



# MOONLIT PRESAGE

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*A chime ripples the still night, unheard by those who dance in the garden of dreams. In a rowboat that weaves its way through Luneia's water canals, a hooded figure sits with a fox that's curled around her shoulders. The fox's vaporous form emits a white haze, her eyes golden and glowing. As their destination approaches, her ears prick up. The fox jumps off the young woman's shoulders, leaving smoky tracks that dissipate before she lands atop the bow. All the while, the bell's song resonates from around the fox's neck.*



With no oarsman, the rowboat slows to a stop by the dock and does not require anchoring. A wiry man with stooped shoulders waves his hand as though afraid she might not see him, even though there is no one else around.

"Lady Naiya," he greets in haste, bowing. He clasps his hands together in prayer, eyes rimmed red. "Please, you must help her. She won't make it through the night."

Naiya steps onto the dock and Zuzu, the fox, jumps back on her shoulder. The man does not notice the creature. "Lead the way," she says as calm as the night allows her.

"Of course. This way." He gestures for her to follow him through the floating city.

As they cross an arched bridge, the man chatters. Naiya recognizes the nervousness in his voice clenching his words together. She learns his name, Aced, and that he has a daughter named Rya, who needs her help. A tingling sensation spreads out from the center of Naiya's gloved palms, itching through the silk.

They arrive at Aced's home where a candle flickers by the window. Aced opens the door and as soon as Naiya steps inside, dread cascades down on her. An uncanny coldness sweeps all around the house, encasing her in an uninviting chill.

Zuzu hops off her shoulder and pounces around the home in a flurry of bright light. The fox's cleansing ritual reduces the thick miasma but does not remove it. The chimes chase away the silence, a haunting melody that only Naiya hears. Once complete, Zuzu evaporates but regains her form moments later. Naiya closes her eyes and takes a deep breath, calling forth the moon's energy.

"Whenever you're ready," Aced says, his words tugging at hope and fear. "I will take you to her."

With a nod, Naiya trails behind Aced as he leads her to the bedroom. The miasma grows thicker, and when she walks in, she steadies herself against the wall. Startled, Aced moves to help but she holds up her hand.

He swallows and takes a step back. Naiya calls Zuzu, and the white vapors reappear, prancing around the room. She stands upright, but the weight on her chest does not grow any lighter. On the bed lies a girl who appears a few years younger than Naiya. Her breathing teeters on the edge of gasps and her body lurches upward every few seconds.

Aced flinches and chokes back a sob with a hand over his mouth. "My precious Rya. I can't bear to see her this way." He squeezes his eyes shut.

Naiya takes a step forward, watching Rya's convulsions. She grits her teeth when her palms grow more irritated. She furls and unfurls her fingers. "No one should see this." She turns to Aced. "I need to be alone with her."

Aced looks at his daughter, brow furrowed. He then nods and backs out of the room. "Of course. I leave her in your hands." With one last plea, he closes the wooden door.

Rya whimpers. The sound beckons Naiya toward the bed. On her knees, she examines the young girl's body. Pushing Rya's dress up, Naiya suppresses a gasp—dark purple blights fester and ooze black liquid all over her thin torso.

Rya's blights are the worst she has ever seen. Naiya's hands quiver before she clenches them. Shaking her head, she dispels her reverie. She peels off her gloves, revealing black veins branching out from the center of her palms. Woven through the veins are ugly, red ruptures. Closing her eyes, Naiya places her hands on Rya's torso, and instantly, the girl screams.

"It's okay," Naiya whispers. "Stay strong."

From the energy that she borrowed from the moon, Naiya's hands glow and, within seconds, the blights stop bleeding. In return, a sharp throb seizes Naiya's chest, disrupting her healing process. She sputters a cough, shielding Rya from the spray of blood with her arm.

Rya moans, her face scrunching up. Naiya resumes her healing, biting down her bottom lip to suppress her coughs. Her eyes remain closed, brow furrowed in concentration. She directs the energy onto the torso through her palms for as long as possible.

The blights shrink, but instead of disappearing, they transfer to Naiya's dark-stained hands. Once Rya's agony quiets, Naiya opens her eyes, gritting her teeth to keep her agony in. Her palms burn and convulse, the blights settling into her skin and forming new ruptures. She watches the black veins travel up her arms.

Rya's torso is bare and her face relaxes. Naiya pulls the girl's dress down and hunches forward, breathing hard. When she hears footsteps, she slips on her gloves and tightens the black cloak around her.

The door opens and at the sight of his daughter's peaceful slumber, Aced makes a small noise of relief and joy. Naiya moves out of the way so he can reunite with his daughter.

"Thank you, Lady Naiya," he says repeatedly. "You are our Savior." He stands up to bow.

Naiya tries to breathe as evenly as she can, but with every exhale, she nearly lets out a cry. "I must go."

Aced catches her tone and notices the blood on her mouth. He shifts his concern to Naiya and asks, "Is there any way I can help? How can I repay you?"

Naiya doesn't reply. She turns her back and leaves the bedroom. At the front door, she pauses. Zuzu returns on her shoulders and licks the tears that stream down her face. Naiya whispers, "Pray to the Tidemother."





When Naiya returns to the Temple of the Tidemother, she stumbles her way inside. Priestesses, each wearing white robes lined with silver, rush toward her. One kneels beside Naiya and wraps an arm around her. Another unclasps Naiya's cloak and strips it from her body. When they see how far the blights have traveled up Naiya's bare arms, they exchange looks of horror.

"Naiya," Nori, the priestess who holds her, says, "How many did you cleanse tonight?"

Zuzu licks Naiya's cheek before leaping down from her shoulders. The fox howls before vanishing—she doesn't reappear. Naiya swallows before answering, "Just one."

"You must summon her, Naiya," Nori urges. She lifts Naiya up with her legs and carries her in her arms. The other priestesses trail behind, murmuring their agreements.

Naiya winces from the pain in her chest and at Nori's insistence. "She won't help me. Not unless I return to her."

No one says anything as they head toward the bath house. As they enter, their hurried footsteps echo off the marble walls. The white, domed ceiling opens up to reveal the night sky. From the stone bench Nori lays her down on, Naiya sees the full moon and her presence soothes her.

"Quickly now," Nori says to the other priestesses as one begins to peel away Naiya's clothes. Two of them lift her into the steaming pool as the others scatter assorted flowers into the water. Naiya watches the roses, lavender, chamomile, rosemary needles, peonies, and lotuses float around her.

As the priestesses wash her, Nori studies Naiya's arms, tracing the tangle of black veins and red ruptures with her fingers. "The Tidemother is your only hope," she says, resolute.

Naiya doesn't meet Nori's gaze. "No."

"Naiya, you must—"

"My powers save people," Naiya says, her voice low. "I won't be of use if I'm with her."

"You won't be of use to anyone if you're dead," Nori counters, setting Naiya's arms back into the warm water. She heaves a sigh. "She calls for you."

At this, Naiya stills. She stares at Nori for a moment before tilting her head up to the ceiling where the moon gazes down at her. "From the Tidemother we came. To her, we must return," she says quietly.

"Many of her children come and go but never stay around for as long as you have," Nori says. Her voice drops. "They fear her more than they fear death."

Naiya lifts up her arms and turns them from side to side. The corruption is evidence of the people she saved in the past year. She closes her eyes and remembers how their grief transformed into happiness. There's a power in that alone—one that Naiya doesn't want to give up.

"Please, Naiya," Nori says. "Summon the Tidemother."

When Naiya opens her eyes, she gives a slight nod.



Outside the Temple of the Tidemother, a stone pathway leads to a circular platform supported by a sea cliff. Naiya stands at the center in a loose white gown. Her tainted arms are a stark contrast to the chiffon fabric, appearing as though she's wearing long gloves. Nori and the other priestesses stand along the pathway, clasping their hands together in prayer. Zuzu still doesn't appear. The winds are not as energetic tonight, but the moon is a witness to what's to come.

Naiya doesn't need to clasp her hands in prayer or perform a dance ritual to summon the Tidemother. Instead, she waits. The ocean waves crash against the sea cliff from below. Before long, Naiya's skin tingles.

*Naiya.*

The waves subside and everything goes quiet. Unlike before, Naiya takes a deep breath and responds to the Tidemother's call. "Mother."

At once, the Tidemother's serpentine body bursts from the ocean's surface. Her gray-blue scales shimmer under the moonlight and her large fins spread out like wings. Her draconic head lowers to where Naiya stands. The mist emanating from the Tidemother envelops Naiya. She doesn't realize how familiar it feels—comforting even.

The Tidemother's icy blue eyes flicker to Naiya's dark arms. Her vertical slit pupil dilates. *You have spent too much time here, child.* Without letting Naiya respond, the Tidemother lifts her head. *It is time for you to come home.*

Naiya takes a step forward. "Mother, I—"

The Tidemother tilts her head back and emits a reverberating roar. *No child of mine will foolishly die just to save a few more humans. I will not stand for it.*

Naiya begins to clench her hands but winces, remembering the fresh wounds. She breathes in and out, keeping the fear that threatens to overcome her entire body at bay. "Please, I need more time. I promise to come home but I don't want my powers to go to waste." Naiya takes another step forward and holds out her arms. "No matter the pain, it doesn't outweigh the lives I've saved."

The Tidemother gazes at the moon. *That which you take must be returned.* She looks back at Naiya. *You wish to become the humans' Savior, but who will save you? There is only one choice, Naiya.*

Naiya can feel Nori's stare boring into her back. From the moment she agreed to summon the Tidemother, Naiya knew that she can't compromise with her. She has to at least try.

"I will go with you," Naiya says. "As long as you promise that I may return to the surface, with or without my powers."

The Tidemother doesn't say anything. She swivels around Naiya, cocooning her. *Your attachment to humans will be your downfall. For me to save you, your powers must return to her.* She nods toward the moon. *You will be powerless to save anyone.*

She meets the Tidemother's intimidating gaze. "This is my choice."

The Tidemother unfurls and holds herself upright. She glances at the priestesses before giving one last look at Naiya. Then she retreats back into the ocean and the waves pick up once again.

*Welcome home, child.*

Naiya walks forward and stands at the edge of the platform. She looks back and smiles at the priestesses. After bidding her silent goodbye, Naiya closes her eyes and falls forward, diving into the dark sea.

The priestesses rush to the edge of the platform and huddle around, waiting, in vain, for Naiya to resurface.

