

The cover art depicts a woman with long, dark hair in profile, looking towards the right. Her eyes are a vibrant, glowing blue. The background is a dramatic, stormy sky with dark, swirling clouds and a bright blue lightning bolt striking down from the top center. In the distance, a jagged mountain peak is visible against the orange and yellow light of a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is mysterious and fantastical.

THE COLORS OF MALENT

DREAMBOUND

BOOK ONE

TIM ADAMS & SAM INZERILLO

**THE COLORS OF
MALENT
DREAMBOUND
BOOK ONE**

**TIM ADAMS
SAM INZERILLO**

The Colors of Malent

Nashua, NH

DreamBound

The Colors of Malent — Book 1

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Revised edition © 2026 The Colors of Malent, LLC.

Originally published in 2010 as **The Colors of Malent: Book One**.

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Publisher: The Colors of Malent

Nashua, New Hampshire, USA

Contact: info@mymalent.com

Paperback ISBN: **979-8-9949798-0-8**

Kindle eBook: Available on Amazon

Printed in **United States**

First revised edition: **March 16, 2026**

*To our wonderful families, whose understanding
and support made this possible.*

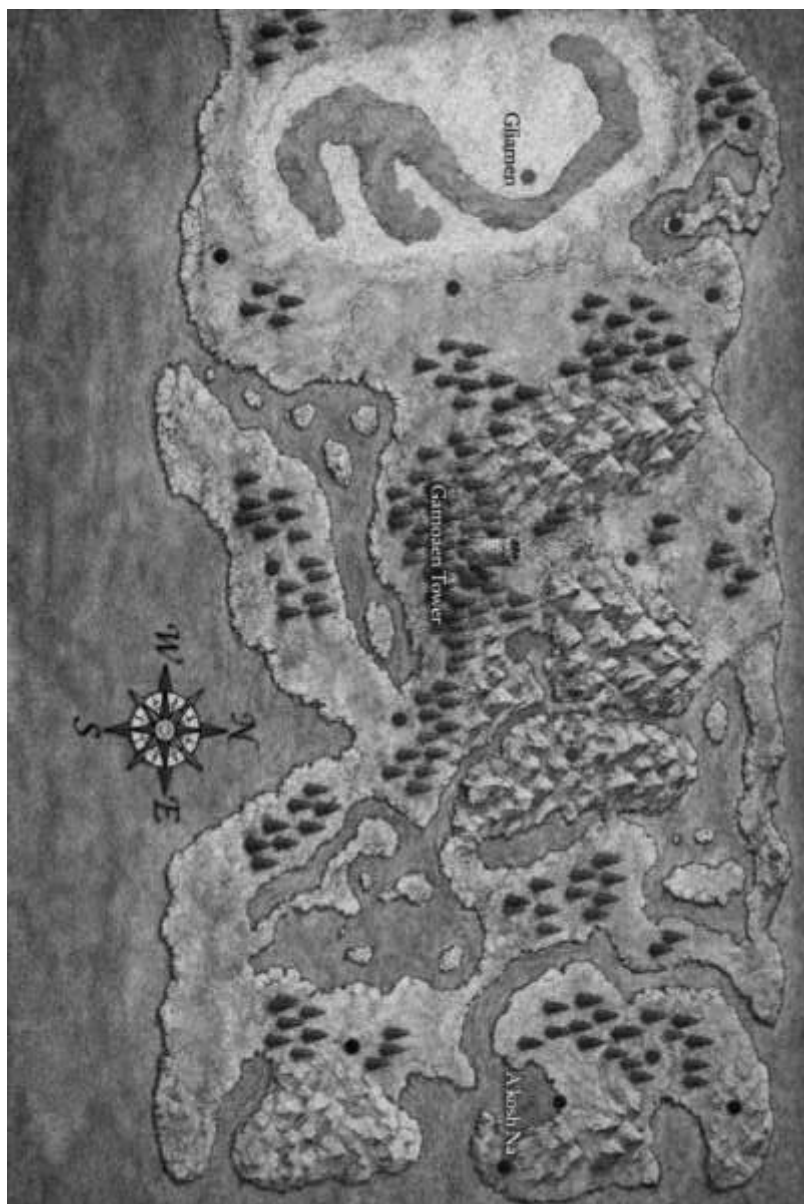


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Prologue

Breath first. Ragged in the trees, iron on the tongue.
Something moved in the darkness. Metal cutting
shadow.

“Kuhaak, see her to safety. I shall take what remains of
the honor guard and delay them,” Braliak rumbled.

Lady Shian’s jaw dropped.

“Master, forgive me, but this is wrong,” Kuhaak said,
voice tight. “Their number is too great. The surest way to
preserve the Lady’s life is with you.”

“No, Kuhaak. I shall remain. You are young. Stronger.
If you must carry her...” His gaze dipped to Shian’s
swollen belly.

Tears pricked her eyes at the sacrifice.

Braliak drew a dagger from his side hilt and placed it in
his pupil’s hand. “For honor.”

“For the morrow yet to come,” Kuhaak answered.

Between them, the faint blue shimmer of their armor
flared. Light answered their promise, taking on color. They
clasped each other’s shoulders, bowed their heads, then
rose and saluted. Warmth lingered where their gauntlets
had met, leaving an imprint between steel and skin.

“This is madness,” Shian gasped. Her voice came out
thin, like it hurt to make sound. “We should flee together.
Surely matters have not grown so dire that you and your
men must be offered up.”

Kuhaak turned to her, voice steady iron. “We depart at
once, my lady. Before honor dies upon the hill.”

She nodded and murmured to Braliak, “My thanks. For
all of it.”

“It has been my honor to serve you, my lady,” he said,
returning her salute.

Kuhaak tugged her by the arm, drawing her off the path and up the hill.

The ascent grew steep and punishing. Roots snagged her steps. Her throat tightened.

After a long climb he spoke, gentle but unyielding. “I know the path is harsh, my lady. Yet we must press on. They draw near.”

“I know, but I am greatly fatigued.”

A cramp gripped her, sharp as a blade. “My contractions grow swifter. She will not wait long.”

“She, my lady? How comes this certainty?”

“I feel her,” Shian whispered. “As though she and I converse without words. It has been so for many days.”

They stopped with their backs to a fir, listening.

From behind them, the clash of steel fell away. A shrill death-howl tore through the trees.

Kuhaak’s face blanched. “It cannot be.”

“What is it? I have never seen such dread in your eyes.”

“Braliak has fallen.” His voice roughened. “I would know his battle cry anywhere.”

Even the needles stopped whispering.

Another contraction seized her, wrenching a cry from her throat. A fool’s quest, she thought. So far from home, and for nothing.

Kuhaak’s hand tightened around hers, steadying her. “Courage now, my lady. The mountain’s ahead. We keep moving.”

Still clutching her stomach, trembling, she forced herself onward.

The forest rang out again. This time it was the raw shouts of pursuit, not death.

“This way!” a distant voice called. “They head north!”

She shivered as they moved away, fear and resolve knotted in every step.

Kuhaak's grip was so tight her hand throbbed. His usual rosy complexion and bright blue eyes, once alight with hope, had gone pale.

At last she wrenched her free hand up in a weak wave. "No farther. I beg you. No farther."

A howl tore the air behind them. She cursed the Fians under her breath.

"There, my lady," Kuhaak whispered urgently. "Behind those bushes, near the fissure in the wall. Hide within the crevice. Swiftly now."

She glanced toward the narrow break in the rock, then back at him. "And you, Kuhaak? What becomes of you?"

"There is no time." His gaze did not waver. "If both of us vanish, they will scent our fear. I must stand, or all hope dies. Go, my lady."

Exhausted, she stumbled toward the crevice.

Kuhaak bowed once, final and formal, then turned to meet the search party. He looked back and fixed her face in his mind. Then his sword rose, hands shimmering dark blue.

Shian felt her legs turn to wet rope. Her knees buckled; she dropped, tears carving hot tracks down her cheeks.

Kuhaak charged the first five combatants, armor blazing with blue light, oath-bright. His blade swept in a perfect arc. One hand fell. A throat opened. Two more staggered back, bleeding.

Then more descended on him, a tide of steel and boots led by a hooded man.

A blinding green haze erupted from the leader's palm, sickly light staining the blue-lit air. The leaves above flashed pale, then went dull again.

Beneath his hood, the man's eyes glowed an unnatural green, the hue of corruption that would one day meet its undoing.

Crack. Flash. Silence.

Shian swallowed a sound and pressed her fist to her mouth.

Kuhaak staggered. His breath rasped but did not break.

The green-eyed stranger laughed. A low, cold sound. “So this is the great Kuhaak? I confess I am underwhelmed.”

Kuhaak’s hands flared blue. “Tore nha vesh kaman—”

A mace struck him mid-phrase.

The weapon shuddered.

Then it exploded in a burst of blue fire, killing its wielder and two others.

Smoke choked the air. The ground rippled.

The hooded man stood untouched within a transparent green shield.

Before Kuhaak could rise, the man placed a glowing green hand upon his brow.

Kuhaak screamed once, then fell still.

“A clever display,” the man murmured, kneeling beside him. “Yet your silence serves me poorly. Where is the woman?”

From the bushes, Shian bit her lip until blood warmed her tongue.

Do not cry out. Not now. Not now.

Kuhaak’s chest heaved faintly. His face was twisted in agony, yet he spoke no word.

A cold touch brushed her shoulder.

Her muscles seized at the whisper in her ear, then let go all at once.

“Come, my lady. This place is unfit for the birth of the Shihan-to-be. She was once named Ehwhihan in the mountain speech, first word of origin worn smooth by time.”

Before she could protest, the rock wall beside her flexed, almost alive.

Calloused hands emerged from the darkness, gripped her gently, and drew her inward.

She tumbled through a seam of stone into cool shadow.

The fissure sealed behind her with a muted sigh.

The dark was not cruel; only weary. It smelled of wet stone and old smoke; the cold sat on her skin like a shawl.

“Be still now,” the unseen voice murmured. “They will hear you if you speak.”

It was too much. The world tilted and went black.

When consciousness returned, memory crashed over her: green eyes, Braliak’s final cry, Kuhaak’s fall. Grief shook her until the tears ran dry.

Only then did she truly see the cavern around her.

The ceiling vanished into shadow.

At its heart, a soft brown glow pulsed, low and steady.

Several figures knelt in reverence within the light. One rose and hurried away; the others did not stir.

“Where am I?” she whispered. “Who are you?”

No one answered.

A voice echoed from deeper within the chamber, rich and resonant, unmistakably authoritative.

“Strip the armor. Wash the blood from her hands. Lay her on the stone.”

Shian straightened, trembling. “Who speaks? Why will none of you answer me?”

Only footsteps replied, slow and deliberate as they approached.

Three hooded figures stepped into the glow. Shadows hid their faces; only their eyes shone: one yellow, one blue, one green.

The yellow-eyed figure extended a broad hand and placed it gently on her shoulder.

Calm settled over her, heavy and warm, inescapable.

“Peace, my lady,” the deep voice said. A hand steadied her shoulder with patient force. “You are not our enemy. Panic is. If you fight us, you spend what your child needs.”

“What is this place doing to me?”

“The corridor only opens while the chamber is fed,” the voice said. “You felt the pulses. When they stop, we all stay trapped. Rise.”

Her body obeyed despite her will.

A contraction folded her in half. Stone dust drifted from the ceiling with the tremor, whispering onto her hair and lashes.

“Where are you taking me?”

“To a place prepared for her birth.”

“And how do you know the child is a daughter?”

“Because she reacts to you,” the voice said. “Your voice pulls her forward. That response is the daughter-sign. The chamber does not give it for a son.”

“And if the pulses stop? What happens to her?”

A pause.

“Ask again after she lives,” the voice said, and the hand on her shoulder eased just enough to feel like permission.

They guided her down a corridor of stone curtains glowing faintly from within.

The veils brushed her arms, cold and damp, heavy as cloth left in a cave.

The light arrived a half-second late, like an echo.

The passage ended in a hexagonal chamber draped in heavy veils.

At its center stood a smooth stone platform.

Fear coiled cold around her ribs. The air tasted of minerals and smoke.

One of the figures took her hand. “Here, my lady. Lie down and ready yourself.”

She opened her mouth, but no words came.

The child must be saved, she thought.

That single truth held her steady as darkness swept in again.

When she woke once more, the world had narrowed to pain.

Three figures steadied her as contractions tore through her body.

Through the haze, she caught sight of one man’s eyes, blue and steady, unmistakably human.

Who are you? Why does my heart know your face?

“My lady,” he gasped, voice cracking with fear and conviction, “I know not how I came to be within this place, nor what foul rites are in motion, but hear me: I swear you shall be avenged. By my life or its ending, I so vow.”

The promise struck her like warmth through ice.

Hope flickered; thin, wavering, but alive.

Chanting swelled around them.

The air thickened with power.

Three of the hooded figures blurred, their bodies dissolving into colored smoke that was yellow, blue, green. It spiraled upward and vanished into the cavern’s unseen heights.

Another contraction hit, fierce as thunder ripping stone apart.

The brown-eyed man lifted his hands.

“Om luka shaw, um laka shaw, umna chi bal.”

Shian screamed once, pure and unbroken, and the child’s answering cry rang out, high and bright as hammered silver.

It split the chamber's gloom and in that moment, the cavern forgot its echoes. Torch flames shrank, guttering in the hush.

In the water's drip, she heard Braliak, once, impossibly clear.

Light blossomed in her hands, rising through the ancient carvings etched into the walls.

The sound of the newborn's cry reverberated through the chamber, through her bones, and outward into the unseen world beyond.

Her strength failed.

Darkness came as mercy.

Deep under the cavern floor, slow percussion answered, stone speaking to stone.

Then the sound turned and searched for a way up.

It found one.

Silence trembled.

Listened.

Then slipped through the seam between realms.

A clear July sky over a wooded park.

A sudden crack of thunder.

The shockwave rolled the tree boughs inward toward an unseen center, then released them.

A man flinched.

He wondered why the ground kept vibrating long after the thunder passed.

His wife seized his arm.

Her grip steadied them both.

Her phone lit in her other hand: map open, blue-white glare on her knuckles. NO SERVICE.

They had stepped off the main path for quiet.

It felt wrong now, as if something vast listened beneath it.

“I heard something,” she whispered. “Maybe a coyote? There was one near the trail yesterday.”

He doubted it, but fear had its own persuasion.

He snapped a fallen limb from the brush. “I’ll check.”

“No,” she said quickly, shaking her head. “We should leave. The quiet feels unnatural.”

He nodded, starting to gather their things.

A faint vibration coursed through the soil, trembling the leaves and the soles of his shoes, too subtle to name, enough to halt him.

Then he heard it, a newborn’s cry.

Impossible.

Real.

His wife’s thumb jabbed the screen. “911—”

No bars. Not even one.

“You heard—”

She was already listening.

They followed the sound without speaking. The air felt wrongly slanted, like a current you couldn’t see.

The cry sharpened, steady and insistent.

Around a bend, the path opened into a clearing.

The air smelled faintly of rain and static, like something waking for the first time.

On a waist-high stone beneath a thick-barked tree lay an ornate wooden box, carved with symbols that glowed. As he blinked, a line shifted, one angle smoothing into another.

He approached and lifted it down with careful hands.

“It’s so tiny,” his wife breathed. “No more than a few days old.”

Within lay a child swaddled in cloth scented of resin and rain.

Light touched her skin, revealing a faint, shifting shimmer the color of deep brown, old heat threaded through root and grain.

Her breath was soft.

Sure.

Along the box's rim, a thin band of blue light flickered.

He looked to his wife.

"We can't leave her."

"No," she whispered, voice trembling. "We won't."

She touched the baby's cheek.

The child stirred, seeking warmth, then settled again.

A hush moved through the clearing like a page turning.

"What is this writing?" he murmured, tracing the luminous carvings. "It looks like symbols, but the edges shift."

She leaned in. "I don't know. It feels warm. Alive, almost."

Far away, though not in distance, a deep percussion thudded beneath the earth, too slow for ordinary hearing.

The sound traveled through the trunks, up their spines, rising into the July light.

He had a brief, involuntary thought that the wind shaped a name he did not know.

The woman gathered the child to her chest.

The man closed the box and tucked it beneath one arm.

Together they stepped back onto the path, unaware that in the space of a single breath, the world had already changed its name around them.

Behind them, the clearing returned to stillness: tree, stone, shadow.

Somewhere beneath sight, thunder folded under the world, counting the space between two skies, steady and unending.

The mountain heartbeat carried her breath across
worlds.

1

“Alara! Sweetie! Wake up! Wake up! Harry!”

From the doorway, Harold saw Mary Ellen waving her hands inches from their fourteen-year-old daughter’s face, her voice breaking on every word.

“Oh my Gah—Haaaarold! Get in here, quick! Alara won’t wake up! She’s screaming and I can’t wake her up!”

He sprinted to the bed and slid to his knees, almost knocking his wife aside.

“Alara, honey, wake up,” he said, trying to keep his voice calm even as his chest hammered.

Alara twisted against the sheets, fists clenched, a low, strangled sound leaking out of her throat. Sweat rolled down her temples. Her jet-black hair clung wetly to her skin, plastered to her forehead like ink.

The air around her felt wrong: sharp and metallic, like the air under a storm. Pressure packed the room, dense as a held breath.

Harold’s calm snapped. He grabbed her shoulders and shook.

“Alara! Wake up!”

Her head lolled before jerking back.

Mary Ellen stood beside the bed, lip trembling, fingers crushing the hem of her robe.

“What’s wrong with her, Harry?” she whispered.

Before he could answer, Alara’s body jolted upright as if yanked by invisible hands. Her eyes were wide and empty, fixed on a point past them, and for one horrifying second Harold thought she wasn’t really there at all.

Then she gasped, dragging in air like a diver breaking the surface after staying under too long. Her chest shuddered with the first breath, then the second.

She blinked fast, as if the edges of the room were sliding back into focus.

“Alara?” Harold said. “Baby, are you okay?”

Mary Ellen pushed in front of him, wrapping her arms around their daughter with a shaky sob.

Alara clung to her. Without letting go, she reached a hand toward her father too, needing both of them, needing something solid to hold on to.

“I had the dream again, Daddy,” she said, voice raw and small. “This time it was so real. It was like I was there.”

Harold opened his mouth, but Mary Ellen beat him to it.

“I know, sweetie. It’s okay. You’re okay now.” Her hand rubbed circles on Alara’s back like she had when Alara was little.

But Alara shook her head.

“It smelled like wet asphalt after a light rain. And the air, it was hot at the edges, cold in the center.”

She swallowed.

“And I wasn’t just watching this time. I was someone else. I could feel everything, but it wasn’t my body.”

Harold forced a smile he didn’t feel.

“Which one was it this time? Was it the cliff again... or the desert?”

He always asked, always tried to sound interested and not terrified. Listening felt like the only way he could help.

He stopped and swallowed. “You don’t have to. Just tell me what you can.”

“It wasn’t like those,” she said. “It was different.”

The words trailed off, as if the rest of the memory was too bright to look at straight on.

“It’s okay, honey. Everything’s fine now,” he said, though he wasn’t sure who he was trying to convince. He

smoothed her damp hair back from her forehead. “Why don’t you get up and start getting ready for school, and I’ll make you some breakfast.”

He glanced at the alarm clock on her nightstand, its red digits painting the photo beside it in a dull glow. The small rectangle of blue plastic and exposed wires sat there, blue light steady, humming the way it always had.

The picture showed Alara and Madison on a hospital bed, shoulder to shoulder, Madison’s head bald and brave under a knit cap.

“Honey, go get her some water,” he told Mary Ellen gently.

Mary Ellen nodded and hurried out. Without her, the quiet hit harder. Harold heard his own breathing.

“That was quite a scare, kiddo,” Harold said once they were alone.

“Tell me about it,” Alara muttered, scrubbing at her face. Her hands were still trembling.

Mary Ellen rushed back in, sloshing water over the rim of the glass.

“Here you go, sweetie.”

She waited until Alara drank every drop, clinging to the small comfort of it.

“Thanks,” Alara said.

She set the empty glass on her nightstand and leaned into her mom’s shoulder. Mary Ellen folded herself around her, small and fierce. Harold watched them, a quiet ache pressing at his ribs.

In the slant of morning light, and catching the edge of the hospital photo, everything looked almost normal. Almost.

Alara glanced at the clock again after they left. The red numbers blinked back: too late to crawl under the covers, too early to pretend the day would be easy.

Her eyes slipped to the picture of Madison. The memory clicked into place right behind it—Madison in the hospital, cheeks pale and puffy, everyone whispering leukemia, like speaking it out loud would bring it closer.

Madison had gotten sick, and a lot of people had proven how temporary they were.

We were so young then, she thought.

She'd have to tell Madison about the dream. Madison always listened, even when she teased Alara about her "extra weird brain."

Alara swung her legs out of bed, nearly tripping over her backpack. She shuffled into the hall, still half-asleep, and walked right into the old bureau. "Ow."

She winced as her hip clipped the corner, making one of her mom's beloved yard-sale knickknacks wobble dangerously. She grabbed the ugly ceramic swan just before it toppled, setting it back exactly where it had been.

"Sorry," she muttered to no one.

In the bathroom, she started the shower, then turned the faucet as cold as it would go and splashed water on her face until her skin prickled. Droplets slid down her wrists like little silver threads, stealing warmth as they went. She shut off the tap and straightened, reaching for the towel.

When she looked up, she froze.

Her eyes, reflected in the slightly foggy mirror, weren't the usual muddy brown. Not the ones she'd seen her whole life.

They were blue.

Not just blue—bright, sharp, electric, like someone had poured sky into them and then plugged it in.

The air in the bathroom seemed to stiffen. A prickling tightness climbed her forearms, raising every hair.

She'd seen unusual things in dreams before, sure.

But this was the mirror in her very boring, very non-magical bathroom.

This was now.

You always look like you're about to wake up from somewhere else, her lab partner had once joked. She'd laughed it off then.

Now the words felt like nails tapping on the glass between her and her reflection.

"Okay," she whispered to herself. "That's new."

A car horn blared from the street outside. She jerked, pulse leaping, and glanced toward the window.

When she looked back at the mirror, her eyes were plain brown again. Just boring, regular, easily ignored brown.

"That was eerie," she muttered.

She leaned closer, searching for any hint of the electric color she'd just seen, but there was nothing.

Nothing except the same girl she always saw. Awkward. Too pale. Dark hair that never did what she wanted, shadows under her eyes like she'd been losing a fight with sleep for years.

It bothered her that she had to share a face with someone so average.

Madison and Mom said she was pretty, and she never knew whether to believe them.

If the blue eyes had stayed, maybe she could've believed them.

She leaned closer, willing the blue back. Nothing.

Still brown.

Still her.

With a frustrated huff, she snatched a towel from the hallway closet.

As she turned toward the stairs, soft voices drifted up from the kitchen below.

Her parents.

Alara paused, fingers tightening on the towel.

She couldn't make out the words, just the tension, the way her mother's voice rose and fell too sharply.

She crept down a few steps, careful to avoid the one that creaked, and sank onto a spot where she could see a sliver of the kitchen through the railing.

"...her dreams are getting worse, Harry. I'm really scared!" Mary Ellen's voice shook.

"She's always had them, even when she was little," Harold replied. "Why are you more scared now? Remember when we first brought her home as a baby and she used to make that awful crying noise? The endless nights she used to keep us awake?"

"Yes, I remember," Mary Ellen said.

She sounded distracted, her mind somewhere else.

"That's why I'm so worried. We just don't know anything about her biological parents or where she came from."

Alara's brain snagged on two words at once.

Biological parents.

A faint draft crept up the stairs, cool against her bare ankles.

She suddenly felt like the house was listening too.

Mary Ellen's voice dropped even lower, almost a breath instead of sound.

"Sometimes, when she dreams, it's like she's not here at all. Like something is leaning close, listening through her."

Alara's skin went cold.

Then Mary Ellen blurted, louder, “I went to see Dr. Finn yesterday.”

Harold said her name twice under his breath. “Mary. Mary.” Like it might stop the sentence from becoming real.

“What?” Harold’s voice cracked, sharp. Then he forced it back to a whisper. “What were you thinking?”

“I was discreet,” Mary Ellen said quickly. “I needed to see if she could give me some information about the symptoms of these dreams and possibly point us in a direction.”

“Look, honey, do you remember they wanted to do all those tests on her?” Harold said. “I don’t want to put her through that again.”

Again?

Alara’s fingers dug into the stair carpet.

Her heart kicked once. Hard. Then it stumbled into an ugly pause.

Tests.

The words clanged in her head, heavy and unreal.

I’m adopted?

Her mouth went dry.

She pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes until colors popped, as if maybe she could block the words themselves out.

She ended up back in the bathroom with the towel in her lap, staring at nothing. The words wouldn’t leave.

Her stomach tightened into a hard knot.

She’d always known she was different.

The dreams, the way her headaches came out of nowhere and flattened her, how she would sometimes wake up sure she’d been somewhere else entirely.

But she’d never imagined this.

Harold and Mary Ellen weren’t her real parents.

She scrubbed her sleeve across her face before anything could spill.

Her head hurt the way it always did when everything got too loud inside her.

This was too much for one morning, too much for one brain that already had to deal with other people's wars in its sleep.

She pressed her fingers against her temples and counted slow breaths until the pounding dulled.

After a while, she forced herself into the shower, letting the water run warmer than usual. She stood under the water until her skin pinked, trying to think herself blank. It didn't work.

They stuck like grit under her tongue.

When she'd dried off and dressed for school, she stared at herself in the mirror one last time.

Same brown eyes.

Same girl.

Except now there was a crack down the middle of her life she couldn't unsee.

"This is ridiculous," she told her reflection. "I'm just going to march down there and make them tell me everything."

Her voice came out steadier than she felt.

Alara stomped down the stairs, each step louder than necessary.

The kitchen smelled like coffee and toast and the faint burned edge of scrambled eggs, a normal morning smell that felt completely fake now.

She dropped into a chair at the table hard enough to make it rattle.

Mary Ellen turned from the stove with a bright, automatic smile that faded the second she saw Alara's face.

She bent to kiss Alara's forehead, but Alara leaned away, jaw tight.

Mary Ellen straightened slowly.

"What's wrong, dear?"

She shot Harold a quick, nervous look.

"So when were you going to tell me?" Alara asked.

Harold set his mug down a little too fast.

Coffee sloshed against the sides.

"Tell you what?"

Mary Ellen asked, but her voice had already gone thin.

"That I'm adopted," Alara said.

The word hit the room. Nobody breathed.

Even the ticking of the wall clock grew louder, like it was waiting for someone to say the next line.

Color rose up Mary Ellen's neck and into her cheeks, then drained just as quickly.

Her eyes went wide, locked on Harold like she'd witnessed something awful and couldn't turn away.

"Lar-Lar," Harold said softly, reaching for the nickname like it was a shield. "We're sorry. We didn't know when the best time was to tell you. Your mother and I couldn't have children of our own, so we—"

"Pumpkin," Mary Ellen cut in, voice shaking, "what your father's trying to say is that when the doctors finally told us it would be impossible for us to have children, we decided to adopt."

The word stung again, even though she'd just said it herself.

Alara swallowed.

"What was my mother like? My birth mother. Did you know her?"

Mary Ellen flicked a look at Harold, twisting the dish towel tighter and tighter.

Harold stood, grabbed his coffee, then came around to sit beside Alara.

He placed the mug on the table, both hands suddenly empty.

He looked her in the eye.

“Your birth mother didn’t want us to meet her or know anything about her,” he said quietly. “It was a closed adoption. We agreed because we wanted you so badly. The problem is, we know nothing about your biological parents.”

Alara stared at him.

Words buzzed around her; meaningless noise compared to the one thing that mattered:

They didn’t know anything.

She shook her head, more in disbelief than refusal.

“So that’s it? After all this time, I thought you were my parents.”

“But we are, sweetie,” Mary Ellen said, stepping closer.

Her lower lip trembled, eyes brimming.

“We’ve loved you since the second we saw you.”

“Oh, please.”

The words came out sharper than she’d planned.

She flicked her wrist in Mary Ellen’s direction, unable to look at her.

“I don’t even know what to call you now.”

Mary Ellen flinched like she’d been slapped.

Her voice steadied only because she forced it to.

“We’ve spent the last fourteen years raising you and providing a loving family and a warm home,” she said, chin lifting. “And I will not sit here and listen to you judge us like strangers.”

Harold stared into his coffee.

The surface quivered with each breath he let out, as if the swirl couldn’t settle, no matter how long he stared.

“She’s right, Lar-Lar,” he murmured. “We tried. Maybe we waited too long. But we did try.”

“You—”

Alara stood up so fast her chair scraped harshly against the floor.

“I just can’t believe this.”

She crossed the kitchen, grabbed her lunch from the counter, and clutched it so hard the bag crinkled in her fist.

“I have to go to school,” she said.

“Honey, please. Just talk to us,” Mary Ellen said.

Her hand hovered in the air like she wanted to reach out and pull Alara back but didn’t dare.

“Alara, we love you. We only want what’s best—for you, for all of us.”

It came out like a line she’d rehearsed for fourteen years.

Her thumb traced the rim of her coffee mug, clinging to the little bit of warmth it still held, as if that warmth could pass across the room and touch her daughter too.

The kitchen felt too small, stuffed with words that had already done too much damage.

The morning’s hush crowded into Alara’s ears, making her own heartbeat sound distant, like it was coming from a room down the hall.

“I... I gotta go,” Alara said.

She walked to the front door and pulled it open.

Cool morning air rushed in, raw with cut grass and exhaust.

She stepped outside and let the door click shut behind her.

But she didn’t move away.

She stood on the porch, backpack on one shoulder, lunch bag slack at her side, the whole world suddenly shifted in a direction she didn’t recognize.

In the quiet, she could still hear her mom's voice inside her head: *We only wanted a child who could stay.*

A garbage truck clanged down the street and moved on.

Silence stretched tight over the street.

Alara touched her temple, where the leftover headache ticked.

She could still feel it: the ground under someone else's boots, the weight of a sky that felt too close, the slow thrum beneath the rocks like the world had a pulse buried in stone, waiting.

The mountain heartbeat.

The sunlight on the front steps felt pale, the kind that made everything look temporary.

She glanced at the brass doorknob, catching her reflection in its warped surface.

Her eyes flashed that impossible blue again, bright, cold and fierce, like a signal keyed to a name she didn't know.

Then it was gone.

Someone else, she thought.

I was someone else in that dream.

And now I don't even know who I am here.

She drew a breath that trembled on the way in.

It steadied on the way out.

She didn't know where she came from.

The dreams were getting worse.

And her parents had been sitting on secrets big enough to crack a life in half. Adoptive parents, her brain added, bitter and loud.

But she wasn't going to stand still and let everyone else decide what she was.

On the other side of whatever thin wall her dreams kept cracking, a world of colors and swords and knives waited for her to remember it.

Somewhere out there, she didn't know where, that slow thrum waited, like it might be keeping time for more than one sky.

She hitched her backpack higher on her shoulder and stepped off the porch, shoes thudding softly against the walkway.

Not running.

Not yet.

Just moving.

Behind her, the house sat quiet and ordinary, like any other house on any other street.

Inside, her parents waited, scared and trying and messy and human, still holding fast to their own invisible vows.

Ahead of her, the day stretched out, crowded with locker bells and whispered gossip and Madison's wide eyes when Alara told her everything.

She didn't know who she was yet.

But she would find out.

2

A familiar voice drifted from the back of the room, fuzzy and far away in Alara's ears, like someone talking through water.

"Quiet down now, students. This is study hall, not lunch."

The fluorescent lights above hummed a cold blue-white, a color she usually found boring. Steady. Safe.

Madison twisted around in her seat, bracelets chiming as she waved a hand in front of Alara's face. "Alara? Alara, hello? Are you there?"

Alara sat frozen. Nothing moved.

"Alara. Alara, snap out of it," Madison pleaded, her voice dropping into that tight, scared whisper Alara hated.

Inside, Alara screamed, *I'M AWAKE. I'M RIGHT HERE. THIS ISN'T FUNNY AND I CAN'T STOP IT.* Her words hit some invisible wall and fell back into her, echoing around her skull like trapped blue static. She tried to blink, to twitch a finger, to even shift her weight in the chair.

Nothing.

The classroom blurred at the edges, colors smearing like someone had dragged a wet thumb across a painting. The pale blue walls and silver desks melted, streaking into warmer tones she didn't recognize. She felt both worlds, the harsh blue of the light fixtures and something gold and sun-warm gathering under her feet, colliding inside her.

No, no, not again. Not here, she tried to shout. No sound came out.

Something deep under her chair, under the tile and concrete and dirt, gave a slow, steady beat counting out a rhythm that suddenly felt personal.

The world tilted.
Then she fell.

She slammed into awareness at the edge of a ship's deck, the smell of salt and tar filling her lungs. Sunlight beat down, bright enough to make the water flash white-gold where the waves broke. One of her arms was thicker, stronger, and more tanned than her own. It stretched out in front of her, pointing toward the horizon.

She tried to lower it and felt the wrongness hit, a full-body jolt. She couldn't move it. She lived inside someone else's skin.

Her head turned without her permission. A man in a captain's coat came into view beside her, his dark beard damp with spray. Words spilled from her stolen mouth before she could stop them.

"What is that off in the distance?"

The ship lurched, the deck dropping out from under her feet like an elevator with cut cables. Her stomach flipped, and she had to grab the rail.

Having sea legs is one thing, but this water is utterly unreasonable, someone thought. Her lips didn't move.

That wasn't me, Alara realized. *I just heard her.*

"That is the great port city of A'kosh Na, my dear Teage," the man answered, voice booming over the crash of waves.

"I am not sure I agree with the 'great' part," Teage muttered, eyes narrowing at the cliff wall ahead. "It looks like a big rock with holes in it."

Black stone loomed in the distance, broken by dark openings and glints of metal. The water between ship and shore shifted from murky green to deep blue, streaked with strange pale bands that moved against the waves.

“You will see,” Captain Korten laughed, his shoulders shaking as he braced on the rail. “Ha! You will see.”

Teage shot him a look like he’d lost his mind, but the glare didn’t last. Her stomach rolled with the ship, and she whipped back toward the sea, swallowing hard as the deck pitched again.

“Why is the sea so choppy? There is no wind.”

“That is because we are not scheduled for arrival,” the captain said, as if that were a perfectly ordinary thing to say. He widened his stance as another wave slammed into the hull, spray soaking his sleeves. “We invite trouble when we arrive unannounced.”

“Scheduled for arrival?” she snapped, clinging to the railing. “What does that have to do with the waves?”

“The harbormaster calms the currents,” Korten said. “If he knows you are coming.” He lifted his chin toward the jagged line of stone ahead. “Look there, below the waterline. The coral fields. Some grew wild. Some, the people of A’kosh Na placed, stone by stone. First defense. They slow hostile ships before they ever touch the walls.”

Teage squinted over the side, fighting nausea as her eyes chased the darker shapes under the surface. Patches of coral glowed faintly where the light hit them just right, flashes of soft green and bruised blue in the darker sea. Her stomach heaved again when the ship bucked sideways.

“But, back to the waves?” she said through clenched teeth.

“Right. The waves,” he went on, surprisingly cheerful for someone possibly about to die. “That coral takes hold of the tide. The moons tug; the coral resists. When they clash, the sea grows ill-tempered.” The ship rocked even harder, forcing him to grab the rail with both hands. “This is mild.”

“Mild?” Teage croaked. “Are you jesting—urrrp.” Her stomach quit on her, and she leaned over the railing as her lunch tried to escape.

As she bent, she caught a quick glimpse of herself in the side of a wet metal bucket. Not her own reflection—eyes that were not her eyes.

Irises burned back at her, bright yellow shot through with a darker ring, like molten metal cooling at the edges.

Alara flinched inside her. The sudden flash of gold felt wrong and strangely right at the same time.

Alara tasted the sourness with her.

That was a nasty verp.

Teage froze mid-retch. *Wait. Whose thought was that? And what’s a verp?*

Mine, Alara answered, hope flaring like a match in the dark. *Can you bear me?*

Teage didn’t respond.

She grabbed a skin flask.

Shaminska.

The name rose in Alara’s mind like it had always lived there.

She rinsed her mouth, spitting over the side as if she could wash the stray thought away. Confusion swirled around her but she shook her head sharply and tried to ignore it.

Captain Korten laughed, kindly. “Surprised that such a mighty warrior as you is sickened by this?” He clapped her shoulder, ignoring the way she flinched. “Do not be ashamed. That is part of the defense. Out here, even hardened sailors get sick. Seasick fighters don’t make effective invaders.”

“So how does the harbormaster control the currents?” she asked, gripping her stomach as another wave smacked the bow.

He nudged a bucket toward her with his boot. "Here. Use this. The winds change swiftly, and you might yet be glad to have it." He nodded toward the cliff. "You see those great stone wheels along the rock?"

Teage followed his gaze. Massive carved circles hugged the cliff, dark with spray. Thin rivulets of water ran off them, catching the light in pale silver streaks.

"Each one may turn," Korten said. "When the harbormaster sets them, air tunnels open, and wind shoots through the stone beneath the water, pushing the sea where he wills it. He can smooth a path, or turn the harbor into a churning maw."

Teage's eyes sharpened despite the sickness, curiosity fighting her nausea. "So if we are scheduled, he sets everything as it should be and the water calms down?"

"That is the simple telling," he admitted with a grin. "There are countless combinations. Only a few grant you a gentle route. Many make matters worse."

"So that is another defense," she said slowly. "They funnel ships into a single calm path and make them easier targets."

"You are quick to understand, young one," Korten said, clearly impressed. "Very good."

Teage swallowed again, trying not to throw up on his boots. "How many paths are there?"

"Enough that you do not find your way in by guessing," he said. "And only one serves us today."

She stared at the cliff, taking in the dark carved openings high above the ocean. Some were in deep shadow. Others glowed with a warm yellow light from within, like watchful eyes set into the stone.

"So what are all those other big holes in the rock?"

“Ship doors,” he said. “He chooses which one you may use. Chooses the path. Chooses how much control you are granted.”

Control, Alara thought, feeling that word like a stone in her throat.

“Now I understand why you call it the great port city,” Teage murmured, eyes tracing the pattern of stone and wave.

He let out a booming laugh as a wave slapped over the bow, drenching them both. “That part is clever,” he agreed. “But that is not why this is a great city. That is but one reason.”

“You mean there is more?” she asked, sick but bright with wonder.

“Oh yes. The architecture is unmatched. And there is a second line of defense I have not yet spoken of.”

“A second line?” Her head snapped toward him despite the nausea.

“Yes.” He dug into his pocket and pulled out a clear stone, pressing it into her palm. “Look through the gem of seeing.”

It was cool and smooth; the edges cut in sharp facets that caught the light. For a second Alara thought she saw a faint gold ring in its center, surrounded by a softer blue halo, like a tiny, captured sunrise. Then it was gone.

Teage turned it over, fingertips following the polished curve. “Very well. What am I to do with this?”

“You place the gem before one eye,” he said patiently. “Rounded side out. Curved side in. Press it to your eye.”

“Oh. I see.” She lifted it, lining it up with her right eye. “Now what am I looking for?”

“Into the ship doors,” Korten said. “Past the teeth.”

“All right, I see them,” she answered, breath catching as everything snapped into sharp focus.

Inside the closest opening, the darkness wasn't empty. Shapes waited, a cavern wide and high, like the throat of some huge stone creature. Faint veins of blue light traced along the ceiling, pulsing slowly toward a distant golden glow.

"Ships sail straight into that cavern," Korten said, voice dropping. "Once they are within, they cannot simply spin their wheels and turn about. There is not room enough."

"So how do they turn?" she asked. "Do they just crash into the side?"

"The city turns them," he said. "The floor is only about thirty feet deep; just enough for ships to float. When vents open beneath the water, the current does the rest."

Teage nodded, throat tightening as bile climbed.

"So once the boats turn, how do they reach the docks?"

"First, guards on the ledges look down upon them," he said. "No vessel enters without being seen. Once they are satisfied, a dock is lowered from its place in the stone. Rope. Pulleys. A good deal of shouting." His mouth twitched. "Then the line guards board, they check again, and only then does the city permit you to set foot inside. There are many tunnels, but each is narrow by design. No army storms A'kosh Na all at once."

"But come, child. First we make ourselves expected."

They moved forward along the deck, bracing as the ship rocked beneath them. Korten motioned for the flag runner to send a blue flag up the mast, the signal for peace and prosperity. Against the dull gray sky, the fabric snapped like a strip of sky torn loose. As it climbed, Korten grabbed a horn made from pale bone, its surface streaked with brownish stains that looked disturbingly like dried blood.

He pressed the small end to his mouth and took a deep breath.

When he blew, the horn wheezed. A sad, strangled whistle.

Teage winced. “What is wrong?”

“My horn is cracked,” he snapped. “And if I cannot sound our arrival, we shall find ourselves in grave trouble in these waters.”

“What?” she shouted back, only then noticing how loudly the sea was roaring around them. Whitecaps curled like angry fingers. In some places the water folded in on itself, boiling without heat, flashes of cold blue and sickly green twisting together. She tightened her grip on the rail, every muscle begging for land.

If they could not signal the harbormaster, the ship would drift straight into one of the hazard zones hidden under the waves. And the rocks would finish the job.

Under the roar of the waves and the creak of the ship, Alara sensed it again—that slow, stubborn heartbeat in the stone beneath the sea, counting out a rhythm the storm could not quite erase.

Sailors sprinted across the deck, shouting orders and curses as the ship lurched.

“Where is that other cursed horn?” Korten bellowed.

“Captain!” the boatswain yelled. “It is not here! It is gone!”

“What?!”

Korten grabbed a line and hauled himself toward the cabin, boots sliding on the wet boards. The boatswain and Teage scrambled after him, bouncing off the walls as the ship shuddered.

Below deck, everything rattled. Loose screws skittered along the floor as the hull vibrated.

“Where is the binding paste?” Korten demanded, flinging open cabinets.

“In the pantry, sir!” the boatswain yelled.

The boat jolted, throwing Korten sideways. His boot caught on a raised screw and he stumbled with a curse. He lunged into a small room, yanked open a door, and grabbed a jar of thick, sweet-smelling paste. The stuff shone dull and off-white in the low light.

He smeared it over the crack in the horn without bothering to be neat, then turned and charged back toward the stairs.

He barely made it onto the deck before the ship slammed into something solid with a deep, bone-shaking thud. For a second the world stopped. Then it tilted viciously.

Korten hit the deck and slid toward the lower side as cans rained down behind him. He scrambled up, shoved past Teage and the boatswain, and burst into the open air.

“Lower the sails to half-mast, and someone get below to see how bad the damage is!” he roared.

Teage heard the sound of water hammering the hull, that sick slap of waves forcing themselves into places they didn’t belong. Back on his feet, the captain tried the horn again. A weak tone escaped, thin and pitiful.

“This paste must have time to set,” he growled.

The paste didn’t just look wet. In the corner of Alara’s awareness, she saw a thin line of pale amber light flicker along the crack, like it was trying to wake up.

“More rocks ahead, sir!” the boatswain shouted, a rope tied around his waist the only thing keeping him from being tossed across the deck.

“Raise the sails! Right full rudder! No, right! Turn the wheel to starboard, blast you!” Korten tried the horn again; face flushed with effort and fury. When the sound

didn't improve, he hurled it down. "More to the right or we shall smash upon those rocks!"

The horn rolled.

It bounced.

It stopped at Teage's feet.

A sharp, blinding pain ripped through Alara's forehead.

The ship, the waves, the shouts—everything exploded into white edged with soft blue and harsh gold. The colors tangled and then tore apart.

When she blinked, she was back in the classroom.

3

She could see and feel Madison pinching her arm and tugging at her hair, but her body still wouldn't respond. It was like being trapped behind thick glass, watching her own life from the wrong side.

"Alara, what's going on?" Madison asked, panic cracking her voice.

The hum of the lights poured down over everything, too bright, too blue, too sharp.

Alara tried to move, to suck in air, to blink, anything. Her body stayed stiff and upright in the chair, fingers clamped around her pencil like she'd frozen mid-sentence.

"Alara," Madison said louder, waving frantically.

"Ms. Peterson!"

"What's wrong, Madison?" the teacher called, hurrying over.

"It's Alara," Madison whispered, then gave up on being quiet. "She's not responding to me or anything. Like at all."

Ms. Peterson leaned down, forcing a smile Alara could see trembling at the edges. "Alara, are you okay?"

Nothing.

"Alara, this isn't funny," the teacher said, trying to keep her tone gentle even as it wobbled. "You've got your best friend here almost in tears." She rubbed Alara's arm slowly, like that might wake her.

Still nothing.

"Oh my," Ms. Peterson breathed. She moved to stand directly in front of Alara and put both hands on her shoulders, shaking her lightly. "Alara, what's wrong? Are you sleeping? Wake up." She glanced at Madison. "I'm going to get the nurse. Stay right here, Madison."

Madison's eyes went wide. She snatched up her water bottle and dumped it over Alara's head.

The shock of cold sliced through the fog like a knife.

Alara gasped and jerked, hands flying up to wipe the water from her face.

"Oh my God, are you okay?" Madison cried, voice breaking.

Alara blinked hard, water streaming down her cheeks, dripping from her hair and soaking into her shirt. The room swam in watery blue streaks for a moment, the outlines of desks and kids smearing like paint.

"What the—Madison, why would you do that?" As she looked up, she became achingly aware of the heavy silence. Every eye in study hall was on her.

"I couldn't think of anything else," Madison rushed out. "You weren't responding, and you were twitching and making weird noises, and you didn't react to me at all, and I just—" She flailed a dripping hand, bracelets jangling. "So I threw water on your head."

Alara pressed her palms to her temples. Pain throbbed behind her eyes, deep as a bruise.

"My head is killing me," she whispered. "I need to calm down and breathe. I had another dream. And even though I'm mad about being soaked, I seriously thought I was going to die. So maybe you saved me."

She lowered her head into her hands and closed her eyes, trying to steady her breathing. "We were approaching the port city, and the horn didn't..."

"Alara? Alara. Oh my God, not again!" Madison's voice warped.

The world slipped.

The blue of the classroom stretched and thinned, pulling apart into threads of color. Yellow bled through the gaps, bright and hot.

And Alara tumbled.

She slammed back into Teage's body mid-nightmare, the impact of the shift almost worse than the storm. Teage sat on the deck with her back pressed against the rail, soaked through as waves crashed over the sides and slapped her in the face. The light here felt thicker, more golden, even when the sky went gray-green with spray. Her stomach was empty, but the nausea still clawed at her throat, and her arms shook with exhaustion.

Alara couldn't move on her own, but she felt everything as if it were happening to her. The wild rocking of the ship. The spray stinging her eyes. The thick dread sitting in the pit of Teage's abdomen like a stone. The horn seemed like the only way out, the only thing that might stop this.

Why won't she just pick it up and try?

Alara focused everything she had on Teage's arm. Her awareness rushed down through bone and muscle, into tendons and fingertips that weren't hers, like she was trying to pull puppet strings while wearing heavy gloves. Her first attempt failed. Her borrowed limbs refused her completely.

She tried again.

One of Teage's fingers twitched.

Hope flared.

With renewed focus, Alara pushed harder, pouring fear and desperation into that single tiny movement. It felt like pushing a wave of cool blue pressure through warm gold veins. Bit by bit, she dragged Teage's hand toward the horn as the ship rocked under them.

Teage was dizzy, sick, and completely wiped. Her hand shook as it slid unexpectedly forward, fingers closing around the horn in front of her boots. For a second she

almost dropped it, flinching at the feel of the sticky paste smeared along the crack.

Ugh. Gross, she thought automatically.

The unfamiliar word sparked like static.

The paste glowed.

At first it was faint, just a thin line of light tracing the crack. Soft blue flickered along one edge, then brightened as a warm yellow pulse answered from beneath Teage's skin. The two colors slid toward each other, weaving together until the crack no longer looked patched, but fused shut, sealed by a ribbon of greenish-gold that didn't belong to any normal glue.

Warmth rushed through her, a sudden wave of heat that made the damp air shimmer. Steam hissed where her skin met the horn, a thin curl drifting up into the storm-thick air.

Around them, the captain stopped shouting mid-order and stared.

Acting outside her own will, Teage raised the horn to her lips. Somewhere deep inside, Alara stood with her, bracing as if she held the weight too. One girl blue, one girl yellow, both of them locked on the same breath.

They blew.

The horn's call exploded across the water, a blast so loud and sharp it felt like it split the sky. The sound held a strange color to it in Alara's mind—bright and golden at the center, edged with a cool blue ring that made her teeth ache. The shockwave slammed into the deck, knocking a deckhand clean off his feet and sending him skidding across the boards. Every sailor froze and turned to stare at Teage like she was some legendary sea maiden dragged up from the depths.

In the distance, a trumpet from the city answered.

The grinding roar of moving stone rolled over the waves as the cliff-side wheels shifted. The crew let out a collective breath, shoulders dropping, eyes flicking to Teage with a mix of awe and relief before snapping back to their work.

To Teage's left, the water began to change. The violent chop slowed, the wild churn smoothing into rolling swirls that almost looked beautiful. Colors shimmered under the surface: green, blue, silver, and a faint gold, bubbling and merging until the chaos thinned into ripples.

The sea turned to glass, glowing softly with reflected light.

A path appeared, a shining road leading straight toward the cavern mouth.

Captain Korten yanked his crumpled, soaked shirt down over his belly and straightened, swagger returning. "Shift the sails and turn to port!" he bellowed.

Canvas slid across the mast with a heavy snap, nearly knocking one careless deckhand off balance. As the crew scrambled to correct it, the ship eased into the smooth water, the horrible jerking replaced by a gentle rocking that felt almost kind.

Soon the last patch of turbulence fell away behind them, and they glided along the glassy path toward the entrance of the inner chamber.

"How did you do that, girl?" the captain shouted over the echoing water.

"I-I do not know," Teage stammered, still gripping the horn. The fused line where the crack had been gleamed faintly, blue at the edges and pale gold in the center. "It happened."

"Nonsense," he said, but there was no real bite as he stepped closer, studying her like a puzzle he could not solve.

“I am serious,” she insisted, flexing her fingers as if they weren’t quite hers. “My body just took over. I sounded the horn, but I did not choose to.”

He smiled finally, placing both hands on her shoulders, using her as much for balance as comfort. “Well, Teage, however you managed it, you have just saved our hides.” He gave her a small shake, almost proud. “I shall argue with miracles later.”

He turned back toward the helm, barking fresh orders as the ship drifted toward the rock wall. They were less than half a league from the cave now.

The cliff towered above, rough stone carved by wind and water and careful hands. Men stood beside the giant wheels, silhouettes sharp against the light.

On top of the main opening stood a bearded, stocky man in full armor, arms crossed. “It has been some time, Captain Korten,” he shouted. “Perhaps so long you have forgotten how to sound your horn?”

Korten laughed, tipping his head back. “It has been too long, old friend. But not so long that I have forgotten how to toot my own horn.” He grinned wide. “We shall have to meet for mead later.”

“Consider it an appointment!” the harbormaster called back as the ship slipped into the shadow of the grotto.

Inside, the temperature dropped. They floated in a cavern filled with layered pools, the ship gliding into one as if it had been poured there. Light filtered down through high openings, tinted a faint blue-green by the water and stone. Guards ringed the upper ledges, arrows ready, eyes sharp in the dim glow.

“Clear!” shouted a guard from the north side.

“Clear from the south!” another answered.

A few more voices echoed their approval, then someone down the line yelled an order.

Stone groaned.

Hidden doors shifted.

Wind screamed through unseen openings high above, rushing into the carved tunnels below.

Teage clapped her hands over her ears as the sound built, piercing and thin. Looking down, she saw the water twisting, pulled into a slow spiral that nudged the ship around. The vortex caught the reflections of the cavern lights, turning them into a spinning ring of pale blue and dull gold.

Alara's own memory flashed.

She and her friends marched in circles around her backyard pool to make a whirlpool, laughing as the center dipped lower and lower. The faster we walked, the deeper it got, she remembered. The sunlight on that pool had been sharp and clean, bright blue cut with white.

Teage shivered, a stray chill racing up her spine, though she could not have said why.

The ship turned slowly, deliberately, until its side faced a broad stone platform. The wind cut off as suddenly as it had started. The water stilled, dark and glassy.

A dock dropped from above, ropes creaking, then settled onto the deck with a solid thud. Guards in armor poured down, boots thumping in practiced rhythm.

"It is good to see you, Korten," one said with a quick bow of his head.

"It is good to see you as well," Korten replied, clapping the man's shoulder.

A shout came from below deck.

"Clear!"

A moment later, the guards stepped aside.

"Welcome back, Captain. May your stay be a pleasant one."

“Come, child,” Korten said, gesturing for Teage to follow. “Let us go and see the city I have been praising beyond all reason.”

They crossed the dock and entered a short tunnel carved into the stone. It was cooler inside, the air tasting of damp rock and metal. Faint blue light seeped along the ceiling, guiding them forward until a warmer, yellow-white glow ahead began to swallow the shadows.

As they walked the stone tunnel, Alara felt a faint pulse in the rock underfoot again. A mountain heartbeat, steady and patient.

When they emerged on the other side, sunlight punched through the dim.

Teage stopped dead.

Her breath caught.

“You were right,” she whispered, eyes wide as the city of A’kosh Na stretched before her. “It is more beautiful than I could ever have imagined.”

Stone terraces rose in stacked curves, sun-bright at the edges, cool in the shadows, with thin waterways gleaming between them.

People crossed slender bridges over the canals, their clothes were splashed with teal-and-amber sashes, scarves of sun-bleached yellow, sleeves dyed ocean-dark.

And somewhere deep inside, behind Teage’s awe and exhaustion, Alara felt it too, wonder rising under the fear. Her own familiar blue met Teage’s fierce yellow and, just for a moment, it didn’t feel wrong.

It felt like the world was finally showing its true colors.

