

A  
Wish  
in the  
Dark



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CHRISTINA SOONTORNVAT



CANDLEWICK PRESS

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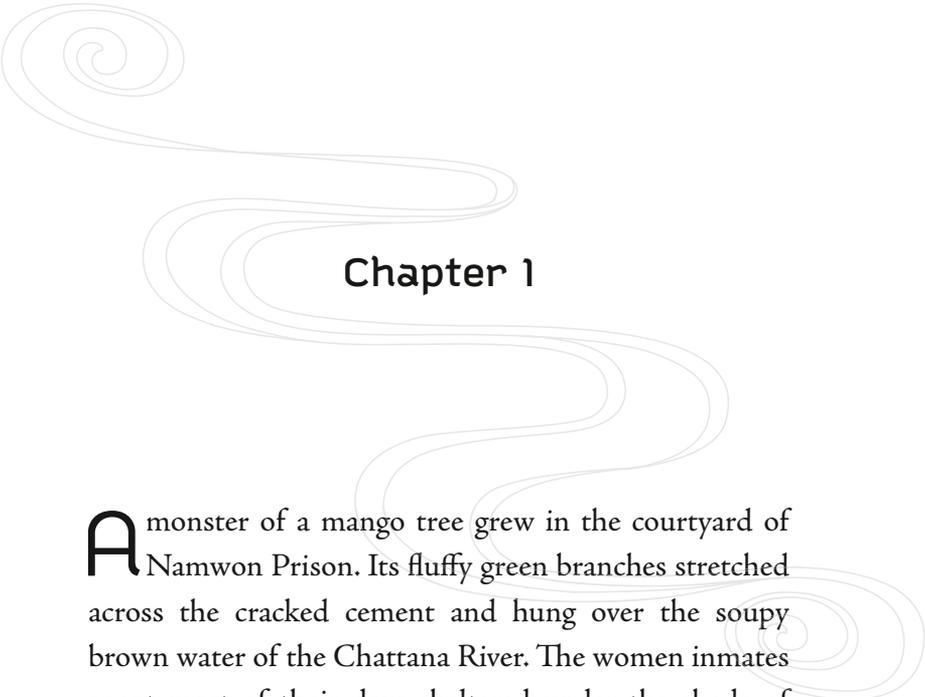
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*For my mother and father*



## Chapter 1

A monster of a mango tree grew in the courtyard of Namwon Prison. Its fluffy green branches stretched across the cracked cement and hung over the soupy brown water of the Chattana River. The women inmates spent most of their days sheltered under the shade of this tree while the boats glided up and down and up again on the other side of the prison gate.

The dozen children who lived in Namwon also spent most of their days lying in the shade. But not in mango season. In mango season, the tree dangled golden drops of heaven overhead, swaying just out of reach.

It drove the kids nuts.

They shouted at the mangoes. They chucked pieces of broken cement at them, trying to knock them down. And when the mangoes refused to fall, the children cried, stomped their bare feet, and collapsed in frustration on the ground.

Pong never joined them. Instead, he sat against the tree's trunk, hands crossed behind his head. He looked like he was sleeping, but actually, he was paying attention.

Pong had been paying attention to the tree for weeks. He knew which mangoes had started ripening first. He noticed when the fruit lightened from lizard-skin green to pumpkin-rind yellow. He watched the ants crawl across the mangoes, and he knew where they paused to sniff the sugar inside.

Pong looked at his friend, Somkit, and gave him a short nod. Somkit wasn't shouting at the mangoes, either. He was sitting under the branch that Pong had told him to sit under, waiting. Somkit had been waiting an hour, and he'd wait for hours more if he had to, because the most important thing to wait for in Namwon were the mangoes.

He and Pong were both nine years old, both orphans. Somkit was a head shorter than Pong, and skinny—even for a prisoner. He had a wide, round face, and the other kids teased him that he looked like those grilled rice balls on sticks that old ladies sold from their boats.

Like many of the women at Namwon, their mothers had been sent there because they'd been caught stealing. Both their mothers had died in childbirth, though from the stories the other women still told, Somkit's birth

had been more memorable and involved feet showing up where a head was supposed to be.

Pong wagged his finger at his friend to get him to scoot to the left.

A little more.

A little more.

There.

Finally, after all that waiting, Pong heard the soft pop of a mango stem. He gasped and smiled as the first mango of the season dropped straight into Somkit's waiting arms.

But before Pong could join his friend and share their triumph, two older girls noticed what Somkit held in his hands.

"Hey, did you see that?" said one of the girls, propping herself up on her knobby elbows.

"Sure did," said the other, cracking scab-covered knuckles. "Hey, Skin-and-Bones," she called to Somkit. "What do you got for me today?"

"Uh-oh," said Somkit, cradling the mango in one hand and bracing himself to stand up with the other.

He was useless in a fight, which meant that everyone liked fighting him the most. And he couldn't run more than a few steps without coughing, which meant the fights usually ended badly.

Pong turned toward the guards who were leaning against the wall behind him, looking almost as bored with life in Namwon as the prisoners were.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” said Pong, bowing to the first guard.

She sucked on her teeth and slowly lifted one eyebrow.

“Ma’am, it’s those girls,” said Pong. “I think they’re going to take —”

“And what do you want me to do about it?” she snapped. “You kids need to learn to take care of yourselves.”

The other guard snorted. “Might be good for you to get kicked around a little. Toughen you up.”

A hot, angry feeling fluttered inside Pong’s chest. Of course the guards wouldn’t help. When did they ever? He looked at the women prisoners. They stared back at him with flat, resigned eyes. They were far past caring about one miserable mango.

Pong turned away from them and hurried back to his friend. The girls approached Somkit slowly, savoring the coming brawl. “Quick, climb on,” he said, dropping to one knee.

“What?” said Somkit.

“Just get on!”

“Oh, man, I know how this is gonna turn out,” grumbled Somkit as he climbed onto Pong’s back, still clutching the mango.

Pong knew, too, but it couldn’t be helped. Because while Pong was better than anyone at paying attention, and almost as good as Somkit at waiting, he was terrible at ignoring when things weren’t fair.

And the most important thing to do in Namwon was to forget about life being fair.

“Where do you think *you’re* going?” asked the knobby-elbowed girl as she strode toward them.

“We caught this mango, fair and square,” said Pong, backing himself and Somkit away.

“You sure did,” said her scab-knuckled friend. “And if you hand it over right now, we’ll only punch you once each. Fair and square.”

“Just do it,” whispered Somkit. “It’s not worth —”

“You don’t deserve it just because you want it,” said Pong firmly. “And you’re not taking it from us.”

“Is that right?” said the girls.

“Oh, man.” Somkit sighed. “Here we go!”

The girls shrieked and Pong took off. They chased him as he galloped around and around the courtyard with Somkit clinging onto his back like a baby monkey.

“You can never just let things go!” Somkit shouted.

“We can’t . . . let them have it!” panted Pong. “It’s ours!” He dodged around clumps of smaller children, who watched gleefully, relieved not to be the ones about to get the life pummeled out of them.

“So what? A mango isn’t worth getting beat up over.” Somkit looked over his shoulder. “Go faster, man — they’re going to catch us!”

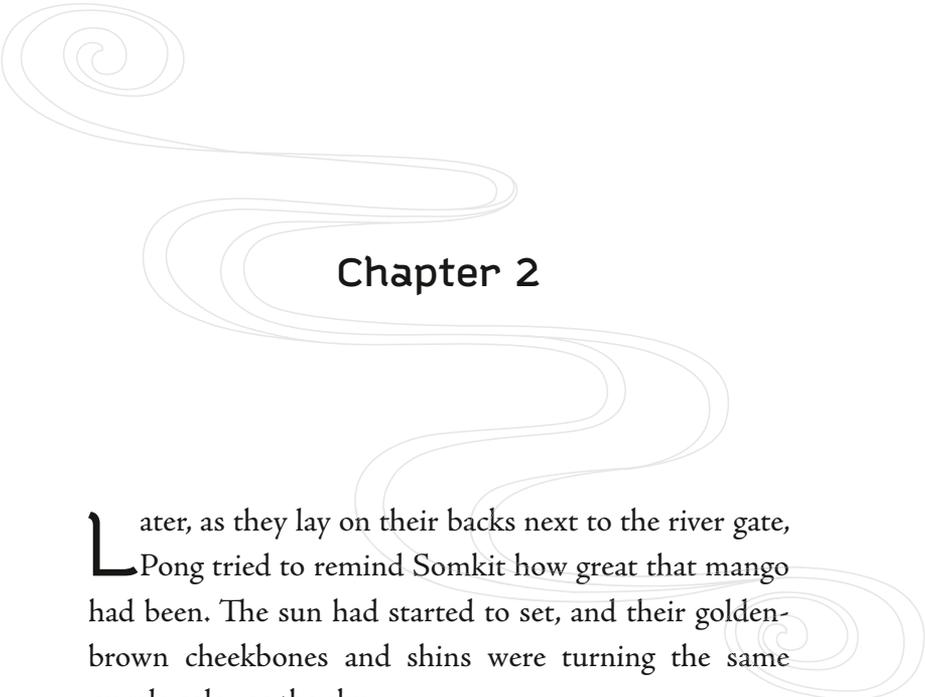
The guards leaning against the wall laughed as they watched the chase. “Go on, girls. Get ‘em!” said one.

“Not yet, though,” said the other guard. “This is the best entertainment we’ve had all week!”

“I’m . . . getting . . . tired.” Pong huffed. “You better . . . eat that thing before I collapse!”

Warm mango juice dripped down the back of Pong’s neck as Somkit tore into the fruit with his teeth. “Oh, man. I was wrong. This *is* worth getting beat up over.” Somkit reached over his friend’s shoulder and stuck a plug of mango into the corner of Pong’s mouth.

It was ripe and sweet, not stringy yet. Paradise.



## Chapter 2

Later, as they lay on their backs next to the river gate, Pong tried to remind Somkit how great that mango had been. The sun had started to set, and their golden-brown cheekbones and shins were turning the same purple color as the sky.

Somkit touched his bruised cheek and winced. “Why do I have to be friends with such a loudmouth?”

Pong grinned. “Because no one else will be friends with you.”

Somkit reached over and flicked him on the ear.

“Ow!” said Pong, scooting away. “You know, between the two of us, you’ve actually got the bigger mouth.”

“And you’ll notice that I keep it shut around the guards and mean kids,” said Somkit. “Sometimes you have to go along with things if you don’t want to get mashed into pulp. But you? You just never know when to shut up and let things go.”

“I know,” said Pong, folding one arm under his head. “But we earned that mango. It’s stupid that we even have to wait for them to fall. The guards should just let us climb the tree. It’s almost like they *want* us to have to fight over them.” He put two fingers on the bone in the center of his rib cage. “Stuff like that, I don’t know — it just makes me so mad. I get this burning feeling right here.”

“It’s probably gas,” said Somkit. “Look, next year those stupid girls will turn thirteen, and then they’ll be out of here. We’ll be the oldest ones, and we can eat our mangoes in peace.”

Children born at Namwon were released when their mother’s sentence was up or when they turned thirteen, whichever came first.

But Pong didn’t care about the girls’ release date. If anything, it was just one more bit of unfairness that those two would get out first. It would be four more years until Pong and Somkit turned thirteen. Four years. It felt like forever.

Pong turned his face from Somkit and looked past the bars of the river gate. Namwon sat a little upriver from Chattana City. From here, Pong could just see the lights starting to come on, one by one by one thousand,

until there were two cities: one on the shore, one in the water, both made of light.

Normally at this time of night, the two of them would take turns sharing their dreams about what sort of life they'd lead in the city after they got out: the food they'd eat, the boats they'd buy. Somkit would have at least three boats: one to live on, one to fish from, and one speedboat with a custom motor that would be good for nothing except driving ridiculously fast. Pong liked to picture himself as a grown man with a good job and a full belly, lounging in the back of that slick speedboat, with Somkit at the wheel.

A single orb of glass swung from the mango tree overhead. Its dim Violet glow couldn't compete with the bright blaze across the river. Compared to the city, Namwon was like a cave. Was it any wonder that life wasn't fair for them? How could fairness find its way to them through all that darkness? But once they got out, under those lights, life would be different. They would eat mangoes they didn't have to fight for. When they asked for help, people would listen.

Somkit turned onto his side with a groan. "Ugh, every bone in my body hurts! You've got to promise me to lie low. At least until after next week."

“What’s next week?”

Somkit rolled his eyes and shook his head. “You’ll sit and listen to mangoes for hours, but you can’t even hear what people are saying when they’re standing right next to you! Didn’t you hear the cooks today? The Governor is coming here next week for an official visit.”

Pong sat up, ignoring the ache in his ribs. “The Governor!”

“I know,” said Somkit, licking his lips. “We’re actually going to get some decent food for once. The cooks said they’re going to grill a bunch of chickens.”

But Pong couldn’t think about food. He was thinking about the guest. Most people in Chattana looked up to the Governor. After what he’d done for their city, how could they not? The man was a hero. But to Pong, he was even more.

Pong had only ever seen a portrait of him in a textbook, but even from the picture, he could tell that the Governor was someone who would understand him. He would care about the unfairness at Namwon. If he knew how things were, he’d change them. That’s just the kind of person he was: someone who made things right.

Pong’s wild and secret wish, the one he didn’t tell even Somkit about because it sounded so silly, was that one day he’d work for Chattana’s great leader. He

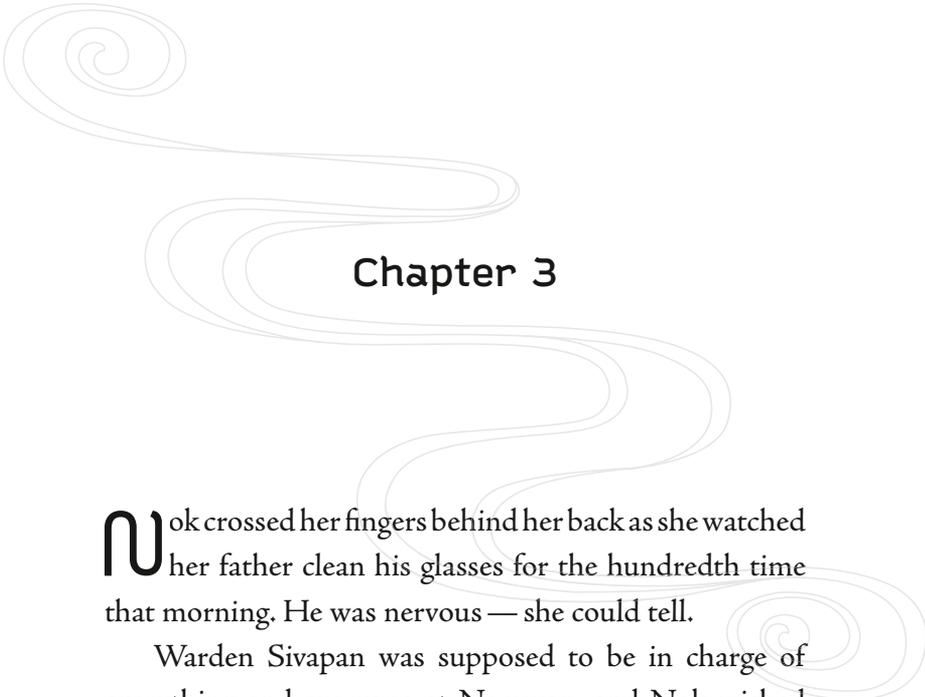
imagined himself standing at the Governor's side as an assistant or an adviser, or whatever sort of jobs grown people had. Together, they would make everyone's life brighter.

The fact that the Governor was coming to Namwon for a visit couldn't be just a coincidence. It had to be a sign. It had to mean that one day Pong's wish would come true.

"Hey," said Somkit, snapping his fingers in front of Pong's face. "You've got that funny look of yours right now, and I don't like it. Listen, you've got to promise me that you're going to keep your mouth shut from now on. No more trouble, okay?" He leaned closer and bugged his eyes out. "Okay?"

Pong squinted at the city, making all the dots of light blur into one. "Okay," he said. "No more trouble."

At the time it seemed like a perfectly reasonable promise.



## Chapter 3

Nok crossed her fingers behind her back as she watched her father clean his glasses for the hundredth time that morning. He was nervous — she could tell.

Warden Sivapan was supposed to be in charge of everything and everyone at Namwon, and Nok wished that just for today he could play the part.

“Nok . . .” whined her little sister Tip. “I am going to die in this thing!” Tip stuck her finger into the high, frilly collar of her blouse and pulled it away from her windpipe. It snapped back against her throat with a *thwack!*

Tip’s twin sister, Ploy, giggled.

“Stop fidgeting,” said Nok. She straightened Tip’s collar, then Ploy’s sash. “Aren’t you ashamed of yourselves, whining on a day like today?”

At least the twins got to wear short sleeves. Nok tugged at the cuffs of her itchy dress, fighting the urge to scratch her arms. She longed for the loose comfort of her

spire-fighting uniform. In her opinion, any clothes you couldn't throw a punch in were stupid. But of course she wouldn't complain, especially not today, the day of the Governor's visit.

Nok's mother glided toward them, an older version of the twins, in pale-blue silk. "All right," she said. "Everyone ready? Remember what I told you to say. No embarrassments today — got that, everyone?"

Nok's older brother smoothed down his hair. "That's fine for us," he whispered, "but who's going to tell Dad?"

Nok glared at him. Her mother snapped her fingers, and it was time to go. The twins followed Nok, who followed their brother, who had come home from university just for this occasion, who followed their mother, who was really the leader of the family, but who walked behind her husband to keep up appearances.

The family lined up near the river gate, in the shade of the big mango tree. The prisoners were supposed to be standing in orderly lines, too, but the children had run up to the gate to wait for the Governor's boat.

"I feel sorry for them," whispered Ploy, slipping her fingers into Nok's hand. "They have to live in a jail. Isn't that awful?"

"It's not a *jail*," said Nok. "It's a reform center."

Nok and her siblings hardly ever visited their father's workplace. That morning, Nok had made a point to show her sisters the official NAMWON WOMEN'S REFORM CENTER sign on the front gate, but the truth was that no one ever called it anything but a prison.

"Why can't Daddy just let them go?" asked Ploy.

Her twin leaned closer. "You know what Mama says: *Trees drop their fruit straight down.*"

"Huh? I'm not talking about fruit, dummy. I'm talking about kids!"

Nok sighed. "She means that you can't expect children to turn out very different from their parents. And these children have *criminals* for parents. It's best to keep a close eye on them. Besides, where else would they go? Some of them are orphans. They'd have to live on the street. At least here they get good food and they go to school. They're happy here."

The children did look happy, or at least excited. Nok noticed that only two of the boys weren't pressed up against the gate. One scrawny boy with a moon-round face stood on his tiptoes, unable to see over two girls who seemed to be blocking his view on purpose.

His friend, a boy with thick hair that stuck up at the top, also hung back, near the trunk of the mango tree. He wasn't looking at the gate at all, but up into the branches.

The boy tilted one ear up at a low-hanging fruit, almost as if he were listening to it.

*How weird,* thought Nok. *Who listens to mangoes?*

“Here he comes!” the other kids shouted.

“The Governor’s boat! I can see it!”

Nok’s mother snapped her fingers and hissed, “Places! To your places! Now!”

The Governor’s barge glided toward the prison dock, its teak paneling gleaming in the sunlight. Swags of white flowers swished from the prow.

A soft whirl churned the water behind the boat as it swiveled into place at the dock. A glass orb the size of a watermelon hung suspended over the silver prongs of the barge’s motor. Its Jade light glowed so bright that it made spots float over Nok’s eyes when she blinked.

The river gate swung inward. Uniformed guards disembarked and stood at attention. Nok glimpsed the sheen of the Governor’s robes, and then her mother snapped her fingers again. The prisoners pressed their palms together and dropped to their knees.

Nok bowed her head, her stomach flipping somersaults. Was this really happening? If the kids from school could see her now, they would burn with jealousy. She was about to meet the man they all idolized, the hero they learned about in history classes, whose proverbs

they had memorized since nursery school. In just a few seconds, Nok would meet the man who had saved their city from the brink of destruction.

It was a story that every child in Chattana knew.

Long ago, Chattana was the City of Wonders. Giants as tall as palm trees waded in the river while singing fish schooled around their ankles. In the floating markets, vendors sold all manner of magical treats: pears that made you fall in love, cakes frosted with good luck, even a rare fruit shaped like a sleeping baby that would let you live for one thousand and three years if you ate it in a single bite.

The people lived blessed lives. Wise old sages traveled down from the mountains to share their wisdom, heal the sick, and grant wishes. But most people in Chattana had all they could wish for — at first.

The city prospered and grew. The houses stacked on top of each other, higher and higher. The canals became crowded. Unfortunately, magic doesn't like a crowd.

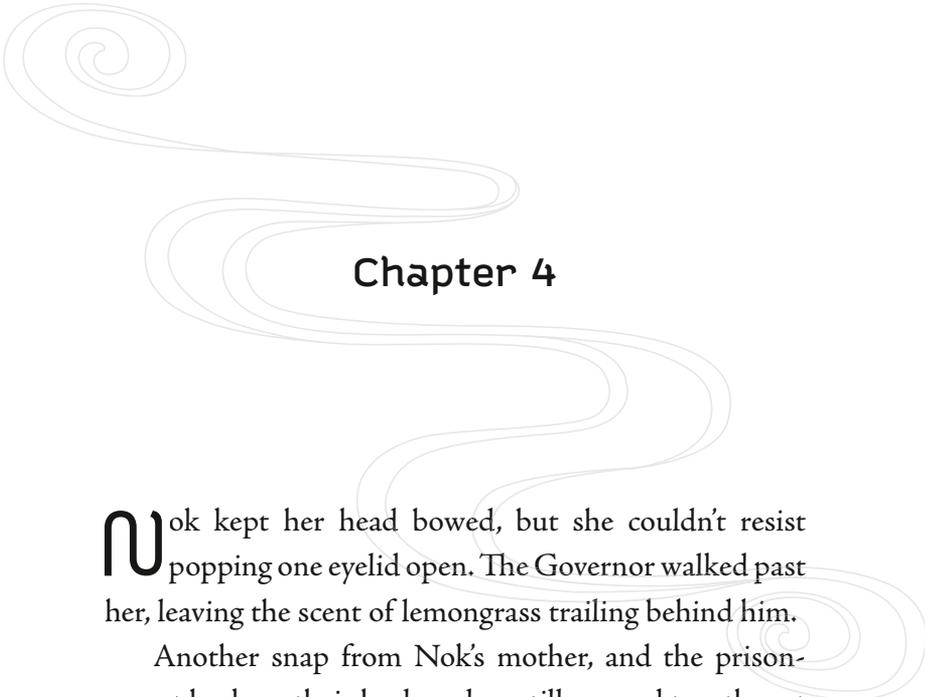
As Chattana swelled, the wonders thinned away. The shy giants wandered north and never returned. The singing fish were netted for rich men's dinners. Bakers began frosting their cakes with plain sugar — it was cheaper than luck and just as sparkly. And the wise sages stayed on their mountaintops.

At first the people of Chattana didn't mind. They were successful and too busy to care about those old-fashioned things. The city spread wider. Buildings rose higher. There was more of everything, but it still wasn't enough. Greed made people careless, and that was a mistake.

No one knows how the Great Fire started. In one rainless night, the City of Wonders became the City of Ashes. Every building and nearly every boat burned. Chattana had always been isolated from its neighbors, but the destruction was so great that no one could have helped them anyway. The few who survived the Great Fire suffered miserably. The sun seared down during the day, and at night there was no shelter from the drenching rains. Disease spread. Fights broke out over what little food remained.

The people missed the wonders then. They despaired, sure that the end was near for all of them. But somewhere among the ruins there must have been one luck-frosted cake left. Because out of the forest came a man who carried magic that no one had seen in more than a century.

That one man turned everything around. He brought Chattana back to life.



## Chapter 4

Nok kept her head bowed, but she couldn't resist popping one eyelid open. The Governor walked past her, leaving the scent of lemongrass trailing behind him.

Another snap from Nok's mother, and the prisoners sat back on their heels, palms still pressed together at their chests. Nok blinked, hardly able to believe that she stood just a few yards away from Chattana's great hero.

He looked ordinary. Nok didn't know what she'd been expecting. It's not like he would be floating in on a cloud, or anything like that, but the man standing before them could have been any man. He was taller than her father, but not by much. His face was smooth and pale, the color of milky tea. He smiled briefly as her father greeted him, and only then did faint age lines appear at the corners of his eyes.

Her father seemed in awe of him, too. Or maybe he was just afraid of messing everything up. He could

hardly meet the Governor's eyes as he stepped forward and cleaned his glasses yet again.

"This is a very special day for us all," her father announced. "His Grace, our Governor, honors us with his presence. As you know, His Grace gives such thought and care to your reform. We are . . ." The warden looked down the line of prisoners, and his eyes became glassy and sad behind his spectacles. His voice drifted off.

*Come on, Dad. You can do it,* Nok thought, willing him to gather up his thoughts.

Nok's mother cleared her throat softly.

"We — we are so blessed to have you with us today, Your Grace," her father stammered. He was supposed to give a longer speech, but he must have forgotten it. "We will now serve a meal, after which my wife has planned entertainment in your honor."

Nok's mother smiled stiffly. She flicked her fingers at the kitchen staff.

Nok's nostrils filled with the smell of garlic and meat. The cooks carried big steaming pots out of the kitchen to the tables under the pavilion. They set the pots on top of metal stands that cradled Crimson orbs to keep the food bubbling and hot.

The prison children all perked up. The moonfaced

boy even licked his lips. Nok wished they wouldn't look quite so hungry.

The prisoners bowed, then made an orderly rush to the pavilion. Nok herded the twins behind their brother, to wait their turn to be introduced to the Governor. She told herself not to be nervous. After all, she'd been practicing what to say to him for weeks now.

As she waited, her eyes wandered to the boy with the sticking-up hair. He had been near the front of the line, and he was already slurping up the last bits of food from his bowl. She tried not to stare, but she found her eyes drawn to him. He seemed so different from the other children. He looked around, taking in everything. He stared at the Governor intensely, though he kept a respectful distance.

Suddenly, he turned his head and then stood up and hurried toward the boy with the round face, who had tears running down his plump cheeks. A full bowl of chicken and rice lay spilled on the ground at his feet.

Two older girls stood beside him, cracking their knuckles. The boy with the sticking-up hair strode up to the tallest girl and without a word, stomped on her bare foot. Nok gasped.

"Nok!" her mother snapped.

She turned to see her family staring at her. Even

her father looked mortified. With a flush of embarrassment, she realized she was supposed to be greeting the Governor at that very moment.

Nok's practiced speech flew right out of her head. Her cheeks burned as she bowed. "I'm very sorry that I was distracted, Your Grace. It's just that . . ."

"Just that what?" asked her mother, impatience edging her voice.

Nok pulled down the cuffs of her dress. "It's just that I think that boy over there is fighting."

Her mother's lips parted, horrified. "*What* boy?"

Nok pointed him out. The older girl was howling now, clutching her wounded foot.

Nok's mother stormed toward the children. "You there," she said to the sticking-up-hair boy. "What do you think you're doing?"

The boy froze. "Oh, ma'am, I, well, I just saw —"

"You saw that we were busy, so you thought you could misbehave, hmm?"

"No, ma'am, it isn't that. You see, these girls —"

The girl he'd stomped on wailed and hopped on her good foot.

"Hush!" snapped Mrs. Sivapan. "You dare to start fights on a day like this?" She looked ready to swallow the boy whole.

His spine straightened. Nok couldn't believe the way he was looking at her mother — as though he was right and she was wrong.

“My friend has been waiting for this food,” said the boy. “And they —”

“How *dare* you talk back to me!”

The Governor glided toward the boy and spoke in a deep, smooth voice. “Allow me to handle this, Madam Sivapan.”

The entire courtyard hushed. Nok's mother patted down her hair as she stepped back to make room for him. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

The boy swallowed and wiped his palms against the sides of his trousers. He bowed to the Governor. When he raised his head, he had a hopeful, almost happy, look in his eyes.

The prisoners and staff had inched closer to see what was going on. Everyone pretended to eat as they leaned forward, listening.

“Is it true, child?” asked the Governor. “You were fighting?”

“Your Grace, it is the greatest honor to finally meet you,” the boy said breathlessly. “I know that of everyone, you will see that —”

“Tut-tut,” the Governor chided. “Now is not the time

for flattery. It is the time for truth. Tell me. Did you hurt this girl, yes or no?"

The boy stood wide-eyed, with his mouth open. He nodded.

"Do you know why I'm here?" the Governor asked.

"To . . . to make sure we're being treated fairly?"

The Governor stared at him for an uncomfortably long moment. "I am here to remind you all of the price of breaking the law. Tell me, child, are the nights dark here in Namwon?"

The boy nodded.

"As they should be," said the Governor. "Chattana is a city of light, but that light must be earned. That is why I had this reform center built here, away from the city. To remind the people that wickedness has a price. You see, light shines only on the worthy."

The boy continued staring, speechless, as the Governor took a half step back. He raised his arms, palms up. The air grew thick, the way it does before a storm. The hairs on Nok's arms stood on end and her scalp tingled.

Everyone in the courtyard seemed to be holding their breath. A pinprick of light appeared in the Governor's palm, like a hovering firefly. It shone brighter, then brighter still, swelling to the size of a marble.

The little ball of light was blindingly bright, even brighter than the orb that powered the Governor's boat. But it didn't seem hot. If anything, the courtyard felt a little cooler than it had a moment before.

A chill raced up the back of Nok's neck. She had grown up surrounded by the Governor's magic, but few people ever got to see him actually use his powers. She shivered, thrilled and frightened at the same time. The man may have looked ordinary, but he was far from it.

Everything in Chattana — every orb, every cook-stove, every boat motor — all of it ran on the Governor's light-making powers. Once he arrived, there was no more need for fire, no more danger. The orbs lit the night; they powered magnificent machines; they had made Chattana prosperous again.

The city had transformed in more ways than one. The Governor hadn't just made light. He had made laws. Chattana had become the City of Rules, the City of Order. Now there would never be another Great Fire. The people would never have to suffer like that again.

The Governor reached his other hand into his pocket and drew out a glass orb, clear and thin as a soap bubble. "Light shines on the worthy," he repeated, placing the orb

into the boy's hand. "All others fall into darkness. Tell me, child, do you want to remain in darkness forever?"

The boy's throat bobbed as he swallowed. He shook his head.

The Governor closed his fingers over the light in his hand and touched the glass orb. The air between him and the boy wavered and crackled. A second later, everyone in the courtyard gasped.

The Governor's hand was now empty. The light had traveled into the orb, filling it with a Gold glow. Trapped inside the glass, the Governor's light was still bright, though a little less raw and frightening than it had been a moment before.

"Tell me," said the Governor. "Will you be a good boy from now on?"

The boy stared at the light in his hand, speechless. Nok realized this might be the first time he had ever been this close to a Gold orb.

Nok's mother stepped forward. "He will, Your Grace — we will see to that, of course." She turned to the boy. "I hope you appreciate His Grace's generosity! For him to give you that light — and Gold light, no less! — is a kindness I'm not sure you deserve. But, please, Your Grace, allow us to convey our gratitude to you with a song we have prepared in your honor."

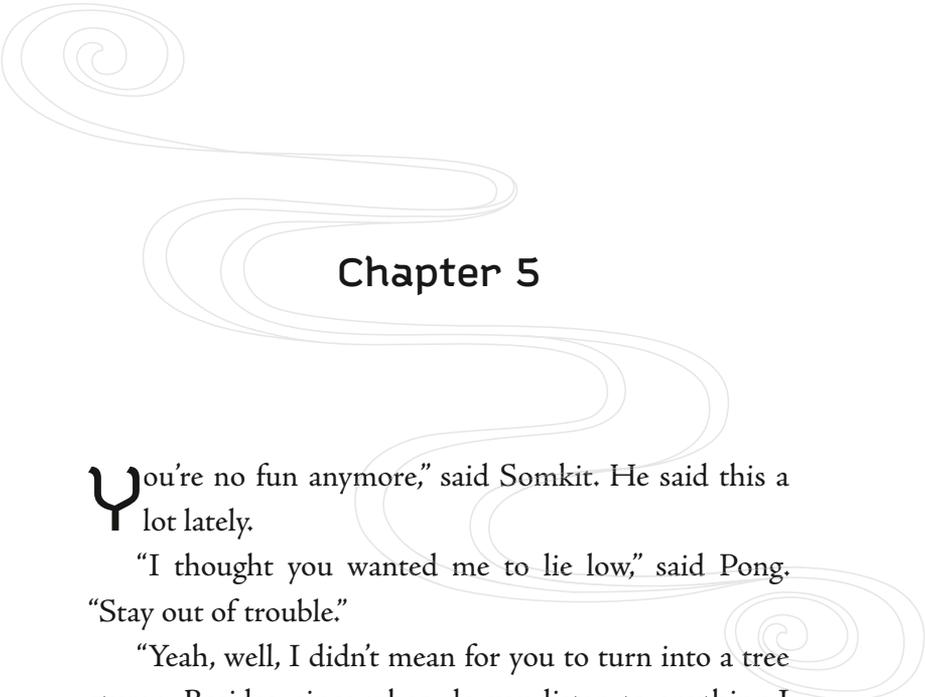
She clapped her hands overhead, the signal for the women prisoners to break into the number they had rehearsed for the occasion.

The small courtyard rang with the sound of their voices. Nok's mother beamed. Her siblings smiled perfect smiles. Everything was back on track and going smoothly.

All eyes were on the Governor, who bent down to whisper some last comforting words to the wayward boy before turning to watch the prisoners' performance.

But Nok was watching the boy. He stood staring at his palm. The hopeful, happy look had left his eyes.

The orb in his hand had gone dark.



## Chapter 5

You're no fun anymore," said Somkit. He said this a lot lately.

"I thought you wanted me to lie low," said Pong. "Stay out of trouble."

"Yeah, well, I didn't mean for you to turn into a tree stump. Besides, since when do you listen to anything I say? Seriously, what's up with you?"

Pong shrugged. He knew he'd changed. No more scuffling with older girls, no more arguments with guards. Pong had become quiet. He just didn't feel like talking.

It had been three months since the Governor's visit. Pong had been so excited that day, even though he hadn't dreamed that he'd actually get the chance to tell the Governor how much he admired him. And when the chance did come, everything had gone so very wrong. Pong would have thought it was all a bad dream if he didn't still have the faded glass orb tucked behind his mat in the boys' bunk room.

Every night Pong lay there, with the used-up glass close to his head. He could still remember the orb's beautiful Gold glow — so much brighter than the Violet orbs they had to make do with at Namwon. He could still hear the Governor's words. Not the words of his speech — those famous phrases printed on posters and in schoolbooks. No, the words that haunted Pong were the ones the Governor had spoken in his ear as the prisoners began their song.

“Look at them,” he'd whispered to Pong, nodding at the prisoners. “They go free, but they always come back. Year after year, the jails are full. The world is full of darkness, and that will never change.” And then the Governor leaned a half inch closer to Pong. He looked into Pong's eyes with his own cold stare. “Those who are born in darkness always return. You'll see. You and I will meet again.”

And then the Governor had squeezed his fingers tight, and the orb in Pong's hand had gone dark.

That was when Pong realized how stupid he'd been. Had he really thought he'd grow up to work for the Governor himself? The Governor would never let someone like him even come near. Pong's dreams of a life outside Namwon vanished in that instant. Things wouldn't be any different out there — not for him.

*The world is full of darkness, and that will never change.*

It didn't matter what he and Somkit did or how old they got. They would be in the dark wherever they went.

Pong didn't share his thoughts with Somkit. He closed them inside himself, where they hardened into a physical thing, making a box around his heart. And when night fell and the lights of Chattana blazed across the water, and Somkit chattered on and on about orb motors and the latest speedboat models, Pong stayed silent. He turned his face away from the river gate. If anything, the lights only made Namwon seem darker.

Though the nights had changed, the days for Pong and Somkit were the same. For Somkit, that meant fruit scavenging.

Mangoes were the only fruit the prisoners were allowed to have, and only then because they dropped straight into their arms. But the prison guards, like most people in Chattana, lived for their fruit. Once a week, after payday, they would wait on the boat dock and wave down the fruit boats heading to the floating markets in the city.

The prison children would press their faces against the metal gate and sniff the sweet scent of mangosteens

and rambutans, the acid aroma of the pomelos and green oranges. They would suck the fruit-flavored air down their nostrils and roll it around on their tongues. But there was one fruit boat they would not smell.

Durian is called the King of Fruits. It's creamy and rich, more like custard or pudding than something you'd expect to find growing on a tree. Its flavor is musky, buttery — sweet at first, tangy at the end. It makes the back of your neck hot to eat it. It tastes like heaven.

It smells like the opposite.

After flagging down the durian boatman, the guards would carry the enormous spiky-skinned fruit to the wooden table under their shaded pavilion. They hacked the fruit open with a machete, careful not to get the juice on their hands or clothes. They scooped out the yellow flesh inside and rolled their eyes back in their heads with pleasure.

After an hour, the ground all around the table would be littered with piles of durian husks, stinking like a dying mongoose. That's where Somkit came in.

Somkit was the only kid in Namwon who didn't mind the smell of durian. He was happy to gather the stinking, sticky rinds and cram them into the trash baskets by the river dock. The guards rewarded him for his help by letting him scrape up any remaining fruit. The

baskets didn't do much to hide the smell, but luckily the trashman would come in his boat that same evening to dump them downriver.

One hot afternoon, the guards had just finished off a particularly ripe, particularly smelly durian, and more husks littered the pavilion ground than usual.

Somkit held one of the rinds, scraping out the last bit of flesh with his fingers. "Hey, Pong, help me take these to the trash."

"No way," said Pong, holding his nose and breathing through his mouth. "That's your thing, not mine."

"Come on, don't be a jerk." Somkit coughed.

Pong's ears tuned to the raspy sound. Somkit had trouble breathing. Running or doing anything active could make him collapse into a fit of coughing. A few times it had been really bad, and Pong had watched him choke and gasp like a fish drowning on dry land.

"Are you okay?" Pong asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine," said Somkit. But he coughed again, three times. His eyebrows shot up with each cough like someone was poking him in the ribs.

Pong was pretty sure it was a trying-to-get-out-of-work cough, but he rolled his eyes and grumbled, "Fine, let's get it over with."

He gulped in a big breath and started picking up the

rinds with the tips of his fingernails. The juice oozed onto his wrists as he followed Somkit to the trash.

The trash baskets sat near the river dock, on the other side of the guards' storage hut. The baskets reeked sweetly, like raw chicken left in the sun all day. Pong opened the lid and gagged at the rotting smell of old durian mixed with old bananas, old orange peels, and old eggshells. He dumped his durian rinds in with the rest.

"I'll go back and get what's left," said Somkit. "Cram all that down to make room, okay?"

"Oh, come on," protested Pong.

"Just do it," said Somkit, making the same eyebrow-cough as he walked away. "I'll be right back."

Pong waited, craning his face away from the durian stench. When Somkit still hadn't come back, he leaned around the corner of the storage shed to look for him. It was the hottest part of the day, and the prisoners lay dozing or chatting in the shade on the other side of the courtyard. The guards, full and happy, reclined on the steps, picking their teeth.

Pong had their schedules memorized, and he knew they wouldn't get up for another forty minutes, when they changed shifts. No one in the entire prison was paying attention.

Pong had never thought about escaping Namwon

before, but now the opportunity lurched up like a mud-skipper and slapped him across the face with its tail. He could get out of Namwon. Not when he was thirteen. *Now.*

Without pausing to think, Pong tipped the basket and climbed inside. He took one last gulp of semi-fresh air and wriggled down under the trash. He nearly threw up as he pushed the durian skins, orange rinds, and banana peels up around him, packing them over his head, covering his face.

He breathed through his mouth as shallowly as he could. With one eye pressed against the straw weave of the basket, he could see a blurry, golden view of what was happening outside.

He froze when he heard footsteps coming closer. Someone swung open the basket lid and held it open for a long time. Pong listened but couldn't tell who stood there. Somkit? A guard? Whoever it was, they shut the lid and walked away.

Surely Somkit would wonder where he'd gone. Surely he would start asking if anyone had seen Pong. But no one called for him. And Somkit never came back.

Pong sat gagging in the basket, stinky juice dripping off his hair and down the bridge of his nose. He didn't know if he could make it until the trashman came back. The whole thing began to feel like a really bad idea. Pong

was ready to give up and get out, but now the guards had moved back into position and would see him if he climbed out of the basket. He'd have to wait until sun-down for the next shift change.

As the sun began to set, the trashman arrived. When Pong heard him whistling, he was seized with terror. He was sure that when the man lifted the basket, he'd realize it was too heavy.

Pong's nervous stomach writhed like a bowl of eels. What had he been thinking? He was going to get caught any moment. And then what would he say? *I fell into the basket, you see. I tried to call for help, but no one heard me. Please don't put me into solitary confinement. Being inside a basket of durian is punishment enough.*

One benefit of being underfed is that you don't weigh much. The trashman lifted the basket with just a little more effort than usual, hauled it to the river dock, and plopped it into his boat.

Pong couldn't see much of what was happening, but he swore he spotted his friend's silhouette standing at the gate. Suddenly, he realized everything he was leaving behind. *No! Wait!* he thought. *I can't go without Somkit!*

But it was too late. The trashman shoved the boat away from the dock with his bare foot and they were off, down the river.