

Jade

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Making a daring escape from the villainous Mothers through a portal to a new world, the teens find themselves ever more intricately woven into its affairs. Can Zee and Abel find a way to defeat Darisan, and thus fulfill her prophecy?

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1 - Orphanage

Muffled whimpers of pain escaped through the doorway as the battered door swung shut on the orphanages dormitory room number four.

A scrap of a girl barely in her teens crept past the door without looking back. Slender, pale and lithe, she was the queen of mischief. Her raven black hair was a rarity in the orphanage filled with browns and blondes. Her emerald eyes shone defiant to all authority, her head had a stronger abstinence than a boar.

As she slowly continued on, she could almost feel the child's pain. When caught red-handed, stealing or failing to be present during roll call for duties, children were beat several times. In the orphanage, all the adults who attended the facility were women, and must be referred to as 'Mother', and spoken to as 'Ma'am'. Despite their kindly appearance to visitors, they were completely opposite people to the little 'children' they controlled.

She was completely past the door now, hidden behind a mountain of rancid laundry. Checking both ways, she took a breath before continuing down the corridor.

On her hands and knees, she hastily made her way across the grit scrubbed floors of 'home'. Taking a sudden intake of breath; she noticed the whimpering growing louder, and realized that the Mother was dragging the beaten child back to his post. Making a mad scramble, she got to her feet and dashed through the bathroom door. Grabbing a rag and bucket, she flung herself into a stall and furiously began scrubbing the filthy toilet bowl. Several moments later, the Mother flung in the victim, and just by hearing, could tell that he had really had a rough time. She listened closely to the Mothers fading footfalls before peeking a look at the moaning child. Realization hit her like a blow from a mallet.

"Abel! You all right?" She crawled over to where her best companion lay on the floor. Her long tangled black hair dangled over him as she bent to examine his wounds, which criss-crossed over his back in deep welts. He looked up at her with a smile.

"Don't worry Zee" His fine sandy colored hair was matted to his forehead with perspiration. And his ocean blue eyes sparkled with innocence. With his lean body, he was able to live off meager portions. Abel had lived at the orphanage all his life, similar to Zee, and was supposedly the same age so they stuck together as friends.

"Abel, stop smiling like that and get over here" Zee sighed. Abel was extremely considerate, hardly ever putting himself as the priority.

Abel scooted over to where Zee beckoned him, maneuvering around puddles of water and buckets.

"Zee, I'm all right, you can go back to scrubbing before the Mother returns." Abel gasped; even by the way he spoke she knew he was definitely not all right. She carefully dabbed at his deep cuts with the rag wet only with cold water.

"At least now you won't catch an infection anytime soon." Zee put down her rag and gently pulled his shirt back on. Abel stood with slight difficulty, and carefully stretched his arms.

"Let's finish up these chores so we can earn our supper." Zee turned back to her stall without looking back, because she knew he always listened.

Roughly half an hour later, two Mothers came in and ushered the bathroom crew into the hallway into double lines; boys in one and girls in the other, alphabetical order depending on name.

The Mothers and the fourteen filthy children made their way down corridors and hallways with little or no sunlight from muck-slicked windows that appeared on occasion. Black and white floor tiles marched in a

pattern as strict as the lines the children walked in and just as straight. Hundreds of smaller hallways branched off of the main corridor they were walking, some merely dead ends and others branched off more still. Having no pattern, almost the whole building was a maze meant for confusing children and possible escapees. If anyone was ever lost here, they could be lost for days.

From the back of her line, Zee looked to the front of the boys' line, and saw what she expected. After many experiences with the belt from many years back, Zee had learned that most often the Mother struck to one side or another. So if you shifted your weight to the other foot when you walked, you would escape a majority of the pain, appearing to 'totter'. Abel had a slight gimp on his left side where the Mother's belt must have made a majority of its hits. The whole way to the orphanages dingy cafeteria, she stared at Abel's lopsided gait, almost fearing he would topple over.

Bursting through the creaky double doors, it was a flurry of feet for food. Unfortunately, they were one of the last groups to arrive. Three great pots of freezing porridge served morning and night were set out, enough to feed about fifty. But nearly triple times that were needed. Usually the older kids pushed to the front to grab their portions first before leaving the younger children to dash for the remains.

"Quick, Abel! Come here and sit down...No! Sit! I'll be right back" Zee made sure Abel was sitting before scurrying off and grabbing two tin bowls set beside the pots. She prayed she wouldn't get caught. But luckily for her, someone in front of her was snatched by a Mother for attempting the same trick.

Pushing and shoving through the mass of starving children, it was a feeding frenzy that even tooth and claw were used. Zee was elbowed several times and even kicked, as she in turn pummeled everyone out of her way. Finally she managed to duck through and fill the bowls with a worn wooden ladle. And crouching underneath the table which the pots sat on, she waited for the crowd to disperse before continuing back. When it finally did, only a small group of children were left crying without food, bearing bruises and cuts from their fruitless struggle. She got up and ran over to where Abel sat before a Mother noticed she had two bowls.

Plopping down next to Abel, Zee was comforted by the daily gossip of the orphans, relaxing slightly under pressure. Finally she managed to ask Abel why he was beaten so harshly. Swallowing a lump of the oats, Abel managed to say, he was caught in the act of someone else's crime.

"Really? Who's?"

"I'm not sure, but the Mother accused me of stealing, though she didn't specify what exactly" Abel coughed a bit.

"Where did she catch you?"

"She saw me as I was coming out of the laundry room; I had been told by a Mother to drop off a load before I went to my daily duties. When I was in there, there had been another Mother, and as I walked out, she followed me and then accused me of stealing" Abel shrugged, "That's all I know" Abel continued shoveling porridge. Zee watched him carefully. Should I tell him?

Suddenly, the background of quiet talking was silenced, and all children turned to face the front of the cafeteria, where a Mother stood, erect in a position which would frighten the general of an army. Like most of the Mothers recruited here, many of the woman were unable to find jobs, and managed to find one here to take out their troubles on the children, whom they thought nothing more of than something to be worked until their use was gone. Their attitudes toward the children was similar to that of a slave traders; nothing more than cargo and a way to make a pretty penny or two.

"Zenith of dormitory number two, front and center!" The words bounded around the room at lightening speed, with the sharp scolding tone of a hen. Zee quickly jumped out of her seat and made her way towards the front. All eyes were focused on her, she received many faces of pity and forgiveness, and she knew she was in for the worst. One of the tables she passed close to her own, she heard snickers of malicious delight. She didn't even need to turn to know who it was. The worst of the worst, Korina took

delight in torment and the superiority of tattling. Whatever was going to happen, Zee was not going to give her the delight of knowing she was on the upper hand.

Standing before the Mother, who seemed to be particularly vicious with her overly masculine features of facial hair, Zee was dwarfed to her huge bulk. The Mothers heavy-set frame bearing down on Zee with its sheer size.

Standing as straight as she could Zee looked into the face of her elder.

“You are the culprit of sneaking into the laundry room today and taking a shirt that does not belong to you. Would you admit to doing this?” Assuming an emotionless face hardened with years of practice, Zee replied that she was guilty. She could feel Abel’s dumbstruck stare on the back of her neck, weighing her down with guilt. She knew that pleading innocent she would earn more lashes for lying, and telling the truth got you more because you know you did it. So either way it was a gamble, and she might as well let everyone know if it were true. Gasps arose from every corner of the room and waves of whispers spread like wildfire. Even the Mother seemed a bit taken back, but nonetheless, she bent over into her face, wafting the scent of bad hygiene and the choking odor of rotting dentures.

“Bend over.” The mother then, unlatched her belt from her navy blue uniform, pushed Zee down and pulled up her shirt. Calling on another Mother to hold her, Zee’s thrashing began.

Biting her lips, Zee took each hit without a sound, refusing the pleasure of either Korina or the Mother. Each hit was left with nothing but a mark, until seconds later the stinging pain came. The Mother was obviously an expert for she waited patiently in-between each lash with timed skill. After what seemed like forever, she was finally released, more rather dropped. Zee flopped to the ground, and feeling the blinding pain of her beating in a flash of white hot burning, whimpered only once before blacking out.

Zenith twisted in her sheets, and yelped as she remembered her wounds, as well as felt them. And she shivered, despite her splitting fever. She moaned and rolled about, wincing as her tendered back throbbed in pain. With no one to assist her, she partly staggered from her bed to the single wash basin set out in the room. She flung off her shirt, and using it as a rag, cleansed her wounds as best as she could. Carefully she slipped on her nightgown from the end of her bed and fell back into her soaked sheets, hoping to ease her pain with sleep.

At some point during the night, Zee woke to a sound coming from somewhere near the back wall opposite the dorm room door. She lay on her cot, staring at the ceiling concentrating on the noise intently.

Scratch-scrut-scratch-scrut

Zee quietly turned her head to check for any light sleeping girls that might be awake. In the narrow room, thirteen cots lined the walls between the door and the back wall, each occupied with a girl of any possible age under eighteen. With as little noise as possible, she slipped her legs out from under the thin threadbare sheet and dropped to her hands and knees, wincing slightly from her gashes. In the gloom of the dark, Zee carefully avoided squeaky boards on the bare wooden floor, and made her way to the back corner. A hole as big around as her thumb was punctured through the wall, and most likely was now a residency for all sorts of critters. She sat motionless outside of the hole; her hand tensed hovering above it, lest the inhabitants ventured outside.

Scratch-scrut-scratch-scrut

It sounded like the creature was crawling around inside of the hole.

‘Is it getting closer?’ Zee’s trigger-like hand pounced deftly downwards as a shape emerged from the gap in the wall. Her hand closed around something very cool for the steamy third floor of the orphanage in April. It was softer than leather and at the same time, had a smooth pleasant texture. She noticed the form was not wriggling in her hand as countless other critters had in her grasp, and she hoped she had not choked or suffocated it. Holding her hands close to her face, she opened her hand enough to peek

at her find.

It's a lizard

Zee had heard the Mothers talk about the infestation of the orphanage with rodents and such, but didn't recall anything about lizards. Nonetheless, Zee held the lizard reverently in her palms. The small reptile was barely the length of her hand and was a sharp forest green down her back, lightening in color around the lesser limbs of the body and deepening to near black at the head. Her eyes were slit golden orbs and sat in such a place on the head that they made her seem to have a calm placid expression. Zee was awed by the small little beauty and surprised something this wonderful can survive in a place such as this. Yet she was surprised the critter was so calm even in the hands of what must appear to be a giant monster.

Little surprises are everywhere... Zee remembered this phrase the tutors had repeated each day when she was small but she still lived by the small quote.

Surprise... Following the naming of her little friend, Zee carefully set the lizard on her shoulder and crawled back up the small path between the cots, making a beeline for her own. Happy that she didn't jump off her shoulder, Zee set Surprise in a small opening in the frame of her welded pipe cot that had been used for many other past pets.

Hopping back into her cot, she began to remember her other pets – all mice. Each one had continued to run away or die within hours of discovery. But Surprise was different, alien to what you'd normally see in any creature. The way she looked at you, and the way she acted already was, well...surprising. Trying not to trouble her mind further though, she quickly tried to forget and fall asleep.

Before the morning bells had tolled, Zee awoke to high pitch screaming coming from down the corridor outside her dorm room. She opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling, once again concentrating. She could also hear the thuds of a broom whacking the tile floor. Worry plagued her mind, she knew the tell-tale signs of an angry Mother attacking an innocent critter.

It's not Surprise is it? No...probably just a common mouse, they're all over the place... Zee's imagination took over then, and had terrible visions of poor Surprise at the mercy of a deadly broom in the hands of an equally deadly Mother. Without even restraining herself, Zee tore out of bed, avoiding the ugly stares from the sleep ridden eyes of the other girls she shared her room with. She rushed into the hall, with the Mother now only yards away from the dorm room door. Unfortunately for poor Zee, it was Surprise. The Mother – who didn't even notice Zee's approach – had cornered Surprise and was madly thrashing at her with the broom she was wielding. Luckily, Surprise positioned herself in such a way in the corner that the Mothers broom couldn't reach, and thankfully, the Mother was not going to willingly touch the little lizard.

With out even further hesitation, Zee made a dive for Surprise, ducking under the flying broom, she swiped her from her spot and cupping the lizard in her hands, ran back into her room. For a split-second, the Mother was dumbfounded, broom poised in the air. One moment there had been a hideous green vermin in the corner - and in a flash of rags and bare-feet - was gone. The Mother's lips curled into a snarl as she turned into the nearest dormitory door. Storming in, she began pulling covers off every girl's cot that hadn't already been roused by the commotion. She paused as she crossed over to Zenith's cot, which was second from the back wall on the left side of the room, seeing she was already sitting up in bed.

Isn't this the girl I flogged for stealing a shirt yesterday? Sneering, the Mother stepped in front of Zee, hands on her hips in a pose almost as menacing as yesterdays.

"So, Zenith" the Mother spat her name, "Did you enjoy your punishment yesterday?"

"No Ma'am" Zee drawled, she didn't appreciate the 'conversations' engaged with Mothers, they were too much to the point for comfort, and were usually physical. Zee twitched. In her haste, she had

released Surprise, who decided that a hole in her ragged nightgown was the best place to hide. She was now making her way up and down her torso, much to Zee's discomfort. Worst of all, she was immensely ticklish.

"By any chance child, have seen any other vermin, besides yourself, scurrying around in this room?" Zee squirmed a bit more, thanks to Surprise.

"No Ma'am" Zee replied, stifling giggles. The Mother had an annoyed look on her face mixed with disgust.

"Is something funny girl?!" The Mother barked.

"No Ma'am" Zee almost let a squeaky giggle escape her lips. Twisting, it appeared as if somebody was jerking strings attached to her body.

"Straighten up girl, stop fidgeting!" The Mother was furious.

"Y-Yes Ma'am" Zee gasped between hysterical giggles. Unfortunately Surprise crawled into one of Zee's most ticklish spots, and she broke out in all-out laughter, and fell off her cot onto the floor, giggling like a maniac. The Mother now appeared highly aggravated.

"For your insolence, you are sentenced to a full week of dish duty!" The Mother was turning red in the face; "Now get up and try to look presentable, we are having guests today!" The Mother stormed out, leaving her ruptured dignity in the wake behind her. Hastily, Zee clawed out of her nightgown, being careful with her backside. In the fold of her sleeve, she pulled out Surprise. Holding her in front of her face, she examined her with a look of almost respect. Aloud, she spoke to the lizard.

"I'm going to make it my mission to find out where you really came from."

As it turned out, the guests left almost immediately after walking in, as the orphanage wasn't one of the finest places to adopt in any manner of speaking. So life moved on and dish duty simply could not wait. After the morning meals of – once again – cold porridge, Zee retreated to the back of the cafeteria, through rusty hinged double doors into the kitchen. Off to her right, piles of unopened boxes of frozen food and silverware sat gathering dust. To her left, an endless line of counters rested against the kitchen wall. Directly in front of her in the back of the room, a cavernous lime covered sink beckoned, with heaps of dirty porridge bowls soaking in disgusting cold water. Pausing, Zee gave an enormous sigh and inspected her future duty before continuing like a condemned man. First draining the water in the sink and filling it a fresh, Zee wished dearly she didn't have to be here, or have to wash these stinking dishes. Furiously, she bashed them around, almost enough to make them scream for mercy. In her flurry, Zee almost didn't notice that the remaining dishes began to rise into the air. Stunned, Zee let the bowl she was holding slide to the floor, thanking God it was only tin. Bending over to pick up the bowl, she kept a wary eye on the floating bowls. Much to her amazement, they began to wash themselves.

Zee's eye nearly popped out of her head. Never, ever, in her lifetime had something even remotely like this happened before. Whether or not something creepy was happening, she was happy that dishes were no longer her duty. Smiling to herself, she decided to poke around a bit. Keeping an eye on the kitchen doors, Zee went from counter to counter making mental notes of everything she saw. After a time she grew bored with opening endless drawers and cabinets, and she wandered over to the heap of cardboard boxes. She poked around there too, but still nothing of interest. Then finally, a sight to behold; the refrigerator, which had been hidden behind the mound of boxes. Her mouth watering, Zee leaped to its doors and flinging them open, she almost cried. Tubs and tubs of dreaded porridge were all that filled it.

'Of course' she thought, 'Why would they keep their food in here, where anyone has access to it?' She sighed and closed the heavy doors. She glanced back at the bowls, which were still cleaning themselves. Dipping and scrubbing till they gleamed even in the dark gloomy kitchen.

The bowls continued to wash themselves every day during duty, and Zee was continuously acquainting herself with the kitchen's nooks and crannies. By the fourth day, she knew the kitchen better than the back of her hand, but everyday, something strange seemed to happen in the kitchen. Once, while inspecting the porridge tubs, a great glob of it came crawling over the edge out at her. She was caught unaware, and was almost snatched by its sloppy grasp. To save herself from heavens-knows-what she grabbed one of the big wooden spoons and bashed it over and over again until it was nothing more than dull grey porridge once again. A second instance was when Zee was going through drawers; forks suddenly came flying out at her, and were caught in the wood of the pantry door that she used as a shield. Zee's week in the kitchen was never boring.

Not only did strange things happen in the kitchen though, they seemed to be following Zee like dolphins after a ship. When she would walk through the hallways, doors would randomly begin opening and closing, and windows would open and shut, letting in small trickles of good fresh air that tickled her nose. In the dorm room, her bed would make itself in the morning and the wash basin water would change itself. The room would seem to rock lazily back and forth at night, soothing her to sleep. Even Surprise continually became stranger by the day. She would act like a guard, jumping out of her pocket when Mothers came to slapping, and hissing as Korina passed by.

Thinking, Zee thought to herself, And none of this started happening until Surprise showed up

On day six of dish duty, Zee couldn't take it anymore, she was tired of the orphanage. She knew that there was something better out there, proof being the bowls and the adventures she's had. She didn't want her fun to end, but at the same time, her adventures made her thoughts bloom into ideas, ideas turning into imagination. And now, Zee was desperate for something more, and wanted whatever it was, very badly.

Flinging everything she touched, Zee stormed about, furious about being here and not there. Her only comfort now, was supper-time, when she could share her feelings and thoughts with her best friend.

One morning at breakfast, Zee leaned over to whisper something in Abel's ear.

"I'm going to find it today" She seemed very serious, yet Abel did not have a clue.

"Find what?" Abel paused in his chewing to think a moment.

"It"

"Um...what is it?" Abel was not catching her drift, quite puzzled by her speech.

"The thing that's been making all the weird stuff happen in the kitchen" Now Abel was confused, having been positive that everything Zee had been telling him were just stories.

"How are you going to find it?" Abel continued to stare at Zee. But she continued to shovel her way through supper, in an attempt to rush to the kitchen and look for it.

This time as Zee walked through the kitchen doors, the bowls were not washing themselves. They were just plain, porridge encrusted bowls that needed scrubbing. Zee warily stepped closer and poked them, still nothing. She just stared. Then, out of disbelief she just turned and sat down on the kitchen floor. Seeing no benefit in sitting around with actual chores to do, she got back up and began scrubbing the dishes, on her own this time.

She did not have the energy to smash the dishes or the spirit to sort through the boxes or drawers. It was gone, and probably would never come back. She knew by now that once something left the orphanage, it was never to be seen again. Whether it was kids or favorite blankets, or pets...

Zee's memory sparked and she began sorting through her pockets. Before leaving her dorm room, she had put Surprise into her pocket, to keep her company in the kitchen and while doing chores. Now

Surprise was gone too.

Abel trudged down the corridors in line with the other children, making their way to their daily chores. Abel could not stop thinking about Zee's stories, all unreal, yet like a good friend, he wanted to believe her. Sighing, he knew nothing like that would ever happen to him, it was too crazy. The lead Mother shoved the children through the bathroom doors, watching them for the first few minutes before retreating to business. Thanks to Zee, he had been day-dreaming more than usual and it was keeping him from doing his work right. He had very narrowly escaped a beating because he had been caught staring off into space. But he couldn't blame Zee for that; he knew he should have better control over himself. Abel picked up a bucket and filled it with the alkaline water from the faucets. He chose a stall all the way in the corner and began scrubbing. He told himself that as long as he kept his hands moving, he couldn't get into trouble for not doing his work. As his body switched into automatic, he let his mind wander. First over Zee's stories, then anywhere his imagination took him.

A quick movement out of the corner of his eye broke his reverie.

A lizard? Abel cocked his head, and sure enough, a small green lizard had perched itself in the corner of the wall, and was eyeing Abel suspiciously. Huh, I've never seen a lizard here before Abel continued his work, but instead of zoning out once again, he kept his eyes on the little lizard. It has stunning golden eyes... In turn, the lizard watched Abel as well, with a strange amused gaze.

When the Mother finally marched through the bathroom doors to receive their crew, he snatched up the little lizard and placed the wriggling form into his only pocket with the button remaining. Checking to make sure it was secured, Abel grinned to himself.

I can't wait to show Zee

Zee managed to complete the bowls after recovering from her double shock. She felt lonely and if it weren't for Abel she wouldn't have anything to live for, but she scolded herself for thinking this. She felt better after consoling herself and marched into the cafeteria with more self confidence than usual. Although it plummeted quickly as she realized that the cafeteria was full, and she was the last one in. This meant one thing: no food this time around. Of course, she had dealt with this before and was really of no great concern. With a small sigh, Zee turned her head to search for Abel in the sea of children.

She immediately saw him, who was waving a hand to her madly, wincing as a Mother came over and clouted his ear. He stopped waving, but she could still see the eagerness in his eyes. When she finally reached him, he pulled his cupped hand out from his pocket.

"Zee, I want to show you something"

She stared wide-eyed as Abel opened his hands to reveal a small green lizard.

"Surprise!" Zee snatched her before Abel could speak, crooning to the small green lizard who seemed to enjoy the attention.

"Where did you find her?" Abel eyed the small lizard in her hands. Zee looked at Abel blankly until she realized he was talking about Surprise.

"Well, I caught her last week I believe when I woke up to her scratching in the floor boards" She continued to caress Surprise's delicate frame. The little lizard had turned over now and exposed her lighter under-belly like a tame dog does. Abel changed the subject.

"So Zee, did you find it?" Abel watched her hopefully, waiting expectantly for her answer.

"Oh...it must have gone away because there was only a plain old kitchen this morning. I actually had to wash the dishes..." Zee looked crestfallen.

"Well...are you going to look again?" He encouraged hopefully. She thought a moment, and then shrugged.

“I guess it wouldn’t hurt”

Meanwhile in the dim interior of room number two, the force that had been propelling the inanimate objects awoke once again after its short rest period of gathering energy. Before, the magic had turned the girl’s mundane tasks and life more pleasant, gifting her with a companion from a separate dimension, to watch over her. Now, it was preparing to alter her life forever. It was preparing to summon her back from where she came.

Condensing, the magic gathered itself, charging energy into a concentrated orb, and feeling the magic begin to seep from the orb, it released a portion of itself, forming a portal to the dimension it had come from. Slowly, it fed the rest of its whole to the growing dimension entrance which to human eyes was virtually invisible.

2 - Escape

Zee waved good-bye to Abel as he trudged through the doors on his way to the next assignment. She went in the other direction towards her next assignment.

She had very carefully placed Surprise in her pocket, but in a way so that she had some freedom and could poke out her head without being seen.

Still sorrowful of her loss of adventure, she took her time getting to the kitchen. Zee poked and prodded all over the kitchen, checking every nook and cranny. After searching for almost a straight half hour, she was exhausted and slowly sank back against the wall next to a wooden counter. She made a checklist in her mind, going over every part of the kitchen, and felt frustrated. A bell went off in her head.

Surprise! She must be connected to this somehow, so it could be right where I found her initially... She paused. The dorm room!

Ignoring the little voice in her head warning her not to leave, she ran through the doors right for her room that was only a little ways from the cafeteria.

Luckily, she encountered no patrolling Mothers, but as she entered the room, she barred it still with one of the beds for the door lacked a lock.

Turning, she felt a throbbing presence in the room, indescribable, yet distinct in her senses. Awed, she stood stock still for nearly a minute, letting the feeling wash over her. It was a cool feel of comforting waves and oceans calm. Breaking free of the spell, Zee knew in an instant, whether or not the bowls were washing themselves - which they still weren't - that this was it. Looking down, she saw that Surprise was fast asleep, her head hanging from her pockets edge.

Immediately she began probing the room, looking under, over and around every little thing. After an unsuccessful search, she took a break to recoup.

Where did I find Surprise? Her mind made her body drift over to the back wall, where she squatted down, inspecting the wall. Her eyes wandered over to a spot above the little hole where she found Surprise, because there was not a speck of dust on its surface. Having never seen anything so clean in her life most likely, she reached out with her fingers to touch it.

"Eeep!" She flipped backwards with her legs in the air. There's nothing there! Cautiously she turned right side over again and stared at the wall, and carefully stuck her hand in and out of the wall several times. After confirming her theory, she leaped up and sprinted out the door. 'It! It! It!'

Poor Zee... Abel was sad for her, really wanting her to be happy and was disappointed that they still didn't know what it was. He sat mulling this over as his hands mechanically wiped down the counters in the sorting room. He was with only a few other orphans - all older than he - for this special task of cleaning the endless counter-tops in the sorting room. He was in the middle of these thoughts when he saw the door open just enough to allow a slim figure to step through.

Zee spent what seemed like seconds, flitting from room to room; searching. She had already out-run the two Mothers that were after her, and was flexible enough to dodge the three she had nearly barreled over. Finally she reached the sorting room, which was simply a maze of counters identical to the ones in the kitchen. She had almost burst through the door before she caught herself.

Korina That conniving worm was here too and barely three feet from where Abel was standing. Without further hesitation, Zee slipped in through the door. Dropping down, she made her way into the maze, hidden by the counter of her only protection.

Korina saw it all; the quick glance from Abel and the slight movement of the door. She sprinted for the other side of the room where a lazy Mother was snoring.

“Ma’am, you may want to come and see this”

Abel was caught.

“Uh-oh” From both directions he saw movement, one good and one frightening. He swallowed the lump in his throat. Dropping to all fours, he tried to remember the path to the way out of the maze towards Zee. Scrambling, Abel was caught in dead-ends over and over again. Once every few seconds he looked up to check the situation. Sometimes it was better - closer to Zee - or worse - closer to the Mother and Korina. He continued until his hands were raw from the gritty floor. An instant later Zee seemed to drop from nowhere. Getting to their feet, she grabbed his hand.

“Come on” From the view he had, all to be seen was Surprises head sticking out of her pocket as if saying, ‘Lets go for a ride’ So Abel followed after the swift Zee, and his only thought was it.

Out of desperation and frustration from the counter maze, Zee jumped over the top of a line of island counters, dropping directly in front of Abel. Already having blown their cover, she stood and thrust her hands towards him. As they made their way ever closer to the exit doors, so did Korina and the supervising Mother, who knew the maze by heart.

“Jump!” Zee leaped on top of the counters, with Abel close behind. They quickly made their way over the maze, dropping down and then back up again as necessary, making a beeline for the door.

The Mother was furious at how her age kept her from even a little physical exertion. After seeing how quickly the children scurried, she turned back to resume her duties instead of continuing - for she knew it was futile. Seeing the Mother giving up, Korina knew there was nothing holding her back now. Taking the leap, she advanced toward s the door.

‘We’re almost there’ Abel moved his legs swiftly so he could to stay with the nimble Zee. He looked over his shoulder for a split-second, smiling to himself to see she had given up all together. ‘Where’s Korina?’ He looked towards the door again to see his answer. ‘Oh’ they came to a screeching halt several feet from the door.

Zee furrowed her brow in thought for a moment as Korina smirked to herself. As an older orphan, she was confident of her superiority.

‘She’s planning to hold us in here until another Mother comes running’ Zee snarled to herself. ‘I’m leaving aren’t I? I don’t have to be intimidated by anyone anymore, so long as we’re not caught!’

“Abel, when I say ‘now’, run as fast as you can to dorm two, but don’t get caught. I’ll be right next you” Abel nodded. Calmly, Zee took a step towards Korina, flexing her arms and hands.

“So Korina, the Mother’s been good to you?” Now Zee was the one smirking as Korina seemed to shrink back against the door. “Why don’t you run off to bed now,” Zee lunged at Korina, fist pulled back, “It’s lights out!” Zee swung her right fist full length across the side of Korina’s face, feeling her head snap sideways with the force of the blow.

“Now!” As Korina dropped to the floor from the impact and the shock a junior had defied her, Zee and Abel burst through the door, racing into the hallway. Confronting a crowd of Mothers, making Zee stop and think. Five or six Mothers were gathered in the hallway, all menacing in their ways.

“Great...” As the Mothers grinned at their future success, Zee made a dive. Taking a running start, Zee dropped and slid between the legs of one of the Mothers in front, and easily dodging the rest.

“Come on Abel!” He had seen the take-off, only thought for a second before mimicking her action.

Running down the corridors, Abel managed to ask the much pressed question.

“It?”

“It”

Nearing the room, Zee’s heart pumped faster, much faster than her own feet or those of the pursuers behind them.

Not bothering to be sneaky any longer, they crashed through the doors; Zee dragged Abel to the back wall, ducking her head down she ran headlong through the wall. Abel didn’t budge for a second; the only thing still connecting them was their clasped hands. Zee’s hand sticking from the wall gave a tight squeeze. Taking deep breath, he ignored the oncoming Mothers, and followed.

A majority of the Mothers who managed to keep up with the fleeing orphans, fainted at the sight of the disappearing children. The only one left standing, had the acute sense that there was something in this room that was not right. Recognizing the feeling from her past long ago, she suddenly knew where the children had gone, and she smirked.

“Bingo” Swiftly, she followed after

ORPHAN CHILDREN DISAPPEAR THROUGH WALL!!!

The event that has shocked many, the disappearing orphans!

The Mothers of a downtown orphanage were appalled as two junior orphans walked straight through the dorm room walls. The Mothers who had not fainted away at the sight attempted to follow, but by then the wall was once again normal plaster!

“They simply ran from us, straight into the wall!” States one Mother who managed to stay conscious through the event.

“Who would even want to run away from us? We treat the children so nicely there!” Cried the supervising Mother of the orphanage.

Following the event, the Mothers did a head count and came up with three short of their normal staff and children. Apparently, a Mother had been able to chase the children to wherever they may be. The Mother had not been working long at the facility, and had shown up at the doorstep with no background information or birth certificate at all.

“She did seem a little bit stranger than the rest of us” Recalls a fellow Mother.

More information to follow, after the investigation, what really happened?

3 - Recovery

Zee was breath taken.

'Where...am...I...' Standing on a sandy beach with Abel next to her gasping like a fish, Zee felt strangely... good. She flopped down onto the white sand, wondering.

"Zee, where are we?" Abel asked it more as a question to break the silence, for he knew already that she herself did not know either. He was gazing around, staring at the blue sky and green sea behind them. Zee stammered.

"I...I don't know" She looked up, only to find that Abel too had sat down.

"Well at least it's sunny out" Abel murmured, still looking up.

"What a beautiful sky it is" Zee remarked.

"And clean" Abel added. Both sat under the bright sun for several minutes before Abel noticed there was not only a sun, but it appeared that there were also two moons in the sky.

"Zee! Look at that!" Abel pointed towards their right, nearer to the horizon. "It appears that there are moons that appear in the day time here" Both gawked for a moment. Indeed, there were two moons in the sky, one yellow and one a more red color that appeared to give it a pink hue. They sat side by side in the sky.

"Amazing..." That was the only word Zee could utter. Both ex-orphans sat on the beach, admiring the settings around them. Before long, their stomachs began to rumble and their mouths began to parch.

"Come on Abel, we should find something to eat" Zee stood and brushed herself off and assisted in helping Abel rise also. "More importantly, water" They wandered close to the gentle surf, skirting it, searching for a stream that might lead into the ocean. They had not gone far before Zee sighted something.

"Abel! Look!" Zee stared wide-eyed with fright.

"What? Water?" Abel peeked over Zee's shoulder. His face assumed the same expression. In unison, they turned their backs and fled with the haste of all the wind.

The Breva sentry was out patrolling the Kopian grounds surrounding the tribes' village. As he was peeking through a grove of trees, he saw what appeared to be children, a boy and girl staring quite stupidly looking at the sky as if they had been in a cage all their lives. Judging by their clothes, which were ragged and torn, he thought they must have been in a cage. As he thought this was strange and knew that they had not been there on his last round, he went to fetch the chief.

Chief Kuorega was very puzzled and gathered a party to go and investigate the strange circumstances, himself leading it.

Turning out of the secluded shelter of the forest tropical floral, he immediately saw them. True to what the sentry had said, they were most definitely foreigners, probably flotsam from a recent wreck. Kuorega scanned the seas surface, and seeing no hint to what direction they had assailed from, he assumed Magic was at work. He noticed they were walking quite close to the surf as if searching, most likely looking for a source of clean water.

He ordered the party to continue in their direction with the peace flag raised. He knew that if they were in need, surely they would turn to them for assistance if they were peaceful.

They ran hard, feet pounding in the sinking sand.

"Who...were...they?" Abel panted through strangled breaths. Both were unused to rigorous exercise.

Nearly jumping over the creek in their path, they turned and followed it into the dense jungle, which consumed them whole. Immediately their bodies were swarmed with overwhelming senses. The change from light to darkness nearly blinded them. Stumbling, they halted until their sight returned to them.

Blinking, Zee looked around, noting the ever-forest greens and blossoming reds of heavy fruits, hanging just out of reach.

“Should we keep going... or have we lost them?” Abel was doubled over, grasping his knees for support. His forehead dripped with perspiration, from the hard exercise and the humidity the plant life gave off. Zee nodded to keep going, she was just out of breath as he was.

Instead of continuing on at their breakneck speed, they stumbled into the growth at a pace that barely kept them in motion.

Staying as close as possible to the small stream, they refreshed themselves every once in a while. What seemed like several hours later, their rumbling stomachs caught the best of them. They stopped at one point where the palm fruits were low enough to grab and eat. Biting into a bright scarlet fruit, pink juice poured from its porous flesh. Both Zee and Abel gorged themselves to the brim.

“Augh...that was great” Abel patted his over stuffed girth, sitting up against the fuzz covered trunk of the tree he had been harvesting. “Never have I had such wonderful food!” Zee agreed.

After sitting awhile, they felt wholly good and much better. Getting ready to set off once again into unknown territory, Zee attempted to stagger to her feet, but only crashed back down. Stunned, her mouth gaped like a stranded fish.

“I can’t stand up, my legs won’t support me!” Zee stared at her immobile limbs. “Now I can’t even move them!” She sounded panicked. Abel also tried, but having gorged himself more than Zee, his legs refused to budge. After much struggling, Abel’s eyes began to droop, and he began muttering to himself incomprehensibly.

“Abel! Abel oh Abel, what’s wrong?!” Zee was shaking his shoulders, crying in his ears. Suddenly, her fingers slipped, and she collapsed next to him. She felt ever so tired, and she knew she wasn’t going to make it. She tried sitting up, and was feeling even more helpless by the second. Her last memory as she slipped from consciousness was Surprise, wriggling out of her pocket and scurrying off into the underbrush.

Seeing the children flee at the sight of them, Chief Kuorega knew not to pursue them. Peace flag or not, he knew the tribe was frightening in numbers. He ordered everyone back to the village and told scouts to begin looking when the three moons were at their peak. Anxious to learn where they had come from and where they were going, Kuorega decided to burn off the apprehension and go hunting with the younger warriors.

Zee woke with a splitting headache pounding in her ears. Squinting, she tried to gain her bearings. Even moving her head slightly made waves of nausea flood her thoughts. She forced herself to take deep breaths, calming her unnerved stomach. But even after several minutes of rest, Abel refused to stir from his slumber as well. She knew it was night by now, seeing the difference in the light, even below in the dim interiors of the tropic forest. She vaguely remembered that Surprise had gone off, and it perked her up slightly.

“Surprise?” Zee called softly, even knowing a lizard wouldn’t respond like a common dog. As she knew, the only reply was silence, not even a rustle of leaves.

“Wha--?” Zee rubbed her eyes, ‘Am I seeing things?’ she rubbed her eyes again, ‘No, it’s definitely there’ She watched as a small shape flitted over to perch on Zee’s shoulder. The little shape screeched something, and seemed to be demonstrating a form of charades. Zee peered closer in the darkness, ‘A

fairy! But aren't they supposed to have butterfly wings?' It was a slim figure of a girl, covered in a reptilian garb that seemed to mold into her skin. She had a short crop of uneven black hair, tangled with layers of small leaves and twigs. Her wings were similar to a bat's, giving her an eerie appearance. She screeched something, but this time, instead of hearing screams, Zee understood her.

"Surprise? How? You're a fairy?" Surprise was chittering on too fast for Zee's comprehension, so she grasped Zee by a strand of hair and pulled her over into a little grove of trees where an amazingly beautiful flower stood in full bloom. As they watched a small bee came by and landed inside the flower, preparing to gather its nectar, but in an instant its petals twirled shut, and the bee was trapped inside for a full minute. When the flower finally opened, another little fairy emerged like Surprise, except it had bumble bee wings, and was dressed in a fuzzy yellow and black garment.

"Wow, so you were stuck in there? And now you're a fairy?" Zee was breathtaken. "Amazing..."

Abel was sore all over, no matter what position he was in, he felt intense pain.

"Zee..." He called weakly to her. She didn't seem to hear him. She was staring at something off to their right. He heard small screeches in the air, and it pierced his ears.

"Zee..." He tried again to call her but to no avail. Exhausted even from speaking, he fell asleep once more.

Zee cast a worried glance at Abel's pallored face.

'Poor Abel...' She patted his hand comfortingly. She attempted several times to gain her footing, using the tree as support. Falling down several times, she continued until she was able to walk at least a few feet. A couple of minutes later, as she was walking circles, an enormous pulse throbbed from somewhere deep in the thick foliage. She knew in an instant that only she felt its presence.

"Surprise, watch over Abel for me" Zee stepped forward confidently, feeling overflowed with full awareness. Continuous throbs of...emotion kept pulsating like an enormous heart, reaching only Zee's body. She cautiously made her way towards the creek. Step by step, Zee managed to advance to a large boulder that was nearly sitting the creek bed. It was cool and smooth, much different than the other life in the humid biome, all rough or fuzzy.

Zee rested there a moment, feeling the cool surface, and the warm throbs that continued their steady beat from the leafy mass on the other side of the stream. Zee glanced around and saw a fallen log that lay across the stream not far away, several feet above the swirling waters. Deciding it was better than getting wet, she made her way over to it. Up close, the log was much bigger and hollow throughout. It was moss covered and slick from the moisture. Zee took a couple of tentative steps on top, making sure the wood would hold her weight. Satisfied, she carried on, her hands outstretched to either side for balance.

'Closer, closer. I'm almost there...' Zee's foot slipped, and her leg twisted from under her. Frantic for a moment, she flung her arms around, and feeling a draping vine, she grabbed it. Her arm was nearly wrenched from its socket as the rest of her body was pulled downwards. She looked around, and saw the opposite side of the creek was only a yard or so away. Thinking, Zee reached up with her other arm as well, and swung back and forth on the hopefully sturdy vine. She gradually gained enough momentum to swing across.

"One...two..." She felt the vine begin to break and tear and hurriedly released her hold. Her feet landed solidly in the firm soil. "Now where to?" Zee closed her eyes and felt the throbs blur together, forming a vibration. "Over there, it's getting so close now" She let her feet guide her, slowly with measured steps. Every time she felt the soft earth beneath her scarred feet, the vibrating got stronger, and felt inclined to go faster, and she could only agree with herself.

She trotted along, up until the vibrating had turned to a humming. All of a sudden it started to quiet,

wanting it not to stop, Zee began to run and it ceased all together. Halting, Zee turned back. Again, it turned to a deep hum, and in time, it grew softer.

Going back and forth several times, she finally ended up standing before an enormous bushy fern that towered several feet higher than Zee's five foot six.

"It isn't coming from the plant, is it?" Zee carefully pulled back the leaves and looked around its middle. She looked down near its base, and gaped open mouthed.

Lying glittering in the tropical atmosphere was a perfect sphere of swirling coils of mist. It was larger than her head, and about as big around as a small pumpkin. Staring, she watched, and with every gentle breeze, the shifting patterns seemed to flow with it, adding to its illusioned appearance.

She noticed the deep humming had stopped, but the emotions continued to flow from the orb. Zee reached out her fingers to caress its smooth surface, and found invigorating pleasure in doing so, feeling as if a shock of energy had jolted her.

Then she had a wonderful idea. She reached into the gargantuan plant and grasped the orb, dragging it out into the open. Cradling it in her arms, she turned back to go and wake up Abel.

Zee took extra care not to slip on the trunk, checking her balance and using the vines above for support. Thankfully, she managed to get across safely this time. She walked towards Abel, holding the orb in front of her.

The Breva scout was following the faint sound of footsteps and constant moaning. He crept quietly over and through the tangled vines and fuzz trunks, avoiding certain plants here and there. Having been keeping so aware of his surroundings, he almost stepped directly in front of one of the children, the boy it seemed. He appeared to have eaten too much of the smussa fruit, for he looked quite drowsy, and had the face of one with an enormous stomach ache. Wanting to take both children, he restrained himself from revealing himself and hid behind the tree the boy was leaning on. He had not seen the second child yet, but it was no doubt she would return soon.

She did come, and she appeared to be carrying a light source in front of her, though he didn't see what. She went straight for her companion, as the scout suspected. He took this as his opportunity and stepped from behind the tree, though much to his surprise, the girl did not scream at his considerable size compared to hers. She was terrified though. Before the girl could run away he walked straight for her and grasped her shoulders, forcing eye-contact.

He began asking questions, but she only shook her head, making him increasingly frustrated. Then she began to talk and he realized she spoke English, a language only known to higher classmen and elders old enough to remember. He began to pull her away, but she held firm and pointed towards her friend. Sighing, he bent down and hefted the boy over his shoulders. He pointed at her and then at the forest, she nodded and they started off.

He glanced back several times at the girl, and he could have sworn he had seen a strange type of sprixi settled next to the girl's ear, which apparently seemed to be conversing with it.

Zee was terrified of the man, who seemed to tower over her. He seemed to be twice her size with deeply tanned skin and a fierce face with dark slanted eyes. He seemed intent on squeezing some sort of information out of her, his face set in determination. He gripped her shoulders with bear strength. When he began to speak, it seemed as if he was speaking English, but muddled with a strange accent.

"Whara du yuo cuna phrun?" He spoke very distinctly and she knew it was not English he was speaking, so she only shook her head. He seemed puzzled, then spoke again.

"Whara era yuo guimg?" She shook her head again, but once again he spoke.

"Du yuo maad essistemea?" This time, Zee told him she couldn't understand him. He shook his head as she spoke, and started to pull her away, into the forest. Zee dug her heels into the ground, forcing

him to turn around. She pointed to Abel with the hand not supporting the orb behind her back. Much to her surprise, he picked up his limp form. To show that was what she wanted, she nodded to him as he made motions to show he wanted to go deeper into the forest. Quietly they crept into the thick vegetation, with Surprise chattering in her ear, reminding her that it was not so safe in a place like this, and following a stranger. But Zee quickly reminded her it was better than being in an orphanage or being alone, and she did not have an answer to that.

Abel felt like screaming. His belly was on fire and his head continued to throb. He saw Zee leave, and also saw her return, with something bright in her hands. But it was all slurred together, mixing with his imagination, because he saw a fairy a strange man and fuzzy trees.

He sat, as the strange man from fiction attempted to communicate to Zee, but he knew she could not understand him.

Almost too suddenly he was jerked from his position and thrown over the strange mans shoulders, who was becoming very real all of a sudden. He was fighting to stay conscious with the overwhelming feeling of vomiting and dizziness, when they began to walk.

Zee was unsure of this man, almost as unsure as she was of here. From a safe distance behind, but not too far from Abel, she eyed him warily.

Glancing down, she gazed at the swirling patterns of the orb, encompassing it even more tightly. Surprise wheeled around her face and tried to comfort Zee, sitting on her shoulder from time to time. Confused, she kept her eyes glued to the forest floor, watching her step in case of anymore odd objects she might pass. It seemed forever ago that she was in an orphanage, even though its memories still were imprinted on her mind. It was just that so many strange and wonderful things have happened in a short period of time, she felt inclined to believe it has always been this way. She gave a sigh; she didn't know what to really believe anymore. She continued to stare at the ground.

'Everything has become so unreal'

Chief Kuorega returned refreshed and invigorated with a great sense of pride. The hunt had been successful and thrilling, as well as relieving, to be able to replenish the low meat supply. Now he almost swelled as one of the scouts returned with both of the children.

The village people crowded around as they walked through the mob towards the chief, many of them silent. The scout walked quickly with the boy swung over his shoulders, while the girl followed close behind.

'What is it she's clutching?' Both children seemed underfed, ragged, and appeared to be in their early teens. The chief regarded them, thinking what was to be done with them.

The scout halted before Kuorega, setting the boy down beside him. He gave the village salute of greeting and well being, taking his right hand with his three outstretched fingers, painting them down his face starting at his forehead. Kuorega returned the salute, and exchanged several words with the scout. Nodding the scout ran off into the village, taking Abel with him.

"Greetings, my name is Kuorega, Chief of the Kopian Breva tribe." The man that had been conversing with scout addressed Zee in a firm and yet soft voice, gentleman like. Zee had the impulse to reply.

"My name is Zenith, an ex-orphan" Zee gazed directly into his eyes, enjoying the comfort he had for her there. Kuorega was a tall man as well, with the same tone of a deeply tanned skin from hard work under such a foreign sun. His head gave way to a small harvest of thick black locks that dangled above his ears. Muscles shone through his flesh around his arms and chest, and even though his body seemed strong, she could tell that he was soft as a flower.

“Come, I will show you to my quarters where we can speak in private” Kuorega turned to leave but Zee stopped him.

“What about my friend? Will he be safe?” The chief sighed again.

“Yes, he will be fine. I have sent a scout to bring him to the medicinal elder. You will see him shortly if she permits.” Cautiously Zee turned, to follow the fatherly man she knew nothing about, with only instinct to guide her.

They passed down many alley ways, merely dirt paths running between sturdy huts constructed out of the local resources. Walls of the trunks of sapling fuzzy trees and roofs covered in huge leaves of the strange plant Zee had found the orb in. Continuing down each twisted path, Zee tried to remain focused on the task at hand and not to let her mind wander too much. Every time she thought of something, a question would pop into her head and leading to another and another until she was nearly flooded with them. She hoped to disintegrate many of these after talking with the man. She continuously checked the egg, as if it would disappear from her arms.

Finally, they walked up to a hut that was slightly larger than the others on a raised platform. Leading the way inside, Kuorega had to duck to enter the doorway.

The inside was functional, with a small fire pit in the center, stacks of wood, sleeping cots, and etcetera. Zee looked long and hard at the stranger as he settled himself in a woven chair covered in many various strange hides. She merely sat on the floor.

“We shall ask each other all of our questions, and answer the others truthfully, until we are both satisfied. That way, we are both content.” He spoke, “I shall go first; my question is how did you get here?” Zee thought a moment, and deciding not to tell him a lie, she told him the truth.

“I walked through a wall” Because she also had many questions, she asked him her question before he thought of another one. “Where am I?” The chief sucked in a large breath of surprise, then released it slowly.

“You are in the realm of Delëna, and more specifically, the island of Kopia in the Brevia village.” He replied, “Where did you come from?”

“I came from an orphanage, because I have no parents” She shifted the orb's weight to her other arm.

“No parents?”

“None” She had never really thought about her parents, but occasionally she would wonder about them. Like what they looked like, where were they, did they love her? But these wonders were fleeting and didn't occur often or last very long. She squeezed the orb for comfort. Now because of this man, she began to wonder again. The more she did, the more she wanted to see them once. Her eyes began to tear but she shook them off. ‘Why am I being such a wimp? It has always been this way’ Kuorega thought he had triggered some of her feelings for her lost parents and believed he had upset her. He reached over to comfort her, but she pulled away.

“Don't touch me” She snapped. Slowly he drew his hand back.

Zee heard a rustling and turned to see two men carrying Abel in on a large mat, followed by whom she guessed to be the medicinal elder. She kept clucking to the men in the strange language as the men set Abel down near the fire.

“Nut su clusa! Gamtla! Gamtla!” She whistled at the men. ‘Poor Abel,’ Zee thought, ‘He must still be in pain, his moaning is absolutely horrid’ Indeed, Abel appeared to be going through quite a bit of inner turmoil. ‘And he ate so much of that terrible fruit’ When the two men left, the elder rummaged through her numerous packs she carried, laying out assorted containers and bottles. Her skin was darker than both of the scout's had been, and just a tad bit shorter. But her hair was lighter, almost white, that lay like the fuzz on the trees on her head. Her fingers moved quickly, passing over Abel's body, and several times forcing different things down his throat. When she finally seemed to be through with him, she sat

back against a wall and closed her eyes. Zee wriggled over to where Abel still lay. Kuorega cleared his throat.

“Saramé, wa heva e visitor. Te buys cunpemon” The elder whom Zee assumed to be Saramé, opened one eye and looked over Zee before closing it again. After a moment or two, she spoke, seemingly directed towards Zee.

“It saans tet za hes racuvarad kicly phrun ta froit”

“Excuse me?” Zee asked very politely, hoping she knew English as well.

“My! Kuorega, why didn’t you say she spoke English in the first place?” She cast a glance in his direction, and then looked back at Zee. “Sorry, but he’s a little short on the details” She spoke with a much better accent than Kuorega did, and could understand more of what she said. She looked Zee over with intense curiosity. “I’m quite surprised you healed so quickly from the smuusa fruit – it packs quite a painful amount of poison into its flesh, usually inducing quite a long period of sleep.”

Barely several seconds had passed when Zee heard a screeching searching her out.

“Zee! Zee! Zee!” Surprise darted into the room, and flew over to Zee’s shoulder, jumping up and down excitedly. “Found you! Found you!” She clapped her hands with delight as a child would for a new toy. Zee giggled. Saramé casually glanced over, annoyed by the disturbance.

“Oh, so you have also befriended a sprixi huh? Intriguing” She seemed to close her eyes, but once again Zee interrupted.

“Actually no, when I met her she was a lizard, and when we got here, she got herself caught in a flower while we were passed out” She motioned to Abel, “She said it changed her” Saramé considered this amusing, for her lips parted to reveal her even, if slightly yellowed mouth full of teeth.

“Ah, your little friend was lucky enough to encounter a cyselis flower, huh?” she nodded, “What did you say her name was? Surprise? Cute little thing” She nodded her head satisfactorily.

Abel stirred on the cot and quickly Saramé leaned over and adjusted his blankets and applied assorted salves until he settled. Leaning back she closed her eyes.

Zee looked at the orb again, feeling it pulsating soothingly and gazing into its tantalizing patterns.

Suddenly, Kuorega seemed jerked awake.

“Child! Where did you find that?” Zee looked surprised at his sudden change in demeanor, but answered as best as she could.

“Across the small stream in a large fern, that I think you use for the roofs on your huts” She held the orb more tightly, feeling the warmth and emotions. To her even greater surprise, the chief sighed a mighty heave. He muttered to himself for several seconds before speaking again. She looked down at the strange orb, caressing the shifting patterns.

“What you possess in your hands is a dragon’s egg.” He let this soak into Zee’s mind for a moment.

“Every decade or so, the dragon’s mate, and an egg is laid some months later. Some species care for the egg until the hatchlings are almost mature. More common in wild breeds though, the eggs are left alone. “He took a long breath, pushing his black hair back with one hand, “Sometimes, when a hatchling is still developing inside its egg, it will find its soul partner, another being it was destined to be with. This has almost never happened in a wild species before” He shook his head in disbelief. “It then calls out to its partner, in what is described as, ‘indescribable’. When the egg has become acclimated with his or her lifestyle, it will then choose when it is the appropriate time for it to hatch. Most often they come out when their name has been found or their partner has for them” He paused to massage his temples for a moment, unaccustomed to so much of the English language. Zee looked down at what now she knew to be a dragon’s egg. She felt an intense sense of pride and happiness wash over her, and she sat gazing at it. Kuorega motioned for her to stand. “Come for a moment.” They stood outside of his doorway, gazing up at the starry sky. Instead of cloudy skies and a hazy moon, Zee saw spectacular color.

In the sky, the two moons they saw on the beach were on the opposite horizon side by side still. But now their colors were so much brighter, fluorescent even. Spilling color onto the land in great billowing waves of brilliance, and both seemed exactly the same size. As she tore her gaze from the lovely sight, she noticed three more moons. One moon was directly overhead, a luminescent giant compared to the other moons. It's blue light not quite as bright as the others, but it offered a sense of calm. Then she noticed something odd. Surprised, she took a double take at the monstrous moon. 'Yes, that moon has its own moon!' Indeed, there was a small pale colored moon that seemed to be hugging close to the blue beast. It appeared to have a pure white surface, unblemished of any craters.

Finally, in the most Easterly part of the horizon still in view, was the last moon Zee could see. It was barely in the sky, almost hovering in the air above the ground. It had a green glow about its appearance, and she gazed at it more. Like the others, it also appeared to have its own special trait. Encircling it, were two silver rings, crossing over each other in front like a present. The truly was an amazing night.

"What a lovely place it must be here" She breathed softly into the chilly air.

"Yes it is, It's not often you get a glimpse at Pora or Anvy." Kuorega was gazing just as lovingly into the night, momentarily forgetting the egg Zee clutched.

"Which ones are Pora and Anvy?" Zee asked, wishing she knew more about this place.

"Pora is the moon that encircles the planet Cretar, and Anvy is the green moon, that has such an elliptical orbit it's hardly ever seen."

"Tell me more!" Zee was excited to learn about this place.

"Well, see the two moons? The red one and the yellow one?" Zee nodded, "They orbit each other, and us. The red one is Harnemu and the yellow one is Harnemö. They are the brother and sister moons, and are always in the sky together. Because they orbit so slowly, they can be seen during the day as well. It is truly a magnificent sight when Cretar creeps up behind them; it makes such a wonderful palate of colors. Every two days though they can not be seen at all" he thought a moment. "Cretar is a very special planet. Delëna and itself are so close in orbit that exactly two weeks out of the year, it is possible to fly there in the rockets that Delëna derived from Earth's version."

"Rockets? Really?" Zee was amazed.

"Well, our planets have large atmospheres, so when it comes time to breakthrough into space, the Gifted do not have to keep spending such a large quantity of Magic on guiding the rockets. Because no one has actually been on an Earth rocket, they have virtually no other worldly devices inside, merely several Gifted mages using their Magic to guide it through the air and space. Normally, during the twenty day period, the two kingdoms exchange information and send over reports. Their planet is very similar to ours, except it is much colder and the inhabitants are more elegant and beautiful than anything you've ever seen. Though because it is so close, it blocks quite a bit of the heat rays from the Star, causing what is called the Chill. Thankfully it is only for twenty days"

"Wait a minute!" Zee held up her hands, "You said it only lasts two weeks, yet you said twenty days also. I thought a week was only seven days? Wouldn't that mean it lasts for only..." she counted on her fingers "fourteen days?"

"No actually. I know what you're trying to get at though. Here in Delëna, we use the same names for our time measurements, but our orbit is much slower around the Star, which is the equivalent of your Sun" He sighed, "So here, all the times are much longer than that on Earth" Zee was dumbstruck.

'It's even more complicated and different than I first believed!' Kuorega sighed again,

"It's not often all of the moons, Cretar and Pora are all in their full phase, and all in the sky at once." He furrowed his dark brows in thought for a moment, "In fact, up to this point, it is unheard of! Tonight must be very special" he calmly stared up at the strange sky.

'Is it Abel and me that are so special? Or is it just coincidence?' Almost on cue, Abel staggered from out behind them, falling against her, she supported him. She saw he was about to say something, but he

closed his mouth moments before, and took a step forward, entranced in the by the unusual yet beautiful night.

Subconsciously, Abel could feel himself moving, being carried on the back of some giant. He knew that he still felt pain, but he felt almost disconnected from his body, as if his soul was hovering close by. 'Where am I? Where is the pain coming from?' He felt himself wince as his body was placed - ever so gently onto the ground - yet still painful. After lying still for a long time, he slowly felt himself, or his soul, slowly losing its unearthly feeling and returning to his real form. It was only moments afterwards, the real pain came and the gut wrenching feeling of his stomach being pulled from his throat. He convulsed with it, and whimpered, he knew rather foolishly, but it was unbearable.

Soothing hands calmed him and he felt cool liquids sliding down his throat, easing the pain there, and making it easier for him to breathe. Quietly in the distant was the soft murmur of voices, one familiar to him but out of reach. He was at peace in total darkness, quiet alone in his mind. He felt himself drift off to sleep for a time, dozing comfortably. Against his will though, his memory danced in his eyes, reminding him he still wasn't alone, not to forget who he came here with. The thoughts were enough to snap him to attention, thanking the heavens for the strange potions. Steadying his uneven breathing, he cautiously whisked his eyes around the room, searching for the figure of Zee. When he did not see her, he began to panic, and slowly he rose onto his elbows, minding that he didn't jerk himself or move too quickly. He caught a glimpse of a figure dozing in the corner, paying it no heed because he knew it was not Zee. Slowly, ever so slowly, he positioned his feet underneath himself, testing them before resting his full weight on them. Staggering to the wall, he slid his feet along the ground, inch by inch towards the door. Sliding the woven fabric from his path, he stumbled outside, leaning onto the first figure that he caught sight of, thankfully Zee. She looked at him, and he was about to tell her exactly how much he was sorry and that he would be careful, but instead he followed her gaze to the heavens. Without a sound, he snapped his mouth shut, and stared at the night sky with the same serenity and peace that he had felt within himself.

The trio stood staring at the sky sometime before retreating back into the hut, Zee supporting Abel. Sarama had already made herself comfortable in one corner, her head leaning against the wall with her legs stretched out in front of her. Kuorega walked over to her and placed a woven blanket over her, without disturbing her slumber. He tossed mats to each of the children, who gladly laid them out by the fire pit, curling up underneath the surprisingly warm covers. Cradling the egg in her arms, Zee felt the comforting feeling this world emanated this strange place that she knew was beyond 'special'. Within several minutes, she fell asleep to the soft sounds of the night and a quiet chirping that could only have come from inside the jeweled egg.

In the predawn hours in the bizarre village, Zee pushed herself onto her elbows and blearily rubbed her eyes. She slowly swung her head around the room, remembering the past events of yesterday. Clutching the egg to her chest, feeling its soft warmth, she drew the covers from her thin frame. Slowly she slid her feet across the woven mat floor, maneuvering around cots, bowls, and various furniture. Stepping outside into the near frigid air, Zee sat cross legged on the wooden slat steps to the hut. Sighing, she let herself slide into an almost unconscious state, meditating within herself for warmth, searching out her own feelings. Glancing at the sky, Zee could tell that the sunrise - or here, the 'star-rise' - would be just as breathtaking as the night sky. Sitting on the stairs to a chiefs hut, Zee calmly gazed on as the rising Star coated the sky with a lucent blue glaze. The wispy clouds burst into many colors, sprouting from the moist interiors, glorious rainbow that rained upon the dense thicket of tropical forest. Still calmly watching the blazing array, Zee waited until her eyes had adjusted to the new

light before daring to blink.

Slowly the Star made its way into full view. She could hear the sounds of life emerging from the small hut choked village, of sleepers waking and early risers beginning their day. She looked down at the egg laying in her lap, which was silent for the time. Moments later, rustling sounds behind her alerted her that someone was approaching. Chief Kuorega strode into the morning light...and onto Zee.

"Hey!" Zee exclaimed as the Chief's knee buried itself into her back. Stumbling to catch himself, he mumbled an incoherent apology. Momentarily forgetting the incident, Zee returned her gaze to the skies and let out a contented sigh. Seeing Zee enjoying the beauty of the unique astronomy of Delëna, Kuorega spoke up.

"Zenith, our village here has a secret bond to the Star, and every morning when it comes into view and gives this land its light and beauty, we hold a special...ceremony you could say." He took a deep breath and looked away, pushing back his medium length of black hair. Kuorega was awkward with his words, never before had he allowed any outsiders attend the Ster Walcuna ceremony.

'There's something about this girl, but I can't quite put my finger on it' He glanced at her, quickly turning away when she looked back at him.

"It sounds interesting"

Walking briskly along the dirt paths in the village, Zee enjoyed every minutes of the clear morning air. The light from the Star gave light and beautiful colors to the hut roofs, illuminating the sheen of green to striking gold, and making the dew on the fuzzy trees glimmer and shine. Through the village they walked, almost nothing unchanged, for the houses were growing shabbier, and the people slightly more ragged, yet the scenery around them was becoming more and more stunning.

Finally, they reached small clearing ringed by some of the most broken down huts in the village. The area was free of debris of any sort, and there were groups of people milling about its center, were a lone low altar sat.

"Now, you stay here, and do as everyone does. No matter what happens, do not say anything outloud, and don't lose the egg." Kuorega put emphasis on the fact she musn't let it walk off, for it was the wrong part of the village to do so. Walking to the altar, Kuorega breathed the morning air deeply, cherishing its crispness. He looked skywards, closed his eyes and reached out his arms, feeling the breeze tickle his fingers. Taking a deep breath, he declared in a booming voice,

"Ster Walcuna!" Zee was astounded by his deep, magnified baritone voice, admiring the amount of power it held. Flitting her own eyes around, she saw no particular uniqueness in this part of the landscape than anywhere else, beside the lack of trees. But it did have something, she could feel it. Instinctively she clasped the egg tighter, but remembering Kuorega's words, she ran over to the nearest hut and placed the egg in a large vase behind the hut, concealing it from view.

"Stay here" She whispered to it, in hopes it would enforce her will. She turned and returned to where she was standing, except this time there were more people standing around her, all taller than a normal human.

In several minutes, it seemed the whole village had gathered in the small clearing, as if answering Kuorega's call. She swept her eyes over the crowd, observing all the new faces and appearances. Startled slightly, all around her a deep throaty hum began, vibrating slowly through the air. Around her, she could feel that it came from all the villagers, and through the undertone of the sound, she could hear Kuorega from the center of the crowd, chanting in the strange language.

"Walcuna tu ta dey ty graet emd givimg Ster. Plaesa phurgiva ty nurtek avil emd blass os phur emutar dey." In time with his words Zee could see the light around her growing stronger, until she realized that the whole crowd was surrounded by a circle of light that seemed to be shining from the ground itself. As soon as his prayer ended, the light slowly faded away. As everyone opened their closed eyes, they

dispersed in different directions as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

'Do they go through that every day?!

"Well, what did you think of that?" Kuorega had marched over to where zee was standing gaping, looking very pleased with himself, like a silly child.

"It...It was...spectacular! The chanting was so strange and mesmerizing, and wow! What was that glow? How does it happen? Do you do that every day? And--"

"Hold on! What a minute...I can clearly see that you are very much enthused about the morning ceremonies, so if you follow me, I will tell you more about it on the way" Kuorega chuckled to himself that such a girl was fascinated with everything she saw.

"Sounds good, let me grab the egg..." Zee hopped off for a moment to retrieve her unhatched companion, and came back quite bewildered with a forlorn look upon her face and empty hands.

"It's gone"

4 - Arrival

The moment the treacherous words left her lips, Zee could feel the same familiar pulse that had become so close to her, pulsing through the air. Instinctively, she broke into a run after it. Kuorega, as shocked as she, was stunned for several moments before he had enough free will to chase after her.

Shooting through the village, Zee ran as hard as she could without reaching the point where turning would leave her eating dirt. For several heart stopping moments, she was constantly reeling around the village without a general direction until she was able to map out a small area of where it could possibly be. Slowing to a jog, she felt out its presence ever so slowly, similarly to the day or so ago when she had been searching for it in the same manner.

As she ran, she past a shabby hut, that for some reason, she didn't remember being there before. The vibrating halted as she passed it.

'Curious' She turned and stared at the hut for a long while, noticing broken glass everywhere and dirt and grime coating everything in sight. Tentatively, she approached the house, almost afraid it would bite her if she came too close.

Just as she was about to open the lopsided plank meant to be a door, a high pitched shriek pierced through.

Zee tumbled backwards into a heap, frightened. Gathering her nerve, she stood again, brushing herself off with composed dignity. Looking around, she checked to make sure no one had noticed, but no, all the villagers had not even hesitated in their step. Once again, she reached out, but this time she was able to make contact, pushing it open enough for her to spy on the inhabitants of the hut. Startled, Zee watched as an old hag of a woman cavorted around the room muttering strange words, encircling a shabby table where her precious egg lay on the table.

"Sataya, the village enchantress. Exiled from the main land, forced to live on Kopia forever." Zee nearly jumped from her skin as Kuorega spoke. She turned, and he looked down on her. "Come to think of it, lately she has been going on about some prophecy approaching. Kept saying she was going to interfere with fate and test its power."

Zee pointed at the door.

"Does that mean that egg is the prophecy?!" She gasped.

"No" He sighed. "It's you"

"Wha – me? Wh – " Zee blinked, stuttered and stalled. Finally, she could atleast utter how?

"It all makes sense, Sataya starts going on about a prophecy, villagers complain from all sorts of ailments that seem to occur from overreactions, like insane anger or intense sorrow and – "

"Wait, what do emotions have to do with this?"

"You said you can feel emotions from the egg right? Well someone passing by might catch a whiff of it but unlike you, they can't handle it and usually they pass out cold"

Zee exhaled.

"Okay, keep going"

"As I was saying, when predicting prophecies in Delëna, you watch things like the stars – an example would be last nights curiosity." She sifted her feet in the dry dust under the cool overhang of the hut.

"How do I get the egg back then?" She gazed up at Kuorega, searching for support in his eyes. Sighing, Kuorega scratched his head, as if to dislodge an answer that might be there.

"Sataya is notorious for difficult riddles, so if you seek to retrieve that egg from her, you'll most likely be pitted against an extremely difficult one." Without hesitation Zee turned and scurried through the door.

Surprised, Kuorega had no time to react and try to stop her, try to make her think. Realizing she may very well not succeed, he followed her in. Before entering, he thought, 'Sataya knows very well that the egg will not hatch for her, so she must have other motives in mind.' He tapped his chin a moment. 'What is that woman up to?'

Zee stepped through the huts small entrance, finding bits and pieces of strange trinkets and doo-dads laying cluttered on the floor in heaps and mounds, plates of rotting meals covering every surface. "You!" Sataya screeched at Zee and pointed a wicked finger in her face, covered by just enough skin to hide the bone. Her pale face was hollow and haggard, worn away by the ages, seemingly ancient. Her eyes were a steely gray and her hair pure white, with her skin the same obvious dark tan like her tribe, though her clothing was darker. A layer of the purest black fabric was draped across her shoulders, atop a hideous dark black dress that reached her ankles. Her gaze was piercing, like a vulture in a barren desert absent of predator and prey.

"You're the girl who has bonded to this egg, is that true?" She shook her finger in Zee's face. "Well if you expect me to give it back willingly, you're wrong. You'll have to win it back." She sneered, pulling back her thin lips to reveal two rows of missing, crooked and infested teeth.

"How" Zee eyed the woman with growing hatred. Sataya however gathered herself up, pushing back her shoulders and planting her hands firmly on her hips. She stated that Zee would have to answer a riddle. She agreed with a silent nod.

As Sataya began to recite the riddle aloud, Kuorega shuffled through her door, standing behind Zee, hunched over because of the huts non-sufficient height. Sataya glared at the man.

"What is greater than the Gods,
More evil than the orbs of Raike
The poor have it, the wealthy need it
Misers spend it, spenders save it
If you eat it, you will die?"

Slowly, Zee pieced together the pieces of the puzzle, and remembering her own life – knew the answer. Swallowing, she answered.

"Nothing."

Sataya gawked, then began to laugh.

She laughed and laughed, cackling until Zee began to wonder if this woman would keep to her word.

"So you are a clever one aren't you? I heard all about your interest in the Stars and our Ster Walcuna ceremony, impressive wasn't it?" She dropped her arms from her hips and walked cautiously over to where the egg was caressing it softly. "Well anyway, you answered that riddle too easily for me to believe that you hadn't known the answer before"

Zee was fuming.

"You're not going to give it back?!"

"Of course not, I've waited too many years for you to come along so I could take little friend for my companion"

Zee grew into a rage.

"Do you really think I'm going to relinquish my companion to you? You must be out of your mind! I'm the one who could hear it calling, I'm the one who held it close even as I trekked through the jungle! I did not chase it all the way back here to go back empty handed!" Her fists clenched, Zee glared and breathed heavily at her. Kuorega clamped a bear hand down onto her shoulder.

"Sataya, give it back" Stataya sneered up at him.

“Oh dear me, Mister high and mighty is going to get me if I don’t give back the child’s little egg, I’m so scared” She looked up at him again with the arrogance of a spoiled child, teasing him just out of reach. Kuorega kept his face firm, and remained staring at the enchantresses face.

Before another word was spoken, Surprise flitted into the room and spiraled around Zee’s head, flying directly into Sataya’s face, scolding her.

Kuorega continued to watch Sataya’s face, and he noticed a change. As the sprixi zipped into the room, a greedy glint in her eye could be seen. That was when he knew what Sataya was after.

“Zee!” Kuorega cried, “Get her!”

Zee didn’t have time.

“Aha!” Swift like lightning, Sataya had snatched an empty jar off a shelf and stuffed Surprise into while still in mid-air. “Gotcha!” Her speed was incredible.

“Give her back” Zee said darkly. Sataya tapped her hawk-like nose thoughtfully with a fore-finger for a moment.

“No, I don’t think I shall, because you see, this is what I was really after.” She held up the jar with an angry sprixi. “I already knew I couldn’t have the egg because it had already chosen you. But I had heard a rumor that a little bat-winged lizard sprixi was floating around village, never far from the little foreigner.” A quick glance at Zee. “This sprixi here is a one of a kind, no others like it, because she is the first ever dragon sprixi.” Kuorega sighed. “You see, some sprixi’s are born sprixi’s, and some are actually something else with just a little Magic mixed in. Commonly you’ll see mouse, bird and bug sprixi, and sometimes you’ll see fish sprixi – the tasty little treats. But you’ll never find a dragon sprixi; it’s unheard of, a rarity. So that means -” Sataya licked her lips, “She’s valuable”

Zee began to turn red with anger.

“Give her back!” She screeched lunging toward her with arms outstretched, intending to rip the woman apart. Sataya still remained amused.

“O, I’m sorry, but you have overstayed your welcome. Bye now!” She flicked her finger harshly in Zee’s direction. Immediately Zee collapsed, stunned.

“Sataya! Those Magics are forbidden in this village!” Kuorega snapped, bending down and lifting the girl onto his shoulder. Sataya smiled innocently.

“Oops, my finger slipped” She laughed under her breath, turning away as Kuorega left with the girl over his shoulder and the egg in his arm.

He turned one last time to see Sataya examining the glass which held the furious little sprixi with bat-wings and lizard skin.

“Argh, she can’t do this!” Angrily, Zee sat down in a huff, placing the egg in her lap. Apparently being stunned by Magic hadn’t fazed her at all. Still worried about her current state of mind, Kuorega made a suggestion.

“Perhaps if I might go and fetch Abel, we may all make a plan to retrieve your friend.” He handed the egg back to Zee, hugging it close.

“Why can’t you just make her give me Surprise back? You are the Chief of this village, right?” She glared stubbornly at him, wishing he had stood up for her back in the dingy hut where Sataya still had her companion.

“Just because I may be a leader, doesn’t make me a god. How would you feel if someone bossed you around everyday? I’m simply the Chief to lead in the decision making process that would only be beneficial to the tribe, or to perform ceremonies only recognized with ‘higher’ classmen.”

Zee sighed, recalling moments in the orphanage where the Mother’s tyrant rule lead to violence and hatred.

“Well, it would be more comfortable if he were here.”

A few minutes later, Kuorega returned with a still groggy eyed Abel teetering alongside him.

"Hey Zee, what's up?" He tiredly rubbed at the sleep lingering in his eyes.

Zee looked away.

"I lost her"

"Lost who?" He took his hand away from his eyes and walked over to sit by her.

"Surprise!" She snapped. Abel's eyes softened as he saw how it made her feel, placing the same feeling into his own heart.

"I'll help you get her back" He smiled at her, though she remained glum.

"So, what happened anyway? Like, how'd you lose her?" Zee turned to look at Abel, then away again.

"I lost the egg when I went to the Ster Walcuna ceremony, and to get it back I was forced from Surprise." Pouting, she crossed her arms over her chest. Abel sat next to her, staring intently for a moment.

"I know a way."

"Really?!" She leaned over as he began to whisper it in her ear. At first her face showed excitement, but as he finished, she was in disbelief.

"It won't work I'm telling you, I'll do what I just thought of instead." Abel looked up at her as she stood, with hurt in his eyes.

"Why don't you think it will work?"

"Look, with someone as ancient as her, you can't make her swallow her own medicine." She turned away from him, putting the egg back into Kuorega's arms. She walked over to the hut, not glancing back or halting in her step. Kuorega came and heaved himself down next to Abel, who drew his knees under his chin, hiding his face in his hands.

"Hey, are you all right? Look, sometimes people will hurt others because their ways of thinking is different. You two are great friends though so don't let the little dispute get in the way." He patted him on the back. Abel continued to hide.

"But she's never outright denied me of what I've thought, we've just been so close you know?" He sighed. "But it's okay, it'll work out, somehow." He lifted his head, resting it on his arms. Kuorega watched him, searching for any particular reason why he was so kind hearted.

A commotion stirred the air as Zee came crashing through a window, clutching the jar.

"Run!"

"Zee!" Kuorega barked angrily, "What did you do?" She continued running, straight into the jungle.

"Well, I jumped in through the back, hoping to catch her unaware" She shook her head as a reaction to what she had said, and because millions of insects began swarming around their faces. "Didn't work" She kept running, without a hint of continuing her story, swatting away as she went.

"And?" Kuorega tried to keep up with the girl., but was still slowed down by the egg in his arms. Zee slowed down slightly.

"And, I used Abel's idea. I really wanted to get Surprise so I asked her a riddle. Even though she couldn't answer it she wouldn't give her back so I just ran grabbed Surprise on my way out the window.

"She absently scratched at several bites that had already formed on her arms and face. "So technically Abel, your plan still didn't work." She ran faster all of a sudden,

"Zee! Wait! There's a--" But in a burst of speed without even hearing, she disappeared into the undergrowth. Kuorega, slid to a halt instead of pursuing, reaching out and stopping Abel with him.

"Wha--?" Snapping and cracking sounds could be heard.

"A cliff, there's a cliff behind that bush." Immediately after finishing he grabbed Abel's hand and started running through the weeds, swatting at the masses of bugs. Running down a steady incline, Abel

began to whimper, his salty tears only attracting more and more flying fiends. Kuorega was suddenly very glad that he hadn't given her the egg back right away.

Running down the slope, they thrashed through mountains of ferns and palm saplings, clawing out of huge spider-webs clinging to their faces and ducking to avoid low hanging branches.

As the ground evened off, Zee came into sight, unconscious on the ground with bucketfuls of insects swarming around the blood coming from cuts all over her body. As Kuorega inspected her, he was grateful that she only had small bruises and scratches from the fall. He bent down and pried the jar from her hands, releasing the small sprixi from inside.

"Well, Zee should be fine in a while, the fall was not more than ten feet down. Most likely she landed on her back, and knocked the wind out of herself pretty badly." He checked for a bump on her head.

"Umm, what's a foot?" Abel was still getting used to random words placed into English sentences.

"It's the same as a foot measurement." He picked Zee up, throwing her over his shoulder. "Abel, you and Zee are going to have to leave this island today, right now. There are some boats docked only about two miles from here. OH, take this too, Zee's heavy enough as it is" He handed Abel the egg.

"Two what from here?" He clasped his arms around it as Zee had done before.

"A mile is the equivalent of a mile" Kuorega began walking, with Abel close behind.

"Oh"

As they trudged on through the jungle, Surprise continued to flit back and forth between Zee and the trees. Every time she came back, Abel noted, another one of Zee's cuts healed.

"Hey Kuorega, what's Surprise doing?"

"Hmm?" He looked back and watched Surprise a moment. "Oh, some sprixi's have a small amount of healing abilities. What she's doing is getting the dew off the trees, and adding some of her magic to them, and placing the water over her cuts like bandages, at the same time healing them. Some believe that water has healing powers so it's commonly used in the practice."

"I see" Abel said. He continued to watch Surprise go back and forth, slowly making all her little bruises and cuts disappear. After a while though, she ran out of things to heal, so she sat on her back, giving a big sigh and wiping her brow with a little 'whew'. There was a period of silence as the only sound was their footsteps through the underbrush. Abel watched the patterns on the egg swirl and dance on the surface of the egg, still amazed at the small phenomenon. Zee began to stir, blinking her eyes to clear them of the bugs, and stretching her arms. Kuorega gently placed her back on the ground, supporting her as she wobbled on her feet a moment.

"Whew! That was some fall, why didn't you say something?!" She looked back at Kuorega.

"I did! But you didn't listen, you just kept running then boom! Down you go!" He huffed.

"Hmph. Where are we going anyway?" She took the egg back from Abel.

"I'm not going anywhere, you two are going to the mainland." He pulled back some ferns to reveal the beach once again. "He gave a small gasp as he ran over to the boats, only the tips of their prows peeking over the breaking waves.

"Argh! Sataya must have sent one of her apprentices to drill holes in the boats!" He carefully examined the neat round hole in the bottom of all seven of the small watercrafts. "You'll have to hitch a ride on a water wyrm. Luckily for you I have acquaintances with a few of the local dwellers." He whistled, high pitched chirrup piercing the air. Waiting a minute or two, a webbed frill came from under the waves, nearing the shoreline at an incredible speed.

The creature came onto the beach, a massive head, reptilian in all respects, frills lining the jaw line, and descending down its back. Large canines peeked from under the lips, razor sharp and white. The body was covered in fine, small silver fish scales, slippery and slick. The legs were well muscled, with more

webbing in-between the toes armed with frightening talons. The body was long and snake like, seeing how it's lower half was still hidden in the surf.

Abel fell back onto the beach, mouth open wide in astonishment. Zee continued to stare, awed at the beauty of the creature. She looked down at her own egg, beautiful in its own way.

"Abel, Zee, this is Hatsunia." The wyrm bowed her head to children respectfully.

"Pleasure of acquaintance is mine" The wyrm's accent was foreign and strange, it sounded of hissing, but it was an elegant and well rounded speech.

"Hatsunia, would you be willing to transport these children to capitol's port? It is imminent they get off the island immediately." Kuorega spoke as if the creature was of a higher status than him.

"Of course, I will make it my goal to be there by morning" Without any further hesitance, Kuorega threw the children, egg and all, onto her back, at the base of the neck where there were no frills. Surprise chattered angrily and flew off a safe distance behind the wyrm as it turned back into the water.

"Good-bye! May we meet again someday!" Kuorega waved from the safety of the beach. Zee turned and waved also, watching as his form slowly grew small, and the island blurred with distance. Within several minutes it was out of sight all together.

Their speed was incredible, as white foam trailed out from behind, Hatsunia's frilled tail propelled them along, cutting through the water like air. For a while there was silence, but before an hour was up, the egg began chirping. Nonstop, it kept on chittering and squeaking like no there was no tomorrow. It seemed that it soothed the large wyrm.

"It makes happiness to hear a dragon chick before emergence" The wyrm seemed to grin, as more of the pearl white teeth were showing. As Zee relaxed, listening to the dragon chick and feeling the water glide around her legs, Abel appeared to be seasick. He tried in vain to keep his feet out of the water, curling up behind Zee, making hideous noises and changing color every few minutes.

"Hey Zee, I think I'm gonna-" However before finishing, Abel did. Hanging over the uncomfortable wyrm, he released his hold on breakfast into the water.

For many hours it seemed they did nothing but sit and listen to the chick inside the egg. It made all sorts of noises that ranged from high pitched screeches to super low purring. And it seemed their stomachs were making a chorus of noises too.

As they watched the Star sink below the horizon, Zee thought she was going to die of hunger. The more than substantial breakfast of some kind of meat and bread had kept her stomach quiet for some time, but now she was running on empty. It seemed the same way for Abel.

Unfortunately, as their stomachs grew louder, so did the egg. Even Hatsunia joined in, humming as she stroked through the water. Then Zee gave a little shout.

"Eep! It's hatching! Oh my gosh, it's going to hatch right now! I've only had it for a day! Eep!" The experience was nothing like she could ever have imagined. She lost all awareness of her surroundings, she could feel through the dragon the struggle against the stable wall of the egg, felt the crack as she threw herself at it. She was overwhelmed with her emotions, she knew she would never be alone again, now there was something else taking a little corner in mind, making its nest there, and she knew it was her dragon. But at the same time she felt her own mind open up more, exposing itself to the world. And that was all in the one instant, the particle of a second, the moment before the dragon emerged from her haven in the egg.

The little dragonet was awkward and ungainly. While Zee tried to keep her from falling into the water, the dragonet was determined to get out of her arms, clawing at her in an attempt to get away. Biting her lip and holding on, Zee waited until she was sure she had stopped moving before releasing her hold, and placing the dragonet in front of her for a good look.

The dragonet was a light green all over her body, deepening in color down her legs, coming to a near black by her little silver talons. But she was spiky all over, under her jaw, down her back, behind her legs and the tip of her tail, which was thrashing dangerously close to Abel's head. Her wings resembled arms protruding from her back complete with thumb, though the fingers were stretched to great lengths. The skin was stretched between the three fingers and another finger that seemed to come from her 'elbow', even more was stretched between the upper and lower arm, and even a little was stretched from the thumb to the side of the first finger. Though the wings were still too big handle spread out, so they were kept close at her side. Inspecting the little dragon, Zee tickled and played with her, stretching out her wings to feel the smooth leathery feel, and lifting her clawed feet in mock fight.

As Zee and her little dragonet frolicked a bit, Abel sat quietly behind watching and admiring.

Unfortunately though, as soon as he was able to get comfortable, he began to be seasick again.

Recalling the same feeling from when Zee had hurt him, he had to ask her what she did with Sataya.

"Hey Zee, what did you do to make her so angry anyways?" He still had his head hanging over the wyrms side.

"I asked her a riddle, and when she was mad that she couldn't answer, she threw a fit and I hightailed it" She shrugged.

"What riddle?"

"Lets see, it goes like this:

Fallen in the snow, is easily seen

Fallen in the sand, you cannot find

The more you take

The more you leave behind"

Zee giggled.

"You should have seen her face when I told her the answers was 'footsteps' "

Abel managed to crack a smile before his sickness came back to him.

As the dragonet sat in Zee's lap, she cried and cried, screeching towards the stars. The sound was enough to even drive off Surprise, who had come close enough to sit on Abel's shoulder for a time.

"Abel! I can't make her stop! And I'm hungry!" Zee whined out loud, directing it at Abel.

"I know Zee, but the little dragon is hungry too I bet, because so am I!" As Abel and Zee kept shouting at each other about hungry they were, the little dragonet finally stopped abruptly, and fell asleep. Awed, Zee and Abel watched, hoping with all their hearts she really was asleep.

"Hey Zee" Abel whispered.

"Yeah?" She whispered back.

"What are you going to name her?"

She thought a moment.

"I don't know yet. Any ideas?" Abel shook his head in response. While watching the moons and stars, Abel and Zee thought, both of a good name for the dragonet, and of how much food they could gorge once they arrived at the capitol.

5 - Beginning

“Young ones, we arrive in capitol port” The hissing sound of the wyrm’s accent woke Zee from half sleep. Blearily she looked around. Snapping to attention she turned around and shook Abel awake, who had been leaning against her back all night. As he too began to wake up he suffered from the same reaction as Zee. Truly they had never before been outside in a city street, so their surprise at the bustling scene was a huge impact. The wyrm had paddled up into what appeared to be a special dock for water wyrms, for there were no boats or ships in sight, pulling up, Hatsunia relaxed in a special sling rigged in the water. Zee woke up Jade - the little dragonet’s name for her soft green eye color - very gently, so as not to trigger her screeching again. Cradling Jade in her arms, she stood up, her legs dripping from the watery ride. Abel followed, and together the strange group made their way from the dock, followed by Surprise.

Unbeknownst to them though, a mysterious figure proceeded to trail the group, ever since their departure from the dock.

Cautiously walking through town, they received many glaring eyes, and little fingers from young children passing by tried to grab at the little Jade, and attempt to snatch at Surprise, who continually had to fly higher over their heads to stay of reach. Passing by many shop windows, they were all inclined to stop and gaze into the bakery where warm cakes and breads sat steaming on large platters. Once again they all felt their long unattended to hunger pains. As they were about set out once again after drooling long and hard in front of grocery window, a voice came from a side alley.

“Come here” It was a hoarse whisper, firm but barely audible to them. Zee peeked around the corner and Jade made a little curious chirping noise.

Without warning, the front of Zee’s shirt was snatched by the man and she was dragged into the alley, kicking and clawing.

“Shuttup you foolish girl, I’m not the only one in these parts interested in that dragon of yers.” He took a swig of something foul from a jug hidden in his cloak. “The name’s Jocab, yers?”

“Zenith, call me Zee”

“Abel”

“What a girly name” Jocab snickered. Abel scowled. Jocab managed to compose himself. “So, tell me, how’d you two get ‘ere from Earth and why?”

Abel and Zee’s mouth dropped open when he said this.

“How did you know?” Abel whispered.

“Easy, you two got that look of complete tourists. Gaping like a fish that’s been landborne.” He took another swig. “Luckily for you and that li’l dragon of yours, when you get to the Academy you’ll be just another egg in the basket.” He winked. “Your ‘friend’ on the other hand will – “ Zee halted him.

“Did you put an applied meaning onto the word ‘friend’?”

“Me? Naw, I just thought that yer a girl an’ he’s a boy – “

“Quit that!”

“Fine! Sheesh...feisty li’l thing.” He took another swig. “Anyways, he...” He jerked his head at Abel, “will have to pass some tests before being able to be admitted. Anyways, I’m guessing by yer clothes that yer trip here was on accident, right?” The man never ceased to surprise them.

“How do you know it then?” Zee asked.

“Well, sort of, we knew we wanted to get away, but we just didn’t know where” Zee said, pulling her finger away when Jade tried to gnaw on it.

“Hmmm, how did you find the dragon?”

“I found her as an egg, on... Abel, what was the name of the island again?”

“Kopia” He said.

“Right, Kopia. She was hiding in an enormous fern in the middle of the jungle.”

The man scratched at his stubble on his chin.

“If anything, she’s a wild breed. She’ll grow up small, swift and hardy. She might not be the prettiest thing you ever saw, but she definitely has potential to be the toughest.” He coughed as some of his potentially alcoholic beverage seemed to travel down the wrong tube. “Come, it’s best not to stay in the same place for long, the streets aren’t even safe anymore.” Putting their trust in the man, they followed him out of the close quarters of the alley, and into the bright sunshine of the city streets. Following earlier advice, Zee did her best to hide Jade from view, who did not enjoy being under her shirt at all.

“What’s with all the secrecy, apparently creatures like dragons and things aren’t uncommon, so why should I hide Jade?” Zee continued to struggle with Jade, but thankfully the little dragons power was still weaker than Zee.

“Lately there have been rumors of pirates in the Malsha Seas, threatening to kidnap the Kem” He whispered this close to Zee’s ear, shielding the facts from the outside world.

“They want to kidnap who?” Abel asked.

“The Kem, the title is equivalent to a King or Queen of sorts. Except there’s only one.”

“What would they want with her?” Zee was struggling to keep Jade from wriggling around so much.

“Actually, a lot. The Kem isn’t chosen for good looks, or on her families background. She was chosen because she had a knack for Magic, therefore being a Kem, it is her duty to keep an eye on the leaders of the world, keeping them in check and monitoring the activities of dark Magic. If she would take a sudden absence, it would throw the world into chaos.” He paused and glanced around. “There’s another rumor that the Captain of the pirates has either joined forces with the Cursed, or has been possessed by one of them. Currently the ship has been seen drifting around Hassile in the Laesi and Mapu Seas” Zee shrank back as Jocab’s face hovered close to hers. The news didn’t seem to make her as heartfelt as she thought she should be.

“Judging by the way you’re taking the news, I’m guessing that threats aren’t very important either?” Zee seemed sarcastic.

“Of course they’re important!” He snapped. “It’s just that this city in particular has been the brunt of blame for everything. Losing track of the Orbs of Raike, the lack of Gifted mages, the surplus of demon sightings. They even blame us for the disappearance of the Elven lord from ten years ago!”

Abel calculated in his head that ten years here was roughly fifteen on Earth.

“Lately the Elven kingdoms have been in harsh situations with each other. The Denosian Elves keep saying the Prophecy will be the return of their Lord, to restore both sides to their former glory. While the Mekësoan Elves say that the Prophecy will surely be their total destruction.” He laughed darkly to himself. “Neither side realizes that they’re pushing each other farther away from a treaty that will be necessary in the oncoming war.”

“What war? Against who?” Zee was already getting the feeling as though this new world wasn’t any better than the one she had come from besides the fact that there were no Mothers; there’s was just so much that was going on it was overpowering.

“The Raike mages and their demons of course.” He sidestepped over a cart that had fallen in the road, scooping up a strange soft fruit nonchalantly and popping the little thing into his mouth.

“Demons?! DEMONS?! As in, evil bloodthirsty things that like to eat people?!” Even though Abel had lived his life in the orphanage, he wasn’t born there, and the only memory he can conjur up of his past is of a black and hideous contorting face, dripping saliva from the corners of it’s mouth, a demonic, evil face. Zee nearly jumped from her skin when Abel began screeching, wondering if he was okay.

“Yes demons” He said irritably. “Stop overreacting like that, it’s quite annoying and under aged” The man walked faster, and as Zee was going to call out to him she realized she didn’t know his name. She ran up along side him, Jade bouncing happily inside her shirt.

“Hey, who are the Raike mages? And what have they done?” Zee’s curiosity always had the best of her. Jocab just sighed.

“The Raike mages are the dark mages who have been banned from this world. After the finding of the white and elemental Magics, someone out there who we now know as Darisan, the ultimate demon – created the dark Magics. Magic that is used for mind-control and spreading disease. Planting hatred into hearts and destroying things. Darisan is the only true demon in the world, the only born demon ever to stalk Delëna, and he is ruler over all other lesser demons. He was the one to create the orbs of Raike. He made them to overthrow the orbs of Aesi, so he could literally rule the world with darkness and hate. Those who serve under him will never again be blessed by light. Raike mages have the ability to create demons as their scouts and bringers of misfortune. They rip out their souls which keeps their very bodies alive. There are a few though, who have studied under him-three to be exact, and each one of them guards one of the orbs of Raike.” Jocab beckoned them all to take a seat on a bench outside of a deserted clothing store. Jade curled up on Zee’s lap like a cat, and began to purr even. “The Orb of Despair is held by the dragon Valar in the mountains that surround Nelë the volcano. He is the most powerful of Darisan’s henchmen and not one to be caught alone with. The Orb of Poverty is held by the shadow stalker Salssi, the most cunning and wicked of the dark beings. She is devious, and not many live to tell of the night they met her. The final Orb is held by a shape-shifting demon, who can take any form of any thing or person. Although not many know his true name, he is called Tzek.

“Darisan, about ten years ago, had gathered an army up, and was preparing to attack the entire world from all sides. It seemed that everyone was doomed for eternal misery. But, from the shadows of the Anodor Forests, came an elven man, who stood up to face the foe. The elven lord, gave Darisan a night to remember. They fought for many days, and while he was keeping Darisan busy, the world strangled the demonic armies. Small towns with nothing but pitchforks, helped. Doing everything in their power to keep themselves alive. Even being an Immortal, he was beginning to tire, so he stopped fighting and cast a spell, that sealed Darisan in a magical tomb where nothing could enter or escape. As the enchanted rock closed over Darisan, who was defenseless, he swore, that his child would be cursed a thousand times of death, if he ever laid eyes upon him. That his own kin would surely mean his escape. Darisan is still there, sealed in the Tomb of Darisan, what an original name. Although the lord fought off an attack from the ultimate demon, Darisan’s henchman came for him, and he was kidnapped. Somehow, he did escape, and all say that he shoved his only surviving heir through a wormhole into Earth, where he would hide until the spell summoned him home, to begin the war against the demonic armies and defeat Darisan one day when the seal crumbles. Soon after the lord was named one of the Gifted, he vanished - all traces of him lost, and so he was presumed dead, although many good and bad folk are still searching for him to this day” Out of habit Jocab reached for his flask, still disappointed at its vacancy.

“Wow, that was an incredible story. How do you know so much?” Abel asked, wide eyed.

“Well, I was a good friend of Cedrus’s; we went to the Academy together and shared many hours causing mischief and such. The usual boy thing of scampering around.” Abel began day dreaming, and as if she hadn’t listened Zee asked,

“Where are we going anyway?”

“To the Palace. according to recent laws, anyone who sees suspicious characters during the week of the Prophecy is to immediately make an appearance to the Kem.” He looked over at Jade. “And because you have your own dragon now, it’s mandatory for you to attend the academy for training.”

“Training? For what?”

“Remember the war I told you about? That’s what.” Jocab took out his little bottle, but missed his mouth, cursing and muttering as cleaned himself, ignoring the teeth chattering Abel behind him who continued to recall nightmares of little evil sprites that were going to gobble him up.

Continuing down the cobblestone streets masses with people of all colors and shapes, there was a sudden change in the air. Before the three-some knew what was happening, the entire wave of people separated as men on strange horse-creatures came riding through at top speed.

“Quickly now!” Jocab hastily snatched at the backs of Abel and Zee’s shirts, dragging them off running, ducking into another alley. The sound of galloping continued behind them.

“They’re after you two, see? I’m not the only one looking for suspicious characters.” Jocab lead them running through the streets, knocking down carts and temporary vendor stands behind, setting the city into confusion in their wake. The riders seemed consistent, their mounts agile and swift, leaping over obstacles and fallen people alike.

“Faster children! We’re almost there!” Jade was furious, and she struggled hard to escape from Zee’s sweaty shirt. Her little tail slipped from under her shirt, tangling in-between Zee’s fast moving legs.

“Oof!” Zee trips and falls, landing painfully on her head, she doesn’t move, waiting for the world to stop spinning. Jade climbs out of her shirt and sits on top of Zee, flapping her wings and screeching threateningly to anyone who comes too close. The riders came to a sliding stop not five feet from where she lay. Jade reared up her little head and squawked and carried on. Surprise descended to examine the situation and chattered into Abel’s ear, pulling his head around.

“Zee!” Abel turned back and ran as one of the riders jumped off his mount and strided over to Zee. He stopped as Jade began a series of hissing fits, in order to protect her.

“Wait! No! Leave her alone!” Abel shouted at them, running as fast as he could. As Zee stood, feeling much better, another one of the riders pointed at her.

“Perelysa” Instantly Zee’s body stiffened, and once again she keeled over backwards, frozen. Jade began thrashing her tail violently, spitting and hissing like a cat, emitting streams of smoke from her nostrils. Wary of the little dragons power, they backed off. As Abel ran up, Jade took no notice of him, and continued to have a tantrum at the riders. Jocab walked up behind the children and the furious dragon, several of the riders giving him nasty glances.

“So, I see that the Kem has tired of waiting for me.” He announced to the small squadron. The rider who was un-mounted, seemed to be the leader and he spoke up.

“The Kem Rastri, has ordered your immediate return. Unless you had the children and the dragon, we are to take them from you, and into our custody.” The man did not seem to stand with full confidence, the presence of Jocab intimidating him more then the smell of booze emanating from him.

“Well, to be blunt with you, the children have literally just arrived, so I’m afraid I can’t let you do that. I will personally deliver them to the Kem, safe and sound, and relieve you of any charges that she may have prepared for you in case you were unsuccessful.” He smiled at this and motioned for Abel, who stammered and pointed to Zee. “Oh yes, the girl, almost forgot” He motioned at the leader to undo his hex.

“Dastom” Several seconds later, Zee stiffly, sat up. Seeing the man who had stunned her, she charged at him.

“Hold up girl, don’t start anything until we get you to the castle” Jocab had grabbed her by the collar, and was dragging her away from the squadron. Submitting, she merely glared, but the riders all felt an icy chill up and down their spines. Jade walked by with the same look, spitting as she passed.

‘Creepy girl...’

“Oooooow, my head!” Zee rubbed the spot on her the back of her head where she had hit herself on the hard pavement. Surprise, was sitting daintily on her shoulder, admiring the surroundings, happy that no

one paid attention to her for a while.

“You’re should be thankful for Jade, or it could have been more than a little bump, riding a Rësentì without proper experience, can be a painful one” Jocab scolded. Zee stopped rubbing a moment and scratched under Jade’s jaw, a pur emitting from her throat. Zee giggled.

“She’s so much like a cat, it’s almost uncanny!”

They continued their walk in silence, and before much longer, they found themselves face to face with the palace guards, standing guard at the gate. As Jocab conversed with the guards, Zee and Abel stared in wonder at the gate. It was not the black iron gate Zee had expected any castle to have. It was a silver gate, shining in the daylight, carved to appear as a silver garden, leaves and vines intertwining with each other, silvery little animals, playing in the metallic garden. When she looked down, the gate seemed to grow straight from the ground.

“Come along, the guards have allowed entry.” Before their eyes, the gates pulled apart, the branches and leaves untwining themselves, and little animals watched as they made their way through. Passing the guards, Abel peered into their silver armor. Appalled, he ran to catch up with Zee as he saw no face in the in the helm.

“Jocab! There wasn’t anyone in that suit of armor! How could you have possibly talked to it?!” Abel grabbed onto Zee’s shoulder. “Didn’t you see?!”

“The pieces of armor were enchanted, just like the gate. In fact, they are a part of the gate, that way we don’t waste any currency trying to hire people who can’t be trust worthy.” Once again, he sipped from his flask, disappointed as the last drop ran onto his tongue. “The guards act like a two way radio, directly connected to another guard inside the castle, who is in the constant presence of the Kem. After I relayed my message to her, the guard listened to the Kem’s message and opened the gate for us. You two will be meeting her in a moment”

They strolled through a beautiful garden, with many strange birds and insects humming and buzzing around silver flowers and trees which seemed to whisper. The castle door itself was elegant and simple at the same time, it seemed to be a single piece of wood, with silver hinges and gleaming crystal adornments. Forest creatures were engraved in the wood, in a beautiful landscape. Jade even was silent, but she ran ahead several times to sniff a flower here and there and watch small sprixi’s at work watering the plants. Zee vowed that she never close her eyes again, in fear of missing something as beautiful as this. Jocab brutally hammered the door with his fist, and a round man with a smiling face opened the door, his eyes alight with joy.

“Ah! The Kem Rastri is very eager to see you children!” He glanced at Jocab, “Not so much of you” Jocab pouted. He turned and beckoned them to follow through. The door closed silently behind them, and everyone averted their attention to the interiors of the castle. Smooth shining walls with large hanging tapestries gave it a warm feel, with airy, high rafter ceilings and lights that shone on the walls, alighting their footsteps. “My name is Azarie, personally guard, assistant and close friend of the Kem.” He smiled back at the children. “Don’t let my cheerfulness fool you, I graduated from the academy with the qualifications required for the Gifted!”

The hallway opened up into a vast room, at its center - not a high-backed stone throne with a grumpy faced man; but rather a round bed with many pillows, being all hues of blue and green it gave the impression of a gentle ocean, the deep blue blankets billowing out from the bed onto the sleek grey stone floors. A very beautiful young woman in a flowing silver dress appeared to be asleep in the bed, under a mound of pillows.

“Your grace, the children, and – ahem – Jocab have arrived.” Azarie announced. He leaned over the woman’s ear. “Your guards are still searching for the third mysterious figure that appeared on the Prophecies night. Reports have said she was last seen on a ferry off the Arcila plateau to the Maltra swamplands.” The man very gently whispered into the woman’s ear, but firmly enough for her to

awaken.

“A third pers-” Zee began to ask, but Jocab interrupted. She shot him a dirty look.

“Your grace, the female child here has been connected to a young wild dragon, and for the boys sake I ask you admit him into the Academy as well.”

After a good long stretch, the woman opened her eyes. She speculated the children, her eyes and Zee’s met, and for a moment, they seemed to look through each other. She beckoned for Abel.

“Young man, how many fingers am I holding up?” She held up two fingers with one hand.

“Erm...two?” Abel said, confused.

“Do you have normal hearing?”

“I believe so...what does this have to do with – ”

“Do you wish to pursue Magic?”

“Yes, but – ”

“You’re in”

“What?” Abel’s jaw dropped.

“I said, you’re in. You can go to school at the Academy with your friend now.” The woman sat up fully so that several maid girls could proceed to brush the woman’s long brown hair with shining silver combs.

“Your grace, usually the Test is much more difficult, is there a reason he didn’t even need to move?” Jocab seemed even as appalled as Abel was at that moment.

“What, you don’t want him to go to the Academy?”

“No, that’s not what I – ”

“Well than leave it. Lately there have been so few applications for requests into the Academy that I’m almost admitting anyone right now. The issue of demons are widespread, and many of the families are keeping their children with them, helping their parents protect their homes.”

“Really though, was it really necessary to admit that many in? You know I don’t cope with hooligans very well...” Jocab sighed and massaged his temples.

“I believe you’d find that if you stopped drinking so much you’d be able to have a clearer mind about things.” In a huff, Jocab left. Zee and Abel seemed ready to follow, but the Kem kept them.

“Don’t mind him. He’s had trouble with a few students in the past who had taken a liking to taunting him about drinking in the Academy. He is a great mage and all, but sometimes not the best people person.” The Kem shooed away the girls, and stood, stretching her legs and accepting several drinks from awaiting servants and a plump purple fruit that seemed very crunchy. As she was unable to talk, Zee and Abel found it the best time to ask questions.

“What is the Academy? I’ve heard it several times, is it like school?” Abel asked.

“The Academy here is for the training of young aspiring mages. You cover the three represented elements, fire, water, and earth; as well as white magic. Black magic however, is strictly forbidden. All students caught in the act are banned from ever attending again.”

“Harsh” Zee muttered.

“Not at all, the Dark Magic’s are nothing to play with, and severe punishment is always the price to pay for something not ment to be meddling in.” The Kem beckoned over a maid and whispered something into the girls ear. “I’m sure you dragon hasn’t had any proper nutrition yet so I’ll have the maid fetch something for her. When she’s done eating, Jocab will procede to direct you children to the Academy, where you shall have a quick tour and have your rooms assigned to you.” The maid returned with a heaping plate of apparently raw meats of various kinds. Jade leaped at the plate, diving headfirst into the mess. Abel and Zee made faces of disgust. The Kem speculated the childrens appearance. “You two could also use a wardrobe change, I can’t have two jungle children waltzing around the Academy.”

A group of maids came forth from the shadows and hustled the children from the room, leaving Jade and

the Kem alone for the moment. Rastrri examined the little dragon.

"You are quite the unusual dragon that's for sure" She stroked Jade's head, who even in gorging herself managed a little pur. Jocab revealed himself from hidden in a secluded hallway.

"Seen anything in particular in the children that strikes you as familiar? Perhaps the girls attitude?" The Kem clearly saw his hidden meaning.

"The moment she walked in Jocab, I had a feeling it would be so. I almost thought for a moment it would be the boy, I could feel such a talent overflowing in him. But then I saw her eyes, I knew it was a match." Rastrri shook her head in disbelief. "Has it really been ten years? Seems like only yesterday the wormhole opened and closed in that single night of chaos." She sighed.

"One thing's for sure, it's going to be extremely difficult to prevent her from finding out who she really is. And when she does, things could be totally destroyed or—"

"She could be the one, to save us all." Rastrri finished for him, whether he liked it or not. Jocab simply pouted.

"Your grace, the children are here." A maid walked in, followed by Zee and Abel, now fully clothed to appear at least semi-normal, to this world at least. Zee's outfit made her look even more intimidating than, normal – a foreign type of leather tunic was worn over what appeared to be a light fabric shirt, and rough boots that extended almost to her knee. Abel's was somewhat similar, also giving him a more assertive air, rather than his constant passive one.

"Ah! Now you two can walk into the Academy and blend right in." Rastrri seemed very satisfied with herself. Jocab pouted as the Kem waved them away.

"There's much to do before either of you are ready yet to attend the academy." Zee and Abel followed in his swift footsteps, Jade trotting placidly behind, lingering over her meal, Surprise occupying herself by braiding Zee's hair as she walked.

The hallway they tread through was not long at all, shortly giving way to the lush castle grounds. To their amazement as they were walking, [excluding Jocab] children of all ages appeared. In couples and groups, almost all were carrying books, and a weapon; even strange types of cats or birds appearing. Much to Jade's delight, around every corner there came an increasing number of dragons! Of all colors, shapes, designs and sizes. Some with wings of bats or feathers and some without, some were horned or frilled, and all were trailing one of the children. Suddenly, Jocab halted and seemed to rap his staff in midair, like knocking on a door. But with every thwack that shouldn't have been, a building was exposed. First a door materialized, then glorious stonework, the very building itself seemed to come from Jocab's simple staff. The stones in the walls were uneven and varied in size, seeming to flow with each other, and windows were inset with wreaths of climbing greens that seemed to grow before her eyes. To further her amazement, the upper-half of the building still remained transparent.

"It's a technique that we use to give the academy some protection." Jocab explains as he leads them through the entrance. The inside appeared much larger than what the actual building seemed to show. Jocab slammed his staff to the floor and immediately several of the tiles on the floor rose beneath his feet, raising them to a large doorway on the second floor, avoiding the first floor ceiling, by only inches.

"Hmph, stupid floor" As Abel ducked to avoid smashing his head.

The room was stuffy and choked with cheery decorations. A huge fleshy woman had managed to squeeze herself into a fluffy pink chair behind a small desk. Now as they entered she rose – with the chair still clinging to her bottom.

"Oh! So these are the children who are to be our new students!" She embraced Zee and Abel all at once in a hug that could have been labeled fatal. She released them and introduced herself.

"My name is Miss Krell, but you may call me Amsy" She gave Abel a grandmotherly smile, loving him already. Zee was still pondering over the fact she knew about their arrival.

"How do you know about us already? We've only got here the night before last." Amsy appeared

appalled.

“Why, your arrival has been the biggest event to happen in the last ten years!”

“10?”

“Why yes! Just about fifteen Earth years. Ever since the late Star mage of the Gifted sealed up Darisan, Delëna has been absolutely – uneventful! Though even in his absence the air grows thick with the thoughts of war...”

“Who’s at war?” Abel asked.

“Well, no one knows for sure. If there is a war, it will most likely involve lots of demons, most likely Darisan’s lost Trio of Terror. Though the Demon is sealed, his army remains, not even a day goes by without a reminder.” Abel hovered behind Zee, still in fear of the mention of demons.

“Why do we want a war if this Darisan is gone – sealed up in a magical chamber somewhere?” Zee questioned. This place is as messed up as the people.

You said it. Zee swiveled and could’ve sworn it came from Jade, who was poking around under the desk.

“Since the the late leader of the Gifted disappeared – the elven kingdoms of Vosta split, creating the kingdoms of Denosa and Mekëso. Though the two kingdoms are newly formed – they have adapted a whole new philosophy than their past kin. They threaten each other often – for the Gifted leader was also the ruler of what was once the great Empire of Vosta. Now it is in ruins, occupied only by the rogue elves who are believed to still have connections with the Gifted leader they call a leader.”

“I hear a lot of Gifted this and leader that – did this guy die or something? Is it against the law to at least say his name?” Zee had her hands on hips, mildly confused.

Amsy and Jocab exchanged glances.

“Well, it’s out of respect we keep his name undercover, there are those who are searching for him still, drawn to suspects who unknowingly speak his name.” Jocab replied, who was standing fairly close to the door.

“Yeah? Well why would anyone want to find a dead guy? Or is he still alive?” Zee demanded.

“It is unclear whether he is still alive or not, but the Vostans are still buzzing with anticipation of his return. He disappeared shortly after sealing Darisan.” She leaned close, whispering. “Though there are rumors that he sent his heir to Earth to keep it from harms way.” Zee recalled what Jocab had said about the man, sending his heir away because Darisan had cursed it. As Jade began to snore lightly, puffs of smoke drifting to the ceiling, Zee continued to question the woman and Jocab.

“So, this guy, how powerful was he really?”

“Not only was this man the first to be named with such a powerful title, he was also one of the first students to attend this school when it was first built about two centuries ago – graduating a year ahead at the top of the class. He was so full of talent and power, he still holds the record for the highest grades”

“Wait – two centuries?! On Earth that’s like...” Zee struggled with the math.

Coughthreehundredcough Abel hacked nudging Zee in the ribs. Jocab gave him a sideways glance and thumped him on the back for good measure.

“That’s like three hundred years! How old is this guy?!”

“Well lets see, he was only about ten when he enrolled – those were the years where he could have been mistaken for a human were it not for his ears. Elves are like that you know – they grow like a human till they turn fifteen then they barely seem to grow at all. Even for his young age though he managed to graduate at the top of all his classes.”

“Impressive” Abel murmured. Zee rolled her eyes.

“Well then Miss Krell, I do believe it’s high time that we send these children on their way, so they might even be ready to attend by tomorrow morning. Jocab shuffled Zee and Abel out the door, signaling to

Surprise who was investigating a jar filled with sweets.

“Bye now you two! See you in school! Tootles!”

Jocab slammed the door on her smiling face, his eyes indicated the pure image disgust.

“That woman never ceases to churn my stomach.” He spun, his brown cloak swirling about his feet.

“Why do you hate her so much, its true she’s a little...um...fruity, but there really is no reason to despise her that much.” Zee said to his bristling back. (Though she had to admit she didn’t have a soft spot for her either) To her surprise, Jocab’s face was shoved into hers – his fury immense.

“The only reason I put up with that woman is because she’s the head honcho here and she’s only here because the last administrator was overly cruel and caused the death of a student!” He spat. He turned again, his anger diminished. “The man hated children, and would fly into a rage when they would break the rules. Children who even stepped out of line slightly was sure to face severe punishment. One such child was locked in the dragons battle arena, and expected to defend himself.” His voice softened. “His teacher beforehand had taken away his wand in sorcery class for bewitching the class miniature Ranachad, When the dragons began fighting, a friends gold-wing tried to defend him, but his opponents dragon had swept the boy off his feet with his tail, but he was caught in the barb, and when the dragon completed the arc of his tail, the boy was flung against the wall. He was killed almost instantly, his head shattered.” Jocab shook his head with despair.

“My question is; what did the tail catch on?” Zee looked down at her own attire.

“His cloak, the reason we no longer use them for students except in wintertime” Jocab said matter-of-factly.

“Ohh..” Zee got the shivers thinking about it.

When it seemed both Zee and Jocab had finished their talking, Abel also had something on his mind.

“Why was it she spoke perfect English, unlike most people on the island?”

There was a short pause while Jocab collected his thoughts. “The language on Kopia and most islands is an altered form of English, mainly because of old conflicts, they didn’t want to even share a language with the mainland. So many centuries ago they formed a new script and language.” He scratched his head. “You’ll soon discover though that that isn’t the only other language here in Delëna. The only reason English adapted so well is because when Delëna was first formed, many of the first inhabitants had a sort of meeting to agree upon the basis language, and English was the winner. Or so the story goes, it’s all a little fuzzy. I could never imagine dwarves and elves in each others company long enough to agree on something like that.” He clapped his hands together. “Now then, time to get to work!” Moving into a brisk walk, Jocab exited the Academy and entered a large courtyard that was just inside the castle gates. Zee was surprised she didn’t atleast hear it as they were walking to the castle. Many vendors and little shops lined a circular bricked paved area. Merchants were shouting put sales and special deals, luring unsuspecting customers with a couple quick words and slight of hand.

“Come and get yer boots! Sturdy boots for every occasion! Boots for riding and boots for work!” “Maps!

Maps for every little town in Delëna! Maps of Delëna! Even maps not of this world!” “Dragon tears!

Dragon scales! Come and get yer dragon wares! Buy a dragon tooth and get yer next one fer half off!”

Through all the commotion, many times Abel was drawn to a stall run by a family of dwarves selling small metal trinkets and toys of all varieties. While Zee was admiring a dagger by the blacksmiths shop with intricate dragon designs and inset gems. She had a hard time from keeping Jade away from a stall selling all manners of creatures – half of which she was sure Jade thought was lunch.

“Be quick ‘bout it now! First order of business is your uniforms, they’re custom made so I took the liberty of ordering them for you. They should be in your dorms by the time we return.” Jocab said,

rounding up Abel and Zee. “For starters like yourselves, it’s necessary to use a wand – so it’s easier to focus magical energy.” With the knowing steps of a veteran, he led them to one of the few actual buildings. Beside the wood doorway, it had a small silver plaque that read: Marley Jouba; Wandmaker

Professional. They walked into the dim interiors, Jade avoiding having her tail slammed in the door – and sneezed in the airborne dust that rose in her footsteps – slight hints of smoke drifting upwards. As Abel and Zee explored the room, Jocab walked to the front desk and leaned over the counter and called for the wandmaker.

Some distant tumbling of boxes sounded and muttered curses reached his ears, as a small man in his late sixties came around the corner. “Spike! Wake up you old bird brain! Yer ‘posed to be watchin’ the door featherfluff! Wake up! SPIKE!” The old man (who Zee presumed to be Marley) Shook the stand the bird was perching on and promptly shook the bird awake. The startled bird fell of his perch and once again – slumbering. Marley sighed, “I suppose I won’t be needin’ any more o’ dis bird chow in back, I think I can jus’ –“ A squawk from the bird nearly made Abel lose his skin.

“I’m up! I’m up! Leave my food alone you grumpy old cow!” The bird clambered back onto his perch and decidedly preened its dull grey feathers. Marley only humphed. He looked at Jocab and asked him in a gruff tone what his business was.

“Looking for wands for these two youngsters, first time and never used magic before.” He replied in an equally gruff manner. “Something simple, none of the fancy wands with dragons blood or elven hair inside. They need wooden sticks. You hear?” Once Jocab made his point was across, he turned away from Marley and waited for him to fetch the wands. Zee was giving the bird a look a skepticism.

“So why do they call you Spike?” She almost slapped herself for talking to a bird. Surprisingly though it answered.

“Because I can do this – “ The bird fluffed it’s whole body out, and from below the feathers numerous quills jutted out and shot across the room. Thankfully Zee managed to dodge one that ran a little close to home.

“Cool” Zee continued to investigate the room, that had many little sculptures of different creatures and people. Abel hung close to Jocab, wanting to ask questions.

“Why is it we need wands, can’t we just use our finger.” Jocab was shaking his head.

“We did that the first two years the Academy was open, too many kids were focusing energy into their fingers rather than from them and were ending up blowing it up.” Abel’s face paled at the thought. “So now we make it a requirement for first and second years to use wands, and those that become mages use their own discretion. Most sorcerers though use wands their whole lives, and are constantly upgrading.” Abel turned away from Jocab, more interested in the small wares than combusting appendages. Zee spoke up from the back corner of the room.

“Jocab, what’s this?”

Jocab turned to see what Zee had this time.

In her hands was a small crystalline orb with a deep red liquid suspended in the center. Zee turned the ball, admiring how warm its surface was and gave it an experimental toss into the air. Jocab nearly lost his head.

“Don’t! Do! That!” He snatched the orb from her hands, receiving a bloody stare from her direction.

“This is the blood from a lava wurm, drop it; and the whole place’ll be up in flames.” He gently placed the orb down among other strange memorabilia.

More loud cursing and the sound of boxes tumbling. Marley came around from the back of the store with an armload of long boxes with writing on each end. Words like dragons blood, merfolk hair, elven crystal. He looked first at Abel after placing the boxes on the already cluttered front desk.

“Have ye used magic before?”

Abel shook his head. Marley swiped most of the boxes to the floor.

“Have ye a dragon?”

Abel shook his head again. Marley threw even more boxes to the ground.

“What race are ye?”

“Uhh..human?”

Marley picked out several boxes and used his arm to move the rest to the floor. He rubbed his hands together, deciding which to try first. He picked up a box with ‘pine’ written on the side. He opened it and presented a thin wood - stick - to Abel. He stared at it a moment until Marley realized that Abel hadn’t a clue.

“Go on now child, focus some of yer energy into that wand, focus!” He said, dramatizing with frantic waves of his arms. Abel squeezed his eyes shut and concentrated hard on...well he really wasn’t quite sure what. But before he knew it, the wand had snapped in half. (of it’s own accord – he didn’t do it, really) Marley seemed used to this and passed him another wand that was really a stick. This time from a box that had another English word on it; birch. Abel took it this time, holding it more lightly, and concentrated hard again. He had barely begun when the wand itself exploded, splinters flying. Abel, whirled back in surprise. But was again handed a stick – fortunately this one seemed more wand-like - from a box labeled Traesëra. Jocab raised his brow in surprise, acknowledging the same conclusion that Marley seemed to have. Abel grasped the wand, which was slightly carved at the base into twining branches, and concentrating he managed to produce a bright glow from the end of the wand. With wide eyes he looked at Zee, who wasn’t easily impressed. Marley smirked.

“Interestin’, most only elves can use wands of the Traesëra tree.” He nodded in approval. “Good luck, it’s a wand that most can’t use ‘til their third year.” He motioned to Zee. He asked her similar questions, and when she replied yes to having a dragon, he scuttled to the back and brought out another twenty or so boxes. With the same process Abel had, Zee worked the wands. But almost every single one of Marley wands either snapped, exploded, lit up in flame and even screamed when she touched them. She finally got to a rather bland looking wand that came from a box whose label was too scratched up to read. There was a place for her hand to grasp, and small twisting spirals around the stem of the wand, resembling a unicorn horn. Although it took several seconds, when the wand did not in some way reject her, Marley deemed it acceptable. Unfortunately his feeble mind couldn’t remember what it was made of or even what was in it. After charging the fees for the wands onto the school tab, they left the shop into the still blinding light of noon. Both children admiring their new wands.

“All right, now that we finally have everyone’s wands” Zee frowned at Jocab’s remark, “We can proceed to several of the vendor’s booths selling weapons and such.” At the word of weapon, Abel became frightened of what Zee would be like - angry - with a weapon.

At the booth, Zee was immediately drawn to the long katanas and slender curved blades; while Abel was drawn to the much smaller and sturdier daggers. Jocab stood behind them calculating expenses, noticed Zee admiring an elven blade on display. Jade was more interested in the ground, pouncing on the small rodents and insects.

“That blade is too expensive and extravagant for school, find something a little more practical.” He attempted to steer Zee away – but the vendor saw a potential buyer for a particularly expensive sword. “Dis bwade was made by none oder dan de bwack smiff Ywatta, - de same ewve who forged de magicaw swords in de ewven wars!” The poor man had a very bad lisp and was unable to pronounce his L’s or Th’s.

“You mean black smith Ylatta?” Jocab inquired, still trying to pry Zee away.

“Yes! Bwack smiff Ywatta!” He was excited now, chattering like a schoolgirl, “I convinced her to give me de sword as wong as I promised to seww it to a proper weiwder.” He winked at Zee. “You seem perfect, widdwe wady” Zee scrunched her nose in disgust. Jocab was still not impressed.

“I’m sorry sir – maybe another time. But we need something simpler for these two – for school.” The man scratched his crumb dusted beard in thought.

“Weww, I dink we have a sword wike dat around here somewhere...” He reached underneath his stand, and pulled out a large skinny case. When he clicked open the locks, inside were many swords – about

ten – that each looked a little different, but seemed much less flamboyant than those he had set out. Jocab looked over them quickly. He picked up one sword, that had a blade about the length of Zee's arm, and a plain black hand hold without any flourishing designs –it had a little bit more thickness too it, unlike most of the others Zee had looked over. He passed it to Zee and watched her as she experimented, twisting it in her hand, turning it, lifting it and such – avoiding giving both Jocab and the man a shave. She nodded. Jade approached and decided to sniff the sword. Seems good quality... Again Zee turned to Jade when she heard the voice in her head.

“This one seems nice” She really didn't have a clue to whether it was good or not other than Jade's opinion, considering she had never held a sword in her life. Jocab bartered the man for a cheaper price then wandered over to Abel as Zee was attempting to figure out how to talk back to Jade.

“See one you like?” Jocab trusted Abel more – he already knew the kid didn't really have any guts and probably wouldn't think about wanting anything too fancy – he was too modest for that.

Cautiously though, Abel pointed to a straight-edged dagger that was reasonably long without adornments – like he thought – he was too modest. He continually saw his eyes revert back to a dagger placed near the front that was luxuriously placed in a velvet lined case – it had silver infusions in the hand grasp with lovely floral designs. The blade had a gentle curve and was quite pleasing to the eye. However – like he had done to Zee, Jocab pulled out the plain dagger with the man's consent and had Abel examine it himself. The elven dagger caught the sunlight in its silver glory as the trio – plus dragon - proceeded to their next mission.

Many hours later, laden down with all sorts of things, Jocab finally pointed out their rooms, and passed them a small piece of parchment.

“Don't you dare lose this, it's very important and without it - you will surely be doomed to failure” He looked particularly at Zee. “Zee, you're down in the girls' wing, down that hallway there, and Abel, you're with the boys, in the opposite hallway. You can't miss 'em.” Jocab turned, remembered something, and turned back. “Whatever you do – don't try to act tough or pretend to know everything. You aren't, and you don't” With his last words, Zee turned and walked down her hallway with Jade, and opened the door to the girls wing. Abel stood a moment contemplating Jocab's last words before he too did the same.

6 - Academy

As soon as Zee was through the doors, she immediately dropped her bags and gawked. The room was a lounge area, with several doors leading off into the actual bedrooms. It had several bookcases with books casually sorting themselves. There were couches to lounge on and a clock in the corner. Jade wandered off to inspect her surroundings. Several girls were sitting scattered in the room and came slowly up to Zee.

“Are you new here?” One girl asked. She seemed to be several years younger than Zee, with silvery hair that reached nearly to the floor. Her pale complexion made her seem sickly, and her small mouth and wide eyes sort of creeped Zee out. Another girl stepped beside her.

“Of course she’s new Via, you’ve never seen her before have you?” She snapped, “You’re supposed to be a psychic” She seemed a little harsh, even by Zee’s terms. This girl seemed about Zee’s age, with long arching brows, and a piercing gaze coming from steel colored eyes. Her medium length dull colored hair of no particular color seemed to be getting redder by the second. A third girl stepped up beside her, placing her hand on her shoulders.

“Chill Autim – keep it cool girl.” This girl seemed older than Zee, maybe only by a year or two, with dark skin and thick braided black hair. Her face was free of any emotional lines, her face smooth and unflawed, her wide nose gave her an air of calm. But this girl was different also - she appeared to have cat ears on the top of her head. Along with feline eyes, a slender brown and black striped tail, and sharp claws that were digging into Autim’s shirt.

“Fine, fine, just lemme go.” She shrugged off the girls hand. Autim looked Zee up and down, who was staring in turn. “Whadda you lookin’ at?” Her hair began turning red again.

“Nothing – do you know where my room is?” She wanted to know a little bit more about the girls, but her back was starting to tire. The older girl pointed to a room on the end.

“Autim has an open bed in her room, most can’t put up with her temper, so if she gives ya any hassle now, you can jus’ come on down to my room.” She pointed to a door several down. She smiled at Zee.

“But firs’ your name girl, you know Olivia, we call her Via, and Autim; I’m Alma, so wha’s yours?”

“Zee; and I probably can put up with Autim if she’s really that bad, I’ve most likely seen worse.”

“Really now? You come from one o’ those places where they gots a whole lotta people smashed into one room?” Alma, asked. Zee already liked her.

“Sort of, it’s called an orphanage, there were thirteen of us in one room – and there were a lot of fights and bickering, until the Mothers got there and broke it up – literally”

“Mothers? Who are they? Nannies?” This time it was Via speaking up.

“They’re like the leaders, if you did something bad they would punish you for it, and they gave you lots of chores you had to do, and only gave you porridge to eat.” Zee frowned. “I hated it there”

“No wonder, porridge is the most vile thing that I can’t believe someone thought it was palatable” Autim made a face of total disgust “I can’t stomach that stuff for the life of me.”

“I agree” Zee hoisted her things and beckoned for Jade to follow. Autim stepped in her way.

“Hold up girly, there’ll be no dragon in my room no matter how house trained it is.” Jade’s scales stood on end, ruffling her appearance like a cat. “You come with me and we’ll put her in the stables with everyone else’s dragons.”

The hallways were dark, the stone tiles moving silently up and down, moving through holes in the ceiling to multiple levels in the building. The corridors loomed empty and forboding, giving it a haunted feel, like

something might jump at them any moment –

“What’re you girls doing?” A voice sounded from down the hallway. From the shadows, a boy materialized, curly black locks hung about a feminine face, his tall frame was eye catching and appealing. Zee felt her heart sway. So handsome...

Jade sniffed. He doesn’t smell right, if you ask me. Like he’s up to no good. Zee rolled her eyes, used to the mind-to-mind thing by now.

You’re too overprotective – besides, what do you know about guys?

Look who’s talking – you’ve only been ‘friends’ with one your whole life. Zee saw Jade’s point

Whatever...

The boy smiled at her and she still felt mushy inside.

“I could ask you the same thing, Daemon. Stalking in the shadows again on innocent girls? Naughty naughty” Autim waved a scolding finger at him. Daemon only closed his eyes and shrugged.

“What can I say – I have a weakness...” He looked at Zee. “...for females...”

“Such a pervert, go on now and let us through, we have to go and put this little dragon to bed.” Autim sidestepped around him. “Come on Zee.” Zee hastily followed because she could see her hair begin to redden again, and didn’t want to know why. Jade scuttled after them.

“He can be a jerk, I would avoid him at all costs.” Autim pushed the door to the stables open, disturbing several animals inside.

“He doesn’t seem all that bad, sure he is creepy but, a jerk? I don’t know...” Zee’s mind wandered.

“Don’t let his charming side fool you, he’s one of those guys who’ll use you until his satisfactions are over and done with, then leave you on the sidelines. I’ve seen him do it to girls before. He breaks their hearts” She shook her head.

“Did he do it to you, too?” Zee asked softly.

“Hell no! I knew exactly what he was from the beginning, and I make his life miserable!” For a moment her hair turned a deep shade of red, but as soon as she realized it, she calmed again. “Come on, this way.”

They made their way down the hall of stalls, mostly occupied of small dragons and small grey horse like creatures.

“Where are all the big dragons?” Zee was peering into all of the stalls, surprised at all the different variations of dragons.

“They’re in a massive cave that was blown into the ground years ago, all the big dragons go there because it’s nice and warm, and they can all sleep together. The little guys stay in here until they’re fully grown – like yours” She glanced at Jade, “Like yours. What breed is she anyway? Not like any of the dragons you see here.” She bent down into Jades reptilian face, who licked Autims’ nose with a forked tongue. I like her “She’s puny” Autim sneered into Jade’s face. I take that back Zee laughed out loud. Autim gave her a quizzical look.

They walked a little more ways until they came to an empty stall, which had dirt on the ground and a little enchanted puddle in the corner that never ran out.

“This can be her stall. Every kid is required to empty it of its...um...waste every day. The dragons are usually let out at noon to go to their own lessons on communication and battling.” She looked at Jade once more, who was inspecting a small pile of fresh meat that had appeared. “Judging by her current size, she should be ready to fly in a week or so. She seems like she’s a decent size already. “ Zee looked surprised. “You’d be astounded by how fast dragons can grow. I wouldn’t doubt for a second that she’ll be almost twice her size in a day or so.”

They returned to their rooms without another encounter with Daemon, to Zee’s disappointment. Autim

went directly to sleep, while Zee stayed up for a while, fingering her new uniform. I sure hope this place is better than that place. And very distantly, Zee could have sworn she heard Jade's little voice, comforting her and saying goodnight.

The next morning, bright and early, a voice pounded on the door, summoning the girls.

"Time to get up! Breakfast time! Get ready for school!" Sleepily Zee rubbed her eyes, and sat up, wondering what the day would be like. She rose and gently shook Autim, who continued to snore. She picked up her uniform, and attempted to figure out what goes where. It's been so long, the last I had new clothes was when... She remembered the beating both herself and Abel received for a single shirt. While putting on a long sleeve shirt, her arms became tangled at the end.

"Here, it goes like this, around your finger" Autim assisted Zee with her shirt by slipping her middle finger through a ring situated at the end of the sleeve. "To keep it from sliding up and down your arm"

"Hey, weren't you just –"

"You making too much noise just trying to get dressed, no one could sleep through that." Zee was amazed as the shirt slowly shrank to fit Zee's size. The same went for her pants and boots. "All pieces of clothing are enchanted so they fit you properly, the same will go for your battle equipment which you'll get today" The last piece was a brown cloak with a huge hood, with sleeves that only came to her elbow, and ended at just below knee length.

"Pretty strange clothes if you ask me." She inspected her movement ability. "How can you tell it's a school uniform?"

"Because everyone else is wearing it."

"That makes some what of sense." They both finished dressing, and brushing out their hair.

As they left their room, both noticed other sleepy eyed girls just emerging from the separate chambers. They met up with Via and Alma in the lounge.

"Mornin' slow-pokes, breakfast'll be cold now 'cause of you" Alma said. Autim merely rolled her eyes, then glanced at Zee.

"You still have that paper?" Zee tilted her head in a confused manner. "Y' know, the small one without any writing on it?"

"Oh yeah!" Zee rummaged through pouch stitched inside her cloak. She pulled out the small piece of parchment Jocab had given her, and passed it to Autim.

"Keep that with you, it'll tell you where you need to be and when. You get one every year, so after school' s'out for the holiday breaks, don't be afraid to trash it."

"Autim'll trash hers whether it's holiday or not." Alma joked, slightly smiling as Autim's hair flared red again. "Don't worry about Autim, you won't have to see what she really looks like until it's time for combat class."

"That's Alma's favorite class because she doesn't have to sit." Autim sneered. Alma only rolled her eyes.

"We'd better hurry, Krell won't be pleased at our punctuality" Zee jumped, having forgotten all about Via.

"I suppose we'd better hurry then, Via can't even get through half a day without food"

The group of girls headed down the hallway, occasionally being jolted off the ground on one of the many floating stone tiles. Zee noticed that some only carried one student, a few carried what appeared to be huge groups of ten or more. She was still astounded by all the variations in human form as a boy passed her that had a normal upper half, but the lower half was composed of the same body as the small horse like creatures she had seen in the barn. Jade!

"When do I get my dragon back?" Zee asked, to no one in particular. Surprisingly it was Via who turned to her call.

“All the dragons are brought in during breakfast, so you’ll meet up then. But you’ll be separated again for morning lessons in the classroom. After that, you get all of after luncheon together.” She turned away again, finishing her reponse. Strange...what’s with the white hair anyways?

The group entered into a vast hall, with many huge – hovering – table tops, clustered all around with the different cliques of the students body. Zee surveyed the area, analyzing all the different behaviors that each clique was unique to. She could see a group that had all human girls, powdering on make-up and making themselves pretty. There was a group of thick armed guys, who were picking on several pretty wimpy looking guys – knocking their heads together and generally causing them pain and misery. It appeared that the different races hung out with their own kind: elves with elves, dwarves with dwarves, those weird people with markings all over their body...Zee recognized those markings, she remembered that some of the people in Kuorega’s tribe had them – probably marking magic users.

After checking out everyone, Zee noticed next that everyone appeared to have food and all the tables were set, but she didn’t see anywhere to get the food. Alma, Autim and Via all led Zee to a table that was next to a clique of mixmatched humanoids. They sat down, closed their eyes for a moment and Zee watched as food began to materialize onto their plates. Alma looked up at Zee when her plate was full. “The plates are enchanted, so when you concentrate steadily on a certain type of food, that’s what you get. It’s idiot proof so no matter how bad you are at magic they’ll still work” Surprised, Zee thought of food - real food for once - but couldn’t focus on only a couple different kinds. She took a deep breath, and concentrated on a stack of hotcakes, drenched in sweet sticky syrup. As Zee began forking down her meal, she heard a disturbance at one of the tables.

“Ha ha! Little sissy’s scared of demons!” Zee turned around in her seat, and rage boiled up inside her. Several of the tougher looking guys were carrying around a small cage, it’s occupant concealed from view. But the victim was Abel, who was being chased around by whom Zee assumed to be the leader, the cage being shoved in his face. Without a word, Zee rose and stormed over to the bullies.

“Hey big guy, leave him alone!” seeing his savior, Abel scampered over to Zee. The bully still was holding the cage, which Zee could now see that it held what she guessed to be a sort of demon. It had a slightly canine black body, most of it’s flesh appeared to be either heavily soiled or rotting completely. Her nose scrunched up in disgust.

“Who wouldn’t be scared of that thing, it’s hideous!” Zee waved her hand in front of her face, “Smells bad, too” The bully only sneered again, several of his buddies jeering him on about a girl.

“So the little sissy’s using a girl to save him! How pathetic!”

Zee only laughed, out loud to their faces.

“The only thing that’s pathetic around here is you guy’s picking on him when his physique is obviously smaller than your hulking weight! Can’t even stand up to someone your own size?” The boy seemed surprised, his jaw dropped momentarily. By now there was a large ring of spectators, thankfully no staff in sight – for now. His buddies – who called him Ked – urged him on, seeing how he was only a hair taller than Zee.

“Hey! I don’t hit girls, especially not a scrawny one like her.” Ked said, turning back to his gang. When he looked back at Zee, the last thing he remembered was her angry fist swinging up, making a painfully direct hit to his lower jaw. They gasped and swarmed around him as he lay sputtering on the ground. Zee dragged Abel back to the table, where Autim was laughing, clapping Zee on the back.

“I can’t tell you how long I’ve been wanting to do that!” She said, wiping a tear from her eye. Her happiness disappeared as a figure emerged from the shadows.

“Well done Zee, now pray that none of the adults on grounds saw your little performance, and I think very quickly you’ll become quite popular.” Zee blushed lightly when she saw the voice was Daemon, who had been watching secretly from the sidelines.

“It was nothing, just a warning to all those jerks out there.” She tucked a stray lock of hair behind her

ear. Abel had wide eyes, he had never seen Zee act so...meek before! He glanced up at Daemon, what's so special about him? He added, besides his charm, his handsome looks and great body...He crossed his arms.

"Zee, have you had a tour of the building yet? I don't think Jade would mind if we skipped seeing her this morning, and we still have some time before classes begin." Daemon smiled at her.

"That sounds--!" Before she could finish Daemon had taken her hand and ran off with her, leaving Abel, Autim, Alma and Via in her wake. Autim's hair started simmering, smoke rising from her head. Zee never told him Jade's name... Moments later the doors to the stables were thrown open, the residents streaming out, forming beelines for their masters. Jade trod nervously in place, head swinging back and forth, unable to pinpoint Zee's location. Abel walked up instead, stroking the spines on her back and neck.

"Sorry girl, Zee just ran off with pretty boy Daemon, you'll see her later." Jade hung her head. Thanks a lot Zee...

As Zee and Daemon ran into the building, Zee felt a pang of guilt as she sensed some of Jade's emotion waves.

"You'll love it here! There's plenty of adventure and surprises, so if decided to skip classes-" he winked, "you wouldn't be bored." Zee blushed. They hopped onto a rising tile, Zee swaying as she adjusted to the altitude, Daemon supporting her much to her embarrassment. He looked down at her with his deep, dark eyes. As their ride shuddered to a halt, Daemon held out his hand as Zee stepped lightly onto the solid ground. Still holding her hand, Daemon led her down various hallways, pointing out the charm lab, the broom storage room, and the various places where students go to hide when they skip. Most were enchanted areas where they can simply walk into the wall and be hidden. (He warned that it wasn't a good place to hide if you were claustrophobic)

Daemon led Zee through a door, into the center courtyard, hidden inside the outer walls of the Academy. The area itself was huge, a massive area in the center had a formation of rocks surrounding what Zee assumed to be the battle court.

"This is where combat class is held. For the first day here, you're not allowed into the actual battle zone, the teacher – Mr. Vick – has to show you a couple of moves first." He stops to look at Zee, "At the end of every week though, Mr. Vick puts on a tournament. He chooses the best of his students, usually the older kids, to compete. The winner automatically gets an extra ticket deposited into the box for the amcesant drawing."

"The amawhat?" Zee turns to him in confusion. This place has too many weird names!

"The amcesant is a highly revered ceremony that was developed during the first demonic wars. The Academy recently pulled out their old spell books again because of the war." He said. "The ceremony gifts the chosen one with their full potential, and complete control over their magical ability. Because it uses techniques to raise one's ability, it also brings out the more dominant blood. So if someone appeared human, but actually had an elven parent, the person would become, an elf"

7 - Classes

“How do you know all this? You’re not an elf are you?” She reached up and pushed back his hair, checking to make sure he had normal ears. “Okay, you’re clear”

Daemon laughed. “Actually, just last year one kid went inside looking human, but when he came out he had turned into an elf. You’d be surprised at how often that happens you know. Only about twenty years ago it was considered disgraceful to marry outside your race. The Academy took a whole day explaining the origin of the amcesant and the demonic wars”

“Well that would clear things up a bit. So, where to next? The dungeon perhaps?” Zee giggled.

“Only if you want to, some kids go down there and never come back” Daemon said.

“You’re kidding” Zee gave him her skeptical look.

“I cross my heart and hope to die” He raised his right hand and traced an X over his heart.

Dong, dong, dong.

“Oops, you’re saved it seems. If I were you I’d hurry to your classes, some teachers aren’t quite as forgiving as some” With that Daemon ran off, waving as he went. Zee rummaged through her pockets, and looking at the slip of parchment. In the blink of an eye, neat ink lettering appeared on the slip that read: World History. Zee looked around.

“Where is it?” Expecting a reply from the paper. Instead, a small arrow appeared pointing to the left. Zee followed the arrows direction for about two minutes, taking certain tiles up several levels, and finally arriving at a wood door with a small sign that read: Mrs. Pulls. She followed several other students into the class, thanking Amsy that she was in the same class as Abel. As everyone else found their friends and sat down, Zee and Abel found places in the front near the corner. A tall woman who appeared to be in her late sixties stood at strict attention at the front of the class, behind an equally tidy desk with a single cup of what Zee imagined to be feather pens, and a stack of paper. Her face was gaunt, eyes sunk to the back of her head giving her a ghost like appearance, and lips sagging at the corners, making her seem even more unpleasant. Abel swallowed. Both him and Zee were imaging that this woman looked just like a Mother, minus the uniform.

“Good morning class. I take it that none of you tried to sneak your stink bombs into class? If you did, I’m sure all of you are aware of my new pet, Narook, will find you with his acute sense of smell and make sure that you won’t try it again” With that said, a small creature leaped onto Mrs. Pulls desk, and death glared the class down. It had sleek, black hindquarters, and a tail with grey rudder-like feathers. Although its upper half seemed totally different, though the parts blended together smoothly. It had the head of a hawk, small grey ear feather tufts on either side of the head. When the creature screeched and fanned out it’s magnificent grey and white wings, both Zee and Abel knew that Narook was a griffin.

“Hey Mrs. Pulls, does the Academy authorize you to have a griffin?”

“Mrs. Pulls, why is your griffin so black?”

“Mrs. Pulls, your griffin is puny! Can it even fly?”

“Mrs. Pulls! Why – ”

“SILENCE!!” Mrs. Pulls roared. She examined her class with a look of disgust. “Narook is only a hatchling, being trained under the watchful eye of Ms. Linmel. As you can see by his unusual appearance, Narook is a rare form of griffin, taking on a more sultry appearance than the usual deep golds and browns-”

You call that kind of black sutle?! (Poor Zee couldn’t even hear right)

“He was an orphan found in the Hemgar Canyons, and the Zetti tribe handed the orphan to us, in hopes

that it would find a suitable companion here. Alas, the poor thing continually bit at all the children who tried to befriend him, so we cancelled the sessions we had been arranging for him to meet different students. Now, he is here in my class, me being the only one who can even tolerate him during class.” She glanced down at the creature who was preening himself on the table, the students staring fascinated by him. “Class, please take out your textbooks and turn to page five! We shall be reviewing our session from yesterday on the first demonic wars.”

Zee felt around inside her desk, and removed a hefty book with the title, History of Delëna. She casually flipped through the pages, ignoring Mrs. Pulls demands. (Though she saw from the corner of her eye that Abel was totally engrossed in reading) Zee stared into space as Mrs. Pulls began her lecture, resembling the ones the Mothers gave in the orphanage.

“The first tensions of war were brought about with the birth of the first true demon Darisan, many did not believe him as a threat at first, not really realizing the extent of his power, thinking he was simply a child gifted in mysterious magics...” Zee traced the wood on her desk, her eyes wandering from shelf to shelf, scanning the shelves.

“...henchmen were created ...Tzek, Salssi and Valar...Darisan’s most powerful creations...” Zee watched idly as Narook snoozed, in complete content on Mrs. Pulls empty desk.

“...Tzek...power and sheer pride...shape-shifter...slaughtered...” Zee fiddled with the feather pen sitting on her desk, discovering how to fill it with ink and scribbling over the portraits on peoples faces in her text.

“...Salssi...taking the guises of beautiful women...wedge her way...central powers of Delëna...destroyed...” Zee giggled to herself as she added mustache and buck teeth to a picture of a man labeled “Yartay Pooanah” Actually she giggled more over his name than his new looks.

“...Valar...dragon form...said to be the most powerful...none survived attacks...”

Zee slightly perked up more when she heard the word dragon, thinking of Jade herself. Now that they had known each other for a while, Zee had started getting a strange feeling in the back of her head – sort of like someone whispering really quietly in your ear. She sometimes was able to pick out...emotions...from the swirling voice. Occasionally she would feel little emotions crawl under her skin. A little happiness, a little sorrow, a little...

Grrrrormm

A little hunger apparently. Zee sighed. Ever since she started eating actual food her body had started to realize that it would be able to beg a little with it available. She lay her chin on the desk. At least I’ve dealt with this before. She felt Abel’s skinny elbow poke her side.

“Psst! Zee, she’s giving out homework!” Zee blinked a couple of times, then copied down what Mrs. Pulls had on her blackboard. The chalk sketched away, writing down Mrs. Pulls every word onto the board.

“Everyone, have the assignment completed by tomorrow, class is dismissed!” Before she had even finished, the bell rang from high up somewhere on the buildings transparent towers, reminding teachers the students had to take leave.

Abel stayed close to Zee, happily chattering about everything he learned. Going on and on about how intimidating Darisan would be, face-to-face. Zee rolled her eyes.

“Abel, you gotta fix that chattering problem. If I had been interested, I wouldn’t have been doodling” Abel raised an eyebrow, mouth shutting like a trap.

“Think much about carrying a snack with you?” Abel had known Zee long enough to know that her distractedness and mood meant she was probably hungry. “Next time, save a little of your breakfast, or think up something to munch on before you go. Here,” he tossed her a little napkin wrapped pouch, containing a still warm chunk of seedy bread. “I was going to save it for later, but you need it much more than me”. He smiled at her, the same smile he gave he so long ago inside the bathroom of the

orphanage, following the beating of a false accusation. She could only smile weakly in return and say thanks.

Zee gave a quick glance at her card, the ink neatly spelling out that her next class was Basic Magic, and at the bottom – which she hadn't noticed before – counted down to how long she had until class began. Hurriedly she munched on her bread, using the map scrawled on the back of her paper by Autim. Abel hurried to keep up, convinced that they missed a turn or that Zee was going the wrong way. Thankful that the bread calmed her down and she wasn't snapping at him for whining.

When they reached the class at last, Zee knew she would actually try in this class. Something in the room said this would be fun, and the shelves packed high with interesting books, (two words Zee never puts together) gave her a weird feeling, but a pleasant one.

The plaque on the desk read: Professor Jocab. Zee was surprised, she instantly made the resolution to harass Jocab to no end. (Of course she remembered him saying he hated dealing with hooligans, which was exactly why she wanted to pester him)

As the students streamed in – most purposely walking in late to annoy Jocab (who was sitting behind his desk muttering to himself why he ever volunteered to take over for a past teacher) pretending to be late and that someone had stopped to talk with them. Zee merely sat quietly in the front row, devising a plan of ultimate impishness, a slightly creepy smirk resting on her lips. (Her first goal: weird-out Jocab)

"Basic Magic has now begun, take out your textbooks and flip to page four." As Jocab doled out his orders, he watched as Zee excitedly pulled out her book and eagerly turned the pages, nearly ripping them from their binding.

"Without tearing the book please, Miss Zenith" Zee flinched, disliked at being called by her real name (not too fond of the fact that it wasn't quite a 'normal' name – on Earth anyways) Nonetheless, she look up at Jocab and batting her eyelashes replied,

"Of course not professor!" Her words like sweet honey. Jocab took a slow step back, avoiding crossing her center of sight.

"Today we will...um...be learning about - Zee? What are you doing?" Jocab was wide-eyed, carefully contemplating Zee's mental health as she batted her eyelashes and twirled locks of her raven colored hair in her fingers. She made faces that were the pure image of a flirtacious girl. Her first goal was complete. Her next goal: Annoy Jocab.

"Today we will begin learning the basic techniques and forms for simple spells that will have common everyday uses. The basic form for holding a wand in its most effective place, so as to have the maximum amount of power, is outlined on page five." As Zee looked at a list of spells in the column of the first chapter-Sparks, Levitation, Enchant, Stun- she raised her hand.

Jocab hesitated before calling on her.

"When will we learn how to make peoples faces turn green?" Zee was amazed at herself for keeping a straight face.

"U-um, huh? Why in the world would you want to turn someone's face green?"

"Because that's how I feel in this class" she wrapped her hands around her neck and pretended to barf. Laughter aroused from the class. Jocab glared at her.

"The basic form should have your dominant foot slightly out to balance you, and your wand arm out in front and slightly bent. If the spell is slightly more powerful, you may need to bend your knees slightly for better support." Jocab demonstrated what it was supposed to look like.

Zee's hand rose from the crowd. Jocab grimaced.

"Do you always have to stand like that?"

"No, there are several other wa-"

"Then can I sit down?"

"Only if – "

“Do you have to point your wand at what you’re casting a spell on?”

“Yes, but-”

“What if I was casting a spell to protect myself” Then would I poin-”

“Enough!!” Jocab’s irritated voice barely rose above the classes, as everyone had decided they too wished to ask their questions out-loud, following Zee’s lead. Sitting back in his seat, watching the class shout above each other to be heard, he only smiled quietly to himself, his eyes death glared at Zee, who smiled back and waggled her fingers at him.

“Fine,” he said, “be that way, everyone-DETENTION!” Immediately the class silenced for a moment, Jocab’s face of complete and utter contentment, as the class sat, stunned.

Only for half a moment.

Jocab sunk into his seat in despair as moans and complaints billowed from the class like heat from a fire. Jocab massaged his temples, hoping to escape a terrible headache he knew would come.

“Homework is to read pages four through twenty two and to answer all ten of the chapter questions! Due tomorrow!” His voice rose as the class grew even louder. “all those who fail to present themselves at detention this afternoon shall receive punishment!”

After several more minutes of whining and annoying children noises, Jocab finally sighed as he relaxed, delighting in the soft sounds of flipping pages.

Zee smiled at him when he looked up.

That girl is exactly like him...

Kem Rastri laughed, a hearty laughter like one who enjoys something with all of their heart.

She had just received the news of Zee’s little consequences of toying with Jocab. She found it simply delightful that the girl had such a mischievous streak, so much like the one he had.

She sighed as Azarie poured her a dainty cup of a strong smelling, black liquid.

“I swear Azarie, if she gets in the same trouble for all the things he did-”

“I’ll bring down the castle!” He shook his fists in the air, smiling broadly. He finished her sentence as he had so many times when she had been saying it many years ago.

“Azarie, do you believe she is the child? When she walked in, I could tell that there was a power emanating from her, but now I am not so sure. It may have been coming from that boy, or her dragon.”

She took a deep sip from her cup draining it, and held it out as Azarie refilled it.

“My guess is as good as yours, Kem Rastri. There was definitely power coming from both children, but it could be anyone’s guess to as who it belonged to.”

“I suppose only time will tell”

“It always does, my Kem.”

“Did you see her face? I thought she was going to bite your head off when you reached in to pet the griffins!”

Daemon laughed, light and happy, it made Zee sway. Both were walking side by side, leaving the confines of Mrs. Linmels Creature Class. Abel hovered slightly behind, the corners of his mouth turned slightly down. Autim, Alma and Via walked in formation around him, feeling the same way. (Though it seemed Autim was stalking, her hair a bright red and smoke rising with anger at Zee. Alma and Via could care less, both munching on a shared fruit pastry.)

The whole rather broken-apart group was heading to Combat class, Daemon’s arm slowly snaking it’s way into Zee’s.

8 - Conflict

“Hey look!” Zee pointed excitedly to the combat arena – unaware to Daemon’s close contact – where apparently two students were already having a duel. From the distance they were at – not to mention the growing crowd size – no one in the group could distinguish who the combatants were. They ran closer to get a better look, and as they neared, they heard chanting.

“Autim! Autim!”

“Pake! Pake!” All around Zee she heard whispering as well in the mob, feeding off the information as they shoved their way closer to the front.

“...heard he took it too far...”

”...jumped him from behind...”

”...called her a disgrace...”

Zee nearly had a heart attack.

Autim’s hair is on fire was all she could think of. Autim and Pake were circling each other in the arena. Autim’s eyes had turned to pools of liquid tar, where her hair should have been was a fiery mass. Her skin was black and cracked like hardened lava to act as an impenetrable armor.

Her opponent was not much better.

Pake was continually shifting forms, one moment he was a sort of big cat, the next a bird with terrifying talons. He happened the form of a giant wolf, barix was what Mrs. Linmel had called them, the elves rode them around in the forests or something.

Moans and cheering rose from the student body, Autim had countered one of Pakes pounces using a bone crunching punch to throw him into the air, and giving him a kick that could send a normal person back through the timeslip to Earth. Pake landed with a heavy whump. Faster than Zee could see, Autim closed the distance in a single bound, landing softly where Pake lay. She peered down at the still form of the barix, and seemingly satisfied with her work, she doused her flames with a careless flick of her finger, and turned on her heels. Much of the crowd went wild. Not so much for the fact that Autim had won, but because of the sheer joy of the fight. Suddenly, the crowd roared, just as Autim’s face was dug deeply into the earth. Pake had regained consciousness or had simply been faking it, but had immediately come for Autim. Apparently he wasn’t too bright though, because Autim grunted once and she burst into flame. The flames surrounding her body licked at Pake’s fur, the rank smell of burning hair overwhelmed the front of the crowd, who desperately tried to push backwards. As Pake shook the shock from himself, Autim sneered as she warmed up her arms, flexing into a fighting stance, beckoning to her opponent.