

Prologue

Here, if you look to the horizon, you can see the ocean tilted toward you like a bowl about to spill. Look up, and if the sky is clear enough, you can see light-webs of cities halfway around the world. It is perpetually night. There is only one star in the sky, a pinhole of light in the center of the world, above everybody's heads. Sometimes it blurs blue or red or gets masked by clouds. The only other natural light comes from below and within: a faint turquoise from the oceans, crimson and orange from the land, trees and brush emitting many shades of blue. The living organisms also glow in every color and with every intensity, including the ones that would conquer this hollow place. The whole is much like the images you see when you press on your closed eyes.

In a remote area, a wavy-haired young woman paced in the basement of an abandoned house. Her name was Nymcala. Like most people of the world, she had a simple form with four arms ending in webbed hands. And like most people of her country, she glowed a gentle pastel green, and wore a simple cloak. She paced, kicked the leaves and dust, and gripped nervously at the ivy on the walls. Her face was contorted and stretched thin, and tears flooded the lines her face made. She invoked the names of all the gods she knew and waited. The phone in her hand collected her sweat and tears. She had to hold it with two hands, while the lower two arms lent support to her strained upper arms.

For the hundredth time, the answering machine played. Furiously she dialed out and then thumbed the number again, and waited.

She gasped. There was an answer.

<Hello?> said the panicked voice.

<Ebim! Ashia!> said Nymcala. <Do you have it?>

<We just got back from the dealer. All the cash is here. Where are you?>

She paused and looked toward the door. In seconds, Metguel had made his way down the stairs. He glowed a darker green than Nymcala and wore a darker cloak. His hair was just as long as hers, and there was darkness under his oval eyes and oval chin. He smirked and waited.

<He--he--he has conditions,> said Nymcala.

<Yes. We have not told the police,> said the other voice.

<He is serious. He has a gun. He'll shoot me if he suspects police.>

<Nymcala, we want you back. We would not risk it.>

<Do you have all of it? All seven hundred thousand?>

<The house is sold. We counted the cash. It's all here.>

Nymcala looked painfully at Metguel. He nodded.

Nymcala spoke into the phone one last time, and dialed out. <Come to the place... where my father proposed.>

The elderly couple, Nymcala's grandparents on her father's side, exchanged glances, and walked to their car. The grandfather, Ebim, had thrown all calculators, pencils, handkerchiefs, and other articles out of his work briefcase and filled it with the small fortune in

bank notes, and now carried this briefcase with difficulty, insisting that Ashia not bear any of the weight.

Their own tears were spent already. As soon as they had heard that their granddaughter had been kidnapped -- and by her very first lover! -- they had not slept. They had spent the last day cleaning out their accounts and selling nearly everything to their name. They could not help but arouse suspicion in their neighbors, but Ebim and Ashia did not say anything. Now they traveled over bumpy roads leaving a wake of dust behind them. After an hour of driving, they arrived at what had once been a flourishing lakefront spot.

Indeed, it was at the opposite edge of the lake that their son had proposed. In three years, the newlyweds had given birth to Nymcala, and a year later, disappeared, leaving Nymcala nobody but Ebim and Ashia to care for her. They loved her as their own, and she loved them back. She struggled in school, but then again, so did most girls. It had only been sixty years since girls had even been allowed to attend school in this country. But what she lacked in her studies, she made up for with her gift of immaculate singing. Throughout her years, she strove to be a part of the nation's top choirs and acts, and made it past the first few hurdles of the selection process, but always fell just short of fame.

The couple came to a stop a stone's throw from the site, where an abandoned house stood. As was agreed, Ebim took a flashlight and flickered a signal out the windshield.

They sat in silence, windows sealed, waiting.

In response, a light from the third story flashed at them.

Ebim threw himself from the driver's seat and climbed into the flatbed, where he had stored an oblong case that took up the length of the bed. He opened it to reveal a war rifle, a relic. Just like decades past, he removed it from the case, cleaned it, loaded it and waited, with his sights on the window.

Ashia whispered, <What is this? You'll get her killed!>

<Defense,> said Ebim. <Otherwise, there's nothing stopping him from killing her AND us and running off with the money.>

From the dashboard of the car, Ashia's phone rang. She jumped as though she saw a spider, and picked it up. Nymcala's quivering voice was on the other end. She said, <Take the suitcase. Set it down halfway toward the house.>

Ashia obeyed, taking the suitcase with her lower hands and keeping the phone firmly to her ear with another. Gingerly she opened the door and stepped onto the dewy ground. She managed the suitcase well, but each step she took was slower than the next. She stopped. The suitcase fell from her hands, and she turned to make her way back to the truck.

<Wait!> shouted Ebim toward the house. <Bring her out! Bring out Nymcala! Ashia. Don't move until she comes out unharmed.>

Thirty heart-pounding seconds they waited. Then there was a movement just inside the empty doorway of the house. A round face, drenched in sweat and tears, peeked around the corner. She took one hesitant step, then another, then broke into an all-out run across the wet grass, beginning to sob again as she embraced her grandmother tightly. They wove their arms around each other and wept into each others' shoulders.

<Get on. Get over here. Now!> whispered Ebim.

<I need to see it,> said Nymcala, cracking open the case and flipping through the bills. She looked her grandmother in the eyes and kissed her on the cheek. <Now I need to show it to him. They are real, yes? Not counterfeit?>

Ashia nodded.

<If they are not real, he will shoot us all.>

<They are real, Nymcala.>

She picked up the suitcase and walked slowly to the entrance, taking an arced path so that she kept her back up against the wall. In two hands she held the case and held it open in front of the door, and paused.

A hand reached around the corner and picked up a stack of bills and brought it inside. Nymcala could hear them being shuffled.

Ashia knelt on the ground and kept her fatigued eyes on her granddaughter.

Ebim kept the sights of his rifle squarely on the open doorway.

Then Nymcala straightened up, closed the case, wandered around the corner into the house, and gave her grandparents a smiling salute. She disappeared and there was the sound of rapid footsteps followed by two gunshots.

It took a few seconds for it all to sink in. Ebim barked, <Get in and drive!>

Ashia hurried to the driver's side and fumbled with the door and the keys. They heard the ignition and roar of another car on the other side of the house. <Now! Now! Now!> screamed Ebim. Ashia finally got a grip on the key and started the truck. In the distance, tires screeched. Ashia steered the car around the house just far enough to see the taillights of their getaway.

But in the instant that they skirted the side of the house, a fiery blast sent the house skyward and the truck rolling. Ebim was tossed onto the ground in the path of the wreckage and Ashia was trapped within. The car itself quickly caught fire and exploded.

What was left of the site was now only a smoldering dot in the rear view mirror. Nymcala drove, keeping the accelerator to the floor. The suitcase sat in the passenger seat where only hours before, Metguel sat. Nymcala flipped through an atlas, making her way toward one of the nation's largest airports. On more than one occasion she broke into laughter. <Luck and magic, luck and magic... how else can I explain why I'm about to embark on the life I was meant to have? I couldn't have done it myself. Ah, all of you who helped me, all of the gods of the Craft, all your luck and magic got me here. I will make you famous in Gyla.>

She practiced her favorite dialect of the gylan language, which she had learned from countless films, one of Gyla's greatest exports. "Can't wait to hop on the plane and get some shuteye."

ZEROBLOOD