

National Book Award-winning author of *KING AND THE DRAGONFLIES*

KACEN CALLENDER

MOONFLOWER





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FOR THE YOUNGER ME WHO DIDN'T WANT
TO BE IN THIS WORLD ANYMORE:

I'm so glad you stayed.

FOR ANYONE WHO HAS ALSO WANTED
TO LEAVE THIS WORLD:

I'm so glad you're still here.







THE TREE OF LIFE

There is a tree growing inside me.





Once upon a time, there was a human named Blue. Blue didn't have a home, and she didn't have parents. You might think that everyone has parents, but Blue didn't have parents because she came from the sky. A star drifted down from the dark one night, cradling a baby Blue in its light. Everyone in this world and in your own world as well is made of stars. Blue was made from a star, too. I guess you could say that star was her parent, then, if you really want to.

But the star didn't know how to take care of a wailing human infant, so it carried Blue on the salted breeze and left her in a bed of blooming pink and red and yellow flowers. Each and every star in the night sky has a single wish that they can gift to any child. The child can ask for anything their heart desires, and their wish will come true. The star tied the wish around Blue's neck. It was a glimmer of light that hardened so it looked like a pearl. There are a lot of wishes in this world that people mistake for pearls. There are a few in

your own world also—a whole entire wish, gone to waste behind a glass case in a jewelry store.

“There,” the star said, satisfied it had done everything it could for the child. “Now when you’re old enough to speak, you can tell me what you want, anything at all, and it will be yours.”





PAPYRUS

The pyramid is in the center of the city. It's solid gold. Well, I think it might be, anyway. I've never been able to get close enough to have a good look.

I hide in the shadow of an alleyway. Luckily, right now my skin is so transparent that someone has to be looking closely to see me. I must look like a mirage to the beings here. The only thing about me that's as clear as day is the chain. It's like a warm gold thread looped around my ankle, the end dangling before it sinks into the ground, disappearing beneath me like a ray of light. I've tried to get that chain off a thousand times, but nothing works. I can't cut it, can't bite it, can't untie it. The more I try to tug at it, the tighter it gets around my foot.

There's only way to get the chain off, and the answer is in the pyramid. It has to be. They're both the same golden color. That can't just be a coincidence. Wolf says

there's no such thing as coincidences, only signs and messages.

Wolf flutters by. He told me that his real name is something I can't pronounce with my human tongue, in a frequency I can't even hear, and the first time I saw him, he was in the form of a wolf, so the nickname stuck. But right now, he's a bright blue butterfly, lazily drifting until he lands on my shoulder. He's the only being that can see me whenever I come here, even when I'm as see-through as a glass of water. My skin is invisible right now, but the longer I'm here, the more my color begins to fade in. I'm starting to see the outline of my gray T-shirt, my brown skin. *You're running out of time, Moon.*

I know.

I slip out from the alley and keep close to the walls of the busy street. All sorts of beings are in this town, ambling around. One rushes by as they pull a rickshaw that kicks up red dust, and another chases after a top hat that's blown away in a wind gust, but everyone else takes their time, looking around in awe and pointing at the sights. There are humans, some from thousands of years ago, dressed in traditional ancient garb like tunics and shawls and loincloths; and there are humans from

the future also, wearing white outfits that glow a faint light, who have evolved to be super tall, their heads so big and heavy it's amazing they don't fall.

And there are other beings, too: some with blue skin and wide black eyes, some who grow feathers from their arms, others who have the faces of lions as they stroll around in white robes, backs straight, chins raised, dignified. One of the lion beings with a puffy red mane pauses, sniffing the air, and turns to look right at me, pupils widening in their yellow eyes. I slip behind a stall where beings sit on stools and eat a slimy green cuisine I don't recognize (are those *slugs?*), and a being with pale gray skin and red eyes gasps when I accidentally knock their leg while I crawl past, looking underneath their stool, head turning back and forth as their gaze goes right through me.

Careful, Wolf whispers. Someone's going to catch you. You're not supposed to be here.

He likes to find ways to sneak in this reminder. *You're not supposed to be here, Moon.* But I can't let fear stop me now. I'm almost there. This is the closest I've ever gotten to the pyramid. The entire city is like a maze, buildings packed together and stacked on top of each

other more and more the nearer I get to the center of the city and the pyramid that waits there. The closer I am to the pyramid, the closer I am to getting rid of my chain and escaping this realm and its world forever.

Wolf flutters around my head. *You should turn back, Moon. You should go home.*

He always says the same thing whenever I try to reach the pyramid, but I shake my head. *That isn't my home.*

The road changes from cobblestone to red dirt to white pavement. The shops and houses are mixtures of cultures and civilizations throughout time. A tall red pagoda looms over a circular mud brick home with a thatched roof. A coffee shop with cushions sits beside a giant coliseum with white pillars. A giant mosque with white towers is surrounded by a canal that grows palm trees along its banks, where riverboats and canoes and ancient red rafts sail by. There are buildings from the future, too. Skyscrapers that go so high I'm pretty sure they're touching the other realms, dazzling with white-blue-silver light. The sky that waits above is a swirling universe of colors, a kaleidoscope of patterns and designs. There's so much waiting in the beyond.

I stop beside a movie theater that looks like it's from the 1950s (it's even in black and white) and peer around the corner. Just a few streets away, I see the tips of the walls. The center of the city's maze has a redbrick fort surrounding the pyramid, and the only gate opens to a drawbridge over the moat carved from the river that snakes through the city's streets. There's a line of what looks like hundreds of people waiting to get inside. No way I can just sneak past all those people and make it into the pyramid. But it looks like the only other option I have is to swim across the moat and climb the huge wall. I feel ripples of frustration. Why does it get more difficult to reach the pyramid every time I come here? It's like a video game that gets harder whenever I lose and try again. Maybe Wolf is right. Maybe I should just give up. He says the pyramid isn't meant for me yet.

I know it seems impossible now, but there's so much waiting for you still. Stay.

Wolf talks like a know-it-all, just because I'm human and just because I'm twelve. He must be hundreds of thousands of years old, but it doesn't matter. He has no idea what my life is like. None at all. He says that he always watches me from afar, even when he isn't by my

side, but he doesn't know what it's like to be me. He doesn't feel everything that I feel. He doesn't know how much it hurts when I cry myself to sleep. It's a physical pain, right there in the center of my chest: all the years of the hate built up, hate I've ever received from everyone around and sometimes even from me.

Time is ticking. Time always passes here so much more quickly. A few hours can feel like just a few minutes. My skin is coming in more and more, like someone you might see beneath the waves of the ocean, fading in and out and in again. It won't be long before I look like a solid being, just like everyone else here. And if I look like everyone else, that also means they'll be able to see me. I'll be caught, captured, and who knows what would happen then? I don't want to find out the answer to that one.

I have only a few minutes left. I don't have any choice. I have to make a run for it.

I take a deep breath, get ready to run, and—

It begins.

The scream.

I gasp and spin around. The screech was so loud I thought its maker would be right behind me, but nothing

is there. Nothing but other beings, also twisting and turning in surprise.

It's here, Wolf says.

The Shadow. That's what Wolf calls it.

My skin prickles with fear. I lose my breath. The Shadow comes almost every time I'm here. Usually, I have at least an hour, just as I become completely solid and have to return home again, but today, the Shadow has found me early. The monster is like a siren. It seeks out children like me. Screams and alerts anyone nearby that I'm here when I'm not supposed to be. What's scariest is that I've never actually *seen* the Shadow. It's shrouded by a black haze, like smoke gushing into the air. What's waiting for me beneath? It could be anything. It could be a monster, a giant spider with hairy legs and fangs, a wraith reaching for me with dead hands. Wolf has suggested that I don't run. *Stand and face the Shadow. See what will happen.* I think beings like him have a different definition of fear.

My skin is almost completely solid now, and with the Shadow's screams going off, everyone's looking around. Some beings stop in the street and point at me, their eyes wide. Their whispers echo.

Is that a child?

Look at the chain around their foot.

How did they get here?

Is it my imagination? It looks like smoke is gushing over one of the buildings just a street away, the Shadow coming closer.

Moon, listen to me, please, Wolf says. He lands on the tip of my nose. His wings open and close. You have to go back now. If you stay long enough to become solid . . .

But I'm too close. This is my last shot. It's the closest I'll ever get to the pyramid. I ignore him, turn around, and run.

Beings gasp and jump out of my way as I rush toward the fort's walls. I run across the street and jump out of the way just as an old-time automobile races by, blaring its horn. I slip past the line of humans that wait, the line curving around the fort's walls, gazes and gasps following. I run onto the drawbridge, feet thumping against the wood, toward the opening. The pyramid is huge so up close, as big as an enormous castle, and there—right there, at the bottom, is an entrance, like a square archway, but it's too dark to see inside—

I blink, and when I open my eyes again, a being

has appeared in front of me. I slide to a stop so fast I almost fall.

The being looks human. She's tall, with pale skin and red-pink hair that matches her dress, which flares around her legs. I know who she is. Wolf has told me all about her, and I've seen her from afar, strolling through the streets with a gaggle of courtiers. She's the Keeper. She oversees the pyramid—this entire city and the lands that surround it.

"Don't you know that it's rude to skip a line?" she says.

I take a step back. There's an echo. A blare. The alarm. I'm yanked *down*.

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