

THE
LAST
FALLEN
STAR

A GIFTED CLANS NOVEL

BOOK ONE

BY GRACI KIM



RICK RIORDAN PRESENTS

Disney • HYPERION LOS ANGELES NEW YORK

1.

My Family of Healing Witches

SO HERE'S THE THING.



There are only two days left until my sister's initiation ceremony. In two sleeps, Hattie will turn thirteen, and she will have to prove to the entire congregation of gifted clans in Los Angeles that she has what it takes to become a witch. A healing witch. A *real* Gom.

And she's gonna be amazeballs, of course. I mean, it's her birthright. Healing magic flows in her blood, as it flows through our parents' blood, because we, the Gom clan, are descendants of the Cave Bear Goddess—the patron goddess of service and sacrifice.

Well, except me.

Sigh. Yep. My own thirteenth birthday is only a month away, but unlike my eomma (that's my mom) or my appa (that's my dad) or my sister, I'm a normal, non-gifted person without a lick of magic. I'm a saram.

I was adopted. And don't get me wrong. My parents try super hard to make me feel part of the gifted community, and

I love them so much for it. But the truth is, the harder they try, the more I realize how much of an outsider I really am. I'm *different*.

Hence why I'm here, sitting behind the reception desk of the Traditional Korean Medicine Clinic that my parents run, doing mind-numbing data entry instead of practicing healing spells like my sister.

The bells chime on the clinic's door, and I jolt up in my chair as an old, dark-haired man limps in. He looks like he could be Korean, but I don't think I've ever seen him at temple.

"Welcome to the clinic!" I say. "How can I help you?"

"Good morning," he says, wincing as he wobbles up to the desk. "My name is Robert Choi. I've just moved here from New York, and I was told to ask for a James or Eunha Oh. I think I've sprained my ankle."

He slides his wrists together, and the water in his Gi—the cylindrical glass charm on his bracelet—sloshes a little as it rubs against his skin. An image of two suns and two moons appears on his right wrist with the motion, and the symbol glows green.

Ah, he's a Tokki—an infusing witch. All witches get the same gifted mark on their wrists when they do magic, but it reveals itself in different colors depending on which clan they belong to. The mark is also how we can tell which patients are gifted and which are saram. If they're saram, we have to make sure they don't know we heal with magic. The infusers make special memory-erasing potions for that.

I know what you're thinking: Why would you keep such an awesome skill secret from the world? Well, Appa says if

the saram found out about the gifted clans, that would bring grave danger to our community. People don't like what they can't understand. It scares them, and scared people do foolish things. I guess that makes sense.

"You've come to the right place," I say, smiling brightly. "James and Eunha are my parents. And sorry to hear about your ankle, Mr. Choi. Appa has just finished up with a patient, and there's a free slot for you now if you'd like it."

"Ah, you must be Hattie." He nods knowingly at me. "I hear you have an initiation ceremony coming up. I hope you are well prepared."

I shake my head. "Hattie's actually my sister. I'm not . . . Well, I can't . . ." I trail off, and Mr. Choi frowns.

"That's odd. They said the Oh's only had one daughter."

Oof. The comment spears right through my chest, but I stay silent and put on a well-rehearsed fake smile. What I'd really like to do right now is take out my Gi bracelet (if I had one) and heal his ankle right here and now, to prove how much of an Oh I really am. Or at least stand up for myself and tell him I'm part of this family, too. That's what Hattie would do if she were in my place.

But I'm not my sister. I'm not brave like she is. I prefer to keep my head down and stay out of trouble. Trust me, it's easier this way.

A warm hand squeezes my shoulder, and I look back to see Appa standing behind me. I didn't hear him come to reception. "This is Riley, most *definitely* our daughter, and the most dedicated Gom I know." Appa beams at me, and then extends his hand to Mr. Choi. "Welcome to our humble clinic, Robert.

And welcome to LA. Come with me, and let's get that ankle looked at."

Appa leads the hobbling Mr. Choi down the hallway, and a stinging heat builds behind my eyes. *Sigh*. Yet another day in the life of Riley Oh—the wannabe witch living in an exclusive gifted world.

"Riley!" Hattie runs up to the reception desk, puts her elbows on it, and rests her chin on her palms. Her rounded cheeks are pink, and her hair is damp with sweat. "Please come save me. Eomma is driving me up the wall. She's making me repeat the incantations a billion times, and I don't know what they mean anymore. I mean, honestly, what are words, even?"

"She just wants you to do well at the initiation."

Hattie rolls her eyes, but she knows I'm right.

A successful initiation ceremony is the most important rite of passage in a witch's life. She's got to perform three spells that satisfy the elders in the gifted clans council, and then say her vows in front of the whole congregation at temple. That's hundreds of people from five different clans, not to mention our patron goddess, who will be watching from the Godrealm.

Then, and only then, will Hattie get to wear her Gi around her wrist without adult supervision. Without it, she can't do any magic. So yeah, basically, it's a *big* deal. I mean, no pressure or anything.

Hattie fiddles with the earth-filled charm that's attached to a gold chain around her wrist. Eomma usually keeps my sister's Gi in her enchanted safe, and Hattie only gets to wear it when she's practicing spells with our parents. "Okay, but can

you come with me anyway? Eomma's all cranky and flustered, and I need moral support. Please?"

I make a serious face and pretend to be preoccupied with the patient database. "I'm kinda busy."

"Pretty pleeease?" She gets all up in my face and makes big puppy-dog eyes at me. "You can have my favorite sweater. And I'll do all your chores for a week. Come on, Rye, have a heart!"

I hold off as long as I can before laughing. "Okay, okay, you twisted my arm." I push her sweaty mug away. "Just wanted to see you beg. Looks good on you."

"You'll pay for that!" She slaps me on my shoulder but grins, and then drags me out of my chair and down the hallway to Eomma's consultation room.

Eomma is inside, pacing back and forth while holding the family spellbook up to her nose. Her glasses are foggy, and her black perm is bouncing like a halo around her head. "Hattie, there you are! Now come back and practice the wound-closing incantation again." She points her finger at a Korean word in her spellbook. "And remember this time that the *p* is aspirated, so don't be shy—put your whole diaphragm into it. *Puh! Puh!* See? Like this—*puh!*"

Hattie drags her palms down her cheeks and gives me an exasperated look. I stifle a laugh. Eomma is in fine form today. She pulls off the *plugged-into-a-power-socket* and *rest-is-for-the-weak!* looks better than anyone I know.

As Hattie reluctantly follows Eomma's lead to aspirate her *puhs*, I study their two faces. And, for the billionth time, I wish I looked more like them.

I'm told my biological parents were of Korean ethnicity, too. But that's about where the similarities end. Where my Gom family are round, petite, and unblemished, I'm tall and freckled. I'm all pointy chin and high cheekbones, with more angles than curves. I'm the one people raise their eyebrows at when they look at our family photos.

Before I know it, my eyes are burning and I quickly wipe them, embarrassed. Ugh. Classic me. This is what my best friend, Emmett, calls my "leaky-bladder eyeball problem." You see, I have a slight issue controlling my tears. When I'm sad, I cry. When I'm angry, I cry. When I'm frustrated, I cry. I'm basically *really* talented at crying.

Hattie says it's a good thing—that I'm "in touch with my feelings" (more like drowning in them...). And Eomma and Appa say I'll grow out of it. But let's face it—compared to my confident-and-composed family, I'm flawed. It's yet another piece of evidence that I'm not a true Oh. That I'm weak and don't belong.

Eomma has now prompted Hattie to practice her vows, and my sister reluctantly obeys. "I vow on the name of Mago Halmi, mother of the three realms, mother of the six goddesses, mother of mortalkind and all creation"—Hattie's lisp is making an appearance, which only happens when she's tired or stressed—"to carry out my sacred duty to heal those in need. To uphold the Gom clan motto of Service and Sacrifice... and... and..."

She trails off, forgetting the words, and I finish the sentence for her. "And I understand that with my gift comes great responsibility—to my clan, to the gifted community, and to

our ancestor, the Cave Bear Goddess, who blesses us with her divine power.” I might not have a Gi or magic running through my veins, but I know my stuff.

Hattie gives me a grateful look. *Thanks*, she mouths. She puts her hands on her hips. “See, Eomma? Riley is so much more ready for an initiation than I’ll ever be. Have you spoken to Auntie Okja about Rye being allowed to do one, too?”

I stick my hand in my pocket and squeeze my onyx stone to calm my nerves. It’s shaped like a curved teardrop, and it’s the only thing my biological parents left me. Hattie thinks it might be a family heirloom or something, but I just like how hard and real it feels in my hand. It’s only a stone (and not nearly as cool as a Gi), but sometimes I carry it with me, because touching it reminds me that I came from somewhere, too.

“Sorry, girls. Your appa and I have been trying to find a good time to tell you. . . .” Eomma sighs. “Auntie Okja tried really hard, but the other elders just won’t budge.”

I lower my eyes, mostly to hide the new trickle of disappointment forming on my eye line. My stupid leaky-bladder eyeballs fail me again. “Oh . . . that’s okay,” I say, even though that’s far from the truth. “Thank you for trying.”

Hattie raises her eyebrows at me. “No, it’s *not* okay.” She turns to Eomma. “You and Appa are always pushing for more inclusivity in the gifted community. This is the perfect opportunity to make a statement, isn’t it?”

Eomma looks sheepish. “You’re absolutely right. But change takes time. Some of the clans aren’t as progressive as we are. They’re arguing that, without a Gi, Riley wouldn’t be able to

cast the spells anyway. And if the council can't witness the spells during the initiation, they can't make a fair assessment."

I shrink, but Hattie pushes back. "But that's the whole point. Rye knows the words to all the healing spells, back to front. If the council just gave her a chance to prove herself, maybe the goddess would be convinced and grant Rye a Gi, too." She rolls her eyes. "They've got it all backward."

"I understand, sweetheart. You know I do. But the other elders think it's asking too much of the Godrealm to bless a saram with magic. That it would be impertinent of us. Disrespectful, even. Your auntie is only one voice among five."

Hattie raises her hands in exasperation, and I want to melt into the floor and disappear. I hate being the reason they argue. "Seriously, it's okay, Hat—" I start, trying to calm my sister.

"What's disrespectful is not even giving Riley a chance," Hattie continues. "If she tanks the initiation and the Cave Bear Goddess doesn't give her a Gi, then fine. Or if Riley doesn't want to do it, then that's also fine. But not giving her the freedom to choose? That's wrong on so many levels."

When Eomma doesn't respond, Hattie squeezes my hand, and a determined look appears on her face. I call it her "boss face," because no one in their right mind would mess with Hattie while she's wearing that expression. "As soon as I'm old enough," she says, "I'm gonna run for Gom elder. And when I do, mark my words, I'm going to shake up that place. The whole secret-society thing is so outdated."

"I have no doubt you will achieve that, and so much more," Eomma says, and I totally agree. I mean, why stop at council elder? Hattie for president! I can see the enamel pins already.

I squeeze Hattie's hand back and feel a warmth spread through my chest. For everything I don't have, I definitely won the jackpot as far as my sister goes. She is literally the Best. Sister. Ever.

"It's a shame you can't just do a spell to share your magic," I joke, trying to lighten the mood. "One where the recipient doesn't need a Gi. That would solve all our problems."

A grin spreads over Hattie's face. "Crowdsourced magic. Now *that* would jolt the clans into the twenty-first century, right, Eomma?"

We both look to Eomma, and she laughs nervously.

Hattie and I share a glance. Eomma only laughs like that when she's hiding something.

"*No. Way,*" Hattie says. "There actually *is* a spell for sharing magic with a saram, isn't there?"

My jaw falls to the ground. Impossible!

Eomma mumbles something under her breath but still avoids our eyes, and *that* is a dead giveaway. "It's not that simple, girls," she finally admits. "It's dangerous, and even if it worked, it wouldn't be permanent. The spell would have to be redone again and again—"

"What's the name of the spell?" Hattie interrupts. "And where can we find it?"

And were you ever going to tell me about it? I silently ask, my gut rolling into a tight knot.

Eomma closes the spellbook in her hands with a decisive *thud*. "This conversation has gone on long enough." She looks at the clock on the wall and gasps. "And we're going to be late for temple! Quick, go get your appa. We're leaving in two."

She hurries us out of her consultation room, and I get my butt moving. I wouldn't miss temple for anything.

"Rye!" Hattie stops me in my tracks and grabs my arm. "Did you see Eomma glance at the book when I asked where we could find the spell?"

I shake my head. I hadn't noticed. I was too busy wondering why my parents had kept this from me when they knew how badly I wanted to become a witch.

"I know that book's only supposed to have healing spells in it," Hattie continues, "but maybe Eomma just told us that so we wouldn't snoop. Maybe the magic-sharing spell is in there, too. In fact, I'm *sure* it is. Where else could it be?"

I frown. We're not allowed to touch the family spellbook—not until Eomma and Appa deem us ready. And besides, breaking rules makes me erupt in hives.

"But, Hat," I start, "you know I was joking before, right? Even if the spell is in there, I could never ask you to share your magic. Besides, Eomma said it was dangerous. She wouldn't lie about something like that."

She snorts. "Who said I wanted your permission? Didn't you hear me drone on about choice before? If I want to share my magic with you, who are you to stop me?"

I stare at her, wondering what I ever did to deserve such a fearless sister.

Hattie lowers her voice, and there's an excited twinkle in her eye. "Looks like we need to get our sticky hands on a certain spellbook, wouldn't you say?"

As she drags me to Appa's consultation room to fetch him, I hear a small voice in my head.

Could I actually become a healing witch—a real Gom? Could this be my chance to do my parents proud and prove to the gifted community that I belong?

I know I shouldn't get my hopes up. It'd just be a recipe for disappointment.

But here's the *real* crux of the problem, folks: I, Riley Oh, have a sweet tooth.

And hope? Well, hope tastes sweeter than candy.

2. Saturday Is Temple Day



H-MART IS ONE OF MY FAVORITE places in the world. I mean, it's hard not to love it. It's a grocery store full of the most delicious things: every variety of gimchi you could ever dream of, ice cream in the shapes of watermelon wedges and corncobs, and don't forget the little counter that sells tornado fries (basically an entire potato spiraled out and fried on a stick—*drool*).

But those aren't the only reasons I love this particular H-Mart. It's also one of the secret entrances to the temple. The gifted community is really paranoid about their secret getting out into the saram population, so the Gumiho clan (they're the illusionists) use their glamour magic to hide us in plain sight. Genius, really.

For example, right now, my family and I are walking through the refrigerated aisle of brightly colored milk drinks, past the sweet-potato-cake stand, and toward the counter that sells Korean fried chicken. To the saram eye, the cherubic-faced man at the counter might look like an ordinary chicken

vendor. But those of us from the gifted clans know he's actually a Miru guard. The Miru clan are protectors descended from the Water Dragon Goddess. They have either superhuman strength or speed, which make them ideal for protecting our secret portals and entrances.

"Hi there. Could I interest you in some K-fry today?" he says brightly.

In response, Eomma and Appa each rub their wrists together, and their Gi bracelets reveal their gifted marks.

"These two are with us," Appa adds, nodding at Hattie and me.

The Miru protector checks out the gold symbols on my parents' wrists, and then he nods toward the swinging door to his left, which leads to the kitchen. "You may pass."

We push through the door into the bustling kitchen and immediately smell the delicious waft of sweet-and-spicy fried chicken. But it doesn't last long. As we continue over to the walk-in fridge and step into its chilly belly, we are transported to the lobby of a grand building with high ceilings and marble floors.

I come here every week, but the temple never ceases to take my breath away. At first glance, it looks like a super-fancy hotel. The Miru guards protecting the lobby could pass as doormen, and there's always soothing music playing in the background. A sandalwood fragrance lingers in the air, like those signature perfumes some hotels have.

But it's so much more than that. Once you jump into the elevators, you get a sense of the temple's true scale. There are eighty-eight levels, and so many rooms on each floor that

no one can keep track of what's behind each door. Most of the rooms aren't accessible without the right keys, but Auntie Okja says some doors are portals to the various gifted temples around the world, while others house mythical creatures visiting from the Godrealm. They say there's even a door that takes you to the Spiritrealm (the place we go when we die), which, frankly, blows my mind.

"Hurry, girls," Eomma urges, pushing us out of the elevator at level 88 and toward the big bronze doors. "Mr. Pyo is going to make us pay for being late."

And she's right. As soon as we enter the sanctuary through the heavy wooden doors carved with animal heads, Mr. Pyo's booming voice calls out.

"Well, well, well. Good of you to join us, Oh family of the Gom clan. You've interrupted the service, but I'm sure you have a very important reason for being tardy. Please, why don't you find a seat while the punctual members of the congregation sit and wait."

We lower our heads and quickly sit in the Gom pews while hundreds of eyes follow our every move.

"Absolutely mortifying," Eomma mumbles under her breath.

"Ugh, he's the worst," I whisper.

"Agreed," Hattie and Appa echo.

Mr. Pyo turns his attention back to the service, and I eventually get the nerve to raise my eyes from my lap and look around.

The large hexagonal chamber is full to the brim today, with witches from the Gom clan, the Samjogo clan, the Miru clan, the Gumiho clan, and the Tokki clan all sitting in their

respective pews, which fan out from the center. Each block of pews ends with a polished bronze plaque brandishing the clan's motto, beneath a tall statue of their patron goddess. The icons are made out of materials that match their clan's colors—jade for the Tokki, blue lapis for the Miru, gold for the Gom—that kind of thing. Of course, the Horangi clan's pews are empty. The sixth clan hasn't been allowed at temple for years.

As per custom, the five elders are standing in the raised center of the sanctuary next to the Gi cauldron, which is basically a large black urn with clawed feet. It has the symbol of the two suns and two moons branded on its side and is filled with sand from the beginning of time. Sticks of incense poke out from its top, reminding me of candles on a birthday cake.

The elders are all wearing hanboks in their respective clan colors, including Auntie Okja, who's in gold. She's my mom's older sister, and the Gom elder on the LA council. I give her a small wave when her eyes meet mine. She winks back in response.

"Now, as I was saying," Mr. Pyo continues, "today is not a normal Saturday service. It is a momentous day for my family and the entire Samjogo clan, as my granddaughter Mira turns one hundred days old today!"

The congregation claps enthusiastically, but my family all glance nervously at me.

Let's be clear—I love going to temple, I really do. But the one thing I hate about attending each week is the number of Gi ceremonies I have to endure.

When a gifted child turns one hundred days old, the Gi

cauldron assesses the witch's elemental balance and forges her Gi. Parents then keep the Gi safe until the child is old enough to start training for her initiation ceremony on her thirteenth birthday.

Auntie Okja once explained it to me like this: The world has five sacred elements—wood, earth, water, fire, and metal. If a witch can harness the perfect balance of all five, he or she can channel the power of the goddesses and wield the specific magic of their clan.

The catch is that witches are born with only four internal elements. Which is why they must wear the fifth element—the one they lack—around their wrist. A Gi is kind of like a car key. Each witch needs their fifth element to start their car, but the particular car each clan drives (i.e., the type of magic each clan can do) is different. It's in their blood. For us, the Gom, it's healing.

Mr. Pyo takes baby Mira from her mom's arms and carries her toward the cauldron. I instinctively shrink into my velveteen pew cushion, wishing I could melt into its softness and disappear.

“Mago Halmi, mother of the three realms, mother of the six goddesses, mother of mortalkind and all creation,” Mr. Pyo starts, holding Mira up into the air with both arms outstretched. “Today I humbly present to you this child of the Samjogo clan, descendant of the Three-Legged Crow Goddess, for your divine blessing.”

The Samjogo clan chants their motto, Leadership and Wisdom, while the four other elders take turns touching Mira's forehead with their activated gifted marks. Then Mr. Pyo steps

toward the Gi cauldron and declares, “Mago Halmi, let your will be known!”

The congregation goes silent, and for a moment, nothing happens. Immediately, my heart starts to race and my palms get sweaty. A deep rumble emanates from the cauldron, and I count to ten under my breath as Mina’s first element is revealed.

“Her dominant element is water!” Mr. Pyo announces first, as a swirling tornado of liquid materializes above the cauldron. “The symbol of abundance and grace. How fitting for a seer.” Everyone cheers in approval.

The water tornado disappears, giving way to a glowing seed that grows into a tree in front of our eyes. “Her subdominant is wood,” Mr. Pyo calls out. “The symbol of compassion and growth.”

The cheering continues as the third element reveals itself—a pyramid of solid bronze, shimmering as if it had been dipped in glitter. “Followed by metal. The symbol of strength and power.” Mr. Pyo beams almost as bright as the pyramid.

Finally, a blazing bonfire appears in the pyramid’s place, levitating above the cauldron with its hungry flames. “And finally, fire. The symbol of transformation and will. Mago Halmi has spoken!”

My eyes lock on to the fire. I want to look away, but I can’t.

“And so, Mira’s Gi will be forged with earth—the element she does not possess,” Mr. Pyo concludes. “The symbol of fertility and life, and the key to unlocking her perfect elemental balance. May Mago Halmi bless her future as a seeing witch.”

As the fire dissipates, a small glass charm of soft earth

appears above the cauldron's mouth. It looks just like Hattie's Gi. The cylinder hovers expectantly in the air until Mr. Pyo carefully takes it in both hands and passes it to Mira's parents.

I clutch my chest, and Hattie takes my hand and squeezes it hard. She knows exactly what I'm thinking about right now.

My parents, being the progressive people they are, persuaded the elders to give me a Gi ceremony when I turned one hundred days old. And I'm sure they meant well. It must have been a landmark occasion for the LA-based clans to see a saram get blessed. Too bad it didn't go according to plan. . . .

The story goes that when the Gi cauldron was asked for my elemental balance, it sat silent and idle for an impossibly long time. Eventually, it spluttered and wheezed as if it had swallowed a fireball. Then it delivered its final answer.

First element: fire.

Second element: fire.

Third element: *still* fire.

Fourth element: Yup, you guessed it. Fire.

Then, instead of forging my Gi, the cauldron caught on fire. *Literally*. The entire thing lit up like the Christmas tree at the Grove.

The thing is, no one ever gets two of the same elements, let alone four. That's just not how it works. So the council considered the mishap proof that the saram shouldn't be part of the community, and I was deemed a fiery freak of nature. *Sigh*. As you can imagine, that was the beginning of the end for me.

"Who cares about Gi ceremonies when we have a magic-sharing spell to cast?" Hattie whispers in my ear. "Forget about back then. We have the future to look forward to."

I bite my lip. “But what if sharing means you’ll lose your power? And remember, Eomma said it was dangerous.”

“Sometimes you gotta burn your fingers to enjoy the s’more.”

But it’s different for me, I think. I love Hattie with all my heart, but she doesn’t understand that things aren’t as simple for me as they are for her. One false step and the council could ban me from temple altogether. Or, Mago forbid, what if they decided to wipe my memory with a strong dose of Memoryhaze potion? There’s a reason I keep my head down and my mouth shut. It’s safer this way.

Then again, seeing Mira get her Gi, and knowing Hattie’s going to be initiated soon, it makes me wonder. . . . If I don’t take this chance now, will another ever come again? Will I live the rest of my life regretting the one opportunity I had to fulfill my potential?

It’s probably a result of my burnt nerves, but after a moment, I give in to Hattie’s enthusiasm. As the sweet taste of hope returns to my mouth, I whisper back, “Guess we have to figure out how to open Eomma’s safe, then.”

Hattie’s eyes light up so bright, I can see my reflection in them. “That’s the smartest thing you’ve said in *years*.”

We both sit there pondering the mechanics of enchanted safes, when Mr. Hong, the Miru elder, begins making the community announcements. The first piece of news is that the date for the gifted library’s grand reopening will be announced soon. The library has been closed for over ten years, so it will be a massive celebration for all clans around the world.

The second announcement is about an upcoming Saturday School trip to the traveling carnival. Saturday School is where

kids go after temple service to learn more about the gifted clans and the Godrealm and stuff. Kind of like school for witches, but only once a week. As for the carnival, it's one of the highlights in the annual gifted calendar.

Suddenly I have an idea. "Isn't Professor Ryu teaching Saturday School today?" I whisper to Hattie.

She ponders for a second and then slaps me on the arm. "I like how you think!"

Professor Ryu is one of those super-liberal, ditch-the-lesson-plans-and-let-the-students-direct-the-learning type of teachers, and she claims there is no such thing as a bad question. She's also from the Tokki clan, and Kindness and Heart isn't their motto for nothing. She's one of the nicest people we know and probably our best way of finding out how to break the safe's enchantment.

"And for the final piece of community news," Mr. Hong continues, "a cautious word of warning for our loyal congregation."

The other elders visibly tense, including Auntie Okja.

Mr. Hong clears his throat a few times before speaking again. "It has come to our attention that the Horangi clan has attempted to make contact with some members of the council."

The temperature drops in the sanctuary and the hairs on my arm rise to attention. *No way.*

"The council has convened on the issue, and we suspect the excommunicated clan may be planning another attack on the community. We ask that everyone remain vigilant and take necessary precautions. If you see any of the scholars loitering around gifted property, report them to us immediately.

And if any try to make contact, it is imperative that you *do not* engage. They are dangerous and should not be approached.”

Nervous murmurs ripple down the pews, spreading out from the center of the room like lava from a volcano. Eomma and Appa share a look of concern, and my eyes are immediately drawn to the empty benches in front of the red-jasper statue of the Mountain Tiger Goddess—the ex-patron of the Horangi clan.

The scholars weren’t always cursed. In fact, they used to be the upholders of knowledge and truth in the gifted community. They were the keepers of the sacred texts at the gifted library, and they were well respected. Revered, even.

But then, almost thirteen years ago, everything changed. Auntie Okja said that under the leadership of their new elder, Ms. Kwon, the clan became obsessed with power. Ms. Kwon claimed she’d figured out a way for witches to become as powerful as the goddesses and that she would pursue it until the scholars became divine themselves. When the other five clans accused them of heresy, Ms. Kwon led a Horangi attack against the gifted community. You were either with them or against them.

Luckily, the scholars were stopped before a full war broke out. But not before a bunch of innocent witches were killed, including the Gom elder at the time, who happened to be my best friend Emmett’s mom.

Anyway, as punishment for their actions, the Mountain Tiger Goddess disowned the Horangi clan and cursed them never to be able to wield her divine power again. And anyone seen colluding with the clan would be stripped of their own

gift, too. As you can imagine, the council had no choice but to banish them from the community. The scholars' lust for power had made them dangerous, and it ultimately led to their demise. Sad story, really.

"And on that rather somber note, I conclude today's service," Mr. Hong finishes. "May Mago be with you this coming week."

"May Mago be with you," the congregation echoes in prayer.

Soon the kids start to gather near the elevator to go to Saturday School, which is held in the building next door. Hattie runs to use the restroom, and I see Professor Ryu's digital perm bobbing above the crowd of kids. My heart races. Our plan had better work.

"Riley, do you have a moment?"

I turn around to see Auntie Okja standing there in her beautiful golden hanbok. She looks as graceful and poised as ever.

"Of course, Auntie O." I smile at her warmly. "What's up?"

"I'm so sorry about your ceremony. I tried my best, but the council overruled me." She tucks a loose strand of my hair behind my ear, and I melt at the tender gesture. "You know I'm always looking out for you, right? That even if it might not always seem like it, I only want the best for you?"

I nod and look at my feet. "I know, Auntie O."

For a second, I want to spill the beans. I want to tell her our plans to steal Eomma's spellbook and to cast the magic-sharing spell. Maybe she'd talk some sense into me. Or perhaps

she'd offer to help us. Like she said, she only wants the best for me. . . .

But the moment is broken when Mrs. Lee, the Tokki elder, comes and ushers Auntie Okja away for some urgent council business.

"By the way, I have some new plans for a diversity-and-inclusion campaign," she says to me before leaving. "Can I run them past you later?"

"Of course," I say. "Will look forward to it."

"The only thing you're gonna look forward to is getting half of my magic," Hattie whispers, pulling me away to join the other students. "And yes, I know what you're thinking. And no, we are *not* asking Auntie O for help."

I look away, hoping I can hide the guilt written in Mago-size letters on my face. You'd think I was a book the way Hattie reads me.

"But maybe she would?" I try.

Hattie snorts. "Oh, you have so much to learn, young grasshopper. She's a council elder. There's no way she would help us if Eomma won't. If we want to do this, we're on our own."

I frown so hard my eye twitches.

"If the tables were turned, would you do the same for me?" she asks.

"Without a doubt," I respond immediately. "You know I would."

"Then it's settled," she says, grinning. "We have ourselves an enchanted safe to crack."