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The mist slithers over the broken rooftops like a silent predator, ghostly tendrils slipping quietly from one building to the next. Britta and I are almost halfway across the square before I finally notice it, gathering at the very edge of the city. The only reason I do is that tingles come over me suddenly, rolling waves I feel deep in my arms and shoulders. I've felt them enough times before to know what they are: a warning. Something divine is at play. And wherever there is divinity, there is danger.

I take in the mist, my eyes narrowing. Its edges are tinged an eerie purple-black, and it seems to be . . . searching. There's a deliberateness to its movements, almost as if it's being directed toward a specific target.

*My companions.*

I whirl toward them only to blink, startled. Britta has nearly reached the rest of the group now, even though we were walking together just moments earlier.

How is that possible?

It's almost as if something has altered the distance between us. Propelled her closer to the others.

"Britta?" I call out, fear thumping in my chest.

There's no reply. Britta doesn't seem to notice me, much less the mist. It's like she doesn't see it at all, even though it's creeping ever closer, black tendrils growing increasingly bloated as they slither down the ancient streets.

Worse, she's not the only one who's oblivious. All my other friends are so deeply focused on whatever White Hands is saying, they don't even blink as the air slowly gets warmer and warmer, no doubt a consequence of the mist slowly rolling into the city.

Can't they see it approaching?

Can't they hear me calling to them?

"Britta!" I shout again, hurrying forward. "Keita!"

When there's still no reply, I break into a run, ignoring the pain that jolts through me with every footstep. Every nerve in my body is alive, every fiber of my being shrieking with fear. This is a divine attack. It has to be. We're here on this island, finally close to reaching Mother, and the gods, whichever group of them has sent the mist, want to stop us from doing so.

But how did they find me yet again? When I confronted the Gilded Ones, Ixa destroyed the ansetha necklace—the shackles they'd disguised as a gift, accidentally severing their hidden connection to my kelai. I also helped the others set fire to their mountain, giving the male deathshrieks who had been suffering underneath it the oblivion they'd so desperately called out for. Without their primary sources of food and power, the Gilded Ones' abilities should be limited now—as should those of the Idugu, who are tethered to them.

Given their newfound weakness, the gods shouldn't be able to see as easily across Otera as they once did, much less track me across it.

And yet, here the mist is.

"BRITTA!" I shout again, full-out sprinting now.

Sores rip open across my body, but I breathe past the pain. I have no other choice. If the gods take either Mother or my friends, Otera is lost. Because I would sacrifice anything for my family.

*Anything.*

A scaly shadow matches my footsteps. *Deka want ride Ixa?* Ixa asks, his eyes concerned.

*Yes,* I reply gratefully, hefting myself onto his back. The pain immediately fades—now a dull throbbing instead of the violent burning it just was.

*Hurry, Ixa,* I urge.

*Ixa hurrying* is my companion's grumbled reply as he runs faster and faster until we burst through the circle of statues.

The moment Ixa's claws scratch over a stone, whatever cocoon was muffling my friends' senses seems to unravel. Belcalis is the first to react, and she whips toward us, the moonlight casting a hawkish shadow over her sharp, angular face.

"Deka," she says, her usually coppery skin already grayish with worry. All the time spent running these past weeks has hollowed out Belcalis's once-proud features—carved shadows under her eyes and whittled her body to an almost feral leanness. "What is it?" she asks, running to me.

"The mist," I say, turning to the darkened city streets.

That's when I stop, alarm suddenly a deafening shriek in my mind. Between the time I last saw it and now, the mist has

spread, its tendrils knitting into a web that's rapidly moving through the surrounding streets. Fear hitches my breath as I feel that strange heat rising, driving away the coolness of Gar Nasim's night air.

The mist is corralling us in. Herding my friends and I like cattle.

The gryphs—the winged desert cats my friends use as mounts—growl low in their throats and pace the edges of the square.

But when Belcalis looks in the direction I'm pointing to, a puzzled expression creeps across her face. "What mist? All I feel is this gods-blasted heat." She wipes her hands over the back of her neck, which is now glistening with sweat.

"It's there." I point, unnerved. "It's wrapping around us."

And yet, I notice, it's not moving any closer in. I squint and see that the mist has formed an almost perfect circle around the square, but it's not trying to approach us anymore.

*Why?*

"Wha's there? Wha's happened?" By now, Britta has noticed our discussion and is hurrying over, her blue eyes worried. Sweat drips down her forehead in little trails.

"There's some sort of mist surrounding us," Belcalis answers. "I can't see it, but Deka can."

"So it's divine—like the river of stars in the Chamber of the Goddesses." Britta immediately makes the connection, her eyes surveying the area.

"You can't see it either?" Belcalis frowns at Britta.

"No."

"You need to leave, now." This statement comes from White Hands, who has hurried over, the others behind her. There's a

grim expression on her face, which, like the rest of her body, shimmers slightly at the edges—a subtle sign that she’s not actually physically here.

Everything in me stills. “You know what it is.”

White Hands nods.

“I’ve been hearing rumors of a new abomination of the gods: a shimmering mist that beguiles its victims, entices them before snatching them away.”

“Let’s be on our way, then,” Britta says, tugging her gryph’s reins, but a hand reaches out to stop her.

Lamin, the silent, gentle giant who’s Asha’s uruni.

He’s walked over so quietly, none of us even noticed his arrival—not that we ever do. Despite his height, Lamin is the stealthiest member of the group. We suspect he was some sort of spy before he entered the Warthu Bera, the training ground where we all learned to be warriors, but no one is certain. Lamin never talks about his past.

Lamin never talks about much of anything, truth be told.

We didn’t even know he was familiar with this region of the empire until he volunteered to come with us when the group was splitting into two.

“What about Dekka’s mother?” he asks, his reddish-brown form a towering silhouette against the darkness of the night.

My heart skips a beat as I remember: “She might be hiding somewhere near, or even inside, this city.”

That’s the conclusion I’ve reached after spending the entire day searching for her across the other end of the island. She wasn’t there. Which means she must be somewhere close to here.

“But she can’t see the mist!” Horror rises in me at the thought. Most people can’t see the workings of the divine.

And if she blunders across its tentacles, it’ll take her, and the only chance I have of finding my kelai, not to mention reuniting with my only remaining family.

I turn to regard the mist again, that fear coursing through me. It’s remained exactly where it was, those tendrils gathering.

*What is it waiting for?*

I have no time to dwell on that. I turn to the others. “We have to signal to her. Warn her.”

“But that might alert our pursuers.” These grim words come from Li, Britta’s usually buoyant sweetheart.

He’s staring into the darkness, moonlight highlighting his pale skin and long black hair as he gives us this reminder: everywhere we go, the worshippers of both the Gilded Ones and the Idugu follow, both groups in a desperate race to capture us and hand us over to their respective gods.

I sigh. “At this point, we have no choice. It’s either that or—”

“You could use your combat state,” Li suggests, as if thinking out loud, but then Britta glares at him, another reminder: while I can still enter the combat state, I can’t use it to do much without pain striking every part of my body, rendering it unmovable.

I’m nearly powerless now, and that’s by design. One of the most horrible truths I’ve learned over these past few months is that my body is an arcane object that was created by the Gilded Ones for one purpose and one purpose only: to allow them to steal my power. My body was never truly mine to begin with.

By the time I fell from the cosmos to this world centuries ago in the form of the god known as the Singular, the Gilded Ones were already aware that their counterparts, the Idugu, were conspiring against them. Plotting to gain dominion over them.

So they schemed to find a way to finally and decisively win their never-ending war.

They did so by trapping a portion of my kelai in a golden seed, one that would eventually grow into a human-seeming body, given the right conditions and amount of time. One that would eventually form a small but powerful connection to the rest of my divine powers and give them a way to feed from it, take it for themselves.

But first, they needed the perfect vessel to bear their baby god, an alaki who could nurture such a creature in their womb without being destroyed by it.

They needed my mother.

Why she was that perfect alaki, I still don't know. White Hands tried planting the seed in several others over the centuries, but it never quite took.

But then Mother came around, and I was finally born. A girl who would seem human, and then alaki, so as not to arouse suspicion, all the while growing in power. All the while, reconnecting, slowly but surely, to the rest of my kelai. And all the while, allowing the Gilded Ones, my false mothers, to slowly but surely siphon off what much of it they could.

But then we had our confrontation, and Etzli forced my ansetha necklace to grow roots into my body—roots Ixa almost immediately ripped out. In doing so, he accidentally severed the tenuous thread between myself and my kelai.

As a result, this body is failing. And soon enough, it will be dead.

Without my *kelai* to give it power, any abilities I use outside the combat state speeds up its disintegration. Now I have mere months, perhaps even *a* month, left.

I can feel it already, the growing emptiness inside me. The emptiness that signals my diminishing life force.

Just the thought has that all-too-familiar panic surging inside my mind. Then Keita steps forward.

“What if I send fires to guide her?” he suggests.

My heart leaps. “Fires?”

“Small flames. Wisps, really.” Keita sounds almost bashful. He’s been training every day, and control over his ability has increased in the past few weeks—a very welcome development.

Keita’s gift is related to his emotions—specifically, his anger. Any time he feels anything close to fury, heat pours out of him, so hot it sears his clothes and everything else in the vicinity. It’s a massive inconvenience, given that we had to leave behind our infernal armor, the golden armor made from *alaki* blood we all used to wear. Although it slowed us down and was too distinctive to blend in, it was also heat proof, unlike the dark leather we wear now, which has singe marks all across it.

I watch as he gestures and flames appear in the air. One more gesture, and they’re racing across the city.

“If she’s anywhere nearby, this should draw her out,” he says.

“Send them toward the hills. The mist isn’t there,” I urge, keeping my eyes on the flames as they arc through the darkness like shooting stars. Each one is a wish: *Please let them lead Mother to safety. Please let them—*

The flames sputter out.



I whirl to Keita, horrified, when they disappear completely. “What happened? Why did the flames die?”

He doesn’t reply. Doesn’t even seem to hear me anymore. His eyes are fixed off into the distance, a strange expression gleaming in them.

“Keita?” I ask when he remains silent. As I stare at him, confused, a pale shadow stumbles past us. Li. There’s a look in his eyes, that same vacantness that Keita’s have.

“Li?” It’s Britta’s turn to be worried.

She tries to grab him, but he wrenches his hand out of hers.

“I have to go. It’s calling me.” He continues walking leadenly past the broken pink statues toward the streets, where that heat is rising now. The mist is moving again, the tendrils gathering in on themselves.

I glance at Keita. Thankfully he’s still standing where he was, staring off into the distance. Li, however, keeps moving.

“Li?” Britta calls. “LI!”

She tries to pull him back, but he shakes her off like she’s nothing—an impressive feat, given how strong Britta is. “Li!” She turns back to me. “What’s happening to him?”

The answer comes from White Hands. “It’s the mist,” she swiftly answers. “It’s trying to take them!”

Determination grits Britta’s face. “Not while I’m here!”

A tingle rushes through me as she gestures, and mounds of pink stone form over Li’s feet. For a moment, I breathe, relieved: Britta has Li caught. She’s used her abilities to encase his feet in stone. But then he absently gestures, and that stone crumbles into sand, allowing him to continue walking.

My eyes widen as yet more tingles rush through me. “Did he just—”

“I think it’s safe to say Britta’s no longer the only one who can manipulate the earth!” Belcalis shouts as she hurtles toward Li, arms outstretched.

She slams back, thrown by Li, who has shaken her off like she’s a doll. My eyes round. There’s only one explanation for this sudden burst of power and strength: Li is a full-fledged jatu now. A true jatu, one born of divine blood, with the strength and speed to match.

*My divine blood.*

I’d thought the process had stopped now that I’m severed from my kelai, but apparently, that’s not the case. Or perhaps Li has had this power all along and never thought to use it.

“No, Li, we’re trying to help you!” I shout, urging Ixa toward him.

He continues lurching straight for the mist, which is now pulsing rhythmically in response to his footsteps, the tendrils unfurling, with iridescent nubs stretching toward him. “I’m coming,” he calls out to it, a dazed look in his eyes.

“Li, stop!” I shout, continuing onward, but the distance between us suddenly seems so far . . . so very far.

And then a dark, lean figure staggers past me.

Keita, his eyes just as dazed as Li’s.

All the air rushes out of my body. “Keita, no . . .,” I whisper, but he doesn’t hear me. Doesn’t even see me as he stumbles for the siren call of the shimmering mist.

“So beautiful . . .,” he murmurs, golden eyes alight with flame.

And he’s not alone.

Another, even taller figure shuffles after him: Lamin, his eyes just as entranced, his footsteps echoing in the darkness.

“No!” I shout again, spurring Ixa in their direction. But like before, we’re too far away. Much too far. Once more, the mist is altering my perception of distance, using it to separate me from the others.

“Stop them!” I cry to Britta and Belcalis, who are much nearer. “Stop the boys!”

But it’s already too late.

The moment the boys are in close proximity, the mist’s tendrils lash out, each one so fast, there’s no time to dodge—not that the boys would have even tried, given how enthralled they are.

“White Hands!” I shout, whirling to her. “What do I do?”

Except my former mentor suddenly seems leagues away too, her body disappearing into the darkness. By the time I turn back, the mist’s tendrils are snapping again. Then they’ve wrapped around me, searing ropes radiating white-hot pain that I only dimly feel since I’m still firmly seated on Ixa. Within moments, my friends and I, and even the gryphs, which have remained close beside us all this while, are hurtled through the air into a sound-muffling, all-encompassing darkness, heat buffeting us from all directions, slicing through our black leather armor and skin.

“No!” I shout when Ixa is wrenched away from me by the wind.

The moment we’re separated, all the pain he muted explodes across my senses. Tears burst from my eyes, but I can’t feel them past the sheer, overwhelming agony. My entire body is on fire, lightning bolts sparking under my skin.

“Ixa!” I shout. “Britta! Someone! Anyone! Somebody help me!”

There’s no reply, just that heat searing into me, that wind,

hurling me around like a doll until, finally, there's a great whooshing sound. Just like that, I'm slammed down with such force, all the air explodes from my chest, replaced instead by more agony, spreading like a wave across my body.

And then I open my eyes, and I see the twinkling of stars.