

Ahkin cursed the gods of the underworld for creating such a challenge. Of all the fears they could have created, they had to choose scorpions. He could see the blood slowly draining from Mayana's face.

There would be no wading across this river. Not unless they wanted to die extremely painful deaths.

Mayana's legs gave out and she collapsed into him. He tried to steady her.

"That's not—that can't be—" she mumbled faintly. "You didn't say anything about a river of *scorpions*."

"I've never read about this," he said, breathless himself. How could the texts not have mentioned such a horrific trial? Maybe they did and he just forgot? How could he be so stupid to forget such a crucial piece of information?

"How can we get across it?" she asked, licking her lips.

"I'll find a way, Mayana. You've done so much already."

She curled into his side, hiding her face so that she couldn't see the river of terrors anymore.

Ahkin wished he could do the same, but he couldn't let her down. Not this time.

What did he know about scorpions? He started to sort through everything he'd read, every lesson he'd had about nature from his tutors.

He could list off the colors of varying types. How to identify which ones were the deadliest. He knew about their habits. Scorpions ate other small insects. They liked water. They often hid in rotting leaves and wood . . .

*And they loved darkness.*

Scorpions often came out at night because they hated light!

Ahkin looked down at the shield of Huitzilopochtli, his smile widening.

"I have an idea," he said.

He withdrew his blade and sliced into his ruined hand. He didn't need to crush them all. He needed a path forward. The river was not deep, only a layer or two of the creatures in a wide river ditch. Good. That would make this easier.

“Stay here with Ona,” he said.

Mayana sank to her knees next to the dog, who cuddled into her and supported her with his weight.

Ahkin carefully inched his way closer to the teeming scorpions. He summoned light from the shield, from the faded light all around them, and pulled it all into one powerful beam. He directed the beam right into the scuttling blackness, burning and singeing as it made contact.

The scorpions instantly started to scuttle away from the light. He widened the beam, pushing them farther and farther until a path formed across the dirt.

“Mayana, there’s a path. Come on!”

But Mayana remained where she was on the ground.

“You can do this, Mayana. I know you can. Think of everything you’ve survived so far. Everything you’ve done. You are the strongest woman I’ve ever met. And not just because of all you’ve faced, but because you have the courage to risk your heart over and over again. Caring and loving everyone and everything no matter the consequences. You have the heart of a warrior within you. Get up. You can do this!”

It was a speech he’d given new soldiers before battle, but he had never spoken the words with as much conviction and passion as he did now.

Mayana met his gaze, terror warring with determination inside her eyes. “Go with me.”

“I want to keep it safe enough for you. I’ll be right behind you. If you want to save your mother, we have to escape. And we can’t do that without crossing through.”

At the mention of her mother, the determination in her eyes hardened. Her hand tightened on the strap of her bag and she rose shakily to her feet.

Ahkin’s forehead dewed with sweat. He kept his focus on summoning the light. “You can do this. For your mother.”

Mayana nodded once, firmly. Ona stood up too and leaned into her leg in solidarity.

“Don’t look down at them, just run across. They hate light, and I’m keeping it hot enough that they should stay away, but it won’t burn you. I’ll hold them back, I promise.”

Her feet pawed at the ground like a skittish deer, but her hand remained steady on the bag containing her mother’s bones. She seemed to draw strength from them.

“All right,” she said, her voice as hard as her eyes. “Join me on the other side as fast as you can.”

“I will,” Ahkin promised.

She took one more deep breath, and then sprang onto the path. He watched the muscles of her legs, the remains of her skirt flying around her. She was a glorious creation, inside and out. And after the kiss they had shared, he couldn’t wait until when they were alone together again. He glanced down at Ona. Well, as alone as they could be here.

Ona’s ears suddenly perked up and twitched. The hair on the dog’s back raised as a growl rippled through him.

Mayana reached the other side and collapsed upon the sand, twisting around to see him, exhaustion and fear transitioning into a beaming smile of pride. She had faced her greatest fear and conquered it. Her hand motioned for him to follow, an invitation to join her.

Ona’s growling beside him got louder, a defensive bark echoing through the mists around them. Mayana’s smile slid from her face, replaced by a look of terror. She reached out to him across the distance. “Ahkin!”

Ahkin turned just in time to see the massive, spotted form of a jaguar materialize out of the mists behind him. It was unlike any creature Ahkin had ever seen. He had hunted the cats with his mentor, even killing one by himself as part of his training. Every Jaguar warrior had to prove himself by entering the jungle alone and returning with a pelt that would be used to create his warrior costume. But this jaguar was twice the size of the one he had killed in the jungles of Tollan. Typically, a cat would only stand as tall as his waist. This beast—now fixing him with its deadly yellow eyes—rose high above him. His own head only came to its shifting shoulders.

It opened its jaws and released a roar that shook the ground at Ahkin's feet. Even his bones rattled. Teeth as long as macana swords dangled within its maw.

The jaguar crouched, digging claws longer than his knife into the black dirt. Its muscles bunched as it prepared to pounce.

Ahkin dodged to the side as the beast leapt, a clawed paw swinging around as it missed. Sharp points raked down his back, but he had moved enough that the cuts were not deep. He lost his focus. The path across the scorpions closed as his light faded, a mass of legs and claws and stingers flowing to fill in the space.

Ahkin cursed. His blood already exposed, he bent the light around himself. The cat let out a roar of frustration as it looked around, searching for the mouse that had suddenly disappeared.

It noticed Mayana on the opposite shore of the scorpion river. Mayana scrambled to her feet and bolted for the trees, hiding behind a dark, gnarled trunk.

The cat lowered onto its haunches, preparing to leap the distance across the river. Ona appeared out of nowhere, a mere beetle on the back of a wolf. Still, he dug his teeth into the leg of the jaguar, trying to pull its attention away from Mayana. The cat thrashed, swinging Ona free and sending him flying across the sand. Ahkin knew what he had to do.

He threw out his hand and opened the path across the river again. "Ona, go!" he roared at the dog. "Protect her for me."

Ona stumbled to his feet, searching for the source of Ahkin's voice before he darted across to the other side. Ahkin let the path close again.

He dropped his invisibility and waved his arms above his head, whistling to get the jaguar beast's attention.

The cat roared again. In the distance several more roars answered. There were more coming.

Ahkin looked across the space between them, to where Mayana's anxious face peered around the tree.

"I'll distract it away from you," he yelled. "Run!"

“No! Ahkin, I won’t leave you!” she screamed back. “Don’t you dare leave me alone while you try to be the hero!”

But he didn’t give her the chance to argue further. The moment the cat’s attention turned back to the easier target, he knew what he had to do to protect her.

“Ahkin! Don’t! Please!”

He had to save her. If this was it, the moment where he could make sure she survived by sacrificing himself, he had to. He owed her that. The one thing he could do to rectify his sins.

Ahkin turned and ran into the forest, the sound of pounding paws on dirt behind him—and an unsaid goodbye still lingering on his lips.