



THE LOST DREAMER

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*For my parents, Evelyn and Hector Huerta:
your love is a sacred gift*

CHAPTER ONE

INDIR

The wail of a far-off conch shell woke me from my already broken sleep. I wanted to wail in response, in grief, in terror.

Dogs began barking on the outskirts of the city. Unfamiliar drum rhythms pounded in the distance, echoing off the stone walls of our temple. I rose, blood rushing through my body as I swung from my hammock. An answering conch blew thrice from our own warriors. Three cries for peace.

Delu and Zeri stirred. I knew they were in Dreaming, their bodies struggling to pull them back. I kissed them each softly, Singing a small waking Song, my voice breaking. Delu, two years older than me, opened her eyes first. Zeri, the youngest of us, began her languid waking stretch, but her eyes flew open as she realized what was happening. I reached to her, pulling her small body up from her hammock and into an embrace. Delu joined us. The conch horns were louder, the drums a steady beat, closer, closer, closer. The three of us held each other in silence. For all we'd prepared, we weren't ready.

A temple worker rushed into our chamber, a lit torch in her hand.

From within the walls of our own temple, a human wail began. All of us froze. The temple worker began trembling.



The small, familiar rituals around preparing our bodies for ceremony didn't calm me the way they usually did. As we had done countless times before, we tied on each other's sashes. I held Delu's thick braids in place as Zeri inserted the combs. Delu knelt—she was the tallest of us, born into a body that wore strength, muscle.

“Indir.” Delu handed me the necklace she wanted to wear. She'd chosen carved bone jewelry to contrast her damp-earth brown skin. I held Zeri's thin braids in place as Delu pinned them up. I knelt as they did mine. We painted each other's faces with pigment mixed in rendered animal fat. The temple worker held out a reflector, and we examined ourselves in the polished and oil-lacquered wood. Our bodies were shaped differently, but we had similar faces: wide jaws, dark eyes, our lips full and wide. We looked like our mother, our aunts, like Dreamers. Our black hair rose in braids twisted into the shapes of the Twin Serpents who protected us. Zeri's mouth was, as always, relaxed. She was the serene sister. Delu's mouth constantly curved as if she were about to tell a joke or flirt. My lips were pressed together.

We gathered in a small chamber adjacent to the main gathering chamber at the center of our home, the Temple of Night. The entire city of Alcanzeh was awake, waiting. The drums grew closer. Our temple was lit for ceremony, sacred Ayan smoke hanging in the air, all of us dressed and waiting for him to come. Our mother, Safi, entered. Her two sisters followed.

“We’re ready for him.” Our aunt Kupa grinned. Her twin, Ixara, reflected her grin. They looked like smaller, wilder versions of our mother. All three were long-limbed with abundant hips. They had the same sharp nose, wide lips, and brown eyes that missed nothing. Kupa and Ixara were identical; the only way most could tell them apart was by Kupa’s broken front tooth. She was always tonguing the sharp edge.

“Safi, if there was ever a time to be bold, it is now.” Ixara snapped her fingers. Our mother inhaled, her wide nostrils flaring. She seemed to bite back her response, her lips pressed together into a thin line. Safi was the cautious one of the three. Ixara spoke her mind freely, while Kupa always tried to keep the peace between her sisters.

“He isn’t the boy who was taken screaming from Alcanzeh anymore; we don’t know who he is.” Kupa’s voice was gentle.

Safi flashed her dark eyes at her sisters, then at me.

“Sisters. My daughters,” Safi spoke to all of us, but her eyes focused on mine. “We’ve been preparing for this. It was part of the peace agreement. Outside of anything else that happens, we are Dreamers. We keep our promises.”

To my right, Delu looked as regal as our mother and aunts, her posture straight and grounded. Zeri looked as if she was a girl dressed in the robes of an elder, shifting her weight from one foot to the other the way she did when she was nervous. I was somewhere in between. Delu and I had the same roundness of hip and belly as our mother, but I was shorter so it showed differently on my body. Zeri was still growing into her body’s shape and appeared younger than she was. She was

born into a body of thick legs; even as a child, her thighs had rippled with beauty as she walked. We wore ceremonial tunics, embroidered with the creatures of earth, sea, and sky; dark red sashes tied beneath our breasts. All of us were crowned by our own hair, our black braids wound around our heads and pinned up in styles sacred to Dreamers.

A runner came in and whispered into Safi's ear. She inhaled sharply.

"He demands we join him at the Temple of Memory."

I looked at Safi. My mother appeared calm, but I could see the tension in her jaw, the way the vein in her throat flickered with her heartbeat. She was as frightened as the rest of us.

An Avex warrior came into the room then, her body painted with the symbols of the Twin Serpents who brought forth the waters Alcanzeh was built over. Avex protected us and the rest of the sacred city.

"We understand he refuses to meet you here. We were prepared for this and are ready," she said. "Tavovis has us standing ready at each temple; there are Avex dispersed throughout the city and watching the water canals. We have guards with Lal and Naru."

My sisters and I exchanged small smiles of pity for the warriors who thought they could guard Naru.

My mother gestured gratitude and beckoned us close as the Avex left.

"We are Dreamers," Safi said. "We are Her wisdom keepers, carriers of Her wishes. Blessed with knowing that cannot be taken, no matter what else happens. He cannot take that from us."

“The people, the beasts, the land awaken. Outside the Dream, the living is long,” my aunt Kupi murmured. Her twin Ixara picked up the refrain, my mother and sisters joining in.

“What she gives cannot be taken. We are One, a weaving, a Song.” My voice was barely above a whisper.

I swayed at the words, darkness flashing at the edges of my vision. My mother, my aunts, my sisters, they didn’t know what could be taken. I couldn’t bring myself to tell them what had been taken from me.

We emerged in a line from the Temple of Night. My mother went first, as she always did, flanked by her sisters. My sisters and I followed, Delu to my left, Zeri to my right. Avex warriors, the painted lines on their bodies shining in the torchlight, flanked us. We descended the main temple stairs. It was deep night, a time for sleeping, a time for solitude or rest with chosen beloveds. I wanted to be back in the safety of the temple, behind stone walls where curious eyes couldn’t see or judge me. Every time I left the temple, I felt exposed, watched. But I was a Dreamer. I had responsibilities, even in my fragile state. I couldn’t disappoint my mother; there had already been so many disappointments.

The Water Temple, which faced ours, was lit with torches. Lal, the council member for the Litéx, emerged, dressed for ceremony, her hair coiled high on her head, her wrists and ankles adorned with seashells and corals. She wore a tunic the same color as her skin, brown like ours but with a different warmth of color. She was from an island. Her round face was serene. She glanced my way and took in a deep breath: her way

of reminding me to breathe. She saw my chest expand and gave me a tiny nod and inhaled again deeply. I followed her breath, but the calm wouldn't come.

Lal was the main healer at the Water Temple and knew I hated leaving the Temple of Night. She joined our procession, walking with my twin aunts. I felt safer with her present.

As we walked down the carved steps that led to the Temple of Memory, we saw the city was crowded with onlookers, people who had left their homes to witness the arrival of Alcan, after years of his absence. Everyone was curious as to what sort of man he had become. The people remembered his screams as he was dragged from the city as a boy. How he had cursed his father as the warriors carried him from the only home he had ever known.

Naru waited for us, gleaming in oil and furs, the bones and teeth decorating her body stark white against her jaguar-mottled skin. She was of the Ilkan, though she had lived among us as long as I had memory. Most in Alcanzeh seemed to be equally terrified and fascinated by her.

Our ceremonial drummers stood before their drums, still. They were listening, the approaching unfamiliar rhythms calling to them. Our ceremonial dancers shuffled, unsure of what to do while our own drums were silent. There would be, it seemed, no chance to offer our dance of welcome.

Zeri gasped and gripped my hand. I followed her gaze, my hand reaching for Delu's. My older sister brushed my hand away, her posture straight, eyes focusing on the first line of Fire Warriors approaching us.

The drummers, bodies painted red and shining, came first. They were bare-chested, and not one of them had breasts or was bound. Their drums were black, the animal skin stretched over the tops dyed the red of pooling blood. They pounded their drums with bare hands, every other step they took punctuated by the bone rattles they wore on their ankles. Some wore woven headpieces, bowls of flame balanced on top. I squeezed Zeri's hand back.

The drummers parted. A whispered gasp went through those gathered; even my mother wasn't ready.

The Fire Warriors shone. There was no other word for it. They shone with terrifying power. Their faces were painted white to resemble the skulls beneath. I swayed as they approached, everything in my body screaming at me to run, disappear. I concentrated again on my breathing. I pressed my toes into the ground as Lal had taught me, to try to ground my excess energy. Zeri squeezed my hand again, for mine had gone limp in hers.

One Fire Warrior stopped in front of where we gathered, lines of his kin fanning out behind him. He held a decorated spear in each hand; matching knives hung from his hips. Burn scars ran in two swaths on each side of his head. The stiff black hair that grew from the top of his scalp hung down to the middle of his back. A black Fire Warrior tattoo encircled his neck. He stood before us, perfectly still until the drums stopped. He was the kind of man who stood in his power without the power taking over. He was comfortable in his body. Looking at him, I felt a bite of envy. The confidence of others always made me

feel small. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Delu pull herself even taller.

My mother stepped forward. Her tunic was white, the sash wound around her waist the same red as ours but woven with the Twin Serpents that encircled her body.

“Fire Warriors.” Her voice rang out over the crowd; there was no denying the power she carried. I stood up a little taller. “It has been generations since you have blessed our cities with your presence. For too long your temple has remained dark, since the sacred flames of your altars have joined ours in ceremony, in Song, in peace.” She paused, letting the words she’d chosen sink in. “In peace, we welcome you back to Alcanzeh, to the sacred city of—”

“I am your king!” a voice called out from behind the Fire Warriors. I thought I saw the spear holder flinch as he stepped aside.

The man who came forward didn’t carry himself like a warrior, though his body was strong. His posture was the posture of a trapped animal. Still, he moved forward, grinning. Half his face was painted the same skull-white as the Fire Warriors; the other half was bare. He carried some sort of heavy mallet in his hand, and he swung it in circles as he walked. It was Alcan.

Alcan looked expectant. He stared at my mother a long moment, waiting for her response. Safi’s mouth dropped open at his announcement. She said nothing. He glanced at the Fire Warrior at his side. I suppressed a smile.

“Alcan,” my mother finally said, her shoulders tensing, “welcome home to the city of your birth. We grieve with you.

Your father was a wise man, a man who followed the Dream, a man who lived his life in keeping our sacred rhythms aligned. He was a great negotiator of peace.” She gestured to the carved memory stone we were gathered before.

“Dreamers.” Alcan drew out the word in a way that made our name sound like a joke. “Keepers of sacred Alcanzeh, keepers of secrets. You served my father well, I understand. He trusted you. He kept you close.” Alcan walked over to stand before his father’s memory stone.

King Anz’s carving was taller than any living person, his profile carefully chipped into the surface, symbols of his reign surrounding him. His carving was the only one painted in the Temple of Memory; each ruler before him stood watch in effigy, weathered clean of the paint the city artists tended only for living rulers. Within seasons, King Anz’s effigy would be as colorless as the others.

Alcan paused briefly to reach up and touch the symbol that represented his mother, then stood back, taking in the entire stone. His eyes narrowed as he turned. He tried to match the power of my mother’s voice, but he had no practice.

“The Age of Absence is ending. For nearly five hundred years, we have walked the land without guidance, without our living spirits among us. The test is nearly over; we have survived, despite the mistakes of our elders and the foolishness of those who guided them.” Alcan glanced our way. I stood tall as I could, feeling the council members around me bristle, the sharp hiss of my mother’s inhaled breath. “I am here to usher in a new age. It has been foretold, another Age of Fire will arrive

in my lifetime.” The crowd rumbled. My aunts looked at each other, mouths now pressed into twin grim lines. There had already been an Age of Fire in our legends.

Everyone gathered went completely silent. Even the dogs ceased their barking. No one breathed.

Alcan turned again to his father’s effigy. The Fire Warrior at his side moved as if to stop him, but Alcan was too fast.

He lifted his mallet and smashed it across the effigy of King Anz. Once, twice, a third time, stone chips flying out and spraying all of us close by. I flinched each time, pressing myself closer to Zeri, who buried her face in my shoulder. When he was finished, his father’s face was gone.

Kupi and Ixara, the only ones who seemed able to move after the shock of Alcan’s desecration, stepped forward. Kupi smiled her dangerous smile, the one that had a knife hidden inside. My mother flinched as Kupi opened her mouth to speak, but didn’t stop her.

“Is that a tradition from the Fire Warriors, Alcan?” Her voice was low, her words weaving something I could not yet place, but I knew my aunts and their ways. The Fire Warrior who had tried to stop Alcan closed his eyes briefly, but kept his face still.

“*King Alcan*,” Alcan said, his voice as soft. Kupi wove her arm through Ixara’s.

“We have our own traditions here, Alcan, ones you were born to. Your mother was a keeper of those traditions. We still need to Dream for you, no?” Kupi said, her tongue playing at her sharp tooth. She was watching Alcan’s face to see how he reacted at the mention of his mother. I held my breath.

Everyone in Alcanzeh knew the stories about Alcan's screams and curses after his mother died. The child she had died birthing returned with her to the Dream.

"It is late, and you have traveled far." Safi stepped forward. My mother was always a peacekeeper. "The Fire Temple has been kept clean; your companions will be comfortable there, I am sure. The Temple of Day you were born in—"

Alcan interrupted her. "I will stay with my people in the Fire Temple," he said, staring at my mother.

I felt a shift in the crowd, tension snaking through everyone's bodies. Alcan was born to Alcanzeh, born with the sacred bite of the Twin Serpents on his chest. He was ours, even though he had been sent away. It had been a part of the peace negotiations his father made with the Fire Warriors to keep them from invading Alcanzeh and the lands under our protection. My mother stared back. She looked past him at the gathered crowd; she wanted calm above all else.

"It is late. May you and your companions rest well." She turned and walked back toward our home. We followed quickly, the crowd opening as we walked through. Naru of the Ilkan dropped back so she was the last of us. I heard her growl softly in her throat. Lal tried to Sing a calming Song in a high sweet voice, but the crowd was too agitated and her Song faltered. As we climbed the steps to the Temple of Night, I looked back and saw, for the first time in my life, the Fire Temple fully illuminated. It terrified me.



My mother and aunts walked directly to the main chamber of our temple. Lal, my sisters, and I followed. A temple worker with a gift for small winds was called up, and she set the air in front of the openings in motion so that no sound would enter or leave.

Lal of the Litéx, keeper of the Water Temple, knelt in front of the Twin Serpents altar that lined one wall of the room. She Sang over the bowls of water until their surfaces vibrated. She came to each of us and made us drink. She was tall, with thick, strong legs, broad-hipped and full of power. Her people were of the sea, living in islands far to the west. The Litéx were the best healers and boat makers in close kinship with those under Alcanzeh. They guided those who lived in the seas. Lal had served in Alcanzeh since adolescence, advising the council on healing ceremonies and rituals, as well as guiding those who fished the seas on the best currents, dangerous tides. Her temple workers were healers; they daily Sang morning Songs for birth and evening Songs for those who returned to the Dream. In turn, we Dreamed for their people what storms were coming, which mountains were hungry for eruption; we warned of strange tides, dangerous currents, and she sent the messages through sea traders. She usually wore her mostly black hair in a long braid that swished to her knees when she walked.

We heard Naru before we saw her.

"I do not need guarding, you fangless, soft-bodied children of men!" she snarled, bursting into the chamber, skin mottled by the heightening of her blood. Her teeth were sharp in

her mouth, musk rising from her body in sharp waves. She was as muscled as the Jaguar the Ilkan stories told they were descended from, sleek in her movements, eyes always aware and watching.

The Ilkan lived deep in the jungles somewhere far south of Alcanzeh. Naru's people had the ability to speak with the beasts of the land. When we Dreamed for the Ilkan, we spoke to the spirits of the animals they hunted or tended, bringing back strange messages we were never able to decipher, yet the messages made sense to the Ilkan. In exchange, they sent prey in the direction of hunters and provided the ceremonies held each dark moon to honor the animals killed the previous moon. Naru and any Ilkan who came to visit or train with her lived in the jungle in all seasons. They disliked stone walls and stayed close to the living earth as much as they could.

"Naru!" my mother said, waving her hands in front of her face. The rest of us coughed, eyes watering. Naru stopped and grimaced, taking a deep breath. The markings on her skin faded, her teeth lost their sharpness. Her scent softened after a moment, then disappeared.

"I don't need guarding, Safi." Naru spun to glare at the Avex she had yelled at. A young man and a young woman stood panting at the entry to the chamber. "Go, return to Tavovis, tell him I'll guard myself."

Tavovis walked into the chamber then. He dismissed the two Avex with a wave of his hand. They retreated, eyes grateful.

"You may not need guarding, Naru. I was thinking of the Fire

Warriors. Who will guard them from you?” Tavovis, leader of the Avex, smiled at her. She glowered back. Tavovis turned to my mother.

“Safi, it is worse than we thought,” Tavovis said, eyes serious. “Ovis took our best runners out tonight. There are more Fire Warriors than Avex. They are outside Alcanzeh, for now.”

I swallowed when I heard him say his son’s name. In the before, I sometimes used to late-night whisper his name at our altar, hoping to Dream him.

My aunts started a low hiss that Naru took up. Naru’s hiss was more intense; the skin on my body rippled and rose at the sound of it. Lal countered with a hum of peace. Safi pulled her lips in, proof she was truly shaken. My mother had a practiced face of strength; she showed little emotion. I hoped Tavovis would mention Ovis again, but he didn’t.

“He isn’t king yet; we need to Dream for him. I don’t know that the Dream would allow Fire Warriors to enter and reign in our city.” My mother’s voice was resolute.

“I sent messages to my people, to the Litéx and the Airan when King Anz returned to the Dream. We will require witnesses,” Naru said. A flash of annoyance crossed my mother’s features, quick as a blink. She preferred making decisions in council, but Naru refused to let anyone sway her.

“Thank you, Naru,” Ixara said.

“We cannot know what the Dream will and will not require of us, Safi,” Lal said gently, looking at me. Everyone else turned to gaze at me. My face grew hot.

“I made a promise,” I whispered. My aunts exchanged glances.

Naru hissed again. Tavovis smiled at me. I didn't look at my mother or sisters as I already knew what their faces would look like: Safi, resigned. My sisters, curious. And I was full of fear.



The night King Anz died, I woke up thrashing, tangled in my hammock. I knew myself well enough to know sleep would not return easily.

The sacred city of Alcanzeh below was quiet, the wind blowing in westward from the sea. The late spring air was fragrant with night flowers. There were hours until morning. Torches illuminated the other stone temples, serpentine shadows dancing across the carved facades. From a platform just off our chamber, I watched a runner run down the steps of the Water Temple, leaping off the last few steps and disappearing into the city. Runners had been coming and going for days. I knelt in front of our altar, dropping a dried Ayan flower onto the flame. The flower burned, sacred smoke rose, fragrant and heady. I wondered how soon King Anz would return to the Dream. The healers had been working with him for days on end. I felt the pull of a Dream come with the sacred smoke. I gasped, trying to call upon our protections before Dream took me.

I was in a swamp of dying light. I sunk knee-deep into a substance of decay. I tried to quell the bubble of panic rising. It wasn't anywhere I had been before. I had entered too suddenly, without any safety or ceremony. I tried to speak a few words of

protection, but I couldn't reach my voice. A tree rose in front of me, gnarled at the base, twisting up into a thick trunk that gave way to branches heavy with hanging leaves. The leaves moved as if each were breathing. Voices spoke out in the tone of prophecy. I felt each word thrum in my blood.

Indir, you will lose what you love most. We are sorry, but it is the only way.

I sunk deeper into the swamp. Even through the decay, I could feel living roots tendril around my feet, between my toes, pulling me gently. I didn't fight it. There was no point. I had never entered Dreaming unprotected. I was at the mercy of the Dream.

Dream for Anz, Indir. Now. The last word pounded through my entire being like a clap of thunder.

I woke up on my hands and knees, retching, my hair hanging dangerously close to the altar flame. I didn't know how long I had been gone, but the scent of Ayan smoke was still heavy in the air. I jumped up and ran out as fast as I could.

I didn't bother braiding my hair or changing out of my sleeping tunic. Had it been day, I would have never left the temple so disarrayed, but it was night, and urgency rang in my ears. I hurried down our temple stairs and ran to the Water Temple. An Avex stepped out of the shadows and blocked me as I went to climb the stairs. Her face was painted in broad white and red stripes.

"I need to Dream for the king," I said, trying to move around her. I would have usually been too nervous to speak to an Avex,

or anyone I didn't know, but Dream's voice had terrified me. I had no time to be nervous.

She moved out of my way. I ran up the steps and followed the torchlights to the back of the main temple, where the healing waters that bubbled up from the earth were the hottest.

King Anz was floating in a steaming pool; herbs and medicinal plants had been added to the water, and the chamber smelled sharp, green. Sacred smoke swirled and hung in the air, trailing out into the night through star-shaped openings in the stone ceiling. Healers held his body afloat, chanting and Singing. Council members sat on stone benches at the edge of the pool. I saw my mother and aunts. I joined them. My mother was holding a skin drum, beating out a slow rhythm. My aunts were talking to Naru of the Ilkan. Nahi, Naru's acolyte at the time, had eyes swollen and rimmed red from weeping.

"I need to Dream for King Anz; it was spoken to me in Dreaming," I said quietly, but the chamber was small and my voice echoed. King Anz lifted his head. The healers supported him as he stood in the waist-deep waters. I cringed at how thin his body had become. I could see the ladders of bones on either side of his chest. The serpent bite-shaped birthmark at the center of his chest barely stood out.

"Then Dream for me." King Anz's voice was strained. I slipped into the water and went to him. Even frail and thin, his body retained the lines of his previous strength. His wounded arm was striated with spears of black and purple extending from armpit to wrist in one direction and toward his heart in the

other. The healers brought him to the edge of the pool and propped him up. I sat beside him, holding his hand. He was a good king, flawed like all of us and aware of it.

“What would you like me to seek in Dreaming?” I had asked. He looked at the council members, his eyes softened and filled with tears.

“Leave us.” His voice was weak, but everyone rose and left. My mother stayed, her eyes flicking back and forth between us. Anz raised his eyebrows at her, and she left, glancing back at us. We were alone.

“Indir, Truth Dreamer, tell me, does my son bear the Twin Serpents’ mark?”

I blinked. Alcan had been living away from Alcanzeh for years. I held his question in my mind.

I closed my eyes, breathing in through my nose, imagining the Twin Serpents who protected us and carried our gift, awakening in my belly and heart. I exhaled through my mouth, imagining the wings of the Night Bird, who crossed from the Dream into the Waking World, unfolding from within my chest. I felt the stirrings in my blood, imagining countless tiny spiders made of light unfurling from sleep to spin webs of protection in my body. I touched my hands to my mouth and mouthed the sacred words of Dreamers; we never spoke them aloud around anyone outside of our lineage. I felt the weight of my body drop, then the rush as my mind and knowing moved from the Waking World into the Dream. I was pulled through a tunnel of vibrating light and sound.

Shapes and shadows surged around me, the hum of the eter-

nal pulsating. I looked for the entry point sacred to Dreamers, the place we could enter, be offered visions. But I couldn't find a safe way to enter the Dream. Instead, I saw the tree again. A terror rose in me. It wasn't in a swamp this time; instead, it was formed of countless points of moving light, shifting in color and shadow. Before I could approach the tree, it flowered suddenly, blossoms of every shape and size growing until they split apart, dissolving the tree. Before I could react, forms rose before me.

I had recognized Alcan immediately, nebulous as he was. He was older, but I saw the same angry look on his face I remembered from my early childhood. He was shadowed, turning this way and that. I saw another shape beneath him. He was standing on the back of another man, wisps of smoke rising from both of them. Alcan held a burning branch. He looked through me and screamed, pressing the burning end of the branch into the center of his chest. I smelled flesh burning and tried to turn away. A new shape rose up from the miasma and floated toward me, a sphere of water. At its center pulsed the Twin Serpents' bite mark, in a bloom of dappled red. Alcan flew past me, beating at the sphere with his burning branch. The shape he had been standing on rose and stepped between Alcan and the sphere. An ache started deep in my abdomen. A new shape appeared before me. It was me. I tried to cry out. The other me stared back, her surprise mirroring mine. As I reached out to touch her, the shape of Alcan surged forward; he held a knife in his hand. I stared at the stone blade as it entered my chest. I felt myself dying and tried to scream. The Dream trembled around

us, the other me opened her mouth and everything around us poured into her, splitting apart as I dissolved into darkness.



I rose up sputtering from the water I'd swallowed.

"Indir?" King Anz was breathing hard. I made my way to him. His eyes were all questions. They were wide, pupils dilated. He was full of fear. No one should die in fear. I cradled his head, feeling his skin going cold despite the heat of the pool. I concentrated on my breathing, inhaling deeply, reminding myself I was safe. I hummed myself a Song of return, of safety, but it did little to soothe me.

"The Twin Serpents' mark?" He was struggling to keep his eyes open.

"I saw Alcan, but I didn't see the mark; he was standing on the shape of another man. Alcan burned the center of his own chest."

The king's eyes went wide, his fear punctuated by a groan of regret. I touched his face.

"I saw the mark of the Twin Serpents floating in a sphere of water. Alcan tried to destroy it but couldn't; the man he was standing on was between them. I saw myself. I swallowed myself, the entire Dream," I told him. I didn't tell him I had seen Alcan killing me.

Dreaming was an imperfect gift, like all gifts, but we did what we could. The Dream showed us only what She wanted us to

see. King Anz closed his eyes and pulled me close so that my ear was close to his mouth.

“Tell no one, Indir, promise me. Never speak of this Dream, not even to the other Dreamers. But keep it in your memory, until it is needed.” He coughed. His breath smelled of sweet rot. Inside him, his blood was already dying.

“I promise.”

King Anz closed his eyes, his chest barely rising and falling. He began to slip off the steps; I heard the death rattle in his breath.

“Come back!” I cried, wrapping my arms around him just as he slipped beneath the water. Voices shouted. I was barely aware of the others that splashed into the pool around me, pushing me aside. A woman began Singing, a keening that other voices took up. Arms went around me, pulling me out of the water. My mother and aunts were beside me, their voices rising and falling in Death Song. Naru and Nahi added their voices, gasping growls that reverberated through my bones. Our king had returned to the Dream. I sat on the steps, trembling at the secret he had left me to carry alone.

CHAPTER TWO

SAYA

I landed in the Dream hard. I held my breath, hoping I wasn't in an unfriendly landscape. My body could not experience pain in the Dream, but I was so accustomed to having a body that knew pain in the Waking World, I automatically curled up to protect myself. I opened my eyes. I was in one of my favorite places, one home to generous and gentle trickster spirits. I knew the offerings I had left back on my altar had been received. Sitting up, I looked around, pretending to look for the spirits I knew were hiding, waiting to playfully attack. In many ways, these particular spirits were like small children, attention changing from one moment to the next, speaking in strange riddles I'd learned to decipher. Even if their messages didn't always make sense, the outcomes were favorable and kept my mother happy. And if my mother was happy, there were fewer tensions between us.

The landscape shifted slightly as I made my way across a flat expanse of low-growing grasses that glowed in every color imaginable. At each footstep, waves of light dispersed from my motion, same as my body as it moved through the sacred space. Above me, the sky roiled and shifted, showing a glowing blue sphere rimmed in yellow smoke. It changed into a complicated web of geometric shapes that pulsed and twisted into

complicated swirls. Spirits flitted by, some small as an eyelash, others lumbering shapes that hovered to briefly observe me with unseen eyes before moving away.

A push knocked me flat onto my face. I heard laughs and knew the spirits I had been seeking had decided to show themselves. I made a game of getting up slowly, brushing the webs of unknown substance from where they clung to my skin, fine threads of whatever the Dream was made of in that particular space.

“Saya so protected coming to ask,” a low voice hummed. I smiled, grateful. It was Yecacu, a spirit who loved the offerings I left. I looked toward Yecacu and waited a moment for her to shift into her familiar shape, a strange combination of some kind of Jaguar spirit and the long legs of a hooved creature I did not recognize. Yecacu had grown her ears long and tall. Smaller spirits, shaped like frogs, clung to Yecacu’s ears, chirping a Song in unison. I didn’t know their names. My mother had warned me about becoming too familiar with spirits, never asking their names. Yecacu was one of a few who had offered. My hand went to the protection necklace I had worn since birth. The stones were cool; they only warmed when I was being threatened and rarely in Dreaming.

“Yecacu.” I opened my hands in gratitude. “Little friends.” The frog spirits chirped their greeting back.

“Nuts and grains and sweet filled leaves and a stone painted in stars,” Yecacu began, listing the items I’d placed on the altar before slipping into the Dream. “Nothing living, not a drop of blood.” Yecacu’s eyes stared into mine, asking. I shook my head.

“I cannot offer blood,” I said softly, never knowing how a spirit would react. I touched my necklace; it remained cool. Yecacu shifted for a moment into a blur of light, then re-formed.

“The nuts were enough,” Yecacu sighed. The frog spirits in her ears chirped again.

“I’m living in a village of wanderers, rooted for now. What stories do you know?” It was a careful way of asking what information could be freely offered to me, for me to take back to the Waking World.

“Saya so protected doing the bidding of that woman.” Yecacu stared at me. I looked away. The spirits didn’t like my mother, Celay, and always made a point to tell me.

“She lost her gift when she birthed me,” I said. She never failed to remind me. Yecacu stomped her feet and the frog spirits whistled sharply enough for me to cover my ears, though it didn’t help. In Dreaming, every sensation took over the entire body.

“Stole,” the frog spirits chirped. Yecacu flicked her ears and the frog spirits were flung off. They immediately sprouted transparent wings and flew away, chirping the entire time. We watched them go.

“Gossips,” Yecacu muttered and turned her dizzying gaze back on me. “Stories then, for your offerings.” She listed off small pieces of information about the villagers. An older woman with a bad cut on her foot that would poison her blood; Yecacu showed me the root that would heal her. A child had developed nightmares after being subject to his sibling’s rage; the child needed a cleansing, as did the sibling. She went

on and on, offering strange messages to people I lived among but barely knew.

“Thank you for these stories,” I said when I thought she had finished. Yecacu pawed the ground.

“There is more, but I am not the one to tell you,” she growled, turning to lick her shoulder with her bright red tongue. She hacked a few times and spit out a mouthful of hair.

“And all the stories you’ve offered me will bring no harm?” I prodded. I had no reason not to trust Yecacu, but it was something I always asked. I had learned the hard way.

“No harm, Saya. Though you are being harmed, you know,” Yecacu said. Another reference to my mother.

“She protects me,” I said. It was what I always said. It was what Celay always said.

“Where else will you go?” Yecacu asked. She knew I would say no more about my mother.

I thought. There were countless places to visit in the Dream. As a child, I had been able to access only safe places full of kind and playful spirits. I had met Yecacu there first. When my bleeding arrived three years ago, I was able to visit different worlds within Dreaming, though some terrified me. I was wary of exploring.

“The cove,” I said. Yecacu raised a hoof as I slipped from her chosen landscape. The light surrounding me was a mass of pale and bright green clouds that seemed to shine and throb with power from within. The air tasted the way a lightning storm smelled, like scent from a fire that burned on no fuel but itself. I spun through, relishing the pull on all my senses until

they dissolved into one, a vibration that pulsed and sang in my entire being.

I landed in the cove with a splash that sent ripples glowing out to sea and toward the shore. I floated on my back a long while, staring up at the ever-shifting space above me. It was deeper, endlessly more beautiful than the sky in the Waking World. I felt shapes in the water beneath me, quick pecks at the skin of my legs that tickled. Something with a hot mouth began to lick at my toes. I kicked out gently and whatever spirit it was swam away. I moved my arms until I was drifting further out, the water growing slightly cooler around me as it deepened. Away from the shore, ears submerged as I floated on my back, I could make out voices beneath the water, scraps of Songs and mating calls, a lament or two.

A spirit shaped like a bird drifted slowly above me on out-stretched wings. I was as long as one of her feathers. No air stirred, but she glided, looking down with bright yellow eyes. I felt her gaze on me, reading me, seeing what I had to offer. Nothing. I had no other gifts to exchange but my strange ability to enter the Dream. A gift no one in the Waking World knew about except my mother.

The bird turned a slow circle in the air, leaving a trail of dissolving light behind her. She floated over me again. I breathed in and out, waiting for her to speak. I knew I could leave at any moment I wanted, but I was as curious about her as she seemed to be about me. There were no birds that large in the Waking World, not in any of the places my mother and I had traveled. If

there were stories about birds like her in our world, I had never heard them told. The bird opened her mouth to speak.

“She is coming, Saya. Let yourself be found,” the bird said. Nearby, a whale-shaped spirit breached, sending a series of small waves toward me. One splashed over my head. I sputtered and kicked my legs beneath me. When I looked up again, the bird was gone.

It was odd but not entirely out of the ordinary for Dreaming. Spirits wanted messages delivered; sometimes they offered me messages. I sensed there were more powerful beings inhabiting the Dream; I felt the displacement of them, spaces I could not enter though I was pulled toward them. My mother insisted I interact and exchange only with those satisfied by small, relatively simple offerings. The bird had asked for nothing; it was something I wouldn’t mention to Celay when I returned. I was learning which silences suited us best, which secrets were my own.



I felt my body tense when I returned to the Waking World. I kept my eyes closed and my breathing as even as I could. I knew Celay would be watching, waiting. She had a sense as to when I would return. I felt her hand on my back, a soft stroke. As a small child, when I returned from Dreaming, I would flail and scream, shocked at the weight of my body again, the abruptness of my senses frightening me. I preferred the Dream. She always placed hands on me to calm me. I was curious as to why

she continued to do so as I grew older but didn't ask, afraid she would stop. It was the only time my mother touched me with tenderness.

"You're back," Celay said. I sat up and drank the cup of water she offered. I always returned from the Dream thirsty. I swished the water around in my mouth before swallowing.

"Yecacu," I said. "And the frog spirits that live on her ears, but they were being annoying, and Yecacu sent them flying away." I knew Celay loved the stranger details from Dreaming; she loved the descriptions of the spirits.

"I didn't know they flew." Celay's voice was soft.

"They did when I saw them." I kept my tone playful. I'd noticed Celay's restlessness the past moon; her moods were unpredictable. If Celay was in a foul mood, she would accuse me of trying to make her jealous, and I would have a day of tension ahead of me. "Yecacu told me stories." I recounted most of what Yecacu had told me, but some of the stories involved things I wouldn't tell Celay. A woman living near us wanted to give birth and would require the help of a spirit. I knew Celay would take that information and use it to manipulate the young woman and her chosen. I didn't know them well, but they had always seemed friendly to me.

I gave her as many details as I could. She would get angry if she missed something, and I would be the target of her rage. I could tell she was distracted. It made me nervous.

"Eat something and prepare the basket." Celay looked at where our food supplies hung suspended from the ceiling of our home. There were bundles of dried fish and meat,

bunches of roots and other dried vegetables. Enough food to last a season, but Celay lived two patterns I had grown to know too well. In one, we found a place to live, made a home, stored food, found ways to use my gift to our benefit, without revealing anything of ourselves. After settling into a rhythm—sometimes it took a moon, sometimes several seasons—Celay would grow suddenly frantic and insist we pack only what we needed. We would head toward the smaller trade routes without saying goodbye to anyone we knew. The times we were traveling, Celay was bolder in using my gift to convince those we met that she had a gift, one she refused to name.

We had been in our current home, a small haven composed of people who wandered, a place of temporary rest, for a full cycle of seasons. It was the longest we had stayed anywhere. I was trying to mentally prepare myself for our next season of wandering.

I went outside to the cooking fire behind our small home, set back from the rest of the inhabitants. The previous occupant had been an elder, once a trader until she'd grown too tired to keep moving. She had been known for finding seeds and knowing how to tend them, spreading different kinds of seeds along her trade routes. Before her death, she'd spent several seasons planting and tending different seeds from her journeys. We had come through a few moons after her death and taken up residency in the hut. I was fascinated by the plants the woman had tended and tried to keep them alive. I had mostly succeeded and was dreading the day Celay announced our departure. I wanted to stay long enough to see what I had tended bloom

and give sustenance. I was surprisingly good at working with the plants, convincing them to grow in a strange landscape they had no memory for. Another elder had teased me that perhaps I did have a gift. Celay thought it had something to do with my real gift. I didn't correct her. Tending the plants was the one place in the Waking World where I felt at peace.

Celay motioned me to follow her just after midday. I sighed and lifted the heavy basket. I had found the root Yecacu had shown me in Dreaming, growing among the plants I tended. I hadn't known its use before and was grateful for the knowledge. Besides the root, the basket had Celay's tools, little tricks she used to convince others of her gift. As a child, I thought it was a game we played, telling stories to people so that they would give us things. The better the story, the more we received. Celay would then praise me after we had been given our bounty. They were offerings from people who were desperate.

We walked straight to the home of the elder with the cut on her foot. Celay shook a bracelet made of bones three times, a signal she used to let people know she carried a message for them. A few people stopped what they were doing to come see. It was part of her plan; the more who witnessed Celay using her gift, the more they trusted us and would make offerings to us. The woman limped out of her house, squinting in the light.

"The cut will not heal on its own," Celay said dramatically. "The spirits have sent you a gift to keep your blood from poisoning you." She shook the bone bracelet thrice again.

The woman's eyes widened; she chanted what sounded like

gratitude in a language I didn't know. I felt my face grow hot. I disliked large displays of emotion. I was always punished for mine. Celay seemed to enjoy emotion in others though, and turned her face kind, opening her arms wide.

"A gift, sister, though I had to search my memories long to see where to find this gift." She motioned to me. I kept my face carefully blank as I approached Celay. I reached into the basket and pulled out the root. Celay had wrapped it in woven cloth before we left our home, tying small charms around it so that the root rattled. Celay bowed her head deeply as she took the root from me and walked slowly with it in her two outstretched hands, tilting her head back and calling out loudly.

"We thank you for this gift. And I thank you for allowing me to be the one to bridge this world to what the spirits want." It wasn't untrue. She was grateful. She didn't have to do work to secure food for either of us or help in other ways. She claimed she needed large swaths of time uninterrupted in order to receive messages. If there was work that required help, I was the one who would go. Celay forbade me from talking to anyone outside of common courtesies. I pretended to be shy, though I ached for connection with others. Life with my mother was lonely.

The elder took the root and unwrapped it, careful to keep the charms. She examined the root. It was as long as her hand and half the width. Knobby tendrils protruded like hairs.

"What do I do with it?" the elder asked. I felt weak. I hadn't asked Yecacu how the root was to be used. A very important detail. I saw Celay's body tense. I looked at the root and noticed it had a familiar shape, though the color was different,

like that of a root we used to clear coughs. It also looked like a root Celay had shown me, one to induce strange visions in those who consumed it.

“You will make an infusion of it, to drink,” Celay replied. I gasped. The woman stared at me, then back to Celay. My mother turned to look at me, her eyes cold and full of anger. She kept her face calm, but I could tell by the clench of her jaw that she was enraged. I kept my face serene while everything in me flooded with panic. I didn’t know anything about the root. I hadn’t asked Yecacu, and she hadn’t offered any information. A dangerous mistake. If Celay was wrong, she could kill the woman. I swallowed. I knew what it meant. Celay never stayed close when she made a dangerous mistake.

The woman limped inside and returned with a bracelet made of polished black stones, cut into rough spheres with intricate carvings. Celay took it and put it in the basket, and we continued.

It was a temporary place; it would last several cycles of seasons perhaps, if sickness, drought, or flood didn’t come through. The lands we lived in were full of dangerous and unpredictable seasons. There were more established places we could live, communities that had existed for generations and had stone temples carved by unknown ancestors. However, Celay hated cities, and we had avoided them my entire life. I didn’t think I would ever get close to one, not while Celay had any control over me.

We stopped at a few more homes, offering quiet advice to the family with the sons who needed cleansing. I waited outside while Celay did what she did. If she had any gift, besides her ability to deceive others, it was that she knew how to cleanse.

Everyone had a knowing of how to cleanse, but Celay had gathered knowledge across the lands we had wandered and knew several ways to rid a body of nightmares, fevers, skin reactions, and other small maladies.



We were walking back to our home when someone called out. I stopped, grateful. I was not looking forward to returning home with Celay. Her anger had simmered as the day had passed. I had hoped the abundance of offerings we had been given in exchange for her messages would have calmed her. It hadn't. In my mind, I was already going over what I wanted to carry with me when we left.

The voice belonged to Ruta, the young woman Yecacu had told me needed a spirit to help conceive a child. She was near my age and lived with her mate Kinet. I knew Kinet had once been a trader and that Ruta was from a coastal people. She wove nets better than anyone.

"Celay, I need your help," Ruta panted. I noticed there were dark circles under her eyes, her face pale. Her tunic hung loosely on her frame. She had been unwell recently, which explained why her skin had paled and her usually well-braided black hair was pulled back into a messy knot that hung limply over her shoulder.

"Ruta, of course." Celay stood still, not seeming to notice how tired Ruta was. I pulled a small gourd from the basket of offerings. It had been given to us by a woman whose boil Celay

had pierced. I filled it with an energizing blend of herbs I knew Celay liked to drink in the morning. My mother was already angry with me, and I felt sorry for Ruta.

“Here, please, drink this.” I handed Ruta the gourd. She turned grateful eyes on me and drank deeply. Celay didn’t look at me. She didn’t have to. I knew exactly how she felt. Ruta handed me the empty gourd and smiled at me. Her eyes were full of something I wanted more of, gratitude, a recognition. Kindness.

“What is it you need?” Celay asked. Ruta’s color was already improving after the drink; it must have been a potent brew. I knew Celay noticed too.

“Come, you’ll be more comfortable in our home,” I said, offering my arm out to Ruta. She looked surprised but linked her arm through mine. Anything to delay Celay’s punishment.



Though there was still daylight enough to see inside, Celay lit the wicks of two bowls of oil. The flames gave off a pungent smoke due to the herbs Celay had let soak in the oil. Ruta sat on a folded blanket I set up beside the altar. It was a small altar, home to no specific spirit. It held what all altars held: a bowl of water, a source of flame, earth, and something that could be used to produce sound. Ours had a carved whistle. Celay placed one bowl of flame on the altar and offered Ruta a cup of water. She accepted. I waited to see what Celay would ask of me, to leave or attend. I thought she would ask me to leave

as punishment, but I was surprised when she pointed at the ground beside her. I sat.



Ruta held her hands briefly over the flame on the altar and pressed them to her eyes. We stayed silent while she held whatever moment of ritual she needed. She turned to us.

“My body cannot hold a child,” she said softly. A wave of despair rose in me. I knew there was nothing Celay loved more than acting as spiritual midwife for those wishing to give birth. She claimed she had served at Night Bird ceremonies before I was born. I didn’t know if I believed her, though she did seem to have knowledge in that particular area.

“You know whatever I do may take time. It will require extended work for me, long periods of contemplation and solitude.” Celay was preparing Ruta for service. A part of me was frustrated. I knew exactly what Ruta needed, and I could help her, but my mother would never allow it. The other part of me was grateful, because it meant we would stay where we were long enough to collect whatever Celay felt was owed to her before helping Ruta.

“We are prepared. Kinet knows how badly I want to give birth. We have much to offer in gratitude,” Ruta said. Celay nodded. I could see she was pleased.

“Saya, bring me the birthing basket, the red one.”

I lifted the large basket from the hook it hung from and brought it to Celay. She rummaged through until she found

what she was looking for. I kept my face still, but inside I was screaming at my mother. I could see the hopeful look in Ruta's eyes. It broke my heart. The bunch of dried yellow flowers my mother handed Ruta were used to prevent birth or conception. I stared at the ground. I didn't understand Celay's motives.

Ruta took the bunch of flowers. She held her hands above the altar again for a moment and then turned to Celay with tears in her eyes.

"Thank you, Celay," she said.

"I am only the messenger; your gratitude shall go to the spirits," Celay said. She never specified any spirits, though we lived among those who had their beliefs in spirits. I knew they were real, as did everyone. We saw them interplay in our lives in small ways, but it had been generations since they had moved among us.

Ruta thanked us again and left. Celay was silent a long while, too long. I tried to prepare myself for what was coming.

"Do you know what I have sacrificed to keep you safe?" Her voice was low, each word said with precision. "My gift? I gave you my protection. You wear it. Without that, you would be dead, swallowed by the Dream. I've seen it."

The same words had been repeated to me so many times my entire life that they felt like truth. I tried to reason with myself. My mother lied to others constantly, small lies, lies that changed entire lives; why wouldn't she lie to me?

"We could have told the elder we needed her to sleep with the root one night, and we'd bring her the knowledge of how to use the root tomorrow," I said. I was tired. We had spent the entire

day among people. I had barely eaten anything. After leaving the elder, Celay had told every person we met with that I was fasting while she ate what they offered. I was concerned about the elder. It was the kind of mistake that could change, or in this story, end a life.

“It was your mistake, Saya. If anything happens to that woman, it will be because of what you failed to do.” Celay fell into a familiar pattern.

She ignored me while I made myself a small meal. I was waiting for her punishment. It could be anything; something in my drinking cup that would make my stomach cramp terribly but briefly, taking away my sleeping blankets, or a bowl of water splashed over my head in the night. I tried not to react to her punishments anymore, but she always found a way to make me uncomfortable, to bring me pain.

I knew no other life.

I was starting to wish I did.