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MARK OF THE WATCHERS

I- DEEP SLEEP

A vertical knife of sunlight slowly cuts its way across a darkened room as a splintered wood door creaks open. A girl called JIRAIYA lays sprawled out atop a mass of threadbare sheets, long skinny legs hanging over the makeshift bed onto the splintered wood floor.

JIRAIYA

Nnnngh...? Not yet, I need the sleep...

A small mechanical creature flutters its way across the ramshackle hut and comes to rest on the balled up sheets on JIRAIYA's makeshift bed. The creature's body is made up of harshly angled cogs, grinding against each other like the insides of a broken watch. Springing out from its back are two pairs of dragonfly wings that continue to twitch restlessly.

JIRAIYA (CONT'D)

Okay, okay... I'm awake. What's for breakfast Peaches?

PEACHES takes off from the sheets the way space shuttles used to rocket up out of EARTH's atmosphere. It smacks into the peeling paint of a cupboard door, causing some weeks-old fruit to roll off the counter and squish onto the floor. PEACHES keeps twitching against the cupboard door as JIRAIYA trudges into the kitchen with leaden feet. An angled tangle of short jet-black hair rests on top of a pretty oval face. Her big green eyes blink heavily, working off the glaze of early morning. She's tall for her age, with a lean, wiry frame. She's a bit lanky, standing at nearly a foot taller than the few boys that are left in the huts in the settlement across the stream behind her own. She gently brushes PEACHES to the side and pries the cupboard door open.

JIRAIYA (YAWNING) (CONT'D)

Wow. We uh... we don't have much, do we? Where did the dried fruit go?

A ball of blankets in the opposite corner of the hut starts wriggling. JIRAIYA spins around on her heels and starts marching towards it.

JIRAIYA (CONT'D)

Sammy... Did you eat all the dried fruit?

The ball of blankets becomes deathly still as she approaches it. JIRAIYA squats down, biting her lip as it curls into a smile. She sneaks her fingers across the blankets and launches a tickle attack.

SAMMY (GIGGLING)

I didn't mean toooooooo! Quit it!!!!!!! Stoooooopppp Ji Ji!!!!!!!

JIRAIYA

Hmm... I suppose I can forgive you... but only because you have to skip breakfast now while Peaches and I go round up some eats.

SAMMY

But I'm hungry now.....

SAMMY rubs his eyes and yawns. He is a small boy, the squat and pale antithesis of his older sister. He has pudgy, rosy cheeks and eyes that always look a bit sad.

JIRAIYA

I know hunny, me too. I've got some sweet berries I snatched near a Lurker's nest just three days ago hidden beneath the wash bin. You can eat those and Peaches and I will be back in time for Brunch!

SAMMY's eyes light up in delight as he bolts up out of the blankets and patters into the kitchen.

JIRAIYA puts on some light leather gear and adorns herself with a climbing axe, a serrated knife, and a satchel filled with net traps she made herself for catching small animals. She lastly strings a rickety looking bow across her shoulder and straps the quiver of arrows to her back. PEACHES buzzes near her as JIRAIYA runs to the door, pausing and turning towards the kitchen before crossing the threshold.

JIRAIYA (CONT'D)

Love you munchkin!

SAMMY

I love you too Ji Ji!

## II- TO DO LIST

JIRAIYA exits the hut and walks into a clearing. She weaves her fingers together in the air above her head and stretches out vertically, standing right on the tips of her toes. She pulls at her gear and stares out at what lies before her. She sees a few rows of small huts, so much like her own. She sees girls her own age and younger working hard at chores and play, while the elderly look on from their errands. There are precious few "adults" in the conventional sense, and very few men. Not a single boy can be seen in the settlement.

The scene shifts as JIRAIYA walks through her village, showing her as a little girl sitting with her legs crossed on the ground. She is tiny, but still wiry and lean. She is perpetually fidgeting as she sits among a small cluster of other children, mostly girls. An old woman sits atop a tree stump as she pokes at a warm fire, bringing light to the cold forest nights. She wears a kind expression that shows through her wrinkles, her big-hearted smile creaking against her aged skin. Her eyes sparkle in the light created by the fire as she tips herself towards her awaiting audience.

OLD WOMAN

Do you all know of The Watchers in the Woods?

Excitement mixed with fear ripples through the children, as they speak in hushed tones amongst themselves.

JIRAIYA

Umm... they're the monsters that come and steal all the boys.

OLD WOMAN

Very good little warrior, but not quite. The Watchers were not always this way. Do you know the story of how we left the Old World and came to live in the Sea of Trees?

JIRAIYA shakes her head no, visibly frustrated that this is the first she's heard of it.

OLD WOMAN (CONT'D)

Long ago, we fought with each other to survive in the wasteland that lies beyond the borders of these Woods. The Watchers guarded this forest from our violence, which we frequently brought to their doorstep.

OLD WOMAN (CONT'D)

You see, in the depths of these very woods lies an ancient tree, broader and taller than all the rest. Surely you've all seen it?

The children nod vigorously.

OLD WOMAN (CONT'D)

Well let me tell you young ones, that is no ordinary tree. It is a wish giving tree. Young warriors brave and strong enough to face it are granted their deepest desires.

JIRAIYA bristles at this comment, stiffening up as she hones in on the wise woman's words.

OLD WOMAN (CONT'D)

Eventually, we became so trapped in our battles that we became a danger to the Trees and the Watchers refused us entry into the Sea of Trees.

A hush of silence washes over the fidgeting children.

OLD WOMAN (CONT'D)

One day, a group of brave warriors made a pilgrimage into the Sea of Trees, defying the will of the Watchers. They did this at great risk to their lives.

The hairs on JIRAIYA's neck stand at attention as she hangs on the wise woman's every word.

OLD WOMAN (CONT'D)

They came before the ancient tree and wished for sanctuary in the woods, away from the horrors of the world outside. The Great Tree listened to them, and so we are able to lead out our lives in the safety of the forests.

JIRAIYA bolts to her feet at this, fingers curling into fists.

JIRAIYA

If the Tree gave its blessing, then... then why do the Watchers take all of the boys!?

The OLD WOMAN's smile thins as her eyes flash with pain.

OLD WOMAN

Sweet girl... because nothing in life is free. We are safer in the Sea of Trees than we ever were outside of it, but we came after we caused the woods harm. Even Salvations has its cost.

JIRAIYA trembles and thuds back to the ground in a mix of frustration and embarrassment. She hides her face behind her hair as she chokes back her tears.

JIRAIYA

If we ask the Tree, can we... can we wish for the Watchers to go away and all the boys to come back?

OLD WOMAN

Honey, I don't think... you know, I don't see why not.

The scene shifts back to the present moment as JIRAIYA has walked past the boundaries of her village and looks out at the clearing before her and the dense ocean of brush and trees that stretches out as far into the horizon as her eyes can see.

JIRAIYA

Okay, first order of business. There are usually some Foxen hanging around the brush over there, which I can use to make Jerky.

JIRAIYA (CONT'D)

Of course, I coooould use some more Lurker leather for some new gear. Not to mention that I didn't get any of those berries thanks to Sammy's stomach...

JIRAIYA (CONT'D)

I could also visit the boys across the stream and see if they have anything to trade with me. Hmm... That sounds like the most fun!

PEACHES buzzes off from JIRAIYA's shoulder, allowing her to track its flight along a nearby stream and highlighting a small pocket of ramshackle huts in the distance.

III- MARKED

JIRAIYA crosses the stream and comes upon a small patch of huts. She approaches the door to a bright yellow hut, but stops at the sight of a harsh white MARKING covering its entire facade. She can hear sobbing coming from within.

JIRAIYA (CONT'D)  
Umm... Kala, Hino, Jon... you guys  
in there?

JIRAIYA slowly peels the door open as PEACHES buzzes in ahead of her. She walks in and sees two boys, about the same age as SAMMY, huddling together crying on the floor.

JIRAIYA (CONT'D)  
Jon, Kala. Where is Hino?

JIRAIYA's brow furrows, and she crouches down next to the boys.

JIRAIYA (CONT'D)  
Boys, I need you to breathe and  
tell me what happened. Where is  
Hino?

KALA  
They... they took him Ji Ji! The  
Watchers in the trees Marked us and  
took him!

JON and KALA burst into sobs again. JIRAIYA puts her arms around them in comfort. Then she puts both hands on KALA's shoulders. KALA was always a bit older than his years.

JIRAIYA  
Ka, I need you two to tell me when  
it happened, what he was wearing,  
and where they took him. It is very  
important.

KALA  
It was... last night... He was  
wearing yellow. They took him west,  
towards the Falls Ji Ji!

JIRAIYA's spine stiffens at this answer. She knows what it means.

JIRAIYA  
Boys, wait here. I will be back by  
sunset and I will bring Hino with  
me!

JIRAIYA bolts to her feet and storms out of the hut, PEACHES trailing after her. A great breeze causes the trees to dance as she approaches the woods to the east.

#### IV- THE WATCHERS

JIRAIYA arrives in a vast clearing in the middle of the deep woods. Shimmering waterfalls rush down a large rockface into a pool of still water below. The scene would be absolutely breathtaking if it weren't for the piles of tattered clothing that littered the landscape. Clothing of all different sizes, shapes, and colors paints the dirt, and in various states of decay.

JIRAIYA (CONT'D)  
Breathe, just breathe girl.

JIRAIYA tiptoes her way through the clearing, keeping a keen eye out both for HINO and his yellow smock and for any sign of the WATCHERS.

JIRAIYA (CONT'D)  
Peaches, see if you can scout ahead.

JIRAIYA holds her knife in one hand and one of her traps in the other, watching out for anything PEACHES might find. Suddenly, a ripple is sent across the water at the base of the FALLS. Then another. JIRAIYA turns in time to see dozens of ripples moving across the water in her direction.

JIRAIYA (CONT'D)  
No, no , no, no!

JIRAIYA runs backwards and throws down a trap before taking out her bow. She fires several arrows in the direction of the ripples. The arrows seem to stick in the very fabric of the air. As the ripples reach the edge of the water she sees wet claw prints all over the mud and dirt, prints surrounding her from all sides. A few of her traps are sprung, and the WATCHERS caught in her nets are made visible. Twitching limbs, sinewy frames, and expressionless white MASKS mark their distinguishing features. JIRAIYA adjusts her gear and steels herself for battle.

#### V- AFTERMATH

The battle ends with the clearing littered with the corpses of a dozen WATCHERS trapped in nets, limbs twitching ceaselessly even in death.

JIRAIYA, breathless and battered from the rigors of the fight, crawls on the ground to the spot where PEACHES rests.

JIRAIYA (CONT'D)

Good Peaches... you... you found him!

JIRAIYA paws desperately at a torn smock of bright yellow. Tears roll down her cheeks as she clenches what's left of HINO in her shaking hands. She gathers herself up and makes her way back to KALA and JON, lit only by the piercing, pale moon. Her steps are leaden as she approaches their door, still white with the markings of the WATCHERS. The two boys open the door for her before she has a chance to knock.

No words are exchanged. The two boys hold out their hands and JIRAIYA gently hands over HINO's smock. KALA and JON silently walk the smock to HINO's makeshift bed and lay it on his sheets. JIRAIYA bites her lip and clenches her fists as every muscle in her body tightens.

VI- BRUNCH

JIRAIYA makes her way into her hut with what little spoils she has found for the day. PEACHES buzzes in behind her and comes to rest on the washbin in the kitchen. JIRAIYA's eyes are heavy, and she drops to her knees before dumping her satchel and gear onto the floor. She crawls over SAMMY's blankets.

JIRAIYA (CONT'D)

Sammyyyy... I am home... I'm sorry I am so late...

She nudges at the blankets.

JIRAIYA (CONT'D)

Sammy, I did get more of those berries for you. But you have to share silly boy.

The blankets show no signs of movement.

JIRAIYA takes notice and lifts up the blankets, finding nothing underneath.

JIRAIYA (CONT'D)

Sammy? Munchkin, where are you?

She darts over to her covers and throws them off, revealing nothing. PEACHES stirs to attention and buzzes out through the door. JIRAIYA snaps up and runs after.

JIRAIYA (CONT'D)

No. No no no no no.

JIRAIYA sees the MARK OF THE WATCHERS covering the facade of her hut. She falls to her knees and stares blankly at the white MARKINGS. PEACHES drifts down to her shoulder and rests, completely still for the first time. The camera pulls away and the screen fades to black as the title image comes in to focus.

-MARK OF THE WATCHERS-

#### VII- REBIRTH

The Sun beats directly into the camera. Harsh, bright, and overpowering, before the camera drifts down to rest at a top-down perspective of JIRAIYA's hut. The lands and trees immediately surrounding her hut have been dug out and cut down to craft new gear and supplies. Some of her home's prior natural beauty has been diminished, gutted as JIRAIYA has made her preparations over the past several weeks. The other villagers keep their distance, looking on solemnly.

PEACHES flits about in the distance, guiding the camera's focus to the woods behind the hut. JIRAIYA is dowsing a long, thin sword with oils. She rests it upon a rock as she douses it, its fine point making it resemble an oversized needle mixed with the flat body of a machete.

She is trembling a bit, and the wind is flirting with chunks of her hair, making them crash like waves against the shore. She has given herself various markings, including a familiar one painted on to her stomach. It is the MARK OF THE WATCHERS, painted in the same white the creatures are so fond of.

Without words she grinds the newly slick blade against the rock, causing it to spark. A cluster of sparks catches the oil at the tip of the blade, lighting it ablaze from tip to hilt. PEACHES buzzes over to her shoulder and comes to rest.

JIRAIYA (CONT'D)

There's no going back.

She holds the blade out at her side and dashes madly towards the hut, smashing the flames into its walls. The flames seem to leap off the blade, streaking up the walls and pouring into its windows. She rails against her home again and again, bursts of flame rushing up to its roof and forcing her former home to collapse in on itself. She staggers back a few paces before flinging the sword to the dirt.

The camera focuses on her face as the shadows of the flames dance along it, zooming in on her bright green eyes where we can see the reflection of the heap of splintered wood that used to be a safehaven for her and SAMMY.

JIRAIYA (CONT'D)

Let's go!

PEACHES lifts off as JIRAIYA dashes for her gear. Her bow looks considerably more lethal as she straps it around her shoulder and gathers up the rest her belongings. She sprints towards the center of the woods as the camera pans upwards, highlighting a great TREE much thicker and taller than all the rest.

#### VIII- RESTLESS WOODS

Although still possessed of a natural beauty, these woods look considerably rougher than those around JIRAIYA's home. The forest seems denser and darker, and much of the vegetation appears to be writhing. Long shafts of sunlight cut through the forest canopy like knives, and the surging vegetation seems to be growing away from these beacons. PEACHES stops buzzing and comes to a dead stop on JIRAIYA's shoulder, hesitant to go further.

JIRAIYA (CONT'D)

I know Peaches. But we have to go.  
Sammy's gone. Jon... Kala...

She clenches her eyes shut, trapping her tears inside.

JIRAIYA (CONT'D)

We can't ever stop.

A screeching sound rips through the air, sending the plant life into a frenzy. Sleek and muscled, a pack of wolf like LURKERS cuts through the brush and make a leap straight for JIRAIYA's throat, one after the other. JIRAIYA flattens herself to the dirt, ducking under just in time. She grabs her knife and juts it up blindly, feeling it sink into fur and muscle above her. Blood rains down over her, making her cringe. She scrambles out from underneath her victim and, drawing her bow, she spins around on her heels to face the pack.

An arrow rips loose from her bow and finds purchase in the snout of a LURKER that had already lunged itself towards her through the air. It cries out in pain as its face thuds into the dirt below. Another LURKER hurtles itself towards her, its gnashing teeth ripping into JIRAIYA's shoulder.

It jerks its head from side to side, ripping into her muscles and causing JIRAIYA to fall hard onto her back. She screams in pain and panic, pulling an arrow from its quiver and jamming it repeatedly into the LURKER's soft head. Its mouth loosens as the blood rushes from its skull, giving JIRAIYA a chance to roll backwards and toss out a handful of her net traps.

She looks up and finds luck on her side, as three more LURKERS writhe about in her traps. She takes out her knife and slowly walks up to them. They snap their mouths at her through the net. She kneels down next to them and sinks the blade into the backs of their necks, one after the other, and throws the bloodied knife to the dirt in disgust.

#### IX- TIPPING POINT

PEACHES whirs in the distance as JIRAIYA sneaks through the woods, dizzy and shaking from battle. As she sneaks through the living brush, Lurkers and other creatures can be seen going about their lives. Images flash across the screen. The mountain of boys' clothes littered across the clearing at the FALLS; the true visage of the WATCHERS twitching in her traps; the white mark that she now painted herself with; SAMMY smiling; the disappearance of KALA and JON.

JIRAIYA has cut herself a path through much of the forest, leaving a trail of LURKERS in her wake. The beacons of sunlight are becoming fewer and fewer, but small streams have begun showing up along her path towards the great TREE. The streams are still clear and almost glow, subtly guiding her to her destination.

JIRAIYA (CONT'D)

We're almost to the Tree, Peaches.  
Fly on ahead and see what you can  
see.

PEACHES whirls around her excitedly before darting off towards the tree. The camera follows suit, flying off from JIRAIYA and showing the gnarled roots of the tree. It is massive in scale, impossibly ancient, and is largely untouched by the putrescence present all around it.

JIRAIYA (CONT'D)

What... what is this?

PEACHES' flight reveals a GRAVEYARD of sorts. Sharp, metallic stakes jut out of the ground at the TREE's roots, each one with one adorned with one of the WATCHERS' soulless white MASKS. The hollowed-out eyes stare back at her as JIRAIYA approaches.

JIRAIYA (CONT'D)

I don't like this.

The roots at the base of the great TREE begin to pulsate, tensing and vibrating. The WATCHERS' MASKS begin to rattle against their stakes. Claw prints appear in the mud, so much like before at the FALLS. She springs to attention, light on her feet as she throws down traps like before. A few of the traps are sprung, revealing once again the wet, spasming husks. The claw prints increase in number, all converging in the center of the graveyard. A few of the masks rattle off their stakes and begin scraping across the dirt, gathering in the middle. The claw prints cluster around the masks, and the masks begin beating against each other. JIRAIYA flits around in a panic as she realizes that the WATCHERS are fusing together.

PEACHES sweeps around her as she readies her gear. All of the masks fly towards the center of the graveyard as though pulled by gravity, locking together in unformed lumps. A behemoth made of their masks twitches and shakes and stands upright on barely formed legs, stretching up to the height of more than a dozen of her people's huts.

JIRAIYA runs away as quickly as she can, the abomination dragging itself across the earth after her. She fires the last few of her arrows at the lidless faces chasing after her, but the blackness that binds them simply swallows up each shot. She makes a mad dash for the tree, leaping the largest of its roots and flattening herself against it. The creature ripples over the root and pours itself onto the ground in front of her, a dozen faces staring at her only feet away. JIRAIYA muffles out a scream as she buries her head into her hands, curling into a ball and bracing herself against the three, waiting for death.

A screech tears through the Sea of Trees, a horrible sound shooting into JIRAIYA's ears and making her bones ache. Shaking violently, teeth chattering, she peeks out through her fingers and sees that one of the MASKS is cracked in half. She turns her head to see that the sharp tip of her bow has become lodged in the root of the great TREE. JIRAIYA's hands frantically search the ground, cutting her skin on a sharp rock. Tears stream down her cheeks as she grips the rock and begins digging at the bark of the ancient root.

With each scrape and stab that horrible sound bolts through the air, rattling her skull. JIRAIYA screams, tightening her grip on the rock and digging into the bark harder and harder. She begins wedging it into the hole she has made, prying the tree's flesh back from its bones. The screeches grow louder as one by one more MASKS begin to crack, before the great mountain they fused with collapses into a silent heap on the ground.

X- WISH

Exhausted after the battle, JIRAIYA sinks to her knees. The shards of the masks rattle back to life and unlink from the collapsed beast before scraping back along the ground and coming once again to rest on their stakes. The forest is still now. The great TREE's roots have stopped their movement, the masks no longer rattle, even the sound of animals and other creatures deeper in the forest have ceased. Time seems to have stopped. Even the streams that helped lead her here can no longer be heard.

JIRAIYA climbs back to her feet and rests her bruised body on the frame of her bow. She is breathless, and looks around her with anger and confusion. She waits.

And waits.

Her eyes dart around madly, her head craning slightly outwards, watching and listening for a sign.

JIRAIYA (CONT'D)

Is this what I came for? Silence?

She raises her voice, regardless of the attention it might bring from the creatures in the forest.

JIRAIYA (CONT'D)

Is this why I came? Was this a test? I passed it! These Watchers lie dead at my feet.

Silence.

JIRAIYA (CONT'D)

I was promised answers and I will have them!

Stillness.

JIRAIYA is at wit's end, and throws her bow to the ground before running up to the tree. PEACHES flits after her before hesitating and resting a distance behind her.

JIRAIYA (CONT'D)

Please!? My friends are all gone. All the little ones in the villages will be next. And my... my Sammy... he was all I had left!

Nothing.

JIRAIYA (CONT'D)

Please... He was all I had left and  
they took him from me. Please give  
him back. Give them all back...

She drops to her knees, letting the tears streak down her cheeks. PEACHES flutters over to her and rests on the ground by her knees. The forest remains still, like the wind is frozen.

JIRAIYA (CONT'D)

Make them go away. Make them  
stop... Give me the power to make  
them go away!

At her cry the forest begins to rumble. The roots of the great TREE begin to pulsate as once again the Masks resume their rattling. A splitting pain overcomes JIRAIYA, a sound rushing out of the TREE and into her brain like a rusted knife. She curls into a ball, holding her head tightly in her arms.

The rattling of the masks intensifies, their sounds joining with the piercing of the TREE creating a cacophony. JIRAIYA squirms in pain, pawing at her hair before suddenly, abruptly going limp.

The rattling masks suddenly disappear, flashing out of existence. The rumbling stops and a more natural stillness begins. The streams can be heard, and wind rustles the leaves of the trees. PEACHES flies against JIRAIYA, poking at her repeatedly. The camera pulls behind her as she slowly uncurls herself from the ground and stands up as lean and long as ever. Her hair hangs over her face and she stumbles a bit, turning around to face the camera.

The camera pans up her body to reveal that the MARK of the Watchers she painted on her stomach is now glowing with a bright white light. It pans up along her before settling on what used to be her face. Her fierce green eyes peer out at us from behind the white MASK of the Watchers before the scene fades to white.