

“It’s impossible to miss something you’ve never had, right?” Elziri said, looking up at Zaya.

“Not necessarily.” Zaya replied, washing her hands in the crystal clear brook. “There’s certainly a difference between missing and longing. It’s natural for a baby bird to long for the sky, but a caged bird would miss it.”

“You don’t get it, though, do you? The missing or the longing.”

Zaya smiled at her. “No, I don’t. I’m happy here.”

She stood from where they sat by the shallow stream, drying her hands on her plain linen skirt. Elziri stood as well, feeling soft grass beneath her feet. The grass then transitioned to cobblestones as they routinely made their way to kneel by the wooden bean bed.

Elziri looked at the overcast sky and the thought crossed her mind, as it always did in the colder months, how lucky they all were to have Zaya. She stroked a fragile green leaf. The lack of sun would have shriveled them up if Zaya hadn’t been here to help them along.

Zaya brushed her hand away. “Careful. They’re fragile.”

Elziri didn’t see how it mattered, but sat back to let her work.

Closing her eyes, Zaya reached out to the nearest plant and placed her hands in the dirt. She hesitated, and Elziri wondered if this would finally be the day when she was unable to do it. Then the tattoos on each of Zaya’s hands began to glow softly green. The plant shuddered with life, sprouting flowering buds from the end of each limb. Every flower sprouted a bulbous green pod. Then the petals cascaded to the ground, and the plant hung heavy with the weight of its fruit.

Elziri watched, ever mystified, as Zaya's tattoos faded back to dark brown. The designs were impossibly intricate, full of flowers, roots, and other symbols of her gift. Her *koesh*, as Frost had called it. According to her, they were all Koeshi; human, but not.

Human, but more.

No one knew where she had acquired this information, but since they had no other sources of input, they grew up believing her.

Elziri began plucking pods, breaking the shells and piling the beans in an iron pot. Zaya repeated the growing process on a second plant.

"But it raises the question," Zaya said as she finished.

Elziri recalled their past conversation. Zaya had a habit of jumping from topic to topic, as if she were having one conversation in her mind and one with Elziri, and the two were only loosely intertwined. "If the bird was born in a cage, how could it still wish to fly?"

She looked at her. "We weren't all born here. That would be impossible."

"If we have no memories of anywhere else, isn't that basically the same thing?"

Elziri put the last bean in the pot and stood, wandering over to the shimmering barrier at the end of the bean bed, where the cobblestone broke off into nothingness. She leaned her forehead against the transparent, unbreakable wall of their cage; the Bubble, as they had named it years before.

She gazed down at the untouchable world hundreds of feet below. At this deadly height, she could see hundreds of miles to a distant mountain range. In another direction, the ocean and its boundless horizon. And directly below them, a pine forest, and a glistening blue lake. But she would never swim in that lake, and she could never climb those mountains, or set foot in that ocean.

She sighed. “But if the bird had a window... and she knew what she was missing...”

Zaya spoke carefully, lifting up the pot of beans. “I guess it would depend on the bird. Some would still be content with the warmth and safety of the cage.”

Elziri turned in distress. “I’m not content. I want to be out there.”

Zaya turned away, carrying the pot to the black wood stove, which stood against the only standing wall in the space; a stone structure, crumbling at the edges. She set the pot heavily on the stove, filling it with water from the ceramic pitcher. “I don’t think it matters much, seeing as we don’t have a key.”

Elziri hated to be reminded, but appreciated the honesty. “You’re right. As always.”

She sat on the edge of the bean bed. Zaya placed a lid on the beans and turned toward her, crossing her thin arms. “Is that why no one ever listens to me?”

She shrugged. They both laughed.

“How’s it going in here?”

Frost floated in from the hallway behind the stove, hovering a few inches off the ground. None of them, not even Frost herself, knew just how she had become trapped in the Bubble as a ghost, but there seemed to be no other plausible explanation. Her hair and clothes swished and rippled without need of wind, and her skin had a faded blue glow. They speculated her soul had perhaps become trapped as the Bubble was forming, like an unsuspecting fish in a net. However the situation came to be, she was the irreplaceable matriarch of the household.

Elziri stood to meet her.

“Good, we were just starting the beans for dinner.” Zaya said.

“Lovely.” Frost said, drifting to the stove to inspect their work. “It’s a little early to be starting dinner, don’t you think?”

Zaya clasped her hands behind her back, looking at Elziri for confirmation. She nodded.

“We wanted to have time to cook rice, too.”

“What’s the special occasion?”

“Nothing in particular.” Zaya said. “We just haven’t had any in a while.”

“That’s fine with me, I suppose. Don’t use too much.”

“I won’t.” Zaya assured her, then slipped down the hall in the direction of their small storage room, where a half-empty barrel of rice was stored.

Frost turned to Elziri. “Would you go get Medon and Evren? I need to talk to you all.”

“About what?”

She waved her hand dismissively. “Oh, various things. You’ll see.”

This wouldn’t be the first time Frost had undermined something of importance. Elziri wondered what it would be this time.

Frost looked her up and down, frowning. “And quit growing, will you? It’s hard enough with the boys sprouting up like trees, I don’t need to start looking up at you too.”

Elziri suppressed a grin. “Will do.”

She left to find the trees. They were usually lounging in the library at this time of day. Evren had an obsession with books that she would never understand. They didn’t have a large collection, a couple hundred books at most, but there could have been thousands for how much time he spent reading.

The library bordered the edge of the Bubble, just like the garden. It was the biggest room in the Bubble, and the only one with carpet. It might have been twice as large before the barrier formed and sliced off the other half. There was a strong scent of slightly musty parchment and burning candles upon entering.

The room faced the north, so it was sheltered from the sun, but Evren preferred it that way. He said too much light would damage the books. No one questioned how he knew this, as he claimed to have a spiritual connection with the pages.

Evren was stretched out on his stomach in the middle of the floor, chewing on the end of a pencil. A large book was spread out in front of him, next to the stub of a melting candle. His eyes darted across the pages with unbroken concentration.

She leaned against the doorway. Evren remained unaware. She shifted to make her shadow fall across his page. Only then did he look up, a pleasant expression softening his face when he realized who it was. He removed his pencil from his mouth. "What's up?"

"What are you reading?"

He held his page with one hand and checked the spine as if he had already forgotten.
"Daren Brimstone and the Devil's Sea."

She smiled. "Again?"

He shrugged. "It never gets old."

"Where's Medon?"

"Probably sulking somewhere in a corner. His pride's still wounded from the other day."

She glared. "If his pride's that fragile maybe he shouldn't put so much of it on his sleeve."

"Try telling him that."

She exhaled. "I don't want to make it worse."

He turned his gaze back to his book, casually flipping the page. "You could try apologizing."

“For what? He was the one who-” She stopped as he looked up at her. “Fine,” she lamented. “I’ll go talk to him.”

She turned to leave, then looked over her shoulder. “Frost wants everyone to come to the kitchen.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, she said ‘we’d see’.”

He snorted. “I’ll finish this chapter.”

She left to find Medon, wandering down the cool, shady hallway towards their bedrooms. The hall was one of the only rooms in the Bubble where the ceiling hadn’t caved in, which was more evidence of Elziri’s theory that their floating home had been ripped from the ground. By who or what? She had no idea, but it couldn’t have been an accident.

As she walked, she relived the incident two days before. Once again, Medon had carelessly been experimenting with his *koesh*, which allowed him to transform into any animal he chose. This time he chose a hawk, and had been about to fly directly into the bean bed. She’d walked into the garden in the nick of time and, reacting on instinct, used her own *koesh*. She had saved one of their only food sources, but ended up accidentally throwing Medon into the stream.

Of course she was guilty, but if she was being honest she was more terrified than anything. She rarely used her *koesh* in the first place, but now she saw it in a different light. It was more powerful—more dangerous—than she could handle.

Even so, she hated to apologize, especially to Medon. She took a long breath in preparation but suddenly the ground trembled beneath her. She was thrown off balance, and her head smacked the wall. Through blurred vision, she saw rocks crumbling from the ceiling. Evren

had told them about earthquakes from one of his books, but how could one be happening up here? She had to find Frost.

In the garden, Evren and Zaya were on their knees, scooping half-cooked rice from the cobblestones. The pot of beans had rolled into the bean bed, scattering its contents over the floor.

Medon stumbled in, his dark hair disheveled. "What's happening?"

Frost flew into the room. "Is everyone alright?"

They all nodded, even as blood dripped down Elziri's head.

"Good," Frost said, too distracted to notice. "Elziri...come with me."

"Just me?"

Another tremor shook the Bubble, sending them all tumbling to the ground. A deep crack appeared in the cobblestones, and the stream sloshed onto the grass. Frost hovered around them frantically, unable to touch them in her ghostly form. Elziri got up, heart racing. The ground was slightly tilted against the horizon, as if something had knocked the Bubble off kilter.

"Yes, just you!" Frost stressed.

"But-"

"Hurry! Everyone else, get in the pantry and close the door."

Frost led her to the eastern edge of their enclosure to an empty, crumbling room that generally went unused. At this time of day, the room was completely enclosed in shadow. A layer of dust had long settled on the floor, but an eerie wind was pushing it into the air. The Bubble didn't get wind.

Elziri stopped outside the door, too terrified to enter. "Frost, what's in there? Will I need my *koesh*?"

Frost looked at her gravely. "Yes, Elziri. Let's just hope it's enough."

Elziri had never heard such fear in her voice. “Enough for what?”

“See for yourself.”

Elziri’s hair was blown back as she entered, and she got her first taste of the outside world. It was all she had ever dreamed of, in all the wrong ways.

The Bubble was cracking open.