

# CALYPSO



THE CHILDREN OF THE STARS, VOLUME 1

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Silence. The first sound she heard was silence, a silence more still than she'd ever known. Then she felt the cold. Kira opened her eyes slowly. Ice clung to her lashes, leaving damp kisses against her cheek. Dazed, she blinked twice. Intricate patterns of frost curled across the cryotank glass before her. She inhaled sharply. So they had arrived, and she was alive. The glass shifted with a slight hiss, lifting up and out.

"Miss, are you awake?" The nurse shined a flashlight in her eyes and she cringed, the light making her head throb. "Good. Reflexes are responding appropriately." He checked something on his pad and leaned back, looking at someone beyond the pods. "Pod 379 is awake and active, ma'am." He appeared again and smiled. "Welcome to your new home, honey. Follow the others and you'll be given directions." He pressed a flashing button and moved on to the next pod. Her arm and leg braces released with another hiss.

"Y-yes sir." Carefully Kira stepped down, rubbing the grooves the clamps had left. The nurse nodded absently. Kira stepped into line behind the other newly-awakened colonists. The room hummed with the sounds of the tanks, row upon row of massive frozen caskets. Kira hugged herself tightly, fighting the rising fear. "It's just an adventure," she murmured, fingers digging into her shoulders. She paused at the exit of the room, trying to merge with the lines in the corridor. There were so many people! Her world narrowed to the few inches she had before and behind her as she was jostled out into the hallway.

"Women and children to the right! Men to the left!"

Obediently, she turned right, grateful for the smaller crowd. "This is just an adventure," she said again, her voice shaking. The crowd inched forward. Lights glowed brightly in the ceiling and walls, alternating blue and white. Memories of her days in the Academy rose to the surface. Blue and white meant the sanitation room. Kira eyed the doors before her. The smells of soap and astringent leaked out, burning her nose. "I'm on an adventure."

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Her skin stung, the new clothes rough against her skin. She stared at the plain fabric in disgust, then turned her attention to the crowd around her. No one looked to be over 45, and most were in their middle years. Kira bit her lip, scratching the back of her neck. The shirts were awful. She sighed and dropped her hand, instead focusing on the other children. There were younger children, some toddlers, and one or two girls her age, but none she knew. She felt her stomach drop. Had she been cast away again? Tears rose unbidden and she bit her lip, hard. If this really was an adventure, there had to be a reason why she was here. A tear slipped down her cheek, and her hand drifted to the locket around her neck. Daddy had said that life was one great long adventure. What adventure could there be in being unwanted?

“Ladies, ladies, please settle down.” Kira hastily dropped the locket back into her shirt and looked up for the source of the voice. One of the Brothers of Science stood before them, his deep blue robes rippling with his movements. Kira inched closer. “Please give your name and age to the Brothers at the ramp. They will give you your pack to take to camp.” He pointed to three sour-faced Brothers, then raised his hands. “From here on, we are free from the entanglements of Earth and its politics. We are not American, English, Spanish, or Korean. We are all one body, colonists for the Earth Trade Association, colonists in our own right. This planet is ours, and it is our duty to supply the other colonies in our galaxy with food. You have been chosen for a most glorious task: to be the lifeblood for our corner of the universe. Take pride in this new life and the path chosen for you. Beyond that door lies paradise as we’ve never known it. Will you join the Brethren of Science to conquer and tame this world?” The women cheered. Kira remained silent. Daddy had said no world should ever be tamed, or Earth would happen all over again. She hugged herself again, staring at the Brother. “Today, we create a new world. Join us!” He stepped back with an overly-dramatic flip of his robe.

The women rushed forward, carrying Kira along with them. Names and ages were given, packs were handed out. “Name?” Kira started. The man puckered his lips and frowned. “Name, child. What’s your name?”

“K-Kira Roberts, sir.”

“Age?”

“10.”

He nodded sharply. “Alright. You have lot 12. Follow those with green packs like yours. They’ll take you to Landing.”

“Landing?” The man ignored her question and continued on his way. Kira licked dry lips, all thoughts of adventure disappearing in the wake of reality. She heaved the pack onto her shoulders and waited. Gradually, quiet fell over the room as each colonist received her bag.

Finally, the Brother emerged again. He smiled slowly, the smile never reaching his eyes. “Ladies and children, welcome to your new home. Welcome to Calypso.”



## Book One

### Chapter One

The ocean spread out beneath her like a giant blue-black blanket, the waves tinged blood-red in the setting sun. She rested her chin in her hand and felt the hammock rock gently with the movement. Time seemed frozen, hovering in place like the sun. The whole of the planet held its breath. It was a world apart, the scene beyond her mountain perch. On the western horizon, a huge orange planet hung like overripe fruit, heavy with the weight of the evening to come. Wispy clouds scuttled in the higher atmosphere, but it was strangely clear for Calypso. Pterybirds swooped just over the rocks below, snapping at fish flung up by waves and daring death to catch them. Their horseshoe bodies shimmered yellow-gold in the fading light. They looked like flashes of lightning against the surf. The air was thick with the smell of summer and fruit and wonder, but Kira's eyes were distant. She fiddled with the slender arrow in her hand, thinking. End over end, the arrow flipped around her fingers. Amber eyes watched the world prepare for the night, but the mind behind them was miles away. Her thoughts refused to release their hold on her. The end of the arrow bobbed against her arm, almost friendly, and she slowly came out of her reverie.

Kira gave a small sigh and rolled her head back and forth. Hours of sitting had left her stiff and sore. The hammock swung lazily as she pushed herself up, long legs stretching for the floor. She glanced outside the cave at the setting sun. It was just about time to hunt. Kira paused, arrow held between two fingers, to watch as the sun touched the sea and flattened along the horizon. It seemed to pop, leaking light across the sea. As if on cue, the sky began to blush with hints of night. She stepped to the edge of the cave and let her bare toes grip the edge. Nothing stood between her

and the sea below but the wind. The adrenaline rushed through her. Hundreds of feet below, the surf roared for her. A blast of salty sea air caught her off-guard and she gasped. It felt good, the mist from the waves below. It was cold and bitter and refreshing. Kira stepped back and grinned, running her hands through short hair. Night was coming and she was still alive. For the moment, that was all that mattered. A pterybird shrieked below her and her eyes narrowed. It swept away from the surf and headed for the vast greenery that edged the ocean. Something caught her eye and Kira pursed her lips. A distant shadow hovered on the far horizon, a smudge of darkness over the forest. Shadowy wings slowly turned to face the sea. Distant eyes watched night overcome the water. She stifled a shiver. There was no place for fear, she reminded herself. Fear would only make her careless, and there was no room for error. Not now.

She knelt next to her quiver and slid the bare arrows out. In the rapidly vanishing light, they looked like slender bones haphazardly thrown together. Gently, she picked the first up, balancing it in her palm. This was the best time of day, the moment when Calypso became hers. It took her moments to tip the arrows. Slender fingers went through mechanical motions, tying, twisting, slipping the bundles into the rough-cut slot. The tip rarely broke the calloused skin on her hands anymore. Any nicks left her unfazed after so many years with the poison. She had long since overcome the tendency to pass out from one thorn. Survival depended on it. She slid the last bundle of five needles into her hand and neatly tipped the arrow. The creatures here were a little more immune than her frail human body. She dropped the finished arrow into the quiver and stood. Her bow sat against the wall, the white wood a stark contrast to the pock-marked lava walls. In the fading light it looked like polished bone. The thought sent chills down her spine and she smiled again. During the day, she hit. At night, she refused to play the coward. Kira slipped the quiver and bow over her should and headed into the darkness.

The mountain was a mass of tunnels, its lava tubes hopelessly intertwined. Sulfur clung to the rocks and perfumed the air. The smell hinted to the activity below, a reminder of its more violent nature. Kira wasn't fool enough to pretend it was entirely safe, but her life had been forfeit long ago. Any danger the mountain posed now was minor compared to what lay outside. The volcano would explode out the side



again, anyway, through the destroyed wall that spilled into the sea. It was a lopsided giant, majestic on one front and crippled on the other. She worked her way down through the tunnels, fingers slipping along the walls. The faint sulfurous smell steadily grew as she worked her way lower. It was comforting, the smell. This was home, or as close to home as she'd ever had. Carefully, she skirted a hole in the tunnel floor and headed west.

Gradually a dim light filled the tunnel, the tunnel lit faintly orange from the light outside. Kira gripped her bow tighter. The night was magic to her, how it could be both orange and purple. The twin planet reflected light like a moon and tinted everything with its color. This place was completely different from the one she had left. It was a drug, terrifying and addicting. She stood at the mouth of the cave and took a deep breath. Thousands of scents assailed her senses: the crisp, salty smell of the ocean, the spicy smell of the earth, the cloying smell of flowers. The night was clear, stars standing out like knife points in a velvet sky. Thunder rumbled on the horizon and birds cackled in the trees. She took another breath, then grabbed the canvas pack flung against the entrance. She breathed deeply, savoring the moment, and stepped out.

The night was humid, the distant horizon already bubbling with the hints of a storm. Bugs buzzed in her ears and lantern flowers folded themselves up into purple buds of light. The world called to her once the sun had set. The shadows and the darkness wrapped around her like a cloak. There were hidden dangers during the day. The monsters walked then. The thought itself sent a chill through her. No, the night was her time. Kira slipped from shadow to shadow, feet silent across the jungle floor. The nighttime suited her personality; the very air breathed of solitude. She allowed the barest hint of a smile. Yes, nighttime was her time. The daytime held too much life, too much danger for her. Here, she could melt into the shadows or dance through orange light.

The night air enveloped her and she followed an invisible path through the forest, pausing under rock outcroppings to search the sky. The twin was still rising, its bulk covering almost a third of the sky. It brushed soft orange light onto the tops of the trees and dappled the forest floor, but that was all it touched. There were no animals out now, not near her. As she crept through the trees, she looked up at the vines and branches above her. Tonight they seemed strangely empty, like they were used to

having their boughs full of chatter and bustle. Her skin tingled ominously and Kira swallowed. Eight years of hunting and she still couldn't shake that feeling. She wasn't one to scare easily, but the hairs stood up on the back of her neck. She slipped into a shallow cave and held her breath. Maybe she had missed something. Maybe there was a reason that there were so few nocturnal creatures. She strained to hear any noise that might give away her imaginary boogy man. The night stayed silent save for the sound of insects.

Something touched her back and she started. The arrow slid easily into place, bow string taut. she searched the shadows for signs of life, slowly backing out of the cave. It was too narrow in the back for her to go deeper, but that didn't mean something else hadn't. After moments of stillness, Kira forced herself to lower her bow and breathe. Slipping the arrow back into her quiver, she gave the little cave one more look. Nothing moved. There had to be a logical explanation. There always was. She strained to look at her back and felt a wave of annoyance. It was a drip, probably from the cave ceiling. Thoroughly chagrined, she slipped her bow back across her shoulders and kept going.

She had ten traps to check. It had been a while since she'd had anything meatier than fish. As delicious as the creatures were, there was only so much bacon-flavored fish meat a person could eat. Kira slipped around a knarled tree and pushed aside the drooping branches. Milky-white flowers bobbed against her arm and she brushed them away. The first trap was just ahead, a little circle of sticks surrounded by string and attached to a near-by sapling. Over the years, Kira had perfected the trap. While not as neat as she'd hoped, it did the job well. From a distance, the creamy string was clearly visible, lit by the surrounding flowers. It stood out in stark contrast to the dark vegetation around it, glowing like a black light. She followed the low down and groaned. The trap was untouched, empty and gloating. She felt a vague sense of disappointment, then straightened. This was only the first trap. There were nine more. No use getting upset over one, she reminded herself. She crept forward and reset the trap, listening carefully for any unfamiliar sounds. She frowned as her fingers slid up the string and into the crook of the sapling. It looked like something had brushed the latch and moved it out of the branches. No wonder it hadn't caught anything. She left a cube of fish in the center of the circle and headed on.

Her feet were silent as they pushed off roots and rocks. Years of going barefoot had left them tough but quiet. Working alone only added to that. Less of a mark on this world, less of a trail to track her. She didn't take so much that it couldn't be replaced in a few days, letting her stay closer to home. Even now, Kira could see the mountain through the trees. She never went farther than half a mile from the base. Survival demanded that it be no further than a few seconds away.

The mountain was one of the few safe places on the planet. Everywhere else was ruled mercilessly by Calypso's indigenous. She watched them from her room as they patrolled the forest below, huge shadows overwhelming the sky. She had long since gotten over her fear of them. Fear was a crutch for the weak-minded. Weakness on Calypso was something she couldn't afford if she hoped to survive. She paused to listen and slipped into another rocky overhang.

The night was still. The wind whispered through the trees and thunder rumbled again. She peered up at the forest canopy. The cool rock under her palm helped steady her. On nights like these, she had to be even more diligent. Even though she hadn't seen any of the patrollers for months, she refused to relax. The creatures couldn't melt through the rock and the black-skinned people refused to go near them. She patted the outcrop's walls once and stepped back into the open. The natives' stony weakness was the only thing keeping her alive. Without the mountain as her refuge, she would have been quick bait for Calypso's children. Kira shrugged the quiver higher up and flexed her fingers. The next trap lay just ahead. A stick cracked and she froze, bow ready. Her breath caught in her throat as she peered through the underbrush. Finally, she lowered it but left it notched. If they were out here, she would be ready.

The natives were like nothing she had seen before. Humanity had run across a few different alien races in its quest for supremacy across the universe but none had been anything like these. The people were tall, close to seven feet, and they had pitch-black skin. Florescent markings swirled across their face and chests, breaking through the blackness. The marks reminded her of the tribal tattoos some of the colonists had, all full of swirls and slashes and dots. They glowed different shades of green or blue as well, mesmerizing in their strange brilliance. The people were

humanoid, the only visible difference being a sixth digit on both hands and feet. No two people were alike, but she'd begun to see a few of them more than once. Unlike the flying creatures, she used to run across them often in the forest. Their eyes terrified her the most. In her quick panicked glances of them, she'd realized there was a color within the color: gold inside green and gold inside purple. It was eerie to look at. Their fingers were unnaturally long and spider-like, echoing the slenderness in the rest of their build. Everything about them was unnatural.

Something thrashed through the trees above her and Kira slid into another of her rocky holes. The tree shook above her, pale white petals floating down, and a pterybird emerged. Its strange bow-shaped body plummeted towards the ground before sweeping upwards again. Its tail flipped across the earth and she heard a brief squeal as some creature died. The hairs on her arms stood up. She stood as it flew off, its meal curled in its tail. Compared to the flying beasts, the pterybirds were playthings. Her heart shuddered at the thought of them. They were just as odd as their riders. Her cavern hide-away on the mountain was a few hundred feet up but their wingspan still awed her. Each beast was easily as big as a house. They had huge bird-like heads covered in fur rather than feathers, and lithe feline bodies. In the beginning, the survivors had dubbed them "gryphons" after Earth's mythological eagle-lion mix. The creatures bore a strong resemblance, although their wings were the leathery sails of a bat, not a bird. It helped her originally to get over her terror. She'd watched them from above in the safety of the mountain, but she hadn't seen one up close in all the time she'd been at the mountain. Kira frowned to herself, pushing aside a fern.

As the twin planet centered above her, Kira reached the last trap. Fur was scattered haphazard around the trap, tantalizing evidence of a near victory. Gently, she picked up a clump and stood. The wind ruffled it and she let it blow away. "Dammit." Every single one of her traps had been moved so it wouldn't work. She squatted and reset the trap, fighting her rising anger. This was the fourth trip in a row that every single trap lay empty. She shouldered her pack again after baiting it and headed towards the river. Her mind was racing. Was something out there sabotaging her? The thought made her blood boil. The fish were the last hope for fresh meat she had tonight, and the prospect of another few days of them was steadily growing less appealing. The wind pulled lightly at her hair, the

scent of water cooling her slightly. Her palm slid softly over a tree, grounding her anger. There was nothing to be done about them now. Kira sighed and dug her nails into the rough bark. "Of all the nights..." In the distance, she could hear the rippling of water and her stomach rumbled hungrily. Fish or not, she needed something.

Thunder cracked above her. The storm was nearly upon her. Still, she refused to return empty-handed. The trees thinned near the river bank, their long roots the only pieces daring enough to venture out. Kira silently laid the canvas bag against a tree and steadied her bow. Adrenaline tingled through her. She flexed her hand and grinned. "Still scared of the sky, Kira?" she muttered. Rock crunched under her feet and she centered her weight. Her steps were silent as she crept towards the bank. She glanced over her shoulder into the jungle behind her and swallowed nervously. The night was silent, but Kira couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. The beach stretched before her, white stones glinting in the light. The river was a good twenty yards wide and the beach was another fifteen. Kira suppressed a shiver. She had survived being in the open before; she could do it again. Cautiously she made her way to the edge, careful not to slip into the deep waters. She couldn't shake the uneasy feeling. "This is ridiculous," she said and lowered her bow. Crouching, she stuck her hand in the water. Usually the water was rippling and bubbling with fish trying to escape. Tonight, the planet reflected serenely off the surface of the water. A sick feeling settled into her stomach and she sat back on her heels. The trap was empty. The wood frame smacked wetly against the beach, smashed on the near side. The back end waved crazily in the deeper current. "Gah!" She slapped the water and flung her bow down. She stared at the blatant sabotage, furious. She could hardly think past the anger. Was this their new tactic? Were they really that spineless? After years of chasing and shooting at her, they settled for tweaking strings and smashing sticks?

She heard a faint noise in the brush behind her and spun around, rocks crunching beneath her sudden movement. Her bow was in her hand with an arrow flying before she could think. She grabbed another one. No black-skinned monkeys were going to mess with her. They hadn't bothered her for months but this was too much. She notched another arrow and watched the bushes. The needle tip quivered slightly in front of her and she fought down the warnings in her head. She was exhausted

with always trying so hard to survive only to have this happen. What had she done wrong other than breathe? Years of careful hunting and delicate harvesting were rewarded by this? There was no movement among the trees and she slowly lowered her bow. "Bastards," she muttered, turning back to the smashed cage. "Dammit!" she cursed, kicking stones into the rushing water. "Can't even face me!" Her voice carried, scattering a few smaller birds. "Whatever..." Blistered fingers spun the arrow expertly once, then slipped it back into the quiver. She gave the trees another glance before sinking back into a crouch before the trap. She sighed. This would take hours to fix and dawn wasn't far off. THunder rumbled and lightning lit up the sky. Kira shook her head and stood. There was so much to do and so little time. The wind lifted the hair off her neck and she shivered. Fruit would be her only reward tonight.

Someone cleared his throat. Slowly Kira turned. Had her abuser finally shown his face? The arrow whispered against the wood and she searched the trees. He leaned against one of the massive winged beasts, watching her. She couldn't quite see him in the shadows. The beast snorted, huge eyes narrowed. Its wings rustled and it hissed. Slowly, she pulled her gaze away from the gryphon. The arrow followed her stare and he snorted. She watched him carefully, waiting. He licked his lips and smiled slightly. Pointed fangs glinted in the light. "You called?"

His voice was soft, melodic, and thick with sarcasm. Kira stared. He spoke English with an accent unlike anything she had heard before. Still, it was definitely English. Her ears soaked up every syllable. Kira blinked, too surprised to speak. The beast tossed its head and snorted, fine lavender-blue fur rippling with the motion. The gryphon was easily larger than anything she'd imagined. The man only came to its shoulder with the beast sitting. It said something to the other in a strange fluid language, and the man's face twitched with faint amusement. "You have something to say? You shot at us. What is it?"

Her anger slowly worked through her veins and brought her back to herself. He made it sound like she had summoned him. She stepped forward, then stopped. Was hunger worth this? And how could she be sure he was her saboteur? Her thumb traced whorls on her bow, still held down. She wasn't about to rise to his bait. He had come to her. She wouldn't be the first to break the silence. The same thought seemed to

come to him and his smile faded slightly. The strange, shadowed eyes narrowed and lost some of their amusement. Something caught her eye and she dared look away from him for a second. A slender arrow tipped with thorns twirled between long fingers. Kira blinked, then snorted at the stupidity of it all. Her enemy and he was standing in front of her chatting. How foolish was she to wait for her own death? She took mental inventory of what was around her. The mountain was to her right, just far enough to be a nuisance. She hated the thought of running. Her thumb moved against the wood, waiting, weighing the options. With the way he was fingering the arrow tips she wouldn't have much luck doing any more than pricking him. The beast said something else and it was the man's turn to snort. "She is afraid," he said, jerking his head towards her. "You're a coward, aren't? You are always running, always hiding."

"I am not." The words were quiet. She watched him tense against the gryphon's side. She raised the bow and glared at him. She'd been called many things, but coward was not one of them. Heartless, yes. Cold, yes. Coward, no. "I'm not afraid of you." The beast flexed its wings and she pulled back the bow string. The man grinned wider. She let loose the arrow, relishing the surprise in his eyes as he dodged. It slid soundlessly through his hair. "I am not a coward." His eyes narrowed dangerously. She was tempted to stay and see if he could back up his threat. Quickly, she pulled out another arrow and raised the bow, watching him. He flipped the arrow again, then slipped a finger under his own bow string. There was a different light in his eyes now and she swallowed nervously. Fighting was tempting with the way she was feeling, but something warned her that she would only end up dead.

Common sense won over the strange urge and she lowered her bow, turned, and ran. Her normal instincts took over and she was again running for her life. Her feet barely touched the ground, pushing off roots and dodging around thorns. She strained to hear their approach, arrow notched and ready. Her ears strained. There was only the silence of the forest and the sound of her fleeing steps. Her toes gripped wood, silent as she fled. She had learned well how to travel in this environment. If only that alone would save her.

The mouth of the mountain engulfed her. The coolness from the depths brushed moist fingertips across her face, the familiar smells of sulfur and



dirt comforting. A few yards in, she finally slowed to a stop. Her bow clattered to the ground as she gasped for air, hands on her knees. There wasn't enough air in the world to soothe her screaming lungs. The night was as silent as it had always been, hiding its children from her. As her breathing slowed, her mind flew through the events of the night. She shook her head and spat. Everything she had practiced had flown out the window the moment she saw him. She leaned her back against the nearest wall and slid down. Whatever had been out there tonight had nothing good in mind for her. She was the final piece that needed to be taken care of, the last one left. She would always be hunted, always followed, until she was dead. Whatever had happened tonight, it wouldn't happen again. Kira sucked in a deep breath, eyes lingering on the jungle just beyond the mountain. She had enough dried fruit and fish to last her for a week or so. That should be enough time for her world to settle and the natives to go back to their normal murderous ways. She wasn't used to this chattiness.

## Chapter Two

Dawn rose gray and rainy. The storm raged outside and the sky echoed her mind. Kira was angry. Sleeping usually helped her process things, but she was still too wired to sleep. She stood, the hammock swaying behind her. The world stretched before her, bathed in grey mist. She leaned against the wall. Hours had passed but every time she shut her eyes, images of her broken traps burned against her lids. On top of that, she couldn't get the scene from the river out of her mind. Kira let the mist from the rain coat her face as she thought. It sent shivers across her skin, and she wiped away the beads caught on her lashes. The man was so different from the monsters that had ruined her life. He had seemed almost civilized while the others had been banshees on bats. Everything about last night was wrong. It just didn't fit. He hadn't attacked her; instead, he'd waited for her to turn around. Even his dragon hadn't gone for her. Kira frowned, trying to recall the beast. She didn't remember much about his mount aside from its size. She groaned and returned to her hammock. "What is this?" She covered her eyes with her hand, trying to clear her mind.

Frustrated, Kira sat up. Pterybirds shrieked at the surf below and the ocean slammed against the rocks. The world was in as much turmoil as she was. Kira rubbed her eyes tiredly. She was going crazy. She couldn't get his face out of her mind. For once, someone had actually stepped forward. She was so used to the constant paranoia that it was nice to know which direction to look in. He didn't hide behind trees and come at her from behind or chase her through the forest like it was some kind of game. She frowned. Unless this was a new game. The thought chilled her. Either way, it felt good to get into a fight. Something in her wanted to understand why he was different, but having tea-parties with the crazies wasn't on her to-do list. She stretched and caught a whiff of herself. "Oh god..." She pulled the shirt way from her chest and wrinkled her nose. It was disgusting, crusted with sweat and dirt and river slime. No, her to-do

list for today was cleaning up.

The tunnels wove up and down, narrow and then wide and then narrow again. It was a spider web of darkness that she had long ago memorized. She could sense the slightest breeze or the smallest change in smell. Kira felt like a bat, every sense alive while her eyes remained useless. She took a deep breath, reveling in her freedom. Who thought a mass of caves could be freeing? The ground sloped steadily downward, rough beneath her feet. As she went lower, the sulfur smell grew stronger. The sound of the surf leaked through the rock, pounding out a heartbeat. Just when the sulfur smell grew unbearable, she saw a graying in the floor. Sulfur mingled with salt as she sat at the edge of the hole. Taking a deep breath, she pushed off.

The water swallowed her, its warmth seeping through her clothes and into her skin. Gasping, she came up for air. The cave was full of steam. Hot spring pools dotted the cavern floor. They hissed as waves crashed over them, steam curling and spinning with the wind from outside. Kira swam to the edge of her pool until she could stand. Peeling off her clothes, she flung them against a rock. There was a sliver of left-over soap on the edge. Making a face, she grabbed it and began scrubbing. She'd be lucky if the piece lasted long enough to clean her hair, let alone her body. The soap stung her multitude of scratches and cuts and left a soft lavender scent on the air. The dirt suds slipped off her skin, light brown clouds in the water until it was swept out to sea. Kira scrubbed every inch of her body. It had been a while since her last bath, but she was starting to run out of soap. Baths weren't necessary; soap was. Finally finished scrubbing her scalp, she dipped herself underwater. She could feel her muscles unwinding and her body relaxing. This was good.

After a while, she got out. Steam came off her skin as it hit the cave air and she shivered. "Ah..." She stretched again, relishing the feel of clean skin, and smiled. Snagging her dirty clothes, Kira left the hot springs behind and headed towards the center of the mountain. The sounds of the surf and the storm faded behind her as she worked her way ever deeper into the mountain. Kira let her fingertips trail against the wall, waiting for the dip that signaled the room behind it. Ah...there it was. She slipped around the slight corner and reached to the left. A light turned on and she was momentarily blinded. It threw blue-white light across a medium-sized

cavern. The walls were covered with boxes and trinkets and pieces of her past life, columns of plastic that reached from floor to ceiling. Black lettering marked the contents inside, but she couldn't make it out. After the darkness, the light was too much. She chuckled softly. "Maybe I am becoming part bat." Gradually her eyes acclimated and she set the light to the manual setting. The battery bar flickered green, as it should. She'd recharged the solar battery a few months back out of habit more than anything else. They were supposed to last for up to a year, but these batteries were getting old. Eight years below ground hadn't left them in the best condition.

Kira turned back to the room and grimaced. The silence was deafening. It was one of the reasons Kira avoided the place. After the sounds of the surf and the birds and life, the cavern was a shock. She couldn't help the uneasy feeling that crept over her skin. She hugged herself, trying to shake it. The place reminded her of death. It was the one place in the entire mountain that Kira hated. It was a reminder of everything that she'd lost. Suppressing a shiver, she pressed a little bump just behind her right ear. Music flooded her mind. Classic rock from the '20s beat out a steady beat, overwhelming the silence around her. Kira let out a sigh of relief.

The box she wanted was made of the clear plastic all the colonists had used for storage. It sat half-open, the first in a row of ten. Khaki pants filled the bin, women's and men's, and Kira started to dig around. It had bothered her in the beginning, wearing dead people's clothes. Survival quickly overrode that. As refreshing as it was to walk around naked, she hadn't been alone in the beginning. Now, it was just a habit. It was her safety net, reminding her that she was human. "Here we go," she muttered, tugging out a faded pair. As she pulled them on, she felt a pang of annoyance. Why couldn't women's pants do the same thing as men's? Length and width. Was that so much to ask? It wasn't like she had hips to measure for. The hem hit her a few inches above her ankle. Cursing, she slid them off and flipped open her knife. "Damn short people...make me do all the work...Them and their short legs..." She held up the mangled pants and nodded, satisfied with their new cropped appearance. Shirts were much easier. She grabbed one off the top of the "Shirts" box and slipped it over her head. The faded army logo hugged her lean frame but she didn't bother looking for another shirt. The tighter the better: there was less chance of it catching on something. Stretching, she smiled.

There was nothing quite like the feel of clean clothes.

Her eye caught something in the far corner, carefully placed on a flattened stalagmite. The stalactite above it had been sawed away to put a little motion light in the ceiling. Kira frowned, trying to remember why they'd put a light in. Curious, she walked over. Kira flicked it off when it awoke. If the other went out, this one's battery would be useful. A standard-issue box sat on the stalagmite, gray plastic walls scratched and worn. For the life of her, she couldn't remember what was inside of it. She had only come ever down here for clothes and supplies. This part of the cavern was sectioned off from the rest, free from the clutter of boxes. A lock hung from the door of the box. She let it rest in her palm, staring from the lock to the box and back. Had there ever been something they'd needed to lock up? Kira gasped as she realized what it was and knelt before the crate. Her fingers rested on its side, shaking slightly. Inside the box was the only video player they had been able to save. She hadn't seen another face in so long... Carefully, she undid the combination, her ears pricking at each click. The door let out a quiet sigh as she opened it. The back wall of the box appeared through the semi-transparent blue screen, the logo of the shuttle catching the faint light. The Earth Trade Association's emblem caught just above it, an eerie reminder of what had become of Earth.

It was the perfect safe, the plastic virtually indestructible and weatherproof. The vid-screen itself took up the entire box. It sat on a back stand like a picture frame, the computer embedded in the frame and the screen a thin mesh of LED wires. Her eyes tried to focus on the screen but kept shifting to the back of the box. She sighed. Each time she looked through a vid-screen it gave her goose bumps. It had an unnatural feel to it, both ethereal and profane. Kira rubbed her finger against her pant leg in a vain effort to get dirt off the tip, then gently touched the screen. It jumped to life, little white boxes popping up in the corner with names like "Harvest 2087" and "Welcome Isaiah." She clicked on one that said "New Year 2089" and waited. There was a soft whirring from the screen's frame.

"Is it on?" The voice was young and male and a little slow. She sat back on her heels, tingles all over.

"Yeah, but you've got the cap on, you idiot." Another male, this one slightly

irritated. Light suddenly burst onto the screen, and a pimple-marked young man peered out at her. "There. Now you can actually see what you're recording."

"Oh...well, I could see what I was recording before. The camera couldn't." The recorder sounded a little sheepish. The visible man rolled his eyes and backed up. The disembodied voice continued. "Where is everyone? It's almost midnight!"

The other shrugged. "I asked Joan to make some pies, and Sam said he was going to bring some of that fruit wine he finally finished, but I don't know where they are." He started to say something else, but she reached out and pressed the fast-forward button. Chit-chat had always bored her; now wasn't any different. When she stopped, there was a crowd of people. There were men and women and children, all rosy-faced and smiling. These were her family. In the least, she shared the same 46 chromosomes with them. Kira watched, devouring the sight of humanity. They were watching a huge digital clock. She could remember it from her own village, a huge solar-powered beast that kept time exactly. "7...6...5...4...3...2...1!" they all chanted. "HAPPY NEW YEAR!" There was kissing and drinking and cheering, and one little boy ewwed at his mother and father. Someone in the back shouted, "Three years and still alive!" Everyone laughed. There was a pit in her stomach as she watched them, happy and free. Three years... They had one year left, then. Kira swallowed the sudden lump in her throat. People... God, she was lonely.

She chose another video. A group of women were huddled together and an older woman pulled herself out of the crowd, wagging a finger. "Get out of here. I know what you're planning, I do. Don't think you can get around me like that. You boys can't see her until she walks down that aisle. Now shoo!" That one was a little easier to watch, even if weddings bored her. The next video had a gurgling baby and a laughing older brother. The brother bounced the baby and threw her in the air, and the baby howled with laughter. She smiled and brushed her fingers across the smiling pair, their faces warping under the touch. The next was a play. Then there was one of women shucking corn.

She eventually lost track of the videos. She was swimming in humanity, reliving other people's memories. She could feel her own memories slowly

coming back. She had resented her life, not these people. In their own way, they'd been kind to her. The gryphons had taken this all away from her. They took the friends and the leaders and the teachers and destroyed it. They destroyed everything. The screen fogged over and Kira hastily blinked the tears away. These people were so real. Each one had a name and a life and a story that no one would ever know. That was how life was supposed to be, there in the little clear screen: happy and busy and going.

The videos played themselves out and moved on to the next until she found herself watching a young girl. Her auburn hair was long and loose, hanging down the middle of her back in copper waves. Her golden-brown eyes stared into the camera. Kira held her breath. The little girl's eyes were serious and not at all congruent with her age. She couldn't have been more than thirteen, still boyish and round-faced. Sullenly, she kept glaring at whoever was behind the camera. Kira caught herself tracing the lines of the face, her fingers denting the screen and warping the image. Hastily, she drew back her hand. That little girl was her. She was so innocent, so intent on talking about her fish. There was no fear in her eyes and there were no scars on her face. It was high and brisk, the voice of someone very confident and very annoyed. It hit her harder than any of the other videos. She had changed. This Kira, this child, had been bitter coming to this planet, but she hadn't known hardship yet. She hadn't seen death. She had felt it, but she hadn't seen it. Something in her wanted that little girl back. Kira couldn't stand it. She pressed the "off" button and slammed the door to the safe shut.

\* \* \* \* \*

Darkness greeted her. She closed her eyes again, wishing for the relief of sleep. Kira lay in the dark for a while, listening to the silence. Every now and then, there was a distant drip. The images played through her mind again and again in the darkness, their lives haunting her. Of everyone, she was the only one to survive. It seemed like some cruel twist of fate. She swallowed, her throat still thick from her crying, and sat up. The light sensor above her flickered on, its light flickering off the frame of the vid-screen. Kira paused. It seemed wrong to shut them away again down



here, but the pain was still too much. She massaged the back of her neck and sighed. "Just for now, I'll leave you down here." Gingerly, she shut and locked the box.

She arrived in her room in a daze. Her foot caught on the lip of the cavern, jarring her back to reality. Kira leaned against the entrance and stared out across Calypso. The night was black and cloudy. Except for occasional lightning flashes, everything was dark. The air was charged with the coming storm, ozone pricking at her skin. Kira watched the waves roll below her. The surf thundered against the cliffs, oblivious to anything except its carved out path. She chuckled and made her way to her hammock. "Now I'm envious of waves? I must really be losing it."

She went to stand at the edge, letting her hair catch in the wind and flip against her face. The ragged hairs tickled her cheeks and nose. She pushed it behind her ears, her fingers lingering in the choppy ends. Once her hair had been a thing of pride. She remembered the girl from the video with the long flowing copper waves. After watching another woman's neck break because of her ponytail, Kira cut it all off. Pride was useless on this planet.

She frowned, eyes following the coast in search of the gryphon's ever present shadow. Nothing hovered today in the gloom. Kira bit her lip and settled back on the hammock. Yesterday hadn't been like any other attack before. She tried to remember exactly what happened. What had he wanted? It was so uncharacteristic for any of them to stand still, let alone speak to her. Kira stared at her hands, trying to figure it out. Had something changed? Was this a new tactic? "ugh." She scrubbed her face with her hands and flopped back. A cave bat stared down at her, its triple eyes swiveling from her to the hammock and back to her. "Thinking won't feed my belly, will it?" The bat squeaked and dropped, wings opening inches above her face. Kira watched as its dark form vanished into the dark.

Hungry, she stood and grabbed a canvas pack against the far wall. The aroma of fruit wafted her and her stomach rumbled. "Dinnertime," she breathed. Kira reached in and grabbed—nothing. Panicking, she opened the bag as wide as it could go, but it was too dark to see into it. She shook it upside-down and ran her hand all inside. Nothing. "Shit!" The bag

smacked into the wall. The fruit had been the last food she had. Her mind raced as she tried to figure out what happened. She should have had more than enough. Something skittered in the darkness, eyes flickering blue-green before vanishing. Kira groaned and sat down heavily. Of course, the cave bat alone should have been a clue. Did Calypso really have a vendetta against her? She grimaced and tossed the bag against the wall. Now she had to go outside. Unarmed or not, she had to eat. She hadn't had meat in days and the fruit had just barely been getting her by. "Shit, shit, shit!" The cave echoed as she pounded the ground. "Really?" Her luck was absolutely terrific. No weapons and no food. Lightning flashed again, lighting up the cave. Her bow leaned against the wall, its bleached wood bright in the sudden light. All of her arrows were gone, dropped at the river and ruined in the rain. Pushing herself up, Kira searched for her stash of untipped arrows. "One...two...three..." They clinked softly against each other as she counted. "Twenty should be enough." Kira glanced around the cave, searching for her little cup of thorns. She could always make more. Her eyes fell on the empty cup and she snorted. "Of course it'd be empty." Without a weapon, she would have to stay here. It would be suicide to go out so soon after an encounter. Her stomach grumbled angrily.

*"You are always running, always hiding."*

Kira shivered and looked behind her. His voice had seemed so close, so mocking. She searched the little cavern, almost expecting him to jump out. She shook her head angrily. This was insane. "It's just the hunger." She watched the clouds scuttle across the sky and bit her thumb nail. She had water. She would be fine for a few days. her stomach clenched and she winced, holding her stomach. "Two days. I can make it for two days." Angrily she kicked at the empty canvas bags. Their smell was almost unbearable.

*"You're a coward, aren't you?"*

Kira flinched. No one had ever called her a coward. She dug her nails into her palms, trying to fight the urge to hide. Her stomach rumbled again and she threw her hands up. "I give up. I'm not a coward, and I need food. If i

can just fix the trap..." She stood and forced herself to breathe. The trap would fill up quick enough and she could hide out for another week or so.

Lightning flashed again and illuminated her bow. Its edges were smooth from nights spent perfecting the finish and the ends curved wickedly out. She picked it up, trailing her fingers down the curve of the bow. It was heavy enough to be a club and the ends were sharp enough to cause serious injury. She had her weapon. She had no excuse not to go out.

*"You have something to say?"*

Kira grabbed her bow and headed down.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thunder rumbled through a forest heavy with the scent of rain and ozone. It wrapped her in an electric blanket, raising the hairs on the back of her neck. Kira glanced up at the heavy clouds and grimaced. She wouldn't have long to fix the trap. Sighing, she readjusted her bow. The forest was still, boughs heavy with fruit and the weight of the storm to come. "Let's get this over with."

She moved quickly, careful not to leave tracks. Fallen leaves and petals stuck to her legs, but she herself left nothing behind. Kira forced herself to stay in the open a little longer before ducking under an overhang. As much as she tried to deny it, his accusations had hit home. Her mind was in turmoil. By nature, she hated Calypso's inhabitants. They were vicious, blood-thirsty animals whose only goal in life was to torment her. She had spent years running from them and praying for their collective deaths. Kira sighed to herself, brushing a vine out of her way.

Kira dug her nails into the bottom of her palm, trying to center herself. Now was not the time to lose focus. Her bow tapped lightly against her shoulder, keeping beat with her steps, and she found herself humming a tune from earlier. Thunder rolled again, and she glanced up. Kira was in the open, in the dark, racing a storm. She dodged a fern frond and

jumped from one root to another. The trees whispered in the growing wind, their bright blue bark standing out in the flashes. Watching the sky, she hummed quietly to herself. Tonight she would live or die. She needed all the courage she could get, even if it was from some crappy 2020s rock band.

Kira heard the rush of the water minutes before she reached the fringe of the forest. Adrenaline pumping, she scanned the bank. Nothing moved. Licking dry lips, she skirted the open beach and knelt before a massive knarled tree. Under a near-by bush was a shallow hole where she had hidden her supplies months back. Holding the branches away, Kira pulled back the tarp. Wood gleamed slickly in the storm's light. It didn't look any worse for wear, even with the constant rain. Kira glanced over her shoulder before pulling out two three-foot long poles. The wood was still supple, and she threw them towards the trap. A few pieces of tack and some string and she would be good. She pulled a fist-sized piece off the block, hefting the tack in her hand. It was silvery and semi-solid in its pre-use form, almost like a super duct tape putty. In the early days, the survivors had scavenged boxes upon boxes of the stuff. They were gathering dust in the storage cavern now, next to all the other remnants of their lives. Her hand tightened on the putty and she sighed. Those thoughts were best left to after she'd fixed the trap. Tonight was about facing fears, not reliving them. "Alright, Kira. You have 30 minutes." She tossed it up and caught it, feeling surprisingly good for her earlier depression. There was something empowering about facing death. The irony made her smile.

She stood, all senses alight for any hint of company. The trees bent in the wind, leaves brushing her face. Lightning tattooed her skin briefly before leaving her in darkness again. She took a deep breath, slipped her bow off, and stepped to the edge of the shadows. The rods quivered in her other hand, their sides clicking together. Kira licked her lips nervously again and stepped onto the beach. Within moments, she was at the water's edge, crouched with her bow at the ready. The forest bowed and twisted but nothing moved in the darkness. Kira narrowed her eyes. Would she see him even if she tried? Lightning cracked above her and she shook herself out of her thoughts, casting one more glance at the trees before setting her bow within reaching distance of the water. Grabbing the poles, she waded out into the water and began her repairs.

Over the next hour the lightning steadily grew closer and louder. Her hands worked fast in the cold water, untying and cutting the strings of the net and retying and fastening them onto the new poles. The net was slippery with algae and it took almost all her concentration to get it tied and glued on. "Dammit!" The wayside ripped out of her hands again and Kira lunged for it, her fingers cramping from the chill water. The wood bit into her palms and her knees burned from scraping the river rocks, but she had the side. The current pulled at it, trying to rip it from her grasp. "Just...a little... more..." Her arms ached, exhausted from fighting the water. Finally, the two ends were tied and puttied. She allowed herself a moment's admiration. With the wayside net fixed, the others would take only a few minutes. Kira smiled briefly. She still had some small skill. She hadn't lost it all in the months since she'd made the trap. The air was heavy, casting a thick silence over the forest. Even the rush of water was muted. Thunder split the sky again, breaking through her thoughts. The lightning flashes were closer together now, but the rain had yet to make its appearance. This would be a big storm. She needed to hurry. Kira focused her attention on the trap, shutting out everything else. It wouldn't matter what he did if she let herself get caught in the storm. The net held on the last piece of the side. She stepped back with her hands on her hips and admired her work. Already there were a few fish. One nipped at her ankle and she kicked at it.. Satisfied, Kira turned to pull herself out.

He was watching her. She swallowed her terror and lowered her foot to the ground. He squatted by the edge of the forest, a strange expression on his face. Tonight, his markings glowed a muted green. She could have sworn that they had been blue the night before. They stared at each other mutely for a few seconds. She licked her lips, shivering from the cold and the wind.

"It will rain." Kira blinked, surprised. His face hardened slightly, and she arched an eyebrow. "It will."

She shook her head in disbelief. Water dripped off her as she pulled herself out of the river. "Probably," she said. Kira hated how her voice shook. Even now, her past refused to let her go. She knelt slowly and picked up her bow, never taking her eyes off him.

The man stood, keeping his movements small. Kira's eyebrows rose

higher. Was he trying not to scare her? or was this another trap? The gryphon was missing tonight and Kira couldn't help looking into the shadows. Was it waiting for her? Hiding in the bushes for when she ran? Something dripped onto her shoulder and she dropped to a crouch, bow balanced lightly in front of her. The man snorted and she glared at him. Another raindrop hit her on the cheek. He nodded as if to say "I told you so," but Kira ignored him. Brushing the drops off her shoulder, she stood and dropped the bow to her side.

He snorted again. "What did you build?"

Kira frowned, eyes darting from the river to him. "Excuse me?"

"What did you build?" He stepped forward slowly, muscles rippling under his skin. His marks were a light green now, swirls of deep blue tinging the edges. Kira stood frozen. Her mind seemed to have deserted her. All the questions she had wanted to ask vanished as he approached. "What... did...you...build?" he asked again. Kira wrinkled her nose at his patronizing tone. They watched each other, but Kira refused to play his game. Lightning flashed, illuminating the banks, and the skies ripped open. The rain pounded the ground, drenching her in moments. Kira grimaced at the suddenness so typical of tropical storms. He glared up at the sky and then at her. "Come." Long fingers motioned for her to follow him. She tightened her grip on the bow. "Come!" he said again. He didn't look like someone who was used to being denied.

Kira lifted her bow slightly, feeling the first hints of real fear. Her voice deserted her and she licked her lips. "No." He stepped back in surprise, then hissed. She steadied herself on the rocks, uncomfortable in his stare. "I'm not an idiot. I won't follow you."

He rolled his eyes in annoyance. "It's raining."

She nodded. "I'll survive. With you, I don't have that guarantee." The rain bit into her skin, harsher than any Earthen rain. She hid the pain, focusing all her energy on him.

His mouth twitched. "I won't kill you." A hoarse laugh escaped her mouth. He honestly expected her to believe him. When she didn't move, he bared his teeth and headed towards her. Kira braced herself to run but he was at her side in a moment. Distantly, she noticed that it only took him a few

strides. "Come." He grabbed her wrist and pulled her towards the forest. Her bare feet slid over the rocks, unable to slow his progress. Panicking, she swung her bow and caught him square in the jaw. He staggered back and let go of her wrist, but she couldn't move. The pieces of her bow lay scattered across the ground. His face had broken her bow. Terrified, she watched him work his jaw. Those weird eyes fixed on her and the blood drained from her body. His hand was steel on her wrist before she could move. "You will come." Kira didn't have a choice.

As they stumbled into the forest, Kira cursed her arrogance. She should have waited until she was starving to come back to her fish trap. She should have fixed the trap faster. She shouldn't have hit him. There were so many things she should have done. Why had she let his words get to her? Leaves slapped in her face, and she kept tripping over roots and into plant pods. They lit up purple-blue in protest, one exploding across her foot. The fluorescent nectar clung to her leg, eerily bright in the darkness of the storm. She gasped as he pulled her through the jungle. Her wrist looked tiny in his massive hand and she suppressed the urge to scream. So far he hadn't done anything directly violent, even after her failed attempt to hurt him. Her mind raced. Was there a reason he needed her alive? The pain from the rain and the effort of running slows her mind down. Kira took a deep breath, focusing on his back. If he wanted her alive, she could use that to her advantage.

A root tripped her and she pitched forward. Blue bark jumped out at her, its surface studded with thick yellow thorns. He jerked her up, inches away from one, and she screamed in agony. Fire lanced up her arm, her shoulder completely dislocated. He didn't stop to fix it, just switched to the other wrist and kept going. Kira bit back sobs, lights dancing before her from the pain. She could barely see ten feet in front of her, and the mountain was completely lost in the rain. Everything was a blur of grey, whether because of the storm or by her shock she couldn't tell. Her wrist began to ache as the skin pulled under his grip, and she focused on the pain. It helped bring her back to reality. Pain shot up her arm as he pulled her over a log; Kira bit her lip to keep back the cry. She had to think. She had to get away. She was smarter than this. There had to be a way.

Leaves whipped around in the wind, slapping against her face as he dragged her ever deeper into the forest. She winced and stared at his



back. Eight years ago, she had run like this with another man. Kira bit the inside of her cheek, tasting blood. The panic receded slightly. She refused to think about that day. The ground gave way beneath her and she slammed into his back. He hissed and glared over his shoulder at her. Lightning lit up his face, transforming it into a horrific mask. Visions of the attacks assaulted her senses and she could suddenly smell the acid and burning flesh again. Lightning flashed again and he pulled her forward. It was too much. The videos and his face, it was all too much. She bit her lip, trying to hold back the terror. "No! No...no no no no no no!" The moan spiraled into a scream. Kira writhed in his grip, surprising him enough to twist out of it. Her dislocated arm swung limply beside her. The memories were too strong. "No! I won't let you! No!" she screamed at him. His hand snapped around to grab her wrist, but he paused, blue-gold eyes watching it swing lifeless. Kira spun around to run, but he caught her good wrist. She could feel the skin stinging but instincts were taking over. He didn't say a word, only looked at her. His eyes picked up the light from the plant pods, making them glow a freakish purple. Light flashed again and the world shook with the thunder. She tried to get away from his gaze, but those eyes kept watching her. A thousand deaths echoed in her mind. The rain sheeted down around them, falling in heavy drops from the leaves above. Kira twisted again and he jerked her straight. She cried out in pain. She wouldn't end up dead like all the others. She had to survive. Of all the colonists, she'd been the only one to make it this far. She couldn't die now.

Kira launched herself at him. Her nails just missed his face, but she was free and running before he could react. Bare feet slapped against the ground as she ran. There was no sense to the world. Everything was dark, but her instincts had taken over. In the dim light she could just make out footholds. Kira's breath burned in her throat and she hugged her arm to her chest. Her feet flew across the ground. The forest was a green strobe light. Kira couldn't focus. The trees stood out in stark relief against the darkness of the storm. Blue trunks jumped out at her, their gnarled arms grasping and reaching. She clumsily dodged a thorn, slipping in the mud and slamming into the trunk of a sap tree. Its bulbous body loomed up against the sky outlined by lightning, a giant towering over her. Kira screamed and ran the opposite direction. The fear was overwhelming. She had never been so afraid, so sure she was going to die. Vines slapped against her face, catching her arms and scraping across her skin. Plant pods and lantern flowers exploded in light as she thrashed through

them. She couldn't breathe. Memories long suppressed choked her. One moment she was running through a tropical storm and the next she was stumbling along with the sounds of the attack in her ears.

She was stupid, so, so stupid! How could she ever have thought that confronting him would solve anything? Her caution had kept her alive. She was stronger than this. She was the only human still alive. She was currently on the way to being dead. The ground was slick with mud and leaf clutter. Her feet kept slipping. Every breath was a dagger between her ribs. Her shoulder was a mass of agony. Everything ached on her but she couldn't stop running. She couldn't. A pitiful keening sound filled her ears and made her skin crawl. Horrified, she realized the sound came from her. She stumbled, gasping for air. He wouldn't catch her. She wouldn't let him. Her feet were cut and throbbing, but Kira kept running. Everything ached. She was on her last reserve, and she could feel her body giving out. Her legs were tingling and numb. Her sides were spasming. There wasn't enough air in the entire forest to stop the fire in her chest. Water was everywhere, dripping in her face, stinging against her skin. She was drowning on land.

Kira searched through the trees and rain for the mountain, her hair throwing water into her eyes and sticking to her face. The forest disappeared into a gray sheet of water and the mountain was invisible. She stumbled again as her knee gave out. It slammed into a root and she pitched forward with a startled grunt. Blue bark jumped out at her; she threw her hand out and caught herself just above a thorn. Her palm slid along the jagged edge and she pushed off as hard as she could. Blood ran down her hand, dripped off her fingers. The thorn split down the center and vomited needle thorns out. She covered her head. Her palm stung where the poison had touched it, but the cut wasn't deep. It was strangely bright, a light crimson against the whiteness of her skin. She flicked her fingers and pushed herself to the side. The needles fell around her, some sticking into her forearms. Most went over her head. Kira pulled them out as quickly as she could and pushed herself up. Her leg from the knee down was momentarily numb. It throbbed uselessly, making her slow. She had to keep running. She could already feel the poison numbing her fingers. Soon it would work its way through her arms, to her shoulders, to her heart... Kira shuddered, her movements becoming more and more sluggish. She staggered between the trees. She was going to

die. Kira was going to die just like all the others: hunted, crying, and pathetic. She had to get up. She had to keep going.

Her knee was a dead-weight, but she forced herself to keep moving. Each step was easier. Each step left her waiting to die. Thunder crashed again and she started. The world was lit briefly in white light, and she saw him running next to her, long legs keeping pace. He was watching her, his blue-gold eyes following her disjointed movements. She couldn't look away. She didn't want to look at him. Why had she ever thought to prove her courage? He gave a ghost of a smile. Then, she slipped on a fallen frond and hit her head. Everything vanished.

## Chapter Three

A drum. At first, Kira thought the pounding rhythm was a drum. As the darkness slowly began to fade, she realized it was her heartbeat. Kira kept her eyes closed. It took a few moments for the pounding to lessen. Slowly her senses returned to her. Everything ached. her knee throbbed in time with her head. The kneecap felt massively larger than it should. She worked her way up her body, silently cataloguing her injuries. From the smell of the air, she was somewhere in the forest. There was no lingering scent of sulfur; instead, the air was light, almost peppery. She kept her breath steady, careful not to move.

Her right palm felt crusted, the center burned from the base of her fingers to the top of her wrist. The hand would be useless for a while, then, with a gash that long. Thunder rumbled above and she stifled the urge to wince. Breathe in. Breathe out. The pain receded and she worked her way up from her wrist. The skin there felt tender, but the fire on her arm was more worrying. Kira tried again to remember what happened, but her mind drew a blank. How had she gotten so many needles in her? She easily recognized the familiar burning sensation, but it was the strongest she'd ever felt. It reached tendrils of heat up her arm, already coiling into her shoulder. Thunder cracked again and a stray breeze brushed her face. It smelled of rain and cinnamon. Kira swallowed. She had been captured. Everything was over. Lightning flashed again, blinding even against her closed eyelids and her breath caught in her throat. So her nightmare had been reality. She could feel her left arm throbbing uselessly beside her, the joint still out of place. Needles from running into the thorn tree. Torn knee from falling. She turned her head slightly and a gasp escaped. The pain shot up the back of her skull and she fought to steady her breathing again. With the other injuries, she had had a slight chance of escape. A concussion left her completely open.

Resigned, Kira focused instead on her prison. The sounds of rain were

distant and hollow-sounding, so she was somewhere deep. Other than the rain, the room was silent. Slowly, she opened her eyes. She squinted, trying to see what little of her surroundings she could in the dark. Lightning flashed, searing her eyes. She closed them and waited for the world to stop spinning. In that brief moment, her worst fears had been confirmed. Walls towered above her on both sides, the sky just barely visible through branches above her.

“You’re awake.” The voice was deep, fluid-sounding. Her breath caught in her throat and she bit her lip. Survival demanded she run, but her body could hardly move. She opened her eyes slightly, searching the darkness for the origin of the voice. The words were very clearly English, a strange English that she’d heard before somewhere. The shadows were too deep. She couldn’t see her own hand, let alone someone else. The ceiling was briefly lit again; branches tangled overhead, disappearing into a thick blanket of green. Lightning filtered through, leaving little patches of white across her nose. White spots danced across her vision, obscuring any chance she had of seeing her capture or her escape. Kira sighed and stared upwards again. Little puffs of green drifted down every now and then. She watched one as it floated down to settle on her nose. “Don’t move.” A black shape moved across her face and gently picked the leaf off her nose.

She watched the fingers move up and away. Her head throbbed when she tried to follow it into the darkness and she grimaced. His voice had been close. She closed her eyes, willing the pain away. What was he waiting for?

A shape bobbed into view overhead, blue-gold eyes travelling from her head down her body. “I’m surprised. I didn’t think a human would be so durable.”

“Oh, shit!” Kira was up and against the wall of the tree before she could think. White fireworks of pain exploded across her vision and she blacked out.

\* \* \* \* \*

The drums beat against the inside of her skull. Kira licked dry lips and slowly opened her eyes. She was still propped up against the wall. Her focus came back more quickly this time and she searched the darkness for the alien man. She could just make out a darker shadow in front of her. She flinched, then grabbed her head with a ragged gasp. "Oh my fucking god..." The shadow man backed up slowly. Kira watched him through watering eyes, relieved. Still, nothing fit. She propped her elbow on her good knee and held her head in her hand. He squatted a few yards away, the lightning illuminating him every few minutes. Kira swallowed and forced herself to show the same indifference. His eyes were narrowed and his dagger was out, but he made no move towards her. The poison was already fast at work. She tried to flex her injured hand. Nothing happened. Startled, she ventured a look down, fighting the dizziness. Black blood seeped slowly from the wound. Kira grimaced. Of course the hand was numb. The thorn and all its defenses had sliced it open. Carefully, she pulled the wounded hand into her lap. The man shifted and she returned her eyes to him. Her pulse raced, waiting. Every defense she had was gone, yet he didn't move. His marks slowly began to brighten, the light catching in his eyes and bathing the ground around him in dim blue light. She took a steadying breath and met his gaze. "What do you want from me?"

He flipped the knife between his fingers. The sight of six fingers unnerved her further. He followed her gaze and stilled the knife. "What did you build?" She licked dry lips and said nothing. He watched her, his thumb rhythmically rubbing the hilt of the knife. He smiled slightly and flipped it. "What did you build?" he repeated. Lightning reflected off the barest hint of fang and chills broke out along Kira's arms. The blood rushed to her face. He couldn't break her that easily. He frowned and sat back on his heels, marks lightening to a powdery blue. Kira looked him over. She had never seen him before now, she realized. He wasn't one of her usual tormentors. He sighed. "I know you can understand me." She flinched as he leaned forward. His eyes watched her, the blue-gold irises catching the light. "Tell me: what did you build?"

Kira curled her lip. "And if I don't tell you?"

"Stupid human." The man stood and stared down at her. "It's a simple

question. I need the answer.”

She frowned and sucked in a breath. The poison had reached her chest. It was slowly getting harder to breathe. “Mine was a simple question, too. What if I don’t tell you?” She met his gaze, eyes steely with determination. Something was off about him. She could hardly think past the pressure in her head and chest, but something kept her quiet. “Why do you need an answer so badly?”

The man smiled briefly. “Amazing... Even in the face of death, you refuse to give in.” He shook his head and walked to the far side of the tree, his movements jerky and disjointed in the lightning flashes. “I wonder how long you’ll hold out...” He settled against the wall and flicked something behind him. A minty green light lit the cavern, its light illuminating the bulbous body of the tree. Thick walls bowed outward and Kira followed the green lace up. She closed her eyes for a moment, trying to compose herself. The green light twisted its way from the floor to the top branches, an intricate web of fungus. The sap tree was huge; there was no way she was getting out. Gritting her teeth, she looked at her capture. She swallowed, her mouth dry with pain. He frowned and leaned forward, fingers tseepled before him. “You have about twenty minutes of consciousness left. Can you afford to ignore my question?”

Kira snorted and winced as the world shivered before her. “Ah....” She rested her head against the wall and waited for the pounding to slow. “I have no reason to answer you,” she hissed, wrapping her good arm around her chest. His eyebrows rose. “There is nothing good about you people. I know how this ends.” She gasped and curled forward against her knee. Fireworks exploded across her vision again, but the pain in her chest was worse. The man stayed silent, watching her agony. She raised her gaze and spat. “Either way, I die.”

He smiled coldly. “So you understand the situation. What did you build?” he repeated. His eyes bored into her. She wrinkled her nose, body crippled by the poison. She took shallow breaths, trying to keep conscious. “This will all be easier if you tell me,” he said.

Kira snorted, then gasped against the wall of pain. His calm diplomacy was irritating. She straightened slowly against the wall, fighting the



scream welling up. His eyes narrowed at her expression. "Easier for you or for me?"

He grinned ferally, running his hand through his hair. "Oh, much easier for you."

Warily, she watched him. The silence grew. Finally, Kira cleared her throat. "Time's running out. I don't plan on talking to you, so are you going to kill me like a man or let the poison do the job for you?" Her voice broke and she coughed. A vice tightened around her throat, invisible fingers cutting off the air slowly.

He snorted. "Kill you?"

She shifted and barely nodded. "Diplomacy isn't one of you people's strong suits." She wrinkled her lip. "Or are you really a coward?"

He shook his head and stood. "How amusing."

Kira's sneer faded. "And how do you figure that exactly? Why are you toying with me?"

He shrugged. "No one is toying with anyone. If you answer my question, everything will be over." His gaze shifted to her. "I won't kill you."

Kira laughed softly and rolled her eyes. "All this for a question?"

His face hardened. "I was wondering the same thing." He leaned forward and ran a finger down the length of his bowstring. It sent chills down her spine. "You will answer my question. What did you build?" Kira glanced at him then looked away. She didn't have much longer. The bands on her chest were growing steadily tighter. Her head throbbed. Kira blinked, trying to keep the black waves at bay. She briefly closed her eyes, steadying herself. If she stalled enough, she'd be dead before he could get anything from her. For the first time, she resented her immunity to the poison. If she hadn't been so clumsy back then, she'd already be out of her misery. He hissed in annoyance, bringing her attention back to him. "Answer me."

Kira refused to look at him. Out of the corner of her eye she watched him. He sat against the far wall, legs crossed before him and hands braced on his knees. His marks swirled an angry blue, the light blending with the glowing fungi. He scowled across at her. She looked away quickly. The man carried himself like someone used to giving orders. Kira took a shallow breath, trying to organize her thoughts. Clearly he was someone of importance. Her eyes slid back to him, narrowed in suspicion. "Why should I tell you? If I tell you, then you'll kill me."

He grinned ferally again, eye teeth glinting in the eerie glow. "It's sounding more and more attractive." He stood, muscles rippling with the movement, and his marks faded altogether. The light from the fungus gave him an eerie glow, an eclipse before an emerald sun.

His shadow blurred, the edges bleeding into green, and Kira blinked. "Shit."

His grin deepened. "You have about ten minutes left. Are you feeling it now?"

She glared at him, trying to see him through her failing eyesight. "I'm not a fool," she snapped, voice cracking. She took a wheezing breath and leaned her head back against the tree. "If I tell you, I die. If I don't tell you, I still die."

"I already told you that I wouldn't kill you, however I could always put you out of your misery. You seem convinced I'll do it either way." She flinched at the twang of his bow string as he pulled it over his shoulders. His voice dripped with sudden derision. "After all, I'm an alien. What virtue would I have?"

She closed her eyes. Her ten minutes was quickly slipping away. The liquid fire had burned away to a steadily-growing agony. Every nerve felt like it had exploded. She chuckled weakly. "I'm the only alien here. And I'll take my chances with the poison." Her breaths came in short gasps and she bit back a cry. "I have a better idea. I tell you, and you help me. Deal?" She tilted her head, listening.

"Help you?" His fingers ran across the bow strings again, the sound giving her chills. The seconds stretched. Finally he grunted, his bow tapping

against the floor. "It is a deal. Now-" His voice was suddenly closer and Kira recoiled, inhaling at the pain of movement. He sighed, sitting heavily. Kira pulled herself tighter into a ball; his blatant noise-making was a relief, but entirely confusing. He sighed and Kira slowly turned to face him. "Now, tell me."

Each breath ripped through her body. Kira gritted her teeth. "I was...building a...fish trap." The effort of speaking left her dizzy.

The man grunted. "Why would you build a trap?"

Kira tried to swallow. Her mouth felt full of cotton. "I had to...to survive." Another grunt met her words and she frowned. "Someone...kept messing - ah!" She cringed forward as her muscles spasmed. Gasping for air, she stared blindly at the floor. He waited patiently for the spell to pass. After a few moments, she relaxed against the wall again. "Someone kept messing...with my land traps. Even us humans...have to eat." She tried to swallow again, her throat sticking. "Fish were...a more dependable...source."

"Yes, but-" The man shifted, something scraping across the floor. She heard a light tapping and realized he was tapping his knee. "Why would you want to catch the children of Vitastami?"

She frowned, her head rolling to the side. "Who?"

He pushed himself to his feet. "Vitastami: the sky mother. She rules over the sky and the waters and the earth." He paced back and forth, footsteps rhythmic against the fading storm. "Why would you want to catch them?"

She gave a ghost of a smile. "I didn't...know that they were-" She lurched forward again, breathing ragged. She bit down on her lip, trying to keep the screams at bay. If she could hold out just a little bit longer, he would help her. She dug her nails into her forearms and forced herself to continue talking. "I didn't know...that they were...the children of your goddess. I'm...sorry." She shuddered slightly, picturing the bulging eyes and gaping jaws. "They were...the only way I would survive."

He said nothing. Kira lifted her head, desperate to hear where he was. Her hearing faded for a moment with the movement and panic rose. Then she heard the tapping again. "You wonder why we kill you," he muttered, standing. "Still..."

Her senses were rapidly failing now. The pain had hit the point of unbearable and was quickly being replaced by numbness. Any moment now, she would be unconscious. She didn't need a native to tell her that she wouldn't wake up from it this time. "I told you," she ground out. "Now it's...your turn. Help me."

His arms slid behind and under her, the warmth penetrating the foggy haze of the poison. She jerked in surprise as he picked her up. Her head flopped against his chest. The sound of his heart beat against her ear, a strangely soothing sound. "I promised I wouldn't kill you. I never promised I could save you." Her eyes flew open, unable to see but shocked all the same. He sighed and set her gently down. "At this point, Baleeina, nothing could save you. Even if I could, I'm not sure I would."

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Kira groaned. Faint light filtered down over her in little patches of gold. She blinked crusty eyes but didn't move to get up. The air smelled differently than it usually did. It smelled like cinnamon and nutmeg and earth instead of sulfur and stone. Her arms and shoulders and hips ached in places she'd forgotten existed. Above her, dust motes float lazily in the sun beams. The room was quiet, devoid of any sound save the faintest rustling of leaves. She frowned, closing her eyes again. The surf was missing and the rocks were gone. Where was she?

"You're awake. Good." The voice was gruff but musical.

She tensed and held her breath. The events of the past night came back. She bit the inside of her cheek, thinking. Had he changed his mind then? She had survived somehow. Kira took a steadying breath and sat up. She squeezed her eyes shut, waiting for the waves of pain or the throbbing headache. Neither came. Surprised, she reached up to touch the back of

her head. There was a little bump but nothing more. She stuck her arms out, inspecting both sides. All the bumps from the needle thorns had faded to little red pin pricks, and her left shoulder moved easily again. Goosebumps ran up her arms. She sat up a little straighter and slowly turned her right hand over. "What the hell?" The gash from the thorn had stitched itself together, the pink of healing showing along the edges. Something moved and she jerked her head up to meet those unnerving eyes. "How long was I out?" she demanded.

He stepped into the light and squatted down across from her, long hands resting on his knees. The sunlight played across the flat planes of his face. "Five days and five nights." He watched her carefully, waiting for something.

"Why didn't I die? Did you change your mind?" She kept her voice distant, remembering his final words.

His eyes narrowed and the markings began to glow faintly. They had been almost as black as his skin, she realized, a perfect camouflage. "Vitastami decided that you should live."

Her eyebrows rose incredulously. He paused again and she realized he was testing her. She stayed quiet, deciding to wait him out. Her mind raced as their look lingered. There had to be a scientific explanation. Finally, she groaned and crossed her legs in front of her.

"Try that on me again, please. How exactly am I alive right now?"

His mouth twitched down and he frowned slightly. "You drank of her and you didn't die," he said, voice clipped.

"Ok, so I drank your...?" He looked away in irritation and pointed next to her. Her eyes shifted to a depression in the wood. The water reflected her face serenely and she sat back. "You've got to be kidding me."

His lips twitched. "I wish I was. You drank the water and you'll live." He looked just as shaken as she did. An ebony hand twisted uncomfortably around the grip on his bow. "Now you have to go back to the mountain and stay there." He pushed himself to his feet and stared down at her. She squinted against the sunlight and shaded her eyes with her hand. He

frowned. "Or maybe not even there."

She laughed. "I didn't die cleanly like you'd hoped," she guessed. His frown deepened but he didn't turn away. "I should have known that you would be difficult."

Kira snorted. "I make a habit of it. Now that I've survived and you're done with me, though, why shouldn't I go back to the mountain?" She leaned back carefully, waiting for the usual pain after the poison. It didn't come. There were the aches and bruises from sleeping on the floor, but that was it. She flexed her fingers and rolled her neck, taking a moment to enjoy being alive. "And explain to me again why I'm not dead? I feel great!"

He squatted suddenly in front of her. She sucked in a breath and he shifted uncomfortably. She forced herself to relax, but his discomfort remained. A lock of hair fell across his face, giving him a rakish look. "Vitastami saved you, girl. This," one long-fingered hand gestured to the tree, "is the place for captives. It is for traitors and liars and idiots." She pulled away from his gaze and looked at the tree again, slightly offended. He caught the feeling and sighed. "You weren't supposed to live, especially with your condition. No one lives long here unless they get out or Vitastami decides they will live," he was saying. "At least, that's what I'm assuming. No one has ever survived the rasvatee." His eyes shifted back and forth, searching for something in hers. "No one," he repeated. Abruptly, he stood and began to pace.

She watched him, mulling over his words. No one had ever survived this prison chamber. She rubbed her shoulder thoughtfully. It had to be luck. He certainly hadn't done anything to help her out, and he had obviously planned on her dying. Kira tried to remember. When had she drunk anything? Not once did she remember waking. Disturbed, she stared upwards into the soft green light. The snowflake leaves drifted lightly down; light escaped through places where the leaves were thin, but even those spears of light were tainted by the green of the leaves.

Kira jumped as he sat down in front of her. "This does solve a problem, though." She stared at him. He grinned suddenly and propped his chin on his hand, elbow on his knee. "Yes...this solves a lot..."

“What, that I’ve been divinely ordained to live?” she said. He ignored her sarcasm. The sunlight softened his face as he thought. Kira sighed and propped her own cheek on her hand. With a start, she realized that she was no longer afraid of him. Cautiously, she allowed herself to really look at him. He brushed back the wayward hair, blue-gold eyes lost in thought. Aside from the obviously alien phosphorescence and double irises, he could have been human. She straightened and glanced away, feeling the heat creep up her face. He would have been stunning as a human.

He seemed to sense her discomfort and, looking up, grinned. “I suppose it doesn’t look too good from your side, does it?”

“No shit.” She stared intently at the wall behind him, fighting to regain her composure.

He grinned, teeth bright against the blackness of his skin. “May I explain?” He leaned forward slightly and held out his hand. Kira eyed it warily. His hand curled into a fist before dropping into his lap. “Ah...I suppose you’re right.” He tapped his knee thoughtfully, then shrugged. “I never wanted to kill you.” Kira snorted. He grimaced. “I wouldn’t believe me either. The second night I saw you, I heard a patrol nearby. Even if you’d used the cover of the storm, they would have found you.” He sighed ruefully. “I had to take you, and I’m sorry, but they can’t know you’re alive.”

“They can’t know I’m alive. Who? And why?” Kira watched him out of the corner of her eye. What would he care if some other native found her?

He scratched his chin sheepishly. “I told the Council three months ago that you were dead.”

Three months...that was when the sabotage started. Kira sat up and glared at him. “So you were the one messing with my traps!” He winced but didn’t deny it. “Gah! You coward! Trying to starve me to death instead of killing me like a man?” she snapped.

His marks swirled a stormy blue as his face twitched in annoyance. “Your continual doubt of my manhood is rather irritating.”

Kira flushed, but crossed her arms defiantly. “Is it manly to hide like that?” Her words stung him and she gave a short laugh. “I don’t think I was the one hiding that night.”

He looked her up and down, then laughed. She watched him in confusion. "Well said, Baleeina. As to my 'sabotage,' you seem to be just fine for all my attempts to starve you." She quirked an eyebrow, unimpressed. His smile grew. "I like to think I'm a better hunter than that. If I'd wanted you to starve, you would have that very first month." He shook his head, all humor gone. "Be glad Vitastami saved you. Otherwise, I would have been forced to kill you this time." Kira shivered at the truth behind his words. His eyes lingered on the pit in the floor, the water still reflecting the sunlight. "Honestly, I'm not sure even your divine ordainment can keep you alive. Let me think." He pushed himself up, long fingers splayed against the gray wood of the tree. Marks swirled and danced across the skin, curling around all six fingers. Kira shivered again, this time from the alienness of him.

He paced back and forth, mumbling and muttering to himself in his strange language. Minutes melted into hours and she moved to settle against the far wall of the tree. He glanced briefly in her direction when she moved, then returned to his brooding. Time crawled. For a while, she counted how many footsteps it took him to get from one side of the tree to the other. Then, she tried to see a pattern in his markings. She was beginning to wonder if they changed color with his mood. At the moment, they had faded back to a deep midnight blue, tendrils of a lighter blue-green twining through it. In an eerie way, they were pretty. It was frustrating to watch him determine the rest of her life.

The light had vanished from the inside of the tree and the leaves above were burnished gold when he finally stopped. She watched him pivot, one hand still on his chin in thought. He stepped forward and tapped his chin, eyes holding hers. She swallowed, waiting. Time froze. Finally, he nodded. "You live."



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