

NIGHTINGALE

RECKLESS AT HEART

Nightingale crawled through the narrow tunnel, the faint light of her spell showing her the way. She could hear Kufu's heavy breathing as he followed close behind her. With every twist and dip her horns scraped the stone walls. She tried not to think about what would happen if they got stuck.

At last the tunnel opened up into a large cavern. Nightingale stood, stretching her back and dusting off her knees. She could see a soft green glow across the cavern. Striding forward, she found herself standing on the edge of a narrow canyon, illuminated by the glowing eyes of a limestone statue carved into the opposite wall.

Lowering herself carefully to the ground, Nightingale assessed the situation. The opposite wall was several yards taller than the one she sat on. Looking down into the slot canyon, she couldn't tell how deep it was but she could hear the rush of water below. The face of the statue was still intact but most of its body had crumbled away during the decades it had sat, hidden in the cavern.

Kufu approached, taking in the same sight with a smile. "You sure you can make the jump?"

"Of course! Remember the jump I did at Mount Si? The weather was terrible too, it actually snowed in Seattle that night. This will be easy." Nightingale's eyes were locked on the bejeweled statue, and she licked her lips, letting the adrenaline pump through her. This was going to be dangerous, but she was confident she'd make the jump. Of course, as she looked down into dizzying drop into the slot canyon she really had no choice if she was going to try.

"Okay." Kufu said, holding a bag out in her direction. "We're going to have to hurry if we have any chance of getting back before your dad finds out we're gone. I think he'd actually take my head if he knew I was doing this with you."

Nightingale took the equipment bag Kufu had been carrying and rummaged through it. "If Balthazar knew I was here with you of all people he'd have both our heads."

"Yeah, well, let's hurry up and keep both our heads then." Kufu watched as Nightingale pulled out a small hand drill, some bolts, a length of rope, and a couple of carabiners.

Nightingale skipped a short distance from the edge of the canyon and excitedly drilled two holes into the rock floor making sure to not let Kufu help her like he had every time before back on Earth.

"You sure you got that, Night?" Kufu raised an eyebrow as Nightingale worked with the bolts.

"Yeah." She said with a grin, finishing the job and flicking at the metal. "Easy peasy."

Kufu took care of the carabiners, making sure to carefully check the locking mechanism on each one before threading the rope through them. He grabbed his harness out of the bag and stepped into it while Nightingale checked her own harness and then secured herself to the rope.

The various metal devices Nightingale carried on her harness jingled as she walked back to the edge. Kufu joined her and

threaded the rope through the belay device attached to his harness. Facing away from the crag, Kufu planted his feet firmly on the ground while Nightingale coiled the rope neatly on the ground, checking that there would be enough slack to make the jump.

"On belay?" She squeaked, flicking her tail up towards Kufu's face playfully.

"Belay on, don't die." Kufu responded tartly, blowing at the tuft of fur on the end of her tail to get it out of his eyes.

"Will do!" Nightingale responded, and winked at Kufu.

She took several steps back before sprinting towards the gap. Nightingale's stomach lurched as her feet left the ground. She seemed to hang in the air for several moments before she hit the opposite cliff face, scrambling for a hand hold.

Rock chipped, and her body scrapped against stone as she fumbled for a moment before sliding to a stop. Nightingale let out a long sigh and closed her eyes for a moment, enjoying the fact that she was a bit banged up but not falling to her death into the deepness below her.

Her hand was jammed into a crack in the rock wall while the other clung to the nose of the statue. Nightingale slipped her hand out of the crack, shaking a little as she let go and grabbed a cam off of her harness. She jammed it into the crack and gave it a hard tug before clipping a carabiner onto it and then clipping in her rope.

"Up rope!" she called, her voice echoing through the cavern. Immediately she felt the rope tighten as Kufu took up the slack. Nightingale found herself with her feet planted on the statue's cheek, the glowing eye within easy reach.

Nightingale pulled the knife from her belt and gripping it with both hands. She tried to slide it between the smooth stone and the gem. The space was tight and it was hard to wedge in the thin blade of the knife.

She grunted, pushing against the blade handle with all her strength but it was no good. It was probably more dangerous than it was worth, but she'd already come this far. Nightingale decided to put her weight on the end of the handle, hinging it and lifting her whole body so that she could bounce, using what little weight she had as leverage.

Just as she thought it was coming loose, one hand slipped across the handle and fell on the blade of the knife leaving a shallow cut.

Nightingale swore and in her surprise she almost dropped the knife.

"You okay?" Kufu called out. "You didn't drop my knife did you?"

"I'm fine, just... Hold on!" Nightingale wiped the blood from her hands on her pants and went back to working the gem. Gradually, the gem began to wiggle in its socket. As she lifted it out of the eye socket of the statue she heard a small "click" and then a rumble.

It was so loud that Nightingale could only barely hear Kufu yell, "Trap! Hold on!" before an avalanche of dirt and rocks rained down on her. She clutched her prize and pressed herself against

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the cliff waiting for it to be over. Something gave out from under her and Nightingale yelped as she lost her footing and hung for a moment, held up by the cam she had stuck in the crack, until the quaking finally dislodged the cam too.

It was almost like being on a carnival ride. Nightingale fell until the rope went taut and she swung toward the other cliff face. Nightingale threw her hands over her head as she crashed into the rock with enough force to knock her out.

When Nightingale came to Kufu was kneeling over her, dabbing something sticky and smelly onto her aching head. Miraculously the gem was still clutched in her hand. Looking back towards the statue she could see that the face was completely torn away, taking with it the other Gem.

"Well at least we got one," Nightingale said weakly, shaking a bit.

Kufu shook his head. "It's worthless."

"You said these gems were worth a fortune! aren't they supposed to have some overpowered ability when you combine both of the—" Nightingale trailed off remembering what he had told her before they came.

Kufu laughed. "If you have both of them? Yes, yes they are."

Nightingale swore under her breath. She looked over the side of the cliff, imagining the other gem being swept away by the current below. Letting out a string of curses, she chucked the gem into the crag to join its brother.

GROOMED FOR A ROLE

Nightingale was purposely groomed for her role as a princess. She didn't know it, but her life in Washington was planned. The motel she worked at, the high school she attended, and even her foster parents were specifically chosen to produce the kind of child the Arsen family had hoped for. However, the nature of raising children vicariously through the Harbinger program is prone to ruin even the most carefully laid plans.

When Nightingale entered junior high school, she met a fellow student named Kufu Taiga. The two quickly became close friends and began doing everything together. This relationship blossomed throughout her high school years. And when Nightingale finally graduated, she used the money she saved working at the motel over multiple summers to purchase herself a vehicle. Alongside Kufu, the two planned to run away together and vagabond across the west coast.

Her unexpected reckless decision to travel alone, alongside the vigilance of her harbingers is credited for the reason she was pulled into Middara at such a young age. To stop Nightingale from leaving the country, her assigned harbingers had to move quickly to pull her into Middara.

Under the impression he'd witnessed the abduction of his friend, Kufu pursued the harbingers. Despite being threatened, Kufu was relentless, and his unyielding pursuit for Nightingale eventually led him to discover the portal they'd taken her through.

These events didn't bode well for the Arsen family. Her Middaran parents, Balthazar and Kezia, had intended Nightingale's arrival to coincide with that of the Jeong's son, Zeke. The two were considered to be the best possibility of merging the diarchy into something with more lasting stability.

Afraid that Kufu's familiarity with their daughter might threaten the relationship with Zeke they hoped for, Balthazar fought with Nightingale every step of the way as he tried to keep her away from Kufu. Eventually, Balthazar compromise on having Kufu schooled in Tima to become part of Evie Jeong's Demiurge program. This move allowed Balthazar to keep Kufu away from his daughter while still honoring Nightingale's request that he be allowed to stay a part of her life.

To the Arsens' disappointment, their daughter's personality was anything but regal. She was crass, loud, and rambunctious. She scored high in all of her classes, but got into trouble often and made many of her teachers crazy. Despite all this, she was quite personable, and well-liked by her peers.

What made her father the most furious though, was her desire to join the Demiurge. The Demiurge was established by the Jeongs as Elenia's special ops team. Balthazar's son, Dominic, had already died in their service, and he wasn't going to let his family suffer that kind of loss again.

