

Prologue

“Run, Zori! *Run!*” Her mother’s voice echoed in her mind. She wasn’t here anymore to tell her that, but she knew it anyway.

She kept running, even though she wanted to stop, even though she had been running her entire life and she was sick of it. But they were gaining on her. She didn’t have a choice.

They needed her for their evil plans.

So Zori did the only thing she could do.

The only thing she could do in order to escape them.

Chapter 1

The scenery faded into view. Zori was now standing in a bustling city filled with people. And noise. There were cars honking, people shouting, laughter, voices, music.

So much different than what it had been only a couple seconds ago.

Luckily, nobody seemed to have noticed a random girl appear out of nowhere. She kept her head down as she walked, trying to find a place to hide. Yet again.

Zori sighed and continued walking.

A couple of hours later, the sun was going down and Zori told herself she had gone far enough. Her legs hurt from walking so far. She looked around for a place to stay. There was an abandoned building halfway through construction that looked like it had been there for years.

Zori decided to go there.

She climbed up the stairs... there didn’t seem to be any people.

Finally, she reached the top floor. Half of the side was constructed, but the other half was empty. She could see all of the city now. It was amazing. Skyscrapers towered over the metropolis, and it seemed to stretch on forever.

“What are you doing here?” A voice behind her said sharply.

She whirled around. In front of her stood a tense girl, about her age, with straight brown hair and emerald green eyes.

“I’m... uh...” She stammered, trying to come up with an excuse. “I don’t have a place to stay. I came here thinking it was abandoned. I didn’t know. I’m sorry?”

The girl softened. “I guess you can stay here for a little.” She gazed out the windows with a faraway look in her eyes. “It gets a bit lonely here.” She shook her head. “I’m Sonia. What’s your name?”

Zori was always careful to trust people, but this girl—Sonia—seemed to be trustworthy. “Zori,” she responded.

“Come sit over here,” Sonia offered. “It has the best view of the city.”

Zori did as she instructed. It really was amazing, especially with the sun setting and all. The two sat in silence for a few moments before Zori asked, “Why are you here?”

There was a pause again before Sonia spoke. “I lived in a foster home. The people there... weren’t very nice. So I left.”

Zori nodded. She understood.

Chapter 2

As the last wisps of sunlight disappeared behind the horizon and the stars started to emerge, the two became fast friends. They talked and laughed, yet Zori did not tell Sonia about her past. It was nice to have a friend who thought her birthmark was just a birthmark.

Zori had a golden mark on her face. Everyone in her family had one. In her world, nobody saw anything past that. She hated it.

Finally, Zori yawned. She was so tired and couldn't believe that only a couple of hours ago, she was back in her world and running for her life. All she wanted was to go to sleep.

Sonia was also tired. "Here," she said, getting up and grabbing some cardboard from the corner of the room. She put it down on the floor, grabbed a small pillow and a very thin blanket, and laid them down on top of the cardboard. "You can sleep here. Sorry, it's not exactly comfortable..."

"Thank you," Zori responded.

She crossed the room to the makeshift bed. Sure, it wasn't very comfortable, but Zori was grateful for it. She lied down and closed her eyes.

"Good night," she whispered in the darkness.

"Good night," Sonia responded.

* * *

Zori was running. But she didn't understand why. She thought she was safe now. Her footsteps pounded on the forest floor, her heartbeat pounded in her ears. And then she was falling.

Down,

down,

down.

And then the darkness swallowed her whole.

Zori awoke with a start. *Just a dream*, she reminded herself. She lay there in the darkness of the building, staring at the ceiling, when she heard a sound. She thought she imagined it at first, but there it was, getting louder and louder.

Footsteps.

She glanced over at Sonia, who was staring at her with wide eyes.

“I thought you said no one comes up here,” Zori whispered.

“They don't.”

And with those two words, Zori got scared.

“Hide.” Sonia ordered. “Behind those boxes over there.”

Zori scrambled to the boxes, heart beating fast. She had been running and hiding her whole life, and now, when she thought she was safe, there was *more?*

The footsteps came closer and the door was thrown open.

“Where are you?” Someone shouted. “We know you're in here!”

Zori's breath caught in her throat. She knew that voice.

It was one of the men who had been chasing her, back in her world.

How did they find her?!

She wanted to cry, but she knew she couldn't make a sound. That would just put her and Sonia in more danger than they already were in.

She could hear the men searching the room. And then she heard a yelp as one of them found Sonia and yanked her out of her hiding place.

“Come out, girl, or I'll push your friend off the building!” He yelled.

Zori faced an impossible choice: save her friend...

...or save her world.

Chapter 3

Ultimately, Zori took a deep breath and stood up. Two of the bad guys raced up to her and grabbed her arms.

Zori knew that what she just did, by standing up, could— and would— change the course of human civilization in her world forever, but Sonia had been so kind to her. And Zori had brought her into this mess. It was her fault.

“Let her go!” Zori demanded.

“We make the choices here, girl,” the leader growled. But thankfully he motioned at the one holding Sonia and he let her go. She stumbled away, her countenance frightened.

She was glad that Sonia was safe, but she knew she was still in a lot of trouble. She tried to close her eyes and pretend like this wasn’t happening, but that was impossible. The two that were holding her were already tying her hands together so that she couldn’t escape, and the leader was pulling out the travel gadget that would take them to the power source. And from there everything would fall apart.

Zori felt tears streaming down her face, and she could think about nothing else but the mess she made...

...and how everything was her fault.

* * *

Back in her world, Zori’s family had always been the most prestigious people of their civilization, Arianbare. But that was mostly because they were the most *powerful*.

Because of their birthmarks, called the “Mark of the Golden Sun”, they—and only they— had the power to open a great power source, which could either make or break the world. *Only* those in Zori’s family had it, and they were treated like royalty.

But then there was Koin.

Koin was another world, and it was very different from Arianbare. For instance, where the people of Arianbare honored kindness and peace, Koin was the opposite. Arguments were always breaking out in that world. Civil wars had happened more than once. And Koin was jealous of how amazing Arianbare was.

They started attacking Zori's world, which was all she had ever known. Since her family was the leaders of Arianbare, they targeted them. It was only after all of them were dead that they figured out about the power source.

Zori was the only one to escape.

She had been on the run for three years now, and each time Koin had managed to find her. If only she'd tried harder to hide... if only she'd escaped to a place where they never would have found her...

She opened her eyes to escape her thoughts. They had arrived in a forest, the exact same one she had seen in her dream. And they were headed for a towering mountain.

Yet as they neared closer, Zori could see there was an opening in the mountain. A wave of realization passed over her and she tried to resist the person holding her. She failed and he pulled harder.

The power source.

It was *right there*.

They were so close to it... it was almost as if Zori could *feel* the power, radiating in the air. And all she wanted was to be as far away from it as possible, though some part of her was curious.

What really was in there?

But she knew, whatever was in there, she knew if it got into the wrong hands, destruction would happen.

And on that happy note, they dragged her into the cave.

* * *

The first thing she noticed was the smell.

It was a pleasant smell, a combination of jasmine and lavender. Vines covered the wall, and flowers of all colors bloomed from them. That must have been where the smell came from. The flowers were beautiful and vibrant, with colors like sapphire, amethyst, autumn orange, daffodil yellow, rose pink. Though they were all different colors, they fit together beautifully.

The cave ended at a huge gateway. (Well, maybe the cave didn't end there, maybe that was where it *began*.) The gateway was sealed off by rock. But she didn't see any way to open it.

"Well, do it already," the leader ordered, breaking the awed silence.

"I-I don't know how," she said.

Maybe that was a good thing.

Or maybe it wasn't.

"Do it, girl," the leader growled, malice lacing his voice.

Zori had an idea. "I kind of need my hands for this," she said casually.

They reluctantly untied her. "Don't even *think* about running."

'*Well, that won't work,*' she thought. She sighed inwardly and went over to the gateway.

She ran her fingers around the wall, looking for something. Then something clicked.

Zori held out her hand. A glowing golden light enveloped her, starting from her open palm. For a second she couldn't see anything. And then....

The gateway rumbled open.

Chapter 4

“There’s... nothing here.”

She wasn’t sure who had said it. It might have been all of them.

Zori sounded confused.

The rest sounded angry.

She gazed into the open space. It was completely empty. Nothing that seemed to radiate power or be any use to anyone.

Shouts and groans of frustrations broke the silence as the group searched but found nothing.

“Leave her here.” The leader said, hatred in his eyes.

“What?!” Zori exclaimed.

She tried to resist as they tied her up again, this time both her hands and her legs. The rope was so tight it cut into her skin.

“No!” Zori cried. “Please, no!”

“Quiet, girl!” He yelled. He looked to his companions and said, “Let’s go.”

And then they were gone.

* * *

As Zori lay there, shivering and crying, she remembered the time when everything was perfect. When everything was peaceful. Now, stuck in a cave with no escape, she missed her family more than ever.

She closed her eyes and remembered the sweet aroma of her aunt’s pastries, and the lake that she would swim in with her cousins every summer. She remembered how they would race to

the bottom of the lake. She remembered the feeling of her mother's warm embrace and how her father would lift her up onto his shoulders and they would laugh.

Suddenly a sound pulled her out of her memories. She held her breath.

Were the men back again?

Or was it...something else?

She heard the sound again. And then...

"Sonia!" She cried.

The girl rushed over. "There you are! I've been looking for you for almost an hour."

"How did you get here?" Zori asked incredulously.

"One of those guys dropped the gadget you used to get here."

Zori was amazed and incredibly grateful as Sonia started untying the ropes. "You have some major explaining to do."

"Yeah, I do." She took a breath and then explained that she was from another world and how Koin needed her to open the power source, and how when they opened it, there was nothing there.

When she was all done, Sonia just blinked. "O-kay, then."

Despite everything that had happened that day, Zori smiled. Sonia did too.

"Hey, what if there is actually something here?" Sonia asked. "What if there was something they missed? We should look, just to be sure."

All Zori wanted was to leave this place, but her friend made a good point.

They checked every inch of the room, running their hands over the wall, looking for anything. After a while, Sonia called, "I think I found something."

Zori went over and looked. There was a little marking on the wall. It was a representation of a sun, hidden behind some clouds. At least, that was what she guessed it was. It was so faded you never would have found it if you weren't looking for it.

“Want to do the honors?” Sonia asked.

She nodded, took a deep breath, and held out her hand.

Then, just as what had happened at the gateway, her hand glowed and everything was enveloped in golden light. She shielded her eyes, and when the light cleared, a door was left.

Zori looked at Sonia and Sonia looked at Zori. And the two of them pushed the door open.

The two blinked from the sudden change of light. They peered into the small room and Zori gasped.

Because inside was a person.

And that person had a very recognizable birthmark on their face.

A Mark of the Golden Sun.

The End