

Mu-Takl

Blurred undergrowth and white fur, tumbling. The rustle of ripped cloth snagging on upturned roots. A set of gemstones glinting, the soft gasping of a pain that few could understand, and finally, a thump.

Ahri opened her eyes sluggishly, strands of black hair catching on her eyelashes as her gaze focused on a familiar gold glow amidst a spinning world. She thought of the garden she'd been running from, and with the sickeningly sweet scent of the snow lily all too clear in her mind, she pushed herself up.

The world around her began to still, and Ahri's breathing stopped, catching in her throat. She laid in a small clearing, yet the forest around her was vibrant, everywhere she looked she saw life. Small animals above her jumping from branch to branch, elegant flowers of all forms reaching for the sun, a nearby brook babbling with all the stories caught in its gentle flow, begging anyone who understood to listen.

However, Ahri also noticed that the grass beneath her was trampled, much like the path her weary body had made tumbling down the hill. The flowers in her wake crushed, the tales they carried with them, silenced. As Ahri stared at the destruction she'd caused, she felt her physical pain melt into an emotional one she recognized all too well.

The golden glow caught her eye once again, and Ahri tore her gaze away from the forest. The twin gemstones she carried for as long as she could remember lay glinting in a stray sunbeam, seemingly untouched by the burden she carried.

Ahri picked them up, holding them tenderly in her hands. She listened to their gentle song as they clinked together, always fitting perfectly in place, just as she had always longed to.

Ahri's ears perked up as she heard movement. Swiftly getting to her feet, she turned, nine white tails gracefully fanning out around her. What she saw was not what she expected, a raven-like vastayan girl staring out at her from the forest with eyes filled with wonder. As girl stepped into the clearing, she was lit up, revealing crimson hair beneath a heavy hood. Ahri could immediately tell she was of Lhotlan lineage.

"Nine tails," the Lhotlan breathed. The girl was making a steady, yet careful approach. Ahri saw vivid blues and purples appearing as the feathers on the vastayan's cape rose slightly. She wondered if it was in fear or excitement. "I'm Xayah. You're the 'fox demon' from the human myths, aren't you?"

Ahri's heart sank. No matter how hard she tried, she could never shake the reputation her most hated self had created. Ahri watched Xayah's demeanor change as her eyes followed the path she had tumbled down.

"Why were you in the garden?" Xayah asked, voice suddenly much wiser than her initial appearance gave off. The unexpected chill behind Xayah's words sent shivers down Ahri's spine. "What were you trying to forget?"

Ahri froze, her mind going through a million responses before ultimately deciding to not share with the Lhotlan. "Everyone has their stories, some better than others, some they'd rather not tell, and some... they'd rather forget."

Ahri turned from Xayah, trying to ground herself as the mottled memories from the garden returned, making her head spin once again. Finding a log, she wandered to it, planting herself down and feeling the moisture in the wood seep through her clothes. As she sat, her leg brushed against a magnolia, and she gingerly plucked it, mesmerized by the simplistic beauty in

the untainted white. As she cleared her head, she felt the vastayan girl sit down beside her, bumping the log upwards.

“You’re vastayan. Family.” Xayah urged, amber eyes flaring with passion. “That means we protect and confide in one another. If we cannot trust each other with our stories, take pride in our heritage, how are we any better than humans?”

Ahri looked up from the magnolia, meeting eyes with the vastayan with a passion all her own. “Pride? We are not any better than humans. Why should they be worse?”

Xayah stood up instantly, her tattered dress and cape flaring around her, an aura of rage emanating from her nimble form. “Humans steal our magic and pillage our lands; their poisonous ideals and vast greed have reduced the vastayan race to the creatures we are now. We are hiding in forests afraid while tribes disappear, and traditions die,” She growled, “and you would ask why *they* should be worse? Have you felt that pain, do you have no idea how it feels to lose the ones you love!?”

“I killed the one I loved!” Ahri roared, eyes hard as fury welled up inside her. She felt the petals of the flower falling against her hand as she crushed it, standing her ground. “I have killed, I have stolen what was not my own, I have destroyed homes and have enjoyed it. You say humans are poisonous, but I have loved and tried to forget one, tell me I am not a monster!”

A flash of violet flew past Ahri’s face, and she felt blood begin to trickle down her cheek. Her eyes widened in shock as she pressed a shaking hand on the wound and stared out at the vastayan in front of her.

“This is what it is to be blind,” Xayah hissed, her words dripping with hatred, feathers flashing as she held them threateningly at her side.

Shocked by the hypocrisy, Ahri narrowed her eyes and removed the hand from her cheek, allowing the blood to rush down her face. “You would dare spill the vastayan blood you strive to protect?”

For a second, Xayah faltered, horror displaying itself across her face. The feather flew from behind Ahri and returned to its owner. Xayah turned away, walking into the undergrowth. With amber eyes peering out sharp as the feathers she’d been holding, she turned for a final word, glowering at the fox as she spat.

“Mu-takl.”