

The land is alive, throbbing and spewing with magic. Spirits hover under the moonlight, dribbling through trees, exploring a world that isn't theirs. The silence of the village was comforting, soothing. It was a midnight emptiness that wrapped you, as your own thoughts, as small as they may be, seem to disrupt the tranquility of the land. This is the land of Azure, home of the magic dwellers, home of life.

## ONE

Him, her, the flame

### Namira

Her fire burned gently, its ember limbs stretching high above the purple-blue roots below. It danced with the changing breeze, swaying freely. At some point it let out a snap, a little crack, and began to retract its limbs, shrinking. Namira carefully added another log of wood, encouraging it to rise and dance once more. She liked this. Much like spirits, fire needs to be supported to fully bloom. Maybe this was why she made fires, to have something depend on her, to feel needed. She shook her head, it was no secret she was needed, special even, the whole village knew. When this fire goes out, and his brother rises in the sky, it will be her last day alive.

Her father said it was for a greater purpose, "to stop an unthinkable evil from residing in our land", were his specific words. She was the chosen sacrifice this year; the pressure of prioritizing other's well being over her life was nested on her shoulders. By tomorrow, all the tribes gather at the central court to watch her blood drip out of her lifeless body. She wished she could stop it, to pass on the responsibility to someone else; but she was chosen. Every five years a girl is chosen for the ritual, to have life taken from, to give prosperity in return.

A noise behind her breaks her train of thought; she turns, then smiles. Juru.

"I knew you'd be here," the fire reflects in his eyes.

She made space and beckoned him to sit down with her, to feed the flame together.

"Amara would have my head if she knew you were here," she laughs,

"Yes, she really would," He agrees.

"Well, I guess she can tomorrow." The laugh faded.

"She doesn't know I'm here," he ignored the other half of her statement, "and she doesn't have to."

Amara was the feisty princess of the Kordaria tribe, the beast tamers. She had always despised Namira, but long ago, when they crawled on four limbs, they used to be friends. Amara, after assuming the role of princess sought out Juru as her groom, knowing fully well Namira's heart was with him secretly. This hurt Namira more than she could admit to anyone, many nights passed with her tears falling off

her face. At a point she accepted the faith, she was from the Lox tribe, the spirit people, and she could never be with Juru. Union of people from different tribes wasn't permitted; her feeling for him wasn't a flame she could groom to something long-lasting. Amara won this time, once more the gods had given her more than she had deserved.

The fire rose above them.

"Why are you here *Nami*?" His voice was subtle, respectful to the silence around.

"Where else would I be? Amongst strangers who look at me in pity and remind me how unfortunate I am?"

"I'm not saying you-"

"I cannot, will not, be the center of anyone's sympathy,"

The silence crept in again.

Juru slowly stretched out and held her hand, she was shaking, trembling, resisting his comfort.

"Don't," he demanded.

She was stubborn, pushing him away. He comes closer to her, holding her firmly. She couldn't resist, so she didn't. Sinking into him, fully embracing him, she cried into the animal skin fabric of his shirt. She felt his muscles wrap around her, she felt his cool breath on her skin, making her feel hotter than the fire ever could. He held her, for the first time in a long time, he held her. tightly. passionately. And in his embrace, they remained; him, her and the flame.

Her heart sank when he began to let go, calling this special moment to an end.

"You cannot go like this," he placed his hands on her cheeks, "you are bold, strong, a free spirit. It's your last day, live."

He smiled, which made her smile.

"And what do you suppose I do to 'live' on my last day?"

"Have you ever been to the castle of Kordaria?"

"No, it's restricted to royals and besides, Amara would have my sacrifice moved up if she saw me."

They both laughed, Amara was known to be very erratic.

"Well, I'm coming from there, and I noticed the view at the upper room was breathtaking, you should see it,"

Namira took a big step back,

"What were you doing in the castle?"

"Namira, it's not-"

"What were you doing in the castle Juru?"

They stood a distance apart, strangers now.

"I got recruited, I'm a huntsman now," he said facing the floor.

This wasn't a bad thing necessarily, the Kordaria tribe was the only tribe allowed out of the land of Azure. They selected a group of men, *huntsmen*, to go into the world beyond and procure anything useful, food especially. It was a thing of honor, to go and be initiated as a huntsman, every Kordarian male's dream. What stung, what hurt Namira deep down, what they both knew, was that as his life took off for

the best, hers was ending. The realization that she wouldn't be there to hear his stories of the other world, to bid him farewell and welcome him from his adventures. The realization that as she dies, life would go on, and eventually she would just be a distant memory. Everyone would forget her, everyone would be happier.

"When's your first hunt?" she asked.

"Tonight, we leave tonight. I came to say goodbye, I don't want to see you...tomorrow,"

The flame cracked again, gradually sinking into the ash under it.

She looked at him, "Fine, I'll go and see the castle view. They cannot punish me if I'm dying tomorrow."

"That is, if they are able to even catch you," Juru said with a grin.

He walked towards the door of her hut and stood by it, turning to have one last look at her.

"You are special *Nami*, to me. And not because of this stupid ritual," his eyes were locked on her, "I have to go prepare for the hunt, but I'm happy I saw you."

She replied with a smile and like that, he was gone. Namira stood there, reacquainted with the feeling of loneliness.

She sat down and restarted the fire. With a sharp edged knife she sliced a straight line in her hand and let the blood flow out. The cold feel of it dropping from her hand into the ember was oddly comforting. As the ruby drops fell in, the fire became restless and wild. Its blue base crept up slowly, enveloping the red until it was all caerulean. Now or never. Eyes closed, Namira slowed her breathing and finally called out her spirit.

Eyes open to see her mortal body still sitting in the state she left it. She studied herself, the way her dreadlocks fell freely below her shoulders. Her little chalk symbols on her arms, her skin glowing against the blue fire. In time she turns away from herself, phasing through the wall and gliding through the night.

A benefit of being from the Lox tribe was the ability to briefly astral project. She flew swiftly in the air against the night winds, fully liberated. Looking down below to see the little homes and people, who look like moving dots from her vantage. She moved faster but cautiously as she entered Kordaria territory.

There it was, the Kordarian castle. A gigantic stone structure with a lion statue mounted at the front. Guards were posted on both end of the wall, each with two wolves hunting for foreign scents at their sides. Above were ravens, circling the castle. They could sense spirits, could sense her. She moved carefully once they grew suspicious.

Her eyes moved to the windowsill at the peak of the castle. After waiting for an opening, she flew up there.

The view was amazing, it spanned across Kordarian land, from the empty wrestling grounds to the caves on the other end. She could see the road paths, twisting and bending as they link to each other. The scorpion pits, the eagle nest above the trees,

the armory with spears and arrows locked safely in. She could see Kordaria for what it was, the tribe of the barbaric. Free hunters who used their magic to tune with the wildlife. They were the main muscle of the village. At this view, she appreciated the Kordarians, appreciated the memories she had growing up with Amara before they realized the divide tribalism could cause. The Kordarians weren't nice people, very blunt and a bit too serious most times. But she like them. Her tribe shared neighboring territory with the Kordarians so it was easy to visit.

Out of the five tribes, The Lux tribe was probably the most boring to her. They were a community of magic users who could call and manipulate spirits to their will. They lived in the huts, all surrounding the sanctuary. This was where sick village members would come to be healed by the Lux women. It was probably the only interesting area in the whole tribal territory. That is, apart from the spirit forest. A large maze of greenery, between both tribe territories, which has a strong connection to the spirit world. The Lux tribe members come here to strengthen their bond and their magic. To recharge themselves.

She turned and looked over at her tribe, in the far distance, barely able to be seen from here. It was the last time she'd see any of this, the last time she'd appreciate it.

A noise came from the other side of the window; it was Verdo, the chief of the Kordarian people, walking with one of his huntsmen. Nemira phases through the concrete, it was terrible if the chief himself caught her. He wore his crown, a structure rumored to be made from the merged bones of the twelve great beasts. Behind him walked his own prized beast, a large tiger, thumping and slugging it's way into the room.

"Prepare the second batch of huntsmen for tomorrow, we need as much men as possible when the darkness breaks," the chief's husky voice filled the room, "once its released, we must help it feed, we need our forces to be strong."

Namira peeped in shock, what exactly did this mean? How could the darkness escape?

"Chief... the sacrifice this year, what if it doesn't work?" asked the huntsman.

"It will, we have altered the spell for the ritual long ago, the past three have been redirected to empowering the darkness, tomorrow, once the last sacrifice is made, it will be complete. With its help, the other tribes will fall, and ours will rise."

Namira was frozen; she couldn't believe what she'd just heard. Was she the one who'd free the impending doom rather than trap it?

The tiger faced the wall and locked eyes in her direction, she screeched as it flared its teeth. Some animals can see spirits clearly. The beast let out an alerting noise that ended the men's conversation and drew their attention to the window.

"Someone is there," the Chief spat out outraged.

Namira quickly closed her eyes, calling her spirit back to her body. She opened them startled but was back in her hut. The blue fire returned to its original red. quickly, she began to grab her possessions, pushing her dagger and all her potions into her strap-on bag. She needed to leave now. She didn't know where, or to whom, but she

was caught, and she knows something she shouldn't. She cannot die tomorrow, if what she heard was true, she must not die tomorrow.

She ran as fast as she could, through rocky grounds and grassy ones. Past sleeping home and vibrant gardens. Her feet moved swiftly, towards the only person she could trust, towards the only person that she might get help from, Juru. She couldn't go to any of the other tribe chiefs, she didn't know who was in on this plan, and she didn't want to take the risk. It'd be a long shot accusing a tribe chief, and it would only look like she's trying to escape her sacrifice tomorrow. Juru was the only one who would believe her. Her feet hastened up as fast as they could. She turned at intervals, to be sure no one had gotten her trail yet, but the more she did the more she had noticed birds, more and more accumulating behind her. They were all heading in her direction, heading right for her.

She swiveled her heel and spun to her left, running under the vine bridge, then breaking into the forest. She would be safer here, she used the trees to her advantage, staying low and running under branches. The birds wouldn't find her here in the spirit forest. She knew every inch of the place, every twisting root and fallen leaf, every way out. She kept moving in the darkness, relying on her clear knowledge of her surroundings to guide her. Somehow that knowledge omitted the tree she just ran into, but there wasn't time for pain. She got up and continued.

She was close, the eastern end of the forest led to the barrier. A circular standing stone structure carved with ancient runes. This was where hunters used to travel to the outer world, and thus, only the hunters could pass. She would find Juru there if they haven't left yet. She heard the flapping of wings not too far away. The birds are closing in. leaping over a shrub and diving through a bush, Namira was out of the forest.

Right in front of her, in its large domineering stature was the barrier. The runes glowed white as the barrier opened, breeze blowing wildly around it. It was ready. Hunters began to jump through the barrier, each holding a weapon. Each with their beasts.

She could spot Juru in line, ready with his pet monkey on his shoulder. He was talking to his brother, Mado, a taller, quieter version of Juru. Namira ran to them, shouting their names, watching their faces puzzle in confusion as they saw her.

"Nami, you can't be here, you're not-"

"Verdo, he is after me, please, please help," She spoke over him.

Juru's face became more confused, not sure of what exactly she was talking about.

Mado's jaw tightened, "I hear something approaching from the forest," he said, looking into nowhere, "I think I hear birds."

Mado was blind but his other senses worked excellently.

"I need to go, now!" Namira exclaimed, drawing the attention of the other hunters who hadn't gone through the barrier yet.

“Spirit child, what are you doing here?” a huntsman shouted,  
“Do you not know your place? or do we have to punish you to learn?” another said.

A legion of birds darted out of the forest in waves. The mass of moving black feathers looked by far larger than before. Verdo was angry.

In that split second, Namira jumped right into the barrier. She heard the outraged gasp of the huntsmen, saw a quick glimpse of the confusion on Mado’s face. And then, just in a faint hollow, she thought she had heard Juru’s voice calling her name. A tear drop fell from her eye as she spun into the light, so blinding, so concentrated, that she thought she had made a mistake. No. It was too late for regrets now, she was going to a new world; she lives to fight another day.