

CREATION'S OMEN  
Novel

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I had apprehensions composing this novel, wondering if it was deserving of an M.F.A., if it would be literary enough for the grueling and seemingly unreachable standards of The Fine Art. Some writers would never pin fantasy as literary or take it seriously as a work of art, yet here it is, demanding the label. For that, I am immensely proud of the product thus far and of my process to get it here.

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Novel

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Storytelling ©

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Dr. Brandon Hobson, Chairperson

CREATION'S OMEN



Lily Yim

## Chapter 0

A long, long time ago when tigers used to smoke, one shared a story about the earth as a newly formed cosmic egg. The tiger, inhaling catnip from the tip of her long pipe, leaned in closer to young rabbits gathered around the sacred pine tree eager to hear about the old ways of living. With a slow breath, the smoking tiger, an ancestor of wisdom, explained that while the earth was not a new world creation in the slightest, something about its buzzing golden color puzzled the faceless entities tasked to ensure it hatched.

“Nothing is wrong,” a young spirit said, staring at the new cosmic egg. The spirit shifted their essence color to a deep green, like algae hairs on a boulder flowing with the river. “Nothing is wrong at all!”

Out of nosiness, the other faceless spirits absorbed the egg's loose, unsettling energy to turn their own auras into similar shades of pensive green. They crowded the cosmic egg as it glowed. They wanted to assess the enshrouding fog of smoke and reflect on what, exactly, was meant to be puzzling.

One spirit was quicker than the others at detecting the root of the trouble, their color brightening to a peachy pink. “Something *is* amiss.” This spirit floated above the cosmic egg until their cloudy pink grew static from the cosmic egg’s buzzing golden hue. The other spirits remained crowded around the cosmic egg, questioning the divine with a chime of spiritual symphony. “And we all know what it is. Will we not admit it?”

From the darkness within the chamber, the elder spirit entered with a pale-yellow brilliance resembling soft leaves accepting the wind’s call to float away from a tree as it enters hibernation. “There is no need to convince ourselves of something false to make us feel better,” the elder spirit said in agreement. “The source made certain we’d all be aware of this moment.”

These faceless spirits were descendants from the source of all creation. For centuries within the cosmos, the spirits fed remnants of essence to cosmic eggs that would shed as they matured through their lifetimes. In return, the eggs would offer the spirits opportunities to live as many lives as they needed to progress their spiritual maturity, following the flow of the natural world. But this cosmic egg – the earth as you currently know it – was the last one, and that knowledge frightened the spirits.

“It has been a thousand cosmic years,” a mature spirit said, reflective of the elder spirit’s guidance. Their essence gleaned bright red, like the staining juice from poisonous berries. “But we have all witnessed this before when Pachua abandoned us, have we not? I am not particularly worried.”

An older pale blue spirit, who had just returned from a life on a world egg, entered the chamber with anguish from failing a single task they had set out to achieve before entering that lifetime. They took their tears and essence like a delicately loved and frayed blanket then coaxed it away from their spirit to deliver to the new cosmic egg. This blue spirit had little faith that the

cosmic egg would receive the essence of what they had learned during that lifetime – but what they wanted it to recognize was the culmination of the smaller successes in that most recent life they felt was worthy enough to mature. As the essence flowed toward the cosmic egg glowing like a fresh riptide, it assessed that spirit's testimony then accepted the essence with love. This allowed the spirit to pass through the gates of maturation with a better understanding of how, enhancing their glow to the next level.

The shimmering and sparkling essence often brought the spirits an audience of pride, jealousy, and self-doubt. But this time, many spirits' attention focused on the cosmic egg accepting what many perceived as failure to ingest that growth as feedback for what kind of world the spirits needed. Since a cosmic egg required lessons to make its world as habitable and spiritually progressive as possible, this new cosmic egg was establishing a best-opportunity lifestyle for the spirits, so they'd have an opportunity to live through their last life.

After all, cosmic eggs are destined for progress.

The pale blue spirit, after showing thanks and appreciation to the cosmic egg by planning their next lifetime according to what it accepted, realized the aura within the chamber upon exiting the offering area. Their mature essence immediately enhanced with a glow of fright and anxiety, a dramatic dark purple resembling the deep colors of the cosmos. "I don't know if we'll have enough time," they said, adding more fear to the collective. "I'm not even halfway through what I'm needing to spiritually accomplish. Is this really the final egg? Have we all procrastinated for too long?"

The spirits, entranced by the cosmic egg, couldn't help but be reminded of their beginnings and how they all had so much more growth left to accomplish. As more spirits returned to the chamber to shed their essence, they too became desperate to convince themselves

that this was not the final cosmic egg – it couldn't be.

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As the cosmic egg neared maturation, an imugi named Pachua grumbled to herself in a dark corner of the cosmos. Pachua had agreed under duress to assist the source for a thousand cosmic years, and on the thousandth cosmic year, she would have the final task of designing the last cosmic egg without restriction before moving on to a grandeur journey.

Pachua wanted the final world to be peaceful.

After she made that ancient promise and created the first spirit as a reflection of the source, it disappeared, leaving Pachua to guide the spirits manifesting from emptiness in strange places. After years of pandering to unusual demands that Pachua swore would guide their spirits, and realizing after many cosmic centuries they had barely made any spiritual progress at all, Pachua had forgotten why she made that oath, allowing bitterness to overcome her.

Now that the last cosmic egg was in front of them, Pachua's claws gripped onto the pearly orb the source gifted her after making that promise. Despite being fearful, joy vibrated through her iridescent, turquoise-patterned scales that stretched for the first time in centuries.

“Will I finally be free of this place?” Pachua said, her voice low and hoarse. She refused to speak for three hundred cosmic years, exhausted from guiding unwilling spirits who chose not to listen. “Will the mother relieve me of my duties?”

With a soft yellow hue, the elder spirit approached Pachua with understanding. They was the first spirit to spring out from the source with one lifetime remaining until they fully matured. Aside from Pachua, the elder spirit was the closest informant to the source any of the other spirits had. When Pachua entered her era of silence, many spirits looked to the elder spirit for guidance, trusting this spirit's wisdom over Pachua's in knowing what the source would have wanted.

“If all goes according to plan,” the elder spirit told Pachua with a melancholy tone. “We will have another opportunity.”

Four long iridescent feathers on the tip of Pachua's tail flicked. Her scaly lips covering her sharp fangs stretched from horn to horn into what appeared to be a snarl, but it was, in fact, a smile. “You know this for certain?”

“Do you not remember?” an older immature spirit asked, their essence appearing as a dull purple. It formed a spiral, which often communicated spiritual grievance. When spirits took this spiring form, they had recently tried to accomplish something mortally grand while ignoring the aspect of a collective growth, which often made them sorrowful for their progress when they returned to the chamber. “Did that essence of yours fall asleep? Or are have we already failed and now you can enjoy this last world egg as a plaything?”

Other immature spirits giggled. Pachua's tail flicked again. The delight that tugged at her teeth had vanished. According to Pachua, these immature spirits were too deep in their refusal to self-reflect, often blaming their lack of growth on her.

The immature spirits leaned against each other, their mist-like pearly blobbed bodies floating around Pachua, surrounding her with many pigments. They tried to stifle their laughter, but Pachua could see their muffled giggles through soft, flashing transitions of color. There was never a moment in the chamber spent in silence despite all her attempts to find a moment of peace.

“This is a promise you made to us, to the source, decades ago,” the elder spirit continued, ignoring the immature ones as they scattered around them. “In your thousandth year when the last cosmic egg is finished transforming into a cosmic world, you agreed to design it.”

“Let's say her essence fell asleep,” a red immature spirit said to the elder, their essence

intensifying as they strayed from the symphony of bellous spirits. “How can we expect Pachua to perform this job properly with her essence asleep? She needs to keep her promise to us! If it’s asleep, who will take her place?”

An older and mature lilac spirit, who recently completed a mortal life they couldn’t grow from, offered a suggestion. “I’d be more than eager to spend my last cosmic moments living on this egg as a mortal guide for you, Pachua. It would allow me to be away from the stresses of our immediate return. Besides, I’m almost done with what I need to achieve, and I believe experiencing just a few more lives will allow me to complete my tasks just enough – *just enough* – to be satisfied with my progress before we return to the source.”

“I’d also like this opportunity,” a young and immature green spirit said. This one was close to shedding their last immature layer before advancing to more difficult spiritual tasks. “But if you’re wanting to bring only one of us with you, then it should be me. I have so many lives left to live, and I’d like to get as many opportunities I can. I think I’ll be ready to take your spot. Maybe Mago will grant us another cosmic egg if I get your spot.”

Many spirits agreed, their essences shifting hues as they asked for similar things. Many wanted so badly to return to the world they had just grown out of, wishing to be blissfully unaware of their end so they could live their last cosmic cycle with a peaceful, worldly ignorance.

The elder spirit, beginning to grow impatient with fear, addressed the restless spirits with slow words. “There is no time to worry about even the *tiniest* possibility of Mago relinquishing Pachua’s position to one of us. It is *destiny* to be hers, and she alone will fulfill it.”

The frequencies in the cosmos reverberated with shock, which was quick to pass, however, as they had enough time – relatively – to process that this was indeed the last cosmic

egg. What came next was disbelief, as acceptance didn't necessarily mean they agreed with the situation or believed it was possible.

The elder spirit, trying their best to hold onto the sunshine appeal of their yellow essence to not let these frequencies taint, attempted to reconcile with some of the spirits through reason. "Out of the thousand cosmic years we've lived, will we regrow the layers we worked so hard to shed by neglecting what we knew would come to pass? We choose now to insinuate we had no time when there was plenty and is still plenty more? We should all help each other out. To help Pachua is to help each and every one of us live to our last lives. Isn't that what we all want?"

Pachua had no patience to appease them. "You all won't have much time to grow," Pachua said, clasp onto the shining orb, "the longer I am here and not fulfilling my final task."

Not knowing they all had no say in anything at all on the matter, the spirits erupted in chatter to decide what to do as the cosmic clock ticked closer to the end of opportunity. Their colorful, argumentative boom was all-encompassing, making Pachua uneasy. Her claws gripped tighter onto the pearly orb, a tiny cosmic purple dot forming in its center as Pachua's claws trembled.

The orb had always piqued a certain curiosity with the spirits – Pachua kept safe eyes on it long enough for them to never be able to satisfy that interest – but now that its glass-like surface chilled the spirits' energies, forcing them to calm to a shimmer, they all wondered if they would ever be able to hold onto the only present the source had gifted. In mourning, their frequencies dulled as many noticed the orb's purple hue burgeoning through its pearly glow.

The elder spirit, with anxiety and uncertainty, shrouded the orb with their essence, hiding the spot from view. Their color shifted to a bright periwinkle, illuminating the chamber with the

orb's gleam. Pachua's scales clamored until they harmonized with the orb's hypnotizing tune. The spirits lulled into a small dance with the melodies. It was beautiful.

With a deep breath and no other words spoken to the spirits, Pachua lunged forward into the grand expanse of the cosmos toward the newfound earth.

She swam toward the earth in a current as if the cosmos itself was aquatic. Her body twisted and turned, her scales turning outward when her ribs contorted into a spiral. Mimicking the pattern of the spirits, her scales shimmered, reflecting the prism of the new world's atmosphere like glass shards. This is when she breached the chamber's veiled threshold to enter the expanse of the earth's universe. Pachua knew the color returning to her body was a good omen, and when she breathed in the fresh, cool air of the new world, what entered her body was a feeling of serenity she had forgotten about for a long, long time.

*in my presence, the sun rises and falls, the moon guides oceans to land, and mountains yearn for the sky. my temperature changes depending on how gracious the sun offers her light. but at night, when she sinks behind the horizon and the chilled air embraces my skin, moon-kissed goosebumps stir until she recovers her clamoring glory.*

The Body as a Vessel

## Chapter 1

Standing on a field of clay, vibrant in comparison to the quiet blue sky, the earth molded no one else aside from Minari. The clay sculpted powerful curves of flesh until her human vessel became distinguishable from soil and her personhood formed to completion.

Fragrant with a musty smell, the surrounding mortal sensations overwhelmed her. She wiped off excess clay, sliding her hands quickly along her skin that resembled rays of the golden sun peeking through a wave of fog.

The earth, when she dug her way through its soil, gifted her clothing that shielded Minari from the chilly moisture lingering in the air. The cloth, a beautiful, high-waisted silk hanbok with

intricate embroidery, draped smoothly over her skin. Hanging from her waist was a *norigae*, an intricate tassel with elaborate knots. In its center knot was a moonstone. The thread matched the soft purple hues from the crest of a mountain sunset. Massaging the tassel's softness with her fingertips made her feel at peace.

A cool breeze tickled her *hanbok* against the hairs on her skin to welcome her as she walked along its harmonious pathway. The wind filled her draping hood with the earth's fresh scent, which relieved her overwhelmed senses, allowing herself to settle into her human vessel with more unity. When the wind rolled through again, strands of long black hair adhered to the sides of her moist cheeks. Her skull ached when she brushed the ends away and pulled at her roots by accident.

It wasn't the type of pain that forced tears to well in her eyes or the kind that lingered with a soothing throb – it was a dull pain that caused no physical reaction at all – yet she knew it was unpleasant. She had remembered thinking, at some point during her creation, that this world was supposed to be pleasant. She wondered about those falsities as she itched the sore spot on her skull and wondered how they were attached to her presence within her body. From what *Minari* could recollect, she was born from the earth: The soil constricted her, pushed her, and squeezed her out of its depths until she bloomed.

But where she came from before that – well – she had trouble piecing it together.

She knew she was a spirit. Every living being – the forest of birch trees hidden behind the dense fog before her, *Minari* herself who was made from the living material beneath her feet, the fresh waters splashing with vigor in the distance, and the earth as it came into existence in the cosmos – had a spirit. What she was struggling to understand, however, was which beings were meant to be aware of that presence, and which ones were only meant to live in accordance to the

earth's influences.

She assumed she was awake and aware because she was able to question her surroundings and feel something around herself. Yet as she continued to think about where she was before this, she gazed at a nearby tree, whose star-shaped leaves rustled with the wind, its presence content. With feelings of foreboding stress and anxiety lingering within her, she wondered why she wasn't born as that tree as she believed it would have been more peaceful.

A sharp inhale of mountain air left an earthy taste in the back of her throat. As she breathed the frigid mountain air deeply through her nose, her belly expanding, warm air flowing out in a similar rhythm, it felt like an ethereal connection.

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Fog entered the clearing, weaving between pillars of birch trees in swirls and enshrouding large boulders lining the edge of the clearing like a fence.

As Minari studied the eerie calmness, something felt amiss. Illuminated from behind the boulders was a beast's iridescent body shining through the fog, a trio of glowing orange eyes on to an enormous head hovering above the foliage.

She knew this creature was Pachua.

Pachua turned and descended the mountain, loose twigs and branches snapping in a cacophony, their echoes heavy. The ground rumbled as Pachua slithered, the earth's vibrations trembling beneath Minari's bare feet.

Minari ran into the dense fog, her heels digging into soft ground. She followed the deep crevasse Pachua created with her heavy body that weaved down the mountain like a stream.

Traversing her way around snapped birch trees, roots grasping onto the ground for support, limbs splitting in the middle and hanging on by the edge of their spiraling trunks, Minari

quicken her pace as her feet learned how to navigate. As she ran, high-pitched chirps sounded deep in the grove, some trilling within the cover of leaves, others flapping their wings without an echo.

Minari continued down the mountainside, following Pachua's path until her feet squished into muddy waters that suctioned her ankles to the ground, her toes squishing deeper in mud as her feet shuffled. With every step, her legs sunk deeper until the mud reached her knees. She was able to move with struggle, meeting resistance as she pushed forward.

Walking soon became painful. Her inner thighs ached and burned, so she slowed her pace, her legs taking wider steps, allowing the mud to settle on her skin and relieve her with its refreshing temperature. Her trek across the stream lasted until the sun reflected its rays through the dissipating fog and her eyes squinted from the brightness.

When she wrestled her way out of the mud, she found struggle in finding the weight of her body again as her feet planted on the ground, sending a signal against the earth's surface that she was in existence with her body. Her hanbok flowed when the wind blew, the muddy ends of fabric flapping heavily in the breeze. She tried her best to remove as much mud from herself as possible, returning it to the earth, before moving forward.

On a small incline upward, past the stream and away from the fog, she ascended. With her feet now on the soft moss, clear of the dampness on the ground, she ran on the curved trail toward the sun's light. She thought if anyone else was born aside from her, then they'd be crafted from the earth's mud.

As soon as she passed the forest of tall trees and thick foliage, outside the boundaries of fog, she entered another clearing. There, the land adapted before her. Mountains boomed upward in the far distance like a backdrop of a mirage. A cool breeze blew across a glistening blue lake

at the mountain's center below her. From the center, a small geyser squirted spinning saplings into the sky, their leaves growing wider and longer before landing on wet soil so their roots could dig into the earth.

Dewdrops gathered on these saplings like a sac, giving them nutrients to grow. When the trees' canopies stretched and their branches expanded as far as the sacs would allow, they burst and squirted the surrounding area with more dewy fluid, embedding the soil with its water to sprout a boundless grove of trees overtaking the horizon with their outstretched leaves. From the empty spaces where grass couldn't grow came abundant wildflowers, then bushes with berries, and finally clusters of mushrooms sprouting near the mossy side of trees.

The grove ahead of her grew compactly, canopies stretching thick enough to offer endless shade on the ground below. Birds chirped, singing a communal song that reverberated in rhythmic beats. Buzzes of bees hopped from flower to flower, covering their fuzzy bodies in pollen, hovering past with alacritic zips in front of her, minding themselves despite the intimidating loudness of their wings. Long needle-like bugs with four long wings darted in sporadic patterns, looking for food or a place to raise their young. Movement existed in the still grove filled with oddly shaped trees twisting and curving to collect the sun.

Once the sounds of nature blended together like white noise, Minari continued along the indented trail following broken branches with distressed canopies forming a V until she met the lake's edge where the trail ended beneath the water. With a sigh, Minari studied the lake, hoping to find if the trail began again.

Soon after, a large shadow glided toward her beneath the water. Four jagged horns sheen with a pearly hue led the way, peeking out from the water. Her turquoise-patterned scales beamed as her mane, glistening with the hue of aquamarine, flowed from behind her horns with

thickness.

Her tail's four long, slender feathers opened like a fan and reflected the sun's light like a rainbow. Water sloshed onto the ground as Pachua slithered onto shore. Pachua lifted her body from the river, ascending higher than the tallest tree. Water droplets glided off her long beard onto her sinuous torso.

The thing delicately held between one of her four-taloned claws, however – the thing that captivated Minari as soon as she laid eyes on it – was a glowing pearly orb. It radiated a familiar warmth that reminded Minari of the sun, and she couldn't look away.

Pachua dragged her heavy body closer to Minari, the mass of her weight indenting deep into the earth.

“Who are you?” Pachua asked, her scaly mouth stretching open, threatening Minari with her jagged teeth. “Speak,” she said with a bite, as if she was desperate for an answer.

Minari's name danced its way to the perch of her lips, like speaking her name was an attack. “Minari,” she said. “My name is Minari.”

“Minari,” Pachua replied, lingering on the ‘n’ until her long tongue spurred out, its tip forming an upside-down ‘V’ that undulated in front of Minari's face before retreating. “And what are you supposed to be?”

“A spirit,” Minari said with hesitation.

Pachua lowered her massive head and held the orb to Minari's face. The radiating energy warmed her chilled skin. “I must have bad luck meeting you here. The spirits put you into... a human?”

Pachua's three unblinking orange eyes and seemingly permanent grin assessed Minari's movements – Minari's breath grew anxious and labored, the beating of her heart loud in her ears.

Pachua's tail circled around Minari as she slithered the rest of the way out of the water, flicking her beard back and forth in agitation. Minari remained still. "Are you Pachua?"

Pachua lifted her body in the air to show off her majesty. "My name *is* Pachua," she said as she hovered the orb in front of her chest, pronouncing the second 'a' in her name with a soft tone, "the maker of this realm, and the imugi who will soon become a full-fledged dragon. Now, why are you here?"

"The spirits told me to find you."

Pachua's tail flicked. "Well find me you did." Her voice boomed through the trees. "Now, deliver your message then leave."

"They said you'd help me cut my tether to this world." Minari tried her best to remember what else she was supposed to ask, but the more she thought about it, the farther away the memory became. "They also said to find the mother, Mago. She's supposed to help direct us to our last life how the seven-pointed star guided us here and will guide us back when the egg hatches."

Pachua leaned on her side, her scales shimmering as the sun rose behind her four horns, the pearly sheen glistening. Minari thought she could hear them glitter.

Pachua's tail flicked as she assessed Minari, her orange eyes peering at Minari, as the sky behind her brightened to a light blue. Minari was taken aback by Pachua's magnificence as the sun lifted higher in the sky.

Pachua clutched the orb tightly in her claws. "Mago warned me some spirits would act on fear. Why she would allow herself to be remembered, I have no idea. Do you realize she is much, much closer than you think?"

Minari's brows furrowed until the middle of her forehead tensed. "What do you expect

me to know? I only know I'm a spirit and nothing else.”

A low growl emanated from Pachua's belly like a menacing hum. “You're here before me, are you not? How can you know nothing else?”

Minari stayed silent.

“They told you nothing about me,” Pachua said, lifting her long body into the air, blocking the sun, “nothing about my thousand years of serving them – they told you *nothing* about the countless, meaningless tasks you forced me to do for all those years?”

Pachua's tongue tickled the air in front of Minari's face, her thick and spindly beard brushing Minari's cheeks, her scales sticking out like thorns. Pachua's snout opened and closed with every breath, its intensity swaying Minari's stance.

Pachua closed her orange eyes and regained control of her breathing. In that brief moment, Minari felt no immediate threat from Pachua's aura, nor of anger. Instead, it felt like a wash sadness and deceit.

Pachua huffed her giant nostrils, a putrid gust of rotting fish stench blowing onto Minari's face. “I shouldn't have expected a spirit to remember anything of importance.”

“You know who I am?”

Pachua shook her beard back and forth like moving her head would have taken too much effort.

“I would love to ask the trees,” Minari said, “or even know what the birds and bugs who fly around are saying.”

“The only life those spirits know, and have known, is here. They won't be able to help you.”

“Are there other spirits who can help me remember?”

Pachua's tail flicked agitatedly with her beard. Her claws tightened around the orb, which developed a deep purple in its center. As Pachua breathed down the back of Minari's neck, the cosmic color bled deeper in the orb, dimming its pearly shimmer. Warmth radiating from its center felt tantamount to Minari's creation in this world, similar to the energy beckoning her to emerge from clay.

Pachua slithered around Minari, speaking softly to the orb in a language Minari didn't understand. What had whispered back was Pachua's voice, but distorted – it spoke more forebodingly than her careful tone. As they spoke, Pachua descended into the water, her snout floating above the water line.

“The spirits are so desperate to live their mortal lives,” Pachua said. “They probably sent you here to pressure me into finishing my creation more quickly.”

“How do you think I came here without your permission?”

Lifting her body, Pachua hovered her long snout over Minari, droplets of water falling from her beard onto Minari's head. “That,” she said, “is a good question.”

Minari shivered, unsure if it was from a creeping threat lingering behind Pachua's voice or from the chilly water that dripped onto her skin. “What if you invite spirits to come here early? After we figure out what I need to do here, we can help you finish the world.”

Pachua's tail flicked. “Very well,” Pachua replied. “If creating a human from the earth is how you wish to remember how to live your last life, then we will.”

Relief flooded Minari's mind, thrilled for how soon another person would arrive. The trees' canopies in the grove absorbed muted golden colors as they hovered over the shining lake, their shadows blending with the wind's hypnotizing sway. Leaves scattered from their branches, falling softly onto the water. When the ripples dissipated and the grove returned to silence,

Minari's eyes locked onto the orb caged delicately between Pachua's talons.

“I am the creator of this world after all,” Pachua said as she descended into the shallow waters along the shore, the orb shimmering.

## Chapter 2

The lake's center rippled. Pachua submerged her snout, bubbles from her breath shaking the surface with undulating ripples. "A beautiful energy – do you feel it? *This* is the vibrancy needed to create!" Pachua slithered into the water, her feathers gliding through like air.

Minari's eyes widened as the ground trembled. "It feels dangerous."

"Not for Mago," Pachua replied. The orb shined a beaming glow as the land echoed whispers of expectation.

Pachua swam in rapid circles to form a whirlpool. Wisps of water misted Minari's skin every time Pachua lapped her by the shore, her aquatic spirals quick and smooth. Once the

current became unruly and pulled her in, she dove into the lake's deepest point. The whirlpool ceased.

A few moments after the silence of the water settled in the air, Pachua emerged and spit a glowing mass before Minari's feet. "Only certain materials can craft a human from the natural world. This would have been my original material choice to craft a human, but that decision was stolen."

Minari crouched and placed a hand on top of the crystalline mass. As soon as her palm touched its surface, the blob wrapped around her fingers, its gooey texture warm and slippery. "What if this human doesn't remember their past?"

"Stay still. I'm having it borrow the form of your personhood."

The mass prickled her skin. "What does that mean?"

Pachua lowered her snout, giving the mass her breath until it became luminescent. "If the spirits were so adamant with understanding the knowing form, they would have asked."

An eerie tingle tickled Minari's hand. "What if it doesn't work?" That sensation spread up her arm then radiated through her body.

"It will work," Pachua said, her voice lingering as Minari's consciousness slowly left the earth to peer into the chamber. "The beloved Mago promises it."

Minari sensed the spirits were worried. Colors splayed everywhere, their pigments flashing sporadically with robust songs of overlapping melodic voices. While a part of her felt at home within that high-energy crowd, a different part of her didn't understand anything at all.

Eventually, after much discussion, Minari sensed that a spirit radiating a beautiful sweet-blue essence offered to be the next human. "I'm compatible with this body," they said. "I wish to be close to my true self in this last cycle. If Pachua is asking for a human resembling a spirit,

then I will proudly go.”

“You must be quick with your actions,” another spirit said, their essence glowing a dark pearly hue. “Otherwise your spirit won’t remember why you chose to go. You will naturally want to stray off the path to disrupt Pachua’s cycle.”

“With these obstacles, the lot of them, I won’t guarantee I’ll be successful.” The blue spirit shimmered. “But fear not – there is no doubt in my mind that the early markings of our success will prevail.”

“Do what you need to do,” they said. “But be weary. Pachua is capable. She will not take our meddling as lightly as she has done in previous worlds.”

As the aura faded, they sent the blue spirit to the new vessel and Minari’s consciousness returned. The bioluminescence of the mass reflected the orb’s light brighter than the surrounding puddles, birthing an energetic energy. It was warm, calm, and peaceful.

Minari studied her reflection in the water. Long black strands of hair fell over her shoulders and framed her rectangular face. Her jaw, narrowing into a squared point on her chin, felt tense. This body was hers, just as the next body would belong to another spirit. She made a point to remember they were just visitors.

“This human is ready to mold,” Pachua said. The crystalline mass was in the early process of forming a human. “Creating a human is like creating yourself. Don’t confuse this process with your own. Borrow from it to craft a new human with better knowledge and preparation than yourself.”

Minari nodded. With a deep breath, she closed her eyes and focused on her arm. Her body swayed. Her knees fell to the ground, rooting to the earth to keep her steady. As the mass molded a human vessel, she felt confident the new human would help her piece together what,

exactly, she was sent here to do.

“Care for the earth. Without it, the land will fail, and the spirits will lose their chance.”

The gelatinous blob contorted itself with edges and divots. It lengthened and widened, adjusting bodily measurements until it formed a human body. Once Minari's skin turned gray, she pulled her arm out of the crystalline mass.

With that separation, an electrifying energy broadcasted a message from the spirits. They wanted Minari to see the world's end if she did not succeed, but the mission itself still remained unclear to her. The spirits were too focused on sending memories to her, bits of the chamber, of Pachua lurking in darkness, of rogue spirits ejecting themselves from the chamber to Earth.

Minari listened with intent, thinking the spirits would never harm. It was then when the spirit who was meant to inhabit the new vessel used her own to place itself within its new home, like a mother offering life to a child. Minari jumped in place, shaking her body until that energy warmed her flesh.

“Yes,” Pachua said, holding onto the ‘s’ until it fizzled away from her breath. Her nostrils flared, and her tail slapped the ground. “Yes, Mago. We will be together soon.”

When Minari opened her eyes, features on the new human became distinct: Their arms elongated, extending those ends into fingers; from the bottom of their torso, their legs split into an upside-down V; and their head molded into a shape like Minari's. Long white hair grew out of their round head and reached their lower back. Their hanbok, the color of sea foam, accentuated the square of their sharp back and covered their shoulders. The norigae tied to their waist was intricately woven in the shape of a butterfly and carried a moonstone in its center.

Glinting with a hue lighter than Minari's, divots lay where their eyes, nose, and mouth should have grown, as if Pachua was in the process of shaping their bone structure, adding and

taking away definition, cutting creases into the jawline and forehead, collarbone and hips – just enough to distinguish emotion. When the crystalline mass was fully absorbed, the human glowed as bright as the orb before taking their first steps onto the soft, muddy ground, their expressionless stature guiding them forward.

As the breeze welcomed the new human to land, it beckoned waves to form across the lake, kissing the human's feet. Water sloshed onto shore, foam curdling on the muddy lakeside that, for a moment, resembled sand. The breeze, continuing the mirage of a beach, pushed onto shore a carved wooden mask. It tapped the new human's ankle.

The human leaned down to pick up the mask, their wrinkled hands appearing frail in comparison to the smoothness of the mask. When they rose and stepped out of the orb's comforting light, Minari's eyes widened with an unknowing gleeful surprise when she noticed this new human was faceless.

As the human held the mask, a melodic group of chunky water sprites covered in purple seaweed emerged from the lake. They first appeared in a long line, some carrying a stick with bells on the end, ribbons of kelp tied to their foreheads, knots dangling behind their heads. The sprites flicked their wrists and shook their hands to ring the bright bells with sounds of splashing.

Behind these fat water sprites dancing were others that emerged on the lake's surface sitting with their legs crossed, drumming with two long jagged sticks of soft coral. Underwater vines, tied around the top of their heads, dangled under their upright buns like the vines were part of their hair. When they played, they spun their heads, the tail-end of the vines spinning in circles around them like wisps of a tornado. Some sprites carried cymbals made of oyster shells that reverberated bright clashing sounds and others played horns and flutes made with sunken wood that gurgled like fish. During that harmonic tune, an old shaky voice began to sing, and the

sprites danced the melody of water.

As the cheeriness continued in orchestra, with little expression on their featureless face, they put on the wooden mask then tightened the leather string to the back of their head. The masked human stepped gracefully in a circle, dancing to the ups and downs of the song.

“A warm welcome!” The faceless human’s voice was clear and concise. A small cloud of gnats buzzed behind them in the afternoon sun.

Joining in, Pachua curled her tail up and down to the song’s flow, conducting the speed they played. Caught up in the fun and newfound feeling of welcomeness to the world, Minari clapped her hands together with joyousness.

When the faceless human finished their quick-paced movements of stepping in a line, spinning, then wisping the end of their silky hanbok back and forth like a wing, the eyes of the mask peered at Minari as they bowed, the song’s performance approaching a close.

With the mask’s expression almost quizzical and a little *too* happy, the faceless human crouched then slow-walked toward Minari on the drummers’ softening beat, tilting their head back and forth as if still in dance.

After a few movements, the mask looked up to her cheerfully. Like a slow turn of a winding clock, their chin tilted toward the ground then returned their head to a neutral position as they approached Minari, the mask inches from her face. The mask’s curves cast a shadow over smiled wrinkles, accentuating the narrowness of its eyes and sharp cheekbones.

“Thank you for inviting me here,” the faceless human said through the mask. The faceless human jumped back, wiggling their head with happiness. “While I wish I could have come here through other means, I’m glad the creator allowed me to visit.”

A stagnant smell rose from beneath the moss. Pachua’s dancing tail became agitated,

changing it light swing to a flick. Pachua spit her tongue out, flittering the tip of her tongue in front of the mask. “Is that the spirit saying so or Yangban using this spirit as a vessel?”

Yangban wriggled his head and laughed.

“Why did you choose to come here through a mask?” Pachua said.

“My beautiful creature, nothing on this world is permanent, so of course I chose the route with the easiest exits – but that also doesn’t mean I’m not allowed to enjoy its finer moments when I choose.” Yangban tilted his mask forward so his gaze looked down on Pachua, almost chuckling. “After all, this is our last chance.”

Pachua flicked the Yangban mask, the edge of her tail feathers yanking it off the faceless human. With a gasp, the faceless human jolted their head down. The Yangban mask spun in the air above the lake before plopping into the water.

“Was that necessary?” Minari asked.

“It was completely necessary,” Pachua replied with a snarl behind her words. The fat water sprites stopped playing their fun tune and dove into the water to follow the Yangban mask. “These masked spirits are tricksters. They will do nothing but cause trouble, lure other spirits into a selfish trap, and create rifts. You will be wise to listen.”

Minari nodded.

Pachua slithered toward the faceless human and rose her body high into the air. “Who are you?”

“I’m a spirit,” they said. Their voice arrived with the wind and the high-pitched clashes of waves visiting the shoreline.

“Why did you choose to come here?”

“I – I don’t remember,” they said as their facelessness searched the ground. “I thought I

did. I can only remember a bright flash of light and wisps of a voice before I was born.”

“And what did that voice say?”

“That I need to help the elder spirit – but I want to do it the right way. I believe I’m here to help the elder spirit finish creating the world.”

Pachua’s tail whipped back and forth. Without another word, she slithered toward the grove as she murmured something with anger to the orb.

Minari turned to the faceless human. “Do you know who I am?”

“No,” they said. Sitting down, they curled in one leg and propped up the other, wrapping their hands around their upright ankle. “Do you know who I am?”

“No,” Minari replied. She sat, mirroring their pose. Bubbling waters from the stream trickled near them, competing with the lake’s serenity. Wind whistled through leaves on trees and brushed through blades of grass as Minari stared at her reflection, noticing the determination in her sharp eyes, the roundness of her wide nose, and the delicate heart shape of her full lips. “Did you choose to be faceless?”

The faceless human laughed. “Am I supposed to know the answer as to why you have features that stick out on your head and I don’t? They are mysteries.”

Minari focused on the orb’s faint purple light in Pachua’ claws that reminded her of the sparkles in the cosmos. “I thought our vessels were connected to one another, so I was curious if your facelessness was my doing.”

“I can tell you it’s not your doing. But to be honest, I don’t remember.” The faceless human leaned forward, their voice becoming low and secretive. “One thing I know with certainty though is I *chose* this body.”

Minari sat on the wet ground across the faceless human and leaned in to whisper. “I had a

vision before you arrived. We might be able to piece something together.”

“Please,” they said, their tone piquing interest. “Please tell me.”

“I’m not sure what it all means, but you said something about needing to help the elder spirit.”

“Yes,” they said. “What else?”

“You were a blue spirit when you chose to come here. You also told another spirit you were almost out of time. I think the spirits are working toward something on Pachua’s world, but everything is contradicting.”

“Is Pachua the creator of this world?”

“Yes,” Minari replied. “Would you be able to tell me what all of that means?”

With silence increasing its anticipation between them, the faceless human crossed their arms. “I don’t remember anything.”

Like clockwork, Pachua seemed in-tune with the mention of her name and slithered toward them along the muddy earth. The low sun above the horizon made her pearly horns shimmer a peachy glow. “Has this spirit oriented themselves yet?” Pachua asked.

“I have,” the faceless human said. “Can you tell me how I got here?”

“You were crafted from the earth,” Pachua said, her tongue tickling the air in front of their face.

The faceless human looked up, a soft shade of lavender sneaking in from the middle of the sky toward the horizon. Minari was still amazed by the world and the simple beauty of it all.

The faceless human’s long white hair fell forward on their torso. “Call me The Faceless Being. It has a nice ring to it. I may change it in another life, but in this one, it fits me just fine.”

“The Faceless Being?”

“Yes,” they replied. “I am The Faceless Being.”

“Okay,” Minari said. “The Faceless Being.”

“What if the spirits are forcing us to not remember, just as they have sent us here?” The Faceless Being asked Pachua.

Pachua huffed a strong breath through her flared nostrils, whipping her beard across the ground. “Sometimes the answer is very simple. I created this land, yes. I helped create the second human, yes. But did I create you? Did I tether your spirit to that body? Oftentimes,” Pachua said calmly, taking a moment of breath, “it does more harm than good to give someone the burden of the world’s timeline.”

“What is the world’s timeline?” The Faceless Being asked.

With a soft sigh, Pachua stroked the orb with the tip of her claw. “Its timeline is short, which is something none of you will be able to control.” Pachua slithered toward the grove on the mossy floor as the sun lowered. “Now, when you are ready Minari, follow me into the grove. We have one more human to create. After that will be when I help you break your tether.”

### Chapter 3

“We are looking for a tree,” Pachua said as they traversed through tall swaying grass, dense enough to slow Minari’s pace as she stepped widely. The grass hid Pachua from view. Birds flew away as Minari followed Pachua up the path, their feathers brushing leaves as they hid.

When Minari pushed through the grass with her arms, tiny bugs flew out of the puffy-ended florets and into her face, up her nose, and inside her mouth. She blew air out of her mouth and nostrils with a little bit of spit and buzz.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Pachua asked as she slithered through the brush with ease, the tall grass bending at the sheaths to mark her arrival. “The tricky part of your job as a human is to

figure out how the natural world communicates. You'll be able to forage for food, cook up delicacies, and appreciate the part of nature you were born from." Pachua pulled a few spiky green leaves with her tail that emitted a strong earthy odor. Pachua handed the bundle to Minari. The leaves were long and spiraled around the main stem.

Minari ate the leaf. It was deeply tangy and bitter, and there was a lingering sweetness that reminded Minari of that first full breath she took on this world. "How are we expected to learn all of this?"

"You listen, and you teach your descendants to listen, which is what the spirits need to learn. I designed this world to give them exactly that."

Minari furrowed her brows. "Is this advice for all the spirits? What about the golden mushroom?"

Pachua flicked her tongue, tickling the air in front of Minari's face with its upside-down V. "Who told you about the golden mushroom?"

"It is a fragment I remember," Minari replied. "It's like I remember whispers from before I was born. Will you tell me more about it?"

Pachua smiled, breathing through her sharp and jagged teeth. It warmed the area with an aromatic scent of the mother of pearl. "I'm sure Mago will appreciate knowing which kind of information is shared by whom."

"I think I'll make an effort to keep an eye out for it. What does a mushroom colored golden look like? Or is it made of gold?"

"No," Pachua replied. "You may not find the golden mushroom if you seek for its golden color. It actually resembles the colors of a mountain sunset."

"Thank you," Minari replied. "Is it true that this golden mushroom has the ability to

directly bestow a spirit their last life?"

Pachua's tail flicked. "Mago prefers not *everyone* know the magic of the golden mushroom."

Minari shrugged. The weight of responsibility pushed onto her shoulders. She did not want to think about how understanding the golden mushroom would impact her relationship with Mago or with Pachua. For Minari, they felt as close as a mother, as close as a sister. She thought it best to not actively seek the golden mushroom's magic and to allow those who wish to rapidly access their last life continue their moral quest. "Will you tell me more about the spirits?"

Pachua released a bellowing laugh that shook the ground. She raised her upper body in the air, her tail curling inward. "I've been serving them for the past thousand years, burdened by their selfishness. Do you trust what I will share hasn't been swayed from my experiences?"

"I'm separated from their memories," Minari said. "It's like what The Faceless Being said – I wouldn't be able to tell you anything about them apart from what I've learned while being here. After all, if your plan is for the spirits to grow apart from their selfishness, then I am willing to learn and help them with the knowledge I've gained."

Pachua's talons gripped the orb. "All you need to know for now is they've imprisoned me for a thousand years, and once I finish overseeing the world, I will be free."

"Do you trust they'll keep their promise?"

"I don't have a choice," Pachua said as she descended to the ground. Her body flattened the blades of grass as she slithered forward.

The skyline grew darker, the remaining light along the horizon now a soft purple as Minari continued to follow Pachua and search for the first tree, pausing to calm herself with the peaceful muted hues of the sky. As she breathed, a solitary lightning bug floated before her, its

translucent tail glowing.

It was a fascinating creature. Minari stood with her mouth agape while it flashed its tail with a soft light. As it buzzed little strides in front of her, flying slowly, she reached out in an attempt to catch it.

It dodged her wanting grasp, flying away in zig-zags. Minari chased the light, cupping her hands together repeatedly until she encased it between her opened hands like the cosmic purple dot in Pachua's orb.

She waited until the lightning bug's crawls of confusion ended before opening her palms into a bowl as carefully as she could. However, with one slight, unintentional movement, a portion of its delicate body became squished between her fingers until light leaked from its tail end.

Minari stared at its faint glow and long body as her heartbeat elevated. With a languished crawl, it slowly dragged itself on the back of her hand, depositing a trail of shine along her skin.

Other lightning bugs around them glimmered, almost as if they were oblivious to the fatal accident that had occurred. Minari wondered what would happen if this lightning bug were to die, and she wondered if it knew she didn't mean it any harm. Bending down, she lowered her hand next to a fallen tree branch and nudged the lightning bug's suffering body onto it.

Songs of forest sprites emerged from the depths of mud, their tiny plump bodies adorning moss and dead leaves. They surrounded Minari in a wide circle. With whimsical pipes of dandelion stems and soft fingertips fluttering across drum skin, deep airy flutes blended with the wind as they crescendoed in sporadic volume and pitch, pleasantly screeching. They twisted their torsos in a spiral to dance with the music, enjoying their evening forested symphony.

Minari leaned forward, an inch from the lightning bug, to assess how injured the

lightning bug was. The shell on its back had nudged open, and underneath, its translucent wings were ripped. Minari gasped. One of the wings had fallen off when she breathed.

A faint ringing sounded from the lightning bug. "Get away from me!" it screamed with a high-pitched alarm, adorning a miniscule lop-sided wooden mask that held a crooked open smile with jagged teeth. From the side, the smile was visible with a raised cheek, resembling a sneer. Bulging eyes in deep sockets stuck out far beyond its wide nose casting a shadow over its crooked grin.

"Oh!" Minari moved her head back. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You little punk! Look how big you are and how small I am." The masked lightning bug turned its bug-eyed mask toward Minari. "When I return, I will tell the spirits *you* are the reason Pachua hates us." The forest sprites animated the lightning bug's movements with their breathy melodies.

"If she does hate us, I think she'd hate all of us equally," Minari said, a little annoyed at the escalation.

"Hah! Tell that to the smoking tiger." The lightning bug shook its wings, and within seconds, they fell off. The forest sprites trilled their fluting tune as the lightning bug tried to test its flight before growing frustrated by its lack of airtime.

"Will you be all right?" Minari asked.

"No," the lightning bug said, rubbing its leaking, glowing tail. It spit a paste onto its tail a few times until the outer layer of skin stopped bleeding. "I will die."

"What does death mean?"

"It'll be an excruciating death, too. I'll tell them I was murdered – no, I'll tell them *you* murdered me." With three shakes, the lightning bug closed its shell. "I came here to only find

Yangban as he instructed me to do, but because of my unfortunate encounter with a *giant*, I will tell the spirits it was an impossible task. It will also give me the perfect excuse to not deliver his medicinal morning soup.”

“I’ve met Yangban.”

“You have?” The lightning bug spun in a circle three times, flashing the remains of its fading light to the tune of the forest sprites’ song.

“I have,” Minari replied. “I can show you where he is if you tell me about the process of dying.”

“You want me to trust you after what you’ve done to me? *Hah!* I’d rather give my message to Pachua again than to you. As a matter of fact, I’d rather die right now than give it to you.”

“We can catch up with Pachua now,” Minari said. “That’s also where Yangban is. We’re trying to find a tree to craft the third human.”

“Boss already found the elder spirit?” the lightning bug exclaimed. It sat on the log as if it had just come back from a long day dodging tall threads of wheatgrass and bright lights beaming through treetops, never ever getting closer to the top of the sky. “What a relief. I’m not supposed to talk to the elder spirit, just locate her. But it’s just one small task checked off my endless to-do list. Yangban also wants me to find a mushroom. I’ve found at least twenty, but they’re not the right ones. Have you ever heard of the golden mushroom?”

“I’ve never heard of the golden mushroom. I’m a human, not a mushroom.”

“NEVER HEARD OF – oh, oh okay. You were born stupid. I’ll be nice and elaborate.”

The lightning bug stood on its hind legs. One of its legs dangled off its squished, lop-sided wing. The bug didn’t seem to notice as it continued on its tirade, the mask still tightly

secure around the bug's face.

With a slow, steady, and mocking voice, the lightning bug continued. "The golden mushroom is a mushroom colored golden. It's about *yay* big, with a little thing right there, and there is no other mushroom that looks like it."

Minari shook her head. "No, I don't think I've ever seen anything like it."

The lightning bug sighed. "Bibi might be the first to find the golden mushroom. It has a head start – it's thinking about starting up some shenanigans with Pachua. Say – if I tell you Bibi's plan, will you tell me something I don't know, Stupid One?"

"Sure," Minari replied.

"So, Bibi's plan is to steal Mago. All of Mago. I have no idea how it plans to do that, but the tricky part is that's Bibi's plan to convince Pachua to tell Bibi where the golden mushroom is, and I told Bibi that that was not a good idea, especially because Pachua is the reason why we are all here in the first place, and it's dumb of her to have us look for this dang golden mushroom to begin with because my boss is saying that the golden mushroom is his but that doesn't make any sense to me, even though I'm gonna try to steal—"

The lightning bug twisted its hanging leg off its body then pulled its wing to keep its mouth shut.

"Sorry about that. Sometimes when I'm frustrated, I talk too much. Please excuse that. But now, you have to fulfill your promise to me. What can you tell me that I don't know because *I know everything* that goes around on Magoland."

Minari shrugged. "The only thing I can offer you is that I helped Pachua to create a human and—"

"Speaking of – do you know where I can find the first human?"

Minari moved back with a bit of shock. "Why do you need to find the first human?"

"I have a very super important message to deliver, and it's for the first human."

The forest sprites lowered their tune to a whisper, the music of leaves rustling in harmony with the wind. "That's me."

"Hah! Are you really?"

Minari nodded.

The lightning bug sighed miserably. "So first you try to kill me, and now you're trying to get me in trouble? I think it's best if you do kill me – I'm not even supposed to talk to you! Boss will think I'm giving away all our secrets."

"Well, I'm just the first human. But if you're needing the elder spirit, I think we're about to create her. Pachua told me that the tree we're looking for, the one where the next human will be born from, is vitally important. I think this human will be the elder spirit."

The lightning bug laughed. "Thanks for making this easy for me. I'll be sure to tell everyone that you're stupid on this world!"

"Stupid?" Minari frowned. "I may not remember my origins, but that doesn't make me stupid."

"Sure it does," the lightning bug said. It turned its crooked mask back and forth, checking to see if anyone was eavesdropping. "I asked Pachua a very important question earlier, but all she did was toss me back into the abyss. As if she could get rid of me forever, *hah!* Has she broken your tether?"

Minari sighed and shook her head. "We're working on it."

"Working on it? WORKING ON IT? What kind of detour are you taking? Do you know you only have one job to do and it's that? Don't you know what's at stake?"

"I can take you to Pachua now to explain again? I'm sure she'd like to hear your message."

"No," the lightning bug said. "Just leave me to die. That is my wish."

"That sounds cruel," Minari said. "Won't that just bring you unnecessary suffering?"

"Then kill me! I can't wait to return to the chamber and tell the spirits of all the sinful things you've been doing. They'll greet me with open arms and would love to listen to my stories."

"What about the message you wanted to give me?"

"It doesn't matter if you don't remember anything. We are screwed. Completely screwed. Boss will drag my head through the mud again because of you! You'll do us both a favor and send me back to the chamber. I'll figure something out. But *don't* tell ANYONE you saw me."

With that knowledge, the forest sprites cut the air with sharp notes as Minari picked up the lightning bug's fragile body then squished it between her fingertips. Its glow popped onto her palm, and its gooey consistency squirted onto the mask resting on her thumb.

The forest sprites immediately stopped their song then descended below the moss along the forest floor. The crooked mask oozed onto the ground, disappearing with them.

With a sigh, Minari wiped the remnants of blood on the grass then continued her search for the tree with death on the back of her mind.

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In that daze, Minari stumbled upon a tree with a peculiar energy radiating from its core. Its trunk, wrapped in thick vines, stretched wider than two fully grown trees. The twisted vines overlapped with one another as they climbed the tree, their tips expanding into nodes, their branches sprouting toward the sky.

More vines poked out of the trunk's spindling body, displaying heart-shaped leaves pointy at the tip, their color lighter than the moss she stood on but darker than algae by the shore of a muggy lake. Through its leaves glowed the setting sun, and Minari spotted persimmons shaped like an acorn. They ranged in different colors – some hard with an earthy tint, others pale and yellow, and only a few that were smooth to the touch and deeply vivid with the colors of sunset. With saliva pooling in her mouth, she believed if everyone could eat one of these persimmons, then this world would certainly be peaceful.

Picking the plumpest persimmon, Minari slid her teeth with a smooth bite into its squishy exterior, flesh sliding across the inside of her lips. Juice trailed down her chin as she sucked on its body. She savored the sweet liquid in her mouth. Compared to the delightful vegetation she had tasted earlier, Minari swore this fruit had to be a semblance of what the chamber was like, and she wondered if Pachua placed sweetness on this world so the spirits would remember to cherish it.

Pachua slithered around the spiraled trunk toward Minari. "I see you've found the tree we've been looking for as well as the ripe fruit it has produced."

Minari smiled. "It's delightful. Thank you for creating this."

Pachua snarled, her jagged teeth putrid with stinky fish breath. "Sweetness is not the only delectable thing on this world – in fact, it is one of the more dangerous flavors meant to be eaten in moderation."

Pachua pulled a plump fruit from the tree. "Here, try this."

"What do I do with the rest?" Minari asked with the already bitten fruit sticky in her hand.

"You offer it to the tree to absorb its nutrients. It's completely made in nature, so it is safe

to return to the tree.”

Minari rolled the bitten-into persimmon along the ground, grabbed the fruit from Pachua, then took a second bite. It was tougher to sink her teeth into, but its flesh was still soft. The full flavor, a hint of tang and bitterness, caused her to salivate. “Why do they taste different?”

Pachua flicked her tail. “The sweetness of fruit is meant to be a reminder of my care for the spirits on this world – not its mission. Bitterness is what will humble you and set you on the proper path.”

Minari nodded, taking another bite of the fruit Pachua offered her. Now that her taste was accustomed to the fruit she was meant to consume regularly, her tongue was able to separate the intertwined tangy and bitterness, which left that pleasant taste in the back of her throat.

The lightning bugs buzzed cluelessly around them. “Every decision I’ve made was crafted with the love I have for the spirits. Please don’t let those tastes be overshadowed. Now, are you ready to create a human?”

Minari nodded, wiping her lips with the back of her hand. She followed Pachua to the other side of the trunk where a deep hollow formed its center, expanding as large as the width of the tree. Vibrant purple ooze seeped from the opening and sheened with a thin iridescent-like sweat. After Pacha’s instruction, Minari finagled her way inside the tree, leading with her back until her shoulders touched the edge of the hollow. When she was comfortable, and the sounds of the world were hushed by the tree’s protection, she hugged her knees tight to her chest.

“Are you ready?” Pachua asked. Minari could only see Pachua’s tongue flicking from her scaly lips.

“I am,” Minari replied.

Pachua breathed into the hollow. The tree unfurled to showcase the underside of its

canopy until Minari stood comfortably encased within its center. Inside, the tree's vines dug deep into the ground, spiraling around Minari. With graceful movements, the vines lifted her toward the opening canopy, beckoning her to peer beyond the encroaching night.

As she rose, a vision of the chamber appeared to her. A spirit, sitting on a scratched and worn wooden stool, was hunching over their bent leg carving wooden masks in a corner. The spirit had carved four – one of which was Yangban, a second the lightning bug's mask. This spirit meticulously painted three red circles on the next mask – one on each cheek and the other on its forehead above a thick unibrow that complemented its smiling eyes and long nose. When the spirit brushed the carving dust away from the finished piece, they outstretched their arm to get a full look at the mask in the sunlight.

Immediately after, the spirit adorned the fourth mask themselves. It had a happy face with an open mouth and a big, wide nose that accentuated the spirit's happiness, but it was difficult to tell if the mask was smiling as its jaw was hanging detachedly from the hinge with strings. The spirit turned to Minari wearing the mask. "Leave at once before you get caught!"

"Why? Am I not supposed to be here?"

"You fool! The spirits are angry. These masks will keep us in existence. A traitor like you who doesn't care what happens to the rest of us doesn't deserve to gaze upon what *real* progress looks like. Now shoo! We have found another method of arrival, and it no longer involves you!"

The vines unfurled Minari their grip and brought her back to a state of reality. As Minari balanced herself, the vines twisted together to form the shape of a human. They thickened and tightened, darkening into glowing skin illuminated against the faint purple hue of dusk. The vines stretched taller than Minari, bending and contorting to define the new human's features taking on a human form parallel to her own.

Branches twisted around the human's torso, poking out to form her arms, her legs, her head. The tips of these vines swirled around her body, adding height and definition to her cheekbones and jawline, creating crescent moon-shaped eyes before bending and flattening her nose. From the neck up, other vines distinguished her jawline then followed her cheekbone until parsed lines formed full lips. Near the end of her creation when the vines finished dancing, Pachua reached inside the tree with her talons to prune the connecting vines, slicing her apart from the branches.

Once she was disconnected, everything else fell into place. Her skin solidified. Fat spread and enlarged throughout her body. Her head grew pristine curls that smelled of sweetgrass, twisting like the vines she was born from. Her hair grew thick and long, more saturated than the blooming night sky behind them while retaining its shine like stars peeking out from behind soft clouds in the sky.

Leaves from the tree's canopy floated down, delicately landing on her skin, forming a hanbok like Minari's. Instead of a color that resembled the sun during a clear day, it stood out like the lavender of a setting sky. Intricate embroideries of many shades of green adorned the hanbok, including heart-shaped leaves of the tree she was born from and the vines that formed her personhood. A tassel hung from her waistline, woven together with soft string in the shape of a heart-shaped leaf.

"Who are you?" Pachua asked, helping the new human step barefoot onto moss as she gazed at the full moon taking control of the sky.

"Rumi," she said with a low and raspy voice. There was a softness behind it, the kind that could hold power behind even the simplest words.

"Wonderful," Pachua said. "Do you know why you're here?"

Rumi furrowed her thick brows. “No,” she said with confusion. She cleared pollen from her throat and then spoke clearly. “I feel like I need to remember something, but my memory isn’t working.”

“We’ll get Yangban,” Minari said to Pachua, feeling guilty for something she couldn’t control. “The masks remember. I spoke to one who works for Yangban, and that mask came here to supervise us.”

“You *cannot* trust the masks.” Pachua glared. “They will only gift you more questions.” With a flick of her tail and no other words spoken, Pachua slithered toward the grove. Minari and Rumi followed.

“You remind me of the sun,” Rumi said when they got used to the relaxing pace. “The sun gives us energy and light. It helps us grow.”

“That’s very kind of you to say, but I was made from clay like you were made from a tree. Maybe Pachua was made from the sun. She’s the one who created this world.” Knowing The Faceless Being came from the floatiness of sea foam, Rumi from the core of nature, and herself as the strands that bind roots to the earth, she ached to assist Pachua more with understanding why the connection between the flesh and the soil mattered so deeply to her.

Rumi nodded. Stretching her arm out to experience the texture of the bushes and trees around her, she smiled. “What a beautiful world,” she said when she kneeled to look at a tiny ladybug perched on a flower petal. It had a bright red color and few dots wide apart from each other. On the ground were large ants marching on a trail along the base of a tree, grubs and roly pollys scavenging through the dirt, and worms wriggling their way through soil to soften the earth. “I wish I could remember why I chose this place, but after looking around, I think I wanted to live surrounded by beauty. We must be sure to give back to the earth,” Rumi said with quiet

hazel eyes that sparkled with the world around her. “We only have to listen, and the earth will communicate what she needs from us.”

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At the edge of the grove, Pachua slithered under a tree's canopy and curled around the orb. Whispers sounded as her horns sparkled. Soon, before Minari and Rumi made their way back into the clearing, Pachua fell into a slumber. A quiet whistling snore blew from her nose as she breathed.

The Faceless Being, ensuring she was fast asleep by throwing a small rock at her face, pulled the Yangban mask from behind a tree.

Minari waved as they breached the grove's line, motioning The Faceless Being toward her and Rumi. The Faceless Being waved back. They put on the mask before gliding toward them with the mask's chin tilted downward.

Minari paused. The Yangban mask's gaze bubbled uncertainty within her throat. She remembered Pachua's warning, but also the lightning bug's sinister movements.

Upon arriving, the forest sprites tumbled through the grass behind The Faceless Being as they wore Yangban then quickly crescendoed their bright tune. When Yangban was steps in front of Minari and Rumi, and the sprites sat themselves like the curve of a crescent moon behind the masked performer, Yangban tilted his mask upward, revealing his full carved smile. “Wonderful,” he said, his hands rubbing together. “Another human.”

“I met another mask,” Minari said, reluctant to introduce Rumi. “It was searching for you.”

“Ahhhhhhhhh,” Yangban said with a high-pitched toned trailing upward at the end. The forest sprites trilled their dandelion stemmed flutes and spun their heads in quick circles. “It was

probably my crooked servant, Choraengi. He delivers all the important news surrounding the chamber so I can get ahead. Any developments, failures, and happenings – I'm the *first* to know. He must have uncovered something beautiful if he came all this way."

"Choraengi didn't tell me much," Minari said. "I offered to find you to share the message, but he requested death."

"You're another spirit – of course he wouldn't tell you! Choraengi is loyal only to me. It is our partnership that will put us both ahead of the other spirits. Well, it'll put *me* ahead first and then him. But no matter. Where is this servant now?"

"I murdered him." The forest sprites paused their song on a dramatic note.

"You did *what*?" Yangban lowered his mask, shadows from the moon darkening his gaze. The forest sprites began their tune again softly, bobbing their leafy heads up and down. "What a cruel and unnecessary act you've committed. Did this other human help you?"

With widened eyes, Rumi looked toward Minari. She had been silently listening, absorbing the new information of the world.

"I was alone with Choraengi," Minari said. "I asked him if he wanted to die, and he said yes, he wanted to die."

"*Tsk*. How inconvenient. No matter. He will tell me the *truth* when I return to the chamber more *peacefully* as soon as this host is ready to reclaim their body. But it seems they like wearing me. I wonder how similar you feel, knowing *nothing* of the chamber and that *I* am here with all those answers?"

"What have we forgotten?" Minari's heart quickened.

The forest sprites recognized her mood and swiveled their dance and tune in response to something more quizzical.

Yangban glared at the forest sprites, trying to shoo some away. They floated backward at first but returned with a threatening melody. "There are no secrets at all, actually. You know everything you need to know. You don't know what you don't need to know. The 'secret' you speak of is merely advice that is no longer applicable to the current situation."

"What about the golden mushroom?"

"You are not interested in the golden mushroom. No one here, actually, is interested in the golden mushroom. It is on a need-to-know basis, and you are not in the need-to-know crew. Only me, Bibi, Pachua, Sonpi, and two bimbos know about the golden mushroom."

Yangban lifted his mask just slightly to increase the shadow of intimidation leaking from the sharp points of his carved face.

"What do you know about the golden mushroom?"

"All I can tell you is there is only one, and it goes to *meeeeee*. No one else needs to know, but I already have a map that leads me directly to it. Would you like to see it?"

"That would be nice," Minari said.

Rumi nodded her head in agreement. "Maybe we can give it to Pachua. She might be able to use it the wisest out of anyone here. She probably created it."

"She created it, most definitely," Yangban said. His mask tilted side to side with curious shadows. "As the leader of the spirits who have chosen to arrive through these masks, I can assure you that *I* am the most worthy to accept the golden mushroom when I trace its final steps to be plucked from the ground or the tree from which it will have grown."

"I've never heard of this golden mushroom," Rumi said.

"Choraengi talked to me a little bit about it," Minari replied.

"You bitch," a small, little voice echoed from the depths underneath Yangban's feet.

“You spoke with Choraengi?” Yangban asked, the ball of his foot squishing the ground beneath him. “What did that lovely fellow share with you?”

Minari answered with a quizzical look, as if she was supposed to remember something important, but she couldn't place her finger on it. “Well, Choraengi said I only had to tell him something unknown about me. It was all confusing, but I definitely remember him saying that the golden mushroom was only colored golden.”

“Only colored golden?”

“Yes. When I asked Pachua, she said it was close to resembling a mountain sunset.”

“Thank you for this information,” Yangban said as he continued to squish the ground below him as it squeaked a plea to end the suffering with each swivel. “What else did Pachua share?”

Minari shrugged. “She was very hush-hush about the whole thing.”

“Oh, I remember her saying something about the golden mushroom,” Rumi said. “She did say it grew from the bark of a tree. It's symbiotic.”

“Mycorrhizal,” Yangban added, stopping the twists on his foot. The squealing stopped. “Sonpi taught me that.”

“What else is so special about the golden mushroom? I don't understand this whole ‘last life’ stuff. How can eating a mushroom send someone to their last life?”

“You don't know? What a shame. That just means it was never meant to be plucked from the mycorrhizal bark by you. The golden mushroom only respects sacred bones, which I have.”

“That's unfortunate,” Rumi said. She shrugged her shoulders. “Who else has sacred bones?”

“It's very special. It's on a need-to-know basis. But I have sacred bones.”

“Will you be able to answer any questions?” Minari asked. “Instead of giving us vague assistance?”

“No,” Yangban said. “And don’t take my no for not being able to – I just don’t want to. That would put you in a spot where you’d excel faster than me, and we both *don’t* want that.”

Before Minari could press Yangban further, The Faceless Being removed the mask, and their stature softened. The forest sprites spun away like winged seeds. The Faceless Being sat and motioned for Minari and Rumi to sit with them. “I remember talking with a spirit before I was created, and when I was ready to tether myself? Nothing.”

“Why do you mention this?” Rumi asked with a soft and serious tone.

“Just because Yangban speaks through my mouth doesn’t mean I’m unaware of what he says. I didn’t like how secretive he was being – in fact, I don’t care much for him.”

Turning toward Rumi, they introduced themselves, apologizing for the unsettling mask persona. They got along together well.

“I have a similar experience,” Rumi said, continuing the conversation. “I remember waiting until I found where I wanted my spirit to tether itself, and I followed the same light you did. I have trouble remembering who I was before and where I came from. I just remember this is where I wanted to be.”

Through these confessions, Minari tried to remember her herself being sculpted. Thinking hard, she was able to recall bits and pieces beyond what she already knew, but it was mostly feeling. What became clearer as they shared their stories was that her spirit had gravitated toward that body as Pachua formed it from the earth.

Minari listened as they both elaborated on their experiences, their curious postures yearning for more information of how they came to be. She knew she had to tell them something

they didn't know. So, while Pachua was asleep at the top of the hill, the moon shining brighter than the stars, Minari shared with them their origins.

#### Chapter 4

“You know what I think?” The Faceless Being spoke with an alluring softness, monotonous in tone but vibrant in receipt. “I think this is all a ploy to get us to listen to her. That Pachua just wants control – to control us. That *has* to be why we don’t remember.”

They all lounged in a circle on the hard ground. Rumi hugged her legs and laid her chin on her knees. The Faceless Being lay on the ground and held herself up with an elbow. Minari sat with their legs and arms crossed.

“What reason would she have to control us?” Rumi asked, rubbing her chin on her knee.

“I think it’s because she’s afraid we’re going to take over the world and build it without

her,” The Faceless Being replied, plucking daisy petals from their stem.

“I don’t know if that’s right,” Rumi said. “And if we keep talking like this, we’ll pollute our minds. It’s best to think with positive purpose.”

The Faceless Being rolled their head. “The only thing we know for certain about the spirits is that they have a plan, of which we are not aware of, that Minari needs to cut her tether, which we have no idea how to, and that the elder spirit should know the answers, who we don’t know. Pachua knows these things and *more*.”

“I believe our only task is to live on this earth and to respect it,” Minari added. “We aren’t here to collect what we think we are owed. We’re here to progress our spiritual paths.”

“I know what will help us,” The Faceless Being said with a suspiciously optimistic voice that tempted Minari to distrust them. “It’s something we’ve had our eye on for quite some time. A good amount of time, in fact. And I truly believe, strongly, that if we acquire this item, then we’ll figure out the answers we seek.”

Minari paused, an inkling of fear etching itself into a new portion of her mind. “We should ask the masks.”

“Pachua said we can’t trust them,” Rumi replied with a worried tone.

“What a wonderful idea!” The Faceless Being clapped their hands together. “I actually have a mask for you. Yangban found it a bit ago and warned me kindly to wait until a grand moment before giving it to you. I think this is that moment.”

From behind their back, The Faceless Being pulled out two masks: Yangban and a new one carved from wood with crescent moon-shaped eyes and a thinly curved smile fit for a tax collector. Long wrinkle lines cut horizontally across its forehead resembled ocean waves that Minari imagined would crinkle with anger from rowing after thieves into the foggy morning

light.

“This one is Byulchae. Yangban specifically wanted you to wear it.” The Faceless Being handed the mask to Minari.

“Will these masks really help us?” Rumi asked as she sat up.

“Why are you worried about something that hasn’t happened yet?” The Faceless Being replied. “We will both wear the masks, we will discuss how to acquire a certain object, and then we will decide whether or not it will truly help us. Rumi will be here to remove the masks if she gets uncomfortable.”

“Did Yangban tell you why it was for me?” Minari asked.

“He only advised it will help all of us. I, for one, only want to know why we were sent here when Pachua was not prepared to receive us. Did the spirits want to send us because they didn’t believe she knew what she was doing? Did they send us because we were chosen and the most worthy? Or did they send us to get a head start in figuring out what we need to accomplish because we’re the most behind? I’d personally like to trust them as we all come from the same source.”

Minari stared at the masks’ sawed-out eyes, anxious about how Yangban might influence her. After a long breath, she grabbed Yangban from The Faceless Being then pressed its smooth wooden face against her own, tying the leather band around her head. When she looked up, forest sprites played their song from the treetops. An old woman’s wisdom sang eloquently among them through fluttering leaves. Next to them, plump mud sprites rose from puddles, playing a woody tune.

“How does it fit?” Rumi asked.

Minari wanted to respond, to let her know her breath had warmed the space between her

skin and the mask, but those words did not leave her mouth. Instead, it was her voice through the words of Yangban. "It fits as smooth as can be," Yangban said. "A joyous moment for a joyous occasion."

Through Yangban's crescent moon-shaped eyes, The Faceless Being wore the Byulchae mask. Byulchae clasped The Faceless Being's hands together then rhythmically tapped fingertip to fingertip against the tune of the sprites' song, "Now to get where we all need to be, let's discuss what we're owed."

"What are we owed?" Rumi asked with a frown of confusion on her face, appeasing aristocratic conversations that lit the air with falsities.

"The entire world of course," Yangban said.

"Even more than that," Byulchae added. "We are owed the *world*, and we are here to ensure we are returned something that has always belonged to us. Pachua stole it."

The smile disappeared from Rumi's face. Her lips formed a neutral line as if she was trying to hide her emotions. "Is this really why we're here? Wouldn't this create more chaos and suffering? Are we not here to live peacefully in the natural world and to care for it in return?"

"Of course not," Byulchae said. "This world was crafted *for* us! We can do with it what we will because *we* are owed the world and *more*."

"Let us make peace, my dear friend." Yangban gripped Byulchae's shoulder then tilted his head, the shadows from his cheeks settling deep onto his face. "Is it more unjust to *not* live in a world we deserve?"

"No," Rumi said, her voice trailing off. The mud sprites twiddled their wooden instruments, dancing at a delicate pace of tiptoes and whispers. "I just don't know if this truly is the best path to take."

“Nonsense,” Yangban said. “You know exactly what the best path is – it’s just behind the memories Pachua stole from you. Why else are you reluctant to believe us? Why else would we risk our lives to help *you* uncover the truth? What we are doing is admirable and *deserving* of attention.”

“I fully agree,” Byulchae said, gripping Yangban’s shoulder. “But we’ve spoken enough to try and convince our dear friend to follow the right path, the one of justice, truth, liberty, and the pursuit of freedom. We cannot sell her falsities like Pachua seems to have successfully done.”

Yangban nodded. “We only need have belief that she will make the proper decision, along with our other dear friends, Minari and The Faceless Being. At least we all agree that the orb is ours.”

“Think of it as improving the situation for everyone,” Byulchae said to Rumi. “It may not feel welcoming, but it will be a great and wondrous thing.”

The Faceless Being removed the Yangban mask. “I say we should try. We can always return the orb.”

“That’s the spirit,” Byulchae said. He held his fingertips in place. “I knew we sent the correct spirits to accomplish the tasks we needed to get done.”

“So we *were* chosen?” The Faceless Being asked, looking at Rumi with excitement bouncing in their shoulders.

“Of course you all were,” Byulchae added. “We selected the brightest, most-accomplished, best-in-chamber spirits. And we did it specifically because we trust, with all our hearts, that you all will do what’s necessary to clear things up cleanly.”

Without control of her arms, Minari untied the mask. The mud sprites plopped into the

mud as the air refreshed Minari's sweaty face.

"I still don't think it's a good idea," Rumi said.

"Oh," The Faceless Being said with disappointment. They sighed. "I guess if the two of you really don't want to, then I'm alone with this idea and –"

"I think it's a good idea," Minari replied. "It'll be useful to help Pachua. If the orb *is* the one influencing her, then it might be best if we take it away so she can focus on maintaining the prosperity of the land."

The Faceless Being clapped their hands and wrapped their arm around Minari's, giving her a friendly squeeze. "I'm glad you said that – I'm *really* happy you said that. Because I *want* to steal the orb from Pachua while she's asleep. We have plenty of time before the sun wakes."

"She'll kill us," Rumi said.

The Faceless Being stood. Their shoulders stretched back like they was ready to take action. "Pachua can't kill us," The Faceless Being said. "It would go against her responsibility to the spirits. I bet if she kills any of us, the spirits will curse her."

"Do we want to risk it though?" Minari asked, hearing Rumi's concerns. "If she wakes up and doesn't kill us, she'll make the rest of our time on this earth miserable."

"I'm scared of Pachua," Rumi said, fidgeting with her fingernails. "I'm scared we'll do something we can't take back."

"It's fine to be scared of her," The Faceless Being said. "She's terrifying! But my curiosities outweigh my fear. Do you have anything that would outweigh yours, Minari?"

"I am afraid we'll force Pachua into a place where she becomes polluted by our decisions. I don't want to curse her because of our actions."

"*Psh*. How can we curse her? It's nonsense." The Faceless Being turned to Rumi. "What

exactly are you afraid of?"

"You remember what the masks said – we're meant to take over her responsibilities. One way I think we can do that more safely is if I create a daughter. What if Pachua doesn't allow me to have children if we steal the orb?" Rumi pulled grass out of the ground.

"She is looking for a human to accept the burden of childbirth," Minari said. "If this is something you want, I don't think Pachua will try to take that autonomy away."

"Precisely that," The Faceless Being said. "She needs us to complete her final task. Do you think she'd risk killing us or preventing us from accomplishing things that will help her?"

With a deep breath, Rumi nodded. "If you two are so adamant on stealing it, we need to test it after. We should make one last human, one made out of material like us."

"What a wonderful idea!" The Faceless Being threw the masks far away from them. They sank in the mud, becoming one with the earth again. "And if we get caught, a good excuse, a really good excuse, would be that we heard the spirits calling our name from the orb, and *they* gave us permission to use it."

"Will that work, though?" Minari asked, her gaze switching back and forth between the two.

"Who's to say we can't create someone from mud?" Rumi asked. "I think it's worth trying. And if it doesn't, then we can test it another way."

"I can guarantee the orb is also holding our memories captive – if we just touch the orb, I bet it'll all come back to us."

Minari pointed toward the mud field. They were on a small grassy hill with a cliff overlooking the pit as if the ground had absorbed a large puddle of water. "That's an area of land that hasn't been touched by anything. If that pit is anything like the one I was born from, then it

should work.”

With the full moon illuminating their scheme, they discussed how they would pry the orb out of Pachua's talons while she slept. They outlined possibilities and best paths until a big wave of clouds hid the moonlight and ignited their simple plan into action.

Shuffling quietly along the muddy grass toward Pachua, ready to explain what they were all up to in case she woke, Minari led the way with The Faceless Being then Rumi directly behind. Minari was thankful when the wind blew, rustling the trees loud enough to hide their shuffling. It was when the wind refused to roll its gust across the grassy plains that made them anxious. In those bouts of loud silence, they moved slower, their breath staggering in direct opposition to the rapid beatings of their hearts.

As they approached Pachua, they had no choice but to stare at her sleeping peacefully curled up beside the edge of the grove. Under the moonlight, her turquoise-patterned scales stretched and relaxed when she breathed, her curled body rising and falling, her feathers fluttering as she exhaled. Her iridescent horns peeked out from behind the orb.

“We're going with Plan A?” The Faceless Being whispered. Even though the whisper was quiet, Minari kept her eyes on Pachua at the bottom of the hill, afraid that Pachua would wake from her slumber.

Minari shook her head. “No, Plan A was too risky. We're doing Plan B.”

“What was Plan B?” Rumi asked.

“It's the safe one in case we screw up,” The Faceless Being whispered. “It's including Plan A, but Plan B is the added step to ensure it works.”

“Okay,” Rumi said with uncertainty, nodding slowly.

Pachua remained undisturbed. Continuing their slow shuffle, they moved closer when

Pachua's deep breath overpowered the wind, taking more steps when Pachua's raspy inhalation sang like sand falling on stone. In the hours of silence between her inhales and the softened breeze, Minari stood still, afraid it would interrupt the natural flow of rhythm that had soothed Pachua to remain asleep.

It was muddy, and her bare feet couldn't get traction. In the next step as Minari placed her foot forward on the grass during Pachua's exhale, her entire weight shifted to her back foot, and she slipped. She tried to catch herself with her other leg out of instinct, but when it slammed on the squishy ground, she continued to slide, the tips of her toes curling in the mud, knocking The Faceless Being and Rumi down with her.

The Faceless Being and Rumi yelped as they fell, landing on the ground with thumps and grumbles, grabbing onto each other's waists. Once their butts flopped onto the muddy hill, Minari's foot slipped again, causing them all to slide toward Pachua.

They were close enough to hear her breathing.

To their dizzying surprise, she was still asleep.

Minari kept focus on Pachua's curled body, her light golden underbelly facing the moon. With a deep and quiet sigh, Minari closed her eyes until her breathing returned to a normal rhythm.

Once her body regained stability, Minari assessed Pachua's talons. The space between her claws was big enough to fit the orb through.

Minari pointed at it.

The Faceless Being nodded.

Without hesitation, The Faceless Being delicately placed their fingertips around the orb, gently lifting it away from Pachua's hold, careful not to touch the talons seizing their prize. Rumi

stood next to them and quietly replaced it with a rock of equal size.

Holding it in both hands, the allure of its soft exterior mesmerized them all. Its iridescence transitioned to bursting speckles expanding inside the orb like they could be transported back to the cosmos. The light wasn't similar to the one Minari remembered upon blooming from clay, nor when The Faceless Being or Rumi was created, nor when Pachua spoke to the spirits – this glow was warmer in color, almost inviting. As soon as the light beamed brightest, the glow subsided, its energy becoming absent as if nothing had been there at all.

Minari reached her arm out, a silent way of asking The Faceless Being to let her hold it. She didn't care if Pachua woke – in that moment, something urged her to hold it in her hands. Rumi, at the same time, outstretched her arms as if she, too, was captivated by its mysteries and alluring promises. The Faceless Being, however, kept their facelessness toward the light in their hands. With energizing cosmic speckles shining as bright as the moon, they glided away.

## Chapter 5

Minari focused on her breathing as she trudged through the mud to The Faceless Being with Rumi equally out of breath beside her. Minari checked if Pachua had figured out their ruse and woke, but she continued with her slumber, the small boulder still between her claws. Minari's anxiety allowed herself to feel safer the farther they got, but there was a burgeoning fear she was sure also existed in The Faceless Being and Rumi: Pachua will realize the orb is missing and kill them.

“What was all that about over there?” Minari asked when they stopped in the middle of the pit.

“What do you mean?” The Faceless Being asked. “I got the orb – like the plan. And following the plan, Pachua is still asleep.”

“The orb,” Minari said, “it glowed when you touched it.”

“I saw a strange light too,” Rumi said. “It made me feel uneasy, like it changed the trajectory of *something*.”

“Okay,” The Faceless Being said, fidgeting with the orb while Rumi crossed her arms and held a tight face. “Okay, so I think there may have been some confusion – just a little bit – but everything about the plan is still going well.”

“What about the plan is going well?” Rumi asked with a nervous voice. “We were supposed to remember, and now we’re risking our safety for an unknown future.”

“It’s too late to go back,” The Faceless Being said, their voice steady. “We need to use it.”

The Faceless Being put the orb on the ground behind them. They extended their palms, and with just the air between them, rotated their hands as if they was holding a sphere. “The orb feels alive. The very essence of my being was like my spirit belonged to it. I also heard voices.”

“From the orb?” Rumi asked, the worry in her face growing deeper.

“Yes! Voices! It was amazing. When the orb was this close to me,” The Faceless Being held their hand a few inches from their chest, “I heard them. They shared stories with me about the beginnings of the land.

“The spirits?” Minari asked.

“Yes. Well, I don’t know. Nothing sounded familiar to me, but they talked as if they knew who we were and what we’re supposed to be doing here.” The Faceless Being paused, almost hesitant. “Pachua was never meant to be the creator of this world.”

“And you believe that?” Rumi asked as she paced back and forth, her eyes glancing at Pachua. The wind picked up and clouds overhead moved quickly.

“Why would the spirits lie to us?” The Faceless Being replied. “They *are* us!”

“This is all very confusing,” Minari said, crossing her arms too.

Rumi breathed in deeply. “We need to figure out how to use the orb,” she said slowly. “Anything of memory should help us decide who is lying.”

“You think the spirits would lie to us?” The Faceless Being asked. “They want to protect us – that’s why we’re all here. We need to get the orb back to the spirits. Pachua stole it!”

“Do you trust them?” Minari asked.

The moon, high above their heads, illuminated The Faceless Being, the smooth curve of their face resembling a mask made of birch wood. “Are you frightened I’m lying to you?”

“I’m frightened *they’re* lying to *you*,” Minari said.

“We’re spirits ourselves, remember? Why would they lie to us?”

“Then why don’t we remember anything about them?” Minari asked. “Why don’t we remember why we’re here?”

“Because of Pachua,” The Faceless Being replied. “Pachua is to blame for our loss of memory.”

“She created us,” Rumi said as she squeezed the tip of her thumb between her index and middle finger. “What if she freed us from the spirits, and that angered them?”

“All right,” The Faceless Being said, grabbing the orb and giving it to Rumi. “Hold the orb. See if they say anything to you.”

Immediately, it glowed with a tint of lavender that illuminated the space between them, the same bursts of cosmic purple dots overtaking the orb. Minari turned away and closed her

eyes, the brightness too sharp for her vision.

Rumi gasped. "I'll have a daughter."

The light subsided into a soft pink before returning to its original pearly hue.

"I'll be a mother."

"What else did they show you?" The Faceless Being asked.

A single tear fell down Rumi's cheek. "They only showed me a vision of me and my daughter. She is the last one I'll have before we return to the chamber. But it wasn't in this lifetime."

"Did they explain what that meant?" Minari asked.

"We need to live to our last life on this earth as quickly as possible," Rumi said. She faced Minari, the orb still in her hands. "But they didn't tell me how."

"They promised both of you something?" Minari asked

"Now that Rumi is backing up my claim of them talking to us – yes." The Faceless Being crossed their arms and nodded. "They promised me I'd retain the essence of my spirit in every lifetime."

"And they told you that from a vision?"

"Yes!" The Faceless Being grabbed the orb from Rumi. "I've seen my faces – *many* faces – and they are all beautiful. I get to be as fluid as I want in *all* of my lives! And when I wanted to get closer to that, it showed me Pachua taking the orb from a spirit, and then that spirit vanished. Poof!"

"And you think it was Pachua stealing the orb?" Rumi asked, almost sounding convinced.

"Why else would we be here? Why else would she be so protective over it? Here," The Faceless Being said, offering Minari the orb. "I think you'll change your mind if you hold it."

Minari stared at the orb, its hue glistening a creamy sheen, and accepted it from The Faceless Being. She was taken aback by how delicate the orb felt between her hands, like the sheer pressure of her thumb pressing against its smooth surface would cause it to crack.

“What do you see?” Rumi asked.

Minari blinked, and as soon as she did, it glowed a warm yellow, like the comfort of sunlight on a chilly day. Flashes of light glowed around her like the illumination of a lightning bug. She appeared in a foggy area brighter than the others. Within that space was the orb.

In that space, Pachua had been slicing through the fog with her tail, before taking a break then setting the orb on the ground. A large cloud consumed the orb. Pachua grinned, drool bubbling at the bottom of her teeth. Her scales held the same magnificence, but they were more reflective here, more bright.

Flicking her beard, a low snarl emanated from her chest. Ahead of her was another cloud that had placed itself between her and the orb. She chased that cloud until it dissipated, then a bright light shone. With it, Pachua grew a fifth talon, and from her third eye grew a fifth horn. Pachua's brilliance then shined so brightly as if she herself was made of gold.

The vision vanished. Minari was again surrounded in the dark with only the full moon to brighten their surroundings. “It doesn't look like she stole the orb.”

“I think she did,” The Faceless Being said. “Pachua only wanted power. Why do you think we were only able to get answers? The spirits were warning us!”

“What if we gave it to her as a gift?”

“Something this powerful as an item to share? I don't think so.” The Faceless Being took the orb from Minari. “You're the first person to be created, and even Pachua said the spirits chose you. Do you think they wanted you to create humans *Pachua* wants or humans the *spirits*

want?"

The Faceless Being walked deeper into the mud pit. Their long white hair swayed from side to side, their long fingers wrapped tensely around the orb.

Rumi and Minari followed. Ahead, The Faceless Being turned and waved their arms, the orb shimmering. They all came across a smoother, undisturbed area in the mud.

"This is what we need to do," The Faceless Being said. "Because we can't give the orb back, and we're both at odds with what that vision meant, we need to test it out to see what is true. We need to make a human without Pachua's help."

"What about the vision of my daughter?" Rumi asked.

"Pachua told me there are many ways to create life," Minari said.

"With what I saw in my vision, I was happy." Rumi closed her eyes, almost as if she was wanting to be with the vision now. "I would like to try."

The Faceless Being crossed their arms. "I think, then, out of the safety for our friend, that we can confidently try to create a human made like us at first, and if that fails, then we'll rely on Rumi's vision."

Minari and Rumi nodded in agreement. Minari breathed in deeply. She crouched then dug her hand into the soft and cold mud. For a brief moment, with the earth as an aid, she felt the tether that connected her spirit to her body.

Minari closed her eyes, focusing on the coolness sinking into her arm.

"It didn't take that long to make you, did it?" The Faceless Being asked Rumi.

"I don't believe so. I remember being born as soon as the sun disappeared for the night," Rumi said. "But things like this take patience."

"I don't know," The Faceless Being said. "Something doesn't seem right."

Minari sighed. "It's hard when Pachua isn't here to help me."

The Faceless Being snapped their fingers. "Aha! Think about what you learned," The Faceless Being said. "Do you remember anything before you were created? Maybe it was a feeling, or maybe you brushed it off as a dream, but do you remember? For me, I felt warm. I was a blob trying to look at the shining sky through bubbles floating on a lake. The first thing I remember seeing was the faint glow of the orb and an imugi slithering behind you."

Rumi nodded her head. "I remember something similar. My first memory is of vines twisting and wrapping all around me, protecting me from the wind. Then I remember seeing you, Minari. The whole experience energized me and made me feel positivity and love."

Minari sighed and closed her eyes. Focusing on the mud, she said, "I remember being pushed out of clay as if something was squeezing me out of the earth. The spirits guided me during that, but they disappeared before I found Pachua."

"What else?" The Faceless Being asked. "Don't stop talking. Keep pressing your mind for answers."

"The spirits are depending on me to find something out about Pachua."

The Faceless Being *cheed*. "So I was right."

"We don't know that for certain," Rumi said.

"I remember..." Minari said a little louder, her eyes still closed, "wanting to be here."

"But what about Pachua?" The Faceless Being asked.

"We watched Pachua create this world. She left before me, and I left as soon as it was complete."

"Do you remember seeing the orb before you got here?" Rumi asked gently.

Minari took a big breath. It was difficult for her to recount these memories as if they had

been hidden beneath a labyrinth of cryptic dreams. "Yes. Yes I do."

"Describe it to us," The Faceless Being said.

"It was all-encompassing. It felt like I was in the chamber. My only remaining purpose was to sit and wait, and it was terrible. But after the sitting and the waiting, I forgot I was sitting and waiting, and then it became a thing of curiosity as to why I was sitting and waiting, which turned into me no longer sitting and waiting and returning to the spirits. That's when the orb was no longer there and Pachua was already on Earth."

The Faceless Being and Rumi gasped. Minari opened her eyes. The puddle of mud formed permanent waves as if molded from the wind. Below her buried arms appeared a feint glow.

She was creating a human.

A soft purple hue leaked ahead of the orange along the horizon. As they admired the world's beauty as if it'd be the last time they'd see it, the ground beneath them rumbled. Minari turned when she couldn't feel the new human grasp her hands. Pachua was slithering with great speed toward them, indenting herself deep into the mud, slicing the air before her.

The Faceless Being ran and was not too far behind with the orb in their possession. Pops of mud suctioned their feet as they fled, slowing them down. Quickly, Minari tried to pull her arms out to flee with them, but she was stuck. Rumi grabbed Minari's arms to try and yank her out, but she was stuck.

Within seconds, Pachua's sinuous body tore through the mud and caught up to The Faceless Being. She coiled her tail around their waist then lifted them from the ground to meet her face. The orb had lost its brilliance, fading to a dull cream. "Why?" Pachua said behind clenched teeth. "WHY?"

The Faceless Being struggled in Pachua's grasp, their pale skin turning flush from tension. "Hhhhhh," The Faceless Being said. "Hhhhhh."

With deep huffs, Pachua plucked the orb out of The Faceless Being's hands with her four-taloned claw. From its center appeared that small cosmic dot, shaking with anger.

Rumi looked at Minari, who gestured for Rumi to run. Rumi, with fright, ran toward the Faceless Being as fast as she could. Within a few strides, she tripped over the front of her hanbok and fell onto the cool, squishy ground.

Minari's anxiety heightened. Something pulled her shoulder down toward the mud. With all her might, she tried to pull her arms out. As the edge of the sun lifted behind the horizon, a sliver of light beamed past the clouds, polishing the blossoming sky.

With a huff, Minari focused on the pain radiating through her arm that sent sharp, rippling pinches through her body. Even with Rumi's strength combined with hers, nothing budged.

Pachua had been seething. Her grip on The Faceless Being tightened until the light of the orb returned. Despite the orb being back in her possession, Pachua still held onto the rage in her body, her feathers standing on their ends.

Once scales shook and her feathers lay flat from the wind, Pachua roared. The Faceless Being screamed beneath her, and Rumi screamed as well, a cacophony of terror and regret. "Stop," The Faceless Being said behind sobs.

Minari pressed her eyes closed. She needed to concentrate. Whatever was pulling her under the mud continued to tug at every nerve. The rigid grip tightened around her wrist.

At the same time, the orb flashed, radiating a powerful beacon into the sky, widening like a funnel as it reached the clouds. As soon as the orb's flash ended, the normalcy of the sunrise

returned. Pachua roared again, raising her snout to the sky. Her frayed feathers molted, revealing her dull and slimy aquamarine scales.

“We had no ill intention,” The Faceless Being yelled, trying to regain their breath as they struggled in Pachua’s grasp. “We only wanted answers you weren’t able to give us, and we received them!”

“Do not speak to me of answers,” Pachua said, her voice screeching. She bore her teeth at the orb. Thick goo seeped from the crevices between her scales and dripped off the corners of her mouth. Pachua hurled The Faceless Being far across the clearing toward the lake. They twirled in the sky before plopping into the water.

With her four-taloned claw clenching the orb, Pachua leaped into the air, gliding with a sinuous pattern. The sheer force of wind from her tail pushed Rumi to the ground.

Minari took a deep breath, trying to shake the pressure from her heart. In a moment before her chest steadied, a voice called to her from the mud. *I’m almost there*, the voice said. *Wait for me.*

Sweat trailed down her back, her hanbok clinging to skin. She grunted through tightened lips, pulling as hard as her adrenaline would allow. She used that energy, her breath, to pull.

After a few more tugs, mud swelled at the surface. A person screamed, their voice gurgling as if they was suffocating. What had grabbed onto her wrist was a hand. It had popped out of the mud, its fingers clasped around her wrist. Maneuvering her own hand around, she grabbed onto their wrist and pulled.

With a gust of wind, Pachua’s head was the first to ascend above the clouds. She roared again, her head pushing as much as it could toward the sky. But her body wouldn’t follow. In a winding downward spiral, she began to fall. As she did, the orb shone a gray light, shifting the

beautiful colors of the morning sunrise to a bleak hue resembling a brewing storm as if the sky itself was in decay.

Using her entire body as leverage, Minari pulled with as much force as she could until her arm popped out of the mud. As she fell backward, she expected someone would climb out of the earth just as she had dug herself out of the clay. But when the spray of mud cleared and she traced the hand clasped to her wrist, the arm had detached itself from its body. The human was still stuck somewhere inside the mud.

Minari tried to pry the detached human arm from her skin, wanting instead to run into the grove's safety with Rumi, but its fingertips gripped her wrist tighter. Pulling at its dangling, bleeding elbow, the arm refused to unclasp itself. Without bothering to try and peel it off again, she stood and ran toward Rumi. The arm flapped with every step, its bloodied end bumping into her as she ran.

The human arm jolted, throwing Minari off balance. She fell on her side halfway through the pit, her side slapping onto mud. As blood seeped from its open wound, the arm tried to pull Minari back to its body. Its fingers gripped harder around her wrist. Minari sat up. The pain in her wrist ached her bones. Her hand lost feeling.

Ignoring the arm's pleas, Minari cleared the mud field then caught up to Rumi. Pachua's scales lost their sheen, and patches of her feathers were missing, many of them floating down beside her. Pachua roared again, her face still directed toward the sky.

Minari kneeled to Rumi's side and pulled at her shoulder. "We need to go."

Rumi's forehead stuck to the back of her hands. "I can't move," she said, her voice muffled.

"What do you mean? Let me help you."

“Look!” Rumi cried. “Look at my hands.”

Her fingers, pressed against the ground, had rooted into the earth. Her knuckles turned into bark, their divots hardening, creeping up her elbows. Her knees had fused together into a twisting trunk, forming the base of a tree.

“We messed up,” Rumi said, tears dripping onto her roots as they stretched, her tight curls lightened from black to green, each lock growing thicker, branching upward into leaves. “Have we cursed ourselves?”

Rumi’s body solidified into bark. Her limbs turned to thick branches. She grounded herself deeper into the ground, her canopy stretching until it covered Minari. Heart-shaped leaves floated downward as Rumi grew higher, her trunk becoming wider, pushing Minari away.

Minari stood. Pachua’s shadow formed on the ground, spilling past Rumi’s canopy. With one last look before Pachua completed her unfortunate descent, Minari ran toward the lake with a desperate plea that The Faceless Being hadn’t suffered the same fate.

As she ran, Pachua landed on Rumi’s canopy, the thrash of her branches breaking as it tried to support Pachua’s weight. But only a few bristles snapped and fell to the ground, her base remaining strong. Pachua’s tail wrapped around Rumi’s trunk, her claw gripping onto branches. Above her canopy, Pachua stood tall, the orb fully purple in her claws embracing the cosmos like a black hole.

Pachua’s orange eyes glared at Minari. Her third eye, just above her flared nostrils, darkened. Like sunflower seeds being scraped from its flower, Pachua’s remaining scales shed from her body. They buzzed and hovered in the air, the sounds of them knocking into each other like clashes of thunder in a clear sky. With a roar, they jetted toward Minari.

Minari turned toward the lake, wanting to get past the tree line, but Pachua’s scales flew

faster than she could run. They sliced through the air behind her, cutting her arms, her cheeks, her legs. Some lodged themselves in her shoulders.

With faint steps and a staggered balance, the dismembered arm jolted again. Minari collapsed to her knees. Pachua's scales circled above her.

As day spilled fully into the sky, and the only thing she could control was the lingering vision of blue light, Minari remembered thinking that this life was supposed to be peaceful.

Pachua's scales clouded her vision like static until it was dark again. But before she lost complete consciousness, the arm flicked itself, the bloodied end slapping scales away from her skin.

Immediate clarity entered her head, and she acted. Standing quickly, Minari surged forward, using the arm to shield herself through the cloud of scales toward the lake that met the morning sun.

When Minari breached the edge of the grove, in a space where the scales didn't follow, she looked back. Pachua had lifted the orb, her scales reacting to its movement, her beard tickling the orb like an antenna. Once it reached the grove, the trees began to decay and topple over, disintegrating under the wind's pressure until they turned to ash.

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Escaping into the grove, Minari weaved her way through collapsing trees. Her steps, silenced by the blanket of white ash, dampened the chaos that surrounded her. She ran until she fell into the lake, the water hidden below ash.

At another end of the lake, The Faceless Being crawled out. Their white hair draped over their shoulder, dragging along the ground. As The Faceless Being stood, they stepped back with their arms out to act. With shaking fingers, they pointed to the arm still gripped onto Minari's



## Chapter 6

Entwining herself through splintering trees as roots ripped from the ground, Minari followed a familiar winding path in the grove with the man's arm still latched onto her wrist. Pillows of ash hovered like fog as trees clashed, their desecration rising. Boogers leaked, her nose itched, and tar-like slime coated the back of her throat. With thick, congested coughs, she lifted her hanbok from her neck, tightening it above her nose so she could breathe.

In the distance, a single tree, the one Rumi was born from, remained intact. Its leaves had fallen, as did many of its branches, but its hollow trunk stood strong. The top was jagged and loose, its logs broken and hanging on by a sliver of bark.

As Minari curled herself inside the tree to settle her mind, the entrance's frame crumbling in her palms, she had hoped a positive warmth would bring her to a place of familiarity, but it was silent and cold.

Concentrating on the tightness from the arm's grip, she thought of that tension and nothing else. She had hoped to use this moment to think about how to escape from the grove, but the only way out was through the ocean. She knew Pachua would be just as proficient in water as she was on land. It was her world, after all.

Minari wondered if she would end up like The Faceless Being and Rumi. She also wondered if the masks had fled too, but she held onto hope that one would show up as a guide. She leaned back, rough bark pressing against her spine. She studied the texture behind her, focusing on the grip tied to her left wrist, until a soft rhythmic beat emerged from its fingertips like a pulse. Minari opened her eyes.

Appearing through a thick cloud of ash was a man. An empty sleeve of his gray-colored hanbok flapped in the wind. The man approached Minari with a clenched fist, his deep amber skin streaked with mud. His wide heart-shaped nose flared as he approached with a running pace toward her, his gait sturdy, his tense squared jaw defined and sharp. His legs, thick and wide, took silent strides toward her.

Thunder clapped in the sky, seizing the space around them, causing the hairs on Minari's arms to statically cling to the atmosphere. Rain fell, pelting the ash.

Minari said nothing as he approached. When he stood in front of the tree's hollow, he wiped his face clear of mud then slicked his long black hair from his face. With a smooth voice, the man spoke. "Can I please have my arm?"

Saying nothing, Minari held out her hand, his detached arm still clamped on her wrist.

“I’ve been trying.”

“Sorry,” the man replied. The detached arm loosened its grip then fell to the ground. Blood rushed back to her nerves, and her body relaxed, the release from her wrist bringing her relief. Minari’s sore skin was red and indented.

The man rolled up his empty sleeve, picked up his detached arm, then tried sticking the bloodied end back to his body. No matter how many times he held his arm in place, twisted it against his shoulder, or shook it loose before trying again, nothing worked. In his fourth attempt, he lost his grip then dropped it onto a pile of ash in front of the hollow. As soon as a pillow of fluff wafted into the air, his arm disintegrated.

The man fell to his knees, digging through the ash in a minor panic. Sighing, he leaned back and closed his eyes. “I guess not.”

He looked up with a sigh. His crescent moon-shaped eyes, a soft brown, held no hatred that Minari could sense. With a melting sadness that wanted her to disintegrate into the ash with his arm, she leaned deeper into the hollow, its cavity surrounding her with cover. “Do you know if the spirits cursed us?”

“What do you remember?” He asked as he stood, leaning his only arm on the tip of the hollow that compelled her to honesty.

“Nothing useful,” she replied, focusing her gaze on soil that had found its way inside the tree. “I only know I’m supposed to break the tether that binds my spirit to this body.”

The man chuckled then looked to Minari with quizzicality as if he was surprised that she had nothing more to say. “And did you break that tether?”

Minari shook her head.

The man furrowed his brows then looked around. He kneeled in front of the hollow, lifted

Minari's hand, then rubbed the sore spot on her wrist. "Please remember."

Minari sighed. Tears formed in her eyes. "I remember inviting you here. Thank you for accepting."

"The plan worked. Pachua agreed to invite us to Earth as humans. I accepted your invitation so I can bring you home. You've been ignoring my messages."

Minari dried her eyes with her sleeve. Sage's thumbs were still caressing her skin, his grasp lowering to hold her hand. Minari shrugged. "I still don't know if I've broken my tether. Pachua was supposed to help, but she is angry with us."

The man chuckled. "That's exactly why I chose to live my first life with your last."

"Who are you?" Minari asked.

The man gently pulled on Minari's hand to lead her out of the hollow. "Sage," the man said as he waited for Minari to regain her footing on the ash. He held care and worry in his eyes before letting her hand go. "I've been trying to think of what to name myself. I've decided on Sage."

Minari sniffled. "How are you still alive?"

Sage smiled with a serene calmness. "I was never gone. I guided you here then guided myself to follow. You're like a beacon."

Minari smiled. "My name is Minari. It's nice to meet you, Sage. Are you here because you know how to break my tether?"

Sage sighed. Trying to hold onto a semblance of his smile, he tilted his head as he breathed in slowly to try and explain. "No, but I will help you find out how. It will also help me to break mine. Ours are intertwined." Sage sighed then crouched on the ground. "Luckily you pulled me from the chamber."

Sage pulled a sickle from his rope belt, the tassels dangling from his legs swaying as he held the handle in his grasp. Moving to a small bamboo patch, he sliced long bamboo stalks and stacked them in front of the hollow. Minari crouched then dug through the ash until she found ground ivy. She pulled at their vines, grabbing enough to rope the bamboo stalks into a raft.

“The earth is the last cosmic egg in the universe,” Sage said without hesitation. “When it hatches, every spirit will return to the source and cease to exist. The spirits believe the return won’t be seamless because many have not lived to their last life, but I disagree. I was the guiding spirit before being born as a human to make sure this world does hatch. You, as the elder spirit, and I, agreed it would be disrespectful to impede. The spirits, after volunteering you here, have been selfish. They’ve been trying to ‘save’ themselves by destroying the delicate process of the cosmos and upending our very reason of existence.”

“What do you suggest we do, then?” Minari asked as she knotted the raft’s frame. “Should we wait here for Pachua to enforce our return?”

Sage shook his head. “It is not our time to return yet.”

The sky ahead of them grew darker, the clouds’ increasing density hiding the sun’s crispness that should have overlayed a bright blue morning sky. In the distance, a faint buzzing swarmed, chiming like Pachua’s scales were following the wind toward them. Minari tied the last knot on the raft as her hands trembled with nervousness. The raft was small, but it would be enough for them to travel along the water.

“This will work,” Sage said. He held his hand out to help Minari up. “I’m glad your hands remembered how to tie a knot.”

“You’ll have to fill me in when it’s safe from Pachua,” Minari said and she accepted his gesture. “I have so many questions.”

Sage let her hand go then lifted the raft, holding the end on his shoulder. In the distance, Pachua roared, her booming cries causing the ash around them to rise from the ground. Pachua was getting closer. "We need to leave," Sage said.

Minari nodded. Together, they ran away from Pachua's cries, deeper into the grove, toward the shore of the ocean. Beyond being filled with a sudden urge for nostalgia and a return to peacefulness, Minari felt defeated knowing that this situation could have gone so many different ways.

Looking back, Rumi's mother tree began its final process of decay. The outside of its trunk expanded, tearing itself away from the roots until it split into four parts, one of them bent toward the ground, its tip touching ash.

Minari and Sage began her quick strides toward the sea. As Rumi's mother tree faded in the fog of ash behind them, a rising flood greeted them. Their feet splashed on the ground, and white ash clung to the bottom of their hanboks.

A cacophony of sliding mud cascaded away from the ground like a giant clashing avalanche. Minari remembered hearing that sound before. She was too scared to look, but she knew Pachua was slithering toward them, knocking down stranded trees in her path, breaking them away from their roots to decay into ash like the others.

They ran, quiet as they could, the only distractions ahead of them being tree branches they jumped over, ash that slowed their pace like quicksand, and loose twigs that frequently caused them to stumble. Despite these obstacles, they kept their stride, remaining side by side.

They quickly moved out of the grove and ran across the plains. Minari knew Pachua could find them despite their silent footsteps imprinting on the ground, but Pachua had not caught up to them yet.

Pachua's orange eyes glowed through the fog, the orb shimmering along the plains. Her scales circled the air, her shed skin dripped a gooey layer. As Sage and Minari held each other's gazes, the deep brown of his eyes comforting some of her fears, Minari thought Pachua would kill them. Sage gestured his head to keep running. When their feet splashed onto water reaching their knees, Sage lowered the raft, helped Minari on, then pushed the raft until it caught the wave outward.

Sage said nothing to her, but she could tell that he, too, was afraid. The current, rapid and undulating, sailed them away as Pachua boomed her way across the ashy plains. She roared despairingly. Minari's heart clenched with guilt knowing that she could have trusted Pachua fully instead of enacting selfishly like the rest of the spirits.

Sage pulled a bamboo oar and rowed, the raft moving quicker out to sea along the waves until a quiet fog separated them from Pachua. Near them, a large splash sounded like a pebble falling into water.

Sage lifted the oar and placed it along his crossed legs. He lifted his finger to his lips, gesturing for Minari to stay as quiet as possible. They stared at each other in silence, their breathing heavy, sweat pilling on their foreheads, their hanboks soaked. They waited for the current to push them farther out into the ocean and for the anxieties of the ocean below to subside. In silence, after a calm remained in the atmosphere, the only sounds that rang were creaks from the raft and the rhythmic splashing of wading water.

Swirling Sands of Living Remembrance

*in my presence, the sun guides creatures through thickets of forgotten paths. maybe soon when  
the land's air becomes too hot and you're guided to caress the indents that have healed  
into scars, i will show you visions of your future and what you hope it will become.*

## Chapter 7

The ocean's current slapped the sides of the raft, sending droplets of cool water onto Minari's clammy skin. She closed her eyes and succumbed to the ocean's undulating energy. It dizzied her enough until she puked wild vegetation and fish, leaving a residual dryness on her tongue from the swells of salt in the air. Her breath tasted pungent.

Aside from water quietly lapping against the raft like a faint drum, the air was silent.

The sun tried beaming its light through the fog, and Minari had often looked to the clouds for a sense of where they might have been going, but the sun was too difficult for her to find.

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Sage, with the oar balanced on his legs, stretched his neck. He had been unmoving with his eyes closed. "I trust the current will take us where we need to go. Pachua created it, so it will follow her ultimate will."

"Do you think she wants to kill us?" Minari asked.

"This world is supposed to be peaceful," Sage said, "but she never promised it to be easy." Sage shrugged then wiped his face with his hanbok. Dried salt flaked off his skin.

Minari dipped her hand in the sea. It was out of curiosity at first, thinking she'd be able to bring The Faceless Being and Rumi back, but that hope faltered when her fingertips pruned, her skin dried, and she grew cold. She kept her hand in the water, hoping something would happen.

Minari thought about what she was trying to accomplish by choosing to come here, but she also thought back to the confusion they all felt, as well as the guilt, for not understanding why. "What can you tell me? About before?"

Sage opened his eyes. "After coming here, I remember being stuck underground when my spirit tethered to this body. I was suffocating. Then," Sage continued with a smile on his face and a tense, quiet voice that spoke as if he had prepared to share this thought. "A pinhole opening above me gave directions on where to dig, which ended up being your hand, so I took it. But then in another tug, you ripped off my arm."

Sage grabbed the armpit of his empty sleeve and flapped the end until it clapped the air, echoing along the water. They laughed together, detailing the horrors of the time, making peace with the memories.

"When I breached the surface, I remember Pachua coiled around a tree with the orb in her claws. Then I saw you running into the grove with my arm."

"I'm sorry about your arm," Minari said.

"I forgave you as soon as I popped out of the mud," Sage replied. "I consider it more of a condition leading to my birth."

Minari smiled. "I don't think I was a patient spirit if I agreed to do all of this."

"You were actually the most patient," Sage said with a grin. "You may not feel patient being in a new body. In my experience, you not being patient in this life means you need to learn how to be patient again."

"Knowing, doing, and learning are all different things."

"Yes," Sage said. "They certainly are."

Smiling, Minari talked about the grove and how she met The Faceless Being and Rumi. She shared her feelings about family and how Sage had come into the picture, shedding a few tears as she narrated the tale, either from the sorrow of remembering how she lost them or the regret from all of it being preventable. She fidgeted with the end of her hanbok in silence, the once intricate golden embroidery adorning the edges of a shining moonstone now scratched and frayed.

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The ocean's current rocked them onto shore. With excitement, they crawled out. The fog had dissipated, allowing them to find the land. The shore held an unfamiliar plot of bright sand reflecting the sun.

Minari washed away the grime that piled up on her skin, cleansing herself of the seaweed and algae that had crept into the boat then shook her arms, pockets of fluid releasing from her joints. The relieving ache in her lower back came when she stretched by lifting her arms over her head and arching her back, re-energizing her body for the long journey ahead.

The push and pull of the water that their bodies had grown accustomed to dizzied her when she took a few steps, so she lay on the sand and stared at the vast blue sky through closed eyes. She could stay there for a while, she thought as the waves reached her ears and pushed her hair above her head.

“Don’t fall asleep - we have places to go, things to do, a journey to be had.” Minari’s eyes fluttered open. Sage had been laying next to her.

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After wiping sand from their skin, they climbed a dune separating the shoreline from the mainland then entered the desert. Minari expected the sands to darken as they moved inland, but the sun reflected its sheer crystals like freshly lain snow. The brightness hurt her eyes as she moved forward. She stared at her feet when she walked.

Minari climbed the dunes, the sands cooling her clammy skin. Occasionally, as they trekked forward between the dunes, she would step on hard sand slates that had cracked and curled at the edges, the layer crunching under the weight of her feet.

She tried her best, however, to step around thorns poking out in the sand. Sometimes she couldn’t avoid them and winced when they threatened to puncture her skin. After she stepped on a painful one that drew blood, she rubbed her feet. The ocean was no longer visible.

Taking a small break, they both sat at the bottom of a dune, the chill of the ground soaking into their backs, the fine particles creating a sheer layer of coating on their skin.

“What if what we’re looking for is not this way?” Minari asked, her voice hoarse. Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth when she spoke.

“Let’s hope we’re going in the right direction then,” Sage replied with the same desperation.

“Is hope really the only thing we have going for us?”

Sage laughed. “No, but we certainly can hope we’ve agreed to go through this type of suffering.”

“What if we accomplish nothing?”

Sage shrugged. “Then you try again in a different life with a different body until you get it right. If there’s enough time anyway.”

“In that case, I guess I’m sharing some of my punishment with you. It seems like it’s all the same in the end.” Minari turned to Sage. He was still leaning against the dune. Behind him, the clouds highlighted the sun’s radiance, appearing pink and orange in splotches before transitioning into a beautiful shade of lavender.

Critters made their way across the clear and undisturbed terrain, their footprints quickly hidden by the wind. One critter in particular slowly crawled across the dune in front of them. When the wind came and Minari shielded her eyes from blowing sand, she had a slight fear the beetle would drift away with it. But as soon as it stopped, she searched for her little friend. It was still there, walking across the sands, just slightly rolled away from the path.

The trail it followed led it to a shrub on Minari’s left, half of which was buried in the dune. Its large-bladed leaves lined at the edges with serrated spikes stuck out from a common center, caked in a velvety layer of sand.

The wind blew again. With it came an object flying past her face. Sage reached out to catch it. It was a mask.

Immediately, a colony of sand sprites ascended from beneath the dune, tiny kernels trailing off their tiny bodies. These sprites wore spiked leaves on the back of heads from yucca, hanging tunas from the ends of their long pipe-like flutes, and cactus sticks burned of their spikes

for the drums. They kicked up sand from below their tiny bare feet into a cloud of dust and played a happy song, one that invited beetles and crickets to come out from hiding and dance with them.

The bugs kicked sand into little mounds below them until the wind wiped away their work, but their dancing, happy bodies didn't mind. They kept on dancing, treating the wind like a figureless participant in their jamboree. As the wind blew, a familiar old woman's shaky voice sang, her melodies bringing an air of somberness.

Sage eyed both the sprites and the mask with quizzical eyes. Like the others, this mask was made of wood. It had a pointy head and chin, bulging attentive eyes, a thin pointed nose, and a wide toothless smile. Carved wrinkles rested under the eyes and where its smile curved into a fine point on its heavily wrinkled cheeks.

"What is this?" Sage peered through the mask's eyes, its wood hovering in front of his face. Before Minari could warn him, the mask's identity took over.

The mask looked around frantically, as if searching for something. With a hunched back and protruding butt, the mask shambled their way in a circle as if moving with a cane. It stepped in rhythm with the sprites, twirling with the beetles and crickets until the song quieted to exist in the background. "He's not here? What is a frail, old woman to do! We've looked everywhere."

"Who are you looking for?" Minari asked, surprised by the sincerity and care through the mask's voice.

"My husband," the mask said. "My name is Halmi, and I'm looking for my husband – he's missing."

Minari thought back to the other masks, but none of them were sweet old ones that she could recall. "What does he look like?"

“I don’t remember – it’s been so long that his face has dissolved from my history. I just know he’s no longer with us.” Halmi chuckled a cry. “We were separated from many wars we didn’t wish to be part of.”

Her back arched into a deeper curve like something on her mind weighed on her shoulders.

“It’s as simple as that. It pulled us apart. Then it separated us. Then when we got close to reunification, it started again. Then they removed him from us. Then it was said to heal by promising a freedom that never came. I’ve been trying to reunite with him ever since.”

“Wow,” Minari said, trying to understand. “Do you think you’ll ever find him? If it’s been this long, I think he would understand if you’ve moved on.”

“We’re family,” Halmi said, her voice filling with anger and sadness. “I am ill-fated. I know this. I’ve always refused to hang new clothes for my ancestors. That would be acknowledging the suffering they’ve put us through, and I refuse.”

“Do you really believe you’ll find him?”

“I have no idea,” Halmi said, “but I will not stop trying.”

With a tremoring hand, Sage took off the mask. The sand sprites dissipated, their bodies transforming back into sand. The bugs paused for a moment before flying, hopping, and crawling away. “We need to find him,” Sage said, his hand still shaking, sweat trailing down his forehead.

“These masks can’t be trusted. This is what Pachua had told me before, but I didn’t listen, and then we wound up here. Now I want to listen. Halmi might be nicer than the others, but we shouldn’t trust her.”

“No,” Sage said, gripping onto the Halmi mask. “You don’t understand. Halmi isn’t here to cause mayhem. She’s using the mask to find her spiritual bond, and she’s been searching for

years. Years! Well beyond the time we have lived. She's sure he's here. We have to find him. They must be reunited.”

Minari nodded. Stress piled up on her nose. “Where do you think the old man is?” Minari asked.

“He could be anywhere,” Sage replied, his voice hoarse.

As they talked about where to go, a deer with a mask shining like gold ran in front of them through a crevasse between the dunes. Sand sprites blossomed with a sorrowful bell when the deer's hooves touched the sand then sank back into the ground when the deer moved. Before going out of eyesight, the golden-masked deer paused to face Minari, its eyes reflected a copper hue under the sun. Just like them, it seemed as if it was in search of something. The deer, soon after, trotted away.

Minari dragged herself down the dune then ran through the crevasses to follow the deer, kicking sand up behind her, embracing the fire in her thighs from pushing her body forward. As she ran, with Sage frantically catching up behind her, the ground became more crystallized as if the sand had been continuously stomped into the ground, permanently forming a trotted pathway.

She paused to take a breath after a long stride, staying conscious of following the song of the sprites. Her lungs, devoid of moisture, struggled to expand. In the heat, they swelled and toxified her throat, bile coating her esophagus, trailing into her lungs. She coughed blood. The deer came into the path again then paused, its shimmering mask facing them, waiting.

They continued to follow, creeping along the dunes and stepping lightly on the path. Where it turned, they turned. The deer ventured through the dunes as if it knew exactly where it was going. Soon, it led them to water.

The sand sprites jumped into the oasis as the deer drank, their bodies sinking underneath

the water. Others pulled out large cactuses from inside their flutes and soaked them in water, their melody turning bubbly. Water sprites, upon hearing a new tune, jumped out from the water and danced the song of a warm summer day.

## Chapter 8

Minari and Sage fell to their knees at the edge of the oasis. Minari cupped water into her sandy palms to rinse her dry mouth, splashing her face in the process. The golden-masked deer scurried away after a few gulps, taking the sand sprites with it. The water sprites morphed back into droplets. When Minari took a breath and basked in the refreshing waters that dripped off her chin, a shadow from the bottom of the waters swam toward her, glinting a sheen of turquoise.

In déjà vu'd fear, Pachua's aquamarine scales, glossy with slime, glistened under the sun like a kaleidoscope. Her slicked-back mane stuck to her freshly forming scales. Frayed feathers clung to her sides, almost barren. The orb, caged in her talons, retained some of its pearly hue

with colors of cream and light pink, except its vibrancy had faded tremendously into a dull shimmer.

Stretching her mouth into a wide smile, her pointed teeth shining, Pachua leaned her wide head forward, her four horns framing the sun. "I've been cleansed," Pachua said with calmness behind her voice. Her tongue slipped out of her mouth to tickle Minari's nose. Pachua's three orange eyes welled with tears that glided off her scales and dripped into the oasis waters. "I will no longer be persuaded to heed the requests of the spirits."

With a quick breath and an air of fear of Pachua reverting back to rage, Minari lied and said, "That's absolutely true. I bore witness to it."

Pachua lifted her body high in the air to expose her fresh underbelly, newly scaled and back to its pristine golden hues. "You've witnessed my transformation? Ah, yes. I do remember you being there."

"What else do you remember?" Minari asked, her breath quickening, her heartbeat swelling in her ears, her eyes shifting between Pachua's belly and her frayed back. If Pachua looked behind her, she would have realized how much damage the stress the spirits had caused her.

"I remember you all being there... except for this human." Pachua slithered toward Sage, slicking her tongue out and tickling his face. A feather from her back fell onto the sand, the sides of its once soft vane now pommeeled, the image of its luster frayed, the spine of its quill broken. "I see you've succeeded in creating another one without me."

"What else do you remember?" Minari's palms sweat. Beside her, Sage remained silent and unshaken.

"Why are you so curious?" Pachua raised her sinuous body in the air. "All that matters is

I've embraced my freedom, and now I no longer have the pressures of completing this world solely on your behalf. I can design it how *I* wish, and I will build it to benefit all of us. No spirit will influence me with their selfish wishes again."

"This place is proof of that," Minari said, lying again. She was so fearful of Pachua remembering what happened in the grove that she wanted to say anything to avoid that harrowing shift of perspective. "And we're here to help you fully realize your potential."

Pachua tilted her head, gripping the orb in her claws. A tiny purple dot bled from the orb's center, tainting its creamy hue until the orb resembled the shadows of the cosmos. With a low snarl of impatience, Pachua dove into the oasis before the orb's hue shined again like a beacon.

Sage, who had not uttered a word, was quick to speak as soon as the waters returned to a calm state. "Is lying to her the best choice?"

"She believes she's free. What if she is?"

"Her state of mind exists as an illusion. Her belief that she has opportunity and choice, when she clearly doesn't, will lead to dishonest living that will derail her entire goal. It will continue to pollute her sensibilities."

"Is that my problem?" Minari replied. "She should have enough knowledge to be able to separate falsities from reality."

"She is wise yes," Sage said with caring caution, "but even those who are wise need guidance. She has been suffering for almost a thousand years – do you think she'd know what freedom would look like without healing from the trauma of her past first?"

Bubbles from beneath the oasis rose to the surface, and Pachua's snout soon followed. Skulking along the waterline with her nostrils barely hovering above, Pachua swam in a slow

circle. The orb's hue calmed to a pearly color. "I need to show you something." The slits in Pachua's irises focused on Minari.

Minari's heart quickened. "What is it?"

"Trust me," she said. And for once, Minari wanted to.

In an instant, Pachua wrapped her slimy tail around Minari's waist then pulled her under the oasis waters. Minari had thought it was shallow, but as she held her breath and Pachua swam deeper, Minari suspected she would drown.

Minari closed her eyes. Water gushed up her nose and entered her throat, causing her to cough. With burning lungs, Pachua's scales blended with the environment as the sun disappeared above them, growing darker the deeper they descended.

Minari's body soon began to convulse. She was choking. Her eyes bulged out of her head like they wanted to pop out of her skull. Bubbles left her breath as she tried to scream. She clawed at her throat. With her eyes wide open, the bubbles eventually stopped. Tightening her tail around Minari, Pachua pulled her deeper to the oasis floor. Pachua then snaked her way through an underwater tunnel until they reached a large air pocket to a cave.

It was pitch black. As soon as Pachua placed her on a cool, smooth slate of rock, Minari heaved on the cave floor, coughing to release pressure from her lungs. Droplets of water landed on her hands. Her heart beat loudly on the sides of her head. Saliva dripped from her open mouth as she tried to catch her breath. (softly) (Bibi)

"That was awful," Minari said. Her voice echoed in the cave. She lay her cheek on the soft icy rock to focus on breathing. Even with her eyes open, she couldn't see a thing.

"Would you have agreed to come if you knew of the experience beforehand?"

(also softly) (Bibi)

Minari stifled a laugh. "Telling me to take a deep breath might have helped."

Once she was ready to sit, Minari opened her eyes and let herself adjust to the darkness until only the outlines of her fingers became visible. She shouldn't have been able to see anything, but she eventually found Pachua's smile silhouetted from the orb's glimmer. Pachua's tail coiled as she stood on her hind legs, her scales as dark as the depths of water surrounding them. Her four-taloned claw gripped the orb, and its pearly shimmer sparkled with hints of the cosmos.

"What am I doing here?" Minari asked, her voice echoing as if it was coming from a space that wasn't her own. (low and strenuous) (Bibi)

Minari looked around. The whispered name rang a familiarity inside the cave that caused her eyebrows to furrow. There was a curious approach the voice had, which felt as if it was waiting somewhere in the darkness. Pachua didn't seem to take any notice to the voice.

"I wanted to show you something," Pachua said.

Following the orb's light, Minari focused her gaze on an ashen tree that resembled the fallen grove, moments before collapsing into disintegration. Its vines had burned away, leaving spiraling indentations that coiled around the tree as if it was the only thing preventing it from toppling over. The canopy's leaves that Minari remembered to be heart-shaped and pointed heavily at the tip were torched. Scanning the leaves in search for persimmons, she found nothing but charred fruits hanging delicately on the branches, some already burst at their core.

With a sigh, Minari followed disintegrated vines around Rumi's mother tree. When she got to the hollow, she jumped back with fright and fell to the rocky ground. Inside was a half-decayed body wearing a hanbok strikingly similar to hers. A thick rope lay on its lap, untethered. It was then when she realized the corpse was her own. (low and soft) (Bibi)

Minari breathed deeply. "Is that really me?"

"Yes," Pachua said, flicking her tail. It scraped against smooth stone, whipping a thin layer of water against the wall.

"Is this what Choraengi meant by death?" The odor surrounding the tree was stale in the back of her throat and smelled of pungent meat.

"I see you are still asleep, despite your tether being broken."

Minari stared at her decaying body. Pachua laughed. Minari wasn't sure if it was snide or humorous.

"Please feel free to return to the chamber whenever you find it appropriate, unless you have another life to live. Mago already informed me of the nefarious wills of the spirits," Pachua said as she flicked her tail against the damp cave rock, the scrape echoing off the cave walls with a pitch that clenched Minari's ears. "I suspected as much. It's no matter – your time here and how you've spent it will make much more sense when you return."

"What about helping you?"

"Helping me?" Pachua said with a surprise behind her tone. "How can you help when you don't even remember who you are or why you're here?"

"I want to assist. The spirits must return to the source. While I'm here, I will help you with your duties. We want you to fulfill your thousand-year promise."

Pachua flicked her tail. "If you are insistent on suffering through another mortal life, then so be it."

"What does it mean to be asleep?" Minari asked, staring at her former self. "I remember what happened at the grove – I just don't remember dying."

Pachua flicked her tail. "Out of the grace of my forgiveness and the responsibility I still

have to myself and the spirits, I will tell you. It happened away from the grove, through the polluted mindset of believing they could fix what was already perfect. Utilizing the tools of the world like a respected companion is something I intended, but to refine them to something that cannot return to the earth? It's a bastardization.

“In its place, I've created this desert to avoid permanent calamity. It is where life will act as a test for the spirits who find themselves here. If they refuse to understand and appreciate the gifts Mago and I have bestowed within and outside of their vessels, they will witness, in horror, the final world egg hatching. But if they listen to and harmonize with the land, then they will return to the middle world to live their next life.”

“And this will help the spirits?”

“It's what I know will work, and it is my decision. It's a finicky thing, this world as the last cosmic egg.” Pachua slithered around the tree. A familiar creeping of echoed rhythms from boulder drums beat softly from cave sprites. Their song engulfed the space around them, resting in the back of Minari's head like a reminder of something important.

From the ash that blanketed its base, Pachua dug up a mask from the stringed hinge of its jaw with her tail. The mask was similar to Yangban's. Its jaw was detached and strung together at the hinges by two threads of twine. Its wide forehead scrunched tightly with pronounced and heavy wrinkles, its wooden cheekbones defined. A large lump rested in the middle of its forehead. Its crescent moon-shaped eyes stared ahead, the light of the orb beaming through its slits. It was old like Halmi. Pachua shook ash off the mask.

“This is Chung,” Pachua said. “He is a wise spirit who has spent many lifetimes studying the art of mindfulness and purposeful thinking. He will be able to explain. He is one of the few masks I trust.”

“You said not to trust the masks,” Minari said, thinking of Halmi.

Pachua slapped her tail on the rock, the sound changing the pace of the cave sprites' rhythm. “I did say that, didn't I?”

“What will a spirit mask be able to explain that you can't as the creator of this world?”

“Perspective,” Pachua replied. She offered the mask to Minari, who accepted it with reluctance. “Since being here, you have missed many lifetimes in the middle world. Generations have come and gone. The world has since changed dramatically. Chung will provide wisdom.”

Pachua's tail dug into the ash to pull out a small creature that uttered (loudly with a bit of surprise and mischief) (Bibi).

“I despise these creations,” Pachua said, her tongue rolling out of her mouth. “But the spirits have been fond of these dokkaebi in every world, so I thought it fitting to include them on this one.”

Pachua placed Bibi in front of the orb's light. This creature's head, made of heavy clay, bobbed back and forth. Its chicken feet stomping on the ash, creating a cloud of dust around its body like smoke. As Bibi stomped, it grew bigger until it matched Minari's size (strongly, with a challenging aura) (Bibi).

“Bibi overheard our conversation about the golden mushroom,” Pachua said. “Bibi has been on the search to protect it ever since. It has had difficulty finding it.”

(Bibi), Bibi said, the echoes of its expressive voice bouncing off the cave walls unlike Minari's or Pachua's.

“There are many masks looking for the golden mushroom,” Minari replied. “Last I heard, Sonpi and Imae are doing research to locate its exact whereabouts.”

(Bibi), Bibi said. (Bibi!).

“Bibi, you will not find the golden mushroom. It is not destined to happen – Mago foretold it.”

Bibi clawed its meaty finger toward Minari, asking for the mask. Minari offered it to Bibi, who quickly put it on.

The cave sprites crescendoed within the darkness of the cave, shadow-like bodies breathily humming into metal pipes to create the sound of stagnancy.

Chung’s voice echoed through Bibi, his voice brighter. “The golden mushroom,” Chung said as if processing Bibi’s pleas for its search. “Didn’t Bibi ask about the golden mushroom just yesterday?”

“Indeed it did,” Pachua replied. “What advice may you offer us, Chung, about the knowledge of the golden mushroom?”

Chung laid a hand flat atop the other in front of him then cut the wind apart in a flat line. “There have been many moons who have paid testimony to the slaughtering of innocents under its beaconing light because of their obsession with the golden mushroom. I do not wish to partake in the bad influence the golden mushroom has on the body and the mind.”

“Chung, it is only advice to not allow the golden mushroom to toxify us. Will you please share your knowledge?”

Chung crossed his fingers in front of him then leaned a chicken foot atop the other. With a long breath in, Chung nodded his head slowly. “All right. For my good friend and someone who I have always viewed as an older sister, sometimes a mother, I will share the little knowledge I remember of the golden mushroom, only to allow it to depart from my mind. Perhaps this is the best time to share. Will you allow the space for me to release this burden?”

Minari nodded. “Yes, please.”

Chung nodded then sat cross-legged on the ground. Bibi's chicken legs appear to be floating. Chung tilted his mask forward to tell the tale. "For centuries, the golden mushroom has caused chaos and strife among this peaceful land that Pachua has spent many, many years planning up for us. The golden mushroom, while relatively newer on the world eggs, is newer to many on this one. With that newness comes curiosity and an innate desire to crave more just because we are wired to jump into every hole of immaturity to test our readiness for our next life. We would be unwise in a wise body, wise in an unwise body if the golden mushroom is ever to be found. It is dangerous to be curious. Be cautious."

"What should we be cautious of?" Minari asked.

Chung tilted his mask lower. "Be cautious of those who toxified themselves because of their pursuits for the golden mushroom. If there is an attempt, obsession plants itself, and it will root if allowed space to fester."

Chung removed his mask, returning to Bibi's body. Bibi tossed the Chung mask toward Minari, it twisting through ash on the ground below her. The cave sprites lowered their tune, but their shadowy bodies continued to bob up and down to the rhythm of water droplets splashing against wet rock.

Pachua sneered, her long white beard picking up Chung's mask and offering it to Minari again. "Chung has another thing to share. Bibi used Chung's spirit to deliver the message about the golden mushroom. It prefers you stay away."

(BI BI.) Bibi stomped its chicken legs in a wide-legged stance, its stick-like talons kicking up ash.

"Okay," Minari said and tried to hand Chung back to Bibi.

(loudly, defiantly) (Bibi!). Bibi stomped furiously on the ash. Minari coughed.

Pachua's tail flicked. "You need to wrestle Bibi. The dokkaebi play ssireum." The boulder sprites' hollow rhythm increased in fullness, which thrilled Bibi.

"Wrestle it?" Minari asked.

Bibi smiled with thin blood-red lips spreading wide across its face to reveal long and sharp canines, tiny front teeth, and a snout resembling a snarling tiger. It had thick curvy eyebrows like its colorful mane. Like spirals of energizing vigor, it stared at her bug-eyed. Bibi widened its stance, a long rope belted around its blue body, with legs resembling a chicken's. (laughing) (Bibi)

"A lot of spirits usually run away from the dokkaebi, but unfortunately for you, that's not an option."

Bibi leaned its head forward, the short blunt horns on its head shining with the orb's light. (BIBI)

"It's ready," Pachua said. "Do you remember wrestling one on a different cosmic egg?"

"No," Minari said, her voice shaking, her palms sweating. "I don't know how to wrestle."

"This is unfortunate. Perhaps I should allow the spirits close to their last life remember some instinct from their past lives. Fun like this should always be remembered." Pachua flicked her tail. "The concept is simple, really. It's the fluid technique in the execution that defines whether you've perfected the craft or not. It requires both patience and endurance."

"Has Bibi perfected the craft?"

Pachua laughed. "Not in the slightest. These goblins wrestle for fun. But that doesn't mean Bibi doesn't know what it's doing. The good thing is you only need to win one time for Bibi to take a request."

Minari took a deep breath and nodded while listening to Pachua explain the rules of this

wrestling game. Taking as much information in as she could, she prepared herself. When she was ready, she placed the Chung mask on the ground then entered the drawn circle in ash that Bibi made with his chicken foot.

Bibi handed Minari a long fabric belt, and she wrapped it around her waist and thigh following Bibi's instruction. They kneeled in front of each other on the ground, each locking a wrist into the belt. Minari's heart pounded with fear and anxiety as she sized herself in comparison to Bibi's massive gait despite Bibi adjusting himself to the same weight class.

"Is this fair?" Minari asked.

"Bibi cheats all the time," Pachua replied without a care. "But it isn't cheating horrendously. Just enough to make scoring a victory more difficult than it needs to be. Bibi wants its opponents to cry."

Bibi readied its hands immediately and waited patiently for Minari to prepare her own grip. Feeling nervous and adjusting her grip on the belt tight enough on her wrist to feel tension but not so tight to where she'd lose feeling.

Preparing the countdown, Pachua repeated the basic rules. "Remember: No pushing, nothing above the waist, don't try to break your opponent's grip, and always keep both hands on the belt. You win by throwing or pushing your opponent out of the ring or by forcing your opponent's knee onto the ground. Are you ready?"

(BI BI).

"Ready," Minari said. The cave sprites thrummed their boulder drums.

Bibi lunged at Minari. Its hands pulled her belt, its knee pushed against her inner thigh to lift her feet slightly in the air before slamming her shoulder on the ground. A cloud of ash poofed into the air (with victorious cheering) (Bibi).

“*Psh*,” Minari said, rubbing ash off her face. Minari regained her position in front of Bibi and loosened her shoulders. After preparing the start and taking a few breaths, she lunged at Bibi then locked her wrist onto its belt. Minari tried lifting Bibi the same way it tossed her, but Bibi kept sturdy.

Minari took a breath then readjusted her chin to rest on Bibi’s shoulder just as Bibi’s rested on hers. Bibi, however, pushed Minari with as much of its might toward the ground, its hands tugging at her belt, its chin pressing heavily into the crevasse in her shoulder. With an unprepared back foot slowly sliding along the ash, Bibi touched her knee onto the boulder.

Bibi immediately let go then jumped back. (happily with aggressive confidence) (Bibi).

“Bibi is left-handed,” Pachua said with a tone that implied Minari should have already known. “You’ll have more success if you focus on its right side.”

Minari nodded and breathed deeply, setting up another round. She positioned her stance wide, pointing her toes out, then lowered her hips to engage her core. The cave sprites lowered their rhythmic beats, building up a crescendo as Minari prepared herself. With a readied gait, Bibi lunged at Minari.

Flexing her body in unison, Minari pushed Bibi with her chin, using her chest to hold her strength and her legs to press Bibi as close as she could to the ground. But in response, Bibi skipped backward, which loosened Minari’s grip, then twisted her belt until she lost her balance. She fell onto her shoulder outside of the ring before falling into the water.

Fumbling her way onto the boulder, her arms gripping on the cool rock, she pulled herself up with heavy breaths and shaking muscles.

(with victorious cheers) (Bibi).

Swiftly, Pachua lunged at Bibi with a four-fingered grip. Two talons curved around the

rope on Bibi's waist, one rested on its shoulder, and the other pressed against the ground for leverage. Within seconds, Pachua turned her wrist and wrestled Bibi's knee to the floor.

(angrily with acceptance of defeat) (Bibi).

"You'll get better," Pachua said, "and when you learn to have fun, it will be more rewarding." She grabbed the Chung mask then handed it to Bibi, who gracefully accepted the mask from Pachua then put it on.

Bibi's clay head peeked through the mask's edges. The cave sprites' beat quieted to a melodic tune.

With heightened anxiety and an elevated heart rate, Minari asked, "What new perspective can I gain?"

"*Sh*," Chung said. "It's been years since I've experienced a place as serene as this, and I would like to exist within the silence and listen."

And so they sat in silence.

Minari tried to listen at first, but when she asked for advice on how, she was met with shushing and an air of 'figure it out.' With a sigh, Minari closed her eyes and tried to do what Chung instructed her to do, but it was difficult. She still had not recovered the memories of the chamber, nor of any lives since her previous mortal life. With another sigh, she thought it disappointing that she couldn't achieve her final spiritual life with one mortal life, but then she remembered that other spirits have struggled with their lives and have taken many mortal lives to accomplish one spiritual year's worth of growth, and then she realized that early on in her own spiritual path she had probably done the same, so she felt more at peace with her progress and decided to try and figure out what Chung meant by existing within the silence and listening.

Pachua's tail flicked ash into the air, poofing in bursts. The sound brought calmness to

her mind, but after a while, it wanted something else aside from the silence existing within the cave. She tried to concentrate on something visual, but the only light that existed was from Pachua's orb, and Pachua had since huddled away for a small nap, the orb acting like a flickering candle to highlight their meditating bodies.

Closing her own eyes, Minari tried to listen some more, tried to exist within the silence more, but she eventually dozed off. She awoke when her open-mouthed head tilted to the side.

Orienting herself and wiping drool from her chin, Chung remained across from her laying flat on the ground, fingers folded over his blue belly, chicken legs crossed.

"You aren't finished listening," Chung said, crossing his ankles. "How do you expect to gain perspective if you don't listen?"

"I'm done listening," Minari said. "May I ask another question?"

"If you believe you're finished listening mindfully," Chung said. "Where are your curiosities leading you?"

"Why is Pachua confident you'll be able to help us? She doesn't like the spirits." Minari expected Pachua's head to turn, but her frayed feathers remained still.

"Aren't you also a spirit? Doesn't she seem to have taken a liking to you? This is one of those things you need to listen for: Why would an all-powerful being who claims to hate the spirits treat you as a friend?"

"She has no choice," Minari replied. "The spirits are making her create for them."

"Perhaps," Chung said. "Or perhaps you are still involving yourself as a participant in the spirits' foolish endeavors. Perhaps the beloved Mago will know. I don't know why she chose me out of all the other spirits to offer perspective, but perhaps I can give you a lesson I learned from the past."

While Pachua slept, Chung told a tale with the voice of the smoking tiger about his many lives on the last cosmic egg and how he had lived as a wandering monk. Over his lifetimes, leading to the lifetime Minari will be traveling to after she passes the threshold into the middle world, there were many battles fought over the philosophies of living.

“It was a fatal error,” Chung said with regretful caution behind his voice. “I failed to teach these spirits of the many pathways to achieve fulfillment. They learned there was only one pathway to several goals.”

Chung shrugged before pulling out a long pipe. With a swipe of a match along the jagged ground, Chung started a flame and lit a tiny bowl at the end. Taking one long breath until the brightness of the bowl dissipated, Chung exhaled a large poof of smoke that twirled in the air. After a brief second, Chung coughed.

Bibi bowed his head then took off the Chung mask. The cave sprites halted their tune and dropped their rocky bodies onto the cave floor like pebbles rolling off a cliffside. Bibi, with its large clay head, jumped around happily (screaming with joy) (Bibi).

## Chapter 9

Drips of water from the cave's ceiling echoing on the damp cave rock brought Minari to a moment of reflection. Chung spoke as if Minari should have known everything he was referring to, but it brought more questions instead of a new perspective.

Pachua flicked her tail and snuffed. "Chung taught you how to listen and receive mindfully – what more is there to know?" There was a bite to her tone.

"Chung said you treat me like a friend."

Pachua raised her torso in the air, the orb's light bouncing off the cave's ceiling. "I treat you like a friend? I don't view any of the spirits as friends. Some are more tolerable than others,

so that may be what Chung thinks qualifies as 'friend.'"

"Is anyone your friend?"

Pachua laughed. "I have a few, yes. Some less powerful than others. These friends treat me with respect, and I treat them with respect. They're my family."

"Family. Is that what's missing from my life?"

"What are you trying to ask me?"

"I want to know why I was sent here without your knowledge."

Pachua lowered her snout to face Minari, who was sitting cross-legged on the cave floor. "You're the only one who knows the answer to that. Every spirit who is fortunate to visit here is trying to get to their last life. Perhaps you are finally at the realization that you are on your last life. Wouldn't that be something?"

"What about the other spirits?"

"Every spirit is on a different path, and only they know what they need if they listen and receive mindfully. Perhaps you rushed to get here because you wish to make reparations for how your kind has treated me. Or perhaps it was because you wanted to be the first to experience this final world."

"Is this really the final world?"

"Oh I've said too much, haven't I, Mago?" Pachua grinned, the corners of her mouth stretching wide to display her sharp jagged teeth. "While I don't know what the spirits need to progress in their lives, I've watched and I've waited and I've learned what many of you are trying to accomplish. And that is because of Mago. She is my family."

Pachua showcased the orb to Minari, its beautiful pearly hue swirling.

"Do you hear her charming voice? Feel her song's charm gently sweep across your

flesh?"

Minari nodded. She did feel more at peace, almost like she could have forgotten her troubles. "You're the creator of the world. Should you be relying on Mago as much as you are?"

"You are the first human of this world – should you be relying on its creator instead of the land you were offered life from to tell you how to live?"

"That's not the same thing," Minari said. "I just need guidance."

"I have guided you! I have told you to care for this world until your last lives and to respect the land I've meticulously built for your benefit."

The orb highlighted Pachua's frayed back as she slithered around Minari. While Pachua's magnificence hadn't faltered, Minari became saddened by Pachua's depreciating state since the spirits shimmied their way onto this land, wrecking and destroying, tainting and bastardizing.

"Then help me to remember. Please." Minari kneeled then bowed like Rumi, the back of her hands touching her forehead, lowering her palms to the ground, before she reverted to her original form. "Please."

Pachua flicked her tail. As Minari bowed, expecting Pachua to lift her from the boulder and flick her into the water, possibly slam her against the cave wall until she exploded into clay, Pachua remained calm.

She whispered something to the orb, which did not seem to be receptive of anything Pachua had explained, until Pachua lifted Minari's chin with her four-feathered tail. With a calm demeanor, scaly ooze detailing Pachua's long, sinuous body with a reminder of the past, Pachua breathed steam onto Minari's face – and in an instant, thinking beyond the putrid fish breath or the lingering horrors of Pachua making a snack of her head, a pang of remembrance on the square of her forehead blossomed.

Spiraling with the cave sprites' melancholic tunes, her vision faltered slightly to her own past within the chamber, remembering that she, alongside Pachua, were as close as sisters. A hypnotic sensation lingered when she took a deep breath, the smelliness of Pachua's teeth keeping her contained within the vessel she chose for herself, until Pachua fanned her face with her tail.

It was then when tears escaped Minari's eyes and an overwhelming warmth crept under her skin from the crevices below her neck. Pachua paid no mind to the inconsistencies of the human body, her snarling face turning more serene as the sprites clanked their tiny rocks on their boulder bellies to detail the recollection dripping from Minari's chin: She was more focused on the mist-like form hovering above Minari's skin.

With a swift motion of her tail, Pachua encircled Minari with her body then breathed into the orb, a bit of slime from Pachua's degraded form leaking onto Minari's skin. It hastened the mist's design, enshrouding the immediate area around Minari contained within Pachua's bodily walls, until Minari breathed one more breath in deeply to inhale the essence that had been wanting to escape her.

Pachua smiled with her scaly lips and jagged teeth. "After witnessing and learning and remembering, are you ready to finally be a sister to the other spirits?"

"I am," Minari said as Pachua wrapped her tail delicately around Minari's torso before diving in the water to return to the surface.

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Minari's head safely breached the waterline. Her eyes, stinging with algae, tripped her orientation when Pachua released her, and she fell into the water. With a strong grip lifting her from her armpit and to shore, Pachua led her to safety with her tail delicately wrapped around

Minari to prevent her from falling again.

When Minari felt the sand beneath her feet, her stability returning to normal, Pachua released her grip. The empty sky shone brightly. The sun was warm. Pachua slithered out of the oasis, streams gliding off her healing scales.

Across from them was a circle drawn on the sand. Inside the ring was Bibi, its intense gaze in full concentration under the sun, and Sage, coated in sweaty patches of sand equally matching Bibi's dedication. Sage's thick brows furrowed as he tied his hanbok's empty arm sleeve in a knot to avoid sand from getting in, the excess flapping in the wind.

"I don't know anything about the golden mushroom!" Sage said, his breathing ragged, his eyes teary and intense. "Please believe us!"

Sage and Bibi approached the ring slowly, and with a strong and fierce nod of their heads, they gripped onto each other's belts. With a movement of their legs moving forward and a pause in anticipation, they mashed their shoulders into one another to push each other out of the ring.

Bibi, with its two-armed advantage, pushed against Sage's right shoulder, causing him to wince and lose balance. Sage adjusted his gait until he regained his footing, not allowing Bibi to catch him being momentarily caught off guard by a bodily imbalance.

Bibi rammed into Sage's shoulder repeatedly until his body curled inward. (Bibi~) Bibi said with alacrity and a celebration of a victory yet to have arrived. (Bibi~)

Sage took Bibi's brief joyous chants to restore a strong grip on Bibi's belt and pull, his chin pressing into Bibi's left side. Bibi switched his stance, its foot claws shuffling with knocky knees, the chicken legs stilted yet sturdy. It shifted its chin then lifted Sage's pressure with ease while pressing against his right side.

It was then when a wide-eyed panic set into Sage's face and he grunted with fierce ambition, his breath loose and weary, his stature shaky, until Bibi took the opportunity to capitalize on Sage's moment of anxious hesitation.

With a giant breath, Bibi squeezed its short wide face with Sage doing the same. After a moment of patience and strong perseverance, Sage tried his absolute best to prevent his knee from touching the tip of the hard-grained sand, his legs clenching ferociously, until Bibi delivered the final push that brought Sage's knee to the ground.

Minari and Pachua both clapped in admiration. The athleticism was outstanding.

Sage dropped both of his knees on the ground in front of Pachua. With heavy breathing, a defeating sadness encroached the air. After a brief moment of silence, a single tear streamed down Sage's cheeks. "Please tell Bibi I don't know anything about the golden mushroom," Sage pleaded.

Pachua's tail flicked against the sand as Bibi stomped its chicken legs on the ground. "Bibi heard from the spirits that you had information about the golden mushroom. They told it the golden mushroom had the scent of sage surrounding it. Bibi thinks that meant you."

"I don't know what sage is supposed to smell like. I only know it means wisdom." Sage breathed deeply. "That wisdom is something I thought Bibi could help me with."

"Bibi will not be able to offer you wisdom." Minari said. "Bibi is seeking for the golden mushroom. It is trying to trick you."

"No," Sage replied. "Bibi said some things about the chamber I was curious about. It promised answers."

"What can a master of wrestling and a keeper of good fortune offer as knowledge?" Pachua asked.

Sage opened his chest to the sky. "All the knowledge I've ever had from the chamber separated from my spirit when I chose this vessel."

(BI                      BI).                      (BI                      BI.)

"Bibi thinks you only want to best him," Pachua said.

"Indeed I do," Sage replied. "I will not be picked on by someone who thinks it can bully someone just for a treasure hunt."

(Bibi.) Bibi said, pointing to the orb.

"Yes," Sage said, nodding, his breath ragged as his loose sleeve flapped in the wind. Sand piled on his face. Sage wiped it away with his hand. His somber face made him sink deeper into the sand. "Bibi was going to tell me why I came here. The longer I'm here, experiencing the plains of the mosaic in-between, the more I forget – Why? Why? Why?"

Pachua flicked her tail. "I know every spirit from the chamber. I've watched every one grow for the past thousand cosmic years. I also know you never wanted to live any of your spiritual progressions in a world and you prefer the familiar comfort of the chamber. Yet here you are in the flesh, asking me, out of anyone you could be asking, why you came here. Did you not think to seek answers from yourself before offering me this burden of curiosity?"

"Why am I here, Pachua?" Sage asked with hope hidden behind his voice.

Pachua rested her head on the ground, her snout poofing sand away from her with a heavy breath. "There's no sense to speculate on uncertainties of the past," Pachua said. "It will pollute our minds and send us in a spiral of illusion. Even after all my years of living, I still have difficulty listening to that advice. That has made living in this most recent century difficult, especially for healing."

"Is it normal I don't remember why I'm here?" Sage asked.



“No,” Pachua replied, flicking her tail.

Bibi huffed before stomping on the ground, kicking up sand. Pachua ignored Bibi, her tail flicking back and forth with similar aggression. Bibi responded by spinning rapidly, its feet lodging into a point against the ground, and drilling a hole in the sand. Within seconds, Bibi disappeared underground.

“I almost won,” Sage said, his voice croaking. “I just needed one more chance.”

“You will gain that chance,” Pachua said, her tail flicking back and forth. Pachua gripped the orb in her claws and surveyed the land with her enormous head as if skeptical of Bibi’s whereabouts.

“You don’t understand,” Sage replied, “Bibi was going to tell me why I’m here. Bibi was going to explain my origins *beyond* my origins. I need to know what to do! I knew before coming here – I swear I did – but I need to know now so I know what to do with myself.”

Pachua, with a full-bellied laugh, lowered her snout into the sand, meeting her three orange eyes with Sage. “You think Bibi has the knowledge to tell you something you don’t already know without the temptation to gain something in return? I am the one who has given you the opportunity to grow in this lifetime without knowing what you came here to accomplish. To disrespect the process is to disrespect the work of all your past lives.”

“Then why was I created? What was the purpose?”

Pachua leaned forward, her beard floating around Sage’s face like she wanted to detect something amiss from his creation. Sage’s chest rose and fell as he breathed heavily through his wide heart-shaped nose. “Why do you think?”

“It wasn’t my choice,” he replied.

“You could have accepted death,” Pachua said. “You could have returned to the mud, but

you chose to stay. Why?"

A strong breeze whistled past them, carrying grains of gypsum that pelted the sand below them with the sounds of a scattered violin. Inside the orb, its colors swirled around like the desert, brewing a storm within its pearly shimmers. "I don't know," Sage said with a sigh.

In the silence between them, the sand shook beneath them. Bibi popped out from underneath Pachua's claws and wrapped its sticky hands on the orb. Taken by a moderate amount of surprise and shock, Pachua gripped more heavily onto the orb, remembering the traumas of the last time it was stolen from her, but Bibi, with a brief wrestling warmup, was successful in wrestling the orb away from Pachua's grasp.

With the orb contained within Bibi's grip, it leaped into the hole it made in the ground and dug itself away like a mole. The sand closed in on itself. Before Bibi was able to dig away, Pachua lurched her claws into the ground to fish for Bibi.

With a dramatic stance, Pachua curled her body inward, using her hind legs as leverage to pull the orb away from the ground, her tail as an added push, Pachua pulled with all her might, her talons trembling as her body dug into the loose sand.

Bibi, however, drilled itself deeper into the ground like tree roots wrapping around the veins of another, using its neighbors to hold steadily onto the soil. After the sand hid Bibi from view, the orb slowly descended beneath the grains.

"Mago, please!" Pachua exclaimed, her third eye squeezing shut while the other two focused on the orb slipping from her hold. "Don't let this happen!"

Bibi pulled the orb successfully out of her hold and tunneled away.

With a shrieking cry, Pachua slithered along the sand before digging herself underground to chase Bibi beneath the dunes.

Sage, who had been sitting with sadness, came to Minari's side, his soft brown eyes glazed and his golden amber cheeks tinged with red from wiping away tears. "It's exactly what Halmi warned us about. We need to get out of here before this place ends up like the grove."

With a rapid heartbeat, the memorious disaster of the past looming over her mind, a large gust of wind swooshed across the sandy plains, pelting grains of sand against her skin. Bringing her hanbok's sleeve to shield her eyes so she could see, Minari caught a glimpse of a dark funnel swirling above Pachua in the distant sky.

The winds picked up, the gust roaring as the sands swept. The funnel was growing, swirling violently in a winding gust. It took seconds before the tip of its funnel kissed the ground they walked on.

Sage grabbed Minari's hand, and they ran. The moving sand acted like waves, burying their legs as if they were walking on quicksand. They tried their best to escape the sandnado as the wind pushed it toward them as wafts of sand lifted from the ground, jettisoning toward the spinning wind taking up half the sky. The pull of the wind and the quickness of the sandnado slowed them down, both of their legs sinking deeper when they moved.

Gripping their hands together as tightly as they could, they continued to run until the sandnado picked them off their feet, pulling them inside the gust of its wind. Swirling around and around, Minari kept her eyes closed and held her breath, gripping as tightly as she can onto Sage's hand. The drum rushes of sand filled her ears until it felt like the insides of her stomach dropped and the weight of her vessel was no longer a responsibility.

When it felt like the sand stopped gathering on her skin, she opened her eyes. Thousands of feet above the ground with Sage by her side, the sandnado lifted them high above its center before funneling them down its eye. The weight of the fall pushed her abdomen as they

descended. As they twirled, hands still clasped, the winds slowed them down enough until it delicately placed them back on the ground.

With shaking legs with fear, they both collapsed. Minari suspected the sandnado would run over them and pull them elsewhere, but it widened its eye, keeping them directly in its center. With a roaring gust that did not drag them toward its sides, Minari took a breath of relief.

Sage, with a soft and shaky voice, chuckled. He gripped Minari's hand before releasing. He used his extra sleeve to wipe his face from sand and tears.

## Chapter 10

The sands, shining like crystallized snow under the sun, frictioned against their callused skin. Their sweaty bodies hiked the dunes to find a way to escape the confines of the sandnado. The eye was slow-moving, pushing them at a slower pace than Minari had expected. They glanced nervous-eyed at each other as they attempted to peer through the rough winds picking up sand and vegetation, making it almost impossible to see beyond the confines of the gust and to determine where Pachua was in recovering the orb.

Sage remembered enough about his past in the chamber to note the severity of Pachua separation from Mago, like a thief stealing a child from its mother, will create waves of suffering

upending the reality the child was meant to grow part of. But Minari, who knew how Pachua had been affected from the first disconnection between her and Mago, wanted the orb to stay gone so Pachua could begin to heal.

“Do you think Pachua will destroy this land too once she gets the orb back?”

“No,” Sage replied with calmness. They had taken a break on one of the dunes, their backs resting on the cool sand. They gazed at the sky through the eye of the sandnado. “I think she’ll be happy to be with Mago again. It’s Bibi’s obsession with the golden mushroom that got us here.”

Minari leaned against her elbow and faced Sage, whose empty sleeve was raised above his head. “It’s happened before. There’s a magnetism Pachua feels from the orb. I remember her thousand-year promise and her duties to the spirits, but it has taken a toll on her. There should be no reason for her to continue being the orb’s caretaker.”

Sage shrugged. “I don’t think any of the spirits know what will happen when she finishes this world. What will happen to them and what will happen to us? I would prefer not to experience that, but even Pachua doesn’t think everyone will be able to make it to their last life.”

Minari nodded then leaned against the dune, the worry in her essence piling as she went over again and again the experiences she had in the chamber and the responsibilities she now felt. She was at a loss of what to do, and the only one who she could have relied on had unremembered. “I think we were right to want to take away the orb from Pachua. I think our intentions were misguided, but the more I reflect on the situation, the problem exists with the orb, with Mago, expecting Pachua to uphold something that she is struggling to accomplish. How is that fair? Mago left us to figure out the state of the cosmos, and Pachua’s only help was me, and you, and right now neither of us are of any assistance at all.”

“Do you think any of the masks will be able to help?”

Minari chuckled. “I don’t think Chung will be of any assistance. I met him in the caves, and the only advice he was able to offer was how to pay attention to the silence. And to breathe. He also warned us to not be curious about the golden mushroom.”

“I’m actually thinking about Halmi. She has spent so many lives searching for her husband after they got separated. She hasn’t stopped. Can you imagine how lonely she must feel not knowing where her family is?”

“It’s a small moment of time,” Minari said. “I’m sure they’ll find each other again. Maybe they’ll meet in another life.”

“It’s not that simple,” Sage replied. “That type of memory haunts you. By saying they may meet in another life is saying the suffering and lack of reparations are minor, forgettable details. That is not true. Life is timeless. I know this. But after many lives without a chance to rekindle, don’t you think she sometimes wish there might be a pause in the suffering so she can experience small moments of peace? I’m lucky enough to have an opportunity so quickly to be reunited with my family. Where is that for Halmi?”

“You think there’s a chance they’ll meet again?”

Sage wiped tears away with his empty sleeve. “I certainly believe so. I want to believe we’ll figure out how to live our last life.”

Minari smiled. When she did, sand sprites rose from the depths of the dune playing an airy, cheerful tune on wooden flutes. One by one as they sprouted, the sandnado picked them up and spun them around and around, their merry melody playing in the spiraling breeze. It was dizzying.

Minari, as if she was prompted, searched for the mask she knew was going to appear to

them. She had hoped the fanfare was meant for Halmi's husband, but it was Halmi herself who rose from the ground in front of Sage, her wrinkles appearing like they had been carved much deeper than the last time they had met.

Sage put on the mask, and Halmi's words were the next to leave Sage's body. "I wanted to visit you again. It's been lonely, but having met you made me feel more like I was home again. I felt more connected to myself by being with you. How are you doing? How is Pachua? Have you found the rest of your family? Have you been eating well?"

"Hi Halmi," Minari said, wondering why Sage put her mask on instead of giving Halmi to her. She had thought Sage would've wanted to ask Halmi questions. "We wanted to talk to you about our family, actually. We should be meeting them soon."

"How wonderful. Sage told me how you all got separated, and my heart shattered when the sprites told me what happened. Even Bibi shed a tear for that poor boy. No one should be forced to go through that kind of pain." Halmi grabbed Minari's hand, caressing the back with her thumb. "Even you, sweet child. Some responsibilities as the elder sibling can be too much to bear."

"What about you?" Minari asked, thinking about the burdening responsibility Halmi had regarding the years-long search to reunite with her husband. "Sage has been looking every which way for Toktari, hoping he'd show up."

Halmi sighed. Tears from Sage peeked through the mask, dripping from his chin. Minari wasn't sure who was supposed to be crying. "There are many things I wasn't aware of when it happened. Many horrors passed us. I know now that it may not be in this lifetime when I find him. Maybe not even the next. But I will eventually reunite with him. I have to hope I will."

"How do you know?" Minari asked. "How do you know there will be time, even after so

much has been lost?"

Halmi chuckled. "There is always never enough time or too much time. While it can be disappointing, the hope I have for the future is good enough for me."

"How is that not focusing on the now?"

Halmi smiled with sadness. Minari wasn't sure if it was Sage or Halmi who had made that decision. "That *is* focusing on the now. Concern for the future is affecting your choices right now. Train yourself to reflect on these choices you're wanting to make. Are they good decisions to lead you into the future you want? Are they shortcuts that will create chaos for others but secure a future selfishly for yourself? With practice, you will always think of now with the future as influence."

"I don't understand," Minari said. She imagined her future, of her removing the orb's influence from Pachua, but she couldn't think of then and now at the same time. They were too separated, and Minari worried she was doing something wrong.

"You will," Halmi replied. "One day, it will all click, and you'll know."

The sand sprites shifted their song to a harmonic melody, one that vibrated strings with deep hypnotic chords. They played their wooden flutes as they flew in the vortex. Many of the sand sprites played with the wind, acting as if they were walking up and down steps as the sandnado kept them lifted. With intensity, a familiar mask rose from the sands.

It had a large lump in the middle of its forehead that spread its thick eyebrows far apart with crescent moon-shaped holes. It had a large and wide nose centered on the mask with pointy lips that jutted upward, almost touching the tip of its nose, the bottom of its jaw unhinged and separated, tied together by string. Minari hypnotically placed the Chung mask on her face.

"Hello Chung," Halmi said.

“Hello old friend,” Chung replied with a hint of positive recollection. “It’s interesting to see you again after so many years.”

Halmi laughed. “I still have the same woes as before, but the feelings are less saddening now, despite the situation being even more sad. But I don’t wish to seek advice. I want to tell you I’m going to accept peace.”

Chung laughed, and it brought out a deep, bellous laugh from Minari’s stomach. “It is both hopeful and distressing to hear that, considering you’ve sought me for countless advice in the past. Nevertheless, I am happy for your progress in letting go. It’s the most burdensome thing to have weigh on your shoulders – so much so it has hunched you over!”

Halmi laughed and slapped Chung’s shoulder. The laughing quickly turned to silence when Sage removed Halmi from his face, speaking to Chung himself. “How can you be all right with Halmi abandoning her loved one? How can you encourage that?”

Chung sighed softly, as if he was preparing careful words with respect to Sage’s feelings. “Halmi is not going to let this experience take power from her anymore. Does it mean she no longer has feelings for her husband? Does it mean she will stop looking for him? Does it mean she is the happiest without him in her life? No. It simply means she is moving on from the weight that has caused her all this unhappiness. The opposite of unhappiness is not happiness. It’s peacefulness.

“Peacefulness on this world is to allow the world to live and for us as spirits to be honored that the world allows us to be part of her natural growth. It’s to participate in the beauty Pachua designed for us and to care for her so she allows us to live to our last life. Why do we seek to excavate her? The land is sacred.”

“Pachua may have designed the land this way, but the spirits have already altered her

fate.” Sage took a deep breath. “How can we know whether Halmi and her husband haven’t found each other because of Pachua’s design or because the spirits have gotten in the way? We are disrupting the natural order!”

“We don’t know,” Chung said. “The only thing we have the power to do while we are visitors on this holy ground is to experience what is presented to us. Knowing this, what type of guidance are you seeking?”

Sage paused. With his lips tight, he lowered his head while gripping onto Halmi’s mask, his thumbs caressing the heavily carved wrinkles on her cheeks. “Do you have advice for when someone may feel separated from their loved ones? How can someone heal from that kind of pain?”

“Let me tell you something,” Chung began. “There’s a lot of love in what you said, and that is really important. It shows this person has things they care for as well as things they don’t care for – which is the pain someone may want to heal from. The hard part of what I’m about to tell you is there is no healing from this kind of pain. It will last, and it will hurt. That pain communicates loss. That loss can mean anything from the loss of opportunity to understand a loved one again, the loss of connection, the loss of an evolving friendship, the loss of an idealized future, or even the loss of a form of joy and happiness that would have flourished with unity.

“I have personally experienced only one lifetime with a loss like this, and the answer is never easy, but it is also the easiest thing – whoever is experiencing this pain will have to move on. This yearning is not reality. It is a toxified substance of thought worming its way into the brain. That’s not to say this someone should let go of the love or the potential of a reunification, but that is to say the pain is preventing a life well-lived.”

The sprites mellowed their tune to maintain the vibrations of Chung's words, serenading the space around them with their heads rotating in slow circles and methodical movements that seemed to guide the softness of the wind within the sandnado.

"What would your advice be for someone who may not want to give up that pain?" Sage asked. "For someone who relies on it as a form of hope?"

"That is a tricky thing," Chung said. "The first advice I would say is to continuously meditate on it and ask oneself, 'How is this pain helpful? When is feeling this pain a positive thing (but ask yourself, if it's a negative thing, if there is a positive connection within the negativity, which will be your positive thing)?' And if that is unhelpful and the pain is still there, which happens more often than not, then I would then say to write about it. By writing, truths will begin to unfold. By reading writing, an understanding of those truths will surface. Now the truths coming to the surface depend on the pain of the person, and it may be confusing if not chaotic. But after more meditating, more writing, and more reading, things will begin to make sense. The most this person should ask of themselves is patience."

Before Sage could say anything else, Chung undid the strings from behind Minari's head, and the mask fell into the sand. "Do you believe him?" Sage asked.

"No," Minari said, laughing. "How can one person know the truth about everything, despite how wise they are? Not even Pachua understands everything. I think Chung's advice is useful, but to take his advice as the sole truth seems silly."

The ground rumbled beneath them. The sand sprites juttred forward as the sandnado whipped closer behind them, pulling the masks into its breeze, tossing them and the sand sprites from the top of its spiral. The sandnado moved again, pushing Minari and Sage forward.

They continued their trek, following the eye of the storm. "Maybe when we find Rumi

and The Faceless Being is when we'll find Halmi's husband," Minari yelled as the sandnado's winds blew fiercely around them.

Sage shook his head. "What will we do differently that hasn't already been done? Every effort has been exhausted by Halmi."

"The only thing left is to do what Halmi has been doing for years, and it's to wait and hope that reunification will happen someday. Pachua told me about Rumi and The Faceless Being returning here before they live their last lives. We can find them to figure out what to do next."

"But what if that isn't the most we can do? What if there's more?"

"Then we wait until those answers come."

They looked toward each other and started their trek again, the edge of the sandstorm near their backs as they followed the eye swirling slowly through the desert.



## Chapter 11

“I remember being born into chaos because you all wanted something selfish,” Sage said as they sought for the place Pachua wanted them to find. “I’ve been asking myself if it’s my fault I don’t know what the grove was supposed to be like or how we were supposed to find home there because we desecrated it.”

With the sides of her fingers pressed around her eyes to block out the sun and sand, Minari shrugged. “We didn’t intend for this to happen.”

“Yeah,” Sage said with a slight nod to his head.

“Do you remember anything else about the spirits’ intentions in the chamber?” Minari

asked, turning to Sage. The sheerness from his amber-colored skin collected a thin coating of dust. Some areas had patches of red from him wiping the sand away.

“I’ve been losing my remembrance.” Sage turned to Minari with a melancholic smile. “Pachua warned me I wouldn’t be able to retain anything from the chamber. I only feared it would be true then. I was actually thinking the golden mushroom might be of help. Something whispered to me that it’s in the lower world, but I’m afraid to go there because of Chung’s warnings.”

“I agree it’s dangerous to seek the golden mushroom.” Minari nodded. She was relieved to hear that Sage’s curiosity didn’t toxify his mind. “Did she tell you where to go so you can recove your memoryr?”

Sage shrugged. “She said to trust in family like I have done in the past. So far, that trust has us here.” Sage pointed to something in the distance, hiding from behind the roaring, dusty winds.

Beyond the crisp mist of the sand was the outline of a cabin. Standing by its door waited Rumi with a thick lilac blanket covering her body from the thrashing winds. Behind her, The Faceless Being stood with their arms crossed, their facelessness peering from inside the shadows of the home.

Beaconing Minari and Sage inside, they both entered the cabin with a relieving gait. The entryway led into a small room, squeezing a cast iron hearth near its center with log chairs surrounding and a steaming tea kettle on top of the smooth surface. Once inside, Rumi and The Faceless Being greeted them as if they had been anticipating their arrival.

Minari, after noting their familiarity with the situation, pointed to Rumi’s belly. “Is this the pregnancy you envisioned?”

Rumi chuckled and adjusted the thick wool blanket on top of her pregnant belly. “When I was dying and my body was returning to its mineral state, I was hovering between what it was like to live in this body and what it was like to be a tree. Eventually, I became nothing, and then I wound up in my next life. The spiritual-to-body shift – the feelings, the regrets, the passions – they influenced where I went.”

The Faceless Being, with their arms still crossed, peered out the sand-coated window. Minari stood beside them as Rumi and Sage talked about her pregnancy and their experiences. The Faceless Being rubbed sand away from the inside of the window then motioned for Minari to look outside. Beyond the dunes and past the rushing winds of the sandnado that had since lessened its pull was Pachua, diving into the dunes to catch a light. If Minari didn't know any better, she would have assumed they were playing a game of keep-away.

“Did Pachua ever tell you anything about the last lives?” The Faceless Being asked.

Minari shook her head. “All I know is we need to live through our last lives before the cosmic egg hatches. I have no idea where we are in that process.”

“No,” The Faceless Being said and shook their head. “I'm talking about *the* last lives. The final few spirits to make their trek from the chamber to this land. When we stole the orb from Pachua and the land turned to ash, we allowed every single spirit in the chamber to dive into the river toward the land.” The Faceless Being pointed to Sage. “He tried to stop them. That's why he lost his memory. His loss of personhood, his sense of self, is because of something we did. And I don't regret one bit – not one bit at all.”

Rumi placed a hand on Sage's arm, who had been listening with intensity. Rumi turned to The Faceless Being. “All of my children were born from me like seedlings, and they all are living very fruitful and spiritually progressive lives. Who is to say Sage is unable to sprout

similarly to recover?”

Sage nodded. “Why would I try to stop them?” he asked as he stood in front of the hearth, steam from the tea kettle rising to the ceiling, his empty sleeve very close to the fire. The pearly hue of his clothing shined with the embers from the flames.

The Faceless Being laughed. Their facelessness turned toward Minari and Sage before pulling a mask from below the window. The winds thrashed against the cabin, the sing-song tune of the sprites existing like a dampened whisper. Sage breathed deeply as he walked toward the window to open it, but The Faceless Being shook their head and stopped them. With the small hum of echoing winds, The Faceless Being put on a mask with bug-headed eyes. Minari immediately recognized the mask as Choraengi.

With his crooked grin and wide, toothless smile, Choraengi tilted his head to straighten his gaze then laughed snidely like a cackle of chiming lightning bugs.

“You again?” Choraengi pointed to Minari with a curve to his ugly finger. “I told all the other spirits about your sinful actions. And they think you are stupider than ever! Pachua *refuses* to tell any of us about where to find the mushroom *AND* she *refuses* to tell us *anything* about how close the egg is to hatching. Do you know how *stressful* that is? EXTREMELY. It’s extremely stressful. And what good are you in—”

“Wait,” Sage said, putting his hand up. “Wait. Did you trample me because of the golden mushroom?”

“Yes I did,” Choraengi said with an uptight confidence as if he was Yangban himself. “Of course we all did. Me *especially*. I was just doing my job. Weren’t you the one to inform us about this delectable opportunity? A mushroom that grants whoever ingests its immortal flesh will gain access to their last life is absolutely something we all need. And since I, your *delightful*

helper, is already on his last life, it is up to me to ensure that my boss gets to his last life as soon as possible. I do not want to leave the chamber with him behind, because in the next stage, *I* will be *his* boss, and I can't wait!"

"He doesn't remember," Rumi said to The Faceless Being's body, massaging the baby in her belly. "You shouldn't have brought Choraengi out to try and explain. It will get us all in trouble with Yangban and Sonpi if we keep gossiping about its whereabouts."

"What do you need to worry for?" Choraengi said, pointing to The Faceless Being behind his mask's nose. "The golden mushroom has Choraengi and Yangban's name on it. Have you seen Sonpi and Imae yet? Last I heard, they found some clues. Even got a pair of bull testicles for free after goading about this information. They were delightful!"

"What did I tell you about this mushroom? Will it allow me to have remembrance?" Sage asked, his breathing slow and nervous.

"That's a good question!" Choraengi said with a snide, impish laugh. "I'll be happy to tell you *only* if *you* tell *me* what you told Sonpi and Imae."

"I don't remember what I told them," Sage said. "You all trampled me before my body dug itself out of the earth."

"How very unfortunate," Choraengi replied. "Too bad, too bad. I guess you will never gain your remembrance back if you don't know. Maybe Pachua will be able to help you, since you are so committed to being a Pachua goodie-goodie."

The Faceless Being removed Choraengi's mask before he could say another word. The winds outside had dulled, the sandnado faltering in its sweeping gusts. "He knows Pachua is where the mushroom is," they said. "If we follow Pachua to where she is going after our bodies awaken again, then Sage will be able to find the mushroom."

“Pachua won’t trust us,” Minari said, pointing out of the sandy-coated window. Across the flattening dunes, Pachua was still chasing Bibi around with steady determination. Her snout glided across the sand with ease, slithering as if the ground was slippery. Bibi, with its chicken legs and fatigued upper body, ran with high knees and a desperate, scared blue face as it still held tight onto the glowing orb. It had not lessened its glow under the sweating sun, but Pachua did not look any less amused.

“I agree,” Rumi said as she stood next to Minari with her hands lifting her belly. “We shouldn’t have taken the orb away from Pachua. It was a cataclysmic event. The spirits must know it can prevent the cosmic egg from hatching. We cannot let that happen. We cannot let our selfishness spoil the gift Pachua has given us for the past thousand years. It is one of my biggest regrets, knowing I willingly partook in that insurrection.”

The Faceless Being shook their head and turned to Sage. “She believes the spirits need to accept that the cosmic egg will hatch with or without the spirits’ readiness, but I disagree. Remember, I was the one to hold onto the orb first out of all of us, and while it showed each of us a vision, in *my* vision, luckily or not it showed me the end of our *lives*. If we don’t live through our last lives, Pachua will not be free, and we will be stuck without any progression at all. Imagine how *boring* that will be. We will move on through our final lives to visit the great beyond. It’s the natural next step in our lives.”

“Pachua will guide us,” Rumi said with worry. “She will tell us the truth if we go to her and ask.”

“Pachua isn’t in the right state of mind to tell us the truth,” The Faceless Being replied. Bibi slowed its pace, the high-kneed chicken legged running finding a way to create a frightened whimper.

“What does that have to do with her ability to tell the truth?” Rumi responded. “The state of mind you fear so much is because of the orb. It is weighing her down with its demanding tasks. It is *our* responsibility as spirits to help Pachua fulfill them, not enact in selfishness to do whatever we want and pass our problems to our future selves.”

Bibi tripped, holding the orb tightly in its chest. With quick head shakes, Pachua paused, her tongue flickering in front of Bibi's face. She waited before it, her massive head descending a shadow onto its horrified face.

“Pachua brought me to a strange cave and introduced me to my dead body in the grove,” Minari said. “She had broken my tether without me living up to my end of the promise. If we can't move forward in our spiritual journey, it's *our* fault. Pachua has been giving us enough time to figure that out, but we lost touch with our energetic center.”

“You sound like Rumi,” The Faceless Being said. “What about our vision? How can you accept that we won't live until our last lives when the orb foretold it?”

“Maybe for us it foretold our future, but what about the other spirits?” Sage asked. He had wrapped his hand around his rib, his loose sleeve dangling near the fire.

The Faceless Being paused, a damp circle below their feet. “If we use the orb, we can help them too.”

Sage shook his head. “Don't you see? Just after one vision, we've grown too reliant on its fortune. It is unnatural for us to know our future when we are meant to grow without that knowledge. Why do you think Pachua has never allowed us to hold it? Why do you think she has been suffering all this time? It was for us!”

“Pachua calls us selfish,” The Faceless Being said with sweat forming along their face. Their hanbok was drenched in water, their skin dewy with moisture. “Isn't *she* selfish for

keeping the orb's knowledge from us?"

"It *burdens* her with knowledge," Sage said. "I understand now why I can't remember anything. The orb, this artifact of fate, I want to destroy it. It is our responsibility to accept some of her burden of duty. If Pachua is able to release herself from the thousand-year promise that has chained her to us, then she must be willing to assist everyone to this supposed great beyond."

"Ridiculous," The Faceless Being said, large droplets of sweat dripping from their chin as if their face was melting. "We have only ever wanted to live a nice, peaceful life like Pachua promised us. Do you think we'll gain it in our next lives?"

"I am privileged enough to have remembrance of my spirit progressing as far as it has and knowing I have one more life left to live," Rumi said, massaging her belly. "In this next life, I'll be pregnant with my last daughter, and I can't wait to start this new life with her. That, to me, is peacefulness – a family to grow with and to love. It's simple, but good."

Rumi moved around Minari to open the door. The sandnado's winds rushed inside, knocking over vases filled with beautiful summer flowers and creating metallic jingles with the steaming tea kettle atop of the cast iron hearth. Rumi ushered Minari and Sage out the door, giving each of them a long hug.

"Now is the time," Rumi said with a warm smile as The Faceless Being melted into a puddle behind her. "We will meet you both in your next life."

Under them, the ground quaked. The dune they were on shifted, sand falling from its tall hill, rolling down the dune to become flatter. The sandnado moved again, its spiraling winds forming patterns in the sand and pushing them forward, beckoning them to keep moving.

When the wind took a break from its roar, Minari turned toward Rumi. She had a hand over her belly with her other waving toward them as she stood by the cabin's door until the

sandado overtook her where she stood, the crackling foundation crumbling in the winds that had once given them the illusion of safety.

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Grains of sand beneath their feet shifted as they moved slowly along the desert, the undulating pattern changing with every powerful spiral of wind as the sky shone a clear blue. Past unrelenting winds and flickers of sunlight was the shoreline that promised them passageway to safety.

In the close distance, Bibi was still holding tightly onto the orb, trembling on the ground. It had dug its chicken legs into the sand in an attempt to root itself to the land to hold more tightly, but unlike the tunnels it had previously been able to build, it had run out of energy. Pachua, with only using a single claw to pry open Bibi's grasp, she held her talon between the orb and Bibi's arm, her scales reflecting light onto the sand like glitter.

As they continued toward the shoreline, sand sprites poked their tiny sandy bodies from the ground, willfully picked up by the wind. Playing their flutes and singing a shaky melody with an old woman's voice, the sand sprites built their crescendo, welcoming Chung as his mask unearthed from the sand. Without hesitation, Sage looked to Minari with wide eyes before putting him on.

Chung was silent as he walked alongside her.

"Can I ask you for advice?" Minari asked after a long moment. She looked back and forth between Chung and Pachua, a nervous energy quickening her pace. Chung maintained his calm stride, stepping with purpose from heel to toe as if to feel every single grain of sand below his feet.

“What advice do you seek?” Chung asked.

“What would your advice be for someone pulled in two directions and can't decide between the two?”

Chung put his hand behind his back, the empty sleeve flapping in the wind. “That's a tricky question because there is no such thing as a ‘perfect’ good. Perhaps an ‘all right’ good or a ‘decent’ good, or even an ‘it's not that bad so it's fine’ good. A ‘perfect’ good is a perfect bad in disguise.”

“How does someone find out which to choose, then?”

“By making a choice then learning about the choice,” Chung said. “I can offer advice for you to think about what to choose, and I can offer advice on living with the consequences, positive or negative, but I cannot choose for you.”

“This is too difficult,” Minari responded, sighing. The sand sprites danced in twirls around them, their dusty bodies carried by the winds. “I don't remember what I've learned – I only know what I know from the life I've lived on this world. I just don't want to regret destroying the orb. Sage thinks it's a good idea, and I do too, but I don't want to hurt Pachua anymore.”

“Then that is the knowledge you must use to make these decisions.”

Chung lifted Sage's hands to remove the mask. The sand sprites stopped playing, and the mask disintegrated into the sand. “You agree with me?” Sage asked.

“I do,” Minari replied. “I fear the orb has polluted Pachua's mind and has prevented her from fulfilling her thousand-year promise. To an extent I believe it's the fault of the spirits for not being willing to progress with her, but she relies on the orb too much for knowledge. It has become an obsession. But if we destroy it, then where does that burden go?”

Sage nodded slowly. Turning his head, he assessed where Pachua was in recovering the orb. Bibi was crying on the sand as Pachua grasped the orb in her claws, her four long talons delicately holding the orb while preventing Bibi from being able to maintain its hold. Bibi, who was trying its best to yank the orb away, was faltering as its chicken legs dug into the sand and its exhausted torso was not strong enough to pull it away again. Bibi had large tears streaming down its face as it tried to pull.

## Chapter 12

The once hilly area filled with dunes and varied textures had flattened, most of its land now visible beyond the horizon. With deep breaths and a moment of peace as Minari reflected on the magnificence Pachua had created after wiping off sand that clung to her sweaty skin, she stood in awe with the humbling feeling of how small and insignificant she was compared to the vastness of this world. She wondered how her actions had rippled throughout the land's years and how she, as someone so tiny and seemingly non-important to the grand ecosystem, would be able to accomplish something horrendous.

As Minari and Sage continued on their trek toward the boat, the water line visible along

the horizon, the land began to shift again. Bushes peeked out from under the sand and shook off the lingering disaster when soft winds blew, which slowly piled fine grains back into dunes. Minari looked to the sky for answers that might give her an idea of if the desert would turn to ash like the grove, a fear beckoning to her as Bibi's exhaustion turned to surrendering. As she trekked, her feet trusting that the land would not crumble, the sky became more intense with its heat, the mirage of how close the shoreline was flirting with her perceptions of reality.

A couple paces between them and the shore was a wooden mask. With a frustrated sigh, Minari waited for the sand sprites to emerge from the ground. With understanding, the sprites lifted from the grains humming their bright tunes with lively dancing cheerily serenading the land around them.

With quick blinks, they had reached the shoreline. Sage was already at the boat, cleaning loose sand and releasing it from being buried.

"Whose mask is this?" Sage asked.

Bending down to pick up the mask, Minari dusted sand away from deep wrinkles and a familiar tight-lipped smile. It was Halmi. With a hurried gait, Minari put Halmi on, knowing Sage would want to speak with her.

Beaded sweat pilled on Minari's forehead. Halmi had said nothing at first, but the tingling on her skin and the spiciness of her breath told her that Halmi was trying to communicate something.

With a big mental sigh, Minari closed her eyes to prepare herself for the message Halmi wanted to offer. The instant Minari allowed Halmi to temporarily borrow her vessel, one surfaced that showcased the peaceful love her and her husband had once shared with each other.

Despite their hard life, they were happy.

Waving that memory away, Halmi dove into another that showcased the chaotic moment of their separation. It was familiar to the energy that shivered along Minari's skin when Pachua destroyed the grove, their decision to steal the orb radiating beyond the space Minari had thought disappeared completely.

At that moment, Minari understood why Sage wanted to find Toktari so badly. To find Halmi's husband would allow the land to release some suffering so it may begin to heal. To reunite them would be to officially declare a true desire for peace and pivot the spirits toward a path of growth.

With a heavy heart, Halmi's voice beckoned to Sage. "I know where my husband is," she said. "He is trapped in a different place that is not this one."

Sage lowered the oar onto the boat. "You know this for certain?"

"When Bibi stole the orb from Pachua, I saw a glimmer of that place as it left her grasp." Halmi grabbed her back and hobbled closer to Sage as if she was afraid to say the next words out loud. "I can lead us there."

Sage approached Halmi and offered his arm. Halmi took it with a hobbled grasp, her fragile shaking slowing their walk to the boat.

During this walk, as Halmi's steps became more and more careful, her voice more hoarse and more quiet as she spoke, she was careful to speak her next words. "But if you take me to where my beloved husband Toktari is, then you will not be able to live to your last life."

Minari removed Halmi from her face. With hesitation, Minari dropped the mask, and the sand sprites dissipated once it met the ground. "Pachua warned us we couldn't trust the masks."

"We can go to both places," Sage said. "We just need to get on the boat again, and then we'll go."

“What if it’s not possible? What if we need to choose?”

Sage picked up Halmi’s mask from the sand before it became buried underneath its fine grains. His hands shook as he gripped onto the mask. With hesitation, he stood still. “I don’t know.”

“How certain is she that her husband is there? And what if he’s not?” Minari asked, a wave of uncertainty spewing through her thoughts. “Will we able to move forward in our own spiritual journeys with the rest of our family?”

Before they could discuss the ramifications, if any, that could have happened, the ground rumbled beneath them. Toward the horizon, the sun was so bright, their eyes teared. Only when it cleared, Minari caught a glimpse of Pachua’s long, sinuous body creating mounds in the sand, chasing the light that darted back and forth to try and lose her. They were coming directly to them.

Within seconds, mounds snaked around them, blocking their path. When everything grew quiet, Minari’s heavy breathing and rapid heartbeats drowned the sounds of sifting sand drifting delicately from Pachua, her tail wrapped tightly around Bibi’s body.

(BIBI) (BIBI) (BIBI) (BIBIBIBI)

Her skin, slimy like decaying algae, smelled of putrid fish. She gripped the orb in her four-taloned claws, its colors shifting from a regular pearly hue into a dark cloudy color that resembled the grove’s sky before it disintegrated to ash. Lifting the orb, Pachua blocked out the sun like an eclipse. “Do you see what one action has caused?” she said to Minari. “Do you understand now how the spirits have cursed humanity?”

Without intending to, those words sparked a rage that Minari hadn’t felt before. While she was prepared to accept the burden, she felt she was also an unwillful, stupid participant in

their chaos.

“Tell me how,” Minari said with regretful anger. “How did we fail?”

“Humanity has been tainted by the spirits’ polluted touch,” Pachua said. “You are a spirit, are you not? Imbued with selfishness, hatred, and fear. You are also to blame for the catalyst of humanity.”

Those words rang in Minari’s ears. “I’m the catalyst?” Minari yelled. “I chose none of this, none of this responsibility! Why are the spirits my responsibility when you are the one with creation’s knowledge?”

“You chose to come here without permission,” Pachua said. “And now that the permission of the land you stand on has since been revoked by Mago’s will, you now wish to side with their selfishness and demand to know why you are suffering?”

The orb radiated a dark light that extended far past the sun’s rays, permeating throughout the desert with an energy that acted as if the universe was contained within it. When the light reached the horizon, the orb’s darkness engulfed it like an infinite black hole. It felt like the orb wanted to suck Minari into it, too.

Pachua’s labored breathing slowly and aggressively turned into a growl. Drool with a stinky aroma dripped from her sharp yellow teeth visible through her shaking scaly lips. Her beard tucked behind her horns and flicked against her slimy skin, creating a web of ooze that lifted when her beard slapped against it. She no longer had any feathers flittering in the wind, and her scales had since transitioned to a dull green like rotting algae. Her three unblinking orange eyes remained fixated on Minari despite wind blowing against her face.

“Mago has offered you wisdom to assist the spirits in cleansing the situation polluting you. It is time for you to reflect on why you are incapable of understanding how you are

choosing to maneuver through these difficulties so you may witness the bile below your soles and not carry a speck with you into your next life.'

"There is only one way to make up for the calamity of your past," Pachua said with anger. "There is only one way Mago foretold."

"What?" Minari said as Sage stealthily moved out of Pachua's vision until he maneuvered himself behind Pachua and to the edge of the dune that blocked their path to the boat. "What did she tell you?"

"You are not meant to know," Pachua said with a seething flicker of her tongue. "You are not meant to have the burden of that knowledge yet."

Slowly, Sage used his arm and dug out a path to escape. With the wind blowing, it helped him make a dent in the dune large enough for them to escape. He climbed out until he stood before the boat, motioning for Minari to run through the passageway he had just created.

Minari shook her head, but Sage waved his hands with pleading.

In that moment of hesitation, however, Bibi wrestled out of Pachua's grasp and juttied into the sand. The light of the sun returned like a flash. Pachua, taken by surprise, shuffled around the sand searching for Bibi. Sage used the distraction to run back to Minari. "Let's go," he asked as he pulled her hand.

"If Pachua wants to take my life or not, I will leave it for her to decide. She is the creator of this world, and even though I decided to come here without her knowledge, I want her to decide if I should continue to stay."

Bibi torpedoed out from the sand. With the orb in its hands and a horrified and struggled appearance to its stature, Bibi tossed the orb to Sage, who caught it. In chaos, Sage froze in terror as the orb lit up into the sky like a beacon.

With fear, Minari pulled Sage toward the boat. As Sage blinked himself back to reality, Sage dropped the orb in place, its colors blending into the sand. The orb had ceased its light, returning to its regular pearly shimmer.

As they both ran, Minari wanted to turn back and pick it up, an urge to see if there was another message Mago had for her, but the desire to get Sage and herself to safety outweighed her curiosities, so they fled.

Out of the corner of her eyes, a large mound below the sand made its way toward them. Sage had unburied himself from distraction, and after seeing the orb glowing in Pachua's claws, he grabbed Minari's hand to help quicken her pace.

Sage's caring brown eyes, glistening with golden tears under the sun, caused her to sigh. She wanted to accept whatever fate Pachua intended for her, so she loosened her grip. "I'm staying here," Minari said. "It is my responsibility to accept the fate Pachua has communicated to me."

Pachua greeted them with a full-forced bodily tunnel under the rocking sand trembling beneath their feet. With only one aquamarine feather in tact, Pachua's tail coiled around Sage's ankle then wrapped around his waist. In a panic, Minari reached her hand out to hold onto his, frantically grabbing the air to keep him grounded. Meeting their eyes together, Sage could only look at Minari in terror. Pachua wasn't supposed to take him.

Minari tried to pull him free with as much strength as she could muster, but the more she pulled, the tighter Pachua squeezed. In a panic, Minari clawed at Pachua's slimy tail, her nails catching the edges of remaining scales. Pachua's tail clenched tighter around Sage before she began to lift him slightly above the ground.

"Don't let go," Minari said with heavy breaths and wide eyes. She grabbed Sage's wrist

with her other hand and tugged.

Pachua, with playful tugs, turned her massive head. With her tongue flickering toward Minari and her slimy beard dragging along the sand, she looked apologetic. “The first time entering the next life is never fun. Never fun. Forgive me, friend,” she said, “yours will be a much sweeter exit.”

“Isn’t it ironic,” Sage said with a calm voice as Pachua began to slither toward the sun, “that I’ll be leaving this world with the possibility of losing my other arm.”

His grip was slipping. Minari grunted as she tried to maintain her grasp. “Pachua might let go. We don’t know yet.”

“She won’t,” Sage said. “I already lost feeling in my foot.”

“So you want me to let go then? What about Halmi?”

“You’ll be free to decide,” Sage said. “I’ll have nothing but love for you no matter what.”

With sadness trailing down their cheeks, they held each other’s gaze before Pachua pulled Sage hard enough for their hands to unclasp, jetting through the sand as if it was water. Screams of anguish and terror sounded as his body dragged along the rough surface of the sand, first becoming a dot in the distance and then an echo.

When Minari’s heartbeat lowered and the wave of anxiety was beginning to crash, she pushed the boat into the waters. When she rowed out far enough and caught the current, she looked back to the shore where a mask had been waiting. It had wrinkles like Halmi, but it had a wider gait that looked masculine in appearance. She knew it was Toktari. A tear rolled down Minari’s cheek when it sank below the sand to be lost again. Pushing the raft back into the water with the oars tucked under her arm, she sailed away from the desert, rowing away in expectation of something greater under the dimming sunlight.

Returning to the Land

*In my presence, the sun screeches as heavy blankets of gray wash inhabitants with life instead of shine. When the clouds cry back with the wind and the trees and the water and the land, she seeks the beauty of harmony and fears the dangers of selfishness.*

### Chapter 13

Earthy yellow and orange leaves descended onto wet pavement, stuck between concrete cracks soaked from a recent rainfall. Despite the boat's cramped space and how fatigued her shoulders rested, a gut feeling told Minari that this place she had ventured to was her next life.

When she had passed the foggy threshold between the desert and this new space, the sun peeking out from the fog offered her new clothes for this new world: a soft yellow turtleneck sweater matching the same quality and hue of her hanbok, a light jacket resembling evergreen bristles on a nearby bush, and high-waisted gray slacks fitting loose. She thought about Halmi as she assessed herself in these new clothes. She wondered if the guardian spirit Halmi had referred

to was her family and if anyone had ever laid out new clothes for her. Minari felt more comfortable after lacing the wide-toed boots and adorning her jacket like a rebirth amid the aftermath of decay.

It was dusk when Minari strolled along the cracked road as moonlight permeated through the town. Flickering halogen lights zapping bugs above her was the loudest source of noise. Moths clouded the lamp, their tiny bodies zooming through the air in a chaotic, cyclical path. As bugs flew and the loud screeching of cicadas softened just enough to listen to hiding crickets sing, the sun disappearing slowly beyond the horizon, Minari thought about those last moments in the desert, of The Faceless Being and of Rumi and where they might be. She also thought of Sage and how she couldn't shake the feeling he was somewhere else aside from here. She dismissed a lot of negative associations, thinking it should all be kept as a distant memory while she focused on finding out why Pachua only wanted her to travel to this new reality.

Minari followed the barren pavement engulfing the natural world around her. It was endless, and she hated it. It stretched far too wide for someone to walk on and was lined with overbearing cookie-cutter houses lacking the vegetation of the normal world. Minari turned the corner. In the distance, standing out from the offensive architecture was a fence of woven sticks holding living vines sprawling through the weaves. This fence was taller than Minari, but the small holes within the vines allowed her to witness smoke wisping into the night sky, the area contained within illuminated by the soft glow of a fire.

Inside was a suffering garden with many of the plants either dead or in hibernation. In the center on the grassy pathway was a leaf pile where a familiar-looking woman burned a large pile of dry leaves. From the remains of an already burned pile, she shoveled ash and then spread it around her garden beds lined with cut logs.

Following the fence around the corner, Minari walked past an arched opening covered by a loose red curtain with a slit down the middle. It was embroidered with golden string and shaped like a forest. It reminded her of home.

The wind blew against her back softly as if it wanted her to walk in. Minari worried Pachua would be on the other side waiting to tell her the cosmic egg was hatching. But as the wind shifted and blew the curtain open, Pachua's iridescent scales were nowhere in sight, nor was the shimmering from her orb.

Trying to take comfort in the silence, prepared to flee if the worst did come to pass, Minari pushed through the curtain and went inside. The woman, wearing gardening gloves, held her hands on her hips. Thick braids hung below her spine, pulled back with a lilac fabric tie in a loose knot. The wind blew past them, intensifying the flame.

She knew it was Rumi.

Rumi stopped shoveling leaves into the fire and pulled off her gloves. She leaned against her shovel and watched the pile burn. "Rumi, how did you get here?" Minari said, trotting up to Rumi for an embrace.

Rumi turned. Her eyes smiled a crescent moon, the apples of her cheeks lifting. Rumi laughed as she hugged Minari, tightening her embrace as they rocked from side to side. "I got here the same as you did," Rumi said before stepping away. "It's all from the blessing of our creator."

Minari smiled, and her heart filled with happiness.

"It's funny," Rumi said as she wiped her forehead with the back of her hand then leaned against the shovel. "You arrived at a difficult time in this iteration of my human life. All my plants have been dying. The sun hasn't been shining lately – it's always covered by smog. Other

gardeners have been blaming that this fall has been unseasonably cold, but it's been so much harder to grow things these past few years. I'm just cleaning up carcasses."

Rumi fanned smoke blowing in her face. Gazing away as she flapped her hand, she moved out of its path to quickly put her gloves on. She shoveled the last of the leaves and dead plants into the bin as she sniffled. Rumi's face appeared older in this life, the wrinkles around her eyes and mouth indicating that despite the current hardships, she was enjoying a good life. "I'm sure you'll get your green thumb back," Minari said.

Rumi stepped toward Minari, fanning smoke out of her face. "I sure do hope so! My business relies on it. I can survive one season like this, but I'm not sure about another." Rumi sighed and placed the back of her wrist on her hip while rubbing her forehead with the other. "I had a feeling I should have closed shop before selling all the food I grew, but the institution wants us to pay extra because the bigger farmers don't want to pay extra. On top of that, they've raised taxes on our land because we don't sell enough to be considered a big business, yet the big businesses pay less than we do! It's truly not equitable. It's all a scam, really. If Pachua were here, she'd surely end the world like she did in the grove. Too many spirits have lost knowledge of how to live."

"I'll tell you what," Minari said, wanting to get to know the land in this reality. "I'll help you finish your chores, and then we can catch up afterward?"

"I would love that," Rumi said, handing Minari an extra set of gloves from her back pocket.

It was getting chilly outside. The wind brought in a cold air that caused both Minari and Rumi to shiver. Heat from the burning pile kept them warm while Minari helped Rumi rake the remaining carcasses in the garden, slowly piling them all into the bin until the smoke lessened.

When they were close to being done, a swath of small-headed crows illuminated by the moon landed on a tall tree behind Rumi. They jumped around branches, fluttering their large wings as if they were trying to scare something away. When they relaxed, they lurked on the branches in silence, unmoving.

“Oh – these birds! I always get the heebie-jeebies when they come here. I don’t know why they like this tree so much. I’ll tell you something scary. They started to hang out there after I had my daughter. \_\_\_\_\_ thinks they’re scaring away my fertility, and I’ve always had the fear that it’s true. Having those thoughts in the back of my mind give me so much anxiety.”

“ \_\_\_\_\_ ?”

“Ah, yes, who you once knew as The Faceless Being prefers to be called \_\_\_\_\_ in this lifetime. It’s their new name. They change it every lifetime depending on the face they are gifted. I’ve preferred to keep my same name.”

Minari nodded, and they both stood to absorb the remainder of the heat. Staring at the remnants of ash that remained at the bottom of the bin, embers of coal shining brightly like the warmth from Pachua’s orb, Minari felt like this life could be one to live peacefully.

Once the fire subdued, Rumi invited Minari into the house for tea. “I’m not a coffee drinker,” she said, “and neither is \_\_\_\_\_, so we only have tea in the house. I like herbal remedies, and I make my own blends. I’d love to share some with you and see what you think.”

“That sounds really nice,” Minari said.

They shared a smile together that made Minari feel at home. It was nice.

A dried floral wreath with spring flowers hung from Rumi’s back door. “I keep it here to remind me of this year’s bad luck. I’m trying to stay positive. I’ve been assessing what went wrong to try again better next year, and I think I have a few things figured out that I can control.

Or that's what I say to make myself feel better. I'm supposed to replace this with an autumn wreath, but you already know how that turned out."

"I think it's a fateful reminder that the spirits haven't taken care of the land."

Rumi paused with her hand on the doorknob. "You know, I think you're absolutely right." Rumi pushed the creaking door open. "Welcome home," she whispered to herself as she slowly walked inside.

Darkness greeted them. Ticks from an old clock tapped in the living room, growing louder as their ears became accustomed to the home's silence like the world was going to fall asleep. As she closed the curtains, only dim moonlight piercing through the fabric, silence within the home begged them to settle into the nighttime tranquility. Rumi flipped on the lights, the soft glow of the bulbs illuminating the quaint home with a soft, warm glow.

"My daughter always leaves a mess," Rumi said as she pulled out two teacups from the pantry. "I swear we're usually not messy people."

"It's nice seeing how you live," Minari said, following Rumi. "It's refreshing."

Rumi motioned to a high round table pushed against a window facing the garden. It had three stools. On the table was a tiny tree inside a pot glazed with speckles of light green splattered around its surface. The pot itself was short and shallow, yet obtusely round and uneven. It had handles on each side, too small to fit a fingertip through.

"This is the first pot I've ever made," Rumi said as she placed two tablespoons of her herbal tea mixture in each cup. "I rented out a studio spot so I could make a pot for my bonsai, and this was the product after three months. All I did was work on different forms to figure out what I wanted and learn how to do it, recycle the clay, and repeat until my rent was up. I fired up this piece in the last week. It's not the absolute best, but I didn't try to make anything else. If you

ask me to throw a cup, I wouldn't have a single clue how to do it."

"It's nice," Minari said as she sat on one of the stools. "What type of bonsai is it?"

Rumi poured steaming water into the cups. "It's a rosemary bonsai, and the only plant in this household I will never let die. I loved the idea of using clippings from trims for cooking. I've tried my best to let it grow into something that resembles a tree. For a while, I thought the trunk wouldn't get as big. It used to be spindly and thin. For a while I thought about giving up and letting it grow into a tiny bush."

"How long did it take you to grow?" Minari asked.

"\_\_\_\_\_ gifted me that bonsai when Violet was born, so about eight years ago." Rumi wiped her wet hands on a kitchen towel. "Please make yourself comfortable. Feel free to sit or wander around. If you need to use the restroom, there's one ahead of you – the one with the light blue door. The tea should be ready to drink in about six minutes, and then I can try to read our fortunes. I like to read my leaves when I feel stuck in life. Or just for fun sometimes."

While Rumi shuffled things around, Minari slowly paced around the living room after using the restroom. It took a while to figure out how to squat on the toilet, but she was eventually able to relieve herself safely.

On the wall in the living room next to her was a family portrait, one taken when Violet was still an infant. In the portrait, \_\_\_\_\_ kneeled next to Rumi who was sitting on a stool cradling Violet. Their hand draped behind Rumi's shoulder. In this life, \_\_\_\_\_ did have a face. It was average at best with unfamiliar features that couldn't be picked out in a crowd without looking hard, but the striking thing was the smile splayed widely across their face. They was happy.

When Minari returned to the kitchen, Rumi was blowing steam from her mug as she

looked out the window into her dying garden. “Come, sit down! I’ll read your leaves. I’m not the greatest at it, but it’s some insight into the future to figure out if you’re on the right path. It’s important to be mindful.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“Well, first, we drink tea and talk about whatever’s on your mind.”

Minari sat on the chair across from Rumi. The moonlight was bright. “Can I ask you something?”

“Anything,” Rumi said. She pushed the pot farther to the side and moved her mug forward. The steam smelled divine. Rumi hadn’t lost her connection with nature.

“How many lives have you lived?” The tea was light brown, and the leaves were visible at the bottom of the cup. Taking a sip, Minari tasted hints of floral brightness and a calming, earthy undertone settling on the middle of her tongue. It wasn’t too sweet. “This is delicious.”

Rumi smiled. “I’m glad you’re enjoying it. And, well, it’s funny. I’ve discussed the same thing with \_\_\_\_\_, and do you know what they said? They told me, ‘It’s at least 1,000,’ so I’d say mine is around there somewhere too. I’ve lived my life with them for a good 700 lives. You’d think I’d be tired of living at this point – even with \_\_\_\_\_, but you know what? Even though \_\_\_\_\_ feels like a vampire right now, I feel like I’ve lived my lives fully, and I’ll be ready when the creator wants me to return to the land where I was born from.”

“That means the earth will hatch soon,” Minari said.

“Yes,” Rumi said. “But there was only so long we could prolong it for, and I’m happy with all the progress we’ve made. We did it together.”

“You are the first and everlasting mother,” Minari replied. “You know best.”

“Indeed I do,” Rumi replied with a smile. She pointed to Minari’s almost empty cup of

tea. "When you're finished, and there's just a liiiiiittle bit of water left, swirl the cup three times, then place it upside down on the table. Water will get everywhere, but it's just tea, so it'll be all right. Here, I'll show you."

Rumi splashed a small bit of water along the table when she placed the cup upside down just a little too hard. Minari did the same. Rumi waited for a few seconds before picking her cup up, turning it over, and contorting at different angles to study the leaves before giving it to Minari.

"Tell me what you see," Rumi said.

Minari studied the inside of Rumi's mug. Tea leaves were stuck to the bottom and sides of Rumi's cup, but she wasn't sure what she should have been looking for. "I don't know if I'm doing this right."

"If you look on the side of the cup by the handle, you can see the tea leaves form the shape of what I saw to be a man – it could also be a monster. And next to that, I see the number one.

Minari turned the cup until she saw what Rumi was talking about. "Okay."

"And if you look at the bottom of the cup, there's a bunch of stars or dots."

"All right," Minari said. Staring at the spot Rumi directed her to, she studied the scattered dots of tea leaves.

"I'm not the best at reading tea leaves, but I think that either means that at this time tomorrow, I will be greeted by some kind of visitor if the leaves are meant to portray a man, or it means I'll experience terror if it's a monster. And since it's near the handle and on the side of the cup, that just means the probability of whatever event the image is associated with is higher. The dots or stars at the bottom of the cup are a little separate. It just indicates good fortune in my

distant future.”

“Interesting,” Minari said, seeing everything Rumi talked about. She could see the man and the monster, their bodies capable of shifting with each other. She imagined both fortunes could apply if the leaves wanted to blend the two images together. “How accurate is it?”

“I don’t know,” Rumi said. “The future is always changing. It was accurate for my yesterday’s reading. I saw a wheelbarrow at the same spot the man/monster was at, a number one on the opposite side of the mug, and a bunch of dots and stars at the bottom. I had originally thought it meant I should do gardening chores tomorrow, which would be today, which would bring good fortune to my garden in the distant future, but I was wrong. It actually signified the arrival of an old friend, which was you. Though I still don’t know if you’re meant to bring me good fortune.” Rumi chuckled.

“How interesting that the leaves knew I was coming.”

“It’s not the leaves,” Rumi said, “it’s the ancestral spirits who guide the leaves if you let them. I don’t read my leaves too often though, as sometimes the ancestors can get sick of telling you what to do and ignore you altogether. Then you’ll just have a pile of leaves that you think means something but really means nothing at all.”

Minari nodded, looking at her own mug, thinking of her ancestral spirits. She wondered if she had any as she turned her mug around and studied the leaves sticking to the sides and the bottom. Out of the corner of her eye, the weird-looking crow perched itself outside on a nearby tree, the side of its head peering inside the home as if it was trying to read our fortunes, too. “I see a circle. It could also be the orb. Or a ring.”

“That’s three possibilities, and each means something different,” Rumi said. The crows cawed. “Where is it in your mug?”

“It’s at the bottom. I’ll say it’s Pachua’s orb. I’m thinking it’s a reminder of something I promised myself? And there’s a cloud surrounding it.”

“What’s the promise?”

“I’m going to make it up to Pachua. I feel the karmic burden we’ve passed to land have been felt, and I want to stop that suffering.”

“Huh,” Rumi said. She took a sip of her tea then licked her lips as she looked outside at leaves scraping against concrete. She motioned for Minari to hand her the mug. “I don’t know what the orb means – could easily be Pachua’s orb like you were saying. A ring usually means some kind of completion – like a marriage, maybe a goal being completed, or maybe a finality to something important.”

“How interesting,” Minari said.

“A circle means success. Because it’s at the bottom of the mug, it’s predicting at least one of these things will happen in the distant future. But it’s a little alarming that you see a cloud surrounding this circle because a cloud means there is trouble ahead, and that trouble is also in your distant future. You can guess what the two mean together, especially since they look intertwined.”

“That’s confusing,” Minari said. “How can I have both in my future? Isn’t that contradictory?”

“Well, this could mean a lot of different things. Like I said, I’m not the best at tea readings, and it really depends on how you analyze your leaves. The future is always changing, so your current outlook can also influence how the leaves are read. But, off the top of my head, I think this fortune could mean that after you persevere through whatever trouble you may run into, it will come out successful in the end. Or it could mean that even if you are successful in the

future, in whatever it is you are successful in, *that* success will be shrouded by troubles. I think it really depends. Do you see anything else?"

Rumi hands the cup back to Minari. "Uh, well, the only other thing I see is a bug. It's close to the top of the lip area, but it's still kind of on the side."

"Do you know what kind of bug?"

"No," Minari said. "It just looks like a bug."

"Okay, well, a generic insect usually means you'll overcome some kind of minor problem in the very near future."

"I don't know what a minor problem would be. I have big problems right now, but I don't think there are any minor ones."

Rumi shrugged. She stood and grabbed their mugs for a refill. "Maybe the minor problem is something that will show up soon. Or maybe because we shared the tea together, it could mean the expected visitor we might have tomorrow is your minor problem or will bring a minor problem with them."

"Maybe my outlook will determine how my success and trouble in the future will be played out."

"That is also a possibility," Rumi said as she filled their mugs up with more hot tea.

As Rumi and Minari reflected, Violet burst through the entrance. The clash of the door vibrating against its hinges caused Rumi to jump. Violet held a crocheted doll tightly against her chest.

Walking in, \_\_\_\_\_ placed three cloth bags on the kitchen counter. "You have a friend over?" they asked, making sure nothing was going to fall. Behind them, Violet peaked her head out and stared at Minari. She was more than a full head shorter than the tip of \_\_\_\_\_'s shoulders.



Pachua. She was making sound effects of her slithering across the carpet, ones that matched too perfectly to how she moved. When Pachua jumped, Violet would lift the arm that held the orb into the air. With a whisper, she would hum like white noise, her pitch increasing higher and higher until it breached what Minari's ears could comprehend, the rest of the room encased in its vibrating murmurs.

## Chapter 14

After an evening of jollity when moods began to wind down and the catching up turned to its peaceful rhythm, \_\_\_\_\_ wanted to show Minari the 'artifact' room.

“I say artifact, but really they're our family's heirlooms. A line of Rumi's children was tasked with looking after them, but there were some complicated things generations later where another line of her children wanted to steal them – and successfully did for one – that made me spend three lifetimes searching for these things so we may never lose touch with the spirits. We have all but three. Two were separated but are still considered home, but one was stolen. It was vicious. They still refuse to return it.”

\_\_\_\_\_’s lips widened to an ear-to-ear smile. They clapped their hands together before placing a delicate hand on the doorknob leading to the room.

“I’m sure you can guess the artifacts, but it’s one of the prouder cross-lifetime accomplishments. They are our heritage.”

Upon opening the door, there was a crowded desk filled with loose papers, dust, and an assortment of trinkets seemingly shoved away from their dedicated spots to make room for an unorganized assortment of more papers and a metal object, a futuristic model of what Minari knew to be ‘technology.’ A small bed was pressed against the opposite corner of the desk, and it had folded blankets in its center with bunches of pillows splayed about. But when Minari fully entered the room, on the top wall near the ceiling were nine wooden masks.

She recognized the first four.

The first was Yangban, the aristocrat. His mask was carved with flowing care. He had a short forehead leading to a long, wide nose with big nostrils that highlighted his thick unibrow that extended far along the sides of his forehead. Smiling with crescent moon-shaped eye cutouts, it made his open, unhinged smile much wider. His jaw was tied to the rest of his face with string. In this lighting, he seemed happy and content like he was welcoming Minari to this lifetime, wishing her many more.

To his right was Choraengi, Yangban’s crooked servant. The wood, carved lopsided with tiny pointed teeth spaced far from each other like a baby’s, held a slanted sneer with a raised cheek. His eyes, bulging like a bug in deep sockets and tiny holes in the center for the wearer’s vision, still creped Minari out. His short, wide nose was illuminated by the ceiling light, casting a dark shadow over his menacing smile and pointy chin. Because of his protruding forehead, Minari thought he was looking directly at her.

Next to Choraengi was an empty spot with a sticker plaque that had the name Byulchae, the tax collector, written on it.

“What happened to Byulchae?” Minari asked.

“He was stolen by a thief who ran toward the rising sun.”

Minari nodded, upset that Byulchae is living a life surrounded by thieves. She remembered him having a blunt nose with wrinkles on his forehead and face similar to the other masks. She wondered if they stole him because they thought he was wise.

Next to the name tag was Halmi, the old woman with a tired wrinkled face, attentive crescent moon-shaped eyes, and a wide toothless smile. Minari smiled back, remembering her kindness and love. Her big, pointed nose and pointed chin accentuated her deep wrinkles, and Minari knew that the hardship she faced was what made her wooden carves so rugged.

Next to Halmi was a name tag meant for her husband, the old man, Toktari. Minari was sad that she hadn't found him yet, but carrying Sage's grief, she did have belief that they would one day be reunited again.

The next mask was the last one she recognized, and it was Chung, the monk. His jaw, hanging on by threads of a rope attached at its hinges, were not tied as tightly as Yangban's. His crescent moon-shaped eyes veered straight ahead like he always knew what was in front of him and the big bump in the center of his wide forehead acted as a guide. His large lower lip, attached to his loose jaw, made his smile broad and peaceful, highlighting the wrinkles around his eyes.

The next five masks were unfamiliar to her.

The one next to Chung was a mask with the name tag of Kaksi, the goddess. She was made from birch, her long black hair dyed with squid ink that twisted in two braids, one that

hung down her back and the other in the front of her shoulder, meeting in a braided crown on the top of her head. She had small crescent moon-shaped eyes delicately carved below her thin unibrow that reminded Minari of Chung's, one that seemed like she had met peace. She had bright red lips and three bright red circles, two on her long cheeks and one in the middle of her forehead that was aligned with her long nose. Unlike many of the others, her jaw was square, her face was much bigger than the rest, and she was the most beautiful. Looking at Kaksi, Minari thought she was being graced by the presence of a goddess.

The next mask had the sticker name tag of Bune, the concubine. She was not as beautiful as Kaksi, but she still had a pretty charm. She had an ovular face with a protruding long nose. Her highly curved and thick unibrow was in parallel to her large and smiling crescent moon-shaped eyes. Like Kaksi, Bune had three red circles painted on her face, but they were a little messy. Her red lips, however, were perfect and had a hint of a smile. On the wall, Minari wasn't sure if the mask was tilted or if her face was just a little crooked, but her large apple cheeks shined just as brightly as the two red circles adorning them.

The next mask was labeled Baekjung, the butcher. He intimidated Minari a little. His mask was coarse with heavy slits carved across his face like scars. His hinged jaw looked as if it was held together with string, but it was carved to appear that way. Like Yangban, his thick unibrow curved to match his crescent moon-shaped eyes, which looked ahead like Chung's. He had a big crooked nose and what looked like a snarling crooked smile that, upon closer inspection, looked fatigued but happy.

To the right of Baekjung was Sonpi, the scholar. His crescent moon-shaped eyes were slightly slanted and bulging, appearing fatigued. His unibrow was tighter than the others, yet it still followed in parallel to his eyes. His large nose, complemented by a wide bridge that traveled

to his nostrils, stood out in comparison to his sharp cheekbones.

The last mask was named Imae, Sonpi's servant. His flat nose looked as if someone sawed away at the wood unevenly, leaving two large holes for his nostrils. His lower jaw was missing, as if the strings to attach it to the rest of the mask had been untied, allowing it to fall off. From what Minari could gather at what remained, Imae had drooping crescent moon-shaped eyes and two eyebrows that mimicked his sorrowing curve. From the missing hinge jaw, however, Minari could see the faint remnants of a soft smile.

"Have you been victim to their meetings?" Minari asked. A low cacophony of crows cawed outside in the darkness. A strong gust of wind shook the house, tearing off heavy branches that landed with a thud on the roof.

"Hah!" \_\_\_\_\_ laughed. "Of course. Did you think I wouldn't be curious? I've showcased the spirits many times to Violet."

\_\_\_\_\_ pulled Bune from the wall. "Bune is fun. She has Yangban and Sonpi wrapped around her fingers, and she doesn't even say a word to them! It's absolutely hilarious how much she's able to ridicule them. But her eyes are set on Kaksi. It's a whole drama. Rumi and I have played their story out, and we've tried to see if Kaksi would let us play the non-romantic portions for Violet, but Kaksi has a lot of moral goodness. She doesn't want to share the story aspect with Violet at all to not unpreparedly encourage Violet's curiosity. But she does agree that intimacy should only be taught, not showed in intimate detail, to children."

\_\_\_\_\_ put on Bune and began to dance. Tilting their knees as if crossing their legs, Bune's mask tilted to the left where her nose appeared straight. \_\_\_\_\_ danced toward Rumi, who was leaning against the door with a cup of tea in her hands and a crocheted blanket shawled around her shoulders. Bune tilted her head back to a straight line, and her nose became crooked

again. \_\_\_\_\_ grabbed Bune's chin with their fingers and tilted her head back and forth in an alluring motion. Rumi smiled and took a sip of her tea.

"Bune loves women," Rumi said, smiling at Bune. "She tries to seduce me all the time. I told her once that Kaksi will get jealous, but then Bune tells me Kaksi endorses it."

With an alluring sweet voice, Bune said, "It's possible to have more than one family in a single lifetime."

"Indeed it is," Rumi replied, hiding her smile behind her teacup.

Bune circled her head back like a serpent's and danced toward Minari in an equally sinuous allure. "

Bune gasped. "How curious! What does your spirit need to accomplish to be at peace?"

"Well, I plan to help Pachua."

Bune snickered. "And how do you plan on doing that? Sing a little song? Do a little dancey dance? Get on your knees with your head pressed to the floor and scream, 'I'm so sorry Pachua please forgive such a wretched spirit like me, even though I am just like all the others!'" With her fingers on her chin, Bune tilted her head back and swayed her face from side to side. "Pachua gifted us this land – freeing her is a waste of time. She can free herself at any point she'd like. She created this world, and she can end it whenever she sees fit. All she has to do is free herself of the orb and let the cosmic egg hatch – so why hasn't she?

"If she's as smart as we all imagine her to be, she is holding onto the cosmic egg for a reason. Wouldn't your purpose, then, be to find out what that is and stop her for the sake of your fellow spirits? Or are you so ready to call it quits before the rest of your family has even had a chance to catch up to your *elite* level?"

Rumi held her teacup near her chest, her smile fading to a serious gaze as if she had been

wondering the same thing.

Minari shook her head. "The reason I'm doing what I am now is to ensure everyone lives to their last life in accordance to the original plan. This world is worse off because of all the alterations we've made to try and prevent it from hatching. At this rate, the egg will die, and we'll rot with it. While this land was created for us, we overstepped our boundaries and tainted whatever act of good faith we had left with Pachua."

Bune shrugged and cackled loudly. "Good luck. Even though Pachua is a patient imugi, she has served her sentence ten times over. The moment she sees you? Maybe it *will* be the end of the world."

"Pachua is much wiser than any of us. What do you think her reaction will be when she sees Minari again?" Rumi rubbed the rough unglazed ceramic of the teacup with her thumb. "She greeted me in a dream the night I knew I was pregnant with Violet. I was afraid. We were in a large room with no light, except I could see her clearly. She circled me. She met my eyes with her own. I thought I wasn't going to wake up. But I did soon after in a cold sweat. I've feared that exact thing since then, but I still want to repair the damage we've done."

Bune cackled and cackled and cackled. "So you'll risk permanent death just to ask for forgiveness? You might as well burn yourself alive."

Violet pushed past Rumi in the doorway with the Pachua doll hugged tightly in her arms. "I want to wear Kaksi," Violet said.

"Yes," Bune said with sarcasm. "Let's give this little one the mask of the bride and see if Kaksi will show."

Rumi sighed and pulled Kaksi's mask from the wall, rubbing the red dots on her cheek and her small red half smile with her thumbs. "I usually wear Kaksi as she is more receptive to

talk with an adult, but she is still quiet. \_\_\_\_\_ asked her once why she doesn't like showing herself when Violet wears her, and Kaksi said for a child to wear the face of a bride is preposterous and should not be tolerated."

Holding the Kaksi mask in front of Violet, Rumi explained it wouldn't work because children are not brides. Adults are brides, and if a child is, then it is both a crime and an act of disgrace for participating adults.

Violet, with a pouting face, complained. "Let me try again," she said. "I don't want to be a bride, I just want to be friends. She's the nicest one. I don't like the other masks."

"The other masks *are* meant by trying to tell you how life works and how to connect with non-masked spirits. I wouldn't like them very much either. I also want to learn from my own mistakes and grow like everyone else," Rumi said. "But sometimes, if a spirit close to our family tries to help, I like to let them help because they have our best interest at heart. We all grow together as a family, yeah?"

"Yeah," Violet replied. "But I still want to try to wear Kaksi again."

"Okay," Rumi said. "But don't get mad if she doesn't show up. She already explained to you why she has her boundaries. She's not going to change her mind."

"I know," Violet said. "I just want to see."

"Okay," Rumi replied and handed Violet Kaksi's mask. Violet put her on and played with the Pachua doll on the floor. Everyone waited to see if Kaksi would say or do anything, but Violet was constantly in control. "Is Kaksi showing up?"

"No," Violet replied. "I'm just playing."

"Kaksi doesn't want to play," Bune said. "Can you give her to Mom?"

Violet pouted for a minute before taking off Kaksi's mask and handing her to Rumi and

leaving the room. Rumi left the room with Kaksi's mask to tuck Violet back into bed.

When Rumi returned, she was wearing Kaksi's mask. Kaksi closed the door nicely behind her. "I apologize for my shrewdness," Kaksi said with a soft, caring voice. "I only have a few morals, and coercing children into becoming married at such a young age by my presence as influence alone is something I will not stand behind. From personal experience, it is a horrible thing to do to a child."

"If you ask Yangban and Sonpi, they will say I stole Kaksi away from Chongkak," Bune said with a smile behind her voice.

"Let them think that," Kaksi said. "I had only ever feigned interest in those two brutes. They are disgusting little creatures with pathetic moral compasses and low emotional intelligence. They act without thinking, and when they do think, it's solely through selfish reasons."

"Chongkak was her groom," Bune added. "He was twice her age and was intimidated by her beauty."

"I have a theory he only wanted to wed me as a child so I could be trained to always be inferior to him. It didn't work," Kaksi said, facing Minari. "Bune stole me away before the ceremony."

"Do you remember his reaction? He was so embarrassed, he fled north and was never seen again." Bune danced in front of Kaksi. "Shall we show our beloved last-life guest how I stole you away from your *rightful* groom and troublesome suitors?"

Kaksi, with low and rumbling chuckle, Kaksi mimicked Bune's steps. With one elegant step, her shoulders pushed her right braid forward and her left braid backward. At the same time Bune crossed her legs, tilting her crooked nose straight to mimic Kaksi's gait. They tangoed in a

circle, inching closer together until Kaksi's firmly set lips were cast under a shadow from Bune's mask, and then they embraced.

After giggles and tickles, Rumi and \_\_\_\_\_ took off their respective masks and placed them back on the wall. With blushing faces and disheveled hair, they invited Minari to spend the rest of their evening gambling for seeds.

"You'll of course be spending the night here," Rumi said, rummaging through a dresser drawer for a box. Inside was a collection of seed packets. There were flowers, herbs, vegetables, and fruits. "We like to gamble with seeds to tell us how our garden will look the next year. Whatever we 'win' is what we try to plant, depending on who we select as the seed winner. This year, \_\_\_\_\_ was the designated seed collector, so we planted whatever they won in the garden. This time, whatever *you* 'win' is what we'll plant in the spring."

"Rumi jokes I'm the reason why the garden isn't doing too well this year," \_\_\_\_\_ said, shaking their head. "Maybe your winnings will have better luck."

They spent the remainder of their evening on a thick, heated blanket on the living room floor, seed packets sprawled about with a hwatu deck. As they laughed and enjoyed the remainder of the evening teaching Minari how to play a game they've developed many generations ago, Minari had a permanent smile on her face knowing that \_\_\_\_\_ and Rumi had lived happily together for many lifetimes.

When all was said and done, they invited Minari to stay the night. After showing her the guest bedroom, Minari went to the bathroom to clean up before laying down.

As she lay in bed, her head on the pillow, she focused on breathing. On the inhale, she thought of her stresses and what she'd have to do in the immediate future without much knowledge or hope that anything would go as planned. On the exhale, however, she found space

for herself to have faith in Rumi and \_\_\_\_\_, who had been with her throughout this whole process, and who also felt their fears overloading their sensibilities. She would help them all tomorrow. But now, she needed rest.

These thoughts still crept into her mind until Minari lay awake in bed thinking about what they would all do if Pachua was here. Staring at the ceiling, a green dot from the fire alarm flashing, she turned to the side to face the wall. If she closed her eyes, orange eyes would flash rhythmically in the dark, and the sound of heavy rain splattering against the side of the house with thunder ripping across the sky didn't help her anxiety. No matter how hard she squinted, she wasn't able to get them out of her mind, so she kept them open and stared at the wall, tendrils waves of shadows flowing against the backdrop.

## Chapter 15

In the morning, Minari woke to nervous pacing on the wooden floors in the hallway. Outside, tree branches scraped against window glass. A dried leaf held onto the end of a branch as it shook.

After she brushed her teeth and rinsed her face of her dreams, she went into the living room where Violet was napping on the couch with her head on Rumi's lap. \_\_\_\_\_ was preparing coffee in the kitchen. A tense, sad air lingered in the home.

"Good morning, everyone."

"Good morning, Minari," \_\_\_\_\_ said, quietly.

“Violet had nightmares last night. Neither of us got much sleep.” Rumi stroked Violet’s hair.

“Does she have nightmares often?” Minari went into the kitchen where \_\_\_\_\_ was standing in front of the stove watching the water slowly rise to a boil.

“She’s been having more of them recently,” \_\_\_\_\_ said. “This time, she dreamed of a bear who turned into a woman after eating a man alive.”

“Oh,” Minari said. “Was she scared of the bear?”

“No, she was scared of the man,” \_\_\_\_\_ replied. “And then she was scared she was going to turn into the bear.”

“I’m worried,” Rumi said. “It reminds me of the Corean bear woman story, which is a nice story about motherhood. But in Violet’s dream, she was a little girl scared of turning into a bear. Something is worrisome about that dream, and I wish I understood more of it.”

\_\_\_\_\_ pulled the water off the stove as soon as the steam rose strongly, but not burstingly, from the kettle’s gooseneck and then poured water slowly in another pot filled with loose leafed tea. “Would you like some tea? It’s high caffeine. We usually have green tea in the mornings, but today calls for black.”

“Sure,” Minari replied.

\_\_\_\_\_ nodded their head slowly then poured another serving of water in the pot before opening the pantry and pulling out a mug.

“We should give respect to our ancestors,” Rumi said. “Tidy up our altar and light a fresh stick of incense.”

“Yeah,” \_\_\_\_\_ replied, waiting for the tea leaves to open. “When do you want to do that?”

“After we finish the tea.”

“Sounds good,” \_\_\_\_\_ said. “We’ll try and cut away any bad luck that might have been attracted to Violet.”

Rumi stroked Violet’s hair. “I don’t think it’s bad luck. I think she’s going through spirit sickness.”

“I’ll go to the library today and look for a mudang.” \_\_\_\_\_ poured the tea in the three mugs. They handed one to Minari and the other to Rumi.

While they waited for the tea to cool, Minari followed \_\_\_\_\_ to the altar. It was a small table next to the entrance. On it was a rock that held incense, a few small plants, two soy-based candles, two small vases, and a raised silver tray that held loose pearls and a bunch of mugwort.

After lighting the soy candles with a matchstick, \_\_\_\_\_ pulled a stick of incense from one of the cabinet drawers and used the candle to light its end before playing it on the incense holder. Right outside the kitchen on one of the branches swaying heavily with the wind was a crow holding on tight, using its full wings to maintain balance, while peering into the home.

“While being a mudang is a closed practice, simple things like this are expected and allowed for a general household to do. This should help to purify our house fire.”

“If she is going through spirit sickness, this might help appease the spiritual energy attracted to Violet,” Rumi said. Violet’s face scrunched as she slept. Rumi sighed.

“It’s just a temporary solution,” \_\_\_\_\_ said. “I’ll head to the library now. I should be back in less than an hour. I remember seeing a directory of local mudangs on the community board. I’ll schedule an emergency appointment with one available today.”

“Thank you,” Rumi said.

\_\_\_\_\_ put on a jacket and shoes then left. They didn’t drink a sip of their tea.

When the front door shut just a little too loudly, Violet sat up on the couch. "Good morning," she said. Rumi sighed with a smile and stroked Violet's back.

"Good morning, Baby. How did you sleep?"

"I had another dream," Violet replied.

Rumi held her lips in a fine line. She didn't want Violet to know she wanted to cry. "What was it about?" Rumi said with a soft voice.

"I saw a one-armed man in a pearl hanbok wearing a scary mask. We were in a dark room, and he was the only person I could see. It looked like he was floating on air. I think his lips were bleeding."

Minari's eyes widened, and Rumi paused as she was rubbing Violet's back. "What else happened?" Rumi asked with more urgency in her voice.

"He mumbled a lot of stuff. An angry cloud of bugs buzzed around his head."

"That's Sage," Minari said. "He's upset with me. I let Pachua take him."

"He's dead," Violet said. "He's stuck in the lower world in the grove's ghost land."

"The grove is still there?" Rumi asked, shocked. "You saw the grove?"

Violet shrugged. "It's just what I heard."

"Do you know how to get there?"

"You die with unfinished business," Violet said. "But you have to be pulled away unwillingly."

"How do you know all this?" Rumi asked, tears welling in her eyes.

Violet stared at her mother with a serious face. "They said they would curse me if I didn't learn."

"Curse you?" Rumi asked with shock and concern. She looked at Minari with wide eyes.

“Can the spirits curse each other?”

“I don’t know,” Minari replied.

“What spirit told you this?”

“The sprites told me,” Violet replied. “They’re the spirits of the land.”

“This is a new thing,” Rumi said. “Aren’t we the spirits of the land?”

“No,” Violet replied. “We are spirits born from the land. The sprites of the land were here first. They were created by Pachua and have only lived on this world.”

“Huh,” Rumi said, leaning back. She grabbed her mug and sipped on some tea. Minari had been holding onto her empty mug for a while.

“We need to consult one of the masks,” Minari said. “I’ve met one who has traveled worlds to find her husband. Her name is Halmi.”

“I don’t want to,” Violet said, sighing with tears in her eyes. “I don’t want to!”

“Baby, it’s to help you. It’s so we can all understand what’s going on.”

“Is there something wrong with me?” Violet started to cry.

“Listen,” Rumi said with a stern voice. “There is absolutely nothing wrong with you, all right? This is just new for everyone. All of my other children had spirits watch over them and help them through their spirit sickness, but the spirits talking to you are scaring you instead. We are trying to figure out why. Okay?”

“I don’t have siblings!” Violet said crying.

Rumi sighed and fumbled her words. “You’ll understand when you’re older and know the world a bit better.”

“I want to know now!”

“You will! You will learn! You just need to worry about one thing at a time.”

Violet cried harder. Her screams reverberated like a high-pitched whistle that sustained its pitch at the top of her ears, making Rumi anxious.

Rumi stood and grabbed a blanket, putting it on top of Violet's legs before kissing her sweaty, tear-soaked forehead then pulling Minari away from the living room. "When she gets like this, it's best to let her cry it out," Rumi said, wiping tears from her own eyes as Violet screamed as loud as she could.

Rumi pulled Minari into the artifact room and closed the door, Minari was surprised at how well the sounds of Violet's crying became muffled inside the room, but a dull pitch of Violet's screams lingered in her ears.

Sitting on the edge of the bed with a sigh, Rumi held her hands on her face and cried silently. "This is so difficult. In every lifetime, I think I finally get the hang of motherhood, but then in my next life, it feels worse. I thought in my last life as a mother, I'd be able to enjoy it." Rumi breathed in through her nose, clearing it. "Right now, I absolutely hate it."

Minari grabbed a box of tissues and a small waste basket from the nightstand. She set the basket on the bed next to her and held out the box for Rumi to grab. "It's unrealistic to enjoy every aspect of motherhood all the time," Minari said.

"I know," Rumi replied, wiping her nose. "I just didn't think that after all this time, my last child would be called upon by the ancestral spirits. All my other children who went through spirit sickness didn't have symptoms this bad."

Minari crossed her arms and searched the wall of masks. "Maybe we can ask," Minari said, pulling Halmi off the wall. She rubbed the wrinkles carved so neatly into her cheeks and the corners of her eyes and wondered if the thousands of years since they spoke had turned her into a bitter old woman. With Violet still crying in the living room, straining her voice from screaming

as loud as she could, Minari put on Halmi's mask.

In an instant, whistles slammed into the windows, causing them to creak and shake. With instinct, Minari opened the one next to her. What looked like hundreds of fluffy white pollen clouds floated inside, carrying the whistles with them. But as the wind continued and the pollen clouds danced in a circle around Minari, she knew that these small puff balls were wind sprites, eager to sing for the masks.

As soon as they grouped together to form the shapes of instruments like clouds in the sky, Halmi's persona took over. "Oh what a beautiful song," Halmi said. "I haven't seen these little ones for a few hundred years."

With her crescent moon-shaped eyes, Halmi sat next to Rumi and gave her a big hug. "Oh Rumi. What ails you?"

"It's my youngest daughter. She is going through spirit sickness."

"Who was she in her past life?"

Rumi chuckled behind her tears. "Violet is a fresh spirit from the chamber. The last one who had been waiting patiently for her turn."

Halmi laughed a booming laugh, one that ended with tears rolling down her wooden cheeks. "Have I really spent all this time searching for my husband? Am I really going to return to the chamber having not been reunited with the love of my life?"

Rumi smiled sadly. "You've done everything you can to try and be reunited with him. There are forces standing in your way who refuse to move. They're stubborn and are influenced to think with anger instead of forgiveness and acceptance of each other."

Halmi sighed. "I just don't understand why they won't let me be reunited with my husband."

“I wish I could tell you the answer,” Rumi said. “These are the same forces preventing my daughter from experiencing a bearable spirit sickness. It feels like they are wanting the ancestral spirits to be angry with her.”

“Spirit sickness mostly tends to happen with children not born into a shamanic family. My daughter often becomes the host of Mudang Princess Bari who has experience with this sickness and has led others through their own.”

“How did you become a mudang?” Minari asked.

“Well, during the war that separated me from my husband, I was able to flee, and he couldn't. That experience awakened the calling within me. The ancestral spirits wanted me to test my strength. It was in Kaksi's childhood when she started showing signs of spirit sickness. Mudangs are chosen by the ancestral spirits at birth. Kaksi was one of them. Fortunately she was not cursed with the curiosity of the golden mushroom.”

“Being a mudang is always passed down through the same ancestral spirits, but Mudang Princess Bari wanted her presence to be known. She put Kaksi under her own spirit lineage to ensure the lineage continued.”

Kaksi's symptoms were similar to Violet's. Kaksi did have many bouts of silence that did not appear to be spirit sickness, but when she went through something horrible, she would be filled with such spiritual rage. Hundreds of her ancestors would channel through her tiny body. This happened many times, often tiring Kaksi's body out to exhaustion, but then she began to have dream-like visions where her father would appear, someone she had not met or seen, and Kaksi would be able to describe him and what she saw him doing in detail.

“I do believe your daughter has this spirit sickness,” Halmi said, “but I also think it would be wise to check if she is also cursed. Curses hide very well underneath another ailment, so if

that's a fear you have, I would seek guidance."

"Thank you," Rumi said with a smile, holding onto Halmi's hands.

Halmi stood and approached the wall of masks, pulling Kaksi from her hinges. "It was good to see you again, Rumi."

In a second, Halmi's mask fell off of Minari's face. With one swift look between Minari and Rumi, they both nodded before Minari breathed in the fresh breeze from the wind sprites and put on Kaksi's mask.

Kaksi, with red dots on her cheeks and forehead, tilted her head, her braids tilting with it. Kaksi picked Halmi off the ground and carefully inspected the mask before returning Halmi's mask to the wall. "You spoke with my mother?" Kaksi asked.

"Yes," Rumi replied. "We needed to know the external symptoms for spirit sickness. My daughter is going through it now, and I fear something is wrong."

"Why are you just telling me this now?"

"Sister!" Kaksi said with her hands on her hips, pacing back and forth. "Despite the fun I have when you adorn my face and \_\_\_\_\_ adorns Bune's, don't forget that I can see inside your head – even this despicable elder spirit's who is so focused on selfish redemption that she doesn't see how her worry has reverberated through the land's frequencies for generations! It's these concerns that have caused Violet to not be in touch with her ancestral spirits."

Minari's hands shook, and she couldn't tell if it was because of Kaksi's rage or because of her own embarrassment.

"You must find her a teacher who has chosen to absorb Minari's karmic suffering and undue its harm, and you must find one soon. Violet is at the breaking point of permanently rejecting the ancestral spirits. If she does, it *will* curse the bloodline and prevent everyone from

reaching their last life. *That* will be the curse. Unfortunately, I am not the teacher for that.”

The wind sprites, blowing one last spiral around them, whistled a harrowing last note before knocking Kaksi's mask off Minari's face. Rumi held a tissue to her nose as she sniffled. With shaky hands, she called \_\_\_\_\_ and relayed the message Kaksi sent.

With tight lips and dried tears in the corner of her eyes, Minari returned Kaksi's mask to the wall. Just as she did, she noticed Violet peeking into the room. Once they met eyes, Violet scurried away, leaving the door creaked open. Her irises were formed into slits like a serpent's.

## Chapter 16

Minari immediately followed Violet out into the living room. Rumi was still on the phone with \_\_\_\_\_ talking about the mudang. With blankets sprawled on the floor was a crouching Violet, her back turned toward Minari. She wiped her sniffling nose with her arm before resuming her playtime with the Pachua doll.

Strong winds picked up, knocking leaves and small sticks against the side of the house. Minari suspected it was the wind sprites, but as soon as the fierce, bellowing roar of thunder clouded the sky in gray, the light flickered. Once a flash of light beamed through the window, an electrified boom tore through the air, shaking the house.

Minari took a deep breath to calm her nerves. "Are you doing all right Violet?"

Violet ignored Minari, continuing to play with her Pachua doll.

"Your parents are searching for a mudang. Kaksi told us you needed to have one as your spirit mother, so they should find someone soon."

"Okay," Violet said calmly.

Minari wasn't sure how she felt about that response.

Moving to pick up the blanket and sit on the couch, she looked at Violet who had her head down and was still playing with Pachua. "Violet," Minari asked, "have you ever met the real-life Pachua?"

"Yep," Violet said, nodding. "She visits me in my dreams. The less scary ones."

"Less scary?"

"She scares the other spirits."

"Does she talk to you?"

"No," Violet said. "She just mumbles like everyone else."

"Have you been able to figure out anything she says?"

"No," Violet replied. She didn't say anything further.

"Okay," Minari said, crossing her arms and legs, fully letting her back rest on the couch.

Rain started pouring, droplets hitting the house like hail. She wondered if \_\_\_\_\_ would return before it stopped.

"Pachua got mad when you got here."

"What?" Minari uncrossed her legs then leaned forward.

"She just told me. She said you should be in the lower world where the grove's ghost land is. She's upset you're here in the middle world."

“Why is she upset?”

“Because she’s in the lower world and wants you to visit soon.”

“Why?”

Violet shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Minari gripped her knees. “Is Pachua here now?”

Violet shrugged. As she did, the front door slammed open. \_\_\_\_\_ ran inside, shaking their voice in an off-pitched song like they was cold. “It’s really raining outside – it came out of no where! Did you see that lightning earlier? I thought I was going to get hit.”

Their long white hair was drenched. Removing their soaked jacket, they hung it on the coat rack and laid a towel on the floor to catch any dripping water. They took off their shoes then placed them upside down near the door before stepping up into the living room. Their wet socks squeaked as they tiptoed to the bedroom with swishing pants and a damp shirt.

Returning with a big sweater, comfy pants of equal size, and rabbit slippers, \_\_\_\_\_ put turned on the stovetop to heat some water. “We found a mudang.”

Rumi came out of the room shortly after with puffy eyes and a sniffing nose. “She’ll be here soon. She said she’d gather some supplies first and would be over here as soon as she got them.”

“What supplies does she need?”

Rumi crossed her arms with the tissue still in her hand. “Well, to see if Violet is going through spirit sickness. But if she’s been cursed, then we’ll schedule a gut with the mudang.”

\_\_\_\_\_ poured steaming water into a cup. “One of the mudangs I called told me that spirit sickness doesn’t just affect the individual. It also affects the household. Rumi’s plants dying might be because the spirits are angry and think Violet is rejecting them.” \_\_\_\_\_ sighed and

crossed their arms. "If they're angry, we must ask for their forgiveness."

"Yes," Rumi said, nodding.

As if by habit, they both approached the house altar then pulled out a recycled notebook and squid ink. They each wrote something on the piece of paper. "I wrote peace and happiness," \_\_\_\_\_ said, tossing the folded paper in the silver bowl.

"I wrote a curse-free life for Violet and her family." Rumi folded hers before pressing it to her chest with her eyes closed then tossing it into the bowl.

Violet stood next to Rumi, clutching the Pachua doll tightly in her hand as Rumi and \_\_\_\_\_ lit the contents on fire. Standing, they brought the back of their fingertips to their forehead and bowed so their heads touched the ground. They repeatedly bowed until a bright knock on the door reverberated through the house. "It's the mudang," \_\_\_\_\_ said before opening the door.

Standing at the entrance with an umbrella and a raincoat. Coming inside, she shook the umbrella as much as she could onto the porch before wiping her shoes on the doormat.

"Thank you for inviting me into your home," the mudang said.

"Thank you for agreeing to an appointment on such short notice," Rumi said. Violet scurried into the hallway, peeking at the mudang behind the wall.

The mudang removed her wet coat, placed it on the coat rack, then leaned her umbrella against the door as if she was a nonchalant visitor who had made house calls to this home many times before. She was wearing comfortably fashionable slacks and a light sweater that was tucked into her pants. She then delicately removed her slip-on tennis shoes before stepping into slippers laid out for her in the living room. She set the back of her shoes neatly against the step.

When the mudang stepped into the living room, she smiled at Violet, whose head was visible from the hall. "Hello Violet," the mudang said with a sweet smile, bending her knees to

meet Violet at eye level. "My name is Magnolia."

"Hi," Violet said.

"It seems like we were both named after something beautiful in nature," Mudang Magnolia said.

Rumi motioned for Violet to come out of hiding, and Violet emerged with her hand holding her elbow, leaning against Rumi's back. "We think she's going through spirit sickness," Rumi said. "We just want to verify if that's the case or if she was cursed."

"If you don't mind, this will be best performed wherever Violet feels most comfortable," Mudang Magnolia said standing upright. "It seems like the living room may be a little too crowded."

"I'll take you to the artifact room. Violet's room might be too comfortable."

"You're more than welcome to sit and join us. I know how important it is for both a child and a parent to feel comfortable together," Mudang Magnolia said to Rumi. "But don't say anything, communicate anything, or give Violet any kind of reaction."

"Okay," Rumi said. "I'll wait by the door."

"That's perfect," Mudang Magnolia said. "I usually don't divine for children. It's so difficult to say what their future will be as they still have so many choices to go through to decide the trajectory of their lives. I have one question that is foolproof with kids, however. But it can be dangerous."

"What's the question?" Rumi asked, her arms crossed.

"It's about the golden mushroom," Mudang Magnolia said.

Rumi gasped. \_\_\_\_\_ put a hand against the table to stabilize themselves. Minari's feet stood heavier, as if the air itself had pushed them closer to the land. Mudang Magnolia appeared

perfectly steady, her stance erect, her posture elegant.

“I know about the golden mushroom,” Violet said. “It smells like sage and is colored golden after the mountain sunset. It’s about *yay* big, and there is no other mushroom that looks exactly like it. Many are looking. One has found it.”

Mudang Magnolia’s eyes widened tremendously. She breathed in as if this had been knowledge she was curious about. “It is too dangerous to ask this question now,” Mudang Magnolia said. “This may require an additional assessment.”

Rumi leaned into Violet and rubbed her shoulders. “How do you know about the golden mushroom?”

\_\_\_\_\_ leaned down and eyed Violet with intense curiosity. They had a small remembrance of the golden mushroom that Minari didn’t realize appeared on everyone’s faces until that moment. She was fearful that Violet had been too curious about the golden mushroom.

“Yangban and Sonpi talk about the golden mushroom a lot. They have meetings here.”

\_\_\_\_\_’s eyes grew as wide as Mudang Magnolia’s, who had been listening intently to Violet’s new information. “What do you do out of bed when I tell you to go to sleep?”

“The uncles are just loud. I hear them when I’m trying to sleep.”

Rumi gasped then looked to \_\_\_\_\_ as she stood taller. “I have only ever allowed the women access to my vessel.”

“It’s complicated,” \_\_\_\_\_ replied. “I’ve showcased the masks to Violet. They love to entertain her with stories sometimes. But she overheard their meetings about the golden mushroom.”

“What meetings?” Rumi asked.

Mudang Magnolia was listening intently, not moving a single bone in her body as if

moving any part of herself would deter the conversation away from the golden mushroom. The soft roar of thunder rolled through the sky.

“Pachua will be eager to hear about these meetings,” Mudang Magnolia said. “Perhaps Mago already knows and is waiting to find out who will share newer information first.”

\_\_\_\_\_ looked around the room. “Yangban, Sonpi, and the other two convene every once in a while to discuss the whereabouts of the golden mushroom. Violet must have overheard the most recent meeting when they celebrated finding it. They traced it to the lower world.”

Mudang Magnolia peered her eyes closer to Violet, who was fidgeting with the orb on the Pachua doll.

“Yangban and Sonpi are going on their own paths in search of it now. They want the gift of the golden mushroom for themselves.”

“They may have cursed her for overhearing,” Mudang Magnolia said with an intense gaze on Violet. “It may be speeding up her own awakening to the point of spirit sickness.”

“Isn’t she supposed to become close with the spirits if she’s going through spirit sickness?”

“If she chooses to reject this spiritual calling that has loomed over her since birth, then a lot of suffering will be undergone by the family. That suffering can entail accidents like car crashes or falling and getting injured, unfortunate circumstances like lost items you had seen just moments before or dead plants despite taking care of them, sickness like a common cold or something more stressful like cancer, or even death. If it’s severe enough, she can cut ties to her ancestral spirits completely, barring them from ever making contact with her or any of her descendants until one can figure out how to wake the lineage again, but that won’t be for generations. The severity of her situation all depends on how her refusal angers her ancestral

spirits, if that is the path she chooses. The choice of following the path of a mudang is a lonely one, but it is a necessary one to protect the family. It is bad luck, but it is fated.”

“What can we do to get the curse out of her?” Rumi asked, holding onto Violet’s shoulder tightly. Thin rain drops pelted the side of the home like a soft caress of the sky.

“We can do another assessment,” Mudang Magnolia said. “Because there is new information about the golden mushroom, I’m waiving the fee. This curiosity has a way with anything else that is golden.”

“I had a dream about the golden mushroom,” Violet said. “Somebody who butchers found it. He was squeezing something in his hands and screaming at the sky. It was raining.”

“Okay,” Rumi said with \_\_\_\_\_ nodding beside her. “We can do that.”

“Great. Let’s move to a more comfortable spot. Talking about the golden mushroom near entryways can bring bad luck into the home. Violet, are you ready for the next assessment?”

Violet nodded. Rumi nudged Violet toward the kitchen. Mudang Magnolia smiled then followed them with a very small duffel bag, leaving \_\_\_\_\_ and Minari alone.

\_\_\_\_\_ cleared their throat when the door closed then moved to the altar. “Join me,” they said.

Kneeling, they both stared at the burning incense smoke trailing upward in intense spirals.

“I asked Mudang Magnolia on the phone if it was possible to reverse a curse without a ceremony,” \_\_\_\_\_ said, staring at the incense smoke. “She said that sometimes, what we feel may be curses might be a karmic duty we’ve been neglecting for far too long, and the ancestral spirits are ensuring we deal with it.”

“Oh,” Minari said. “Do you think that applies to Violet?”

“No,” \_\_\_\_\_ said, “but it made me ask myself, what karmic responsibilities have I been ignoring? As a first thought, especially since this is my second lifetime with you in it, I think I bear the burden of aloofness, especially when it’s related to the consequences of my actions regarding the orb. It was my idea to take it from Pachua, and it was based on fear. I feel this aloofness I’ve had within me caused it to continue to reverberate through the generations and affect me, especially now with Violet. If we took more care into making sure she stayed connected to her roots, connected to her ancestors, she wouldn’t be struggling with her spirit sickness. And now, I think the ancestral spirits are forcing Violet to absorb some of my karmic neglect.”

“In my memory, the spirits with a more direct connection to the chamber have been influencing us,” Minari said. “You heard what Mudang Magnolia was saying. She doesn’t like to divine for children because then it limits the aspect of choice. Our existing self-reflections, what we wanted to have and work on, and what we were striving to accomplish – it wouldn’t have been genuine through our hard work on ourselves. In my memory, that might be why Pachua doesn’t trust the masks and another reason why she destroyed the grove – she was wanting to get rid of artificial influence while we were still fresh on this world.”

\_\_\_\_\_ nodded slowly. The incense smoke had calmed and lifted straight into the air before funneling into a small cloud above their heads.

“We spoke to Kaksi,” Minari said. “She told us something similar. She said she often had visions of Pachua like Violet does. In those visions, she saw no reason for Pachua to sabotage her final year. Kaksi also said that Pachua was going through her own kind of spirit sickness, but she wouldn’t tell me anything more.”

“Do you trust her even though Pachua told you to not trust the masks?”

“I trust Kaksi,” Minari said, reflecting on the masks she didn’t trust. “I don’t believe she has a reason to lie to us. If anything, it may have been a warning to be keen on which masks to trust.”

“Whatever the case,” \_\_\_\_\_ said, “I’m at a loss with how to go forward and so is Rumi. We’re concerned for Violet. And I know we’ve been this concerned for her other children before, but this one is Rumi’s last child. Shouldn’t we be living a life of peace? Shouldn’t all of us be in our last lives? I don’t know. I wish Pachua better prepared us for this.”

Before Minari could respond, Mudang Magnolia came out of the room with Violet and Rumi behind them. Violet had tears in her eyes, but she contained them from falling. She was still gripping onto the Pachua doll.

“She has a curse placed on her,” Mudang Magnolia said. “It’s fascinating, really. Your daughter has the potential to be excellent at divination. She did find the correct path to the golden mushroom. It is guarded by someone living in the shadows, though it’s not entirely clear if he is the one who currently holds the golden mushroom.”

“How do we get rid of this shadow person?” Rumi asked with her hands clasped together tightly.

“This curse is a bit interesting, considering it wasn’t meant for Violet. But there are a few things you can do. The first is to wait until Yudu in the next lunar year during the full moon of the sixth lunar month to wash her hair in a river that flows east. This is a cleansing to renew your spirit, and it is often used to repel negative energy and pollution. It will also purify her spirit and body. Another positive is that she won’t smell after.”

Mudang Magnolia smiled to herself, trying to hide a small chuckle.

“Another alternative would be to wait until next week during the full moon of the ninth

lunar moon. It will be a time to cleanse yourself and then pay respect to the spiritual ancestors with chrysanthemum. This time is also good luck to spend outdoors. My ancestors love when I sit outside in a park to watch leaves fall from trees. You could also wait for the winter solstice when it's prime time to dispel bad spirits. However, if her symptoms don't progress, and regular home spiritual cleansings don't do the trick, then please call me."

Mudang Magnolia smiled with tight lips before removing the house slippers to slide into her shoes. Tapping the tip of her feet with her hand against the wall to secure them fully, she turned around and smiled again.

"Aside from the regular house cleansings and simple spiritual practices, there is nothing else you will be able to teach her on your own. This is a *closed* practice. It's not only disrespectful and forbidden for outsiders, and for those belonging to our spiritual heritage who did not receive a calling, to dabble in the advanced practice without being initiated - it's also dangerous."

Rumi and \_\_\_\_\_ nodded in silence. Mudang Magnolia picked up her umbrella and opened the door. It was still raining.

"This world as we presently know it is not as connected to the earth as it once was, as much as people think they spiritually are now, and as such, is not connected to the ancestral roots. No one ever spends time with themselves anymore. Everything is a distraction. Everything is an influence. Everything is polluted. How can anyone know themselves if they're constantly told how to know themselves?"

Mudang Magnolia said her goodbyes before opening her umbrella, the splatters of rain falling on its fabric. \_\_\_\_\_ watched as she walked to the sidewalk and went home. Closing the door, \_\_\_\_\_ wiped any water with the towel they had been using and hung it on the coat rack to

dry.

Violet resumed playing on the living room floor with Pachua, and Rumi led \_\_\_\_\_ and Minari to the kitchen for more tea and to get her fortune for the day. As Rumi waited for the water to steam, they spoke about their next plan of action.

“Since Minari will be staying with us, I think we can reconnect with our roots like Mudang Magnolia suggested,” \_\_\_\_\_ said. “Especially since Minari’s previous life was in the grove. She has a closer connection to the earth as it should have been, which means Violet will be closer to that too.”

Rumi nodded, spooning out loose leaf tea into a teapot.

“I would need to learn how this lifetime functions,” Minari said, grateful that she was with her family again.

“We can go on a trip,” \_\_\_\_\_ said. “Take one of those trains across the country. We’ll stop at every stop. It’ll be fun.”

“What about school?” Rumi said, pouring steaming water into the teapot, waiting for the leaves to bloom.

“It’ll be when she’s on break,” \_\_\_\_\_ said.

“What if she wants to spend her breaks with friends?” Rumi said. “She’s at the age where the friends she keeps is really important. It’ll influence her future.” Rumi poured tea into the mugs then placed them in front of \_\_\_\_\_ and Minari before sitting down. Rumi immediately began drinking her tea.

“You heard what Mudang Magnolia said – we need to try harder to connect her to her ancestral roots! What a better way to do that than going on a family trip?”

Rumi sighed. “It’s not about the trip, it’s about the sudden change in environment. Her

winter vacation is one lunar cycle away, and we haven't talked about any of this trip stuff with her."

"It'll be a surprise."

"You know she doesn't like surprises. I think we should wait for the end of spring when the weather gets warmer. We'll have time to prepare ourselves and get Violet ready for an energy shift."

"Okay," \_\_\_\_\_ said, leaning back in the chair. "I can be patient. I think I'm just frightened."

"We're all scared," Rumi said, swirling her tea in a circle three times before dumping her leaves upside down on the table. "We never expected for her to be cursed while going through her spirit sickness. It's a difficult, scary time."

Rumi lifted her teacup with a sigh, twirling it every which way to read her leaves.

With a furrowed brow and frightened breath, Rumi slammed her teacup on the table before running into the living room, almost knocking her chair over with it. \_\_\_\_\_ set their cup on the table with alarm then followed Rumi out of the room. Near the handle and by the rim of Rumi's teacup, its sides rolling along the table dripping steaming tea, was a dragon.

## Chapter 17

“Violet!” Rumi yelled. “Please stop hiding if you are. I am not playing with you right now!”

\_\_\_\_\_ peeked into the living room where Violet had been playing moments before, tilting their head back and forth trying to spot Violet. They paced into the room with urgency when they didn't spot her. Doors opened and closed, large items shuffled around with little carefulness, and panicked murmurs strained the silence.

Minari entered the living room where heavy aluminum clanks beat against the front door, the glass of the storm door window shaking as if about to shatter from the wind. Thunder rolled through the sky as rain found its way inside through the cracks. “I think she went outside.”

Rumi and \_\_\_\_\_ rushed into the hallway with teary eyes then rushed out the front door. “Did you remember to lock the door?” Rumi asked frantically. “After the mudang left?”

“I did,” \_\_\_\_\_ replied. They stepped outside into the rain, their slippers soaking in the rain. They ran to the road, looking left then right before running across the lawn to go around the house. After a minute, they returned completely soaked. “Are her shoes gone?” \_\_\_\_\_ asked no one in particular, picking up and tossing splayed shoes that hadn't been put away.

Rumi followed counted the pairs before searching for a particular one. “Her sandals are gone,” Rumi said.

\_\_\_\_\_ grabbed their rain jacket then tossed it on before grabbing Violet's. \_\_\_\_\_ ran outside. Rumi grabbed her jacket, tossed one to Minari, then ran outside behind \_\_\_\_\_. Minari followed them.

It was mid-afternoon, but dark storm clouds covered the sky as if dusk was approaching. The heavy air seeped into Minari's pores and covered her skin in a heavy layer of damp air, feeling as if the energy surrounding her was slowly beginning to suffocate.

Raising her hood before she stepped away from the cover of the awning, she wondered where Violet may have gone. She followed \_\_\_\_\_ and Rumi, who were searching around the house to figure out if Violet went anywhere familiar. In the garden, after they searched, Rumi and \_\_\_\_\_ stood facing each other as the rain drowned out their voices.

“Maybe Pachua is with her,” Minari said, thinking of the dragon in Rumi's tea leaf reading. “Violet told me a little bit ago she was talking with Pachua.”

“What?” Rumi asked. “When was this?”

“Just before Mudang Magnolia arrived. She said Pachua had been calling her. What if it's about the golden mushroom?”

\_\_\_\_\_ threw their hands into the air in exasperation. "I've always felt like knowing about the golden mushroom was a trap, but I haven't really thought to accept it until now."

"If I had just listened to my senses," Rumi said. "I knew there was something fishy going on. She didn't tell Mudang Magnolia about Pachua."

"Where do you think she went?" \_\_\_\_\_ asked Minari. "If it's in the lower world, she may try to get there."

Memories of Violet's eyes flashing like a serpent's appeared, but Minari waved the thought away.

"The docks," Rumi said.

"That's a ten-minute walk from here," \_\_\_\_\_ said. "Are we sure she went that way?"

"What if she went to find Mudang Magnolia?" Rumi said with tears running down her cheeks. "What if the curiosities of the golden mushroom toxified her?"

"Minari and I will walk the neighborhood on foot and go toward the dock," \_\_\_\_\_ said. "She couldn't have made it out of town. Rumi, you should grab our bike and head to Mudang Magnolia's home to see if she went there. Do a lap or two around the neighborhood before meeting us at the dock."

Rumi nodded then wiped her tears away. "We'll find her," Rumi said with a blank voice as if she was saying the words out loud as a plea for the spirits to help bring her home. After Rumi took a deep breath, she pulled the bike from the yard with tears still running down her cheeks then rode off in the heavy, humid rain.

Without sharing what the plan would be, Minari and \_\_\_\_\_ began walking briskly toward the dock with their eyes hooked onto the small slit of a horizon peeking through dissipating clouds.

“It’s my fault Violet ran away,” \_\_\_\_\_ said. “If I didn’t bring up the golden mushroom, she might not have gotten spirit sickness.”

Minari sighed. She peered through fences, eyeing behind bushes and trees for Violet. “Pachua warned me once that the golden mushroom is dangerous. It would be wise to ignore it, but the curiosity always finds its way back to us somehow.”

\_\_\_\_\_ had a straight face that signified no visual emotion that Minari could pick up on. “It was an unfortunate circumstance,” \_\_\_\_\_ said. “In all their meetings, the golden mushroom had only been an empty update. It only took one conversation for Violet to overhear for her to be infected by its allure.”

Minari huddled into her jacket more deeply to block the rain from hitting her face.

“Violet had complained too that the Pachua doll told her mean things – very mean things. What if they were threatening her about what she overheard?”

“We’ll find her,” Minari said. She huddled into her jacket a bit deeper, the insides of the fabric damp. “If it’s a trap to lure us to Pachua, then I know what should happen. Whatever happens will be my karmic burdens catching up to us.”

“Why do you think she’s here for you?” \_\_\_\_\_ asked with an even tone and rapid breaths. “The trap of the golden mushroom doesn’t just seek one person.”

“Pachua needs to cut the tether that binds my spirit to this body,” Minari replied, her feet slapping puddles on wet pavement. “It’s the final step before the egg hatches.”

She thought about Pachua and wondered what kind of anxiety she would bring with her. Pachua had always been forthcoming with her desires for how this final world egg should look, and she wanted it to be peaceful. Minari sighed as she thought about the little amount of time the spirits had remaining and if this world was anywhere near Pachua’s vision of serenity.

\_\_\_\_\_ peered around the houses. Nobody was outside, the rain halting the desire for the outdoors. The rain droplets sent damp shivers to Minari, encouraging an ache in her bones that amplified her worry for Violet. Minari opened a stranger's mailbox. Inside was bent newspapers damp with the air around them and a stack of mail shoved inside. She closed the mailbox. "Does Violet have any friends living nearby?"

"Not living anywhere in this neighborhood," \_\_\_\_\_ said. They kept their head on a swivel, searching earnestly for Violet as they paced briskly toward the dock. "When we moved, we picked a retirement neighborhood to revitalize the community."

"I'm starting to think she'll be by the dock," Minari said. "If the masks want information from her about the golden mushroom, where else would she go?"

"She had been curious about the lower world for a while." \_\_\_\_\_ breathed in deeply then paced quicker toward the dock. The skyline shined brightly through the cloudy horizon, the dampness of the air around them gleaming like the pearly hue of Pachua's orb. "What if she thinks it's under the ocean?"

Minari increased her gait, the wetness in the air sticking to her damp skin like a mask. It smelled of decaying earth and a bile from sewage run-off. "Does she know how to swim?"

\_\_\_\_\_ shook their head. "Not that well – she passed her swim classes a few years ago, but she's not an athlete."

"Let's hurry to the dock, then. Just in case."

With those anxieties propelling them both forward, they scoured harder for Violet as they kept toward the dock. They peeked into absent neighbors' yards, calling Violet's name with hope that she would sneak out from behind a bush as if playing a rainy game of hide-and-go-seek. But the only thing appearing out of the ordinary were crows tilting the sides of their heads toward

them as if inspecting their search efforts in vain.

Their beady eyes and sleek feathered bodies were undisturbed by the rain, appearing shiny like ducks enjoying a day out on a pond. But the crows, unmoving from the one spot ahead of them on a lamp post, stared at them as if they had a very important message to deliver, and it was not one of good news.

A strong gust of wind tossed wet leaves to the ground, swirling them in a dance of rustles with the harrowing drums of rain. They continued their fast-paced walk toward the dock, the crows keeping a watchful eye on every footstep.

“These crows might know something about the golden mushroom,” \_\_\_\_\_ said with heavy pants between breaths. “Should we ask them?”

Minari nodded, her feet splashing against the pavement. Minari waved to the crows as if they were a vessel for one of the masks. The crows stare at them, tilting their beady-eyed heads. “They may not want to speak.”

“Where is the golden mushroom?” \_\_\_\_\_ yelled at the crows.

For a brief moment, rain pelted harder and thunder boomed in the sky despite the breaking clouds above them. The crows stretched their wings far and wide then hopped off the lamp post without another word. The golden mushroom was not something even the crows wanted to be curious about.

They trekked on, shielding themselves from the booming rain that poured a strong, steady stream against them. The trees around them creaked, their canopies tilting heavily with winds that snapped loose branches. The cold and wet chafing between Minari's toes turned sore.

“What if our decision to steal the orb led to the chaos involving the golden mushroom,” \_\_\_\_\_ said. “What a terrible way to find out that we were wrong so many lifetimes ago. And

here I thought we were just being reckless. Pachua treats that orb like her own child. And now this whole debacle with the golden mushroom – ugh!”

“Are you curious about the golden mushroom?” Minari asked. “Pachua told us it was something we should avoid. Have you been avoiding it?”

“No,” \_\_\_\_\_ said, shaking their head. “I want to know everything about it, just like Yangban, Sonpi, and the other two. It is an opportunity for *any one spirit* to immediately begin their last life. What a wonderful thing to find! It is worrisome that Violet fell prey to its curiosities at such a young age.”

“She should not have been exposed to it,” Minari said.

\_\_\_\_\_ had held tears in their eyes. “It is my fault and not Rumi’s. Every time I’ve mentioned the golden mushroom, Rumi strayed away from the conversation. She remembers betraying Pachua more closely than I do. She was always fearful that seeking the golden mushroom will turn out like it did when we stole the orb from Pachua.”

“Pachua talks about the golden mushroom differently,” Minari replied.

“I always thought she wanted us to find it, just like she wanted us to steal the orb. I don’t believe that right now because Violet should not be seeking it on our behalf.”

Minari nodded. “We will find her. Pachua had been communicating with her through something. We’ll find it and ask Pachua her intentions with the golden mushroom.”

“I found something,” \_\_\_\_\_ said. They ran ahead of Minari to pick up something from a puddle. When Minari caught up, they was holding the Pachua doll. It was dripping water. A small stream of water ran down \_\_\_\_\_’s forearm, following the path of their light amber veins like mountains. \_\_\_\_\_ gripped the Pachua doll tightly until bubbles oozed out of the crocheted insides.

Looking up, Rumi was standing on a home's porch. With a worried grip squeezing the Pachua doll, they walked a few houses down with Minari. They had moved out of the rainfall as they approached the edge of the neighborhood with Rumi's bike laying on the driveway.

Rumi had been talking in low murmurs with Mudang Magnolia. Rumi was soaked with rain. She had Violet's jacket huddled beneath her own to keep dry.

Mudang Magnolia waved toward \_\_\_\_\_ and Minari, beckoning them closer. Beyond the haze of the thundering clouds peeked a deep pink of the setting sky.

"I was hoping Mudang Magnolia saw Violet pass by," Rumi said as she left the porch and picked up her bike with shaking hands. "Violet might have gone to her with some more questions."

"It must be about the golden mushroom," Mudang Magnolia said as she left her home in slippers scratching against the concrete. "We've been warned many, many times by the divine Mago that the curiosities surrounding the golden mushroom should never be sought after. I'm fearful Violet has become tainted with its bile and is seeking a way out."

Mudang Magnolia pointed toward the docks. "I asked the spirits. They offered a vision of renewal."

"That should be a gracious thing," Rumi said. "Violet will begin the cyclical step of entering young adulthood. So this whole debacle is just temporary."

Mudang Magnolia shook her head. "This renewal is more than that – the vision is similar to the earliest vessels when they first set foot on this land."

"I do not wish to take part in anything related to that horrific event," Rumi said. She lifted her bike. "We stole something we were warned never to touch, and I do not want Violet to fall prey to something similar."

“The golden mushroom beacons us to be curious again,” \_\_\_\_\_ said. “The warmth from the orb when I held onto it for the first time aches like no other – it is such a nice feeling - and now I know it mimics the warmth of the golden mushroom. It *has* to be inside the orb – there is no other reason why it compelled us to steal it. The masks will know how to help.”

“Pachua warned us to not trust the masks,” Minari replied. “That they would lead us to trouble. Is this the trouble she was referring to?”

Rumi shook her head. “I’m going to keep looking for Violet. I want nothing to do with the masks and their curiosity for the golden mushroom. As soon as we find Violet, those fools are no longer welcome.”

Rumi got on her bike to do another lap around the neighborhood to search for Violet.

Mudang Magnolia pointed toward the dock. “As I told Rumi, if I remember correctly, I saw Violet run toward the dock wearing a golden-colored robe. Pachua was with her.”

“Pachua is here?” \_\_\_\_\_ asked.

“The spirit of her is here. She does not like to bring her vessel to the middle world – it is too delicate for someone of her status. She prefers to project her spirit. It ran with Violet.”

From a large rain puddle floated up a mask and a colorful fish. It was Choraengi and his bug-eyed self that used the fish as a vessel. The wind breezed through, chiming through the shaking trees, inviting sounds of eerie gusts singing soft tunes as they shook from the cold dampness of rain.

“The golden mushroom!” Choraengi said with bubbles spitting out of his mask, the fish lips of his vessel apparent through his crooked grin. Rain sprites sprinkled toward the land with rain droplets, their wispy bodies fluttering through the wind. Their song was not as strong as other times. “Violet has found the golden mushroom!”

“She has not,” Mudang Magnolia said, shaking her head. “And if you were any wiser, you would tell your boss that there is nothing good to come out of seeking the golden mushroom.”

“That is not true,” Choraengi responded. “Violet is out by the dock now fishing the golden mushroom from the ocean.”

\_\_\_\_\_’s eyes widened as they ran toward the dock. “She’s by the dock!” they screamed as they ran, hoping Rumi would hear wherever she was. “Violet is at the dock!”

“She’s going to get to it before you!” Choraengi yelled after \_\_\_\_\_ in his fish body. He raised himself in the air with his tailfin, showcasing a torn side fin sliced close to the skin. Choraengi sighed then lowered himself into the puddle as if lounging comfortably. He slapped the water playfully with his good fin as if there was nothing better to do. “I can only swim on one side, so I’m all out of luck! I can’t swim *and* carry the golden mushroom. It’ll be too much. I told my boss about it, though.”

“I fear we will pay for the curiosity surrounding the golden mushroom if you keep encouraging the spirits to seek it out,” Mudang Magnolia said.

“Curiosity is not a dangerous thing. It is a one-way ticket to our last life! Who wouldn’t be curious about such a prize as that one?” Choraengi sipped some puddle water with his fish mouth, sucking up a pebble before spitting it back out. “I had the decent mind to give it to my boss a long time ago, but that was before meeting this murderer,” Choraengi said, pointing to Minari.

“You seem alive and well to me,” Minari said.

Choraengi shook his head. “No,” he said. “Not in the slightest. Do you know how difficult it was to gain Yangban’s trust back? He thought it such a just thing to have me lose my

leg, he said every vessel from then on should have a missing appendage! Luckily for me, I hear someone with close ties to the golden mushroom has a missing appendage, and it's a big one!"

Mudang Magnolia eyed Minari with a cold curiosity that signified no knowledge into her thoughts. The mudang Minari had met earlier was nicer and more sincere, but now it was as if she had toned down the face she performed in front of Violet. "One of the last humans has a missing arm," she said. "And he calls for Violet. Perhaps you should not indulge yourself in this conversation surrounding the golden mushroom."

Mudang Magnolia sighed then bent down toward Choraengi, whispering something that made him sink deeper into the puddle. He stopped playing with pebbles in the water, maintaining a steady manner that only the rain disturbed.

The rain sprites picked up their eerie tune as a mask unearthed from the muddy grass beside Mudang Magnolia's feet. Mudang Magnolia picked up the mask then put it on without another word.

Minari wondered if Halmi ever reunited with her husband, but she knew the sufferings that the spirits prioritized over others pushed some away. The sadness surrounding Halmi's face etched deeply into the mask, appeared with more sadness on Mudang Magnolia's vessel.

The rain sprites sang with wispy melodies like the shushing of mist. They danced around Choraengi, trying to uplift his down spirits like a spoiled kid wanting only to get some cool stuff. Halmi paid no attention to Choraengi as he pushed some rain sprites into the puddle. Some were kind enough to soak up the rain, adding fatness to their bodies, so they could dance as good as they could along the edges of tar. It was not a good spot for dancing.

"Remember Mago's wisdom, elder spirit." Halmi crossed her hands in front of her.

Choraengi nodded, lifting his fish vessel from the puddle. "That's right, that's right.

Mago knows all. She is wise and all-encompassing.”

“Pachua must fulfill her thousand-year promise,” Halmi said. “Do you remember what happens if she doesn’t?”

“We will all die,” Choraengi said with ickiness. “And it will be Minari who caused it!”

“I will keep my promise to Pachua,” Minari replied. “I want every spirit to have their best chance to live through their last life.”

“Now is your opportunity to officially make that promise,” Halmi said. The softness in her voice had also disappeared. “Pachua has never once believed you were trying to help her as long as you have lived in this vessel.”

Minari nodded. “I understand, thank you.”

Halmi’s mask fell off Mudang Magnolia’s, knocking Choraengi’s mask off in the process. Halmi’s mask sank into the puddle. Choraengi’s floated along the top as if waiting for the fish to stumble into the mask again. The fish stayed below the water, comfortable in the little puddle.

A single crow flew overhead, perching on a pole. It stared at Minari, its beady eyes curious about something. Minari, as if possessed by where the crow wanted her to be, had a vision about Sage in the lower world wearing a scarred mask. It was then when Violet’s vision relayed in her mind, of Sage with the scarred mask yelling at thundering clouds gripping something. It was not the golden mushroom.

“The crows love to show us things,” Mudang Magnolia said. “Known to deliver messages from the ancestors of those who come before us. This one has been keen on delivering a message about Sage since your arrival. Now it has finally been delivered to the proper recipient, I trust you will figure out the remainder.”

“Will you please offer me wisdom about this vision?” Minari asked.

Mudang Magnolia chuckled. “The wisdom you seek is the answer you already know to be true: Sage does not have the golden mushroom, yet Violet believes he does. Choraengi and the other believe Violet can lead them to the golden mushroom if she meets with Pachua.”

“Thank you,” Minari said.

Mudang Magnolia said nothing. With a sigh, she walked back inside to avoid the remainder of the rain.

Minari looked opposite the dock where Rumi was biking. Minari raised her arms as high as she could so Rumi could see.

“We think she’s by the dock!” Minari yelled. Her echoed voice sounded empty in such a space filled with taller-than-normal homes spread out to amplify its surroundings. Minari hopped over the lone fish swimming in its puddle then ran toward the dock.

## Chapter 18

Closer to the dock, they spotted Violet offshore standing on Minari's rowboat as it creaked atop the waters. She was wearing Minari's golden hanbok. \_\_\_\_\_ shouted for Violet, still holding onto the Pachua doll.

Minari's hanbok weighed heavily on Violet, too large to fit properly on a child. Violet held the extra fabric from the sleeves close to her chest. She was shivering. The end of the hanbok hung off the side of the boat, absorbing water and wobbling Violet. The boat shook as Violet tried to maintain balance as the ocean waves pulled her farther out.

\_\_\_\_\_ was taking off their shoes when Minari stopped them. The waters were too dark to

navigate, the seaweed and algae hidden underneath the ocean's murky waters. As \_\_\_\_\_ held the Pachua doll tightly in their hands, with thrums of the water clanking against wood, they hesitated to dive in.

Minari surveyed the immediate area and found the oar floating under the docks, the end of the rod sticking out from the surface. On her knees, she bent down and pulled it out of the chilly waters. It was slimy and caked in algae.”

“She is *not* going to swim her way back to shore,” \_\_\_\_\_ said, staring in horror at the oar.

Violet had not noticed \_\_\_\_\_ shouting at her from the shore. Her back was turned to them, the sky ahead of her finally breaking the rain clouds apart. A beacon of light beamed through the clouds, hitting the sea ahead of Violet, who waved as if expecting something. Nothing appeared from the depths of the ocean aside from piles of floating seaweed and seafoam.

“Violet,” \_\_\_\_\_ yelled again, their throat shaking as they screamed.

Violet turned her head. Her face held onto a child-like cheeriness that did not assess the dangers of her surroundings as she should have, like a threatening ghost mimicking the sun's disposition. Violet waved. The sleeves of Minari's hanbok draped off the side, dragging atop the water. As she waved harder, not realizing the fabric grew heavier, her arm jutted to the side from the weight, causing her balance to shift and the raft to sway even more.

Violet pulled the fabric floating along the current into the boat. For a moment she lost balance and leaned on one leg, but she regained it after flailing her arms. \_\_\_\_\_ gasped when she twirled, the light of the sun highlighting the details surrounding her horrific positioning as the rain clouds departed.

“Violet,” \_\_\_\_\_ yelled again, as if they didn't know what else to say. With tears in their

eyes, \_\_\_\_\_ heaved and paced around the docks, both of their hands pressed against the top of their head, squeezing as they released anxious whimpers.

“Pachua told me to swim out here and wait,” Violet yelled back. “She said she’d be here once the sun set.”

\_\_\_\_\_ cursed under their breath. “It’s about the golden mushroom,” they said with tears rolling down their cheeks.

With mechanical whirring, Rumi rode onto the dock with the bicycle, the wheels bumping along the cracks. She hopped off, letting it skid against the pavement. She was carrying Violet’s jacket. “Where’s Violet?”

Minari pointed, and upon seeing Violet wearing Minari’s hanbok, something seemed to have clicked in Rumi. She dropped to her knees with swollen eyes and snot bubbling from her nose.

“She says Pachua told her to go there and greet her when she arrives,” Minari said.

Rumi shook her head. “If that were true, we’d be greeting her at the docks. Or on a proper boat with an actual ship’s crew.”

“I know,” \_\_\_\_\_ said, sobbing.

“Violet,” Rumi yelled. “We’ll meet Pachua on the docks. It’s too dangerous. The boat will flip over and you’ll drown.”

“No,” Violet yelled back. “Pachua told me to wait here. She’s going to bring me the golden mushroom!”

“Please just get back to the docks,” Rumi pleaded.

Violet furiously shook her head. “I’m supposed to be here by myself,” she yelled. “You should have stayed home – I was going to come back.”

Flashbacks of horror replayed in Minari's mind as the sliver of pink from the setting sun grew darker and deeper, the screams between Violet, Rumi, and \_\_\_\_\_ settling a shock in Minari's system. Static in the air made the hair on Minari's arms stand tall. Pachua was here somewhere.

As if by instinct, Rumi yanked the Pachua doll from \_\_\_\_\_'s hand and threw it as far as she could into the ocean.

"Momma, no!" Violet yelled.

"Come back here," Rumi replied.

Violet shook her head and stared at the Pachua doll floating between them. "No!" Violet yelled, throwing her hands to her side. The sleeves touched the water. Violet started crying.

"Roll up your sleeves, Violet!"

The waves picked up, pulling her farther away from the docks. Violet rolled up her sleeves then sat in the boat. When splashes of water rocked the boat more viciously, Violet shrieked, calling for her mother to help.

With strong waves creating energy with the moon that appeared in the sky as the sun weakened, Rumi instructed Violet to lay on her stomach if kneeling was too difficult, then to paddle with her hands, placing them in the water in front of her, pulling, lifting, then repeating. In the next few minutes as the clouds approached the shoreline and the sun was almost fully below the horizon, Violet made an attempt to paddle to shore.

Rumi and \_\_\_\_\_ continued to coax her: Keep paddling – you're almost there, almost close to shore. Minari was focused on the sliver of the remaining sun. Violet wouldn't make it before Pachua got there. Minari intensely watched the dark waters, hoping she'd be able to catch a glimpse of glistening turquoise-colored scales or of the pearly glimmers of the orb.

“I’ll go,” \_\_\_\_\_ said as they watched Violet make futile attempts to paddle to shore, the waves pushing her farther out into the ocean. Removing their shoes and jacket, \_\_\_\_\_ dove into the water.

Immediately, the waves picked up. \_\_\_\_\_ flailed as if they were about to turn back into ocean foam. Their white hair whipped across their face blocking their nose and mouth. The waves pushed them under water. As soon as \_\_\_\_\_ surfaced, they screamed for help through their hair as their lungs tried to encapsulate the shock of the freezing temperature. The waves whipped against the docks as \_\_\_\_\_ tried to stay afloat, but it splashed their face, forcing them to cough and hang onto the ladder for support.

Frenzied, Rumi bent down and pulled them up with both of her hands. \_\_\_\_\_ breathed heavily and cried as they climbed back to the docks. Pushing their hair out of their face, they sat at the edge with their feet dangling across the top of the waters and shivered. “Pachua doesn’t want me to go,” \_\_\_\_\_ said. “She’s under the water. She’s threatening us.”

“What are we supposed to do?” Rumi said with a clogged nose.

Violet was screaming for help. Her voice was sore and beginning to croak.

Minari stood at the edge of the dock and stared at the undulating water that crashed against the wood. Splashes of water lapped up to kiss her feet. “She wants me to go.”

Without letting the fear of death seep into her mind, Minari dove into the water.

The energizing coolness electrified her skin. As she surfaced past the docks, she vocalized her inhale. Trying to control her breath, her core shaking as it protected her heart, she swam. Seaweed tickled the tips of her toes as she kicked with the current toward Violet. It was dusk.

Minari reached Violet without a lot of duress. When she tried to get on the boat, Violet

stopped her. "You're going to tip us over."

"Okay," Minari said, her teeth clattering. Minari swam to the other end of the boat to push it toward the docks. As she kicked, the roar of her feet splashing against the water prevented her from hearing what was around her. She couldn't tell how close they were to the docks or how far out they had actually been, so she focused on paddling as the waves tried to pull them away from shore.

Minari stared at the Pachua doll floating along the raft. It was a steady guide point at first for the direction of the waves and when to brace her breath to be slapped in the face by ocean water. She had thought, for a brief moment, that Pachua was assisting them to shore until Pachua coiled her slimy tail around her ankle.

The tug played with her balance, attempting to drag her underwater. It was soft at first as if Pachua was making sure she grabbed the correct ankle this time. Minari kept kicking, however. Pachua's grip increased in pressure.

When Minari made it to the edge of the docks and Rumi lifted Violet from the boat, \_\_\_\_\_ went to the stairs to coax Minari out of the water. With fear in their eyes, Minari knew \_\_\_\_\_ spotted a shiny glint under the water. Pachua's tail was still gripped onto her ankle, and she hoped with all her might that it was just seaweed tangling itself around her.

Minari swam around the swaying boat, her ankle still restrained. When Minari tugged at her ankle to release herself, Pachua's tail pulled her under the water with such force, she pulled the boat underneath with her. It wasn't until the resistance of the buoyant boat trying to stay afloat and the strong current from Pachua dragging her beneath the ocean's waters when her body felt as if it was tearing in half.

With a desperate decision, Minari accepted her fate and let Pachua take her wherever she

wanted to go. Letting go of the boat, it rising to the surface with a bellowing splash, Pachua dragged Minari near the ocean floor.

Pachua pulled Minari deeper, her eardrums squeezing as the pressure built. Her lungs, feeling like they were about to pop, forced her to exhale as she continued to be pulled under. It was then when her body, not as calm as her mind, began to go into shock.

She kicked, flailed her arms, twisted her body, but every aggressive movement slowly deflated her lungs – in a sheer panic, her lungs she inhaled water, and she choked. As she coughed, her chest pressed inward until every last bit of water was pushed out. More liquid was taken in during the panic, filling her lungs with salty water caked in algae until her brain began to shut down.

While her body wasn't conscious, her spirit floated with it, aware of her body scattering along the ocean floor in pieces. As her vessel separated, the skin of her flesh tearing away from the muscle, away from the bone, she followed her body as her skin was being torn off by schools of fish, her bloated flesh pulling with the tides, her bones crashing into boulders. It was when her body began to tear away from the hinges, her palms going one way, her feet going another, when her spirit stayed with the coral at the bottom of the dark sea.

As her spirit floated with the current, she spread herself out along the sandy floor, integrating with as many grains of sand her spirit was able to latch onto. The last thing she remembered before her consciousness faded completely was her decaying body in the hollow of that tree.

Here, We Are Visitors

*In my presence, as the moon shines as bright as the sun, listening rabbits bear gifts for the flaming trees, their outstretched arms seeking the stars. But as they cycle through night and day, saying hello and goodbye, they wish, just once, they could gaze only at the moon.*

## Chapter 19

In that breathless moment between death and what Minari assumed to be rebirth, an owl perched on the top of a very tall tree, watching her. Its weaponizing eyes veered as if it was snickering at her circumstances and had cursed her very presence. In that unspeaking silence, paranoia willed Minari to sit up against a strong breeze that shielded the owl in its fog, a glimmer of its shining eyes tormenting her.

When the wind faded and she tried to get up, her feet sunk into the snow. The snowflakes floated down like silkworm cocoons and piled on each other until mounds blocked her pathway. As she stepped, she would raise foot high in the air to clear her sole of the snow before taking a

step. She repeated this process until the snow gifted her a white winter hanbok. It had a tiny fold near the hems and gold embroidery that detailed the ends. The tassel attached to her waist had intricate woven patterns using golden yellow thread in the shape of a tree with a moonstone as its center. The pants on this hanbok was thick while staying loose around her legs and tight at the ankle, making maneuvering through the cold a little more bearable. A large blanket-like jacket formed from the snow, keeping her warm. She huddled her shivering body as she walked, hoping she would warm up soon.

The land was brutal. Each gust of frozen wind that flittered across the snowy plains also swept across Minari's chapped cheeks and dry lips, both flushed. Woefully unaware of this environment, she had no idea how to be more comfortable – how to breathe out hot air to warm her core, how to huddle her fingertips underneath her armpits, how to wrap her scarf around her nose, shoulders, and neck to capture the heat from her breath, or even how to pack the bottom of her snow sweats into her boots to prevent her toes from turning blue – she didn't do any of these things. Instead, she led with frozen toes, braced her bare face against the wind, and clutched the edges of her hanbok's jacket with shivering fingertips.

Ahead, Minari could make out the faint outline of a forest shining from moonlight in its third quarter, hidden behind fog. But from what she was able to distinguish, the forest consisted of tall pine trees that extended outward and was messy compared to the other pine trees she had seen. It was when the wind rushed through with violence, slapping snow across her wet face, was when she tucked her head down again and kept on.

She remembered Rumi telling her once, clinging onto her disappearing voice in her mind, that if someone was blindfolded and tried to walk in a straight line, they would end up going in a direction they weren't prepared for. To Minari, if she went in the wrong direction, it would lead

her farther away from safety and possibly deeper into the blizzard. It would also lead her farther away from Pachua. She begged her ancestors to keep her body warm enough until she could find shelter, and when thorns from the wind prickled her skin, she knew they graced her with momentum.

Thinking back to the time she had spent walking through soft blades of grass that tickled the hair on her legs, feeling the warmth of the sun grow as it rose in the early morning, and listening to the chattering bugs and singing birds behind thick green foliage, she knew Pachua would be waiting for her at the top of the mountain, the place where they all were born.

Brushing melted snow off her face, she squinted her eyes to find a faint outline of the forest's edge. Through her peripherals, she caught a glimpse of what she assumed to be Rumi's mother tree, and she was close. She turned slightly to the right and kept forward, holding onto that faint shadow in her field of vision until the tree line became visible.

The scattered pine trees around her swayed, dropping needles, pine nuts, and cones onto the snowy ground. Minari was anxious that the snow from the trees would fall and bury her. They loomed over her with each gust from the blizzard. When her body shivered, she knew she shouldn't care about the trees, about how the wind whistled when it traveled through the bark, or how piles of snow plopped onto the ground – she just wanted to be warm.

Minari avoided breezes and followed a path that glowed through the fog with the moon's guidance, the whistles from the forest guiding her just the same. Clenching her shivering hands together underneath the cover of her hanbok jacket, a faint light flickered like a dull flame in the distance, leading her the way to what she assumed was safety. On her way toward the light, a fox roamed through thickets of pine as if it wasn't affected by the blizzard at all.

On its face was a mask of some kind of animal held in place by the fox's snout. It

resembled a large colorful fin with splotches of bright yellows and oranges. Minari had no idea what it was supposed to be.

Snow sprites descended from the sky with the snowfall, their tiny fat bodies floating down like whimsical creatures. The familiar old and shaky voice, reminding Minari of Halmi, sang a melancholic tune that floated through the chilly air. The snow sprites plucked string instruments, the deep and beautiful melodies reverberating through the silent night like the wind.

“Excuse me,” Minari yelled through the roaring winds and tilting trees. “Can you tell us where we are please?”

The fox, immediately turning to face Minari, stared at her without a word. “Did the smoking tigers invite you here?”

“No,” she replied. “Who are the smoking tigers? I’m looking for Pachua.”

“WHO ARE THE SMOKING TIGERS?” The fox fluffed its tail. “Clearly you are too new to be bothered with.” The fox ran toward the light.

Minari followed its trail as it hopped around the large pile of snow. “Wait,” she pleaded.

“Stop being creepy,” it said, looking back at Minari and jumping away. The fox, misjudging its hop, rammed into a pine tree, causing a large pile of snow to fall directly onto it.

Rushing to help, Minari dug into the snow. Finding its body, Minari rushed to help the fox before it suffocated. Once the snow was far enough away from its face, the fox jumped out of the hole and yelped when it landed. One of its back legs was injured. “Let me help,” Minari said, feeling guilty that it was hurt. “Let me help you.”

“You’ve done enough,” the fox said as it hobbled away, trying to push against the mound of snow.

Minari followed the fox as it approached the light, wanting to ensure it got where it

needed to be safely. Soon, the light became more defined, dancing in the fog like something was on fire. When the wind slowed for a brief moment, allowing the thick fog of snowfall to allow her vision, the light of a flaming tree flickered.

All she could think about at that moment was the warmth it would give her amid the blizzard, so she left the fox to its own survival and made her own way toward the flame. The snow sprites stopped their tune as soon as the fox hobbled out of her sight line. The closer she got to the flaming tree, the slower the wind became. Instead of a whistle, bristles of pine brushed against each other. Snow fell from their branches, plopping softly onto the ground below. As she moved closer, her feet slipped. Falling face-forward, she tumbled down the edge of a pit hidden underneath snow, its loose flakes kicked into the air as she submerged into the large pile of snow until she reached the bottom.

Laying on the thicket of snow to catch her breath and regain her balance, Minari inspected where she had fallen from. From the snow her body cleared was a ledge carved from the earth. Sitting up, she looked toward the flaming tree, the bottom of its tangled roots exposed, yet surprisingly healthy considering the freezing state of the land. It reminded her of the tree that Rumi was born from – vines that spread out and dangled from the canopy, a thick trunk that twisted as it grew, and the hanging leaves that stayed connected despite the tree being on fire and bent toward the ground. The flame's bright light had melted the snow around it, revealing a muddy pit. To its sides were two large mounds of mud, and Minari suspected someone had dug out the pit she was standing in.

As soon as she stood to let the light of the fire reach her, she felt a little bit warmer. As she walked closer to the flaming tree, her feet squishing in melted snow and mud, her face prickled as her blood vessels warmed back up, and her body soon stopped shivering. Wood

crackled, sparks popped, and tiny specks of bark jumped into snow, but branches didn't fall, nor did leaves float away in ash. The tree stood strong and alive as if nothing was wrong.

Feeling warm exhales, Minari stood in front of the flaming tree until her toes regained feeling and the flickers dried out her damp skin. Swelling pressurized her boots, the soggianness growing uncomfortable. It was too hot to stand directly in front of the tree, but she tried to get as close as she could, the prickling heat lowering the aching pressure in her heart, it released a few tears from her eyes of relief.

Ahead of her, the fox with the unknown animal mask unearthed from a burrow close to the flaming tree and growled. With a fluffed tail and an arched back, it bared its teeth and licked the air. Saliva dripped from the edges of its mouth.

Minari tried to go around the fox, giving it enough distance to not feel threatened, but when she passed the fox's burrow, it pounced. Minari tried pushing it away, falling on her butt as she tripped over her feet. It tried to bite her forearm, her hanbok acting as a barrier. The fox's teeth latched onto the fabric, but it pulled as if it was trying to tear away flesh. When the fox tore the fabric, it released its grip and circled around Minari. The colorful wings of its mask cast a terrifying shadow that reminded Minari of the haunting owl that had perched on the tree upon her arrival.

"I told you to leave me alone!" The fox cried as it lunged again, biting the air in front of Minari.

"I'm sorry," Minari said. "I didn't know you were here. I was just trying to get warm."

Before the fox pounced at her again, she kicked the wing of its mask, flailing her foot a few times until the fox jolted to the side, twisting its neck. It jumped at her again, chomping its jaw, trying to grab anything it might be able to.

“Will you just stop for a second?” Minari said with frustration, crawling backward.

The fox paid no mind and tried to bite again. It successfully grabbed onto the edge of her hanbok and pulled, violently shaking its head. Minari pulled out a sharp rock from the snow and swiped, cutting the fox along its collarbone.

The fox yelped with its jaw still clenched onto her hanbok, its teeth ripping the fabric further. “You are not a worthy ancestor. Have you even perfected your three years of work?”

She swiped the rock again, slicing its skin. The fox let go with a snarl. “I am the elder spirit,” Minari said with anger, knowing her position. “I am working toward connecting the threads of this family.”

“You stupid spirit,” the fox said, matching her anger. “The land is the ancestor and is just as part of your family as the humans you stay so close to. Yet you know nothing of your work of becoming an ancestor and taking from the lands you use to survive? How do you ever plan on repaying the ground you walk on?”

It snipped at her arm again, ripping the fabric further.

“I am working on it,” Minari said. “Now please let go.”

The fox didn't let go and pounced on her again, grabbing the fabric that was closer to her neck. With her heart beating rapidly and the fear of permanent death looming over her mind, Minari lifted the pointed rock above her head and then slammed it onto the fox's head. The rock's sharp edge broke through the fox's skull, killing it.

Blood seeped from the breaking point until it dripped from below its jaw, leaking onto the bottom of her boots. Minari stepped back, letting go of the rock. Her body was trembling. The mask had fallen off its face, disintegrating into melted snow and mud.

With tears in her eyes, Minari set the rock back where she pulled it from, wiped her

bloody hand with clean snow, then picked up the fox and stumbled toward the fox's burrow. She understood why the fox chose to reside there – it was indeed close enough to face the flaming tree for warmth, but far enough away to not get burned.

Its body was still warm. Minari stayed with the fox, petting its bloodied head, believing its spirit was staying beside her, watching. She stayed with it once the fox turned cold. Leaving the den, she picked up a fallen log and jammed its pointed end into the ground then pinned the fox on top.

Minari dug out more dirt from the fox's burrow until the hole was big enough for her. Once it was, she removed her clothes to the lightest layer. Jamming more sticks into the ground, she hung them as close to the flaming tree to dry before huddling into the hole. As she dozed off, the blank light from the fox's eyes beaming as if its spirit still resided with her, she remembered Violet's nightmares about the woman who ate men and then turned into a bear, and Minari suddenly understood what Violet was fearful of.

## Chapter 20

Stepping out into the clearing covered in blood, Minari felt refreshed. The fire from the flaming tree radiated warmth, and despite the chilling light breeze, she didn't feel cold. Her fingertips had regained feeling, her toes were a little sore but not blue, and her clothes had mostly dried. She flipped them to where the dampest sections faced the flaming tree. Her boots were also still damp, so she turned them too.

Bracing the cold as she stepped away from the flames, she gathered loose pine sticks that have fallen inside the pit and braided them together into a rope. Returning to the fox, she inspected that all the blood had dripped from its body in a collected puddle, then she moved it to

a cleaner location.

As her clothes finished drying, she sharpened a rock with another rock to skin the fox. When she was done, she lay its fur out to dry with her clothes and prepared its meat to cook. Using the braided rope and large edges of bark to hold the juice, she tied its body together so little juice would sizzle onto charcoal. She then cleaned her hands with fresh snow then gathered loose twigs to form a small fire.

Shuddering the heat of the flames away, she stuck a long branch on the fire until the end lit, then used that flame to start her fire to cook.

After eating, she laid her dry clothes on the den's floor, huddled inside until her body grew restless.

It was still dark when she stepped out to stir the fire. The remaining charcoal burned brightly. Minari suspected only a few hours had passed as she fed a few pieces of wood to the fire. Forming a pinhole diamond with her index fingers and thumbs, she blew compressed air through the hole, meeting the coal at a close angle, to start a flame. At first, puffs of smoke billowed out from the ash and forced her eyes close, but as she kept blowing air, tears stinging behind closed lids, the flames eventually warmed her face, and the fire rose.

As she shivered, Minari tested the dryness of her clothes and shook out extra dirt that had gathered. They were perfectly dry, if not a little cold, so she waved them over the tip of the flame before putting on the warmed fabrics on, which brought her heart warm relief. A strange stench followed the clothes, however, as she breathed in. She wasn't sure if it was the melted snow, burnt fabric, the fox's blood, or a mix of the three.

Sitting on the ground by the fire, watching the flames flicker around the fox, she wondered how long she had slept for. Pulling its juicy leg away, she slowly munched away at its

meat. Based on how many logs she put in earlier from the amount of time it took for the current fire to burn down, she assumed four or five hours had passed from when she put her clothes back on. The fox's meat dwindled as she ate its skinny legs and bony ribs. She wished there was more.

When she pulled off the last bit of dry meat that had lost all its juices, she anxiously waited for the beckoning of dawn that would signal more warmth and vision, but no instance of a sunrise peeked beyond the shadows between the trees. She was still in the darkness when the meat was all gone.

Poking at the fire with a stick, the edge of its warmth biting her left arm, Minari seemed to have understood that being in the lower world was part of the process of her death, but there was an inkling worry that the sun would never come up. The waning crescent moon hovered at its zenith.

She ventured to the edge of the circle. Wind shuffled through pine, whistling past the leaves into a soft roar that sounded like Pachua's low grumbling that whispered beneath leaves ambling along the snow. With anxiety looming, Minari was as prepared as she would ever be to see Pachua again, but as she let the chilled breeze caress her cheeks in the lonely night, Pachua didn't show.

Minari hiked her way toward the edge of the crater and tried to climb it. She dug her fingertips inside of the snow for grip, and when she reached her hand on the edge, the wind blew with such a ferocity, it knocked her back inside.

Closer to the crater's edge, she expected to see her footprints splayed everywhere from her fight with the fox, but she couldn't – everything was flat again as if a fresh sheet of snow covered her tracks. Waves from the wind, however, had etched themselves in the snow. Strange, the thought, how the flames didn't flicker or how her clothes no longer received a fresh brush of

snow. Shivering with the feeling of defeat, she walked to the fire then rubbed her hands above the open flame.

Despite the blizzard still erupting through the forest, the heat from the flaming tree eventually soaked through her clothes and drenched her in sweat. The blizzard had just begun to die down, its wind calming to occasional gusts and snowflakes the size of her fingertips. She wasn't sure how long it had been, but she knew she wouldn't see the sun grace this land as the moon shaved off more of its crescent.

In the distance, a high-pitched scream that sounded like a whisper in the distance emanated through the trees, carried by frigid gust. Immediately, Minari threw snow on the fire and swatted the leftover flames and embers with her coat, the coal sizzling. She cursed herself as the flaming tree lit up the surrounding vicinity, thinking herself unlucky and exposed and cowered in the den, her anxiety heightened as she anticipated Pachua emerging out of the darkness to kill her.

She had thought she was prepared to approach Pachua, but as she suffered through the cold, her emotional state was loose and frightened. All she wanted right then was to go back to the brief moment of happiness she spent with Rumi and \_\_\_\_\_. She *wanted* to be selfish.

The scream came again, closer this time. Listening to the sparks of the flaming tree, its fire roaring inside the hollowed trunk, she couldn't distinguish exactly where the screams came from or what it might have been shouting at. Soon, something slid into the crater, the soft poof of its landing too light to have been Pachua. "I know you're here," the voice said, sounding separate from the screams that continued to screech.

A heaviness lifted from her chest as she recognized its comforting sound, and in sheer jubilation, she climbed ferociously out of the den. Shaking, a little nervous, but mostly grateful

that the voice wasn't Pachua's, she found Sage wearing a terrifying mask.

In the darkness with light highlighting the mask's crevasses, it took her a moment before realizing the mask was Baekjung, the butcher. She recognized the many carved wrinkles and jagged cuts slashed across his face. Sage's body, however, was covered in blood, his hands stained red. Relief lifted from her chest when Sage took off the mask.

Sage wore winter boots, ones made from fox skin. He had a boar's shawl over his shoulders and a crossover bag attached to his leather belt. His breathing was long and heavy like the sound of his exhales had battled with the remaining crackles of the fire. Vapors from his breath swirled like a vortex.

"You scared me," Minari said Sage hiked closer to the fire, his boots caked in a thin layer of snow and mud. His amber skin illuminated by the fire, and his soft brown eyes still held the sweet gaze she remembered, but the layers of exhausted creases under his eyes brought her a feeling of safety.

"Sorry," Sage said. "I was skinning a deer to help Baekjung."

"How long has it been since I've seen you?"

"You mean since Pachua confused me as you and dragged me here? Oh, I don't know. I stopped keeping track a long time ago." His voice sounded muffled like the snow between them silenced their communication. The blizzard above them swept through the sky. "But here, if we die, we'll return to the chamber and won't be allowed to come back."

With wide eyes, Minari crossed her arms. The nighttime chill shuddered her skin. She moved closer to the flaming tree, feeling better about its intense heat.

"Are you not cold? It's warmer over here." Flicking and popping, the fire continued to breathe like an eternal flame.

“No,” Sage said. He was wearing a thick coat made of fur.

Minari pulled the fox skin from the rack she made next to the fire, feeling to see if it was dry enough to use as a blanket. Sage shook his head and handed her another pelt that he had carried with him. It was bear skin. He fit it over her shoulders snugly.

“The blizzard is at its strongest tonight with the full moon,” Sage said. “I built a cabin a few miles north of here. Shouldn’t take too long to trek to, but we need to leave soon if we want to avoid the worst of it.” Sage wiped his beard with his gloved hand. His face was deeply stressed and dragged toward the ground.

After a brief moment, Sage turned an ear to the sky and looked away, trying to listen for something. Minari tilted hers in the same direction, wondering what echo he had heard. Only the wind whispered back.

“Why don’t we leave now?” Minari asked.

Sage set the Baekjung mask on the ground and sat by the fire, which wasn’t successfully put out when Minari tried to hide earlier. Sage stirred it with a stick to move around the coals. “We’ll wait for the fire to die down. Even with snow everywhere, the forest can still catch fire.”

And that’s exactly what they did. Sitting by the fire’s warmth, they waited. Behind the flickering flames highlighting the rugged exterior that overtook Sage’s soft demeanor, Minari wondered how long it had been since they’ve seen each other as he poured water onto his bloody hands to clean them, offering Minari the same. In silence, they exchanged glances, and Minari could tell that Sage thought the same. Minari grabbed the canteen made of animal skin and woven bark then cleaned her hands too.

“When Pachua grabbed me,” Sage said without prompting, his soft brown eyes glistening from the fire, his amber skin luminescent under the stars, “she pulled me to the other side of the

desert. I died about a minute after she went under the sand and dragged me with her. When the pressure of sand building up inside my nose became too much, it went into my lungs. That's what did me."

"Horrible," Minari said, returning the canteen.

Taking out a knife, Sage scraped bits of meat still left on the fox skin and tossed the pieces onto a leaf next to the fire. "You don't want to waste anything," he said. "We took their life away. It would be disrespectful."

Fat rendered from the remnants, frying the leaf as it cooked. "And you wound up here after you died?"

Sage nodded. "I've been here for quite a few centuries now."

"And you haven't been able to live until your last life?"

Sage chuckled. He grabbed the leaf, picked up a piece, then gave the rest to Minari. It was tough. "For the first decade or so, I was upset. But now that I've grown comfortable here and have made good friends with Baekjung, I've realized why I chosen to come here."

"And why is that?" Minari said, swallowing the tough meat.

"Tell me first. What are your goals in this life of yours? Do you know how you'll grow your spirit?"

Minari huddled deeper into the bear pelt blanket. "I want to help Pachua move on peacefully," she said. "And after a lot of thought, the orb stands in the way."

Sage breathed in deeply and crossed his arm across his chest to hold his nub. "Don't you remember what happened all the times it was taken from her? It's best to leave the orb alone."

"She's held onto it for a thousand years. Isn't her dependence on it preventing her from living with peace?"

“That isn’t for you to decide,” Sage said quickly. “If you want her to find peace, as well as the rest of the spirits, you must find another way. Perhaps helping her finish her task of ensuring the spirits live through their last life in preparation for the cosmic egg.”

Minari sighed. “I thought she’d want to speak with me.”

“She’s hibernating on the mountain’s peak,” Sage said. “She left maybe two centuries ago to run an errand. When she came back, she went to sleep and hasn’t woken up since.”

Minari laughed. “I guess I’ll go there myself. You said the blizzard is at its worst now?” Minari looked up at the sky. She couldn’t see anything past the raging snowy winds that blocked her view of the sky.

“We need to do something else first,” Sage said quickly.

“What is it?” Minari asked, ready to help Sage with anything. Despite them being separated unwillingly, she still held onto a regret that she couldn’t quite shake. Helping Sage might improve those emotions.

“We need to help Baekjung. He needs to hunt two more spirits to return to the middle world.”

“What about you?” Minari asked. “Would you go with him, considering it’s your body he’s borrowing?”

Sage nodded. He picked up a small handful of snow and let it melt, water dripping from his knuckles onto the muddy ground. “But now I’m wondering if I should stay here to help you to the middle world.”

“No,” Minari said, shaking her head. “You need to live your life. You’ve barely lived.”

“I never asked to be put down here. I was trampled, and now I’m stuck. I was perfectly content with continuing to help everyone in the chamber where I felt most comfortable.” Sage

sighed. "I've learned to feel comfortable down here. It's not too bad."

"How do you expect to assist other spirits if you are down here only helping the mask spirits?"

Sage sighed. "We can talk about that later. Right now, we need to focus on hunting Sonpi and Imae."

"Why?"

"Baekjung has the curse of Yongbo. For a chance to return to the middle world and have another chance at his last life, we must eat a hundred of the aristocratic spiritual elite. So far, we've hunted 98 of those spirits. That leaves Imae and Sonpi, who have been alluding us since Pachua went into hibernation."

Minari nodded. Since this was an opportunity to let Sage live at least one more life, she was willing to delay finding Pachua in order for him to achieve this. "Okay," she said. "Let's go hunting."

Sage nodded. Standing up, he gathered the remaining meat and bones, wrapping them in the pelt. "We'll make some soup with this later," he said as he tied the pelt together with twine. "Then we'll use the rest of the bone to make bone meal."

As the fire burned the rest of the way, a trail of white smoke twirling into the sky, Sage covered the remaining ashes with snow. With a nod of his head, he led Minari into the blizzarding night as they climbed out of the large crater that contained its breeze. The burning tree behind them crackled with ferocity.

## Chapter 21

Sage led them through sweet spots between the blizzard where wind didn't rage in their ears and behind rigid birch trees. They zig-zagged through the forest to avoid as much of the wind as they could. Piles of snow fell from the treetops, smashing onto the ground below them. Sage was unbothered.

Before they left, Sage had shared a story of a traveling spirit, one he found wandering in this frozen tundra when Sage felt comfortable enough to navigate without getting lost. The spirit was outside of the forest shouting for help. Sage waited for the spirit to approach the forest before helping as that unprotected area was the most difficult to hike during a full moon: The

winds were unforgiving and blinding, so it was difficult to assess where you were and where you were going. However, once the man fell onto the ground, Sage knew he had to go out and help him.

He had assumed that the spirit was a regular passerby that would visit briefly after a mortal before returning to Pachua's world to live their next life, or it was a spirit that would die and return to a miserable, uncompleted life in the chamber, but something was off. This spirit adorned the mask of Baekjung.

In a desperate plea to destroy the spirits when they would come here, Baekjung pointed at the hollow oak tree across the clearing, which burst into flames. Sage hadn't noticed it was on fire at first – he just saw a comforting light that beamed in the distance. Baekjung grabbed his chest, shouting anxious profanities about needing to right the spirits' wrongs, before running out into the blizzard toward the flaming tree.

Sage tried to warn him not to leave, saying if he died out there, then he would return to the chamber permanently, but he didn't turn back. Sage watched as Baekjung's silhouette slowly disappeared in the fog, but he kept his curiosity on that flaming tree's tiny light in the far distance.

Only minutes later, the tree that had been burning brightly began to dwindle until it went out completely. The spirit never came back.

Once Sage returned to the same place during the new moon when the blizzard was absent and the world calm, he found the traveler cemented to the ground, encased in frost and ice. The mask, however, was sitting on top of the snow as if it had just been placed there.

Since then, a few other spirits had appeared and died just the same. Many knew nothing of how the place functioned, and only few were open-minded enough to learn from Sage and

eventually recognize their body and spirit connection to gain another chance at life in the middle world. Others, who understood the boundaries completely, chose to go back to the chamber, accepting that they would not mature in time of the last egg's hatching and would happily watch and learn from others' progress from a distance, accepting their fate. Sage enjoyed all of those moments as it reminded him of his original spiritual duties guiding his family toward reflection in the chamber. But this time, in the lower world, he was able to help them accomplish something else entirely – another chance to live their last life. Eventually, he wanted it for himself.

With Minari there, it had changed things. To Sage, it meant that the plans they had made years ago could finally come to fruition. All they had to do was wait for \_\_\_\_\_ and Rumi to arrive.

“We'll climb this tree,” Sage said. It was an ashen pine tree that had been burnt, immortalized by the flame. “Sonpi and Imae travel down the mountain around this time, and we think they'll come from this side.”

Sage put on the Baekjung mask, his crooked eyebrow glinting under moonlight. “Maybe finally we'll be able to move on from the lives we've taken and the senseless blood we've shed,” he said with protruding lower lips as his pointed eyes gazed at the moon.

“Won't the limbs break under our weight?”

Baekjung's scarred face turned toward Minari. “It's fossilized, frozen remains. With every spirit that dies here, this is what their flaming tree becomes.”

The char formed deep grooves on its trunk, reaching far into the center.

“How many flaming trees are there?”

“Two,” Baekjung replied. “Yours and mine.”

“Where’s mine?” Minari asked.

“On the peak where you were born. Sage built a village there for the family. Pachua has been sleeping there, waiting for your arrival.”

Minari nodded as Baekjung ascended the tree, using both of his legs to propel him up as he used his shoulder and hand to balance himself. After a few maneuvering positions, he made it to the fifth branch and was hidden behind crystallized pine. Minari followed, choosing a branch next to Baekjung’s to sit on.

“We must wait for the moon to reach its first quarter in the cycle. That is when they will descend the mountain.” Baekjung said nothing else and took off the mask.

“If we kill the masks to help Baekjung,” Minari asked, staring through the pine needles toward the base of the mountain, “you really will go back with him to live another life in the middle world?”

“I would want you to go back,” Sage said. “You would be better help to the spirits as the elder. I would continue to help them here with however much time we have left.”

“What if it’s the opposite? You’d have the opportunity to live your life, and as the elder, I’d guide the spirits on your behalf.”

“I don’t like that idea,” Sage said. “I never wanted to come to any of these worlds. I was the most comfortable in the chamber, and staying here will be the most peaceful. If I am to live at least one life on a world, here is where I feel safest.”

Minari huffed out a sigh. “Can you take me to Pachua at least?”

“No,” Sage said, shaking his head. “I’ve seen what happens to the spirits who come here. Their bodies remain frozen in this place. Many of them are buried in the snow. More often than not, they die on their backs. Their eyes are open, and I can see the blood in their bodies weigh

down into the ground, but the blood freezes before it can decompose. If you find Pachua, that's exactly what will happen to your body."

"She dragged me here," Minari said. "She wants to see me."

Sage shrugged. "What's a few more days?" Minari felt guilty that she abandoned him in the desert, but a larger pang struck her heart knowing that she was planning to meet with Pachua despite his concerns.

Before she could admit her fallacy, crows cawed overhead. Sage warned Minari to stay silent as he put on Baekjung's mask. "We must be quiet, otherwise the mice will be able to listen."

Immediately, the air around them shifted. The heavy silence turned toward the base of the mountain. Baekjung shifted his gaze after every shuffle among the leaves or every tweet of a sleepy bird until the bellowing song of snow sprites danced its way through the valley, echoing a tired melody filled with play and quaint singing.

"Maybe Baekjung can hunt us down, and we can trick him into telling us where he is," a high-pitched squealing voice said. "If we eat the pheasant, we can also eat the egg!"

"Don't be silly," another said, their voice a little lower and more grumbly. "We can lay a trap for him instead where he *believes* he captured us. In that plight is when we can retaliate and force him to tell us where the shroom is. It would be too dangerous if he actually captures us."

"What an outstanding idea," the squeaky voice said. "I need to become more educated so I can be as smart as you one day."

"One day soon Imae," the grumbly voice said. Minari surmised this voice to be Sonpi, the scholar.

Baekjung and Minari listened in silence as their voices grew louder, the echoes seeming



start my day.”

“You always complain about how miserable it makes you,” Imae said, his swirly voice creaking Minari’s ears.

“That’s the *fun* of it. A widower knows a widower’s sorrow, and the widower is happier knowing.”

“That sounds so sad,” Imae said. “Do you want me to die?”

“We’re not married and we will never be. Anyway,” Sonpi said. “It is just something you say.”

“I never say that,” Imae said with a sullen tone. “I like to think happy thoughts, otherwise I’ll fill myself with negativity and regret my life path.”

“Happiness doesn’t exist,” Sonpi said. “Happiness is boring.”

“Maybe your happiness is boring,” Imae said. “When we find the golden mushroom and get another chance at life, I’ll live out a happy life, and you’ll see how happiness can exist.”

“Let’s posit that happiness *does* exist,” Sonpi said. “Do you have proof?”

“No,” Imae replied, “but I believe it.”

Sonpi laughed a little too loud before stopping. “Unknowing belief is a far too burdensome and will lead to the ultimate disappointment.”

“Why is it so bad to believe something?” Imae asked. “If I believe I can be happy, do you not want to see that come to fruition?”

“It’s difficult to believe you with only half of your jaw,” Sonpi said. “Your words just freely spill out without your lips squeezing together to reel them back in.”

“At least I’m honest,” Imae replied. “I’m respectfully honest.”

“That is a fact,” Sonpi said. “We will wait for the moon to shift before leaving. I do think

our plan will work.”

“It is an outstanding plan,” Imae said. They continued to sit there.

Tilting her head to find anything below them past the pine needles, the only thing Minari could see were snow sprites with spiraling dances and lulling lullabies playing a peaceful, tiring melody.

“Sonpi, do you think that’s Baekjung?” Imae was referring to something that raised Minari’s heartbeat and quickened her breath.

“Of course not, Imae. Do you see a mask? It’s but a simple bull trying to find a grazing spot along the ice. A stupid bull if you ask me.”

“Stuuuuuuuuuuuuuupid!” Imae yelled toward the bull.

“SHHHHHHHH!” Sonpi said. “What if that was Baekjung. What would you do?”

“I would cry,” Imae replied. “And I’d try to fly away.”

“Indeed. As would I. But just because that is not Baekjung does not mean he is not near.”

“Baekjung!” Imae yelled. “Please don’t kill us – we know a more peaceful remedy for you to chase! The golden mushroom can give you the life you seek!”

“SHHHHHHHHHH!” Sonpi said again. “We must stick to the plan. Do you remember what I told you?”

Imae sighed. “You said he won’t believe a single word out of our brilliant aristocratic mouths.”

“Precisely. He will not believe a single word out of our brilliant aristocratic mouths. What else?”

“That we have lied to him so many times of another opportunity that there is a slim chance he’ll believe us this time.”

“Exactly,” Sonpi replied. “There is no reason for him to believe us now after so many lies.”

With a sudden movement, Baekjung hopped from the branch and landed on the floor. Minari listened as scuffles scuffed on snow, large squawks grunted, and feathers flapped. After a moment of silence, Baekjung said, “I believe you.”

It was then when Minari began her descent down the pine tree until she slipped and fell onto a pile of snow.

“Oh!” Sonpi and Imae shouted. “Oh my!”

One mask, with slightly slanted and bulging crescent moon-shaped eyes, tilted its large cheeks backward to let his triangle-shaped face shine under the light of the stars. With a grumbly voice attached to a crane, its long neck viced under Baekjung’s strong hand, he said, “You there! Are you friendly or foe-like?” Minari recognized this voice to be Sonpi’s.

Imae, whose mask fit on the second crane with a sawed off-looking nose below crescent moon-shaped eyes, stared at Minari with its lower jaw missing. “Are you friendly or foe-like?” Imae repeated.

“She’s with me,” Baekjung said. “She needs to live another life just as we all do, so you’ll give us the most hope by telling us where to find this mushroom.”

“Oh me oh my,” Sonpi said. “How can we trust you when you’ve been trying to *murder* us?”

“I’m choosing to trust you now,” Baekjung said. “You’ve been slippery for far too long. The body I’m using to hunt you will be ready to leave soon. Either I get my next life with the mushroom, or I’ll still be happy to take one life with the next to follow. Which one would you prefer?”

“Okay okay,” Sonpi said. “But know that if you kill me, you’ll lose *all* knowledge of where the golden mushroom might be. I have been careful to not share anything of importance to Imae. I’m the only one with the information to track down the golden mushroom.”

As soon as Baekung loosened his grip, Sonpi cackled.

## Chapter 22

The faint echoes of Sonpi's laugh dampened from the snow. Imae laughed too, his crane neck bouncing back and forth, his beak swiping snow from the ground, his wings widening and closing to kick up flurries. Eventually, when the cackling grew louder, Sonpi coughed, and they both stopped laughing. The pressure of Baekjung's consistent grip was too strong. "Can you loosen up?" Sonpi said through strained breaths.

"It's not that serious!" Imae said, fanning his wings.

Baekjung kept his knee on one of Sonpi's wings and let Sonpi's neck free.

"Do you want my help or not?" Sonpi asked, swirling his head around as if he was trying

to pull himself free. "If you do, you need to let me go."

"I won't fall for another one of your tricks," Baekjung said. "The situation is different this time. If you have a way out for everyone, then let's hear it."

"You'll double cross me!" Sonpi said. "I need to know I'll be safe first."

"And me," Imae said, flapping his crane wings. "I need safety too."

"Yes, we all need to know we'll be safe."

"You'll be safe," Baekjung said, "if you tell me your research."

"You are in no position to barter," Sonpi said as he tried to wriggle away from Baekjung. "I am also a sacred animal right now, you fiend – how dare you bend my feathers."

Baekjung released Sonpi then immediately brought a dongpa out from behind him and nestled it under his armpit. The trident-like tip pointed toward Sonpi, ready to strike in case he tried to flee. "You know what will happen if you run. Regardless of the path you choose to take, I *will* live my last life."

"Okay okay," Sonpi said as he loosened his fathers, swaying his neck. He turned to the sprites who had begun singing a harrowing, fast-paced song to mimic their anxieties surrounding immediate death. "Why do you want to make killing me sound fun? It shouldn't be a spectacle – it should be *dramatic*, a piece of melancholy and fright. This tune is far too upbeat for my tastes."

The sprites ignored Sonpi and continued playing their harrowing tune, adding flavors of chimes and deep earthly drum sounds.

Sonpi huffed. In response, Baekjung pointed his dongpa closer to Sonpi's mask, his pointy chin lifting up. Sonpi turned his gaze toward the clearing where a bull was running directly toward them. Minari was stunned, afraid to speak. "Do you remember that bull you

killed when you thought you caught Imae? And do you remember how he switched his mask to a rat seconds before you impaled that very bull?"

"What of it?"

"Well, its companion remembers the whole thing. It was tragic, really."

It was then when the bull rammed through the group, knocking them all back. Minari, who fell, immediately crawled her way toward the tree. Leaning her back against the bark as far as she could, she listened to the scuffle, occasionally peaking her head around to see what was going on. Sonpi and Imae fled, their wings flapping like the sounds of thunder. Baekjung, however, evaded the bull's rams until it paused to turn around. Baekjung used that opportunity to impale the bull directly through its skull, killing it on impact.

"Is this what you wanted?" Baekjung yelled toward the sky. Sonpi and Imae had landed on a pine tree in the distance to watch Baekjung and ridicule him. "Violence?"

Baekjung took the spear end of his dongpa and sliced off the bull's testicles, raising them in the air like an offering.

"Do you take me to be a murderer when you have placed me in this position of suffering? When you, through your mind games, have purchased my time to prevent me from living my life? I have never lived! *We* have never lived! And you? You both have lived *thousands* of lives in *luxury*. The other 98 aristocrats I've slaughtered and eaten does not *compare* to the amount of spirits whose lives *you've* stolen."

Baekjung placed the testicles in a pack on his waist before slicing the bull's ribcage open to tear out its heart. Like the testicles, he offered it to them.

"I've torn out 98 hearts, 98 of which did not deserve to be sacrifices for how you've stolen their bodies and bastardized the ground they walked on, and 98 of which only resulted in

*polluted* progress. What about the innocent lives like this one and the *countless others*, only seen as cursory casualties of your desire to live a life where you are only *seen* as success? Where your success comes from the suffering of others?”

Baekjung placed the heart in his pack before pointing his bloodied hand and dongpa toward them.

“I have destroyed life – I admit that. And because of that, I carry that guilt in my heart. Can you say the same for yourself? Do you not carry guilt for the lives you’ve stolen? Do you not carry guilt for how selfish your actions have been at the expense of others?”

A small echo in the distance from Sonpi sounded. “I carry guilt,” he said. “But unlike you, I don’t care! If those spirits were smarter than me, then they may be alive right now!”

Baekjung gripped the dongpa tightly in his hands. “Why should you be the one to decide that?”

“Why should *you* be the one to decide that? You have hunted my community of smartly aristocratic spirits! Why do we deserve to die?”

“You are a scholar, yet you cannot understand what’s necessary? Removing the oppressor will always require some form of violence. The violence of undoing our indoctrinated hatred toward each other by working together to find the golden mushroom under the pretense of equality was not violent enough for you to seek reparations. So instead, I *will* hunt you down and seek violence as I have been.”

Baekjung returned to the bull and began to process the rest of it. With tears running down his wooden cheeks, he gives thanks to the bull for his unwilling sacrifice and apologized to him for the trauma that lived through him as a result of Baekjung’s actions. As Baekjung skinned the bull, careful not to tear through the hide, he swore he would absorb the bull’s traumas and seek

reparations on his behalf. Sonpi and Imae cackled in the distance before flying away, the sound of their flapping wings resembling thunder.

Minari, who had only witnessed the entire event, thought back to why she wanted to meet with Pachua. With those thoughts looming over her mind, she snuck away to find her.

As she crossed the small valley and entered the ascending path that would take her to the top of the mountain, two cranes flew overhead. Plops sounded next to her, and as they kept circling back, more plops sounded. When one of the plops landed on her shoulder, she turned her head to find poop.

Minari took a leaf and cleaned the poop off her shoulder before digging through snow to find a large rock, which she threw at Sonpi and Imae, who had since turned around to try and drop more poop on her. The rock hit one of Imae's wings, which caused him to tumble down toward the ground in a spiral, landing directly in front of Minari.

"Please, please, please! Please don't give me to Baekjung. Please!" Imae cried tears of panic. "I have so much left to live for – I should have another chance at life! I should have another chance to redeem myself!"

Minari sighed. "But you don't want Baekjung *or* Sage to have a single chance to live?"

"But *my* future is secure! I've worked so hard – I can't die yet, I can't!"

"Okay," Minari said with tenseness behind her voice. "If you go back and tell Baekjung the location of the golden mushroom, then when I go to see Pachua, I will tell her to make sure you get to live another life without the limitations from the mask if Baekjung kills you or if he betrays you."

"What if we betray him?" Sonpi asked as he landed a small distance farther than Imae, ignoring Imae's suffering.

“Then no deal.”

“That is outlandish,” Sonpi said. “If he ends up betraying us, isn’t it fitting that we betray him? After all, he should respect us.”

“No,” Minari said shaking her head. “I mean what I said, and those are the terms.”

“Then fine,” Sonpi said while clapping his beaks. “I’ll do you one better. As long as you wake up Pachua and help her with whatever she needs, then *after* is when we will tell Baekjung the location of the golden mushroom. Only then. Not sooner.”

“Okay,” Minari said. “Deal.”

“Really?” Imae said, flapping his wings as if he had not been injured at all. He sat up and stretched his long crane neck, rustling his feathers back to their comfortable position. “You’ll do it that easily?”

“Shhhhhhh,” Sonpi said. “There is nothing easy about it. I’m sure she’s shaking with anxiety from meeting this world’s creator. *Honored*, even.”

“I’ve been needing to speak with her for a while,” Minari said. “She brought me here for that very reason.”

“Yes,” Sonpi said, looking toward the trees. “Yes she has – can we keep you company on the way up? Make sure you keep your word that you will wake up Pachua?”

When Minari gave her reluctant agreement, Sonpi and Imae flew up the mountain. Within a few seconds, two foxes ran through the trees to greet Minari along the path. They held the masks of Sonpi and Imae. “Are you here to hunt us down while we walk?” Imae asked, sitting in the middle of the path a few strides ahead.

“I’m not Baekjung, nor do I have possession of his mask,” Minari replied, continuing her hike. “I am a maskless spirit looking for Pachua.”

Sonpi and Imae paused before looking at each other. They waited for Minari to meet them before they trotted along her, their little fox paws indenting crunches into the soft snow. Imae, with the same squeaky voice, would not stop talking. The sprites followed them. “We’ve been scared shitless walking around! I almost ran off again as soon as you made it past the base of the mountain, but Sonpi said it wasn’t you, and he was right.”

Sonpi trotted a little faster, his tail swooshing back and forth with pride. “Of course I was right. I’m always right. It’s all because of my smarts.”

“All because of your smarts,” Imae said.

Minari crossed her arms, protecting herself from the cold. Despite the blizzard having halted, the air was still frigid. “Why are you scared of Baekjung?” Minari’s breath clouded the space in front of her.

“We’ve been hiding for a few centuries,” Sonpi said, looking back.

“It’s been a disaster actually,” Imae said. “When Baekjung almost sliced us way back when, I tried to tell him that I was poor and was but a humble intern to Sonpi, but he didn’t believe me.”

“Can you cite his exact words?” Sonpi said with a grumbly voice.

“Uh hold on.” Imae sat in the snow, raising his long snout to the sky. With a fox’s happy yelp, Imae scurried back and they continued walking. “He said, ‘It’s through the privilege of learning in an elite environment that sets an intern in a position of power compared to those who don’t have those opportunities,’ and I think he added something about how, according to the curse of Yongbo, it’s applicable.”

“Very nice,” Sonpi said. “What do you think of that?”

“It’s not fair,” Imae said, sniffing the ground and pacing nervously around Minari as they

walked. "I wasn't born into that privilege, I earned my way into it!"

"Consider it an honor that the Yongbo curse applies to you." Sonpi laughed heinously.

"But I don't want to die! I want to live until my last life too!"

Sonpi bit Imae's side. They ran ahead, fighting each other. The snow sprites, with their exhausted gaits, followed after the soft drums of their feet. Even with them departing, Minari could hear them in the distance, and she knew the masks were still following her.

Sighing, Minari kept walking, thinking back to how Sage said he was helping Baekjung and why they felt safe to talk to her when she knew their tracker.

It wasn't very long until they came back, this time their masks fixated on two bucks. "Where is Baekjung now?" Sonpi asked.

"He's still with Sage."

Imae stomped his hooves on the ground. "What a vague response. Is she in cahoots with Baekjung? We're in the forest now!"

"No you dummy," Sonpi said, ramming his antlers against Imae's. "Sage is the name of the butcher."

Imae twisted his head, trying to free his antlers from Sonpi's. "Oh."

Blocking Minari's path with their antlers stuck together, Minari waited for them to unstick themselves before she continued her path up the mountainside. But after a lot of tugging, huffing their breaths, and stomping their hooves, Minari walked around them with the idea that if they got themselves stuck, they could figure out how to get unstuck.

Moments later, two masked rabbits hopped out from the side of the forest, their fuzzy bodies thick with fur. "And you know for certain where Baekjung is?" Sonpi asked.

"Yes," Minari replied. "Sage brought the Baekjung mask into the cabin with him, and I

do not have it with me, so it's with Sage."

Sonpi and Imae hopped around joyously in front of Minari, blocking her path again.

"Have you seen Pachua?"

"She's at the top of the mountain," Imae said. "We're not supposed to bother her."

"You mean *you're* not supposed to bother her," Sonpi said. "I have spoken to her before, and she didn't mind at all."

"That's not true," Imae replied. "She picked you up and tossed you all the way to the butcher's cabin, and she did it because you were bothering her."

"So what if it's true? She told me she'd rather have Baekjung eat you first."

Minari sighed, wishing the conversation to not exist as it currently was. Interrupting them, she told them what it was like to live in the middle world, sharing her brief life with \_\_\_\_\_, Rumi, and Violet.

They both gagged. Imae, who puked a little, hopped ahead to not step in the steaming vomit that was melting the snow beneath. "That sounds awful. Who could live in such a drab place like that? From how you describe it, they could have designed it so much better. They could have improved it so much that anyone who walks in there would feel refreshed."

Sonpi nodded his little head and hopped past the puke, his drooping ears making two lines in the snow. "They're all family, Imae. You've seen how the butcher designed his disgusting little home. The size of that home is the size of my bathroom. Imagine how their home looks in the middle world! I think it's worse than you envision it."

Minari sighed. "It's peaceful actually," she said with tenseness behind her voice. "No one needs to take up that much space."

Imae puked again, this time getting vomit on the bottom part of his ears.

Sonpi, who hopped past Imae, continued hopping next to Minari up the mountain. “Trust us. When we lived in the middle world, we tried every gadget and new item you could think of. In fact, we were the first! Everyone was so eager to let us assess the merit of these things. We know what’s best. We know what kind of home brings happiness.”

“I was happy without those things,” Minari said.

“Not everyone can be smart like us,” Sonpi said, looking back at Imae who was still vomiting. “Come on now!”

“I’ll catch up,” Imae said.

Sonpi sighed and turned his little rabbit body around. Before Imae left to catch up, he pooped small pellets next to Minari’s feet.

Trying to get the background noise of the snow sprites away from her completely, Minari walked faster up the mountain, taking bigger strides and deeper breaths. It was futile though. The sounds of the snow sprites appeared again, their fatigued melodies growing closer as Sonpi and Imae flew toward her as storks.

“Have you seen the village yet?” Imae asked Minari, his long neck stretching out in front of Minari. “It’s worse than the cabin. The butcher built it for his family, which is you I guess. There needs to be more space. It also reminds me of the forest when it should remind me of the beach! The beach is much more refreshing.”

“That’s where he’ll feast on us with his family too,” Sonpi said, his wings flapping against Minari’s ears. “The village isn’t as horrible as the cabin in my mind, but it is more intimidating.”

“Do you want to feast on us?” Imae asked.

“Not right now,” Minari replied. “I’m more focused on other things.”

“Like what?”

“Well, like how Sage’s idea of a peaceful life was living as a family again in the village he built for us.”

“He did say something stupid like how you all were born on the same day on the highest point of the mountain,” Sonpi said. “What a disgrace – it’s confusing too! How can you all be born on the same day? How can you *share* a birthday? It’s absolutely fanatic.”

“That’s embarrassing,” Imae said. “With something so precious, why would you want to share it?”

“It shows our sense of community,” Minari replied. “Which you don’t want to be a part of, and that’s fine. I will still share my day of birth with the rest of my family who chooses to accept that we are family.”

“I don’t understand,” Sonpi said. “It’s much less confusing to *not* share a birthday.”

“Are you dumb?” Imae added. “Do you need a reminder for when your birthday is?”

“Why is this important to you?”

“We’d like to know!” Sonpi said. “Why would I want to share a birthday with Imae? Do you know how many hours Imae has studied compared to my thousands mastered hours of work? You’re telling me he *deserves* to share a birthday with me?”

“You don’t have to share a birthday with him if you don’t want,” Minari said. “Pick your own birthday, but I want to celebrate our origins, so my family and I will celebrate our birthday together. I will also celebrate the time of my own personal birth too. It’ll be nice.”

Sonpi and Imae landed on the snow in front of Minari, blocking her path. The snow sprites stopped with them. Sonpi, who had turned to face them, was the most quiet he had ever been since meeting. Imae was looking at Sonpi, waiting for him to speak. “We must depart now.

We're getting too close to the village, and I fear Baekjung will pop out to kill us."

"We are very close to the village," Imae said in agreement.

"Remember the deal," Sonpi said. "We will share the location of the golden mushroom *after* you wake up Pachua and complete assisting her in whatever it is she needs done."

"Right," Minari said, suspicious of their insistence.

Without another word, Sonpi and Imae, with their slender stork bodies, faced each other before flying away. The snow sprites, with their light snowflake bodies, rode the gust with them.

### Chapter 23

With a sigh of relief and appreciating silence, Minari trekked uphill through the snow, weaving past a forest of birch. She peered through their skinny wooden trunks and kept her eye out for anything that might have slithered between them. Aside from the harsh whistling of the wind and the solitary flame in the distance she was moving toward, nothing indicated that she was being watched.

The moon added a bit more to its fullness, just a sliver of darkness left until it was completely light, lifting the snowfall to a light flurry, enough for Minari to see through the fog. As she walked, Minari focused on pushing her legs against the snow that helped propel her body

toward the village.

As she ventured farther into the forest and the wind acted as a white noise behind her, a majority of the birch trees did not hold onto any foliage. The bushes that existed between trees or in small clearings only consisted of snow-covered, dried-out branches that held no signs of life. She wondered how close the egg was to hatching, considering how barren the landscape appeared, as if the nature she once remembered was put to the side as an afterthought for something else.

She bent off dead twigs from some of the birch. They snapped off without much pressure. Out of curiosity, she stepped on fallen branches as she got closer to the flaming tree on top of the mountain, hoping that Pachua would hear her and approach, the snapping being carried through the snow. She should be the one to confront Pachua and not the other way around, but she couldn't help herself. She wanted to take the anxiety away. Despite knowing what she intended to do, the pressure of what she would do if she saw Pachua's orange eyes hiding behind the trees loomed over her.

After every snap of the branches, however, she built up her courage and told herself that once she met Pachua, once she'd be able to truly look at how the spirits had affected her, Minari would offer to help Pachua complete her task. All Minari had to do was get her to listen.

When the light of the flaming tree illuminated the forest with a warm, flickering light, the branches were no longer snapping underneath her feet or breaking off with a small push from the weight of her hand. Only by twisting the branches again and again, eventually tearing the strands of live wood away from the source, was she able to tear it off completely.

The breeze led her farther up the mountain until she came across a large flat clearing, one that separated the forest from its peak as if she wasn't on a mountain at all. Ahead, a few pine

trees decorated the area. Many others were cut, the lumber left on the ground to decay. It was difficult to see how far she had hiked in the blizzard, but she could make out some things from the base of the mountain. To her left was a smooth clearing of snow that had no trees or animals she could see that she assumed to be the lake. Straight ahead was the frozen river she had crossed. To her right, behind the dense cover of pine leaves, a small light flickered in the distance that she knew to be Sage's flaming tree. Scrunching her face with a bit of unease, the pleasant feeling that once distracted her mind had dissipated. Turning back around, she moved forward on the flat peak. In the distance, past the flickers from her flaming tree and illuminated from its source of light, was the village.

Stepping into the clearing, Minari's foot slid on ice, one of her feet moving backward. When she took another step to regain balance, her feet slid forward, causing her toes to gather a mound of snow covering a thick layer of ice. As she shuffled her feet with chaotic swivels, a few areas in the ice creaked from her weight. She landed on her back with a large thud. A few crackles of ice creaked as she looked to the stars and begged she wouldn't fall through.

As she slowly sat up, the reflection of the ice's surface shimmering despite the dark waters beneath them. As she cleared the snow to inspect how severely the ice was damaged, the light from the flaming tree flickered off her face. Her dark hair, twisted into a braid behind her like Kaksi's, had become disheveled. Strays of hair stuck out in every direction. The tired sags in her face made her look older. Taking a glob of snow, she wiped her face. She instantly felt relieved and a little refreshed. Smoothing out her hair with snow and wiping her face once more for good measure, she looked a littler more prepared to greet Pachua.

Minari propelled herself forward, careful to not apply too much pressure to any one area. While she carefully glided across the clearing, the crunch of snow and ice more vocal beneath

her feet now that the wind stopped singing, she could feel eyes stalking her movements, hidden behind the depths of the forest. They followed her as if she tainted the ground with her very presence.

Once she made it past the clearing, she could see the village clearly. Four houses circled the flaming tree, forming an upside-down U-shape with a courtyard and the tree at its end. Standing in the center was Sage, who had his back turned to Minari and was facing the flaming tree.

Stepping off the ice onto a flat stone trail leading to the village, Minari walked toward Sage, her weight sounding as if she was chiseling stone with every step. Absent of any snow, the trail was easy to follow. When she got close enough for Sage to hear her footsteps, he turned. He was wearing Baekjung.

He remained silent until she caught up to him. "I heard about your deal," Baekjung said as soon as Minari stopped walking and let silence overtake them. "The cranes told me when they switched bodies to possess."

"Oh," Minari said. "Then you'd be all right with letting them help you?"

Baekjung stared at Minari, Sage's soft brown eyes gazing at her with a light gloss from behind the mask. "I am," Baekjung replied, motioning Minari forward.

Following Baekjung, he led her through the village. Covered in straw roofs and structures made of yellow and red clay, the village brought tears to her eyes. She would have liked to live here, and she was surprised by how much she expected it to look awful out of the misguided influence of Imae and Sonpi.

"The two masks told me this place was horrible," Minari said.

"I'm aware," Baekjung said. "I heard the clash of two bucks getting their antlers stuck

together. Those two love causing suffering for the animals living here. I wouldn't put it past them to be lurking along the forest line now watching us."

"Have they found the golden mushroom off of you yet?"

Baekjung crossed his arms together and held them ahead of him as if he was trying to prevent a curse. "Speak nothing of that cursed thing. It causes nothing but trouble down here, and those two goons are being hunted even more because of it."

"Do you hate them that much?" Minari asked.

"I don't hate either of them in particular, but I do hate the system they're willing to be a part of and are happy to continue being a part of for the sake of spirits suffering."

"I understand," Minari said, reflecting on her decision on why she wanted to meet with Pachua. She was tired of benefiting from the system that set the spirits apart from Pachua's own journey. They should be intertwined, woven together like the tether she had tried so hard to break. "Are you wanting to take me to Pachua?"

Baekjung nodded, motioning Minari forward. She continued to follow Baekjung through the village. The cobblestone path, flush and soft beneath her feet, lined the center of the village that led to the flaming tree. The village was encircled by stone far enough away to mark where the flames were the hottest. They walked past the village and continued up the rest of the mountain until they reached a location resembling Minari's birthplace. She knew they were in the right area. She recognized the large boulders that lined the edge of the peak, the same ones where she spot Pachua's orange eyes for the first time.

"She's sleeping," Baekjung said, pointing toward a pile of boulders. There was nothing odd about it at first glance, but the longer she looked, the more she saw Pachua's sinuous curve balled underneath a sheet of snow. "Are you ready to wake her?"

“Yes,” Minari replied, her heart fluttering. She would finally get a chance to speak with Pachua like a friend.

With strenuous movements, Baekjung pushed one foot in front of the other. His arm shook as his hand lifted to his face, but Baekjung fought and brought his arm back down. He pushed his clenched legs forward, rotating his hips from side to side to gain distance. Sage did not want to wake Pachua.

As they approached Pachua's breathing body, Baekjung brought Minari to where Pachua's head rested. Baekjung brushed off snow with his trembling hand that had blocked Pachua's eyes. They were open and covered with a light layer of ice. In one large jolt, Baekjung swung his arm as if Sage was trying to reclaim his body, which smacked Pachua, breaking the ice that kept her eyes asleep. Once the ice shattered, Pachua's three orange eyes glistened with an alert sheen.

Unmoving, Pachua assessed the situation. With her tongue flicking out of her mouth, breaking more ice that held her mouth together, the tip forming an upside down 'V' in front of Minari's face. She moved her body. Scales snapped ice away from her back, shattering the thin layers until they landed on the ground like broken glass.

At first, Pachua said nothing as she unfurled her body, outstretching it high in the air, the orb in her four-fingered claws. Even then, her scales were covered in a slimy algae that coated the ragged edges of her decayed scales like an infection. Her tail flicked toward the sky with a single broken feather hanging on as best as it could.

With a long stare, Pachua brought the orb in front of Minari's face so she could see it better. While it still had a normal pearly hue, it swirled like the movement from its dangerous cosmic purple, resembling a void. There was nothing contained within it anymore. Not even the

flames from the tree could illuminate it. It was as if the orb was trying to tell Minari that it was running out of energy.

“What do you see?” Pachua asked, her voice calm.

“I don’t see anything.”

“Nothing?” Pachua asked. “Nothing at all?”

Minari looked closer. “Nothing.”

Pachua brought the orb to Baekjung, hovering it in front of his face. “What do you see Baekjung?”

“I see me accomplishing my dream of eating Sonpi and Imae. I see myself returning to the middle world to live out my last life.”

“Back in the grove, can you tell me what your family saw?” Pachua asked.

Minari furrowed her brows. “Rumi saw a life with her daughter.”

“And \_\_\_\_\_?”

“\_\_\_\_\_ had a vision of the orb’s keeper sacrificing herself before you took it.”

“Who is the orb’s keeper?”

“Mago,” Minari said.

“And what vision did you have?”

Minari blinked. “You were chasing a cloud, and then you put the orb in it.”

“Who was the cloud?”

“I don’t know,” Minari said. “I just saw a cloud.”

“Baekjung,” Pachua said. “What vision did Sage have?”

“He saw the world break,” Baekjung replied. “He witnessed the final cosmic egg hatch.”

Pachua turned to Minari, her three orange eyes studying Minari’s every movement.

“What do you make of these visions, hearing them again? These are visions the orb gave to each one of you. As the elder, how do you piece this together?”

Minari paused. “I don’t know,” she said. “I’m not the keeper of the orb.”

Pachua laughed. She laughed so hard, the bellowing waves of her breath knocked Baekjung’s mask off of Sage. Immediately, Sage ran to Minari and positioned himself between them. “Please don’t listen to Pachua anymore,” he said.

“My final year is almost over,” Pachua said with a commanding voice. “You expect to keep the truth from her?”

“It’s not fair,” Sage said with tears in his eyes. “She didn’t even get a chance to live. She was too busy worrying about you and the other spirits to live out her last life.”

“It was my responsibility as the elder spirit,” Minari said. “That was what I needed, and still need, to accomplish in this lifetime.”

“Tell her Pachua,” Sage said. “Tell her.”

Minari looked to Pachua quizzically. “What do I need to help you with Pachua? This is exactly why I traveled up here to wake you.” Minari stepped away from Sage and let nothing but the wind between herself and Pachua. “Is there something else I need to do? Please tell me. I want to help you finish your task.”

“You must accept the orb from me,” Pachua said, holding the orb in front of Minari’s face.

With wide eyes, Minari thought about how she could allow Pachua to fulfill her promise to the spirits by taking it. If it was something as simple as that, she would gladly accept it.

Sage pushed her away.

“Give her every detail,” Sage said.

Pachua's tail flicked back and forth, the algae on the top of her head dripping onto the ground. "Because you are the first spirit to come from the source, you have watched every spirit from birth to what should have been their last life. Don't you think that entails something special beyond the level of responsibility you've been pinning on yourself?"

"If I've failed, then please tell me. I don't wish to play these games," Minari said. "Is it possible to help you complete your thousandth-year task?"

Pachua's tail flicked back and forth in agitation. "You have not yet failed – in fact, you are ensuring that both I and Mago do not fail. I am passing my responsibilities as the keeper of the orb to you, just as Mago passed them onto me."

Sage interjected, trying to persuade Minari away from the peak. "You'll suffer a thousand years absorbing the spirits leftover karmic duties. You'll be responsible for things that are not your burden to accept. You will live a life of duty, and it will be horrible. I've seen it."

"You've seen the final cosmic egg hatching," Minari said. "Why do you want to stop it?"

"Because we haven't gotten a chance to live together, to be a family together. You, me, \_\_\_\_\_, and Rumi – we haven't had the opportunity."

Pachua lowered her head to the snowy ground. "As the keeper of the orb, she has the opportunity to bring the spirits back for another chance to live until their last life. She also has the opportunity to create new ones who wouldn't know what it means to suffer."

"But what about Minari?" Sage said, his voice strained.

"It will give her a chance to truly live her last life. I will exist in the orb as a spiritual guide for Minari so she won't be alone." Pachua flicked her tongue in front of Sage's face. "Who knows – perhaps she will select you as the next keeper if she brings your spirit back to live out the rest of your lives."

Minari thought about Mudang Magnolia, the warning she gave to a spiritual calling. She wondered if this was similar, and she feared the grave dangers the spirits, and Pachua, might suffer if she refused. With a sigh, she thought of the positive. The spirits would have more time to live until their last life like they all had been wanting, and Sage would have a chance to live as well. She saw more benefit in accepting Pachua's suggestion than refusing it all together, dooming them all to oblivion. "It's what I came here to do," Minari said. "I just didn't know what I had to do until now. It's a responsibility that I will accept the burden of."

Sage angrily shook his head. "You shouldn't have to decide this now. Pachua should give us more time."

"You've seen the vision, have you not? The cosmic egg is ready to hatch, and birth waits for no man."

Pulling a dongpa spearing blade from the clutch on his back, Sage held a fighting stance against Pachua. The spearhead, with two outer blades slightly crooked and a double-edged center blade that extended taller than the other two. On the opposite end of the long pole fastened another double-edged blade.

Poking the dongpa toward Pachua's claw and swinging it around so both ends of the blade cut her weak and unarmored flesh, Pachua dropped the orb in pain and reeled back, pulling her tail inward in an S fashion to protect herself from further harm. Putting the dongpa back on his clutch, he picked up the orb and placed it in his sack, then grabbed Minari's hand and pulled her away from the mountainside.

## Chapter 24

For a moment, fear struck Minari where she stood, worried that Pachua would smite them. But she didn't. As Minari gained courage to meet Pachua's eyes, pain radiated through her glossy orange lenses. Her slumped body, tattered and weak, curled in an unnatural splayed form that revealed more of her fatigued underbelly. Her body was failing her.

Minari fled with Sage through birch trees down the mountainside, despite wanting to accept Pachua's suggestion. With all the harm Minari had caused Sage in this lifetime and in the many others he could have had instead of living out his spiritual growth in the chamber, she wanted to listen to his thoughts and make him understand why she had to do what was going to

do. "We can't prolong what's destined," Minari said with care.

"We can prolong it as long as we need to."

"Didn't you say you remember what we talked about in the chamber? Was I ready to deny helping Pachua then, too?"

They continued to follow the icy river along the mountain valley, hopping over snow-covered logs and avoiding icy slopes hidden beneath the dusty snow that Sage had memorized the location of. When they were hidden between thick brush and the cover of trees, Sage pulled out the orb. "You were ready to help the egg hatch for the spirits to keep their promise," Sage said. "You were *not* doing it to sacrifice yourself for Pachua."

The orb radiated a faint glow of ember within its pearly form, reflecting its iridescent through Sage's eyes. There was a seriousness to his soft golden face as if he was afraid to lose the opportunity to be with his family for a third time. "I am helping the spirits by helping Pachua. What is so terrible about that?"

"She's the creator of this world. She's waited a thousand years. Can't she wait just a few more?"

"You're thinking like a human not a spirit," Minari said. The orb pulsed with a flaming light, mixing radiance with its creamy hue.

"There is no difference. Either way, you were not meant to accept Pachua's responsibilities. This is not your problem. I don't want you to do this."

With sadness in her heart, Minari crossed her arms. From their position on the mountain, wind blew more fiercely through the trees. Despite the blizzard lacking and the new moon dark in the night sky, the chill made her breathe deeply. Gazing at the view of the grove, she wondered how lonely it was for Sage. His only companions were the masks he must wear

himself or the animals who feared him because of Baekjung. "I have to accept the orb," Minari said. "It's my responsibility."

"According to who?" Sage asked. "Did you decide this yourself, or was it passed down to you like a consequence for living?"

Minari tightened her lips. She breathed deeply, her heart skipping beats as she tried to calm its call to her anxiety. "Of course I'm not choosing to accept this burden out of my free will, but I am open to accepting it, and I plan to embrace it. And if I do, then guess what? I'll get to live again. You'll get to live again. Rumi, \_\_\_\_\_, Violet – they'll get to live again. I'll even let the cursed masks live again! Everyone will have more time."

Gripping the smooth surface of the orb, a single tear from Sage's cheek dripped onto its trembling surface. Peering deeper into its pearly hue, Minari noticed a chip. The small, seemingly insignificant injury pulsed a deep menstruating red. "You'll gain the responsibilities of everyone's karma at the expense of a thousand years of servitude? You won't even be free after you fulfill your duties! You heard what Pachua said – you'll select the next keeper, which means you'll be forced to be a guide for another thousand years. Do you really want this cosmic cycle to continue?"

"This is what I'm meant to do," Minari said. "And I will accept it."

With his soft brown eyes glistening with tears, Sage wiped his face then rubbed the orb's marble-like shimmer. The vibrations widened until it trailed to the orb's center, overwhelming the orb's soft hue with its convulsive energy.

"Give me the orb," Minari said, afraid of the cosmic egg beginning to hatch. "We'll see each other again. We will be a family again."

"It won't be the same," Sage said. More tears streamed down his face, landing on the

orb's bloody energy. "It's going to separate us again."

"You don't know that for certain."

Sage looked up. The flaming orb illuminated his eyes with fear. "Will we even remember each other?"

"I don't see why not!"

"So you're trying to fool me with this false sense of urgency? With this charade of attention?"

A spark from the orb's chip sizzled away, its red light growing brighter, highlighting a tiny crack that began to form a line across the injury. "It will benefit all of us – even Pachua. If I do this, then we will all get what we want."

"It'll turn into an endless cycle of only a few spirits learning enough to make it to their last lives. The rest will be left behind. That orb? That opportunity for freedom? It's an illusion." Sage gazed deeply into the orb's center, anger filling his senses. With one deep breath and a look toward the distant grove, he hurled the orb as far as he could down the mountainside. It tore branches from birch before toppling to the ground.

"Why would you do that?" Minari asked as she followed its red light down the mountain, making a mental note of its tracks.

"It was tempting you," Sage said. "I see your obsession. This is how it begins."

"I am choosing to accept it," Minari said as she tried to move past Sage, anxious that no one would get another chance to live. "You have no say in the matter."

Unsheathing the dongpa and positioning it in attack mode, Minari was prepared to run from Sage. Instead, he pushed her behind him as the ground shook and trees derooted and pointed it toward a rumbling noise. From the chaos, Pachua tore her way through the

mountainside, the sliminess from her scales dripping onto the icy ground where she slithered. Steam rose as her three orange eyes spotted them.

Sage gripped onto the dongpa's leather strap and positioned the long pole underneath his armpit and pointed the trident-like tip toward Pachua. Minari took a small step backward, eyeing the sharp end that pointed directly at her. "How dare you threaten me," Pachua said.

"How dare you not complete your task," Sage said. "You've had a thousand years to complete it, yet you've ignored the spirits' progress for three hundred of them. And you still expect Minari to absorb your burdens? How is any of that fair?"

"Fair?" Pachua said. "You're saying it was solely *my* responsibility to ensure the spirits progressed despite their unwillingness to look inward? My vow of silence did nothing to alter that progress just the same as my involvement."

"You had a thousand years, and you failed!"

"Perhaps," Pachua said, flicking her tail. Her three orange eyes glowed under the light of the new moon, staring past Minari in search of the orb. "Perhaps it allowed me to open myself up for change. Failure does not mean the end of possibility."

A thundering descent from Pachua trembled the ground beneath them. Sage grabbed Minari's hand, and they ran down the mountain, their feet light on the snow.

Pachua, however, was faster. Within a few strides, she blocked their path before the trees could finish crying. "You fool."

"We just need more time!" Sage let go of Minari's hand and pushed her behind him. The trees finished toppling over, their branches no longer creaking. With the back of her feet on the incline, she peered over Sage, the view appearing as if the snow lifted and remained in stasis between the moon and the ground. The earth was shifting.

Pachua turned her gaze to Minari, who knew what had to be done. Once Pachua's tongue flicked, Minari turned toward the grove and snuck down the mountainside to find the orb.

She followed its trail far from the bottom of the mountainside. Relief washed over her cold skin when a small crimson light beamed through the snow in the distance. The convenience of it all made finding the orb feel like destiny.

As she approached the orb, she slipped on ice hidden beneath the snow. Once her weight slammed against its fragile surface, the ice cracked under the pressure. It was still stable as Minari slowly sat up. The orb's light beckoned for her to traverse deeper, and she listened to its harmonious call as she stepped carefully, shuffling her feet along the icy surface.

The wind had softened as the light of the moon peeked out from behind a cloud, shining directly onto her. The once beautiful melodies that sang between the trees as the wind blew had turned into an eerie silence. She couldn't even hear the sprites trying to share a song in the distance.

Approaching the cull of the orb, Minari tried to unbury it from the depths of snow, but Pachua had come down the mountain soon after, fleeing from Sage. She slithered onto the ice, the surface aching with loud cracks wherever she placed her weight.

Sage, unknown of the fragile landscape, followed Pachua. Letting his feet slap the ice like thunder, he swiped and lunged the dongpa. "It is the only request I have ever asked of you. Why are you unable to fulfill it?"

As they danced back and forth, freezing waters pooled beneath their feet, and the ice lifted into jagged edges. "You saw the vision," Pachua said as her four-fingered claws dripped slime. "Do you really believe I have the power to prevent it?"

"Yes," Sage said as he lunged again, stabbing Pachua in her stomach.

With one roar from Pachua, she tore her way toward Minari, knocking her backward and picking the orb up with her tail. Behind Minari, a scattered cacaphony of small branches broke from their limbs without an enemy. Turning around with a heightened heart, they were floating slowly toward the sky.

Gripping the orb as tight as she could, Pachua raised her tail and beat Sage against the ground, the ice splitting where Sage lay, until the orb screamed a high-pitched cry that caused Pachua to recoil and bring her tail toward her ears for cover.

Sage, who was dazed and soaked, groaned in agony. Minari grabbed her own head and crouched on the ice, clenching her teeth together to get the sound out of her head.

Pachua, who had begun to writhe, dropped the orb while coiling her body. Rubbing her head along the ice, a bloody sore appeared where her third eye rested. It bulged out of her head, its orange hue seeming like it wanted to pop. After dragging her face along the ice, the orb stopped screeching. When Minari was able to release her head from her hands, she noticed a fifth horn on Pachua's head was growing in where her third eye was.

The brevity of silence was only temporary as the orb shrieked again. This time, Minari's body became disoriented as if it was being lifted off the ground, hovering above the snow. Minari couldn't tell if it cracked beneath her feet anymore as the orb's cries permeated through the forest like a siren.

As it cried, Minari crouched on the ground again, covering her ears. When the orb's shrieks dwindled, Minari stared at the village in the distance. The straw roofs of the houses had lifted into the air, its walls broken in bits as it surrounded the straw roofs.

When Pachua lifted her head and noticed she didn't have the orb, she frantically twisted her body, kicking up snow like dust.

But Minari knew where it was.

Before Minari could reach the orb, Sage ran toward it, his spear trying to fend off Pachua at the same time. With another shriek of the orb, however, Pachua glowed. She glowed brighter than the orb, her aquamarine scales regaining its color as she absorbed the slime on her skin. When she returned to her magnificent beauty, her scales glowed even brighter. Minari shielded her eyes, the light bringing tears to her temples.

She blinked a few times to adjust to the light. When she was able to see clearly, Pachua had transformed. Turning into a shiny golden dragon, she had grown her fifth horn fully. Her fifth claw had also grown in like a thumb. With her peach-colored mane restored, she jumped in the air, using her regrown aquamarine-colored feathers to propel her farther in the distance. But this time, she was able to fly.

With her majestic golden shine, the sun glimmered off of her fresh scales as she accepted her true dragon form. “Whether you choose to accept your destiny or not is up to you. My job here is finished either way.”

Soaring sinuously around the sky, her body swimming in the air's current, she flew toward the village, moving through the clay houses torn from their structure and ripped into chunks in the sky. Behind Sage, Pachua's tail ascended higher until she disappeared into the atmosphere behind the moon, her body hidden behind the stars.

Fleeing to the right of the clearing, toward the sheet of flat snow, Minari ran to the spot where Pachua dropped the orb and dug around the snow until she found it. Sheets of snow lifted into the air as if the sky was pulling the land. Lifting the crimson orb toward her, the color vibrant, Minari noticed the jagged crack extended its hairline fracture toward the center and was chipped in several places.

As Minari held onto the orb, the sky's grasp on the world had gotten stronger. Snow floated away from the earth, blocking the moon with a fog of snow. The village, fully broken from its home, became illuminated by the rising flames of the tree that was beginning to deroot.

With fear and uncertainty, Minari ran toward Sage, her feet floating on top of the wet ice with every step. Sage kept himself grounded by jamming his dongpa into the ice. "Can you really give us more time?" Sage yelled as his body tried to float away toward the moon.

He tried to maneuver himself the ground, but the dongpa broke away from the ice. The moon's rays shimmered through the foggy snow as the light pulled Sage toward it. Minari grabbed his hand before the sky consumed him. "Not on this world," Minari said as her feet remained planted onto the ice, her body felt light, but she also felt secure.

Ice cracked around her, and sky lifting large glaciers from beneath the depths of the lake. With them, puddles of water lifted, their surface contorting into oddly shaped bubbles as if the water itself was confused.

The space around Minari remained undisturbed as a perfect sphere of ice. After the earth finished being torn away and the only thing left in the vicinity was the ice she stood on, Sage was becoming heavier as the force that wanted him to go toward the sky grew stronger.

"You could have lived another life," Sage said as tears tore away from his eyes toward the moon. "We all could have had another chance to live."

"This is that chance," Minari said as she tightened her grip, the sweat from their palms heating the space between them. "This *is* that chance."

"No," Sage said, shaking his head. "But you've made your decision." Sage relaxed his hand, his fingers beginning to slip from Minari's grasp.

When she tried to place the orb below her, the spherical nature of the two prevented her

from letting go, and she was unconfident in her ability to balance them as she balanced herself. With the orb in one hand and Sage in the other, she looked to Sage. "You have to trust me," she said as her body trembled. "We will live together again."

With a small chuckle, Sage closed his eyes before wriggling his hand free, forcing Minari to lose her grip. Minari watched Sage as he floated toward the sky, the light of her flaming tree directly behind him.

She stared until only the darkness surrounding the new moon and the sparkling stars stared back at her. Behind her, the flaming light of the sun roared as her back basked in its bountiful glory. The stars above remained unmoving and twinkled at their sorrowful lights. The moon, facing Minari's exposed nature, grew darker with unrelenting majesty.

When the sphere of ice she was standing on began to crack, she gazed deeply into the orb.

It was suffering.

With the cracks, she saw what could become of the world, and she knew what she had to do. She lifted the orb high above her head and threw it on the ground. When it broke in half, she vanished, and the troubles of the world vanished with her.

\* \* \*

END