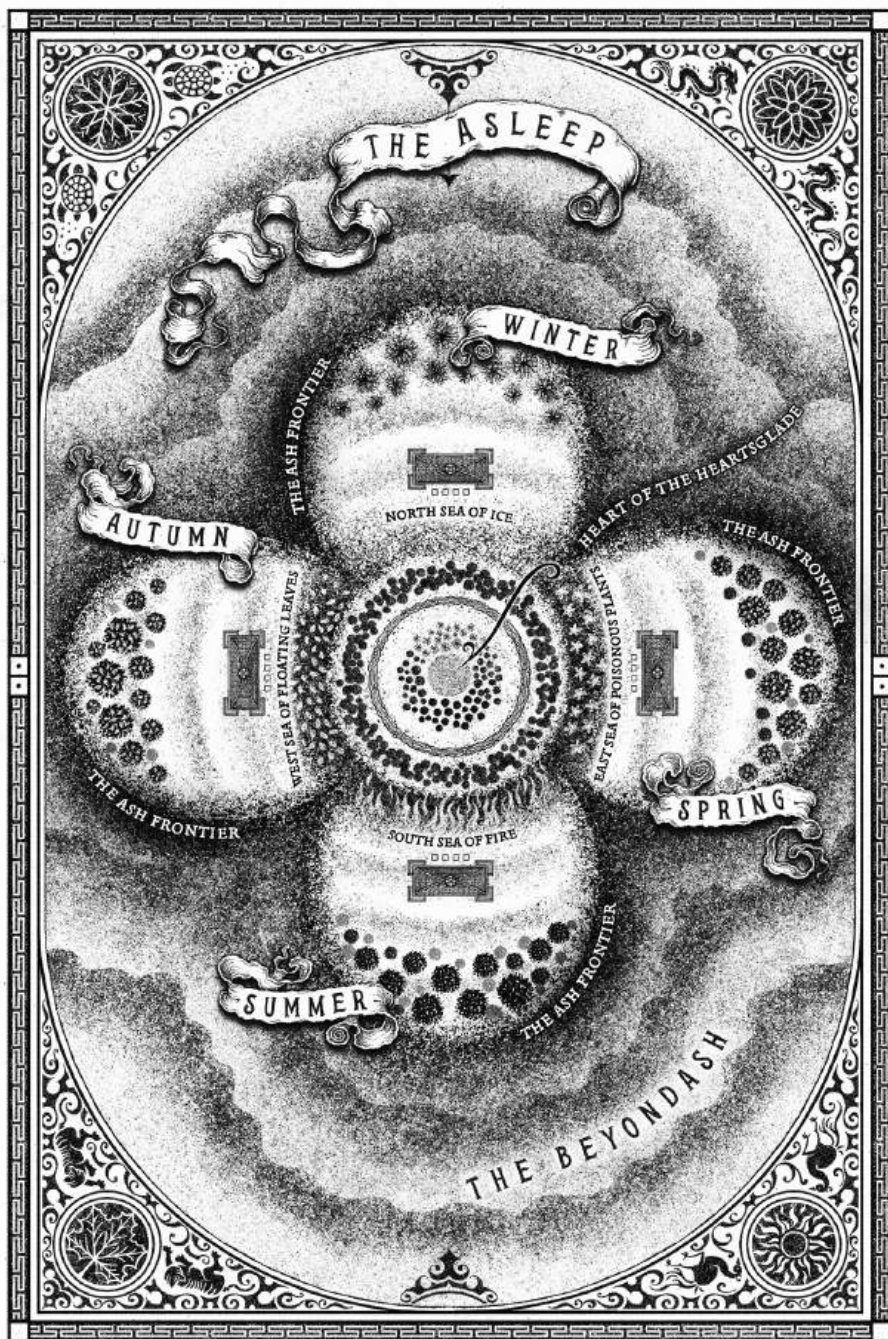


DREAMSLINGER



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First published in the UK in 2025 by
PICCADILLY PRESS
an imprint of Bonnier Books UK
5th Floor, HYLO, 103–105 Bunhill Row, London EC1Y 8LZ
Owned by Bonnier Books, Sveavägen 56, Stockholm, Sweden

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-83587-058-7
Also available as an ebook and in audio

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Typeset in Pacella ITC Std/ITC
Designed by Zareen Johnson
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



bonnierbooks.co.uk/PiccadillyPress

*To all those who are exceptions to the rule.
May you rise to be exceptional.*





TODAY WAS GOING TO BE REVOLUTIONARY, ARIA LOVERIDGE THOUGHT, as she got out of bed and reached for the metal-fiber gloves from her bedside table. Next to them, propped up against the box of dominoes, was a little note from her dad.

Morning, Sparkler! Wager a game of dominoes after the big do?

Aria smiled as she slipped on the gloves. “Sparkler” was her dad’s nickname for her, after the little firework. Ever since she was born, she’d been quick to alight and quick to temper. Her childhood tantrums were legendary—a common early indicator of the gene.

But even before they discovered she was a dreamslinger—that is, a carrier of the dreamslinger genetic mutation—her dad had made sure she knew there was nothing wrong with her. She was merely a deep-feeling kid. A person who felt the world more than

the average. As her parent, his job was to teach her how to manage those big emotions.

He was, hands down, her biggest hero. And today he was finally going to be recognized in front of the entire country.

Giddy with nervous anticipation, Aria made her way down to the lab in the basement of Resthaven Home for Dreamslingers, joining her fellow PJ-clad residents for their morning check-ins.

"Aria Loveridge, please approach," Dr. Dixon's stiff voice rang out as he released a resident from one of the four chambers spanning the length of the lab. He strode across the shiny tiled floor to sit back at his desk, opening Aria's file on his computer and nodding toward the plastic chair. Before Aria had a chance to sit down, the questioning began.

"The brain monitor recorded heightened activity during your sleep last night between 3:12 a.m. and 3:40 a.m. Did you have any dreams?"

Aria fidgeted with her gloved fingers. "I remember one where I lost a few of my teeth. I hate those. And I think I also had one where I couldn't find the toilet. Pretty *crappy*, if you ask me."

He pretended not to hear her joke. "Did you have any dreams about the Nightmare Circle?"

"Yes." This was pretty standard. For a reason no one really understood, all dreamslingers shared the same recurring dream. They would find themselves in a circular wilderness, containing a creek, valley, and eerie woodlands, all blanketed by a violet sky.

"Did you encounter any of the Beasts in the Circle?" Dr. Dixon continued.

"Yes, the Bird Beast."

The gigantic bird with a tail of flames was one of the four Beasts

that dreamslingers could encounter in their dreams. There was also the Turtle Beast (whose shell was made of ice), the Tiger Beast (whose fur was made of autumn leaves), and the Dragon Beast (whose scales were made of flower petals). All four were as giant and terrifying as they were strange and mesmerizing.

Dr. Dixon typed into his computer. "Did the Beast lure you to its sea?"

Aria lowered her eyes and gave a small nod. She'd followed the bird to the south end of the Nightmare Circle, where the curved boundary abruptly gave way to a chasm of burning fire.

No one knew why there were four "seas"—the South Sea of Fire, the North Sea of Ice, the West Sea of Floating Leaves, and the East Sea of Poisonous Plants—surrounding the edges of the Nightmare Circle, each guarded by one of the Beasts. Nor did they understand why the Beasts tempted the dreamers to jump into them. What Aria did know was that ignoring the inexplicable desire to leap into the seas took every speck of willpower she had.

Dr. Dixon stopped typing into the computer and narrowed his eyes at Aria. "And did you make contact with the South Sea of Fire?"

"Only with my toes," Aria quickly admitted, knowing that any lies would be uncovered as soon as she went into the chamber. "Then I immediately pulled back, I swear."

Entering the seas infected dreamslingers with that particular affliction. That meant when the dreamer woke up, their Outbursts that day would take the form of the sea they encountered. Fire, ice, wind, or poison.

Dr. Dixon's shrewd eyes bored into Aria as he pushed the return button on his keyboard. "You know as well as I do how

much is riding on today. Your dad has worked hard to get us here. Do *not* let us down."

Aria huffed. "Really, Dr. D? As if I'm not putting enough pressure on myself!"

She was well aware that as Professor Jack Loveridge's daughter, she'd be seen as a walking example of his work. Her dad's pioneering research on dreamslinger welfare was the reason the gene-compromised were finally being treated with the care they'd been denied for far too long. Resthaven was the result of all his work. And if today was a success, the Resthaven model would be replicated throughout the entire country. There'd be no room for mistakes today.

"Now go extract everything acquired during your dream. Every last drop."

Aria hurried down the hall of extraction rooms, past the heated chamber able to melt ice within seconds, the detoxification chamber able to nullify all manner of poisons, and the vacuum chamber designed to withstand gale-force winds, to get to the fourth chamber. This one was padded with fireproof walls, the floor and ceiling covered with a white fire-extinguishing gel.

Bolting the door behind her, Aria peeled off her protective metal-fiber gloves, and immediately felt the onslaught of feelings she'd been trained to withhold. As with all dreamslingers, emotions were the trigger to Aria's Outbursts, and inside the safety of the chambers was the only time the residents were encouraged to let them go. She cracked her knuckles, the anticipation of release almost painful under her skin. Then she allowed the storm of nerves, fear, excitement, and tension to reach their peak before expelling it all from her person.

She let out a deep-bellied howl as hungry flames whooshed out of her fingers, and with it came a delicious release. She closed her eyes and let her mind wander. She thought about how lucky she was to be in Resthaven. How nice it'd been to celebrate her fourteenth birthday with her fellow residents. How safe she was inside these walls.

Soon, she was traveling back to the memory of her first Outburst. It was a year ago now, when she was still thirteen, during school camp at Almiro State Park. She'd fallen asleep in her cabin, her belly full of s'mores and campfire stories, when she'd had a terrifying dream of a giant amber-leafed tiger chasing her into a sea of floating autumn leaves.

When she bolted awake from the nightmare, her body had tingled painfully like it had been dunked in hot crackling candy. Scared and confused, she'd shaken out her throbbing fingers, only to release a deadly windstorm into her cabin. The windows exploded and her sleeping cabinmates were violently flung from their bunk beds, hitting the ground like rag dolls. That was how Aria discovered she was a carrier of the dreamslinger gene.

It was safe to say she was traumatized. Learning you suffered from the same genetic mutation as the people who killed your mom was enough to scar a kid for life.

Back in the extraction chamber, Aria drained every last wisp of fire she could conjure from her hands until all that spat out was smoke. And only when her body was numb and her throat hoarse from howling did she allow herself to leave, finally feeling prepared to face what was sure to become the best day of her and her dad's lives.



"Basima, I think we need a bit more polish on these floors. I can't see my reflection."

"Maria, let's make sure the singed curtains are all replaced. Oh, and the yoga mats with the acid burns, too."

"Do you think they should film the meditation room or the breath-work pods? Actually, maybe the art-therapy wing would be better."

Aria was aware she was probably coming off bossy and demanding to the Resthaven staff, which was not her intention. But as she scoured every corner of the Home on the way to the Morning Mantra session, she was gripped with the need for everything to be *perfect* for her dad's big moment.

It wasn't every day that the US Commissioner of Dreamslinger Relations and the governor of Texas came to visit, let alone sign the national rollout of your dad's Dreamslinger Home initiative live on national television. This was their one chance to make Resthaven the sparkling example of what could be in every state in America.

Realizing she was late for leading Morning Mantra, Aria hurried to the commons room.

"Restrain, contain, maintain!" Aria chanted from the stage as the residents beat their bowl drums and joined her in repeating the same three words over and over again. "Restrain, contain, maintain!"

Morning Mantra always took place after the check-ins with Dr. Dixon and his team. It only took five minutes, but Dad was right that it helped start each day with gratitude and united purpose.

"Grateful are we for the protection we receive, from the dangers within us we cannot foresee," Aria recited to conclude the session. "May we be free from doing harm to our kin, and each do our part for goodness to win."

"Restrain, contain, maintain!" the residents echoed in unison.

Aria was just stepping off the stage when Pablo, a sixteen-year-old fellow resident, turned on the news.

"Guys, look—there's been another anti-slinger attack in Almiro!"

Everyone crowded around the tiny TV.

"That's the third in as many weeks," Levi, another resident pointed out, shuddering. "Isn't that the town hall? That's just down the road."

Aria spoke above the residents' worried mutterings. "That's why today is so important. Dad's work is helping counter anti-slinger rhetoric, but there's a lot more work to be done."

The residents nodded in agreement.

"Makes you appreciate how far we've come," Pablo murmured, which incited another series of nods.

He was right. Dreamslingers had always been a marginalized group in society, deemed dangerous, volatile, and to be avoided unless necessary. But ten years ago, when there was a mass dreamslinger Outburst in Texas, thousands of people died and the landscape shifted overnight. Many states passed laws that allowed dreamslingers to be locked up without the need for trial. Mere suspicion was enough to be incarcerated for life. They'd become public enemy number one.

Some particularly fervent anti-slingers went as far as to demand the eradication of all dreamslingers, as if they were pests who

needed to be culled. But through the chaos, Aria's dad had risen as a voice of radical compassion.

Despite the Great Outburst having killed Aria's mom, her dad had introduced a revolutionary approach to dreamslinger welfare. He argued the gene-compromised were not criminals. They were patients who deserved society's care. If dreamslingers could be taught the skills to "restrain, contain, and maintain," it would create a win-win for humanity. Little did he know that when his daughter hit puberty she'd become one of the beneficiaries of his work.

She owed everything to her dad. Pride swelled in her chest as Aria returned to her room to grab one of her late mom's journals and to wrap the band with a four-petaled flower—the universal dreamslinger symbol—around her upper arm. It was another of her dad's recommendations. Wearing the symbol prevented dreamslingers from being accused of hiding their identity for nefarious reasons. It also allowed more cautious citizens to keep their distance, and be safe from any potential Outbursts. In Aria's experience, the armband was an effective tool for her safety, and for others'.

Satisfied that it was affixed properly to her arm, Aria made her way to the main doors of Resthaven and faced the bright morning, already heady with the summer heat. Her dad and the important guests were arriving later this afternoon for their big live-streamed event. And there were still many things to be done.

But first, there was somewhere important Aria needed to go.

THE FIELD OF SUNFLOWERS

ARIA'S MOM HAD ADORED SUNFLOWERS. IT WAS WHY HER DAD HAD scattered her ashes at the Almiro Sunflower Fields, where, in the summer, the meadows would come alive—their bright, gleeful faces blooming like a million petaled suns. Her dad said Aria had taken her first steps amongst these flowers, recounting how the giant stalks crowded around her like proud doting aunties, and how they'd celebrated afterward with a picnic by the lake.

Aria was barely four years old when her mom, Ersal Loveridge—who'd chosen her English name after the Greek goddess of dew—was killed during the Great Outburst. And with her died a part of Aria too, including her connection to Korea—her mom's birth country. The only memories she had of her mother were the lucky number eight pendant she'd worn around her neck, the warmth of her embrace, and her scent—a light citrusy white musk that Aria would recognize *anywhere*. That, and a lullaby she used to sing as she cradled Aria to sleep. Aria visited the Fields often,

whenever she wanted to feel closer to her. Because here, her mom was eternal.

"Hey, Mom, today's the big day," Aria said out loud as she wandered through a grove of happy yellow faces, rubbing the pendant that had belonged to her mom and that she now wore around her neck. She looked down at the journal she'd brought with her. This one was titled *Ersa's Treasures, Volume 8: Highly Specific Emotions I Didn't Know There Were Names For* in her scratchy handwriting.

Her mom had a box full of the tiny journals, each one a unique collection of treasures that tickled her curiosity at the time. Funny song lyrics. Interesting names. One even chronicled a database of animals she could see in the clouds. This notebook was one of Aria's favorites, though, because it almost felt like having a conversation with her mom.

"Dad's going to wow the nation today, Mom. I'm so proud of him. Aren't you?" Aria opened the journal to a random page and pointed to the first word her finger landed on.

The entry read:

*SAUDADE (Noun) (Portuguese origin):
Nostalgia and the love that remains;
a desire to be near something or someone distant.*

Aria nodded. "I wish you could be here with us, too. But you're okay wherever you are, right?"

Aria chose another random page and placed her finger on a word without looking. This time, the entry read:

HIRAETH (Noun) (Welsh origin): (1) Homesickness

*for a home to which you cannot return; or (2) A
longing for a home that never existed.*

Aria sighed. "I'm sorry you're homesick, Mom. If it's any consolation, I am, too. But not homesick for a place. For a time. Back when home was the three of us."

She felt the sticky tendrils of loss weaving through her ribs, and she put the book away before the gluiness seeped farther in. Instead, she walked toward the lake, singing the lullaby her mom used to sing to her.

*Fly, free bird, fly
Fly, free bird, fly
Don't let them clip your wings
When you were born to soar
Fly, free bird, fly
Fly, free bird, fly
For there, beyond the gray
You'll find a new door
My wings will guide you home*

Grief was the hardest emotion to restrain, let alone control or maintain. All the emotional regulation techniques she'd learned from Resthaven hadn't yet given her the skills to master it. Because grief couldn't be tamed like frustration or anger. It was slippery. Unpredictable. It crept up on you when you least expected it and took the floor out from under you.

As if illustrating the point, an errant flame erupted from her fingers, leaping onto the patch of grass as she came out into the

lake's clearing. She grunted and quickly stamped it out before it could spread.

There was a flurry of activity near the lakeside, and she turned her attention to the commotion, grateful for the distraction. There seemed to be a group of young kids gathered in front of some older teenagers in cloaked hoods with symbols on the backs. It looked like some kind of a cosplay meetup.

But as one of the teenagers chanted something, a turtle the size of a dinner table with a shell of ice materialized beside him. Then another cloaked teen summoned a gigantic dragon who had petals for scales. A shiver ran down Aria's back.

Most of the local kids shrieked and immediately made a run for it. They knew the rule when it came to dreamslingers—engage at your own peril. Only a brave few, or perhaps they were the foolish ones, stayed back, trembling but too curious to leave.

Aria gawked at the familiar creatures in the unfamiliar setting. That ice-shelled turtle and petal-scaled dragon were Beasts from the Nightmare Circle. But how were they *here*?

"You guys want to have some fun?" the teen with the Turtle Beast asked the remaining kids with a grin, and he slung his hands toward the lake. Aria flinched, expecting an ice Outburst. Instead, a sheet of ice began forming on the water. The frosty shell on the Turtle Beast glowed as the boy's fingers did an intricate dance, constructing an ice slide on the floe that spilled into the lake. "Thought you might like to cool off in this heat."

One fearless kid peeled off his T-shirt and jumped into the lake with a howl, eager to try out their frosty new waterslide.

"What about a rope swing?" the teen with the petaled dragon teased. "Bet I can make one like you've never seen before."

She slung her hands toward the nearest field of sunflowers and made a *Come here* motion. Her dragon glowed as one stalk stretched all the way toward the lake as if made of stretchy elastic. The girl twirled her hands and made a tying motion, and the stalk affixed itself to the branch of a tree overlooking the water. One kid jumped on, using the sunflower head as a pommel seat to swing himself into the lake.

Aria watched the scene with equal parts fascination and fear. Who were these people who could wield their Outbursts with such calm precision and skill? There was no ugly release of emotion like Aria let out in the chambers every morning. None of the raw, uncontrollable wildness of her Outbursts. It was like they had real-life superpowers.

"You can join us if you want to," an older teen with dark hair said as he approached Aria. There was a daisy on his cloak. "We don't bite."

It was only then that Aria noticed the intricate knot charm hanging from his waist, long silky tassels flowing from it. She frowned. Where had she seen that before? It looked familiar, but she couldn't quite place it. She thought back to her lessons at Resthaven. . . . Something to do with preventing dreams? No, that wasn't it. Something to do with historical methods of capturing—

She gasped and stumbled back as awareness dawned on her. "That's a B—Beast catcher!" she stuttered.

The boy cocked his head. "Not quite."

Aria's mind spun. "Yes, it is! We learned all about them. And the only people stupid enough to use them are—" Her eyes widened. "You're a royal slinger from the Kingdom of Royal Hanguk,

aren't you? But how? You're a hermit kingdom. You guys aren't allowed to leave."

"And yet here we are."

Aria took another step back. The Kingdom of Royal Hanguk was a tiny country nestled on an island inside Seoul, known for its disproportionate population of dreamslingers and for their decision to live completely isolated from the rest of the world. Little was known about them, but their king governed the Royal League of Dreamslingers, which trained teenagers to harness and wield their Outbursts.

You'd think that was an enviable skill, except that the controversial training involved catching dream Beasts from the Nightmare Circle and pulling them back into the real world. And this put young dreamslingers—and the general public—at great risk. In an interview, her dad had once likened the League's methods to giving loaded guns to young people. Except worse, because young people were being turned *into* loaded guns.

The boy looked down at Aria's armband and paused. "You could be a hero, you know."

"You mean like *you*?" she spat. "You can't be a hero if you're already the villain."

"You'll find that depends on whom you're asking."

Aria's gaze flitted down to his tasseled knot charm again, and the boy lifted it up for her to see.

"It's where we house them," he explained. He chanted something that sounded like "*Suri suri masuri*."

Aria blinked, and suddenly, a giant dragon with rose petals for scales was standing next to him. Aria screamed and leapt back.

"There's no need for that." He jumped on the Beast's back

with a well-practiced ease, and the long, wingless dragon let out a hiss. “My name is Tae and this is Jaya. He’s a bloom dragon.”

When Aria merely gaped in response, he continued. “Having the genetic mutation doesn’t make you a villain—it makes you an exception. The Royal League could help you become *exceptional*. Remember that.”

For a split second, Aria was so caught up in the moment that she found herself nodding along. But then her senses returned, and she remembered why this all looked too good to be true. Because it *was*.

After all, the Royal League of Dreamslingers were the ones who caused the Great Outburst ten years ago. The hermit kingdom had suddenly sent hundreds of their young royal slingers on a world tour, to showcase their controversial abilities to the public. They claimed it was a diplomatic effort to help dispel negative myths about the League, and to build positive public sentiment toward dreamslingers—royal or otherwise. To show the world that dreamslingers’ powers were a force for *good*.

But that’s not what happened. By the time the contingent arrived in Texas, they’d been pushed beyond their limits and were exhausted. A fight broke out between some royal slingers and a group of local protestors, which sparked a mass conflict. What resulted was a series of fires, ice storms, hurricanes, and poisonous plagues that ravaged multiple cities and took thousands of innocent lives. Including Aria’s mom’s.

At the thought of her mom, fresh grief seeped into Aria’s bones. Since the Great Outburst, hardly any royal slingers had been seen outside the hermit kingdom.

Until now.

"Hey, kid, be careful!" a royal slinger shouted as one of the local kids swung himself too eagerly on the sunflower rope swing, almost colliding headfirst with the ice slide.

"This is incredible!" the boy cried, ignoring the warning and going for another, bigger swing.

Another slinger summoned his Tiger Beast and used his wind Outburst to pull the floating ice sheet closer to the shore. But at the same time, the one who'd made the sunflower rope swing lassooed the stalk around the boy's body, dropping him into the water. Unfortunately, the marriage of the two actions resulted in the boy suddenly being dropped, not into the lake, but onto the hard ice. His head struck the sharp edge of the floe with a sickening crack. Blood began to pool under his head.

Aria screamed.

She suddenly understood her dad's analogy. The problem with becoming a human loaded gun was that you didn't have to *want* to hurt people to still be able to hurt them. There were many ways to pull a trigger.

Quickly, she sprinted back to the carpark to find someone to call an ambulance. A man there complied, but not before he muttered under his breath.

"Human abominations."

It was only when she caught him sneering at her armband that she realized he wasn't talking about the royal slingers. He was talking about *her*.

"It wasn't me!" she shouted, feeling indignant. "I didn't hurt him. It was *them*. I'm different, I promise. I'm not like them at all!"

The man looked at her with pity, which only made her fume

even more. Soon, her fingers were sparking with heat from a ballooning Outburst, and she gritted her teeth. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing her lose control.

Restrain. Contain. Maintain.

It was like her dad always said. A wise person allowed some battles to be lost in order to win the war. And this guy? He wasn't worth the fight.

Checking that the boy was being looked after, Aria turned and ran. She put all trace of stupid ignorant haters and of weird royal slingers out of her mind. Because for the briefest of moments, she'd almost forgotten. Today, back at Resthaven, she and her dad were about to win a real war.

And *that* was something worth fighting for.