The candle's flame flickered, drawing Paku's eyes for a moment. The pooled wax at the base had begun to brown, and time was running short. Paku returned her quill to the inkwell, gathering the carefully penned papers into a single pile. There would be time to finish the letters after, the messenger wasn't due until the next morning. The condolences had always been her least favorite part. Last rites are for the dead and the Guides, she thought, but the relatives always seemed to butt in. She picked up the pottery shard her sister sent her as a sample, turning it over and over for what must have been the hundredth time. Kaja had made it, of course, in their mother's kiln. Her kiln, now. Paku remembered the warmth of that room, the way her mother lit it up. How long had it been since she was sent away? Years slip by so easily. She felt a pang of jealousy, sharp and sudden.

Paku dropped the shard on her desk and turned her back. It was not the time. They were in this together now, and during the ritual, her and her sister needed to act as one. Paku quickly gathered her things, she was running late. Gloves for the dead, out of respect. Knives for the living, out of fear. Her armor and makeup took a few minutes each, both of them worth every second. Her chalks, incense, and salts went into a small bag, the bag went over her shoulder, and Paku went out the door.

The steps softly echoed off the claustrophobic tunnel walls as Paku and Kaja strode deeper into the darkness. Kaja cradled her ceramics as Paku murmured a prayer to the Lost Death over and over, like a mantra. The air here was humid with the stench of death, there was no escaping it. As they walked for what felt like hours, the miasma of soul's lament clung to them and pooled in the specially-crafted pottery, as planned. Their steps became heavier and slower as their burden grows, each additional fragment with its own tragedy, memories, and whispered secrets. But there was another force, another pull on the remnants of spirits, much stronger than theirs. Lingering on the edge of perception like the shadow of a half-remembered nausea, the immense, restless, entity was unnerving. Paku stepped forward once, then again. What was this thing? It was no spirit of any kind that she could recognize, and if it wasn't a spirit, what was it? Her vision grew blurry as she stepped closer again. If she could just get a better sense of…
"*Paku!"*
Her sister's voice echoed in Paku's head, compelling her to look behind her. Kaja shook her head, concern and fear in her eyes. She was right, Paku realized. What had come over her? She turned and the two sisters quickly retreated to safer passages.