

THE TIME TOWER

"Looking Back"

There are certain universal desires, and chief among them is the desire to possess a button that will allow you to turn back time. The answer to all your problems.

They thought that they had discovered the means to achieve the secret desire of their hearts. They thought they'd discovered magic. But we know that magic does not exist. Not in the way that most people wish it would. It was only an illusion.

You cannot turn back time. You can only move forward.

She hit the stone floor, and the door slammed closed behind her. The double boom echoed in the silence. She lay there for a long time, blind either from pain or panic for the space around her glowed with an eerie yellow light, and felt.

She felt her heart beating in her chest, erratic but welcome. She felt her shoulder aching where it had been pulled out of its socket. She felt the floor beneath her, cold and warm at the same time, like a living animal left out in the chilly night air, shivering and breathing.

She tried to sit up, but she seemed glued to the floor. When she finally gained the strength to wrench her eyes open, she was surprised to find that she was lying not on stone but on black metal, cut into perfect square tiles.

She heard a shuffle of feet to her right. Somehow managing to prop herself up on one arm, she turned sluggishly to face whatever had materialized to attack her. A cry was torn out of her lips when she saw the man standing there.

He was propped up against the wall on shaking legs. His arms hung limp at his sides. His breathing grew louder, filling the room and forcing her to press one ear against the floor to block out the sound.

When she looked back at him, the man was staring at her. His jaw worked as he struggled to speak through his labored breathing.

"No, no, no. He's dead. He's not...You're not...My brother is dead!"

The phantom's expression remained impassive. She forced herself up to a sitting position, and with a howl of rage that burned her throat, she flung the key clenched in her fist at him - at it. She expected the key to pass through the phantom and clang into the wall, but it bounced off the phantom's chest. It flinched.

Before either could react, the girl heard a sound like a door opening and slamming shut. But how...

She whirled around, scrambling away from the door on all fours, and caught sight of another figure leaning against the wall beside the door. The figure turned, eyes sweeping across her to the man in the corner, and then sprang forward. His hand clamped down around the phantom's throat for an instant, and then it vanished.

He turned in slow motion, hands clenched into white-tipped fists, and stalked toward the girl. "Pima?" He knelt, extended a tentative hand, and placed it on her leg. He gripped it tight, his nails cutting into her flesh. "Pima...Pima..."

He scooted closer, throwing an arm around her shoulders and drawing her to his chest.

"Ahhh!" she cried out in pain when he squeezed her injured shoulder.

"What's wrong?" he asked, pulling back. His fingers traveled lightly up her arm, and his brow furrowed. He began to twist the arm this way and that.

"It's...my shoulder," Pima whispered.

His eyes flicked up to hers and held for a long moment as they examined each other's faces.

"Neeman...how...?"

He seemed unhurt except for a gash that reached across one side of his face, from his left cheek to his temple. He smiled when she said his name, but his eyes remained sad. He pulled the key he wore around his neck out from under his shirt and let it rest on his chest. Pima's eyes fixed on it, and she frowned.

His eyes dropped to her chest. "Pima...your key?"

She gestured at the far wall where she had thrown the key earlier. Her hands were shaking. Neeman's eyes followed her movement, but his hands remained on her arm. He gave it a sharp twist, and Pima's shoulder popped back into place.

He caught her as she slumped forward. "Breathe. Breathe," he murmured. "I'm sorry."

There was a pause as Pima tried to catch her breath. Neeman reached up and brushed the hair from her eyes, forcing her to look at him.

"You really shouldn't throw away your key like that. You have to keep it close. It's important."

Pima managed a half glare, which he ignored. He stood and looked around the room while she struggled to lift herself onto her knees.

"What now?" she asked, bracing herself against the dizziness that made her head swim.

"Now we wait."

"Wait? For what?"

That wasn't the answer she'd been expecting.

"For you to regain your strength and for me to regain my head. We rest," he added when he saw her confused expression. "We hole up in this...metal room...with our backs pressed against a solid wall, and we plan our next move."

"Our next move is to climb," Pima said, hauling herself to her feet and wincing. Her head pounded, but she knew she couldn't complain. At least nothing had tried to crack her skull open. "That's always been the plan."

"Pima, weren't you just outside in that hell landscape? Didn't you see? This place is evil, even more than I thought. It'll drive us insane. We have to be smart."

"No, we have to stick to the plan. And if you don't think that's smart, why did you come up with it in the first place? Remember *that!*"

She stormed over to where she had thrown the key and glared down at it, trying to melt it with her gaze. She didn't know what made her angrier: Neeman's sudden indecision, or being trapped in this horrible place, or what she had left behind outside that door. It all swirled together in her mind into an angry red haze of fog. But sitting still and doing nothing - that would drive her crazy faster than anything the Tower could conjure. She was sure of that.

Her eyes slid over Neeman. He was looking at the key with an odd look on his face. She wondered if she should make him sit down for a minute or two.

She bent and scooped up the key. "Cross the marsh. Combat the guardian. Gain entry to the Time Tower. Find the stairs. Climb to the top. Open the door. Hit the off button. Save the world and everyone in it." Her voice rose with each statement, and she took a step toward him with each pause. "That's the plan, right? Right?"

She stood almost chest to chest with him, staring up at his stone expression. He nodded slowly, his gaze still locked on the key. Pima closed her fist around it and held it against her chest. Taking a step back, she spun in a circle, searching for a break in the smooth metal walls.

"Combat. Stairs. Key. Door. Off."

Neeman slid back into her line of sight. "Pima..." He reached out to take her hand, his voice silky smooth. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry about...It should be me. It should have been me from the beginning. Give me the key."

"Neeman, no."

He pressed his forehead against hers and closed his eyes, attempting to wrap an arm around her hips. "Yes. Let me. Please. I'll take the key."

"No." Pima shook her head emphatically. She slipped out of his grip, angling her body away from him, but kept one hand on his arm. "I think you hit your head too hard, Neeman. You're not making sense. You know it has to be me now. *It has to be me*. I'm sorry for anything bad I ever said about you. You have fought to get us here. But this has to be done, and I...I have to do it. You stay here. Everything will be alright." She tried to pull him toward the nearest wall, but he resisted.

"I can't let you. Your brother---"

"Is gone. I have nothing left to lose. It has to be me."

"We don't know---"

"Neeman!" Pima spun as he lunged for her. "Quit stalling! You have to let me go."

Her foot hit the wall. She felt cold metal for a second, and then she fell back. She cried out when her knees met the floor. She jumped up and swung around, her eyes wide. One of the walls had disappeared. A staircase rose up in the center of the opening, dark and forbidden-looking.

Neeman inhaled and then breathed out, "The stairs."

Pima glanced at him over her shoulder - one last look at his handsome features - before she dashed to the foot of the stairs. A moment's hesitation - a second to let fear grip her heart - and then she shook herself free and began to climb.

One step. Two. Three. Four. Five.

There was a burst of light. A door swung outward, almost catching her in the face, and she was thrown into a nightmare.

BREAK - CHP 2

"The Climb"

"Shift change," Neeman said, clapping Akish on the shoulder. Pima sat up and rolled her stiff neck. She and Akish were supposed to be keeping guard - which they were - but she had spent the last half hour with her head leaned against Akish's shoulder, tucked against his side under his arm.

"Right," Akish said, and immediately lay down to stretch out on his cot. He didn't wait for Pima to stand. She leaped up just in time, stumbling away from the cot, and nearly fell face first on the ground. Neeman thrust out an arm and caught her.

"Thanks," she mumbled. His hand lingered on her arm, and she felt his other hand hovering behind her back.

"I...I wanted to make sure you're okay."

"Okay? Yeah, I guess." She tried to laugh, but the forced noise that came out of her throat sounded more like a choked sob.

Neeman winced at the raw emotion in her voice and glanced away, past her, out into the misty darkness. "I wish there was something I could be doing. Anything but pace and stare at this dismal fog. Anything..."

It was Pima's turn to blush and look away.

"Pima..." Neeman's eyes bored into hers, burning with barely restrained emotion. "Pima, I..."

"No, Neeman. Not again. Not now."

Neeman's hand shot out, and he grabbed her hand to keep her from turning away. "Then when, Pima? I'm out of time. You have to know...I'll risk everything, but only if I leave all regrets behind. That's what I promised myself a long time ago. It doesn't matter if you don't have your own whispered promises to give me, but not telling you how much I care for you"---he tugged on her hand, swinging her around to face him---"not making you understand how much I love you will be my greatest regret.

"I love you. I'm sorry for any pain I've caused you since we've met, and any pain that I'll cause you tomorrow. I'm sorry for leading you here, but..." He paused, and his eyes took on a faraway look. When he looked back down at her, her heart fluttered with an unfamiliar longing. "But I'm glad that I'm not here alone. I would be without you. Your face will be the last thing I see before I die."

Pima couldn't stop shaking her head. Just as she couldn't stop from leaning toward him. He placed a hand on her cheek, brushing away a bit of salt-stain that had dried there.

"I'm sorry. I've run out of time. I can't wait any longer."

Pima closed her eyes as he bent down and pressed his lips against hers. They stood there for a minute, not moving, not breathing, and then Pima pushed a hand against his chest. He took a step back, and her eyes searched his face, memorizing the look in his eyes.

She opened her mouth, but she couldn't think of what to say in response to his declarations. Neeman saved her the trouble by giving her cheek another caress and walking away.

Pima took two steadying breaths and then turned to look back out into the night. She felt something touch her ankle and looked down at Akish. His eyes were open, and his hand gripped her leg. He gave it a squeeze and smiled weakly at her. She brushed her hand against his. Then she returned it to his cot, tucking it beneath his blanket.

She wasn't tired. She had too many thoughts battling for her attention. *One lap*, she told herself, and then she'd lay down and rest. She hadn't taken more than three steps when she saw it. A light in the distance. It grew closer as she watched, bobbing up and down, like a lantern in someone's hand.

"Neeman! Akish!"

They were at her side in seconds, along with half the camp. She raised a shaking hand and pointed.

"Everyone up! Arm yourselves!"

Cries rang out through the camp following Neeman's shouts. Pima's hand tightened around the knife hidden in the top of her high boots, but she didn't draw it. Not yet. She heard other people readying weapons, but she, Neeman, and Akish stood at the front of the line and watched the light approach.

It *was* a lantern. Pima realized this before she could make out the features of the figure carrying it. Her stomach churned as she saw that the figure - although of human shape with the height and build a man - had a blank face. Not a blank expression. A blank face. No eyes, no nose, no mouth. Dark hair, receding at the temples, fell down its shoulders.

It drew within five feet of them before Neeman cried out in a commanding voice, only slightly shaky, "Halt!"

The figure stopped and seemed to regard Neeman. It kept one hand in the air holding its lantern, which admitted a sickly, orangish light. Then it reached up and touched its empty face about where Pima assumed its mouth should have been. Suddenly, its pale complexion turned into a shiny black mirror. It lifted one edge of the mirror near its chin, hesitated, and then removed the rest of the black mask.

Neeman sucked in a sharp breath. Pima glanced at him, shocked to see his face drained of color.

It spoke---“Shouldn’t that be what I say? You are in *my* domain. This is *my* home. Not yours.”---and Neeman sucked in another breath. “You should not be here, son.”

“I am not your son,” Neeman barked, and then softer, quieter, “You are not my father.”

The figure of the man smiled - thin and cold - and lowered the lantern. His face wasn’t thrown into shadow but continued to glow as if illuminated from within.

“Are you sure?”

“Devil!” Avir yelled from behind Pima. From the corner of his eye, she saw him step forward and brandish a torch as if it was a weapon. Akish waved him back.

Neeman didn’t say anything, but his stance hardened, defiance clear-written on his face.

“Still,” the figure said, eyes sweeping their ranks. “You should not be here. You...or your friends.” His eyes lingered on Akish. Pima leaned in front of him, and the figure’s eyes snapped down to meet hers. “You do not want to relive your past. You wouldn’t survive the journey. No one does without going a little mad.” It lowered its voice as if speaking only to her.

“You know why we’re here. We will not turn back,” Pima said, meeting his burning gaze.

“Even if I were to tell you what is ahead?”

“You know we won’t.” Neeman advanced a step forward and raised his hand. He shook his head, his brown knitted as if in pain.

The figure’s response chilled Pima to the bone. “Then come. See what lies ahead.” It stretched its hand out to grab Neeman’s as he took another step forward.

“Neeman? Neeman, no!” Akish took hold of Neeman’s shirt and yanked him back. He pulled something out of his pocket and hurled it at the figure. It vanished, and the spherical object - the homemade bomb - made contact with the ground. The impact was deafening, and they all dropped to their knees.

The fog was sucked up in one big breath. The air became chokingly acrid as if the fog had been protecting them, not hindering them, and they found themselves gasping and staring up at the hulking shape of the Time Tower.

1541-----1248

BREAK - CHAPTER 3

It wasn’t black as she’d been told, but dull gray, tarnished by its imprisonment in time. Who knew how long it had really stood in its sixteen years. Pima’s view wavered and lengthened. The Tower that had been right there, so close, was pushed back ten, twenty, fifty yards. She stumbled to her feet.

“Akish?” she said, her voice strained.

He also stumbled to his feet and stood there, a dazed look in his eyes. He reached for her hand as ghostly figures began to rise up out of the ground. With a shout, he dropped her hand and charged toward the nearest figure, gun loaded and drawn. The spell that had kept them all locked in place snapped. The wall of fog fell like a curtain around their shoulders once more. But the Tower was still visible, now one hundred yards up ahead.

“Move! After him!” Neeman shouted. “To the Tower!”

The crowd surged forward into the fog, weapons held at the ready. Pima clutched her knife in one hand and a bomb in the other. She wasn’t sure if either would be an effective weapon in this fight.

The connection she felt to the keys helped her to stick close to her brother and Neeman while everyone else was consumed by the fog. She doubted that she could turn back if she wanted to; the keys and the Tower tugged at her feet, pulling her forward.

The guardian apparitions - insubstantial figures conjured by the Tower with its crafted power of protection - stalked through the fog. Pima punched and kicked and slashed. Detonations rang out all around her, but she didn't reach for a second bomb. The first one hadn't seemed to do much damage when she threw it, and the risk of tossing it out into this blinding maze became evident when she heard screams follow a detonation.

The figures responded to her straight-on assaults as if they were being injured, but instead of dropping after her knife stuck their sides, they vanished. She kept her feet pointed toward her destination but kept twisting and turning to look behind her, expecting an assailant to reappear behind her at any moment and strike her in the back.

Her arms and legs were covered in scratches but nothing that kept her from walking on. This felt odd when she heard screams all around her. Who knew what was real and what might be a trick to lure her astray? As if it heard her thoughts, the figure of Neeman's father appeared before her. An unnatural hush fell like a bubble around her. She halted, her knife pointed at the figure's chest.

"Turn back," the figure told her in a deep, monotone voice. "Turn back now. You don't belong here. Turn back."

Pima's legs turned to jelly. She locked her knees and held her head high, refusing to drop before him.

"Turn back!" the figure insisted in an animalistic growl. "Your brother is weak, and you are weak. You will not succeed."

"I can't." She gritted her teeth and dug her heels into the mud as the figure took hold of her shoulder. She didn't try to fight him off. Instead, she leaned closer and screamed into his ear, "I will try! I will not back down! I will not run from you!"

The figure turned its empty eyes on her. He grabbed her wrist, yanking the knife from her grip and tossing it aside. It disappeared in the fog, and she shivered when she heard a scream echo back. His nails dug into her shoulder, so sharp they felt like iron nails being driven through her flesh, through her muscles, to her bone. She cried out in agony and heard someone shout her name.

The guardian bared his teeth in a wild grin. "Perhaps you will." He picked her up, spun around, and tossed her toward the Tower's shadow. Another scream was involuntarily ripped from her throat as she flew through the air and landed on her shoulder. She felt her muscles stretched beyond their limit and heard a popping sound.

She held her breath until the initial shock of pain subsided, and then sat up and peered around for the ghostly figure. She gasped in surprise when she realized that she had landed a few feet from the Tower in a patch of ground cleared of fog. The figure was nowhere in sight, but the Tower door stared back at her, tantalizing close.

"Pima! Pima!"

Neeman fought his way out of the fog and ran over to her, Akish on his heels. They each took an arm and hauled her to her feet, steadying her as she swayed from side to side.

"What happened?" Akish asked.

"The...the Tower..." She glanced over at Neeman, who had remained silent. She took in the cut over his eye that was still bleeding and the way he stood off balance, mostly on his right leg, and winced. His eyes scanned the open area before taking five long strides toward the Tower and slamming his hand against its heavy metal door. He yanked his hand back as if he had been burned. He fumbled the key from around his neck, shoved aside the cover that hid the lock from view, and jammed the key in the lock.

A boom echoed from the Tower, and the ground shook. Pima hung onto Akish's arm, not sure how much longer she would be able to stand on her feet. Her vision swam before her eyes, but she saw the door open and the look of triumph on Neeman's face.

"There," he half croaked, half wheezed. Pima and Akish stood, motionless, as he stumbled back to the edge of the barrier of fog surrounding them. He sank to the ground and shut his eyes. "Ak...Akish..."

It sounded like he was having trouble breathing. Pima took a step toward him. A body fell out of the mist, striking Neeman across the back and pinning him to the ground.

“Neeman!”

Too late, brother and sister realized it was one of their own, dead or wounded, and his attacker was right behind him.

“Akish! Akish, go!” Pima yelled as the figure rushed them. She threw herself into its path, but it tossed her aside like she weighed nothing and rammed its hand into Akish’s chest. No weapon. Just a hand that ripped open his chest.

Akish’s lips parted, but Pima’s voice filled the unnatural silence, a wordless scream. He fell to his knees beside her. His eyes found her, and he held out his hand. His palm pressed against hers, and she felt metal brush her fingertips.

Before she could take a breath, before she could think, before terror could paralyze her, she snatched the gold key from his hand, dove for her knife, which had landed blade sticking into the ground not far from where they stood, spun around, and sprinted for the door.

1156

BREAK - CHAPTER 4

Pima scrambled forward a step and sank to her knees. Her forehead cracked against the floor. She grunted - the pain was there, but it was muted compared to everything else - and turned her head to the side.

Another door appeared on the other side of the stairway. She watched, helpless to turn away, as it opened of its own accord.

“Avir!” Neeman’s voice landed like a whip crack - the loudest sound they’d heard in hours - and the young man jumped back. Everyone else stopped like they were frozen to the spot, Pima included.

She halted immediately, and then questioned herself why.

When had Neeman gained that power over her? But as her gaze shifted from scanning the horizon to him, she was impressed by his calm features, his proud profile. A born leader, as she was not. She dropped her eyes quickly as he turned to her.

“Do you feel that?”

“What? What is it?” Avir asked, fear lacing his words.

Neeman closed his eyes, and Pima did the same, trying to calm her mind.

“There.”

Pima’s eyes flew open, and she gripped the key that hung around her neck. Neeman nodded at the unasked question. His hand crept up to cup the key that hung around his own neck.

Pima slipped the key from around her neck and offered it to her brother. Akish was standing beside her, lips pressed into a thin, white line to keep from asking his usual thousand questions. He took the key from her, but instead of slipping the string around his neck, he thrust it into his pocket. Pima started to protest, but Neeman stepped forward to address everyone.

“We’ve reached some type of border. From here on out, things are going to get weird. We’re going to have to be fast and stealthy. We’ve been traipsing through the marsh all day. I know you’re all tired, but we cannot become complacent. We don’t know how the Tower will project its guardian.

“Keep an eye on your neighbors. Don’t believe what you see until it’s behind you. And keep your wits about you. Akish, Pima, stay with me. The rest of you spread out. Make a line.”

Pima found herself sandwiched between Neeman and her brother. She didn’t mind too much. She wanted to keep an eye on them and the keys. But if something attacked them and they had to fight, she hoped they’d give her space and not try to corral her and push her behind them.

Pima was used to “swampland,” as what constituted as such in Pavta. But this area was decidedly different. The further they walked, the harder it became to find solid footing. She was glad for the extra layer of thin metal she wore in the bottom of her boots, protection against the acid that might be mixed into the water and mud here, this close to the baleful spire that towered over this land, and found herself thanking over and over the person who had made them.

Every few seconds, she felt a throbbing in her chest, like sparks from a fire kept landing on her lungs. That’s what she’d felt earlier when she was wearing the key. Could it be the *same* feeling?

She shuddered at the thought of being connected to the Tower in any way. Then her mind took a darker turn.

Did the Tower know they were coming? And why? Was it truly sentient? How could someone have created such a thing? But perhaps the most demanding question was: What was this guardian that Neeman kept warning them about?

It was the piece of the plan that troubled everyone the most. And for good reason. The Tower was an enemy that hid many secrets. Their goal was to get Akish to the Tower door; he would take the rest from there. But even that wasn’t a secured victory.

They kept trudging on through the muck and mire, careful to keep to solid ground and avoided touching the stagnant water with any part of their skin.

Every so often, someone would cry out, and the company would come to a standstill, no one even daring to ask what had alerted their friend. Twenty heartbeats sounded loud in the silence that echoed across the marshland. Shadows were all they saw. They encountered no physical threats, real or otherwise. Although Pima shouldn’t have expected to meet any threat from man or animal. Nothing could thrive in this no-man’s-land.

Signs of increased pollution were everywhere, and Pima, who had thought she would never be surprised by the diseased nature that she had grown up witnessing, mourned for this place which once might have been beautiful but through no fault of its own was filled with such poison.

She kept up a constant stream of questions in her mind, making sure that her mind was still free. *What day is it? What is my mother’s name? What am I doing here? What does poison oak look like? What emotion is on Akish’s face?*

She knew the others were doing the same. They must keep their minds alert. She slid between the past and present, but she kept her thoughts steadfastly away from questions that involved the future.

Pima wasn’t sure how he could tell through the fog that clung low to the ground and hid the sky from view, but Neeman called a halt when he said the sun began its descent. Akish, too, kept glancing at the sky, and Pima wondered if it was more of a sense than a knowing when, all at once, a deep gloom descended on the group halfway through setting up camp. If they hadn’t set up the tripods that held the small fires out of the water, she might have thought that she’d gone blind.

They each set up the bed stands and sleeping bags they’d carried on their backs. In the morning, they would leave their beds and most of their supplies here so they could continue on less hindered. If their minds didn’t play tricks on them, sending them in circles, and they were able to keep their bearings straight, they wouldn’t need to spend another night out on the marsh on the way to their destination. Those who would survive to the next night had to hope they were lucky enough to find this camp again.

1060

BREAK - CHAPTER 5

Pima came to and felt someone brush her hair back from her forehead. Her eyes flickered open. Neeman was crouched above her, looking warily over his shoulder, up the steps.

“Neeman...you can’t be here. You can’t climb the stairs with me.”

“Apparently, I can. You’re guiding the doors, I think. You’re the one the Tower is attacking. Oh, Pima...” He sighed as he helped her into a sitting position. “Why are you always running into danger?”

“Me?” She accepted his hand as she stood and let him keep hold of it, enjoying the warmth that his presence emanated in this cold, narrow space. She glared at the closed doors and shuddered. That had been horrible. It can’t be much worse than that. That had to be the most painful day of her life.

Pima nodded up the stairs, and without a word, Neeman slid an arm around her waist and turned her toward the next step. They climbed eight more steps before another door opened. Pima leaned back against Neeman and peered into the light that spilled out of the doorway.

The trio was sitting beside a glowing fire pit in the wooded marsh not far from Neeman’s house. The old camping spot had been turned into a base camp for his followers.

Pima sat beside her brother. She was only half listening as he and Neeman reminisced about “the good old days” and what they hoped would return when - *if*, she amended in her head - the Time Tower would be made to work in their favor.

Avir sat beside Neeman on Akish’s other side. He offered a comment here and there but, for the most part, chose to listen. He had spent less and less time by Neeman’s side as Akish spent more. If there was a hierarchy in the group, Pima would venture to say that he had been ousted as second in command by her brother, but he seemed to take it in good stride.

Neeman and Akish schemed well together, and Avir was more suited for lighter discussions and alleviating the others’ occasional moods with his dark humor. His family had been considered well-off before the Time Tower was constructed. Both of his parents had been surgeons, she had learned, and so it made sense that he was able to acquire the best supplies for Neeman’s cause. She did not think his spine thick enough for the front line, but she would not insult him by telling him to his face.

Neeman soon lost his reminiscing mood. Pima recognized his serious expression. Hush radiated outward until silence rang throughout the camp as all eyes turned to stare at his firelit features. He called for everyone to gather closer to discuss - once again - the latest version of “The Plan.”

Starting with the treacherous journey across the northern half of Pavta, and then into the toxic marsh that surrounded the Tower, and ending with Akish’s sacrifice. The plan as it had been conceived by these two young leaders - reckless, improbable, and...and hopeful.

The word sprang up in Pima’s mind, like a new flower popping up out of watered earth. When the seed had first begun sprouting in the background of her thoughts, she didn’t know. But she found herself nodding along as Neeman spoke about the world they could re-create, the lives they would be changing, the sacred, heroic nature of their mission.

“We are fighting for more than ourselves, our families, our land. We are fighting for more than our present. We are fighting for our past, our future, *and* our present. When this is over and the Tower falls - *when* it falls - we may not all rise. But the sun itself will rise to greet a new world.

“There will be lives to rebuild. There will be friends to bury. There will be wounds that refuse to heal. But every sacrifice will be worth it, and heal we must. For in one way or another, we will all leave here heroes and rise from the battlefield to a better life.”

His eyes strayed to Pima’s, searching, questioning, pleading.

“We must create it. Pain and sacrifice is a requirement to build our better world, and I have to ask you all again. Are you willing to risk all to our cause?”

Pima's throat swelled with tears, but she kept her teeth clenched as voices yelled affirmative all around her. She had never been one for flowery speeches, and she knew Neeman felt the same. But, oh, could he deliver when the time came.

She nodded once, her only sign of approval. The tension in Neeman's shoulders disappeared. He kept his body turned toward her, but his eyes swept over everyone gathered. He raised his hand in the air and clenched it into a fist.

"In just a few weeks' time, this will all be over. So raise your voices now, all together, and remind me why we fight. For we will always fight!"

Again, cheers rang out. Akish bounced up from his seat to embrace Neeman, calling him brother, and the others toasted the mission with the last of Neeman's wine, blood-red offerings held high.

They felt the sacrifice worth it. Success inevitable.

And for the first time, Pima found herself agreeing with the first and desperately praying for the second. To change the world. Change the past. Could they do it? Could he?

He would do it or die trying, with Akish by his side.

And she knew with a bone deep certainty that she would be there, too, at his side whatever end might come.

Memory Neeman's words ringing in her ears, Pima turned to Neeman. She'd dropped his hand at some point. He stood with his arms outstretched as though waiting to catch her. Pima squeezed her eyes shut and opened them again, daring her gaze back to the door. She felt the same constriction in her chest that she'd felt that night, sitting around the campfire, listening to Neeman's speech. It was such an odd, painful thing to see one's memories played out before you.

"Did you see?" she asked.

"Vaguely. As if through mist," was Neeman's hesitant reply. "Pima, listen. We could rebuild our lives. Go out there, find your brother, bury our friends. We don't need to use the Tower to do that. And start over. We can do that, all on our own. That's what I've wished for for so long. Maybe it's best to leave what we don't understand alone. Weren't you the one who told me that?"

She turned around slowly, her eyes narrowing as she stared down at Neeman, two steps below her. Had she imagined the warmth in his eyes that day? Or was it the warmth in his eyes as he held her on the stairs that seemed false now? The warmth of his hands in hers a moment ago?

"That night...that speech...that was the first time I really felt like this would work. Like it was worth the risk to come here. You made me feel valued and needed and brave."

The hairs on the back of Pima's arms tingled a warning. She stiffened her spine and clutched the key, which she still carried despite having passed out earlier, tighter until the cold metal bit into her hand.

"You knew then that I would stay by your side through this. I wouldn't leave you. But you left me, didn't you?" Her voice caught in a sob, but Neeman's face remained placid as he held out a hand to her.

"I'm right here, Pima. I---"

"Neeman worried about me. About my size, my experience. He trained me and my brother to fight. He told me to stay close. But he *never* doubted my courage. He *never* told me to *stay* or *go back* or *back down*. And he never would."

"Pima..." There was a dangerous quality in his voice, and a little guilt. Like she had stumbled upon a secret that he'd intended to keep.

"So who are you? *What* are you?"

1341

BREAK - CHAPTER 6

Neeman's mouth elongated into a devilish grin, and his eyes darkened into a molten black mask, like the mirror that the guardian had worn out on the marsh.

"Very good," it hissed, still in Neeman's voice, and pushed her down until her back made contact with the stairs. She scrambled up them backward on her hands and feet, crab-like, not sure how far she would be able to climb this time, as the monster wearing Neeman's face stalked her.

She almost cried out in relief when - a dozen steps later - a door burst open. She hurried to put it between herself and the monster before she was caught up in the memory.

"The Fall"

A cough broke the still night air, jerking Pima awake. She'd fallen asleep with her cheek pressed against the low kitchen table, legs bent under her at an awkward angle. She stumbled sleepily to her feet and hurried to the next room.

Her mother was lying amidst a heap of thrown off blankets. Her purple coverlet lay crumpled on the floor at the foot of the bed. She was sweating and mumbling in her sleep, caught in a fever dream. Pima grabbed a blanket off the edge of the bed and threw it over her mother's form before turning her attention to the leg poking out of the sheets.

The bottom half of her mother's right leg was swollen and red. A square of linen - folded twice and stuffed with feverfew - was taped around the worst section. Pima would have to change it again tonight. She fought down the bile that rose in her throat as she pictured the skin underneath it.

Pima had found her two days ago lying crumpled on the ground at the edge of the treeline outside their house. She seemed unharmed except for the bright red wound on her leg. It didn't look like an animal bite. Try as she might, Pima had not been able to get her to open her eyes.

Pima had found no fang marks, no stringers, no attached parasite. The redness had spread at a fast clip until it consumed her lower leg, and the wound itself - whatever it was - had swollen into an ugly pink, purple, and brown pitted mass.

The fever had set in late last night, and nothing Pima had tried had eased it.

Pima was ashamed at the way she'd screamed her head off when she found her mother, and, except for short trips to the latrine and the kitchen, she hadn't left her side since Akish carried her to bed. Akish was gone to collect supplies from neighbors - she'd finally bent to his suggestion - and Pima shouldn't have left her alone.

She reached for her mother's hand now and laid her head down beside her pillow.

"Hey."

Pima jerked upright and whirled toward the kitchen. Neeman stood in the doorway, a sack slung over his shoulder.

"What are you doing here?" She didn't mean to sound so harsh, but his expression only sunk deeper into pity.

"He's with me. He helped me carry the supplies." Akish shouldered past Neeman, dropped two packs on the ground beside his sleeping pallet, and sat on the other side of the bed.

Pima bowed her head and asked in a gentler tone, "Did you find anything?"

"A few things. Can't be sure when we don't know what got her. I'll try anything, though." His tone was light, but he couldn't hide the pain in his eyes. Pima didn't doubt that his pain was an almost physical thing. He was much better at that sort of thing than she was. She had often wondered when she was

younger if there was something wrong with her, the fact that she couldn't connect with people that way that her brother did. But she didn't have time to worry about such things now. A numbness like she'd never felt before had crept into her mind, and it left her feeling ambivalent to her surroundings.

Feeling the sudden urge to do something, anything, with her hands, she retrieved Akish's heavy packs and retreated to the kitchen. Neeman followed her. He sat beside her, too close, but she didn't protest.

They began to unpack the supplies that Akish had collected, which consisted of more food than medical supplies. She frowned.

Akish, no. Tell me you didn't go begging for food.

They were fine. Still, she knew they couldn't afford to refuse any charity.

Neeman kept looking over at her, and she watched him from the corner of her eye. He broke the silence with a cough. "I'm sorry."

Pima nodded absentmindedly, grouping the supplies on the table before them.

"I wish there was something more I could do. If there's anything..." He covered his hand with hers and gave it a light squeeze. She pulled away and stood.

"I'm sure your friends need you more. Aren't you supposed to be leading a revolution or something?"

"Pima, please don't be like that. I just want to help---"

"You're telling me that you didn't trudge all the way out here to fill Akish's mind with foolhardy plans and try to bend my ear to them again. In case you didn't notice, this isn't a good time for us to be entertaining visitors!"

"Hey!" Neeman shot to his feet, and Pima took a step back, standing in his shadow. Fear filled her eyes, but as soon as Pima stopped talking, he leaned down and somehow fit his 6'1" frame within her 5'3" frame.

"Your brother and I talked on the walk over, but I have no plans to talk business in a sick house. I wanted to make sure Akish got home okay, and see if there was anything else I could do, and...and to see how you were doing. He told me that you were the one who found her. I can't imagine what that must have felt like...but I do know what it's like to lose someone you love and feel like you're the loneliest person in the world."

Angry tears pricked Pima's eyes - at the pity in his voice, the hopelessness, this situation. She had backed herself up against one wall. Neeman rocked back on his feet and said, a twinkle in his eyes, "If, however, you find yourself in need of a distraction, I do have some new points of argument I've been saving to share with you."

Pima laughed, caught off guard by the change in topic, and shoved his shoulder. "Normally, I'd say bring it on. I'm not afraid of an argument."

He smiled, pleased to have brought her back from the brink of tears, and caught her hand. Swiftly, before she could react, he leaned in and kissed her. Pima's mind blanked, and she stood there, motionless for several heartbeats, before shoving him back.

"Get out!"

"But---"

"You have more to say? I don't care! It's dark? I don't care! I don't care! *Get out!*"

Neeman scrambled backwards, grabbing his empty pack from the table and his coat from the hook by the door. He paused with one hand on the door.

"I'd try the pills in the white bottle. Avir's family gave them to me. It's pre-Tower. Apparently, it's a very useful, very powerful anti-inflammatory."

"Get out!"

"Neeman? Pima?" Akish had come to stand in the kitchen doorway. His expression was carefully guarded as he looked from one to the other.

Neeman raised his hand in farewell and slipped out the door. He caught it before it closed and stated, "I'll be back to check on you." Then he let the door slam shut and stalked off into the darkness.

1279

BREAK - CHAPTER 7

Pima fell against the Tower wall and forced herself to breathe - once, twice, three times - big, deep breaths, before turning to face the next door.

The difference between Akish and Pima was immediately noticeable. He swung his arms as he walked, steps light, and greeted everyone they passed. She walked with a reserved gate, head slightly lowered, eyes guarded.

It had become necessary the past few months to travel to the nearest bartering hub between houses in their area and trade for supplies. Pima knew it was difficult for their mother to go, but she trusted Pima enough to watch out for any trouble that her brother might walk into and Akish to bring his younger sister back home safely.

Pima, used to the solitude of their secluded house as their mother was, hadn't been able to shake the prickling along her spine since they had entered the sea of gazes. She'd agreed that splitting up would be the quickest way to get done and get gone. Akish was supposed to meet her here by the pondweed bushes beside the path that would lead them back into the safety of the trees' shadows.

After ten minutes of waiting, she took the drawing that she always kept in her pocket out and traced the lines she'd memorized long ago. The familiar action did nothing to steady her racing heart. After twenty minutes, she began pacing the short distance between two bushes. Finally, sighing in recognition of the feeling that she was too late to steer him away from trouble, she walked back into the makeshift market.

She found Akish sitting with a group of hard-looking young men. They were all caught in their own conversation, stubbornly ignoring the crowd around them. Her heart beat a staccato warning.

"Brother, there you are," she said, hovering above him. "We have to go. Mom is expecting us home before nightfall."

"Pima!"

She winced at the use of her name and the look he cast around the circle of strangers. Their reassuring smiles at his next words raised goosebumps on her arms.

"I was just telling them you would come looking for me soon."

"I thought you were going to me back there near the path."

"I wanted you to meet my friends."

"Your friends?"

Pima recognized their faces from their visit to the market last month. She'd remained blessedly in the shadows while she heard them shouting about change and rising up and "finishing the clock." Propaganda, she'd realized immediately. Another homemade leader had hatched a plan to tear down the Time Tower and reverse its effects on their land, and he'd recruited a band of young renegades who thought they were invincible to parade up and down the streets, do his dirty work for him, probably besiege the Tower and die for him.

She'd never gotten mixed up with such a group herself, but she'd heard grumblings about attempts on the Tower. She cast her eyes curiously around the circle even as she edged closer to Akish, preparing to haul him up by the collar and drag him away if need be.

At best, his new friends were fools. At worse, they were dangerous. Very, very dangerous.

One of the men - the boys, really - sprang up and extended his hand. "Hey!"

Pima shrank back.

“Take it easy, Avir,” another one said. Keeping his voice low and calm, as if talking to a spooked animal, he asked, “Do you know who I am?”

Pima met his appraising gaze with one of her own. Half a dozen sarcastic answers flashed through her mind.

Akish’s eyes slid nervously from Pima to him and back. He reached back to take Pima’s arm.

“Pima, this is Neeman. Neeman Vidish.”

Pima’s brow furrowed. Vidish...why did it feel like she should know that name?

The boy stood and stepped close, and Pima stiffened. He bent his head toward hers, continuing in a lower voice. Not a whisper, but private, intimate.

“I know who you are, scientist’s daughter.”

Pima drew back as if she’d been slapped. The boy pulled the collar of his shirt down a few inches. She sucked in a breath. The top of a key was visible, hanging around a cheap leather cord that disguised the hidden shimmer of real gold. Gold - like the key hidden in the bottom of the trunk at the foot of her mother’s bed. She saw that a different symbol was carved into its handle. It looked like a cross with a partial oval behind it, like a waning moon; a tiny black gemstone was set in its center.

“I know who you are, and now you know me. And if you’ve been gifted the same inheritance from your father that I have from mine” - he tugged his shirt back up and glanced down at Akish - “then you’re going to want to hear what I have to say.”

“Akish, what did you tell him?”

Her brother wilted under her glare. Pima heaved a tired sigh, shoved the full pack she was carrying into Akish’s chest, and spun around. “Never mind. We have to go.”

Akish mumbled an apology to the ground and stood to follow her. They hadn’t taken five steps before the boy with the key was in front of them again.

“Neeman,” Akish breathed a warning.

“Look, I explained everything to your brother. Just listen to him. The keys are the key. Don’t you know what they are?”

“Yes. Do *you* know what they are? What they do?”

His eyes bored into hers; Pima wanted to wipe the cocky look off his face. “They open the door of time. A one-time trip. But so what if it works. If we can make a difference, change the future, help everyone---”

“We help ourselves,” Pima interrupted, nearly spitting the words in his face. She wanted him to understand that she wasn’t buying his act for one minute. “And I think you’ll find most people do nowadays. It’s a better use of time than being led like sheep to the slaughter by a crusader.”

The boy shook his head, but he stepped aside to let her pass. The smile that pulled at the left side of his mouth as his eyes followed her and the friendly clasp on the back he offered Akish made her want to yell at him some more. But there *were* better uses of her time. Like survival.

She held up a hand, stopping Akish as he took a breath to speak, and stalked off down the path. She wanted to get as far away from this place as possible and put the boy with the sparkling eyes and the golden key behind her. If she was lucky, he’d go off and die on his little quest and she’d never have to see him again.

1136

BREAK - CHAPTER 8

Neeman - or rather, the thing wearing Neeman’s shape - had halted to examine Pima as she watched this memory. She had been so captivated by the scene - Akish and Neeman’s optimistic faces from a year and a half in the past - that it took her several minutes to shake the vision from her eyes.

If she could go back...she might not change anything, but she wouldn't miss anything either. That expression on Neeman's face as she walked away. Was that her wishful thinking now - now that it was too late to look him in the eyes again - or could it be close to the truth? Why had it taken her so long to understand? She would give anything for one more conversation with him, one more charged glance, one more lopsided smile.

"You left them."

Pima stared at the figure, eyes wide and tight-lipped as it took a step forward. It shook a fist in rage. False rage, she knew, but still terrifying.

"You left them. Left *him*. It's clear which one you care more about. Letting me keep this shape all this time. Really, Pima? How could you?"

It crouched in front of her, and its demeanor softened, pulling her in. "Still, there's no need to torture yourself. Do you hear that?" It cocked its head. "Sounds like the fighting has stopped. Shall we check and see who's waiting for you outside?"

It extended its hand when she didn't move and held it palm up before her. "I'll hold your hand."

Something inside Pima snapped. With a wordless cry, she rammed the heel of her hand into the figure's shoulder. It fell head over heels down the stairs, crying out in pain. But it couldn't feel pain. It was all an act.

Pima's eyes followed Neeman's shape down the stairs, and she cursed under her breath. She'd barely made any progress. She was getting too distracted. She had to climb.

She couldn't run. Not unless she wanted to get slammed in the face by another door. But she scrambled up the stairs two at a time. How many steps had she already left behind her? How many more doors were left to stop her?

Another one popped open to her left. She kept her head down and shielded her gaze, and miraculously, it let her pass.

A dozen to go? Twenty? Less?

A year and a half of her life - fourteen and a half to go - and then that final step beyond. She had to finish it. There was no turning back.

"Pima!" She heard Neeman's voice shout behind her, her name drawn out, pleading. "Piiimaaa!" The force of that voice was like a strong blast of wind, trying to knock her over, draw her back. Another door opened, and she tried to maneuver around it, bent nearly double, one arm covering her head.

"Hey!"

Pima stopped at the unfamiliar voice.

"Hey, are you alright?" the boy standing in the doorway asked. A girl peeked over the top of his head. They both tried to step forward as if they could escape the world behind the doorway, but before this new horror could overwhelm her, Pima took hold of the doorframe.

"You are not part of my future *or* my past. Get out!"

And she slammed the door in their faces.

On the other side of the door, which was very much still visible, the boy and girl stood in dumbfounded silence. He reached out to try the door's handle, but it was locked now.

The girl put a hand on his arm, shrinking down to his height again, and he followed her a few steps away. "That...that was..." She swallowed, unable to find the words to explain what they'd just seen.

"Another land. One apparently ruled not by place or size but by time." The boy stared at the door with the hungry longing of an adventurer who had been denied the most amazing adventure. "Time! Can you imagine?"

"No," the girl said, shaking her head and smiling fondly at him. "It seems you have been locked out of that world."

"We'll find the key. And other doors...there are other doors..."

"The Lock"

Pima tried to continue her upward journey, but her concentration was broken, and she sank to her knees in front of the next open door.

It looked like any other day in her life. She was twelve years old. Her mother was sitting at the kitchen table shelling pea pods that Pima had brought in earlier that day from the garden. A seventeen-year-old Akish was chopping wood outside. Pima could see him clearly through the broken window over the sink that would need to be fixed before the winds began to blow colder. He kept pausing every few minutes to squint off into the trees, trying to satisfy his need to work and daydream at the same time.

She wondered what he was thinking about, and that was the extent of her daydreams. She wouldn't know what to dream for.

Her life wasn't a fairytale. She lived on the outskirts of a swamp in a land that was quickly being taken over by toxins and poisons, and where every stranger's smile or shadow hid potential danger. Winter was coming, and while it might dispel the fog and quiet the wildlife, they would have a hard time if they didn't hustle to prepare their house and larder.

But - she often reminded herself - she had everything she needed. Her family, her home, food and shelter. Everything was fine in her world.

She glanced sidelong at her mother. It'd been a while since she'd asked to be told a story of the old world - from her or Akish. Perhaps tonight, after preparing supper, she'd sit at the foot of her mother's bed and ask to look through the old trunk that held her father's things. She'd long since ceased to sneak into the bedroom while her mother was busy and let her hands and eyes wander over the keepsakes - wrinkled clothing, a couple of dusty books, a pair of old eyeglasses, and a few, more precious trinkets wrapped in a tablecloth and tucked into a corner of the trunk.

It might do them all good to slip into the past for an hour or two.

Yes, I'll ask Mother for a story, Pima thought, sneaking a smile in her direction.

1064

BREAK - CHAPTER 9

The memory of that night caused cold pricks of pain to stab Pima's heart. Turning to take another step, her mind was consumed with one thought: *The story. The story.*

The urge compelled her up, up, up. The next door opened just as she reached it, and she peered around it to find a very different scene than what she had expected.

Akish was in the middle of telling one of his “true” stories. Not the story that Pima had wanted to hear but just as worn. She didn’t know how he had been able to keep all the details straight. He had been only five when the Tower was completed and the world in his stories had disappeared.

How could he remember? Why did all he cared for involve the past? How could he hold such optimism for the future when that life was gone?

These questions, this suspicion, belonged to the older Pima.

The younger Pima stood - round-faced and smiling - looking up at him with eager, wide eyes. Everything else was forgotten in that moment. She shut her eyes and leaned her head back against a scraggly tree, imagining the images that Akish invoked with his words.

“A whole store filled with candy! All they sell is candy! Chocolate, taffy, lollipops. We’d go there every Friday after Dad got off work, and he’d let me fill this little bag with anything I wanted. My favorites were the chocolate caramels - sweet and gooey - and the grape bubble gum balls - the ones all twisted up in pink paper. But they were on the top shelf---”

“So Dad had to help you reach them. He sneaked behind you and picked you up---”

“---and placed me on his shoulders.”

Older Pima felt tears prick her eyes as she saw Akish’s wistful expression.

“Every Friday. Chocolate caramels and bubblegum balls.”

“Grape,” Pima reminded him as if he’d forgotten the most important detail of all. It sounded like a wonderful dream. A Friday afternoon with nothing better to do than hang out with your dad in a shop full of candy. If she had---

“Pima!” Akish’s tone brought an immediate stab of panic to Pima’s heart. She whirled around to search for what caused the shift in Akish’s voice.

A blanket of fog had risen over the ground, ankle deep. They hadn’t been paying attention. They’d stayed out too long, allowed their wandering feet to take them too far from their shelter, and now they were going to be caught out in the strangling fog.

The fog was rising as it drifted towards them. Soon, it would be at Pima’s waist, and then it would be too late. The fumes carried on those vapors would be strong enough to fill her lungs with noxious gas. Pima had never been caught out in it, but she’d had nightmares for weeks after her mother described the effects of “fog poison.”

A shape fell out of the eerier darkness that was descending. Pima screamed, and Akish grabbed her shoulders, spinning her around.

“Run! Go!” He turned her in the direction of the house they had moved into three days ago and pointed.

“The...the sacks...” Her lips trembled, but she refused to return empty handed. Akish’s fingers dug into her shoulder, but she stubbornly dug in her heels.

“There’s no time. Ahh!” he exhaled in frustration. He took the pack and upended it, spilling half its foraged contents on the ground. “There. Now go!” He shoved it into her arms and pushed her forward as he turned back toward the groaning figure.

Pima’s heart pounded in her ears, drowning out the sound of her feet as she splashed through muddy puddles and dodged the thin trees that stood in her way. She tucked the pack into her stomach and sprinted for the house. *Please, Akish. Please, Mom. Please.* She didn’t stop to look at how far back Akish was, if he was following her. She had to focus on where she was headed. She twisted her head this way and that, searching for their one-room shelter in the rapidly fading light.

“Pima! Akish! Children!”

Tears burst from Pima’s eyes when she heard her mother yelling her name off to her right. She turned toward the voice and ran headfirst into her mother’s chest. Her mother ignored the pack, which fell to the ground, and gathered Pima into her arms.

“Pima, oh, Pima! Where’s your brother?”

“He...He...”

“Akish!”

Akish ran past them, carrying a limp form in his arms.

“Get inside!” he shouted. He ran to the shelter and kicked the door in. Their mother stumbled as she hurried to carry Pima inside. Pima was getting too big to carry, but she refused to set her down. Even as she barred the door and pulled out the candle box and gathered blankets to stuff in the chinks in the door and walls.

Pima clung to her, breath rattling in her mother’s ear, as she and Akish made sure that every hole was secured. Then she curled up on her sleeping pallet and watched them tend to the injured stranger. They tried to shield the stranger from her view, but in the glow of the lit tallow candle, Pima stared at the woman’s face.

She thought it was a woman. Red tracks lined her face, scratch marks or tears marks burned into her skin. Her eyes were bloodshot. Her chest rose and fell in spasms, shallower and shallower, until its chest barely moved at all. A mask bag hung limp around her neck; no one thought to remove it. It was the same simple linen mask that Pima’s mom had fashioned for all of them, and it had done nothing for her.

Pima’s mother hovered over her, applying cool compresses to her face and checking her pulse regularly. Akish mimicked her movements in the stillness. His face was twisted with sorrow and pain for this unknown woman. Every so often, Mother sighed. Pima heard the inevitable in the sound, but still, they kept working to provide whatever comfort they could for the stranger.

Mother only spoke twice that long night. Once to Pima: “Are you hungry?”

Pima shook her head, heat filling her cheeks as she remembered the food she’d left behind and the way she had been salivating over imaginary candy earlier that day.

And then once to Akish: “We have to move again in the morning. We can’t stay here anymore.”

This statement shook Pima into action. She shuffled on her knees to her mother’s bags and pulled out her bag of sewing supplies. They’d need new packs, and she would need to finish cutting the patterns for the coats that her mother had marked on scratchy fabric.

And no more stories.

It was time for her and Akish to stop dreaming about the past. *This* was their present, their future. Mom needed them *here*.

1149

BREAK - CHAPTER 10

Pima felt the figure behind her, seething with rage, but she didn’t have the energy to care anymore. She turned, moving in slow motion, to face the guardian, and registered with shock that it still wore Neeman’s face.

She had finally broken free of her memories of Neeman, escaped into the past. Akish and her mother and that suffering stranger...they were the ghosts that should be greeting her.

As if it heard her thoughts, the figure’s face began to change. Its features shifted and softened and rearranged themselves until Akish stood there staring back at her. Its anger disappeared as well, replaced by a mask of sorrow and curiosity which now seemed halfway genuine.

Pima’s heart ached to see his face; she flinched under its gaze. As she watched, it swept a hand down its front, like it was brushing away dust, and the bloodstains on its shirt were washed away.

Its eyes slid past her and fixed on a point further up the stairs. The hairs on the back of Pima’s neck stood on end as she glanced behind her and up, up - to the door that stood two flights above them.

How many steps? How many years? Darkness lurked in the space behind the door. She couldn't see anything beyond it, but it couldn't be the top of the Tower. Not yet.

That's too easy, Pima thought with a grim smile.

One step. Two. She flung a hand out to catch the wall. Her vision swam. The stairway seemed to spin before her, and out of the walls sprang memories unbidden. A wave of emotions overcame her at this new assault. Fear, hope, joy, guilt, sadness, love, hate. Whatever she had felt at the time.

Memories she didn't even remember were pulled to the front of her mind and played out before her eyes, which burned with tears. Even with her eyes squeezed shut, they found her, and each step felt heavier than the last.

Voices echoed from wall to wall, from one side of her head to another, but one voice rose above the din along with an image of her standing in front of her mother, face downturned. She was covered from head to toe in mud, and a broken bowl lay at her feet.

Her mother reached down and lifted her chin, silencing her mumbled apology. "I know. I know. Thank you for being honest. Thank you for saying that you would go back and choose to do something different. But, love"---she knelt, still holding onto Pima's face, making sure the little girl heard her---"you can't change the past. You can only move forward and try to do better. Do better, okay?"

The irony wasn't lost on Pima. All her life, she had been chasing the future while those she loved had been trying to escape the past. But now it was she who was chasing the past.

The scene dissolved as her mother drew her close for a hug, and Pima halted, her fingers now clutching the edge of a doorframe. Leaning against the wall and breathing heavily, she willed the world around her to stop spinning before opening her eyes. The silent presence that had followed her all this way stood behind her, peering over her shoulder at the memory.

They were moving again - Mom, Akish, and her. She knew that, but she didn't know why. She clutched her pillow to her chest. She'd stuffed her treasure into it - her pink bead necklace, the smooth river stone Akish had found her, the shiny silver thimble she had borrowed from her mother's sewing kit, a crayon drawing of her family, and the pretty yellow flowers she'd picked from the patch that grew outside her window.

She stood in front of her brother, pressing back against his legs, as she gawked up at the horse. Her mother had gotten it from...someone...to help them move their things...somewhere.

The older Pima squinted her eyes and shook her head. Why couldn't she remember?

She must be very young. Younger than in the other memories. Her mother came out of their house with one more load for the horse.

"Mom, where are we going?" Akish asked. When she didn't answer him, his voice rose, whiny and fearful. "We can't leave! How will Dad find us?"

"Akish! I told you. Your father---" She pressed her white knuckles against her mouth and took in a lungful of air through her nose. In and out and in. She considered Pima and Akish for a moment before dropping her hands and offering them a weak smile.

"Come. We have to get going. I promise everything we need will be waiting for us." She gathered the ends of the horse's leash in one hand and held out her other hand for Pima's. Pima turned and fixed her big brown eyes on her brother.

Akish sighed and hoisted her up onto his back. It was a bit awkward with his pack and the pillow. He reached back and took the pillow from her. "It'll be fine," he said when she protested. He worked it carefully beneath one of the ropes that held their luggage on the horse's back.

"I've got her," he told their mother.

"Well....Well then, I...We have a little ways to go today. How about a story? Do you remember what I told you about the Tower of Time?"

Pima rested her head on top of Akish's and listened to the calming tone of her mother's voice.

"A long, long time ago - four years - a group of people got together to find a solution to the question of Time. The world wasn't how it is now. The pollution was appalling. No one was taking care of the land, or their neighbors, the way that we should. It was a dirty time. But we might have been able to do something about it then. I believed that, so I..." Her voice trailed off as her eyes took on a faraway look.

"I supported the group of scientists and engineers - thinkers, builders, problem solvers - who thought they had discovered the only solution.

"They thought they'd discovered magic."

She shot a rueful smile at her two rapt listeners.

"But *we* know that magic doesn't exist, not in the way that most people wish it would."

Akish nodded, and Pima lifted her head to copy him, trying to appear wise.

"You can't turn back time," Mother continued. "But, oh, they tried. Brave, smart men and women, your father among them. They...we thought if we could use the Tower to turn back the clock, return Pavta and the world to an earlier time, we could fix our mistakes. It wasn't supposed to poison the land or the people. It wasn't supposed to be able to go in the opposite direction.

"But when the Tower was activated, it didn't move time backward. It moved forward. Forward in time instead of into the past, and its effects continued to spread. Your father, I know...I know regretted building the Tower. Even before it was activated. If I had just gotten the others to listen to him, things might have been different."

1200

BREAK - CHAPTER 11

The Pima standing in the doorway sucked in a breath, aware in a way that she hadn't been since entering the Tower what was real and what wasn't. Perhaps because she couldn't remember this trip, this day. It had to have been dragged up from the deepest reaches of her mind. She couldn't be imagining this. There was no reason for the Tower to show this, other than for honesty's sake.

This wasn't the story she remembered being told. It started well enough like it, but the words became too harsh, the voice too pained. Too realistic. Her mother had always spoken about her father's role in building the Tower. She'd never mentioned that she'd had a connection to it.

She must have decided at one point to try to remove the worst details, little good it'd done. Now Pima stood here, in the Time Tower, stuck in the harsh reality of time. And she longed for it to be magic, an illusion.

She watched the mother in her memory lay her hand over her chest, and the sight was so familiar, although she'd never seen it on her mother, that she knew what was coming next.

Her voice had steadily grown softer as her tone sharpened with bitterness.

"It was horrible. And it couldn't be undone. Not alone. So I took it." Her hand clenched the bulge under her dress. With a quick flick of her eyes right, left, she threw out an arm to stop Akish and stepped closer.

"This is the truth. I took it"---she pulled out a key with a sun symbol marked with a red gemstone on the handle, took it off, and held it out for Pima to take---"from the Tower, from your father. I hid it. I

couldn't trust anyone else to keep it. Now it's harmless. Useless. Except as a reminder. A dangerous reminder. You cannot undo. You cannot. You can only move forward and try...try..."

She shook her head as if the rest of her sentence was stuck in her throat and she could shake it free. Akish's grip on little Pima's legs tightened, and he took half a step back.

All of a sudden, Mother stopped, and her eyes grew clearer, her gaze nearer and sharper. A look of horror passed over her face and was gone in the blink of an eye.

"I can take her, if you need..."

"No. I've got her. But we should make sure the horse doesn't wander."

Her head jerked like a bird as she nodded. "Yes, you're right." Her story and the key were forgotten for the time being. "We need to head east, away from the marsh, and our neighbors..."

"My turn. Have I ever told you about the time Dad took me camping by Azure lake? It was just the two of us. You weren't born yet, and---"

"Akish?"

"Hmmm?" He turned his head to try to look back at little Pima, but she leaned forward and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Is Mom okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, she's fine. It's the marsh fog. It can make your brain kind of funny. We just need to get further away from the Tower, someplace with fresh air."

Little Pima squeezed the key in her hand, hard enough to cut the impression of the rising sun on the handle into her palm, and laid her head against her brother's shoulder. If Akish said it would be alright, it would be.

Pima clenched her hand tighter, feeling the bite of the key against her skin, and stared at the retreating forms of Akish - strong Akish - and her mother, still mumbling to herself.

The guardian placed a hand on her shoulder. It wasn't quite substantial, but it held weight more or less. Pima hated that it held some comfort in it as well.

She shifted, and the figure dropped its hand. It spoke. "You should listen to your mother, Pima. It didn't work. It never does. It never will. Trapped. Trapped in time. You can't turn back the clock. You can't turn the hourglass back over. You can't..."

Its eyes implored hers as it babbled on, confusing her train of thought. "...even you. You can't. You might as well---"

"Might as well what? Go back? Can I, or have I already climbed too far?" Pima pressed a hand over her eyes. She was beginning to feel lightheaded again. Like everything around her was moving, but so was she, floating up towards the ceiling, the ceiling of time, the top.

"The top!" She dropped her hand, and her eyes traveled up the long flight of stairs before her. They were dark, the steps less eager to shine and show her the path. How close now?

"Are you trying to make me go back? Or are you pushing me forward? Telling me I can't. That it's impossible, *even for me*. You're egging me on. Or - I know." She took a step, left hand on the wall, right hand to her chest, and poised on one foot over the next step. "You're trying to twist my mind into knots. You want me to sit down and stay here and get lost in time with you. Is that it, *brother*? Is it?"

She was aware that she wasn't making much sense, and the shadowy figure wasn't going to answer her, and she took another heavy leaden step forward.

"I can't stop you," the figure said. "Until you are stopped. But I will stay with you."

Pima had no response to that, to the pity in this...this *thing's* voice. And soon, she was too swept up in visions of the past to care.

These memories couldn't all be hers. The visions became more and more fractured. Images of faces, mostly, interspersed with the land. Horrible, hideous visions of poisonous fog and blackened fields and starless nights, dead wildlife and scared, scarred people. Gunshots and screams and boxy monsters that exploded in such force, whole buildings were knocked down.

These images did not fit with those of her mother's steady hands bandaging her knee, Akish's laughing face, the bright blue painted house surrounded by wildflowers that had to be left behind.

Pima fell to her knees and screamed in agony. Whether her cries were spoken out loud or not, she didn't know or care. The pain was so real, so deep, that she almost didn't stand, almost laid down right there on the steps, and begged for release.

But she instinctively knew that she'd breached a barrier. She'd won another unspoken challenge, and there was just one more. One final challenge. She had to stand. She had to keep going until she couldn't, or what was the point of all this?

She gritted her teeth against the throbbing ache that pervaded her whole body. And she stood, locking her knees against the dizziness. And she bent her head, pushing forward against the onslaught of sights and sounds and smells. And she climbed.

A square of light became visible up ahead. Pima fixed her eyes on it. Each step now was less painful but more draining. There was no other word to describe it. Something was being drained from her. She was so tired, she didn't even blink when a man appeared at the top of the stairs or hesitate when he offered her a hand.

She started when she felt his cool touch. He was more than memory. *Guardian*.

She pulled back, looking behind her for Akish's form. Though when she saw him standing there, she wished she hadn't. She stood between the two not quite substantial figures, quivering and breathless.

Without a word, the man stepped back and made a wide-armed gesture that seemed to say, *Choose*. Light from the window - natural, orangish-yellow, late afternoon light - fell on its face. It wasn't Neeman's father. Peering up at its face, Pima couldn't see how she'd thought it was. This figure was thinner, more angular in features, and it had a salt and pepper beard. A stranger. Why would the Tower choose a stranger to confront her?

Pima cringed back from it again, away from the window. If the view on the other side of the glass was true, she didn't want to see. The door seemed more promising. At least, she was used to doors by now. But there was no lock. There had to be a lock!

He turned away from the window and peered down the short hallway that led off to the right of the door. There, caught in a beam of light from the window, was a golden keyhole. No door, no opening, no knob. Just a keyhole set in the wall.

That was it. The beginning. The end. She inched towards it. Raised the key. Lined it up with the lock. It slid in with a faint click. Pima became aware of a low buzzing sound in her head. Though whether it was the key's doing or the Tower's, she didn't know.

Her hand shook as she grasped the key's handle and twisted it...or tried to. It wouldn't budge. She jiggled it and immediately felt silly. It wasn't an ordinary stuck lock. She looked back at the two shadowy figures behind her; they stared back with impassive faces.

“How---?”

The door behind the strange man clicked open. He moved out of the way, and Akish's form stepped to the other side of the door, two stoic sentinels. Pima's legs trembled, her breath caught in her chest, and her head swam, but she took those ten shuffling steps forward, eyes locked on Akish's face.

Then one more step, face turned toward the door, eyes closed. And one more, until she stood at the room's threshold, and peered inside.

“The Maze”

Pima blinked at the sudden brightness. She took in the room slowly as her eyes adjusted to the light.

A couch was pushed up against one wall. A floor lamp with a yellow shade cast its sunny light over the cushions. A chair and wooden side table faced the chair against the opposite wall, occupying the remainder of the cramped space. There was barely room for someone to walk between the couch and the chair to get to the door on the other side of the room.

Taking a closer look, she noted that the walls were bare but painted a pale blue that matched the carpet. She resisted the urge to reach down and touch the floor. She had no memory of lying on carpet before, but she bet it would make a soft bed.

“Daddy.”

Pima jumped. The blanket on the couch moved. A head appeared above the blanket, and Pima shrank back. She felt a little foolish hiding from a memory, but she was taken aback by the face that looked back at her. It was clearly Akish, but an Akish with rounded cheeks, wide, innocent eyes, and tiny hands that gripped the blanket under his chin.

“Daddy!”

“Shhh, Son. What is it?”

A man entered the room through the other door. He sat down on the chair across from Akish and patted his leg.

Akish sat up and rubbed sleep from his eyes. The blanket slipped revealing a blue t-shirt with red and white paint splattered across an image of a man in a blue bodysuit with a red cape. Pima's eyebrows knitted at the curious sight.

“Is the baby here yet?”

“Not yet. You should go to bed. I'll wake you when she's here.”

“No, you won't.”

The man laughed. “You're probably right. But you need your rest. You can meet your baby sister in the morning.”

Akish crossed his arms and shook his head.

The man sighed. “Suit yourself. But your mother needs me.” He stood and held up a corner of the blanket. When Akish didn't lay back down, he settled the blanket around the boy's legs and tousled his hair. “It won't be long now.”

He hit a dimmer switch on the lamp before he left, and shadows appeared at the corners of the room. Akish leaned against the back of the couch. His eyes were already starting to grow heavy.

It took effort for Pima to drag her eyes away from him. The man had disappeared through the door and down the hall.

“Hey! Wait!”

Pima took a step forward and then fell back as a stab of surprise coursed through her body. Until that moment, she didn't know if she would be able to enter the scene beyond the door. She extended her hand, inch by inch, and stared at her fingers as they passed through the doorway. When nothing happened, she cast one more look at the stranger standing beside the door and then ran into the room.

“Dad? Dad, wait!”

1211

BREAK - CHAPTER 13

If Akish or her father could hear her, neither responded. She bolted through the room with the couch, nearly tripping over a chair leg, and halted in the hallway beyond, turning in circles.

Everywhere she looked, there was a new door. The door that led to the room where her brother lay awaiting her arrival had disappeared. Two doors flew open at the same time. A woman came running out of the first. She was past Pima and through another door before Pima could think to act. She whirled to confront the man as he came running out of the second door but stopped short when she saw the woman he carried in his arms.

“But...I thought...She...” Pima spun in a circle, searching for the first woman. “Mom?”

In the brief glance she got of the couple before they, too, disappeared, she tried to compare the woman’s face to her mother’s. She took a step after them but was distracted when a third door opened and the man, once again, stepped out.

His face was drawn. He wore an ironed white coat. It was thin, obviously not made to withstand the cold. A nametag and a silver pin hung from a pocket near his left shoulder. The door started to close behind him, but before it slammed shut, he stuck his foot out and caught it.

The black box he held in his hand buzzed. He looked at the box and heaved a tired sigh before bringing it to his ear. “Vidish? I’m leaving now. She gave the go ahead. She wants it activated pronto.”

He paused, frowning down at the glowing screen. “I’m alright. So is she. Exhausted though. Yeah, a healthy eight-pound girl. They’re both sleeping now.” He uttered a tired laugh. “Yep. See you in ten.”

He pressed a button on the black box and shoved it into his pocket. Pushing his shoulder against the door, he leaned in and whispered, “I love you.” Then he stepped out and started across the hall.

Quick as lightning, Pima lunged for the door. As soon as her foot hit the carpet inside the room, her leg gave way. Dizziness overtook her, and she slumped against the wall outside the room. She got a brief glimpse of a bedroom and two figures sleeping side by side in a bed covered by a familiar, dark purple coverlet - one tall, one teeny. Then the door slammed shut, and she gasped.

That one step had been enough to knock the air out of her. She reached out a hand to touch the knob, then thought better of it and spun back around to catch a glimpse of the man opening the door at the far end of the hall.

“Wait! Wait! Don’t do this! You know it’s a bad idea! Tell them! They’ll listen to you! Don’t do it!”

She attempted to run after him but fell to the ground after the second step. Her legs felt like rubber. She pushed herself up on hands and knees, pressing her forehead against the ground, and took five deep breaths. “W...wait!”

She managed to climb to her feet and stumble forward a few steps. Her strength seemed to return to her the further away she got from the room with the sleeping figures. Gaining confidence as she went, she followed her father through the door he had left open, only to find herself in another empty hallway.

This one was shorter. There were four doors. Two to the right, one to the left, and one dead ahead. All of them were closed, and there was no evidence that anyone had passed this way.

As she watched, the door directly ahead down the hall opened. The two ghostly apparitions of Akish and her father peered through at her through the door that led to the Tower landing where she’d left them. She stared them down as she reached out and grabbed hold of the knob to the first door on her right. Not waiting to see if she felt the same energy drain as last time, she threw the door open, flung herself inside, and wrenched it closed behind her.

Pima whirled around to face the room. A woman lay on a bed against the back wall, seemingly asleep. The same man she’d been chasing was leaning against the wall looking out a window. The woman stirred and struggled to sit up.

“Easy, easy,” the man murmured. He approached the bed and handed the woman something wrapped in a blanket. Then he grabbed a pillow and propped it behind her back. The woman adjusted the blanket in her arms and cooed at the tiny face that appeared.

Now face to face with them, Pima couldn't deny it. This was her mother and father. It was the first time she'd had to really take in either of their faces - this man whom she had never met and this younger version of her mother. Without wrinkles or worry lines. Young, healthy...happy. But it was her. And that meant the baby in her arms...

“Oh, she's sleeping...” the woman said.

“And so should you.”

“Where's Akish?”

“Asleep downstairs. He was determined to stay up with you. He was so excited to meet his little sister, but he didn't last long.”

“Mmhmm. Jaru, about tomorrow...”

Pima's father rocked back on his heels and his expression hardened.

“I haven't changed my mind. I don't want to delay the Tower's activation. No one does, except you. This is our lives' work. We've had our disagreements, but...Jaru... you have to see this is the right thing to do. I know you don't want to leave me, but it'll only be for a little while. You have to go to the office in the morning, as early as you can. You have to activate it tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow. So soon? I didn't know it would feel like this.”

“Like what?” she asked.

“Like we're standing on the edge of a cliff, getting ready to jump without knowing what's waiting below.”

“And I'm giving you permission to be the first to jump.” She laughed, and then she sucked in a breath when baby Pima stirred. But the baby didn't wake, and the two adults relaxed.

Jaru caressed his newborn daughter's cheek. When he looked at his wife again, his features were drawn tight with worry. “Activating the Tower without the senior engineer? It seems wrong.”

1074

BREAK - CHAPTER 14

Sixteen-year-old Pima fell back against the door as if she'd been slapped. She missed her mother's response. Blood pounded in her ears.

Her father was wearing his white coat with the silver pin. A similar coat was hanging off the end of the bed. Her eyes searched the white fabric and found no hint of silver. The little medal hanging off the pocket was gold.

Matching coats with name tags - one silver, one gold.

In her mother's story - her version of events - her father was the engineer. Pima guessed that was true. But she had grown up thinking that he was the one making the decisions. The Tower was his project. He was the one who experienced guilt too late. He was the one who crafted the key and left it for Pima. As Neeman had once called it - her father's inheritance. He was the powerful and reluctant engineer caught between duties. Her mother had never mentioned playing a role other than that of his wife, his supporter.

But it had been her. She was the head engineer. She was ordering the Tower to be built, to be activated. There was no hesitation or guilt on her face. Not yet.

And suddenly the burden of guilt Pima had seen her mother struggle under all these years took on a new weight. Pima had to do something, and quick, or that guilt would descend, along with the Tower's oppressive shadow. This was her purpose. To change history. But perhaps she couldn't change history until the past was set to rights.

“Yes, check on him,” her mother was saying. “And then get some rest. We'll be fine.”

“Mom. Dad. Can you hear me?” Inching over to the bed, she laid her hands on her mother's coat, clenching the white fabric in her hands. “Tell her no, Dad. Tell her no! Don't leave!”

She flung herself at him as he turned aside and began to pack a bag. He was deaf and blind to her, but surely he couldn't ignore her fist pounding into his arm. "Dad! No! Don't leave! Don't leave us!"

Jaru paused for a moment, and his eyes found hers. He blinked rapidly several times. Then he shook his coat sleeves out, wrenching free of her grip, and turned back to his wife and newborn daughter. He bent to give them each another kiss, his eyes lingering on baby Pima's face, and then he strode to a door that she hadn't noticed before.

"I'll check in on you before I leave. Call me if you need anything."

"Dad, listen to me! You can't do this! Don't activate the tower. Don't---"

He slammed the door in her face. The sound, harsh in the still room, caused the baby to stir. "Shhh. Shhh," her mother said, rearranging the blanket around the tiny bundle, but the baby took in a deep lungful of air and let out a piercing scream.

Pima's heart stuttered. Her breath caught, and her legs once again betrayed her. She fought to keep from passing out as she dropped to the floor. "M...om. Stop...him. Pl...plea...ahhhh..."

Pain wracked through Pima's body. Time paused as another newborn cry shot through the air like an arrow to pierce her skull. "No. No...Oh..."

Pima propped herself up on her elbows and started to pull herself toward the door. It took forever, but she finally managed to hook one arm around the door and pull herself out. She laid on her side in the hallway for several minutes, waiting for her heart to stop stuttering.

She shut her eyes and welcomed the dark.

When she came to again, she found herself staring at a closed door. A cold sweat broke out on her forehead. She flipped over onto her back. Her head turned from side to side. Left. Right. Left. Right. Which door was the correct choice?

She needed to fix the mistake that was about to be made...before it was made. Surely one of these doors must lead to a time when the Tower didn't exist yet. She tipped her head back and met her father's eyes.

"You...You! How do I go back?"

The guardian shook its head.

"How do I make them hear me?"

Another head shake.

"Talk to me! How do I go back?!"

"You can't."

"But I have. I am! I need to go back further!"

"You can't."

"Stop saying that! I *have* to!"

The guardian shook its head again. Anger surged through Pima's body, along with a burst of her energy, and she shot to her feet. She crossed the hall in two steps, threw open the left side door, and came face to face with the apparition of Akish. She might have been fooled before, but she could see it now. Its eyes gave it away. They had lived too long and still seen so little.

Its eyes slid toward the wall with the keyhole. Pima sucked in a breath.

"No. No."

She backpedaled into the hallway with the doors and made for the last closed door. Before she could open it, she heard a woman's blood curdling scream. She laid her forehead against the door, taking a shuddering breath.

"What do I do? Akish...What would you do?"

She swung around and reached for the door to the room she'd just exited. She turned the doorknob, opened the door, and stuck her head inside. The scene that met her was like the perfect snapshot. Her parents sat on the edge of the bed. Her mother's head was lying on her father's shoulder, and a swaddled baby was resting in her arms. The sky outside showed that it was earlier in the day than before.

Pima was glad that they couldn't see or hear her. She didn't want to interrupt this moment. She wanted to remember it. Eyes fixed on her parent's faces instead of where she was going, she walked across the room and through the door on the opposite side.

She was standing in a different room. The room was brighter. Multiple windows had been thrown open to let in the fresh air. Akish was sitting on a window seat that ran along the back wall. He had a crayon in one hand, but he was only pretending to draw. She watched his eyes drift up to look at their parents, then back down to the page, then up again.

The two adults were sitting at opposite ends of a dining table strewn with papers.

"I'm done checking your calculations," their father said.

Mom looked up eagerly. "And?"

He paused, and then he broke out in a grin. "They look good."

She heaved a sigh of relief. "But?"

"No but. I'm pleased with the numbers."

"Are you questioning whether we should push back the activation date?"

Her father stood and busied himself collecting the papers laid out on his half of the table into a stack. "I am. The last environmental report was inconclusive. We have to be exact when we choose a date. And I think we should add a few more safety precautions. I'm not sure..."

"We talked about this. The last three reports were acceptable. And we've done all we can for safety at the present time. We won't know what additional measures may be necessary or cost-effective until we try to turn it on. Until *I* try to turn it on. *I'm* willing to take any risks."

"And *I* think you are taking too many risks lately."

He offered her a hand up. She had to push her chair back further to navigate the table with her pregnant belly. Tears pricked at the corners of Pima's eyes. She was still here.

And she was still powerless.

1290

BREAK - CHAPTER 15

She wanted to scream and hit something and have someone hear her. She wanted to take those papers and shove them out the window, trample them in mud.

"Mom...Dad..." She leaned forward, surprised when her hand passed right through the table. She caught herself just in time and made a swipe for the stack of papers. They were as insubstantial as air to her.

"This is real. This is real," she whispered in a mantra as she began stalking around the room. It meant something that she could touch the table. It meant the rules weren't concrete. All she needed was something that she could hold in her hands and she'd get their attention. Oh yes, she would. She would...

Pima pressed a hand over her eyes. She was swaying on her feet, but for some reason she couldn't recall, she knew that reaching out for a chair to steady herself would be a bad idea. Where was she? What was she doing here? Who...who were these people?

She'd known the answers a moment ago.

The man and woman were arguing.

"Tell me what would make you happy," the woman said.

"Maybe...maybe if you advanced the date a year or two. That would fix the ionization ratings here," the man replied.

The woman seemed to consider it, but then she waved her hand. "No, I can't do that. That won't work." And then she demanded again, "Tell me what would make you happy?"

Back and forth, while the little boy sat in the corner and stared at his paper with a bored expression. He lifted his eyes from the page and paused. He tilted his head, staring at her from the corner of his eye.

"Can you see me?"

He looked down quickly, eyes wide. Pima stepped forward eagerly.

"You see me. I know you do. I'm talking to you. Can you hear me?"

He frowned and looked up again, and this time she followed his gaze a little to her right. He was staring at her shadow, which the sunlight that filtered into the room through the windows cast across the floor. Pima sighed and sank onto the seat beside him. "I thought I had something there. Can't see how this helps me though."

She leaned back as another wave of dizziness crashed over her consciousness. When it passed, she peered over his shoulder at his drawing.

"Oh!"

She remembered the picture. It was the exact match of the folded picture she had carried around in her pocket since she was a little girl. That one had been folded and refolded so many times, there was a tiny hole in the center. This one was unmarred, beautiful.

"Oh, Akish..."

She traced the edge of the paper with her index finger and started. "Ow!" A dot of red had appeared on her finger. "Paper cut," she said, lifting her finger to her mouth. She paused, staring at it. "Paper cut!"

"Ahhh! Jaru!"

Pima stood and whirled around to face her mother, who was bent nearly in double, clutching her belly.

"Jaru!"

"Amoli? Is it the baby?"

"Yes!" she wailed, swatting at his arm. "What else could it be? Really?!" She pulled away and waddled out of the room.

"Alright. Alright. I'll call the midwife," Jaru said. He started to follow her, and then stopped and looked back at Akish.

The little boy bounced happily on the window seat. "The baby is coming! She must know I finished her picture. See, Dad! I finished it! It's our family!"

Jaru gave him a tired smile. "That's wonderful, Akish. I'm sure she'll love it. Now, I have to tend to your mother. The baby...it could take a while. You're a big boy. Can I trust you to entertain yourself for a few hours? Maybe we can order something special for dinner to celebrate."

"Pizza?" Akish asked, bouncing up and down again.

"Perfect! I'll check in on you in an hour. Don't get into any trouble now." He held his finger up to his nose and winked.

"Yes, sir."

Once Dad was gone, Akish grabbed his picture and hopped up. He smoothed it out and folded it twice, taking care to crease it just so, and then he walked over to a box labeled "for our baby girl" and laid it on top of a pink blanket.

Akish rubbed a corner of the blanket. "I can't wait to meet you."

A yelp of pain echoed down the hall. Akish sucked in a breath and slapped his hands over his ears. "Please hurry," Pima heard him say, and then he raced out of the room. Pima hoped that he was heading someplace far away from those screams.

She took the drawing out of the box and unfolded it. A cartoon sun smiled back at her. Beneath it, there was the green field with red flowers and a bright blue lake with crooked yellow waves. And standing in the middle of the field stood the smiling family that Akish had drawn, all holding hands: Mom, Dad, Akish, and her.

"Sorry," she whispered. She had to be quick. She flipped it over. What should she say? Only one thing came to mind. Stealing herself, she slipped her knife out of its holder and ran her finger quickly over the blade's edge along the paper cut. Three drops of blood fell in quick succession onto the paper. She hurried over to the table and pressed her finger down on the page.

FIND
NEEMAN

Her hand was shaking by the time she finished her message in a bottle. It was slightly smeared and still wet when she folded the paper back up and placed it in the box, but she had to have hope that it would work.

It pained her, but she took the much-loved drawing out of her pocket and ripped a corner off. Using her left hand now, she wrote the message that she prayed would change everything.

1004

BREAK CHAPTER 16

“The Key”

She rose shakily to her feet and made her way over to the door, leaning against the frame. She caught a glimpse of Akish vanishing down the hallway on her left. Their parents’ voices also echoed from that direction. One door stood off to the right.

Note clenched tightly in hand, Pima rushed the door, flung it open, and ran inside. Not stopping to throw more than a cursory glance at her parents where they stood over their diagram-strewn table, she cut a path straight across the room to the next door. And then through the next, and the next.

She had to give them as much time as possible. She had to go as far back as she could.

She slowed when she reached the third door. Same room. Same table. But her mother was absent. Instead, her father was sitting across from the man she recognized as Neeman’s father.

The sight distracted her for a second too long, and she crashed face first into the door.

“Jaru? Jaru?”

“Hmmm?”

Neeman’s father laughed. “You seem a little distracted today. Is there something...anything...you might want to tell me...”

Jaru flashed a smile. “I’m not supposed to say anything, but Amoli...she’s...”

“Is she?”

Jaru tapped the side of his nose and grinned wider.

“Congratulations! How far along?”

Pima shook her head to clear it and grasped the doorknob. A shock ran through her. The door swung open, and on the other side...nothing.

She teetered on the edge. She felt an overwhelming urge to step off into that blackness. She’d reached the end, and a small part of her was curious to see what lay past the final door.

She heard her father’s response as if through water. “Not long. We haven’t told anyone yet.”

“What strange times these are. Our families are growing. Our careers are advancing. We’re about to change the world forever. These are truly the best years of our lives.”

“I don’t know about all that, Vidish, but it certainly is exciting.”

A hand appeared in the darkness, reaching out for her. Pima extended her hand, placing it in the apparition’s. She let her breath out and took a step forward, but instead of pulling her in, the apparition caught her and shoved her back. As soon as her feet hit solid ground again, she scrambled back toward her father.

“Here we go!” Vidish said, returning to the table with two glass bottles. “Cheers!” he exclaimed, handing one to her father and lifting his in the air.

“Cheers!” Jaru raised his glass to his lips and took a sip. “Okay, now about these numbers. I’m not sure...”

“Dad.” Pima pushed herself along the wall. Her head was pounding; her vision swam. She had come as far as she could go. Before she took that final jump off the cliff, she had to make good her promise.

“Dad. Here.” She held out the paper; he looked right through it. She moved so that she stood in the light and her shadow fell across the floor; he turned the other way. She screamed and yelled. “Dad! Listen to me! Take it! Why won’t you listen to me?” He was deaf to her pleas.

In anger, she slammed the scrap of paper with her hastily written note on top of the page he was looking at, but it fluttered to the floor and drifted under the table.

“No!” Pima yanked on her hair and slammed her fist into the ground. “Why isn’t this working? This has to work! Dad! Dad, please!” Tears, salty with sorrow and hot with anger, flowed freely down her face. She scrambled to pick up the note and ended up laying on her back, unable to find the will to sit back up. “Please, Dad. Please. Please listen to me. Stop. Listen to me.”

The Tower was playing tricks with her mind. The light in the room dimmed. Every noise was amplified inside her head until it was like she was surrounded by a raging tornado. The door at the end of the room that led to nothing grew closer and closer as the room shrank. Or she was moving toward it. She didn’t care anymore.

The door opened, and her father’s expressionless face stared down at her in pity. “Come,” the guardian said, and in its voice, she heard a door slam and a cat screech and a baby cry. It held out its hand to her again, but she made no move to take it.

“Why?” she moaned.

“You don’t belong here.”

“Why?”

“You had to see---”

“Why?”

“It’s over, Pima. You don’t belong here.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No!”

“Yes!”

With a crack like the final toll of a clock, the Tower pronounced its judgment, and the vision broke. The floor buckled, the room was turned upside down, and Pima found herself sliding toward the door. It swallowed her up and spit her back out, shaken but on her feet.

She was standing in the hallway outside the threshold to this maze of time that she had entered. But it wasn’t the same hallway. It couldn’t be. Everything was flipped, and the wall was an insubstantial thing, a shimmering barrier between her and her father, who was approaching his side of the wall with the ominous lock from the other side.

“Dad? Dad! Stop! What are you doing? Dad, don’t!”

She ran toward the wall. Her key was still stuck in the lock. She tried to turn it, throwing her full weight at it and screaming in frustration. But it was no use. Was it even meant to be used from this side? There must be another door. Another lock. Something. She scratched at the wall, desperately trying to peel back the layers of metal to find the secrets that it kept buried.

On the other side of the shimmering, transparent wall, Jaru, oblivious to his daughter’s presence, halted before the keyhole and took a deep breath. He shook his hands out as if dispelling nerves and glanced over his shoulder at the group of shadowy figures who watched him from the top of the stairs. One of them gave a thumbs up, and Jaru turned back and produced an identical version of Pima’s key from his coat pocket.

He slid the key into the lock and turned it. There was a click. And then a horrible scream.

Jaru screamed in pain. He tried to pull the key back out, tried to release the key's handle, but they were both held fast. Shadows leaped from his eyes and open mouth, from the keyhole, from the cracks appearing in the wall.

Several onlookers cried out and attempted to reach him, but they were swallowed up by the shadows. Their cries of pain joined Jaru's, echoing off the walls and piercing Pima's eardrums. Pima scrambled for the key as well, but she couldn't pull hers out, and she couldn't break through the shimmering wall to grab its copy.

Time shifted. The scene elongated and compressed, shoving this Jaru to the side and making room for a long line of Jarus, each of a mirror of the first Jaru's agony, to appear.

Pima tore her gaze from this vision to look behind her. A line of Pimas wound down the hall behind her and disappeared down the stairs. A hundred Pimas all stuck to the floor, their expressions frozen in various stages of hopelessness and horror.

And this is the vision that undid the knot that held the part of herself that she'd been holding onto in her mind. There was a...slip...She felt it. She was unraveling.

"Ahhhhh!"

Her hands flew to her head, her heart, her mouth. She threw herself at the guardian's image of her father and beat at him with her fists. She stumbled into Akish's chest and threw her arms around him, too drained for tears or words to express all the heartache she felt at her failure, her inability to cage time, to turn back the clock, to save him, save them, save anything.

As time incarnate, the Tower had always seemed two things to her: imposing and cruel. Now she knew that time was impassive. It marched on because it must. It was hard and immovable but it wasn't cruel.

She felt the apparition's arms encircle her, gently, lovingly almost, and she pressed her face into its shoulder.

"Pima..."

"Don't."

"Pima, you can't--"

"I know I can't! I can't change anything! I can't save anyone! I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry I couldn't save you!"

"Stop looking back, Pima. You can't stay in the past. You don't belong here."

"I know. I know. I can't go back. I can't. I can only...go...forward..." She pulled away, her eyes searching for the light that stood watch over the form of a sleeping five-year-old Akish. "And do better."

She took a step away from the Tower guardian, prying her arm free from its grip, and crept back into the room to stand beside young Akish's sleeping form. She reached out a trembling hand as if to brush the hair from his eyes. "I have to look forward. There's nothing else I can do for you...for them...but they can still make a difference. They can do better. I choose to look forward...to their future."

She refused to run. She refused to look back when the guardian called her name. She refused to stop, though the floor continued to buckle and shadows leaped from the walls and it felt like she was caving into herself, crumbling into dust. She walked through door after door in a straight line, never deviating from her chosen path. No, she inched along as if she had all the time in the world, teeth and fists clenched against the odd sensation of walking outside of time.

She reached the room where her father stood over the bed as her mother cuddled a newborn baby in her arms as they discussed the activation of the Tower. With eyes burning from unshed tears, Pima walked through the next door - a scene of her parents bent over Tower schematics - and the next - the family of three sitting around the same table eating supper - and the next - her father holding back her mother's hair as she threw up into a wastebasket - until finally - she was met with nothing on the other side of the door but a black void.

She closed her eyes and imagined her mother and brother as they had been in her memory of them standing beside the horse, getting ready to move on to the first tiny, rundown house among many

that stood out in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by wildlife and fog poison. There she was riding on Akish's shoulders. She laughed at his joke, the joyful sound ringing out loud and clear.

There was her father, leading the horse on, while their mother walked beside him. She held his hand; she was smiling. And there was Neeman as she imagined him at that age, walking beside Akish, grinning up at her, with the left side of his mouth screwed up just a bit higher and a warm twinkle in his eye.

Amir and all the rest, the brave group that had stormed the Tower, trailed behind the horse, skipping and hopping along as if they were part of a celebratory parade. In the background, she heard her mother's voice singing a lullaby, lulling her to rest.

"I choose you," Pima whispered. She took a step back, and her searching hand found the guardian's.

She was lifted off her feet and cradled in gentle arms. Good, because at that moment she heard a baby's thin wailing cry, echoing through the maze of time, a shrill cord of hope. She was sure the sound would have sent her to her knees.

Pima lay limp in her brother's arms as he cradled her close to his chest. She imagined that his hands were warm. She imagined that she could hear his heartbeat, and she smiled.

He looked down at her, a question in his eyes. Her vision blurred, or its face did, and she didn't know who she was looking at. Akish or Neeman or her father. She didn't care. It was enough to know she wasn't alone.

The figure took one step forward, and they fell into the dark abyss.

1003

BREAK - CHAPTER 18

524

"Looking Forward"

Jaru rubbed his face, sighing in frustration.

"Am I the only one who is beginning to think this can't be done?"

"Just because it hasn't been done yet, doesn't mean it can't be done."

"The numbers aren't adding up."

"Just because they aren't adding up yet---"

"Oh, would you quit with that?" Jaru picked up a piece of crumpled paper and threw it at him.

Vidish caught the paper and chuckled. "Have faith, my friend. We have the three most talented engineers working on the problem."

"Three?"

"You, your wife, and...me, you imbecile! Me!" He tossed the paper ball at Jaru's head.

Jaru ducked to avoid the missile. "Fine, then *you* can...Hey, what's this?"

"What's what?" Vidish asked without looking up from his calculator.

Jaru bent to pick up the piece of paper that was lying forgotten under the table. He read it through several times trying to make sense of it. "Did you write this?" he asked, handing the note to Vidish.

"No." Vidish's eyes grew wide as he read the message. "Could Amoli have..."

Jaru shook his head. "It's not her handwriting. What do you think it means?"

"I think it means someone else agrees with our earlier supposition. We need to take another look at the set date. A future date may be the answer to the equation."

Jaru took the note back and smoothed it out on the table. He turned it over and frowned at the mark on the back. It almost looked like smudged crayon. He couldn't make sense of either side.

"Amoli isn't going to like it," he said. "She told us that we needed to stop talking about the future."

“This is for the future. All of this. For our families. For our wives, our sons.” He laid a hand on top of the note, forcing Jaru to look up at him. “It’s worth one more look. Don’t you think?”

Jaru hesitated. The skin on the back of his neck prickled, warning of danger. Vidish withdrew to his side of the table again, and Jaru's eyes drifted down to the note, and he read it one last time.

STOP
TOWER
DOESNT
WORK
FORWARD

He nodded once. A plan had already begun to form in his mind. The decision was made.

“Let’s do it then. Forward...”

The Tower, eyeless and mouthless, turned away from the jabbering, foolish men and instead set its attention in the child. It watched as the baby opened her eyes wide. Then she opened her mouth and released her first full-throated cry.

The guardian was not needed anymore. Not until the girl returned.

Absently, in the way of one not quite capable of thoughts or feelings, it wondered if this time might be different. The past could not be altered. The future...it was possible.

It couldn't bring itself to care. But still, having some company had been nice. It hoped that she would hurry and return soon. Until then, it would stand. The immovable Tower of Time.