A Home for Fire: One - Ember

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Summary

A legend is what has brought Sabo, Robin and Koala to a long lost city hidden deep within the jungle. What will Sabo find, though, when he sneaks into the city's temple? Because every tale holds a shred of truth - and sometimes that truth turns life upside down.

Notes

Well, it took me a while to finish, but this is my project for the One Piece Big Bang. It was an amazing experience to write something for this event, and a HUGE THANK YOU goes out to my lovely partner @motolokiev!! Thank you for all your support, the ideas, suggestions and constructive criticism, the times you listened to me throwing ideas around as well as your enthusiasm and patience! I had the best of times working and creating this AU (and others) with you!!

You can find their absolutely gorgeous art throughout the story as well as on their tumblr. Please check it out and give it some love!!

And now enough of the talk and please enjoy the story!! :3
The fingers around his shoulder tightened, never releasing their menacing, bone-crushingly strong grip, and suddenly the spot, where they touched, started turning cold. Not any cold, no. Not the gentle cool of a light evening breeze rustling the leaves after a hot summer day. And not the soft, sparkling cold of snowflakes falling on skin either. It was a freezing cold, like a thick-walled prison of ice greedily sucking all warmth from a living being’s every fibre. The icy cold of darkness, with no spark of light to brighten and warm it. Just deep nothingness, despair and the lack of something, something that had once warmed him.

He tried to breathe, blowing his lungs wide, lips forming around a gust of air that never came. The sheer panic running up his spine was just as biting cold as the grip on his shoulder, and just as relentless. And then it started. The tingling sensation spread all over, tiny icy needles pricking every
inch of him before he was ripped apart, his astral form, the living breathing fire that he was, twisted, distorting in every direction as his power was sucked out of him.

His vision blurred, spots danced before his eyes, moments of blindness cut in between, and slowly his warmth, his fiery soul, was pulled away from him.

As he stumbled backwards in an attempt to free himself from the vice-like grip, and the greedily sucking darkness absorbing all of his fire, he wondered how it had turned out like this, when he had been the one who had come down to seal his powers. He had failed, had hesitated a moment too long, and had let fear and doubt prevail his actions.

Sealing another god’s power was a bargain; an offering had to be made in order to keep the natural balance. He had come down from Heaven with every intention to do so, determined to forsake everything that was dear to him, turn his back on his home and give up his eternal life, which knew no sickness, no frailty, no weakness, no fatigue.

But accepting and embracing humanity had suddenly seemed like a terribly frightening thing to do. He, however, had not hesitated, and had taken full advantage, seeing his chance, making use of the powers he had stolen—powers that had once belonged to their brother.

He groaned when there was only one last spot of him which glowed brightly inside, defying the inevitable, the centre of his power, the spot on the left side of his chest. In a last desperate attempt he moved his arm mechanically. His fingers were stiff, the feeling unfamiliar, joints and muscles and tendons refusing to work properly now that he had them. Gravity was his opponent, the strain in his limbs his foe, and when his hand finally clenched around his arm, or would have had the difference between them not been as vast as the ocean, his fingers grabbed at nothing but icy thin air, black smoke curling upward.

His eyelids were heavy, his head dizzy, and his legs refused to carry him. He took another step back without wanting to, feeling an edge beneath his bare heel. Next thing he knew, he lost his balance, lips forming around a shouted ‘No’ but no sound found its way up his throat.

He fell. The bitter certainty of failure replaced his fire as the last shred of his powers left him, now glowing brightly in the traitor’s hand. He saw him smile smugly—triumphantly even.

“Sleep well, your Grace,” his raspy, surreal voice reached his ears.

And he wanted to curse and threaten him, wanted to snatch his powers back and reverse their roles, wanted him to be the one feeling frail and helpless, falling into uncertainty.

His back hit the water’s surface hard, but what took his breath away was not the force of the impact. No, what made his lungs inflate and his breath catch in his throat was the cold that claimed every fibre of his being.

He saw him standing at the edge, watching, his eyes full of glee, a perfect accompaniment for his foul, rotten smile. The eerie grin of a traitor, a murderer, of blasphemy’s despicable servant. He had desecrated what was sacred, had coveted another’s power and position, and had disrupted the natural order, driven by his greed.

He wanted to scream, his throat burned to let loose a blood-curdling war cry; but to what end? The water’s cold was already seeping into his limbs; his body refused to obey, stiff and limp—tired.

The water’s surface crashed closed above him, his body sinking deeper, eagerly swallowed by the suffocating mass pressing in on him from all sides. No breath went past his lips anymore, no sound
reached his ears; all was numb, numb and tired. Why was he so tired? Was it because he had been robbed of his powers? Or...was he about to die?

What little had remained of his conscience struggled to stay awake. A futile effort, and far too late.

He sank further into the water's depths, his vision blurred, the traitor nothing but a looming, smudged shadow beyond the surface. His eyelids slid closed, the darkness at the edge of his mind closing in further before it swallowed all of him.

In the east, dawn had set the skies on fire.
Sweat covered his brow, forearms and the small part of his chest that was exposed. He had unfastened the two upper buttons of his shirt in a feeble attempt to find some relief in the sweltering, humid heat of the jungle. It was like the bathhouses back home, the surrounding air thick with moisture, clinging to his skin like a second layer, damp and sticky.

He wiped his forehead with his sleeve, no longer caring about adding another stain to his clothing already torn and even singed in places, sighing when, even for just a moment, he felt a little lighter, a little less drenched, before he glanced around. Sea blue eyes scanned the surrounding vegetation, trained to distinguish between what was important, foreign and unknown, and what he had come across already. The tip of his tongue flicked over his lips, the means of the action unnecessary in such a humidity but a force of habit whenever he tried to concentrate.

There were trees everywhere, small and large ones, and ferns and bushes were scattered all along the ground, eager to catch what little sunlight trickled through the thick roof of leaves above with exotic plants in various shapes and vibrant colours dotting the branches winding through the air.

This place was a gigantic green maze, a mysterious being with a lifetime’s worth of secrets, secrets he longed to discover and reveal.

“Sabo!”

He blinked, brow furrowed, a bead of sweat trickling down his neck, ears straining to hear, but there was nothing; no unusual song of a bird he had not yet heard nor the rustling of dead leaves and undergrowth nor the hissing and growling of a larger creature. Just footsteps—hurried ones—as she wended her way through the jungle towards him.

The vegetation was nothing new either; its characteristics and peculiarities were already catalogued in his sketchbook. In their little group, Koala was the one in charge of storing the most important specimen and she did so with great care and enthusiasm and a lot of help from the five locals on their team.

“Geez, Sabo. Answer me!” Koala’s voice rang out again, the slightest edge of worry in her tone.

“I’m here, I’m here,” he said, but kept his eyes trained on the brush, hoping her approach would startle something out of its hiding place.

A moment later she stood in his path, swatting a low hanging branch out of the way before stopping, gloved hands settling on her hips in an almost accusing manner, an annoyed snort coming out of her nose.
“Why do you always have to venture out on your own, huh?” she asked, cocking her head to the
side, anger making room for a darker shade of worry in her big blue eyes.

“I could’ve still gone on for a couple of miles,” he tried defending himself, shrugging a bit stubbornly, and her shoulders tensed, chest rising with the deep breath she took, probably to calm herself as well as prepare for a well-meant scolding.

“Yes, but we are making camp and so are you,” she said with a lot of emphasis on the last part, her gaze unwavering as it held Sabo’s. But after a moment she added in a lighter tone, “Just think of the consequences for all of us, as well as this expedition, if you got lost.” She pushed her lips outward into a pout, blinking furiously.

He stared for a moment, taken aback by the abundance of emotion in her voice before his shoulders slumped and a slight pinch of shame squeezed his heart. With an apologetic smile on his face he walked over to her, nudging her shoulder with his upper arm.

“I know, I know,” he said. “It just seems like we’re not making any progress at all.”

She sighed before jabbing at his chest with a few hard stabs of her finger. “At least take me with you next time you venture off on your own. You’re not the only one who’s curious.”

Sabo blinked again, this time honestly surprised, and then he broke into a wide grin, which crinkled the corner of his eyes. “Will do,” he promised.

“You better!” she warned but with an equally broad smile curling her lips. “Let’s head back, then. We should set up camp before it starts raining.”

They both turned their faces towards the sky, spotting a few shreds of blue, but Sabo had already noticed that it had grown darker since he had left the others, which certainly hadn’t been too long ago, a clear sign that the daily thunderstorm was approaching to drown the world in its floods.

While they had been on the little steamboat that had taken them upstream and deeper into the jungle, they hadn’t been bothered by the weather’s daily outbursts. However, the moment they had left the sheltering roof of their boat and set foot in the jungle’s ground to start the real journey, they had realised that it was impossible to carry on while the tropical thunderstorm was raging, with rain pouring down hard and incessantly, looking like billowing white curtains hanging over the deep green sea of trees. Within seconds the soft ground of the animal trails they were following turned into a path of slippery mud, hungrily swallowing their every step, and it simply made no sense to waste their energy trying to get through unscathed.

After the first two days on foot, their Jayan colleagues had admitted that it was the raining season and thus probably the worst time of the year to explore the jungle. But even if they had pointed this problem out beforehand, it would not have altered their plans in any way, since this was the agreement which they had made with Goa Kingdom’s Geographical Society. Delaying their journey for what would have been two or three months was not included in their funding, and would most likely have left them with barely a dime in their pocket when they would have finally set off. Aside from that, the next group of eager explorers was surely already on its way to the other side of the world now that their plans had been revealed to the public, with a headline in big, bold letters on the front page of the capital’s most read newspaper the day they had departed.

So time clearly was not their ally, and the only thing working in their favour was their thorough planning, although there were some in their line of work who certainly weren’t afraid to simply start out with rough outlines of what awaited them abroad. Especially those who didn’t have to worry about funding, like one Trafalgar Law; explorer, surgeon, adopted son of the influential Doflamingo Family and heir to its pharmaceutical empire.
“How close do you think we are?” Koala asked, disrupting their comfortable silence. The question had become a routine, a daily roundup of what they had seen and done before Sabo would sit down after supper to fill more pages of journal with the day’s happenings, and also a guessing game, a diversion to pass the time while at the same time keeping track. Their Jayan colleagues had picked up on it, and sometimes they would discuss it over supper, sitting around the fire with people throwing in suggestions. Of course neither had thought to just stumble upon those ruins but, the three foreigners had sobered up rather quickly the moment they were deep inside the jungle. They had no directions, no detailed maps and just rough estimations of where they were going and where the remains of the ancient towns were located. Their theories were mostly backed by myths and half-truths passed down through generations in the form of stories told by more than a thousand different tongues and lips; it would be nothing short of a lucky shot if they did stumble upon that place.

After the first week on the boat, it had been brought to their attention that they had now ventured deeper into the jungle than anyone who had ever returned alive from a trip to find those ruins. But then there had never been this large a party before either, since those who had set out had solely done so in the hopes of finding treasure and had thus never been more than two or three, unwilling to share any of the gold and jewels they had all been hoping to encounter.

Naturally, the ruins had become infamous over the centuries, leaving barely anyone bold enough to look for them except the desperate or the ignorant, and thus they were the first party ever to set out with a cultural purpose, albeit they had kept that agenda hidden. Cooperating with local explorers had not been part of their presentation to the committee either, since the Geographical Society was hoping to claim the treasure they might find as Goa’s own. However, Robin’s party had no intention of doing so and they had already reached an agreement with their local partners that all treasure would remain within Jaya and the safety of its own museums. Of course they would get in trouble once they returned home but they had agreed to leave those worries for when they had made it back.

Robin and Koala were mostly interested in finding the temple supposedly hidden at the centre of the ancient town, because according to the legend written on a stone slate Robin had inherited from her mentor and which she had deciphered, someone extraordinary had been asleep inside that temple for almost eight hundred years now.

Ancient Shandora’s most devotedly worshipped deity and the protector of the golden city, the God of Fire.

The tale carved into the slate had indicated that the town, ironically, had been destroyed by a devastating fire at the peak of its glory and power.

If Sabo were to be honest, simply reading an old story on a piece of rock would have never made him travel to the other side of the world with the hope to actually find those long lost ruins, even less so to find an ancient, sleeping deity, but despite never fully deciphering the writings on the slate before passing away, Robin’s mentor had been able to gather quite a lot of information on the old city of Shandora and had proven that, back then, it had been the largest, most thriving city the world had known. Unfortunately, his fellow archeologists had already stopped paying much attention to what he had to say, because his explanations about the town had always entailed stories about that sleeping fire god as well, which no one had believed, and thus his reputation had suffered. But Robin, now counted among the best archeologists in the world, had been free of prejudice regarding the actual existence of that fire god and had promised to carry on in her mentor’s stead. So this journey east held a very personal note as well and no matter how skeptical Sabo was with regards to that fire god, if it was Robin asking, he would follow her to the ends of the world.

He thought about Koala’s question for a moment, eyes focused on the ground to not miss a root hidden beneath the myriads of rotting leaves layering their path as they made their way back.
“The city’s supposed to be on a plateau,” he said, “if this is still the case then it would be easy to spot from afar if it wasn’t for all this vegetation.” He stepped over a protruding root before kicking at a large, torn leaf lying on the ground in frustration. “We could be half a day’s walk or a two weeks march away from it without knowing. We might even already have walked past it.” He dragged his gloved fingers through his messed up blond locks and chewed on his bottom lip.

“Is that why you’re getting more and more restless with every passing day?” Koala asked, her thoughtful glance burning on the side of his face.

She had been watching him carefully, of course she had. Sabo usually wasn’t this impatient, yet something about his surroundings made him feel on edge, and the fact that it should not have, because he was a seasoned traveler and explorer, one who even had already tracked the unbearable and dangerous Alabastian Desert annoyed him even more.

But the chill, which had crept deep into his spine, would not let up despite the temperature and he constantly was in an odd mood to hurry on, glaring off into the distance, or where it would have been if it had not been for all the trees and bushes and ferns surrounding them. The sensation was so irritating that he even had a hard time enjoying his studies of the foreign biosphere, making him feel pressured despite that they were in no rush to find the ruins.

“Yeah,” he replied, knowing full well that she wasn’t buying his lie, but would leave him alone for the time being; if he did not feel like sharing what bothered him, there was no use in pestering him with questions.

“I see,” she said, tight lipped and with disappointment clearly audible despite the few words she had spoken, redirecting her eyes to the ground.

Guilt squeezed his heart, leaving him to feel sorry for not confiding in her like he had used to back when they had been younger and had lived under the same roof. They had often snuck into Robin’s study to pull out the large, leather-bound volumes of encyclopaedias and ancient as well as modern history books. Sabo had read the lines in quick, hushed words, his pointer finger following letters printed in black ink on thick parchment paper, while Koala had held up a small gas lamp as they had hidden behind Robin’s heavy wooden desk, unaware of her figure in the doorframe cloaked in the nightly shadows, a fond smile curling the corner of her lips as she had watched her two eager, tireless protégés.

They walked on in silence for the rest of the way, but all tension evaporated into the humid air the moment they emerged from the greenery and stepped onto a small natural clearing. A fire, with a large kettle hanging above it, was already burning, crackling and sending sparks up in the air, smoke’s heavy odour mixing with the spices which had been thrown into the pot. Next to the fireplace a couple of tropical, exotic fruits had been piled up.

Several of their group glanced up from their tasks of hoisting up the small tents into the tree tops which would later be hanging between the branches like hammocks, offering more safety than sleeping on the wet ground. Neither of them had had any experience with such sleeping arrangements before, and the first night up in the trees had been the biggest adventure they had had so far, their uncontrolled movements while fast asleep making the whole construction sway precariously, ripping them from their slumber with fluttering hearts and wide, panic-filled eyes only to realise that they were still where they belonged, high up above the ground, safe.

The next morning, Conis, a woman of Koala’s age belonging to the group of Jayan explorers, had offered them a cup of steaming coffee with a wide smile to fend off their droopy, sleepy eyes and the dark circles beneath them from lack of proper rest during the night. The other Jayans hadn’t been as sympathetic, having a laugh at their expense but had clapped them on their shoulders when they had
finally gotten the hang of it around the third day.

Koala and Sabo hurried to help those who were taking care of the tents before they all sat down around the fire to enjoy an early supper, which would hopefully not be disturbed by the rain, chatting and discussing, making plans for the next day or telling stories. The ominous tingling on his nape was back, but Sabo ignored it as best he could in favour of accepting another colourful fruit with sweet, orange flesh and a lot of dark pips in the centre. However, he was unable to avoid rubbing his neck in discomfort to fight the urge to turn around and search the bushes behind them for anything lurking close by. He still laughed and talked with the others, but when he glanced at Wiper, the leader of the Jayan group of explorers and a very observant man, he realised his odd behaviour was no longer going unnoticed. They stared at each other for a moment or two, the chitchat around the fire continuing on unremittingly, before Wiper looked away and leaned over to point at something in a book Kamakiri was holding.

Some of the tension, which had gathered in Sabo’s shoulders and his jaw unnoticed, eased; however, the fact that there was not only an unknown something, which might or might not be anything other than a troublesome illusion his mind had come up with, out there watching him but also a real person, who was now undoubtedly keeping both keen eyes out for him, was highly unsettling. Hiding his discomfort and unease, whenever they would call it a day, would require much more cunning and thought from now on.

So it was not without relief when he sighed heavily the moment the first rumbling claps of thunder rolled through the jungle. Everyone hurried to clear away the cooking utensils and hoist up what had to remain dry to where their tents were, hanging peacefully between the maze of branches and below a large tarpaulin, made especially to withstand the masses of water soon to be pouring down from the skies.

When everything was taken care of, a few of the group usually returned to the ground, searching for the largest gap in the foliage and taking advantage of the heavy rainfall to either wash their clothes or themselves before it was the turn of those who had stayed behind to have an eye on the camp.

The first few rumbles had already been accompanied by lightning, turning the skies into parts of blinding white framed by the jagged outlines of myriads of leaves, and when the first few heavy drops hit the foliage, Sabo had stored what little personal belongings he had brought with him inside his tent before climbing down one of the rope ladders dangling from a thicker, sturdier branch close by. He had exchanged his boots for the slippers the Jayans wore and left most of his clothes behind, wearing only what he intended to wash, a small linen bag containing some necessities, slung around his shoulders.

Normally, Sabo would join the Jayan men, but since he was wary of Wiper today and not eager to be questioned about his odd behaviour, he wandered off on his own. The further he left camp behind, the more slippery the ground became, rain pelting down in gushing drapes, almost completely drowning out the birds’ cheerful calls, the buzzing noise of insects falling silent. He was drenched within seconds, shirt clinging to his frame, hanging heavily from his shoulders, water running down the exposed parts of his tanned skin on arms and neck and lower legs, washing away the day’s sweat and dust as he kept walking, granting some relief.

Koala’s eyes had been on him the whole time he had been up in his tent, but once she had realised that he was only preparing to take a shower, she had left him to it and engaged Conis and Laki, the other woman on the Jayan group, in conversation instead, murmur of spices and medicinal herbs, which could be found in the rainforest, soon reaching his sharp ears. If the reason for his tenseness had not sounded this crazy in his own head, he may have considered confiding in her, but since he knew that she trusted his instincts, he was certain she would start to worry, and would most likely
become just as tense as he was, which, in turn, would attract the others’ attention, because two people acting strange was definitely something to notice, no matter how careful they were to hide it.

When he was sure he could no longer be seen, he hung his small bag on a branch, peeled off his shirt and took out a bar of soap. Crouching down, he started lathering the shirt, rubbing the cloth together, especially in places where there were more stubborn stains, while the rain continued to beat down on his bare back. It took a while to rinse the shirt and Sabo made sure to keep an eye out for his surroundings, using the thick trunk of the tree to protect his back, but the tension would never let up, no matter how long he sat there watching out. As soon as no more milky liquid dripped from his shirt, he shook it out a little to smooth out the creases before hanging it next to his bag, slipping out of his pants next for them to undergo the same treatment.

He paused briefly when his eyes caught the quivering movement of a fern nearby, but when it ceased and nothing had jumped out of it, he continued, internally chiding himself for his nervousness. Once the pants were clean as well, it was finally his turn. He ran the soap bar along his sinewy arms and legs, noting the stark lines on his skin where his clothes had prevented it from turning a darker shade, before washing his hair and face, allowing himself to close his eyes for just a second.

The soap went back into the bag and he was washing off the last remnants of it under the natural spray when he noticed. Even with the cool rain water running all over his face and body, his left side was unusually warm. He brought his hand up to his face, covering his left eye with it where the burn scar had forever changed the texture of his skin, carefully examining. Was it more tender than usual? Stretching out his arm he took a closer look at the back of his hand and his forearm, following the scar tissue’s uneven pattern without spotting any evident changes. Still, it felt unnaturally warm—hot even. A light tingling ran along his shoulder and down his back, where once charred skin stretched over the curves of his muscles, and he shudder, his right hand shooting up to touch it.

The heat, now pulsing beneath his marred skin, was not unpleasant as such, but the last time he had been overcome by such a sensation had been during the healing process fifteen years ago.

Another rustle in the ferns and bushes surrounding him drew his attention and this time he was sure he was seeing something unusual, an odd blue shine glowing through the leaves. Sabo reached for his just-washed pants, hastily putting them on before slipping on his shirt again as well. He slung the bag around his shoulder without ever taking his eyes off the glow, retrieving a small knife, which he kept hidden there for moments such as this and, slipping off the leather pocket protecting the blade, he inched closer. The glow intensified, casting an unnatural blue shimmer onto the surrounding leaves but Sabo could not see its source. He started sweating despite the rain still falling heavily, the burning on his left side slowly becoming uncomfortable, the pulsing turning into a throbbing, which reverberated in his head along with the loud thumping of his heart.

Nervousness and tension, adrenaline and a slight tinge of fear shot through his veins as he carefully put one foot in front of the other, praying he was not making enough noise to startle whatever emanated the blue glow, if it was something that could be startled and not just another exotic rainforest plant.

With trembling fingers he extended his arm, determined to pull aside a few leaves and reveal what lay beyond, bracing himself for an attack while trying his hardest to push back the distracting sensation on his left side, which threatened to take over his mind any second now with its rapidly increasing intensity. His jaw clicked shut, teeth pressed together, breath pausing in his lungs as his fingers brushed past the first few leaves, smaller branches pricking at his skin, their sharper ends scratching over the back of his left hand, momentarily competing with the burning feeling radiating from his scar.
His fingers clenched around a handful of branches and leaves, pulling them aside for him to peer into the space beyond, his heart beating hard against his ribcage and in his throat.

Nothing.

His brow furrowed, eyes narrowing as he stared harder at the empty spot behind the bush. The blue glow had vanished.

A rustle to his right side, up in the trees. He whirled around, fingers tightly curling around the handle of his knife pointed slightly upwards, ready to defend, eyes scanning the canopy, blinking when raindrops blurred his vision.

Nothing.

Then why was he plagued by the unnerving impression that he was still under surveillance? The pressure of a set of eyes closely following him never letting up, a constricting weight on his chest and back. He shifted slightly in his defensive stance, allowing himself to glance around and scan his surroundings, eyes trailing over undergrowth and other greenery, straining to see something out of the ordinary. And yet, there was nothing.

Sabo pressed his lips together, not ready to release a whistling sigh of relief from his lungs just now, strangely aware of the soft worn leather, wound around the handle of his knife, against his calloused palm, his shoulders set, taut. But even after another minute of agitated staring, the jungle remained silent except for the monotone gushing of the rain and the constant chirping of the birds, which never ceased—just softened. Almost a bit reluctant he lowered the knife, straightening his posture, arms and shoulders slumping into a more relaxed position. He licked his lips, tasting pure rain on his tongue and with a sigh that was more annoyed than relieved he pinched the bridge of his nose, pressing his eyes shut for a moment of thought and self-reprimand.

In that moment, he noticed the lack of burning along his left side, his limbs and upper body back to their normal state with not even an itch or a dull aching left behind to prove he had not hallucinated. He sucked in his lips, breathing in deeply to prevent his heart from speeding up again, suppressing a small shiver from pulling tight the muscles in his back. The urge to touch his scarred skin, to make sure it really wasn’t hurting anymore, was almost irresistible. A heavy, icy apprehension settled in his stomach, curling in his guts like a nest of restlessly winding snakes.

He had been to so many countries, had seen and experienced so many things, faced unknown dangers… So why now? Was it this place; the heat, the humidity, the never-ending shades of green, the lack of expanse? He was eager to see more, to travel deeper and further, uncover the secrets hidden in the depths of this green maze, but with every passing day, with every step they advanced, he became more and more anxious. There was just something about this place that made him restless, as if, even in the absence of the monstrous storm clouds, there was a mantle of foreboding lying over the forest.

The soles of his slippers stuck to the muddy ground as he trotted back to camp, a squelching sound accompanying each of his steps. He had slung his bag over his shoulder again and the knife was back in its small leather scabbard, but instead of returning it to the bag, he had pushed it into the waistband of his pants, hand resting on the handle with apprehension, ready to draw it at the slightest sound of threat.

But nothing happened and he returned, unharmed but soaked to the bone, muscles aching from stress and strain, mind exhausted from constantly being on edge. He was glad the darkness of the clouds and the setting sun had begun to obscure his surroundings, blurring the outlines of people and plants in the hazy light of dusk, the rain’s deafening rush gradually turning into a dripping without rhythm.
Climbing the ladder in silence, he returned to his small airy resting place, only briefly glancing over to where Robin’s and Koala’s tents hung close to his. He noted that neither were present, but when he looked up a little later he caught Wiper watching him from across the branch between them, the lines around his mouth hard as always, yet for the first time appearing to be almost threatening due to his narrowed eyes as be observed keenly.

Sabo nodded, silently bidding him good-night, wondering whether he would be approached tomorrow. The unsettling prospect accompanied him all the way into peculiar and very vivid dreams once he was finally able to slip into a fitful sleep after hours of staring at the darkening canopy of his small tent while the rest of their party gradually returned and settled in. Conversations held across branches and nothing but thin air slowly turned into a handful of whispered words between a few before falling silent altogether, leaving only the birds’ nightly songs behind to fill the forest. Koala had asked about him—he had heard her say his name in question—because he had already pulled down the curtains covering the front and back of his lofty little tent despite the early hour of the evening, but had ultimately left him alone, perfectly aware that he had his reasons and was understanding enough to grant him his self-imposed isolation.

His last thought before his eyes slid closed was that he should tell her and Robin, even if it was just to ease his anxious mind by sharing what bothered him. If Wiper knew, both of them had certainly noticed as well, so from now on not confiding in them would only add to their worry. Besides, they were his family after all; they would be glad to learn what was unsettling him.

Sabo blinked, groaning quietly as he carefully rolled onto his side, the fabric of his airy tent shifting beneath him without giving way, the fact that gravity was tirelessly pulling at his weight no longer bothering him. His eyes opened a crack just to check the state of his surroundings and whether the approaching day’s light was brightening the sturdy linen cloth.

A moment later his eyes flew open, a surprised shout just barely stifled on the way up his throat, and he momentarily forgot that he was high up above ground, pushing himself into a sitting position. The tent wobbled precariously at the sudden movement, forcing additional adrenalin into his veins. The left side of his tent, where he knew to be a couple of metres of nothingness between him and the next tree, was glowing bluish, and there was the outline of a shade he was very familiar with at that, one that had been so very present in his perturbing dreams. Listening carefully, he tried to remain as still as possible, the earlier shock already forgotten in the face of the return of whatever it had been that had lurked in the bushes during his short shower. But neither did the bluish glow faint nor was there any noise or any other hint of movement outside the relative safety of his tent. Sabo swallowed drily, breaths coming in deep and quietly through his nose before he took heart, carefully slipped on his boots before reaching for his iron pipe, which he usually kept at his side at all times, the cool, smooth metal calming in its familiarity.

He opened the cloth covering the frontside of the tent a bit, peeking outside. Dawn was fast approaching, the sky already a lighter shade of midnight blue, only the brightest of stars still twinkling down from above and yet the blue glow prevailed, bathing the branches and leaves in its eerie illumination. The rope ladder was close enough for him to reach it from the entrance of his tent without much problem and his abrupt awakening had driven off what little fatigue had remained in his limbs and the corner of his eyes, adrenaline conveniently heightening his senses.

However, nothing of the source of the glow could be seen from the small gap, so he would have to leave the tent and hope he would get a better look at it from the rope ladder. Fetching his worn leather gloves and hastily pulling them on, he took his pipe once more, tightening his grip to brace himself for the possibility of an attack the moment he left the tent to reach the ladder, though he was
perfectly aware that he was probably at a great disadvantage if it came to fight in these lofty heights, and the moment he slipped or lost his grip on the ropes he was doomed anyway, the ground far enough away to shatter his bones upon impact.

But if he stayed where he was he would never uncover the source behind this glow, and maybe whatever it was was also the reason for his unease.

With a quick motion of his arm he flipped the cloth to the side, reached for the ladder and slipped off the edge of the tent, his natural survival instincts screaming at him in dismay at the vulnerability of his back, lungs and heart ceasing to work as he waited for an impact of sorts. Then his feet found the roped steps of the ladder, his left arm no longer straining under the burden of having to carry his whole weight, and, still with neither breath nor heartbeat filling his chest, he whirled around, pipe securely in his right hand’s grip to ward off the assailant he did not know.

But the stunned scream building up in his throat never rang out, leaving only his mouth hanging open in utter shock and astonishment, his eyes widening with every passing moment they gazed upon the wondrous creature perched on a branch of the opposite tree, staring back with something that couldn’t be called anything but total composure and ease, not at all startled by Sabo’s appearance and the threatening manner in which he held out his pipe.
The massive blue bird blinked, once, twice, momentarily hiding its tiny twinkling jet black eyes before it leaned over to sharpen its long beak on the branch, entirely undisturbed. When it returned to its position it slightly spread its wings, giving a good impression of how large they were once extended entirely, flapping them a bit before settling them back at its side.

A golden glowing feather crown sat proudly upon its narrow head, looking as if swayed lightly in a non-existent wind, just like the rest of the vibrant blue and golden feathers covering the rest of its enormous body, reminding Sabo of a myriad of tiny flames licking up towards the sky, radiating with an eerie bluish glow.

They stared and seconds stretched into equally silent, motionless minutes, the rainforest surrounding them moved to the back of Sabo’s mind until it was just him and the bird, its strange blue aura shrouding Sabo in its other-worldly, mystical cloak.

What was this creature? Even among all the oddities and peculiarities he had come across on his travels, this bird exceeded everything he had seen so far, and to make things even more concerning, his scar started tingling again in a silent warning, urging him to be cautious.

Sabo’s grip around the rope tightened when the bird unfolded its massive wings again, which appeared to be almost translucent, as if they weren’t even real, as if the whole creature was something out of this world. He knew of mirages appearing to desert wanderers, created by the cruel interplay of hot air and the desert’s sandy plains. Often, they would lead those desperate for water and a cooler shade’s shelter to their certain deaths by luring them on, dangling salvation before their very eyes until fatigue and exhaustion got the better of their poor souls. But here, in the humid narrowness of the rainforest, the conditions were different.

The longer he stared, though, the more convinced he was that he had seen something close to it before, and suddenly he remembered. It had been in one of Robin’s old, leather-bound books, with the golden letters of the title already peeling off its wrinkled spine. On one of its pages was a detailed, fine-lined print of a mythical creature, a bird of sorts with feathers and wings and a body made of flames, rumoured to live endlessly, for whenever it had died, its fiery body would consume itself and then be reborn from the ashes.

A phoenix. Harbinger of the sun, emblem of royalty.

The book, however, had described that fabled creature to be red, the colour of the fire burning within it, not blue.

Sabo licked his lips, still staring, and the bird blinked again. Its tiny jet black eyes gleamed in understanding, as if it had read Sabo’s thoughts and approved. Sabo swallowed uncomfortably, undecided about what to do.

He was about to say something, ask the bird a question even, despite how stupid it would seem to talk to an animal, when the bird stretched its wings wide, flapping them a few times before taking off with much more grace than was to be expected from a creature of its size.

“Shit,” Sabo cursed, a hiss on his lips, and descended the ladder in a rush, luckily without slipping and breaking his neck. The tingling on his left side intensified and he had a notion that the presence lurking in the bushes watching him had been the enormous bird. How it had managed to practically vanish into thin air when he had pulled the branches aside was even more of a mystery to him now that he actually new what had emanated the blue glow.

With a soft sound his soles touched the cool damp ground, his toes digging into the slightly muddy soil. He turned left and right, face angled upward to search for the bird, and caught sight of it a
couple of metres in the direction he had already walked in before he had been called back to help set up camp. It effortlessly glided through the air despite the confined space and its large wingspan, leaving a trail of glimmering blue in its wake. Sabo dashed after it right away in vigorous pursuit.

Twigs and stones and roots were scattered about on his path, but he never slowed down, nor did he pay much attention to where he was going, the bird’s glow all he cared for, all he saw, leaving no room in his mind for anything else but remembering to glance at the ground every once in a while to make sure he wouldn’t stumble and fall, and possibly lose sight of the mysterious creature.

Subconsciously, he was aware that the sensible thing to do would have been to call for Koala and the others, but then he had never been known for making sensible decisions. When an opportunity so rare and unbelievable as this presented itself, he simply had to act, waiting until the others had woken up and were ready to leave would take too long, and since he had no idea where the bird was flying to, telling them where he was going was out of the question as well.

So he ran on, tightening his fingers’ curl around his pipe in response to the effort it took to navigate the treacherous trail at such speed but never slowing down, never falling behind enough for him to not be able to see the creature anymore.

His lungs widened and shrunk again in such quick intervals that his chest soon started to burn, breaths rattling up his throat. His thighs screamed in anger at the torturing speed he expected of them but never refused to carry him forward, tirelessly pushing off the soft ground, the chase becoming harder and harder the longer it went on. The beat of his heart reverberated in his jaw, his temples, a mind numbing hammering in perfect synchronisation with his steps drumming on the ground.

A groan, half a curse and half a plea, escaped him when the ground gave way beneath him for a second, forcing him down on one knee; however, he spurred himself on almost as vigorously as a jockey would his prized race horse, stumbling on against gravity’s cruelty, refusing to be pulled back and succumb to the sweet temptation that was lying down and catching his breath.

Slapping branches away, he dashed on, jumping over roots rising from the ground, relying on every muscle in his body, flexing them all to keep up with the blue bird’s carefree, graceful glide through the air. The fact that he was catching up prevailed over his exhausted state.

He skidded to a halt just in time, the bird shooting out of the jungle and into the morning skies, suddenly no longer surrounded by the rainforest’s countless trees and sailing on through nothing but air for the first time while Sabo fell back hard, pebble he had kicked loose when preventing his fall clacking down the precipice yawning before him.

For the second time today, no sound found its way past his lips as awe and comprehension slowly superseded his adrenaline high.

The precipice, several hundred metres deep, formed a vast half circle around a mountain with a wide, flat top. To the west the plateau, on which he was, opened up, releasing the jungle’s sea of trees to meet with the ocean gleaming in the distance. A few rivers turned into foaming waterfalls at the edge, their waters’ roar echoing along the stone walls, spraying sparkling white mist everywhere and flocks of birds travelled through the air, shrinking into tiny specks of white or black or vibrant colours the closer they got to the other side.

However, it wasn’t so much the breathtaking, magnificent view which had captured Sabo’s attention, but rather the mountain at the very centre of the valley. The jungle had long since claimed its flanks and most of its top as well, except for one spot to the east of the flat peak where the vegetation was less dense. It was there that the rising sun’s rays were reflected by something still halfway hidden by the treetops. He had no idea what it was, just that it looked like it wasn’t natural, and the longer and
harder he stared into the distance, searching for something out of the ordinary in the green
endlessness atop the mountain, the more he was able to make out shapes not fitting into the
rainforest’s usually ragged, uneven outlines.

With an excitedly beating heart he got back up on his feet, his legs slightly trembling under the
weight they were not yet willing to carry again, but he ignored the strain as well as the dull throbbing
down his left side in order to fully comprehend what he most likely had discovered.

The blue bird’s piercing cry startled him for a moment as it flew past him at high speed, drawing
circle after circle in the air to attract Sabo’s attention before changing its course, heading towards the
mountain top with the occasional beat of its massive wings, calling out again. Sabo gazed after it,
anticipation buzzing all the way up into his fingertips, the message he clearly understood, whereas
the why never crossed his mind.
Days and weeks and months of thorough planning seemed to have finally paid off. The stiffness in his back from having stood bent over a table with maps and papers and books to consult for days on end, the soreness in his eyes from all the reading at late night hours by the light of gas lamps and candles forgotten in an instant at the prospect of having found what they came looking for.

The Ancient City, asleep in the green maze for almost eight hundred years.

Shandora, the City of Gold and Fire.

The blue bird called again before it dove into the kapok trees, vanishing from sight, and Sabo took a deep breath, imprinting the view before him into his mind; the wide opening of the valley, the vast plateau surrounding it, the mountain in the middle, its flat top with the blinking reflection of the sun
caught his eye again and again. So it did exist, but was held so tightly in the jungle’s clutch that without knowing what to look for or having your attention directed towards it, it was clear that it was easy to miss.

With a pleased smile he turned on his heel to make his way back to camp, the corner of his lips curling up further as he pictured Koala’s wide eyes and thunderstruck face, and Robin’s soft but proud smile, the relief over being able to keep the promise she had made to her mentor lighting up her eyes. His knees hurt from when he had stumbled and fallen, pants caked with mud, but he couldn’t have cared less; the thrill of having almost certainly found the ruins exceeded everything else, and for the first time after a very long while, a once familiar warmth returned to his chest. It was excitement mixed with his zeal for exploring the unknown, a heady mix he had only ever felt so strongly on expeditions during his adolescence, when he had still travelled and explored exclusively with Robin and Koala.

This was what exploring and discovering the unseen was about. And it was all the more exciting, because he had the right people here to share it with.

His steps picked up speed all by themselves as he hurried back, and not before long he was running down the same path he had dashed along earlier in pursuit of the bird, his heart in his throat but not for exhaustion but for the promise of adventure.

And who knew, now that such an extraordinary bird, a creature resembling the legendary phoenix, had led his way, there might as well be a god of fire asleep in those ruins.
Chapter 3

It took them two weeks to reach the top of the mountain protruding from the emerald ocean of leaves; one to find a halfway decent path down from the plateau and to the foot of the mountain, and another to climb its western flank. Had it not been for their heavy backpacks with all their equipment, they surely could have made the ascent much faster, but as the slope became steeper, the breaks they had to take in between walking had become longer and more frequent. Their exposed necks burned despite what little sunshine actually made it through the foliage, the sweat trickling down to soak their shirts barely providing relief.

But no one had been complaining, least of all Sabo, because ever since he had chased after the mysterious blue bird to stumble upon what was most likely ancient Shandora's ruins, he felt calmer, having seen the goal of their whole expedition with his own two eyes, giving their tracking through the jungle a more concrete purpose than ever before. Or maybe it was because he felt lighter than he ever had since they had set foot on the rainforest's grounds, the spine-chilling feeling of being watched that had weighed down on his chest and back finally lifted, breathing and thinking suddenly much easier.

As expected, Robin's and Koala's faces had just been like he had imagined them to look after he had told them the news, the Jayans staring at him with the same wonder and disbelief, the latter only turning into excitement once he had lead them to the spot from where the mountain in the middle of the valley could be seen. After a quick breakfast of fresh fruit and thin black coffee from dented tin mugs, they had shouldered their bags and resumed their journey, but for once their animated chatter had almost drowned out the chirping of birds and buzzing of insects.

What he had not told his companions, though, had been his encounter with the mythical creature. At first, he had definitely been planning to, but when he had wanted to say the words, strangely enough, none had come out, and after staring at expectant faces for a few moments he had clapped his open mouth shut again, pretending as if he had nothing more to say. His strange behaviour was quickly forgotten once he had led the others to the spot by the precipice.

He had thought about at least confiding in Robin and Koala ever since, but with every passing day the bird seemed more and more like something he had dreamed up, a being too fantastic for this world, or, indeed, an illusion, a trick the jungle had played on a mind desperate for a sign that their daily hours-long walking wasn’t for naught. But maybe that was only an excuse he had come up with to justify why he was, yet again, keeping secrets from the two people most dear to him. Simply because it felt right just wasn’t convincing enough, but then it did. It was as if the bird had only entrusted Sabo with the secret of his existence by showing up when he had been the sole one awake or, intentionally, had only woken him from sleep, whichever it had been, because there had been a million chances to appear before all of them and yet the bird had chosen not to.

Somehow Sabo felt obliged to at least keep quiet about it until they had reached Shandora’s ruins, after that he would come clean, no matter how absurd the whole story sounded.

However, when their path finally levelled out and they knew they had reached the top of the mountain, he forgot about the matter entirely, the sudden change in their surroundings and the overall atmosphere completely occupying his mind as they all stopped at once to stare at the remains of what had to have been a massive, several metres high stone gate and which was now almost entirely overgrown with moss and tendrils and smaller trees. But it was impressive nonetheless and the first evidence of human life they had encountered so far, whether it had actually been part of the Shandian empire they had yet to find out.
Robin was the first to walk closer for inspection, her keen eyes following the pillar all the way up to where the arc had broken off, the edges of its massive remnants driven deep into the soft soil and the once angular shapes distorted by the many plants, which had claimed the surface as their own grounds to rule over. Her long, slender fingers reached out to caress the moss, the Jayans walking closer, too, now; Kamakiri, the architect among them, carefully measured the structure with his trained eye, probably already estimating its age. He cautiously peeled off some of the vegetation, taking a brush from his belt to gently dab at the stone he had laid bare. They watched on in silence as the spot grew and only when a spasm went through his tight chest did Sabo realise that he had held his breath in anticipation. He swallowed thickly and inched a few steps closer, wetting his lips with a quick, nervous flick of his tongue.

Kamakiri paused and then beckoned Robin closer, stepping aside for her to have a closer look, pointing out ornamentation with his finger that was invisible to those in second row. She took her
thin-framed glasses from their usual spot atop her head to place them on the bridge of her sharp nose, narrowing her eyes to better peer at whatever it was that Kamakiri had outlined with his index finger. She slightly pursed her lips, as she always did whenever she was highly intrigued by an archaeological artefact before her, before briefly discussing the matter with Kamakiri. Their sentences consisted of nothing but a few, quick words and sharp nods of approval, telling Sabo and the rest that they were certainly of the same opinion before they finally turned around to six anxious faces with hopeful eyes.

Koala turned up beside him, taking his gloved hand, gripping it tightly with her own to share the tension weighing heavily upon them all, and he returned the gesture with a reassuring squeeze of his own fingers despite the nervousness eating him up from inside, his guts a nest of winding, writhing snakes again, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end, the air surrounding them charged, crackling with agitation.
“Robin,” Koala said so quietly that only Sabo would have heard had their senses not been heightened by all the adrenaline rushing through their veins, the edge to her voice lending a sound to what everyone was feeling.
Robin turned around after one last quick exchange of words with Kamakiri, blue eyes alight with the fire of an archaeologist's determination. Her lips curled upward in a soft smile of satisfaction.

“We’re both rather certain that this structure dates back almost eight hundred years, and judging by what little is left of the ornamentation as well as the style in which this gate was built, it is most likely of Shandian origin.”

Sabo’s heart picked up pace when he heard Robin’s clear voice, the pressure of Koala’s fingers around his own intensifying.

“What makes you both so sure about its age and origin?” Wiper asked, barely able to contain his own excitement, the syllables shaking as they left his lips.

“There are patterns common in Shandian architecture, many of them symbols originating in Shandian faith, like the sun,” he pointed at something on the spot he had freed from the moss and they all moved closer until they could see what had been carved into the sandstone, “and here, the fire and the phoenix as the divine messenger between Earth and Heaven.” He pointed out the two last ones for them to see as well and Sabo momentarily tensed at the mention of the phoenix, biting the tip of his tongue just in time to hold back a surprised gasp.

He scrutinised the simplistic, curved lines that hinted at the outline of a flying bird’s outstretched wings, sure that it had not been on the stone slate Robin had translated.

“Since they are all depicted here, is it safe to say that this structure belongs to the Ancient City?” Koala’s question disrupted his thoughts and now everyone was truly holding their breaths, yearning for confirmation.

Kamakiri and Robin took their time, though, giving each other sideway glances before Robin answered. “We can’t say that much yet. The structure looks like it was once part of a massive gate, one befitting the entrance to a large city like Shandora, but it might just as well be any archway. We need further proof before we can be sure.”

A sobered up silence prevailed among them as they looked at the ruins and back to Robin and Kamakiri.

“However,” everyone’s eyes darted back to Robin, “we all know that Shandora is theorised to have been built atop a mountain, and so far this is the only mountain we’ve seen. The chances are high that this is, indeed, the western entrance to the Ancient City.”

High and low sounds of joy mixed, the birds close by falling silent for a second or two, startled by the eruption of strange noise. Koala leaped forward, arms wrapping around Robin and hugging her tightly while the Jayans took turns embracing each other or clapping their shoulders appreciatively.

Sabo was just about to step up to Robin and Koala as well, when a heavy hand was placed on his shoulder, keeping him in place. He turned to stare straight into Wiper’s piercing eyes, and for a moment the commotion around them faded out completely, tension hardening their muscles.

Wiper had never confronted Sabo about his suspicious behaviour, since it had all more or less stopped after Sabo’s meeting with the bird; however, since Sabo had never explained in full detail how he had found that spot overlooking the circular valley, and just told them that he had felt like an early morning walk to clear his head, Wiper had continued to watch him, sensing that something was amiss and most likely suspected that Sabo had chosen to keep parts of the story to himself. Yet now he was standing beside him, hand on Sabo’s shoulder and together with the widening of his grin, which considerably lightened up his usually scowling face, the weight of his grip lessened until it
was gone altogether, and he clapped Sabo on the back, then offered his hand—not just to congratulate them both, but also in a silent peace offering and an apology of sorts.

Sabo did not think twice, taking it and shaking it with a wide grin of his own, grip firm but without an intimidating show of strength. Neither had come here to quarrel. They were partners in crime, looking for the same thing, both their expertise was needed to accomplish their mutual goal, so they buried their mutual distrust, and instead, chose to celebrate this brief moment of satisfaction together as fellow explorers.

Then Koala hugged him, tears of joy already glittering in the corner of her big blue eyes, and Sabo laughed, a deep felt, hearty laugh from the centre of his body, and he wrapped his arms around her and they started to sway from side to side, barely able to contain their exhilaration.

Robin he did not hug, because one look between them could convey more than any word or touch could have. His eyes brimmed with gratitude, while hers shined bright with affection and delight over having him with them, that they were able to experience this thrilling moment together as the family that they were.

Everyone stood before the broken arch for a bit longer, either observing the structure and its symbols with Robin or aiding Kamakiri in carefully scraping off the moss. But when they realised that the spot they had already uncovered was the only one still in such good condition, they eventually resigned themselves; moving on was their best option.

It was now up to Robin and Kamakiri to lead the way, with Koala and Sabo right behind them and Wiper forming the rear. The path they walked on was still nothing more than an animal trail, but it didn’t take long until someone called out in alert and pointed towards another large structure. Again, it was as overgrown with vegetation as the gate, but clearly something constructed by human hands. They all glanced to their left and right meaningfully, nodding at one another to confirm that they had all seen the ruin before turning to the head of their party to see what was to be done next. Robin had put her hand beneath her chin in thought, staring at where the green cube rose from the ground, intently listening to what Kamakiri said before they agreed that moving on was for the best right now.

The longer they walked, the more the trees thinned out and were replaced by more obscure, unnatural forms in the guise of the rainforest, some shattered and broken, some still in one piece. They varied greatly in size and shape, some were high, some small and some had crumbled in their entirety, giving no hint as to what they had once looked like. One thing, though, was clear to all of them: this had once been a great town inhabited by many people. The sheer amount of ruins was proof enough of that.

“Is it just me or are there less trees the longer we walk?” Koala asked.

Sabo looked around to confirm and shook his head. “It’s not just you. There are less trees. Less vegetation in fact.”

“It’s as if the jungle is scared to move closer to where we’re headed,” Conis said behind them, having overheard their conversation.

Koala glanced over her shoulder, brow furrowed.

“That sounds a bit too much like a ghost story…” Her tone was dry but there was the notion of a question hanging in the air when she had spoken.

“If this is, indeed, the Ancient City, then the fire god’s temple should be to the east, and that is where
we’re headed right now,” Laki said, offering her own opinion.

Sabo looked up at the large patch of bright blue sky visible between the treetops, mulling over her words. After following the bird, he had not only spotted the mountain in the middle of the valley, but had also seen something reflecting the sun’s light from between the foliage, which meant there had to be a building somewhere that was still as high as the trees. And that building had clearly been to the east.

He shared his thoughts with the others without saying a word about the bird.

“It could have been water,” Conis suggested.

“Or the roof of a building decorated with some kind of metal. It would not be unusual. Shandian architects used to gild the tops of sacred or important buildings. If I’m not mistaken?” Koala said, speaking up a bit for Robin and Kamakiri to hear.

“No, you’re right,” Kamakiri confirmed before suddenly stopping, almost causing Sabo to run into him.

They had been walking at the same pace for so long that he had allowed his eyes to wander and take in the wonders and curiosities around them, no longer paying attention to what was happening at the front. It only took him a moment, though, to understand just why Kamakiri had stopped so abruptly.

About a hundred metres ahead, the jungle did not just thin out further but seemed like it had stopped growing altogether. Bright sunlight trickled in between the trunks, dust sparkled and danced in the air, and the ground glowed where light pooled. It was a beautiful sight to behold, but to Sabo it also seemed like a warning. Conis’ words about the jungle being too scared to have crept closer replaying in his head. It wasn’t that he was expecting something big and dangerous to suddenly leap at them from the clearing ahead; unlike the past weeks, they would actually be able to see clearly, and maybe even a few metres ahead, which made ambushing them all that harder. But his survival instincts had picked up on something neither logic nor vision could explain, and his guts tightened with wariness.

At the same time Sabo reached for his pipe, Koala tensed beside him—readying her muscles to defend herself with precise kicks and blows, which, by now, were more reflex than actual thought through motion—and Wiper drew a long, curved blade from its sheath. The others, alarmed by their behaviour, looked around with unease, some more hands flying to the handle of a dagger or clenching around the strap of a backpack.

“What is it?” Braham asked under his breath.

No one answered for a while until Sabo spoke, “Nothing really. Just…I have a funny feeling.”

Behind him, Wiper made a sound of agreement somewhere deep in his throat. “You’re not alone. I have a bad feeling about this.”

“Maybe the fire god does not approve of our being here and will burn us with his holy flames once we step out of the rainforest. The last thing we hear will be each other’s agonised screams as the fires devour our flesh and bones,” Robin whispered.

Sabo could tell their Jayan colleagues were stunned into silence and horrified by Robin’s vivid imagination. He threw a sideways glance at Koala who smiled just a little despite the hint of fear which had tinted the humid air. What worried others greatly, helped to calm them down as used as they were to Robin’s dark sense of humour.

“Well, staying here won’t help us either. We’re all very well capable of defending ourselves, so we
should move on,” and after a brief pause, Sabo added, “And if the fire god does not appreciate our presence I’d say we’re doomed anyway.”

“Sabo’s right,” Wiper said, making his way to the front now, “Just keep your eyes open for anything suspicious.” He waited for all of them to confirm his orders with a grim but collected nod before turning around to lead the way, blade ready in his hand.

They kept the same pace at which they had advanced so far, and within a couple of minutes they had covered the small distance, stepping out into what turned out not to be a meadow or a clearing but a devastating wasteland. A few gasped, others swallowed audibly, but all looked with disbelieving eyes at the sight before them.

Again, Conis’ words echoed through Sabo’s mind, and though he didn’t believe in the supernatural, there was no other plausible explanation to justify why the mighty jungle grew no further than a certain point, and created a border which looked like someone had taken a compass and drew a wide, perfect circle around the ruins. Ruins that looked like an angry giant had picked them up and thrown them around in a tantrum before setting them on fire, barely one stone still atop the other, façades sooty and charred, the ground mostly black and burned. Ruins, which still looked like they must have almost eight hundred years ago.

“What…” Kamakiri began to speak but as nothing came to mind he stopped and kept on staring.

Shandora, the Ancient City. The capital of an empire, which had been feared but also admired throughout the old world, lay at their feet, crushed and broken, with nothing left of its former glory but a pile of rubble and ash. Ash, which should have long since been scattered by the wind and rain to all four corners of the earth.

And yet it looked as if it had only been brought to its knees a couple of days ago, instead of centuries, the destruction left untouched by both human hand and nature.

The fire, which the Shandians had praised and worshipped, had been their downfall after all.

“This is impossible,” Wiper whispered, one hand pressed flat against a tree trunk, as if it was his lifeline to reality when what his eyes beheld was so surreal. But no matter how much logic’s persistent little voice insisted that this was beyond the bounds of possibility, the image before them never flickered or faded, nor was there any other explanation for why they were seeing what they were seeing.

“It has been preserved so perfectly,” Robin said, her eyes roaming the scenery and taking in every detail, “I have to see this up close.”

She took a determined step and then another, stepping out of the tree line, but before she could cross the border between rainforest and town, Kamakiri’s hand shot out, curling around her upper arm, holding her back. Sabo and Koala frowned but remained where they were. Kamakiri quickly realised his inappropriate behaviour and let go.

“Sorry, Robin,” he mumbled, “I’m just not sure this is a good idea.”

Robin simply smiled, like a fond mother smiling at her overzealous child who had done something stupid but had only meant well.

“I appreciate your concern, Kamakiri, but I will not miss this opportunity,” she said.

Kamakiri could not hold her gaze and instead looked to the ground.
“I know, Robin.” His tone, despite a clear ring of disapproval, was full of deep respect for her, the words not coming easily across his lips. “But we have no idea what it is that has preserved the town so perfectly. It might be dangerous and the reason why no one who’s ventured out to find these ruins has ever returned.” He glanced to his left, along the row of trees, where the jungle stoically kept its distance from the chaos.

Sabo had gone down the same path of reasoning in his head, but like Robin he wasn’t willing to pass up this chance. And wasn’t this the absolute essence of what it meant to be an explorer—to venture out and seek what no one else had seen before, to discover the unknown and see what ordinary people could not even imagine in their wildest dreams in spite of dangers and the possibility of no return? An explorer, an adventurer, had to move forward, always, driven by an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and the unrevealed, and a moment’s dithering could be his loss and another’s chance. Their line of work did not forgive those who hesitated.

Robin never shrank away from challenges, another reason why she was so good at what she did and why Sabo admired her so much. During his time alone he had come across a few different types of explorers, but only those bold and brave enough to dare were the ones whose names remained, whose teachings and discoveries were passed down generations, who inspired.

However, this, right here, was Robin’s, Koala’s and Sabo’s chance to become part of those people who had carved their names into history’s everlasting slate, like ‘Red Hair’ Shanks and his rival Dracule Mihawk, and of course, another one of Sabo’s idols, though no one knew for sure if this man truly existed—the great Monkey D. Dragon. If they were able to return to Goa Kingdom with thorough documentation and proof of the existence of the Ancient City they surely would be mentioned in the same breath as these great people.

And even though it wasn’t necessarily fame Sabo was after, suddenly being named among those whose adventures he had read about as a kid and whose deeds had been the substance of his dreams, was certainly enticing. Also, it would not just make Robin proud—pleasing her was what he strived to do first and foremost after all—but mark the conclusion of breaking ties with his noble family and make a name of his own. He would make sure to stress that none of this had been achieved because of the heritage he could not seem to shake and that his aristocratic background could no longer cast a shadow over everything he did.

There had been a moment of heavy, prolonged silence after Kamakiri had spoken, everyone coming to their own conclusions after silently debating with their fears and worries, and Robin, being the wise and prudent person that she was, granted everyone a fair amount of time before stating her cause in a clear, unwavering voice.

“I’m well aware of all the dangers this could entail, but I haven’t worked so hard and come this far only to back out now because of ‘what ifs’ and possibilities. Finding these ruins has been my mentor’s dream; at his deathbed I made a promise I intend to keep. And if I die exploring these ruins to fulfil my promise, so be it. People have died for less.”

The resolve in her posture as she spoke to them left not a trace of doubt behind that she would venture out all by herself, if the rest chose to stay behind. She would neither make an effort to convince them nor would she hold a grudge, but she would not be stopped unless they would tie her to a tree. Judging by the humbled looks on the Jayans’ faces they were well aware of this, and her speech had made quite the impression—not that they hadn’t already known just what kind of person they were travelling with.

Another brief moment of silence followed, the Jayan members of the expedition alternately glancing at the burned town buildings, the jungle surrounding it and each other until Laki stepped forward,
rifle in hand.  

"You're right. We've worked hard as well and we owe it to our people to carry on after coming this far. This was our nation’s capital when it first came to be, and we might never get a chance to learn so much more about our founding days than right here, right now. Besides, we’re not plunderers nor do we plan to steal secret artefacts. If there is, indeed, a fire god asleep in these ruins, I’m sure he knows we didn’t come here with ill intentions.” Her face was set, determined, as she spoke in the direction of the town’s remains, almost as if to appease its alleged guardian.

The Jayans nodded in agreement and the gentle smile returned to Robin’s face.

“Before we go on, though. Does anyone have an explanation for this?” Wiper asked, making a sweeping gesture with the whole length of his arm to include all of the inexplicable before them.

They all took a moment to think hard on his question, since even the smallest of clues would help to boost their confidence but, of course, no one came up with anything other than supernatural or otherworldly, and Sabo briefly wondered, if they weren’t all assuming this too readily in view of the legendary fire god supposedly asleep in the depths of his temple. But as long as he wasn’t able to analyse the ground’s composition in a proper lab or had actually walked through the ruins he wouldn’t be able to counter the argument, so for now it seemed like he had to resign himself to not knowing a thing, just like back when he had first accompanied Robin on her trips and had not yet had enough experience or knowledge to make sense of what he saw.

“Well then,” Wiper said, picking up a stone from the ground and weighing it in his palm. “Let’s see what happens.”

The small rock flew high and wide in a perfect arc. It did not crash into some invisible barrier nor did it explode or vanish. With several distinct short sounds it collided with a crumbled wall and, after bouncing off its surface several times, landed on the ground, lying perfectly still to their held breaths. After that, nothing happened. No hole opened in the ground, no monstrous animals burst forth, no humans or any other creature appeared to attack it. The buzzing and chirping of the animals in the surrounding forest did not falter for even a second, and the leaves still rustled naturally and without the slightest hint of premonition with every occasional breeze that went through them.

They were all so obviously relieved that some even laughed, and yet Sabo stooped down to pick up another stone, throwing it in the direction of a different spot. This time, the stone did not hit any rocks but, again, nothing happened. However, their eyes lingered a bit longer as they realised what the next step would be.

“I’ll go,” Wiper spoke again, already taking off his backpack. Conis took it from him with worry deeply engraved in the soft lines of her fair face but didn’t argue. They were all aware that one of them, eventually, had to take the first step and cross the line.

“I’ll go with you,” Sabo quickly volunteered, already pulling his arms out of his backpack’s straps. Koala’s motions were mechanical and a bit befuddled when she took it from him, which she probably not even would have, if he hadn’t thrust it at her and startled her from her shock over his words. He watched her lips part, ready to argue with him or put her own name up for the task, when he got in ahead of her.

“Don’t drop it,” he said.

She blinked confusedly, but then said, “Well, then don’t let me hold it for too long.”

He smiled, nodded and stood next to Wiper, the beginning of the darker, burned ground, which the
trees avoided, only a couple of steps ahead.

“What if you don’t return?” Laki suddenly asked.

“Don’t come after us,” Wiper said, a note of warning in his voice. It seemed he knew his friends and colleagues.

“Mark this place on a map, try to get back to the boat and return with more people and better equipment.”

Even though he couldn’t see them, Sabo knew they had all nodded in confirmation and with grim expressions.

“We’ll just walk straight ahead. No stopping, no second thoughts,” Wiper said.

“You scared?” Sabo asked with a snort, smirking.

“Don’t get cocky now,” Wiper whispered lowly but with a note of dark amusement underlying his words. “My whole life I’ve dreamed of finding this place.”

“Stop bickering, you two! I’m counting. On three,” Koala said.

They tensed, almost as if bracing themselves for a life-changing one hundred metre sprint, listening to Koala’s countdown, the others’ stares heavy on their backs.

“One.”

Sabo swallowed thickly.

“Two.”

His heart toppled before picking up speed.

“Three.”

They started moving, striding forward in perfect synchronisation. Their feet hit the ground at the same time, each step the same length.

They emerged from the tree line and were suddenly immersed in warm, bright sunlight. Sabo blinked, deep breaths filling his lungs, but not for a second did his steps falter and neither did Wiper’s.

There was nothing but a short metre of greener rainforest ground separating them from destruction. His heart beat loudly in his head.

He took a step and another. He held his breath.

And then his feet crossed the border.
Chapter 4

When Kamakiri softly called his name, he was already awake, answering promptly. He had spent the last couple of hours staring at the roof of his tent, unable to find sleep; his left side, especially of his face, throbbed lightly. It wasn’t hurting much but after an hour or two it had started to really annoy him, and he felt just as much on edge as he had during their first week in the jungle. With a sullen face he sat up, pinched the bridge of his nose and breathed in deeply. His mind was weary and his legs ached from walking and climbing around the ruins all day, and still, not a moment of proper, restful sleep.

Sabo knew Kamakiri was waiting for him to take over, so he quickly took his journal with a small pencil already pushed between the yellowed, crumbled pages and opened the flap to his tent to put on his shoes.

Kamakiri stood by the fire, which had grown considerably smaller since they had all gone to bed, watching him.

“Anything I should know?” Sabo asked. Kamakiri shook his head, took off his tinted glasses and rubbed his eyes, yawned and announced that he would go to bed now. “Good night,” Sabo said, and watched him crawl into his tent on the other side of the fire. He stared at the closed entrance for another moment, his senses adjusting to his new task of keeping watch before turning around to observe his surroundings.

But the attempt was futile. It was a moonless night, the stars barely providing much illumination, and the fire’s glowing circle was small, so his vision was limited to no further than the tents huddled closely together. He rolled his shoulders a few times and stretched his neck, his joints popping, and noted with some discontent that just a few weeks of sleeping high up in the air had made sleeping on the ground a lot more uncomfortable.

After he had peered out into the night a little longer, ears straining to hear any suspicious sounds, and when there was nothing but the crackling of the campfire and the occasional sleeping noises of his colleagues to catch on, he resigned himself to sitting down on the steps leading up to the gallery where they had set up their camp, opened his journal and took the pencil from where it had been wedged between the pages.

There was still a lot of writing he had to catch up on, since in just the span of a day, more had happened than all of the weeks preceding it. They had reached the top of the mountain, had found their first ruins, all of them covered in moss and ferns and trees, only to stumble upon the remains of Shandora a couple of hours later with the most disturbing sight to greet them. Nothing was left of the once vast and impressive capital but tumbled, crushed stones and burned ground. Or so they had thought at first.

After Wiper and Sabo had volunteered to be the first to step into the ominous circle the forest had created around the burned ruins and it had turned out that it was neither a trap nor a place of no return, the others had followed, and together they had started exploring what had been the inner part of the city.

Robin and Kamakiri often stood together, closely observing what had survived the raging fire, searching for clues in the form of symbols and letters and architectural characteristics. All of them had been eager listeners before swarming out to peer into crumbled houses and search for whatever would give up hints on what exactly had happened.
It had been after an hour of scouring the toppled buildings when Koala had suddenly stopped and looked around with a distraught expression on her dust streaked face.

“What is it?” he had asked, following her gaze.

“Haven’t you noticed?”

His brow had furrowed and he had shaken his head.

“Listen closely,” she had said, and he had, only for his ears to pick up nothing but eerie quietness. No birds, no insects, no rustling leaves or gurgling waters. Just the shuffling of feet and the clacking of stones their friends had been the cause of.

They had told the others, none of them looking comfortable after hearing the news and together they had decided to move on and seek shelter, since the afternoon rains would be upon them soon.

Much to their surprise—and maybe even horror—clouds had been looming in the sky, though none had come close enough, as if they, too, were avoiding the area of the burned city.

“If this is a natural phenomenon, scientist all over the world will talk about nothing else for quite some time. That is, if we make it out of here again,” Laki had said as they had walked through what was left of the once wide, cobblestone paved streets, advancing further into town.

“I don’t know if I’d like for this to be anything else but natural at this point,” Conis had whispered, glancing at Sabo and Koala, who had stood close enough to hear her.

The sight of nothing but destruction and devastation, as well as the absence of the sounds they all had grown so accustomed to, had been gnawing at their sanity. They were all used to finding nothing but remainders of former glory and splendour yet somehow, in this particular case, it was more unnerving, more unsettling than usual, so the thought of these peculiarities being the result of something supernatural suddenly was not very appealing anymore.

What had added to all their distress had also been the traces of hostility lingering in the air, as if this place was trying to be as bleak, uninviting and threatening—both to them and the surrounding nature—as possible, and not once had Sabo let go of his pipe, always ready to strike or defend himself or the others if need be. And the subtle throbbing in his left side had only heightened his own personal trepidation.

After they had found out that no pouring rain would force them to make camp during the early afternoon, they had continued on, making their way through a field scattered with rubble and debris. Occasionally, they had stopped and either Kamakiri or Robin had explained a distinctive feature of a crumbled building they had just passed, and sometimes one of the other party members had helped out with a little additional information. The sheer height of what was left had still given a rather intimidating impression of what the city had looked like before it had met its devastating end, and not just once Sabo had overheard Kamakiri whisper—more to himself than anyone else—that it would take him months to catalogue everything.

Even with most of the structures destroyed and their walls blackened by fire and smoke, they had discovered a couple of well-preserved ornaments and writings. And with how proficient Robin had become at reading the Shandian script, she had been able to quickly decipher most of the writing, most of them old tales or hopeful prayers the people had carved into the walls of their homes.

The city had been vast back when it had still been the splendid capital of the Shandian Empire, there was no doubt about it, and even now, with much of its outer ring claimed by the jungle, they had
walked for hours without reaching the mountain's other side. They had advanced far enough for the rain forest's highest treetops to be completely out of sight, when they had been able to spot the remainders of another wall, which had once divided the city. Much to their surprise it had looked mostly intact except for the occasional hole in the walkway on top—the massive debris lying scattered all around it with houses closer to the wall crushed and buried beneath them—and the wide, gaping maw where a massive gate had proudly stood in times past to shield the sanctuary behind it from the ordinary citizen's view.

A sanctuary with three round towers, which had risen high into the sky, towering even above the wall, their golden tips glistening and sparkling in the setting sun.

They had paused, stunned by the view, realisation slowly trickling into the bends and curves of their brains.

A sanctuary.

With shaking fingers Wiper had retrieved a compass from his bag, their eyes drawn to the quivering, indecisive needle as it had been spun around by the hand of an invisible force, finally pointing straight north and thus unmistakably laying down that it was east where golden tops were glowing.

Sabo had been sure that he had not been the only one who had recited the words, carved into the ancient slate Robin had translated, in his head.

*The temple in the east, where fire lies asleep.*

They had found it.

Sabo paused, the pencil's point hovered above a page almost completely covered in his neat, narrow handwriting, reminiscing in the sweet, precious memory of finding a gem after digging around in the dirt for weeks, the triumph and elation he had felt returning instantly, rolling through him with a pleased hum as he closed his eyes to savour the moment for just a bit longer.

And somehow it was even more exciting now that he had the entrance to the temple at his back. He rolled his pencil back and forth between his fingers, staring at the pages lost in thought.

However, no matter how much they had hurried to reach the wall and what lay beyond, by the time they had finally passed through the wide opening of the gate, dusk had approached, bathing the temple grounds in quickly waning golden twilight to shroud it in night's thick, dark cloak of mystery. They had rushed to cross a surprisingly sturdy looking sandstone bridge spanning a wide artificial lake, which further separated the temple grounds from the city, to still reach the island during daylight's final moments—all the while unable to take their eyes off the breathtaking sight before them.

Wide stone stairs lead up to a terrace, their lowest steps below the surface of the lake's calm waters, on which the temple's main sanctuary was situated, easily to be distinguished by the three towers with their golden top looming above it. The premises were surrounded by a half-gallery with an entryway at the front, but, yet again, it had been impossible to see what came after, the whole construction most likely set up to block every visitor's view of the holiest place at the centre. Estimating the size of the whole complex just from where they had been standing had been impossible, and it would probably take a whole day’s worth of walking with proper equipment to measure its expanse.

However, from what they had been able to see, just before the sun had been swallowed up by a hidden horizon, there was very detailed and complex ornamentation carved all along the bridge's side
and the gallery, most of it curling, winding lines with the occasional flower embellishment but also figures of all kinds, some with human shapes, some with the looks of animals and others with features entirely unfamiliar to their eye.

Once they had reached the stone steps, it had been decided that they would set up camp right here on the terrace in front of the temple's entrance and since Koala had probably sensed his restlessness, she had volunteered them for pitching the tents, so Sabo wouldn't have a chance to wander off on his own again.

Now, though, he was the only one awake, and there was nothing else to do but write or read or stare off into the darkness. He turned slightly, pencil still between his fingers, his journal perched on his knees, and stared at the entrance leading into the temple's heart. Of course he was perfectly aware how dangerous snooping around unknown ruins in the middle of the night could be, but to him it seemed as if all they had done since reaching the city had been nothing but walking. They had looked more closely at some of the destroyed and burned buildings, yes, but there had never been any hallways begging for him to follow them without having the slightest clue where they were leading, or the promise of a hidden door somewhere in a wall, only revealing its secrets to those patiently searching for the opener.

He sucked at his lower lip for a while as he contemplated what to do. He knew both Robin and Koala would be mad with worry if he hadn't returned come morning, but it wasn't like he would advance as far as the temple's heart. No, he would only look around close to the entrance in the half-gallery and always make sure he was still able to see the fire's glow.

With a few quick steps he stood beside the fire, already holding the end of a torch into its embers, his journal lying forgotten on the stairs. While he waited for the pitch to catch fire, he stared hard at the rectangular entryway, once again listening for any noise or sound. He half expected Koala to crawl out of her tent, woken by the wild excitement radiating off him, but all remained quiet and peaceful.

He carefully stepped over the threads with which they had secured the tents on the columns. The torch's flame cast a path of flickering light before him but when he finally stood in the entryway frame he still wasn't able to discern anything in the pitch black darkness looming in his way.

Sabo licked his lips in a habit of agitation and glanced over his shoulder to his clueless colleagues soundly sleeping in their tents, the thrilling sensation rushing through his veins mixed with a touch of nerves. The reassuring thought that Koala and Robin knew him well enough to deduce that he hadn't wandered back across the bridge towards the town but had ventured into the temple when they found his tent empty in the morning should he not make it back in time, crossed his mind and he smiled. Then he stepped into the darkness.

Luckily, since it was night outside, his eyes did not have to adjust to the oppressive darkness filling the hallway, and there was no other sound beside his steps echoing off the walls. He was only able to see a few steps ahead and when he turned around for the first time to see how far he had come he noticed with a pinch of unease pricking his stomach that the campfire's glow had dwindled to nothing but the size of a single star in the vast span of the nightly sky. The sound of his steps in the hallway ceased for a moment as he pondered whether or not this was as far as he should go tonight before he straightened his posture and moved on.

A moment later the walls ended, making way for open space. There were more columns here and another bridge, which did not lead across a lake this time but solid ground covered with—

*Grass?* he wondered, a bit bewildered, and stepped closer to the stairs leading down from the half-gallery so the torch's light could reach the ground.
There had been neither grass nor any other form of vegetation ever since they had crossed into the odd circle the rainforest had formed around the ruined city, yet somehow the whole ground of this inner enclosure was covered in it, and it wasn't burned or withered, it was perfectly green and lush.

He remembered the remark he had overheard Kamakiri utter to Wiper when they had lit the campfire about how the temple appeared to be completely untouched by the terrible fate which had befallen the rest of the city. Parts of the wall surrounding the temple premises had been destroyed, but everything within its perimeter looked just like it probably had almost eight hundred years ago; the sandstone barely weathered and well cared for, the ornamentation and decoration neither chipped nor broken and no gaps and holes in the walls.

But it was almost impossible that the catastrophe, which had taken place in the city, had not affected the temple at all. Unless...

Sabo suddenly thrust the torch high in the air, straining to see further, past the bridge leading to the next building, his mouth gone dry at the thought which had just occurred to him.

He really wasn't one to believe in superstitions and the supernatural, but the longer they had walked through the ruins of Shandora so completely left untouched by the ravenous jungle, which had long since devoured its outskirts, the more he was inclined to believe in the extraordinary.

And now there was the temple, the sanctuary dedicated to the God of Fire, still standing proud despite hundreds of years having passed by. It somehow reminded him of the tale of Sleeping Beauty, where the prince, after he has made his way through trees and brambles and thorns, finds a castle and its folk in a deep sleep, neither walls nor people affected by the hundred years which have gone by since the princess has pricked her finger.

Just that they hadn’t seen a living soul so far, not even their mortal remains.

But then, at least according to the very legend which had lead them here, there was only one soul asleep within this very place.

A shudder ran up his spine, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end, his eyes focusing on the smudged outlines of the building across the bridge, barely visible in the dim, weak light of the torch in his hand, which suddenly blazed up with a hiss, the sound, or rather the whole occurrence, freezing the marrow in his bones. His heartbeat sped up, pupils blown wide in disbelief as he stared at the lively flickering flame and he knew that returning to the camp, back to the safety of his companions, was the sensible thing to do but his feet had already set themselves in motion, carrying him across the bridge.

He walked through another entry, down another hall, everything so much brighter since the flame of his torch had flared to life, and its light still intensified the closer he seemed to get to the sanctuary's middle, if his mind, clouded by over-excitement after drawing the earlier conclusions, wasn't playing tricks on him. The fire appeared to be almost eager to advance further, leading him deeper and deeper down the corridor like an exuberant child impatiently tugging at a parent's hand at the prospect of something extraordinary happening soon.

Carvings and paintings lined the walls on both sides now, the figures, coloured mostly in red and white, were eerily animated by the torch's light. A pearl of sweat trickled down the side of his face. He had not even noticed how hot and stale the air in the corridor was, smelling of dust and the lack of human life. His eyes dwelled on the stories the walls told him, words superfluous with how detailed some of the pictures were. Fighting scenes were depicted but also episodes of court life, if he was interpreting the garb of the figures correctly.
Then the hall ended and, just like the first one, there was open space again. Sabo deeply breathed in the nightly air, barely cooler but so much more refreshing than the air filling the corridor, and wiped the sweat from his face, swinging the torch from side to side to better see his surroundings.

The enclosure looked almost exactly like the one he had just come from, just that the building in the middle of the plane of grass was the one with the three golden towers on top—the heart of the sanctuary. But the towers were not what caught his eyes, for when he lifted the torch higher above his head, its light reached a detailed sculpture of a massive bird guarding the entrance to the next building. Its wings were outstretched as it perched on the entryway frame, its massive yet sleek body leaning forward, as if it was ready to swoop down and attack whoever tried to enter the shrine and bore ill will to the deity it had been consecrated to, the feathers' outlines carved with much care and great skill and in the dancing flame's brightness it appeared to be just as alive as the figures on the walls, its empty stone eyes trained on Sabo at the other end of the bridge.

But it wasn't the splendour of the statue, which had made him freeze on the spot, but the recognition that he had seen the very same bird alive only a couple of weeks ago. It was the phoenix, messenger of the gods, its symbol found all over the ruins of ancient Shandora. Sabo kept staring at it, maybe waiting for it to shed its stone cover and soar up into the sky again but nothing happened. Neither did it cry out like he had heard it do before nor did it shake its impressive wings. It was only a statue after all.

He turned around, glancing at the hallway behind him, the light from the campfire no longer visible. He may have even turned left or right while following the hall, his sense of direction confused by the narrow walls with their paintings. Should he turn around now and come back with the others tomorrow morning? He glanced back up at the phoenix's statue, his scar tingling and he brought his free hand up to his face to feel the tissue. The bird kept on watching.

After another minute of silent arguing, he took a step forward and another, and before long he had crossed over, standing right beneath the winged sentry. The flame at the end of his torch hissed again in encouragement, insisting Sabo got over his hesitancy and carried it deeper, into the temple's middle. He raised his gaze to lock it with the phoenix's, narrowing his eyes. Last time he had seen it, it had looked a lot more friendly and certainly not as intimidating and threatening as the likeness made it appear to be. But then last time Sabo had not been on the verge of entering a god's earthly dwelling.

He remembered that, so far, not a single person who had set out to seek these ruins, had ever returned. Maybe he wasn't the first to stand here and stare up at this silent guardian, and he wondered whether the moment he crossed the threshold, sharp talons would close around his throat to strangle another unworthy being.

Sabo rolled in his lips, furtively glancing at the entryway two steps away from where he stood.

*It's just stone. It's not alive,* he told himself, feeling stupid for being so uncharacteristically cautious and superstitious. He was an explorer. Of course he knew fear, though his sense of self-preservation was probably less developed than with other people, and he only feared where there was an actual, real reason to be afraid. Right here, right now these were only his emotions reacting to the oddities this place had shown him so far, clouding his usually rather rational and logical judgement of a situation.

He straightened his posture and with a last, almost sullen look at the phoenix statue, he stubbornly stepped forward, entering the sanctuary.

No matter how much he had tried to convince himself that he wasn't scared, a sense of deep relief washed over him when nothing happened. Not even the flame of his torch made a sound or lit up a
bit more. A long exhale rushed out from deep within his lungs, the tension draining from his limbs. He walked a couple of more steps but neither was he pierced by lances coming out of the walls nor did a hole open up underneath his feet nor was the entrance blocked. And, most importantly, the bird had remained in its place without making a sound.

Shaking his head in a manner of self-reprimand, he continued on, letting the torch’s light shine high above his head to fill every crack between the large blocks of sandstone. This time, though, the walls started glowing and when Sabo stepped closer to inspect, curiosity sparkling in his sea blue eyes, he noticed the golden lines adorning them, dividing yet more paintings depicting different scenes. However, he was sure what he was seeing now were no longer humans, at least not all of them, because most of the figures were dressed in gold and white, and had been drawn with much more detail than before.

He recognised the symbol of the sun above the head of a figure with long, flowing amber hair, concluding that it had to be the sun goddess, but he had no idea what the symbol at the feet of the figure drawn beside her meant. Robin would have known, he would have to ask her tomorrow. Their hands were joined but the sun goddess' other arm was stretched out, pointing at the outlines of a city—a city he easily identified as Shandora, the temple with its three distinctive towers with their golden tops in the middle. Beneath the two gods there was a third one, the fire symbol beside it.

He inhaled audibly, letting his eyes roam over the figure with its dark shock of hair, striding towards where the Goddess of the Sun was pointing, the phoenix leading the fire god's way in its vibrant blue colours. Sabo's fingers inched closer to the sandstone, his breath whirling up a small cloud of particles with the lack of space between his face and the painting. Gingerly, he dragged his pointer over the outlines of the phoenix, its colours suddenly shining more brightly now that the thin layer of dust had been removed. Putting his whole hand flat against the wall, he wiped clean the fire god's figure and took a step back to study his work. He definitely had to show this to the others tomorrow, though he knew he was in for a scolding if Koala found out he had gone exploring on his own again. Maybe she should be the first to learn of his discoveries, to appease her.

The other pictures lining the walls mostly showed more scenes with gods, some with, some without the fire god, and Sabo guessed that they were telling the legends the Shandians had for their deities. But without Robin and the Jayans around there was no use in lingering for too long so he walked on, only occasionally glancing to the side when something caught his eye.

At some point the passage's floor declined slightly before he stepped out of another entry and into a large, wide room with a ceiling so high he wasn't able to see it with what little light he had. Judging by how far he had walked, he was most likely at the centre of the sanctuary and right beneath the three towers. The light of his torch wasn't bright enough to properly illuminate the far corners of the chamber but enough to give a good impression of what function this room once had had. However, it was in complete and utter disarray, chaos even.

In the middle of the room a massive, rectangular block of polished quartzite had been placed and, taking into account the many golden artefacts lying scattered about on top of it, it had most likely served as an altar. With a tinge of hesitancy in his step, Sabo entered the chamber, his eyes roaming the ground and the walls, but aside from the mess close to the altar there were no other signs of disorder. The frescos on the walls looked perfectly intact from where he stood and, once again, the whole place appeared to have just been left by those who had erected it almost eight hundred years ago.

Carefully, he picked up a golden, ruby-encrusted cup from the floor and turned it in his hand. The crimson stones caught the torchlight, each glowing as if it had a tiny flame burning inside, the gold
radiating a warm shine. It was smooth against his palm and Shandian characters, which Sabo didn’t know the meaning of, had been engraved along the rim. Selling a treasure such as this back at Goa would probably earn him enough belli to live without a care for half a year, even more if sold to the right people on the blackmarket.

He estimated the cup's weight out of habit and upon realising the corners of his lips turned down both in disgust and self-loathing. With two wide strides he crossed the distance to the altar and put the cup down with a decisive clang, and maybe a bit more force than necessary. The sound disrupted the chamber's deep silence, echoing off the walls for what seemed like a small eternity, and his skin crawled with the fact that he was nothing more than an unwelcomed intruder.

This had once been a place of worship, though by the looks of it he wasn’t the first to disrupt its peace, because when he held his torch higher he spotted yet more artefacts strewn about. Someone or something had clearly gone on a rampage, or a fight had occurred, but there were no weapons nor signs of injury. Had an animal broken in? But what reason would there have been for it to cause such chaos? Besides, they hadn't seen a living thing since entering the inner city's eerie circle. The mayhem had been caused before the city's downfall then, perhaps.

Sabo walked around the altar, the tapping of his feet creating more noise he felt oddly sorry about. A moment later, a shining surface, much too large to belong to one of the ritual objects, caught his eye. His brow crinkled into a frown as he moved closer until he his feet had reached the topmost step of a stair enclosing a large pool. The perfectly still waters glistened in the shine of his torch and, even though the few steps leading down to the surface were steep, the basin itself wasn’t.

He tried to see what lay beyond the pool, raising his torch higher, when a figure caught his sight. Perfectly motionless, it lay below the water’s surface at the centre of the pool, raven hair surrounding the head like a black halo and dressed in white garb Sabo had never seen anywhere else before. Although…

His legs moved almost mechanically down the first step, his heart ceasing its beating for a second before thumping back to life with a force that made his chest vibrate and his limbs shake so violently that he almost lost grip on his torch. His lips parted to say something despite that he was the only one present to hear in the hopes that the sound of his own voice would bring his mind back to reality, but no words came out, not even a disbelieving whisper nor a croaked noise of shock made it up his throat. Sweat gathered on his palms, above his lip and on his brow with how quickly his heart was beating, fuelled by adrenaline, and his pulse was so strong and loud he felt it reverberate in his toes and fingertips and most of all his head, drowning out all thought with its thunderous pounding. Thinking was no longer possible, but what good was a clear, sane mind anyway in the face of such impossibilities, such insanity.

The fire of his torch flared to life once more, now bright enough to easily light up the whole of the chamber, chasing the shadows from their corners, drowning out the darkness that had reigned.

When there were no more steps above the water surface, he stopped. The figure still hadn’t moved, but not even for a moment had Sabo believed the person to be dead. No, he knew the man wasn’t dead, had known the moment he had glimpsed his body floating in the waters, because sleep was what had held him captive in the water all these centuries.

And now Sabo had to get there and hold him, rouse him from his slumber and end his night, which had endured almost eight hundred years. The need to wade through the waters until he had reached the centre of the pool had an even greater pull to it than gravity. There was no debating it, no denying that strange force, which drew him towards that person.

His breathing had turned into panting, almost as if he had just run a long distance at high-speed, even
though all he did was stand on these stairs, staring at the lean figure in the water, the golden jewellery adorning the man’s arms and wrists and neck softly reflecting the light of Sabo’s torch.

What did his face look like?

It was difficult to properly see and tell from where he was standing, the water blurring lines and warping shapes.

Sabo swallowed thickly, his heartbeat still erratic, out of control. There had been drawings of the fire god but none had been detailed enough to show the outlines of his face.

With all his remaining power of will he walked back up the steps and hurried to put the torch into a mounting on the wall, the knowledge of who lay asleep in the basin behind him heavy on his back and shoulders. It was impossible to contemplate whether he really should go down these stairs again and into the water, because it appeared to be his only option, as if it were some lifelong instinct which had always been inside him, like the need to breath or drink or eat, just that he had only learned about it when he had spotted the figure in the water. But now there was no walking away, no sitting idly by the side. It could not wait till morning, not even for another hour. It had to be done now.

On his way back to the pool he tugged off his boots, stumbling but never falling, and dropped them to the floor with the rustling thud of soft leather and heavy soles. The stone of the floor was smooth against his naked feet and cold, and when he reached the edge of the stairs he didn’t hesitate and quickly started his descent. There was no reason to be scared and without at least just dipping his toes into the water first, he moved on, disturbing the water’s calm with his presence and his brisk approach, climbing down step after step until there were no more.

Small waves lapped around his waist and the water’s gurgling on the edge filled the chamber. It wasn’t cold, at least not as cold as he had expected it to be, and even if it had been freezing, it would not have hindered his advance.

There was the shock of raven hair, now slightly billowing with the current his movement had created. He was close.

The flame of his torch hissed again but in his head it was a persuasive whisper calling him, urging him to move on

Nearer. Nearer. Come nearer…

He licked his lips and sucked them in in agitation. If he stretched out his hand below the water’s surface now, he would be able to twirl dark strands around his fingers.

…where fire lies asleep…

Sabo stopped, eyes searching the man’s face. Time ceased to flow, the world coming to a standstill. There was no up above or down below, no gravitational force to hold him to the ground. The laws, which life abided by, were no longer in effect. All that mattered was right here before him, and if the world had been about to end right now, he never would have noticed, because all he was able to see were the perfect shapes of the beautiful face below the water’s surface. The lines of a strong jaw, the curve of soft-looking lips, garlands of full, dark lashes fanned out over smooth skin and freckles scattered across cheekbones and the bridge of a sharp nose, sleep’s calm engraved in every dip and turn of the man’s peaceful silhouette.
Slightly, Sabo bowed his head to better see the breathtaking, divine perfection before him. His
fingers had already dipped into the water without him even noticing, nearing the fire god’s face to touch it, hold it, lift it out of the water, and when his palms finally met with soft cheeks, the tip of his nose nothing more than a hair’s breadth away from touching the water, the world turned upside down.

Lids flew open, revealing steel grey, burning eyes.

Pain shot up his left side, exploding—blinding white—inside his head, just as it had on that fateful night, and, with a silent, unheard cry of agony, he staggered and crashed into the water, where darkness swallowed him.
He was ripped from the darkness with a start shaking him so violently his teeth clacked together, the sound ringing in his head. Blinking sleep from his eyes, he fumbled for his surroundings, discerning a soft cloth beneath his hand where there should have been the sandstone tiles’ smooth, unyielding hardness. The torch's brightness was gone but, luckily, there was still a soft orange glow bathing the room in murky light. However, the silhouettes he was able to make out didn’t match those of the chamber, which had been almost bare of objects save for the massive altar and the pool, but now there were various angular shapes of different size visible in the semi-darkness.

His brow crinkled in lack of understanding before realisation hit him, dealing him a one ton blow of shock and terror straight to the gut, panic cutting off his breath. He knew his surroundings despite not being able to properly see them, the surface of the floorboards—roughened by the years, with vicious splinters scratching his palm when he swiped his hand over the floor a second time to make sure—imprinted into his brain like barely any other memory of his youth, along with the heavy, pungent smell of smoke creeping in through the gap below the door, hovering close to the floor first but slowly, steadily, filling the room, devouring vital oxygen and spitting out poison instead.

He jumped to his feet but they weren’t as strong as he was used to, buckling under the sudden movement so shortly after waking up and when he looked down, he noticed that they also weren’t as long as usual. A glance at his hands—tiny hands with short fingers and no traces of scars from countless explorations and adventures—confirmed his fears, and with a cry closer to a sob than a shout he slumped back to his knees. The old wooden beams making up the house creaked and cracked ominously and the orange glow grew brighter, the smoke becoming thicker and darker.

His head whipped around in search for a way of escape, the familiar whirl of his blond locks following the motion missing, making what he had already feared had come true even more obvious. He was Sabo, ten years old and trapped on the attic of an old warehouse down by Goa's docks after he had just tried escaping his familial noble home for the first time in his young life.

The attic had seemed like the perfect hideout to spend the night in, sheltered from the gruesome heavy late autumn rains and the biting winds sweeping through the city's streets. The night had promised to be a lonely but cozy one, since he had thought of taking one of the warm blankets from his room, which he had wrapped around himself after lying down on the softest spot he had been able to find on the floorboards, his small backpack, lacking the luxurious comfort of a down pillow but instead smelling of freedom and cast off expectations, serving as a pillow.

Fantasising about the many stories of daring explorers he had read in those numerous books he had had back home and which he had to leave behind, his eyes had grown heavier with every minute until he had finally fallen into a deep slumber, his last thought before drifting off one full of relief. He had escaped his gilded cage.

His sleep had not lasted for long; though, he was lucky he had woken up at all, otherwise he would have simply suffocated, leaving his lifeless body behind as fodder for the ravenous flames. Not a trace would have been left. A cough rattled his lungs, and suddenly the possibility of dying peacefully in his sleep seemed to be a much more appealing option than burning alive. The flames roared angrily outside the door to the attic, the fateful sound mixing with the deafening rush of adrenaline spiked blood filling his ears.

Sabo stumbled backwards, eyes darting to the window he knew was the only route of escape, or escaping a death in agony at least, because jumping from this height would mean his death no less, he was sure. Tears brimmed in his eyes and he blinked to fight them back but the smoke wouldn’t let
him.

Another cough shook him when the flames started licking at the far wall and a moment later it was on fire. The heat was tremendous and almost tangible, closing in on him from the front and above. A loud groan from above made him stumble closer to the window and with utter horror he saw the strong beams of the roof were almost entirely on fire.

His instincts decided for him when he turned around to make it to the window in time, but with a crack as loud as thunder the roof collapsed. Heavy, burning wood struck him down, the pain along his left side searing hot and blinding white. Sabo screamed, writhing on the floor, flailing, unable to see or hear or feel anything else but the fire eating at his skin, his flesh, his bones. He would die up here; die without anyone knowing he had, without having found anyone who cared and would bemoan his loss, having had nothing but a pathetically brief glimpse at freedom.

A scream rolled up his throat, but this one wasn't full of pain like all the others before it. No, this one was filled with rage and resistance and the refusal to let his life end like this. Sabo had only had a taste of freedom but its pure, addictive flavour was still strong on his tongue, chasing away the acidic bitterness of the fire's smoke in his mouth, driving out the mind-numbing pain. He slapped at the left side of his face, rolling around on the floor to extinguish the fire feeding on his clothes, ignoring the sickeningly sweet stench of his own burned skin filling his nostrils and started half crawling, half dragging his small body over the floor towards the window. He would not die here.

Outside this window there was a world full of mysteries and so far he had seen nothing of it except for what lay within the city's boundaries, and his experiences consisted only of what his parents had made him do, his sub-conscious filled with memories he rather would have had erased.

With a locked jaw and grinding teeth he continued on, aware that the pain he desperately tried to ignore and the lack of oxygen might make him pass out any moment now. Another battle cry broke free from his lips, eyes stinging, watering as the burning chaos blazed on around him. If hell existed, surely this was it. He knew there were no more flames eating away at his body but the heat in the attic was so fierce it felt as if they were still at it, and every shallow breath he took was like breathing in liquid fire, burning him from the inside out.

The building’s wooden structure creaked and cracked and groaned again, trembling when one side of it gave away, tumbling to the ground. Sabo’s fingers clawed at the floorboards, his arms screaming in protests as they had to pull him forward, face strained, twisting in anguish, toes pushing against the shaking, trembling ground, further, further.

A cloud of smoke washed over him when another part collapsed and his eyes went wide in terror. There was no escaping it, he had to breathe but if he did…

He had inhaled before truly noticing, the reflex too strong and overwhelming, impossible to quash. Poisonous, bitter air filled his mouth—stinging, biting—and was sucked down his throat, deep into his body, with the expansion of his lungs.

He convulsed, on hands and knees now, gagging, gasping before he coughed up water.

The heat was gone and so was the noise, the burning storm no longer raging on around him. Instead, there was nothing but silence and a steady *drip drip drip*.

A dream. It had only been a dream.

A weak, tired smile tugged at the corner of his lips before another rasping cough forced them apart. He let it happen without fighting back and when the fit had passed, he took a couple of deep, gasp-
like breaths to steady the pattern of his lungs, greedily gulping down the much needed oxygen before sitting down on his heels and resting his forehead against the tiles.

Even though the images had been part of a dream he had had many times over, they had never been this vivid before, and it would have been a lie if he had denied that he hadn't believed it to be real, that he really was trapped in that attic again and about to go up in flames. And even now his left side, where his skin was covered in burn scars, stung unpleasantly with the after-effect of those imagined flames eating away at him, regardless of the cool fabric of his soaked clothes clinging to it.

His lungs were still on fire, too, straining with every breath he took, but for that at least he had an explanation. The series of events, which had occurred before he had had the pleasure of reliving his most dreaded memory, returned abruptly and without showing any consideration for his exhausted mind and body. A face so gorgeous conjuring up a mental image of its beauty was easily done, whereas putting its perfection into actual words would prove impossible. And those eyes, the colour of anthracite...

It had been in that very moment, when his gaze had met with the fire god's, that the pain had returned and he had lost consciousness and fallen into the pool's waters.

With his figure still bend over he stared at the floor for a while, collecting his thoughts or, much rather, not daring to look up and be confronted with the inexplicable so shortly after having escaped a nightmare. But it was obvious that he hadn't made it out of the pool alone, and his logic persisted that there was only one option as to who had saved him. So taking another breath and bracing himself for his world to change irrevocably, he slowly stood up on shaky legs and turned.

The man stood a couple of metres away from him, strong but pleasantly slender arms crossed before a broad, almost completely bare chest, feet firmly on the ground. His whole posture radiated confidence, the notion only intensified by the way he held his head, chin tilted slightly upwards, lustrous grey eyes fixed on Sabo. Damp ebony waves hung heavy with moisture, sticking to his brow and cheeks, beds of pool water trickling down, following the finely sculpted lines of his beautiful face.

He truly was breathtakingly gorgeous, now even more than when Sabo had found him, fast asleep in the depths of his watery resting place.

His wet, flawless skin, which glistened in the warm light, rose and fell with every curve of well-developed muscle and the angular shape of bones showing through beneath it. His main items of clothing were a pristine white waist cloth—fastened at the side and held in place by a crimson sash and an exquisitely crafted, jewel-encrusted golden belt—and a second sash in a different shade of white winding around his upper body. On his arms and legs jewels of all sorts, all wrought from pure gold, glimmered and sparkled; some were simple slim bands while others had been beaten into the intricate shapes of flames, and held sapphires, emeralds and rubies of all sizes and cutting. His necklaces were all made of gold as well but one, which consisted of a row of simple red beads on a string, and a pair of golden, hooped earrings shone through between his ebony waves.

Even if Sabo hadn’t been aware of the man’s real identity, he would have believed him to be of heavenly descent nonetheless, for an appearance so stunning and without fault simply had to be out of this world. In a way his impeccable looks reminded Sabo of a collection of marble statues he had once seen at a museum back at Goa Kingdom, all of them images of a long since faded culture’s ancient gods carved by expert hands. However, he was sure no set of hands was skilled enough to coax a replica of the man before him from a block of marble, not even those of master sculptors of old times that was how fair, how sublime, how ideal he was.

A rippling motion caught Sabo’s eye and his brow furrowed in bewilderment. For a fleeting moment,
he thought he had seen a line of fire flicker across the man’s chest, but it was only the sash shimmering in various colours, coincidentally those of flames. Because cloth didn’t move like that. Right? But then the person observing him intently was by no means ordinary either. And if there had been so much as a scrap of doubt nagging at Sabo’s mind about whether he was truly the being out of Shandian folklore, then it was dispelled in an instant when he noticed the undeniable similarities between the shape of the fire god’s jewellery and the symbols carved into the walls of the room as well as the objects scattered about. Flames. Fire.

The only actual flame in the room, the one of the torch he had brought with him, hissed again, but this time it sounded neither eager nor excited just threatening, like a snake hissing, about to strike its prey. His throat suddenly felt dry, as if he had run for miles on end without a drop of water, so he swallowed, but the act was strenuous and the parched sensation remained. Sabo cleared his throat. Once. Twice. But there was nothing to be done about it. Sweat trickled down his temple and only then he noticed how much of it had already gathered on his forehead, and not just there. When he brought his hand up to his neck, there was slick skin beneath his fingertips, and with the next breath he took dry, hot air filled his lungs.

He was unpleasantly reminded of his first time in the Alabastian desert, just that when he had longed for water there had been a flask at his hips. But now…

With a laboured breath his head tilted around, towards the pool. By now he was so thirsty he would gladly have drunk from the murky waters of a three day old puddle on Goa Kingdom’s main road regardless of the consequences. But his body wouldn’t move, or at least his limbs were resisting his commands, because turning his head back towards the fire god, impassively standing in the same spot as before, presented no problem. In this short moment, the temperature in the room had increased, the heat torrid, worse even than in the desert.

Sabo’s eyes found the fire god’s, the man appearing unbothered by the heat, looking completely unfazed, as if there was a cool breeze swirling through the room right where he stood. For a moment, understanding chased away the scorching heat from every corner of his body when it was poured over his head like a bucket filled with ice-cold water. Had he really believed that he could walked out of this unscathed? His teeth clamped shut and a shudder crawled over his skin. Then breathing became close to impossible, the air he inhaled burning his tongue, his throat, consuming him from the inside out as well as the other way around, and the fire god’s presence became tangible in the intensity of the heat filling the room, weighing down on Sabo’s shoulders, crushing him. The room was much too small to contain such an enormous aura. That the chamber wasn’t ablaze yet was all that was missing.

Sabo’s scar started throbbing again, the mark fire had left on him coming alive, as if it was a foreign creature that had clung to his body for years now, only pretending to be dead while waiting for the chance to finally consume him and finish what it had once started.

From every side the heat’s invisible walls pressed in on him, and that, together with the pain from his scar, took him back to the dream he had just had, the hell he had escaped from, or so he had thought. As it turned out, he had simply stumbled on and entered the next level. However, there was no escape from this one. This was reality. The flames had not forgotten that he belonged to them, and they had come to bring their gruesome task to an end and at the same time punish him for his indecency, his boldness.

The plants and animals of the jungle had been wise enough to stay clear of this place, they had known what fate would befall them should they cross into the fire god’s territory. But simply stepping over the border hadn’t sufficed. No, Sabo’s thirst for more was never satisfied, so of course he had to venture deeper until he had found the sacred resting place, and in a moment of pure
madness he had waded through the waters of the pool to rouse the god of fire from his sleep.

He, of all people, should have been aware of the dangers that arose from playing with fire. It was fickle, capricious, destruction lying in its very nature, its terrifying power hardly tameable, consuming furiously and without discriminating, leaving only desolation behind.

The sad state of the Ancient City crossed his mind but quickly made way for an even more horrifying scenario; his family, his colleagues, sleeping innocently, unaware of the perils looming inside these walls, the doom Sabo had assigned them to.

Would the god spare them, if he, the perpetrator, threw himself to the ground before him and begged him to have mercy? Would that appease him?

He tried to find an answer in the fire god’s deep grey eyes, which continued to regard him with the same curious but slightly guarded expression. Sabo’s heart picked up speed, thumping hard inside his chest, reverberating in his head, his throat, but he was incapable of breathing deeply to provide the necessary oxygen. His vision blurred, sweat stinging his eyes before his pupils were able to focus again. He would go up in flames any minute now, so he at least had to make the attempt of pleading for his friends’ lives.

With eyes locked on the fire god’s ethereal face, his cracked lips parted and he readied himself to fall to his knees, when the man blinked and Sabo staggered forward, just managing to catch himself, inhaling deeply, like he had just emerged from a bottomless ocean, lungs screaming to be filled. All tension, all strain had evaporated, the smouldering air threatening to eat him alive suddenly cool and moist again, the only remnants his strenuously beating heart and the film of sweat tenaciously clinging to his skin. Instinctively, he checked his bare forearms and hands for blisters but nothing. He was fine.

“So you truly are human.”

His head snapped up, gaze fixing on the fire god, eyes wide. Had he spoken? Sabo didn’t trust his brain enough right now to not taunt him with another illusion.

“Who are you?”

This time, he watched the man’s lips move in accordance with his words, but he was too captivated by the low, melodious sound of the fire god’s voice to focus on the actual question. Soft and sonorous but clear enough to reach into the farthest corner of the room. It was the kind of voice that was so pleasant to the ears one wanted to hear more of it, and every word spoken in its warm, velvet baritone further ensnared the mind, a gentle caress to the brain yet at the same time highly intoxicating, addictive even. A death threat would have sounded just as sweet as a declaration of love. It was a voice to rule the world with.

The fire god shifted, tilting his head to the side, the motion accompanied by the airy, irregular ring of countless tiny golden objects brushing against one another, sounding like a thousand small wind chimes had just been stirred by a gentle breeze in the distance. It was an agreeable sound, soothing almost, and Sabo no longer felt like an intruder. He was welcome now, his presence accepted.

He reined in his straying thoughts and managed to recall the question that had been directed at him. But when he tried to speak only raspy syllables came out, his voice lacking after all the turmoil and disuse, the water he had swallowed and the scorchingly hot air he had inhaled. He cleared his throat but nothing came of it. So with an apologetic look towards the fire god he bent down and picked up a golden cup from the floor, filling it with pool water before hastily gulping it down, uncaring for its taste or what drinking it might entail. Only now that the water washed down his throat, did he notice
how thirsty he was, and after he had finished the first cup he filled it up a second time, greedy for
more. All the while, the fire god watched him, amusement lighting up his eyes.

When Sabo was done, he wiped his mouth with his arm and put the cup down before getting back
on his feet. He cleared his throat and said, “I’m Sabo. An explorer from Goa Kingdom.”

“Sabo,” the fire god tasted his name on his tongue and Sabo immediately liked how it sounded
rolling off the man’s lips; simple, free of judgement, an observation, nothing more. His gaze
swooped over Sabo’s appearance once more—his still wet shirt clinging to his figure, same as his
pants, sleeves and pant legs rolled up, the sheen of sweat on his skin, his mussed hair—briefly but
without missing the details. Then it settled on his face again, no more caution left in his eyes, just
curiosity.

“I am Ace,” he said nonchalantly.

Sabo blinked, startled. “Ace? Is-Is that your name?” His words were laced with disbelief.

The fire god paused, tilting his head in thought. “It is. Is this not customary among humans? You
gave me your name so I give you mine?”

“Uhm, yes, it is,” Sabo said, rather unintelligently. “I just wasn’t expecting it, I guess.”

“For me to give you my name?” Ace inquired, brows coming together in visible confusion.

“No, no. More the name itself, but of course you have a name.”

Again, Ace paused, thinking on what Sabo had said before a small smile tugged at his lips. It was a
marvellous sight despite the vagueness of the emotion on display, and Sabo wondered what an
impact a real and wide smile would have, if a hint of it was enough to make him feel a bit light-
headed. It was an odd sensation so briefly after he had to fear for his life and those of his family and
friends; on moment he had thought he would burst into flames and the next a completely different
heat had crept into his cheeks.

“It is not grand. Is that what you are trying to say? Because I am a god of fire you were expecting
something a little more intimidating, maybe?” Sabo nodded hesitantly. “I guess I do have these titles,
but Ace is the name my mother gave me. I thought it would be easier.” His smile widened some
more as he lowered his arms, losing his unapproachable stance, and he started to gracefully move
closer, every step accompanied by the sound of wind chimes resonating in the hushed silence of the
room again, lulling Sabo into a peaceful daze, the remaining tension easing off his limbs, making
room for a deep feeling of carefreeness that acted as a muting blanket wrapping around his mind.

“How much time has passed?” Ace began, his enchanting voice adding to the bewitching resonance coming from his
jewellery, his bare feet hushed on the smooth sandstone tiles, “How much time has passed?”

“Yes. Since I fell asleep.” Ace halted for a moment, assessing the state of the room with a swooping
gaze, his friendly expression falling for just the span of a heartbeat before it was in place again.

“Because this room looks like not even a day has passed.”

Sabo dared to copy Ace, briefly examining the room as well, though the chamber itself wasn’t so
much the problem but rather the state of the whole temple and that of the destroyed city, both
appearing as if their peace had only been disrupted recently. However, if Sabo’s recollection of the
legend was correct then the fire god had fallen asleep a long time ago.
“According to the stories, almost eight hundred years have passed since then.”

The words coming from his mouth sounded surreal, yet at the same time they didn’t, and where a human would at least have been fazed by the news of having slept through almost a century, Ace wasn’t bothered in the least. So far nothing had seemed to bother him; not Sabo’s appearance nor the fact that he still looked like he was in the prime of his youth, when clearly he wasn’t.

But then what did Sabo know about gods? He wasn’t a religious person or rather he had never concerned himself with it, if it wasn’t linked to his expeditions and historical as well as cultural interests. During his travels he had come across so many beliefs, faiths of all sorts and fundamentals, some differing greatly while others showed a great number of similarities. Naturally, he had reservations with regards to gods and higher powers, and his instinct to question the peculiarities of this world, the need to get to the bottom of things, to reveal secrets, also proved to get in the way of settling for a particular faith or religion.

Now, though, he was confronted with the consequences of solving yet another ancient enigma, but this time, instead of answering his questions, he was left with a thousand new ones and a worldview turned upside down.

“Stories, huh?” Ace said, more to himself than to anyone else, amusement crinkling the corner of his eyes, dimpling his cheeks. What a lovely sight he was, his perfect, smooth skin glowing in the torch light, droplets of pool water glistening on it like he had just emerged from a sea of tiny diamonds, the freckles scattered across the bridge of his nose and the perfect arch of his cheekbones giving him a boyish look that did nothing to diminish his ethereal air. “But even though there were stories, it took eight hundred years until someone came and woke me up.”

“You weren’t able to wake up by yourself?” It was more a question than an assumption; however, Sabo forgot all about it when Ace stopped right in front of him, the clear sound of his jewellery ceasing. He had been too preoccupied with watching Ace and immersing his mind in that sound than to pay attention how close he was getting, and now there was barely any space left between them.

A gentle warmth snuck below Sabo’s damp clothes, permeating his skin, reaching into every corner, every fibre, rising to his cheeks, the tip of his ears and his fingers, his toes, filling his heart. It was the gentle warmth of tamed flames—the camp fire keeping the night’s terrors at bay in a foreign, unknown place, the flames crackling in a house’s hearth, turning the most uncomfortable room into a home, a safe haven, the fire sheltering life from the cold. As ambiguous as fire was, as violent on the outside, it was truly a nurturing element.

Sabo’s breaths were even and calm, deep, expanding his lungs with air, Ace’s unique scent filling his nose. He smelted of pure life and crisp, clean mountain air, the fragrance unexpectedly cool, a contrast to the heat radiating off his body that cleared Sabo’s mind and grounded him further, his heartbeat strong and steady inside his chest.

When was the last time that he had felt so alive and yet so placid?

“We are no strangers,” Ace said, voice soft, almost a hum, and raised his hand, brushing wet golden curls out of Sabo’s brow, fingertips ghosting over his skin before the lock was tugged behind his ear. Ace tenderly traced the line of Sabo’s jaw and then cupped his cheek, his thumb stroking the exposed scar tissue covering the left side of Sabo’s face almost reverently, devotedly—apologetic.

“Because it seems like we have met before.” His words were nothing but a whisper; the smile which had curled the corner of his perfect lips only seconds ago gone, replaced by a regretful shadow darkening his sublime features.

Whether it was that shadow or the tingling suddenly returning to Sabo’s scar that broke the spell, he
didn’t know, but with a frightening clarity the memory of that fateful, terrifying night—the vividness of its fleeting images enhanced tenfold due to his most recent nightmare—startled him from his daze, and with an almost violent jerk he pulled away and stumbled backwards.

Again, Ace wasn’t surprised and neither did he come after him but he watched, observed, as Sabo struggled to find his bearings, momentarily overwhelmed by the many sensations of all kinds and colours.

Sabo's trembling fingers found the edge of the altar and he used the solid block of sandstone to steady himself, leaning against it while putting his thoughts in order. He let his eyes sweep around the room, mostly to keep them from returning to Ace, but as far as he could see nothing had changed.

"I did not mean to scare you," Ace said, sounding like he meant it, wisely choosing to remain where he was, a couple of steps away from Sabo.

"You didn't," Sabo replied a bit too readily, searching for the entrance he had entered the room through, brow furrowing in confusion when he couldn't find it.

“You were screaming.”

He had started to cross the room in the direction where he was sure the exit had to be, but Ace’s words made him pause and turn. “Screaming?”

“Yes, when I pulled you out of the water you started screaming.”

“You pulled me out of the water?”

Ace nodded. “I did. At first, I thought you were screaming because of the shaking ground, but even when it was over you would not stop.”

“The ground was shaking? You mean there was an earthquake?”

Ace nodded again, and Sabo looked over his shoulder, at the spot where the exit was supposed to be, a nagging sense of dread gnawing at his guts. “Please. No,” he whispered and, ignoring Ace, quickly strode towards the wall. His flat palms met with solid, unyielding blocks of sandstone as he felt for a clue of what had happened. He could still remember the angle through which he had entered the chamber, the first view he had had of the room, the entryway had to be here, he was certain. Panicked, his head turned from side to side in a desperate search for the hint of a door. There had to be one.

“Did you have a nightmare?” Ace asked calmly, apparently oblivious to Sabo’s rising panic, watching as he started to knock against the evenly cut stones. Sabo ignored him, mostly because the blood rushing through his veins, urged on by his gradually accelerating heartbeat, had turned him deaf to anything but the hollow sound indicating that he had found what he was looking for.

He knocked and knocked and suddenly perked up. He knocked again just to make sure, and then took a step back to examine what was now blocking his way out. If he looked closely, he could trace the edges of the stone wall. With determination strengthening his muscles, he braced himself and pushed.

Nothing.

He pushed harder, naked toes digging into the small gaps between the sandstone tiles, until his bare soles slipped on the smooth surface. Catching himself just in time, he cursed under his breath and examined the wall again, teeth grinding in frustration.
This time, he pushed with his shoulder, careful not to slip again, but just like before his efforts were futile. There wasn’t even the slightest sound of heavy stone dragging across the floor nor the faintest notion of the wall giving way. He wet his lips with his tongue, tempted to smash his fists against the heavy stones but knew that nothing good would come of it, so he resorted to let them tremble in simmering anger at his side instead, his blunt nails digging deep into his palms as he stared at the unbending obstacle that had come between him and his freedom.

But his attention was soon directed elsewhere, when he could hear Ace was moving around again, his jewellry producing that enchanting ring, not just giving away that he was moving but also—at least to Sabo’s sharp ears—where he was going, which so happened to be where Sabo was currently standing. A sense of unease joined the dread which had settled comfortably in his stomach.

“Sabo,” Ace said, and Sabo hoped the noise his throat made when he swallowed thickly was not as loud as it had sounded in his head. Even though unpleasant memories had made him wary as soon as Ace had said his name, he felt comforted. “What are you doing?”

Sabo’s shoulders slumped. He wasn’t the only trapped in this room, it just seemed like Ace’s hadn’t grasped the severity of their circumstances yet, and now he was the one to tell the fire god that, after he had escaped his watery prison and an eight hundred year long sleep, he was locked up once more. The thought wasn’t exactly pleasant. But then a different line of thinking occurred to him. What if Ace had remained calm because this door posed no threat to him at all?

Sabo tilted his head to the side, glancing at Ace out of the corner of his eyes.

“The entryway, through which I entered the room, is blocked,” he explained.

Ace looked from him to the wall they were both facing now, craning his neck to see all the way to the top, his necklaces tingling.

“The door closed during the earthquake,” he said, still unperturbed, and brought his long, slender fingers up to feel the wall before pressing his palm flat against it.

There was a shift in the atmosphere Sabo picked up effortlessly, the earlier scenario still powerfully present in his head. However, this time the tension, the threat, the hostility, weren’t directed at him; there was no hot air flooding his lungs as he breathed and burning his nostrils, no heart about to explode, no skin almost catching fire. Across the room, the torch hissed and sputtered in response, its flame flickering, casting twisting shadows.

Sabo almost yelped in surprise when sparks flew from Ace’s hand, their crackling ominously loud in the vastsness of the room. Then his eyes widened, both in wonder and hope before everything was back to normal once more, and Ace lowered his arm again, staring at his palm, for the first time something like discontent and worry hardening the lines of his face. Clearly, he wasn’t pleased with the outcome. Sabo held his breath and looked on as Ace sucked in his lower lip to chew on it in a clear outlet of frustration. There could not have been a more perfect display of mannerism.

*Human* mannerism.

Sabo’s next breath came sharp across his lips at his silent assumption and Ace turned to him abruptly, his grey eyes finding Sabo’s, a warning flaring up inside them. They stared at each other for a moment or two, until Ace apparently found he had gotten his point across, and returned to look at the solid wall again, his posture suddenly not as straight and confident anymore. A wan smile followed, but Sabo didn’t dare to speak.

“I was hoping it was just a bad dream,” he said, voice flat, devoid of emotion, lacking all of its earlier
power and smoothness, as if he had just resigned himself to some unknown fate.

When he said nothing more for quite some time, Sabo asked, “The closed door?” although he already knew the answer to his question, there was a graveness hunching Ace’s back that was far worse than being trapped inside this chamber—as horrible as that was.

Ace’s wan smile widened, reaching up all the way to his eyes, clouding them with sadness.

“The reason for my being here. What happened on that day.”

Ace’s voice was so soft Sabo wasn’t sure he was talking to him or to himself.

“What happened on that day?” he asked, although he perfectly recalled the legend about the clash between fire and darkness. They had talked about it while sitting around the fire during their early suppers and up in their lofty gathering of tents, everyone adding some piece of information they had heard, Robin and Wiper had been the most knowledgeable ones. But in the end, it was just a legend, a human explanation for what had happened on that day, warped and obscured over centuries, and eventually forgotten by most.

Ace sighed and turned to face the altar, eyes seeing but not what Sabo saw as he immersed himself in memories. Even his dismal smile had disappeared.

“I can get us out of here,” he simply stated after staring at nothing in particular for a small amount of time. Sabo perked up, tongue flicking over his lips again.

“You can?”

“I can.” Silence. Sabo inched closer. “But you know how it works with gods and the wishes that they grant.”

Sabo’s eyes flicked over to the altar and back to Ace’s profile.

“You want something in return for your help. Something like an offering?” What did he have to give? What was it that people usually gave? Food? Money? Though somehow he doubted that Ace was after either of them.

“Call it whatever you like. What I want in return for getting you out of here is basically the same thing you will be receiving from me.” Sabo’s brow furrowed in slight confusion, and Ace clarified, “I want your help.” He turned his head a bit, closely watching Sabo’s reaction over his shoulder.


“Am I now?” Ace asked a bit brusquely.

Sabo quickly averted his gaze, remembering his earlier train of thought, the one that had earned him a warning glance, but it started to dawn on him what Ace was implying. “Like I said, I only heard stories…”

“Tell me about those stories.” It was not a request but Ace’s voice held its gentle tone again, and Sabo obliged.

“Well, according to the legend, the Shandian Empire became too powerful, so the kings of the surrounding countries feared for their authority and sought help from the terrifying God of Darkness. They asked him to bring misfortune upon the Shandian people. The God of Darkness heard their pleas and challenged the God of Fire, guardian deity of the Shandian Empire, and eventually
defeated him.” Sabo’s voice had become more and more quiet during the end of the story, the fate of the city before his inner eye.

Ace listened intently and then pondered on what he had learned for quite some time. When he spoke again, Sabo strained to catch the words.

“So that is what they made of it,” he said, sounding disbelieving but not upset, still deep in thought.

“This is not what happened then?” Sabo asked.

Ace looked at him, as if he had forgotten he was there. “From a human’s point of view it probably is what happened.”

“And from yours?” Sabo dared to investigate further.

Ace shook his head. “That’s irrelevant. What matters is that I was defeated and…” he paused, lips pressed firmly together, eyes searching Sabo’s face for something, but what Sabo had no clue. It appeared that he had found it, though, for he continued to speak, “and that my powers were taken from me.”

Sabo remembered the sparks flying from Ace’s hand. Had that been an attempt to call forth his powers?

“I am human now,” Ace said, and no matter how much he tried to sound bland and unbothered by this fact, he wasn’t able to keep a trace of grievance out of his tone. “Stranded on Earth and unable to return home.” His hands clenched into fists at his sides. “Beaten by a traitor.” The words came in a hiss that sent shivers up Sabo’s spine with how full of menace and loathing they were.

What was he supposed to say? What was he supposed to do? It was obvious that all this was no minor incident, but he knew too little about Ace’s world to properly relate.

“I failed my family, the Heavens, and now I am here, trapped in a world that I know nothing about and with not even the slightest idea how to retrieve my powers and return home. Do you now understand why I am asking for your help in exchange for mine, Sabo?”

Sabo nodded vaguely, mulling over what Ace had told him. “So basically what you want from me is someone to help you get along in the outside world?”

“Yes. You are not from Shandora but since you are in the temple you have been to the city. I am sure it has changed a lot. I will need a guide, someone to advise me on human convention, when I talk to the priests and Shandora’s king to try and find out how to return. You should also tell me what has happened in those eight hundred years, of course only as much as you are familiar with the history. I know you humans have a short lifespan and you look young. Also—”

Sabo raised his hands. “Please, slow down!” he interrupted, eyes wide. Ace blinked, surprised, but stopped speaking. “What do you mean you want to talk to the king of Shandora and the priests?” He had a horrible sense of foreboding, his mouth going dry.

“Well, I am Shandora’s guardian deity, the people here are going to help me if they hear that I am in trouble, and there is a library here in the temple. I might be able to find hints there. But I cannot fully rely on anyone besides you. Since you are the one who was able to enter this room and wake me up it means you mean no harm to me.”

Sabo’s lips parted but no words came out. He didn’t know what to say, or rather, he knew what to say but dreaded doing it. The town… Almost naturally Sabo had assumed that the fire god was
somehow related to the city’s demise, but it appeared he had no idea what had happened to it. It was
no more, and now it fell to Sabo to tell him that. Tell the guardian deity of ancient Shandora that he
had failed to protect those people and their homes. He closed his mouth again, feeling like a fish on
dry land.

“What is it?” Ace asked, eyes narrowed.

The lines of Sabo’s face automatically morphed into a compassionate expression, reluctant to say
what he had to say, his tongue a foreign object in his mouth that felt hard to move and his voice far
too quiet, almost timid, when he spoke. “The city is no more,” he said reluctantly, as if his every
word was what brought about destruction. And in a way it did. For Ace it did.

Ace tilted his head, a crease forming in the middle of his brow. “I am sorry. I do not think I
understood—”

Sabo shook his head. “I said, the city is gone.” His voice rang harshly in his ears.

The stages of realisation played out perfectly on Ace’s features; eyes narrowing further before slowly
widening in gruesome understanding, lips parting, forming around syllables, words of rejection, that
wouldn’t come, because with every passing heartbeat the painful knowledge that what Sabo had told
him was, indeed, true kept sinking in.

The city is no more. The city is gone.

It was a heartbreaking sight to behold, seeing this angelic face twisted in slowly intensifying agony,
an agony that was alien, unfamiliar, to the lines around the finely shaped mouth and the burning grey
eyes, which started to glaze over, losing their shine. Ace took a hesitant step towards him, and even
the ring of his jewellery sounded dull, sad.

“What do you mean?” he asked, voice hoarse.

He was so obviously, painfully human now; face pale, ashen, flooded with dread, limbs trembling,
looking helpless, lost in his overwhelming grief. It was easy to see that he had never experienced
such an onslaught of emotions, such inner turmoil, and if he hadn’t been hurting so much he would
have probably looked confused.

“You were right. On my way here, I had to cross through the city. But…there’s nothing left of it but
ruins.”

“Ruins? And the people?” His last word was nothing but a frightened whisper.

Again, Sabo shook his head.

The Shandian Empire had ceased to exist almost eight hundred years ago. The surrounding nations
had claimed some of its former territory and over the centuries the border had constantly changed,
depending on who had won a war until, eventually, Jaya had been founded some seventy years ago.
Since the empire had been vast, Sabo was sure there were descendants of the Shandians, but he
doubted that anyone living in the capital of the empire had survived the inferno that had befallen it,
and then most of its culture had been irretrievably lost in the mercilessly grinding wheels of time.
Sabo knew, because they had tried to find remnants, information, anything, but not even the Jayans
had been able come up with much.

They had all hoped to discover more by finding the capital but after they had seen its sorry state they
knew barely a thing of significance was to be found. Except here in the temple maybe, which looked
like it had been spared the city’s fate.
And then there was the odd fact that the jungle had refused to take over completely, but that, Sabo decided, was something Ace had to see for himself.

The distraught, vulnerable look on Ace’s face made Sabo’s mind race in an attempt to come up with some soothing words of comfort.

“But I didn’t come here alone. I’m with a team of other explorers, and they’re all good people. Most of them are from Jaya. That’s the name of the country we’re currently in. If you get us out of here, you’re going to meet them. I’m sure they’ll be able to help you in one way or another.” The words hurriedly tumbled out of his mouth.

Ace’s face remained unchanged at first before bewilderment started to claim it. “I’m in pain,” he observed after a while, sounding almost astonished, directing his gaze at Sabo again, as if looking for help, an explanation.

“I-I guess that’s only natural,” Sabo replied, not entirely sure what kind of answer Ace was expecting. “It’s not the kind of news you’d want to hear after such a long time,” and after giving it a second thought he added, “It’s not the kind of news you’d ever want to get.”

Ace nodded as a sign he agreed, and ever so slowly his lines lost their shadows as he contemplated what to do next.

“Ace?” he startled the fire god from his thoughts.

Sabo was thrown another scrutinising look, as if Ace was trying to anticipate whether Sabo and his information could truly be trusted, and he tried to make himself appear as trustworthy as possible, the sympathy on his face genuine.

Straightening his back a bit, Ace took a deep breath and said, “I think I want to see for myself what happened to the city, and I would also like to meet those people you were telling me about.”

The deep, whole-hearted relief those words elicited, was apparent on Sabo’s face and was accompanied by a long exhale that whistled past his lips. Slowly, the close-meshed web of dread that the sombre atmosphere had spun around them started to peel off, returning them to the real world where time flowed and life existed little by little, and the colour gradually returned to Ace’s face as did the sparkle to his eyes. The next couple of seconds were a bit bizarre, as if both of them had just jolted awake from a gruesome nightmare in the early morning hours, the memory of grief’s suffocating, icy fingers on their throats still vivid, heavy, lingering, but they could already feel a rising sun gently caressing their faces, chasing the last few wisps of a haunting dream from their clouded eyes.

Sabo dragged a hand through his golden locks, which had started to dry, shaking the last remainders of weariness, and Ace tugged at the sash slung around his upper body, adjusting it. Again, Sabo was under the weird impression that the piece of cloth with its fascinating colours moved and flickered, but when he looked more closely it lay perfectly still against Ace’s bare chest. Quickly, he blinked a few times and blamed his tired eyes and mind while pinching the bridge of his nose to gather his wits. They had to get out of here after all.

Ace watched him and smiled softly.

“Well, how are you going to get us out of here?” Sabo asked, his eyes roaming around the room again, checking if he had simply overlooked a way of escape, but once again, finding nothing but walls on every side.
“Can you read the Shandian script?” Ace replied with a question of his own and walked towards the altar, Sabo’s eyes followed suit.

“Not perfectly. Why? Can’t you?”

“I can, of course. But in this case it will be any good. Please get the torch.”

Sabo quirked a brow, equally confused and curious, but complied in the end, crossed the room and retrieved the torch from its mounting on the wall. The flame was still unnaturally bright but had stopped its hissing and sputtering. When he stood beside the massive altar again, Ace kneeled in front of it, his fingers tracing the script that had been skilfully carved into all sides, his stern expression losing its hard edges, transforming into something more content as he was reminiscing in the past.

“Do you want me to read that?” Sabo wondered, kneeling down beside him, bringing the torch closer to better see the writing. It were simple words, as far as he could tell from just a glance.

“Yes. Are you able to?” Ace slightly shifted to the side to provide Sabo with a better view of the altar’s front, and Sabo started to decipher the script. When he turned to look at Ace again, though, he found him deep in thought, staring at Sabo, looking intrigued. He sharply snapped his fingers in front of Ace’s face, jolting him from his daze, then he quickly turned away again, eyes firmly staring on ahead, appearing to be highly preoccupied with the lines carved into the sandstone. But the faint traces of a blush that crept into his cheeks and coloured the tips of his ears peeking through his golden locks probably didn’t go unnoticed.

“What is this?” he asked, trying not to squirm under Ace’s curious eyes, which he knew were still closely watching him.

“A prayer,” Ace replied simply.

“I know that much. But how’s this going to get us out of here?” If he sounded annoyed, it was mostly because of Ace’s unabashed staring. Of course he was aware that he had been staring, too, at first, but who could blame him; Ace was a god after all, and a very beautiful one at that—the matter was indisputable. He was convinced that even a blind woman or man could sense his perfection, because such was his nature.

“You know that faith can move mountains, right?” Ace whispered cryptically, and when Sabo’s head jerked around to look at him, highly confused, he smiled enigmatically. “Hold onto the torch and give me your hand,” he ordered, offering his own, smooth, unblemished palm facing upwards, for Sabo to take.

But Sabo hesitated, staring at the proffered hand and back at Ace’s freckled face, whose smile widened reassuringly, urging him to do as he had been told, to trust him. The tip of Sabo’s tongue flicked across his lower lip. Ace was serious, the glow in his anthracite eyes nothing but sincere.

He carefully balanced the weight of his crouched figure on his two feet before putting his hand into Ace’s. The long, slender fingers closed around it instantly, squeezing lightly, dispelling the last of Sabo’s irrational worries. Just like earlier, when Ace’s fingertips had traced the scar on Sabo’s left cheek, his touch was nothing but tender, and his unnaturally high body heat immediately permeated Sabo’s skin, reaching first the tip of his thumb and then those of all the other fingers, flowing past his wrist, into his lower arm, and suddenly it was already spreading from his left shoulder into his chest, until, finally, it had swallowed him whole and every fibre glowed.

The torch in his right hand flickered excitedly again, but Sabo paid it no mind, he was too entranced
by what was happening, fascinated by their shared connection. However, the fire he was holding onto refused to be ignored and when Ace let his other palm rest against the altar’s side again, just above the prayer verses edged deep into the sandstone’s surface, it flared to life.

Not once did Ace’s intent gaze leave Sabo’s sea blue eyes; not when he told him to repeat aloud the words he had just read nor when Sabo started speaking in a voice surprisingly clear and even and, least of all, when the torch flame blazed brighter still, climbing towards the chamber’s roof. The fire’s power raced through his body in a searing line and straight into Ace’s from where it claimed the stone to fill every carved word on its side with amber light.
Sabo never stopped to recite the prayer as long as Ace’s eyes were on him, and even though he had no clue what was happening, he was aware of the deep intimacy they shared in that very moment. There was a link between them and it was unlike anything he had ever felt, the word coming closest to describe it *warmth*, and yet it was more than that, but he failed to find the proper words.

From one moment to the next, though, the ground beneath his feet trembled and then the grating noise of heavy stone slowly dragging over the floor filled the chamber. The words died on Sabo’s lips, his eyes darting to the altar with the glowing script on its sides before they grew wide in shock. Ace squeezed his hand again to tell him that everything was alright before he rose to his feet, pulling Sabo with him, and when they both stood Ace let go and the comforting glow inside Sabo vanished without leaving a trace behind. Everything was back to normal, except that the heavy, massive altar was now moving over the floor, revealing a gaping hole in the ground and steps leading into darkness.
Questions whirled through Sabo’s mind, some nothing more than scraps, too formless to grasp, while others took on a more distinct and solid shape. Still, the whole event was so beyond belief that even when everything had long since stilled he had trouble finding words, and thus continued to stare—stunned and amazed—at what was most likely their way out.

“It seems that he did not know about this one,” Ace said beside him, and not without a small hint of triumph in his voice. A bit reluctantly, Sabo tore his gaze away from the stairs leading into darkness, and directed it at Ace, who, once again, couldn’t have looked more at ease or more pleased that he had made good on his promise and had found a way out. He noticed Sabo’s eyes were on him and smiled again, but this time Sabo wasn’t reassured so easily.

If it had only been for the secret tunnel, Sabo wouldn’t have felt so troubled, since it wasn’t the first one he had encountered. There were ancient cultures who were famous for hiding their most precious secrets within a maze of halls and tunnels, and only a couple of years ago Sabo and a certain someone had loved to compete over who could discover the most hidden passageways.

No, what really bothered him was how this had happened.

“I thought your powers were taken?” It was a reasonable question that held an undertone of accusation, which Sabo knew he could have concealed, if he hadn’t been both dazed and unsettled. But if Ace had picked up on it, it didn’t show. However, when he spoke, it was clear that he was aware of what Sabo was indicating.

“They were, I did not lie.”

Sabo bit his lower lip, undecided, and not yet satisfied. “Then how is this,” he made a sweeping gesture with his arm that included the still altar and the passageway, “possible?”

Ace regarded him thoughtfully, carefully considering his answer. “I told you, faith can move mountains.”

“I’m not a believer.”

“Everyone believes in something.”

Sabo briefly considered this and reached the conclusion that Ace was probably right, but it still wasn’t the explanation he wanted to hear. He pursed his lips a bit in a display of clear discontent, but again, if Ace was annoyed by his unwillingness to let the topic go, he kept his feelings to himself. Instead, he actually proceeded to explain.

“The people built this passage together with the temple in case the city was under attack and they had to flee. They would seek shelter at the temple, hoping that they would either be protected or spared. Normally, several people are necessary to move the altar. One human alone cannot move it. And that prayer is what they recited when they came here, a simple but heartfelt plea for me to listen to their worries...”

The glow in Ace’s eyes dulled for a moment, when he reminisced, and even while speaking, his speech had slowed, faltered, when he had realised he was now telling stories of the past—a past he was the last to remember, its sole keeper—and the disconcerting sensation that came along with it made his gaze drift aimlessly around the room, unfocused, as he unconsciously searched for answers that simply didn't want to be found.
Sabo left him to it, guilt still lingering in the pit of his stomach heavy and uncomfortable.

After a couple of quiet moments, Ace began to speak again. “So what you did was what the Shandians used to do: You asked fire for help, and your prayer was heard.” He smiled again, as if there was nothing extraordinary about what he had just said or what had happened. It wasn’t the explanation Sabo had hoped for, and it certainly wasn’t as simple as Ace made it appear to be.

“You do not look pleased,” Ace remarked after studying Sabo’s face intently for a while. Once again, his voice was bare of any form of judgement, his words a plain statement, nothing more.

Sabo’s gaze fell to the stone steps leading down into a dark, gaping maw. He wanted to be persistent and get to the bottom of things yet at the same time he wasn’t sure how to find words for what he had felt while repeatedly reciting the prayer and holding the torch, holding Ace’s hand. A hand that had never trembled, never threatened to pull away, its finger’s grip relentless in their determination and tireless in their encouragement throughout the whole event, reassuring Sabo that they would not let go, no matter what.

But maybe Ace hadn’t felt what Sabo had felt?

Sabo raised his gaze again to see Ace looking at him expectantly, waiting for an answer. No, somehow it was hard to believe that Ace hadn’t felt this tremendous power, the warmth. It had flowed right into him, from the torch, through Sabo’s body it had entered him, their joined hands a magical connection.

He put his left hand over his heart, where the warmth had been the strongest, crumpling the fabric of his shirt between his fingers as he groped for words.

“There was something… It’s hard to describe, but it was warm. I’m sure it came from the torch. Some weird energy maybe or… I don’t know. I’ve never felt anything like it before.” Unable to properly explain what concerned him, what he wanted to learn more about, was deeply frustrating, and he had already taken another deep breath to try again when Ace spoke.

“That was fire.” Again, his answer sounded like he had just explained the most obvious thing. Sabo nodded, seemingly convinced, until…

“Wait, what? H-How’s that possible?”

Ace shrugged in another display of human mannerism, his jewellery jingling, the sash around his torso shifting, flickering almost, like leaping flames, its pristine whiteness briefly overtaken by hues of yellow, orange and red, real fire turned fabric. But Sabo was too caught up in what Ace had said so nonchalantly to notice or care.

“But how did you know it would work?”

Ace chuckled and the sweet sound momentarily distracted Sabo from his racing thoughts.

“I told you, my powers were stolen from me.”

Sabo desperately tried to find an adequate reply, brow furrowed, but after a while of thorough pondering he had to admit that all that came to him was: “This is impossible.” So he said it aloud and added, “I’m human.”

“I know it is hard to grasp. I am afraid I cannot explain it either.”

"But how did you know it would work?"
This time Ace seemed to seriously think about Sabo’s question. "Can you not simply know that something is right?"

Of course he knew that feeling, and now that he thought back on what had happened when he had taken Ace’s hand, he remembered how readily he had taken it, instinctively almost. As if he, too, had known it was going to be fine, that together they would be able to get out of here. He had believed in Ace’s words and when fire had poured its power into him, he had also believed in that. How odd. Was it because Ace was a god that he trusted him without reluctance?

His voice was quiet for all the sudden wonder and astonishment that had swept over him, when he had realised that Ace was right. “I do.”

Ace’s face lit up some more. “Shall we go then?”

Sabo nodded absent-mindedly, his thoughts still occupied by their little conversation, but his gaze swept towards the looming stairwell nonetheless. They should leave. Who knew how much time had passed since that earthquake. If the rest of the expedition had noticed his absence, they were searching for him, and instantly his guts clenched tightly with his guilty conscience taking over. He had to let them know that he was fine and apologise for sneaking away again without telling anybody, though he doubted that they would actually care once they had met Ace. All fear and distress would be forgotten, replaced by awe and fascination. And who could blame them?

He pushed all remaining questions aside for the time being and focused on the task ahead.

“Where does this tunnel lead?” He handed Ace the torch, who took it gingerly. His steel grey eyes reflected the fire’s orange glow, looking on at the dancing flame with great affection, yearning almost. Ace closed his eyes then, basking in the warmth, the light, and in that moment the connection was undeniable. He and the flame were supposed to be an entity, their link far deeper than that of lovers or parent and child. The fire was his soul, and if the flame had suddenly flared up again to soothingly caress his freckled cheeks, Sabo would not even have been surprised.

The moment was over just as quickly, though, when Ace’s eyes flew open and he all but thrust the torch away from himself, now holding it at arm’s length, and he glanced at Sabo to check whether he had witnessed this moment of personal weakness, which apparently he wasn’t very eager to share. Sabo averted his eyes—too late, he knew, but at least he was allowing Ace a moment to collect himself.

“I should get my shoes,” he mumbled, suddenly realising that his feet were still bare, conveniently breaking their awkward, heavy silence. He found them where he had taken them off before descending into the pool’s calm waters, which now seemed like a small eternity ago. Slipping them on, his eyes lingered on the water’s surface, still, no ripples, no waves, no sleeping mysterious raven haired man floating in the shallow depths. Had he really walked down these stairs to the centre to wake him? It seemed more like a surreal dream. But when he turned and walked back, he was reminded that all this was, indeed, reality, because the man he had roused from his slumber was standing right there, waiting for him with patient eyes and a smile playing around his lips.

Ace took the lead, not even hesitating for a second when taking the first step, gracefully, confidently walking down the stone stairs, as if he had taken the same path a thousand times already, unperturbed by the possibility of hidden traps or collapsed ceilings. Sabo followed but just before he had reached the bottom of the stairs he paused, lingered and turned, catching a glimpse of a wall’s carvings in the last stretch of the retreating light, the fire symbol carved deep into the stone still glowing in the growing darkness. Then Ace and the torch were too far ahead, and he quickly caught up to them, the rhythmic sound of his heels hitting the ground hard fell in stark contrast to the floating, gentle tones of Ace’s jewellery.
Another question burned on Sabo’s tongue, but he was reluctant to ask for fear the matter was too personal or caused unpleasant memories to return to Ace, so they walked on in silence for awhile with nothing but bizarre echoes as accompaniment and the occasional flicker of the flame.

Just when Sabo started musing how far away the exit might still be, only to realise that his earlier question had remained unanswered, Ace spoke.

“This tunnel will take us to the backside of the temple complex. There is a large forest that reaches all the way to the city outskirts.” Ace’s words ceased momentarily before he continued much quieter and Sabo had to strain to understand him over the cacophony of noise bouncing off the tunnel walls; however, the bitterness lacing every syllable was clearly audible. “Or at least there was one eight hundred years ago.”

Since Sabo and the rest of the expedition had not yet encountered that forest, there was nothing he felt he could say that would put Ace’s mind at ease. He had little hope, after all they had seen on their way through the ruins, that this forest was indeed still where it was supposed to be. Flora and fauna alike had either retreated from the demolished city or had been wiped out along with it. So instead he said, “We set up camp at the temple’s entrance,” to avoid a stretch of lengthy silence.

Ace briefly glanced over his shoulder, as if he had momentarily forgotten that Sabo was walking behind him.

“By ‘we’ you mean the people you came here with? The ones who might be able to help me?”

“Yes, them. I’m sure they’ve already started looking for me.”

Ace pondered this for a second or two before saying, “Please tell me about them.”

Sabo was taken aback by Ace’s request, but then of course it was only natural that he wanted to know more about the people Sabo was about to introduce him to. What a strange and frightening situation it had to be for Ace, being woken after so long only to find out that everything he had once known was gone, including his powers. He had no friends, no one he could trust and was forced to believe what Sabo told him; he was at his mercy, when it should have been the other way around, his fate and future uncertain. And still he had struck a bargain with Sabo so readily.

In a sudden pang of sympathy, the words started bubbling out of his mouth. “Including myself, we’re eight people. Five are explorers from Jaya. Wiper is the name of their leader. They are good people and they each have their own field of expertise, but they all have in common that they’re very interested in Shandian culture and history. Then there’s Robin, Koala and me who are all from Goa Kingdom.”

“Where is that Goa Kingdom that you are from?” Ace interrupted him, glancing over his shoulder again, curiosity glowing brightly in his anthracite eyes, the tunnel too narrow to let them walk side by side.

Of course he had never heard of Goa Kingdom, Sabo realised, the country had only been founded some four hundred years ago; Ace had already been asleep during that time.

“It’s west from here. It took us several weeks by ship to get here.”

Ace’s eyes widened ever so slightly when he asked, “By ship?” suddenly appearing to be much more intrigued by the fact that Sabo had come here on a ship rather than that he was from a country Ace had never heard of.

“Yeah, by ship. You know what a ship is?”
Ace snorted and turned around to watch where he was going again. “Of course I know what a ship is. I have just never been on one.”

“Oh. Okay,” Sabo mumbled unintelligently, feeling stupid all of a sudden for asking such a question and as a result was at a loss for what to say next.

Ace seemed to have sensed his unease and was gracious enough to continue their conversation. “You, Robin and Koala… You came all the way from Goa Kingdom just to see Shandora.” He paused, thinking about the assumption he had just made before he continued to speak. “Why?”

Sabo was taken aback, though it was only to be expected. Should he tell Ace that they had found a stone that hinted at the presence of a fire god sleeping in the ruins of Shandora? He might start to distrust him, maybe even suspect that they had only come to find him and use his powers for their own benefit.

“Why? For adventure’s sake, I suppose,” and because he wasn’t exactly satisfied with his own answer, he added, “and because we barely know a thing about Shandora and its history and culture—not even Wiper and his friends know much about it—which is really sad, because during its time it was one of the greatest, most powerful empires.”

“It was, was it not?” Ace said, and Sabo bit his tongue in self-reprimand.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“It is fine. I will get used to it eventually. I have to.” Even though Ace’s voice sounded mostly confident, his words were strained. They proceeded in silence for a bit until Ace said, “I am glad there are people who would like to learn more about Shandora.”

“Everyone will be thrilled to meet you,” Sabo said softly, more mumbling to himself, picturing the moment when he would finally be reunited with his friends and introduce Ace to them, their astonished and shocked faces, their gasps and cries of disbelief. They hadn’t dared to hope that they would find the rumoured, legendary fire god, yet here he was in all his glory—mostly. “They will do everything they can to help you.”

Ace stopped and turned, looking both incredulous and eternally grateful at the same time, and only then Sabo realised how much resolve his voice had carried, how firm and strong and bold it had rung out over the chime of Ace’s jewellery and the steady clicking of his heels.

Ace’s lips fell apart to say something, but in that moment a rumble could be heard above them. Sabo’s eyes narrowed, wandering upwards to the ceiling. Another rumble echoed through the tunnel, but this time it was followed by the blood-curdling groan of heavy stone. His eyes widened, all blood draining from his face. “Oh, no,” he whispered. Then a loud crack tore through the silence of the tunnel and with a strangled yelp—a cried out, “Run!”—his body operating entirely on instincts, Sabo reached for Ace’s arm and yanked him along, out of his stupor, both dashing down the corridor as they were chased by the collapsing tunnel roof.

His ears were full with the vicious roar of crumbling stone and tons of soil pushing into the narrow tunnel mere metres behind them, his heart hammering violently in his chest, expanding and contracting rapidly with every panting breath he took. Adrenaline burned in his veins, his fingers tightening their desperate clutch on Ace’s arm, digging deep into his flesh for fear he would slip right through his grip and be crushed, and all the while he pulled and ran, harder, faster, the noise never letting up.

Then darkness fell and Sabo realised that Ace had dropped the torch, but the thunderous rumble
never ceased, a horrific, deafening reminder of the collapsing roof’s ongoing merciless pursuit. Yet somehow, when he had blinked once or twice, the way ahead was still faintly illuminated.

There was no time for investigations, though, with the ground beneath their feet and even the very air inside the corridor resonating with the shocks of impact of the heavy, ancient stone continuously falling, crushing, burying everything in its way. Not even thoughts of the gruesome death that they might suffer had time to flash before their inner eye, but they were looming in the form of a sheer and total panic urging them on, growing with every passing metre and no life-saving opening far and wide.

Sabo cried out between clenched teeth in deep frustration, the sound travelling no further than his lips, but it helped to spur him on, to increase the pace some more, his eyes always trained ahead, and maybe Ace had heard him because a moment later he was level, keeping up with Sabo’s speed, and only then did Sabo let his arm slip from his grip and noticed that the tunnel was becoming wider suddenly.

“Stairs!” Ace shouted, breathless, at the same time Sabo spotted them and, with hope lending new strength to their legs and feet, they took two steps at a time and emerged above the surface.

There was nothing but a narrow gap between two massive rough stones serving as the exit and Sabo never thought twice when he reached for Ace again and pushed him through, turning to see the stairs collapse behind him along with the untreated rocks serving as walls, the ground beneath his feet trembling, giving way before he, too, was forced to squeeze through the gap by two strong hands pulling at his frame.

Stumbling, falling, flailing, he was dragged backwards, watching dazedly as wide cracks ripped up the ground, the large rocks, sheltering the tunnel’s exit, quivering before subsiding, vanishing into a massive, gaping hole. Then his heel got caught in something and he truly fell.

His collision with the ground was cushioned, though, by a body beneath his own, and Ace’s gasp was loud and sounded painful in his ear, but after that, silence reigned save for the thumping of his flying heartbeat reverberating in his head.

It took him a good while to regain his senses; his vision blurred, and his body still buzzed with adrenaline and the gradually fading need to flee. Ace’s voice was what pulled him from his shock. “Are you hurt?”, he asked between two whistling breaths, voice raw and strained, the whole act of speaking obviously an arduous task.

Sabo jumped up, suddenly aware that he was still halfway lying on top of Ace, loosely cradled in his arms, and groaned when his head started spinning again, his movements much too quick for his exhausted body. He was forced back down on his knees, one hand pressed flat to the ground for support, his legs screaming in protest. Blinking, he looked out from under his blond curls to see Ace lying on his back on the ground, chest heaving, raven hair sticking to his face covered in cold sweat, his grey eyes, fixed on Sabo, full of fear and anguish, devastation looming in their depths should Sabo’s answer be ‘Yes’.

“I’m not, I’m fine, I think,” he hurried to say, crawling closer, suddenly deeply unsettled by Ace’s lack of motion. Relief was instant, erasing all sorrow from the lines of Ace’s face and he closed his eyes. Sabo panicked, inching closer. “Ace?” he called, his voice’s pitch high with distress. “Are you hurt?” His eyes darted up and down Ace’s still body, trying to take in as much as possible.

That was when he fully realised that they were outside and just like Ace had predicted the tunnel had ended in a forest. His distraction was only momentary, though, his fear for Ace’s health and life all-encompassing, the dominating thought inside his mind, so he went back to check for any wounds or
broken bones. The light was still almost non-existent with a thick canopy above, but there was a strange glow to the sash slung around Ace’s upper body; in fact, it had the same light orange hue as the strange illumination in the tunnel. But Sabo put aside that thought as well, and was just about to feel for any damage done to Ace’s bones when Ace said, “I think I am fine, too.”

But his eyes remained close.

“Are you sure?” Sabo’s voice was much calmer than before, but the fact that he was shaken by all this was undeniable, and it certainly hadn’t gone unnoticed for Ace opened his eyes, his gaze searching for Sabo’s.

“I am not, but the pain is bearable, so I assume I am.”

“Where does it hurt?” If any of Ace’s bones were broken, there was nothing he could do to try and fix it. He new some basic first-aid, but in his excitement to explore the temple he had left everything behind, not for a second considering such a turn of events. But if they were in a forest, he could make him a splint, and though it would take forever and would be highly strenuous, he could even carry Ace back to the camp, to Conis and her medical equipment and the care of all the others.

Ace smiled. “Everywhere.”

Sabo’s eyes narrowed in confusion and finally Ace moved, gingerly trying to sit up, gently guided by Sabo’s helpful hands.

“If it hurts, you shouldn’t move too much,” he said, not really knowing what to do. Ace was still smiling and it clearly wasn’t a grimace caused by pain, but he had said he was hurting everywhere. Had he hit his head, when they had both crashed to the ground? If it was a concussion, would Conis be able to do something about it all the way out here?

Ace looked intrigued as he watched Sabo’s worry play out on his face.

“So you do not hurt?” he asked.

Sabo was taken aback by the question. “Not really, no.”

“Your legs and lungs do not burn? Your heart does not beat hard against your chest? Your eyes see clearly?” Ace fired off his questions.

“Well…” He wasn’t sure how to answer and much less knew where Ace was going with this. “Of course I feel all those things, but that’s only natural. Running for your life is horrible and I’m totally exhausted.”

Ace’s gaze never wavered and, once again, Sabo was under the odd impression that it was impossible for him to tear himself away from those eyes.

“Exhausted…” Ace muttered carefully, as if trying out the feel of the word on his tongue before his eyes dropped down to his hands, which lay trembling in his lap, and examined his palms, his flawless, perfect skin now marred by a few shallow scratches and stained with dirt.

Realisation hit Sabo like a speeding locomotive, hard and unexpected.

“You’ve never felt exhausted…” he muttered just as quietly and with the same level of astonishment as Ace, and suddenly he was only too aware of the echo of Ace’s beating heart against his palm, which was still resting on Ace’s upper back.
Ace’s smile widened in response and he turned back to Sabo, looking much too thrilled for all that had happened to them. “I never had a physical form, a human body.” And the joy radiating off his gorgeous face over such a trivial revelation, over a sensation that every human would consider onerous and undesirable instead of fascinating and amazing, was highly contagious, and within the span of a heartbeat Sabo found the corner of his own lips tilting upward and into a relieved grin.

They sat on the soft rainforest ground with no words passing between them for a while, allowing their bodies and minds an unhurried transition into a calmer, more relaxed state. An infrequent breeze rustled the leaves above their heads, the air around them was filled with moist earth’s heavy and rich scent; it was a soothing fragrance. Every now and then, the clacking of a small stone tumbling down over its larger collapsed brothers and sisters reached their ears, but it was nothing to fret over and soon enough they had gotten used to it, the noise becoming part of nature’s well-tempered symphony.

Then Ace dug his fingers deep into the ground, leaving shallow furrows and bringing back a handful of soil only to let it trickle down the sides of his palm again, watching intently. Sabo knew he was mentally taking note of every feeling, every sensation he experienced with his human body, mesmerised by the onslaught of a thousand new experiences to his human brain. It was like watching a child that had just learned to walk and was now allowed out of the house for the first time to explore nature—a nature that he or one of his peers had helped create, at least according to Shandian beliefs.

“How do you feel?” he asked, when Ace started grinding some of the crumbs between his fingers.

“Still tired, but I can walk. You are worried for your friends?”

Sabo slowly got back on his feet, dusting off his clothes before offering a helping hand to Ace, who took it and got back on his feet more gracefully than Sabo would have expected after all they had been through. He mimicked Sabo, though his scarce clothing was neither stained nor torn, tugging the sash around his chest back into place, which brought the strange glow back to Sabo’s mind.

“That thing,” he pointed at the sash, “how come it glows sometimes?”

Ace smoothed out some non-existent wrinkles in the silky fabric to allow himself some time to think about his answer. “I do not really know. It is usually all flames, but it seems now that I am without my powers it has changed its shape.” He caught Sabo curiously staring. “You can touch it, if you want.”

His fingers darted forward free of conscience, itching to touch, to feel and he stopped them just in time, only mere centimetres from the silky fabric that glimmered in the dim light from faint stars above, for once its colour non-existent, a pristine white, looking like it was alive, like it would feel soft and pliant running through his fingers like a gentle stream of water. Withdrawing his fingers, he shook his head, smiling.

“It’s alright,” he said, although it wasn’t, because he was more than curious, but it felt greatly disrespectful, simply touching the sash like it was nothing more than an object he wanted to study. If he found an artefact on an excavation site, it was unclaimed, belonging to no one, but this sash was worn by none other than a god, human body and all aside. And even though Ace had offered, he shouldn’t touch it, it wasn’t right.

It was obvious that Ace was confused and since Sabo didn’t feel like explaining his behaviour, he turned around and walked over to what was left of the tunnel entrance on this side—a gaping hole of chaos. Even if they managed to lift the stones, a great part of the tunnel had collapsed, which meant right now there was no way back into that chamber other than moving or crushing the heavy stone.
door that was blocking the doorway he had come through. With almost soundless steps, Ace came to stand beside him, inspecting the remains.

“I hope there’s nothing in that chamber that you’d like to have back.” He remembered that when he had looked back at the chamber from the tunnel, he had meant to ask Ace if he didn’t want to take a look in case he wouldn’t return. Should he have? He glanced at him and was mildly surprised.

Was it relief that had briefly flickered up on Ace’s face?

“I cannot go back there…” There was no regret in Ace’s voice, no disappointment, just ease, his words more a conclusion than a question. And why would he be sad that he would not return? That room had been his prison for almost eight hundred years.

“I guess nothing good ever happened to you in that room,” Sabo remarked casually, hands resting on his hips, knowing if there was anyone regretting that they weren’t able to return, it was him.

Out of the corner of his eyes, he caught Ace tilting his head to face him, but he ignored his stare despite the strength it cost him, knowing that if he returned it, he would be entangled by those eyes again. It was enough that simply his awareness of them made a warm flush creep up his neck, his hairs stand on end.

He never heard Ace’s softly whispered objection, the hushed, disagreeing syllables falling from his lips, because the wind picked up again, the leaves rushing overhead, and he was trying his hardest to remain calm and unaffected, staring straight ahead.

Then Ace turned away again and Sabo heaved a long inward sigh before angling his face upwards to take in what little he could see of the nightly sky. The stars started to fade, which told him that another day was fast approaching and the growing hollow feeling in his stomach announced that it was time for breakfast soon, so maybe not more than a couple of hours had passed since he had snuck into the sanctuary. Were Robin and the others searching the temple for him or even the city? Was this forest easily accessible from where they had set up camp? The pressing, nagging notion that he had to get back as soon as possible had only intensified during their break, but now he was suddenly in a hurry to leave. He didn’t want to make them all worry any longer, even more so because it was all his fault.

“Let’s go,” he announced and started walking off, knowing Ace would follow because he had no other option, though he also wouldn’t put it past him to simply stay behind, unaware of what that might entail, so he briefly glanced over his shoulder to check and quickly turned around again, when he saw Ace walking only a metre behind him.

“Do you know where we have to go?” Again, no judgment, no distrust, just curiosity.

“I do.”

“But you’ve never been to this forest before. So how do you know?” It was odd being questioned so openly when none of the words held any doubt, just plain and candid interest.

“Well, I know in which direction our camp is and I’ve learned to navigate by the stars,” he patiently explained. “I doubt there’ll be a proper path but we’re at least heading the right way. How long it’ll take, though, I can’t say.” That was what bothered him the most, that he had no idea how far the camp still was, and he hoped that they would encounter a small stream soon, because thirst already started itching his throat. He would even drink leftover rainwater and take his chances, but since the city and the temple had seemed to be removed from the weather conditions of the rainforest, he wasn’t sure when the last rain had fallen.
“You are smart,” Ace acknowledged, and the words made pride bubbled up in Sabo, a warm, mellow feeling curling in his guts. So far there had only been two people who had been able to evoke that feeling in him with their praise: Robin and... He quickly pushed the thought aside, forbidding himself from thinking about him of all people now, in this kind of situation, with something akin to fondness lighting up his cheeks.

He was glad it was still dark and that his back was turned on Ace, and to disperse his own thoughts, he started talking, picking up where they had left off, telling him about the others, his friends from Jaya, the two women he considered family, and Ace was an attentive, eager listener. Sabo made sure to point out all the skills and expertise that could be helpful, wondering if he was bragging, but quickly deciding, no, it was all true. They all were excellent at their craft, well-versed in their respective fields, and it was only a sign of his deep respect for all of them, along with his own pride of being part of such a splendid team of explorers that made him smile and even use his hands for emphasis while he kept talking.

Ace had questions, too, and when they had been answered he fell into a pensive silence, mulling over what he had just been told. They touched the subject of the ruined city every now and then, but other than a brief, strained twitch of his perfectly shaped lips, he kept his thoughts and feelings to himself. He also didn’t talk about the circumstances under which his powers had been taken or where he came from; his interests lay more in the present and the future, and even though the longer they talked the more burning questions about the Heavens and Ace’s past started burning on Sabo’s tongue, he never asked, out of respect and courtesy and the certainty that, at least right now, Ace didn’t want to talk about it.

It was when the rising sun’s approach began to colour the sky in lighter shades of blue that Ace started to fall behind. They had already walked in silence for a while, Ace seemingly entangled in his thoughts and Sabo content with examining his surroundings as they passed, but suddenly it was only Sabo’s presences causing noise. He stopped and turned and saw Ace standing already several metres behind, his freckled face uncharacteristically twisted. When he noticed Sabo had stopped, was watching him, his expression became smooth and unrevealing, and he hurriedly caught up.

But he had trouble keeping the limp out of his stride and the pain from deepening the lines around his mouth, his lips already taut. Sabo raised a brow.

“Are you okay?” Ace’s eyes evaded him and darted to the right, telling Sabo he was about to lie. Had he been injured after all? Worry returned instantly. “Are you tired? We can take a break and sit down. I think there’s a small stream around here.” He had heard its gurgling waters earlier, the parched feeling in his throat became unbearable at the sound, so he had decided to stop there anyway.

“That sounds good,” was all he got for an answer and it wasn’t enough.

“Do you feel exhausted or does it hurt? Please, tell me.”

“Let us go to the stream,” Ace insisted, and Sabo couldn’t help but roll his eyes in exasperation. Out of all the gods the people worshipped, he had to come across a stubborn fire god.

“Fine,” he relented and lead the way again. After a couple of minutes, it took them longer, because even though Ace tried hard to keep up with Sabo’s pace, he couldn’t, and Sabo’s worry increased tenfold.

Ace sat down on a moss-covered rock, closing his eyes, his shoulders slumping, and Sabo realised that his gait and posture had lost all of their grace and in the faint light of daybreak trickling in through the canopy, Sabo saw how pale he had become.
“It hurts.”

“Where?”

This wasn’t good and Sabo kneeled in the dirt, eyes almost pleading as he looked up at Ace.

“My feet.” Now Ace grimaced.

When Sabo’s eyes darted down to Ace’s feet, he had no more questions, because the moment he saw them, he knew what was wrong. He sucked a sharp gasp into his lungs. No shoes. Bare foot soles. The smooth sandstone of the temple had never been a problem, but out here, with broken twigs and branches, fleshy leaves, some spiked with thorns and roots scattered all across their path, a path that wasn’t even deserving of the name, every step must have been excruciating. Sabo bit his lip, internally reprimanding himself for his stupidity.

How long had Ace been in pain? He clearly hadn’t said anything because he knew Sabo was anxious to get back to the others.

“May I see your feet?”

Ace nodded and lifted them off the ground, where Sabo took them, gingerly, careful not to put too much pressure on the soles. They were covered in dirt, which was to be expected and in the faint light could not see the scratches and cuts, but he was sure they were burning viciously. He shook his head, angry at himself.

“I’ll have to clean them, otherwise they might get infected. And you can’t walk anymore.”

Ace turned to the stream.

“It won’t be pleasant,” Sabo warned before carefully lowering Ace’s feet into the cool water. He winced at the contact, but never made a sound, not even when Sabo had to increase the pressure of his rubbing fingers to get rid of some of the tougher spots. Despite the cold water, Ace’s feet were warm, his skin smooth against Sabo’s calloused palms marred from countless travels and adventures.

“I will stay here then and wait for you.”

Sabo huffed, reaching for the other foot.

“Like I’ll leave you behind.”

“But you said it yourself, I should not walk. I will try, of course, if you want me to…”

“Don’t be stupid,” Sabo snapped and instantly regretted it, clenching his jaw. “Sorry,” he mumbled right away. He shouldn’t vent his anger over his own negligence on Ace, but it was so frustrating that, after traveling for years now, even alone, he had made such a serious, novice mistake. Even the smallest scratch could turn out to be lethal if it became infected, especially out here.

When he was done washing Ace’s feet—Ace had chosen to be quiet for the rest of it, but did not look upset—he let them dangle in the shallow water a bit longer and reached for the sleeves of his shirt, rolled them down and then tore off first the right one and then the left with one quick pull each. Afterwards, he placed Ace’s heel on his thigh and carefully tied them around his feet in a makeshift bandage, examining his work skeptically when he was done. It wasn’t perfect but it would have to do.

“Are you thirsty?” he asked Ace.
Ace touched his throat. “Yeah.”

He was about to slip from the rock to reach the stream, but Sabo held him back. “Stay or your feet are going to get dirty again.” Instead, Sabo bent over, cupped his hand and dipped it into the water in an attempt to gather as much of it as possible, then he brought it up to Ace’s lips. Their eyes met, sapphire and anthracite, in a short moment of unspoken trust that had no reason but also needed none, it was simply given and neither questioned it. Then Ace tenderly took Sabo’s hand to bring it closer to his lips, his gaze unwavering, his fingertips warm against the back of Sabo’s knuckles before he finally averted his gaze, bowed his head and started to sip at the tiny puddle, his soft lips brushing over Sabo’s palm every now and then.

For a brief moment, Sabo was reminded of their holding hands back in the temple as he had recited the prayer, and of the fire flowing through him, into Ace, into the altar—their deep spiritual intimacy. And in that instant, out there in the woods, he felt oddly content and grounded.

It took a while until Sabo was satisfied with how much Ace had drank, and only then did he lean down and drink as well, wiping his mouth with his bare arms afterwards and found Ace looking at him expectantly, eyes briefly darting to Sabo’s left arm, the burn scars that were now exposed before returning to his face, pretending like he had never seen a thing.

“I’m going to carry you,” Sabo announced. He knew it would be strenuous, but it was their only option. It would take longer, but he was hoping that maybe the others were somehow coming up to meet them.

Ace blinked. “Carry me? How? Are you sure?”

“Like this,” he said and turned around, crouched down and widened his arms, signifying Ace to climb on his back, and Ace was unexpectedly compliant, reaching for Sabo’s shoulders. “Yes, now put your legs through my arms. Yes, like this. Good. Please hold on.”

Carefully, Sabo got up. Ace wasn’t heavy, but he wasn’t light either and Sabo estimated him to be about his own weight, also because their build was similar. He should be fine if he took the time to rest every now and then.

After a moment of getting accustomed to the situation, Ace relaxed and slung his arms around Sabo’s neck instead of just letting his hands rest on Sabo’s shoulders. It was more comfortable this way, for both of them.

Sabo started walking, slower than before but at a steady pace. The body pressed against his back was almost unnaturally warm, and he would have gotten worried over that as well if he hadn’t known that it was right that way. Sometimes, the ends of Ace’s raven waves would tickle Sabo’s ear, his breath ghosting over Sabo’s neck and jawline. His distinct cool, minty scent mixed with the rain forest’s smell, soon overpowering it, and with every breath Sabo took he felt refreshed despite the additional weight he was now carrying. The chime of Ace’s jewellery, for the first time, was now in line with Sabo’s movements, creating a peaceful harmony, a gentle recurring song that accompanied them on their way.

He took breaks when he felt his arms and legs grow tired, carefully lowered Ace on a rock, stretched and sat down on the soft ground, breathing deeply before Ace climbed on his back again and they moved on.

Occasionally, he would point out a tree or plant to Ace, until there was no answer anymore and Sabo realised that Ace had fallen asleep, the strain on Sabo’s back and arms slightly heavier and Ace’s
soft, warm cheek pressed to the side of Sabo’s neck, his heartbeat, which was echoing through Sabo’s chest alongside his own, steady and calm—so very human. Was this man on his back really a god?

Sabo’s grip tightened and he smiled, and that was when the sun had finally risen high enough, breaking through a gap in the canopy to fall on the two of them, gently warming Sabo’s face.
Chapter 7

The muscles in Sabo’s arms and legs felt as if they were slowly fraying, pulled taut by constant strain to the point where he was sure they would snap any moment now, but with Ace still sleeping soundly on his back he had been unable to bring himself to sit down and rest. Instead, he had carried on, the sun rising higher, the familiar humid heat returning to the jungle, leaving him drenched in his own sweat, rivulets trailing down his temples, stinging in his eyes. Ace was a much too warm and by now very heavy burden on his back, but one he was willing to carry to the ends of the earth if he had to.

A small salvation came in the form of the forest starting to clear, the smooth ornate sandstone walls of the temple already partly visible through the trunks and leaves and vines. Strength returned in a sudden surge to his burning limbs, exhaustion forgotten for a moment. He stumbled on, briefly contemplating whether he should wake Ace or not, but decided it was best to let him rest for now.

He stepped onto the temple grounds and a wide square covered with stone, leading up to the sanctuary, stretched out before him. And it was there, beneath a clear blue sky, that he stopped and wondered how to proceed. Where should he go? Where were the others?

He turned, let his eyes roam to observe his surroundings and in that moment he heard someone call his name in a voice raw from incessant shouting, heavily laced with panic, worry and a hint of smouldering anger. Then Koala rounded the corner of the temple walls with brisk, heavy steps, no hat atop her dishevelled auburn hair, face flushed, sweaty, her clothes in disarray, looking as if she was about to cry. She hadn’t spotted him yet, her focus loose, as if she had returned here countless times without ever finding what she was desperately looking for, having lost all hope by now.

Sabo smiled both ruefully and tired, and turned his steps towards her but refrained from calling out. It was only a matter of seconds now until she was going to spot them; first him before she would see the extra set of legs dangling from his arms and maybe even the mop of raven hair nestled against the side of his neck.

What would happen next, however, was impossible to anticipate. He sped up his steps despite the screaming protest of his legs, his heart thumping wildly in his chest.

Her gaze swept over him and for a moment she froze, trying to figure out whether her mind was playing tricks on her before she cried out, the sound guttural, coming from deep within. Never before had he heard her call his name with so much relief, so much elation, so much evaporating anguish, and it pained him, because he instantly knew that they had been searching for him for hours now and had most likely started to lose hope to ever find him. But he also knew it would all be forgotten the moment they saw Ace.

His smile widened and Koala broke into a run across the narrow strip of grass lining the temple grounds on either side, shouting his name again and again, choking on the syllables when the need for oxygen prevailed and tears started to streak her reddened cheeks. Sabo watched as she came closer, fast, could see how she was taking him in, checking for obvious injuries. Her blue eyes lingered on the bare legs dangling in front of him yet she continued running. Until she stopped a couple of steps away from them, when her vision and mind had made the connection that Sabo wasn’t alone.

Her lips moved, parting and closing with unspoken words, her mind unable to express all the questions racing, whirling, around her head.
In the end, she resorted to saying Sabo’s name again, but it was nothing more than a fleeting whisper now, incredulity heavy at the end. Sabo’s arms tensed under Ace’s limp legs for just the fraction of a second in a sudden need to reassure himself of Ace’s presence. It was almost a miracle that he hadn’t woken up when Koala had been shouting and had continued to sleep soundly, obliviously, expressing a substantial amount of blind trust in Sabo and his word that bordered on recklessness.

Koala took one tentative step towards him but not more, her eyes darting between the mop of raven hair and Sabo’s face repetitively.

"Sabo,” she whispered again, and he discerned his name more by the motion of her lips than the actual sound with how hushed she was speaking now. "Who is this?"

He was sure the question was only to hear him speak aloud the confirmation for what her mind had already pieced together, that the one he was carrying on his back was the one they had dreamed of finding.

All of a sudden, Sabo was overly aware of Ace’s warm body resting against his back, his soft hair tickling the side of his neck, his overwhelming fragrance, and the strain his weight put on Sabo’s arms and legs. He was real. He existed, not just in that surreal reality that was more fantasy than actuality Sabo had been a part of until now, no, also here, in front of Koala. And Sabo became aware that up to this point, he had firmly believed that the moment he was reunited with the others, Ace would disappear and he would snap awake from his dream that was as fragile as a soap bubble floating through the air.

In an instant, everything shifted into perspective in a dizzying whirl of colour and sound, images flashing past his inner eye, words spoken echoing in his ears: Ace was trapped, had lost his powers, was in need of help, assistance, guidance. The weight of those memories was crushing, pulling at his tired body like a second source of gravity.

He had woken a god from his sleep.

Staring at Koala without seeing her, his throat constricting, he dove deeper and deeper into the true meaning of his actions without wanting to, and, trembling, his legs finally buckled under the heavy burden, the responsibility.

“Sabo!”

Faintly, Koala’s cry reached his ringing ears. He reacted vaguely, angling his face in her direction as she rushed forward to help him. His breathing hitched and he tried to blink away the haze before his eyes to see her clearly. Her gentle hands were cool on his face, soothing and a part of him returned.

“Your should lie down,” she tried to coax him, her firm grip on his shoulder keeping him upright.

“I can’t,” he whispered, hands holding onto Ace.

“Sabo!”

Sabo’s head jerked to where this other voice had come from. Was it Wiper hurrying across the grass towards them?

“Let me help you,” Koala insisted and slid over the grass on her knees. His eyes followed her, he could see the disbelief etched deep into her features even with his blurred vision and the poor angle from which he was looking at her. She watched Ace, marvelled at what was visible of his face through his raven strands, taking in his attire, the gold and jewels, the making of his clothes.
The sound of hurried footsteps closing in ceased abruptly and Sabo raised his heavy head, a searing pain starting to throb between his brows. Wiper now stood where Koala had only moments ago, eyes wide and white, mouth falling open. Sabo had never seen him so shocked, so overwhelmed, and Sabo mused that understanding and believing was probably easier with the backstory of how Ace had ended up with him, but even then it was hard to grasp.

“Can-Can I touch him?” Koala asked, her voice trembling with uncertainty, her arms raised but hesitant to take Ace from him.

“Yeah,” he croaked, his body loosening in acceptance, readying itself to let Ace go.

“Wiper! Don’t just stand there and stare. Help us!” she ordered, a bit breathless but resolute. With a start, Wiper’s attention turned away from Ace and towards Koala. For a short moment, he appeared confused before he obeyed, kneeling in the grass beside Koala and together they moved Ace’s sleep-heavy body from Sabo’s back to Wiper’s arms who held him gingerly like Ace was both frail and precious, gaping at his peaceful freckled face with incredulity all the while.

Sabo groaned when his back was no longer bent, his vision blackening for a second before Koala was at his side, pulling him into a hug, her gloved hands clenching the back of his shirt in tight, shaking fists of relief. Her embrace was strong, a physical reflection of the fears and worries she had had to endure in his absence, the prospect of his death, which had haunted her, suddenly painfully evident. Sabo’s limbs screamed under the force but he made no sound of complaint, because bearing it was all he could do after the trouble he had caused. Instead, he simply leaned his head against hers, exhausted but grateful for her presence and concern.

Wiper cleared his throat and Koala retreated, hastily wiping the corner of her eyes with her palm.

“Sabo, I’m glad you’re alright as well, but…who is this?”

Sabo’s eyes—his vision clearer now that he was finally able to rest, though his legs still felt as if his bones were made of lead—roamed over Ace’s body nestled in Wiper’s arms. He still hadn’t made a sound or moved. Was he alright? But he refrained from reaching out to feel his pulse, knowing it had been there, shallow but even, only a moment ago.

“Well,” he began, a small smile tugging at the corner of his lips, “this is Ace.”

Wiper lifted his brows, his expression urging Sabo to go on and Koala whispered beside him, “Is Ace…who I think he is?”

The smile on his face wavered and he tore his gaze away from Ace, directing it towards the temple building rising behind them, the monument that had been erected to worship his glory and which today was the sole thing left in tact of the once prosperous Shandora, the god it had served in the past now one in name only.

But this wasn’t his story to tell, Sabo decided, so all he said was, “He is.”

Koala’s gasp was loud next to his ear as he leaned against her for support, and Wiper’s lips were thin and taut, face pale, and silence reigned as they each hung after their own thoughts, until Wiper spoke again, questions coming forth in quick succession, which was very unlike him. “Please say it, otherwise I won’t be able to believe it. How did you even find him? Is this what the earthquake was about?”

Sabo’s next breath was long, drawn out. He understood Wiper’s curiosity, the tension in Koala’s body at the prospect of what he had to tell, but he was also tired.
He was about to start, when Koala interrupted him. “Shouldn’t we call the others?”

It seemed Wiper had forgotten all about them for the moment.

“Of course,” he fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a small wooden whistle, “They’ll be glad to know you’re alright, Sabo. Everyone was worried, especially Robin and Koala,” and then he blew into the whistle, creating a sound similar to a bird’s call. It reminded Sabo of the countless days of tracking through the jungle together. It all seemed so long ago now…

“Sorry for making you worry,” he apologised, glancing at Koala, though it was meant for both of them, and he would later have to tell Robin, too.

Koala smiled as a sign she had already forgiven him. “It’s not like I haven’t specifically asked you to take me with you next time you head out on your own before…” and she left that teasing accusation hanging in the air between them. Sabo sucked in his lips sheepishly, making clear that this time he was taking it to heart.

Wiper whistled two more times and not long after the last call had faded, there were voices calling Wiper’s name. They had all been close by it seemed.

Sabo shifted nervously, suddenly apprehensive of meeting Robin’s eyes. He knew she wouldn’t scold or blame him, he was too old for that and it wasn’t like her, but just to see the worry cloud her eyes briefly before it would make room for relief was enough to make his insides churn in shame.

It did not take long until they saw them rounding the corner of the temple, running towards them over the grass, and when they were close enough to not only see Sabo but also Ace, their reactions were similar to Wiper’s and Koala’s—confusion, bewilderment and shock as understanding hit them—and they halted at a safe distance to assess the situation.

Robin was the first to step forward, her blue eyes clear and sharp, but even her brow showed the fine lines of astonishment. She took in Sabo’s dishevelled state calmly nonetheless, his bare arms and the frayed seams of his shirt where he had ripped off his sleeves, his exhaustion showing in a sheen of perspiration on his brow, and the paleness in his face.

“I’m fine,” he informed her, his voice still frail. “Sorry to have made you worry. All of you.” He let his eyes wander over the others, who glanced at him before directing their attention back to Ace.

“I’m glad you are,” she said softly before her eyes, too, drifted to where Ace was still sleeping soundly in Wiper’s arms. “And…is he who I think he is?”

The silence reigning was tense, expectant, everyone holding their breaths, watching him out of the corner of their eyes. Sabo nodded. “He is.” A collective gasp cut through the silence like a whistling blade. “His name is Ace and he is the fire god the legend said was asleep in the temple.”

Their reactions were similar to those of Wiper and Koala; shock and disbelief prevailed, mingling with reverence. Robin took another step forward, the fine sharp lines of her face alight with wonder and fascination, the glow in her eyes that of a child who had just received the most extraordinary present, and warmth bloomed inside Sabo.

“How do you know that?”

It was Laki who had spoken and when Sabo looked up he saw she had her arms crossed before her chest skeptically, her eyes the only pair not trained on Ace in captivation, instead they were scrutinising Sabo. But before he had a chance to answer, Kamakiri turned. “Just look at him? How can you doubt it?”
She briefly glanced at him, unimpressed, before her piercing gaze settled on Sabo again. “I never said I doubt it. I just want to know how Sabo knows. And what even is with him? Is he still asleep?”

Sabo pressed his lips together. He assumed Ace was still asleep, but he had no idea why the commotion hadn’t woken him up yet. Had the walk put that much strain on him? Was it because of his injured feet?

But before anyone else could say anything, Conis emerged from her stupor, her medical training taking over and, ignoring Laki’s doubtfulness, she asked, “What’s this around his feet, Sabo? Is he hurt?” She crept closer, observing Sabo’s makeshift bandages.

“Yes, it—I was stupid. You should have a look at it. He cut them walking barefoot. I tried to wash them in a stream earlier and—”

She cut him off. “So he was awake at one point? And I gather those are your sleeves?”

“Yes,” he affirmed, embarrassment over his carelessness hushing his voice.

Conis nodded more to herself, clearly entranced in her own mind’s calculations of how to best proceed, a finger pressed to the tip of her nose in deep thought. Then she let out a long drawn sigh, her shoulders rising high before they fell, her eyes finding Wiper’s, silently communicating with an earnest look.

“If he’s hurt, I’d like to treat him as quickly as possible,” she said, carefully picking at the makeshift bandages until they were loose enough for her to peek below them.

“Why treat him? If he’s a god, I’m sure this is nothing.” There was no defiance on Laki’s weatherbeaten face, but suspicion had hardened the lines of her jaw and pulled taut the curve of her lips. “That is…unless Sabo didn’t tell us the entire truth.” Her dark eyes narrowed, regarding Sabo closely.

“Sabo hasn’t really told us anything so far,” Wiper interjected, trying to pacify with a softer tone than usual, but the sudden tension among the Jayans didn’t go unnoticed by the three from Goa Kingdom.

“It’s complicated, but I promise I’ll tell you as much as I can,” Sabo offered, feeling the need to contribute to Wiper’s effort to calm the situation, even though he had not the slightest idea why Laki was so doubtful.

“As much as you can?” One of Laki’s brows arched high.

“There are some things that are for Ace to decide whether he wants to share them with you. But he really is in need of our help.”

“Our help?” Her words rang high with disbelief. “And what if we don’t want to help him? Is he going to burn us like he burned down this city?”

Confusion carved deep lines between Sabo’s brows before understanding dawned on him. “It’s not his fault that the city was destroyed,” he said.

Laki had already parted her lips to demand more answers, when a third party joined their argument.

“But it is.”

All their heads moved simultaneously in one direction and even Laki couldn’t keep awe from flickering across her face.
Ace was awake, sitting upright, a hint of sadness clouding his anthracite eyes, but other than this there was neither fear nor hostility, just curiosity and friendliness playing around the soft lines of his mouth. “You must be Sabo’s friends. My name is Ace and I am pleased to meet you,” he introduced himself, and the shadow in his eyes made way for a brighter glow along with a warm smile parting his lips.

But no names were returned, everyone just stared and Wiper hastily slid back a bit to bring some distance between himself and the man Sabo had claimed was the legendary fire god of Shandora. Ace’s smile flickered as his eyes shifted from one to the other, waiting for a response, and Sabo was about to say something, when Robin got ahead of him, slowly walking up to Ace like he was a shy dear that upon being startled would make a mad dash for the bushes and disappear.

“It’s an honour to meet you…Ace. I’m Robin.” Her smile was warm and friendly and the relief that he had received an answer and had been given a name was evident on Ace’s face. After that the ice seemed broken, because everyone else spoke up—Conis timid, Kamakiri reverent, Koala exhilarated—welcoming Ace to the group in their own way, except for one.

Laki still kept a safe distance, posture stiff and muscles pulled taut, ready to react at the smallest notion of threat, but her hard, unimpressed mask had become brittle, a glimmer of fascination shimmering between the cracks. However, her lips remained a thin strained line and closed.

“I am not going to burn you, if that is what you are afraid of,” Ace said, speaking in the softest, soothing of voices, like an adult speaking to a frightened child to dispel unreasonable fears, and Sabo mused that that was what Laki truly was, at least to Ace, a scared, fragile human, a child compared to the millennia of his existence.

Laki swallowed thickly, her throat bobbing and her gloved fingers flexing around her biceps as she held onto herself for reassurance, clearly uncomfortable with the way he spoke to her. Her voice was raspy, low, when she finally used it. “How can I be sure of that?”

Ace’s lips parted in a haste to answer before they closed again without a word, the realisation over what he would have to admit if he wanted to explain, weighing heavily so he just stared at her in silence.

“You don’t have to answer that, if you don’t want to,” Sabo said, pushing himself up with only one knee on the ground now to act as a protector, the effort painful and infuriatingly slow, but he managed to glare at Laki nonetheless albeit knowing he shouldn’t get involved. But there was no reason for her to be so wary and distrustful.

Laki’s eyes darted over to him, her unimpressed mask back in place, though now she appeared almost stubborn.

“Sabo,” Koala whispered under her breath, attempting to placate with a hint of reprimand thrumming in the two syllables.

“Since when are you making the rules?” Laki asked defyingly, lifting her chin.

Sabo’s fingers dug deep into the soil, teeth grinding.

“Laki, please calm down.” But Wiper’s plea sounded every bit like an order, and it was enough for Laki to loosen her rigid poster, the feisty spark in her eyes dimming.

They were all friends, but there was also a hierarchy among them; Wiper was the leader of his friends while Robin was Sabo and Koala’s.
“Sabo?”

He averted his gaze and turned, looking at Robin who smiled benignly.

“I did not mean to cause trouble,” Ace said, and suddenly everyone’s attention was back on him. Lines of concern streaked his brow, anthracite eyes apologetic. “And of course I will answer your questions, if that is what will make you trust me. I am in need of your help after all.”

“How about we return to camp first so Conis can treat your feet? If you want her to that is.” Robin proposed, ignoring Laki’s eyes boring into her back.

Ace looked down where Sabo’s blood speckled sleeves hung loosely from his feet. He had clearly forgotten about his injury. Grey eyes trailed over to Sabo undecidedly, who nodded and carefully got back on his trembling legs. His back was stiff and he longed for a good night’s rest. The others, however, remained where they were, glancing at Ace at bit uneasily.

“You shouldn’t walk by yourself,” Conis finally said, rolling in her lips.

“Oh, I see,” and again Ace looked at Sabo.

Sabo’s legs and back screamed in protest at the sheer thought of having to carry Ace again, but he started to walk over nonetheless.

“I’ll carry him,” Wiper offered out of the blue, and Ace’s head jerked around in surprise, which brought forth a hastily stumbled, “If I may.” It was rare to see Wiper, always so composed and unapproachable, embarrassed and almost shy, even his grim looking features had begun to soften in Ace’s presence.

Ace looked back and forth between Sabo and Wiper, studying the deep lines of fatigue carved into Sabo’s face and the shadows below his half-lidded eyes telling of an almost sleepless night.

“Oh course,” Ace said, and took Wiper’s hand with a strong grip when it was held out to him before climbing on his back.

For Sabo, it was a strange sight to behold, the odd, unnatural warmth of Ace’s body pressed against his back still fresh on his memory, his clean, minty scent lingering in Sabo’s nose.

“Let’s go,” Koala said, one hand on the small of Sabo’s back. Her touch was grounding, the memory dissolving into his subconscious like a spiral of smoke curling upwards into a nightly sky.

Their pace was unhurried as they walked back to camp, silence reigning while everyone hung after their own thoughts. Every now and then Sabo caught Koala glancing at him out of the corner of her eyes and Robin’s watchful gaze had settled on the back of his neck. Since it was her, though, it wasn’t unsettling, much rather comforting, just like the knowledge that he had shared the mystery, the impossibility turned flesh and bones, that was Ace, his shoulders no longer the only ones carrying the heavy duty that was helping Ace to find his way back home.

The sanctuary’s walls passed by him without Sabo taking notice, and with the temple proper lacking the cover of trees, the sun beat down mercilessly, Sabo’s forehead soon damp with sweat again. But then something caught the attention of his tired mind after all and he stopped short, angling his face up towards the sky, bringing up a shaking hand to shield his eyes.

A flock of birds flew overhead, their cheerful chirping resonating with life.
“There’s birds?” he wondered aloud. Robin stopped beside him, looking up as well.

“Ever since the sun came up. There’s more and more of them.”

Now Sabo listened closely and much to his wonder there was even more noise than he had noticed at first.

“But when we came here…” He looked at Robin blankly.

“It’s as if death has retreated and life has returned,” she mused, and with her sphinx-like smile curling her lips, her blue eyes drifted ahead to where Ace held tightly onto Wiper’s back.

Sabo contemplated her words, but said nothing in return and soon they resumed walking, following the others back to camp.

The camp looked much like it had when he had sneaked away to explore the temple, just a bit more in disarray, the rush and worry over his disappearance evident in the equipment scattered around. The fire was nothing more but weakly glowing cinders, indicating that it hadn’t been fed fresh wood for a couple of hours.

Wiper gently let Ace sit down on a blanket by the dying fire, who promptly looked left and right, grey eyes blown wide with amazement and marvel as he meticulously took in everything within sight. Conis hurried off to gather the medical equipment she would be needing, briefly vanishing into her tent where she kept the most valuable ointments and drugs.

Sabo eased onto another blanket not too far from Ace, groaning in relief when he was finally able to relax his sore muscles again, a pounding starting in the back of his head, which he knew would soon become annoying if he didn’t eat and drink and go to sleep. He lightly massaged his temples, closing his eyes for a moment to plunge into the soothing darkness of his fatigue dazed mind, then he pulled himself together and started to drag his shoes off his feet as well as his socks, sighing when he was able to curl his toes before carefully lying down. In his state, the hard stone floor of the outer terrace was almost as soft as an array of fluffy cushions.

A moment later, a hissing crash made him jolt up again, one hand flying to a pipe that wasn’t there. He wasn’t the only one looking alert, but it had only been Laki who had thrown a log into the embers, scowling when Sabo glared at her again before she retreated.

Sabo quickly checked to see Ace’s reaction, but all he did was stare into the cinders and the flakes of ash dancing before him in the warm air, watching as the first tiny flames tentatively licked up the side of the dry piece of wood, spewing sparks the bigger they got.

His absence of mind ended abruptly when Conis walked over with a small, rattling tray carrying glass bottles and pots of all sizes in which she stored her salves and other medication, a leather bag slung around her shoulder. She dropped the bag beside Ace’s feet and kneeled, smiling at him shyly, the gesture returned promptly but without the timidness.

Sabo watched her cautiously pick at the torn off sleeves, until Braham approached him. “I guess neither of you has had anything to eat yet?” Sabo shook his head, his stomach growling obnoxiously loud at the sheer thought of food, especially the one cooked by Braham. “Good, we haven’t either.” Braham sheepishly glanced at Ace, who observed Conis gingerly applying alcohol to disinfect the cuts on his soles, his brow furrowed, mouth and nose twitching whenever it stung but no sound came across his lips. He lowered his voice, when he spoke again. “Does…he eat?”

Sabo cocked his head to the side, not sure what to make of this question before he understood. “Oh,”
he said unintelligently, not really sure what to answer other than, “I think he does…”

Ace was human now after all, which meant he had to eat and drink. And who said gods didn’t eat as well?

“Well, if he doesn’t, there’s more for us,” Braham shrugged, straightening his broad back again.

“Do you need help?” Sabo asked out of politeness, not sure he would be of much if Braham actually took him up on his offer.

But Braham only motioned over his shoulder, where Sabo spotted Laki rummaging through their supplies. “Laki has already offered her help. You should rest for now.”

Sabo thanked him with a grateful smile before stretching out on the floor again, the soft murmur of Conis’ gentle voice as she explained to Ace what she was doing drifting over along with the acrid smell of a growing fire.

Whenever he had been haunted by a strong afterimage of that night with the searing pain so vivid that it felt like his left side was on fire again, the sharp tang of smoke was overly menacing afterwards and his pulse sped up automatically. So he rolled onto his side and opened his eyes again, fleeing the monster that was his childhood memo lurking on the border of his conscious mind, patiently waiting for him to fall asleep.

Just then Conis securely tied the last end of the new bandages she had wrapped around Ace’s feet and sat up to look at her work.

“We should find some shoes for you so you can walk around. Although I wouldn’t recommend trying it out right away, better let the ointments I applied do their job for a little while.” She leaned down to start packing up what wasn’t needed anymore when Ace thanked her, inspecting his wrapped up feet, gently prodding the soles hidden behind cotton covers, not realising how flustered Conis looked. “Don’t mention it,” she mumbled, ducking her head deeper to hide the blush flushing her cheeks. “Now is there anything else I can do for you? How do you feel?”

Ace earnestly considered her question before he said, “I am fine.”

“Are you sure?” Sabo interjected and both their heads jerked in his direction. “You slept so deeply while I carried you. You didn’t even wake up for a while when the others arrived…”

Ace’s expression looked troubled for a moment before he quickly averted his gaze. “I was... tired. But I am fine now.” But he refused to meet Sabo’s gaze while speaking to him, clearly uncomfortable with the topic.

Sabo was about to probe further, when Conis came to the rescue. “I’m sure it was just the aftereffect of your eight hundred year long sleep.” She smiled at Ace who blinked at her in confusion before realising she was helping him. Sabo raised a brow, but before he could say anymore someone stepped up behind him, the person’s arrival carrying the mouthwatering scent of Braham’s cooking.

“That is, if you actually slept for almost eight hundred years.”

Sabo didn’t have to turn to know that it was Laki who had spoken. If he hadn’t been familiar with her voice, the judgemental ring to her words would have given her away. Everyone else did look at her, though, and a deep, hushed silence settled on the camp, making clear that this time, Laki wasn’t the only one who burned to hear this story, they had all been listening in on their conversation, eagerly waiting for the moment when everything would finally be revealed.
With his limbs still protesting, Sabo got up, sitting cross-legged on the ground, crossing his bare arms before his chest, pondering on where to best start. He glanced at Ace who returned his look with determination hardening his features. It had to be now, there was no way around it.

“Maybe I should start with how I found Ace,” he said, letting his eyes roam around the group and seeing only anxious faces. Even Braham had come over with his chopping board.

“I don’t care where you start as long as you finally do,” Laki groaned, and Sabo thought that maybe out of them all, she was the most excited to hear, since she had yet to make up her mind while everyone already seem to have, and her decision, whether or not Ace was friend or foe, depended on this story.

He took a deep breath, both to calm his annoyance and brace himself, before he started with how he had entered the temple all by himself after he had relieved Kamakiri from his shift last night.

No one else spoke while he talked, his voice and the birds’ cries the only sounds, and even Ace was listening intently to the part of the story for which he hadn’t been present, the intensity of his gaze palpable on the skin of Sabo’s face. There was a collective gasp when Sabo told how he had spotted Ace in the water of the pool, suspense growing when he described his slow way down the stone steps into the calm water. His left side started tingling again, heat spreading through his body as he remembered Ace’s serene face, peaceful in his sleep, raven waves curling with the motion of the water he had stirred. His hands had reached out, had ached to touch and hold.

He must have spoken, because the others reacted to his words, but for a moment he was no longer present. He was back in that chamber, water reaching up to his waist and the most magnificent grey eyes had just opened for him. After that…darkness.

Sabo’s heart thundered in his chest, his breathing heavy. He tried to blink the images away that had haunted him through that darkness, but they were persistent, pressing in on him. His lips opened. Maybe if he spoke, they would disappear? But they closed again without a sound. He was trapped.

“-bo?”

He frowned, turning his head blindly.

“Sabo?”

The darkness cleared and his vision gradually focused on Ace’s face. There was no worry, no confusion, just calm understanding. Had he seen it? Did he know about that night?

“I will continue from here, since you were unconscious.”

Sabo nodded dazedly, unable to tear his eyes from Ace’s. Ace knew something, he was sure. But how?

He only had a chance to hang onto these thoughts for a couple of seconds; Ace began to tell the part during which Sabo had been unconscious, and so he found out that Ace had grasped the situation quickly and had pulled Sabo out of the pool while the ground had been shaking. But the earthquake had ceased just as quickly as it had started, and so he had put Sabo down beside the pool and checked to see if he was still alive. When he had heard a heartbeat and made sure Sabo was breathing, too, he had retreated and started to inspect the room. That was until Sabo had regained consciousness.

After that Ace fell silent, undecided about how to continue.
“And then?” Koala leaned forward, her clenched hands on top of her knees, blue eyes blown wide with inquisitiveness.

“We…talked,” Sabo offered, rolling in his lips.

“About what?” Kamakiri probed, adjusting his red-shaded glasses, pushing them up the bridge of his nose.

“Well…” Sabo glanced over at Ace who was playing with one of his golden bangles, appearing to be deep in thought, remembering maybe what Sabo had told him, reliving a moment of dread. Neither of them held only good memories of their fateful meeting in that chamber, it occurred to Sabo.

Then Ace’s face suddenly twisted into a barely composed mask, anger flaring up beneath it, shining through every now and then, his teeth grinding. Sabo knew what went through Ace’s head, the mixed expression a manifestation of his inner struggle as self-loathing and loathing for the one who had stolen his powers battled for the upper hand.

“Sabo told me what happened to the city, to Shandora and its people.” The words were pressed out between gritted teeth and Ace’s fingers crumbled the cloth of his sash with their iron grip. The fabric flickered from a pristine white to a light yellow, then to an orange that appeared almost threatening, a mirror of sorts for Ace’s boiling emotions.

_He’s fire_, a tiny voice in the back of Sabo’s head piped up, _and fire is capricious, appearing tame one second and blindly raging the next._ It was his own fear speaking, a vicious thing and unreasonable at times, like now. Yes, Ace was fire, and Sabo knew better than anyone else in this group how fearsome fire was, but right now Ace was also human, stranded in a world that was familiar to him but also strange, with no clue on how to return home.

“Sabo said it wasn’t your fault, but you said it was. What’s the truth?” Laki demanded to know, the tension radiating off her body so strongly it even seeped into Sabo’s back and neck, the hairs on his nape standing on end, his spine rigid.

The seething fury vanished at once from Ace’s posture, and he slightly bowed his proud head with the golden circlet. Knowing what was likely going through his head, Sabo felt the overwhelming need to lay a reassuring hand atop his arm. He didn’t. Instead he said, “You can trust them, Ace. There’s nothing to fear.”

Murmured affirmation came from everyone around, a collective display of reassurance spiked with a hunger for knowledge.

Ace considered it and after what felt like a small eternity, he finally spoke. “When I came to Earth… my powers were taken from me…” Speaking those words took a lot of effort, Sabo could tell by the repulsion shaking Ace’s body, the vile taste of defeat probably burning like acid on his tongue.

“Who took them? Your powers...” Robin asked.

Ace’s jaw tensed with animosity. “The traitor Teach,” he spat with malice, the name spoken to curse. “He wanted to make them his own. And when he had them, he pushed me into the prison of water Sabo found me in, cursing me to sleep for what was supposed to be eternity, I am sure.”

“And the town?” Laki pressed, but with a voice more quiet.

“When I descended, it was still glorious. It…must have been Teach’s doing.” Ace’s head hung low now, his raven waves covering his face, making it impossible to see his expression, but his hushed
voice was telling enough.

Sabo remembered the devastated look when he had first told him about what had happened to Shandora and quickly looked away, not wanting to pry too much. He glanced up to see Laki’s expression softening with sympathy before she, too, looked away.

“So you see, I am not a threat to you. Not only have I been robbed of my powers, but their absence has also turned me into a human.” A bitter smile curled Ace’s lips and Sabo watched as embarrassment coloured Laki’s cheeks and neck. “And that is why Sabo brought me here. I am in need of your help.”

“Help with what? Getting your powers back?” Wiper asked, eyes narrowed, focused solely on Ace.

“If that is possible, yes. But first and foremost I would like to return home.”

“Home?” Koala probed.

“Yes, back to the Heavens, to my family and friends.”

“And how do you return?”

Ace inhaled deeply, eyes wandering off.

“You don’t know,” Robin spoke for him, quick to deduce. And despite her matter-of-fact tone, Sabo knew she was full of compassion and deeply moved by Ace’s story, like everyone else, if he was interpreting the looks on their faces correctly. Even Laki seemed to slowly come to terms with what she had learned. Ace only shook his head.

Again, the only sound came from the birds around them, which, little by little, were reclaiming their former territory, while the small group of humans in front of the temple simply sat there, staring at nothing in particular, trying to comprehend what they had just been told. Racing thoughts had to be put in order before more questions could emerge from the chaos.

“This Teach person… who are they?” Conis was the first to end the silence, her restless fingers peeling off the edges of a handwritten label on a glass bottle she held in her hands.

Ace looked nauseous. “He used to be a minor god among those admitted to the holy court and he was also part of my entourage, but then he betrayed us.”

“What did he do?”

“Don’t make me say it!” Ace suddenly yelled, anger flaring to life, the already oppressive heat of the equatorial noon increasing tenfold, filling their lungs with burning air, ghosting over their skins like a singeing breath. It was just like it had been in the chamber after Sabo had woken up.

“I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you,” Conis breathed, stumbling over her own words, panic drawing all blood from her face; she had turned pale despite the heat.

Whether it was because of her frail voice or the horror in her eyes that Ace’s anger evaporated together with the heat, was impossible to discern. “I apologise. I did not mean to frighten you,” he said, but his voice also shook slightly, giving away how agitated he still was.

Beside Sabo, Laki dropped to her knees, breathing heavily, the hand with the kitchen knife trembling with subsiding adrenaline.
“It’s okay, we shouldn’t have forced you to talk about it.” The colour had not yet returned to Conis’ face, but she already came across as more composed than the rest of them, her voice calm and soft, soothing. Sabo was impressed, he wouldn’t have been able to act like that had he been in her place. But upon looking closely he found a blazing determination in her eyes that wasn’t born from just her passion for exploring, it was more profound than that. Devotion, deference, was what gave her strength and courage. She wasn’t one to blindly follow, for that she was too much a scientist, but she was quicker to forgive if her instincts and her judgement told her to.

And maybe she was right, Sabo thought. Ace was a god, but he was also human, trapped in a foreign place with no one to rely on but the strangers he had just met. He wondered if Ace felt scared and alone; perhaps the longer the was exposed to this new world, the more frightening it became.

“I mean no harm to you, I promise.”

“We know that,” Conis assured him promptly, the curl of her lips warm and forgiving.

Ace glanced to the side, grey eyes searching for Laki, who stared at him wide-eyed, still terrified, and his lips stretched taut, his gaze focusing on the knife between her rigid fingers.

Sabo hastily placed a gentle hand atop hers, prying the knife from her grip. Much to his surprise she let him without the slightest form of protest, but the moment it was out of her hand, she rose and staggered away. Ace looked as if someone had slapped him hard across the face.

“I’ll talk to her,” Wiper said and went after her.

Ace sighed heavily and dragged one hand through his raven hair, his jewellery jingling. “I understand if you do not want to help me now.”

“We do,” Kamakiri was quick to throw in, “It’s just…”

“Like you, we need time to adjust,” Robin helped out. “None of us has ever met a god before so give us some time to understand and get used to you. Some have already come around while others will need more time,” she patiently explained.

Ace nodded. “I will need time as well.”

“Of course. This must all be very strange to you. Maybe even frightening and—“

“I am not scared,” Ace interjected, sounding almost like a child.

Koala’s laughter was odd in the stunned silence that followed Ace’s bold statement, and when Ace looked at her irritatedly, she hurried to explain, “I’m sorry. You just reminded me of Sabo when he was younger and got lectures from Robin.”

“Koala!” Conis and Sabo exclaimed simultaneously, both sounding upset, though certainly for different reasons.

“What?” She shrugged more at Sabo than Conis.

“Now that you’ve mentioned it,” Robin mused aloud, one finger pressed to her lips in thought.

“Robin, not you, too!” Conis looked appalled.

However, she, too, had to feel the change in atmosphere, the last bits of lingering tension fading. Ace looked back and forth between them, bewildered, while Sabo stared at Robin in disbelief.
“Sabo, you have to admit, it isn’t that far fetched,” Robin said, sounding serious.

“But…” He wasn’t one to argue with Robin so he turned to Koala. “Well, if you think there’s a similarity, maybe I’m a god, too? And for the record, I never said I wasn’t scared when I actually was.”


“Sabo, you are not a god. I would know if you were.” Ace was completely earnest and Sabo turned to him, mouth dropping in incredulity.

“I was trying to prove how stupid the comparison is,” he tried to explain, but it was too late. Koala’s gleeful cackle rang out first and moments later, Robin and Conis’ chuckles were almost drowned out by Braham and Kamakiri’s boisterous laughter. “Oh, bite me,” Sabo hissed and rolled his eyes, though he was relieved that everyone, especially Ace, was more at ease now.

A second later, though, they froze, the laughter dying in their throats. Circling above them, the shadow of a massive bird raced over the ground, its piercing cry loud and surprisingly familiar to Sabo’s ears. Their faces turned to the sky in unison, but while the members of the expedition stared at a blue and yellowed-feathered bird, Ace jumped to his feet, notwithstanding the cuts on his soles, and with exhilaration high in his voice, he called, “Marco!”

The phoenix flapped its massive wings of blue flames, descending gracefully among their midst, whirling up dust from the ground, the particles sparkling in the air. It folded its wings and shook its sleek head, ruffling feathers that licked up the side of its body in a change of blue and yellow.

Ace was frozen to the spot, his lips parting with incredulity, but he made no sound. The holy bird tilted its head, inspecting Ace from head to toe with eyes like small black pearls.

“I guess this is it then…” Koala’s whisper reached Sabo’s ear from across the fire. “He’s without doubt the God of Fire.”

But neither the phoenix nor Ace paid them any mind, both too astonished, too overwhelmed. Ace was the first to move, hesitant at first before he broke into a short run, his arms reaching for the bird while calling, “It is you, Marco! It is really you!” It was a sight to behold as he reached up and let his trembling fingers stroke through the phoenix’s flickering plumage, down the slender neck and the phoenix spread its wings again, embracing Ace and touching its forehead to his.

“I am so relieved you are here,” Ace said, tone raw with consolation, his voice cracking even.

The phoenix brushed its wing down Ace’s back in a way that would have meant comfort had a human done it before it directed its gaze at the onlookers—Sabo in particular. He had stared into those mysterious eyes before, the memory rushing to the forefront of his mind. Dangling from a rope ladder, the phoenix perched on a tree opposite of Sabo’s tent, had been the first time Sabo’s and the phoenix’s gaze had met. The beginning of it all.

If the bird hadn’t led him to the precipice, who knew if they would have ever found the ruins of the ancient city. Maybe—after an almost endless search of this foreign green maze—or maybe not.

He felt a thank you was in order and so he bowed his head slightly without breaking eye contact, hoping the action was understood as gratefulness. The bird tilted its head to the side again and that was when Ace turned.
“You and Sabo have met before?” he asked disbelievingly.

Sabo’s brow furrowed. Were they talking? If so, they were communicating in a way he couldn’t hear?

“Uhm…yes. We have. He lead me to the spot from where I was able to see this mountain and the roof of the temple.”

His statement elicited sounds of surprise from the rest of the group; the back of Sabo’s neck tingled under Koala’s envious stare. Ace only blinked, caught in a pensive silence before turning back to the bird, making eye contact again with too much meaning in both their gazes and the silence between them stretched far too long to be simple.

Again, Sabo wondered whether this was how they were communicating. Was the bird able to read Ace’s thoughts? His eyes widened a bit. If he was able to read Ace’s thoughts, could he also read Sabo’s?

*Only if I choose to,* a foreign voice echoed through his head and Sabo jumped on the spot, crying out in shock, eyes darting from side to side before they focused on the phoenix.

“Amazing,” Sabo muttered.

“What is?” Koala wanted to know.

“I can hear its voice… in my head. It said that it’s able to read my thoughts…” Sabo touched his temple, waiting to hear more, but there was nothing but silence beside his own racing mind.

“His name is Marco,” Ace remarked, running his fingers through the bird’s plumage once more.

*It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, explorers of Jaya and the Goa Kingdom,* the voice resonated again and this time it wasn’t just Sabo who looked around a bit irritated.

“This is incredible,” Conis murmured under her breath, her face—cheeks red with excitement—glowing in awe.

Robin cleared her throat. “Are you the Phoenix? The divine messenger between Earth and Heaven?” She had spoken hesitantly, quietly, maybe for fear the moment she voiced her thoughts aloud Marco would disappear and with him Ace. Naturally, everyone had already pinched an arm or leg to make sure they weren’t dreaming, but even after ascertaining that it was not, that they were all awake, a small part remained that was convinced this was a fantasy.

*I am.*

Sabo was sure he had never seen Robin’s striking blue eyes sparkle as in this very moment, and a gentle smile curled the corner of his lips unconsciously. This was so much more than they had ever dared to hope for.

Robin was about to ask another question, when Ace said Marco’s name again and this time his voice was hollow with anxiousness and agitation. Sabo could tell that Marco’s attention shifted immediately, now entirely on Ace again.

“Do you know a way? Because I would really like to go home.” At the end of his sentence, Ace’s voice dropped so low Sabo had to strain to hear him. The despair the words held, though, wiped the smile from his face. For a moment there, he had forgotten… This wasn’t how it was supposed to be. Ace didn’t belong here and neither did Marco.
Despite his bird appearance, Sabo was able to discern grief and misery on Marco’s face, the raw emotions all the answer Ace needed or maybe they were silently communicating, excluding everyone else again, the matter too private, too personal, a god’s affair, not meant for human ears.

For a while, only the birds flitting around, exploring their new territory, were heard. Neither Ace nor Marco spoke and the rest of them watched intently, agog to learn more, hoping to overhear something in the tense silence. But it was impossible, because unlike Marco they were unable to read another person’s mind, and so they had to wait until Ace paled, the fine lines of his beautiful face deepening in distress, shadows creeping over his skin, smothering its glow.

He staggered backwards, away from Marco, and even the usually cheerful, warm jingle of his jewelry had a dismal, bleak ring to it. Then his legs gave way.

Marco unfolded his wings to cushion the fall and Sabo rushed to him, arms reaching out to catch him when he was too far away.

“Are you alright?” he asked, kneeling down beside Ace, his tired legs forgotten. Ace just stared at the ground. Conis approached, too, anxiously glancing at Ace’s feet.

“Are you in pain, Ace?” she asked.

*He is, but not the kind of pain that can be cured with your potions and ointments,* Marco’s sombre voice echoed through their heads.

Sabo moved closer, a hand ready to comfort hovering over Ace’s shoulder. “What did Marco tell you? What did you talk about?” Maybe he was prying too much, maybe he wasn’t in any place to ask or know, but seeing Ace suffer like this left a cold, hollow ache in his chest.

“I need to see,” Ace hissed before he tilted his head in Sabo’s direction, anthracite eyes glinting madly. “I need to see the city.”

Sabo looked up, shielding his eyes against the glaring sunlight and easily spotted Marco’s slender, blue and yellow body perched atop the remains of one of the taller buildings. The landscape of destruction was nothing new to the phoenix, but it was to Ace who was currently walking by himself. So far he had been silent, observing the destruction left and right with an undeterred look on his face, his posture still as erect and proud as it had been when he had walked across the bridge leading to the wall that surrounded the temple premises.

When Ace had uttered the wish to see what was left of the city, no one had wanted to deny it, though Sabo had been able to tell by the look on Conis’ face that she hadn’t agreed easily. Ace wasn’t supposed to walk far with all the cuts on his feet. It would take hours to reach their point of entry—for this was how far Ace had demanded to go—and return to the camp again.

So with growling stomachs, they had hurried to pack food and water for the way and Braham had offered to stay behind and watch the camp while they were out, promising to prepare a most delicious meal for their return.

Ace had hardly listened to what they had discussed, his face sober, pensive, his eyes studying the wall. He still hadn’t told them what he had learned from Marco and what had provoked the sudden wish to see the ruins, and neither had they dared to ask. So they had worked around him, equipped him with slippers and told him to let them know if his feet were hurting too much or if anything else was the matter, though Sabo was sure Ace wouldn’t make a sound until he had seen the extent of the damage, the markings of his incapability to protect the city that had once been under his care.
Then they had departed, Marco spreading his wings and taking to the air again with a strangled, sorrowful cry.

The first time Ace had seen the remains of the city, he had paused and allowed for his eyes to observe; quiet, making no remark, his face composed. They had left him to it, taking the chance to look around as well.

When they had first walked on this path, they had been curious. The sight had been sad, yes, but not as burdening; they were explorers and perished cultures were what their occupation entailed, nothing was everlasting, all things would have to meet their end eventually despite humanity praising them to be eternal or to withstand millennia.

Now, however, with Ace among them, it was different. The slightly sinister feeling that had lingered in the air before was gone, but instead it was now heavily laced with apprehension that made the back of Sabo’s neck tingle.

For hours they walked, the sight becoming ever more gruesome the longer they were on their way—not because the state of the destroyed city became more ghastly the closer they got to the outskirts, but because its constant forlorn presence weighed heavy on their minds and hearts. They ate, but their food tasted like it had turned to dust in their mouths, and Ace refused to eat altogether, only taking a sip from a flask Conis was handing him every now and then to make sure he stayed hydrated in the steamy heat.

On their last break before reaching the border between city and jungle, its alluring, lush shades of green already visible in the distance, they sought shelter in the shadow of a larger pile of debris, passing around flasks and food and wiping the sweat from their brows, when Ace suddenly stepped out of the shade and quickly walked to the opposite remainders of a house, atop which Marco was resting.

He inspected the crumbled front and upon looking closely, Sabo remembered that they, too, had stopped here on their first time coming through. The walls inside had scripts on them, which Robin had translated for them, her words echoing through Sabo’s head. They sounded oddly familiar. He took another swig from his canteen, the lukewarm water rolling down his throat and sealed it with the cork stopper while he watched Ace peer through the damaged doorway before slipping inside.

Sabo put down the flask, swiftly rising to his feet, ignoring Koala’s calls and hurriedly crossing what probably had once been a road. Marco watched him carefully, but made no sounds of objection when Sabo entered the ruins of the small house. He found Ace standing before the wall that was best preserved, studying the scripts, but when he heard Sabo’s shuffling feet on the dusty ground, he turned, the look on his face sober.

“The family that lived here was very devoted. They only had little and their greatest pride was the small shrine that used to stand before this wall. There would always be flowers or incense here, sometimes even food and golden coins on special occasions, and every morning and every night every member of the family would stop by, thanking me for my protection and asking for my blessing.” A proud note warmed the tone of Ace’s voice as he reminisced. Sabo was moved, but didn’t know how to respond; however, he had a notion where this would lead. “But despite their deep devotion, I failed them.” He paused and turned, studying the script again with narrowed eyes, indecision flickering across his face, looking as if he was torn between letting Sabo in on his thoughts or keeping silent, and when he finally spoke again, his words were laced with bewilderment. “Somehow I cannot stop agonising over what their last thoughts were when they saw the flames—my flames—consuming their city, their bodies, their lives. Did they feel betrayed? Forsaken by their own god?” Even though Ace’s voice was even, thoughtful, Sabo was under the
impression that the words lay heavy on Ace’s heart.

“Ace,” he began, though he was still clueless for what to say. On the outside, Ace appeared composed and calm, but nurturing such gloomy thoughts surely had to leave a mark.

“The words behind me, do they look familiar?”

Sabo’s brow furrowed in confusion upon the unexpected change of topic. He let his eyes trail over the words carved into the wall again and suddenly remembered very clearly. The chamber, the altar, the glowing script, the prayer he had recited as he had held Ace’s hand. The fire that had coursed through him. It was the same words, the same symbols, the same prayer.

“From the chamber…” he said.

Ace nodded. “They must have repeated these words over and over again, but their god never came to help them. Maybe at some point their prayers even turned into curses.” Ace’s countenance hardened and he admitted, “I would not blame them.”

“But it wasn’t you destroying the city, Ace. You were asleep. There was nothing you could have done,” Sabo hurriedly threw in.

Ace appeared unimpressed. “But it was my fire, my power that I let a lowly traitor steal. And even if I had not been asleep, there was nothing I could have done, helpless and powerless as I was.” When their gazes met again, there was a pugnacious gleam in Ace’s eyes, almost as if he dared Sabo to argue with him, the small room’s stuffy air suddenly heavy with tension. Above them, Marco let out an ear-piercing cry. Sabo didn’t reply anything but he also refused to avert his gaze.

The silence dragged on until Ace turned his back on Sabo. “And here I am now, eight hundred years later, still without my powers, having to rely on humans for help when I am supposed to protect them,” he said, his words spiked with bitterness over his own incapability, hands clenching into fists. It looked like his outward composure was slowly crumbling. Sabo licked his lips in agitation, Ace’s last outburst and the change in atmosphere perfectly present on his memory. He wasn’t keen on experiencing it again.

“ Asking for help is nothing to be ashamed of, though, Ace.”

Both their heads jerked around to see Robin had entered the ruin unnoticed, Koala and Conis standing right behind her in the doorway, both looking uneasy.

Ace gave her a long, contemplative look like he was honestly considering Robin’s words, but he never responded. Instead, he walked past Sabo and headed for the doorway, Conis and Koala hastily making room for him. Sabo exhaled heavily, only now realising that he held his breath before he followed them outside with Robin.

Wiper gave him a questioning look while they shouldered their bags again, but never asked.

The rest of the way was spent in awkward silence, only occasionally disrupted by a casual remark, but Sabo caught himself glancing over his shoulder to check on Ace more often than not. He looked unfazed, gracefully striding along regardless of the cuts on his soles and the chaos reigning around them, and not for the first time Sabo wondered what he was thinking of all this, what kind of impact it had on him. Back at the chamber, when he had first told Ace about the fate that had befallen the city, he had been perplexed about the feelings those news had elicited. And it had been similar back at that house, when he had talked about that Shandian family. As if he had yet come to terms with what he was feeling.
When they finally reached the jungle, the unnatural looking border that had been so unnerving the day before held nothing of its former threat anymore. It was but a simple line. They all crossed it several times just to make sure, but it remained the same, the eerie aura gone.

Ace watched them for a while, wordless, before he walked towards the tallest ruin in the area, the broken remainders of the roof already Marco’s seat, his gleaming blue and yellow feathers just as odd a colour as Ace’s radiant white clothing.

Sabo wasn’t the only one who had noticed that Ace was walking away.

“Where are you going?” Kamakiri asked with polite interest, following Ace a couple of steps, undecided whether it was fine to just let him leave.

“Up there. I have to see,” was all Ace replied without looking back, continuing towards the crumbled building undeterred.

“I’m not sure it’s safe to climb up there,” Koala remarked, loud enough for a receding Ace to hear, but he continued on, this time without even the slightest hint of a reaction to their words of warning.

Sabo huffed in annoyance before following to at least prevent the worst from happening. By the time he had reached the ruin, Ace had already climbed up half-way despite his injured feet, but now he paused.

“Let me help you at least,” Sabo called up, already testing the first crack in the battered wall with his foot. It held and he pulled himself up, hurried footsteps sounding behind him.

“I am not sure a help of yours would be needed,” Koala remarked with a smile. “You hardly seem capable of it.”

“Please be careful, you two,” Conis shouted just as a rock trembled in Sabo’s hand before coming loose. Luckily, he had only been testing it, but it proved their point; these ruins were not stable.

Above him, Ace had resumed climbing. Briefly, Sabo wondered if Marco had anything to say to this, but if he did, he said it silently, once again solely communicating with Ace’s mind.

When Ace finally reached the edge of the roof, a couple of metres above the ground, Sabo sighed heavily, relief rolling through him. With arms and legs screaming in searing pain, he followed, always careful but swifter now that worry wasn’t tensing up his limbs. He pulled himself onto the roof and collapsed on his back, lungs expanding wide, his heart hammering wildly in his chest, his vision flickering with exhaustion. The burning had reclaimed his muscles and tendons and his whole body felt as heavy as if it consisted of a single piece of lead.

He moved his head and saw Ace sitting on the charred roof, his raven waves sticking to the side of his face and sweat trickling down his brow. For the first time since Sabo had met him, he looked truly human; the wan look of weariness had stolen his skin’s glow, the corner of his lips were cracked from sun and dust and his hair was dishevelled, lacking its shine. Underneath the colour changing sash, his chest rose and fell in quick succession and shallow scrapes covered his bare knees.

Sabo rolled onto his side and slowly got up, dusting off his clothes when he stood on shaking legs. Then he walked over under Ace’s wary gaze. They stared at each other for a moment until, after gathering all his courage, Sabo hissed, “This was stupid.” Ace’s eyes narrowed dangerously and Sabo exhaled loudly, relaxing. “But I don’t get to judge after what I pulled last night, I guess,” and he stretched out his arm, offering a helping hand. Ace eyed it skeptically but took it nonetheless and Sabo pulled him up on his feet.

“Sabo, are you two alright?” Conis’ voice rang out from the ground, resonating with an edge of panic.
He let go of Ace’s hand and walked to the edge of the roof. “We’re fine!” A collective sigh of relief ran through the group below. “I’m not sure how easy getting back down is going to be, though. Maybe we can—” But the rest of his words were swallowed by a sudden strong gust of wind that swept across the plain covered in crumbled buildings before whistling through the trees, their loud rustle resonating in his ears before fading away again.

Sabo looked at the sky, scanning the tree line and spotted clouds; not light and wispy ones but those that were dense and fast-moving, dark and threatening. Storm clouds had gathered on the horizon and the wind that carried them had also brought the heavy scent of rain along. The first few bolts of forked lightning flared to life, lighting up the clouds’ insides. When he looked down at the others again, they, too, were searching the sky with alert eyes.

“There’s a storm coming,” Sabo informed them, “we better get down now.” He turned to see whether Ace had heard him, but what he saw made his breath catch in his throat.

Ace had walked to the edge of the roof as well, just on the opposite side, from where he was able to see across a sea of broken remains, an ocean of charred chaos, the temple’s gilded rooftops faintly gleaming in the hazy distance. It was a shattering, depressing sight to behold with devastation reigning far and wide, its true extent hauntingly clear.

But what was even more frightening, was the sheer heat radiating off Ace’s body, the air surrounding him shimmering, obscuring and twisting the shapes of what was lying beyond.

“Ace,” Sabo whispered, taking a hesitant step towards him.

Another gust of wind, this one stronger than the one before, cut through the ruins, and Sabo had to bring his arms up to shield his eyes from all the dust whirling through the air. Behind him, the rustling of the foliage had taken on an alarming note, the tree trunks creaking under the wind’s force as they swayed left to right.

“Ace!” Sabo called against another roaring gust, “We should really get down.”

Slowly, Ace turned and for a moment Sabo forgot the approaching storm. Ace had discarded the composure he had donned while they had walked here from the temple and all his breathtaking beauty had vanished from his face, replaced instead by raging anger, the fine, perfect lines of his lips and jaw, his brows and nose, twisted by seething fury. And the sparkling grey of his captivating eyes had taken on a dark, menacing glow. He was truly terrifying, a vengeful demon rather than a benevolent god.

Behind him, the horizon had turned into a threatening wall of looming clouds growing higher and claiming the azure of the sky, tainting it with their darkness. The wind tugged and pulled ceaselessly at Sabo’s clothes now and faintly the cries of Koala and the others reached his ears over the roar.

Ace!

Marco’s voice was a lot clearer than that of the others as it echoed through Sabo’s head where the wind couldn’t drown it out. He still sat on the roof’s edge, seemingly unfazed by what was happening, though Sabo was sure to see something like concern reflecting in his eyes. And finally, Ace reacted, placing a hand above the spot where his heart was, his burning eyes holding Sabo’s gaze.

“So many died,” Ace said, voice barely above a whisper, ominous, “and this city that took so many centuries and hands to build was destroyed in the blink of an eye.” He took a step towards Sabo who was unable to retreat, paralysed by the fear of raging flames, instilled in him on that fateful night.
almost two decades ago. “My fire that was meant to protect has brought nothing but despair and,” Ace continued to approach, “every thought in my head demands for revenge.”

Sabo’s heart thundered in his chest, his breathing coming fast across his lips and sheer, icy panic raced up his spine again as the blazing heat of Ace’s rage started to singe his skin with its scorching fingers.

Then all birds in the vicinity took to the air at once, screeching and crying and forming another dark cloud, this one made of living, fleeing, bodies. Thunder rumbled in the distance, the jungle roaring, adding to the pandemonium with Sabo in its very core.

But before Ace could take another step, Marco flew up from his spot, landing between them and spreading his large wings. Instantly, all heat had vanished and Sabo staggered on his feet, taking deep breaths of cool air.

Stop, Ace. You are going to hurt them. That is not what you want.

“No, what I want is the traitor down by my feet, begging for his life before I am commanding my flames to devour him until there is nothing left of his existence. And I will make sure he feels the same pain that these people felt when he took their lives,” Ace hissed with words like venom.

Yes, but you have to calm down now. Please.

Ace’s gaze shifted from Marco to Sabo who was partly hidden behind one of Marco’s shielding wings. Again, it was impossible for Sabo to tell whether it was Marco’s plea or his own horrified stare that was effective, but Ace’s expression began to soften, the fury retreating from his face.

The birds still screeched, flying through the air with no formation, but the wind let up a bit, its force now more what Sabo knew from the thunderstorms he had experienced on their expedition so far and, finally, the air around Ace stopped to shimmer.

When Marco folded in his wings again, Sabo knew the worst was over, but he still looked at Ace warily.

“Are you scared of me now, Sabo?” Ace asked, taking a hesitant step forward, looking positively worried.

Sabo pressed his lips together. He was scared, and then he was not. Human Ace was something he could deal with, but this other side of him…

“I… This…grief you humans feel,” Ace mumbled, bringing his hand up to his heart again, then he blinked, suddenly looking deeply bewildered, swaying. “I am…tired,” he said confusedly, eyes darting to Marco in question. A moment later, they closed and his legs gave way.

With Ace’s name a shout on his lips, Sabo darted forward, catching Ace’s limp body just in time and carefully sunk to the ground with it safely cradled in his arms. His face looked peaceful once again, the curve of his lips no longer twisted, features relaxed. But he was cold, colder than Sabo even.

Worried, Sabo turned to Marco for guidance, an explanation, anything to help him understand what had just happened. Marco had his sleek head tilted at the horizon, observing the approaching storm clouds.

Please forgive his temper, Marco’s voice resonated in Sabo’s head, he is a young god born in peaceful times. He never had to experience loss and grief until… Marco paused, hesitating, sounding like whatever he had wanted to tell Sabo was infinitely painful. Until recently.
“When he learned about what happened to Shandora?” Sabo asked aloud, not used to communicating solely with his thoughts.

No, before that. It was why he came down to Earth eight hundred years ago.

“To go after…Teach, right?”

Yes. He was not supposed to, but before we knew what had happened, Ace had already left, driven by his need for revenge. When I heard of it, I followed him as fast as I could…but I was too late.

“Shandora was already destroyed…”

Not yet, but Teach had already stolen Ace’s powers. I tried to stop Teach and get inside the temple, but I failed. By the time I was reborn from my ashes, the city was already destroyed and no life left within its boundaries but me. After that, Marco fell silent and they both hung after their own thoughts a while.

“Sabo! Ace! Can you hear me?”

It was Wiper’s voice coming from below, ripping Sabo from his thoughts.

“Yes, I can hear you,” Sabo hurried to answer.

“Are you alright? What’s with Ace? What the hell was this?” Koala shouted before anyone else had the chance to.

“I’m fine and Ace is asleep again.”

“Asleep!? Why is he asleep?” she asked.

And Wiper added, “I’m coming up now, Sabo.”

Sabo was just about to shout down another answer when Marco’s feathers rustled beside him and he found him stretching his wings again, looking like he was about to take off.

“What are you doing?” Sabo asked a bit panicked. “Are you leaving?”

I am of no use to you here, so I will see what I can find out about returning a god to the Heavens.

“But we need you! Ace needs you! And what if something like this happens again? You both said that his powers were taken, but that’s not what it looks like. Who’s going to stop him next time when you’re not around?”

It will not happen again if you leave here as soon as possible.

“Leave?”

Yes. Some of Ace’s power still lingers here from when the city was destroyed and it looks like it reacts to Ace’s presence even though he is human now, Marco explained.

“But where do we go?”

Behind them, the scraping of Wiper’s boots against the wall could be heard and Marco flapped his wings, eager to leave.

Why not take him to where the spirit of Shandora is most likely to have lived on? I am sure he would
like to see it.

“Shandora’s spirit? You mean take him to Jaya? Are you sure this is a good idea?”

_It will be fine, Marco said with the hint of smile in his tone, and I know you are all going to take good care of him. Especially you, Sabo, since you were the one who was able to wake him up. And with that, Marco’s wings beat the air, lifting him off the ground._

Sabo would have jumped to his feet, but he was still holding a soundly sleeping Ace in his arms.

“Wait! How are you going to find us?”

_Do not worry about that, Sabo. Just know I will. And tell Ace, I will surely find a way for him to return._

Then the voice in Sabo’s head fell silent as Marco climbed higher towards the sky.

“Sabo,” Wiper wheezed a moment later as he let himself fall over the edge of the roof, “where did he go? And what happened?” After taking a few steadying breaths, Wiper came to his feet and walked over.

Sabo shook his head, trying to clear his mind and gather his wits to briefly explain some of what had happened, when another clap of thunder exploded in the distance. They both turned, scrutinising the what little of was left of the once blue sky before Sabo said, “I’ll tell you later. Let’s get down first and seek shelter somewhere.”
Chapter 8

“Sabo!”

With a groan rolling up his throat, Sabo emerged from deep within his subconsciousness, the dark, heavy curtain of sleep drawn aside, exposing his mind to reality and slowly heightening his senses.

“Sabo!”

The ground he was lying on was hard against the bone of his hips and shoulder blades and there was a dull ache in his limbs. His tongue was parched, thick and furry in his mouth, but there was also a pleasant smell filling his nose.

And that voice calling his name… It was faintly familiar. But it did not belong to anyone on the team.

He groaned again, rolling onto his side. His lids were still heavy and sleep refused to fully retreat, lingering on the edges of his mind, but there had been an urgent undertone to that voice calling his name that made him want to wake up. He opened his eyes a crack, his blurred vision slipping into focus. There was a wall not far from where he was huddled on the ground, the relief of its carvings sharpened by the shadows of an early morning sun making its way past the horizon and the pleasant rich scent of Braham’s cooking mixed with the fresh one of yesterday’s rain, its moisture still lingering.

“Sabo?”

A fleeting image of intense grey eyes set in the most beautiful face he had ever seen crossed his mind, and in an instant he jolted awake, the memory of who this voice calling his name belonged to sharp and clear again.

He turned, easily finding his tent among the rest and scrambled to his feet. Braham was already up, cleaning and cooking what he had chosen from their supplies for today’s breakfast and as he made his way past the fireplace, Koala’s head with her russet hair ruffled peeked out of her tent’s entrance, blinking at him drowsily. The rest was either still asleep or had left camp without Sabo noticing.

He had slept surprisingly soundly after everything that had happened the day before, his exhausted body forcing his restless mind into submission, allowing for much needed sleep to take over. Judging by the time of day, however, he hadn’t slept much. After Ace had fallen asleep again, they first had been forced to wait out in one of the ruined buildings until the thunderstorm had passed and when the rain had finally stopped, it had taken several hours for them to return to the temple.

Together, they had put Ace in Sabo’s tent and after eating the food Braham had prepared, they had all retreated to their respective tents except for Sabo, who had made himself a bed of blankets on the ground close to the fire.

While they had waited for the storm to pass, he had informed the rest about what Marco had told him, which had lead to a long discussion about how to proceed. They were all aware that Ace was their responsibility now, even Laki didn’t object, but leaving Shandora’s ruins so soon after their arrival seemed outright cruel. However, in the end they all agreed that Ace was their priority and if taking him away from the ruins was what was necessary to prevent what was left of his powers from coming to life and posing a threat to them, then that was what they had to do.

“Sabo?” Ace called for him again.
“I’m here, I’m here,” Sabo hurried to reply while he unfastened the sheet that covered the tent’s entrance before pulling it back, revealing a wide-eyed Ace, relief flashing across his freckled face when he saw Sabo.

“Where am I?” Ace asked.

“You’re in my tent. We put you in here last night while you were sleeping,” Sabo explained.

“I see.” Ace glanced to the side. “For a moment, I thought you had left me, because of what… happened.”

Remorse started to bloom in Sabo’s stomach and he quickly changed to topic. “Why didn’t you call for Marco?”

Ace tilted his head to the side a bit, looking at Sabo again. “Because Marco is no longer here.”

“How do you know?”

“I dreamed it. He flew away. But he said you would look out for me and that he would return.”

A small, surprised smile tugged at the corner of Sabo’s lips and he looked at Ace with renewed wonder in his eyes. “He also told me to tell you that he’s going to find a way for you to return home.”

Ace’s face faltered momentarily, but when he spoke his voice resonated with trust nonetheless. “He will.”

“Ace, are you hungry?” Braham asked, his cap pulled deep into his eyes as always despite the heat. Sabo moved aside to let Ace see outside, and when the smell of breakfast wafted over, Ace’s stomach grumbled demandingly.

“I think I am,” he concluded and crawled out of the tent to follow Sabo to the fireplace.

They sat down and while Ace inquired about what Braham had made, the rest of the group woke and emerged from their tents.

“How do you feel today, Ace? Are you still tired?” Conis asked, carefully taking Ace’s wrist and managing to find his pulse below all the softly clinking bangles.

“No, I think I am fine, just hungry.” He offered her a friendly smile.

“That’s good. I changed the bandages on your feet last night, because you moved around so much and I would like to check them again after breakfast, if that’s okay?”

“Of course.”

Once everyone had gathered around the fire, Braham started to hand out breakfast in small bowls. They took them and thanked him for preparing the meal before digging in, and in the silence that prevailed among them, Ace’s hum resonated loudly.

“This is delicious,” he declared, staring at the porridge in his bowl with astonishment in his eyes and licking his lips.

Koala laughed from across the fire. “It’s just porridge, Ace,” she said, and after a sideways glance at Braham, she added, “Though I have to admit, Braham has a way of preparing it that makes it taste special and not as bland as it is at home,” and she amiably poked his upper arm with her elbow.
“What do you eat in the Heavens?” Robin wanted to know.

Suddenly, everyone’s attention was on Ace, curious for his answer, the food in their bowls momentarily forgotten.

“Oh. Well…” He looked back down at the greyish mass of oats in his bowl. “We do not eat.”

They stared at him in shock.

“What do you mean?” Laki probed.

“We do not eat. There is no need to. And there is no food.”

No one said a word and then they all started talking at once, their different voices mixing with the fire’s crackling and the clanking and scraping of spoons in their bowls.

They were all cheerful and talkative, but yesterday’s happenings always lingered on the edge of Sabo’s mind. At some point, they would have to tell Ace what Marco had advised and that they would be leaving this place as soon as possible. How would he react? Would his unpredictable temper flare to life again?

In the end, it was Robin who broached the subject after everyone had finished breakfast by asking what Ace’s plans were from here on out.

Ace looked around carefully before staring into the fire.

“There is something I would like to do,” he began, glancing up briefly. Sabo tensed immediately, the memory of what had happened the last time Ace had wanted to do something still fresh on his mind.

“What is it?” Robin encouraged him, and Sabo wondered if she really was as calm and unfazed by this or if she was just very good at hiding her uneasiness. It unnerved him that he wasn’t able to tell and even more that he thought it possible that she truly wasn’t bothered.

“I want to build a pyre.”

Sabo’s eyes narrowed.


“Because that is what you do when people die.”

“It is?” Koala wondered, looking from Ace to Robin.

“Is that what you do in the Heavens?” Conis asked.

“In the Heavens?” Ace looked surprised that she would even think of something like this. “No. It is what you do here.”

“Here?” Wiper looked positively confused.

“Is it possible that you’re referring to the funeral ritual of old Shandora, Ace?” Kamakiri finally had mercy on them, exchanging a glance with Robin, who was smiling to herself. Ace thought about it before he nodded slowly. “I see. Well, nowadays we don’t burn the mortal remains of our dead on a pyre anymore. But as far as I know the Shandians did this, because they believed that in order for a soul to go to the afterlife, it had to be freed from its non-eternal shell. At the same time, the fire cleansed and prepared it for what was to come. Did I forget anything, Robin?”
“No, this is also what I have heard and read.”

“But why would you want to do this?” Laki probed further, her voice quieter when she noted, “There’s nothing left to burn.”

“Laki!” Conis reprimanded her in a hushed tone, worriedly glancing at Ace, who was staring into the dancing flames again.

It took a while, during which no one dared to speak, until Ace replied calm and composed much to everyone’s relief. “I am aware. But I still feel like I need to do this, like I owe it to the people of Shandora…after all the misery I caused them.”

“You want to atone for what happened,” Robin mused aloud.

Again, Ace nodded. “I feel like this ache inside my chest may not leave otherwise.” He looked around, Sabo’s face the one where his eyes lingered the longest, as if he was silently asking if Sabo understood him.

“Well, if that’s the case, then I guess we can’t tell you not to,” Kamakiri said, leaning back on his hands, smiling reassuringly and Ace seemed to relax a little.

“But I thought we decided on leaving this place as quickly as possible?” Laki interjected.

At once, all eyes were on her, including Ace’s.

“Leave this place?” Ace asked, his brow furrowing, but his voice sounded neutral. “Why would you want to leave? I thought you only just got here.”

They all looked at each other uneasily and no one dared to explain, until Robin took it upon herself to let Ace in on what Marco had said, carefully choosing her words. While she talked, Sabo watched Ace from the side, alert and ready to react at the slightest of changes. When Robin was done, they held their breaths in anticipation and Sabo caught sight of Laki’s fingers slowly moving towards the knife on her hip in case she had to defend herself, though Sabo wondered how much it was actually able to accomplish should Ace choose to use what little of his power apparently still resided in this place.

But Ace’s expression remained unchanged and Sabo started to relax again, glad that the air’s temperature hadn’t started to shift and that the birds were still happily chirping down from the temple’s gilded roof.

“I have been wondering why it felt so familiar.” This time, Ace stared long and hard at the fire, almost as if he was hoping it would bend to his will, but nothing happened and after a while he gave up. “I feel like I need to…apologise for losing my temper yesterday. Especially after I swore I meant no harm to you all.”

“Just make sure it doesn’t happen again,” Sabo sighed beside him and everyone nodded in agreement.

“I will,” Ace swore solemnly. “But does that mean you do not plan to leave this place?” His tone rose a note or two with hope.

Wiper made sure to briefly make eye contact with everyone before giving his answer, his gaze dwelling on Laki a bit longer than on the rest. “I guess it does. You’d like to build that pyre and we respect that, but we also take you by your word that what happened yesterday won’t happen again.”
“Thank you,” Ace said, and he sounded so honest that no one could help the smiles from spreading across their faces.

And while Sabo collected everyone’s dishes to scrub them clean together with Koala, he remembered Marco’s words and the trust they had held.

I know you are all going to take good care of him. But before the rest of what Marco had said could echo through Sabo’s head, he quickly started talking to Koala to distract his thoughts.

Ace started working on the pyre that very day, and the rest of them had soon to find out that, while he accepted their instruction with regards to how to actually build it, he wasn’t willing to receive any physical help, no matter how much they insisted.

During the afternoon, he took Kamakiri and Koala to the sacred forest behind the temple to discuss what wood he should use and what the best way for cutting it down was. Wiper he asked for tools and how to use them, and Conis he visited every evening before dinner, so she could tend to the cuts and bruises that soon started to blossom all over his body.

They had offered him more sturdy looking clothes to wear while he worked for fear he would stain or tear his own, but surprisingly they looked as flawless and pristine as they had when Sabo had first seen him, proving to be much more durable than their own. The only thing he made an exception for was his jewellery, which he stored in a large cotton cloth that he hid in Sabo’s tent, which he still occupied while Sabo had built one for himself out of the sheets they had left.

And even though they were all worried that Ace might harm himself while working on the pyre, they didn’t complain since this was the perfect opportunity to finally start exploring the ruins as well as the temple.

So on the first day after Ace had begun with his work, they all set out in different directions, except for Conis who had offered to stay and watch the camp and who was best equipped to help Ace in case of a medical emergency. Braham, Kamakiri and Robin went back to properly explore the remains of the city while Sabo, Koala, Wiper and Laki were trying to find another way to get into the chamber where Sabo had found Ace.

At the end of the day, however, it wasn’t their failure that irked Sabo the most as much as his lack of focus and the subtle but constant hint of worry over leaving Ace behind that had gnawed at his sanity throughout the day. And when Ace was proudly showing him the bloody blisters that had formed on his palms from cutting away at trees all day, Sabo only frowned, wondering what Marco would have to say after he had found out about the great care Ace received.

So on the second day, Sabo volunteered to stay behind and watch the camp, much to Koala’s surprise. He used the necessity to catch up with his journal as a pretext, which was partly true, but the moment Braham returned from checking their surroundings for something he could serve them for dinner, he left the camp to head for the forest where he knew Ace would be.

Ace smiled when he saw him approach and eagerly took the canteen with water from Sabo’s hand.

“Do you need help today?” Sabo asked, even though he was sure to know the answer.

“No,” his guess was confirmed a moment later; his offer turned down.

“You know it’s alright to ask for help…” he sighed, glancing at the logged trees scattered all about.

“I know, but this is something I have to do myself. It is my way of showing devotion to the people
that looked up to me,” Ace explained with a lot of confidence in his voice.

Sabo raised a brow. “This sounds a lot like something Robin would say…” he mused.

“She did. You know her well.” Ace smiled. “Is there someone you are devoted to, Sabo?”

Sabo stared at Ace for a moment, taken aback by the overt curiosity on his freckled face before he quickly turned away, feigning interest in their surroundings. “Robin and Koala, perhaps, since they’re my family” he said. And… to you in a way… I guess, he added quietly in his head. “Well, I’m going to sit over there,” he pointed to a withering tree trunk lying on the ground, “and work a bit, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure. I do not mind the company.”

Ace’s smile widened some more before he turned around, picking up his axe from the ground. But when Sabo saw his bruised palm closing around it, a thought struck him.

“Ace,” he called, holding out his gloves, “If you don’t want any help, at least take these and Conis will have a little less to worry about every evening.”

Ace stared at the gloves for a while before taking them, fingertips lightly brushing over the back of Sabo’s hand, his unnaturally high body heat leaving a warm trail that Sabo was overly aware of, the recollection of their joined hands in the chamber indelibly imprinted on his memory. And while Ace thanked him and turned around again after putting on the gloves, Sabo still hung after his own thoughts.

For the rest of the time that Ace was working on the pyre, Sabo never ventured far from the camp, and every afternoon he took his journal to where Ace was working in the forest behind the temple, sitting on the withering tree to write down what he had learned from the others over dinner the night before while watching Ace pile the logs up higher and higher every day.

Sometimes Koala would ask him to spar with her on the grass plane behind the temple in the hour before the rain would start and if Wiper was around he would usually join them. Soon, Ace was more intrigued by what they were doing than his actual task until he finally came over, asking if Koala could teach him a bit of Fishman Karate. Sabo tried to make her refuse with a stern look but of course she only smiled at him before she agreed.

And then, on the evening six days after he had started, Ace declared that he was done, looking thoroughly exhausted but happy nonetheless, and they all followed him behind the temple to see.

The pyre was a cube made of thicker logs for stability and woven branches to feed the flames.

“When are you going to light it up?” Laki asked.

“Tomorrow night. Robin told me that the Shandian custom is to build it for six days and then light it up on the seventh after the sun has set.”

“Is there anything we can contribute?” Koala wondered, looking from Robin to Ace.

“Usually, the deceased would be given personal belongings that were thought to be useful in the afterlife, but gold or flowers or incense were just as common.”

“What do you think, Ace?” Conis inquired.

“Hibiscus flowers,” Ace replied promptly.
“Hibiscus?” Koala brought a finger to her lips, thinking. “Are they special?”

“Yes. They are my mother’s creation.”

“The sun goddess?” Robin probed and Ace nodded. “Well, she is the highest goddess in the Shandian pantheon and was the most worshipped beside you.”

A fond smile curled Ace’s lips. “Yes, the people loved her for her gentle nature.”

“And where do we find these hibiscus flowers?” Koala wanted to know.

“I will show you,” Ace said before leading them all deeper into the forest.

They all watched as the last pink flower slid out of Ace’s hand, joining its siblings on the huge pile amassed on the pyre, then Ace carefully took off one of his golden bangles and threw it into the flowers before stepping back.

Sabo’s gaze travelled around the semi-circle in which they were standing around the pyre, looking only at solemn faces. Everyone had made an effort to look their best, wearing their cleanest clothes with the least tears, weapons tied to their backs or fastened at their hips as far as they owned one, and even though the chirping of the birds usually quieted down a little come nightfall, it seemed like even they were sensitive to the intense atmosphere, allowing for a hushed silence to fall over the grass plane behind the temple.

With steady steps, Wiper walked up to Ace and handed him the torch he was holding. For a moment, Sabo expected the flame to react like it had a little over a week ago, when he had snuck inside the temple and come upon a sleeping Ace, but it remained of the same size and intensity. Torch in hand, Ace stepped up to the pyre again, his back turned on all of them. He took a moment, paused, breathed, maybe even whispered a few words to console the dead before he held the flame to the pyre.

Surprisingly, it hadn’t rained that day and the wood, dried out from a whole day’s worth of hot equatorial sun beating down on it, quickly caught fire, crackling and spitting sparks everywhere. Ace took the torch to walk around the pyre once, lighting different spots before throwing in the torch and joining their semi-circle.

Ash twirled through the air once the first hibiscus flowers had burned, filling the warm jungle air with their rich and exotic scent along with the distinct smell of burning wood and smoke.

Koala was the first to break the silence, leaning towards Ace. “Where do they go, Ace?” she asked.

“Who?”

“The souls.”

From beside her, Sabo watched how Ace studied her face, contemplating her question before directing his eyes up at the nightly sky, beholding the countless stars dotting the vast darkness.

“Not even the gods know that.”

When the hungry flames had consumed most of the pyre, Laki and Braham slowly and quietly walked away, soon followed by Robin, Koala and Wiper and when there was only a small fire left burning, Sabo and Ace were the only ones still standing on the plain. Throughout the whole rite, Ace
had barely averted his eyes from the flames and the longer it had lasted, the more wistful his face had looked, the happiness over completing his task, the sense of accomplishment that had lit up his features slowly draining away. Was he thinking about what would happen next? Or agonising over what had happened in the past?

Sabo cleared his throat. “Would you like to be alone?”

Ace spoke without looking away from the fire. “Would you like to leave?”

Sabo gave his question some thought before answering truthfully, “No.”

“Then stay. Please.”

And he did, sitting down cross-legged on the grass when Ace sat down, too. For a while, they stared into the fire without speaking, the only sound the murmur of the flickering flames.

Then Ace spoke, his voice calm but he was unable to conceal the edge of sadness to his words. “Would you like to know?”

“Know what?”

“The reason why I came down to Earth.”

Sabo turned, watching the fire’s orange glow flickering over the skin of Ace’s freckled cheeks, bathing it in warm, mellow light.

“I thought you came down here, because you were going after Teach?”

Finally, Ace turned to look at him, his anthracite eyes closely studying Sabo’s face. “Yes, but do you know why I went after him?”

Sabo shook his head and added, “But if you don’t want to tell me, that’s fine. You don’t have to feel like you have to.”

“I would like to tell you, though. Maybe sharing it takes some of the weight off my heart.”

“If that’s the case then I’m listening, of course.”

Ace smiled faintly before resuming to stare at the fire, collecting his thoughts. “Teach committed the worst crime in all the Heavens.” Ace’s voice had taken on that hard and bitter undertone again.

Sabo swallowed before asking, “What did he do?”

Ace’s lips briefly stretched into a thin line, the effort it took for him to talk about it plain on his face before he spoke with a voice so quiet Sabo had to strain his ears to understand and yet each syllable dripped with loathing, “He killed another god.”

Sabo bowed his head, staring at the ground while thinking about what to say next, carefully weighing his words. “Were you friends with the god he killed?”

“He was family, like a brother. But the worst part is that Teach killed him, because he wanted to obtain his power and status. You have to know that only a god can kill another god. That is why it is considered the worst crime in all the Heavens and the Underworld. When I heard, I went after him immediately, but he had already fled to Earth, trying to find the entrance to the Underworld where he would be safe, aware that I was not allowed to follow him.”
“Why weren’t you allowed to follow him?” Sabo asked.

“Because it disturbs the balance of all things. We gods are too powerful to walk the realms of men. But I was too angry to care. I wanted to punish him for what he had done. And blind with rage as I was, I lost my focus.” Ace sounded remorseful before he snorted lightly. “If you had been there, you would have told me I was stupid for acting so rashly, just like you did back on the roof.” A fond smile coloured Ace’s tone and when Sabo looked up his breath caught in his throat.

While he had been staring at the ground, mulling over what Ace was telling him, wondering if there was a way for him to console a god, a swarm of fireflies had started to gather around them, filling the air with their small floating lights, some clinging to Ace’s hair while others had settled on Sabo’s arms and legs.

Ace looked at them, his eyes following the slow dance they were performing in mid-air.

“Maybe this is the people of Shandora telling me that they have forgiven me… Wouldn’t that be nice?” Ace mused, looking back at Sabo.

But Sabo had no words to answer with, his mind completely overwhelmed by what he saw—not the breathtaking, divine beauty of Ace’s face but rather the fragile innocence of a newborn human heart, and when he had finally found part of his wit again, he muttered, “It sure would be.”

And just like that moment in the chamber, when Ace had held his hand, Sabo knew that the grateful smile he was given in return would forever be part of his memory.
Chapter 9

The noises of a bustling, thriving market enveloped them the moment their barks turned at a bend of the river and the capital's main square—consisting of floating boats and buildings on stilts, some painted in vibrant colours, some leaning precariously to the side and some with freshly washed laundry left out to dry—came into view. Ace shifted about on his seat, craning his neck and pushing his hood back to better see where all the noise was coming from, the jingle of his jewellery absorbed by the incessant cries of the seagulls sailing above them and the traders vaunting their goods to potential buyers.

They had left behind the steamboat, which had carried them from the jungle’s remoteness back to civilisation, this morning, after a long and strenuous march back on the way they had come. Ace had done his best, had never complained, but after the first couple of days, the strain had shown. So they had tried to distract him, pointing out things along the way, asking questions, and after the second week had passed, his steps on the soft, treacherous ground had started to become more confident and less of a stumble. Wide-eyed he had marvelled at their tree-tents and the closer they had gotten to the capital, the more excited he had been.

Their small fleet of barks slowed down to better navigate the tangle of boats, but Wiper, the captain of the bark Sabo, Ace and Conis were on, steered through it with a sure, steady hand on the pole he used for manoeuvring.

“This is the Floating Market of the capital,” Conis began and Ace turned to her, eager to listen, his grey eyes sparkling with wonder and excitement, “It’s the largest in Jaya and people come here from all over the country as well as the neighbouring to purchase or sell goods. There’s almost nothing you can’t find here and if it should really happen that you can’t find what you’re looking for, you’ll find someone who’s willing to get it for you.”

When she had finished, Ace turned back, closely observing the making of the houses lining their way, the boats drifting by with their decks piled high with the goods the owner was selling. But most of all, he focused on the people, nearly all of them engrossed in negotiations, but some were also chatting or cleaning or cutting or cooking.

Sabo looked at him, followed his gaze, watched him as he closed his eyes to let sound and scent complete his vision, inhaling deeply, concentrating, savouring the taste of bustling life that wafted his nose, a random collection of sound filling his ears. Ace’s shoulders relaxed, a shadow retreating from the fine lines of his face and in the bright light of a hot morning sun he suddenly looked peaceful, placid, at ease. Relieved.

Then he opened his eyes again, the corner of his lips tilting up ever so slightly, into a gentle, soft smile and Sabo felt his own lips mimic him, the warmth, the comfort, contagious.
“It’s still here,” Ace whispered, more to himself than to any of his companions with whom he was sharing the boat. But he had to have felt Sabo’s gaze on him for he turned, not in the least surprised that he was being watched, most likely having gotten used to it during the course of the weeks he had spent with them now, accepting his special status, the miracle he presented.

“What is?” Sabo’s voice was just as low and hushed for fear he would disturb this tender moment of tranquility.
A spark lit up in Ace’s eyes, a burning Sabo had last seen glowing so fiercely and brightly when he had first seen him in the chamber after he had woken up, when Ace had not yet heard of the fate that had befallen Shandora and its residents.

Ace’s smile widened, flashing perfect white teeth and delight. “Shandora’s spirit.” And suddenly, Sabo knew what that glow in those grey eyes represented. Ace had found his purpose again, his reason for existing, of which he had lost a part when he had seen what Shandora had been turned into after Teach had taken away his powers. A pile of rubble and cinders, ash and dust, bare of any life. “Its walls may no longer stand and its former glory has perished along with its people. But its spirit, the reason for its greatness and its prosperity, is still alive.”

Ace looked around, at the weather-beaten, sun-kissed faces of the people on their boats, their smiles bright like Ace’s, telling silent stories of contentment, a sense of purpose immanent, and Sabo could see it, too, the spirit Ace had talked about. How dull were the false smiles and expressions the people of Goa Kingdom wore like masks outside their homes in comparison?

It truly is, he thought, holding onto the warm calm that had settled in his chest, caused by the moment and Ace’s contentment, letting his eyes roam, too, to take in the wonder as they drifted along.

They were greeted now and then or asked if they were interested in buying from the pile of goods, some people waving and every now and then he heard someone say, “They’ve returned,” as they passed. Of course people had heard about their expedition, though most had probably assumed they would never come back, just like so many others had before them. Yet here they were, and word would start to spread like wildfire now that they had been seen.

On impulse, Sabo leaned forward and tugged the hood of Ace’s cape back into place protectively. Ace looked at him, startled for a second before he thanked him with a nod and a brief twitch of his lips and then resumed watching the people.

Sabo had been glad that Ace had accepted wearing the cape so willingly after he had flat out refused to change into different clothes for reasons Sabo had yet to understand. And now he hoped the additional member to their team wouldn’t catch a lot of people’s attention or be seen as a sensation. Should there be questions, Wiper had suggested to introduce Ace as a family member of his, a distant cousin they had picked up on the way back, and with a little luck people would buy it.

This, however, also meant that he—and Koala and Robin, too, of course—would have to part with Ace since they would be going back to the hotel they had resided in when they had first arrived and Ace would go to live with Wiper. To think about their imminent parting left a lingering sense of apprehensiveness in the pit of Sabo’s stomach, but fortunately a boat with a large pile of various fruits pulled up, the owner smiling down from the deck, demanding his attention.

The woman greeted them cheerfully and revealed that she knew they were the explorers who had set out to discover the lost city, offering them to pick a fruit from her boat in celebration of their safe return. For a moment, Sabo worried, because her gaze had lingered far too long on Ace’s face, before he realised that this wasn’t Goa Kingdom and the people here made such offerings out of the goodness of their heart and not because they were pursuing a hidden agenda. And who was he to judge anyone for staring at Ace’s face longer than necessary, it was a captivating sight to behold after all.

He took a deep breath and watched as Ace eagerly accepted the woman’s offer, excitedly conferring with Conis which fruit to take under the fond smiles of Wiper and the saleswoman. Some of the fruits they had eaten while tracking through the jungle, others were new to Ace and some even to Sabo. He listened in on Conis’ explanation, exchanging a sideways glance with Wiper to make sure it really was alright to be stopping here, a bit startled by his constant fretting that was rather
uncharacteristic for him, but was soon distracted by Ace complimenting with words and sounds the saleswoman’s fruity goods, which had come down from the boat peeled and sliced, ready to eat.

She was so delighted by Ace that, after she and her three daughters were done with handing out the fruits to the rest of their team, she gave him a pineapple to take with. Ace’s eyes went wide as he turned the fruit in his hand, carefully running his fingers through the spiked leaves sprouting from it, feeling the texture of its skin before looking up and announcing with elated laughter it reminded him of Marco when he wasn’t in his phoenix form. Even though none of them knew Marco well or had seen him in his other form, Sabo doubted he would take it as a compliment.

But Ace didn’t seem to be bothered by this at all and angled his face upward to looked at the woman again. “May the gods bless you and your family,” he said with kindness in his eyes.

For a moment, the saleswoman stopped what she was doing and looked at him, more closely than before and within the blink of an eye the atmosphere in their bark shifted, their muscles pulling taut, straining with tension. Then the woman replied, “Thank you,” and, after smiling at her one last time, Ace turned his back on her.

Wiper hurriedly steered their boat away, but when Sabo looked over his shoulder to check whether they were being watched, all the women on the boat had resumed their initial tasks, not paying them any mind anymore. He sighed deeply, the tension draining from his limbs, leaving a void of exhaustion behind. Beside him, Conis cleared her throat.

“Ace,” she began, keeping her voice low despite no one being within earshot, another sign of how overly cautious they were, how scared of anyone finding out just who sat with them on this boat floating down the river.

“Hm?” But he didn’t look at her, too fascinated by what he was seeing.

“Well, would you mind terribly not…not doing that again?” she asked, choosing her words carefully with the constant awareness of who she was talking to on her mind.

Some of their team were unable to overlook the fact that Ace, at least for the moment, was human and not god, and Sabo found it odd that Conis was one of them. When she had treated Ace’s feet back in the ruins of Shandora, she hadn’t distinguished, but when it had become clear he, indeed, was who Sabo had claimed him to be, her behaviour had changed and even after weeks of travelling with him, her deference remained unchanged. For her, he was a god no matter his lack of power or inability to return to the Heavens.

Wiper had explained to him that Conis hadn’t just received an excellent education in medicine, but also in the Jayan faith, which partly overlapped with that of old Shandora. Sabo had asked Wiper whether he thought this would become a problem at some point, but Wiper had dispelled his worries and assured him that, if anything, it would only make her more devoted to the cause of finding a way for Ace to return. And so it had been.

Conis, and Kamakiri, who seemed to share her notion, had worked tirelessly on finding clues. And while Ace didn’t seem to mind the special way he was treated by those two, he didn’t exactly behave differently than he did with anyone else. But then, what did Sabo know about a god’s behaviour? The only one he had ever met was Ace and Ace was, at times, so unlike anything Sabo would have thought a god was like.

Her request was able to draw Ace’s attention away from the spectacle before him and he looked at her curiously.
“What do you mean?”

“Telling people that you hope they’ll be blessed by the gods,” Sabo said.

Ace’s eyes moved to Sabo, assessing the tense look on his face before flickering over to Wiper to make sure all three of them held the same opinion on the matter to find out they did. Then he spoke to Conis again, “If it bothers you, I will stop, of course,” but he let the question of why linger in the air between them. When no one answered it, though, he thought on it for a moment, coming up with a conclusion he voiced aloud. “It is a nice thing to say, is it not? I only want to wish the people, who have been kind to me, well. Do you think they will notice who I really am because of that?”

Conis averted her gaze, staring at her shoes and Sabo bit his lower lip, because it was hard to explain what exactly it was that bothered them about what Ace had said, when Wiper spoke up, his voice holding a warm patience Sabo had noticed was solely reserved for explaining things to Ace.

Conis and Kamakiri weren’t the only ones who Ace received special treatment from, but then again Sabo wasn’t in a position to judge since only a couple of days ago Koala had casually remarked, when the two of them had been away from the group, how she had observed Sabo was more concerned about Ace than anyone else.

When Ace had asked Koala to teach him Fishman Karate, he had been against it. When he had left Ace behind to explore the temple that one time, he had been unusually edgy and it had resulted in Sabo preferring to stay behind as well, constantly frowning upon ever new bruise and blister Ace had gained while building the pyre. And finally, on their way back, he had made sure to always look out for him.

Being confronted with Koala’s observation and knowing there was no use of denying it since, just like Robin, she had the ability to read him like an open book, he admitted that since he had been the one who had woken Ace, he felt a strange sense of responsibility for him. Koala had lightly nudged his upper arm with her shoulder and assured him that they were all feeling responsible, but that she got that it was different in a way for Sabo. Much to his relief she hadn’t brought it up thereafter or teased him for it with the others around.

“We know you do, Ace, and you’re right, it’s polite and a nice thing to do, but at the moment all of us are a bit tense, because none of us has any experience with how to best handle such a situation. We have no idea in what way it’ll influence people, this nation, the whole world, if it becomes public knowledge who you are. And whereas no one is probably going to deduce that you’re—” Wiper swallowed thickly, quickly glanced from side to side to make sure no one was listening and lowered his voice considerably when speaking again, “—a god just by you saying that you hope for the gods’ blessings for those people, it’s an odd thing to say these days. People here are still religious, but in a different way than eight hundred years ago.”

Ace listened intently. “I see,” he finally said, glancing first at Sabo and then at Conis. “I am sorry to have made you worry, Conis. I will not say it again, I promise.”

Conis smiled a bit helpless. “It’s fine. I’m sorry that we have to be so careful and keep you from doing the things you’d like to do, but it’s only because we have your best interest at heart.”

“I know and I am very grateful for that.”

But the mood never returned to being as light and cheerful as it had been before the encounter with the saleswoman, and Sabo realised it was because they had all grasped now what it meant that they had brought a fire god to the capital of Jaya.
Back in the jungle with just them around, Ace had been free to do as he pleased, no one had meant any harm or was out to sell his secret to the highest bidder, but regardless how nice the Jayan people were, people were still people and there were also a lot of foreigners around, mostly traders and explorers, who wouldn’t think twice about seizing the chance of making money or becoming famous overnight, even though Sabo doubted half of them would be able to make the connection between their new team member and the legend of the sleeping fire god of Shandora.

But there was always a risk… And Sabo alone could name at least a few people who would easily make the connection, their wits too quick, their minds too sharp, both honed by years of intense travel experience and excessive reading and studying. Suddenly, he was glad that Robin and Koala were part of this team and didn’t belong to the people they were hiding Ace from.

“There’s the jetty,” Wiper announced, pulling Sabo from his brooding thoughts and a couple of moments later a few helping hands pulled them close to the wooden planks protruding into the river and swiftly tied their barks to the construction before they helped Conis out and then Sabo, who in turn offered a helping hand to Ace.

When Ace held on, Sabo was reminded again just how warm Ace’s skin was despite the leathery barrier of his glove between them and he also realised that they had barely touched since they had made it to the camp. The still very vivid memory of them holding hands, while Sabo recited the prayer over and over again, hit him unexpectedly and his heart started pounding hard inside his chest, his breath stuck in his throat.

Then Ace stood beside him and let go, and Sabo struggled to regain his focus, blinking at their swaying boat down in the water for a bit before he was able to help unload the barks with their equipment and belongings. In the meantime, Wiper had set off for a busier road closer to a part of town that hadn’t been built on the water in the hope to find horse carts, and he returned with three not long after they had finished unloading the barks.

The drivers jumped down and helped to put their belongings on the cart, and much faster than Sabo would have liked it was all stored and tied, ready to go. He glanced at Ace, who let his hand brush through one of the horses’ manes. They would have to part now. Not for long, but it was still strange to know he would be sleeping in a proper bed tonight in the safety and comfort of his hotel room with actual walls separating him from Robin and Koala and a wickerwork of streets lying between him and his fellow colleagues from Jaya as well as Ace. How long would it take before he grew tired of all the comforts? How long until his heart would start yearning for freedom and the unknown again? How long until he would actually be able to give in to that pleading? They hadn’t decided how long they were planning on staying in Jaya for. Until they had found a way for Ace to return to the Heavens? And if that day never came?

Wiper standing in front of him all of a sudden forced Sabo to focus his attention on what was going on again. He took the proffered hand, shaking it, both their grips firm.

“If you need to reach us, you know where I live. Just send a message. If not, I’ll see you in a couple of days. Rest well, you deserve it.” And Wiper even offered one of his rare smiles to go along with his words.

“I’ll try, thanks. May I ask what your plans are for today?”

“Rest, first and foremost. And then I’ll probably start writing down places where I hope we’ll find a lead on how to help Ace, so I can share them with all of you and we can allocate places to everyone to be more efficient.”

“I see,” Sabo said, biting his tongue to keep himself from asking if Wiper needed any help. Again,
his eyes trailed over to where Ace was standing, chatting with Koala. “I’ll see you in a couple of days then.”

Wiper had clearly watched him, correctly interpreting the signs he saw, the feelings crawling over the lines of Sabo’s face despite his attempt to keep them suppressed the best he could.

“I’ll watch out for him, I promise,” he tried to reassure.

The corner of Sabo’s lips twitched upwards momentarily before he averted his gaze, fixing it on nothing in particular, unable to meet Wiper’s. “I know you will. It’s just odd…saying goodbye, even though it’s not for long.”

“I know what you mean…” But he said nothing more than that except a short word of parting before he walked back to the group. After another moment, Sabo followed to say goodbye to everyone else as well.

It was a short affaire since they all knew it would only be for a couple of days and then the five Jayans and Ace walked off and Koala and Robin got on the carriage. But just when Sabo was about to get into the carriage, too, Ace turned to look at him. Something squeezed Sabo’s heart at the smile he was given and he hesitated on the steps up the carriage. Then Ace tilted his head away from him and the hood of his cape hid his features, the moment gone.

“Get on, Sabo,” he heard Koala call for him and he shook off his daze and climbed inside, firmly closing the door behind him. With a start, horse and carriage got into motion and not before long they rattled down the cobblestone streets of the upper part of Goa’s capital.

“Will you stop?”

Sabo glanced at Koala, sitting at a delicate desk situated at one of the floor to ceiling windows their suite was equipped with. She had pushed the light curtains aside to let unfiltered sunlight in for her to better observe the glass containers holding the specimen which they had brought back from their expedition. But right now, she was doing no such thing, instead her upper body was twisted on her chair, her blue eyes glowering at him. From the far corner of the room, Robin’s chuckle drifted over, her bright, keen eyes observing them over the rim of her spectacles, which were perched on the sharp bridge of her nose, an old book with yellowed pages lying on her lap.

“You seem anxious, Sabo,” she remarked on his restlessness, observing him closely and he quickly averted his gaze again under her scrutiny.

He had been striding up and down the room for a couple of minutes now, gloved fingers tightly curled around the metal of his pipe, the familiar feeling the only thing putting his unsettled mind a bit at ease. But now that he had their attention, it was impossible to escape their prying eyes. It was unnerving, even more so since he had no explanation for why he was so tense other than the feeling in his mind and heart and the odd tingle in his left side that he tried his best to ignore since the last couple of weeks had taught him that nothing good ever came from that sensation.

His tongue darted out to wet his lips as he searched for words, when a light breeze swept aside the curtains and invaded the room, carrying a chill that sent a shiver up his spine despite the stifling heat outside. Koala and Robin had to have felt it, too, for they turned and glanced out the window as well.
In the far distance, looming on the horizon above a sparkling ocean, clouds started to gather, heralding the daily downpour during the late afternoon. Sabo relaxed a bit, relieved; in the city, the weather was nothing to get worked up about.

“If you’re this bored, you can help me with the samples,” Koala said before her eyes wandered to the pipe in Sabo’s hand. “And please put that down, you’re making me all anxious, too.”

“Sorry,” he mumbled and put one end of the pipe on the ground, casually leaning against it, trying to look at ease. Robin chuckled again.

“This is even worse,” Koala sighed, rolling her eyes.

“Why don’t you go outside for a bit, Sabo?” Robin suggested.

“And do what?”

Koala groaned. “You’re an explorer. Explore?”

“Very funny,” he huffed, glaring at her.

“Oh my! We’ve been back from the jungle for three days now and you’re already so prickly.” A smirk started to curl her lips. “Could it be that you’re missing Ace?” she teased.

“Oh shut up, I’m not!” he snapped. “I’m glad Wiper volunteered to look after Ace. Saves me a lot of trouble.”

“Is that what you keep telling yourself?” she cooed smugly, her smirk widening.

He let out an angry snort and turned to Robin for help, but she, too, was smiling at him. “I can’t believe this.” He took his pipe and turned, walking to the door with quick strides. “I’m going out,” he hissed in the doorway, offering another affronted glare before he closed the door behind with a lot more force than necessary.

Koala sighed, glancing at Robin. “I didn’t mean to upset him like this…”

Robin smiled sweetly. “Wandering the streets a bit will do him good. You know how he gets when he’s in a city for too long.”

Koala laughed. “I do.”

Another icy breeze rustled the curtains and Robin rubbed her arms. “Would you mind closing the window, Koala? It’s gotten cold somehow.”

“Sure.” Koala got up and walked around her desk, briefly observing the band of dark clouds crawling closer from the south. “Looks like there’s quite the thunderstorm coming. For once I’m glad we have a proper roof above our heads.” She closed the window and watched the street below through the pane, the taxis stopping in front of the hotel, dropping off new guests, the carriages rattling over the cobblestone, people animatedly chatting on the sidewalk or briskly walking by.

Movement in the narrow alley between the two houses on the opposite side caught her eye and when she looked closer, she was able to distinguish a man huddling in the shadows. As if he had felt her gaze and interest from across the street, he glanced around before he looked up. Their eyes met and Koala froze to the spot, going pale, her breath stuck in her throat.

His face was ghostly white, his body tall and slim. Long, spindly fingers held onto a wooden cane, a
black top hat sitting on his head.

She was unable to tear her gaze away, cold sweat breaking out on her brow, and the man’s dark lips stretched into an eerie grin before he retreated deeper into the shadows and the spell broke.

With trembling fingers, she grasped the curtain, her heart hammering in her chest, and with a sharp pull she drew it close.

Heavy raindrops pelted the roofs, the roaring rush drowning out every other noise. A string of curses fell from Sabo’s lips as he pressed against the wall of a shopfront where he had found shelter for the moment, the hotel where they resided not even a minute’s walk from where he was.

He had roamed the city centre for two hours without a purpose other than getting rid of his restlessness until his feet had carried him to the harbour, the sea winds’ salty taste on his lips, its gentle caress in his golden locks the first thing that was able to slowly coax the tension from his limbs and mind. Down here, with the murmur of many different tongues perfectly mingling with the gurgling of gentle waves washing around the boats’ hulls, he started to relax, watching as the storm drew nearer.

So many unexpected things had happened since they had first arrived here. If he was able to travel back in time and meet the Sabo of four months ago to tell him what the jungle had in store for him, he was sure he wouldn’t even believe his own self, the story he had to tell now sounding too fantastic, too incredible—the fire god they had dreamed of finding now part of their group, a friend in need of help.

When he had thought of Ace, a smile had snuck upon his face. What might he be doing right now? Was he accompanying Wiper to another place where they were hoping to find a clue on how to help him return to the Heavens? Or was he telling stories to his attentive listeners Conis and Kamakiri? Donning his most friendly, radiant smile to finally win Laki over completely?

Then his train of thought had returned to what Koala had said to him back at their hotel room. That he was missing Ace. With a deep sigh whistling past his lips, his shoulders hanging low, he had been able to admit that she had been right, but only in the privacy of his own mind.

When the approaching storm’s thunder was no longer just a low rumble in the distance, but a whipping crack almost above him, he had startled awake and hastily scrambled to his feet to hurry back to their temporary home.

But the rain had caught up to him after all and now he was standing so close and yet so far. Even if he dashed down the street like a madman, he would be drenched by the time he made it to the lobby.

He glanced at a sky that did not appear like it was willing to stop the rain from falling any time soon before he took heart, pushed himself off the wall and ran out in the storm.

Dripping and completely soaked, he walked into the lobby. The wide room dotted with wing chairs and polished coffee tables looked deserted and not even the concierge stood behind his desk. A cold draft came in from the street and intensified the icy chill in his bones, making the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. With a few swift strides, he crossed the room, climbing the stairs taking two steps at a time until he reached the hall with their suite.

To his surprise, the lamps usually lining the way down the corridor were out, but some light fell through the crack beneath the door to their room. He should probably let the concierge know when they were going down for dinner, for now, though, he wanted nothing more than a hot bath to warm
him to the very core.

Shivering, he started to walk towards the light pooling on the carpeted floor. The air was oddly cold up here as well, colder even than downstairs in the lobby, filling his lungs with ice.

Something rustled behind him and he paused and turned around, looking down the hall all the way from where he had just come up the stairs. The lights there were now out as well. His eyes narrowed as he strained to see into the darkness, the outlines of the large potted plants beside the stairs vague and hazy.

Outside, lightning flashed across the sky and turned the stairwell into a momentary black and white picture, and not even a second later another clap of thunder rumbled past, rattling the window frames. Sabo’s fingers tightened their grip on his pipe, his whole body resonating with tension. Something was off.

An icy breath of air ghosted over the back of his neck.

His eyes widened in horror and he whirled around, his pipe already halfway up to strike, when the person’s hand shot out and closed around his throat.

He gasped but managed to kick out; his foot connecting with a leg was followed by a grunt, the pressure on his windpipe letting up. Gulping down air, he clasped his pipe with both hands before bringing it down hard on the person’s shoulder. A heavy thump echoed through the corridor as a body crashed to the floor, Sabo’s racing pulse thrumming loudly in his ears.

“Koala!” he called, but before he could call her name a second time, someone attacked him from behind.

He drove the end of his pipe deep into what he believed to be the person’s stomach, once, twice, before the vice-like grip of a pair of arms around his shoulders vanished. By now, Sabo was panting, both due to exertion and the adrenaline coursing through his veins.

But he never had time to think about what was going on, because the door to their room opened and light flooded the corridor, revealing the extent of the mess he was in.

Men and women alike filled the hall, both behind him and in front, their ghostly, large eyes black as onyx, focused entirely on him.

“Sabo, what is go—” The rest of Koala’s words died in her throat when she stepped out of the room.
“Be careful,” Sabo whispered, “they just attacked me.” And louder he added, “What do you want?”

But no one replied. Instead, a man came running at him, pulling a dagger from a small scabbard at his hip.

Sabo cursed, dodging the knife by swiftly stepping to the side, leaving Koala to deal with the man because the next one was already coming at them.

He had counted fifteen people in total and neither appeared to be fully conscious, their sole purpose rushing at them with either weapons in their hands or just bare fists.

“Why are they attacking us?” Koala shouted over the commotion, landing a well-aimed blow in guts of the woman who was attacking her with the side of her hand. Her attacker gagged, eyes bulging before she collapsed on the floor out cold.
“I have no idea. I’m not even sure they’re human.” Sabo skipped from side to side, deceiving another man with a knife that cut through empty air before charging, knocking the man out with a hard strike to his temple.

“Watch out!” Koala cried, and Sabo turned just in time to see a woman surging towards him, when a hand tightened in his hair and pulled him back. He screamed, the woman lunged out before a vase crashed into the back of her head and she crumbled.

Sabo only spotted Robin behind Koala in the doorway, blue eyes alight with fury, but her face was composed nonetheless. But he didn’t have time to thank her, as whoever was yanking at his hair tried to drag him down the hall. His head snapped back, colliding with the person’s nose and a nauseating crunch told him that it was broken. He whirled around and dealt out another blow.

Then he briefly analysed the situation. Out of the fifteen people who had attacked them, only five were still standing, watching while Koala sent a sixth one flying through the hall to crash into the opposite wall and Robin was strangling a woman with a thin silk rope that was her trademark weapon until the lack of oxygen made her collapse.

He only had a moment to catch his breath, though, the next man already rushing forward, blade in hand. Sabo was ready to parry it with his pipe, planting his feet firmly on the ground, when searing white pain flared up in his left side, blinding him with its force. He cried out, staggering, barely evading the deadly thrust, the knife slicing through the thin fabric of his shirt, cutting into his skin.

“Sabo!” Robin and Koala shouted as he stumbled backwards, clutching his left arm, his vision blurred.

It felt like he was burning alive again, but there were no flames, he was able to discern as much.

Before his attacker could charge again, though, Robin was already there, throwing a knife she had picked up from the ground at him. He ducked and when he looked up again, she was already there, the silk rope winding around his wrist before she pulled hard, at the same time driving the heel of her boot deep into his pectorals. The joint of his right shoulder dislocated with a pop. While he screamed in pain and shock, Koala came up behind Robin who nimbly stepped to the side before Koala drove her fist deep into the man’s throat, her battlecry filling the hall. Naked rage was blazing in her eyes when she stepped back, looking wild and beautiful.

With clenched teeth, Sabo sank to his knees. The pain had subsided, leaving a hollow ache behind, but he was more anxious than ever now.

“Sabo? Are you alright?” Robin checked his shoulder, where a crimson flower was blossoming on the white fabric of his shirt. “The cut isn’t deep,” she assessed.

“I’m fine,” he said, rolling his shoulder, relieved the pain was bearable. “I can still fight,” he assured her. Behind Robin, Koala was already dealing with another attacker, delivering swift, hard blows to vital organs.

“We should try to get out of here for now. The noise we make should be heard all the way down to the lobby and yet no one has come up to see what’s going on. It’s weird.”

“But where should we go?” Koala asked, retreating a couple of steps, hand pressed onto a spot on her side where the woman attacking her had managed to land a kick. There were only three left standing now, but Sabo could already make out the faint groans of those regaining their conscience.

“We need to find Ace. I have a really bad feeling about this,” he said and got back on his feet again.
“You think this has something to do with him?” Robin asked, letting go of his arm to see whether he was able to stand on his own.

“My scar… It was hurting just a moment ago, and it only does that when something’s the matter with Ace.”

“I see. Then we should try to get to Wiper’s home as quickly as possible.” She turned around, facing their last opponents. “Let’s get this over with then.”

When they stepped out of the empty lobby, ready for an ambush, the storm was still raging on, dousing them in cold rain. They had been to Wiper’s place before, when they had first come to the Jayan capital, but with what had just happened at the hotel, they moved carefully, checking every corner before turning. The storm had taken on a ferocity Sabo had never seen, and with every crash of thunder, their surroundings rattled ominously.

Sabo’s lungs started to burn as they continued running, the rain blurring his vision, his feet slipping on the ground. And what was even more unsettling, was that the throbbing in his left side had started to increase again.

Higher and higher they climbed the hill on which Wiper lived, the alleys narrow and the stairs steep, forcing them to take a break and bend over to catch there breaths when they had only covered half of the distance. Sabo turned to look at the city centre down by the ocean, and saw how a bolt of lightning struck. The flash was blindingly bright and the crash that followed left a ringing in their ears. Immediately, the roof caught fire despite the heavy rain.

“This isn’t good,” Koala whispered, more to herself than to the other two, staring at the leaping flames in shock.

“Let’s move then,” Sabo said, leading the way this time, but he couldn’t keep himself from glancing over his shoulder every now and then. The fire was already spreading to the other buildings on either side of the one that had been struck by lightning, and the ringing of a large bell announced that the fire brigade was on its way.

They reached another intersection, but just when Sabo was about to turn the corner to enter another narrow alley, the pain in his shoulder made him stop. He bit his lip to keep in a groan, a worried hand coming to rest on his back.

“Sabo…” He could tell Koala was scared with how low her voice was when she said his name, but he had no time to reassure her that he would be fine in a moment, already busy checking the wider street leading into a different direction than Wiper’s house was.

Something was calling him. It wasn’t a voice but rather his intuition urging him to follow that street. It was the same sensation he had had when he had stepped into the pool where Ace had been sleeping without question or giving it so much as a second thought. Ace was at the end of that street, he was sure, and he was in danger.

Sabo took a deep breath and straightened his back. They had to protect Ace. He had to protect him. Marco had put his trust in them and Sabo wasn’t planning on disappointing him when he returned.

With a clenched jaw, he turned around, running the other way.

“Sabo! Where are you going!?” Koala called, but followed him nonetheless.
“He’s down there,” he explained, leaving them to figure the rest out for themselves.

Water splashed up on all sides when he rushed through the shallow puddles on the ground, the throbbing in his left side pulsing violently now.

They were getting closer.

He turned another corner without hesitating and was hit by a wall of ice cold air, skittering to a halt on the wet cobblestone. Before them, the darkness was creeping out of the alley as if it was a living thing, crawling over walls and ground towards them. His instincts screamed and begged him to retreat, to run away, because whatever was at the end, was beyond what they were able to take on.

“Sabo, I have a very bad feeling about this,” Robin said beside him, her face stern as she took in the darkness drifting through the air like poisonous smoke.

“So do I,” he admitted.

“But Ace is down there, isn’t he?” Koala guessed, her voice matter-of-factly, even.

“He is.”

“Then we have no other choice,” Robin concluded, and with one deep, determined breath, they plunged into the darkness.

They couldn’t see, they couldn’t hear, the blackness around them deep and complete. Robin’s hand found Sabo’s and Sabo’s found Koala’s and together they stumbled on, groping for the walls on either side, the darkness hideous, suffocating, unending.

After what had felt like eternity, they finally emerged again and there he was, backed against a dead end with his hands curled into shaking fists, drenched completely, but the fire in his eyes was more alive than ever.

Sabo couldn’t help admitting that even filled with rage and fury, Ace was beautiful, terrifying but no less fascinating and divine. The next thing he noticed, though, was that Marco had indeed been right. With the ruins of Shandora left far behind, the threatening, oppressive heat no longer accompanied the rise in Ace’s temper.

And only then, Sabo saw the man who had his back turned on them and who was apparently the reason why Ace had receded all the way to the end of the alley.

He was tall and of slim stature, the same swirling darkness that Sabo and the others had just passed through clinging to his body as if they were one and the same.

A laugh that made Sabo’s guts churn with discomfort bubbled up the man’s throat. "I see the humans you surround yourself with these days have arrived, Your Grace. How very convenient." He turned around, looking at them out of hooded, penetrating eyes, his dark lips stretching into an eerie grin on his pale face. “I already had the unfortunate pleasure of meeting one of you. So obstinate. And if I am not mistaken, we have met as well, have we not?” His spindly fingers motioned in Koala’s direction.

“Koala? Is that…true?” Sabo asked.

Koala pressed her lips together before replying, “I saw him loitering around when I closed the windows after you left this afternoon.”
The man’s grin widened before he directed his attention at Sabo, taking him in from head to toe. “And you must be Sabo, breaker of the curse. Did you like my little surprise? I was quite sure they would not be enough to stop you from coming here and it seems like I was right. Though, sadly, this means that I am now stuck with the lot of you.” He clicked his tongue, clearly displeased. “Unless you are willing to hand the prince over, of course.” He leaned forward, his smile of false friendliness making his face hideous to look at.

“I already told you that I am not coming with you, Laffitte,” Ace hissed.

Laffitte’s expression faltered, his face twisting with annoyance as he glared over his shoulder. “Why must you be so stubborn, Ace? And selfish, yes, that is what you are. Do you not care for the lives of these poor humans?”

Sabo was sure if Ace still had had even an ounce of his power, Laffitte would have gone up in flames right then and there, but nothing happened and with an outright sneer Laffitte turned, walking towards Ace. Sabo’s fingers curled tighter around his pipe, bile rising in his throat.

“I see you have nothing to say to this,” he jeered and added, “Your Grace,” the title dripping with scorn. “How about we put an end to this farce then and leave. You have an audience with the emperor of the Underworld and he does not like to be kept waiting.” His pale hand reached for Ace.

Without thinking, Sabo leaped forward, pipe in hand, and yelled, “Don’t you get it! He doesn’t want to come with you!” before his staff swished through the air to strike Laffitte.

But it never connected with his body, instead it went right through him, parting the twirling dark haze and with too much momentum on his side, Sabo stumbled, tumbling to the ground, and in the last second managed to catch his fall with a swift roll over his shoulder. Breathing hard, he came up on his feet, eyes widening as he watched the darkness moulding back together, closing the gaping cut his pipe had left.

“What the—” but his words died in his throat, when Laffitte’s icy hand closed around his throat, yanking him up in the air and pressing him against the wall with so much force that the breath was knocked out of his lungs and a blinding pain exploded in the back of his head. The world spun around, bereaved of its sound before it all came rushing back to him and his hands scrambled for Laffitte’s, scratching and clawing without success. He thrashed about in mid-air.

“Sabo!” Koala’s enraged shout reached his ears, but Ace was faster, coming up behind Laffitte and wrapping his sash around his head. The pressure on Sabo’s throat let up instantly and he collapsed on the ground, gagging and coughing, his windpipe burning. There wasn’t enough air around for him to suck back into his lungs. His eyes watered, but he was still able to make out the flames erupting from the sash and even if he hadn’t seen that, Laffitte’s screams were distinct enough.

Koala and Robin showed up by his side, hoisting him up just when Laffitte had finally gotten a hold of Ace’s leg. Ace’s eyes went wide with horror but he had nowhere to escape. He flew through the air before crashing on the ground. Briefly, he raised his head, dizzily staring at Sabo and the other two, but then he had to let it sink back down with a groan.

Laffitte roared, seething, the darkness hurrying to repair his burned, disfigured face. His head whipped around, eyes landing on a barely conscious Ace.

“I asked you nicely to come with me, but now my patience has come to an end.”

Even from where he was standing, Sabo could see Ace glaring at him defiantly.
“You cannot kill me,” Ace said, breathing heavily.

“No, unfortunately I cannot. But the same does not apply to those humans and this town. I will kill them slowly, make them suffer before I bring mayhem to this city, just like Emperor Teach brought mayhem over Shandora. Only that I will make you watch. And then I will drag you down to the Underworld behind me.” His voice was thick with malicious anticipation.

Ace tried to get back up. “Leave them alone!” he yelled, but Laffitte only laughed and turned to Sabo, Robin and Koala again.

They had nowhere to go.

“Give me my pipe,” Sabo told Koala and she handed it over, letting go of him and falling into her defensive stance. On his other side, Robin did the same, reaching into her pocket to pull out her silken rope, stretching it taut between her fingers.

“You are just as stubborn as the other one,” Laffitte huffed, closing in on them, but a piercing whistle made him pause and suddenly he was surrounded by a ring of tiny blue and yellow flames.

His head jerked up towards the sky and so did Sabo’s.

Gracefully, Marco took flight from one of the roofs, his blue and yellow body twisting suddenly, morphing before he gracefully landed on two feet, the last of his flickering flames vanishing. Sabo gaped.

“Look who got lost. I was not expecting to meet Teach’s pets up here on Earth, yoi.”

“Same goes to you, bird. I thought you had ran back to the Heavens after Emperor Teach clipped your wings, but it looks like you are the better pet out of the both of us.”

Marco’s face darkened. “Go back to the Underworld, Laffitte.”

“I am afraid I cannot do that, unless I take the prince with me.”

“Well, if that is the case, then I am your opponent, yoi.”

Laffitte scoffed. “What do you think a lousy bird like you can do against a Lord of the Underworld?”

“You are one to talk.”

Out of thin air, Laffitte produced his red cane, jabbing at the tiny blue and yellow flames surrounding him with its end. Instantly, the flames flared to life, towering high above him. He snorted, but did not yet dare to move.

Marco took the time to turn around, his drooping eyes taking them in.

“Are you hurt, yoi?”

All three of them shook their heads.

“Good. Now I want you to take Ace and get him out of here. Take him as far away as you can. Not just out of the city. Get him out of the country,” he said emphatically.

“But if it’s a god, how can we hide him? Won’t he be found anywhere he goes?” Robin probed, for the first time sounding deeply worried.
“Do not worry about that. I will keep an eye out for you. Besides, if Teach had been able to come here and go after Ace himself, he would not have sent Laffitte. And I can deal with the messengers of hell,” Marco assured them grimly.

Sabo glanced over at Ace who was slowly getting back on his feet. Koala and Robin left his side to help him, but Sabo lingered, staring at Marco.

“He won’t like it, leaving you behind to fight his battle. And frankly, I’m not sure he’ll be able to deal with it if he loses you, too,” Sabo noted.

“So he told you about Thatch, yoi.”

“If by Thatch you mean the god Teach killed then, yes, I know about him.”

A small, sad smile appeared on Marco’s face. “It is good that he feels like he can trust you, Sabo.”

“He still won’t like leaving you behind.”

Marco sighed. “I know. But first and foremost, I am his protector.”

“I see. We will do our best to keep him safe then.”

“I know you will, yoi.”

And with one last look across his shoulder, Sabo hurried over to where Robin and Koala were supporting a swaying Ace.

“Let’s go,” he announced, and they started to move in the direction where they had come from.

“What about Marco?” Ace asked.

“You heard him. He’s going to fight Laffitte so we can get you out of here.”

“No!” Ace declared, eyes wide. “No! I will not allow it. Even if he is immortal, if he is defeated it might take a hundred years until I will be able to see him again.” He tried to fight against the hands holding him up, but Robin and Koala only tightened their grips, determined to fulfil Marco’s wish.

“He’ll be fine,” Sabo said, coming up behind them, blocking Ace’s view. “Look at me, Ace!” With great effort, Ace tore his gaze away from Marco. “He will be fine.”

Ace appeared to believe what Sabo said, but only for a moment. “No! I do not want to be alone again!” he cried out, turning and twisting in his attempt to slip out of Robin’s and Koala’s grasp, and they had trouble holding him.

Sabo tried to soothe him. “You won’t be alone, Ace. We’re going to be there for you!”

But Ace continued to struggle. Behind them, Laffitte screamed.

“I will not let you escape, Ace!”

“Sabo, get him out of here, yoi,” Marco roared, suddenly between them and Laffitte, half his body made up of blue and yellow flames again.

Panic wound its way up inside Sabo and finally, Ace managed to tear himself loose, rushing towards Marco.
In a split second decision, Sabo stepped into his path, wheezing when Ace crashed into him, but planting his feet firmly into the ground, relentless. His arms closed around Ace, holding him tightly, feeling his defiance pause.

“I won’t ever leave you alone, Ace. I promise,” he whispered into Ace’s ear, putting every last bit of conviction he possessed into his voice.

The world stood still, the only living thing their beating hearts thrumming through the other’s body. Then Ace’s resistance crumbled, and with an internal sigh of relief, Sabo pushed him back into the darkness they had come from.
Chapter 10

Gentle waves lapped at the hull of their fishing boat, making it bob up and down in synchronisation with their own rhythm. Sabo had propped his head up on his hand, staring out at sea, but now he stole a sideways glance at Ace, who stood at the stern, the hood of his cloak pulled deep into his face.

Ever since they had left the port of Jaya’s capital, Ace hadn’t moved from his spot, keeping his eyes trained on the outline of the city, blurring more and more the further they got. The trail of smoke climbing into the sky was still visible and so was the occasional flash of lightning cutting through the dark sky—or at least ordinary people would think that it was lightning, but Sabo and the rest knew what it truly was: two divine creatures fighting.

After they had stumbled back through the darkness that was still closing off the alley, Wiper had waited for them on the other side with Conis sitting at his side, tending to his wounds. There had been a nasty cut on his brow just above his eyes, which had covered the right half of his face in blood. But despite his state, he had jumped to his feet the moment he had seen them and hurriedly lead them away. On their way down the hill and towards the harbour, he had explained that Marco had found him just in time and taken care off the strange people who had attacked both him and Ace.

Then, Marco had told him that he had already found Laki, Kamakiri and Braham and told them to return to Sabo, Robin and Koala’s hotel and put together as much as they could of their belongings before heading to the harbour, where he should meet them once Sabo and the other two returned with Ace.

Sabo had briefly filled Wiper in on what had happened in the alley, and Wiper had agreed with Marco that Jaya was no longer a safe place for Ace to be.

“The city is in turmoil,” he had said. “Several buildings are on fire, because they were struck by lightning and some people are on a rampage in the streets.”

Soon enough, they had to figure out that these people were of the same kind as the ones who had attacked Sabo, Robin and Koala as well as Wiper and Ace. If Sabo had understood Laffitte correctly, then they were somehow controlled by him. But they had dealt with them swiftly and continued on their way.

Much to everyone’s relief, the harbour was still intact, but a lot of the capital’s citizens had gathered there in their desperate attempt to flee the city. Wiper and Kamakiri had weaved through the crowds towards the smaller boats and after enough pleading and bribing, the captain had agreed to take Ace, Sabo, Robin and Koala on his vessel to the main port of the neighbouring country Skypiea from where they would then get on a boat back to the Kingdom of Goa.

Most of their belongings were still at their hotel room, but Laki and the rest had taken great care to not miss the most important things, and when everything was on board, they had said their goodbyes.

Again, Sabo had tried to convince Wiper and the others to come with them, but they all had refused, insisting that they would be of much more help to them and Ace when searching for hints closer to Shandora. Most of them had been crying and everyone had wished for the best, except for Ace, who had been keeping to himself mostly, quiet, thoughtful, sad. Only when everyone had said farewell, he had cleared his throat and, ducking his head slightly, he had thanked them for everything they had done for him, his voice strained with held back emotions. Then he had turned and hurriedly gotten on the fishing boat, soon followed by Robin and Koala.
But Sabo had stayed for a couple of more moments, offering his hand to Wiper who took it without hesitation, his own hand curling around Sabo’s lower arm, holding on tightly.

“Thank you for everything,” Sabo had said, looking stern, solemn. “Take care.”

“The same to you,” Wiper had replied, nodding grimly, stout. “And I will write to you as soon as I can.”

“You’re always welcome to visit us, all of you.”

The had all nodded.

“Now go!” And as if to put emphasis on Wiper’s words, lightning had flashed across the sky, followed by the menacing low rumble of thunder.

And without incident, the boat had made it out to sea, leaving the city further and further behind.

Silently, they had all agreed to leave Ace alone for the time being, and Sabo was grateful for it for it meant he had a chance to hang after his own thoughts, too.

When they had first come here, they had not been expecting to return back to Goa after so little time, and even though there were still several weeks on the open sea ahead of them before they would reach the kingdom’s shore, he was already anxious.

Again, he glanced at Ace, wondering if thoughts like these were part of why his face looked so distraught or if his mind was fully occupied with worrying about Marco. A salty breeze swept across the ocean, briefly dulling the smell of sweat and fish and catching in the hood of Ace’s cloak, pulling it down.

Sabo didn’t know what shocked him more; the fact that Ace’s face looked like a mask or that he appeared almost unaffected, when Sabo was sure inside him various emotions fought for the upper hand. Then something stirred in the lines of his face. He closed his eyes, inhaling deeply, fully, lips parting in mild pleasure when the scent of the sea filled his nose before he exhaled slowly and opened his eyes again, suddenly appearing as if he had come to terms with the world.

He tugged his hood back into place and turned, his eyes effortlessly finding Sabo, beckoning him to come over. Sabo did and together they looked out at the sea and the dwindling outlines of Jaya’s landmass on the foggy horizon. Somewhere, hidden deep behind those lush green hills, there lay the remains of a once glorious city. But contrary to the legend, there was no fire god asleep inside the temple, because said god was standing right beside him.

It felt like years that Sabo had waded into the calm waters of the pool and roused a sleeping Ace.

“I take you at your word, you know,” Ace said, pulling Sabo out of his thoughts, his anthracite eyes studying Sabo’s face long and without reserve.

“I hope you do,” Sabo replied, receiving a gentle smile.

Then Koala walked up behind them, closely followed by Robin.

“I never would have thought we would return home so soon…” she said, sounding a bit disappointed.

“I think none of us did,” Robin remarked.
“I am looking forward to see the Kingdom of Goa. Is it much like Jaya?” Ace asked.

“No, not really,” Koala replied, “The weather is nothing like here for example.”

“Oh? What is it like then?” Ace probed further, and soon both Koala and Robin were engrossed in introducing Goa to him and answering the many questions that Ace had.

Sabo leaned back against the railing, listening with half an ear, his eyes roaming the sea again. During all of his travels he had always felt more at home away from Goa and yet now that was where he was taking Ace to keep him safe.

But what did it matter, really, so long as Ace had a place where he felt like he belonged, a place he could call home. And wherever that was, Sabo would be.

- End of Part One
Thank you for reading and as always I would love to hear your thoughts! Dankeschön!! :3

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