



THE FLOATING WORLD

NEW YORK TIMES—BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE GIRL WHO FELL BENEATH THE SEA

AXIE OH

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FEIWEL AND FRIENDS
NEW YORK

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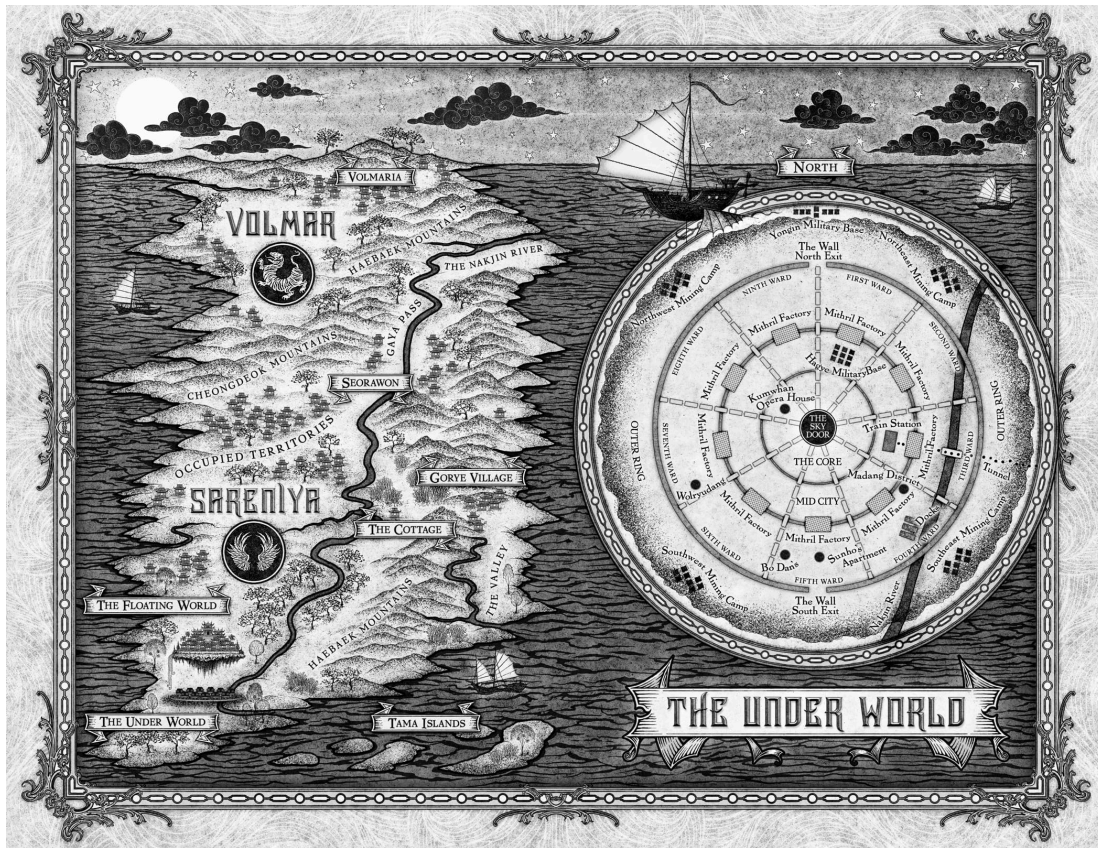
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For my dad, who has always given me wings



ACT ONE

A WORLD IN DARKNESS

CHAPTER 1

REN

East of the Haebaek Mountains

THE DRUM BEAT faster and faster as Ren tumbled into the center of the circle, cartwheeled into a handstand, and walked with her feet lifted toward the sky. Sensing her mask slipping from her chin, she quickly slid it back into place, careful to maintain the illusion that she wasn't a girl but a pink-faced demon.

Gales of laughter erupted from across the circle, where Little Uncle was sashaying his hips for the crowd, his chest bare beneath his short jacket. Like Ren, he wore a mask, though his was painted white with blue dots on the cheeks. With a flick of his wrist, he flipped open his paper fan, fluttering it coyly. A few older women yelled out bawdy comments while some of the young men blushed and jostled among themselves for a better view.

Ren began to make her way toward Little Uncle, hopping on one hand, then the other, swaying her legs to keep her balance.

The crowd was smaller than it had been the year before, but they made up for it in enthusiasm. Some of the villagers had rolled barrels to the edge of the circle and were smacking their palms against the sides, adding texture to the rhythm set by Big Uncle's drumming.

Her troupe had been performing for the past half hour; Ren would have kept on for longer, but the caravan had to depart at noon if they wanted to make it to Gorye Village by week's end. Big Uncle beat both sides of his

hourglass drum in quick succession, a signal to hurry up and conclude the performance.

Ren sprang back to her feet, her gaze sweeping the crowd. She caught sight of a young girl, perhaps seven or eight, sitting cross-legged in front of a group of older boys. The girl paid them no mind though they bumped her from behind, staring at Ren with awestruck eyes.

Ren's heart stirred with recognition—she'd been the same way at that age. When Auntie performed, she didn't want to blink, for fear of missing a single flick of her wrist or tilt of her head. With just her body, Auntie conveyed entire worlds and characters. She was a deer, racing swiftly through a moonlit forest. She was a sailor lost at sea, pulled beneath the waves. Ren would laugh when Auntie was a wily fox, outmaneuvered, running with her tail between her legs, and she would weep when Auntie was a widow on a mountain, crying out for a lover that would never return.

Through Auntie's storytelling, she lived a thousand lives, fought demons, and outwitted gods.

The girl looked at Ren as if she was capable of the same wonders.

Ren and Little Uncle were supposed to be pantomiming a story about a demon who tries to trick a nobleman, only to be thwarted, but they had lost the threads of the plot some time ago. They would need to regain it if they wanted to end the performance, but not before one final trick.

Running across the circle, Ren leaped onto the closest barrel. She turned to Big Uncle, but he was already waiting to see what she'd do next. He thwacked the left side of his drum twice with his mallet, letting out a staccato, thudding sound, then the right side once with his open palm.

A leap and turn in the air would be enough to impress the crowd, and yet ...

Ren closed her eyes. She could feel it—the Light that always lived there, like a perpetual flame that grew and diminished with the racing of her heart. She drew on it now, but only a spark, the heat of it spreading outward from her core, up her arms, before releasing from her fingertips.

It was a windless day, but the Light stirred the air. A strong breeze swirled beneath her, sweeping up the barrel and billowing her pants. She leaped backward, letting it lift her into the sky. She had a moment of panic—she was high, *too high*—but then she twisted her body in midair, somersaulting before landing on the packed earth.

A beat of silence passed, then the crowd burst into raucous applause.

Little Uncle rushed to her side. “You’ve really done it now,” he said, but she could hear the grin in his voice.

“Do you think Auntie was watching?” Ren asked. The adrenaline had worn off, and now she felt anxious. Auntie warned her not to use her magic, and never in front of strangers. Ren could argue that she’d done it to invigorate the crowd—a happy audience was a generous one—but she knew deep down that wasn’t the truth.

“Let’s hope not,” Little Uncle said cheerfully. “Here we go!”

He grabbed the ribbon at her waist. Just like they practiced, he pulled while she spun out in the opposite direction. The ribbon unraveled between them, red from the safflowers Big Uncle had used for dye. She fell backward onto the ground, then lay still, limbs splayed.

Like when a rock is removed from a stream, the villagers poured over her, thrusting gifts of foodstuffs and coins into her arms. She jumped to her feet to accept them, laughing with the children tugging at her pants only to look disappointed when wind didn’t leap from the seams. It was another few minutes before she was able to disentangle herself and go in search of Little Uncle.

She found him sitting on a wooden platform at the edge of the village, tallying the earnings from their performance. A pine tree bowed over him, as if peeking over his shoulder.

He’d removed his mask, revealing his handsome, flushed face. Though she called him “Little Uncle,” as he was Auntie’s younger brother—to differentiate him from “Big Uncle,” who was her husband—he was only eighteen to Ren’s seventeen years. *Almost* seventeen years. His hair stuck up

in messy tufts, resembling a sprout. Ren resisted the urge to smooth them down, to fuss over him like Auntie would.

She sat beside him, slipping off her sandals and pulling her legs up onto the wooden platform. She added the items she carried to the pile—a covered basket of soybeans, a small pot of soy sauce, and a block of fermented bean paste. This village was known for its soybean production. She emptied her pockets of coins, tossing them onto the platform where they clinked and spun before settling.

Shoulder to shoulder, Ren and Little Uncle leaned over the assortment of goods and handfuls of coins. The offerings were meager, totaling less than a quarter of what they'd accrued in previous years. It had been the same in the other villages, though it was still a shock to see; Ren had hoped for more after the liveliness of the crowd.

"Well," Little Uncle said, following a lengthy pause, "I am quite fond of beans."

"There was a blight this past harvest," said a grave voice behind them, and Ren and Little Uncle both jumped.

Auntie had come soundlessly down the short path from the village—an impressive feat, as she had twisted her ankle two days before and was using a walking stick to move about. Strands of her dark brown hair fluttered about her severe face. Her gaze didn't linger but moved past them toward the empty fields. "Something is ill with the earth."

Ren shivered at Auntie's words. The people of the caravan had noticed the changes as they'd traveled first east, then north from the small villages that dotted the river valleys to the larger seaside towns scattered along the coast. It had gotten worse the farther they'd headed inland, west toward the mountains. Their hunters described too-quiet forests, where an arrow shot into a thicket wouldn't release a single bird, with lakes so still they appeared like glass, and withered glades where once wildflowers flourished.

The people who lived in the villages closer to the mountains were superstitious—a difficult harvest was blamed on disgruntled spirits, a child's

sickness on the work of demons. Gorye Village, the last village on their trail, was the remotest of all, nestled at the foot of the largest mountain.

If it were up to Ren, they'd forgo their visit entirely. The people there were dour and ill-humored. But Auntie and the caravan leaders insisted they return every year. The Gorye villagers depended upon their trade, and there were rare plants that only grew deep within the mountains that the elders of the valley needed for their medicines.

Guarding the mountain is a difficult and thankless task, Auntie would say when Ren complained, as she often did. *We are honored to ease their burden.*

Guarding from what? Boredom? Ren would grumble.

It would take the caravan five days to reach the village, the Haebaek Mountains looming ever closer until they awoke one morning to find the daylight gone and the forest entirely engulfed in shadow.

"You disobeyed me," Auntie admonished, and Ren flinched.

Little Uncle looked up from where he'd been counting their coins for the third time.

"I asked you not to draw attention to yourself," Auntie continued. "I didn't think that such an unreasonable request."

"It was just a little bit of wind," Little Uncle argued, always quick to defend Ren.

"A wind at dusk is a storm at night. What if there are rumors?"

Ren dropped her head. "I'm sorry," she said. "It won't happen again, I promise."

Auntie's gaze fixed upon her. "No, it won't," she said quietly. "In Gorye Village, you won't act in the play. You'll accompany Big Uncle on the flute."

Ren gaped at her. "But that's our last performance this year!"

When they returned to the valley, they'd have to prepare for the harsh winter months. No more performances—at least not like the ones on the caravan trails, with big crowds full of new faces. It didn't matter that the people of Gorye were gloomy and humorless. She'd been looking forward to performing at least once more.

“It was one mistake,” Ren said, and she didn’t care that her voice had risen in pitch. “I don’t see why I must be punished for something so small!”

“But *was* it a mistake?” Auntie asked. Unlike Ren, she hadn’t raised her voice—she never did, except for when a performance called for it. Ren felt her words like a blade, cutting to the truth. She *had* called upon the Light, even though she knew Auntie had forbidden it.

“Just a little bit of wind...,” Auntie repeated. “On a day like today, it might only be that—when the sun is out, and we’re surrounded by friends. But the darkness can come down upon us swifter than breath. It’s not a punishment, Ren. I’m trying to keep you safe. All of us.”

“What about your ankle?” Ren asked. If Ren didn’t perform, then Auntie would have to.

“It’ll have healed by the time we reach Gorye Village.” Auntie let out a sigh. “Where’s Big Uncle?”

“He must have gotten wrangled into helping out the villagers,” Little Uncle answered. Ren didn’t have to look at him to know that his brow was knotted with worry.

“One of you go and fetch him. We need to leave soon.”

Ren stood from her seated position. “I’ll get him,” she mumbled, hurrying in the direction of the village.

She was upset, but not just because she couldn’t perform or because she’d disappointed Auntie, which she always took care to avoid. It was that Auntie hadn’t even *tried* to understand why she’d done it.

Ren had regretted her actions immediately and had apologized—why couldn’t Auntie yield, just a little? With a sigh, Ren kicked a pebble that went skittering into the underbrush, then continued with heavy steps down the path.

This village was similar to the others the caravan had stopped at on their travels, filled with thatched-roof homes and tiny dirt courtyards. The sound of knocking drew Ren to a small corner house where Big Uncle was using a rock to pound a wooden support beam into place. He was so large that he only had to lift his arms to reach the underside of the roof.

An elderly couple waited patiently beside him. When Big Uncle was finished, the taller of the men bowed deeply to Big Uncle, while his husband handed over a small parcel wrapped in cloth.

“Please accept this humble gift as payment,” the smaller man said. “We wish we had something of value to offer.”

“This is more than enough,” Big Uncle said, accepting the parcel with both hands.

As he turned, he caught sight of Ren and beckoned her over. She watched him fold back the cloth to reveal two flattened pancakes filled with honey and cinnamon.

“Hmm,” Big Uncle began slowly. “We could share them with Auntie and Little Uncle...” He waggled his eyebrows. “Or...”

“We could eat them ourselves,” Ren finished with grin.

Big Uncle winked. He handed Ren the larger of the two pancakes, and together they walked toward where their caravan had camped east of the village.

“Auntie is angry with me,” Ren said, nibbling on her pancake. Even upset she could still appreciate the sweetness of the dessert, chewy on the inside and pan-fried crispy on the outside. She didn’t have to explain to Big Uncle what she’d done to earn Auntie’s disapproval. “Was I wrong?”

Big Uncle didn’t answer for some time, though he finished his pancake before her. They were within sight of the wagons when he stopped to pluck a petal from the top of her head. Releasing it, he let the petal fall into a swoop of wind that carried it swiftly toward the mountains. Ren watched it for as long as she could, until the petal was only a speck on the horizon.

“Sometimes there’s a feeling inside you that’s too big to contain,” Big Uncle said, and his low, warm voice rolled over her like a gentle wave. “You need to let it out. There’s no harm in that.”

Hot tears pricked the backs of her eyes. That was the truth that Auntie couldn’t seem to understand. She’d warned Ren not to use her magic, but Ren sometimes couldn’t help herself. The feeling was similar to when she performed; in those moments, she felt truly free.

“I have something for you,” Big Uncle said, “but first...” He leaned back to gaze down at her. “Let me see that face I love.”

For a moment, Ren blinked, uncomprehending.

She had forgotten she was still wearing her mask.

That wasn’t so odd for her. She’d sometimes wear one of her masks for days, only taking it off to wash her face. It was a habit from when she was younger—wearing a mask made her feel safe. With it, no one could tell what she was thinking, what she was feeling.

When Auntie first brought her to the valley ten years ago, she’d given Ren a mask that she didn’t take off for a whole year. Little Uncle, who was eight at the time, had teased her, *How can we be certain you’re a little girl and not a demon?*

Auntie had let her be. As for Big Uncle ...

He’d been the same size as he was now, but she’d been so much smaller. For a month, she’d tremble when he’d enter the room. And so, he’d kept away. She’d only known of his presence from the gifts he would leave her—acorns wrapped in leaves, flowers with odd-shaped petals, stones smoothed from the river. She’d find them on her pillow or next to her sandals. He’d built her a boat moored to the shore so that she could lie on her back and watch the stars. And a player’s satchel of tools so that she could mimic Auntie with her flute and paper fan.

The first person she’d shown her face to was Big Uncle.

She’d stumbled upon him sitting quietly by the stream behind their home. At the sound of her approach, he’d glanced up. He quickly turned away, but not before she saw the tears in his eyes. She hadn’t understood the source of his sorrow—later, she would realize it was the loss of a child, his and Auntie’s—she only knew that in his sadness, she felt an echo of her own.

Taking off her mask, she’d placed it over his face, to hide his tears the way it hid hers. But the mask was meant for a child’s face and only covered a portion of his, mainly his eyes and nose. He’d looked so silly that Ren had started laughing, and then Big Uncle had laughed. Afterward, he’d gathered her in his arms, and she’d never felt safer.

“This face?” Ren said, lifting up her mask. She stuck out her tongue.

“Yes,” Big Uncle said, and the love in his voice was as clear as it had been that morning by the river. “That one exactly.”

He gestured to a rock nearby. “Wait here,” he said, before moving off toward the wagons. She did as he asked, sitting down and stretching out her legs. A few minutes later, he returned with a long parcel wrapped in a bamboo mat, dropping it onto her lap.

“A gift,” he said proudly, “for you.”

Eagerly she unknotted the string and pushed back the folds of the mat to reveal a paper umbrella. She knew immediately that Big Uncle had made it; the craftsmanship was exquisite. Gripping the smooth handle, Ren pushed the runner up. The hood of the parasol opened like a flower. It was a beautiful red color, with gold swirling accents.

“Give it a twirl,” he said. She got to her feet and did just that, the gold and red blurring in the air like shooting stars; even the *whooshing* sound it made was lovely.

“I know your birthday isn’t for another week...,” Big Uncle said, rubbing the back of his neck.

Still holding the umbrella, she threw her arms around him. “I love it! Thank you.”

He placed her gently on the ground. “Now, let’s get back to the others before they’re tempted to leave us behind!”

As she walked with Big Uncle, she felt her earlier frustration ease from her shoulders. Auntie was right to be angry; she was only concerned for Ren’s safety and that of the caravan.

Between the use of her magic and her family’s well-being, there was never a choice. Ren would always choose her family. If she had to suppress her powers to protect them, then she would.

And just *maybe* Auntie, once she saw Ren’s determination, would change her mind and let her perform, after all—there were five days until they reached their last stop, enough time for Ren to prove her resolve, that she could bury the Light where it belonged.

That thought, and the realization that in a few weeks' time she'd be back home in the valley, with its cool winter days and star-filled nights surrounded by the people she loved, lifted her spirits. Twirling her umbrella, she raced ahead of Big Uncle, eager to depart for Gorye Village.

CHAPTER 2

SUNHO

The Under World

Outside the Ninth Ward Mithril Factory

SUNHO STEPPED BACK from the gates as the factory horn blared a warning, smoke unfolding from the great stacks like wings in the night. He raised his scarf, the red threads faded and fraying, higher over his nose. His movement jostled the sword sheathed at his back. For fifteen seconds the horn clamored, the stacks spewing enough smoke to fill the sky above the factory. When it was over, he turned away, only for his eyes to catch on sparks of blue in the fumes—mithril particles.

A pigeon warbled nearby. He followed the sound around a corner to where a boy and a girl lingered in the shadow of the factory wall. The boy was slight of build, with silver-white hair. *Tag*. Sunho remembered his name from when they first met. He was seventeen, same as Sunho. The whistling trill cut off as Tag lowered his hands. The girl, Yurhee, was a few years older; her hair—brown with streaks of red—was pulled back from her face with a butterfly clip. She'd been leaning against the wall with her knee bent but rocked to a stand at Sunho's approach.

"We weren't sure if you'd make it," she said. "The patrols are out in droves."

"I saw a few on my way over," Sunho said, recalling the pounding of feet and the bobbing of the lanterns in the dark streets. He'd kept to the shadows

to avoid their light.

He'd come directly from a job in the eighth ward, as hired muscle for a raid. If he'd been caught without the proper papers explaining his presence in Mid City, he'd have been thrown in prison. Two big jobs in one night was risky, but Yurhee's missive that morning had promised a large payout.

"Sunho, you're hurt." Yurhee reached out a hand to his neck, and he took a step back on instinct. He must have been nicked in the raid.

Yurhee lifted a brow, then drew her hand away. "Sorry. Habit. I have a soft spot for closed-off, emotionally inaccessible boys."

Behind her, Tag lifted his brow, frowning slightly.

Sunho had met the two of them a month ago, when they'd hired him for a job pilfering cargo from a petty gangster. They only stole from *greedy bastards who deserve it, the bastards*, as Yurhee put it. Neither of them was skilled in hand-to-hand combat, which was why they'd posted a job seeking a sword-for-hire.

"I'll check on the explosives," Tag mumbled. Crouching by the wall, he shifted aside strands of ivy to reveal two canister bombs rigged to detonate on a timer.

Unease settled in Sunho's stomach. His jobs up until now had been low risk—stealing from a Sarenian mithril factory was on an entirely different scale. If they were caught, they'd face far worse than prison.

Yurhee reached into her jacket and pulled out a scroll, unfurling it with a flick of her wrist. Sketches of buildings in a wide area were scrawled with notes on guard rotations and estimated travel time between marked locations. "We need to get from here"—she pointed to their position outside the wall at the northeast corner—"to here." Her finger jabbed a point in the largest building at the back of the factory grounds, marked with an X.

"What's there?" Sunho asked.

She winked, rolling up the map and tucking it into her jacket. "You'll find out soon enough."

There was still time to back out, but then he wouldn't get the payment Yurhee had promised. Sunho adjusted his strap so that his sword, sheathed