

## *Amara*

Amara had never seen a green tree. At least not the trees of her great-grandmother's stories; the trees that nearly everybody in her village denied ever existed. Amara ached for a world of lush trees with webs of roots that drank from flowing rivers. Her eyes skimmed over the dry skeletons of trunks – awkwardly standing, or lying, or snapped – thrown randomly over a cracked, colorless plain.

Amara foraged the land as she did every day – shadowed by the unceasing disparity of survival. Collecting what little resources the land could offer. Above her, the ancient sky, clear and silent as always, stretched herself between horizons.

Amara walked back to her village; the home of people drained and lost in the rhythm of repetition. Her village was planted at the base of a powerful mountain, ancient and unmoving. Only in her mind could she wander through what it may have looked like long ago; blanketed in moss and ferns, her walk encircled by a chorus of birds. The only person who truly understood her grief was Cato, wise and seasoned by time, his skin leathery from years beneath the sun's touch. He had been a dear friend of Amara's great-grandmother, and over the years had become like family.

Amara walked in a fog of her thoughts. She gently pushed open the door to her cottage, and was met with a familiar scene. Galena, her mother, hunched over a creaky wooden table, passionately tending to yet another sick or wounded. "Hi honey. It's been a chaotic day." Galena smiled, her face creasing with the lines of a life of passion, tendrils of black hair flecked by silver escaping her long braid.

"Where's Verus?" Amara asked– usually he was home by now.

"I'm not sure, he went on some adv-"

Before Galena could finish her sentence, Verus burst through the door, his usual bundle of energy. "Amara! Amara!" He exclaimed; "Guess what!"

He jumped into her arms, giving her a tight hug.

"What is it, Verus?" Amara questioned, as she brushed his dark hair off of his freckled skin. "I found this cave in the plains, it was all covered up with rocks and stuff, but I think something's inside, can we explore it? Please Amara, please?" He pleaded.

"Yes Verus, once it's light again tomorrow. Now go get ready for bed, we've got a big day ahead of us, little sun."

That night, as Amara lay in her bed of dried grasses, she thought about what could be in that cave. What if there was something the earth was hiding in there? Something that could bring life back to the land? *No, no.* Amara shook off that stupid idea. There was probably nothing but rocks, maybe a new herb her mother could use to heal. She could still hear Galena, working well into the hours of darkness, tending to anyone who passed through their door.

The next morning, Verus shook her out of her restless slumber; a slumber plagued by teasing images of blooming land, teased by flowing rivers and healthy animals. Her eyes fluttered open, still veiled by sleep. She stared vacantly up at the cracked ceiling of mud and grass, crossed with sunbeams, Amara's eyes still unfocused.

"Let's go Amara, suns out. Come on! Come on!" He ran around her small room, kicking up

the layers of dust on the floor. Its translucent clouds hung in the stagnant air, glowing in the morning sun's warm light.

"Just wait a minute outside, let me fix myself up." Amara dragged herself out of bed, pulled her woven linen robes over her slender frame, and tied back her long black hair. She left her room quietly, not sure why was so excited, and so nervous. *It's going to be nothing more than an empty cave*, she reminded herself. *Going with Verus will make him happy, at least.* "Verus, let's go, I'm all ready."

He scampered out the front door, his playful jog charged with purpose. Amara had to lift her robes to keep their loose weave from snagging on the jagged earth as she moved nimbly to keep pace.

In what felt like the blink of an eye, the pair arrived at the cave's entrance. Side by side, Amara and Verus worked to clear away the dusted rocks that blocked the cave's entrance. As the light touched its tan walls, etchings began to reveal themselves. Amara fought to contain her excitement, doing her best to distract herself with other thoughts as she labored.

Once the opening was large enough for the two to safely slip through, they entered the cave. Amara first, making sure all was safe, Verus following curiously behind. Amara's eyes slowly adjusted to the cave's duskiness; its stone chamber shaded, but gently bathed in the sun's speckled light. As her eyes began to absorb all that was around her, she couldn't help but gasp softly. Almost every surface was adorned in ornate etchings, faded but still there.

"V- Verus..," She breathed, brushing her fingertips across the stone walls. "This is all what grandma has told us. This proves everything."

The two sat there in awe, studying the etchings. Amara walked around, poring over the ornate illustrations of forests, flowing rivers, lakes, plants, and animals she never could have fathomed. "What's this Amara?" Verus pointed at the stone above them.

It was the sky, but it was unlike anything Amara had ever seen. It looked as if it was crying, alive, and watching over the land. Its tears dripped down the walls and the tree's arms, into the curly grass below. Amara was mystified by this concept, half in wonder, half in doubt— but she knew right away exactly who she had to talk to.

"Let's go little one, we can come back soon. I just need to talk to somebody." Amara murmured, gently prodding Verus back into the blinding light outside.

He gave a tight nod. Though disappointed, he understood the importance, obeying his older sister's wishes.

Amara's hand paused for a moment before gently knocking on Cato's door. After some shuffling from inside, the old man appeared, his long silver hair tied loosely behind him, followed by the mild scent of spices.

"Good morning, little cloud. What's happened? You look like you've seen a ghost." *Little cloud.* Amara's great-grandmother had always called her that, for her eyes, a dark grey-blue she'd been told was the color of a fluff that once covered the sky.

Cato beckoned her into his cluttered home, and sat her down on a fabric-draped chair with a warm cup of something sweet and spiced.

“What’s happened, child,” Cato gently prodded. Amara hesitated for a moment, but the words hastily spilled out of her mouth.

“Cato, did the sky used to cry?”

Cato sighed.

“There are things the others can’t yet know. Things they wouldn’t understand... but-”

Amara eagerly nodded.

“I have watched something awaken within you. I’ve seen it your whole life, but I can see it *now* beginning to stir as time passes, and you learn and perceive more of what’s around you. That is why I will tell you this— not for the village, not for the workers. For you, and for those you love and trust...”

Amara listened to every syllable he spoke, her curiosity and yearning for knowledge eating her from within.

“I promise Cato, you know you can trust me.”

Cato spoke softly, his words weaving a rich tapestry of the old earth.

Lush forests that enveloped the senses; soft damp moss, the tickling of ferns as you wove through the vegetation. A wooded wild bathed in golden shade, and greeted by a lullaby of birdsong. Bubbling rivers, clear and cool ponds.

“What do you think sustained all that?” Cato asked, answering himself a second later; “Water. From our beautiful sky. Often, in fact. Her tears filled our rivers, let our plants bloom, and brought life to the animals and people...”

Amara’s brow furrowed gently.

“Why doesn’t the sky cry any more, Cato? Is she not – sad for what we’ve done to her planet?”

Her voice caught halfway through her sentence, but she pushed on.

“The sky is not unfeeling, child, she never could be.” Cato gently paused, a quiet heaviness sewn through his words, “She just doesn’t know how to weep. She’s watched what us humans have done to our planet, *her child*... decades of time. It’s so painful in fact, all she can do is distract herself... pretend as if nothing has happened. It’s too painful to face.”

“Oh Cato-” Amara whispered sharply, “What can we do about this? What can I do?” “The only way you could possibly speak with her is if you climb the great mountain. It is near enough that she may hear you, and perhaps, she will listen. But don’t get your hopes up. Many have tried, and many have failed.”

Amara walked home under the afternoon’s burning heat, her mind swirling. She arrived on her doorstep, dust clung to her legs. She slipped quietly inside, tiptoeing across the wooden planks, — so as not to disrupt her mother’s labor — beams of light nestling gently in the wood’s ridges. She packed her bag, knowing that she must go now, or time may run short. The earth was nearing a point of no return. Amara packed nothing but a large waterskin, a small stone knife, and a single seed that was once her great-grandmother’s. Round and unfamiliar, she rolled it around the palm of her hand, picturing the spiralling limbs of the tree, and the plump fruit that this may have once come from.

Amara told her mother the sky’s story; it’s weeping, its life. She told her what she had to do.

Galena didn't ask her to stay, her tears silent and still as she tightly held her daughter in her arms. "You're strong Amara. I have faith in your spirit, and in your soul," The words breathily escaped Galena's lips. "I love you, my baby."

Amara slipped her way into the village, its paths quiet and bare, the people hidden from the afternoon heat. Her tread was light and intentional as she darted through the dead grass and dusted stones. Before she could reach the village's shaded edge, she heard the distinct crumble of rock beneath feet. A figure appeared before her.

"Where do you think you're going, girl."

Marcellus. His stocky figure blocked her path, his worn eyes squinting from the light. "There's nothing up the mountain for you. Know your place. You must stay down here, on the plains, helping like the rest of us."

"Marcellus please," Amara's voice was steady and firm, but she felt a bead of cold sweat drip into the palm of her hand. "I'm really just trying to help all of us, you just don't underst-" He grabbed her arm. "If you're trying to find something 'greater'" He made quotes in the air with his free hand; "There's nothing up there for you. There's never been, and never will be. No green trees or lots of water like your idiot grandma and that senile old man have poisoned your mind with. They are fools."

Rage flashed hot in Amara's chest, but she couldn't let anything slow her down. She ripped her arm from Marcellus's grip and bolted up the mountain, heart pounding and feet cracking the dry soil below. He shouted after her, stumbling in pursuit, his words growing blurred and incoherent as Amara fled.

Amara picked her way up the mountain as the sun slowly fell, robes damply sticking to her hot skin. The land around her was littered with burned stumps and powdery animal bones, the dried veins of dusty rivers weaving their way throughout. *What if Marcellus was right? This was just some stupid delusion, and Cato was batty. This destruction must be a never ending cycle;* it was hard for Amara to believe that this land was once truly lush. The stars began to poke through the sky's dark blanket, and Amara's muscles ached, her body growing increasingly heavy.

She gently laid her pulsing body on a patch of loose dirt, wrapping herself tightly in her linen robes. She gazed up at the sky, her thoughts twisting and turning. Even though her exhaustion was unbearable, her mind continued to run.

As Amara fell in and out of broken sleep, vivid dreams flickered through her unconsciousness. She dreamed of her great-grandmother, speaking the names of the supple plants, the same as those drawn in the cave; introducing her to the animals once living. She watched and listened to her ancestors growing and flourishing in beautiful land.

Amara woke up to the sound of silence, the sun's morning rays caressing her face. She burned with a sureness and drive, more than ever before. As Amara walked, she collected fragments of the old world. Stones smoothed by a once-flowing river, skeletons of leaves, a single feather.

Two more days passed, moving through dust and silence – exhausted, but fuelled with purpose. On

Amara's third day, under the waning light of evening sun, her feet lead her through a thicket of thinning trees– brittle and sparse. Just as she was wondering if she'd gone some wrong way, she looked up, and realized she was walking into a break in the brush. The light shifted, the air

changing, catching in her throat; dry and light. She circled the clearing, its edge a sheer drop off the face of the mountain and a landscape blanketed by neverending sky. She was here. Trembling gently, the air pressing in on her, waiting, Amara did what felt right. She tucked the seed within the brittle soil. Not expecting it to grow, but simply to return it to the earth. She sank into the warm dirt, her eyes tracing the pale blue sky above. The sun's low golden rays hit the minerals speckling the dusty earth, shimmering and dancing. In that hushed moment, she noticed the subtle beauty still left on earth. A shiny beetle crawled slowly across the ground, its shell glimmering like a polished stone. The hollowed world she lived in still carried a stubborn and quiet beauty. Amara mourned for what the earth once was more than ever before. The stillness around her called, she knew now was the moment, she must speak to the sky.

"I don't expect you to fix what we've broken. What we've done is terrible, we've killed your trees. We've dried your earth. We've let ourselves become soulless, all we can care about is what the next day might bring."

Amara let her words flow out as she looked deep into the sky, the shadows around her growing. The wind began to pick up, dirt and ash dancing in the air. Wisps of pale blue white slipped their way past the horizon.

"We've lost so many animals, so many souls. We've done horrible things to our land. We've torn apart your child. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I pray that some day the others may recognize this." Amara's tears started to pool in her eyes, slipping down her lower lashes. She didn't brush them away. As she spoke, the wind was slowly settling.

"I'm sorry for what we've done to your child. We've bruised her, and mangled her.." The air was tight and stagnant, wisps of white slowly transforming the sky into a pale grey canvas. *These must be clouds*. The sky gave no response, but she was listening. The silence was suffocating, gently pressing into Amara. It was as if the sky was holding her breath. As everything paused, the tension in the air began to slowly release. A soft, low vibration hummed in the distance, a deep sigh. A glistening bead of water fell from the sky, towards the buried seed. It softly kissed the ground, the breeze stirring a whisper of petrichor.

The sky inhaled deeply, acknowledging the earth's longing after that single taste of rain. Tears began to fall. Slowly and steadily they dripped on the soil. Not a storm of violence and anger, but a storm of gentle mourning, and recognition.

Amara waited on the mountain, her tears coating her skin as the sky's coated the earth. Not enough to change everything, but enough to be felt. Amara began to make her slow journey down the mountain.

After three sunrises, her feet touched the trails of her village, the earth slightly softer under her footsteps. Tiny green sprouts speckled the ground, the frail branches of trees bearing delicate green buds. As Amara scanned the ground, her chest filled with a soft warmth, something deeper than relief. She couldn't stop the soft smile that tugged at her lips.

As Amara quietly made her way back home, she spotted Marcellus, his heavy eyes set on her. Amara prepared to face his usual harsh words, but as she watched his gaze, she noticed something different— an edge of guilt and fragile humility.

"Amara—" His voice cracked, uncertain. "I don't know if it was your doing. I don't know

what happened but the sky has been crying; It has changed our village. Our earth is beginning to grow, more than I've ever seen it."

His eyes drifted, unable to meet hers. "I was wrong to doubt you. I'm so sorry." Amara's breathing softened. "It's okay Marcellus... It's really okay. You don't owe me anything," she paused for a moment, "You owe the sky. We must recognize our actions, we must feel for what we've done."

It was eventual, but the people of the village slowly began to grasp, and connect to this. They mourned for all they had lost in the wake of what could've been.

The grief of the sky and of the people was not the end. It was the beginning of growth; the beginning of something more than just *alive*. The sky began to accept, and she mourned. As the seasons spun, her weeping transformed into beautiful tears of joy and pride, sometimes still touched by sadness. The sky's emotion, her heart's resonance, is what woke the earth's soul and skin.