

ZAYA

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing degree at BRAC University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Ethics Statement

I hereby declare that this thesis composed by me is a genuine innovative work and it has not been published anywhere else. This work has been done for the requirement of MA in English Literature degree of BRAC University.

Abstract

Haunted by trauma, Zaya Qaim takes his own life, only to realize that his body heals from any injury. When left with no choice but to face life head on, Zaya must learn to navigate his past and emotions in order to truly heal.

Dedication

I dedicate this novella to me, myself and I, for actually being able to climb out of a dark space in my life to get this done on time.

Acknowledgement

Endless gratitude to my supervisor, Dr Mahruba T Mowtushi for being patient with me through my many inconsistencies and disappearances.

To my friends, my binus, who kept telling me to get to work when I was crying and whining about not having enough time left, I thank you from the bottom of my heart and I am sure I will need your assistance again in the not too distant future.

And to every single person involved in the process of growing, harvesting, producing and transporting the coffee I drink, I will forever be in your debt.

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For a solitary moment, lightning cracked the horizon into a thousand shards, illuminating the cityscape. Through those cracks crept in a thousand turbulent thoughts, though only one clawed for attention like no other.

Don't.

The previously gentle breeze had now become agitated and soon, the preliminary prickles of rain would also begin their assault. In the distance, pockets of lightning phased in and out of existence, and though he was about to do something irreparable, Zaya Qaim smiled the slightest of smiles. Perhaps it was not quite what he would have preferred as his final view but it reminded him, through the static of his thoughts, of a deeply buried memory involving two others and the soft glow of fireflies.

He closed his eyes and drew in a sharp intake of breath.

He held it in.

He held it in.

He held it in.

He jump-

No.

His eyes flew open and he immediately steadied himself, releasing his breath. Up above, an almost menacing growl swept over the entire region. Zaya stood, shaking, his breathing now erratic. A part of him felt like sobbing through those gasps of air, but he could not cry. The cold of the rain crept under his clothes and skin, clawing into his nerves. He shivered, but he

did not move. Even as the sky now roared at him to make a decision, he simply could not move. Seconds passed by. Then, minutes. Ten, fifteen, twenty, and even half an hour later he still stood rooted to the spot. Now fully drenched, Zaya's unkempt hair had clambered down his face, obscuring his vision. His thoughts had finally been drowned out, sinking within the white noise. His breathing too had gone back to normal. With a sigh, he turned around on the ledge to face the entrance of the roof which would lead him back downstairs. Then, he flipped the hood of his hoodie back on and placed his hands in his pockets.

Zaya looked up, little blotches of lightning still visible through the canopy of his hair. He leaned back to get a better look. In and out of existence they went, those fireflies of the night sky. A little while later, they began travelling away from him. Gently they went at first, but soon he realized how quickly they had gone out of his reach. Faster and faster they went, farther and farther. And in those few seconds of eternity he did not dare close his eyes. He reached out; how he wished they would not disappear! How he wished they would stay just a little while longer.

Lightning ignited the night sky.

And eternity was no more.

Chapter 1

'I'm here! You'll be safe, baby. I promi-'

The waves crashed into them and for a second he thought he lost his grip. Hers was tighter.

'I promise!'

It was too dark, too loud. He could barely hear, let alone see and with each moment the water tried with more ferocity to pull him in.

'Oh thank the Maker, I found you!' came a familiar voice, 'Give me your hand!

'No, I can't. Take him first.'

A pair of arms latched onto his own.

'C'mon Zaya!'

He refused to budge, clutching onto her with as much strength as he could muster.

'Zaya, we don't have time. Let go!'

Zaya's eyes shot open and he immediately gasped for air. No time to ponder, no hows or whys. He needed to breathe. And breathe he did: in- out- in- out- with as much vigor and focus as he could muster, instincts overtaking any other action. Involuntarily he rolled over to his side, half expecting an impact against the floor. The floor however, never arrived. For some reason, his bed seemed to have grown in size. *Wait-* his breathing stabilized a little- *that didn't make any sense.* He felt around in the black of dawn, looking for the edge of his bed but instead of fabric, his hand seemed to brush against what could only be described as odd semi-solid goo. He recoiled immediately, thoroughly alarmed. With his initial disorientation slowly ebbing away, Zaya propped himself up and gradually became aware of his other senses. It was then that the strong, musky smell of rain made its acquaintance, which made as

much sense to him as his enlarged bed. He swung his legs around to the side, expecting (and almost hoping for) them to slide off and touch the floor. That however, did not happen.

Wait, what?

Zaya shook away his grogginess and it was only then that his eyesight finally adjusted. In the darkness he could make out the shapes of certain structures that surrounded him. *Buildings?* He himself sat in the midst of soil- no, mud, obviously a result of the rain. *Where was he?* He sat still, partially confused, his heart rate growing ever so erratic. *How did he get there?* Buildings, mud, rain and the crack of dawn, all information and no answer. He scurried to his feet, or at least made a valiant attempt to do so, for in a moment, his face slammed against the ground below. There he stayed for a little while. When the shock began to subside, he got up slowly. As he spit mud out in quick bursts, Zaya touched the side of his wrist, though it was unnecessary. In the silence, he could hear it, beating away in his chest. *Thump-thump-thump.* He stood still, looking at the imposing silhouettes surrounding his vision. By now the sky had the slightest tinge of red, which made the outlines just a little bit more terrifying than they needed to be at that moment. Alone and confused, perhaps calling out for help would be the best decision to make.

‘H-hel-’

No.

No. His *own* neighborhood was not known for its hospitality, and abduction or not, he was not about to take any chances in a part of town he was not even familiar with. He sighed, trying to bring his attention back to the little waves that traveled inside the side of his wrist.

Thump-thump-thump.

For the next quarter of an hour, Zaya merely stood in place, waiting for light, and trying in vain to recall his journey to the strange situation he found himself in. The taste of mud had melted into normalcy and so too had the silence. In fact, so immersed had he become within this silence that when a distant crow called out to the morning, Zaya almost received a second serving of mud. He looked up at the sky, whose muted shades of blue were in the process of being consumed by what could only be described as... red. Never before in his life had he seen a morning so fiercely, so *violently* red. It was not maroon, crimson, vermillion, or any of the hundred other degrees of the colour that he was familiar with. No, it was red at its purest. It was untampered, unfiltered red. Zaya stared, feeling an almost ethereal tether between him and the sky. Then, as soon as it had come, the red began disappearing, slowly burning away at the edges. The sun had risen at last.

A little saddened, Zaya brought his attention back to the real world and finally took a good look at his surroundings. Grey, lifeless buildings lined the streets, cracked in some places, incomplete in others. Here and there, nature seemed to have begun its reclamation of the land through vines and other greenery. Though the mud and the smell of petrichor were already quite the giveaway, the way the world glistened in the sunlight meant that it had rained recently. If there were any inhabitants, then they were either fast asleep or did not want to be seen or heard by everyone else.

'I know this place.'

The words escaping from his own mouth were distant. In a dreamlike manner, Zaya turned around to look behind him and completely froze. There it was, the familiar tall building. Abandoned and worn away by time, he recalled learning about it being a university in the past. He recalled how it overlooked the city and stood as a symbol of endurance. He recalled chuckling at the irony of that sentiment. He recalled running off at night to access the rooftop. He recalled standing near the edge, looking up at the night sky. He recalled falling, faster and faster, the wind screeching in his ears. He recalled that this was the place where-

'I died.'

He looked down at his body and his eyes immediately locked onto his clothes.

Red.

Zaya felt like his heart had stopped. The world pulled back in his vision, curving inwards, before becoming a blur of colours and light. He reached for his wrist, but felt nothing. His hands were too numb, too cold. Pins and needles scattered from his extremities to the center of his body, immobilizing him. Then, through that wall of ice, he felt it. The deafening rhythm of his heartbeat battered against the walls of his chest. They echoed all across his body. Zaya fell to his knees. His insides were churning, cramping and folding onto themselves. Before he could react to the pain, he vomited all over the ground, or at least he tried to. Nothing came forth, except a series of dry heaves. The heaving soon dwindled into

coughs. Eventually, that too came to an end. There on the ground Zaya stayed, motionless. Incoherent thoughts flashed in his mind, appearing quickly, disappearing even quicker.

He fell. He fell at least fifteen floors. He looked at his hands, now dug deep into the mud and earth. He should have died. He *did* die. He remembered now, all the excruciating details of the previous night. Everything he saw, smelt, heard, everything he *felt* had been amplified in his memory. He could see it all in his mind's eye, the crack of thunder, the sky on fire, the onslaught of rain. They had been imprinted deep in the recesses of his mind. He could play it all back in his head, each painful second after the next. They were the last things he had experienced. Or at least, he thought they were. Zaya flung his arms apart in frustration, scattering mud everywhere. He looked at his hands. They were trembling. He clenched his fists tight. Then he clenched them tighter, as much as his muscles and flesh would allow.

No. He struck the ground. *He died.* He struck the ground again. *He died.* He struck the ground again. *He died.*

Over and over, Zaya pummeled the earth beneath him. He was terrified. He was furious. Those two emotions seeped into one another like drops of paint in water. They mixed and mingled, each nestling within the space of the other. Paint eventually settles into a ugly, muddy concoction, and for Zaya's emotions this was not far from the truth. He did not quite comprehend what he was feeling. He just knew he needed to hurt.

However, he could not hurt forever. As time passed, each strike became weaker than the last, until he no longer had the strength to physically exert himself. He tried lifting his arms, but

they refused to listen. They remained in front of him, immobile- his tired eyes glanced at his hands- and bloody. Zaya fell to the ground, adrenaline now wearing off. Bit by bit, he began to feel pain shooting in from his hands. He lay on his side, looking at them, an unholy combination of flesh, blood and even bone. He had nothing to say about that observation. Some part of him certainly revulsed at the sight, but it was far away, buried beneath the ocean of silence occupying his mind. He wanted to lay there. He wanted to melt into the earth, to be covered in soil and to have the trees and plants use the remainder of his body to bring forth new life. Zaya lingered on that thought, finding a much needed sliver of comfort. Then he let his eyelids droop, ever so slightly blurring his vision of his now disfigured hands. He decided he would let the ocean of static wash over him. And when he would wake up, maybe all of this would just be a bad d-

Caw! Caw!

Zaya's eyes flew open, immediately prying to find the source of the noise. Of course, it was simply a stray crow. He followed its trail til it disappeared from sight before turning back, prepared to once more look at the remains of his hands-

Zaya's heart stopped for a second time that day.

The sight that greeted him was not one of mangled flesh and blood, but it alerted every single element of his fight or flight instincts. *Jump back.* He could not move. *Run away.* He could not move. *Run.* Zaya could only lie there, transfixed at what he was witnessing.

Sinews and blood vessels reattached. Strands of flesh grew and pulled towards each other, reassembling into bigger chunks. Bones clicked into position, disappearing beneath newly formed flesh. Then at last the skin regrew, housing everything inside. When it was all over, Zaya's hands looked like they had never seen a day of use. They looked untouched. They looked perfect.

Zaya's head felt numb, as if all the blood had been drained. The morning light darkened, as did the world around it. His eyes rolled back in his head. Then at last, consciousness finally let go.

Chapter 2

‘Ashia. No.’

‘But grammy, he’s moving!’

‘He might be hurt, little one. Leave him alone.’

Vision faded in with sparse clarity: brown, gold, blur, red, violet, blur.

‘Where am...’

As the world slowly came into focus, Zaya’s eyes fell upon two figures standing over him.

‘Are you alive, mister?’ asked the smaller one, ‘Wow! Grammy look, look! He’s got two different eyes!’

‘Hush.’

Zaya recoiled. There was an attempt to spring backwards but that was immediately foiled by the presence of a solid wooden wall.

‘Easy, boy, easy. We won’t hurt you.’

This time, the other one spoke. Her voice was deeper, almost commanding. Yet, there was such a gentle sincerity around it that Zaya could not help but be put at ease. He was still on

guard, however, and as such he took a good look at his surroundings before making any more hasty decisions.

The room they were in could only be described as a very cramped cabin museum. The whole place was wooden in structure, though it was hard to tell: countless trinkets took up much of Zaya's field of view. They competed for space, while at the same time tried their best to make an opening in the center. From furniture, gardening tools and kitchen utensils, to taxidermied animals and weapons plucked right out of the middle ages, it was as though the room itself was frozen in time. In which exact time, Zaya could not ascertain as every other item his eyes fell upon proudly proclaimed a different historic identity from its neighbor. A viking helmet here, a piece of papyrus there and at the far end, an idle gramophone which looked like it had not played a tune for over a hundred years.

Zaya must have become noticeably transfixed by all that chaos, for soon he heard the lady chuckling.

'You appear to be doing alright,' she said, 'Welcome stranger, to my humble shope.'

The first thing Zaya noticed about Aunt Teek was the way she stood: upright. Even though she carried a cane in her hand, her posture exuded pride, and even though her posture exuded pride, she towered over neither him nor the little girl beside her. There was deliberation in the way she moved and spoke, something which naturally commanded respect. Draped around her was a saree whose orange highlights matched splendidly with the bangles adorning her wrist, both forming a chromatic ecosystem with the soft lights of the room. Behind her

circular spectacles lay two, narrow emerald eyes, shining with an intensity that went straight through Zaya's soul. He gulped. He wondered how old she was, for a mess of gray hair adorned a face that bore more than a few wrinkles.

'Yeah welcome-welcome!' chirped the little girl. Her crimson hair was *overwhelming*. Like her grandmother, her eyes shone a brilliant green, though with a more electric energy.

'H-hi.' Zaya managed to mutter.

He stared at the two, realizing he should probably say something more.

'Pleased to make your acquaintance?'

Very smart.

'Pleased to make your acquaintance too, young man,' said Aunt Teek, 'How are you feeling?'

'I'm-'

Memories of that night and the following day flashed through his mind. He broke into a cold sweat. Instinctively he glanced at his clothes. Fortunately, they were free of any blood stains, but only because they were a completely different set of clothes from what he was wearing before.

‘I’ve been better,’ he said quickly, avoiding her gaze, ‘By any chance, did you happen to, er,’ he furrowed his brows a little, ‘how do I say this...’

‘Pick you up from an abandoned part of town and give you a change of clothes? Why yes, yes I did.’

Zaya stared, before sputtering an awkward thanks. (‘You’re welcome!’ said the little girl)

‘Now I have a lot of questions for you, young man, most of them about your well-being,’ She scanned Zaya, ‘But I don’t want to bombard you with anything too heavy. I hope you aren’t hurt in any way; didn’t have a single scratch on you from what I could tell.’

Zaya subconsciously felt his unbroken hands.

‘Yeah, I’m alright.’

He dreaded where the conversation was headed.

‘I just want to know,’ she walked over and sat down beside him, ‘Do you remember what happened?’

Maybe it was the sudden intrusion in his personal space, or maybe it was the directness of the question, but Zaya’s heart rate flared up once more. He remembered. He doubted he could ever forget, but there was no way to even begin explaining all of that to anyone else. He tried to hold his mind steady. He felt his pulse. *Breathe*. He felt his pulse. *Breathe*. He felt his pulse. *Breathe, damn it!* The world curved inwards and the lady’s voice flew far into the distance.

Run.

In a split second, Zaya jumped out of the sofa and dashed for the door.

‘Wait-’

It was too late. He felt a horrible mixture of guilt and panic at suddenly leaving the woman and the child, but in that moment he had no desire to explain anything to strangers. He *had* no explanations. A part of him still thought that his predicament was not real, that he was caught in some sliver of time stretched out in his consciousness at the moment of impact. He shuddered.

The cold night air crashed into him as he stumbled outside. With no shoes and no plan in mind, Zaya simply ran. Every jagged surface of the road and every discarded material cut and scraped his naked soles. But they would heal. He would run and they would heal.

Chapter 3

‘Oh, thank the Maker, you’re alive!’

Zaya had finally returned home. Exhausted, he made a beeline for his room, but Robert got in the way.

‘*No!*’ he yelled, ‘you do *not* get to do that after being missing for two. Entire. Days!’

Robert Qaim was a portly man dressed in clothes that served only to make him more rotund. A few scrapes of hair desperately tried to cover his scalp but to no avail. Hanging down his face was a graying beard. However, what demanded attention were his eyes. Initially bloodshot, exhausted and drained of hope, upon seeing his son, those sunken brown eyes saw a sudden flicker of life.

‘I don’t have time for th-’ Zaya started.

‘I called,’ said Robert, his voice steadily rising, ‘I texted. I went out there looking for you. I drove around for hours, calling every single person I could think of, contacting people I haven’t spoken to in *years*. I couldn’t even file a missing person’s report until three days passed. *Three days!* Who knows what could have happened to you in three days? Just-’ he made a motion to move forward, but Zaya instinctively stepped back.

Robert sighed. For a moment he fell silent. The loud, familiar ticking of the living room clock filled in the long empty spaces.

‘Just tell me you’re alright, Zaya.’

‘I’m fine.’

‘Okay.’

That seemed like the end of the conversation and Zaya was about to direct his attention back to his room.

‘You’re not hurt are you?’ Robert blurted out, ‘Have you eaten anything? I missed you so much. Your mother’s anniversary-’

‘I said I’m *fine*.’

Zaya pushed past Robert and barged into his room, locking the door behind him. He was fuming. He let his fumes dissipate while he latched onto his pulse. Slumping down against the door, he let it come back to a steady rhythm. Outside, he soon heard broken strands of conversations.

‘...came back home...’

‘...no Shafir...not hurt.’

‘...unpaid leave...’

Tap-ta-ta-tap.

Zaya turned his attention to the sliding glass door that led to the balcony outside. For the first time in what felt like years, he smiled. Then, he scrambled to his feet, and slid the door open with more force than necessary.

Zaya almost fell backwards. A pair of arms had wrapped around him with an intensity he was not quite ready for, because the person behind them had quite literally just thrown themselves at him.

‘I was about to write a tragic song about you, you know.’

‘Wouldn’t expect anything else.’

He had the biggest smile plastered on his face, his bright blue eyes had disappeared with how much he was beaming, and in the moonlight his white hair shone with a radiance that nearly blinded Zaya. Like so many times before, Wiqi Lee Santiago had hopped over from his neighbouring building. After they parted, he placed his hands on Zaya’s shoulders, his initially cheerful demeanor gradually disappearing.

‘Are you safe?’

‘I am now.’

Wiqi’s eyes almost disappeared again.

‘Do you wanna, you know, talk about it?’

Zaya drew possibly the deepest breath he ever took in his life. He spent just as long letting it out.

‘Yeah. I do.’ he said at last. He turned on the lights, ‘You go on ahead? I need to change into something that doesn’t belong to an old lady.’

Wiqi paused to respond to that statement, but he decided against it. By the time he reached the balcony however, he could not help himself.

‘Man, I really hope your substance abuse doesn’t go beyond caffeine. Dealing with that is bad enough.’

Zaya chuckled.

A few minutes later, he had climbed up the external staircase onto the rooftop of the building. He looked over towards the horizon. The city was slowly falling asleep, distant and nearby lights flickering off one after the other. It always struck Zaya as surreal how even a city like Khola could look so free of conflict at times. The skyline reminded him of the edge of a serrated knife, or at the very least, a badly damaged one. Much like the kingdom of Niatlus itself, the sharpness had long since been filed away by time and use.

‘Haven’t seen the moon this shiny in a while,’ Wiqi whistled, ‘Looks like it’s also glad to see you back. Either that, or you managed to scare all the rain and clouds away.’

Zaya took a seat beside him on the swing. The moonlight cast an ethereal glow on the otherwise disheveled rooftop, aided by the presence of multiple tiny puddles. Though he had witnessed this countless times prior, the dissonance still made him uncomfortable. Decades before, construction had stopped midway through, and the landlord never got around to leveling the actual roof. As such, it was a mess of some rocks, rubble, stray bricks here and there and the odd water tanks and pipes at the corner. The only redeeming feature was the swing. Initially sporting a rather tacky marmalade, time had painted over it with a brush dipped in brown.

‘If I could scare anything away, it’d probably be a customer,’ said Zaya, ‘1500 saros for a painting that took 20 hours to make? Run away, please.’

‘Please.’

The two sat in silence for a while. Zaya half expected Wiqi to grow impatient but he said nothing. His mind slightly drifted off to the previous night. The past twenty four hours had been stretched apart, its two ends now lightyears away from one another. Zaya had not felt fully conscious throughout the whole ordeal. A part of him wondered whether or not the maker was actually real and if Zaya was going through some form of punishment for his ‘sacrilegious’ beliefs. Or perhaps he had been cursed by a supernatural entity; he *did* meet an old lady who may or may not have been a witch. To that thought, he scolded himself. She had been kind to him. A flash of guilt rushed through his body, bringing back to the present. He got up from the swing.

‘So,’ he said, exasperated at the conversation that was about to take place, ‘Ready for story time?’

‘If you’re ready to tell me.’

Zaya placed his fingers on the side of his wrist and grounded himself.

‘I’m about to show you something that will make you, well, have a horrible reaction. You’ll want to scream and call me insane. But I want you to promise me that you won’t make a sound.’ He looked around at the surrounding buildings to make sure they were not being watched.

‘What are you going-’

‘Wiqi, I am serious. Something happened to me and you’re only going to believe it if I show it to you. It’s not something I can share with anyone else, so please, tell me you won’t make a sound?’

Wiqi ran his fingers through his hair, furrowing his brows. Nodding at Zaya, he folded his arms and sat still to witness whatever his friend was about to do. Zaya could tell by the worried expression on his face that the next few minutes, maybe even the next few hours, were not about to go smoothly. He could easily have made up some elaborate lie about getting mugged and then being saved by a strange lady in an antique shop, but Wiqi was his best friend. If there was anyone he could and would confide in, it would be Wiqi Lee Santiago.

Zaya brought out a paper cutter from his pocket and for a moment wondered whether he should take a different approach. However, that thought went as quickly as it had come. He stretched out his right arm, taking a good look at his olive skin in the moonlight.

Don't.

In one swift motion, Zaya slashed his arm.

Chapter 4

“The people of Niatlus are as colorful as the paintings of Nazrul, as melodic as the music of Da Vinci, and their spirit, our spirit, as unwavering as the spirit of The Fearless. A hundred years ago, they fought for us, died for us, gave their bodies and souls for us, so that in our tomorrow, the sun would no longer take refuge. Today, my brothers and sisters, as I stand before you, basking in this morning sun, I hold back my tears. It is not grief that brings forth my emotions, but a longing. I long for justice. But it is a justice that cannot be executed today. Nor can it be executed tomorrow, or the endless days after. It is a justice that belongs only in the past, a justice that The Fearless never got to see.

I have led this magnificent nation for decades. I have brought forth changes unheard of. I have unified Upper and Lower Niatlus, praise the Maker! And I will keep steering us on the path of the righteous til my last breath. But if you came up to me and asked “Chiyoko, would you give up your crown to bring them back?” I would not hesitate to answer “Yes!” I would give up my life if I could show our ancestors the beautiful world they left behind for their children. However, time is a cruel monsieur, and for all the good I’ve done, time will not grant me that wish I so desperately desire. So, we must look in the direction it guides us: the future.

To be honest with you my brothers and sisters, the future frightens me. The war we fight today is not against an invader or oppressor. No, the war we fight today is one of balance, a war against ourselves. With the recent surge in gang related violence, and with the last arson attack, I have thought long and hard about what should be done. Believe me, it has not been easy. Countless nights I have stayed awake thinking of a proposition that would bring about the greatest good while causing the least harm. And I have come to the conclusion that the

only way to combat chaos is through an even stronger enforcement of order. Bear with me in the coming weeks. The sacrifice I ask of you in exchange for the safety of the people of this nation is not a great price to pay.

Starting the following month I, Queen Chiyoko N'Ekre, will execute Order 67-'

The sound of the bell broke Teek out of her reverie. She looked up from the newspaper to see a familiar lanky figure. He was a nervous fellow, his unkempt hair almost covering his golden and sapphire eyes. What would have otherwise been an imposing height was undermined by an unfortunate posture. A sudden glint of light from his ears alerted her of the presence of earrings. He was garbed in semi formal attire, though with the way he tugged at his collar and fidgeted with his belt, perhaps this was an irregular occurrence. In his hand was a clear plastic bag and she quickly scanned the contents inside, confirming her guess as to what they were.

'H-hello,' said Zaya with a forced smile plastered across his face, 'I've come to return your clothes.'

Chapter 5

The heavy tick tock of the grandfather clock forced Zaya to be conscious of the ever increasing blanket of silence engulfing his attempt at a conversation. The approaching sunset bathed the room in a painful orange and Aunt Teek adjusted her round spectacles in *just* the right amount to completely reflect incoming light towards his field of view.

‘I’ve washed them too!’ he said, squinting and stretching out the packet in front of him, ‘Though I may have maybe...ruined the shirt. Just a little bit though!’

After a slight pause, Aunt Teek got up from the counter and walked over to him. Her cane made a rather pleasant *tnock tnock* sound as she marched across the room. Her movement was almost mechanically precise. She stopped right in front of him before looking him up and down. Before Zaya could react, the bag was in her hands and the back of her yellow shrug was facing him. A moment later she was back at the counter.

‘Dry cleaning, boy,’ she said gingerly, placing the bag down somewhere nearby.

‘Oh.’

Tick. Tock. Tick.

‘Can I have my clothes back too?’ stammered Zaya. He still had not figured out how he would approach this topic. After all, the last time he saw his previous set of clothes, they were soaked in the remains of his corpse. He shuddered.

‘Hmm, your clothes huh?’ said Aunt Teek, scratching her chin, ‘That depends on if I burnt them or not.’

‘You *what?*’

At this, the old lady burst into roaring laughter. Zaya almost fell over at the sudden shift in demeanor, wondering for a moment whether she was having one of those old lady moments.

Whatever that meant.

‘Humour, boy, humour.’ she said, letting out the final few chuckles of her laughter.

Zaya could not quite ascertain what was humorous about the current scenario he found himself in, but he nervously laughed along anyways. In any case, he was relieved that his clothes had not turned to ash. Aunt Teek turned her head to an empty doorway to her left.

‘Oi!’ she whistled, ‘Leonn? Leonn, where are you?’

Zaya quickly painted a picture of Leonn in his head: a man in his late teens or early twenties with blond hair and a carefree attitude. When he heard the sounds of rapid, thunderous footsteps, he had to readjust ‘carefree’ to ‘enthusiastic’. Then he heard a deep, bellowing growl which made him wonder if Leonn was actually a huge burly man. He was midway

through creating a portrait of a strange amalgamation of the two in his head when his painting was swept away by reality.

A *wolf* had bounded into the room.

‘What the f-’

‘Atten-TION!’

With the sounds he had heard of Leonn coming downstairs, Zaya half expected the room to be hit with the force of a hurricane. However, not a single item had been touched, let alone moved. Upon hearing Aunt Teek’s command, the wolf sat down on its hind legs, its ears twitching ever so slightly.

Zaya could not believe his eyes. By this point, the setting sun had become even more potent and in front of him sat only what could be described as an orange behemoth. A good chunk of Zaya’s field of view had been taken up by the gargantuan beast, the many antique pieces suddenly replaced by a smooth coat of tangerine. Evidently, Leonn’s fur was a little *too* white.

The wolf appeared to not give Zaya much attention. Aside from a cursory glance, it sat patiently, staring straight ahead at Aunt Teek, most likely waiting for instructions. Zaya stared. He simply could not come to grips with just how massive Leonn was. His very presence seemed like an aberration in the fabric of reality. Then again, with the recent events surrounding his life, Zaya was not entirely sure what reality *was* anymore.

‘Listen boy- no not you- I want you to bring me the red box in my room.’

Leonn barked. *Could wolves even bark?*

The canine did not give Zaya the opportunity to conjure a response for himself, for in the time it took to inhale and exhale once, Leonn had dashed away, far out of sight. Once again, nothing was knocked over, and soon he could hear the ascending giant footsteps fade away. Zaya was about to inquire about the legality of a gigantic wolf residing in an antique store, but he felt like that was a topic reserved for later.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

With a loud growl Leonn made his reappearance. Zaya had not heard it coming down the stairs and the way he just materialized into the room startled him so much that he lost balance and knocked over a clay sculpture atop a pedestal. Fortunately he caught it just in time.

Thump-thump-thump-thump-thump.

He focused on the gentle rhythm against the tips of his fingers. It soon slowed down.

Aunt Teek had seemingly chosen not to comment on what had just transpired. Zaya could feel his face turn crimson. She beckoned him to walk to the counter and once he was nearby,

she opened the box. Zaya had not questioned why his clothes would be inside a box of all things. Perhaps the blood stains could not come off. Or maybe cleaning blood required a method he was not aware of, a method which included the presence of a box? However there *were* no clothes inside. Instead, what greeted him were two pieces, seemingly broken off from a whole. There was a golden funnel-like structure, whose wider segment opened up like the head of a flower. Sitting awkwardly against it was a wooden box with a rotating handle. There was intricate craftsmanship etched across the box, designs and markings unfamiliar to Zaya. He was simultaneously impressed by the details and saddened that the instrument was damaged.

‘A shame that it was broken,’ said Aunt Teek, ‘This would have sold for at least 160,000 saros.’

‘What happened to it?’

Aunt Teek smirked. ‘Oh, it was just knocked over by a stranger who rushed out of my shop.

At least he brought my clothes back to me.’

Zaya flinched.

‘Oh...oh no.’ was all that he managed to say.

Aunt Teek did not respond. She instead patted Leonn on the head. The wolf’s ears lowered in submission. Zaya’s pathetic bank balance now drifted into his view. He swallowed an invisible block in his throat, though another took its place immediately. 160,000 saros? He barely made 6,000 a month from his stagnating side project. He would also rather jump off

another building before asking Robert for any help. Even if he did, he knew his father could not just materialize such an exorbitant amount of money out of thin air. As a former Lower Niatlus resident, he had trouble with the bank as it were. To make matters worse, Zaya was supposed to start applying to universities in a few months. In the current economic climate, institutions were *not* cheap.

He sighed, scratching the back of his head. He closed his eyes shut a few times to push back the specks of tears that had begun to take form.

‘Hey, uh, Mrs Teek-’

‘Aunt Teek.’

‘Aunt Teek, look, I’m really sorry about breaking your gramophone. I didn’t even realize I’d knocked it over when I ran away and I swear I didn’t mean to break it.’ Zaya paused, trying to think of how to word his next few statements. ‘I don’t really know how to tell you this, but my father and I don’t have that kind of money. If you’d be kind enough, can I please pay you back in a...’ his voice began trailing off. ‘In monthly installments?’

Zaya expected some form of reprimand, or even a long pause of thoughtful musing from her end. However, her answer was immediate.

‘Yes, young man, you may.’

Zaya’s face lit up.

‘However, there’s a catch.’

Zaya’s face fell. He just knew she was going to ask him about the condition she found him in. Neither he nor Wiqi had not been able to come up with a convincing enough story apart from

‘I got mugged and knocked out in an area where someone had recently bled to death.’ It sounded ridiculous the first time and it sounded even worse now.

Aunt Teek got up from her chair.

‘You may go now, Leonn.’

With a dignified *Woof!*, the wolf once again flew out the room. His thunderous footsteps soon ascended into silence.

‘Take a seat over there.’

Her cane pointed towards a large sofa at the corner of the room. It was the same one he had woken up on the other day. A few moments later Zaya found himself in an all too familiar situation. He squirmed in place. The frustration he felt towards his own recklessness and its consequence was swirling inside of him.

160,000 saros. 160,000 saros!

He looked up to see Aunt Teek walking towards him, a silhouette against the orange sunset.

‘Tell me young man,’ she said, sitting next to him, her features coming alive once more, ‘Are you alright?’

Zaya was taken aback.

‘I guess I am,’ he replied cautiously.

‘Was that an honest answer?’

Zaya was unsure how to respond to that. It had been a long time since he felt perfectly at ease, an entire decade in fact. However, he concluded that the ‘alright’ she was referring to was the bloody mess of a man she found on the abandoned university grounds two days prior. In that case, he literally had no other option *than* to be alright.

‘Yeah,’ he said with more confidence, holding back an exasperated laugh.

‘Okay. I’m glad to hear that. I would be even more glad to know about the details as to how I found you the way I found you, but I fear I may have struck a nerve that night. You being alive and well untangles a knot that has persisted in my mind for two days. Besides,’ she grinned, ‘I would rather you not run out the door and break another one of my babies again.’

Zaya laughed sheepishly.

‘What’s your name, boy?’

‘Zaya!’ he responded abruptly, realizing he had not yet introduced himself, ‘Zaya Qaim.’

‘A wonderful name, a wonderful name indeed.’

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

‘So you want to pay for my broken gramophone in small chunks, is that right?’

‘Yes ma’am.’

‘How about you work for me for a while?’

‘Huh?’

‘Mmhhh. You’ll just help take care of the store, the usual things like greeting customers, dusting, cleaning, bargaining for decent prices and the like. I’ll give you 20,000 saros per month. You can choose to pay back however much you want to per month. If you want to give back the entire amount every single month, you’ll be done in less than a year.’

Zaya’s mind was racing. 20,000 saros was an amount *unheard* of in his life. If he kept even half of that every month, he would be able to pay off his debt in a year and a half. He put his fingertips together, letting them dribble and bounce off each other sporadically. Diving into this offer would not be the wisest of decisions. After all, the end of his gap year would coincide with the work. He could always take another year off, but he would never hear the end of it from Robert. The man was unhappy with the *first* gap year as it were. And then there was Wiqi, who was already in the thick of his first semester at the Niatlus Institute of Technology and Engineering. He would only fall further behind his best friend.

Zaya’s eyes darted over to the red box on the counter. He let out a deep sigh, cursing the curse that was keeping him alive. He wondered what *she* would have wanted him to do. She

was never as stuck up as Robert. Then again, neither was he before life had come crashing down on them.

The sun had all but disappeared now, letting the evening blues slowly blanket the room.

‘I’ll do it.’ said Zaya at last.

Aunt Teek had gotten up. In the sparse light, he watched her navigate her way towards the wall.

‘Are you sure about this, boy?’ came her voice from the dark.

‘Yes, ma’am. I’m sure.’

‘Well Mr Zaya Qaim,’ she said, illuminating the store in brilliant golden lights, ‘I welcome you to Aunt Teek’s Antique Store!’

Chapter 6

It was another night devoid of stars, and if there were any stars brave enough to show themselves, the neon lights of the RQFBD district eventually managed to scare them off. Zaya quite enjoyed this part of town at night, even if Wiqi described it as a ‘lightshow vomit’. People of all shapes and sizes congregated across the various hardware and media stores. There were walls of screens across every junction either displaying sports or the news, or some migraine-inducing mixture of both. Synthwave and retro music blared on various speakers, resulting in a chaotic digital symphony. Some spots had vendors calling out for customers to check out their latest stock of video games and movies. Said stocks were of questionable legality on the best of days, but nobody seemed to care. A few months ago Zaya even saw a policeman purchasing a pirated copy of the superhero movie Platinum Man. That same officer would go on to buy the entire collection of The Vengeance Heroes the following week. Here and there food vendors would be selling items such as panipuri, tacos, fish n’ fries and on the rare occasion, sushi. Zaya had tried sushi from the RQFBD district once. He shuddered at the memory. However, on this particular night, with a new job under his belt, Zaya was in moderately high spirits.

He took a seat near a food cart called ‘Far Away Galaxy’, snickering at the name. Yellow lights flashed across his face as he examined the menu. Sadly, sushi was not available on that particular night, which was quite a shame. However, a fiery hot ramen bowl titled ‘The Chosen One’ beckoned to him.

Twenty minutes and a coffee milkshake later, Zaya took out a crumpled note of 500 saros.

Whoosh!

Caw! Caw!

‘Oh for the love of-’

Zaya shoved the remaining money he had to the vendor before giving chase.

‘Hey! This is only 357 saros!’ he heard a voice rapidly receding.

‘I’ll return the rest of the money after I catch this stupid bird!’

Never had Zaya been happier to have worn sneakers with a semi formal outfit. He burst forward, running, sliding, zigzagging through throngs of people. He was met with a series of yelps, curses and of course, proclamations of the maker’s protection (and his wrath). The crow was still visible from where Zaya ran. It was a constant patch of distortion against the endless streams of light. However, with the density of light rapidly decreasing, and with The Chosen One swirling angrily in his stomach, Zaya had little time left before he either lost the thief or was immobilized by his own dinner. He proceeded to slide and pick up a handful of pebbles from the ground before rolling back onto his feet.

Nicely done.

He took aim and threw. It missed the crow by a wide margin.

Alright, aim where you think it's gonna be!

He took aim and threw. It missed the crow by a few inches.

Getting closer. C'mon, strike tres and he's out!

He took aim. At that moment, something sparked within Zaya. Time pulled back. He saw his current objective as clear as crystal. The crow *needed* to be struck. No other option existed. He had a weapon in his grip and a target in his field of view. His body would provide the force required for the rock to carry out the task. He could feel the low thumping of his heart from within. Muscles locked into position, tightening and loosening against themselves with intensity that pushed far past the boundaries of safety. His pupils dilated and the edges of the world sharpened into blades.

With the force of a missile, the rock collided against the crow, instantly sending it plummeting down to earth.

'YES- argh!'

Zaya's celebration was cut short. A searing pain shot all throughout his left arm. It twitched, spasmed and convulsed in ways he had never seen it do before. Curious onlookers had begun

turning their heads and murmuring but he had no time to bother with that train of awareness. To his relief, the pain had soon begun dissipating.

‘Maybe this curse isn’t so bad after all.’

Zaya got up, nursing his arm and ran towards his defeated opponent. Unfortunately, he did not receive the satisfaction he was hoping for. Before him, sprawled across the pavement with a clearly shattered wing lay not a crow, but a raven. It croaked weakly as he approached it. Zaya was caught off guard by how much bigger it was than an ordinary crow; no wonder he was able to hit it. The raven mustered some strength to fly, but with the injury it sustained, it was not leaving the ground anytime soon. It croaked again, a mixture of disappointment and anger. Zaya considered his next decision, wondering if carrying it out would be the right thing to do or not.

Thump-thump-thump.

He took a deep breath, then carefully placed his hands underneath the bird to pick it up. The nearby store cast a green glow on it. As he ran back home, the 500 saros lay forgotten on the side of the road.

Chapter 7

Robert was not pleased. An animal in his house? A dirty crow at that? How *dare*?

‘Father, we lived on farmland,’ argued Zaya. He maneuvered his fingers away from the frightening beak. ‘I thought you of all people would have some pity for this poor thing.’

‘Yes, I’m very sorry it got attacked, but it doesn’t look like it’s going to last long. Just get rid of it Zaya, or do it a favour and put it out of its misery yourself.’

‘Wha- I’m not doing *anything* like that! What’s wrong with you?’

Zaya had instinctively brought his hand near the head of the bird but then moved it back immediately.

‘Caw!’

Once again, the raven made an attempt to fly, which prompted Zaya to use both his hands to keep it in place. Unfortunately, the jabs from the beak were inevitable now.

‘There’s nothing wrong with me,’ said Robert, ‘The only thing wrong here is the blood from that dirty creature dripping on my floor. Maker knows what kind of diseases you just brought into my house. Now before things get worse, go get rid of it or I’ll do it myself.’

Zaya was at a loss. His anger was at a steady boil. The way Robert was acting made little sense to him. He had seen the man in his quieter moments, feeding the occasional stray animal out on the street. He even went as far as to pet a cat once!

‘*Those* animals aren’t evil.’ was Robert’s ridiculous reply when confronted about it.

‘Evil?’ Zaya was losing patience. ‘It’s just an animal. How is an animal evil?’

Suddenly it struck him. ‘Maker knows’ Robert had said.

‘Is this,’ he said, his voice rising, ‘because of that *stupid* story about the bird?’

Robert looked aghast.

‘How dare you mock the Maker?’ he bellowed, all his blood rushing to his face, ‘Repent! I can’t believe you could say such a thing after everything you’ve been through!’

When Robert Qaim yelled, even thunder trembled. His voice was a force of nature unto itself, sending shockwaves rippling through Zaya. Zaya shuddered, suddenly finding himself in the midst of memories he had chosen to stay away from. At the same time, he lost his grasp on the raven, who had long grown tired of its captor. Seeing its opportunity, the bird unleashed a furious attack.

Zaya screamed in pain as his flesh was dug at and snipped away. Robert, who was already in a state of fury at his son’s blasphemous dialogue, became even more incensed. He dashed forward to swat the bird out of his hands, but ended up getting stabbed himself. He yelled in

pain and commanded Zaya to let go of the evil thing. Robert then dashed to the storage room, no doubt to retrieve either a weapon or a first aid kit. However, once he had walked out, all that greeted him was an empty room and a frightening amount of blood scattered about the floor.

‘Wow, superpowers *and* a raven sidekick?’ said Wiqi, carefully placing the lid on the box,

‘Man, you’re living quite the adventure.’

‘This is not a superpower and that spawn of the Taker is not my sidekick.’

‘**Croak.**’ came a sound from inside the box.

‘Zip it, thief. I don’t like you either,’ said Zaya.

He glanced at his hands. They had expectedly gone back to normal. Though he would be hesitant to admit it to Wiqi, Zaya was quite enjoying what he termed as his ‘curse.’ He sipped on his cup of tea, enjoying the gentle swaying motion of the swing and the diffused light of the moonless sky. He took special delight in the bumblebee that adorned the cup Wiqi had brought.

‘Are you sure about this?’ asked his friend.

‘Trust me, no one comes into the bathroom on the roof. And even if they did, a random box on the corner would not bother them one bit.’

‘Even one that has a demon spawn inside?’

‘Half the tenants here would probably scare away *actual* demons.’

‘Fair enough, fair enough.’

Wiqi got up.

‘Gotta go, man,’ he said, stretching ‘History quiz tomorrow.’

‘History?’ said Zaya, frowning, ‘I thought you were studying robotics.’

‘I’d be doing that if the education board actually wanted the kingdom to develop faster.’

‘Yikes.’

Wiqi gave him a quick hug, then crouched in preparation for a sprint. He looked up at Zaya.

‘You know, you should take my place,’ he smirked, ‘You’re probably gonna have to know a lot of random history working in an antique store.’ He then proceeded to shake his head in a mocking manner. ‘I still can’t believe you got a job when you should have gotten smacked on the head. And you call Mr Raven over there a thief.’

‘Alright, are you leaving or not?’

‘Heh. Goodnight Z.’

‘Goodnight.’

With a sudden dash, Wiqi ran forward at tremendous speed and jumped the gap from Zaya’s roof onto his own. Zaya made a mental note to once again go running with his best friend when he realized he was still holding the cup of tea in his hand.

‘Hey Wiqi! Wiqi, wait!’

Wiqi turned around to see Zaya gesturing towards the object.

‘Just give it back tomorrow.’ came his voice from the opposite roof.

With that, the silver haired man vanished into the stairwell.

‘Caw.’

Zaya turned his attention back to the box and sighed. He had no plans for taking care of a random animal, but he also feared for its safety. He carried the box to the bathroom and gently placed it on the side of the sink. However, as he took the first few steps to leave, a mental force tugged at him. He ignored it at first, walking towards the open door one step at a time. The force responded by growing stronger with each of those steps. Eventually it became unbearable. Zaya stopped and turned around. Then he begrudgingly walked over to the box.

‘Alright, fine. You win.’

He picked it up and began making his way to the external staircase that lined the side of the building.

‘Caw.’

‘Yeah, shush. Any louder and you’ll get Robert in a frenzy again.’

Once he was back in his room, he gently placed the box underneath his bed. Quietly, he went over to check whether his door was locked. Afterwards, he checked his phone: 27 missed calls and 15 text messages.

‘I’m in my room,’ he typed out, ‘Got my hand bandaged and got rid of the bird. Don’t bother me.’

Sent.

He flicked the lights on. His usually spotless room had tasted entropy before, but recently it had grown increasingly lustful towards it. He had not realized the large canvas facing the wall was uncovered, or that his notebooks were arranged out of order, or the fact that the room’s odorlessness- something he worked really hard to maintain- had slowly begun to be chipped away. Zaya immediately went about rectifying the problems, spraying air freshener, tidying his notebooks, dusting his table. However, when he went to cover the canvas, he paused. He glanced over at the drawer that housed all his painting tools. An absurd idea was brewing in his mind and he wondered whether he should actually pursue it. He brought out a palette, a brush and a knife, before going to his bathroom to get some water.

Once he came back, Zaya stood before the canvas and picked up the knife and the palette.

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK!

‘Zaya?!’ he heard Robert’s voice from outside his door, ‘Are you there? Are you alright?’

‘Yeah, father,’ replied Zaya through gritted teeth.

‘Open this door right now. I need to see your hand.’

Zaya closed his eyes in frustration, taking out the bandages Wiqi brought him. He wrapped them around his hand haphazardly and went over to the door. However, he did not open it.

‘I told you not to bother me.’ said Zaya from his room

‘Don’t speak to me with that tone-’

‘I will do whatever the hell I want!’ Zaya’s anger had rushed into him from nowhere, ‘And if you get on my nerves I swear I will rip out these bandages!’

‘Zaya-’

‘Now for the last time, leave me *alone*.’

Not being able to contain his anger any longer, Zaya punched the wall. He held back nothing.

The pain of course, did not kick in immediately, but he saw the effects. Zaya had become all too familiar with the destruction and repair of his hands, so the bloody outcome was not surprising.

He cast the knife aside and walked over to the canvas. On it, he dragged three of his bloodied fingers down the center. Zaya proceeded to stare at it for a while, wondering how he would turn three blood stains into something more presentable to the general public as well as any potential customers.

Would they even buy something like this?

He let his hand heal while he contemplated on the answer to that question. However, Zaya soon found his thoughts drifting off to Aunt Teek's antique store. He let out an audible gasp and rushed over to the bathroom to wash and dry his hands. Then, retrieving a key from his desk drawer, he went to his bookshelf, unlocking *its* drawer with the newfound key. Inside lay only a featureless wooden box. Yet, Zaya very gently took it out, handling it with the utmost care. He placed it very softly on his bed, uncovering the lid. He could not help but smile.

Inside lay a long hunting knife. It was about the length of Zaya's own forearm, sporting a shimmering jade green blade. Along the sharp edge lay intricate markings unfamiliar to Zaya, but on the end attached to the hilt, was a well known insignia. It was an avian creature, wings spread outwards, symbolizing how they touched both ends of eternity. The hilt was no less wonderful to behold. Carved from a rich, dark ebony, it displayed some of the finest woodworking craftsmanship Zaya had the pleasure to see. No design was privileged enough to be etched onto the wood. However, under a magnifying glass, one would easily be able to make out the word 'Ezio' on the corner. The name most likely belonged to whoever the skilled craftsman was that breathed life into the weapon.

Though the memories were distant, Zaya could still remember his mother always carrying the tool. The two were inseparable at times, and it felt odd to him whenever he remembered his mother without the hunting knife also in the picture frame of that memory.

‘Mom,’ he said softly, feeling the blade in his hand, ‘I’m gonna show this to a very interesting person I met. Maybe she can get to know you.’

As Zaya put it back, excited about his upcoming work at the antique store, he could have sworn he heard the sound of someone quietly sobbing coming from outside his room.

Chapter 8

The next day, once Robert had left for work, Zaya brought out the box. Truth be told, he felt terrible for putting the creature through all the suffering it had endured at his hands. If there was any silver lining, it was that his father had not heard any of the noise it made throughout the night. He opened the lid-

‘Ow!’

‘*CAW! CAW!*’

‘Yeah, okay, I know.’

Through some miracle, he and Wiqi managed to construct a make-shift cast for the wing using popsicle sticks and some cloth. The bright side included the raven not flapping about and injuring itself further. The not-so-bright side was that its frustrations had only grown overnight. Upon finally having been set free, the corvid was fully prepared to unleash all of its fury upon Zaya. However, he had come prepared. Sporting thick mittens on his hands, Zaya held in front of him a bowl of seeds, fruits, a few chunks of meat, and just to be safe, some 10 saros notes as well.

The raven glared daggers at him, letting out a series of strange noises he had no idea birds were even capable of making. It then attempted to pry open the bandage, but Zaya leapt into action by shoving the bowl of offerings into its face. The raven hopped back, fully en garde. Zaya was persistent. Eventually after some (quite literal) back and forths, and once a good deal of time and patience elapsed, the raven relented at last.

Peck! Peck! Peck!

Zaya watched in amazement how chunks of food simply disappeared in quick succession. His eyes could barely follow the movement of the animal. He took this little opportunity to observe the raven, to finally get a good look at the creature.

What stood out to him the most was how the colour black was not as prevalent as he thought it would be, especially in the light. Rather, its plumage was a gorgeous mixture of black, blue and some streaks of violet around the neck. While the head and neck looked like tufts of fur, the rest of the feathers had a quality reminiscent of fish scales of all things. Zaya was already familiar with its beak, whose only purpose thus far seemed to be either to steal or inflict pain. As the light bounced off it, Zaya was stunned by how metallic it seemed. It *looked* dangerous, something he never felt about the common crows that inhabited the city. On the other hand, the talons were underwhelming, though he chose not to underestimate them. He had enough pecks and scratches to last him a lifetime.

‘You know what, birdboy?’ he asked, ‘You need a name.’

There was no response. Zaya’s feathered companion was too busy gulping down all the food he had brought.

‘Oh *now* you don’t do your whole *caw caw* thing?’

The raven croaked a half hearted response before turning back to its feast.

Zaya looked out across his balcony, scratching his forehead. What would be an interesting name for a bird? He flipped through his mental catalog of names, fictional or otherwise,

ranging from historic figures to animated characters. While doing so, his eyes automatically surveyed bits and pieces of his room, from the neatly stacked pile of canvases on the side, to the poster of the superhero Arachno-Man that adorned his door, to the desk right beside him which had magically reverted back to being untidy. Zaya could have sworn he cleaned it just the previous night. Then, as he cast his mind back to the previous night, he suddenly found his answer.

‘I got it!’ he cried

‘Caw! Caw!’

‘Quiet down,’ said Zaya excitedly, ‘Mr Raven, I know we have had our differences, but I think I finally have a name to give you. From now on,’ he tapped the floor to mimic the rising sound of a drum roll, ‘you shall be called,’ the tapping reached a crescendo, *‘Ezio!’*

The raven cocked its head to the side, its black eyes fixed on Zaya. Then, with a sound that could only be described as a distorted **‘Wah’**, it went on to finish the rest of its food.

‘I’ll take that as a yes, then?’ he asked.

Ezio pecked his hand.

Zaya smiled, about to make a remark about the history of the name, when the raven defecated on the floor.

‘Why couldn’t they just sell sushi yesterday?’

Over the next few days, Zaya would get more accustomed to Ezio's presence in his life and vice versa. Of course, life did not get any easier as a result. As his wing healed, it became more and more difficult to hide the raven away. It was a blessing that Robert did not frequent his room, undoubtedly a byproduct of Zaya keeping it perpetually locked for many years now. However, sound was much more difficult to conceal, especially in a small, cramped apartment space. As such, right before his new job began, a considerable amount of his remaining money was spent on purchasing soundproofing foam.

Ezio looked on curiously as Zaya and Wiqi glued and hammered away on the walls. How wonderful it was not to have an adult in the house to monitor them.

Zaya paused, suddenly registering the fact that he and Wiqi, by definition, *were* adults. He shuddered, before carrying on with his work.

'Alright,' said Wiqi, clapping his hands at their handiwork, 'Say hello to silence!'

'Wah.'

'Trust me, there isn't any silence with this thing hopping around my room.'

Wiqi fell back onto Zaya's bed, letting out a long sigh.

'Robots must never harm an innocent being,' he said.

‘What?’ asked Zaya, finishing the last sip of his energy drink. He let go of it, watching it fall into the trash can.

‘Robots must obey its directives as long as the order given doesn’t conflict with the first rule.’

‘Are you...feeling okay?’

‘Robots must ensure their own survival, given the previous two rules are not broken.’

Wiqi lifted his torso up, sitting on the bed. His bright blue eyes only served to bring more attention to the dark circles underneath.

‘You know, it’s almost the end of the semester now,’ he said, feeding Ezio some almonds, ‘And I feel like I’ve spent the past three months just memorizing a bunch of stuff. The laws of robotics or artificial intelligence? Sure, I get that. But I’m telling you, if I see one more history book after the month is over, I will throw it at the nearest police officer I can find.’

‘If you do that *you*’ll be history.’

Wiqi threw an almond at Zaya, hitting him square on the forehead.

‘Hey!’ Zaya protested.

‘One more word out of that mouth of yours, and the next one’s getting lodged in your throat.’

‘Joke’s on you. I’ll still be alive.’

Wiqi buried his face in his hands. Zaya chuckled in his own little victory.

‘You could say,’ Wiqi’s muffled voice said, ‘Your jokes are...’

He brought his face back up and gave the biggest grin, ‘Driving me *nuts*.’

Zaya threw the almond back at him.

The two friends proceeded to share a long moment of silence. In this silence, they interacted with Ezio, feeding him, watching him hop around and sometimes cleaning up some of the mess he made. Also In this silence, Zaya observed, from the corner of his eye, the expression on Wiqi’s face drifting farther and farther away from his usual cheerful demeanor. Was the study load actually that unbearable, or was something else bothering him? He wanted to inquire about it, but after so many years of friendship, Zaya knew that the best way to get Wiqi to talk about something was to wait and let him do the talking himself.

Sure enough, as more time elapsed, Wiqi suddenly shot his friend a question he did not expect.

‘Was it scary?’

‘Huh?’

‘What you did a few days back, going to that old abandoned building. Was it scary?’

Zaya was not sure how to respond. Wiqi had not asked any questions the night they reunited, so it was odd that he was asking now of all times. Ezio cocked his head, looking from one human to the other.

‘Well,’ said Zaya, scratching his head, ‘I think the walk up to the building was terrifying. Every step I took, some part of me told me to turn back, that the whole thing was a bad idea. I think once I reached the actual roof, things became a little different. Things slowed down. Then again, when I went to the edge, my body probably tried a last ditch effort to save me. I got *really* shaken up. But right after that, I dunno. It suddenly felt like, like,’ Zaya closed his eyes tight, trying to find the right combination of words, ‘it felt like, if there were hooks that were making me stuck to the ground, at that moment, they began unhooking one by one. Am I making sense here?’

‘I guess...’

‘Yeah, once those hooks were all undone, I was able to just...let go.’

‘Hmm.’

Wiqi looked pensive, almost distracted. After a long time, he spoke again.

‘You wanna listen to a new song I’m working on?’

‘Rough recording version 575?’

‘Rough recording version 536, actually.’ Wiqi smiled.

Zaya sat down beside him, putting one of the earbuds in his ears and Wiqi did the same with the other of the pair. Soon, he was transported into an ethereal soundscape consisting of flutes, mellow guitar notes, soft drums almost melting into the background, all surrounded by curtains of violins and cellos.

‘I thought I would find you waiting for me.’

As I drown in the hourglass, all alone in the past.

I thought I could pierce you and find shelter in your soul.

Now the light is so dim and I can't see me anymore.

At the end of all of time I bury all the broken light

To form eternal fireflies

For me.

We will find Eternity disintegrating you and me

The fireflies will come and

Set me free.'

Chapter 9

On the first day of his new job, Zaya did not expect to see lines of armoured vehicles cruising the streets. Even as early as 8 am, it felt like the entirety of the police force had left their stations to roam around Khola. Written in bold white text across their vehicles was the title ‘Jaeger Task Force’. He barely ever checked the news, so the whole thing caught him off guard. He made a mental note to ask Wiqi what was going on once he went back home. As the Jaeger Task Force eyed him, gliding away on his skateboard, Zaya made sure to just look straight ahead.

‘Don’t make eye contact,’ Robert had told him a long time ago. It was one of the few pieces of advice from him Zaya actually heeded. Zaya mostly saw the police as a combination of useless and frightening. Their constant ineptitude was an open secret but no one dared to vocalize such treachery. Much of the time, if there was a crime, the victim was better off defending themselves than relying on a policeman to do anything, even if they were in the near vicinity. Yet, one could never know whether both the perpetrator of the crime and the one tasked with stopping it were on the same side. Now, with this sudden influx of officers in special vehicles and body armour, the police force was no longer frightening. They were dangerous. Thus, when Zaya finally reached the antique store, he breathed a sigh of relief.

Thump-thump-thump-thump.

Never before had he been so pleased to listen to the chime of a bell. Inside, he found Leonn with a broom in his mouth, dusting the floor. Once again, Zaya marveled at the wolf’s

intelligence. And once again, he wondered about the legality of it being allowed as a pet, let alone a staff. And of course, he was still taken aback by its colossal size.

‘Uh...’ he stammered, looking around for the owner of the store, ‘Is Aunt Teek around?’ Leonn’s did not grace him with a response. Instead, he walked up to Zaya, dropped the broom in his hands, and wandered off into the stairwell.

‘How rude.’

Moments later, Zaya heard the familiar *tnock tnock* from outside his field of vision. Soon after that, Aunt Teek herself sauntered into the room. She was garbed in seafoam green pyjamas; perhaps he was a tad bit early.

‘I see you’re an early bird, boy.’ she said, taking a sip from the cup in her hand, ‘All set to start working, then?’

‘Yes, ma’am!’ said Zaya, mustering up confidence.

He *still* was not sure what exactly his job entailed, but he did not want to disappoint his new employer.

‘Alright. For your first task, I want you to go into the kitchen and make me a cup of tea.’

‘Wait, what?’

‘I’m kidding,’ she laughed, ‘Making a nice cup of tea is *much* farther down the list. I can see Leonn already gave you the broom. Perhaps you can start by dusting the place.’

‘Okay, and what do I do after that?’

‘One at a time! Also, would you be a dear and be wary of the things around here? A lot of the items are a little, let’s say, *fragile*. I can’t have an antique shop without any antiques now can I?’

She took another sip from her cup, gave a small chuckle and walked out of the room. Zaya was half hoping to learn about the history of the different items in the store, so the menial task he was assigned was nothing short of disappointing. However, with the damage done so far, Aunt Teek’s impression of him was probably not the best, and he was not looking to make it any worse. So, he set about doing what was asked of him. He would be very slow and diligent. He would see to it that every nook and cranny would be dusted, no matter how long or tedious the process would be. A few times, he almost knocked something over, but managed to maneuver away in time. So engrossed had he become in his labour that he had not seen a certain crimson haired little girl enter the room.

‘Ooh, it’s the stranger!’

Zaya almost struck a vase.

‘Please, no surprising the stranger while he is cleaning,’ he said, bringing his breathing back to normal, ‘Your name was Ashia, right?’

‘Yep,’ she chirped, giving a wide smile. Then, with a confused expression on her face she asked ‘Why are you cleaning the floor? That’s the puppy’s job.’

Leonn? The wolf the size of one and a half horses? A puppy?

‘I work here now,’ said Zaya, stifling a laugh, ‘So I’ll be helping out from time to time.’

‘Ohhh.’

Zaya continued to brush. Ashia continued to stare. He could always see her on the periphery, the fiery red hair standing out against the dull brown of the wooden walls. He was about to comment on the feeling of discomfort at being so closely monitored when his eyes fell upon a raven, sitting atop one of the many shelves. The sculpture was astounding! Perched atop what appeared to be a collection of tiny human skulls, the figure showcased the all too familiar sharp beak, the bluish black feathers and an eerily realistic and determined expression etched into its...*red* eyes? How odd. Zaya had little time to ponder on this, for the next thing he noticed were streaks of golden lines winding and weaving all throughout its body. He was captivated. He began walking towards the statue, loosening his grip on the broom handle.

‘Slacking off are we?’

Aunt Teek’s voice broke Zaya out of his trance.

‘No, of course not!’ he said, rapidly brushing the floor.

‘Relax,’ she said, ‘I’m just poking a bit of fun. I think you’ve done a good enough job so far, though you could learn a thing or two from Leonn.’

She patted Ashia’s head, causing wild strands of red hair to take flight and settle back down.

‘And what are *you* doing here?’ she asked her.

‘I was watching mister stranger clean,’ came the reply. Then with a very audible whisper, she added, ‘I think the puppy cleans better than him.’

‘Oh, is that so?’

Zaya narrowed his eyes.

‘Okay, go get ready for school. Grammy has to teach mister stranger here how to work.’

‘Okayyy!’

Ready for school?

‘Wait, what do you mean?’ said Zaya, a tinge of nervousness colouring his state of mind,

‘Don’t tell me you’re gonna leave me in charge of the store while you take her to school.’

‘Don’t be silly, boy,’ snapped Aunt Teek, ‘Leonn takes care of that. I’m far too old to be making *that* kind of journey everyday.’

Zaya was at a loss for words. He did not know whether to ask about the logistics of that process, or why he had never seen or heard of a huge wolf escorting a little girl to school. Ultimately he chose to simply nod and go along with it.

For the remainder of the day, Zaya gradually began to grasp the ins and outs of Aunt Teek's house and the items surrounding her business. He learnt how to interact with potential customers. He learnt how to write up the paperwork required for a purchase. He also learnt a little bit of history about some of the antique pieces and where they came from. Among the more interesting ones was a blue necklace that belonged to a wealthy aristocrat who, according to legend, passed away from being unable to tell lies. Then there was a hammer which apparently only the worthiest could wield, whatever that meant. Of course, there were the occasional pieces that alluded to the everlasting power of the Maker, with all of the various intertwining colours and the outstretched wings. These, Zaya ignored. However, he found his mind constantly latching onto the statue of the raven with the golden lines. Ultimately he could not contain his curiosity any longer and pointed it out to Aunt Teek.

'Ah, you seem to have taken a liking to the enemy of the Maker himself,' she said, 'That is a four hundred year old bust of the 'Taker' as they call it, one of the rarest items I possess.'

Of course! The demonic red eyes, the mountain of skulls- it all made sense now. However, the river of golden lines still remained a mystery. At the mention of this, Aunt Teek's eyes came alive with an intensity Zaya had not seen thus far.

'Kintsugi.' she said simply.

'What?'

'Kintsugi,' she repeated, 'Too often in our lives do we hide the parts of us we believe to be ugly. And too often do we extend that very practice to the things we own. The artists who practice kintsugi put pieces of broken objects back together, lining the cracks with gold, or

with anything they believe is beautiful, anything they believe should be shown off to the world. Doing so, they bring attention to the very flaws most would rather hide. They want you to be aware of those flaws. They want you to celebrate them.'

Aunt Teek fell silent, gazing at the raven.

'They killed the sculptor, you know?' she said, 'Said she was a worshipper of evil, said she was the cause of their drought and famine. It was only through sheer luck that her apprentice found all the pieces of this statue among the ruins of her house. The most ironic bit about this story is that none of the statues she created of the Maker survived.'

Zaya could only utter a few noises of admiration and a few more of sorrow. The history of the sculptor and the art of kintsugi spoke to a part of him that he did not bring out to the world too often. Doing so would be unwise and dangerous, as was proven time and time again, whether it be in the present or half a century in the past. As he stood in front of the statue of the raven, Aunt Teek walked over to him and placed a hand on his shoulder.

'I'd say that's enough work for now, boy,' she said, 'The little one will be home soon. Would you like to join us for lunch?'

Zaya hesitated. He had too many experiences with awkward lunches and dinners, but he could not bring himself to say no. Thus, he mustered up the courage, put on a big smile, and accepted the offer.

Chapter 10

Against all odds, Zaya found himself saddened by the prospect of opening Ezio's bandages. Perhaps the only thing that came before sadness was worry. Since he had not taken him to a vet, Zaya was afraid that the amateur work from him and Wiqi could have very well harmed the raven instead of helping it.

'Ready to fly again?'

'Caw!'

'Yeah, I thought so.'

Slowly but surely, he began unwrapping the white cloth, his heart racing faster with each fold that came undone. Before he knew it, the popsicle sticks had fallen to the floor and all of the fabric had been removed. Zaya's heart stopped for a second as he braced for the worst. To his relief, however, Ezio slowly spread his broken wing outward, as if to check whether it was ready for flight. Then, without warning, it rapidly beat them both, causing Zaya to involuntarily step back. When he re-focused his sight on the raven, he saw Ezio perched on top of the canvas. Before Zaya could say a word, he leapt off and flew to the other end of the room, landing atop one of the soundproofing panels that jutted out of the walls. After that, it flew onto the door handle at the center of the room. The raven was by no means finished with exercising his newfound freedom. Ezio proceeded to dash to and fro across multiple random places in the room, desk to bed, bed to shelf, shelf to chair. All throughout it produced every conceivable sound a raven could make, from low rumbles to high screeches and everything variation of caw in between.

‘I was able to just...let go.’

Zaya’s heart stopped.

‘That’s *my* voice...’ he muttered, ‘how did you do that?’

Ezio responded with a solid **‘Wah.’**

‘Okay.’

Zaya fell back on his bed, a little shaken up by hearing his voice coming from a bird.

Apparently ravens could mimic sounds and this was as good a time as any to learn that little tidbit of knowledge.

‘Wait til Wiqi hears about this.’ he said.

No sooner had he done that when a certain thought entered his head once again.

Ezio will leave.

He got up. After all that happened, he wanted to give the raven a hug, but he realized that may just end with him getting his eyes pierced. Yes they would heal, but he would rather not deal with the pain that precluded that. Thus he settled on the next best alternative: try to have

Ezio perch on his arm. He grabbed the tin from under his bed and took out a walnut, producing a series of clicking noises to get Ezio to come take it.

Success!

Unfortunately, the success was short-lived because he had immediately flown away to another part of the room. Zaya tried again, holding his perching arm out in front of the hand that was meant to feed Ezio. No luck; it was the same outcome as before, but he was not going to give up. For the next half hour, Zaya kept repeating his little experiment, getting closer and closer to his desired result, until...

Success!

This time, it was real. There Ezio sat, claws dug into his arm, causing him a level of pain he had not felt in a while. Zaya stifled his instinct to yelp however, and gradually reached his fingers out to stroke the raven's beak. This too was a slow but eventual success.

For the next hour or so, he repeated the same activities, talking, feeding and playing with the bird. However, Zaya had to eventually face reality. He thought of calling Wiqui over so that they could both see Ezio off together, but his friend's latest social media status was 'Building superhero gloves. Don't disturb.' Besides, a part of him wanted to be selfish and have that moment to himself.

With Ezio perched on his arm again, Zaya cautiously walked over to the sliding glass door. He opened it as slowly as he possibly could before finally stepping outside. With no neon

lights of the RQFBD district, and no moon in sight, Zaya could finally gaze upon the small cluster of stars that adorned the sky of Khola.

‘Well, this is as great a night sky as you can ever get,’ he said, ‘I hope you come back to visit sometime.’

Ezio cocked his head and made a strange cooing noise.

‘That’s a new one,’ Zaya laughed, ‘Don’t go stealing any more money alright? And if you do,’ he lowered his voice to a whisper, ‘just bring them all to me.’

With a confident shove from his perch, the raven shot up into the night sky, letting out the most confident caw Zaya had heard thus far.

‘Goodbye, Ezio!’

Zaya left a little space in the glass door as he re-entered his room. He sighed, seeing the absolute mess that lay before him. Belongings, bird feed, shiny objects and cleaning supplies were just a few of many things that were all scattered about and in all the incorrect places. Usually, he would go on to clean up, but he decided to leave that for the morning. Before the weight of his eyes overcame his willpower, Zaya managed to take a last peek at the canvas. Some time in the past hour, Ezio had managed to flick splashes of yellow paint across the entire midsection. Now, in addition to the three vertical marks he left previously, bits and pieces of yellow splotches adorned the canvas.

‘Golden...flaws...’ he said to himself, as he finally accepted the calming blanket of sleep.

Chapter 11

Zaya woke up, shivering. He blindly searched for his blanket, then opened an eye and searched for his blanket, then opened both eyes and searched for his blanket. Upon failing for the third time, he was sufficiently irate enough to sit up. When he saw that the clock read 11:36 AM, however, all of his remaining sleep shattered into fragments and fell away.

He was going to be late.

A frantic 10 minutes of preparation later, Zaya jumped out the balcony, hopping down from staircase to staircase til he reached the bottom. The myriad cuts and bruises healed by the time he came out of the alleyway.

The kingdom was white.

Winter had quietly crept up over the past few nights and covered Niatlus in its own blanket. Zaya would much rather prefer the kind he slept under, but mother nature could never be bargained with. All around him, he saw citizens wrapped up in multiple layers of clothing, fending off the cold to the best of their ability. Sections of Khola had been closed off for vehicles. This rule was predictably not taken seriously by some, which of course led to their vehicles either being towed away, or merely being destroyed by the laws of physics themselves.

As expected, the Jaegers had gotten lax over the past few months, and now only a handful of their vehicles roamed the streets, appearing as strange blue blocks covered by the winter snow. Scanty as they were though, it was still best to be cautious; no eye contact.

A little over a half hour later, Zaya exited the taxi, paid the chauffeur the sufficient saros and stumbled into the restaurant. A few seconds of scouting led him to his destination.

‘Twenty minutes late.’ smirked Wiqi, taking a sip of soda.

‘It’s great to see you too.’

Wiqi looked exceptionally handsome, garbed in a sleek, navy blue suit with an azure tie, a luxurious watch on his wrist, and sporting a hairstyle that was most likely kept in place by magic itself. Like always, his bright blue eyes almost disappeared in his smile. However, as well put together as he looked, Zaya could tell Wiqi used makeup to hide his dark circles.

‘Can we order, then?’ he asked, ‘Or would you like to wait twenty more minutes?’

‘Okay, okay, jeez.’ said Zaya, flustered, ‘Let’s order.’

‘Anything “revolutionary” happened in the conference?’ said Zaya, having completed their order, ‘That month-long disappearance better have been worth it.’

‘Well,’ Wiqi frowned, ‘there definitely was a lot- and I mean a *lot* of technical, sciencey babble. Half the time I didn’t even get what they were saying, but man, were they talking about some next level research. One of the funnier talks was about military drones with natural camouflage, which is basically fancy talk for “my machine can look like a bird

sometimes.” But c’mon-’ Wiqi pointed his fingers at himself, ‘how can anyone outshine “magic gloves that can aid in Parkinson’s research”?’

‘How very humble of you, Sir Santiago.’

‘Oh please, just call me Lee.’

The two snickered, getting a few disgruntled looks from the surrounding diners.

‘Okay shush,’ said Zaya, continuing to laugh, ‘Or else we’ll be kicked out of here.’

‘Wouldn’t mind,’ said Wiqi, holding up a menu to hide half his face, ‘I haven’t had the health hazard of Khola street food in ages.’

‘Well, it’s winter so not much available in the world of street food. *But* we could always check out the RQFBD district.’

‘Lightshow vomit?’ Wiqi cried, now attracting looks of utter abhorrence from the other patrons.

Zaya put his head down, ‘Would you please stop calling it that?’

‘As long as you’re treating me.’

‘Deal.’

It had already gotten dark by the time they sat down near one of the random food stalls in the aforementioned district. The neon lights never stopped glowing. Zaya hoped they never would.

“‘Heckin’ Good Food”,’ said Wiqi, reading out the name of the stall, ‘You’d think they’d be able to come up with better stuff by now, right?’

‘But then how would you know it’s heckin’ good?’ said Zaya, looking at the menu.

‘I already regret coming here...’

Red and blue lights bounced off their immediate vicinity. RQFBD District was a lot quieter in winter, with most people choosing to be indoors in the freezing weather. Of course, there was still the rampant music and obnoxious broadcast of television, but even those felt empty without the chaotic din of live human voices. Zaya stared at Wiqi’s face, half of it constantly switching between red and blue. He was not the biggest fan of the colour combination; something about it never quite felt right to him. With Wiqi around though, he could tolerate it.

‘How about ice-cream?’

‘*Ice-cream?*’ asked Zaya, dumbfounded, ‘We are *surrounded* by snow.’

‘Faluda, then?’

‘That is better, but only marginally.’

‘Black tea?’

‘Is this punishment for me being late?’

‘Alright, alright, the safest option it is.’

The two orders of hot chocolate arrived in record time, which detective Wiqi skillfully deduced was due to the lack of any other customer. However, midway through their banter,

the blue lights of the shop suddenly started malfunctioning, and instead of enduring the red glare or the cold any longer, the two agreed to just head home.

To find adequate transportation, they would have to cross over to the other side of the road, courtesy of one of the many strange winter laws that happened to get passed around during the season. They waited for a pack of Jaeger vehicles to pass by, before making the trip across.

The police vehicles, especially in the winter, were loud, cantankerous hunks of metal. With robotic regularity, they would send out shockwaves of their ear splitting sirens, or unleash a cacophony of their horns. More often than not, the two would accompany one another in a sinful union. In that particular moment, the Jaeger Task Force chose to do all of the above. Zaya and Wiqi became agitated, squinting and trying to protect their ears, attempting to walk across the lane on their side. So engrossed were they in this activity that neither of them noticed the truck that was approaching them. It honked its own horns and flashed its headlights multiple times, but there was no time.

A sudden pain erupted through Zaya's body and the world was no more.

Chapter 12

'Mom? Where's mom?'

'...'

'Dad, she was right there! MOM!'

Lightning tore through the atmosphere and set the sky on fire, causing the head of the windmill to explode into pieces. One of the blades flew right past them and lodged itself into a tree. The storm then summoned thunder, bringing everyone down to their knees. He looked around in the darkness, pelted in the face by dirt and rain. She was nearby; he had to find her. Without warning he was picked up and carried away from the edge of the river.

'No, what are you doing? Stop!'

The tree, the blade, the river, all began receding from view.

'LET GO OF ME! MOM IS STILL IN THE WATER! DAD, LET GO! MOM!!!'

Zaya's eyes shot open and he immediately gasped for air. No time to ponder, no hows or whys. He needed to breathe. And breathe he did: in- out- in- out- with as much vigor and focus as he could muster, instincts overtaking any other action. As he slowly began to take note of what was going on around him, he saw, bathed in purple from the multiple reds and blues of the Jaeger vehicles, Wiqi's lifeless body.

Ambulance.

Mask.

Oxygen.

Hospital.

‘No visible injury. The Maker must have protected you.’

The Santiagos.

Robert.

Aunt Teek.

‘He’s in a coma.’

Check ups.

Home.

Silence.

Robert.

Silence.

Robert.

Silence.

Robert.

Silence.

Robert.

Silence.

‘His condition has stabilized.’

‘Are you gonna stay here forever, boy?’

Emerald orbs. No, those were eyes.

The world attempted to come into view.

No.

‘Wallowing in endless self pity? Withering away?’

The world attempted to come into view.

No.

‘He’s got more life in him than you do right now.’

The world attempted to come into view. Streaks of white lines flickered into existence.

‘But the longer you stay here, the more pain you will feel. The more you wither, the more pain *he* will feel.’

The floor, ceiling and walls appeared.

‘Your father, the Santiagos and so many other people are already out there, screaming at anybody and everybody who will listen, in hopes of changing something, anything, even if that change is small.’

People faded into view, some dressed in white, some in light purple.

‘And people are listening. Khola is listening. Niatlus is listening. The world is listening.’

A mess of gray hair. A face bearing many wrinkles. Emerald eyes shining with unnatural intensity.

‘Now, it’s your turn. What are *you* going to do for him, Zaya?’

‘A-aunt Teek?’ asked Zaya, his voice barely coming out as a whisper.

‘Welcome back, boy. I missed you.’

Zaya spent the next few days in his room. Sometimes he came out to eat. Other times a plate of food materialized outside his door. Sometimes he ate that plate of food. Other times, he didn’t.

Robert would try to talk to him. Sometimes he talked as well. Other times, he didn’t.

Sometimes he nodded in agreement. Other times, he walked away.

Zaya would go to the roof and sit on the swing. Sometimes it was during the day. Other times, it was during the night. Sometimes the city noise penetrated Zaya's silence. Other times, his silence swallowed the whole world.

Then, on a particularly stormy day, as lightning and thunder rocked the earth, the world came into focus again. On that day, after countless months, Zaya found himself once more staring at the cause of all his pain.

It's beak was petite, it's flowery red tail of fire unfurled over the entire base, and its wings spread out in a pose Zaya was intimately familiar with. While its many feathers cycled through various shades of orange, yellow, green, blue and indigo, atop its head lay a crown with a colour separated from the rest: violet.

There it was, the Maker.

The sound of thunder grew distant, pushed farther and farther away from the enclosure of Zaya's world. He walked over and picked it up.

'What are you doing?'

The storm came crashing back.

It was Robert, one hand on the statue.

‘Let go.’

‘No, Zaya. I won’t.’

‘I won’t tell you again. Let. Go.’

‘Please, put it down, son.’

Something sparked within Zaya. Time pulled back. He saw his current objective as clear as crystal. The statue *needed* to be broken. No other option existed. He had his target in his hand. His body would provide the force required to carry out the task. He could feel the low thumping of his heart from within. Muscles locked into position, tightening and loosening against themselves with intensity that pushed far past the boundaries of safety. His pupils dilated and the edges of the world sharpened into blades.

With a loud crack, the statue of the Maker broke into pieces, tumbling onto the floor below.

‘NO! What have you done?!’

Robert fell to his knees, desperately trying to get his hands on all the broken fragments.

‘No, no, no, my lord. Forgive my son, my lord. Forgive my son.’

Zaya simply stood there and watched, completely untethered from what was happening in front of him.

‘Why are you standing around?’ came a voice from far away, ‘Help me Zaya!’

Zaya was pulled back to the present.

‘Help...you?’ he said, ‘Help you with what exactly?’

‘Wha-?’ said Robert, a strange mixture of anger and fear etched onto his face, ‘Help me pick up the pieces!’

‘Why would I help you do that?’

Robert looked absolutely crushed.

‘What do you mean...? How could you even say that? After everything I’ve taught you?’

‘*Taught* me?’ said Zaya, broken shards of laughter suddenly seeping into his words, ‘taught me what? Some prayers? Incantations? To believe that a mythical bird has somehow spread its wings from one end of the universe to the other to, what was it, “watch over” it?’ Zaya burst out laughing, ‘Do you know how *ridiculous* that sounds? GIVE ME A BREAK.’

His temper rose, piercing through his sense of self control. In a fit of rage, he grabbed Robert by the collars.

‘Where was this “Maker” of yours when those men swindled you out of all that money? *Tell me!*’

Robert tried to say something.

‘Where has he been for the past year and a half when the police ruthlessly attacked and imprisoned innocent people?’

‘I-’

‘And tell me *right now* father,’ Zaya’s voice now battled against the raging storm itself, ‘where the *fuck* was he when you killed my mom?’

Zaya could feel a few worlds away, a sensation of something burning, running down his face.

‘Where was he,’ he let Robert go, his voice becoming softer, ‘when my best friend was dying on the street? Father, if he made Wiqi, why couldn’t he just make him new again? If he made mom, why couldn’t he just make her new again? Where was he, father?’

The world was swallowed into the mist and Zaya followed the path it laid out for him.

For a solitary moment, lightning cracked the horizon into a thousand shards, illuminating the cityscape. It reminded him, through the static of his thoughts, of a deeply buried memory involving-

‘ZAYA!’

Zaya came back to the present. He felt heavy. Something was on top of him. It was heavy.

Rain.

Rain. It was like a mist, engulfing the entire city as far as his eyes could see. In the corner, he spotted a brown swing, clinging desperately onto life, coming and going from reality.

‘Zaya, where are you?’

He recognized the voice as belonging to the man who murdered his mom.

‘Zaya, please, tell me where you are! I’m here for you, son!’

Zaya looked over at the edge of the roof. Each step brought him closer and closer.

‘CAW!’

A searing pain suddenly shot through his eyes, taking the world and the mist away from him. In exchange for the world, the pain demanded to be heard. In exchange for the mist, the pain demanded to be seen.

Zaya yelled into the heavens, letting go of all the inhibitions the gods and humans placed on him. He yelled loudly. He yelled endlessly. He screamed. He bellowed. He howled. He roared. For months he yelled, living through spring, summer, monsoon, autumn, and winter. For years he yelled, living through adolescence, childhood, adulthood, and death. For centuries he yelled, living through countless species of life, the unseeable, the unfathomable. For millennia he yelled, living through the rise and fall of civilizations, the glorious and prosperous, the tragic and forgotten. For eons, he yelled, living through planets, stars, galaxies, through creation itself, through the winding colours of dream and reality, until everything collapsed upon itself, into a single point of infinity.

Zaya opened his eyes, then closed it immediately; he was directly facing the sun.

‘W-where am I?’

‘Home.’

Zaya shook his head and got up. It took some time for his senses to adjust, but he soon realized where he was. Around him was a disheveled rooftop, countless tiny puddles, and he saw that he was sitting on one side of a brown swing. Beside him sat a portly man, dressed in clothes which usually served to make him look more rotund. However, in this instance, he was completely drenched, so his clothes clung to his skin. Still, the rotund aesthetic of the man seemed to be permanent for him. A few strands of wet hair flowed down the sides of his head, and hanging down his face was a graying beard, gleaming in the sunlight. However,

what demanded attention were his eyes. Upon seeing his son wake up, Robert Qaim's sunken brown eyes had suddenly come to life.

The two sat quietly, tuning into the many sounds of Khola. With the end of the rain, the insects, birds, animals, humans, and even machinery slowly breathed life back into the city. Somewhere out there, a vendor called out to the neighbourhood to sell his wares. Nearby, a pair of sparrows twirled among themselves in midair, chirping away into a world of their own. Over there, the engine of a car hummed to life, ready to take a mother, father and child to a huge family event. In an alley nearby, two stray dogs barked and yelped, before running away from a human who threatened the two with his shoe in his hand.

Khola was alive, and so was Zaya.

'Dad,' he said, 'Can we talk?'

'Of course, son.'

Chapter 13

In a hidden corner of town, there lay an antique store with treasures and secrets waiting to be uncovered by the weary traveler. However, on this particular day, the three inhabitants of the store were having trouble dividing chores. The little girl with crimson hair was especially adamant about taking on tea duty.

‘For the last time Ashia,’ said the old lady, ‘you may be nine years old now, but you need many more months of training before you get to make tea.’

‘And for the last time, grammy,’ said the child, putting her hands on her hips, ‘I’ve seen you do it a *thousand times*! I can totally do it by myself now.’

The lady sighed, rubbing her temple. ‘Leonn, tell her something, will you?’

The huge white wolf merely carried on brushing the floor. It had no desire to get involved in such petty squabble.

The front door clicked open, followed by the bell. A familiar figure stepped into the store.

‘Hey big guy. Mind letting me take over brushing duty?’

A portly man in his mid fifties had just returned home from work. He was a little upset because his son’s favourite fried chicken shop had closed early, but he was glad to have used that money to buy ice-cream for some of the kids who frequented the area near his workplace.

When he turned on the living room lights, he managed to *just* catch himself from giving out a shrill cry. On the dining table lay a statue of the Maker. However, it was not *any* statue of the Maker. It was the *exact* one he had purchased on his late wife's birthday as a way to remember her, except it had been repaired. He recalled it fracturing into many fragments, so it delighted him to see it put back together.

Upon closer inspection, he noticed something quite peculiar. The many cracks of the statue had a very distinct, jade green substance shimmering from within. Underneath it was a note which read:

'Dear dad,

A gift from me and mom.

Love you.'

In Khola Medical Hospital, Room 5736 housed a patient who had been in a coma for almost a year. He had visitors every now and then, but none more frequent than his parents as well as the lanky man with messy hair and blue and golden eyes. On this particularly cold winter morning, he sat down beside the patient with a cup of hot chocolate in hand.

‘Never got to finish this with you,’ he said, taking a sip, ‘Don’t know where you’ve gone off to, but it’s high time you’ve made your glorious comeback isn’t it? You got music to make, robots to build and a very lonely best friend who needs help kicking his caffeine addiction.’

He held the patient’s hand and stared off into space. Occasionally, he would take a sip or two of the hot chocolate. By sheer habit, he proceeded to let his fingers touch the side of the patient’s wrist.

Thump. Thump. Thump. Thump.

The pulse, though slow and gentle, was a sign of life. The man would come to cherish life, especially his.

The patient’s finger twitched.

Zaya hopped onto the roof of the abandoned university building, carrying a bag, a large canvas and a stand. It had not been long since he was here, though somehow it also felt like an entire lifetime ago. A raven glided through the air and perched on his shoulder.

‘Careful with that beak of yours would you?’ he said, ‘I cut myself shaving the other day. It still stings and I *really* don’t want a repeat of that.’

‘Caw.’

Zaya proceeded to sit on the edge of the roof, waiting for the sun to shine. He brought out a packet of mixed nuts and fed some to his feathered friend. The raven flew and hopped around in absolute delight, catching the treats from all the different directions and angles they came from.

Soon it was time.

Zaya stood up, waiting for just the right moment. As the morning sun burst forth, a rich violet sky embraced all the life below. Zaya stretched his arms out, feeling the gentle rays of sunlight and like so many times before, he fell in love with the sky once again.

He hopped down from the edge and prepared to finish his painting. Its skyline had been incomplete but he finally attained the missing ingredient he had been searching for. Zaya uncovered the canvas. It showed three red silhouettes, two adults and a child in between. They appeared to be in a forest, surrounded by the lovely glow of fireflies.