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A Hero's Journey: Aegean's Destiny

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A Hero's Journey: Aegean's Destiny



Honors Thesis

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Department: English

Advisor: Laura Vorachek, Ph.D.

April 2014

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Abstract

A young woman named Aegean is summoned by the Oracle of her village to go on a journey to defeat an evil civilization at the center of the Three Villages. Though Aegean is independent, strong-willed, and assertive, she does not know her way. With the accompaniment of Maeve, a warrior woman, and Fumito, a cloistered sage, Aegean has a model of femininity and a model of masculinity to guide her in creating her own identity. They face perils on their quest, such as deadly creatures, private struggles – even death. Yet, while they travel they learn about the history of the ancient evil that resides in the Center and the battle that awaits them at the end of their hero's journey.

Dedication or Acknowledgements

My thesis is dedicated to Dr. Vorachek, who allowed me to rant in her office about all the topics I wanted to cover and provided me with wonderful guidance.



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The priestess of the Pneuma village's temple came to see Aegean.

Aegean was surprised; she had only seen the priestess of the Pneuma village leave the temple on errands for the Oracle. When the priestess walked up the stone stairs to the building in her long, flowing robes of gold, the other girls in the girls' dormitory ran to the large windows of the great hall, mystified. Once they had a better look, they saw the sunlight glint off the priestess's gold garments as she held up her robes, cautious of tripping on the stone stairs.

Once in the building, the priestess stood before Aegean. The priestess's posture was rim-rod straight and her arms were akimbo; her sleeves touched the stone-paved floor. The priestess's voice was just as commanding as her presence.

"Aegean," she said. "The Oracle has summoned you."

Aegean had been to the front room of the temple every week as was the custom in the Pneuma village. Aegean knew the Oracle was hidden in the deeper recesses of the building in order to remain undisturbed as she received her visions of the future. This seclusion was normal for Aegean; no one had been summoned to the Oracle's chambers in the sixteen years of Aegean's lifetime. The last time the Oracle had summoned a young man was about thirty years ago. Aegean heard multiple tellings of the tale, but she knew he went on a long journey. A hero's journey.

Aegean gave the priestess a respectful bow.

The priestess gave her a short nod and turned, her robes lightly touching the ground.

Aegean did not need to look around her to know that the other girls in the dormitory's great hall were staring at her. She could feel their stares as she followed the priestess's silent footsteps across the stone floor and out of the big oak doors.

The dormitory itself was not far from the temple, but Aegean felt as if the walk took longer than usual. Villagers stood outside of their huts and shops to witness the spectacle. They knew the priestess only ventured outside of the temple for a good reason. Something important was happening — something that would affect the whole village. The weight of the historic event could be felt by all the spectators.

Again, Aegean could feel their stares as she walked in the middle of the road that divided the huts and shops. To keep her mind off the spectators, Aegean concentrated on the sound of her sandals on the stone-paved path and gazed straight ahead at the sweeping robes of the priestess.

The priestess led Aegean up the stone steps of the temple. Large stone pillars held up the structure of the outcropping of the ceiling; the two that stood on either side of the door were carved into the shape of a man and a woman. Both pillars displayed the man and woman with calm expressions as they held up the building's foundation. While the other buildings in the Pneuma village were far more simple in their architecture, the temple was the only building in the village that had such elaborate decorative and structural work.

As Aegean walked between the stone man and woman, she felt the enormity of her seeing the Oracle settle like a brick on her chest.

Aegean practiced the breathing exercises she had been learning in school since she was a little girl. As part of the Pneuma village, she learned early to control her

anxiety levels. After breathing slowly, she knew to regulate her mind through concentration. She would have to wait to close her eyes until she was standing still in the temple.

She concentrated on the breaths that were slowly entering and leaving her body. Inhale... Exhale. Inhale...She allowed her eyes to wander the temple that she entered only upon special occasions and with the girls' dormitory. She had never been led by herself into the building. Counting the torches on each wall (one...two...three), she wondered if that accounted for the vastness of the place now that she alone had to confront it. The unknown loomed in the dark crevices of the high ceiling, in the shadows moving as if in a ritual dance on the walls.

Aegean continued to follow the silent priestess deeper into the temple. She yearned to ask questions, but she knew she would learn her fate soon enough. For now, her main concern was putting into practice the methods of meditation she had learned from her mentors at school. She wanted to be in as clear of a state of mind and body as she could when she finally met the Oracle.

I am myself, she chanted in her head as she had been taught, and I define who I am. I am myself and I define who I am. I am myself and I define—

The priestess finally reached the end of the corridor. She stopped in a doorway that led to another chamber. She slowly turned to face Aegean and stared at Aegean with mahogany eyes that glowed in the torchlight.

“The Oracle will see you now,” she said. “I will wait here while she speaks to you.”

Aegean bowed as she had been instructed by her mentors.

To her surprise the priestess bowed deeply in return, hands clasped together in front of her in a manner of profound respect reserved for great warriors, philosophers, and sages....

Aegean felt the brick that she had eased off her chest, or at least reduced to a skipping stone through meditation, once again press against her lungs and heart.

The priestess stepped to the right of the open archway and bowed her head to her chest. She was entering her own state of meditation, reciting her own mantra. Aegean wondered if the priestess also worried about Aegean's soon-to-be-determined fate.

Aegean took a deep breath and looked straight ahead into the Oracle's chamber. She knew it was normal to feel uneasiness when encountering the unknown, but she also knew not to let that fear cripple her. She took a first step, and then another, and she found herself walking into the inner chamber of the temple.

The room was lit by torches. Aegean felt the warmth of the torches, but also a breeze lifted a few tendrils of hair from her face. Light fell to the floor from a skylight shaped like a triangle in the middle of the ceiling. The sunlight shimmered in a circular pool surrounded by cream-colored cushions.

A woman sat at the pool's edge, looking down into its shallow depths and dipping her feet in the water.

Aegean realized that she must be the Oracle.

She was wrapped in varying shades of blue and purple fabric, and a light blue semi-transparent material. She seemed absorbed with the water, as if she were having a silent conversation with it.

Then she looked up at Aegean and radiated a feeling of calm that eased all the tension accumulating in Aegean's body. As if she could sense the great effect that she had on Aegean, the Oracle smiled and rose from the poolside.

She seemed to flow across the floor as she walked around the pool, like a stream moving toward Aegean. Her smile never faded as she walked barefooted across the stone floor.

She stopped in front of Aegean and bowed, and her gossamer garments swirled around her.

Despite the Oracle's calming presence, Aegean felt a bolt of lightning hit her heart as another one of her superiors showed her profound respect that she did not understand nor feel entitled to.

When the Oracle straightened from her bow, she continued to smile. Aegean could only stare at her.

The Oracle was not a tall woman, and her might radiated from her. The Oracle's smile welcomed, yet intimidated Aegean. Aegean knew that the Oracle was kind, but she also knew that the Oracle possessed powers that were far greater than hers. The Oracle was always chosen from the Pneuma village because its villagers learn the inner qualities and nature of a person. After the Oracle dies, a new Oracle takes his or her place. Aegean had imagined herself as the Oracle, the highest authority in the Three Villages of Pneuma, Colainn, and Seishin, but so did every child of the Pneuma village. Everyone hoped that by studying meditation and the inner workings of the person, they would be chosen as the Oracle in their future. But the Oracle was not chosen by the mentors of the dormitory. Fate was not in humans' control—not even in the realm of human thought.

The Oracle, as the highest authority, knew who the next Oracle would be, and wrote their name in the Book of Oracles.

Aegean wondered if the current Oracle, the one she now saw in front of her, already knew who the next Oracle would be. That was not the reason for her being here, she knew, because the new Oracle was not told of her or his role until after the death of the current Oracle. She knew there was another reason for her summons to the temple.

“I am sure you have made your own judgments on why I have summoned you,” the Oracle said. Her voice was just as smooth as her walk, her garments.

Aegean thought again of the stories she had been told as a child in the dormitory about warriors and battles of the past. The Oracle had always known of the future conflict and sent for a troupe of people to aid in the fight.

“I do not know for sure,” Aegean said.

The Oracle continued to smile. “You have been chosen for a hero’s journey — not based upon any special set of skills you may possess, but the goodness I can see in your Spirit. Yet,” she said, and paused. “You have a choice. You decide your own actions. I translate what I have seen as a possibility for your future. Only you know your true destiny.”

Aegean nodded. She knew this was part of the hero’s duty. The hero had to consciously make the decision to risk her life. Fate may come from a transcendental realm, but it was always determined by humans. They were given options, but they were always free to refuse.

The Oracle’s smile faded and she grew somber. She looked at Aegean, and her eyes were the light blue of the pool water.

“I have seen a future in which you travel back to the heart of our land,” the Oracle said. “The intersection of the Three Villages, a land that is deeply rooted in our civilization. Its secrets are known to only a few; many refuse to believe that it still exists. You will be accompanied by two guardians, one from the Colainn village and another from the Seishin village. Each will serve their own purpose. Both will give you strength, through their own unique means. There will be hardships on this journey; you will face deadly creatures, excruciating conditions — even death. You may choose to accept, or refuse, your potential destiny.”

Aegean would not refuse, though. As she stood in front of the Oracle, the mightiest authority in the Three Villages, she knew that she, Aegean, was meant to go on this journey. She felt the rightness of it in her bones. She did not feel that she quite deserved the respect that the priestess and the Oracle had given her just yet, but she knew she would do something great to achieve, to win that respect. They may freely give it to her now, but they did not respect the sixteen-year-old Aegean that had lived in the dormitory. They respected the Aegean that would travel outside of the only village she had ever known on a hero’s quest full of danger and turmoil.

“I accept my destiny,” Aegean said. She felt herself stand straighter and become more aware of herself, her being, than she ever had before.

The Oracle nodded and a slow smile crept onto her face. “I believe in your abilities as one of the Pneuma village and as a human being, Aegean. Your acceptance of this quest is your first act of bravery, though surely not your last. Now,” she said, and clapped her hands.

Aegean looked behind her, at the point that the Oracle was staring, and saw the priestess standing in the archway of the temple.

“One of your guardians is here to begin your journey,” the Oracle said. “She will take you to your other guardian, who is found in the Seishin village. Though I have seen him in the future you have chosen, you will need to go to him and ask for his commitment to your journey. Just as you chose your future, the guardians also have to choose theirs.”

Aegean nodded.

“Now follow Malgalia,” the Oracle said, and gestured toward the priestess. “She will show you to your guardian.”

The Oracle smiled, and Aegean followed the priestess out of the chamber.

The priestess led Aegean to a room off the long corridor that led to the Oracle’s chamber.

One lone woman stood by the fire in the corner of the room. She was tall, much taller than Aegean, and her muscular arm leaned against the mantel. She had her back turned to the new arrivals, and only her face was visible in profile. Her eyes were in shadow.

Orange flames reflected off the silver armor that covered her broad shoulders and legs. Her dark ponytail fell down her back between her shoulder blades and over the leather sword sheath that protected her gilded sword.

“This is Maeve,” the priestess said. “She will be your protector on the journey.”

Maeve turned away from the fire, and her round face was visible to Aegean. She was older than Aegean. Her smooth skin spoke of youthfulness, but her presence radiated ancient wisdom. A raised line of skin, a scar, ran along the side of her face, just below her left eye to her jawline.

Maeve did not speak or move.

And she did not need to do anything. Aegean knew Maeve came from the Colainn village, the land of the body, of the brave. Aegean had learned the history of the Colainn village in school; it was well-documented. Women and men were trained side-by-side to become warriors. They valued honor and loyalty to the utmost. They were usually known for stripping superfluous words from conversations; they valued their time and did not want to waste a breath on excesses. Aegean particularly remembered their praise of the outdoors, where they felt detached from all the frivolous items that normally weighed people down to their surroundings. Perhaps that was the reason Maeve stayed so close to the fire, the only true connection to nature in the humanmade room.

Maeve finally moved away from the fire, and the hilt of her sword clinked against the silver armor that covered her back. Her long legs allowed her to take only a few strides to close the space between them

Aegean's head barely reached her shoulder.

"Aegean," Maeve greeted in a calm, controlled voice. "I accept the position as your guardian." She bowed her head, and when she straightened she seemed to stand taller.

Aegean remembered reading about the ceremonial rituals that took place in the Colainn village in order to initiate one into adulthood. On their thirteenth birthday,

children were left out in the woods from the beginning of the summer to the end of winter — from one extreme temperature to the next — to fend for themselves. Those who emerged from the forest at the first buds of spring were said to have been reborn, raised from a lower consciousness to a higher consciousness. After the initiation ceremony, they were branded on either their arms or their legs with the Mark of the Villages.

Maeve readjusted her armor, and Aegean could see the raised, lighter skin in the shape of a triangle on her bicep. She had gone through the arduous initiation ritual of the Colainn Village.

The priestess bowed to both Maeve and then Aegean respectively before leaving the room.

Though Aegean wished to become acquainted with her new guardian, she found herself at a loss of words to say to Maeve. Should she ask her about the customs of her village? How different was her upbringing from Aegean's? Aegean had only ever seen a few messengers from the two other villages. The messengers from Maeve's village were always tall and broad, male or female. Those in Aegean's village varied in size, but no one's body occupied as much space as those from the Colainn Village.

Without looking at Aegean, Maeve removed her sword, leaning it against her thigh. Then she lifted her silver armor over her head and placed it at her feet. She swung her sword onto her back again, and the hilt protruded from her back while the long blade extended from her side. She heaved a great sigh and arched her back, planting her booted feet a shoulders-width apart as she did so.

Then she looked at Aegean for a moment in silence.

Aegean did not squirm under her scrutiny. She had felt many eyes on her as she had left her dormitory and walked through the village. While she knew Maeve was staring at her, Aegean did not feel that she was being judged. Aegean only felt a curiosity emanating from Maeve's body, her eyes still mostly in shadow from the flickering firelight. Aegean wondered if Maeve also felt as curious about her, the girl from the Pneuma Village whom the Oracle had summoned her, Maeve, to guard on this journey.

Maeve lifted her head, and the shadow lifted from under her brow; her eyes sparkled in the firelight.

"Let us sit down," she said, gesturing to two wooden chairs by the fireplace. "We have much to discuss."

Aegean nodded once and walked to the chair without a word.

Maeve's armor clanked as she held it on her arm in front of her body as she took a few strides to the chair. As she sat down, Aegean could see another reason for Maeve's standing beside the fireplace as Aegean and the priestess entered the room: the chair was built for those in the Pneuma Village, not the Colainn Village. Though Maeve could sit in the chair, her legs were longer than the chair was high, and her knees were closer to her chin than they would have been if she were sitting in a normal chair. But the imperfect seating did not deter her; she sat up straight and placed her armor behind her booted feet.

"As the Oracle most likely told you," Maeve said, "we must travel to the Seishin Village to summon your second guardian. He has been notified of your quest, and he should be in preparation for your coming. Do you know much about the Seishin Village?"

"Yes," Aegean said.

Aegean had read about the Three Villages in her schooling at the girls' dormitory. The Seishin Village focused on the mind, studying ancient documents to better understand humanity and beyond. Unlike those from Maeve's village, those in the Seishin Village remained indoors for most of their lives, strengthening their minds rather than their bodies. However, they were still connected to the earth through their knowledge of the magical properties of herbs; they memorized incantations to be chanted while using certain potions and charms. The messengers from the Seishin Village did not come to Aegean's village often; only a few liked to venture outside the village boundaries. Perhaps Aegean's second guardian was one such villager.

Maeve nodded once. "Good. So you are aware of the cloistering that occurs. With their textual knowledge, Seishin villagers often prefer to be with their books rather than animate beings. But I might as well if I had that much knowledge about our chaotic history."

Aegean knew Maeve was referring to how the Three Villages had come into existence, the separation between the Mind, Body, and Spirit. Aegean had been taught that these three entities were always connected, yet still distinct from one another. She knew that there had been feuding before the time of the Three Villages; she had learned about the wars and evil that were present in the world. But the formation of the Triangle of the Three Villages was a type of protection against those previous evils. Yet, Aegean knew that those evils were not necessarily in the past. They erupted from the dark depths, and a hero was called forth to combat them.

But Aegean realized she never really knew what the evils were. She had heard of the supernatural beings that existed, but the Triangle of the Three Villages protected her

from those evils. Even the paths between the villages were safe passages to travel — the formation of the triangle ensured that. Every so often the protection needed to be restored, and a hero rose to the occasion. She, Aegean, would be that hero.

“I can see your bravery,” Maeve said, “and I admire that in light of all that you are about to face. But,” Maeve paused, and she leaned back in her chair, “I must tell you the extent of your journey. You do not know what lies at the center of the Three Villages.”

“I do not,” Aegean said.

“Most do not,” Maeve said. “The secrets that lie there are known by the greatest from each village — secrets that supposedly lie dormant in the Center. Great evils were contained there long ago, by our great ancestors. You have heard the stories of the creation of our Triangle, the protection against all these evils. You were told the peril is over; we won. But evil still seeps out, oozing, throbbing like a wound that did not properly heal.”

Aegean contemplated this.

“Will it ever heal?” Aegean asked. “Or is all this just futile? Will a new hero continue going on this journey again and again to place a bandage over an area of internal bleeding?”

Maeve looked at Aegean and her face did not convey any emotion. Then the corner of her mouth lifted into a half smile.

“Everything depends upon you,” she said. “Aegean, you will create your own destiny, and in so doing you will pave the stepping stones of future generations. Past heroes have all contributed to the world in which we live. They fought for themselves and

they fought for the Three Villages. Perhaps they sought to eradicate the evil entirely as you do, or perhaps they only had the courage to keep it at bay for a few years. The evil is strong, and only a person of great mental and physical strength can defeat it.”

From her high position on her chair, Maeve looked down at Aegean with that same crooked grin, her teeth glittering in the firelight. To Aegean, Maeve appeared excited, and this further strengthened her desire to start her quest. She knew those from the Colainn village often enjoyed a competition; they fought each other multiple times a day in order to build their strength and combat abilities. Though Maeve clearly understood the severity of their situation, Aegean liked the fact that Maeve enjoyed a good challenge. Their journey together did not need to consist of only morose contemplation, but also the pleasing anticipation of confronting an entity believed to be more powerful than them — and emerging victorious.

Maeve’s head turned toward the doorway, and Aegean’s gaze followed. The priestess stood in the entrance. Aegean had not heard her, but perhaps Maeve’s warrior training had strengthened her listening abilities.

The priestess bowed and took a few steps into the room.

“Everything has been prepared,” the priestess said, looking directly at Maeve.

Maeve nodded and stood up. Aegean quickly did the same.

“Now that we have talked about the basics of your journey,” Maeve said, looking down at Aegean, “we will have plenty of time to discuss the specifics as we travel to retrieve your other guardian.”

Aegean nodded.

Maeve continued to smile. “Your journey begins now.”

The two women walked out of the temple with packs on their backs full of food and medical supplies. Maeve asked if Aegean wanted to bring any of her possessions from the girls' dormitory, but Aegean felt that the few objects she owned were not necessary on her journey. She did bring a few changes of clothes, pants and shirts that would not hinder her on the journey.

Maeve had packed plenty of heavy weapons: daggers were slipped in her boots and two swords crossed her back.

All that Aegean needed was in her mind.

As they exited the temple, Maeve and Aegean were met by the whole village as Aegean had been when she had entered it. Everyone was in the streets to send them off on their journey. With solemn looks on their faces, the villagers held their hands over their chests, where they were branded with the Triangle. This is where the Spirit resided.

Maeve looked at Aegean. She was not familiar with this type of farewell. Aegean wondered if the villagers pumped their fists in the air and kicked their legs to utilize their branded appendages, the symbols of their specialties. Aegean imagined they were a livelier bunch than those that resided in the Pneuma Village, who focused inwardly and valued their silence.

Standing at the top step of the temple, overlooking her whole Village, Aegean held her own hand to her chest, over her own brand. The Pneuma village was acknowledging her place among them; they understood she would face perils on her journey. They offered their support, and she felt it uplift her own Spirit.

The village parted in the middle to allow Maeve and Aegean to pass through. Maeve led the way, taking long confident strides that were not burdened by the many

weapons and items on her body. Aegean followed, watching the large pack on Maeve's back bounce over the hilt of her sword. Then she looked at all the faces on either side of her and the hands still resting on the villagers' chests, and Aegean felt a good feeling, a feeling that what she was doing was right.

The lines of people extended all the way down the street, along the entire village. She passed people she had seen daily, all her teachers and the girls at the dormitory. They all remained solemn, but some of them nodded their heads.

Good luck.

They finally reached the end of the village. The large wooden gates were opened by one woman and one man from the village. After their task was complete, they resumed the same position as the other villagers' — with their hands over their chests.

With her guardian leading the way, Aegean walked through the gates of the Pneuma village, the only village she had ever known, and turned back one last time to see the view of her people continue to narrow and narrow as the gates closed.

They were in the forest now. Though they were no longer in the Pneuma village, the security of the Triangle would still protect them as long as they stayed on the path between the villages. But she knew that those protections were weakening, and that was the reason for her journey. While the sun was still shining on them, the darkness in the forest was immense. The trees were quite large and lush with foliage, allowing for no sunlight to filter to the ground. She wondered what enchantments had been cast on them — and what beasts roamed underneath them, off the path.

Aegean changed her focus to one of Maeve's hilts, gleaming just above her left shoulder, and her long, black ponytail, which also shone in the sunlight.

“So this evil,” Aegean said, by way of bringing up the topic they had previously been discussing, “what exactly is it?”

Maeve did not turn around or even change her quick stride at all.

“It comes from an ancient civilization. No one truly knows when it began; it seems to have been around forever. Its root stems from the need for power and domination, the need to assert oneself. It was a civilization ruled by greedy men — men who believed they were superior to all, who fell into a trap of believing they were infallible. They sought to control everyone and everything. It corrupted them, made them view others as less than human. They even dehumanized themselves. They constructed themselves into these omniscient creatures, and ultimately set themselves on the path of destruction.”

“How was this civilization destroyed?”

“A revolt led by an all-female clan rose within the civilization. They brought about change, but they did not destroy the evil. It still pervaded the society, though it was not as apparent because people became complacent. The Three Villages formed out of this division. People’s views differed on how best to handle the evil. Someone believed that focusing on the Mind would better themselves; others believed that the Body would be the key to understanding the differences among the people. Yet, the Spirit seemed to be the essence of the people, what everyone had in common. People knew if they fully understood all of these parts, they would be able to destroy the evil.”

Aegean wondered about this all-female clan. She imagined warrior women, like Maeve, fighting against this immoral society, with metal helmets that covered their faces

and protective armor over their torsos and legs. She envisioned these women holding spears, swords, and bows and arrows.

“Why didn’t more people join them?” Aegean asked.

“Others did not want to face the retribution they would incur from revolting. They had learned from the corrupt society to be passive, complacent with oppression. They feared what would happen if they did speak up, if they did fight against this debased society. That was in the beginning. After many gains were made in eliminating the more obvious oppressive actions of the society, people believed it had been destroyed because the evidence of its existence was no longer so clear-cut. Even today, people reject its existence because they do not want to face the truth. It is easier to live a life in which you are free of such sinister ideas. Yet, that only pushes reality down. It will eventually emerge, with greater force than before.”

“And now is that eventual later,” Aegean said.

Maeve looked back at Aegean and gave her a meaningful look.

“Yes,” Maeve said. She turned back around.

“It is worse than it has ever been?”

Aegean saw Maeve’s head bob forward and back.

“Why?”

“That is the mystery we have to uncover on your quest. As I said, the evil has always radiated from the Center. We formed the Triangle to keep the evil from spreading further. Each village works to keep it contained as best we can. But now it seems like our efforts are not as potent as they used to be. We can feel the evil intensifying.”

“Doesn’t our control over the evil always ebb and flow? Isn’t that the reason behind sending a hero on a journey every decade or so?”

“Yes, but there is something different this time —” Maeve stopped and turned to her right, toward the forest.

A tall — taller than Maeve — human-shaped creature emerged from their right.

“It’s a troll,” Maeve said, and drew both of her swords.

The creature stood in front of them, facing the opposite direction. Its skin was green, the color of scummy water; Aegean was reminded of the color mucus turns when one is ill. There were scabs lining the creature’s arms and legs, which were about as long as Maeve’s entire body. Aegean felt dwarfed in comparison, but she did not feel panic. The creature still had not fully noticed them, and it seemed to sway back and forth, from its left foot to its right foot.

Then it turned around to look at them.

With her swords held at the ready, feet firmly planted to the ground, Maeve examined the creature standing before her. She was ready to fight it if it made any advances toward her.

Yet, the creature only cocked its head to the side with a bemused expression on its face. It was bald and only wearing scraps of clothing around its torso. Aegean felt confident that it was a rather daft and oafish thing, but that did not mean it was harmless.

“What do you want?” Maeve inquired. She did not yell, but was commanding in her query. She was tense, ready to act, to react at any sudden movement toward them.

Aegean wished she had learned how to use a sword in the Pneuma Village; she had only spent time on building the strength of her human spirit. She had focused on the

inner power of herself; that force did not necessarily manifest itself in a manner that could be used for self-defense. The Oracle had summoned her guardians to protect her in the ways that she could not defend herself. Yet, she did not enjoy this feeling of dependence, this waiting to see if someone else could ensure her safety. She trusted Maeve's abilities as a warrior, but she still itched to participate, to demonstrate her capabilities.

Aegean heard Maeve's voice saying "Here!" and a *thud* at her feet. She looked down and saw one of Maeve's swords lying in a cloud of dust. Aegean quickly glanced at Maeve, who was no longer looking at her, but back at the creature. Aegean picked up the sword and held it in her right hand.

The troll regarded this exchange with some curiosity, and its eyes moved back and forth between Maeve and Aegean. Its gaze finally settled on Maeve, and its scabbed hand extended toward her.

Slicing her sword through the air, Maeve cut off four of its five sausage-sized fingers, which fell to the ground in a pool of blood. The troll roared, stupidly holding its damaged hand in the other. It began to lunge toward Maeve, and she responded by puncturing its calf below the kneecap with her sword. It fell to its knee, howling in pain, eyes shut with tears, before standing and lumbering away into the forest, back where it came from.

"Trolls are dim-witted," Maeve said, "but they are not our real threat. We cannot allow them to delay our quest."

With that, Maeve withdrew a square of fabric, which she used to wipe her blade clean, and sheathed her sword in one fluid motion. She looked back at Aegean.

“You should probably keep that sword,” Maeve said. “And I will have to give you a few lessons in sword-fighting before nightfall.”

Maeve faced the path once again and continued walking. Aegean followed.

They walked for a while in silence after the encounter with the troll.

Maeve walked with confident strides in front of Aegean, seemingly unfazed by the episode that had occurred. Aegean knew Maeve had faced many beasts before, and another troll did not affect Maeve’s life as it affected Aegean. Aegean had never seen such gore before; her village did not study violence. Though she was not undeterred due to Maeve’s violent actions, Aegean still had to consider them. Could she do the same? Could she consciously inflict harm, even if it were a beast? Would she falter?

“You are fairly silent,” Maeve commented after still more time had passed. “I know this might be unsettling for you. I understand you have never left your village before. I won’t act like we will not face even greater challenges ahead than the one we just left behind. But you must learn to adjust.”

She looked back at Aegean and stared at her for a moment. Aegean nodded and Maeve gave her a nod before turning around once again.

“I will tell you a story,” Maeve said. “I grew up in the Colainn Village, surrounded by men and women who mastered the art of battle. I will not claim that I am any different from the others in my village; we all learn the same skills and train just as much. Women and men fight against each other daily; the winner is never assumed. With the coming evil, we have been training even more fiercely than before. Beasts have been infiltrating the paths between the villages, causing difficulty in communication. We send

out guards daily, patrolling these paths, and these men and women were the first to discover the encroaching evil, to feel its pulsating power.”

Aegean continued to listen to Maeve’s story, intrigued and yet aware of a cold pool of dread settling in her stomach.

“I was on guard with two of my comrades, Cathal and Gael. Cathal, he was considered one of the highest ranked warriors in the village; he had taught me and pushed my abilities more than anyone. Gael had been beside me since childhood; she had listened to my insecurities in the beginning of my training and supported me through the years. While we were patrolling, just shy of three months ago, we were attacked by a clawed, faceless beast, one that we were not familiar with. It was three times the size of us, and our swords seemed to slice through it without any effect, as if it were a phantom. Yet, it could harm us, with its claws the length of a human’s ribs. It slashed through our armor, killing Gael and badly injuring Cathal. Then the beast managed to tear the flesh on my face, right below my eye, as you have probably seen. I was blinded by the blood; I felt panicked, waving my sword around even though it had no effect. The beast growled, and then it was silent, and after some time more guards came looking for us after our prolonged absence. They found me cradling my face, and Cathal and Gael dead.”

Aegean did not know what to say, so she remained silent.

“This evil needs to be vanquished,” Maeve said. Her back was still to Aegean, but Aegean could hear the emotion in her voice. “It has taken too much. I will not let it think it can control me, or any one of us from the Three Villages. We control this world; it does not.”

Maeve then looked back at Aegean, at the sword still in Aegean’s hand.

“You probably should learn how to use that sword,” Maeve said. “It won’t do much good idle in your hand.”

“First, you need to be able to draw your sword,” Maeve said. “You need to be quick. You can’t let the enemy strike before you.”

Maeve drew her sword quickly. She stood in front of Aegean slightly.

Aegean tried to imitate her agile movement.

“No,” Maeve said. “Keep your shoulders down, loosen up. Keep your elbows bent and close to your body. The sword is an extension of your arm. You need to be able to move your muscles in a fluid motion.” She demonstrated once again, stabbing her sword through the air. “You must be quick,” Maeve reiterated.

She kicked Aegean’s foot lightly. “Keep your feet planted a shoulder-width apart. If your feet are too close, you will trip yourself; if they are too far apart, you will fall over. You must have control of your body and the ways in which it moves.”

Maeve looked straight ahead of her, holding her sword in her right hand.

“Now,” she said. “Breathe. Aim. And strike.”

Maeve slashed her sword through the air and kept it there for a moment before returning to a relaxed position. She looked at Aegean.

Aegean looked at her arm holding her own sword. She cut her sword through the air, trying to keep a fluid, controlled motion.

“Good,” Maeve said. “Now, your opponent will more than likely move in to attack once again. You will need to parry. Keep your blade close to you; you want to be able to protect your body. See how you can easily move your blade up and down. Remain

balanced, keep your feet directed toward your opponent. Dig your foot into the dirt, move it around, keep your connection to the soil.” Maeve ground her feet in the dirt, back and forth. “See. You control it. You control the situation. Feel your strength emanate from the earth.”

Aegean planted herself in the ground, moving her feet. A cloud of dust bloomed, rising around her torso. She raised her foot.

Maeve immediately kicked her shin.

“Do not step with your foot,” Maeve said. “You could lose your balance. Remain connected to the earth, slide your feet along.” She demonstrated once again.

Aegean repeated Maeve’s movements, and Maeve nodded approvingly.

“Stand upright and face your opponent head-on. That way you can twist to avoid impending blows from either direction. That way you are open to defending from many angles.”

Maeve straightened her back and took a breath before twisting her torso in response to an invisible sword. Then she looked at Aegean with a hard gaze.

“You must always be aware of your opponent: their movements, their weaknesses. Listen to the earth, be well-acquainted with your surroundings. The beasts we will be facing will most likely be much bigger than you. You must often aim for their legs, which are left exposed and within your reach. Hopefully that fells them, and you can aim for a more vital area, such as the sides or chest.” She reached out and touched Aegean’s blade to each corresponding part of her body. “Keep your objective in sight, but do not be overzealous. Remain in control of not only your body, but your mind as well. Focus.”

Maeve held on to the top of Aegean's blade, where it rested on her chest plate. They stared at each other, and Aegean felt that she was gaining indispensable knowledge.

"Emanate confidence," Maeve said, continuing to stare and hold Aegean's blade near her heart. "Beasts can taste your fright. They feed off it. Let them starve."

Maeve led them down the pathway to the village.

The dirt path turned into large wooden planks, old, worn. Great trees had been felled in order to create the path. Each plank was separated by a section of earth. Little white flowers bloomed in these patches of earth, and some grew out of the wooden planks themselves.

Aegean stared at the path and then gazed at Maeve's sandaled feet, crushing the white flowers as she walked.

As they continued, the planks grew closer and closer together until they were touching, providing a boardwalk. This wood was newer, fresher, and it was a deep red. Aegean wondered if an enchantment had been put on the planks to retain their durability and vibrancy.

They approached a door that was made of the same red wood as the pathway. It was round, gilded with gold. At first, Aegean thought the gold that adorned the door was decorated with random markings, but as she got closer she realized dragons, entwined and breathing fire, encircled the door.

Maeve walked up to the door. She looked back at Aegean.

Aegean nodded.

Maeve turned around and knocked three times quickly, then twice, then once.

They waited a moment, and the majestic dragons seemed to be graciously allowing them entrance as the door slowly opened inward.

Maeve and Aegean stood outside of the village and progressively gained a better view of its interior as the door swung open.

Aegean had expected to be greeted by a sea of people, the same way that she had been sent off from her own village. Instead, as the door finally opened completely, only one man stood in front them.

He was dressed in a simple black robe and wore sandals on his feet. His black beard and moustache were peppered with gray, but the hair on his head remained raven black. His hands were loosely clasped before him, and he emitted an aura of serenity.

He touched the triangle on his forehead, the Mark of the Seishin village, and bowed to Maeve and Aegean. Without a word, he turned around and began to walk away from them.

Maeve hesitated for a second before stepping through the red door and following the serene man deeper into the village.

Aegean was right behind her, gazing at her surroundings. The trees bloomed with whitish pink blossoms, and their petals decorated the ground that they stepped on. The door closed on its own accord after Aegean had stepped through it. Aegean wondered if another enchantment controlled it, allowing entrance to only those who wished the Seishin village no harm. What else could explain the lack of guards?

In fact, few people could be seen in the village. Maeve and Aegean followed the man past wooden houses that lined the red wood pathway. These huts were made of older wood, like the planks that Maeve and Aegean had initially walked on. A couple of people

were seen reading books in front of their huts, and they merely glanced up at Maeve and Aegean's passing.

Aegean noticed that wooden poles lined the red wood pathway. At the top, red flags displaying a golden dragon blew in the wind. The sound of the flags billowing in the wind and their footsteps on the red wood path were the only substantial noises in the otherwise quiet village.

The red wood pathway did not seem to curve, but rather aimed straight for a large building, a temple like the one in the Pneuma village. It was made of the same red wood material as the door and the pathway. As they got closer, Aegean could see two roaring golden dragons, clawing at the air, supported the building and guarded its main entrance.

The man must be a high priest of the temple. Aegean wondered how the temple functioned in the Seishin village. The Oracle resided in Aegean's village. This temple of the Seishin Village was devoted to the mind. What did their temple hold that could bring them such fulfillment?

They walked up the pristine red wood stairs, between the golden guardians, to four doors. The doors were large; nature scenes, consisting of twisting trees and flowers, were carved into the wood.

The left door slid open first of its own accord, then the right door, and the man stepped over the threshold into the dark chamber within.

Once again, Maeve and Aegean followed him inside, and the doors closed behind them.

Old wooden beams, not the rich, deep red of the exterior, vaulted the ceiling. The same wooden pillars supported the beams from the wooden floor. Aegean felt at ease in

this place, comforted by its antiquity. The wood's sharp edges had been worn down through years' of use, and the softness of this space made Aegean smile.

Without speaking a word of instruction, the man continued walking forward down the aisle of wooden pillars. Maeve looked back at Aegean for a second before they both followed. The sound of Maeve's sword clanking seemed odd in a place so gentle and soothing.

They passed other doors that stemmed off the main chamber until they reached the end of the hall. These were the Oracle's chambers in Aegean's temple. If this was where the most important person lived in the Pneuma village, who must live here? Her guardian?

The doors were once again carved with scenery. Yet, here they not only displayed scenes from nature, but of humanity. People, men and women, dressed in robes, were holding scrolls, looking down at them thoughtfully. Some held their chins contemplatively.

This time, the man turned around, touched the Mark of the Seishin Village on his forehead, bowed, and stepped to the left, holding his hands in front of him.

Maeve stepped forward and the doors slid open, the left and then the right.

She stepped through the doors and Aegean followed.

When Aegean walked into the library, she did not see a man.

There were rows and rows of books. The room was dusty and everything was a different shade of brown: the bookshelves were dark and the book bindings were light, giving the room an earthy feel, as if they were in a burrow, somehow more comfortable

than they were in the hallway. A horizontal slice of sunlight came in through the windows because so many books were piled on top of the bookshelves that sunlight could not fully filter through them. That organic smell of leather-bound books and dust made Aegean feel sleepy and relaxed, and the books functioned as an insulator to warm the room.

Loose papers were crammed between books and scattered on the floor. Ink spills had stained the maroon carpet below her feet. There was a large globe and an atlas spread across one end of a long, thick table with knotted legs and clawed feet. The other end of the table was covered with glass vials and bowls that held bubbling liquids and banded herbs.

But there was no man.

“Fumito?” Maeve called. Her sword clinked on her back as she walked.

Maeve did not seem to fit in this world of books. She looked at the little sunlight coming in through the window as her salvation, her only escape. She seemed uneasy in such a cramped place. Perhaps her training required her to always know a means of escape, but Aegean could sense her restlessness.

While they stared around the room at the many stacks of books in front of the bulging bookcases, a bespectacled head appeared.

Aegean was startled at first, but Maeve remained calm.

“Are you Fumito?” Maeve asked.

The spectacles blinked and nodded imperceptibly.

“You have been summoned by the Oracle to accompany us on our journey. You have been informed of this, have you not?”

There was another slight nod.

Aegean remembered that the Colainn villagers were trained to be patient with others. Though they believed in the importance of showing one's emotions, they also valued controlling them. Aegean imagined that Maeve was exercising that lesson in control as she spoke to the reluctant Fumito.

“Our journey cannot be delayed any longer,” Maeve said calmly. “You have been ordered to be our guide and scholar. Do you refuse this position?”

There was a pause. Then the spectacles moved from behind the stack of old books and papers to reveal a hunched-over body in a maroon cloak.

He paused again when his whole body was visible. Aegean saw that the spectacles and robe belonged to an old man. He was bent over, as if his back had curled in on itself, which accentuated his already short stature, and he had his arm wrapped around a leather-bound book that looked just as well-used as all the others.

He hesitated again before he walked closer to them. Aegean heard his sandals shuffling across the tiled floor.

Aegean stood a bit behind Maeve when Fumito finally reached them, but she could still examine him easily. His eyes were magnified by the spectacles that were almost as big as his face. Aegean could tell that he was older by the gray hair that flowed down his shoulders, but his face did not show such signs of age. Aegean imagined that his skin was so pale and smooth from all the time he spent indoors, in this very room. The only marking she could see on his skin was a number of dots that seemed to have been poked into his forehead, scarring, into the shape of a triangle, the Mark of the Seishin village.

Aegean watched Fumito examine Maeve's leather armor and self-confident stance. She had her legs a shoulder-width apart and her posture was straight. Her hand rested lightly on the dagger on her leg, a seemingly reflexive action. But Fumito seemed like he would fall over if Maeve so much as breathed on him. His eyes were level with her navel. He stuffed his book into his cloak.

Aegean took a step closer so that she was beside Maeve.

Fumito's bulging eyes moved to Aegean. Like he had with Maeve, Fumito examined Aegean with a curious eye. She wondered if just by looking at her he could learn anything about her at all.

He finally looked Aegean in the eyes. She stared back. She wanted him to know the importance of this journey for her. If the Oracle chose him, Aegean trusted that he was vital to their troupe.

"Allow me to collect my supplies" were his first and only words, whispered before he turned his back to them and walked toward a doorway in the back of the library. Aegean and Maeve remained silent as they watched Fumito disappear into the darkness of the alcove.

"I do not question his loyalty to our cause," Maeve said. She continued looking at the dark opening Fumito had entered. Aegean agreed, but she did not speak.

"I trust the Oracle's judgment." Maeve seemed to be trying to reassure not only Aegean, but herself as well. She looked around at all the books without understanding. She had learned through physical training and did not fully understand the power of knowledge and magic. But she respected it.

Aegean knew Fumito would be useful on their journey. If he maintained the library, and had spread the atlas on the table, he knew about the world. He had much knowledge about what they would be facing and how to handle those problems in a logical manner. Aegean was aware of the potent herbs used by the Seishin village; they were used as medicine and weapons in battle.

When he came out of his dark room, he did not carry any bags. In one hand, he carried what appeared to be a glowing green lantern dangling from a thick golden chain. Every time he took a step closer to them, the lantern clanked against the golden chain, a noise that broke the silence in the room. In the other hand, he still clutched the worn book to his chest.

He stood in front of them, looked first Maeve, then Aegean in the eye, and stated, “I am ready.”

Maeve led the way out of the library, and Aegean followed with Fumito right beside her. Eyes straight ahead of her, Maeve took long strides, eager to get out of the dusty, cramped space filled with thousands of volumes of knowledge.

But when Aegean glanced back at Fumito, he could not stop looking around the room, at shelf after shelf of books, at the alchemist’s set of herbs and glasses on the table. Every clank of the lantern against the golden chain announced another step away from his sanctuary, his home. The stoicism he had shown was crumbling, and Fumito was not afraid to show his emotions. He knew Aegean was watching him, but he allowed his loss to weigh his pale face down into a frown.

As the three of them walked through the large wooden doors that led to the library, Aegean saw a few tears slide down Fumito's cheek and heard him say, "Goodbye."

They walked in the forest. Maeve took the lead; Fumito took the rear. Aegean felt protected between them. The clanking of Fumito's lantern coincided with the clanking of Maeve's sword on her back, and this steady rhythm created a kind of soothing environment for their quest. Aegean knew they were going to face a great evil, and yet she did not feel as much dread as she had expected. She still felt fear, yes, but she did not feel overwhelmed, consumed by it. She could still carry on with the knowledge that she could die at this journey's conclusion.

They had been walking for some time in silence before Maeve spoke.

"Fumito," she said, and she did not look back, "how exactly do you use your glowing green orb?"

Aegean had also been wondering about Fumito's lantern. She looked behind her, at the orb gilded with images of dragons, fire curling out of their mouths. Fumito was gazing down at the orb, a pendulum that knocked back and forth, back and forth. He seemed to be deep inside himself, transfixed by the glowing lantern. Aegean imagined he was using it as an object to center himself, remind himself of his life in the library. She did not think he would respond and was surprised when she heard his thin voice, crackly like parchment paper.

"It contains the power from the herbs," he said. "The power of the spirits is contained within this orb. You can find spirits everywhere — within the trees, stones, fields, streams, roads. The history of the Three Villages is embedded with stories of the

spirits and their connection with the earth. They feel the pain of the great evil from the Center, even more so than us. They are connected to the evil in a way that most people are not. Those from the Seishin village feel the effects of the ancient civilization more potently than others through the spirits; the spirits tell the true history of our people and the world.”

Maeve was silent as they walked. Aegean could almost hear her mind digesting this information.

“You can hear the thoughts of the earth?” she asked.

“They are spirits, entities that are not contained in a human body,” Fumito said.

“They are not only in the earth, but in the sky, in the air. They usually whisper their stories, but when they are agitated or frightened, they scream.”

“What do they say?” Aegean asked.

“They want it to end,” he said. “The evil has thrived for too long. They call for the desolation of the ancient civilization and the dawn of a new civilization, one that does not draw the energy, the life from the people of the Three Villages. A civilization should sustain its people, invigorate them with vitality; this evil does the opposite. The spirits can feel this draining of vigor, of being, and they fear for the future if it continues in this way.”

Aegean knew about the spirits from her studies in the Pneuma Village. Yet, she only really focused on the spirit of the person, of a human being. She had not studied the history of the spirits of the earth that existed all around her. She knew of the sages from the Seishin Village who had attained such mastery of the mind that they could communicate with the spirits.

“Can you see them?” Maeve asked. Aegean could tell Maeve was intrigued by this metaphysical talk; Maeve’s life was full of existential realities, of bodily concerns. Though the mind and body were connected, she had to focus on her physical strength in battle more than her ability to connect to the otherworldly.

“The earthly spirits are only a shimmer, a wisp,” Fumito said. “The spirits of our ancestors can be seen in human form, if they so desire us to see them. They exist in harmony with us always, but they often choose to remain hidden away from the visible world. Showing themselves to us can be vexing and tiring; therefore, they have shown themselves most in times of great need.”

“Have you seen the spirits of our ancestors recently?” Maeve asked. Though she was engrossed in Fumito’s answers, Maeve’s interest did not deter her from being hyper-vigilant in scanning the surrounding forest.

“No,” he said. “They would appear when their physical forms are needed, particularly during battle. But the spirits of past sages have spoken to me in my library, voicing their opinions, their concerns, and guiding me toward knowledge that would be helpful on this journey.” He unconsciously clutched his worn book to his chest.

“How long had you been in the library?” Aegean asked. She could not help but wonder how he was adjusting to being outside after being indoors, surrounded by books for so long.

“Seventy-two years,” Fumito said, and a certain sadness seemed to seep from those two words in a sigh. “I committed myself to studying the written word on the celebration of my eighteenth year, and I had not left since that day.”

Fumito finally looked up from his lantern and surveyed the forest. Aegean watched as his lips moved silently, and she wondered if he was speaking to the spirits that he heard and she did not.

They traveled throughout the day and into the night. They set up camp beside the path and at the edge of the forest, under the shadows of the trees. They did not want to wander far from the path. Maeve concluded that sleeping between the two areas would be most beneficial.

Maeve gathered sticks and brush from the forest and lit a small fire to keep them warm. Fumito had offered to make the fire using his magical powers, but Maeve rejected the idea. They all understood that this fire could attract attention, and beasts could swarm upon them, but they needed the warmth during the night. Fumito quietly mentioned that he could use his magic to put a barrier around the fire so that no one could see its light or its smoke but them. In fact, not only could he prevent others from seeing the fire, but he could also create a barrier that made the three of them invisible to others as well. Maeve agreed.

After they laid out the blankets upon which they were going to sleep, Aegean sat at the fire. She looked to her right, where Maeve sat sharpening her blade with a stone. Shadows from the fire danced over Maeve's face and accentuated the sinewy muscles on her arms and shoulders. Maeve was deep in concentration; the close relationship between her and her blade was quite obvious.

Aegean's attention moved to the left side of the fire, toward Fumito. His small, crippled body was bent over, and the long sleeves of his maroon cloak touched the

ground. Aegean heard him whispering. He was touching a flower, and she could see it glow, a greenish glow outlining it. The flower was white, with long petals. She saw it growing, blooming; Fumito's hands danced around the flower, twisting and performing a kind of ritual. The flower seemed to be stretching, extending itself toward the almost full moon in the sky.

And then his hands dropped, and the flower gave a shudder before falling to the ground.

The green glow had left the flower, and it lay, flat, limp, in front of Fumito's feet.

Aegean watched the event with awe, mesmerized by the magic.

"What else can you do with those magical powers?" Maeve asked. She still looked down at her blade, examining its sharpness, but she must have observed Fumito's demonstration.

In answer, Fumito bent over the flower, so close that his mouth almost touched its wilted petals. He whispered to it as if he were telling a secret, and the green glow returned. It surrounded the flower and seemed to lift it up, like flames pushing hot air into the night sky. The flower slowly regained its upright position. It waved once in an invisible breeze, and then stood firmly in the ground.

Maeve nodded slowly, in an approving manner.

"Do you use those magical powers in battle?" Maeve asked.

Fumito caressed the white flower and leaned down to smell it.

"Yes," he said. "I harmonize with nature and utilize its powers for the greater good. I do not harm people for the pure joy of it."

Maeve smiled, shaking her head. Aegean did the same.

Maeve said she would take the first watch.

Aegean and Fumito curled up in their blankets and attempted to sleep. Only when Aegean felt her limbs becoming weightless and her mind turning hazy did she hear the removal of Maeve's sword from its sheath.

Aegean's eyes opened immediately, and she saw a large dark shape as tall as the ancient trees standing above their camp. Its indefinite shape confused Aegean; it seemed to be undulating, a dark mass blocking the moonlight.

As soon as the beast roared and its claws came toward her, Aegean realized that this must be the beast Maeve fought with her two companions, Gael and Cathal. Aegean jumped to the side, and the beast slashed through her blankets instead of her flesh.

The beast roared again, especially now that it had missed its target. It began slashing its claws through the air, nearly knocking down Maeve. Aegean could see the determination on Maeve's face. Maeve was not only fighting to defend herself, but also Aegean and Fumito; she was fighting for her people, for her loved ones. Maeve did not want to give up; she wanted to avenge Gael and Cathal. She needed to show them that she could do it, that she could protect them, all of them. With her sword, she could save the Three Villages. She was channeling all the warriors from the past as she drove her sword into the beast's side.

Fumito waved his arms in the air, summoning the nature around him; his green orb swung madly around him, clanking as the orb hit the gold chain. He was not whispering, but yelling incantations at the beast roaring in front of them. Waves of green

light were crashing against the beast's side. It roared in fury and pain, as if its body could feel like a human's.

Fumito's voice rose and fell like the waves that he cast upon the creature. He summoned the earth, ripping away part of the ground to his right, and a chunk of earth rose to crash against the creature's skull. From the left Fumito summoned a tree, and the green light grabbed it like a hand, gripping it and throwing it across the creature's back.

Maeve managed to ambush the creature, digging her sword deep into the beast's side, but it reared backwards, throwing the tree and Maeve to the side. It seemed to be oozing something dark and black from a gash on its back. Like mist, the substance was pooling around its feet, curling around on the ground. The beast stumbled slightly, and it focused on Fumito.

Fumito brought both of his hands into the air. His maroon robe's sleeves fell down to the creases in his elbows with the motion. His green lantern clanked wildly against the gold chain it was attached to, and the green light pulsed from it.

Aegean watched as the earth underneath the beast's feet again to crumble. The black ooze was disappearing into a chasm that was slowly opening in the earth, bits of dirt and rocks sliding away into darkness below.

The creature did not notice; it only concentrated on Fumito. It rushed toward him, stumbling, one foot nearly caught in the growing hole in the earth. But it reached out its saber-like claws, stretching toward Fumito's old, hunched form, and penetrated the green light that protected Fumito like a womb. The green light dissipated, but the ground kept crumbling. Fumito fell, and so did the creature. Aegean saw it wrap its claws around Fumito's body, and she rushed forward, screaming.

“NO!” Aegean cried.

But the ground underneath both Fumito and the beast disappeared, and they both fell toward the center of the earth.

Maeve and Aegean did not sleep that night. They kept walking on their path. They were haggard, weary from their battle with the beast. Though she limped on her right leg, Maeve seemed more purposeful with her steps as they walked. They both were silent, lips set in a tight line. They stared straight ahead, almost in a sort of stupor.

The sequence of events that had just happened came in flashes in Aegean’s mind.

Fumito’s shield of defense, made from the surrounding forest.

A blade of green light, slashing against the beast’s sides like a katana.

The crumbling of the earth, and the black ooze that seeped from the beast.

The beast’s saber-like claws wrapping around Fumito’s body, pulling him down into the earth with him.

The earth had healed over, like a scab, after they had fallen. Aegean realized Fumito must have meant for that to happen; he had used his magic to seal off the chasm. He wanted to lock the evil into the depths of the earth — and himself with it.

They finally decided to set up camp again and rest their bodies. They sat around the campfire. They were both still silent. Yet, the crackling of the fire and the sound of Maeve sharpening her blade seemed to be enough conversation for each of them. Aegean wondered if she just imagined the extra force that Maeve applied to her sword with her rock.

Aegean stared at the burning orange sticks in the fire, slowly crumbling into a grayish black heap. She felt the heat rising to her face, and her eyes burned from the smoke. But she did not want to move from her position. Yet, some movement across the fire caused her eyes to flick away from the fire and up — at a hunched figure holding an object that resembled an orb.

Aegean was incredulous at first, and she stood up to better see the apparition.

Maeve noticed Aegean's sudden movement with alarm, looking first at Aegean and then following Aegean's gaze to the man standing across the fire.

"Fumito?" Maeve asked, and she stood as well, holding her sword in one hand and her stone in the other.

The figure walked around the fire, and it was then that Aegean and Maeve realized that they could see the expanse of forest through his translucent body.

He stood before them, between them and the fire, and it was as if he blazed with the orange flames of the fire itself.

He smiled at them both.

Fumito's apparition followed them on the rest of their journey, and they knew he had come back to defeat the evil with them. He had banished the beast and sacrificed himself for them, but now he had to see the journey to its conclusion. He had to see Maeve and Aegean safely reach the Center and fulfill his duty as guardian. His presence was comforting.

They no longer followed the path, but walked through the forest, toward the Center that had no constructed pathway. The Triangle only connected the Three Villages

and provided a path between them; the Center was at the heart of the untamed, dense forest.

No one spoke as they walked. They had no words to say; they only had actions to execute. They stomped on leaves and walked through decaying trees that had fallen long ago. They swatted away branches that got in their way and barely felt the scratches that formed on their forearms as they did so. They could only concentrate on the final destination of their journey and the evil that awaited them.

The Oracle had told Aegean she was to go on a journey. A hero's journey, she said. Aegean had been appointed two guardians, and now they were both guiding her to defeat the evil at the Center, in the ancient civilization. A civilization that believed they were superior to all.

Warriors, Maeve's ancestors, had fought in the battle to bring down the civilization. They had worn helmets and metal armor. They had carried axes, swords, hammers, and bows and arrows. Aegean considered their circumstances now. They did not have nearly as many warriors as they had in the past.

And one warrior after another had fallen.

As they walked, the forest blurred past them. Maeve still led Aegean and Fumito toward the Center. The forest remained the same; they did not encounter anything significant until finally a stone wall and gate began to grow larger and larger before them. They did not stop until they were standing before the entrance to the ancient civilization, the Center that housed the evil.

Aegean ground her foot into the underbrush and tightened her grip on the sword at her hip.

Maeve, Fumito, and Aegean walked up to the large stone wall. The stones were falling apart; the mortar had dried and cracked, loosening the hold between the stones. Vines twined up the wall and around the stones. Though the wall should have been crumbling, it was still intact and serving its purpose as a barrier, warding off anyone who decided to come near.

There was a gate.

Two bearded men carved out of stone guarded the gate, one on each side. They were as giant as the wall, molded into it, connected. These stern gatekeepers gazed past Maeve, Fumito, and Aegean with one palm extended, as if these men could push away anyone who wanted to enter. As if to warn intruders. *Stop*, they seemed to say, *you do not belong here*.

As if to challenge these stone men, a woman appeared before Aegean like a mist. Though she was translucent at first, she shimmered into tangibility. She stood as tall as Maeve and wore similar armor. Yet, she wore an M-shaped helmet that obscured the sides of her face and her nose. She was close enough that Aegean could see intricate patterns chiseled into the helmet's metal. The patterns turned into shapes, and Aegean realized they were meant to be snakes. She was like a gorgon; she seemed to turn men into stone.

“We have been waiting for you,” she said to Maeve.

Maeve, Fumito, and Aegean nodded.

“Follow me,” the woman said.

The woman made of mist turned toward the impossibly great wall and then rushed toward it as if she were going to run into it headfirst, protected as she was by the decorated helmet. But at the last instant she let out a battle cry and extended her arms as if to stop herself from hitting the wall. Instead, she flowed through the wall like water through a sieve.

A powerful wind pushed upon Aegean's back, whipping Aegean's hair into her face and obscuring her view of the wall. Maeve's hair remained contained in its ponytail that fell down her back, but it too whipped her in the face. Fumito did not seem affected by the wind.

Maeve, Fumito, and Aegean stood side-by-side, between the two men of stone, as the wind pushed in the two stone slabs that made up the entrance to the ancient civilization. They looked at each other. Aegean first looked to her right at Maeve, who nodded at Aegean, letting her know that they were together. Aegean then looked to her left at Fumito, who smiled. They were not on this journey alone. Aegean felt privileged to be standing beside them.

Aegean faced forward and nodded. Maeve withdrew her sword as the three of them walked through the stone wall.

The ground was paved with more stones as they entered the civilization. As far as they could see, the stone pathway extended ever onward. A mist hovered over the stones and over the mossy grass that grew on the ground elsewhere.

No one was in sight.

Aegean had not known what to expect when they finally entered the ancient civilization, but she had planned for a fight. She had anticipated a loud clamor at their

arrival, being unwelcome as they were in a place such as this. She had not planned on being nice and passive in return.

But it was so quiet.

“Come,” said a voice, and the helmeted warrior woman appeared in front of them once again. She beckoned to them to follow her down the stone pathway. Aegean, Maeve, and Fumito obeyed, feeling slightly more at ease now that they had a guide. The warrior woman made Aegean feel more secure in their actions. Aegean wondered who she was, but her curiosity did not last long.

“You are Althea,” Maeve said, “the leader of the all-female clan who led the rebellion so long ago.”

The warrior woman did not turn around. Though Aegean had recognized that she was holding an object in her hand, Aegean did not realize it was an axe until she lifted it onto her shoulder with ease.

“I am,” she said, with her back still toward them.

Aegean glanced at Maeve to see her reaction. Althea was one of her oldest ancestors, the one who had formed the resistance against the power-obsessed male society. She was known for her bravery and her loyalty to the other female members of her clan. As their leader, she had been the first to rush into battle with her axe held high above her head. She was a warrior, and she had fought for what she believed in: justice. Yet, she had watched as one after another of her female comrades fell in battle. She was the last to survive, and the male society made a display of her insolence. They made a mockery of her and her honor by brutally torturing her before she bled to death. Aegean imagined the mental anguish that Althea must have experienced, watching her closest

friends fall all around her at the hands of disturbed men. And then to face their wrath afterward....

But Althea did not bear the markings of a wounded woman. She took long, confident strides before them, and Aegean could not help but see Maeve's strength reflected in her.

Althea led them down the stone path for quite a while. Aegean had trouble seeing due to the mist that pervaded the area; sometimes Aegean lost sight of her own feet. But Althea emitted a certain glow that pulsed through the haze, and Aegean knew that she was leading them in the right direction.

When the stone path finally ended, all around them were stone buildings that must have served as houses long ago. Green vines grew up their sides, just as they did on the great surrounding stone wall. A stone well sat in the courtyard in front of the largest stone building, one that had more intricate detailing than the rest. Mist floated over the stones, over the steps that led up to the large entrance of the building. Large, warped doors made of dark wood and black metal supports and hinges occupied most of the building's front view. Overall, the place seemed infertile, lifeless; the only green foliage visible was the vines.

Althea led Aegean, Maeve, and Fumito to the bottom of the tall building's stone steps and finally turned around to face them. Various other faces materialized on the steps behind her. Warrior women from the past, some helmeted like Althea and some not, gazed at Aegean, Maeve, and Fumito. Many wore wearied, but resolute expressions on their faces. Many of the woman warriors held their weapons either in front of their bodies or rested them on their armored shoulders.

“We will fight with you,” Althea said. “We have waited for you to come and join us. We needed great warriors like you to enliven us. We failed once; we do not plan on succumbing to their evil again.”

Many of the warrior women nodded in agreement. They had fought and lost their lives attempting to win freedom for themselves. They had banded together behind a cause that they all believed in despite its dangers. They believed in each other and knew that they were united.

Aegean gazed at all the warrior women’s faces. She looked into their eyes and saw their fierce determination set in their jawlines. Each one of them had a story and each one of them had a reason for standing on those steps. Though they were all individuals, the warrior women stood together as one joined by their desire to eradicate the world of evil. Now, Aegean, Maeve, and Fumito banded with them — the past and the present as one.

Mist rolled over Aegean’s feet as she moved forward, stepping onto the first step that led to the large building, the ancient temple, the house of evil.

“Together, we will fight,” Aegean said.

Althea stood before the large wooden doors and extended her palms. The doors blew open with a gust of wind — just as they had previously released the stone gate to enter the civilization. Maeve and Aegean entered the temple at the same time; Fumito and the ghosts of women past followed behind them.

They walked through the main hall. The pillars had cracks running jaggedly throughout the stone. Other parts of the building were in more ruin than others; holes

exposed the gray sky overhead. Wooden beams were splintered; some seemed near splitting in two. The windows were open holes; shards of red, yellow, and blue stained glass still remained around the frame and were scattered below them. The paved stones were cracked as well. As Aegean walked over them, the stones shifted and slightly crumbled underneath her feet.

Yet, the foundation still supported the building.

The warrior women walked noiselessly behind Aegean and Maeve. Aegean looked behind her, at the determination on the women's faces. This was not a world that they lived in anymore. They could have passed on to another world, another existence. But they stayed here to fulfill their duty — to accomplish now what they could not back then.

Fumito walked among the warrior women; he only came up to their knees. Yet, despite his small size and great age, he easily kept up with them and looked just as determined to fulfill his duty as Aegean's guardian.

The time had come for them to destroy the evil.

Aegean and Maeve continued to walk side-by-side as they passed through the main hall. The air was stale as they walked; no wind came through the broken windows. Aegean and Maeve were the only two making noise in the space; if Aegean had not looked behind her, seeing the apparitions of all the women, she would not have known they were there. Yet, Aegean could hear herself breathing, and the sound of her footsteps crunching the stone pebbles. Still, the room was eerily silent.

When they entered the heart of the building, at first all Aegean could look at was the cathedral stained glass window that rose before her. It was round and completely

intact, the same colors as the broken stained glass windows in the main hall: red, yellow, and blue.

But then Aegean saw a beast rise before her, a beast bigger than any of the ones she had encountered previously. This one was a dark burgundy color, with scales; it had a tail and even wings.

It was a dragon, and Aegean wondered how long it must have been living here. The dragon whipped its tail around, and Aegean and Maeve had to duck so that they would not be struck by the dragon's blow.

Then they appeared: the ghosts of the warrior men. They wrapped around the room, dressed in armor as the warrior women were, holding swords, axes, and spears.

The women did not wait. They rushed at the ghost men, and Aegean could somehow hear the clank of metal on metal. She heard the groans of pain, exertion. She saw the bodies rushing toward each other, dueling, advancing and then retreating. She had never seen such a battle, such passion.

But another swing from the dragon's tail caused Aegean to duck down once again and focus on her destiny.

Aegean, Maeve, and Fumito separated themselves from the ghosts of past warriors. Aegean moved to stand in the middle of her two guardians; Maeve stood to her right and Fumito was on her left. She looked at each of them accordingly before digging her foot in the gritty stone floor.

As the dragon swung its tail around again, Fumito raised his green lantern, and green light collected debris from the floor to create a protective wall. The dragon's tail

dismantled Fumito's barrier, and pieces of stone scattered throughout the room. Fumito tried again; this time, the green light took pieces of the dilapidated roof and large sections of the stone walls to form a rounded shield over and around Aegean and Maeve.

Aegean looked at Maeve, and Maeve nodded.

Once the dragon destroyed Fumito's barrier, Maeve ran toward the beast with her sword held high, yelling as only a warrior woman surrounded by her ancestors who were fighting to fulfill their ultimate duty could.

As stone rained around her, but not on her due to Fumito's magical protection, Maeve swung her sword at the dragon. She dug it into its underbelly, using all her might.

Somehow, her blade was able to do damage; a single scale flew across the room.

"AEGEAN!" Maeve yelled.

Aegean's body knew what she was doing before her mind. She rushed forward, ducking while the dragon's tail tried to knock her down once again and jumping over the fallen debris.

Aegean remembered the breathing exercises she had learned in the Pneuma village. She slowed her breathing, counting (one, two, three...), and concentrated on her Spirit. She closed her eyes for a second before opening them and reaching up, digging her sword into the dragon's underbelly, in the tender exposed flesh where the scale had once offered protection.

The dragon roared in fury and pain; Aegean plunged the sword in further.

The dragon began to stumble, furious, and Aegean was forced to let go of her sword as the dragon began to fall. As it attempted to move away from Aegean and

Maeve, delirious with pain, it opened its wings to fly away. But the dragon discovered it could not escape. It rose in the air, casting a dark shadow on Aegean and Maeve.

But it roared once again, and a spasm went through its body, before it crashed through the stained glass window.

Red, yellow, and blue glass showered over Aegean and Maeve, who raised their arms to protect their faces from the shards of glass falling upon them. This action was unnecessary; Fumito's protection already kept them safe from any harm.

Aegean and Maeve stood in front of the large broken window as colored glass showered around them but not on them. Aegean had controlled her breathing, and she looked over to see that Maeve was still breathing heavily.

Aegean looked around her to see that most of the warrior men had fallen, and the ones that had not were disappearing, dissipating like the morning mist as the sun rises. The warrior women were still panting, but they came up to each other and began hugging and laughing. They, too, began to vanish.

Aegean looked at Fumito, her guardian from the Seishin Village, and she saw his apparition begin to shimmer as well.

He nodded at Aegean, smiling, and Aegean rushed over to him to hug his disappearing form before it left her completely. Aegean kept her eyes closed so that she would not have to see him become lost to her once again.

The building was crumbling around them.

Fumito's use of the stones as a tool for protection had deteriorated the landscape, and the dragon's fall had finally caused the foundation to weaken to the point of collapse.

Aegean and Maeve were the only two left in the building; their allies and their foes had all vanished.

Aegean and Maeve were left with the only option of running back the way they came. They ran as the pillars began to sway and the floor began to quake; pieces of the roof were dropping all around them. With the departure of Fumito, they were no longer protected from the falling debris.

They ran out of the dragon's lair and through the main hall with all its broken stained glass windows. The stones crunched underneath their feet, and a stone pillar fell right in their path. Aegean and Maeve hurtled the broken pillar and continued to the entrance of the building.

The warped wooden doors were still open, and Aegean and Maeve rushed through them and down the stone steps. Mist rolled over their feet so that they could barely see where they were walking, but they continued to run.

They heard thunderous crashes behind them that reverberated through their feet and their bones as they ran through the stone street. They did not dare look back, but through their peripheral vision they saw the collapsing of the stone houses on either side of them. Aegean wondered if the magic that had kept the houses standing had worn out now that the evil had been defeated.

Stones flew into the street as each house fell in on itself. Aegean and Maeve put their arms over their heads, but they did not stop running.

Once they left the village, they continued on the stone path. Mist still covered the expanse of area before them, and Aegean finally saw the large stone wall and stone gate before them. Aegean could tell Maeve was keeping her strides short to stay in time with

Aegean despite the heavy armor and weapons that clanked on her back. Aegean felt motivated to run faster.

Only when Aegean and Maeve made it through the gates did Aegean finally turn around to see the destruction that lay behind them.

The large stone building that had been the villagers' temple was a heap of rubble in the distance, and each house was another smaller pile of rubble. Even the stone pathway was cracked and worn away. The stone wall was slowly falling, disintegrating. Aegean watched as each segment of the towering stone wall collapsed, and finally the gate itself disintegrated. The two stone men who served as gatekeepers fell forward together, as if they were performing a synchronized routine. They crashed to the ground, breaking into tiny pebbles that lacked the might and magnificence of their previous forms.

Aegean faced forward and continued running through the forest.

Aegean and Maeve ran as far as their legs could take them before slowing down to a good walking pace. Adrenaline pumped through their veins and they did not — could not — sit down to rest. Instead, as they walked, Aegean realized that the sun was shining, and she could see through the trees. She saw a meadow to her right, and she decided to veer in that direction.

Maeve followed Aegean. Aegean saw her smile.

“Are you getting tired, Aegean?” she mocked. “You are looking a little sluggish.”

Aegean shook her head. “I am not the old woman here.”

Maeve raised her eyebrows and tilted her head to the side, as if to say *Oh really?*

Aegean parted the tall grass that grew around the trees in the forest; she let the blades tickle her fingertips. She languished in this sweet, simple sensation before taking off into a sprint.

Aegean knew Maeve could catch her easily. Maeve's legs were much longer than Aegean's, and she was in much better shape than Aegean was. The heavy swords and armor would not slow her down; she trained with extra weight in preparation for running in battle.

But Aegean had to taunt Maeve. Although Aegean had learned a lot from her, Aegean also liked to show Maeve that she felt close enough to joke with her. They had just defeated the evil that had plagued the Three Villages, and she felt that they had reason to celebrate life — their lives, the lives of the villagers waiting for their return, and the lives of those who had passed away while attempting to rid their world of evil.

Running through the meadow, moving her hands over the white flowers scattered throughout the green grass, Aegean heard Maeve behind her. Aegean started smiling, remembering how they had worked together, with Fumito. Though she felt a pull at her heart that he was not there to rejoice with them, Aegean knew that he had been essential to their quest.

The sea was in front of Aegean, winking as the waves moved in the sun. The hill slope was steep, and Aegean felt herself gaining speed as she ran down it. But Maeve had already caught up, and she grabbed Aegean around the waist and swung her so that the sea and the meadow swirled in Aegean's vision.

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