

[Once in a Blue Moon](#)

[Something borrowed, something blue](#)

Once in a Blue Moon

Once, Kiseia bit his hand so hard that she left teeth marks.

The Khun family traits were cold-blood and intelligence, but Kiseia had always carried a bit of poison in her too, in her slow smiles and her sharp gaze. The only time when she softened was when she was with Sophia.

He had grinned at her, her least-favorite smile, cold, no color, all condescending mockery. He let his hand hang limply in her jaws until she let go and spat out blood.

His hand stung, but a small child - even one from the Khun family - couldn't do that much damage.

If Sophia saw you now, he said, still holding his hand out, *she would never love you back. Nobody likes uncivilized brats like you.*

This is why I hate you, she spat back. *Don't go around saying things like that. It's not right.*

Why are you mad? It's just some friendly advice. He thought he had finally figured her out, his poisonous cousin, the intruder, his little sister. She seemed to hate everyone except for Sophia, and although he hadn't figured out the *why* part yet, he could tell this much:

Kiseia was in love, and she hated Khun Agnero Agnis because he was her competition, and thus her worst enemy.

Kiseia had always been childish, but perhaps she had been right. Maybe Kiseia had understood things long before he did.

In the tower, and especially within the Khun family, love was always a competition.

This isn't a game, she said bitterly. It is to you, but it's not to me.

It doesn't have to be war either, he said. Or if it is, we can have a truce, can't we?

Even back then, he had always been looking for ways to break the rules. He hadn't figured out yet how cruel and absolute they could be.

No, she said, looking at him with the depth of hatred only siblings could attain. And this isn't war either. This is survival. But you wouldn't understand, would you? You've never had anything to live for.

Years later, when he does understand, there's a girl, and there's a boy.

Years later, he tells a girl to bet everything on the flip of a coin, knowing that she would lose.

She was a different type of poison, this one, all summer on the surface but death underneath. He had travelled with her for long enough to see that she and Kiseia were the same type. Take away that one thing, put them in front of a mirror, and they were nothing.

He thinks he might even hate her as much as Kiseia had hated him, back then.

Rachel tries to hate him back, but he can tell that it was the kind of hatred that came from fear. She had been forced to hide her true self for seven years because of him, had been forced to smile and sit in a wheelchair and play the part of a weakling. Every time she saw him, she had to be reminded of who she really was.

"Since when have you been so close with Bam?" she asks, jealous and hiding it horribly. "He's trusting you with his life, you know."

Ever since you threw him away, Khun wants to say, but instead he just gives her his coldest smile, all malice, no answers. She doesn't deserve one anyway, and she hates this smile even more than Kiseia did.

"Whatever you have," he says, "I'll take away from you."

Threats and promises work well on this one, because they are all she has ever known.

Rachel doesn't kill him, but she doesn't kill Bam either. Khun doesn't lift a finger to save her, despite years of pretending that he would. He thinks that they can call it even.

Years later, the boy tells him that he wants to climb the tower together, knowing that he will follow.

He's a jewel, this one, all summer on the surface and life underneath, even after people have hurt him and betrayed him, fed him poison and lies. There's something warm in his gaze, something that doesn't belong to a cold-hearted killer, something that everyone can sense just by coming close to him. It makes people want to use him, or help him, or sometimes both.

Bam never looks up at the sky unless it's dark, but prefers clear days over cloudy ones. Khun thinks he knows why; he's keeping it a secret for now.

He thinks, if they ever make it to the top of the tower together, he won't know what to ask for because it would already have happened.

He's lying to himself. So what? It's nothing new.

When he first realizes what Bam means to him - that he is somebody to live for - the first thought he has is: *how do I help him get to the top of the tower?*

Old habits die hard, but he doesn't realize that until years and years later.

If someone asked him what his fatal flaw is, and Khun would say something like "oh, my pride, I suppose," even though he is no more arrogant than every other cast-off scion of the 10 Great Families and more than careful enough to make up for it.

The truth is, Khun's fatal flaw is that he sometimes forgets that love is a competition, but not a game.

Kiseia thought that the competition had been in between her and Agüero, it had actually been between her and the Tower itself. Her idiot brother is still figuring that part out, whenever he forgets not to think about it. But he thinks he might finally understand how his sister felt, after all this time.

He used to think that he could mess with all the rules of the Tower. He and it are old enemies, old acquaintances. They used to play together, and Khun would win every time, even though - and he knows this now - it's not a game.

He doesn't think of it as easy anymore, not after his last game went so disastrously well. He still sees it, sometimes, when he is too tired to dream:

Maria, looking not a day older, her smile just as pure as it was yesterday in his memories, warm and shy like a ray of sunlight over a cold pond of ice. It shouldn't be there, but there it is.

He wonders, sometimes, if he ever learned to stop being arrogant and started acting more impulsively, if he will ever be able to admit to being wrong about helping her.

He also wonders, sometimes, if he will ever learn to forget - his sister's sightless blue eyes, hands cold, Kiseia crying, his mother saying *trust no one, especially not yourself. You are your own worst enemy, Khun Aguero Agnis.*

Once, Bam came to find him, late at night, shivering like he felt cold, only that the cold went down to his bones, and afraid of the dark.

"Do you think I should stop trying to climb up the tower?" he asks, whispering because it's late, it's quiet under the covers, because secrets are meant to be whispered, and because if anybody else overhears, he might break their heart.

It breaks Khun's heart anyway.

There are a few things that nobody else knows about Bam, but Khun does.

Put Bam in front of a mirror, and he'll only see himself. Put him in a cave, and he'll become his own light. So many people think they can see the pattern there, put him on a pedestal, make him a god, and they think he'll become whatever they want him to be. But even if you put a crown on his head, he will drop it the instant that someone he cares about gets hurt.

He wants to say: *you don't have to, if you don't want to.*

He wants to say: *sure, whatever you want. At least this way you won't have to make friends with demons and mass murderers, tricksters and liars and puppet-string holders. At least this way, you can be free.*

He wants to say: *yes, it would be better for you. Find somewhere to hide, someplace Jahad can never find you. I'll start looking tomorrow, we'll see how far we can get.*

But instead he just reaches for Bam's fingers and holds them in his hands, blowing on them and trying to make it feel less cold. He can't do much for the shivering, and he doesn't have an answer. He is the most useless person in the Tower, and he hates himself for it.

"You're an irregular," Khun tells him, and the word still chills the marrow of his bones. It feels like telling Bam *you're a monster. You're a killer. You are destined to shake this tower's foundations and rip off the sky.*

Bam just looks at him, and because he knows that Khun doesn't mean it that way, it doesn't hurt.

"I'm not sure if you *can* stop climbing, even if you tried."

"I'm sorry," Bam says, and Khun shakes his head, no, Bam has nothing to be sorry about, ever. "I'll get over it by the morning. I'm just tired."

He's not just tired, but Khun doesn't call him out on the lie. He is made up of lies, white lies, lies by omission, ugly, enormous lies, and in the end, the only truthful thing he can do is hold Bam close as he cries silently into his shoulder, and not say a word more.

He realizes that old habits die hard.

I always do this, he thinks.

He wishes he could change, take Bam far away from here, away from FUG, away from the constant games and lies and tests. He wishes he could hide Bam away in some bright corner of the tower where the sky is particularly beautiful and keep him from harm. Keep him from learning how to harm others.

This is a dangerous desire, he knows, because if Bam doesn't go up the tower, then nothing changes.

If nothing changes, then his father gets to keep selling his daughters and sons for entertainment.

If nothing changes, then even if Bam can be happy, Khun never will be.

"I'm sorry, Bam," Khun whispers. He twists his fingers into Bam's shirt and wishes he could wring himself dry of desires. He is too full of them. They'll drag him under.

"Don't be," Bam sounds tired, exhausted, like he might fall asleep.

He will wake up in the morning, and when he does, they will both pretend that this conversation never happened.

Somewhere, a coin gets flipped and nobody knows whether it lands heads or tails.

Somewhere, a boy looks up at the sky and decides to fall, or doesn't.

Somewhere, a girl looks into a mirror, flinches, or smiles.

And somewhere, a boy drifts off to sleep, but not before deciding: enough is enough, screw the rules of this game. It's time to go to war.

Lillytis:

OOOOH notes' fic blessed day!! 

AHH notes uploaded the fic, BYEE

NOTES you have killed me in the best possible way but still

right i was about to send some of my art to twitter, but then notes' fic and annie's art happened back to business

Salty mat:

@noteinabottle ahhh god, that is so good it hurts, it hit my feelings hard too, god... and it is so poetic.

it is so poetic in the lines it bring joy to my heart, while the topics destroy it

10/10

20/10 satisfying prose right there

Something borrowed, something blue

Bam destroys the forest on the 77th floor.

Rachel tells Bam that his body never belonged to him.

That she called him a curse, that she was a witch that made a contract with the Outside god. He is left reeling for days, and it's only when Khun pulls him close and holds his face in his hands and looks into his eyes, and softly tells him that he's still here, he slowly feels himself settling back into his own skin, feeling like his body belongs to him.

And it's because the thing that Khun loves isn't some dead thing, and isn't the thing that Arlene loved and lost and mourned and grieved until she went mad over. Khun doesn't care about any of that.

Something borrowed, something blue

Bam destroys the forest on the 77th floor.

Tags: Philosophy, morality, Fate, Good and Evil, Hurt/Comfort, Mistakes are made, nothing makes sense, Dialogue, Ambiguity, more of an Outline than a fic, goddammit

Listen, listen: nothing makes sense.

When Bam destroys the forest on the 77th floor, they see it for the first time: the true power of an Irregular.

They had seen glimpses of it before, all of them. Spells breaking at a touch, rules being bent, Guardians giving him special treatment, weapons and people and powers all gathering to him, being swallowed up. But never like this.

The air itself is warping around him, dense with so much shinsu that nobody can move. Trees are getting ripped out of the ground, everything burning, their huge, ancient bodies unable to weather this storm. The team is frozen to the spot, helpless to do anything but watch.

This is what an Irregular does - they're reminded: Irregulars are people who bring change. They are the ones who will shake the Tower to its very foundations. Beware of irregulars, they had been told. They will destroy everything they touch.

You're going to cause a lot of deaths, Dowon had said to him. If I let you live, how many others will die? If you keep climbing the tower, you're going to ruin us all.

Bam has never given much thought to it before. Good and evil has only ever been explained to him in the simplest of terms: Harming others is evil. Protecting them is good. Betraying a girl will make the sky fall down. Being quiet and obedient will make those around you smile.

But the Tower is made up of layers upon layers of skies that he is trying to bring down, over and over and over again. Being quiet and obedient has only ended up in him getting used, manipulated, and tricked.

"Have you ever thought about it?" he asks Khun. "About if we're right or wrong."

Khun gives him a strained smile. He probably thinks that he should be the last person to answer the question. But that's why he's the perfect person for Bam to ask. Khun is so convinced that he is a bad person, that he will always be wrong when it comes to the big decisions. How does he know? And why is he so sure?

"There's no use thinking about it," Khun tells him. "The world isn't made up of good or bad people. There's just people, all with their own motivations and all going about their own lives. Most of them don't ever stop to think about this stuff."

"Do you?" Bam wants to know.

"No," Khun shrugs dismissively, but his tone is gentle. "But you do, which already makes you better than all of them."

He gives Bam a reassuring smile. It's so easy to feel relieved after talking with Khun. Khun is so convinced that Bam is a good person, that his decisions can be trusted. It frightens Bam, sometimes, to be trusted so blindly.

What will you do if I make a mistake? he wonders. Trust is such a precious thing, hard to come by, and sometimes irreparable when broken. He imagines the disappointment in Khun's eyes, and thinks he would do anything to avoid seeing it there.

"What should I do?" Bam asks. "What if I'm wrong?"

Khun frowns at the uncertainty in Bam's voice, but he doesn't judge him for it. Rak would make fun of him for getting so caught up in his own head. Hwaryun would scold him for wavering, and all the others - for some reason, Bam doesn't want to let them see him like this. So many follow him just because he's strong, because they think that he'll give them what they want. But not Khun.

"Then it wouldn't be the end of the world," Khun says.

When Rachel tells him about Arlene, her words hurt him more than he ever imagined they would. It feels like an old, half-faded bruise under his ribs, one that refuses to heal no matter how much time passes.

"If you reach the top of the tower," she says. "This whole place will be destroyed. Arlene said so."

Her lips curl back into a vicious grin. She used to be such a gentle person, soft and quiet. She used to always be so patient with him.

"And you call *me* the villain?" Rachel asks. She laughs sharply, and Bam can feel her words cutting into him like blades.

"*You* will kill more people than I ever will," Rachel says. "You don't even know what you truly are. You're not human, Bam. You have a piece of the Outside God in your body. You are a golem, Bam. Arlene sacrificed her son and made it into a weapon that could destroy the tower. There's nothing inside you that used to belong to Arlene's son."

Then she tells him about King Jahad, and the terrible secret he is keeping. The sacrifices he has made in order to keep the peace.

"Do you think you're a hero?" Rachel asks, mocking. "Do you think that if you kill him, you'll be able to make everyone happy? Open your eyes, Bam. That will never happen."

She has changed so much, but some things remain the same. Bam flinches back from her, and feels the same sickening guilt pour into him, like he's back in the cave, and being scolded. And Bam finally, finally knows why Rachel pushed him away all those years ago: she had been right all along.

"I don't want to kill King Jahad," Bam confesses in a rush. He closes his eyes and presses his forehead against the palms of his hands. Khun takes them away, replaces them with his own, fingers brushing into the ends of Bam's hair.

"I don't want to climb the tower anymore."

Khun ignores the chill that runs through him.

"Why?"

"What if Rachel was right about me? What if I am a monster? What if everyone is right about me, and I'm just this dead thing come back to life, this curse? What if Rachel is right, and I never should have been here in the first place. My mother never loved me, so even if I find her, I won't get any answers. If I was always meant to be a weapon after all, I'd rather stay here forever."

"You are none of those things," Khun tells him. "You're just Baam, and you're not a dead thing, and you're not a weapon, and you're not a curse. You're right here, and you're just as alive as I am."

Bam sighs and curls up under the blankets. His forehead bumps against Khun's shoulder, and Khun carefully moves so that his arm is no longer in the way.

"What if I can't do it?" Bam asks, his voice muffled. "What if I can't kill him?"

"I wouldn't think any less of you," Khun says.

"I'd be disappointing a lot of people."

"And what do you owe them? Nothing."

Bam smiles slightly. Khun can feel it in the way his body relaxes, and the way his breathing eases.

But then later, he says, "But I have to," just like Khun knew he would.

They decide to go to the 77th floor, to finally meet up with Urek Mazino, and ask for his help in the upcoming war against King Jahad.

This has been a trend, and so Bam really shouldn't have been surprised, but they don't find Urek on the 77th floor.

Instead, they meet a friend of his - Baek Ryun, the Ruler of this floor, co-founder of Wolkhaisong - the tree part of the 'Winged Tree', who has been waiting for them in Urek's stead.

There's a world out there that's bigger than the Tower, Baek Ryun tells Bam. *I promise you'll get to see it one day, once all this is over.* And for the first time since Rachel told him about Arlene, Bam feels his heart lift in his chest, and wonders if maybe he isn't doomed after all.

On the 77th floor, Baek Ryun teaches Bam three things:

First, how to use shinsu without forming a contract with a Guardian. For people like them, people with a piece of the 'Outside God' in their body, they are equivalent to Guardians themselves. Why rely on others for something you can provide yourself?

Second, what the Outside world really is. It is a place where shinsu doesn't exist, where magic doesn't exist, a place no longer bound by the laws of the Tower. The Outside can only be explained in terms of what the Tower is not. In the Tower, Guides can see futures that are set in stone. Those who read the flow of Fate will always be helpless to do anything but watch as it unfolds. Outside, nothing is set in stone.

Third, the concept of freedom. *You have the most freedom out of anybody I've ever met*, Hwaryun had told him once. *I can't see what you'll do, or where you'll go. That's why I decided*

to make you my God, and follow you. For Guides, most people have one future, maybe two, a fork in the road somewhere in their lives, one choice. But irregulars don't have one future, they have many. Endless, branching paths, and if that isn't freedom, then what is?

Bam doesn't understand all of these things fully yet, but he thinks he's starting to. Baek Ryun isn't strict like Jinsung is, and isn't as hard to pin down as Urek is. He's actually rather soft-spoken, creepy red eyes set in a strangely kind face. It's kind of nice to finally have a mentor who will tell him the whole truth.

You're free to do so many things, Baek Ryun. You can do whatever you want. That's what it's like to be an Irregular.

Baek Ryun keeps telling him that, but Bam finds out later that it's not true.

Jahad's army follows them onto the 77th floor.

Their first strike is absolute and merciless. It's a reminder. This tower is ruled by a King, and rebellion will not be tolerated. A FUG Slayer meeting with Wolkhaisong is apparently more than enough justification to bring down the force of Jahad's entire army.

Bam should have thought of this. He should have remembered - his actions impact far, far, more people than he realizes.

But he realizes too late.

The sky splits open with a massive boom, a crack of lightning - a single blue line from somewhere that surely must be the heavens. And the earth shakes, the whole world goes silent and numb. Every eye is drawn to the beam of light that has just struck the tallest tree - the heart of the forest.

Then the air from the point of impact blooms out with so much concussive force that it flattens the forest like a scythe. Above them all, ships fill the sky until they block out the light.

When Baek Ryun dies, his last words are that *fate can't always be changed.*

It goes against everything that he has taught Bam so far.

“What about free will?” Bam rages. “What are you trying to say? That this was *supposed* to happen?”

The stunned expression on his face is all too familiar - heartbreak, betrayal, more than any one person should ever have to bear. Khun watches him fall into despair and thinks that it might have been too much - Bam has just lost one person too many.

Khun reaches out to touch him. His fingers clasp around Bam’s wrist, silent comfort, but still not enough.

I’m here, it says. And I won’t leave you.

Bam knows that it’s a lie too. He can’t trust anything, not anymore.

“I shouldn’t have come here,” he says. “I was careless. I gave Jahad’s army an excuse to attack. This is all my fault. I shouldn’t ever leave this floor ever again. I should just give up.”

What would Urek say? He had given up so much - his love, his reputation - all so that he wouldn’t have to fight Jahad. He had carved out a precious neutral space in the 77th floor of the tower, and Bam had destroyed all of that just by coming here.

Why climb the tower in the first place, then?

The world is disintegrating around them, and Bam can’t find an answer to that.

Rachel is gone, and has told him everything she knows. Arlene Grace, whatever she is to him, is a stranger at best, and a heartless mother who sacrificed him at the worst. And King Jahad, who so many people want him to kill, is so unfairly that a single blow from him has wiped out the heart of Wolkahaisong, and the strongest wave controller in the tower.

The unfairness of it all nearly overwhelms him.

“Then what about climbing the tower for your friends?” Khun asks, his voice steady, to hide the heartbreak.

“Everybody wants something from me,” Bam says. “Rak wants me to become strong, so that he can hunt me. Hwaryun and FUG want me to kill a King. I don’t know what the hell Shibisu and his team want from me, but they’ll use me too, if they can.”

It would kill Shibisu to hear that, but it's true. They had been the ones to dig up the name Jyu Viole Grace at the Name Hunt Station. And Bam apparently *did* hold grudges after all.

"I've been dragged up all these floors by other people ever since I've stepped into the Tower. I'm tired, Khun. I can't give them what they want."

"They want a miracle," Khun says. "That's why they want you to be their God. Of course you can't. You're human."

Bam's fingers dig into his hair. The shinsu around him wavers, unsteady, a building tide of pent-up rage and despair.

Khun watches it all with a twisting sense of unease. He has never seen shinsu react to someone's emotions like that. It reminds him of all those stories about Enryu, and how he had turned the shinsu around him red.

Whatever happened on this floor, it has made Bam evolve again. Again, he is stronger than he was before, and nobody understands how or why. For all of Baek Ryun's talk of freedom and choice, it really does seem as if Bam is just being swept along by his destiny sometimes.

"What should I do?" Bam asks in a broken whisper.

Khun looks at him and desperately wishes he had an answer.

"You shouldn't be asking me that," he says. "You should be asking yourself. You're the one who has to make the decision."

"Why?" Bam asks bitterly. "Because I'm the one with free will? If that's the case, then everything really *is* my fault, and I'll have to shoulder the blame for how everything turns out."

"Bam," Khun says dryly. "Not to speak ill of the recently dead, but you've been listening too much to a man who's part tree."

The shinsu around Bam shivers, and then settles unexpectedly. Bam brings his head up to give Khun a startled look, and Khun can't help but smile at him.

"You're not a God," Khun says. "And I don't need you to be one. So what if you have free will? So what if I don't? Either way, I -"

He cuts off, and Bam stares curiously at him, his rage forgotten for now.

“You what?”

In a different world, Khun might lean forward and kiss him right then and there.

I'd still love you, he would say. But I don't think that has anything to do with your fate, or any of this.

If anything, it just means that Baek Ryun was wrong. Do you really think that is something that somebody decided beforehand? Does the Outside God seem like somebody with a sense of humor to you?

“I wouldn't blame you for your mistakes,” Khun says instead.

The forest burns, and burns, and as the smoke curls up into the sky, it turns the clouds black. The roaring sound of wood being consumed sounds like a huge animal in agony.

In some remote areas of the Outer Tower, Khun remembers, those who used shinsu used to be seen as witches, and they used to be burned at the stake. He wonders if Baek Ryun used to fear that fate, back when he used to live out there, and what he thinks of it now.

They stand in silence until it's over, and ash begins to fall from the sky.

“I'm going to keep climbing the tower,” Bam tells him, after having destroyed the army and everything around it. The wreckage burns all around them, and so does the forest.

“I'm going to kill King Jahad, and if the tower is destroyed then so be it. And if I'm still alive after that, I want to go Outside, to the world that Baek Ryun told me about. He said he always wanted to see what it was like, out there. I guess I'll go and see it for him.”

He hesitates, then asks: “Khun, will you come with me?”

His gaze locks onto Khun's face, and he looks strangely pleading. For all the fury inside of him now, he still can't bring himself to threaten his friends into following him.

Khun nods, and Bam relaxes visibly, and lets go of his hand.

“Thank you,” he says. “I know I always ask too much of you.”

Khun knows that forgiveness is too late by now, but he tries for it anyway.

“You know that I’ll do anything for you, right?”

He already has. All the pieces are in place, and the line of dominoes won’t stop falling until the tower gets knocked down. Bam finally has his own reasons for climbing up the tower. Nothing can stop him now.

When they reach the 78th floor, everyone is exhausted, tired, and heartsick. They barely make it to a safe location before splitting up into groups, some to be alone, some to drown themselves in drink. They’ve never lost a battle so badly before.

A pyrrhic victory, in every definition of the term.

Khun goes to find Bam, this time, because Bam has a bad habit of forcing himself to be alone when he feels guilty. He used to hide in his room for days, even though it never made him feel any better. The events of the 77th floor appear to have caused him to regress into that old pattern.

Bam is curled up somewhere at the foot of the bed, his head buried in his arms, hugging his knees to his chest. He quietly waves away the food that Khun brought, says *I’m not hungry*, even though he must be starving.

Khun has dealt with this more times than he can count. For some reason, Bam has never gotten better at accepting the deaths of others.

He reaches out and pulls Bam into a hug, no words, just simple contact for now. One day, maybe, Bam will learn how to pull himself together by himself. Or, maybe one day, he’ll stop having to deal with death all the time.

"I'm sorry," Bam whispers, but Khun isn't the one he's talking to. "I made a mistake."

It's fine, Khun wants to say. It's not the end of the world. You're still here, and so am I. You're allowed to make mistakes, Bam.

But then Bam draws in a shuddering breath, and his arms tighten around Khun's neck. He feels warm, his forehead feverish, like he's been crying.

He thinks of all the floors they've passed by - the people and places, testing arenas and administrators and Guardians. Bam had no desire to destroy any of that, and also had no desire to destroy Baek Ryun's. And yet here they are, with the 77th floor burned to the ground.

Some things you just can't change, and Khun is all too familiar with that feeling of helplessness.

Outline.

Bam asks if anything in his life was real, or set up by the outside god
Khun kisses him and asks - does the outside god seem like they seem h

When they had been deciding who should go and who should stay, it hadn't been a hard decision. The forest may be a dangerous place, but no one here should be openly hostile. Bam had decided long ago to try and find Urek here, and if the pin acts as a free pass, then why not use it?

It would save him the time of recounting everything to Khun anyway. And Khun has always been better at gathering information. After all, they might finally meet someone here who has the answers to all of his questions. Who is he, really? And what is he here for?

Khun is silent for a moment. Then, unexpectedly, he asks: "Do you ever think about fighting fate?"

Bam has no idea where that question just came from. It throws him off.

"Not really," he says. "Or, not for long. What do you mean?"

"Like how you're fated to destroy this tower," Khun says. "Even though you are one of the few people here that actually gets to *choose*. Do you ever wish - do you think of that fate as a burden?"

Bam doesn't answer for a long moment.

"No you don't," Khun says, just to play devil's advocate.

"It's too late for me. I can't back out now."

I know, Khun thinks. He has known that since the Workshop Battle.

If you can't

If we have all these laws of nature that are always true, and everything behaves according to them, because miracles don't exist, then does it matter if God exists?

Come to the Sundial Rock when it no longer makes a shadow, the note reads. If you give me back the wooden box I dropped, I'll tell you everything I know about Arlene.

The box is empty, save for a few bits of dirt on the inside. There are no carvings on it, and no shinsu signature that Bam can detect. He stares at it, and wonders why Rachel would get so sentimental about such an odd thing.

Don't tell anyone, the note reads. I don't trust the others. I know you said that you never wanted to see me again, Bam, but this time, I promise. I'll tell you everything.

If it's a trap, he can't imagine Rachel setting one. Her handwriting hasn't gotten any better over the years. And she's alone on this floor, according to Khun. She couldn't bring Yura with her, or any of her other cronies. None of them are Irregulars, after all, and the forest would have swallowed them up.

I want to know, Bam thinks. He has to know. Why would Rachel throw him away if he was Arlene's son? What does she know about him? What's in his future?

He imagines

When Baek Ryun dies, it's Rachel's fault. Rachel, who has taken to hunting down anyone and anything to do with the Outside God, who will take anything powerful and make it hers, who finally tells him about Arlene.

The Wolkhaisong headquarters is a tree. Of course it's a tree. It's massive, dwarfing even the giant oaks that cover the floor.

“What do you know about Baek Ryun?” Khun asks. “Why is Urek so insistent that you go and meet him?”

“Well, he’s the best wave controller in the tower,” Bam points out. “Maybe he thought it would be a good idea for me to train under him.”

“Not a guru,” Bam says. “Urek says he’s the wisest man he’s ever met.”

“Okay,” Khun doesn’t look impressed. “So a hermit. Remind me again, how is a hermit and a pervert supposed to help us against Jahad?”

Their first few meetings with Urek had totally ruined his reputation with Khun. Bam isn’t really surprised. Khun has always been the practical type, and t

“You shouldn’t be taking life advice from a philosopher who trapped himself into a tree.”

Bam laughs, despite himself.

“Urek says that whatever comes, I should just accept it. If I decide to keep climbing, I’ll be giving up any agency. It won’t be like I had much of a choice anyway.”

Even the floor test here is strange - there is no Administrator to run it. In fact, there’s hardly any test. If you make it to the teleportation gate to the next floor, you pass.

Easier said than done, of course. Their real goal here is to finally meet up with Urek Mazino, and ask for his help in the upcoming war against King Jahad.

“Take this,” Bam says. He hands Khun the silver pin that Yuri had given to him - the one-winged tree. “This pin acts as a free pass. It should protect you in there, but we only have the one.”

He grins at Khun's surprised look, and clarifies: "I don't need one since I'm an Irregular. The forest won't harm me."

"You seem awfully confident about that."

"Do I?" Bam teases.

He's in a good mood - and has been ever since they've passed the previous floor test. They've finally made it. They're *here*. He has been looking forward to this floor for a long time.

"Are you sure you want me to go with you?" Khun asks. "I'm from one of the 10 Great Families. They could consider me an enemy."

To be honest, Khun is a little surprised. This isn't part of the plan. He had been expecting Bam to enter the forest alone, leaving the rest of the team in the Inner Tower. It's been the typical pattern so far - solo training sessions under the tutelage of a bizarre mentor, although that time on the Hidden Floor had been an exception.

"Don't be ridiculous," Bam says. "You're coming with me."

The first time they meet, Baek Ryun plays a trick on both of them, playing spooky noises, blowing wind through the tree branches. Bam discovers that even though Khun isn't the superstitious type, he gets jumpy and irritable when he's scared, and he gets a small furrow between his brows.

"Ghosts aren't real," Khun says, sounding as if he's trying to convince himself. "That's ridiculous. Souls sure, but that's just energy. Ghosts don't exist."

He's rambling, and it's adorable. Bam has never seen him this nervous before, so he bumps his shoulder against Khun's, and teases him mercilessly for it.

"Are you sure that you're not just seeing things?" Bam asks. "Maybe that's what all those other armies saw, when they were trying to take over this floor. Maybe you're just going mad."

"Well then, enjoy having an insane lightbearer," Khun says flatly. A branch snaps behind him, and he barely avoids flinching.

Bam could watch this all day. This is the most fun he's had in forever, only then he says "Look, Khun, it's just the wind. If there really were ghosts, they'd say something like *boo* -"

“*Boo!*” a voice behind them says. Bam learns, for the first time, that Khun doesn’t scream when he’s scared. He turns and pulls a knife instead.

“Sorry, sorry,” says a man, rolling with laughter on the ground. He was extraordinarily silent, for someone who had been following them this entire time. When he looks up and grins widely, his eyes gleam an unsettling red. “I heard you two talking about ghosts and I just couldn’t resist.”

Baek Ryun has the same sense of humor as Urek does, apparently.

So they don’t find Urek, but they do find answers. More specifically, they find the rumored Ruler of this floor - the famed Baek Ryun, co-founder of Wolkhaisong - the tree part of the ‘Winged Tree’.

“Urek isn’t here,” the Ruler says. “Sorry, but you’ll have to catch him some other time.”

Khun stares at him, and at the knife that had gone right through his body without harming him.

“I could have killed you,” he says, sounding more confused than irritated by Baek Ryun’s laughter than anything else. “You - why didn’t this work on you?”

“You can’t kill me,” Baek Ryun says, and grins.

Khun sheathes his dagger with an irritated *tch*.

“How?” Bam asks, confused, but also intrigued. There’s something about Baek Ryun that is different from all the other Rulers and test administrators they’ve met so far. It reminds him of Urek, somehow.

“You wanna know?” Baek Ryun asks, and spreads his arms wide. “Then follow me.”

“Come on,” he says to Khun. “You too. Your brother says he can’t *wait* to meet you.”

Khun stops in his tracks, finally realizing why Bam had insisted on bringing him along.

“Oh,” he says faintly. “*Shit*.”

The middle area of the 77th floor is a forest. Khun tries to tell Bam everything he knows about the place, but it’s not much. This is Baek Ryun’s forest. Some people call it enchanted. Some

people call it cursed. There are rumors that even the heads of the 10 Great Families can't enter this place safely. Once, entire armies had been swallowed up in that forest, never to return.

Meet me on the 77th floor, Urek had said.

Easier said than done, of course. Khun doesn't think that vague words like are enough to make Urek their ally, but Bam seems optimistic about it. Their real goal here is to

"If she gets her hands on Baek Ryun's power, she could trap us all here, on this floor, forever. No matter what happens, don't let the box reach her intact."

"And if it does?"

"Then we're all trapped."

"There is another way," Baek Ryun says. He has been quiet till now, content to sit and watch their argument unfold from the background. His voice startles Khun - he had completely forgotten about the pseudo-Rule of this floor.

Bam looks at Baek Ryun, strangely desperate.

"Is this another one of those choices?" he asks. "Or is this fate as well? Did you know that this would happen?"

"I'm not a guide," Baek Ryun shrugs, his massive shoulders creaking. "I don't know."

Then his shoulders settle, and he fixes his red eyes on Bam's face. "The forest is tied to me," he says. "I bound my soul to it a long time ago, and it will die with me. If that box really is in Rachel's possession, you should kill me before she gets a chance to use it."

At first, the meaning of his words doesn't register. Bam gives him an incredulous look.

"You have to be the one to do it."

Khun watches the realization slam into Bam like a hammer.

“Wh - what are you talking about?” Bam stammers. “I can’t kill you. You’re immortal.”

Baek Ryun gives him an unimpressed look. “I’m not immortal,” he says. “Whatever gave you that idea? I just can’t be killed with shinsu used from any Guardian contracts.”

“So what you’re saying is, you can only be killed by an Irregular.”

Bam’s fists are clenched against his sides. He has grown so used to blood in the past few years. He is no longer a stranger to killing. But not like this.

“You’re not the one trapping them on this floor,” Khun points out. “Rachel is, with the box. And we might be able to find another way out.”

The forest is actually a part of Baek Ryun’s body, or maybe even the entirety of it. When they first meet, what Bam sees is more spirit than man. Baek Ryun is a shape-changer - one moment, he’s a normal-looking man with an angular face and red eyes, the next, he’s a pale-faced child dressed in black.

It’s actually a little refreshing, meeting a creature that has all the powers of a Guardian, but doesn’t belong to the tower.

Unlike all those other spirits - Headon, the Guardian of the Rice Pot, the Thryssa inside him, Bark Ryun doesn't constantly egg him on to climb higher.

"We have to get out of here," Khun reminds him quietly. The rest of the team are still at the gate, waiting for them to come back. "It's not safe."

"Why?" Bam jerks his wrist away. His eyes are wild. Khun has never seen him like this, and it frightens him more than he wants to admit.

"We have to go up to the next floor."

"You don't have to do this," Khun says quietly.

"Yes I do."

"Nobody will blame you if you don't want to kill your own mentor with your own hands," Khun insists. His voice hardens. "You don't have to carry that burden."

"They would have every right," Bam wheels around. "I would be trapping them on this floor." His eyes are a little wild, and when he paces back and forth, it's like he has too much energy to contain. He can't seem to stay still.

“Do you have any ideas?” Bam fires at him.

“Not at the moment, no.”

“Then why do you trust me so much?” Bam asks. “People keep telling me that I don’t deserve this power. I’ve just had everything given to me on a silver platter. ”

Khun is about to disagree with that - seven years of training from hell, and all of Bam’s constant training has gotten him to where he is today. Nobody should look at that and call his current strength *undeserved*. And they’re all enemies anyway, made bitter by their loss, throwing out whatever words might hurt.

But Bam doesn’t give him a chance to answer.

“And because I was careless, I led Jahad’s army right here.”