough."

When his gaze traveled back to Ren, her face held an odd expression. It wasn't one he often saw on her—it took him a moment to identify the emotion. She looked uncertain.

"I have an idea," she muttered, her cheeks a curious shade of pink. "Close your eyes."

He immediately obeyed her.

He felt a soft pressure against his mouth, then it disappeared just as quickly. When he opened his eyes, she was looking out toward the single tree in the meadow. "There, it's sealed." She brushed the petals from her skirt and moved to stand. "Now, why don't we—?"

He caught her wrist.

"We *both* have to seal the promise," he said quietly.

He shifted closer to her. Sliding one hand along her waist, he placed the other at the back of her neck, drawing her toward him. She came willingly, her body flush against his. He'd never done this before—before Ren, he had never had the urge to—but it was all he could think about, all he wanted. That brief pressure, while sweet, wasn't enough.

When their lips touched, he felt a sigh go through her; his arms tightened in response.

He thought the need to be closer to her was just one of proximity, but he felt a need in this as well. Every touch of her lips was a balm, every caress of her mouth filled him with a desperate longing.

He felt a spark upon her lips—*her magic*, flowing through her, into him. He could taste her magic, like drinking starlight.

He had a thought that if she couldn't control it, she might burn him. But he didn't care. He would burn for her.

Their kisses grew more frantic. As he pressed her down among the flowers, a piercing pain ripped through his skull. It was like the pain he'd felt

when facing the demon, but worse.

“Sunho?” Ren said, still breathless from their kisses. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know.” He pressed his hand to his head. “I—” The pain seared through him, strangling his words.

“Sunho!” he heard Ren scream from a distance, as the night from the laboratory came roaring back.

Teacher had injected Junho with the serum. Afterward, a demon had knocked Sunho to the side. He’d hit his head against a table and blacked out, but only for a few seconds. Blearily, he’d risen to his feet.

He spotted Junho nearby. His brother was breathing raggedly, hunched over, holding his head with both hands. But he wasn’t turning like the others. He was fighting back the effects of the serum. Sunho cried out in relief. His brother would survive, his brother would—

A sharp pain pricked Sunho’s neck.

“No!” Junho cried out.

A syringe clattered to the floor.

Sunho looked up at Teacher. “I’m sorry,” Teacher said, “but we have to know.”

“Sunho.” Junho stood before him, gripping him by the shoulders. His face was bloody, his eyes in tears. “You’ll survive this. You’re the best of us.”

Sunho felt paralyzed with fear, but he nodded to reassure Junho. He would survive, like Junho. He would—

The pain was agonizing. He felt like he was being ripped apart from the inside. His blood seared him, turning to fire, then ice in his veins. His bones felt like they were breaking all at once.

He was still conscious; he wasn’t a demon. He would survive this. He would fight, like Junho. He would—

“S-Sunho?” his brother choked. Blue, viscous blood dripped from his mouth.

Sunho looked down to see that something had punctured his brother’s chest. It was Sunho’s hand, cleaved right through Junho’s ribs and out his back.

Sunho withdrew his hand, watching Junho slump to the floor.

He didn’t get back up again.

At first, Sunho didn’t understand. More blood dripped down his fingers,

his claws. And then he knew, and it felt as if the whole of the Floating World had fallen down on him.

Junho was dead. Junho was dead because of him.

He winced at a loud screeching sound from across the room. Teacher was closing a door, trapping him inside, trapping them all inside.

A roar ripped up his throat, inhuman, monstrous. He grabbed the nearest person, a soldier from his regiment. Friend his subconscious supplied, but it didn't matter. He tore them asunder.

He didn't stop there. His pain and rage exploded into pure violence. Blue and red blood spilled across the floor, across the walls. It was a massacre. It was a slaughter.

It wouldn't end. It wouldn't stop.

"Sunho!" he heard Ren calling him back to the present.

He heaved into the grass.

"What's wrong? Tell me what happened."

"It was me," he choked, racked with horror. "I killed him."

"I don't understand—"

"I killed Junho. *I killed my brother.*"

And he hadn't just killed Junho. He'd killed *everyone*—the scientists and the other soldiers from his unit.

Ren reached out her hand, but he backed away.

The world began to blur at the corners. A darkness encroached on the edges of his vision, enveloping the flower fields, enveloping Ren.

He couldn't stop it; the pain was too great, of what he'd done, of what he was.

He had one final thought before he fell to his knees, as light turned to dark.

I am the Demon.

CHAPTER 37

REN

The Floating World

The Meadow

REN STUMBLED BACK, falling on the ground as Sunho began to change. While her transformation had been painless and quick, his was agonizing and slow. His bones cracked as his limbs extended, and his hands thickened into claws. Feathers erupted across his body, covering his torso, arms, and legs.

He cried out, his voice guttural and hoarse.

“Sunho!” Ren crawled toward him.

He pitched forward as from his back burst forth great wings, completely engulfed with black feathers.

One of his feathers darted toward her face, and she winced at a sharp, slicing sensation. With trembling fingers, she raised her hand to her cheek, drawing it away to see her fingers were wet with blood. Still, she pressed forward, crying out as a feather sliced her arm, her shoulder.

Sunho was hunched over, his back toward her. “Sunho, it’s all right. We’ll fix this, we’ll—”

He turned, and she felt as if the ground had dropped beneath her.

His face had transformed completely. His eyes were no longer brown with sparks of blue but completely black, filling the white of his eyes. His mouth had widened, splitting, and fangs had sprouted from his upper jaws, dripping blood.

For a moment, she felt as if she was facing the demon on the bridge again. In his transformed state, Sunho was twice its size. He rose to his feet, talons digging into the ground. He towered over her. With one swipe of his clawed hand, he could kill her.

But this wasn’t a demon, this was *Sunho*.

I would never hurt you, no matter the circumstances.

She'd believed him, when he spoke those words on Yurhee and Tag's aircraft. She believed him still.

If this was a transformation, he could turn back. It would be like taking off armor, like he'd said. Though she knew, deep in her soul, it wasn't the same.

She slowly got to her feet. Sunho loomed over her, but he didn't attack her.

Tears sprang to her eyes as she reached out her hand toward his face. For an infinitesimal second, it appeared as if he leaned forward.

Then he threw his head back with a roar. An arrow stuck out from his right shoulder.

She whipped around to see Jaeil standing at the edge of the meadow. Soon after, a half dozen soldiers came tearing through the trees, carrying bows.

"Wait!" Ren shouted. "Don't shoot!"

But it was too late—the archers launched a volley of arrows at Sunho. He lifted his wings to shield his body, screaming as they tore into him.

"Protect the princess!" Another voice rang out across the meadow. It was the commander. He charged forward with his own contingent of soldiers on horseback, the ground rumbling with their approach.

Spreading his wings wide, Sunho launched himself into the air.

The pressure of his ascent knocked Ren off her feet, and she went tumbling backward. Jaeil's soldiers quickly surrounded her.

"Don't hurt him!" Ren cried, scrambling upward as they raised their bows.

But Sunho was too high above them for their arrows to reach. He circled the meadow, his great wings blacking out the sun. Then, with an agonized cry, he beat his wings against the air, flying off and over the mountain.

In a few short heartbeats, he was gone.

Ren sank to the ground. What had happened? Her lips were still tender from their kiss. Her magic must have reached him in that moment, and he'd regained the rest of his memories.

What did he see? He said he'd killed his brother. The pain, the agony he must have felt, must *be feeling* ...

It was her fault. She should have never—

"Princess."

The commander and his soldiers had dismounted and were standing before her. Her eyes widened as he lowered himself to his knees and, with surprising grace for so large a man, pressed his forehead to the ground. His soldiers followed their commander's example, placing their weapons on the dirt before them. "Forgive me," the commander said, and he sounded truly remorseful. "My faith was tested, and I failed. From this day forward, I will protect you with my life."

Ren didn't know him enough to trust him, but she didn't have a choice.

"Where is the general?" she demanded.

"He's being confined, under my direction. I had believed his story that you and your honored mother had perished the night of the storm. Now that the truth has been revealed, he will be held accountable for his crimes."

Ren noticed that not only the commander's soldiers, but *all* the soldiers in the meadow, Jaeil's included, were bowing with their heads to the ground.

At the very back, Jaeil kneeled with them as well, though he didn't seem to be paying attention like the rest, reaching out to pick up a black feather in his gloved hand.

"Princess," the commander said, "please allow me to escort you to the palace. You need rest, and to gather your strength. Though the throne is yours to claim, the path will be difficult. Those of us who witnessed your transformation will spread the news of your return, but others will need more ... convincing."

Ren understood the commander's meaning. She would have to *prove* that she was the celestial maiden—to the soldiers who still supported the general, to the nobles, to *everyone*.

She studied the man, surprised that he would be so candid. The path ahead would be difficult; she would need people like him to guide her.

"I *am* going back," Ren said, and the commander appeared to bow lower in relief. "But not yet." She raised her arm, brushing away the tears on her cheeks that had dried in the wind. "There's something I must do first."

★ ★ ★

THEY COULDN'T DEPART immediately—the commander needed to make preparations and see to the general's transport back to the capital, where he was to await trial from the Floating Council. Ren, the commander assured,

would proceed over the trial, but that was for later, when she returned.

She spent those few days waiting for the commander at Bright Moon Temple, assisting the people there to repair the buildings that had burned in the fire, and to say one final goodbye to Doona. Her nursemaid was buried in the courtyard where the plum tree once stood.

On the third morning, the commander returned with three airships. A day and a half later, they passed over the Haebaek Mountains.

When she saw the valley, Ren burst into tears.

Home.

The villagers had gathered on the hillside for their arrival, children climbing over the heads of their guardians, pushing hats down over their eyes as they pointed. A few were sitting atop the larger sheep. When the doors to the commander's airship opened, two familiar faces stood out from the crowd.

"Yurhee! Tag!" Ren raced up to them. "You made it!"

Yurhee grabbed her hands, squeezing. Her skin was bright from the sun. Tag's pallor hadn't changed, but that wasn't surprising.

"We did make it," Yurhee said, "though just barely. We crashed into a haystack." She gestured to the old aircraft, the back end of which stuck out of a large haystack; a few chickens had commandeered it for a roost. "Though, Ren ... I have to tell you something."

Ren felt her heart go still. "We were too late," she whispered. The healer had said Little Uncle only had three weeks to live.

"We gave your uncle the antidote, but ... well..." Yurhee trailed off. "You'll see."

Ren hurried toward her family's cottage, located at the eastern edge of the village. Most of the villagers stayed around the airships, though a few of the more curious children tagged along, grabbing on to Ren's hands or the back of her skirt. When they reached the cottage, only Yurhee and Tag followed her through the gate into the small courtyard.

"Where's Auntie?" Ren asked as she pressed open the door, passing beneath the bundles of dried persimmons that dangled from the thatched roof.

"She wasn't here when we arrived," Yurhee said. "The villagers say she traveled south in search of a cure."

The door to Little Uncle's room was ajar when she entered, and Ren stepped quietly inside.

She expected it to smell like a sickroom, but a pleasant scent filled the air. Freshly cut flowers were left on the windowsill. A silver sheep bell, attached to a ribbon tied around the stems, tinkled as a light breeze swept through the window. Hwi had visited recently.

Ren knelt by the pallet, placing her hand over Little Uncle's. "Here I am," she said softly, "I've come home."

He'd lost so much weight; his cheeks were hollow. His normally airy hair hung lank across his forehead. He didn't stir at her touch.

"We administered the serum when we arrived..." Tag said. "But nothing changed."

The scientist from the mithril laboratory had lied to her, and yet she couldn't bring herself to feel anger. It didn't matter now. Little Uncle was dying but had held on until she could come home. She didn't want hatred to stir this peaceful room. A magpie winged by the open window, and she glimpsed from beneath its wing a colorful flash of blue. There was only love here.

Yurhee gasped quietly. Ren looked down to see light brimming at the edge of her fingertips.

Quickly, she brought them to Little Uncle's brow, willing her power into him. *Heal.*

When she opened her eyes, Little Uncle slept on.

She knew, before she had even tried, that it wouldn't work. Sunho hadn't healed from her touch—she'd given him back his memories, but the effects of the mithril remained.

"We'll leave you two alone," Yurhee said quietly. She heard them leave, the door sliding shut behind them.

Ren brought her hand to Little Uncle's once more. "I started this journey for you," she said, and her voice sounded calm, peaceful, in the quiet of the room, "but I think I kept going for me."

"I have so much to tell you, about the places I traveled, the people I met." She described to him the three days she spent in the caves beneath the Haebaek Mountains, and the house in the reed fields.

"I met a boy along the way..." Her breath hitched at the thought of Sunho, and it took her a few minutes to recover enough to speak. "He was a stranger at first, but after traveling together for some time, we became friends."

She told him about the outlaws, and Seorawon, the city with the clock tower and the bridge. She told him about the Under World, meeting Yurhee and Tag, about Jaeil's confusing actions, and facing the general at the edge of the Sky Door. She told him everything, her voice growing hoarse by the end. It was like one of the stories Auntie used to tell when they were performing in front of a crowd, filled with equal parts terror and excitement, except the journey was her own.

"After flying to the meadow with Sunho, we..." She blushed. "We made a promise to each other, but then ... something happened." She closed her eyes. "He's gone."

She leaned forward, pressing her forehead to Little Uncle's hand. "I've never expressed in words how I feel—I believe Big Uncle knew, in the end—but I love you. You, Auntie, and Big Uncle. Because of all of you, I had the happiest childhood. I was loved here. In this home. In our caravan. In our family. And because of that, I know I'm strong.

"That's why..." She drew in a deep breath. "I have to go back. My mother wasn't killed by a demon but a man—an evil man who will be punished. But even before then, she'd been deeply wounded by the people around her. I want to understand what happened to her. There's a brokenness in that other world, and I don't know if I can put right past wrongs, but I want to try.

"But I'm afraid. Here, I'm Ren, a troupe performer, Auntie's niece, and your and Hwi's best friend. There, I don't know what I am. They call me princess, goddess. What if I can't live up to the role? What if I become someone else while trying to? I'm afraid..." Ren closed her eyes tighter, tears slipping down her cheeks. "I'm afraid of losing myself."

"If you didn't get lost in a cave for three days," Little Uncle said, his voice scratchy and hoarse. "I don't think you'll get lost anywhere."

"Little Uncle!" Ren cried, falling atop him.

"Oof," he said.

"You were awake this whole time? Why didn't you say anything?"

"Never mind that, tell me about this boy who's stolen your heart."

His voice was weak and he struggled to sit up, but there was a flush to his cheeks, *a pink flush*.

"That's what you want to talk about?" Ren asked. "What about my powers, or that you're alive after almost dying?"

“That’s all fine and good, but is he very handsome?”

Ren buried her face in his shirt. “I’ve missed you!”

The door slid open and Hwi rushed into the room. “Ren?”

“Hwi!” Ren shouted. Hwi ran toward her. As she collided with Ren, they fell backward together onto Little Uncle.

“Oof.”

“Oh, Wook!” Hwi exclaimed.

The three of them held each other for a long, long time.



LATER THAT EVENING, Ren went out to the hillside. The commander had left his airships on the sloping fields, and they appeared like sleeping giants in the mist.

She hoped Auntie would return soon. She wanted to see her before she left. She didn’t know how long it would be before she could come back again. Her gaze traveled to the Haebaek Mountains; beyond them was the Floating World.

Yurhee’s and Tag’s voices traveled up the hill, Yurhee’s chatter that rang like a chime through even the thickest of fog, and Tag’s quieter responses.

They joined her at the top, looking out at the sunset as they stood on either side of her.

Something cold landed on her cheek.

Snow. Soon, the whole valley would be covered in it.

She had a vague memory of the Floating World in winter, soft snow blanketing the many large open courtyards of the palace, the great lake in the eastern garden frozen over with frost.

“Sunho’s somewhere out there,” Ren said. She’d told Yurhee and Tag about what had happened in the meadow, how he’d transformed and fled. “I’m going to find him and bring him home. But first, I have to ask...”

Her gaze landed on Yurhee, then Tag, who’d started off strangers to her but somehow had become friends along the way. “Will you come with me?”

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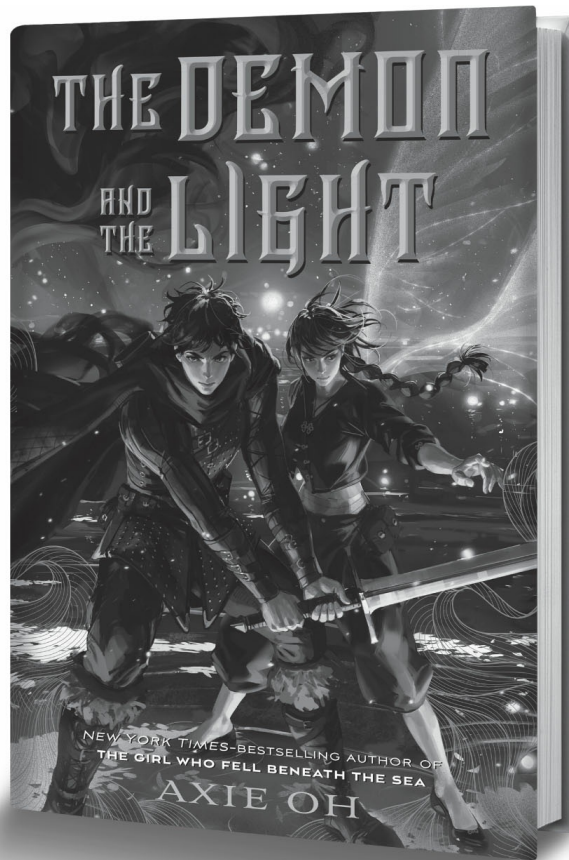
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THE STORY CONTINUES ...



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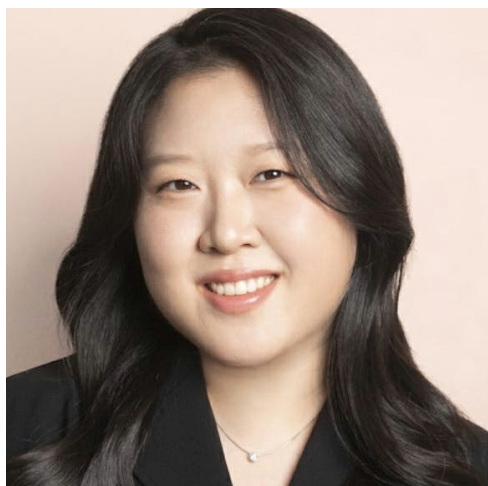
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Content Warnings: Violence/death, needles/syringes, child soldiers, child abuse, and brief mention of suicidal ideation

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