

## How the Sparrow Met the Time-Twister

By Anastasia Snyder (Ink Rose)

In all of her travels, the place that now left Taliyah the most conflicted was Piltover. As she wandered the crowded streets and bumped into people decked out in fancy augments and tailored suits alike, she felt almost blind. The shiny exteriors of copper-lined buildings reflected light straight into her eyes, making the habit of blinking rather tedious at this point. Besides her lack of proper vision, a strange churning in Taliyah's stomach gave her pause. Here in the upper echelons of Piltover, there was hardly, if any, proper earth in sight. Most everything was metal or brick, and whenever Taliyah spotted a stone, it was a precisely cut and fitted corner of a building or a squarely glued down fountain tile. There wasn't anything natural about this earth. Piltover was a meticulously crafted city. While it was beautiful, Taliyah felt nervous within such a place. She reached into her pocket, fingering a piece of soft Shuriman stone. Immediately, she felt a bit more relaxed. There'd normally be a few stones around her neck or floating at the ends of her sleeves, but she shed them before entering Piltover, anxious that her experience in Noxus would be repeated if her powers were discovered.

A tug at her heart drew her attention to a garden set beside a cavernous opening in the city, beyond which lay more shining spires. Gaudily decorated bridges spanning over the chasm looked like stitches attempting to sew the city back together. Taliyah barely gave the artificial canyon a thought, since the garden took up her fancy immediately. It was overlooked by an elderly woman who sat amongst flowers and patted dirt around a sapling. Silently, Taliyah reached through the fence and into the garden, wishing to feel the softness of the earth once more.

The woman's head whipped around, her eyes flashing with anger "Get your filthy hands away from my--!"

The woman's face melted into utter shock. In her complete surprise and fear, Taliyah's powers had unexpectedly manifested themselves. She'd lurched backward on a slab of the garden's soil before being thrust over the edge of the chasm, screaming and flailing as thick, smoky air rushed past her. She tried to orient herself as she fell, and was able to ensnare the bits of rock and dirt that were thrown over with her. Through the fog, it was hard to distinguish the dark shapes quickly approaching from below, though her gut told her that it was probably a bad idea to get near them at such a speed. Taliyah waved her hands, the soil around her solidifying into packed earth and stone. She grasped onto them with shaking hands and willed them to float. Her body swung jaggedly as the force of her magic willed itself against gravity. It didn't work. Force of will giving way to panic, her fingers slipped between crumbling pebbles.

A flash in the corner of her eye gave her a start before a shudder went through her. Time itself seemed to slow-- or perhaps, Taliyah realized, it really *had* slowed. The ground gradually became closer. Her heart lurched when she realized how close it was. She twisted mid-air to angle her legs downward. The process was gradual; her limbs moved as if through molasses. A minute of wading through the fog later, she was finally back on solid ground. A circular metal device under her toes beeped, and then time returned back to normal. Taliyah took deep

breaths, mouth agape in surprise at her survival. The device must have saved her somehow. She gazed at it in wonder before leaping back with an *eep!* when it shook and zoomed upward into the waiting hand of a figure above.

Taliyah blinked. It was much darker down here, wherever *here* was. It seemed like a metal-coated alleyway. A putrid stench reached her nose, causing her to cover the lower half of her face with the ends of her long sleeves. Her eyes wandered upward until she could see the figure clearly.

He crouched on the edge of a roof, his head cocked in interest. He was a teen about her age clothed in baggy pants and a red scarf. A shock of white hair formed a mohawk on his head. He held a strange, glowing blue baton, which he swung from side to side over the edge of the roof as if it were a clock's pendulum.

"Geez, are you alright? That was a long fall," he said, brows raised.

Taliyah finally caught her breath. "Y-yes. I'm fine. Thanks to you, I suppose?"

"Yea. It's no problem," he said offhandedly. He looked her up and down. "You definitely don't look like a Piltie. Where are you from?"

"Oh, uh, my tribe hails from--"

"Shurima, right? I thought I recognized that accent! Alright, alright. That's neat. Why are you here, huh?" The boy continued to fiddle with the baton.

Taliyah paused, choosing her words carefully. "I've been trying to find my way home. I decided to stop here in order to take a look around and gather some supplies. How do I... how do I get back up?" She pointed skyward, gazing at the tiny form of a bridge all too high above.

"You don't want to go up *there*," the boy scoffed. "Down here in Zaun, we've got all you need. I can help you out, if you'd like. The name's Ekko."

Taliyah remembered the stories her mother would tell her of young Shuriman thieves who would lead girls into traps and take all of their coin. She wondered if such stories held any truth here in... what had he called it? Zaun? She looked longingly at the small pockets of sunlight that pierced the veil of chemclouds. She wasn't in much of a position to refuse his offer.

Looking up at Ekko, Taliyah nodded. "Alright."

He smiled in return. "Well, then, Shuriman girl, get ready to meet Zaun!"