

SPIN ... OF ... FATE

The Fifth Realm

—BOOK I—

A. A. VORA

putnam

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York



First published in the United States of America by G. P. Putnam's Sons,
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2024

Copyright © 2024 by Ambika Nagino

Map illustration copyright © 2024 by Sveta Dorosheva

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

G. P. Putnam's Sons is a registered trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.
The Penguin colophon is a registered trademark of Penguin Books Limited.

Visit us online at [PenguinRandomHouse.com](https://www.PenguinRandomHouse.com)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Vora, A. A., author.

Title: A spin of fate / A. A. Vora.

Description: New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2024. | Series: Fifth realm; book 1 |
Summary: In a universe that segregates beings based on the weight of their souls into upper realms of peace and lower realms of strife, three teenagers join a rebel group defying the powers that be by bringing aid to the inhabitants of the lower realms.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023033490 (print) | LCCN 2023033491 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780593617564 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593617571 (epub)

Subjects: CYAC: Fantasy. | LCGFT: Fantasy fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.V6796 Sp 2024 (print) | LCC PZ7.1.V6796 (ebook) |

DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023033490>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023033491>

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 9780593617564

1 3 5 7 9 1 8 6 4 2

[Vendor Code T/K]

Design by Suki Boynton

Text set in T/K

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.



*To maa, without whom
I would be nothing.*

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE	X
----------	---

PART I

1.	<i>An Adequate Crime</i>	X
2.	<i>The Preservation Advisory</i>	X
3.	<i>Last Free Clan</i>	X
4.	<i>The High Priest</i>	X
5.	<i>Unfortunate Destiny</i>	X
6.	<i>The Dead Mountain</i>	X
7.	<i>The Balancers</i>	X

PART II

8.	<i>The Necessity of Violence</i>	X
9.	<i>A Soldier's Delusion</i>	X
10.	<i>An Irregularity</i>	X
11.	<i>Respect and Fear</i>	X
12.	<i>A Forbidden Technique</i>	X
13.	<i>Under the Banyan</i>	X
14.	<i>The Sunken Barrier</i>	X

PART III

15.	<i>Sinless Lives</i>	X
16.	<i>The Rebel Army</i>	X
17.	<i>The Walls of Kaufgar</i>	X

18.	<i>Loyalty</i>	x
19.	<i>The Second Principle</i>	x
20.	<i>Divine Logic</i>	x
21.	<i>Enemies Unmade</i>	x

PART IV

22.	<i>The Shadowed Sea</i>	x
23.	<i>Unbreakable</i>	x
24.	<i>Blood and the Beas</i>	x
25.	<i>Fallen Warrior</i>	x
26.	<i>The Chitronic Prodigy</i>	x
27.	<i>The Four Realms</i>	x
28.	<i>Mother</i>	x
29.	<i>A Shift in the Air</i>	x
30.	<i>Splintering Sky Above</i>	x

EPILOGUE	x
----------	---

SPIN
-OF-
FATE





PROLOGUE



A Flash of White

A SHARP TWANG PULLED Aina from troubled dreams. She staggered to her feet, ignoring the protest of her muscles as she grabbed her bow and slung a quiver across her back. Razor wire strung across the craggy walls like the web of some monstrous spider. One of the tripwires stretched taut. Aina followed its trembling path out of the cave and into the moonless night.

Her mother whittled a thumb-sized stone by the fire, her back rigid as a blade. “What are you doing up so early?” she barked without looking up from her task.

Aina watched, transfixed, as her mother ran a finger over the stone, caressing away tiny chunks as if they were carved at knife-point. But her mother had never needed a knife. Not when she could shape the world around her through channeling. The stone figure took on the form of a horned monkey with spines that glinted in the firelight.

“Will you give me that once you’re done?” Aina asked. “I want to add it to my collection.”

“I’ll give you a tight slap if you don’t go back to sleep. You’ll never learn to channel without proper rest.”

“Something triggered one of my tripwires—” Aina had barely gotten the words out when her mother sprang to her feet with a curse. “I meant a wild animal, Mama. The wire’s intact; it would’ve snapped under the weight of a human.”

“Say that part first, idiot girl,” her mother scolded before settling back by the fire.

Aina ignored the withering glare cast her way. The tripwires hardly mattered, given that her mother had channeled a protective shield around their hideout. Kaldrav’s stupid soldiers would bounce right off it if they approached, alerting her of their presence. And providing her mother’s inexhaustible wrath with another target, for a change.

“And where the blazes do you think you’re going?” her mother demanded.

“To get us some food. I’m starving, Mama. *That’s* why I can’t channel properly.”

Her mother made to stand again, but Aina placed a hand on her arm. Under the threadbare cloak, her mother’s arm felt brittle as a twig. Shadows ringed her eyes and wrinkles forked across her weathered skin.

“It’s probably just a rat,” Aina said. “Let me handle it. You get some rest for once.”

“You’ve had it from me if you’re not back within ten minutes.”

Aina nodded with a glance at the wire. It gave a violent tremor and stretched to the verge of snapping.

Larger than a rat.

Aina set off into the skeletal forest, squinting through the

gloom. Fourteen years in Malin had given her excellent night vision. But today was murkier than usual, as if the misery of the realm had condensed into a grim fog that obscured everything beyond a few feet in any direction.

Aina's heart stopped at a gleam of cobalt blue through the haze.

That can't be what I think it is . . .

But as she inched closer the monstrous form grew clear: a giant nagamor, asleep outside the shimmering dome of her mother's shield. The peacock snake lay in a mound of coils, each as wide as a tree trunk.

Aina crept past the beast and released a tremulous breath. It was just their stinking luck that the one thing in Malin deadlier than enemy soldiers had settled for a nap this close to their hide-out. At least it hadn't slithered onto any of her traps. *That* would have thrown it into a rage.

Quiet as a mouse, Aina followed the wire until she came upon her prey. A runt of a fox thrashed in her snare, teeth gnashing and yellow eyes rolled back in fear. The beast's emaciated form carried enough meat to last them three days at most.

Aina's stomach gave a painful rumble. Three days of fox meat would be a luxury after weeks of dried grass and the occasional lizard.

She drew her bow and nocked an arrow. Best kill it before it bit her hand off. The fox's eyes bulged as she neared. Blood stained its fur as it strained against the razor wire.

"Don't look at me like that," Aina muttered.

Had it been born to the blessed realm of Mayana, this fox might have grown powerful and majestic. Instead it was born cursed. Cursed, like her, to live in Malin. At least, unlike Aina, it could die and be spared from its miserable existence by an arrow to the heart.

A soft whimper stopped Aina in her tracks.

She looked down to see a trembling lump of fur, small enough to fit into her palm. A tiny wet nose brushed her ankle. The pup gave a pitiful squeak as it crawled forward on stubby legs. The fox in the wires snarled as she struggled to reach her whimpering newborn.

Aina lowered her bow, chest folding over at the familiarity of the scene: a small creature and its mother trying desperately to survive the fate that had been dumped upon them. How would this fox pup live without its angry, snarling mother to protect it?

“Stop moving,” Aina hissed. She unsheathed a short knife and cut through the wires.

The injured fox jerked away from her at once. Aina stepped back, knife raised. But the creature had no interest in attacking. The fox snatched the tiny pup with her teeth and bounded into the darkness.

Hunger clawing at her stomach, Aina trudged back toward the cave. The immense form of the slumbering nagamor came into view.

Then the world flashed around her. For a moment the forest disappeared, and Aina found herself suspended in a vast white nothingness. She’d never seen it before, this eerie blankness. Silent and still, it surrounded her.

Sudden as it had come, the whiteness faded. Aina returned to the same spot in the forest, within her mother’s shield, feet away from the nagamor.

What the hell just happened?

Aina had no time to ponder the thought. From beyond the shield came the soft, ragged scrape of scale over stone. Aina’s blood ran cold as the beast, awakened by the flash of white, raised its head and turned.

Bulbous eyes gleamed through the murk, the promise of pain in their bloodied depths. Then several tons of scale and sinew lunged forward and slammed against the shield. It held an excruciating second before shattering in an eruption of light.

Aina fled, gaze lowered as she stumbled through the splintered landscape of Malin. Without the shield, locking eyes with the nagamor would induce intense hallucinations—three years of torment packed into three agonizing minutes.

Living in this realm was torment enough. Aina had no need for more.

The stones rattled under the nagamor's advancing bulk. Aina dodged the beast's snapping beak to whip out her bow and fire at its underbelly. A tail swept through the air, batting away her arrows with a plume of rounded feathers. The beast twisted and struck again. Aina's bow sang in desperation as she loosed more arrows.

But the nagamor's serpentine body raged and wrapped around her, an inescapable whirlwind of pain. Aina's quiver poked her back, the contents of her various pouches digging into her hips. The nagamor squeezed tighter and crushed the air from her lungs.

The ground beneath Aina erupted, and a pillar of rock pierced the beast's cobalt blue scales. The nagamor surged upward with the rising rock, screeching as a cascade of blood poured from its flank.

Freed from its hold, Aina leaped to the ground and raised her eyes to meet a pair deadlier than the nagamor's. "Mama—"

"Blasted fool," her mother snarled, lowering her hands and releasing the channeling. The ground stopped rumbling and the rocks froze in place, although the impaled beast continued writhing. "Waking a sleeping nagamor! I'll flay you to the last bit of your soul, if Kaldrav's soldiers don't get to us first!"

"I didn't do anything," Aina wailed. "I was only walking, when a flash of white light came from nowhere!"

Her mother stiffened. Before she could retort, the nagamor broke free of its stony prison and dove toward the ground, sinuous body curving like a scythe.

Swearing, her mother swiped a thumb across her forehead. Mottled energy pulsed from her palms as the fractured earth danced beneath her fingertips. In response, the nagamor loosed a soul-searing cry and swatted away her mother's boulders as if they were flies.

"Run!" Her mother shoved Aina forward. Her dark energy swirled around them in a protective dome, the nagamor's relentless assault eroding it bit by bit.

As they ran, Aina glimpsed something twinkling in the distance: a beacon of light amidst the gloom of Malin. An elegant silver archway and, beyond it, bright fields and a brighter sky. It was one of the torana—a gateway leading to another realm—this silver one to the upper realm of Mayana.

Which meant Aina and her mother could never get through. They were lowers, with souls steeped in sin. Souls that spun in the wrong direction. The torana would deny them entry as it had all these years. Such was the Law.

Aina's heart shriveled as she neared the torana, the nagamor smashing against her mother's defenses. She pivoted in front of the archway and reached for an arrow.

But her blood-slicked heel slipped in the mud and Aina's left leg slid backward, straight between the silver columns. Soft grass brushed Aina's toes, and she let out a gasp.

Her mother turned to her, inhaling sharply at the sight of Aina's sandaled foot planted in the upper realm while the other remained rooted in the filth of Malin.

"The white flash before," she whispered. "So it's true . . . your soul reversed . . . you're light enough to enter Mayana."

"That—that can't be," Aina said.

None could ascend from Malin to Mayana. It wasn't possible to flip the spin of a soul.

The nagamor clacked its beak, arching its neck to strike. Aina grabbed her mother's bony wrist and tried tugging her through the torana. But the gateway did not yield, an invisible barrier stopping Aina's mother from following her into the upper realm.

Aina knew her mother was not a particularly good person. She wasn't as bad as Kaldrav the Cruel, the despotic king of Malin. But she was bad enough, years of violence weighing her down. And if the torana had denied her mother, yet allowed Aina through . . .

"You're Mayani now, foolish girl!" Her mother ripped her wrist from Aina's grip. "Toranic Law has decreed it! Get away from me and stay in your realm!"

"Not without you," Aina declared as she stepped back into Malin. "I'll stay here, Mama. I'll—"

Her mother cut her off with a slap that split Aina's lip. "Feather-soul! Counter-spinner!" she growled, shoving Aina back through the torana. "I don't want to see your face! If you set foot into this realm, I'll smack you till your skin turns blue!" In the dim light of Malin, her mother's cheeks were wet. "I'll make you suffer worse than a nagamor's glare! I'll—"

Whatever her mother meant to say next was drowned out by the nagamor slamming against the torana. Its fetid breath grazed Aina's cheek, the grimy blue scales an inch from her fingernails.

But for all the ferocity with which it crashed against the archway, the beast could not enter Mayana. Like Aina's mother's, the nagamor's soul spun backward. Toranic Law would not allow it to spill its filth into the upper realm.

Aina watched through the pillars in horror as her mother clashed with the beast, channeling stone and raising up small mountains against its twisting, thrashing mass.

Aina nocked an arrow and made to race into Malin to assist her. But an enormous slab of stone spurted up on the other side of the torana; her mother's channeling had blocked the path that Toranic Law had let Aina pass.

"Mama!" Aina screamed. "Let me through!" Unlike her mother, Aina could not channel the stone away. So she beat it until her knuckles bled and the nagamor's cries faded. "Please, Mama! Don't do this! Don't leave me here all alone!"

There was no reply, only the shuffle of footsteps away from the torana. Away from Aina.

"Mama . . ." Aina fell to all fours on the sweet-scented grass, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Don't . . . leave me . . ."

Warm sunlight drenched her back, the air crisp and thick with birdsong. Aina paid it no heed as she lay there for hours, pounding weakly at the torana.

For the first time since her birth, Aina was in paradise. Mayana was an idyllic realm, free of Malin's monsters and violence and corruption. Free from the tyranny of Kaldrav's reign, from being hunted by his soldiers.

It was a realm protected by Toranic Law, where only those light of soul and good of heart were permitted to live. A realm that had admitted Aina but would never admit her mother.

Mayana was a heavenly place. Yet to Aina it felt like hell.

PART I

*When earth was drenched in flesh and blood,
and hate split lives asunder,
when fire and steel surged forth in flood,
the skies lit by fery thunder,
humankind waged a brutal war,
their savagery a blight,
awakening the Beasts of lore
to set their world aright.*

*And thus the realm was split to four
by will of Beast who made it:
two realms for souls who relished gore,
who sinned and harmed and hated;
two for those proven true and kind,
their realms at peace, united.
And so the balance realigned,
with fair and foul divided.*

—SONG OF SALVATION—

Verse V: The Great Toranic Separation

CHAPTER ONE



An Adequate Crime

ONE YEAR LATER

AINA WANDERED THE bustling streets of inner Kirnos, hood pulled low over her forehead. The marketplace was a vibrant riot of stalls lining a broad street paved with honey-colored stone. Bright-eyed Mayani shouted out their wares without a care in the world, selling embroidered silks and gold-plated pottery amongst an assortment of equally useless things.

Aina wrinkled her nose. *Such abundance*, she thought, recalling the foul-smelling pelts she'd worn in Malin. The wooden straws her mother had carved for them to suck water straight from the ground.

But Kirnos, the largest kingdom in the upper realm of Mayana, was a cesspit of abundance. It oozed from every street and stone, from the lush gardens and tinkling waterfalls, from flowers the size of Aina's face that burst at each corner. Every other door-frame was trimmed with gold, half the shop roofs shingled with

gemstones. Even the blasted toilets in Kirnos had seats of jade.

And today, in honor of the crown princess's ascension, Kirnos was at its worst. The marketplace in particular attracted merchants from across the realm, gathered in their most obnoxious display of wealth and frivolity.

Which made it the perfect spot for Aina's next crime.

She stopped by a table draped in cerulean gauze. It boasted a collection of shells from the underwater kingdom of Amaratir, polished to gleam like pearls. Aina glanced around her, then reached out to swipe a shimmering conch.

A hand enclosed her wrist. Aina recoiled, muscles tensing into the familiarity of fight.

"Do not be afraid, child," a kind voice said. An old woman with skin like bark smiled down at her. She plucked the conch from Aina's hands and held out a spiral shell. "Take this instead. It will bring you good luck."

"How so?" Aina asked.

"See the pattern of the swirl? It signifies the forward rotation of the soul. You are meant to have it." The woman pressed the shell into Aina's hand. "May your soul spin straight and swift."

Aina pocketed the seashell and tugged her hood down to obscure her forehead. As if a stupid trinket could hold such powers. Even if it could, this shell was the last thing Aina needed. She wanted to reverse her soul-spin. Load it with sin until the torana sucked her back into Malin.

Back to her mother.

It would have been easier to walk through one of the gateways. But for some hellforsaken reason, the bleeding things refused to let her through. After ricocheting off the damn pillars for the hundredth time, Aina had lost her patience. So she'd launched a methodical spate of wrongdoing over the past few weeks: pelting unsuspecting Mayani with rotten fruit, flipping off priests, scrib-

bling curse words across the torana, and stealing from Kirnosi teahouses and bakeries.

But today she would not steal food, which was plentiful in this realm. She would steal something of far greater value.

The next stall was piled with Kirnosi goods. Circlets of jasmine and freesia lay in heaps next to emerald-studded miniatures of Sherka the gazarou, the great grass wolf worshipped throughout the realm.

Aina stared at the miniatures, a hand going to the cloth pouch at her waist. She pulled out a piece of shattered rock and ran a finger over its ridges. It had looked like something once. A tusked sea turtle. Her mother had carved it for her many years ago, to keep Aina quiet and out of her hair. Aina never had any playthings in Malin, so her mother had channeled little figurines out of stone: spiked deer and tentacled sharks and elephants with barbed trunks. There was even a broken nagamor somewhere in the pouch, along with the remains of a gazarou.

All her figurines had been crushed during the nagamor attack. But Aina remembered them well, the crude designs of her mother's making. Her gazarou had been a fearsome thing, hackles raised, its tiny teeth on full display. So different from this timid Kirnosi design, gentle-eyed and wrought of gold.

Yet stealing something so extravagant would absolutely burden her soul.

"You are a visitor?" A bearded man peered over the stall. "What luck! To commemorate the crown princess's ascension, I have special gifts for visitors." He produced a jade wolf the size of Aina's thumb and offered it to her.

Aina backed away, fingers tightening around her broken rock. "I don't want that."

"But you must take it," the man insisted. "It is a sacred likeness of Goddess Sherka Herself."

Made from the same stone as the toilet seats? Sacred indeed.

“Accept this gift, child,” the man said, “and let Her goodness bless your soul.”

A half hour later, Aina found her arms loaded with unnecessary trinkets from across the realm: a lacquer hairpin from the eastern kingdom of Nishaki, useful for poking an eye out; a silken scarf from Tahamur down south, maybe she could strangle someone with it; and an intricately carved wooden bowl from western Samaras that might serve well as a bludgeon.

“Bleeding Mayani,” Aina muttered.

How was she supposed to steal anything if they kept gifting her with free samples? She’d considered flinging the wares back at their sellers’ faces, but that would only serve to attract the attention of the Kirnosi royal guard.

Aina needed something discreet. If not discreet, at least utterly damning, so Toranic Law would punish her before the guard had the chance.

Her mother had tortured a man once. Ripped off his fingernails after he’d tried to kidnap Aina. While it had seemed acceptable at the time—another bout of her mother’s protectiveness—Aina’s stomach twinged at the notion of doing that to one of these shallow, softhearted Mayani.

What falls between torture and theft? Aina mused as she jostled through the crowd. A bizarre number of Mayani had flocked to Kirnos for the ascension ceremony, choking the streets with color.

“Word from the palace has it that King Athanken’s on edge,” said a woman in pink silks. “Spent the past moon at the temple, praying for the princess’s successful ascension.”

Her companion gave a laugh, his voice airy and unbothered. “Stressing and praying is all the man ever does. Of course Himalia will ascend, her soul’s light as a cloud.”

Do they have nothing better to do with their lives, Aina wondered,

than watch a pampered princess strut through a pair of pillars?

An idea stirred in her mind. An adequate crime, more nefarious than stealing, but without the brutality of torture. It wouldn't do permanent damage. But it would do just enough.

Aina approached the chatting pair and addressed them brusquely. "The princess's ascension. What time does it start?"

"An hour from now at the palace gardens," the young man said. He looked to her in surprise as Aina dumped her various souvenirs into his arms. "Wait, why are you—"

Aina dashed off without a word, elbowing her way through the crowd. The palace gardens stood atop the circular plateau that sprouted from the heart of Kirnos. If she hurried, she could still make Princess Himalia's ascension ceremony in time.

I'm coming, Mama. Aina clutched her pouch of broken rocks as she ran. I'm descending, soon.

AINA SQUATTED BEHIND the mossy ramparts of the Kirnosi palace. Due to the royal guard's preoccupation with the ascension ceremony, sneaking up had been easy. Aina's vantage point provided her with an excellent view of the garden and the foolish revelry unfolding atop its verdant lawns.

"May your soul spin straight and swift," an onlooker called as Princess Himalia drifted through the crowd, beaming from beneath the flower-studded canopy carried by her four of her guard. Himalia's voluminous skirts swirled as she walked, the embedded emeralds sparkling bright as the torana she was to pass.

The golden torana led to Paramos—highest of the four realms and said to be more obscenely beautiful than even Mayana. Himalia's ascension would reflect her own virtue and that of her family, allowing the Kirnosi throne to remain in their bloodline.

If she made it through the torana.

Aina studied the seashell from earlier. She bounced it on her palm, noting its hardness, how it curved to a point: the perfect ammunition. She pulled a slingshot from her pocket. Nerves taut as the coarse band between her thumb and index finger, Aina set the seashell and took aim.

“Let’s see if you’re as lucky as that old hag claimed,” she said, her voice muffled by the clashing cymbals and rhythmic roll of barrel drums.

She had one shot. One chance to shatter the crown princess’s ankle. Injury aside, violating the sanctity of an ascension ceremony would be enough to condemn Aina to Malin.

The air grew thick with falling rose petals as Himalia swept across the lawn. The drums picked up pace as she neared the torana, the cymbals rising to a wild crescendo. In stark contrast to the stiffly marching guard, the crowd jumped up and down in wild abandon, waving colored silks and showering Himalia with more petals.

A war might do them good. Aina watched an enthusiastic old man bounce his wig off, then scramble through the crowd to retrieve it. *If this is how they choose to waste their peace.*

She shook her head and readjusted her aim. The entire procession, the dancing uppers, that ludicrous canopy strung with lotus buds—it was all bleeding ridiculous.

“Sherka bless your soul,” a voice cried over the clamor, as Himalia smiled and waved like the upper-born brat she was.

Sneering, Aina released the band of her slingshot just before the princess reached the torana.

Himalia let out a cry as Aina’s shell shot between two of the unsuspecting guards and smashed into her ankle. She fell to her knees by the golden pillars, and her lotus headpiece tumbled to the ground. The startled onlookers froze mid-dance, their praises turning to gasps.

"I'm unworthy!" the young princess wailed. She clutched at her leg in pain. Tears spilled from charcoal-rimmed eyes to send black streaks across her dusky skin.

Himalia retreated behind a curtain of dark hair as the royal guard rushed to her aid. The drumbeats and cymbals faded until only the sound of the crown princess's choked sobs remained. "I'm unworthy. Toranic Law has deemed me unworthy."

Aina's lips curved. That foolish Himalia and her fluff-brained onlookers assumed that Toranic Law had blocked the ascension. Even if they discovered the seashell, they would blame divine intervention or call it the will of Sherka. They wouldn't think to suspect Aina, crouched atop the palace walls.

But Toranic Law was no fool. It was all-seeing, all-knowing, and all-judging. Aina waited for it to judge her for this sin. Drag her toward the nearest torana that led to Malin and cast her through its copper pillars.

But as a cool breeze ruffled Aina's hair, her feet remained firmly planted in Mayana.

Blasted Toranic Law. Aina swallowed the hot lump in her throat. *I failed you, Mama. Yet again, I failed you.*

She stowed her slingshot, climbed down the palace walls, and started for the marketplace, where she could blend into the crowd. Aina had made it halfway across the gardens when she heard the command, followed by the clanking of armor.

"Halt! In the name of Sherka the Benevolent!"

Aina whirled around to see a lone member of the Kirnosi royal guard rushing toward her, grass-knit cape rippling.

So he'd discovered it was her. Given the guard's absolute uselessness otherwise, Aina couldn't help her surprise. Still, she'd rather face an angry nagamor than this sanctimonious fool in his fancy uniform.

Swiping a finger across her keiza—the swirl of raised skin on

her forehead, said to be a window to the soul—Aina darted across trim grass. She felt her chitrons bubbling within her as she ran, pressing against her keiza.

Come on, you little shits, Aina urged. *Hurry up and activate!*

She sprinted through the garden, but the guard gained on her, his strides too fast to be anything but chitronically enhanced. Aina leaped over a hedge, then skidded to a stop at the rounded edge of the plateau overlooking a vertical cliff at least two hundred feet high.

Blast it! Aina took a deep breath and dove off the precipice.

Not a moment too late, her chitrons swarmed to life. Aina funneled them through the soles of her feet and bonded them to the cliff. She shaped the rock face through the bond into ledges that caught her as she fell. Aina hopped from ledge to ledge, keiza thrumming from the effort of the channeling, feet flickering with dim turquoise light.

Chitrons were the tiny spinning particles that made up every living soul and accumulated over the course of a lifetime. While individual chitrons were invisible to the human eye, they appeared as colored light when channeled en masse, responding instinctively to the will of their creator.

Or so they were supposed to work.

Aina was convinced her own chitrons were either stupid or plain unhelpful. Every time she swiped her keiza, the buggers took a full five seconds to activate. Their unruly behavior worsened when she tried to use them for anything, be it enhancing the function of her own organs or channeling the world around her.

Her mother would have sped down the cliff in a flash, sculpting a neat trail of stone behind her. But Aina took longer, the stone slow to mold. More than once, her ledges crumbled under her weight and nearly sent her hurtling to her doom.

“I said halt!” came the cry from behind. “You’ll injure someone, channeling like that.”

The Kirnosi guard drew abreast of Aina, his movements swift and precise. She could think of a dozen ways he could have stopped her—collapsing the ledges beneath her feet, summoning a rockslide to knock her out. But a soft-soul like him wouldn’t dare risk hurting her. And while Aina held no such compunctions, she was far too engrossed in not falling.

A tangle of gold-leaved trees ringed the plateau base. The guard landed atop one of their ivory branches and waited for Aina to join him.

As if.

Aina severed her chitronic flows and plummeted toward the trees. She crashed onto the guard, sending them both careening down in a flurry of golden leaves and broken branches. Aina rolled over to break her fall, but the guard moved quicker. He pounced, six feet of muscle and armor pinning her to the ground.

“My ribs!” Aina wheezed as her fingers scrabbled across the dirt.

Immediately, the guard lessened the pressure on her back. Smirking at the predictability of it all, Aina grabbed a fallen branch, then twisted in his grip to shove her makeshift weapon into his chest.

The Kirnosi had the most absurd breastplate design Aina had ever seen: four trenches cut across their chests, as if a giant wolf claw had slashed the metal, revealing silken fabric underneath. The cuts symbolized the “blessing of Sherka,” whatever that meant, and provided Aina with a convenient slot to ram her branch into.

The guard heaved, winded, and Aina wriggled out from beneath him. She could hear his labored breaths as she sped through the forest. She was celebrating her escape when a tree

root snaked from the ground to wrap around her thighs, holding her in place.

Shit. Gritting her teeth, Aina called once again upon her chitrons. They were slow to respond, and more roots rose to encircle her waist.

“You again?”

Aina jerked her head up at the voice, bright and smooth as the guard’s gilded armor. He walked toward her and removed his helm—fashioned in the shape of a wolf’s head—to let sleek golden hair spill past his shoulders. Aina’s lip curled at the sight of Aranel: youngest member of the Kirnosi royal guard and softer than the rest combined.

“Can’t you let me go?” Aina pleaded, squirming against the roots. “Everything hurts!”

Hazel eyes narrowed. “I won’t be fooled by that twice.”

“Fine. I’m sure Toranic Law will reward you for breaking my bones.”

The guard paled, and the pressure around Aina’s waist loosened. Like most Mayani she had encountered, Aranel feared nothing more than the prospect of his soul-spin slowing. And terror, she had learned from fourteen years in Malin, made people easy to manipulate.

“You’re under arrest,” Aranel said. “For sabotaging Crown Princess Himalia’s ascension.”

His solemn expression made Aina want to punch his stupidly chiseled face in. She would have done it, if he weren’t so damn good at channeling. Even now, she suspected Aranel held back so as not to hurt her, which made the entire situation more humiliating.

Without chitrons, Aina would crush him in a fight. But with, she was outmatched. She could neither attack nor break her free

of his binds, and so she was forced to let him lead her through the golden forest.

AINA FLUMPED ONTO a chair and stared at the familiar earthen walls of the Kirnosi guardhouse. Aranel strode across the room, grass-knit cloak swishing as he locked doors and bolted windows in a vain attempt to make this arrest appear graver than it was.

“I’ll have to search you,” Aranel said, then swiped a thumb across his keiza.

Aina tensed as tendrils of energy enveloped her, warm and green and nauseatingly bright. There was an unsettling intimacy to being touched by another’s chitrons this way, feeling the essence of their soul. Aina had only felt her mother’s before, brimming with a cold anger that prickled and pinched. But Aranel’s bubbled with sincerity and the freshness of a thousand grass shoots springing from the ground. Aina relaxed once he released the channeling and his chitrons seeped away.

“What’s all this?” Aranel opened the pouch he’d confiscated during the search. He removed a smashed figurine and held it up as if it might explode. “More ammunition?”

“Leave them be,” Aina snapped. “They’re just—They’re from my mother.”

Aranel set the pouch down. “The commander will arrive soon. If you behave, he may show mercy when deciding your sentence.”

The commander would show mercy regardless of how she behaved. Aina turned from Aranel to sweep her gaze across the wall and the scraps of parchment nailed to it: a list of banned items, including unlicensed weaponry, narcotics, and megarya blood; and a wanted notice, showing several names and faces, for a notorious rebel group called the Balancers.

Aina traced her eyes over the portraits, resting on a woman with fiery hair and a gaze that seemed to burn through the parchment. The notice labeled her as Zenyra, leader of the Balancers.

"You'll end up an outlaw like them if you're not careful," a new voice said, as a tall man stepped into the room.

Aranel jumped at his commander's appearance, and even Aina was impressed. He'd unlocked the door through channeling, and neither of them had noticed.

Samarel's eyebrows furrowed. "It's your fourth arrest since you arrived, Aina," the commander said. "Are you trying to set a record?"

"Sam—I mean, Commander," Aranel said breathlessly before Aina could get a word in. "She's the one who shot the crown princess! I found her in possession of deadly weaponry"—Aina snorted as Aranel continued—"and her actions have caused grievous harm. As you may know, Her Highness has . . . broken an ankle."

Aina resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Only a Mayani would speak of a broken ankle so grimly. These feather-souled uppers had never spilled blood, never known true pain. Centuries under the authority of Toranic Law had graced Kirnos and the other Mayani kingdoms with a perpetual state of peace.

Aranel reached into his cloak and presented Samarel with the slingshot he'd confiscated from Aina earlier.

"My deadly weaponry," Aina clarified. "I thought a bow would be a bit much, so I went with the smaller stick."

"You own a bow?" Aranel asked, scandalized. He turned to Samarel. "She owns a *bow*. An unlicensed bow! And she admitted to attacking Her Highness!"

The commander remained silent for a long moment before summoning a chair from the corner of the room with a flick of his fingers. Samarel sat down so he was level with Aina.

“Why did you do it?” he asked.

“You should train your guard better.” Aina fixed her gaze on the emeralds set into his breastplate. “Aranel found me after I’d already broken through their defenses, and with a single bleeding slingshot at that. They wouldn’t last a second in a real battle, especially with such pointless armor.” She gestured at the decorative gashes cut into the metal. “Malini soldiers would flay them alive. Hell, even my mother would destroy them in a fight.”

At the thought of her mother fighting, Aina’s heart gave a twist. Was she all right? Was she in one piece? Her mother was a powerful channeler, but Malin crawled with enemies.

“My guard will never face any soldiers,” Samarel assured her, “when Toranic Law protects us from such evil. This is Mayana, Aina. You can stop fighting.” Aina did roll her eyes now, and Samarel continued. “I know you didn’t mean to injure her badly, or our princess would be sporting far worse than a broken ankle. Which, I might add, she healed promptly thereafter. But you must have known she’d heal herself. So why did you do it?”

Aina picked at a grain of dirt caught under her fingernail and flicked it toward the ceiling.

“Aina,” Aranel said, impatience edging his tone. “You might show more respect when the commander is speaking to you.”

“Leave it, Aranel,” the commander said, but Aranel went on.

“Despite your antics, Samarel’s been lenient because of your past—”

“My past?” Aina’s eyes flashed. “You mean because I was born into Malin? Because Toranic Law condemned me to a life of suffering before I could even walk?”

Aina’s throat grew tight as she recalled her earliest memories, sobbing in front of a silver torana, pounding at it with her fists. *Let me through*, she had wailed. *I didn’t do anything bad! Please! Let me through!*

The torana hadn't allowed her to pass then. It functioned on bleeding Toranic Law: the absolute and ancient force of nature that had governed the universe for centuries, separating beings into realms based on the spin of their souls.

Toranic Law kept Mayana prosperous and peaceful. It allowed uppers like Aranel to bask in comfort, never knowing the gnaw of hunger, the ache of disease, or the bite of an enemy blade. Such misery was reserved for lowers—sin-steeped beings like Aina and her mother.

Aina could never recall committing any sins. Yet Toranic Law had doomed her the day she was born.

"Regardless of your birth, you're an upper now," Aranel said. "You ascended against all odds, but your petty crimes will burden your soul. Are you not worried about falling back down?"

"I'd prefer walking in over falling, but the bleeding torana won't let me."

Ever since she'd stumbled through the torana a year ago, Aina had tried to return to Malin and reunite with her mother. She'd roamed Mayana—from the floating jungles of Nisharan to the snow-glazed valleys that girdled Samaras to the balmy islands of Tahamur and finally Kirnos—in search of a way back.

"It's like they're all blocked or something," Aina added. "Why won't they work properly?"

Aranel stared at her as if she'd sprouted another head. "The more appropriate question is, why in Sherka's name would you *willingly* descend? Toranic Law has graced you with a better life. You ought to be grateful, rather than squandering this opportunity!"

Aina opened her mouth to retort, but Samarel raised a hand. "Enough, Aranel. It is not upon you to judge Aina's actions." He turned to Aina, softening. "Do be careful, Aina. I'd be sad to see you end up like them."

He motioned at the wanted notice nailed to the wall. Aina found herself once again drawn to Zenyra's searing gaze.

What did she do to land up there?

"That your intent was not to harm may yet extenuate . . ."

Samarel prattled on. Aina ignored him in favor of scraping out the dirt from beneath the rest of her fingernails.

"You should preach at the temple," she said once he'd finished. "Even the head priest isn't as passionate as you."

A hint of a frown tugged at Samarel's features. "Toranic Law may have absolved you, Aina. But per the laws of this kingdom, I'm afraid there will be punishment."

"How many nights?" Aina asked.

"Ten."

The pity in Samarel's expression made Aina want to kick something. Specifically Aranel, who watched their exchange with an air of self-righteousness.

She restrained herself and followed the commander out of the guardhouse, Aranel in tow. She didn't know why the royal guard insisted on bringing her to the guardhouse each time, as if they were going to lock her up or properly punish her. In Malin, an attempt to hurt King Kaldrav would result in flogging or torture, at the least. But the Mayani weren't fond of such punishment. And at fifteen, Aina was a minor, which meant the worst Samarel could do was send her to the temple for prayer and repentance.

Aina didn't mind being banished to the temple. The mattresses were plusher than her own, and Aro, the head priest, served delicious sweets. She felt a mixture of contempt and gratitude as she followed the two guards through a field of feathery grass that came up to her waist. Kirnos was a soft kingdom in an equally soft realm.

"I will pray for you, Aina," Samarel said.

“As will I,” Aranel added. “I will pray to Sherka for the strength and purity of your soul.”

“How virtuous of you,” Aina replied, stopping by a pond dotted with tiny lotuses. She peered into its placid waters and pushed back a tangle of dark hair to reveal her keiza. The swirl glowed a healthy turquoise, vivid against her brown skin.

As a window to the soul, a keiza’s brightness corresponded directly to soul speed and spin. While not as bright as those of most Mayani she’d met, Aina’s keiza glowed brighter than her mother’s ever had. Too bright to be forced out of the realm, despite her earlier actions.

Aina stole a glance at Aranel as they walked. The guard’s keiza shone like one of the ridiculous emeralds lining his helm.

“I hope this time serves you well,” Samarel said. Aina snapped back to her impending confinement. The temple of Kirnos loomed ahead, a sweeping structure of honey-colored stone. The bejeweled dome perched loftily atop its walls reminded Aina of a large, glittering onion.

“May your soul spin straight and swift,” Aranel called as Aina swung the temple door open and marched in without a backward glance.

CHAPTER TWO



The Preservation Advisory

YOU MIGHT HAVE been kinder to Aina,” said Samarel. The commander removed his helm and tucked it under his arm. The grass rippled as he walked, long stalks bending at the nudge of his chitrons to clear a path through the pasture.

Aranel followed his older brother, careful to keep his voice even. “I *was* kind. But she’s a repeat offender, Sam, one completely lacking remorse. Just last week I caught her flinging horse manure through the torana into Paramos. Do you know what she said to me when I tried reprimanding her?”

Samarel’s lips quirked. “Do tell.”

“That Toranic Law is a sham for allowing pieces of shit to ascend.”

“How inappropriate,” said Samarel, although he seemed to be holding back laughter. Aranel glared at his brother, who shrugged. “For Sherka’s sake, lighten up, Ran. Aina can’t hear us, and Toranic Law won’t begrudge you a few laughs.”

"That girl is a menace," said Aranel. "A bad influence on society."

"Perhaps, but you don't know her entire story—" Samarel broke off to offer Aranel a sheepish smile. "I'm sorry, Ran. It's our last day together. I shouldn't be wasting it with a lecture."

"I suppose you can't help yourself." It came out snider than Aranel intended, but Samarel only laughed.

"The Preservation aren't expecting me for another couple of hours." His brother motioned to the grove behind him, a labyrinth of gold-toned leaves and sinuous branches. "Would you like to spar?"

Aranel eyed the treetops with longing. Many moons had passed since he and Samarel had last sparred, and there was nothing more thrilling than testing oneself against the best channeler in the kingdom.

Thrilling and humiliating.

"I'd rather not," said Aranel stiffly. *I'd rather not our last memory be of you showing off how great you are.* "I meant. I'm a bit tired, what with chasing after Aina."

A small frown flickered across Samarel's face. His brother opened his mouth to say something, then seemed to think the better of it.

They sped through the forest in silence, feet aglow with chitronic energy as they leaped through the treetops. As Aranel took in the scenery around him, he could almost see the phantom images: two young boys wreathed in laughter and sunlight, one shining brighter than his brother.

Come on, Ran, Samarel would say, face split in a dazzling grin as the forest danced around him, branches reshaping beneath his feet. *You can do better than that! Don't try so hard, just go with the flow of your chitrons! Look, it's easy!*

Everything came easy to Samarel, chitronic prodigy and com-

mander of the royal guard. Aranel glanced at his brother. The setting sun fell upon the familiar lines of his profile, gilding him like some otherworldly being.

He may as well be. Aranel's gaze flickered to Samarel's forehead. *He doesn't belong in this realm.*

Although Samarel was five years older, he resembled Aranel with the notable exception of his keiza. While Aranel's keiza sparkled like an emerald, his brother's was radiant as a star. The incandescence of a Paramosi, or one meant to have ascended years ago. Yet Samarel chose to remain with him in Mayana, a shining example for Aranel to aspire to.

But Samarel did not simply shine. He blazed like his keiza, casting a shadow upon everything around him. Including Aranel, whose every deed, every achievement, would be but a faded imitation of his brother's.

Curse him to Malin for being so perfect!

A moment later, Aranel shoved the thought into the crevices of his mind. *Pure thoughts*, he admonished himself. He repeated the words his mother had sung to him each night before bed, ever since he'd been old enough to understand. *Pure thoughts and intentions a pure soul doth make, but clouded with malice, that soul doth forsake.* For chitrons were conscious particles—created by each new thought, emotion, intention, and action. Aranel could not afford such small-minded jealousy.

He closed his eyes and dragged a thumb over his palm in a forward circle. Slowly, then faster, as if to counteract his slowing soul-spin.

"You're stressed." Samarel's voice broke Aranel from his trance. They were halfway up the cliff that led to the palace gardens. His brother nodded to Aranel's hands. "Did I say something to upset you? Or do something wrong?"

You never do anything wrong, Aranel wanted to scream at

him, *and that's the blessed problem!* Instead, he circled his thumb over his palm with renewed speed. "I'm fine, Sam. Just . . . sad you're leaving."

Which was likely the first whole truth Aranel had spoken to his brother in moons. Because as much as it stung being in Samarel's constant shadow, the notion of living in Mayana without him cut deeper.

"As am I," said Samarel, and Aranel had to strain to hear him above the tinkling fountains.

They had reached the palace gardens, thick with the scent of honeysuckle and rose. In the distance glinted the torana to Paramos, its alluring golden columns curving to a cusped archway.

The royal guard had wanted to throw Samarel an ascension ceremony, but his brother refused, preferring to keep it a private affair. The torana drew near, and Aranel's every step grew heavier, as if his chitrons were rooting him to the ground.

"I got you something from the marketplace," said Samarel. "A farewell present of sorts. To remember me by."

Aranel stared at him in disbelief. As if he needed something to remember his brother. As if every corner of their home, every tree in the forest, every stone-lined path wasn't already overflowing with memories of him.

"Here." Samarel held out a conical shell with a smile. "You can add it to your collection."

"I didn't think you knew about that." Aranel accepted the shell and traced a thumb over its grooves. It was a foolish thing, his collection: an assortment of snail shells and curling leaves arranged inside his bedside drawer so the spirals faced forward.

"For what it's worth," said Samarel softly, "I don't think you need it, Ran. Any of it. You're fine as you are, no matter what anyone says."

Arael's chin quivered. He wanted to throw himself at his brother as he had when they were younger, let Samarel pick him up and spin him around. Instead, he clutched the shell, its tiny spines digging into his palm.

Samarel stepped in front of the torana. The ornate columns framed his tall figure, silhouetted against the brightness of Paramos.

"Well, then," he said. "I must go. But I'll be back, I promise. I'll visit you once a moon. More, if I can."

Arael nodded, refusing to meet his brother's eyes. His parents had promised the same five years past, and his grandparents nearly a decade before. Cousin Taralei had sworn it four moons ago. Arael hadn't seen any of them since, save his mother, and even she seldom visited.

Lovely as Mayana was, the pulchritude of Paramos was said to extend beyond the limits of imagination. Why would anyone want to return? Why should his brother?

Arael ran a hand across the torana and traced the verse inscribed into the gleaming metal:

*Blissful Paramos, the height of perfection,
idyllic, with beauty that sings.
For souls that spin in a forward direction
and swift as a hummingbird's wings.*

He recognized the verse from the Song of Salvation, one of the scriptures he'd memorized as a child, alongside the Chorus of Creation and Aria of Ascension. Arael had based his life on their teachings. He'd trained in chitronic healing to help those in need. He'd enrolled in the royal guard to help protect the realm against—well, there wasn't much to protect against

besides that ruffian, Aina, and Aranel had tolerated plenty of her nonsense. He even donated a quarter of his savings to the temple each moon.

But seventeen years of goodwill hadn't been enough. Aranel's hand slid across the golden column with its flowing scrollwork before thumping against something harder and more unyielding than any physical material.

An invisible wall separating him from Paramos.

"I'll ascend soon," declared Aranel. "I swear on Sherka."

"You needn't swear such a thing," said Samarel. He angled his head, a sheet of hair obscuring his face. "Although I sometimes wonder if you'll be happier without me. If my being here is what holds you back."

"Don't be ridiculous," whispered Aranel. In truth, he often wondered the same. "It's nothing to do with you. I'm simply—I'm not—" His throat closed in on itself, and he forced the words out in sharp, unwilling fragments. "I'm not good enough."

When Samarel looked up, his eyes were brighter than usual. "You've always been good enough." He reached out to brush a finger against Aranel's keiza, then pulled him into a hug.

"I don't want you to leave," Aranel mumbled into Samarel's hair, allowing himself, for a fleeting moment, to clutch at his brother's tunic. "I'd *never* want that."

"I know." Samarel patted his head. "Take care of yourself, Ran." He stepped away and walked through the golden torana.

Aranel watched his retreating back with glassy eyes, then tore his gaze from the archway. He strode across the garden and stopped at its edge.

The Kirnosi palace and its gardens stood atop a cylindrical hill veiled in golden moss that rose from the heart of the kingdom. Unfurled below, the petals of Kirnos glowed fuchsia under the setting sun. True to its name, the Lotus Kingdom of Kirnos was

nestled within the curving embrace of twelve immense petals, each softer than velvet and stronger than steel.

The whorl of inner petals—raised higher than the rest—contained a sprawling jungle of gem-studded roofs: the marketplace and its surrounding residences, as well as numerous libraries, eateries, and halls for recreation.

But it was the outermost petal that held Aranel's fondest memories as he traced his eyes across the wheat fields and lakes tucked amidst its gentle slopes. He mapped the winding creek where Samarel had first taught him chitronic control, patient as Aranel floundered atop the water; the knoll by the mango orchard where they'd picnicked and played cards with Cousin Taralei; and the tea stall they'd frequented on the evenings guard duty ended early, sipping cool barley tea as the sun streaked the sky scarlet.

Aranel's gaze settled last on a cluster of yellow thatched huts that dotted the fields like pollen. For seventeen years he and his brother had lived in one of those huts, first with their parents, then as a family of two.

Now Aranel remained alone, with only his collection of shells and dried leaves for company.

ARANEL LEANED AGAINST the brocade wall, stifling a yawn as he listened to various members of the Preservation Advisory drone on about matters of the state: Crown Princess Himalia's flight from Kirnos following her botched ascension, the free-trade agreement with the kingdom of Tahamur, and the location of the annual cloudsurfing championships.

Hardly a day had passed since Samarel's ascension, and several of his duties had already been foisted off on Aranel. A week ago he would have been delighted to take Samarel's place, even as a mere guard and observer. A certain prestige came with attending

the Advisories. They were convened by the Preservation, a council of Paramosi elders who oversaw the workings of the universe and descended to Mayana thrice a year to offer guidance.

But four hours into the meeting had Aranel wondering why he'd been so keen to join. He came to the conclusion he'd only wanted what Samarel already had, something that could be said for most things Aranel had strived for. Commander of the royal guard, cloudsurfing champion, elite healer—how much of it had Aranel truly wanted for himself?

Aranel's gaze drifted across the room, taking in the various faces in attendance. The representative of Tahamur, a long-haired woman swathed in richly embroidered crimson fabric, was speaking. Across her forehead lay a strip of bejeweled gold, matching the thick choker at her neck. The Tahamuri, Aranel observed, loved their gold more than the Kirnosi did.

" . . . from Nishaki disappeared a few moons after the young man from Tahamur," said the woman. "They were known to be friends, both in their second decade, and skilled chitronic users, just like the last three who disappeared. Given the timing and their profiles, I suspect Balancer involvement."

Aranel perked at the mention of the Balancers, which meant they had reached their last topic for the day. The rebels were notorious in the realm, their leader Zenyra's face plastered across every guardhouse in Kirnos. The wanted notices listed their crimes in vague terms, such as "disrespecting Toranic Law" and "spreading heresy."

Aranel tried to recall if Samarel had divulged anything about the Balancers. All that came to mind was his brother mentioning how the rebels descended to Malin voluntarily, without a care for their souls. Aranel shuddered. *Why in Sherka's name would anyone do such a thing?*

The Song of Salvation described the lower realm as a teem-

ing cesspit of corruption and disease. A wasteland ravaged by the flames of war, rife with bloodthirsty monsters like the fabled nagamor. The Malini themselves were said to be a diabolic lot, sadists who sought pleasure in the misery of others.

The closest Aranel had been to one was that heathen Aina, but she had ascended to Mayana a year prior. Surely a true lower would be worse. *Although by the Preservation's standards, it's a miracle Aina's face isn't on a wanted notice yet.*

"I suggest the Advisory consider more stringent measures against the Balancers," said the representative of Samaras, a hefty man with hair like straw. "Lest we risk losing our future generation to a rebel cult."

"I strongly concur," said the representative of Amaratir, rising. He wore little clothing, as per was the custom of his people, and had swirling patterns inked onto his glistening skin. When he spoke, the coral beads in his hair clinked together. "Outlawing the Balancers is not enough! If anything, their outlaw status grants them a sense of allure amongst Mayani youth. Nor are the seals on the torana helping, since it seems their leader, Zenyra, is able to unravel them with ease."

A chorus of murmurs followed his words. Aranel leaned forward, intrigued. "Forgive my interruption," he said, "but what are these seals you speak of?"

"Why, the Preservation's seals," exclaimed the Amaratiri man. "Surely you have heard of them. They are on every torana in Mayana that leads to a lower realm."

"Apologies." Aranel lowered his head. "This is my first Advisory. I'm afraid my knowledge is yet insufficient."

Sam would have heard of the seals. Sam wouldn't have asked such an inane question.

"Ah, you must be Samarel's replacement then!" The man's tone grew warmer. "An inspiration, your predecessor. The Bal-

ancers could learn a thing or two from him.” Aranel shuffled his feet, and the representative continued. “I spoke of the chitronic seals. They are unidirectional in nature, placed by the Preservation a few years ago as a precaution against the rebels. The seals cannot circumvent Toranic Law, but they can inhibit voluntary descension from Mayana.”

Aranel sat back in shock as the explanation sunk in. Because while Toranic Law blocked the unworthy from ascension—a bitter lesson Aranel learned each time he attempted to pass into Paramos—it placed no barriers on the reverse. The torana were naturally designed to allow free descension between realms. It was how the Preservation could attend Advisories. How Samarel could, if he deigned, visit Aranel in Kirnos.

And why Aina’s been behaving like such a miscreant. Aranel’s past conversation with her clicked into place. With the torana sealed, she can only force Toranic Law to expel her.

Yet the Balancers *could* use the torana to descend. Zenyra had found a way around the seals, which had the Advisory on edge.

“If the seals are ineffectual, we need more concrete actions!” The Amaratiri representative slapped his thigh. “To stop this heretic and her foolish cult from . . .”

He trailed off as another man stood, silver-haired, with a keiza that shone bright as the sun. The man’s face was unlined—Aranel suspected chitronic concealment—but his eyes held a depth that bespoke centuries of wisdom. His ivory robes marked him as one of the Preservation.

Despite their status, the Preservation had remained largely silent throughout the Advisory, letting the Mayani decide things for themselves and providing counsel only when called upon. This was the first instance of a Preserver addressing them unprompted.

“What might you suggest?” asked the silver-haired Preserver. “That we descend to Malin and confront the Balancers directly?”

A stunned silence befell the room. There was a reason Toranic Law separated the uppers from the vileness of Malin, why every scripture cautioned against voluntary descension. Mayani wouldn't be able to withstand such darkness. It would gather to their souls like moths to a flame.

"My apologies, Lord Seirem." The man from Amaratir bowed deeply to the Preserver. "I did not mean to imply—Of course the seals were an excellent solution—"

"Stand tall, young man," commanded Seirem. "You need only bow to the gods."

"The gods, old people, and Preservers," said the Amaratiri.

"Watch your language," warned Seirem. The corners of his eyes crinkled. "I like to think I stopped aging a couple centuries ago."

Soft laughter filled the chamber and diffused the tension. Seirem nodded at the Amaratiri representative.

"This fine young man makes a valid point," said Seirem, addressing the room. "The Preservation's strongest seals are unable to withstand Zenyra's extraordinary chitronic prowess, leaving us with no way to prevent Balancer recruitment beyond descending to Malin ourselves, which we all agree is a terrible idea."

Aranel nodded along with the others. He didn't understand the Advisory's obsession with the Balancers. From the sound of it, they rarely bothered with this realm. Apart from recruiting a couple Mayani every few moons, they restricted their activities to Malin.

"There must be something we can do," said the Tahamuri woman, "to set these fools on the right path, as intended by the laws of the universe. Is that not our duty to the Mayani people?"

Seirem spread his arms, silver-hemmed sleeves catching the light. "'Judge not those who walk astray,'" intoned the Preserver. "'The will of each shall light their way.'"

The Tahamuri representative blinked in confusion, but Aranel caught on at once. “The Aria of Ascension,” he said. “Verse eighteen.”

“Precisely!” Seirem clapped his hands together and beamed at Aranel. “It heartens me to see such familiarity with our ancient scriptures in one so young. Now tell me, what do those words mean in the context of the Balancers?”

“That it is not our duty to hold them accountable for their actions,” Aranel surmised. “They are answerable to none but Toranic Law.”

“Indeed.” Seirem turned back to the Advisory. “We have already tried to guide them with the seals, done what we can to deter their folly. Beyond a point, their destinies are their own. If they still wish to flaunt Toranic Law and descend, we can do naught but pray that Azyaka has mercy upon their souls.”

ARANEL LEFT THE palace as soon as the Advisory had ended. He hopped down the cliff and onto the golden treetops, their branches twisting beneath his chitrons to form a hidden path. He was halfway through the forest when he sensed another presence draw near.

A gravelly voice cut through the rustle of leaves. “Your channeling has improved considerably since I last saw you, Aranel of Kirnos.”

Aranel nearly fell off the branch at the sight of Lord Seirem of the Preservation, ivory robes flapping as he sprinted across the canopy.

“As I recall, your first attempt to cloudsurf was quite the disaster,” continued Seirem as he came up to Aranel. “You dropped through the sky like a hailstone. Your brother went running after you and caught you moments before you crashed.”

Arael pressed a fist to his forehead in greeting. “Please pardon my discourtesy. But have we met, Lord Seirem?”

“Why, of course! You were but four at the time, so perhaps you do not remember. I am close with your family, Arael. Your great-grandfather and I go long back, and I dined with your parents last week. Your mother served up a lovely elderberry pie.”

“You’ve seen my parents? Are they well? And what of my cousin Taralei?”

“Your parents are well as can be. They have built themselves a fine manor with sweeping views of the crater. There is a spare room for Samarel. And one for you.”

“Oh,” said Arael, taken aback. “How—how lovely.” He trailed his eyes to the sigil emblazoned across Seirem’s robes, four interlocking rings in golden thread.

“I will cut to the chase, Arael,” said Seirem. “Your family misses you. They eagerly await your ascension. With Samarel gone, I suspect you do as well.”

“I . . .” Arael felt too ashamed to admit it aloud.

To stay within Mayana, one had to be of generally good character. But Paramosi souls were sinless. Flawless. They spun forward with great speed, fueled by their various virtues and unburdened by vice. Judging by the brightness of his keiza, Arael had a long way to go.

“There might be a way for you to ascend quickly.” Seirem’s statement cut into Arael’s bleak thoughts.

Arael straightened, tempering his excitement. “Is that so?”

“It is not something I would typically advise, but it would fulfill both your need and the Preservation’s rather pressing one. Consider it high risk for a high reward.”

“High risk for a high reward?” Arael narrowed his eyes.

Good deeds won’t lighten your soul if done solely for reward, echoed a voice, not unlike his mother’s, in Arael’s mind.

“A covert mission of sorts.” Seirem gave him a wry smile. “One of great importance to the Preservation and to the future of the universe. A delicate undertaking, one I would not even speak of to the Advisory, lest she have ears there.”

“She?” asked Arel. Who was Seirem talking about? And what made Arel a worthy candidate for this mission over the Mayani representatives of the Advisory?

“You come from a good family, Arel,” said Seirem, as if reading his doubts. “I have watched your progress from afar. You are a skilled channeler.”

“Not as skilled as my brother,” blurted Arel.

“Far more skilled than you give yourself credit for.” Seirem gave him an indulgent smile that reminded Arel of his grandfather. “But unlike Samarel, you possess a burning desire to ascend. A desire that might make the risk worth it for you.”

“What risk? What are you asking me to do?”

“I need you to descend to Malin. Descend, and infiltrate the Balancers.”

Arel’s stomach twisted. “No.” The refusal left his mouth more harshly than he’d intended. “That’s—that’s immoral. Let alone dangerous.”

“You would act as the Preservation’s spy. You need not do anything immoral, only report back on the rebels’ doings.”

“You want me to lie!” Arel’s voice pitched higher with every sentence. “Lie and deceive and subject my soul to the darkness of Malin! Do the very things that you—that the Preservation caution against!”

“There are times, Arel,” said Seirem, his voice calm, “when we must look beyond caution and transcend conventional ways of thinking. Situations where the merit outweighs the risk. At least for one with your skill and strength of heart.”

Arel stood rooted to the spot, at a loss for words. What

Seirem was suggesting defied everything he'd been taught to believe in, every rule he'd painstakingly followed. But abiding by those beliefs and rules had not yet lightened his soul. And if all his efforts thus far had been in vain . . .

Perhaps Seirem is right, sounded a small voice in his head. *Perhaps this is what I'm meant to do.*

Seirem bent down and rested a hand on Aranel's shoulder. "You deserve to live in bliss, along with the rest of your family," he said. "The Preservation recognize that, even if Toranic Law does not. It is time you seek another way to ascend."