

“Behind you!” Ifunanya heard one of her colleagues shout. She immediately bent on her horse, narrowly escaping the enemies signature poison arrow.

“Not her!” she heard one of the hunters shout as she rode on.

Ifunanya and the resistance had been running nonstop for days. For each day they escaped her sister’s army multiplied. With their numbers they could easily overpower the resistance but they always let them escape, only picking them off one at a time. As if they were only interested in the thrill of the hunt and not in the capturing of prey.

When they made it into the forest, a good distance from the hunters, one of the resistance alighted from her horse. Ifunanya and the others were forced to stop.

“Aisha, what are you doing?!” Ifunanya demanded.

“What are you stopping for? Go!” she replied. “I’ll buy you sometime.”

Another member, Ora, groaned, “We don’t have time for this. Get back on your horse before you get yourself killed.”

“My survival is not important.” Aisha responded then turned to Ifunanya. “You have to get used to the rest of us dying in your stead. Go!”

Hesitantly, Ifunanya kicked her horse and continued to ride without turning back. Even though the explosions and screams compelled her to. There was no time to mourn or cry. After an hour’s worth of running, without the hunters in sight they stopped to rest and treat their injured.

Ifunanya glanced around to assess what was left of her group, what was left of *the great defense*. It was a miserable sight.

“There’s only seven of us left,” Ora said as she finished her headcount.

“Only seven of the great defense. What a joke. We’re a joke.”

Nobody responded. The reality was too depressing to warrant a response.

Suddenly, a twig snapped and everyone jumped into defense mode. From the trees one of their comrades appeared.

“Relax,” he said. “It’s just me.”

“Uche, you cannot just wander off,” Ifunanya stated.

“I did not wander off.” He replied. “I went to put up a barrier. If they approach us this”—he brought out a glass orb from his pouch— “Will glow, giving us at least a five minutes head start.”

“Oh.” Ifunanya receded.

“Alright everyone we need to save our energy so just relax.” another member—Munachi—said. She turned to Ifunanya, “Especially you.”

Ifunanya nodded and found a comfortable spot. “Who’s with the map?”

“Mwanret is with it,” Munachi answered, sitting by Ifunanya's side.

“Is anyone badly injured?”

“Not badly but Muplang is. Jamiu is taking care of it.”

Ifunanya sighed heavily. “We are just seven. We started out in hundreds and now we are just seven. Can you believe it?”

“Your sister managed to *touch* practically everyone in every region, slowly infiltrated our organization and dismantled it from the inside to the point that we can’t even trust our own children. She made it impossible for us to seek refuge anywhere. All these she did in less than three years. What do you think?”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. She was my friend too.”

Ora, whom had been listening in on their conversation scoffed.

With an eyebrow raised Munachi asked, “Something to say?”

“Oh I have a lot to say.” Ora said.

Mwanret looked up from the map she held and rolled her eyes, “Part of relaxing includes no arguments.”

Ora glared at Ifunanya, “People dying for you does not make you a savior it just makes you responsible.”

“I never said I was a savior.” Ifunanya replied. “I-”

“This entire thing is your fault because you were too afraid to do what had to be done.”

“What? Have you gone mad?”

“The opposite actually. I have been the only sane person since the beginning.”

“So you are saying that I should have killed mine in cold blood because a spiteful witch said so?”

“Look how right that spiteful witch turned out to be.”

There was silence for a moment then Ifunanya continued. “If anyone should be blamed for this its you.”

“I only did what was necessary.”

“Nothing you ever did was necessary. If anything you started this whole thing. It was you who started raving about that silly prophecy.”

“I was trying to prepare the people-”

“Are you blind? You prepared nothing! How did making the king ban the practise prepare us? It left us weak and unprepared.”

“He did not ban the practise. You just did not like the new way.”

“You mean the human sacrifices. To appease the gods, right? Well, where are your gods?”

“Blasphemy is still grounds for death so watch your tounge.”

Munachi chuckled, “We’re all at the brink of death.”

“Everything you did was so you could gain more power.” Ifunanya continued. “Because of your blood-thirst you exaggerated that prophecy and poisoned the peoples mind. She hadn’t even done anything and you judged her.”

“If I had done nothing-”

“If you had done nothing maybe things wouldn’t have been this bad. If you hadn’t killed our father or stopped the practice or commit other atrocities you committed in the name of your gods. Maybe a lot of our friends would still be alive. If you hadn’t killed *her*, she never would have become what she is.”

“I did what I believed was right.”

“What you believe is not always right. You’d have known this if you bothered to learn from your mistakes.”

For a moment there was silence then Jamiu raised an alarm, forcing everyone to his side.

“It was poisoned,” he said as he held Muplang’s hand. The wound on her side was dark and black veins crawled out of it to the rest of her body. “It will reach her heart soon.”

“This one is quicker,” Munachi said as she rushed to the dying girl’s side. She stretched her hand over her and began to whisper a healing spell. Before she could go far the light in Muplang’s eyes disappeared. She died.

Ifunanya gently held Munachi’s shoulders. “That’s enough now.” she said.

Munachi sank to the ground and buried her head in her palm.

They found a large wrapper and covered their friend then allowed Ora to perform a small rite since she was the only priestess amongst them.

No tears were shed.

Munachi stormed out and Ifunanya ran her.

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“Muna!” Ifunanya called as she struggled to catch up with her friend.

“Go away!” Munachi responded, “I want to be alone.”

“You can’t go far. We are still being chased.”

“Good, I want them to find me.”

“Stop!”

Munachi halted and turned to her pursuer. “What do you want from me?”

“I know you are angry-”

“Angry? I think we’ve moved passed that.”

“Listen-”

“I’ve spent all my emotions to the point that I don’t even know how to feel anymore. We can’t even cry.”

“Still-”

“I am tired and exhausted. I don’t want to run anymore.”

Ifunanya did not respond. She simply embraced her friend.

“I’m so tired.”

“I know.” she consoled while patting her back.

Munachi sighed and broke the hug. “There’s no hope so why are we still running?”

Ifunanya remained silent.

“I know you can’t say anything because she could have a hold on any of us. It would still be nice to know what I’m dying for.”

“I know this isn’t much but it’s our last hope. If we succeed, we’d be saving all those under my sister’s control. We’ll give them back their freedom. A clean slate.”

Munachi studied her friend. “I saw the map. Don’t tell me the marked cave is this so-called last hope?”

The look on Ifunanya’s face gave her away.

Shocked, Munachi threw her hands in the air. “Are you seriously making us chase a myth?”

“It’s not a myth.”

“You must be joking.”

“I’m not! Listen to me.”

“Listen to you? You need to listen to yourself. The crystal cave is a myth. Just a story.”

Ifunanya grabbed Munachi’s hands and with every conviction she said, “I saw them. They revealed themselves to me and showed me how to end all this.”

“Why now? Why not before we lost all those we’ve lost?”

“Maybe because we weren’t so desperate then.”

“So your mind is making up things now?”

Ifunanya withdrew her hands and looked Munachi straight in the eye. “You have the ability to discern truth from illusion. Look into my soul, am I making this up?”

Munachi placed her hand on Ifunanya's chest and meditated for a minute then gasped, “How?”

“See?” Ifunanya chuckled. “It’s real.”

Munachi teared up, “It’s real. We can actually win.”

“We can.”

“Why must it be you though?”

“Because we share blood. Blood bonds are powerful.”

“Then we should leave now before the hunters notice the barrier. I’m sure you’ll need time to prepare before the spell.”

Before Ifunanya could respond, Munachi grabbed her arm and raced back to the others.

Upon arrival they found the crew hastily packing. Confused, Ifunanya asked, “What’s happening?”

“They’ve spotted the barrier,” Uche responded pointing at the glowing orb. “We have a five minute head-start so let’s not delay.”

“Okay. On your horse, now!” Munachi ordered as she shoved Ifunanya towards the animal.

As soon as everyone were mounted they rode out like their lives depended on it.

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Both the barrier and the forrest itself were instrumental in the delay of the hunters. This allowed the group to reach the crystal cave with ease.

“It doesn’t look like much,” Mwanret said as she came down the horse. The others soon immediately followed.

“If it did it wouldn’t be a myth.” Ora said as she traced the walls with her finger tips. “I can feel ancient magic. It is anything but ordinary.”

“We still don’t know why we are here,” Jamiu said as he glanced around. “A little explanation would be nice.”

“And please don’t say ‘last hope’” Uche added.

“Alright,” Ifunanya said as she faced the strangers who had become friends and family through a shared tragedy. “We’ve come to the end of the road. We may all die here today but-”

“May?” Ora chuckled. “We’re all dying.”

“Have a little hope.” Uche said.

“What was it you said about hope again?” Mwanret asked making everyone laugh.

“Look at us laughing at our foreseen deaths.” Munachi joked.

Jamiu placed his hand over her shoulders, “We did put up a good fight.”

“We did,” said Ifunanya., “and even though it’s under the worst circumstance I found a new family in you people.”

“Oh,” Ora feigned surprise. “I’m family now?”

“You should know that doesn’t include you.” Ifunanya replied.

“You two are like mortal enemies that somehow ended on the same side.” Munachi added. “There’s no special name for your relationship yet.”

With a grateful tone Ifunanya said, “Thank you all for blindly following me.”

“It was an honor.” Munachi said and the others nodded in agreement.

“Now that’s settled, what’s the plan?” Ora asked.

Ifunanya replied, “We are going to undo every magic my sister has ever done and this cave will help us do that. Jamiu, Uche and Mwanret, since you three are the most skilled in offensive magic you will guard the entrance. No matter what, those hunters are not allowed to enter.”

“Once a warrior always a warrior,” Jamiu stated.

Ifunanya continued, “The rest will go in with me. Inside, Ora will show me how to channel the cave’s magic while Munachi will keep a look out just in case the hunters make it through. Any questions?”

“Nope,” answered Mwanret, “It’s plain as day.”

“Good luck then.” Ifunanya said dismissing the group.

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The crystals of the cave did not easily make themselves known. The further they went the darker it became until there was no single light. Ora pointed out that they had to do something special for the crystals to present themselves. She urged Ifunanya to do it since she was the one they called out to. With a little blood and magic Ifunanya was able to summon them. As the green crystals appeared and lit up the cave they provided a path for the girls to follow. At the

end of the path was a hollow space filled with much bigger crystals which grew out of the walls. The energy they carried was unlike anything either girls had ever felt. It was raw power. At the center was a fountain-like stand which carried the only blue crystal in the cave. It beamed gently and exuded energy much different from the rest of the crystals.

“That must be it,” Munachi said as they encircled it.

“It is.” Ifunanya replied, completely mesmerized.

“Alright,” Ora said, “Let’s do what needs to be done before it is too late.”

“I’ll go keep watch,” Munachi informed. “Good luck.”

Just like they planned Ifunanya let Ora guide her in the ancient rite. She repeated the incantations word for word and moved in the exact same manner Ora did until she was able to do it alone.

As she channeled the crystals and started her spell an eerie but familiar energy washed over her. She became too terrified to open her eyes.

“You won’t look at me sister.” she heard Munachi’s voice say. Slowly, she opened to her eyes to see her friend shapeshift into her sister.

“I-Ijeoma.” she managed to say with trembling lips. She turned and saw Ora bleeding out on the floor. “How?”

“Well,” Ijeoma began, “Munachi has been dead for months. I touched her a year ago then killed her months later.”

“Why?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I wanted to spend time with my big sister. It really hurts that you keep running away.”

Ijeoma took a step forward, tearing the barrier Ora had initially put up to protect Ifunanya.

“Don’t come closer!” Ifunanya warned.

Ijeoma smirked, “You’re not going to hurt me.”

“If I channel this crystal I would be equal to you so don’t test me.”

“And what do you think will happen when I channel any these? I don’t need the blue stone to obliterate you.”

“At least tell me why.”

Ijeoma frowned. “Why? Because you feared me and sided with father’s killer.”

Just then Jamiu walked in completely covered in blood.

“Are they dead?” Ijeoma asked him.

“Yes.” he responded with a bow.

“Oh,” Ijeoma giggled, “I’ve had Jamiu for a while as well.”

Ifunanya held on tightly to the crystal and drew energy from it, causing bright blue veins to crawl up her hands.

Amused, Ijeoma said, “You can stop now. You’ve lost.”

Ifunanya drew more energy from the crystal until the veins reached her eyes and completely consumed her. “Not until I’m dead.”

Ijeoma attempted to forcefully remove her from the crystal. When that proved futile she tried to take over her sister with the *touch* but unintentionally merged both herself and her sister to the crystal.

Neither could be separated and so, as the crystal split so did their souls. The last thing they both saw and heard was a shared memory and their youthful laughter.