



# The Strangest Eyes

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## I.

THEY SAW EACH other for the very first time before the last of the commander's demons were due for extermination. As the only living heir of the estate, such as it was, Mayari had received the news and felt obligated, finally, to come home, ordering her caravan of *antingeros* to follow her even though she ended up riding ahead to take the swift but secret roads. On the other hand, the late commander's lieutenant, to whose given name soldiers habitually attached a range of descriptors when they thought he wasn't listening—Baku the Clear-Sighted, for example, and Baku the Hard of Heart, and the late commander's personal favorite, Baku the Slayer of Earthly Joys—had taken to watching the camp's boundaries, as if at any moment a new and formidable enemy were about to invade and he alone would be able to stop it.

Most of the soldiers had already removed themselves and their families from the camp after the commander's long and fatal illness. Now the only inhabitants of the land were the aging senior officer who had been a friend of the commander's and barely a platoon of soldiers who had no prospects elsewhere. And of course, Baku the lieutenant, and the demons in the stables.

Mayari the daughter did not know that the once-mighty camp had been reduced to a shadowland. Nor did she care. When she learned almost a year ago





that her father was dead, she had felt no sorrow, joy, or relief. She had simply thought, *Good*.

The lieutenant Baku had stood by the commander's bedside all throughout his illness, and after the old man had succumbed to it, the same word stole into his thoughts. *Good*.

The heat that simmered in the lowlands was not new to Mayari, whose caravan's routes wound across mountains and plains, but as she neared the camp that she had not set foot in for decades, the air seemed to grow viscous and heavy. She felt the sweat on her neck trickle down her back even as a sharp chill prickled her nape. It was the magic, Mayari knew, it almost seeped into her skin. The land on which Mayari's father had built the camp many years ago was sacred to begin with; it was what remained of an ancient lake that had dried up long before her great grandparents had even been conceived. She herself had been born on it, in a house made of marble on the only truly solid ground within the territory. Everywhere else, silt and sand either shifted with the wind in dunescapes or boiled over into small bogs and marshland.

The boundary that Baku the lieutenant had been watching on the sweltering afternoon of Mayari's arrival was at the edge of one such swampy patch, and Mayari was riding up to it astride a huge and lumbering water buffalo.

A word about the buffalo: its name was a misnomer, because the fields that the animal worked were arid, especially in these parts where the lake had dried up and all the estuaries from the river and to the sea had vanished into dreams. Mayari had received the buffalo three or four villages ago, after the horse that a wealthy suitor had gifted her back at the caravan died from the blades of bandits. Years of encounters had convinced her to have the *kabal at kunat* prayer tattooed on her skin, and this left her unscathed from the attack. She aimed a small throwing knife at the bandit whose heavy blade had cut deepest into the horse's neck, and with the few seconds she gained stole his sword and decapitated him with it. It might have been overkill, but though she had not cared much for the wealthy suitor, she had cared deeply for the horse.

With the horse gone, the only other thing of true importance to her was the pale stone that her mother had taken from her father almost a lifetime ago. It hung at Mayari's chest from a leather necklace, under her filthy shirt and tattered coat, and it was more valuable to her than any of her other sacred amulets and talismans. She pressed her hand over her chest as she watched the butcher turn the dead mare into meat. After the chopping and roasting, she offered a feast of the tough but richly grained red meat to the village folk, washed it all down with coconut wine the likes of which she had not tasted since she was a girl, and dried the remaining horseflesh





for future consumption. As a reward for killing the bandit, the villagers gave her the buffalo along with a small cart to carry the horse jerky, coconut wine, water, and what little inedible possessions she had in the form of books, clothes, amulets, and knives.

The floor of the cart was also wide enough to stretch out on for naps. She was an indiscriminate napper, dozing off whether or not the sun was out, though one night she lay back on the cart thinking she would fall asleep to the plodding pace of the buffalo but didn't, and found herself idly staring up at the multitude of stars. She felt the white stone burn against the skin of her breast and knew that she was approaching home.

When the smell of the dust began to change—no longer the heady dung fragrance that belonged to both the buffalo and the earth of its village, but something that smelled, somehow, dry and tart, like reptilian musk—Mayari crawled back onto the animal, rubbing her palms gently on the warm muscular flesh. She was thankful that it had not died and she had not needed to eat it. It was late afternoon when the road they were on ended near her father's camp, but the heat rose in waves from the ground, what little dampness in the soil vanishing into steam, and her skin tingled from the thickness of the air.

At the sight of the fencing, and of the wards that hung around the swamp, she touched the edge of her *salakot* and almost smiled.

"Idiya," she said, calling the buffalo by its name, "My father died there, despite all that magic." Unimpressed, Idiya the water buffalo stopped short of the wards and snorted.

Perched on a low rock that jutted out from the swampy soil, Baku saw the woman atop the horned beast. She did not look like a soldier from the neighboring territories, with her beaten clothes and permanent slouch, but in an instant his rifle was loaded and aimed. He shifted the spectacles on his nose more out of habit than out of the need to peer through the rifle's sight. It was a single-shot rifle he had scavenged from a foreign invader's corpse in his first year with the commander, but he had come to use it so frequently he might as well have been firing through his own arm.

He could not see her face because of the wide brim of her bamboo hat, and perhaps that was the distraction, because before he realized what was happening, the woman had already slid down the animal's back and was hanging a white kerchief on the fence. The cloth had writing on it, and resembled a few of the spells that the late commander had spent his entire life trying to master.

She saw him as the wards disappeared.

"Hello," she called out.





SHORT STORY

He said nothing so she pushed up the brim of her salakot to see him better. Deliberately, she added, “Don’t kill me.”

He kept the rifle trained on her. “Then please remove your hat,” he said.

She pulled the salakot off, conscious of the sweat that trickled down the sides of her face, but never taking her eye off him. It wasn’t like she could, anyway—she had not seen a soldier trained by her father since she left the camp over two decades ago, and this one looked young, and more importantly, strong. His hair was tied up under a headscarf while the gleam of his horn-rimmed spectacles concealed his eyes; the rest of his features—the slope of his forehead, the narrow bridge of his nose, the breadth of his shoulders, and the length of his limbs—they were surprisingly pleasing to the sight. The gun, not so much.

He tightened his grip on the weapon. The woman’s face looked nothing like the late commander’s. His old master had a strong, flaring nose, cheekbones sharp as blades, a square jaw that withstood uppercuts in close combat; this stranger had a smaller nose, rounder cheeks framed by short dark curls and a few faint scars, a dainty chin that was also scarred but had certainly never been shattered. Even the eyes were different, deep and round for the commander, almondine for the woman. One eye, he noted, did not have the same quality as the other.

He bid her to identify herself, and she said, “Mayari, mistress of the caravan of antingeros, daughter of the late village chieftain Kaguya of the green mountains, daughter of the late demon-binder and camp commander Guguran of the ninth province.”

Ancient names, he mused, as if hearing them for the first time. The old master had enjoyed playing with the names of old gods. He lowered the rifle.

Her gaze followed the gun as she thought about her caravan. They should be here in two or three days, but now she wondered if she should be concerned for their safety upon breaching the camp’s territory. She squinted up at the soldier and asked, “Were you sent here to welcome me?”

He answered, “There was no one to send me.”

“Oh,” she said, “that’s kind of sad.” She smiled at him—how long had it been since a woman had dared smile at him?—and as she walked her beast through, she removed the spell from the fence, restoring the wards.

If this were indeed the daughter, then Baku could not kill her. It would be foolish to even try. *But oh*, a part of him thought, *Wouldn’t it feel good to try?*





II.

She used to have three older brothers and three older sisters. She was sure of it. If she wanted to, she could even list their names, describe their laughter, recreate the softness of their embrace. But she had lost them all one after the other by the time she had turned nine years old, and so they became memories that did not fight back when pushed, ever so gently, into the crevices of her mind.

The golden sunlight had deepened by the time they arrived at the marble house, the place of Mayari's birth. It should have been a tremendous moment to behold the little mansion where she had grown up, to relive the memories of familial love and betrayal, but the dust and putrid mud that caked her leg were hardening and demanded attention. And the heat—were the lowlands ever this wiltingly humid?

The lieutenant who had been guiding them across the camp—Baku, he had called himself—he had thrown on an oiled cloak and boots for the long walk in the dust and mud, and thus did not share her problem. She had been fine riding Idiya across the swampy earth and in the whirlwinds of the dunescapes, but when they were crossing the site of the huts that had belonged to the soldiers and their families, the water buffalo sank to its hooves in mud and refused to budge.

Mayari coaxed, cajoled, and kicked to no avail. Idiya was standing in sludge that appeared shallow enough, but when Mayari slid down from the animal's back and took a step forward in what looked like solid soil, the muck swallowed her leg up to the knee.

"Whoreson," she yelled, just to feel better.

Baku the lieutenant had been walking a few feet away, on a strip of rocky ground that kept his boots relatively clean. He moved close.

"Mistress," he said. He extended one hand and with the other reached for the buffalo's tether. Mayari shoved him away as Idiya tossed her horns in an attempt to gore him.

"Sorry," Mayari said, her face growing warm. She would have liked to touch his hand. "She's just as unhappy as I am to be here."

The lieutenant didn't even lose his balance. He stepped back onto the strip of rock and waited.

It was a bad place, she realized as she gripped Idiya's tether. In her caravan, surrounded by friends and protectors, she had never felt this sort of—pressure. Breathless, she sweated and struggled, and the buffalo grunted, heaved, and at last shook itself free of the shucking, sucking ooze so that Mayari could pull herself back up. The ruins of the huts resembled gravestones, wood and walls broken and submerged in the swamp that was taking over the ground. It wasn't bad in the way





her father's platoons used to turn places bad, with his wars and blood magic, but in the way that water and earth could be bad. *You will drown here, be buried here.* Something wanted them—*her*—to be gone.

She shot the lieutenant a sudden, questioning look. He had been watching her, but his spectacles hid his eyes and she could not perceive an answer.

She did not ask the question aloud even when they reached the house of marble, where the lieutenant led her to the well so she could scrape and wash off the sludge from her clothes and from Idiya's skin. She did not ask it until Idiya had been housed and fed in the courtyard and she herself had been shown a room—no, not her old one—where she could change into drier, comfortable clothing. It was only when she found herself in a large well-lit hall, in the presence of both the lieutenant and her late father's friend Dumangan, that she felt she could voice the question.

"Where are the last of my father's demons?" she asked.

Old Dumangan, short and compact like a mossy rock, was seated in front of her at the small table that held their dinner. He glanced over his shoulder at Baku, who stood a couple of feet behind him. The lieutenant had removed his headscarf, revealing braided hair that fell over one shoulder, but the gleam of his spectacles still hid his eyes. When Baku continued to say nothing, Old Dumangan turned back to Mayari with a sigh. "You must understand how difficult it is," began the captain. "We know where they are, usually, but they are always no longer there."

Mayari put down her spoon as the man who was her dead father's friend began explaining. At the commander's death, the demons he had collected and bound over the course of a lifetime began to free themselves. There were less than thirty after the Pestilence, and the weaker the binding spell, the easier the escape, but any demon that could be bound by weak magic was nothing to fear. It was the Commander's Ten, bound by blood, who had needed termination.

She had not heard the Pestilence spell mentioned in years, and hearing it now made her flinch. She had been a young woman working on her third apprenticeship at the caravan when the spell struck, and none of the antingeros could protect the demons they kept in their amulets. Mayari had two demons under her protection—twin *adas* that slept at her feet every night—and she watched them die slowly for three days, the amulets that were their vessels crumbling upon their deaths.

"My father kept them in the stables, like horses," she said.

Dumangan said, "They were like war horses then. But the Pestilence was what finally stopped the wars."

There had always been wars: Mayari understood this. There were the foreign invaders who had been a threat to the provinces for many generations, white devils





who could not withstand the heat and the demons that the armies learned to summon and unleash. When the invaders left, war continued among the provinces for territories and resources, including demon power.

She had studied under the antingeros because they peddled magic to travelers and villagers, not to armies. The caravan also allowed her to keep track of news about her father's camp, because she had wanted to keep one step ahead. But she had not heard of the Pestilence before it was upon them. They would find out later that it spread to the rest of the plains, wiping out demon populations in several provinces. The Pestilence determined a new order of power among the provinces, and until the Commander's illness, his camp had been one of the centers.

"You inherited his demons, you know," Old Dumangan said. "Because his blood runs through your veins."

Dani and Mira. Those had been her demons' names.

She shrugged. "I didn't want any of that shit," she told her dead father's friend.

But without the living blood, Old Dumangan pressed on, the Commander's Ten had no one to master them. They were bound to the Commander's land, but no longer to his desires, and so the camp lost scores of soldiers, spouses and children before the *baylan* were called in from the capital. What they could not tame to be their own, they destroyed. Of the Ten, the craftiest four remained, the four who escaped.

"You weren't here," Old Dumangan said softly, accusingly, and Mayari tried to remember if *he* had been there the night her father had tried to sacrifice her mother to bind yet another monster. She decided he wasn't and did not remind him of her father's sins.

"Where are the four, then?" she asked instead.

"They're here. They're here the way toads can be kings of gardens."

She recalled having always liked Old Dumangan, but it couldn't have been for his love of metaphors. "Are you saying you don't know?"

"I don't know," the old captain agreed. "That is why we must exterminate."

Mayari stared at her food. It went well with the coconut wine. Tender goat meat stewed in tomatoes and red peppers, the old man had announced, boasting of his cooking prowess. She did not remember him cooking when she was a child—that had been the work of the soldiers' spouses, men and women who cheerily cooked large batches of meals while their children played noisily outside the marble house. In her youth, even the hall was never quiet because it doubled as a dining hall and a convening area for her father and his advisers. The silence that echoed in it now was difficult to bear.





It would have been nice to have brought them here. Dani and Mira. They would have loved chasing each other in the hallways, and giggling and screeching like children.

Extermination. It was the word that had made her pause at the news and decide to come home. It felt wrong, but also insufficient—monsters were much more terrible than pests.

Her eye wandered to Baku, and for a few seconds she tried not to focus on the breadth of his shoulders and the length of his limbs. If he and Old Dumangan were the only officers that remained in the camp, then the lieutenant must be more than a pretty face.

“Lieutenant Baku,” she said, “do you agree?”

He returned her gaze, calculating. “No, Mistress,” he said. “Extermination will require a huge cloud of magic that even the baylan consider wasteful.”

Old Dumangan scoffed, “If you would only help them find the Pestilence spell—”

“It still exists?” Mayari clenched her fists. What she had always suspected was at last confirmed: the magic that had wiped out the demon population originated from the camp, wielded by no less than her father. Like a terrible tidal wave, it had swept over the territories of her father’s enemies; the magic diminished their power and cemented the military and economic status of his province. It had even reached her and her caravan before she had grown strong enough to protect what was hers.

“Do you really believe Pestilence can take them down?” Baku was asking Old Dumangan, with the beginnings of a smile.

Mayari closed her eyes. She missed her brothers and sisters and mother and the twin demons Dani and Mira and the faithful horse from the forgettable suitor and all her other dead. Where was her caravan when she needed them?

“Baku,” she said. The lieutenant glanced back at her. She asked him, “Do you know where they are? The last four demons?”

He said, “Yes, Mistress.”

When he said nothing more, she rose and walked up to him. She was torn between the urge to yank the thick braid of hair and the desire to snatch off those glasses. *It’s a beautiful face.* Instead, she straightened up to her full height so that she was at least eye-level with his mouth. “Then where are they?”

In the evasive, quiet way that was beginning to infuriate Mayari, he answered, “Most of them are in their new stables.”

*Of course they are,* she thought. What power they must have, if they could create their own vessels. Sacralizing stones into amulets required several days of prayer and a tremendous amount of magic. She had never tried binding demons again after Dani







and Mira, and she wondered if the amulets she had brought with her would work on creatures that could wreak so much destruction.

“Where are their new stables, Baku?” she asked.

As if every word were a painful choice, he replied, “Within the boundaries of the camp.”

A sliver of metal sprung from her sleeve. She hardly controlled it; it was one of her secret blades, and it wanted to do more than caress the smooth curve of his throat. “You have been messing with me from the moment we met,” she whispered.

The lieutenant lifted his head just enough so that the knife edge could not draw blood.

Old Dumangan broke the standstill by chuckling nervously. “My dear, take care,” he said. “You will need the lieutenant’s help if you wish to survive long enough to renew the bond of blood.”

The specialized rituals. She cursed under her breath and stepped back. She had preparations to undertake before she could attempt binding anything, and life would definitely be easier with the lieutenant’s assistance. He might even make her stay here tolerable.

“I’m sorry,” she said, disappearing the blade, holding out her empty hands. “But you must tell me right now where each of the four stables can be found.”

He looked at her closely. “Must I?” The glasses caught the light, then released it as he tilted his head away from hers. “Of course, Mistress,” he said, and after a moment, he went on,

“The Kataw has the marsh in the west, where the soldiers’ houses sleep.

“Garuda has found a cave in the east, where the old lake used to kiss the sea.

“The Burulakaw’s stable is near the stream, north of the marble keep.”

She saw his eyes at last, and was so taken aback that she almost didn’t catch his words.

“And I,” he said, “I have no need of any.”

### III.

He had countless brothers and sisters, as well as none. Their bonds were not of blood but of earth and water, sea and sky. He knew all their names still, because he had been bound into human form for only twenty-five years. What was a quarter of a century to a creature of eternity?

The ritual for his capture had been more complex than the others. In his true form he was larger than the moon, and his appetite was deep and unending. Only a



man with a hunger as terrible as his could have captured him, and that man had had the gall to take even a god's name. *Guguran*.

From the ocean bed he had sensed the first of the sacrifices: the firstborn son whose blood was spilled in battle. He had thought nothing of it, even though he felt the push and pull of magic, so much like the power of the tides and the currents. He would ride the magic, too, and think no more of it. But he sensed more battles and more blood, each new sacrifice tugging at him more powerfully than the last; he would have fought the blood magic had the sacrifices been less satisfying, the pangs of his hunger less satiated by the purity of each death. How he loved them all, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven.

But the seventh sacrifice was devastatingly incomplete. It was why the commander had never been able to contain him in a stable or force him to reveal the magnitude of his power. He could have annihilated the invaders in one fell swoop, and the arsenal of all the provinces that threatened the commander's superiors, had the old master possessed full control. To the very end, the commander had made the demon he called Baku suffer for his ability to resist him.

The night he was summoned was the night that Mayari and her mother ran away from the camp, never to return. But the blood that had summoned him was the blood that flowed in the daughter's veins, and so, on the first night of the daughter's arrival, he waited for her to test him the same way that her father had done—methodically, with small and delicate knives peeling skin and filleting flesh—what were the limits of his will, what rules governed his servitude?

But at the doorway of the chamber that the daughter had chosen for her own, the only question she asked was if he could brew her some ginger tea.

"*Salabat?*" he found himself echoing.

He was standing just outside her chamber, and she was leaning against the door, the candlelight from the room casting shadows on her face. "I'd make it myself," she said, "but apparently I can make you do chores like that, right?"

"Chores," he repeated.

The way he said it made her look up at him, and a smile flashed across her face. "I don't know what your talents are, yet. But if you can't boil a little ginger, I'll do it myself."

He stared at her, measuring the slump of her shoulders, her exhaustion from days and days of travel. "I can boil a little ginger."

"Good. *Luyang dilaw*, please, not the pale kind."

"It might take a little time to—"

"Go, then," she exhorted, shutting the door in his face.



In the kitchen which he had had no reason to visit after the commander's death, there were only Dumangan's personal supplies—leftover goat meat, some newly harvested cacao fruit, a few bottles of the local coconut wine—and the sacks of rice and crops for the few soldiers who remained in the territory. There was ginger among the root crops but not the yellow kind that the mistress wanted. So he walked out, removing his boots, and asked the earth.

“East,” he acknowledged. He took a small *bolo-guna* from Dumangan's array of bolo knives in the kitchen and set off barefoot, boots slung over the rifle on his back.

His feet led him to one of the plots of land that the soldiers' families had cultivated and then ransacked upon deserting. He set the wide curve of the *guna*'s blade into the earth and dug. The soil was dry like sand and the bulbs that had remained were already shriveled, but the blade found a root that had not yet blackened. He picked up the root and glanced up at the half-moon, silver in the sky.

A huge eagle was circling the camp.

Garuda.

His hand crept to his rifle as he watched the circumference of the monster's flight. These past few weeks, the radius of Garuda's flight had been growing. When Baku had seen it last, a few days ago, it had been soaring beyond his sight. It had still needed to return to its stable by daybreak, but Baku had been sure that the expansion of its aerial territory was a sign that the brute force of Garuda's will was finally winning against the dead commander's magic.

Tonight, though, the eagle stayed within the airspace of the camp. Baku watched the silhouette fly in circles, until it grew larger and closer, and he braced himself for the storm of its wings. It swooped toward him and landed.

Walls of searing dustclouds exploded around them as Garuda beat its wings. *His living blood is here!* it screamed in fury, its voice striking him with the same force as the wind and the sand

When did he last feel the rage of its wings? Leading the troops in strategy-driven battles, Baku used to direct Garuda's fantastic attack power toward enemy camps, emptying trenches and guard posts, pillaging food supplies. The eagle could lift six men at a time with its enormous talons, but his appetite for meat, human or otherwise, had been so savage that often Baku had had to enlist the baylan to call it back.

*Did you know?* it asked. *Did you know she was coming?*

“I knew only as much as you did,” he answered, hardly able to hear his own voice in the hurricane. He clutched his headscarf before it escaped. “Calm down, you oversized bird.”





*I was almost free!* it cried finally, but its wings slowed to a stop. When the wind died down, the monster said, *I had flown as far as the edge of the province the other night. I almost saw the sea.*

“We all want to be free,” Baku said.

*Not you,* replied Garuda. *Once a snake, always a snake.*

He bristled. “You forget who killed the baylan who had been sent to destroy you.” When the monster did not respond, he continued, “The master’s daughter is no priestess, but she wants to find you, and the others. If she orders me to subdue you, I will have no choice.”

He heard its laughter. *You can try!*

Baku sighed. The Garuda and the others had it easy—they had been summoned and bound by the master’s blood directly, and that was it. The ritual that had summoned Baku had been so complicated and so costly that it had driven the old master insane. And for what? To win a war that never ended? And now the master was dead, and soon he could shed his skin, but still he would be bound to the living blood by the sacrifices.

*Have you attempted to kill her?* Garuda asked.

“It won’t work,” Baku replied. “Not for me.”

*There is a trail of carriages two or three days’ travel from here,* said Garuda. *A caravan.*

“It must be hers.”

*Have you been ordered to ensure their protection?*

He shook his head. “They’re all yours.”

*Once they arrive, then!* He heard the eagle’s screeching laughter again, and endured the blast of wind and sand as it flapped its wings and flew away.

Returning to the marble house, he washed the earth from the ginger root, then from his feet. He boiled the ginger until the broth was darkly golden. Then he poured the brew into a bowl and brought it up to the daughter’s chamber. He knocked but there was no answer.

“Mistress?” he called.

“Try to come in,” she said.

He pushed the door hard, breaking the bolt.

“Tsk.” In her voice was disappointment, but also awe. “You broke the seal like it was nothing.”

As he stood in the doorway, he noticed a piece of cloth filled with writing glued to the broken bolt. She was sitting on the bamboo bed, smiling at him. “Is that the salabat? Took you a while.”





“My apologies,” he said. He walked toward her, but she made no move to receive the bowl until he was standing right beside the bed. When he handed her the bowl, he felt a jolt that made him draw his hand back.

“Ow, hot!” said the daughter as the liquid sloshed onto her fingertips. She put the bowl down in front of her.

“Those are wards,” Baku said. He approached each corner of the bed, staring at the strip of cloth tied around each post, the writings on them nonsensical to him. “The same ones around the camp’s perimeter.”

“Not quite,” she said. She inhaled the steam from the bowl. “I made them, so they’re different.”

He stared at her as she drank the tea. “Why did you put them up?”

“Why?” she repeated, gazing back at him. “Because I have a number of protection spells tattooed on my back, including one that’s supposed to repel my father’s demons, and I don’t think any of them will work against you.”

“I see,” he said.

“I also have one that negates poisons,” she said. “So I can safely thank you for the tea. Which is wonderful, by the way. The *oraciones* take their toll on the throat.”

The old master had feared him, too.

*Have I attempted to kill her*, he thought, echoing Garuda’s question. What could have happened had he fired the rifle at her before asking her who she was; could he have destroyed the living blood that bound him, or would firing have been possible at all?

He had thought the Kataw would make a true attempt. He should have known that she would be more cautious.

He touched the edge of the daughter’s bed and received another jolt. He drew back, then after a second, he reached back in.

She put down the bowl and watched his hand as it tried to break into the barrier spell. “It’s just so I can sleep without worries,” she said.

Her smile faded as the seconds ticked by.

“Stop,” she commanded, and only then did he lower his hand.

She moved toward him, kneeling at the edge of the bed as she grabbed his wrist. His fingers and palm were blistered where his hand had struggled against the barrier.

She rose, toe to toe with him, leaving the wards’ territory. She lifted his injured hand onto her faintly scarred cheek. “I’m sorry,” she said.

Her eyes were shut, her skin was cool and soft, and she smelled of earth, sweat, and something sweeter, something that made him catch his breath and take a step back.

“This will heal quickly,” he said. “Please let go.”



She did. "I had twins," she said suddenly, then blushed. "Not children. Demons. They were adas. They liked to sleep at the foot of my bed." Then she gave a short laugh. "I don't know why I said that. It has nothing to do with you."

He said, "You gave them names."

"Dani and Mira." A different kind of smile returned to her lips. "They died from the Pestilence. I couldn't save them then." She sat down on the bed. "This spell took me over a decade to master, and in those years I kept thinking, if I ever had anyone again that I needed to protect . . ."

"For now, it's yourself," asked Baku. "I understand."

He turned to go, and then faced her again. "Your caravan. Is it coming here?"

"In a few days," she said. She exhaled loudly. "I have to bind the demons before they get here! I never met the Garuda and the Burulakaw, but the Kataw—she was one scary lady. I think she hasn't changed."

"Once you've renewed the bonds," said Baku, "what will you do with them?"

"I'll return them to their homelands," she said. "My caravan and I will take them there to free them."

*And me?* he thought, but did not ask. He realized then that he feared her in a way that he never feared her father.

#### IV.

The wards offered her dreamless sleep, but when morning came the first thing that arose in her mind was the memory of her adas's faces, watching the antingeros work in child-like wonder. They had forged her eye for her, presenting it proudly after it had been inspected by the antingeros. *It has no magic*, Dani and Mira said, *except now you'll have two eyes again!*

She laid out her knives, her amulets, her talismans, and wondered which ones would work against the Kataw. It was she who had tried to sink the buffalo, Mayari was certain now, after rereading her books; she had caused the earth and water to swallow the soldiers' huts, made the air so heavy with magic that Mayari almost drowned. She had met the Kataw as a little girl, before her father's betrayal, and she did not look forward to meeting the demon again.

Downstairs, she ate leftover goat stew while waiting for the lieutenant.

"He's already outside," Old Dumangan told her when she finished.

She saw him by the well, the rifle slung as always across his back. They would go by foot, leaving Idiya the buffalo where it grazed near the house, so as to keep it safely away from the demon that had targeted it yesterday.

"The Kataw doesn't speak," said Mayari. "Am I remembering correctly?"



Baku nodded. "Have you studied the binding ritual?"

"Yes. It's horrific, and I hate it."

"The Kataw has power. That's why your father bound her in the first place."

"I might need help," she said.

"I can come to your assistance if she attacks you physically," he said.

She remembered the game that the Kataw played, and sighed. "A lot of good that will do," she said, and he agreed.

At the marsh, she took an amulet out and hesitated. Then in her loudest, most self-assured voice she said, "I am Mayari, mistress of the caravan of antingeros, daughter of the late village chieftain Kaguya of the green mountains, daughter of the late demon-binder and camp commander Guguran of the ninth province. Come to your Mistress, O beautiful Kataw."

The reply came in a hiss of images, a child visiting the old stables, a slender hand, webbed and luminous, resting on the child's head. *I know who you are*, came the answer, and then came a song.

The song had no words, but its melody was the voice of water, and the sea, of palaces made of coral and glimmering shell. Mayari had been to the sea several times, but none of those occasions had felt as real as the sea that the Kataw sang of, with its sleek and shiny denizens and their underwater dance, and the currents that swept them to and fro, and the light that beamed from the surface, and vessels of men filled with spears and harpoons, and scarlet sea-foam fading onto the rocks, and the creation of the song itself, the song that rang out like a high wind, like the thousand voices of waves crashing on shores, bringing home debris from broken ships.

She felt the sea rise around her ankles, even though there was only the marsh shifting harmlessly under her feet. She stole a glance behind her, at the lieutenant, but he was standing still, eyes closed behind those spectacles, and if he were feeling the sea at his feet, too, she had no way of knowing.

*Three I will show you, the truth you must choose.*

And the thing she dreaded most happened. The Kataw showed her the past.

The first was the face of a stranger, handsome like Mayari's father, but kinder, lighter, the weight of command nothing but a dream.

The second was her father's face, wrinkled and worn, surrounded by veiled baylan. It was the casting of the Pestilence spell. Behind her father was Baku, spectacles gleaming in the magic light.

The third was her mother's face, swollen from her father's hand, and her father's face, tearstained. *You have to kill me*, he wept, addressing her, Mayari, the little girl with the scythe. The blade gleamed like a crescent moon.





Mayari felt the sea swirl around her knees, then around her waist, and up to her chest, but she was puzzled. The third was false, obviously, because why would her father be weeping, why was the scythe in her hand? It was her father who had wielded it, taking her eye—

The sea rose to her neck, and she opened her mouth to give her answer.

“Wait,” Baku said, still behind her. “If you get this wrong, you will drown.”

She knew that, of course. But the third memory was false, so which of the other two was also false, and which one was true? She was only certain of the third, because she had been there . . .

Where would she have been, in the other two memories? In the first, she had not been born, and in the second, she had been with her caravan, far away, perhaps scolding the twins for running away and playing hide-and-seek, right before the Pestilence hit.

She remembered something the older antingeros used to tell her: Magic is drawn through and from the spirit world, then through and from our world. You can no more own it than you can own air. Magic, unlike memories, is not centered on the self.

The sea had risen to her face, covering her mouth, her nose, but she could not have said aloud her answer anyway. How could they all be true, even the third? But the Kataw heard her answer, and received it, and the sea vanished. Mayari collapsed onto the mud, gasping for air.

“Mistress,” said Baku, his rifle aimed. The specter of a woman had emerged from one of the sunken huts. Her hair and limbs were silver with scales, her hands slender, luminous and webbed.

“Let her come,” said Mayari. She held up her left arm, the amulet she had sacralized clutched tightly in her fist, and braced herself. She blinked and then the Kataw was at her side, sinking her fangs into her flesh.

V.

He could not put her on the bamboo bed because the wards were still up, so he laid her gently on the floor and let Dumangan fix the bandage on her wound. The old man knew an old healing spell, learned on the battlefield. Evidently the blood loss was more than she had prepared for, but she had successfully bound the Kataw to her, and now it was in its new stable. Baku held the stone amulet and thought about the Kataw’s essence sleeping inside it. Can any human bear the thought of parting with such power?

The commander’s daughter regained consciousness shortly before sunset. She looked dazed as she opened her eyes, but the sight of the approaching dusk made her bolt upright.







"I lost a day," she muttered, then winced when she felt her arm. Then she saw that Baku was sitting on the floor, at her feet, and the pained expression on her face melted into a smile. "Thank you," she said.

The old commander had never thanked him for any of the times that Baku had been compelled to save his life, so Baku did not know what to say. He handed the Kataw's amulet to her.

"No, you keep it," she said. "She's safer with you. It's not like you'll use her power."

Her talismans and Dumangan's healing spell had reduced the gaping wound into a narrow slice, but she needed to rest. He knew this, and she knew this, but after dinner she was in front of the empty amulets again, reciting the oraciones to fortify their sacralization.

Dumangan mixed a sleeping potion into her salabat, which Baku brought up to her chamber.

She tasted it and spit it out. "Tell me this was Old Duma's idea."

"It's for your own good," said Baku.

She sighed. "My caravan is coming. The Kataw and the Garuda and the Burulakaw—they're not like you at all."

"By which you mean—?"

"They're driven by their primal force. The Kataw must make illusions. The Garuda must draw blood." She paused. "They must have made fantastic weapons on the battlefield."

They did, he almost said aloud.

She glanced at him and asked, "Do you know what your primal force is?"

"Hunger," he replied without hesitation.

"I've never seen you eat," she said.

"I have never needed to."

"But," and she left the safety of the bed again, so that she could touch his bare arm, "your body is human, isn't it?"

He lowered his gaze, following the path of her fingertips, and then shrugged. He decided not to reveal that he had not taken in food since the master's illness, and that, as a consequence, shedding this skin would no longer be too difficult. He wanted the option that his old master's spite had never allowed him.

And also, she seemed to like this human form. He did not relish the thought of her imagining him otherwise.

"Please get some rest, Mistress," he said, stepping back.

"If you promise to help me with Garuda," she said.

"Of course," he said, because he would have no choice.





VI.

In the morning they trekked to the east, near the trench where the lake that had once covered the land flowed into a river that opened out into the sea. Baku led Mayari to a cave that had a mouth just wide enough for a full-grown man to enter.

Mayari slipped on an empty amulet around her neck, and it nestled comfortably between her breasts with the white stone her mother had given her. She checked her throwing knives and her secret blades, and the sacred kris that hung in a snug scabbard at her waist. Then she shot a glance at Baku, who had on his back not just his rifle but also a spear and a *kampilan*.

"I really hope we won't need to use all of these," she said. Then she turned toward the mouth of the cave and called, "I am Mayari, mistress of the caravan of antingeros, daughter of the late village chieftain Kaguya of the green mountains, daughter of the late demon-binder and camp commander Guguran of the ninth province. Come to your Mistress, O great and mighty Garuda!"

She listened to the echoes of her voice. After a few minutes, a tall figure emerged from the cave, yawning.

"You pompous serpent," the stranger yelled past Mayari. "You knew this was my sleeping time."

Naked from head to toe, the man looked almost golden in the sunlight. And of course Mayari had seen her share of naked men, but she had been getting nowhere with her lieutenant, and the utter brazenness of this man—this demon, she reminded herself—was a delight to behold.

The man stopped a few feet in front of her. Mayari kept her gaze high, focusing on the imperious, chiseled face.

"Great and mighty Garuda," she began.

"I was almost free," he said, and she jumped back in time to avoid his sword.

Except it wasn't a sword, it was a talon, and she watched in horrified fascination as he transformed into the gigantic eagle of demon lore.

"Now!" shouted Baku.

She leapt onto its back and clung to its feathers. This was supposed to be its blindspot. She brought out the sacred kris, but before she could strike, the eagle beat its wings and soared up.

How to describe the ride on the terrible Garuda? It was breathtaking and terrifying and joyful, like the first time she had tried to ride the mare that the wealthy suitor had given her, like trying to ride any wild, raging animal, except its feathers were cutting her face and the wind stole her breath away, and toward the end when





she felt she was about to faint and let go of the kris and the feathers and therefore plummet to her death, she called Baku's name.

A rifle shot rang out. The bullet could not have reached that high, but it did, tearing through a wing. Garuda screamed.

"I would free you," cried Mayari over the noise of the wind and the eagle's rage. "I *will* free you!"

They hurtled toward the ground, with the eagle gliding at the last minute, and it returned to its human form. They tumbled together onto the sand. The man righted himself first, and dug the bullet out from where it had lodged in his shoulder. The wound did not bleed much, but little tongues of blue flame seemed to burn around the stricken flesh. The bullet, too, burned blue.

"Dragon magic," he said hatefully, flicking it away.

Mayari struggled to her feet. "Garuda, be mine, like you were my father's," she said.

"Your father!" He grinned. "He was a true warrior."

"I am nothing like him."

He looked into the eye that her adas had given her, and then into her true eye.

"You are more like him than you want to be. His folly was in thinking that he could end the wars by using us."

"Well, it ends with me."

"You bested me only because you had the snake for a weapon."

"It's well within the rules," said Baku.

"I'm talking to the Mistress," Garuda said loudly.

Mayari smiled, despite herself. She took a step forward, hobbling, but she managed to present the sacred kris to the demon with some dignity.

He looked down at her appraisingly. "All right then," he said. He took the sword, swinging it in the graceful dance of the ritual, and then cut her ever so gently on the neck.

"This won't hurt," he said, and proceeded to lick the trickle of blood. Then his body faded, and she felt him enter the amulet nestling between her breasts.

She walked toward Baku and smiled. "That went better than expected," she said.

He turned away. "That oversized bird," she heard him mutter.

## VII.

He let her rest, and eat, and consult her books and her talismans, but when night fell he came to her chamber and waited for her to give him the Garuda's amulet, as she had done with the Kataw's. But she sat on her bed and kept the amulet around her neck.





“The power of flight,” he said, and she squirmed as if he had read her mind. “You want to ride him again.”

“In more ways than one,” she said.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

He sat near the window and looked up at the half-moon.

“Here,” she said after a while. She sat beside him and handed over Garuda’s amulet. Then she held up her other hand and showed him four crumpled talismans.

He remarked, “The wards from your bed.”

“I think I can trust you with my life,” she said. Then she took a deep breath. “Where are your sleeping quarters? In case I need you.”

“I have none.”

“This house has a dozen rooms!”

He calculated if telling her that he did not sleep had consequences. The possibilities were there, so instead, he told her that at night he roamed the camp grounds and did not need a bed.

She returned to her books and amulets. “Should you want one,” she said casually, “you’re welcome to mine.”

He stared at her. The late commander had understood that the more his lieutenant fulfilled human functions—eating, shitting, sleeping, fucking—the more he would exist as a human, and the power he had which the commander could not control would never become a threat. Did the daughter understand as much so soon?

“Thank you,” he said, leaving.

## VIII.

The nightmares came. The wards were gone, after all.

It was all so predictable. In a room filling up with magic so heavy she felt like she would drown, her father was hurting her mother. Mayari watched, a short-handled scythe in her hand, and he was yelling at her. She struck him, but she couldn’t kill him. She didn’t want to. The magic seemed to wane, then, and then suddenly the scythe was in her father’s hand. He buried its point in her eye.

It was the memory of the pain that woke her up. She pressed a palm to where her eye used to be, and the pain sharpened. It receded only when she remembered to clutch the white stone at her chest.

Gods, how she missed her mother. She lifted her hand to touch the replacement eye that the twins had given her, before the Pestilence took them. They were such lovely creatures, Dani and Mira, those demons she had lost. She looked around in





the dark, bare room, lit only by the half-moon shining through the huge window. At the caravan she rarely slept alone, and if she did, it was always outside, where the night sky was always alive.

Without the wards, she could not go back to sleep.

Was her father's lieutenant still outside, guarding the boundaries as he said he would?

"Baku," she called softly and waited.

Her count was at two hundred twenty-five when a silhouette appeared on the window ledge.

"Mistress." His shadow unfolded into the room gracefully but urgently.

"What took you so long?"

"My apologies. I was at the southern limits of the camp when you called."

"I was kidding," she said. But if you were the camp commander who lived in constant fear of enemies, then perhaps three and a half minutes was too long a waiting period. No wonder he made the poor creature his lieutenant—that way he was never out of sight.

"Come to the bed," she said.

He sat at the edge, where the moonlight fell.

"Can you take your spectacles off?" she asked. "You don't really need them, do you?"

He obeyed. The pupils of his eyes were serpentine, draconian. "They make the captain and the soldiers more comfortable," he said.

"I like your eyes, though," she said truthfully.

She put a hand under his braid, on the nape of his neck, so that he could not avert his face.

His mouth was soft and tasted deeply sweet. He let her explore it. He let her remove his shirt, and he watched her remove hers.

"What is this?" he asked, seeing the pale stone on her chest. It glowed like the moon against her brown skin.

"It was my mother's vengeance," she said, moving his hand up. "She took it so that my father could not complete the ritual."

She let him touch the stone. She let him touch the swell of her breasts.

"This is where it's been all along," he breathed, kissing the stone, kissing her breasts, finding his way back to her mouth.

But when she held him down and prepared to mount him, something in his eyes gave her pause.

"What's wrong?" she asked.





“I can’t,” he said. “I don’t want this. Not yet.”

“Not yet,” she echoed in frustration.

“To give myself to you, it will weaken me. I need to—” he broke off. “I need more time.”

She burst into laughter at that. Then somberly, she said, “I can just give you the command, can’t I? To take me. To submit to me.”

“You can,” he said.

She sighed, and with inconceivable effort, tore herself off him. She put her clothes back on, and so did he.

When he moved to leave, though, she reached out hesitantly, then let her fingers fall on his sleeve. “Will you stay here until I fall asleep? I can’t—I can’t sleep by myself.”

He folded his legs and settled in. “As you wish, Mistress.”

She curled up beside him, careful not to touch him. When she fell asleep, Baku lifted a hand and ran it gently in her hair. She had no nightmares after he left.

## IX.

They decided to find the Burulakaw’s stable in the early morning. Mayari did not find much in the books about their primal drive, except that they were messengers, so she did not quite know how the binding ritual would go. Meanwhile, Baku had never had any quarrel with the little women, but he brought both his rifle and his kampilan in case the quest went sideways. When he returned to the commander’s daughter to check if she was ready to leave, she was sitting on the bed surrounded by open books.

“It says they might require gifts,” she said. “I didn’t bring anything valuable enough as a gift. I might have to fight them.”

“That would be foolish,” he said. Quickly he added, “It is in their nature as messengers to listen. They do not fight—they negotiate.”

She flashed him a smile. “All right, we’ll try it your way.”

The walk to the northern stream was uneventful. Because there was nothing to eat for breakfast, Mayari brought some of her horsemeat jerky instead, and a little coconut wine, in case the situation with Baku grew awkward. She tried not to remember the night before.

The Burulakaw’s stream was barely a trickle of water that ran between two marshlands. At the far end were tiny mangroves that should not have been able to survive in the rot. The sun had not yet broken into the shade of the mangrove, so the three tongues of fire that floated toward them were starkly visible.





"I am Mayari, mistress of the caravan of antingeros, daughter of the late village chieftain Kaguya of the green mountains, daughter of the late demon-binder and camp commander Guguran of the ninth province. Come to your Mistress, O mysterious Burulakaw."

*We know who you are*, said the tongues of fire. In their flickering light, their small, womanly forms were almost visible.

"Then you know that I have come to claim you as mine."

*If you had not come home, we would have been free.*

"You would have been exterminated," said Baku.

*Traitor, you would have let them!*

Mayari held up her hand. "He is mine, as you are mine. Be bound to my blood again, like the Kataw and Garuda, and I will set you free."

The Burulakaw huddled together, and Baku recognized the desperation that would make them surrender. They had no real offensive and defensive powers, and if they would not be exterminated, they would be captured by the baylan. But the baylan did not make offers of freedom.

They turned back to the commander's daughter. *We require gifts of blood as a token of good faith. Then we shall be yours to free.*

Baku and Mayari exchanged glances. She took a deep breath and removed something from her knapsack. "Don't you dare laugh," she hissed at the lieutenant.

In her hands was a small bowl of the jerky that had once been her favorite horse. He did not know what the mare had meant to her, though, so his hand grasped the handle of his rifle. He said, "You will force me to spill *their* blood."

"Don't you do anything unless I say so!"

She turned around and stepped forward. She placed the bowl onto the stream, which flowed back toward the Burulakaw. "I offer you an animal I once loved."

The women beheld the jerky and then set it on fire. They returned the bowl unharmed.

*A lovely gift*, they said. *That is one.*

Relief crossed Mayari's face. "All right then," she muttered. She poured coconut wine into the bowl and set it back on the dirty waters. The women took the bowl and then flung it away, and this time the bowl burned into ashes.

*You insult us!* they screamed, their fiery hair rising so that Mayari and Baku could feel the scorching heat. Baku drew his rifle, magic throbbing in his hand.

"Everyone, calm down," yelled the commander's daughter. "Burulakaw, what else of mine do you require?"





*Gifts of blood, they cried. Your eyes!*

Baku aimed.

“Stop,” she said.

“Do you believe that they are worth all this, Mistress?”

“Be quiet for a second,” she said. Her hand trembled, and with some effort, she removed one eye.

“Women of fire,” she said, her voice shaking with what might have been anger, or sorrow. “I offer you my demons’ eye.”

She placed the eye in the stream, and the filthy water took it to the Burulakaw. The eye flamed up and disappeared.

*A wonderful, wonderful gift, they sighed. That makes two.*

“Baku,” said Mayari, “give me your headscarf.”

She wrapped the scarf tightly around her head, covering the empty socket. Baku watched tears flow from the remaining eye.

*One more and we are yours, the women sang. Give us the other eye, the eye of the moon.*

Something glowed from Mayari’s chest. Her hand flew to cover it.

“Mistress,” said Baku.

“Wait,” she said. “I can’t.”

He stared at the silver light that Mayari’s hand could not let go.

“That is not yours to give,” he said. “Let me offer another on its behalf.”

He walked toward the Burulakaw as closely as their fires permitted, then he stretched out his rifle.

“Women of fire,” he said. “I offer you this weapon. It burns with blood and dragon magic, worth a quarter of a century.”

The Burulakaw took it. It burned with a blue flame, and then it was gone.

*This has hardly the same value as Mayari’s eyes, said the women.*

“But it is enough,” he said.

*Yes, it is enough. They turned to the commander’s daughter. Mayari, demon-binder, we are yours to free.*

She moved quickly, then. No bloodsucking here, but she had to carve a symbol on her wrist, on the unwounded arm. She chanted the prayers and the Burulakaw entered the amulet.

“Will you still free them, after all that?” asked Baku.

It was a fair question. The Burulakaw were messengers of the *enkanto*, and the precious gifts they had offered could be retrieved, transformed into unimaginable favors. He watched her contemplate this.







She clutched the scarf that covered the empty socket of one eye, but she looked up and met his gaze. Her caravan was coming, and she wanted him to trust them as he trusted her.

When she freed the Burulakaw, it was noon. She emptied the amulet and it crumbled into dust. With the demons' presence fading, the mucky stream shriveled and dried up, then shortly after, burst forth in clear, powerful waters that grew into a little river.