

## Flickers

For the thousandth time or so, Fahri woke to begin his morning duties. The room was dark with pangs of pale silver light coming through the cracks of the door and obscured through the parchment windows. With a heavy sigh he pushed back his blanket and folded it neatly at the base of his sleeping mat like the others around him. He changed into his robes and slid the bamboo door open with a faint rush, exposing the outside to him fully. A faint wind brushed him and ran its fingers through the wind chimes suspended above his head as the insects played along with their own song. The fireflies danced to the symphony and Fahri sat for a moment at the edge of the covering to watch them. He'd always loved to, they were one of his favorite things about the temple. It always felt like having permanent guests to him. It made the temple feel more like home.

One of those cherished guests landed itself on his hand, blinking slowly and methodically. Fahri watched it with a rueful smile as it ventured around the terrain of his hand. "Hello, come to keep me company? I could use some." It stopped and sat for a second then opened its wings. Fahri stretched his hand out gently and cast it off back to the swarm, following it till he lost track in the light show. He took a quick breath, then got up and headed off to the sanctuary.

Fahri had spent nearly his whole life at the temple and he had never wanted to leave. He still didn't. From the first time he could remember the temple was the center of his world. He had friends here, many he considered family. He still did too, though now his conversations were one sided as he didn't know what they said with their flickers and occasional touches. Fahri knelt down and wet his brush to scrub the floor. Names, faces, and good memories flowed through him; a mental ribbon of time. He thought of Venka, his face wide with joy and belly pulsating with laughter. Then there was Sanji, her warm smile and caring eyes set upon his. Gourtha, the oldest of them all. What he lacked in hearing and physicality he made up for in contentedness and wisdom. There were more. Many more. Though he didn't know them all personally they were still his brothers and sisters. Fifty of them once wandered the temple with Fahri, but now he scrubbed alone. One. Fahri had to sit up from his back-intensive scrubbing to take a breath, his nose slowly clogging and cold from his tears. He felt the heaviness in his heart but also a soft hand resting there to ease him. He glanced out the window, which in the strictest sense might not be a window. It had no glass, just two cross pieces of wood as decoration. The black sky had begun to give to slight hues of blues at the horizon. It would be sun-up soon, almost time for prayer.

While he had always tried to see other people's views, Fahri never truly understood the malice shown towards their congregation. They sought no violence, no tribute, no war or human sacrifice. They'd simply stayed atop the mountain, happy to bother those of the valley below as little as possible. They rarely went to the village. Often going for items they could not

make or when some of the fields had failed or harvested poor. But all they got were stares. Passive aggression. Misunderstanding. A mutual cycle of misunderstanding between peoples even when they lived close. Whispers often circled them whenever they went. *Demon worshippers. Pagans. Witchcraft.* All untrue, all rumors about a people they never sought to meet or sit with. They didn't know their deity. Their deity was warmth. She was light and everything good that existed in the world was because of her. Eventually they all stopped going to town. Evidently people become uncomfortable surrounded by ignorance and hatred. Apparently, that was the wrong choice.

In the dawn of morning a different parade of lights came to the temple, but this time not as guests. They shouted and cried for everyone to leave. Their village no longer wished to see party to witchcraft and blasphemous ceremonies, within the town or not. Slowly, eyes of the temple came to see the commotion, Fahri's included. They carried torches and tools, weapons and shouts. The elders had tried to reason with them all, invited them for tea and conversation, but nothing would work. In their ignorance, it was all deception. So, when the crowd scattered rampant into the temple, Fahri ran to the fields downslope and hid amongst the cane. He couldn't see what happened next, only his hearing gave him clues. The screaming. The cracking of wood. The chanting and roaring. The silence. He'd not dared to move the whole time till he realized the silence and darkness around him. The stillness shook him to his bones.

Fahri stowed his bucket and brush and made his way back the sanctuary, at least what remained of it. The sacred flame burned dimly on its small altar, a black scorching scar surrounding it high and low. Fahri had been lucky on that sad day at least in one regard. He had managed to save the flame and the temple from becoming a light of its own. Now he knelt before it as he and the others had thousands of times before. And he prayed. He prayed for himself, for the temple, for his friends; but mostly he prayed for the village below. Fahri's cheeks itched as the tears slowly slid down his face as they had many times before, and like many times before, he heard the voice of this old master Gourtha. *Weep not for the dead, for they are safe and warm with Rayagni. Pity the living who live without her in the dark.* Fahri felt the flood gates open and more tears flowed than ever before. Years of loneliness and sorrow poured out in his tears, blinding him.

Then, between the gasps of breath, a flicker. The sacred flame sputtered unusually in its brazier, brighter and higher than typical. It spiraled and twisted out and around itself before it finally came down in front of the altar, filling a humanly form like water poured in a cup. When it had been filled to its crown it knelt in front of Fahri and reached out its fiery hand to him.

"Hello my child." A soft, tender voice spoke. Fahri felt his lips move but the words stuck in his throat. His cheeks no longer felt a cold wetness but an encompassing warmth. He knew what it was, what *she* was, but ironically he knew not how to speak to the goddess he'd prayed to for his whole life.

Rayagni let out a slight chuckle and wiped the remaining tears from Fahri's eyes. Fahri

flinched instinctively but felt no pain nor burn, just a warm touch. "You don't need to be afraid, I would never hurt my children. You are safe with me."

"I-I don't..." Fahri felt his cheeks flush and sunk down to a bow before Rayagni, a pressure building in his throat. "I'm sorry my lord but I have not served you as I should. I failed to protect my companions and hid like a coward while they faced death." Emotion overtook the words spilling from his mouth. Now they were laced with gasps of air and tears. "No matter how much I attempt your temple crumbles between my fingers. The flame nearly went out and our connection to you lost. I- "A warm set of fingers lifted Fahri by his chin from and stood him up.

"Fahri my sweet child, you have always worried about doing enough for me, worrying you might never be noticed or I might be angry with you. This has always been the farthest from the truth. I have always seen you try your best and not just for me but for others around you, and that is always enough." Rayagni placed her hand on Fahri's shoulder. "It's time for you to come home and rest."

A sullen wave of happiness came over Fahri. He could go home now. Really home. Where everyone would be. Though maybe not everyone. He nodded out the window the town below, not more visible from the sunrise rather than its spider web of lights. "What about them?"

"Your kin follow my kin and they will find their place with them. Do not worry, they are safe too. Now come, walk with me." Rayagni led Fahri outside and to the firefly garden by his room. The fireflies were less active now, resting in the warmth of the sun on leaves and stems. "This is my favorite place here. Always has been." Rayagni spoke as she felt the leaves of the plants.

"Do you wish to go home?" She asked.

Fahri thought for a moment. "Who will take care of the temple?"

"Others may use it. It's how humans have always worked. Temples are built, destroyed, and rebuilt again; sometimes for the same god and sometimes not. Everything follows the churn. Eventually everything is recycled. Let her be and someday someone else may have the same experience you're having now." Rayagni paused to let a firefly take off from her fingertip. "You may choose to stay, I'm just giving you the choice now. I don't wish to see my children suffer needlessly."

Fahri felt himself pulled two ways. He'd spent nearly his whole life at the temple. He'd worked hard every day to maintain it and sow its crops and pray at its altar. On the other hand, he had his companions. His family. Fahri took a wide look around him taking in every detail he could see. "Let's go." Rayagni smiled and took Fahri's hands in hers. Light enveloped his vision as it outshined the world around him and engulfed him in warmth. He seemed to float in a sea of white before he heard familiar sounds begin to fade in with the color. Laughing, talking,

merriment. It was all there.

The temple stood quiet in the morning sun. A quiet only disturbed by the faint buzz of the fireflies, now one light stronger.