

The Chronicles of Yord

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A sequel to Shamanic Princess, and an attempt to explain the mysteries that go unexplained in the anime. Three little girls, curious about the fate of the Neutralizer Sarah Mikadzuki, make a pact to find out--and get in way over their heads.

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1 - Field of Flowers

They were four years old, and they were bored. It was two months until festival time and that was, of course, forever. They were still too young to start magic lessons, and they had to be five to begin fighting lessons. They couldn't summon Partners yet, or battle monsters, or go to other worlds. Life was an unconditional snore.

"Let's have a pillow fight," suggested Lirael. She had very long, black, shining hair, almost to her knees, and equally black eyes.

"And bash the pillows to splintereens!" Alanis added enthusiastically. She was the youngest by a month and had straight, shoulder-length hair so blonde it was almost white. Her most striking features were her glowing amber eyes.

"No, last time we did that, we got into huge trouble," Rana cautioned. Her hair and eyes were a very dark blue, nearly black, like dark sapphires. She was the calmest of all three.

"Mother exaggerated things," Lirael said dismissively. "It only took three days and four sets of spells to clean everything up."

The others burst into laughter, remembering the event. Mother had gone nearly purple with rage when she had seen the mess that her daughter Lirael and her two friends had made.

"Let's go play Pearls with Miss Lena," suggested Rana when their mirth subsided.

"But we did that the day before yesterday," Lirael complained.

"Well, what else is there to do?"

The grim truth had to be admitted—there was nothing else to do. They straightened their dresses, checked their sashes, and piled down the stairs to set off towards Miss Lena's house.

"Don't you dare get into trouble!" Mother yelled from the kitchen, hearing the door open.

"We're going to visit Miss Lena," Lirael yelled back.

"Mind your manners around her, or I'll hang you by your toenails in the well," Mother threatened.

This was an oft-repeated threat, and the girls ignored it. They were never bad to Miss Lena anyway—she might forbid them to come back, and playing Pearls against her was their only distraction around festival time.

The day was hot and windy, the dancing breeze providing the only relief from the sun as it beat down overhead. The garden-lined streets of the town were nearly deserted, most people having prudently decided to stay indoors to escape the heat. The girls passed only old Mr. Magiselt, working in his garden—he tipped his wide-brimmed hat in return to their shouted greeting as he worked on weeding out pristeras from among his jamastren blossoms.

They left the heat of the road and ambled through the shady coolness of the woods, taking the long road towards Miss Lena's house. This way passed through the Woods of Yord, along the Wind Canyon, past the Festival Stage, and around the Plateau of Ribbons, where they were forbidden to go. However, they didn't have to go through it; from the edge of the canyon, they could simply walk around the Plateau and head over the fields to come into Miss Lena's backyard.

The Woods of Yord were named after the Throne of Yord, something that they knew next to nothing about. They knew the basics—the Throne sustained all magic in the Guardian World, the Throne was a painting, the Festival of Wind was held in honor of the Throne—but, in truth, nobody really knew anything else about it. Even when Rana, the most studious (in truth, the only studious), had perused the library for information, she had found nothing.

Despite the heat, it was a nice day. The sun shone greenly through the canopy of leaves overhead, and new starflowers speckled the emerald grass. The breeze ruffled the grass and teased their skirts, and birds sang sweetly from the branches above.

For some odd reason, the forest ended abruptly and the canyon began. It was like somebody had drawn a line that decreed the end of the forest. Maybe somebody had—they didn't know. It was another thing that nobody told them about.

The canyon was a spectacular sight. The raining sunlight touched the rocky walls with glowing redness and summoned sparkles in the red dust swirling in the breeze. Ribbons tied to spires of rock projecting from all sides streamed like banners in the dusty wind, and one could see the Festival Stage at the bottom of the canyon. It was a large, circular stage surrounded by ascending seats built into the sides of the canyon itself and watched over by a huge wooden eye, bedecked by more ribbons. This was the biggest occasion of the year, the time all children waited for with bated breath, and the time that was two months away, or forever, whichever came first.

The girls strode along the very edges of the canyon, daring each other to move closer still to the breathtaking drop. Mother always flipped out whenever they did that, swearing to Yord that they were going to fall in at any second. The girls considered this pointless exaggeration on Mother's part—before any of them could work up the courage to get close enough to the canyon's lip (it was unusual thinking of canyons as having lips, but everyone said they did, so it must be true) that they might fall in, the canyon's floor rose up, towering into a tall plateau.

This was the Plateau of Ribbons. The only way up was a thin rocky trail which spiraled up to the top of the plateau, guarded by Living Robes. Living Robes were once-ordinary robes that had been animated by magic and directed to perform a specific task. They could survive for thousands of years, since they had no mortal lifespan. These Living Robes had been instructed to let nobody without reason to pass through to the top of the plateau. The girls, of course, had a reason—curiosity—but they had tried that and it seemed that the Robes didn't take that as an answer.

So instead, they went around the Plateau and into the fields.

The fields had whiled away many an hour, and the girls now felt the familiar urge to simply fall down and sleep amid the flowers. The fields were simply long, endless fields of blossoms, always smelling sweet and almost always warm and sunny. It was rumored that a peace spell had been cast over it, which would explain the lethargy that always came over those who walked into it. It was an ideal picnic place, and a nice place for playing Pearls, if you didn't fall asleep before the game was over.

"Remember the Pearls game, everyone," Alanis panted as they crested another gently rolling hill. "We don't want to fall asleep yet."

Finally, they were back in sight of the forest. They had defeated the peace spell again.

"First one there gets first game!" Lirael yelled, suddenly breaking into a run.

Rana and Alanis ran after her. "Unfair! Head start!" Rana yelled playfully. She hoisted up her skirts and charged ahead, leaving Alanis behind. Rana was faster than Lirael, and was soon running beside her while Alanis puffed gamely behind them.

Suddenly Alanis screamed. Her friends whirled around, expecting to see Alanis tumbling head-over-feet down a grassy slope, balance lost due to a piece of slippery grass, or perhaps a capricious pebble, or even an overly violent gust of wind.

They couldn't have been more wrong.

Pale hair fluttering like a banner, Alanis was being suspended in midair by a dark red tentacle. The tentacle attached to a blob-like scarlet monster with an amber eye glaring in its center. It was a piece of rogue magic! Princesses dedicated most of their lives to finding and sealing these monsters with their powers. But how were two four-year old girls without a single spell or any weapons training supposed to deal with such magic? Even as they stood dumbstruck, the magic hauled its tentacle back in to examine

its catch.

Contrary to first instincts, none of the three girls went into hysterics. Living with magic for four years could do wonders for your nerves, even when you were faced with a crimson blob.

“Plan SA!” Lirael cried.

Rana pulled a spindle out of her sash. Lirael snatched a comb from her own sash. Alanis yanked a round mirror from her sash. The girls had planned this out once, idly wondering what they would do if magic ever attacked one of them, just in case. That just-in-case had happened. They had called it Plan SA, for Plan Surprising-Attack. The plan had been messy and disorganized, but that was when they were three. Now they were four. They could handle this monster.

As the rogue magic brought Alanis closer to its toothy maw, Alanis clapped her mirror over its eye.

Rana yanked a loop of thread from her spindle—Lirael’s spinning was lumpy and Alanis’ fell apart as soon as you looked at it, but Rana’s was finer and more regular than that of most girls twice her age—threw it over the magic, and hauled on it. The thread constricted and cut into the blob. Rana ran around it and pulled tighter on her impromptu garrote. The magic was soon tied up tightly, and seemed unable to escape. Or maybe it was trying to find a way to escape that didn’t involve losing its prey.

Then Lirael raked the teeth of her comb brutally across its back.

Abruptly the magic vanished into red smoke and a yelp of pain. Alanis crashed to the ground, and Rana quickly ran back to help up her fallen friend. Lirael stood in front of them, brandishing her comb menacingly in front of her. The monster coalesced a few feet away, took one look at the unexpectedly resourceful girls, and fled, jumping high into the air and soaring into the forest.

“What was that?” Lirael gasped, her legs wobbling like pasta.

“Rene...rene...” Alanis tried.

“Renegade,” Rana supplied.

“Renegade magic,” Alanis finished. “We need to tell Miss Lena.”

“ASAP,” Lirael added. ASAP was an expression from another world that meant “now.”

The full enormity of the situation broke over the girls abruptly, and without another word they whirled around and ran for Miss Lena’s backyard.

* * *

To their surprise, Miss Lena was already in the backyard, and she had a friend with her. They weren’t too sure who the buttery-yellow haired lady was, but it didn’t exactly matter.

“MISS LENA!!!” Alanis screamed.

“We saw a monster!!!” Lirael cried, managing double exclamation points.

“In the fields!” Rana ejaculated.

“It grabbed me!”

“But we fought it off!”

“And it got away!”

Miss Lena stayed remarkably calm. Her hazel eyes took in the panting girls; Lirael with her black hair flung all around her, Rana with her spindle trailing a goo-covered thread, and Alanis with red and yellow ooze on her mirror, which she had not put away yet. Her friend was not so calm.

“A monster?” she asked quickly, standing up so fast that she knocked her chair over. She was dressed in scarlet leather, with a short skirt and high red boots. Her hair was done up in two fluffy ponytails and tied with purple ribbons.

Miss Lena continued to act relatively serene. “Girls, allow me to introduce you to Miss Tiara. Tiara, these are Lirael, Rana, and Alanis.”

The three small friends flushed brilliantly red. Miss Tiara? She was the youngest Princess ever to take

on a Partner. She had begun training when she was eight, summoned her first partner at eleven, and visited her first world when she was twelve. Then her friend Mr. Kagetsu had stolen the Throne of Yord, when she was eighteen. Miss Tiara had gotten the Throne back, but somewhere along the line, her best friend, Miss Sarah, had disappeared. Nobody would say why. Everybody seemed to know why, especially Miss Lena, but they of course remained in the dark. Miss Tiara was now engaged to Mr. Kagetsu (this didn't make sense to them, as she had gone after him with orders to kill him if he wouldn't give up the Throne of Yord, which he hadn't).

"Miss Tiara?" Rana asked, trying vainly to straighten Lirael's hair.

"Very nice to meet you!" stammered Alanis, attempting to straighten her own.

Miss Tiara did not seem to hold with many common customs of greeting.

"Enough of that, girls. Where was the monster? Where did it go?"

"Tiara, we'll need the Elder's permission to exterminate it." Miss Lena stood up without knocking her chair over. Miss Lena had long blue hair like Rana's, and was wearing a ankle-length white dress with a frill along the bottom and a red sash around the waist. She was always dressed decorously, while Miss Tiara, it was well known, was quite flamboyant in her tastes. Whatever that meant.

"Not for this," Tiara retorted. "It attacked...which one of you?" she added, her green eyes flickering over the girls.

"Me," Alanis said.

"Alanis," Lirael added, correctly interpreting Miss Tiara's pause as a request for the girl's name.

"It attacked Alanis, and is running amok. It's clearly in our right to seal it, not to mention the harm it might cause if we leave it alone. I'll take care of it myself if I have to," Tiara added, as Miss Lena did not seem convinced. "And you know I will."

"I suppose," Miss Lena sighed, picking a blue flute off a small table by her chair. The young girls watched wide-eyed. Was Miss Lena going to do some magic?

She was. With a few low trills on the flute, green magic wrapped up around the five girls.

There was a whirling, spinning, wet feeling, and cool currents—most soothing after the exertion of running in the heat of a hot sunny day—flowed over them. Then the dark greenness dissolved into nothing, revealing the fields. And not far off, a mere twenty feet away, an ugly crimson blot upon the tranquil sea of the earth—

"THERE IT IS!!" Alanis screamed.

Miss Tiara wasted no time. She leapt into the air, and a ribbon of gray wind exploded from the ground and wrapped around her feet. Something black materialized from her hands, and the Princess flew at the monster like an arrow.

The two collided. The monster was cleaved in half as the blackness coalesced into a spear and Miss Tiara swung it viciously downward. It recovered quickly, however, and managed to squish out of the way of the next swing.

Miss Tiara backed off slightly on her wind pillar, then rushed forward again. Her spear stabbed straight for the thing's eye, but before she hit it, it burst like a bubble. Miss Tiara flung her hands out in front of her to block it, but it reformed its substance around her, forming a rigid red cocoon.

"Miss Tiara!" Lirael shrieked.

But Miss Lena was dragging them away.

"But what about Miss—?"

Lirael was interrupted by a loud but definitely muffled bang from inside of the monster, and it suddenly exploded again, each piece surrounded by magical fire. Miss Tiara had her arm outstretched, palm pressed against where the monster had been. Her spear had disappeared, and in her palm, surrounded by mystic symbols, had opened a wide, golden eye.

Alanis squeaked and hid behind Miss Lena.

The monster recollected dizzily only fifteen feet away from them. Miss Tiara did not charge at it this time—she laced her fingers together, flung them outward at the monster and then crossed her arms in front of her.

A cross of flame burst from her arms and span at the monster. The cross hit the thing and exploded, sending flames everywhere. The fields caught on fire.

Miss Lena raised her flute. Ribbons of water wrapped around the instrument, around her fingers, down her arms, over her shoulders, off into the air. But this was very bizarre water, more like water turned into a solid while retaining its liquid properties. It coalesced in the air, forming a sheet of water that grew and grew and grew. Arms like snakes peeled off from the sides. Almond-shaped eyes opened near the top of the sheet, glowing violet in its dark blue body. White foam glistened over its snake-like hands and at the bottom of its wave-like body. Shadows swam about in its depths.

The girls clustered close. This was a Water Elemental, a being of pure water shaped like the waves of the sea. Such things were capricious, fierce, and dangerous to deal with. An Ancient Elemental of Water could easily decimate an entire city in the Guardian World if it so desired, and if you had recently angered such an elemental, it was wise to stay away from all water travel and to drink nothing but milk for a week. Why would Miss Lena summon such a thing?

Miss Lena said not a word, but the Elemental seemed to be reacting to some type of command. It rose up, growing higher and higher on the water fed to it from Miss Lena's flute. At first ten feet, then twenty, then thirty, then forty...

When it had reached fifty feet and stretched behind them like a wall of pure water (which, technically, it was) Miss Lena seemed to give it another command. It curled like a breaking wave, and just as the little girls realized what it was going to do, it crashed down upon them.

There was not even time to scream. Ten thousand tons of seawater, complete with salt, seaweed, and even fish, crashed down on top of them. Foam crashed. The fires were all instantly extinguished. Instantly, a circular area of forty feet was submerged beneath ten feet of water.

Then Rana realized that they weren't dead.

They weren't even wet. Lirael, Alanis, Miss Lena, and herself were surrounded by what looked like a half-globe of air. No water or anything else passed into their small sphere. Miss Tiara was inside of another such sphere. However, the monster was in much more trouble. It had no sphere.

A black, bat-like thing swam at the monster, tagging it with its long, thin tail. Rana searched her memory and came up with a name. "That's a manta ray."

"A what?"

"It has a poisonous tail," Miss Lena agreed, nodding. "Very good, Rana. It's common on a planet called Earth."

"I don't want to visit Earth," Alanis decided. "What's that?"

"An octopus. It has a big beak in the middle of all of those arms, and it can eject a cloud of ink to make a quick getaway if it's threatened. See, look..."

The monster had just tried to attack the weird-looking octopus. Instantly it had vanished in a black cloud. The girls watched, amazed.

"I thought Earth didn't have any magic."

"That wasn't magic. It was ink, spread into the water."

Rana, Alanis, and Lirael exchanged glances. Miss Lena had it wrong. The octopus clearly had the magic ability to create darkness.

But other, more familiar creatures were also attacking. A swarm of sharp-toothed fish native to the Guardian World called ariko chewed at the monster's tentacle. Multiple tiny silvery fish schooled in a tight, dizzily complex pattern in front of the monster's eye. Four smallish sharks and seven barracudas took evasive action, swimming quickly about and chomping what they could.

However, it seemed that not even Miss Lena could sustain a Water Elemental for long. The submerged area grew shallow and shrank as water and fish flowed back into Miss Lena's flute, returning to wherever they had come from. The flowers and grass of the fields were not even wet—not one drop of water had been left behind.

The monster was a sorry mess. Black goo oozed glutinously from dozens of teethmarks. Greenish ooze came from a couple of clean cuts, presumably from the manta ray's poisoned tail. Its golden eye had dulled and clouded over. In fact, it was not in very good condition.

Miss Tiara's hands flashed in the gesture of a spell, tracing out complicated lines that her shamanic powers guided her along.

"Guardian spirit, ye who hast rebelled against our law. By the power of my spell, I seal thee! Ye shall be imprisoned for all of eternity! I cast thee into oblivion, until the day when ye shall be summoned forth again by my powers. Know thy mistress, Tiara! Recognize my power! The power of the Throne of Yord! I Seal Thee! ealThe!"

As Tiara finished the sealing spell, a line of light opened underneath the monster, turning into a shining eye. The eye blinked, and golden sparkles began to circle around the creature. The monster keened horribly, but despite its frantic efforts, it seemed unable to escape the whirlpool of sparkles. The tiny golden lights whirled faster and faster into a cone of golden brilliance, which shrank into the eye and was gone. The monster went with it, leaving behind one last, despairing cry. Then the eye blinked shut...and it was over.

The field was completely undisturbed after the battle. Not a drop of water or goo remained. Miss Tiara was as unruffled as the field—she tossed one ponytail airily over her shoulder and turned to Miss Lena.

"Shall we return?" Miss Lena asked quietly. "Girls, you came to play Pearls, didn't you?"

"Um...y...yes," Lirael managed.

"Oh dear," Miss Tiara sighed. "I'm awful at Pearls. Lena, Kagetsu, and S—"

She paused, then said, sounding slightly forced, "Lena and Kagetsu used to beat me all of the time."

The three exchanged glances. S? Surely Miss Tiara had been talking about Miss Sarah...There was only one way to find out. Maybe they would finally find out what had happened to her.

"Excuse me, Miss Tiara," Rana said shyly, "but were you about to say Miss Sarah?"

Miss Tiara looked quickly at Rana, something behind her eyes burning like fire. Was it anger? "Tell me, Rana, what do you know about Sarah and...the three of us, including Kagetsu?"

"Not much," Rana admitted. "It's not in any books, you see, Miss Tiara. I read in an old, old, dusty book in a back corner of the library that Miss Sarah grew up with you and Miss Lena, and that she's Mr. Kagetsu's brother. I even found a picture of her when she was our age. But after she's about thirteen there's only one sentence about her. I memorized it—it said, 'Sarah became a guard of the Throne of Yord when she was sixteen, and has rarely been seen since.' Everything else about Mikadzuki—that is her last name, isn't it, Miss Tiara?" Miss Tiara nodded absentmindedly—"is about Mr. Kagetsu, and there's not much about the three of you when you were eighteen—when Mr. Kagetsu took the Throne of Yord."

Miss Tiara and Miss Lena looked at each other, and something flashed between them. Lirael gave Rana a Good work look, but Rana barely noticed. "Miss Tiara, what was it that happened to Miss Sarah? She should still see people, even if she is a guardian of the Throne."

Miss Lena looked down at the girls, as if suddenly realizing that they were all there. "Come now, you three. We should get back to my house. Maybe you can teach Miss Tiara how to play Pearls better."

Rana knew when to stop pushing. The greeny darkness wrapped around them and again the whirling wetness washed over them. When it had dissolved, they were back in Miss Lena's backyard.

* * *

“So how did your Pearls games go?” Mother asked when they returned.

“We were attacked by a monster!” Alanis said proudly. “In the fields! And it grabbed me, but we fought it off, all by ourselves!”

“Then we went to get Miss Lena, and she was talking to Miss Tiara,” Rana added. “And we all went back to the fields.”

“And we got to watch Miss Tiara and Miss Lena fight and seal the monster,” Lirael concluded. “I can’t wait until I’m old enough to do that!”

Mother half-exploded. “You met Miss Tiara?! You had better have been polite! Oh my goodness...and a monster? Are you girls all right?”

“Of course we were, with Miss Lena to protect us,” Rana said loyally.

“And of course we were polite, Mother,” Lirael said, exasperated. “This was Miss Tiara, for Yord’s sake! I mean, she could have fried us!”

“We asked about Miss Sarah,” Alanis said, a shade too innocently. “What happened to her?”

Mother’s mouth opened and closed a few times, but nothing came out.

“Miss Tiara wouldn’t tell us anything about her either,” Alanis said. “Oh well. I should be getting home.”

Lirael, Rana, and Alanis escaped quickly, before Mother could explode with her other half.

“I’m coming over again tomorrow,” Rana said quietly. “We’re gonna find out about Miss Sarah. I don’t know exactly how, but we will.”

“Me too!” Alanis added.

“Then we swear not to rest until Miss Sarah has been revealed!” Lirael said solemnly and without the faintest clue what she was actually saying.

“Right!” Rana and Alanis said, with barely any more of a clue.

2 - Girl of the Wind

The two months had passed, and it was now the day directly before the Festival of Wind. Everybody was in a frenzy of preparation; the masks, the dancing, the stage, the costumes, the everything else. The wind seemed to realize that its festival was approaching—it grew stronger by the day, whipping the trees about in frenzies of green and blossom, sending the ornaments dancing and glittering with its dance.

Bright colors and flapping banners were everywhere you looked. Vibrant reds and oranges, soft pinks and greens, brilliant blues and purples, glowing whites and yellows—stripes of linen hung from every house, some luminescent, some multicolored, some embroidered with symbols. And on nearly everything, you could see the Eye of Yord, the symbol of the Throne of Yord.

Ribbons were very much in evidence as well. Mostly red, with some orange and yellows mixed in, they flowed easily in the strengthening winds. Tied to trees, gates, doors, chimneys, and fences alike, the ribbons all streamed like long, flowing hair, following the breeze as it arrowed towards one place—the Plateau of Ribbons.

However, for once, Lirael, Alanis, and Rana barely noticed the excitement surrounding them. True to their “oath” sworn in Lirael’s front yard, all three were on the track of Sarah Mikadzuki, doing what they did best. Lirael, as the eldest, braved the Elder’s Palace to talk to the Princesses and the Sky Tower to speak with the Neutralizers. Alanis searched closer to home, using her young charms to glean information from the elder or less-magical or wounded citizens of the Guardian World. Rana tore apart the library twice, then rummaged through her own and anybody-who-would-let-her-in’s homes in search of even a sentence about Sarah.

“I give up,” Rana finally said on this day, laying upside-down on her bed. “Nobody else will let me in. They’re afraid I’ll tear their houses up.” She sighed exasperatedly. “Just because I accidentally broke that priceless vase in Miss Celine’s house.”

“Same here,” Alanis sighed, pillowing her head on her arms. “Just the sight of me makes people clam up.”

Lirael had had no more luck than either of the others. The Neutralizers had just snubbed her outright, and several Princesses had made caustic suggestions about what she could do with her time instead. In a fit of pure pique, she had even tried to obtain an audience with the Elder, but was told that the waiting list was approximately ten months, which was at least seventeen times longer than forever. Lirael had scrawled her name on the list and departed in disgust.

“There is one more place we could try,” Lirael said thoughtfully, her brain squeezing out a useful notion from her chair. “The Plateau of Ribbons. Maybe somebody lives there who could tell us about Miss Sarah.”

“We’ll never get in,” Rana said from her bed. “You need special permission from the Elder, or you need to be a Neutralizer with important business.”

“Well, think, Rana!” Lirael retorted. “If the Elder won’t listen to us—and we’re NOT waiting for ten more months—then we need a Neutralizer to let us in.”

“Who’s gonna let us in?” Alanis asked gloomily.

Lirael rolled her eyes. “We know Miss Lena. Miss Lena knows Miss Tiara. Miss Tiara is engaged to Mr. Kagetsu. Mr. Kagetsu is a Neutralizer.”

Rana flipped rightside up on her bed. “You’re right!”

“But he won’t let us in anyway!” Alanis protested, although she raised her head as well.

“He will if Miss Tiara tells him to,” Rana said slyly.

“But Miss Tiara would never tell him to,” Alanis persisted.

A sigh rose from all three. This was definitely true.

“We’ll have to go find out,” Lirael said decisively. “Let’s go get Miss Lena.”

* * *

Most unfortunately, Mother grabbed them as they were leaving. “Where are you going? It’s time to let the banners fly!”

“Oh no,” Lirael groaned. “Mother, we have to go see Miss Lena right away!”

But Mother was inexorable. Slip on the masks, grab the banners, and out the door to the canyon...

It was tradition on the day before the Festival for young children to take banners out to the canyon and run along the edges, covered by their masks. The run terminated at the Plateau of Ribbons, where the winds would snatch the banners from their hands and whirl them about in a great semi-cyclone of rainbow colors. It could be quite impressive to watch. The banners were supposedly offering-type things for the Throne of Yord. It was beyond any of the girls as to how banners could be an offering to a painting—maybe the Throne liked the show.

Lirael, Alanis, and Rana went grumpily outside and were swept up in a small parade of the other children, all screaming and holding on tightly to their variously colored banners. Lirael held a dark purple one, Rana a dark blue one, and Alanis a light gold one.

The mood was so overwhelming that nobody noticed that the three friends were NOT having fun with this. They lagged behind the others and relied on the flap and rustle of the other banners to hide their whispered conversation.

“Where does Miss Tiara live, anyway?” Rana hissed beneath the shouts and snaps.

“Miss Lena will know,” Alanis answered. She paused. “Won’t she?”

“She will, but she might not tell us.” Lirael sighed. “Is there any other way to find out?”

“The library won’t let me in, but you two could go look,” Rana suggested. “And if worst comes to worst, we can comb the whole Guardian World looking for her.”

“Maybe we could trick Miss Lena,” Alanis said brightly. “Say we want to train Miss Tiara with Pearls. And then, while she’s distracted, maybe...slip in a few questions, about Mr. Kagetsu and Miss Sarah.”

“Hello! What’re you talking about?”

All three jumped and nearly fell off into the canyon.

A little girl had appeared alongside them as if by magic, a flying silver banner held tightly in her hands. Large, chocolate-brown eyes glowed behind a curtain of wind-tossed lavender hair; her feet were bare beneath her long white dress.

“Um...Pearls,” Lirael offered, rather lamely.

“Oh, I love Pearls!” the girl exclaimed. “I could almost beat my brother!”

Rana, Miss Grammar incarnate, pounced on this. “You mean ‘can.’ I ‘can’ almost beat my brother.”

“No, I don’t think so.” The girl looked ahead. “Oops! We’d better hurry up. We’ve fallen behind!”

“Ack!” The quartet leaped ahead to catch up with the main group.

Lirael, Alanis, and Rana let their banners go with great relief and equally great interest in their new friend. She seemed to find joy and excitement in everything; listening to her exclaim over the beauty of the flying banners, the three girls even managed to forget their anxiety about Miss Sarah and Miss Tiara and the whole darn thing. At least, temporarily.

Rana clapped her hands together. “All right, now that that’s over, let’s go find Miss L—”

The crowd carried them towards the fields.

“Ack!”

They had forgotten this. Typically the younger Guardian World children, after letting the banners fly, would wander the fields picking flowers, playing games, practicing fighting, and so on. A festival feast followed the fieldplay—and if they were not found at the feast, then their mothers would want to know Why.

Lirael looked about as dark as her hair, but managed to squeeze out a positive notion. “Everybody comes to the feast tonight. Including Miss Lena.”

“And Miss Tiara and Mr. Kagetsu,” Rana added.

“And maybe even Miss Sarah!” Alanis cried.

“Oh? Are you interested in Sarah?” the new girl asked.

The other three jumped.

“Don’t you mean Miss Sarah?” Rana corrected.

“No.”

The trio exchanged glances. Then Lirael decided to put their situation down on the table.

“Yes, we are interested. We’re looking for her story, but we can’t find it. None of the Princesses or Neutralizers would help us.”

“Or the normal people,” Alanis added.

“Or the libraries,” Rana finished glumly.

The girl smiled. “Why, I know a lot about Sarah! What would you like to know?”

Three jaws dropped. Six eyes fastened on their new idol. Lirael recovered her jaw and blurted out, “Where is she? Miss Sarah?”

“On the Plateau of Ribbons,” the girl said airily.

“Wh—”

Rana butted in. “Who, what, when, where, why? Answer me that about Miss Sarah!”

The girl rose to Rana’s challenge. “Sarah is Kagetsu’s younger sister and the guardian of the Throne of Yord. She is a Neutralizer, like her brother. She became the Throne’s guardian five years ago, when she was sixteen, on the Plateau, because the Throne willed it so.”

Rana danced with impatience. “Of course I know that! Everyone knows that! We want the WHOLE story!”

The little girl shrugged, trying unsuccessfully not to smile. “You asked me who, what, when, where, why. I answered, didn’t I?”

“Stop splitting hairs!”

“Like, why Miss Sarah and nobody else?” Alanis interrupted.

“And why does nobody ever see her anymore?” Lirael added.

The little girl shrugged again. “Nobody ever sees her because she never comes down from the Sky Tower. She is a part of the Throne of Yord now. She must stay with the Throne forever, because the Throne wanted her, and only her.”

“Doesn’t she ever get a vacation?” Rana asked.

“No. The Throne is her top priority. It is food, drink, family, and friend to her. Although...” A shadow passed over the girl’s face. “She misses her old family and friends very much.”

Alanis sniffed. “I bet she does. Does the Throne ever let her come down to visit them?”

“No.”

“How can it stop her?” Lirael asked. “If she’s a Neutralizer, can’t she just neutralize everything it did and come down anyway?”

“If she did that, she would permanently disrupt the lines of magic flowing from the Throne to the rest of the Guardian World. No magic would ever work right from then on. The Guardian World would fall into

ruin without its magic.”

Rana narrowed her eyes. “How do you know all this? What’s your name?”

Just then, the feast gong rang. The girls all turned around to look, and saw the tables groaning under the weight of food. They had apparently just been translocated there; they had probably been arranged back in the main city.

Lirael turned back to the girl, gave a small scream, and grabbed Rana’s arm.

The girl had vanished without a trace. No sound, no spark, no gust of wind. It would take a very powerful Princess to disappear so quietly.

A voice sounded in their ears, a whisper born on the faint breeze.

My name? My name is Sarah...Sarah Mikadzuki.

* * *

“We mustn’t panic,” Rana repeated. “We mustn’t panic. We mustn’t panic.”

Repeating herself was Rana’s way of panicking.

Alanis did not repeat herself. She merely hyperventilated. “What do we do, then?!”

Lirael snorted. “Well, duh! We go find Miss Lena and Miss Tiara and tell them we just saw...you-know-who!”

Rana stood straighter. “Of course! That’s what we do. Lirael starts from the left side, Alanis from the right, and I’ll start in the middle. Comb the table! One of us will find them!”

They separated.

But it seemed that Miss Lena had not come to the feast. Nor had Miss Tiara. They were nowhere to be found.

Lirael and Alanis met at the halfway point between the tables. “Find her?”

“No.”

“How about Rana?”

They stood on their tiptoes and saw Rana going by, panicking. “Looking for Miss Lena...looking for Miss Lena...”

“I don’t think so.”

“There you are!”

Lirael squeaked as a firm hand abruptly snatched her collar.

“Where have you been, young lady? I’ve been looking for you for ten minutes now! I was afraid you’d fallen into the Canyon!”

Lirael squeaked again as her mother shook her.

“That was very naughty of you, Lirael! I’m taking you home right now, as punishment!”

“And don’t think you’re escaping either, young lady,” said Alanis’ mother, swooping down on her own daughter. “For over ten minutes you’ve been missing, and nobody having a scrap of an idea of where you were! We’ve been worried sick.”

“Mom, no!” Alanis cried. “We have to tell Miss Lena something!”

“It’s very important!” Rana added, being hauled over by her own mother.

“Nothing is more important than your own safety,” Rana’s mother scolded. “How could you have left us like that without so much as a message?”

“But Mom—”

“Don’t you ‘But Mom’ me, young lady! It’s straight to bed with you! You shall miss dinner as your punishment.”

“But is Miss Lena here? We have to tell her—”

“I don’t care if you have to tell her that it’s raining blue pigs and pink dogs! Whatever it is, it can and

will wait until tomorrow!”

“But Mom—”

“What did I just say about that?”

* * *

Lirael stalked around her room for a while, although she knew that that wouldn't do any good. She had to do something. Miss Lena had to be told. But how?

Lirael stared out of the window. The moon was rising, big, fat, and full in the night sky. Laughs and cheers could be heard faintly from the festival area. But Miss Lena wasn't there. She must still be at her house. How could she sneak out without Mother knowing or finding out?

The small black-haired girl paced the floor in frustration. If she was a Princess, she could've done something. She could have sent her Partner to tell Miss Lena. She could have flown over on a Summoned Monster. She could have flown over under her own power. She could have turned invisible and sneaked out under Mother's very nose.

But she wasn't a Princess. She was just a little four-year-old girl.

“But you can still do something.”

Lirael started, and whirled about.

A young woman with long lavender hair and chocolate brown eyes was floating in her room, the folds of her plain white nightgown flowing in a breeze that was not there. Her wrists and ankles were wreathed in long white ribbons. Her face was thin and elfin, with lines of pain and grief sketched lightly around her mouth. But she was smiling, and her smile was the sweetest Lirael had ever seen.

“Who are you?” Lirael asked dreamily.

“My name is Sarah,” the woman said softly. She reached out. “Let me show you what you are looking for.”

Lirael extended her own hand, but the space between her and Sarah seemed...not solid, certainly, but...it felt as if she was fighting through a thick liquid. Her mind was moving slowly as well, and the adrenaline rush the little girl would have expected from seeing Sarah never came. “Sarah...Sarah Mikadzuki?”

“Yes.” Sarah stretched her own hand out farther as well, and their fingers touched. Clapsed.

Then Lirael's house disappeared, and they were flying out over the Guardian World. Lirael looked down, but the fear she would have expected had been similarly suspended from her mind. Instead, a feeling of wonder began to spread through her.

They flew up higher into the sky, flying towards the moon. Lirael was not a studious girl, but she knew her astronomy lessons, and she knew that the stars were huge balls of gas and fire, not the starry jewels they looked like. But now, these stars seemed to be the ones she had always imagined stars to be. She reached out and touched one; it jingled softly, like a wind chime. It felt warm and smooth—a perfect globe of silver.

A rainbow spread out in front of them, stretching from the ground below high into the heavens. Sarah led her onto the rainbow, and they sat on it. The colorful band was as solid as a bridge.

Lirael noticed the ribbons encircling Sarah again, and she decided that she didn't like them. They weren't like ordinary ribbons. They drifted around Sarah like...like chains, Lirael thought to herself. Chains tying her to something.

“Miss Sarah,” Lirael began. Her voice echoed back to her from the stars, a chorus of fairy voices. Lirael paused, then said again, delighting to the sound of the echo, “Miss Sarah...”

Sarah, Sarah, Sarah, Sarah...the stars sang back.

“Just Sarah,” Sarah replied, her sweet smile returning.

Sarah, Sarah, Sarah, Sarah...the stars repeated.

"Yes," Lirael said. She wanted to ask her...oh, so many things, but somehow only the least important slipped out. "What are those ribbons?"

"These?" Sarah lifted one, and the stars repeated These, these, these... "They are the lines of magic. It is my duty to keep them flowing and steady."

Just then, one of the ribbons wound itself into a knot. Sarah took it and kneaded it gently, pulling, pushing, picking it apart with her fingernails. The knot unwound, and the ribbon was smooth again.

"What are the lines of magic?" Lirael asked, suddenly dreamily curious.

Sarah's smile slowly turned upside down. She seemed to be thinking very hard.

"I'm sorry," Lirael muttered awkwardly, her ears burning. Sorry, sorry, sorry... "Should I not have asked?" Asked, asked, asked...

"No, that's not it," Sarah replied. "It's just hard...how can I put this in terms you can understand..."

"You know that the Guardian World is just one of many, many worlds in this universe, don't you? And you know that magic flows between them all?" Lirael nodded. "Well, imagine this universe as a present." Present, present, present...

"A present?" Lirael considered, then inquired, "Like a book or a toy?"

"Yes, a big, complicated, sparkling toy, tied up in a box with pretty wrapping paper. Magic is like the wrapping paper. It adds snap and flair to the present, but you could give the present just as well without it." Without it, without it, without it...

Lirael was stupefied. "You mean we don't need magic?"

Sarah laughed, and her laugh reechoed off the stars in a shower of fairy bells. "Not us. For some creatures, such as Elementals, magic is indeed necessary. But we could exist even without magic. And when the magic gets tangled..." Sarah paused. "Do you know what that means?"

Lirael started to nod, thought for a moment, and shook her head instead.

"Hmm." Sarah picked another knot in her ribbons apart as she thought. "Let's use the present analogy again. Imagine that you tied the wrapping paper into knots before you wrapped the present. Would the pattern still be the same?"

"No," Lirael answered. This was one thing she was sure of.

"It's my job to make sure nothing ties the wrapping paper up."

Lirael wrinkled her brow. "And the paper is magic, so..." She was getting dizzy, trying to comprehend this. "...it's your job to make sure..." Ah, she had it. "...magic never gets tied up!"

"That's right!" Sarah agreed, smiling again. "When the lines of magic get tangled, they tangle up the spells people try to cast. In other words, if the lines of magic ran by themselves, no magic would do what you would think it would do. Fire would turn to water, and rocks to air. Everything would fall apart, and magic would become the only thing in the universe."

"And you keep that from happening?" Lirael asked, astonished. "All by yourself?"

"Not precisely all by myself," Sarah answered. "Why do you think our Guardian World has Princesses and Neutralizers?"

Lirael reflected. "Business?"

Sarah laughed heartily. "How true! But for another reason, as well. When the lines tangle, rogue magic is unleashed. Princesses seal rogue magics and hurl them back into the pattern. Neutralizers try to keep tangles from occurring by neutralizing clumps of magic."

"How does that help anything?"

"The lines tangle when too much magic is concentrated in one spot. Neutralizers neutralize the magic there, which stops the lines from tangling. Watch my ribbons; I'm sure you'll see one soon."

Lirael stared intently at the ribbons. And sure enough, a few minutes later, a knot formed in the ribbon, but changed its mind halfway and slid smoothly into unruffled ribbon again.

“How weird,” Lirael said, awed, reaching out and prodding one of the ribbons gently. “But then...”

A strong wind blew up. The stars jangled. Lirael shielded her eyes and looked quickly at Sarah. Sarah was untouched. The wind did not disturb so much as a hair on her head.

“Sarah?!” Lirael screamed over the wind.

“Don’t tell me your name!” Sarah shouted back. “I have to go now! The Throne is calling!”

The rainbow faded away. Lirael was falling, falling through the sky, and the stars had become mere dots in the sky again. The ground was rushing up towards her...

Lirael’s mother came upstairs shortly afterwards and found Lirael asleep, her head pillowed on her arms, still sitting in her chair but sprawled forward over her little vanity table. She was sleeping quite soundly, so soundly that she barely moved even as Mother quietly laid her in bed and pulled off her shoes. She noticed an old white ribbon caught in her daughter’s hair, so she pulled it out and laid it on the vanity table.

Lirael slept on, unmoving.

3 - Festival of Wind

Lirael woke up slowly.

Where was she? The last thing she remembered was falling, with the ground swinging crazily up towards her. But now she was in her own little cream-colored bed, with bright sunlight flooding over her face, and voices were calling from her window.

“Lirael? LIRAEEL?!”

A sleepy black head poked out of the window and looked down. A sheaf of sapphire-blue hair and a mist of fine silver stared back up at her.

“Morning,” Lirael yawned grumpily. “Whassrong? Why’re you over so early?”

“Are you still asleep?!” Rana demanded. “How did you manage?! I barely slept a wink!”

“Get down here!!” Alanis cried. “Did you already forget what happened last night?!”

“Last night?” Lirael jumped as though she had received an electric shock. “LAST NIGHT!!! You guys, I had the WEIRDEST DREAM EVER. I have got to tell you about it RIGHT NOW!!”

Lirael went through her room like a whirlwind, was dressed in record time, and flew out the door without as much as a glance at her breakfast. Mother started to yell after her, shook her head, and turned back to the stove instead.

* * *

“Sarah Mikadzuki visited you in the middle of the night?!?!”

Alanis’ voice rose to a piercing squeak as Lirael recounted the events of the night before.

“Yes,” Lirael said. “It was the weirdest dream I’ve ever had. But do you think...do you think maybe any of it is really what happened?”

“I don’t think it was a dream at all,” Rana said positively. “You know what, Lirael? I think you received a visitation.”

Alanis gasped.

“From Miss Sarah?!” Lirael shook her head violently. “No way!”

“It has to have been,” Rana said. “Because it’s either that, or you’ve been reading a lot more than I have. Even I didn’t know all of that about our world.”

“But why would Miss Sarah send a visitation to me?” Lirael demanded. “Why not Mr. Kagetsu, or Miss Tiara?”

“I don’t know!” Rana snapped back. “I’m not pretending I know why Miss Sarah is doing what she’s doing. But why not send you a visitation last night? She appeared to us yesterday. Why to us and not to Mr. Kagetsu? He’s her brother!”

“There’s one way to find out!” Alanis said excitedly. “Let’s go ask Miss Lena!”

* * *

“WHADDAYA MEAN, ‘SHE’S GONE ON A JOB’?!?!?!?”

Lirael, Rana, and Alanis stared openmouthed at Miss Lena’s housekeeper, a strict, stern-faced woman with a tight grey bun of hair and a frosty white apron.

“Just what I said,” the housekeeper said testily. Miss Lena’s housekeeper did not like children. She thought they were too noisy. “She’s away. She’ll be back in a month or so.”

“A MONTH?!?!?!?”

“That IS what I said,” the housekeeper snapped. “Good day. I have cleaning to do.”

And with that, the housekeeper slammed the door shut in their faces.

“A MONTH?!?!?!?”

* * *

Abruptly their only means of salvation had disappeared. What were they going to do without Miss Lena?

“There’s Miss Tiara,” Rana suggested as they meandered miserably through the fields.

“But we don’t know where she lives,” Alanis said morosely.

“We could ask.”

“Who would tell us?”

Rana considered. “Who do we know who would talk to us like we’re worth talking to, and would still know where Miss Tiara lived?”

They all thought.

“Maybe, just maybe, Sarah might help us,” Lirael said slowly.

“Miss Sarah?” Rana asked, eyebrows raised.

“Like you pointed out, Miss Sarah already came to us yesterday,” Lirael said. “She was that little girl. And she talked to me last night. She might be able to help us out. We may not even need to find Miss Tiara!”

Rana and Alanis exchanged looks, telling each other clearly what they thought of this idea.

“I guess that’s possible, but we’ll need a backup plan,” Rana said practically. “What else could we do?”

“We could stay at the Elder’s Palace until she showed up,” Alanis said helpfully. “She’d have to go there sooner or later.”

Automatically their steps twisted to the side as their path was blocked and redirected by the canyon. A gust of wind kicked up from behind them, sending their hair flying up in a great spray of black and blue and white—they fought their hair back around into order just in time for another gust, this one coming as though it had been thrown from the top of the Plateau of Ribbons, to seize the unruly locks and spray them out of control again.

Lirael cast a dark glance at the Plateau. “Sarah’s just up there, isn’t she?” the black-haired girl said grumpily. “And we can’t reach her.”

Alanis cast her own glare upwards. “It’s those stupid Living Robes,” she complained. “If they weren’t there, we could just walk on up and see her!”

“Yes, but they are,” Lirael said, still grumpy. “If we knew some MAGIC, we might actually be able to get rid of them, or get past them, but...”

Rana sighed. “Magic...I wish we could use it.”

They stood there for a moment.

Then their thoughts were interrupted by an earsplitting fanfare. The canyon walls might have quaked before the sound. Lirael, Rana, and Alanis certainly did. The trees were buffeted by sudden blasts of wind which seemed to come from every direction at the same time. Then there was the sound of tambourines.

“THE FESTIVAL!!!”

Even Sarah was forgotten in the light of this excitement. How could they have forgotten?! TODAY

WAS THE FESTIVAL OF THE WIND!!!

Immediately they turned and ran towards the tambourines. Their music was shaking faster, and the sound of woodblocks and drums were rising to meet them, causing the very wind to dance in time.

They came into sight of the Festival Stage just as the Festival Dance began.

The Stage was festooned with long carmine and pearl ribbons, dancing eagerly in the air. Flowers, the same colors as the ribbons, garlanded the poles standing in a semicircle about the circular Stage. Behind the poles, a huge wooden replica of the Eye of Yord gazed down upon the Stage. Rising seats stood on the other side, filled with people dressed identically in long, colorful robes, sashes, and scarves. They all wore black glass plates over their faces, and it was impossible to tell who was who. One person in the seats was the Wind Dancer this year, and it was everybody's challenge to guess who it was.

Months before Festival Day, a Princess had been chosen to be the Wind Dancer. It was a great honor—the Wind Dancer was the great Goddess who had defeated the evil beasts roaming the Guardian World, and this festival was in her honor. The Throne of Yord also figured into it somehow, but they weren't sure how. Regardless, being chosen to be the Wind Dancer was a fantastic privilege indeed, as well as the subject of much debate among the rest of the Guardian World, as people bet on who the title had fallen to this year. The chosen Princess often diverted attention away from herself by betting on somebody else.

The Elder sat on the top seat. He was like the manager of the Guardian World. He was neither Princess (obviously) nor Neutralizer, but he was allowed to visit and speak with the Throne of Yord. He was very old and very wise, and used a magical crystal to gaze around the universe and guide Princesses and their Partners to rogue magics. He stayed in his Palace for most of the year; the Festival was one of the very few times he came out into public.

The girls watched, entranced. Although they were all slightly disappointed that they were so late, too late to get a good seat in the stands, they said not a word. Nobody was allowed to talk during the Festival, least the Dancer be discovered prematurely as the one Princess who wasn't there.

The opening bars of the song of the Festival of the Wind fell into silence. Everybody waited with bated breath.

Masked dancers linked together by wide red ribbons they held ran out onto the stage from beneath the Eye of Yord and knelt down in a circle, readying themselves to begin.

The girls waited.

The audience waited.

The wind waited.

Instruments tapped out a quick beat.

Then the entrance notes stopped, and the real song began, and the dancers leapt seamlessly into circular dance. Right two three cross four left two three cross four jump right two three cross four left two three cross four jump...

It was a complex, uneven dance, made more difficult by the rhythmic melody. The gusting winds didn't help much either; they snatched at the dancers' ribbons and costumes, teasing them around waists and feet in an attempt to trip an unsuspecting dancer. But they were experts, and never missed a step.

Then Rana gasped.

"What?" Lirael muttered, mesmerized by the dance.

"Magic," Rana breathed. "Can't you feel it?"

Lirael and Alanis looked at her briefly, and suddenly an overwhelming force hit them. It was definitely magic, VERY powerful magic, and it hit them like a ten-ton weight. It felt like the air was alive, and it had a definite, malicious intent.

Suddenly the festival was no longer enchanting and entertaining. The quick beat and howling winds sounded suddenly like a battlefield of cosmic proportions. The ribbons whipped and cracked in the wind. Lirael felt the evil in the air most clearly, and thought she could hear screams and yells of battle. Rana heard the trees creaking, fighting to keep their foliage safe, while flowers were battered to death by the high winds. Alanis heard the wind, just the wind, keening a horrible banshee dirge.

Then the dancers scattered as another dancer, dressed like a horrible beast with the Eye of Yord on its head, came roaring out onto the stage. The dancers danced lightly away to the other side of the stage, and the Wind Dancer walked out onto the stage, long golden hair shining in the wind, a silver blade in her hand.

Then the Wind Dancer and the beast began an intricate fighting dance, carefully choreographed to ensure suspense with constant safety. But to the three little girls on the canyon wall, the scene shifted to a real battle between a shining figure and a mass of bloody eyes, oozing blackly, the figure was burning the eyes, there were screams and cries and blood OH the blood was everywhere...screaming...eyes...

This is the truth behind the Festival of the Wind.

Before they knew it they had turned and ran, anywhere, everywhere. Just not there, amid the blood and the carnage of the planet.

They finally slowed and dropped down, gasping for breath, gulping down sobs.

“What...was...that?” Lirael huffed.

“I don’t wanna know!” Alanis whined. And Alanis could be very whiny when she tried. “Don’t tell me even if you know!”

“Don’t worry,” Rana cried, her face ghostly white. “I have no idea and I don’t WANT to have any idea.”

Lirael looked around them. Their terror had taken them quite some ways—they had retraced and passed beyond their old trail, and gone all the way up to the bottom of the Plateau of Ribbons. There was no living thing in sight.

For a moment, this puzzled Lirael, puzzlement feeling unusual in the middle of her still-powerful terror. Then she realized why, and her terror exploded away.

“OH YORD!!!”

Rana and Alanis, nerves strung to the breaking point, screamed.

“The Robes,” Lirael whispered.

They were gone. The Living Robes had vanished, completely and totally.

“This,” Lirael said, terror giving way to the thumping adrenaline of opportunity, “is a once-in-a-lifetime chance. We need to go now!”

Rana and Alanis knew she was right. Without another word exchanged, the three tiny girls charged up the path. Around any corner there could be more Living Robes, ready to stop them with bared steel.

But there were no Living Robes.

And at the top, there was no painting.

There was, in fact, nothing of any importance. It was so anticlimactic that Lirael could have screamed. There were three small rock pillars, made of roundish stones stacked roughly on top of each other. Strings tied from the top stones to the ground hung almost invisibly in midair, spindly gossamer bodies clothed in a faint drift of ragged white ribbons. The Eye of Yord was carved into the top stone of each pillar.

“I don’t like this place,” Alanis whimpered.

“Why?” Lirael was advancing on the closest pillar. “What’s wrong with it?”

“The wind. It’s gone.”

Lirael stopped. She was right. The Plateau was eerily silent. The ragged ribbons hung sedately down, barely moving. And all around them, magic weighed heavily like strings of iron blocks around their necks.

Then there was the sound of footsteps.

“Behind a rock!” Rana dived for one. Alanis and Lirael exchanged frightened glances and ducked behind the same rock.

“Hold your dresses down,” Rana hissed, wrapping her own tightly around her ankles. “And your hair, too.”

Lirael threw her hair around her neck like a scarf. Rana followed suit. Alanis’ hair was short enough that she didn’t have to bother.

“What’s going on out there?”

“Quiet! They’ll hear you!”

“Well, peek out and at least see who it is!”

Alanis carefully slid her head around the rock.

“It’s a bunch of girls holding ribbons,” she whispered back. “And the Elder.”

The Elder! Lirael and Rana nearly fainted. The Elder was, as previously mentioned, the oldest and most powerful citizen in the Guardian World. Sometimes it was a man, sometimes a woman; it didn’t matter. This one was a particularly serious and unforgiving man, and he would NOT look kindly upon their intrusion. Turning them into toads for a century would be mild punishment coming from him.

Yet he did not turn them into toads, for he had not yet seen them. His voice boomed over the plateau like the most colossal of gongs.

“Submit to the Throne of Yord, to bring good fortune to the people!”

All three girls stared at each other with raised eyebrows. What the heck was this all about?

“For the glory of the country! Praise the Throne of Yord, which offers us a safe haven with unwavering promise!”

It does? The three girls couldn’t help it—they wriggled about close to the ground until they could just barely peer out around the sides of the rock. What was going on?

“As witness to our mutual pledge, endure for all of eternity, thou Throne of Yord!”

Pledge? What pledge?

A powerful gust of wind shook the plain. The ribbons on the threads surrounding the stone pillar were ripped apart and blown away into the gale. Slowly, almost trancelike, the girls surrounding the Elder stepped forward and placed their new ribbons onto the threads. The wind died down, and the girls backed away again.

The Elder raised his arms, and there was a flash of magic. The ribbons slid up the strings, spacing themselves unevenly all the way up to the top stone.

Then the Elder turned to the girls, and his voice boomed out into the once-again still air, proclaiming the glory of the Throne of Yord.

Many minutes later, the plateau lay deserted, the Elder and the young girls gone, the new ribbons hanging still in the silent air, every last vestige of the old ribbons ripped away into nothingness. Not so much as a cockroach scuttled over the dry ground of the plateau. Not so much as a single note of birdsong reached the tall earthy expanse. Not so much as a single living thing was visible amid the rocks and ribbons.

Until Rana unceremoniously booted Lirael and Alanis out from behind the rock. “You’re squishing me!!”

“Sorry,” Lirael said, rubbing her head where it had met the ground.

“But what was that all about?” Alanis asked.

“The Elder being boring, what else?” Lirael jumped up. “Who cares about that? What’s with these pillars?”

“The Throne’s supposed to be a painting, isn’t it?” Rana asked slowly. “And the painting’s in the Sky Tower. So...what’s on this plain, anyway?”

Alanis and Lirael stared at Rana. “The Throne of Yord...is in the Sky Tower?”

“Yes, didn’t you know that?”

“No...”

Suddenly the girls had a very bad feeling in the pit of their stomachs. If the Throne wasn’t on the Plateau of Ribbons...then what was?

Then the magic slammed into them.

Lirael hit the ground hard, the breath snapped from her lungs in an instant. Magic pressed down on her like an invisible hand, crushing her to the ground. Beside her, Alanis was slammed face-first into the earth. Lirael tried to look around for Rana, but couldn’t lift her head. Her scream was lost in a roar of wind and magic.

Then there was a brilliant, dazzling flash of light and a mind-bending, soul-snapping will bent on them. The magic weighed on them heavier than ever, and the light was so bright that it nearly blinded them. Out of the light loomed the huge pillar surrounded by ribbons, a dark, stark contrast against the blinding light. Then an explosion seemed to take place, and scarves of white and blue light whirled about in the dazzling brilliance surrounding them.

And from the whirling lights came a thought, a thought so powerful that it shook the very molecules of their being.

YE CHILDREN OF THE THRONE! OBSERVE, AND SEE THE POWER THAT IS MINE!!!

Then the light slowly began to take on a strange form. It was the form of a woman, with long, icy hair, garbed in shimmering wind and light. She touched the pillar, and the pillar shattered like ice, revealing a sword. The ribbons whipped through the wind and blew away into the brilliance.

The woman reached for the sword’s hilt. It was long and thin, more a rapier than a sword, formed out of clear, flawless crystal. It was like a long, perfect icicle, with a hilt of silver set with scintillating sapphires, emeralds, and diamonds that glittered like stars in the brilliance about them. And as the woman’s long fingers reached for the hilt, a feeling of pure horror blossomed within the little girls. Somehow they knew that this woman should not have this sword. They knew that nobody should have this sword, and if this woman retrieved it, there would be catastrophe like none had ever dreamed of.

Then there was a huge explosion that was at once louder and softer than every noise ever made, and the light seemed to jerk and be swallowed by something else. Lirael had a brief vision of a tremendous Eye before the brilliance vanished and they were back on the Plateau of Ribbons. And when the afterimages had finally cleared from their eyes, they saw the woman standing on the Plateau; and between the woman and the girls was Sarah.

Sarah’s long lavender hair snapped in the air like a whip as the wind accelerated to a howling pitch.

“Detestable!” Sarah shouted at the woman. “How dare you speak such to these children of the Throne, you who was exiled from this planet when you fought the Throne and lost?! You false goddess!!”

“Your ‘children’ turn from the Throne and worship me as the Goddess who snatched this world from the brink of destruction!” the woman shrieked back. “Their worship these years has strengthened me beyond your measly power, you representative! You weaver of ribbons! You dare challenge a Goddess?!”

Sarah was silent. Then her shoulders began to shake and, to everybody’s great confusion, she threw her head back and laughed heartily.

The woman looked beyond furious. “How dare you, you mortal creation!!!”

Sarah’s laugh began to deepen and warp, and slowly it was not just Sarah’s laugh anymore, but the laugh of her and another, a man’s laugh, deep and low and threatening.

“My dear Meirene, how long it has been,” said the voice-that-was-both-Sarah’s-and-a-man’s. “It has been what...three thousand years, since our last collision? Once I feared you—once before that I adored you. But now I have learned much more than you. My ‘mortal creations’ place their faith in me. They borrow their power from me! And you try to attack me on my own planet, on the day when their faith in me is strongest?” Sarah’s voice sharpened like a blade. “You disappoint me, Meirene.”

“Your people worship me, Yord!” Meirene screamed. “It is to me that they pay homage to this day! You know as well as I that the battle they act out this day is the same as that which occurred between ourselves that time, many millennia ago! And it is through their worship that I stand before you now, armed with the Vaineire once more!!”

Sarah-and-the-man-Yord chuckled, a sound that was at once the ringing of silver bells and the grumbling of the earth. “Meirene, if their little play of the Wind Dancer strengthened you half a whit, don’t you think I would know and stop it? You try to trick me into destroying my own source of power—my people—when it is clear you have borrowed most extremely from another Demon. Which was it which lent you your powers? Andromeda? Cassiopeia? Orion?”

A dark blue blush swept over Meirene’s cheeks, and for an answer, she leveled the Vaineire sword at Sarah-Yord within the space of a millisecond. A blast of magical lightning crackled from the edge and arrowed at Sarah-Yord.

“No, those Demons are all too honorable to lend power to a backstabber such as yourself,” Sarah-and-Yord said thoughtfully as the lightning was blocked by a sheet of black flames which absorbed it like a sponge. “Was it Fornax? Nebiru? Perhaps Betelgeuse? Tell me, Meirene, am I getting warmer?”

Meirene screamed in fury and unleashed a massive burst of power from the Vaineire.

“You girls must leave now,” said Sarah-Yord calmly as this magic too was absorbed by the sheet of black flame. “And you will stay away from Sarah. She is not your concern. You will leave her alone.”

And suddenly the magic that had been pressing down on Lirael, Rana, and Alanis vanished with the wind that screamed about the plateau.

“GO NOW!!!!!!” Sarah-and-Yord shouted, unleashing a massive blast of antimatter at Meirene.

Their nerves were keyed so tightly from these events that the little girls were primed. At the resounding shout all three girls scrambled towards the path off the plateau as fast as their hands and knees could carry them. Just as they got off the bottom path, there was a monumental explosion behind them and the Living Robes went rushing up the path, followed by several wild-eyed Princesses and Neutralizers who were far too intent on the roaring maelstrom of magic on the Plateau of Ribbons to notice three cowering little girls.

“What do we do now?” Lirael gasped.

“Run for our lives!” Rana whisper-screamed.

It was good advice.

4 - Casting a Spell

“That woman was the Wind Dancer,” Rana was saying. “That woman was named Meirene. That woman was the Wind Dancer. That woman was evil. That woman was named Meirene.”

“Stop it, Rana!” Lirael snapped. “You’ve been panicking like that for the last five minutes!”

“The Festival of the Wind is for a demon!” Alanis was in tears.

“No, for a Demon,” Rana corrected, seizing the chance to take refuge in explanation. “Capital-D Demons are much more dangerous. I read it in a book called Swell Foop.”

“Who cares?!?!” Lirael exploded. “What are we going to do about Sarah?!”

Rana and Alanis stared at her. “What about Sarah?”

“Well...the Throne told us to stay away from her!” Lirael blustered.

“So we will,” Alanis sniffed.

Lirael stared at her, thunderstruck. “What?!?! You mean, just give up?!?! What about our vow?!”

“Oath,” Rana corrected her.

Smoke exploded from Lirael’s ears. “WHATEVER!!!!”

Alanis stared, her tears momentarily forgotten. “Wow! I thought that only happened in stories!”

Fire was ready to start puffing out of Lirael’s ears instead, but she managed to control it. “All RIGHT!!! But we said that we were going to find out about Sarah! Are we going to let the Throne tell us what to do?!?!”

“Yes,” Alanis said.

Alanis wilted beneath Lirael’s double-barreled flaming glare of daggers. “OF COURSE WE ARE NOT!!!” Lirael swung around and directed her glare at Rana. “We need to find out why the Throne won’t even let Sarah talk to us!! And I won’t rest until we know!!”

What could they say to that? Alanis and Rana bowed to the inevitable. “We’ll help, Lirael.”

“Of course you will!” Lirael struck a pose.

“Now, how do we find that out?” Rana asked.

Lirael blinked at her. “Don’t ask me. I don’t know.”

“Whaddaya mean, ‘You don’t know’?!?!”

Lirael shrugged. “Hey, I did my part. I got you two back into the spirit of things.”

It was now Rana’s turn to smoke.

“Rana, smoking’s bad for you,” Alanis coughed through the heavy cloud that poured from Rana’s ears and immersed the three.

“So, it’s up to me to get us a plan,” Rana muttered. “Why am I not surprised? Okay, let me think. We know the Throne isn’t on the Plateau. We know it is in the Sky Tower. So how do we get into the Sky Tower?”

Unfortunately, the answer was simple. They didn’t. Ordinary Guardian World citizens were only allowed onto the first floor of the Sky Tower. Even Princesses never went past the third floor, and even then only under exceptional circumstances. There were twenty-two floors.

“We’d have to be Neutralizers,” Alanis said glumly.

“We might make it in if everybody else was gone,” Lirael offered hopelessly.

Rana’s eyes suddenly lit up like lanterns. “Or if we had permission!”

“Permission?” Lirael snorted. “We’ve been through that already. We don’t know where Mr. Kagetsu

is, and we don't know any other Neutralizers. Nobody's gonna give us permission."

"There may be a way," Rana said, lowering her voice, although there was nobody around to hear her even if she had been speaking normally. "It would be dangerous, because we're definitely not allowed. And it would be difficult. Very difficult. But it would definitely work. It could get us in there."

"What IS it?!" Lirael was ready to burst.

"We could make ourselves look like Neutralizers."

Lirael deflated. "Are you mad? We'd never fool anybody. Unless..."

"...we used magic," Rana finished triumphantly.

"But we can't use magic!" Alanis protested. "We don't know how! And we're definitely not allowed! You know we're not!"

"Alanis, are you listening to a word I'm saying?!" Rana expostulated. "I KNOW we're not allowed! So we'd have to do it in secret!"

"Ooooh," Alanis said, impressed.

"How would we do it?" Lirael asked, lowering her voice as well.

"I don't fully know," Rana said, biting her lip. "Some form of illusion, I should think. But it would have to be very powerful, so the Robes and the Neutralizers couldn't catch us in it, and that will make it hard."

"Can we even do it?" Alanis asked, worried.

"We'll have to go to the library and find the most powerful spells we can," Rana decided. "I don't know if we can cast them, but we've got to try."

And without further ado, the little trio trooped off towards the library.

* * *

The library was incredible. A full seven stories tall, its walls were lined from top to bottom with shelves packed with books. Crammed with books. Bulging with books. Overflowing with books.

Spiraling staircases offered transport to the next level of knowledge. Ladders slid over the room, going to wherever they were needed. Some Princesses flew twenty feet into the air to reach the top shelves. And that was only half of the books. Every shelf was enchanted with a reversal spell which allowed it to flip around and reveal a new row of books. The library was divided into sections by the floors—Storybooks, Biology, History, Astronomy and Math, Geography and Legends, Encyclopedias and Dictionaries, and Magic—and was Rana's favorite place in the world.

Mrs. Lyan, a librarian, stared over her half-moon spectacles at Lirael, Rana, and Alanis as they entered the swinging double doors of the library. "Come to tear through us again?" she asked with mock severity. Though her colleagues had been furious about Rana's whirlwind searches of the library, Mrs. Lyan felt that it was a good sign that the younger generation was interested in any part of the library, even if it was a little devastating.

"No," Alanis said, giving Mrs. Lyan a dazzlingly adorable smile and cranking up her little-girl charms. "We're looking for a book on illusion."

Lirael smacked herself in the face. Rana seemed to have bit something.

"Illusion?" Mrs. Lyan repeated, firmly quashing the smile that was trying to hover on her face.

"For my mother," Lirael interrupted desperately.

"She needs a scarecrow for her backyard," Rana added. "The birds are ruining her...er..."

"Guarderia roots," Alanis said.

"Yeah, her...guarderia roots?"

Guarderia roots produced small white flowers, immense aboveground root systems, and a very pungent and not entirely pleasing odor. The only reason people grew them was if they were absolutely

desperate for the flowers, which were a rather powerful spell ingredient—but the smell was so bad that very few people bothered.

“I didn’t know your mother grew guarderias,” Mrs. Lyan said, amused. They were clearly up to something.

“She didn’t,” Lirael said uncomfortably. “Until...a few days ago.”

“I see,” Mrs. Lyan said. “So you need a scarecrow illusion.”

“We need a very powerful illusion spell,” Rana jumped in. “She’s got ravens and black cardinals after the...guarderia roots...”

“A very powerful illusion spell,” Mrs. Lyan repeated, even more amused. They certainly didn’t aim small. Black cardinals were very powerfully magic, and ravens could see through most spells.

“So could you get it for us?” Lirael pled.

Even if they had the book, Mrs. Lyan couldn’t see them possibly casting the spells in it. “Certainly,” she agreed, turning to a large oaken box beside her. Three magical runes were inscribed on the lid of the box in reddish gold.

“What’s that?” Alanis asked, her curiosity aroused.

Mrs. Lyan didn’t answer. She waved her hand over the box, said, “Level Seven, Legerdemain and Prestidigitation, by Melana Rynetha,” and rapped the box sharply. Then she opened it.

Inside was a huge book, its cover of faded gold silk. The words Legerdemain and Prestidigitation were inscribed across the gold silk in equally faded silver. Alanis gasped. “Cool!”

Rana, an old hand at this, reached into the box and lifted the book out. She staggered beneath its weight. Lirael ran forward to help her. In the end, they took one side each and prepared to heave it out of the library.

“Sign here, please,” Mrs. Lyan said, fighting harder still not to smile as she slid a piece of paper and a golden feather quill at them.

Alanis looked at her friends, their hands filled with book, and picked up the quill herself. She carefully scrawled Alanis onto the paper.

Fire glowed in the words, and a strand of flame reached from the quill and wrapped around Alanis’ hand. Alanis froze as the thread of fire reached for her, but when it touched her, it simply sank into her skin. Alanis’ face flared momentarily the color of fire, and then all trace of fire had disappeared, leaving a look of astonishment on the small girl’s face.

“A phoenix feather quill,” Mrs. Lyan explained as Alanis touched her hand where the fire had entered her. “So that if you don’t return the book, we can find you.”

Alanis was too amazed to even hear her.

“Come on, Alanis!” Rana grunted beneath the heavy book.

“Yeah, we need to...er...give this to my mom,” Lirael said. “So she can protect her...guarderia roots...”

Alanis followed them out the door, still halfway into a trance.

* * *

Of course, as soon as they had left the library, they did not head for Lirael’s house. They turned around and headed into the woods behind the library. Lirael had to kick Alanis around to get her to turn in the right direction—the phoenix feather quill hadn’t burned her skin, but it seemed to have turned her mind to cinders. Fortunately, Alanis revived after the kicking and followed her friends into the forest.

This forest was larger, darker, and completely separate from the friendly forest between Lirael’s house and the Wind Canyon. They weren’t supposed to go there, strictly speaking, but nobody ventured into the forest if they could help it, so they were unlikely to be disturbed there.

Rana dropped her end of the book with a sigh. “Whoof! Too heavy!”

Lirael dropped her own end with a similar sigh. “I’ll say.”

Alanis dragged the cover open to the first page. The title, which not even Rana could pronounce, was

repeated here, above a picture of a chimera, a beast which was part goat, part dragon, and part lion, and fiercer than all three put together.

“The chimera is the symbol of illusion,” Rana explained importantly as Alanis turned the page.

The table of contents now stared up at them. Rana ran her finger down the chapters. “Let’s see. We have effective ways to use illusion, illusional weapons, illusional traps, conjuring beasts...ah, here we are. Disguising oneself or others, page 387.”

Alanis had just reached for the page when Rana stopped her. “Don’t worry, there’s an easier way to do it.” Rana stared very hard at the book and said, in a loud, clear voice, “Page 387.”

The book shivered slightly. Then the pages flipped forward at record speed, landing directly on page 387. Alanis was looking flabbergasted again. Rana ignored her and started to read.

“Disguising oneself is a difficult piece of magic...blah blah blah...detail is excruciatingly important... yadda yadda yadda...convincing illusions are very difficult...etc., etc., etc....ah, now they go into the actual spellcasting.”

“What do we do?” Lirael asked, her heart speeding up.

“Wait for me to finish reading,” Rana said absentmindedly. “Pentacle...cups...circle...”

Rana fell to reading in fierce silence. Alanis and Lirael waited with bated breath.

Then Rana fell back with a sigh and rubbed her eyes.

“Can we do it?” Lirael asked eagerly.

“I don’t know,” Rana said, sounding very tired. “The ingredients we’ll need will be simple enough... you’ve got silver goblets, don’t you, Alanis? And your mother has a sapphire brooch, doesn’t she, Lirael? But the magical power needed will be very hard to come by. We don’t have any Partners to brace us, and we don’t know our elements or even our objects of power.”

“But there are three of us!” Alanis said excitedly.

“I know, but even then, this is our first spell. I don’t know how much magical power we’ve got between us.” Rana rubbed her eyes again. “I guess the first thing to do is gather the ingredients.”

“What about the book?” Lirael asked, staring at the great volume.

“We’ll have to leave it here,” Rana said. “I can’t see us dragging this thing around, can you?”

Finding a place to hide it proved to be easier than they had thought. A nearby tree with foliage that drooped all the way to the ground and thick moss around the roots proved to be just the thing. Lirael dragged the book into the moss, where it sunk just out of sight, and drew the hanging branches around the area to offer more secrecy to the book’s hiding place.

“We’ll need five silver goblets, a sapphire stone, lots of rose petal essence, and some crystal dust,” Rana said as they left the fringes of the forest. “Alanis has silver goblets—I know, I’ve seen them—and I have plenty of rose petal essence. But Lirael’s mom has the only sapphire brooch I know of, and crystal dust won’t come cheap.”

“How will we get them?” Alanis asked.

“I think,” Rana said, “that it’s time for a little borrowing without asking.”

“Sorry?”

“We’re going to have to steal them both, Alanis,” Lirael said. “But, er...Rana, about the brooch...we are gonna return it, right? Mom will kill me if we don’t.”

“Of course we’re going to return the brooch,” Rana assured her. “But the dust is going to be difficult. You know the jewel store has magical wards set all around it to stop thieves from getting out with their stuff.”

“So how are we gonna get it?” Alanis asked.

“We’ll have to ‘accidentally’ get some on us and just walk out,” Lirael said.

“We can’t just brush our fingers in the jar,” Rana said. “The wards will catch us. No, we’re going to be crafty about this.”

"I got it," Alanis said, a mischievous light dancing in her eyes. "I'll..."

* * *

Rana stood ready at the door. Lirael was examining a box of witch hazel. Alanis wandered closer to the jar of crystal dust.

Ready...Lirael thought, watching Alanis' progress out of the corner of her eye. Three...two...one.

Just as Alanis walked beneath the jar, Rana pointed and hissed something.

The jar began to tip. But then it halted, and slowly shifted back.

Lirael supposed she shouldn't be surprised. Telekinesis was easy, even for little girls who had never cast a spell before in their life, but the store was specially warded to prevent exactly what they were trying to do now. However, that didn't stop Lirael from getting mad. She pointed at the jar. "Move!" she whisper-cried.

The jar reversed direction again and tilted towards Alanis. Alanis, realizing something was wrong with their plan, paused and bent down, pretending to tie her shoe.

Then the charms of the store rebelled. The jar reversed direction yet again and wobbled back into place.

Lirael and Rana looked at each other, then glared at the jar and pointed. "MOVE!" they whispered fiercely.

The jar tilted, wobbled, shook, and suddenly flew off the shelf and smashed over Alanis' head.

Lirael and Rana screamed. Alanis sneezed and sat down hard as finely powdered crystal blew up in a cloud around her. The small silver-haired girl was abruptly transformed into a crystal snowman, or girl, or whatever.

"Oh my goodness!" The clerk came running around the counter. Most of the customers ran over as well. "What happened?"

"She just bent over to tie her shoe, and CRACK!" Lirael cried, torn between triumph at their success and horror that she had just cracked her best friend over the head with a jar of crystal dust.

"I...should like to go home," Alanis said, very dizzy but remembering their plan.

"Oh yes," the clerk said, unsure whether to deal with the girl or the dust first. "Well..." He clapped his hands and beckoned. Crystal dust rose in a great sparkling cloud and settled into a pile in the clerk's hands. Then the jar rose up and put itself back together. The clerk poured the dust back into the jar, and the lid clapped back on. The jar drifted back up onto the shelf.

"Should I walk you home?" the clerk asked anxiously as Alanis wandered dizzily towards the door and almost collided with the front window instead.

"Thank you, sir, but I think we can do it," Rana said, grabbing one of Alanis' arms.

Lirael took the other, and the three of them turned sideways and went out the door.

* * *

Less determined four-year olds than Lirael, Rana, and Alanis might have given up then. However, Alanis had managed to collect quite a stash of crystal dust in her hair, socks, and pockets that the man's spell hadn't collected, and Lirael and Rana merely fluttered around her briefly, assuring themselves she was relatively uninjured, before trooping off with untarnished enthusiasm to Lirael's house to relieve her mother of her brooch.

They were in luck. After a brief and potentially fatal climb up the gloriant-flower trellis into Lirael's mother's room, they could hear her cooking something downstairs. Sweet and savory aromas filled the small room, but little else. The brooch was glittering in plain sight on the vanity table. Rana slipped it into

a pocket, and they climbed down again and rushed over to Alanis' house to borrow the goblets.

Ten minutes later they were at Rana's house, filling the goblets carefully with rose petal essence. Rana's father happened to be home, which was a real stroke of luck. Rana's father was extremely absentminded and saw nothing wrong with his daughter and her friends filling five cups with a magical ingredient. He might even forget that he let them have it by the next day, as they wouldn't be bringing it back.

In fact, the gathering of the ingredients was so easy that, as they were sloshing back towards the woods, trying not to spill too much, they were torn between believing the spell would be just as easy, or that it would be twice as difficult because of the good luck they were having now.

It would turn out to be the latter.

* * *

Once more safely hidden in the edge of the woods, Lirael hauled out Legerdemain and Prestidigitation and Rana again proclaimed, "Page 387."

Using a large stick, Lirael drew a somewhat wobbly circle and filled it with a five-pointed star. Alanis moved a goblet brimming with rose petal essence to each point of the pentacle and sprinkled a bit of crystal dust in each cup. Rana drew some very complicated signs around the sapphire brooch, which Lirael had placed carefully—very carefully—in the center of the pentacle. Then Rana stood to the north, Lirael to the southwest, and Alanis to the southeast as Rana recited the incantation inscribed in the book.

"Omtera sintae iuntukoto. Azaraka aopsi fjasd oais jyfgas koawas youre. Akane orenji kiuro midori aoi murasaki rose rougeu! Yord, kirame ku yume chaili!"

Magic filled her voice as she called the last three words. "Velas toua kinatai!"

There was a curious shiver in the air, and all three girls felt a sudden wrench inside of them. The spell was snatching at something inside of them, something that did not want to come out. It was not ready. But the spell grabbed at it, and fought. Then, with a sickening bloody riiip, the thing came out.

Lirael was effused in darkness. Rana was dissolving into golden flower petals. Alanis was blowing away. Their magic roared around the clearing. The goblets tipped over and spilled rose petal essence over the pentacle, which burned the ground like acid. The pentacle exploded. The signs around the sapphire brooch were blasted away, and the brooch shattered.

Lirael could just barely see, through the darkness surrounding her, a dark figure coming closer.

Amid the golden petals, Rana saw flashes of a white figure coming closer.

Alanis could feel, rather than see, an invisible figure coming closer.

Then there was a blinding flash of silver light. The darkness, the flowers, and the wind vanished, and with a whirling, nauseating, flipping spin, Lirael, Rana, and Alanis found themselves in a peaceful glade.

But they were not alone. Four other figures stood with them.

5 - Trinity

They were standing on a small island in the middle of a vast and lovely forest. The island was on the face of a small, glassy pool, vaguely eye-shaped. Oddly enough, the forest was very quiet. There were no bird calls; no insect clicks or clacks; in fact, no sounds at all. The pool was unruffled; there was no wind.

Three figures stood opposite to the three little girls, about twenty feet away, hovering over the lake's glassy surface. The girls looked at them and shrank closer together. One was tall, voluptuous, her skin black as ebony. Her eyes glowed brilliantly amber in her black face. Spiders crawled in her flowing hair, the color of reddest, deepest blood. Another was slender and petite, with long golden curls framing a pale, heart-shaped face. Her eyes, however, were more terrifying than the black figure's, for although they were the color of beautiful sapphires, there was a look of terrible power in those eyes. The last was a sensuous and curvaceous figure, with white hair that cascaded down her golden-tan back and exotic amethyst eyes. She was dancing lightly on the lake, but the dance contained magic, angry magic struggling to be let out, and the look on her face showed that she was dying to let it free.

But standing between the girls and the women was Sarah, and her face was no longer kind and sweet but cold and sharp, and her ribbons were beaded with golden droplets.

"You shall leave them be," Sarah commanded. "Their power is new and uncontrolled, and they have no chance against you as they are now. It is entirely unfair."

The black-skinned woman spoke, and in her voice was the flowing of blood, the screams of battle, the clicks of spiders. "What is that to us? All is fair in love and war. Their magic called us, and we have answered its call. It wants us to take it, and we want it!"

"If we take the time and the risk to answer it," said the petite one with golden hair, "it is our right to take it at any time and any place we choose." Her voice was slow and measured, betraying no more anger than her expressionless face, but the anger was there.

"The stage has been set," added the dancing one. "It is not quite what we would have chosen, but I will fight for the power now, if this is where you want them to be." Her voice sounded like horrifying music, sharp and metallic.

"You shall not stand in our way," the black one said softly. "You know, you more than anyone, that if you stop us here, we will follow them, and we will strike when our time is ripe. We have no need of food or sleep. As long as their lives shine, they will lead us to them, and we will take their power. We can wait for years if necessary. Only here can you protect them, but here they will never become ready for us. For millennia it has been so. You may not interrupt it."

Sarah seemed to be considering. Lirael met the amber eyes of the black woman and gulped.

Then the forest around them rumbled, and the lake rippled. A wind blew gently for a minute, and Sarah listened to it. Alanis listened as well, but heard nothing in it.

Abruptly Sarah threw her hand up and pointed her open palm at the three figures.

White lightning streaked up from the lake and smashed into all three women, forming a ball, a cage of light. The lightning streamed away from them and into Sarah's hand. Then Sarah turned and pointed her fingers at the little girls.

A blast of white lightning hit each one, and suddenly it was as if a door had been opened in their minds. Lirael felt her power inside of her, and realized that she had never found it because she had been

looking for a shining light of magic, when her power was darkness; subtle and deceptive, but a power that could strike and destroy with fire and venom. Rana saw her own power, and understood that until now it had been a closed bud, which had now bloomed into the magic of flowers, of vines, of thorns and wood. Alanis heard her power, which she had been looking for for four years, but had never found, because it was wind; invisible, immaterial, thereby impossible to see or touch, but just as powerful as any other force in the universe.

Then three familiar objects appeared; Lirael's comb, Rana's spindle, and Alanis' round mirror. The girls grabbed them, bemused. What were these for? They weren't...they couldn't be...their very own objects of power? These familiar, friendly old things?

There was another flash of silver light. And then the forest was gone. They were in a cathedral, with a golden floor and walls and ceiling. They were standing on a raised dais, beneath a massive stained glass window of the Eye of Yord. Sarah was in front of them on the steps of the dais, and the three women were on the cathedral floor, looking a little windswept, but little else.

"I cannot stop you from fighting them," Sarah said. "But I can take your power to strengthen them, and believe me, I will. You will fight now, where I am strongest, and where their power is strengthened by Yord's ambience."

"I believe this is cheating," said the blonde, her voice still as expressionless as her face. "It is, as you say, most unfair."

"All is fair in love and war," Sarah said.

The redhead shrugged. "You have us there. We must accept."

The exotic one did a quick dance, and sparks flashed at her heels. "This is going to be fun."

Sarah smiled wryly. "I doubt it will be, for you."

Then she stepped out of the way.

Immediately the dancer whirled around, clapped her hands twice, whirled counterclockwise, clapped her hands twice again, pirouetted, flung her head back, and struck a pose. Bright sparks flashed up from her feet, and she repeated the routine. The sparks were twice as big, about two inches of flying fire. Then she began to spin around and around—and the flying sparks turned into knives and flew at the girls.

Alanis screamed.

The air around them shivered and began to spin. A shield of spinning wind formed around them, and not a second too soon; the knives hit the air and were knocked away. Alanis stared, entranced. "Cool!"

The redhead snorted. "Child's play." She clapped her own hands and flung her hair back. A large black spider fell out of her blood-red tresses and began to scuttle towards the girls.

Then the redhead opened her mouth. A jet of red liquid—surely not blood?—squirted out and hit the spider, which suddenly began to grow. It was soon about twelve feet tall and twice that long. It hit the wind barrier and glanced off. Then it slammed it again, and began to push through. It was only air; the spider's mass was too much for it to repulse.

"Brace me!" Lirael screamed. Rana and Alanis grabbed her shoulders.

"Why?" Rana shouted back over the spider's clacking pincers, the whirling of Alanis' barrier, and the laughs of the women.

Lirael didn't answer. She was busy remembering when she had touched the stove and burned her finger. She brought the feeling of flaring pain to the front of her mind, and let her magic grab it.

A fireball exploded from Lirael's hands and hit the spider, burning its many legs and sending it reeling backwards with a shrill, screaming clack. Lirael reached for her magic, remembered the burn again, and threw another fireball at the spider.

"We need a stronger barrier!" Rana shouted.

Then Sarah's voice resounded in her mind. Look for experiences inside yourself. Take your memories

and let your magic work them.

Let my magic work them? Rana thought frantically. Alanis had formed a barrier with her scream; Lirael continued to throw fire from her hands. How did it work? Her logical mind could not understand how they had done it without incantations, without ceremonies, without...

Then, unbidden, a memory of a story her mother used to tell her came to mind. In it, a lovely princess was cursed by an evil fairy, but her fairy godmothers managed to protect her, and to stop the fairy from coming back and killing the princess, they had put a wall of briars around the castle.

Then her magic was there, eagerly grabbing this idea and taking off with it.

"Wait!" Rana cried uselessly.

A thread unwound from her spindle and snaked along the ground. The thread glowed green and gold for a moment, then began to inflate into a vine. No, a stem. No, a branch. A thorny branch of brambles wove around them, a dome of heavy wood and thorns. Roses blossomed on the dome, and the thorns grew to a foot in length.

The air wall Alanis had put up was now displaced and destroyed, but they now had more solid protection. They were surrounded by a wall of briar roses.

Outside, they could hear the blonde's voice. "Do they think that will stop us?"

A blinding light shone through the cracks in the briar hedge. Lirael put her eye to a peephole, minding the thorns, and saw that the blonde was effused in a blinding white light. Then the light faded away, and her eyes had gone rose-red.

Suddenly the blonde leapt at the briars and preformed a mighty back-flipping kick.

The briars exploded. Rose petals redder than blood showered them. The blonde landed on the ground, and was rushing them again in a second. Before Rana could react, she had been punched in the stomach and the chest and her legs had been kicked out from beneath her.

Lirael just had time to see Rana disappear beneath a shower of lightning-fast blows from the blonde when the redhead launched herself at her. She flew without wings or support, and her nails glowed bloody red and grew a foot in length. She dived down at Lirael with a shout.

Lirael screamed and skipped backwards. The redhead landed softly, like a cat, and lunged forward, her nails reaching for Lirael. Lirael continued to run backwards, and suddenly collided with the stained glass window with a bang.

"Are you supposed to be comic relief?" the redhead demanded in disbelief.

The dancer had her sights on Alanis. She began to dance, faster and faster, and the stone floor beneath her cracked and shattered upwards, forming huge spears that pushed up beneath Alanis, a forest of spears. Alanis screamed again as the spears of rock and earth exploded around her—but no wind in the world could save her now.

When the dust had cleared, the dancer stopped dancing and looked proudly at Alanis' stony tomb.

"By the skin of my teeth!" Alanis said weakly from within.

The dancer stared disbelievingly at her stone spears. Alanis had let her magic help at the last moment, and she had stretched like rubber. Spears rubbed uncomfortably close on all sides, but not one had touched her.

"All right..." The dancer whirled into another dance. "Let's see you dodge that again!"

Spears exploded up at Alanis.

Alanis stretched impossibly thin with a yelp, and impossibly short with a squeak. Then she turned momentarily into a ballerina and preformed an impossible twirl to escape another batch of spears.

"Voila!" she cried from her pink tutu.

The dancer made an extremely weird face. "Now you're starting to scare me..."

Sarah groaned. "This is ridiculous." She concentrated on each girl in turn. Without her help, they would surely die.

* * *

A voice sounded in Rana's mind as she choked for breath. The blonde had her by the throat with one hand and continued to bludgeon her with the other. Blackness was swimming before her vision when a small silver light said to her, Choke. Spindle. Grab.

Choke spindle? Use her spindle to...

Rana thought fiercely of a flower growing from one place to another and grabbed at her magic. It wasn't sure it liked this idea—it wanted to take the image literally, not figuratively—but Rana commanded it with the strength of desperation and it obeyed. The thread on her spindle curled up and around the blonde's neck, stretching down into Rana's other hand. The blonde was too busy pounding Rana to notice.

Then Rana jerked on her thread.

It was the blonde's turn to choke. She dropped Rana and scrabbled at the thread, but this turned out to be a mistake. As Rana dropped, the thread dragged the blonde down with her. Rana gasped for breath and yanked on her thread. But in the relief of being able to breathe again, she lost control of her magic. Immediately, the image Rana had given it became literal—the thread thickened into the stem of a flower, sending tendrils into the blonde's neck, beneath her skin. The blonde abruptly found their positions reversed. Now she was the one choking, at the mercy of her enemy.

Make her tell you her name!

"What is your name?" Rana demanded, her voice ragged. She jerked on the thread like reins and the blonde collapsed onto the floor, her breath coming short. "What is your name?!"

"Ceres!" the blonde gasped. "Ceres Hi Kirame!"

Say it to her. Bind her. Make her promise to serve you.

"Ceres Hi Kirame!" Rana called, coughing and gasping, but spitting the words out regardless. "Have I defeated you?"

"Yes!" Ceres wheezed. Her eyes had reverted to their original sapphire shade, and her previous speed and power seemed to have disappeared. Perhaps, Rana thought dizzily, the roots sprouting from her thread-turned-flower had sucked it all away.

"Then I command you to serve me! You are my power! Forever!" Rana shouted.

The blonde glowed green and gold for a moment, and suddenly she became translucent. The thread dropped to the floor. Ceres stood and reached out to Rana. Rana stood as well, and the woman melted into the girl. There was a sparkling flash.

The redhead was now advancing on Lirael, her nails sharp as razors. I'm dead, Lirael thought crazily. I'm going to die and I don't even know what's killing me!

Then another voice spoke in her head, one that was not her own. Stop. Fall. Trip.

Fall? Trip?

Trip!

Lirael threw dozens of memories into her magic—tripping over a rock, a wall, Alanis, a rug, a shoe, a cat...

A thin black thread stretched out in front of the redhead.

"Is that the most you can do?" the redhead demanded. She began to step over it.

And the thread reached up and grabbed her foot.

The redhead fell to the ground with a satisfying crack. Lirael jumped up and sat on her head.

"Mmf? Umf!" said the redhead most articulately. "UMF!! GUMF OMF!! UMF DGOMF!!"

Lirael shook her head and bounced a little on the redhead's head. The redhead said something that

was fortunately stifled by the ground. “FUMF OMF!!”

Grab her neck!

Lirael knew who was telling her this, and followed this directive without a second thought. She slid around, tackled the redhead, and fastened her hands around her throat. The redhead protested vehemently and tried to rake at Lirael’s face with her nails, but as she lost her breath, she lost her power, and her nails reverted to normal.

Make her tell you her name! If you have her name, you have her power! Bind her to you! Make her serve you!

“Tell me!” Lirael shouted as the redhead struggled, her black bosom heaving. “Your name! Tell me!”

“I’ll die first,” the redhead snarled.

“That can be arranged,” Sarah said from above, smiling sweetly and yet menacingly. “Lirael, I think your magic needs something new to play with.”

Lirael took the hint, focused very hard on her burned finger, and showed her magic a new way to play with it. Her magic seized the idea joyfully and plunged ahead with it, reveling in its newfound freedom.

The redhead’s black skin began to heat and blister. Heat surrounded the two, concentrated on the woman. Her hair began to smoke, and her body twisted in agony as fire roiled in her.

“Erian Pyr Umbra!” she screamed suddenly. “Erian Pyr Umbra!”

Lirael released the spell with relief. She wasn’t sure she could have caused much more pain to Erian, even if the woman had tried to kill her. “Erian Pyr Umbra, I beat you with my magic, and you told me your name, so you’re mine. Join my power. I command you.”

Erian glowed black and burgundy for a moment, then went transparent and sank into Lirael’s body. A globe of darkness surrounded the young girl.

The dancer danced in place, furiously angry. “You brat! You’re really getting on my nerves!” She began to twirl. “I’ll destroy you this time!” Her feet began to glow like fire.

Light. Coming. Mirror. Wind.

Alanis knew this wasn’t her own thought. There was a silver glow of different magic behind it, and she was pretty sure she knew who it was coming from.

Light coming. Mirror wind.

Mirror wind?

If light was going to come at her, and it could hurt her (how could light hurt her?) she would be able to deflect it with a mirror.

Deflect. Reflect.

Could she use her mirror to reflect the light back at the dancer and defeat her? She glanced at her mirror and knew she couldn’t. It was barely a half-foot wide. The dancer was sure to attack with something bigger than that.

Mirror wind.

Could wind form a mirror?

Alanis didn’t have much time to think. The dancer’s feet had gone from reddish yellow to greeny blue, and were advancing to white. She had to cast a spell now.

She thought of a huge, round mirror, bigger than she was, and dropped it into the tempest of her magic. The idea blew out around her, and the air began to swirl into a recognizable shape.

Lightning exploded from the dancer’s feet just as a huge mirror leapt into reality.

The dancer’s amethyst eyes widened, and she had just enough time to shriek before her own lightning ricocheted back and surrounded her. She dropped to the ground, her hair sizzled, her exotic eyes half-shut, her body burned.

Grab her around the neck! Get her name! Bind her to you! Command her!

Alanis walked up to the dancer, paused, knelt down, and hesitantly placed her hand on the dancer's neck. She applied almost no pressure, but the dancer still flinched as if she had smacked her with a splintered ruler.

"Er...what's your name?" Alanis inquired.

"Myre...Myre Baara Ka...Kaze..." the dancer gasped out, too dazed to protest.

"Um...Myre Baara Kaze...I really didn't mean to hurt you this badly, but...er...I...um...command you to...help me, I guess? I don't know..."

Myre stirred feebly. "Yes," she breathed. "Anything, but hurry, or I will expire."

Alanis thought this was just a fancy word for 'die', but that really wasn't too comforting. "All right...I command you, Myre Baara Kaze, to help me."

Myre glowed like fire and ice, and faded halfway out. Alanis panicked, thinking that the woman really had died and now she'd gone and done it, but Myre's transparent form stood and fell forward into Alanis. The two forms melted together.

Sarah stepped forward, applauding softly.

Lirael looked down. The ground was a lot farther away than she remembered. What had happened? Erian had disappeared. But now that she looked around, Rana and Alanis were gone as well. Had they lost? The blonde and the dancer were picking themselves up now, and each one suddenly noticed the others.

"What did you do to Rana and Alanis?" Lirael demanded.

The blonde and the dancer jumped backwards in astonishment. "Lirael?" the blonde asked disbelievingly.

Lirael's jaw dropped. "You sound like Rana!"

"I am Rana!" the blonde cried.

"You don't look like her," the dancer chimed in.

Lirael and Rana/ blonde turned to stare at the dancer. "Alanis?"

"Of course!" the dancer said, looking a little uncomfortable. "Who else would I be?"

"None of you are quite yourselves at the moment," Sarah said. "You've...er...changed a little."

"What do you mean?" all three asked at once.

Sarah walked over to the huge mirror Alanis had made, and turned it to a better angle. The three walked up to the mirror and stood there, riveted, completely amazed.

Lirael was not Lirael. She was Erian Pyr Umbra. Her skin was jet-black, her flowing hair blood-red, her nails long and burgundy. A bright red, leather, strapless halter-top covered her ample bosom, and a short, slit, red leather skirt was belted around her waist with a black belt. Thigh-high red boots glittering with jet shards hid most of her legs, and her arms were covered by tight scarlet leather bracers.

Rana was just as not Rana. She had become Ceres Hi Kirame. The short golden curls, the heart-shaped face, the light sapphire eyes; none of these were Rana's traits. Long white ribbons streamed from a forest green choker, and stripes of green silk wrapped diagonally across her chest. Her skirt was a puffy white silken bell, like a white blossom, and her dark green high-heeled boots had small white flowers on them. The green silk of her top tied into a large bow on her back, and white ribbons were wrapped around her arms, from her shoulders to her wrists, where they tied off into smaller bows.

Alanis was certainly not Alanis. She was Myre Baara Kaze. Exotic, tilted amethyst eyes stared back at lush, honey-colored curves and long, silvery hair. Golden necklaces and chokers ringed her throat, and bracelets and anklets chimed lightly on her wrists and ankles. Puffy rose-colored silk "sleeves" danced from her forearms, bordered by golden bracelets. More rosy silk trimmed with gold outlined a heart-shaped strapless halter top and poofy gypsy pants. A long stripe of white silk trimmed with yet more gold hung from her waist. Delicate golden slippers completed the outfit.

"I'm impressed," Sarah said softly, coming up to them. "Even with all of the advantages I managed to give you, I was worried up until the very end. I've never seen four-year olds handle magic that well before."

"The question is," Erian/ Lirael said, "have you ever seen four-year olds handle magic?" Then she clapped her hands to her mouth. "Did I say that?"

"No, I did," Erian/ Lirael said.

"You're confusing me," Alanis/ Myre complained.

"It's quite simple," Ceres/ Rana explained. "We are part of you, so when you use our forms, we can talk through you."

"I'm not sure I like this," Lirael/ Erian said. "Erian has so many dark thoughts..."

"I certainly do like this," Rana/ Ceres said. "Ceres knows so much. It's fascinating."

"Can we talk to you when we're not using these forms?" Alanis/ Myre asked. And then, immediately afterwards, Myre/ Alanis said, "Yes, but we can't talk through you then. Only now."

"When Princesses get older, they can control their other sides more, and eventually can control them completely," Sarah said, trying not to smile at this unusual exchange and failing. "Perhaps you could introduce your new selves to each other? I'll just plug my ears."

Sarah promptly turned around and did so.

"Why does she do that?" Lirael/ Erian asked. "She told me not to tell her my name, either."

"It's obvious," said Ceres/ Rana. "If she can't hear us, neither can the Throne of Yord."

"Why does that matter?" Alanis/ Myre asked.

"Oh, do use your common sense," Erian/ Lirael snapped. "The Throne's one and only friend is Sarah. If it thought you were stealing her attention away from it—and you clearly are—it would get angry. Veeery angry."

"My name is Myre Baara Kaze."

"I'm Erian Pyr Umbra."

"I am called Ceres Hi Kirame."

"Really?" Rana/ Ceres asked. "Interesting names. Er...how can we go back to ourselves? Just will it," Ceres/ Rana said, "and call us when you wish to use our bodies and powers again."

Abruptly the three women melted down into three little girls. Lirael sighed and grabbed her hair. "I'm so glad I'm not a redhead."

Alanis was looking pensive. "I wish I could stay like Myre for a while longer. She's so much more impressive than I am."

"Thinking of the boys, are we?" Rana joked.

Alanis went furiously red. "N...no! Of course not!"

Lirael walked up to Sarah as Rana continued to tease Alanis. She tapped Sarah on the back, which was as far as she could reach. "Miss Sarah? We're do—"

The cathedral exploded into darkness. A huge red eye opened up above them. A howling wind began to blow.

Sarah unplugged her ears and shouted, "She was only telling me they were done! She wasn't—"

But Sarah never got to finish her sentence. Because her voice was suddenly drowned out by a truly monumental sound. It was like nothing they had ever heard before, and judging from the bewilderment they could feel inside of them, Erian, Ceres, and Myre had never heard anything like it either. It was a mind-blowing sound, a kind of cosmic scream. It sounded again, and this time the girls could hear words in the roaring sound.

**Mine!! Mine!! Mine!!
My friend!! Mine!! Mine!!**

**Stay away!! Mine!! Mine!!
MY FRIEND!!!!
SARAH IS MY FRIEND!!!!
GO AWAY!!!!**

Sarah turned around and threw her hand out at the three girls. Her mouth moved, but they couldn't hear her over the Throne of Yord. It was clear what she had done, however, because a moment later there was a flash of light, and the darkness was gone. They were back in the woods, with five spilled goblets, a lot of spilled rose petal essence and dissolved crystal dust, and the remnants of Lirael's mother's brooch.

6 - Return

“Whoof!” Lirael sat on the ground and gave herself a hard pinch. “Did we just do that?”

“Yes,” Rana said. “I can still hear Ceres. Look at the destruction we made!”

Then Alanis moaned.

“Oh no. Lirael...look.”

Lirael looked, and she almost died right then and there.

Her mother’s sapphire brooch was scattered around in five larger pieces and several smaller ones.

“I’m dead,” Lirael said fatalistically.

“You’re not,” Rana said. “Not yet.”

“How aren’t I?!” Lirael demanded, her voice rising hysterically. “Unless we find an exact replacement in half an hour, Mom’s gonna realize it’s gone and ask me where it’s gone! You know she uses truthspells to get the truth whenever she asks me a question!”

“Shield yourself from the truthspell!” Alanis suggested.

“We could put a pin on a rock and magic it to look like the brooch,” Rana said.

Lirael started. “That’s right, I could use magic to get out of this! I wonder...could we put the brooch back together with magic?”

“Let’s try,” Rana said. “Ceres says it should work, if the three of us boost each other and they back us up.”

Lirael considered. How could she talk to Erian Pyr Umbra? She looked inside of herself, as if she was looking for her magic, and immediately felt her there.

What is it?

My mother’s brooch. It broke. We want to use magic to fix it. Is that a good idea?

Probably. I don’t think anything bad can happen with something that small, but if it does, call for me and I’ll take over.

All right.

Lirael withdrew herself. “Erian says to go ahead.”

“So does Myre,” Alanis said. “How do we do this?”

Rana pushed Alanis to one side and Lirael to another, then stationed herself at another side. “Let’s hold hands,” she suggested. “It might help our magic combine.”

They took each other’s hands and closed their eyes.

“Imagine something being repaired, and drop it into your magic like we did before,” Rana ordered.

Lirael thought of two shadows melting seamlessly back into each other. Rana imagined a sapling growing from the stump of an old tree. Alanis thought about wind, flowing around a rock and then flowing back together again. They instinctively knew to use only images related to their magics. Who knew what would happen if Lirael tried to create light or if Rana tried to set something on fire? Their magic would probably rebel, and that probably wouldn’t be good.

The pieces of the brooch shone, then slowly moved back together and jumped back into the brooch. The pieces glowed again, and fused into each other.

The magic stopped. Lirael opened her eyes and saw the brooch, once again whole and perfect. She almost melted with relief. “I’m saved! Thanks, you guys!”

“We’d better go home,” Rana said practically. “Our parents will be wondering where we are.”

Alanis stared doubtfully at the goblets and the long streaks of bare ground the rose petal essence had left behind. "Where did that come from?"

Rana looked at the destruction as well and pursed her lips. "We'll have to use magic to clean this up," she decided. "It looks like the crystal dust made the rose petal essence acidic."

Lirael and Alanis looked at Rana in surprise.

"What?"

"You've never said anything quite like that before," Lirael said. "You sounded a lot older. Than usual, I mean."

Rana looked surprised as well. "I suppose I did. I wonder why?"

She concentrated for a moment. "Ceres says it's her influence. She says that our Spirits will influence our personalities, and we'll influence theirs. That's way people can 'control' them eventually; because their personalities merge and they think the same."

"NOOOO!!" Alanis shrieked.

Lirael and Rana jumped. "What?! What?!"

"The goblets!" Alanis wailed, holding one up. "The inside's all gone!"

Lirael looked cautiously inside. It seemed that the essence had eaten away the goblet. It was a mere shell of silver. The others were in the same state.

"I'll handle the goblets," Lirael said hurriedly, because Alanis seemed on the verge of tears. "Rana, grow the grass back."

Lirael took the goblet from Alanis' limp fingers and thought of silver mines, and goblets being carved out of huge chunks of silver. Her magic looked at the image doubtfully, then took it and flowed into the cup. Dark, shadowy liquid filled the cup, and then evaporated. When it had vanished, the cup was as good as new.

Alanis burst into tears of gratitude as Lirael started on the next one.

By the time the goblets had been repaired, Rana had regrown the grass and cleared up any signs of their having been there. Then she yanked at the book Legerdemain and Prestidigitation. "Let's take this back to the library. We'll say your mom finished the scarecrow spell."

"Not this thing again," Lirael groaned, picking up the other side.

Alanis looked hard at the book. It seemed a little different, but she couldn't figure out why. Then it dawned on her. "Hey, guys."

Lirael and Rana paused.

"Doesn't the book look a little...I don't know...aged? And dirty? And just...different?"

Lirael stared at the gold silk. It was faded and dusty, and the silver writing was a bit more tarnished than before as well.

"Clean it up while we haul it," Rana said.

Alanis brushed the cover off, and a huge cloud of dust rose up, making Rana and Lirael cough.

"But we were just gone for ten minutes or so!" Lirael protested through a hacking cough.

Rana was looking worried. "The library has cleaning spells...let's just take it back. I have a bad feeling about this."

* * *

"So you're back!" Mrs. Lyan said. "I was almost worried you'd run off with it."

"Why?" Alanis asked, puzzled.

"Well, it's due tomorrow," Mrs. Lyan explained. "You said you only needed it for one spell, but I suppose you found lots of extra uses for it?"

"It's due...tomorrow?" Rana asked faintly.

“Yes,” Mrs. Lyan said, realizing something was wrong. “Did you mistake the day?” Books were due a month (forty-two days) after they had been checked out from the library. Feeling faint, Lirael and Rana returned the book to Mrs. Lyan. Alanis had gone very pale. They walked out of the library on the verge of a nervous breakdown. “We’ve been gone for a whole month?” Lirael whispered. “What are we gonna tell our parents?!” Alanis whisper-screamed. “The truth, I think,” Rana said, looking sick. “How else will we explain being gone for a month?” “But we didn’t stay there for a month!” Lirael argued. “We didn’t fight for a day, let alone a month!” “Ceres says time must run differently in the Throne,” Rana said. Then she realized what she had just said. Her stomach gave a nasty jolt. “We were...inside of the Throne of Yord?!” “YOU WERE WHAT?!?!?!?” The shout almost stopped the three girls’ hearts. “Hi Mom,” Lirael said weakly. “Hi, Miss Lena,” Rana added. Alanis fainted dead away.

* * *

The house shook with the yells of three infuriated mothers. “OUT OF OUR MINDS WITH WORRY...ALL GONE, NO NOTE...NOBODY HAD SEEN YOU FOR WEEKS...DID YOU CARE? NEVER DID WE EXPECT...NEVER LEAVING THIS HOUSE AGAIN...YOU COULD HAVE DIED, YOU COULD HAVE BEEN KIDNAPPED, WE MIGHT NEVER HAVE SEEN YOU AGAIN...ABSOLUTELY DISGUSTED...HOW COULD YOU...” It seemed to go on forever. Lirael sat there with her face redder than Erian’s hair. Rana was whiter than paper and seemed twice as fragile. Alanis’ face was buried in her hands. And it wasn’t just their mothers. Miss Lena was sitting in a chair with a very serious look on her face. Miss Tiara was pacing back and forth behind her. A dark man was brooding in the corner. A small furry animal was staring at them with great reproach. Another man stood by the door, his silver hair glinting in the sun. “...SO, WHAT HAVE YOU GOT TO SAY FOR YOURSELVES?!?!?!?” There was a ringing silence. Lirael looked at Rana, who was trembling like a leaf in the wind. She looked at Alanis, who seemed ready to go into a coma. It seemed to be up to her. She gulped and tried to speak, but no words came out. She was shaking as well. She dove within herself and said to Erian, Help me be braver, please? Erian stirred within her. Then a warm, comforting heat spread through her body. Calm down, take a deep breath, and tell the truth, her Spirit advised. Be direct. Darkness never gets anywhere by sneaking around behind lies and deception. That route is only for evil and idiots. Lirael felt her tongue ease, and her heart rate began to return to normal. She still felt ready to throw up, but could talk now. Thank you SOOO much. “We saw...Sarah,” she said jerkily. Miss Tiara froze. The furry animal’s tail stood straight up. The man by the door lunged forward, and suddenly Lirael realized who he must be. This was Mr. Kagetsu, Sarah’s brother. “What?!” “We were...er...” Lirael realized she was about to get in a LOT of trouble, but trusted to her Spirit and dived on. “We were curious about Sarah, and we saw her when we let the banners fly. And we tried to talk to Miss Lena, but—”

Lirael's mother threw up her hands. "What a fabrication! Tell us the truth, young lady!"

Mr. Kagetsu put his hand on her shoulder. "What about my sister?!"

"We tried to tell Miss Lena, but she'd left on a mission," Lirael said, gulping again. "So we tried to figure out how to find her to talk to Sarah, because we wanted to ask her a lot of things."

"Why didn't you ask us?" Rana's mother demanded.

"You never told us anything!" Rana suddenly spoke up, still shaking, but suddenly determined.

"Nobody would! We're too young, we're too little, you'll tell us when we're older..."

"We asked everybody," Alanis added, taking her face out of her hands and sniffing. "Lirael tried to ask the Princesses and the Neutralizers, but they just snubbed her. And I asked other people, but they wouldn't talk to me. And Rana looked in books, but couldn't find anything."

"Curiosity killed the cat," Alanis' mother said, glaring at her daughter.

"But we couldn't find anything," Lirael continued. "So we...um...well...we wanted to try to get into the Plateau of Ribbons, so..."

"YOU WHAT?!?!"

"Sarah talked to us," Rana said, glowering. "She talked to us at the festival, and she talked to Lirael that night, so we thought she would talk to us again."

"She did WHAT?" Kagetsu was almost screaming now.

"Calm down, Kagetsu," Miss Tiara said, taking his arm firmly.

"She came to me in the middle of the night," Lirael said, remembering. "And she told me a lot about magic that nobody's ever told me before. And we got onto the Plateau during the Festival of Wind, but Sarah made us leave. She told us to come back another day." She didn't want to say what Sarah had REALLY said. "So we went to the library to get a book to help us disguise ourselves."

"But how would a..." Then a horrible look spread across Lirael's mother's face. "YOU TRIED TO USE MAGIC?!?!?!"

"More than tried," Rana said. "We DID. The spell didn't work, but we brought our Spirits here, and Sarah had to step in to save us."

After a moment, the dark man in the corner said, "Words fail me..."

Lirael plunged on. "Sarah took us into the Throne of Yord, and we had to fight our Spirits. Sarah tried to stop them, but she couldn't, so she gave us a few hints about how to use magic, and we beat them."

"Vait a meenite."

Alanis stared at the furry animal in fascination. "It talks!"

"Ov courze," the animal said. "Ah'm Japolo, Tiara's parrtrner." He had a very heavy accent. "Do u mean to sah tat you tree garls difeeted yorr Speerits aht tis age?"

"We most certainly did," Rana said. "We can show you."

"I'm not sure I believe this," Alanis' mother said.

"We'll prove it," Lirael said. "What did Ceres say?"

"She said we could bring them whenever we wanted if we called for them," Rana said. "Shall we?"

"Should we hold hands again?" Alanis suggested.

"Let's," Rana said. "Okay. Here we go."

"Erian Pyr Umbra!"

"Ceres Hi Kirame!"

"Myre Baara Kaze!"

BLAAAAAST. FLAAAAASH. SHIIING.

There was a blast of fire, wind, and petals.

Dark lightning crackled over Lirael, and exploded into a globe of darkness, shimmering with all the colors of the rainbow. Rose vines wrapped up around Rana, and she was enveloped in a flower bud. Alanis was surrounded in a cone of frozen air, which solidified into a crystalline icicle. Then the dark

bubble burst, the bud bloomed into a white flower, the icicle shattered—and Alanis' mother screamed.

The little girls had been replaced by beautiful women.

“Now do you believe us?” Lirael/ Erian demanded.

The dark man in the corner looked interested for the first time. “It seems that they were not lying after all.”

* * *

Things had whirled by until Lirael's head spun. They had abruptly become the three youngest Princesses ever, younger even than Miss Tiara had been. Lesson choices, lesson times, weapon choices, exclamations, classes, questions, and tests were thrust on them in a matter of hours. Only the combined might of three mothers, three fathers, Miss Tiara, Miss Lena, Japolo, Leon, and Mr. Kagetsu managed to get rid of all the curious visitors, and then Lirael, Rana, and Alanis had to sit through dinner while all eleven of the above belabored them with still more questions.

Finally Lirael managed to plead a headache from all the excitement and the three girls escaped to Lirael's room. Rana flopped onto Lirael's bed with a sigh.

“I really do have a headache from all of that.”

“So do I,” Lirael said from the floor.

“Me three,” Alanis said, sitting on Lirael's chair and spinning herself around. “And tomorrow will be even worse. We'll be mobbed in the middle of our lessons.”

“Lessons, shmlessons,” Rana said disdainfully. “Magic seems like a trial-and-error thing to me. The ways of using it are very simple. You just think of what you want and let your magic grab it.”

Ceres laughed equally disdainfully inside of Rana. You have that right. Magic is a wondrous thing that is limited only by your imagination. There's nothing they can teach you that you don't already know.

Rana repeated this to the other two. Alanis was barely listening. She was playing around with some of the brushes and mirrors and barrettes on Lirael's vanity table. Then she pulled a long white ribbon from beneath a mirror—and dropped it with a yelp.

“What?!” Lirael jumped up. Rana snapped her head up, startled.

“That ribbon!” Alanis screamed.

Lirael looked at it. It lay innocently on the floor. But it was far from innocent. Black drops were welling up on it.

“IT'S ONE OF SARAH'S RIBBONS!!!” all three girls shrieked.

Black magic exploded up from the ribbon and snatched at them, forming long tentacles of black power. All three girls screamed again and tried to get to the door, but the tentacles snatched them effortlessly and dragged them inexorably towards the ribbon, which began to glow a bloody red.

“HELP!!” Alanis screamed, throwing her magic at the door. It shuddered, and creaked loudly as Rana threw hers at it as well.

“LIRAEEL!!!” Rana sobbed as she was yanked towards the ribbon.

Lirael grabbed her panic, threw it into the pool of her magic, and let out a huge blast of fiery power which blew the door off its hinges.

Miss Lena and Miss Tiara were in the doorway. For a moment they stood there, speechless, and then with twin screams they leapt forward. Tendrils of green and blue magic jumped from their hands and wrapped around the three girls.

Japolo appeared around Miss Tiara's neck like a furry wrap and a silver blast of power burst from his collar to snatch Alanis. Leon was suddenly behind Lena, and white power wrapped around Rana. Mr. Kagetsu was there as well, throwing his hands at the black tentacles, draining their power as only a

Neutralizer could. Their mothers and fathers were also there, and magenta-and-purple fires flashed from them to snatch their daughters.

The Throne of Yord recoiled from this onslaught, then pressed back with a vengeance. The tentacles turned to grasping black hands which pulled twice as powerfully as the tentacles, then to pure black ribbons, mirror images of Sarah's, which slashed upwards, severing the hold the three girls' parents had created while still dragging the girls inexorably backwards. Alanis was almost at the original ribbon now, which had wriggled into a circle and formed a blood-red portal. Alanis' foot disappeared into it...then her other foot...then her waist...then...

Alanis disappeared inside of the portal of the Throne, and abruptly it gave a tremendous pull—and with a long, terrible scream, Alanis, Lirael, Rana, Tiara, Lena, and Japolo were yanked into the portal of magic. They were falling down a tunnel of bloody magic, pulsing with fury and vengeance, draped with horrible white ribbons, huge black eyes staring mockingly at them. Falling, falling, falling...and then they landed with a smack, and all was still.

7 - Gram

They were in a huge golden cathedral. They recognized it. It was the place where they had fought their Spirits.

But it had changed. They were on the floor before the dais and the stained glass window. To the left was a massive black pipe organ. To the right was an equally massive silver pipe organ. Strings hung from the ceiling like the web of a colossal spider.

And Yord was there. They could tell this time. Sarah could not be felt. Yord was everywhere, glaring hatefully at them. Yord did NOT like them. They were trying to take Sarah away from it.

Lirael painfully dragged herself upright. Rana forced herself to her wobbly feet. Alanis barely managed to raise her head.

Suddenly one of the black pipe organ's keys thumped down, and three quick notes jarred their bones. Then all was still. There was nobody at the organ.

Then the organ thumped the key again. Dum dum DAH...

In the nearly deafening silence that followed the organ's (extremely loud) notes, Lirael noticed a vague, eerie, trembling note. She looked up, and saw that the strings on the ceiling were vibrating, as if strummed lightly by phantasmal fingers. But there was nothing there.

"I'm scared," Alanis moaned, very softly.

"I'm petrified," Rana said, even more softly.

"I wanna go home," Lirael said, shocked at how much her voice was shaking.

Alanis managed to sit upright. "Me too..."

Dum dum DAH...

Then a hoarse voice called, "Are you girls all right?"

Miss Tiara and Miss Lena staggered into view. One of Miss Tiara's ponytails was spilling over her shoulder. Her scarlet leather outfit was ragged and torn; she rather looked as if she had been dragged through a briar patch. Miss Lena was in worse shape; the pale silk of her sleeves had been shredded to ribbons, and the purple satin of her gown was as ragged as Miss Tiara's leather. Both Princesses seemed to be in a very bad condition, and the three little girls weren't much better.

Then the organ rang out again. Dum dum DAH...

And the other organ began to let out a high, shrill, lasting note. The strings above trembled down a scale.

Then the black organ began to plink like a piano, tripping softly down five notes. The other organ repeated the five notes in a ghostlike wail. The black organ plinked five more notes, and the silver organ wailed them back. This happened again, and then the silver organ let out a new wail, and the black organ began to plink again. The strings above groaned up and down like violins, and the stained glass window vibrated like a gong.

The lights began to dim, and finally, only a soft radiance from the stained glass windows remained. Then the girls screamed as a high scream came from the strings above, weaving up and down through the notes of a mysterious song. Combined with the eerie half-light, it was terrifying.

"Miss Tiara, get us out of here," Alanis sobbed. "I don't like it...I want to go home!"

"I can't," Miss Tiara said, her voice shaking, but her face quite composed. "The Throne of Yord won't let me. I can't do anything here."

“Not even if I boosted you?” Miss Lena inquired.

Miss Tiara laughed mirthlessly as the strings squealed. “I’d need the entire Guardian World—at least!—to contradict the Throne of Yord.”

“I’m sorry,” Rana said, biting back tears. “It’s our fault that you two are here.”

“Nonsense,” Miss Lena said briskly. “If we can’t transport ourselves out of here, Tiara, then we’ll have to fight.”

“We fought the Throne of Yord before,” Miss Tiara reminded her. “We lost.”

“Yes, but the Throne had weakened us by turning us against each other,” Miss Lena said. “This time we are full, if not rested, and are free to use our powers to the best of our abilities. Not to mention that we have three other Princesses protecting our backs and are older, wiser, and stronger than we were the first time. That’s besides the fact Sarah seems to like the three of them and you, and has evidently collected enough power to send herself outside of the Throne. I would say we’d be hard pressed to ask for any more advantages against this foe.”

Miss Tiara looked dubious, but nodded resignedly as the strings gave a particularly loud scream. “Stay close, girls. We don’t know what could happen.”

Miss Tiara staggered backwards as Lirael, Rana, and Alanis slammed into her at high speed. “Oof! Steady!”

“What we need to find out,” Miss Lena said quietly as the organs screeched at them, “is how the Throne will decide to attack us.”

“It used Sarah last time,” Miss Tiara suggested.

Miss Lena made a face. “Let’s hope it doesn’t again.”

The suspense was killing them. The organs wailed on, the strings above thrummed, the stained glass shook with occasional gongs.

Suddenly Alanis screamed, “What are you waiting for?! Get on with it!!”

The music cut off instantly.

For some reason, everyone’s eyes were drawn irresistibly to the dais in front of the stained glass Eye of Yord. And as they watched, a shadow materialized there.

Alanis tried to hide herself behind Miss Lena. “I didn’t really mean it,” she whispered.

The shadow stepped closer, heels clacking on the floor. Miss Tiara had opened the magic eye on her palm. Miss Lena’s flute was at her lips. Lirael was twisting her hair around her fingers. Rana seemed unruffled and serene, but fine beads of sweat trickled down her face. Alanis, as previously said, was trying to pretend she didn’t exist.

Then the floor glowed with a bluish-golden light—and the figure was revealed.

Miss Tiara gasped.

“Gram?!”

It was immediately obvious that this man was not quite a man. His right side seemed normal enough, but his left was a metallic monster. His leg and arm were clawed metal paws. The left half of his face was covered in the same greenish-yellow metal with a large, staring green eye that had a dark slash shaped like a lightning bolt straggling down from it. A thin circlet set with a black gem was on his forehead, almost hidden by his long hair; bluish-lavender in shade, with perhaps a hint of pink. His clothes were rough and ordinary, but black ribbons writhed slowly around them, like malicious snakes.

Miss Tiara seemed to be in shock. She said the strange word again; “Gram?!”

“Who’s this Gram-person?” Alanis whispered.

“Tiara’s first partner,” Miss Lena answered.

Rana gasped. “She had another Partner?! Why didn’t I know that? Why isn’t it in the library? Spill the details!”

“Rana!” Lirael hissed. “Can that wait until we’re not in the clutches of something that wants to kill us?!”

“Gram was Tiara’s very first Partner,” Miss Lena said, seemingly ignoring Lirael. “He loved her, but she had eyes only for Kagetsu. He tried to stop Kagetsu from leaving with the Throne, but Kagetsu neutralized him and escaped. That was when Tiara summoned Japolo.”

“He’s our opponent?” Rana inquired in disbelief.

“No!” Miss Lena said quickly. “It is the Throne of Yord! It may be using Gram’s form, but it is not Gram. Gram is dead; Kagetsu destroyed him.”

Miss Tiara seemed to half-shake off her daze. “Yes...yes, you’re...you’re absolutely right,” she replied grimly. “That...is the Throne of Yord.”

Gram (or the Throne of Yord) took another step, and his metal foot clinked on the floor. “Yes and no,” he replied breathily. “I am no longer animated by Tiara’s magic, so I am not quite the same...but I am Gram. Kagetsu—” he spat out the name like a curse— “merely dissolved the magic holding me in this world. I remained alive, and I stand before you now.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Miss Lena urged. “If he isn’t sustained by you, he isn’t the same Gram.”

“I was not created by your magic,” Gram said. “I was merely given form by your magic. With it or without it, I am still Gram.”

“No he isn’t!” Rana cried. “If the Throne of Yord shaped him, he has the Throne’s wills on him! He is different! No magic can bring back the dead!”

“Only I never died!” Gram said sharply. “Haven’t I just finished telling you? But even if I had,” here his face contorted briefly, “would you have cared? I watched you as you found my jewel—all that remained of me—and then, what did you do? You summoned that absurd, accented ferret and went after Kagetsu! When you returned, you were married to him! When did you spare even a minute to think of me? No, I did not die—but you thought I had, and you did not mourn!”

“But she kept your jewel!” Miss Lena shouted at Gram. “Kept it, and imbued it upon Japolo, so that she would always remember you, so long as Japolo lived!”

Gram’s mutated face twisted into a terrible smile. “Japolo? You mean this?”

He spread the fingers of his metal hand—and revealed Japolo, his small body broken and bloodied. His narrow chest barely rose or fell, and blood was cascading from his throat, soaking his tail. Gram took him by the throat with two fingers, and gave him a brutal shake. Miss Tiara screamed.

“JAPOLO!!”

“It’s another trick!” Alanis cried, although her voice shook. “It must be!”

“Have it your way!” Gram shouted at her. “If you believe he is a trick, you will not object to my snapping his weak, traitorous, replacing little neck!”

Rana concentrated on Japolo.

Suddenly Japolo’s eyes snapped open. With a quick, sudden jerk, he twisted his head impossibly sideways and sank his teeth into Gram’s hand.

Gram’s face momentarily contorted in pain. Then he raised his hand over his head and threw Japolo onto the ground. There was a loud, sickening snapping noise. One of Japolo’s fangs was wrenched from his mouth in a spray of blood, imbedded into Gram’s finger. Lirael, Rana, and Alanis screamed.

Fury and hatred filled Gram’s face, mingled with triumph. He set his clawed foot lightly on Japolo and pressed. Blood gushed from Japolo’s mouth as he tried to breathe.

In one moment, the three little girls exchanged hate-and-terror-filled glances. Then they acted en masse. Lirael threw images of wolves, panthers, tigers, manticores, and katra into her magic. Rana burst into flowers and reformed diving at Gram’s leg. Alanis dissolved into wind and dropped onto Gram’s shoulder with a piercing scream.

As Lirael’s body warped into a strange combination of giant canine and feline, Gram overbalanced

and fell over beneath Rana and Alanis' weight. Miss Lena immediately trilled on her flute, and Japolo was teleported into Miss Tiara's arms. Rana was calling Gram every name she could think of as she wrestled with his leg—Alanis settled for ear-bursting shrieks into Gram's ear as she tried to lock his arm to his side.

However, two little girls were absolutely no match for Gram. His fleshly arm stretched like elastic and grabbed both Rana and Alanis around the neck. He hoisted them into the air as he struggled to his feet, and channeled his power of lightning through his arm. Electricity zapped through both little girls, setting their hair on end. Rana gritted her teeth and tried to force him away; Alanis screamed in agony.

Then there was the pounding of paws.

Lirael the giant canine/ feline lunged for Gram and knocked him over again. Her heavy paws crushed his arms at the shoulder; her jaws locked around his throat. Her momentum carried them into the stained glass window. Rana and Alanis dropped. Miss Tiara shouted a strange word, and the eye on her hand blinked; the air around them whirled, forming cushions that lowered them slowly and softly to the ground. Although Rana's hair was smoking and Alanis' dress was missing pieces, they were still conscious, and not too badly off despite their brush with electricity.

Lirael the monster growled and shook Gram like a rag doll in her immense jaws. She tried not to think about his blood oozing over her teeth or the strange snaps that were accompanying her shaking, because it was making her feel sick. She pretended she was a maraca and shook her head until her brain was knocking on the sides of her skull. Then she spat Gram out.

"Gra~am," Miss Tiara moaned.

"Japolo!" Miss Lena shouted at her.

Tears trickled slowly down her cheeks as Miss Tiara pressed her magical eye to Japolo's chest and her lips to his forehead. The easiest way for a Princess to heal her Partner was with a kiss. The ferret glowed with blue magic, and his many wounds began to weave themselves closed. Soon he unconsciously curled up in her arms and let out a small, contented snore.

"If only it was that easy for us," Miss Lena muttered.

Lirael shrank back into her normal self and spat, trying to forget the taste of Gram in her mouth. "I need a mint."

"Coming right up." Rana pointed into her hand, and a few green leaves materialized.

"Thanks," Lirael said sincerely, chewing the leaves.

"Was that it?" Alanis asked. "It seemed too easy."

"You would rather it was harder?" Rana asked disbelievingly.

"No, just...if the Throne of Yord's so all-powerful, how could we defeat it so easily?"

"An excellent point," Miss Lena mused. "Gram must not have been its true challenge. Be on your guard. I have no idea what could happen next."

The second attack, however, was a complete surprise. Because it did not come from another front.

Their only warning was a soft, strange, echoing sound and a short gust of wind. Then Lirael and Rana were pulled irresistibly forward. Alanis screamed. Miss Lena jumped as a flesh-colored whip lashed towards her feet.

Gram pulled himself up from the floor, his head lolling slightly, deep teethmarks in his neck. His green eye was fixed on Lirael, who (it was now obvious) had been yanked off her feet by his arm, which had split into several whips which were now writhing along the floor.

"You'll die for that, little girl," Gram whispered, a fine trickle of blood running down from his mouth to join the flood gushing from his neck.

Then the song of a flute sliced the air like silver, and an invisible blade severed the whips dragging Rana and Lirael to their certain doom. Gram reeled with a scream as the magic flickered at him and slashed across his chest. Shreds of cloth clung to it, revealing it to be, not a blade at all, but a sparkling

thread of magic.

Gram whipped his arm up and around at Miss Lena, and his arm split like fraying yarn, whips lashing out at Miss Lena from every direction.

Miss Lena was hovering on a thin ribbon of magic, her fingers flying across her flute, and as the whips homed in on her she began an intricate ballet in midair, dodging every whip almost effortlessly. The twinkling thread trailed from her piping flute and spun around her like a streamer as she ducked, twirled, and flipped, graceful as a dancer. Then Miss Lena unleashed a trill, climbing the scale with impossible speed—and the thread contracted from where she had woven it around the whips, and severed them all.

Gram screamed again, but had neglected to consider his other foes. Lirael and Rana were up again, and when the gem on Gram's forehead began to shine, they were ready. As lightning exploded from the gem and sped at Miss Lena, Lirael grabbed for her magic.

Miss Lena was suddenly surrounded by a powerful barrier of pure magic, alight with the castings of a thousand shadows. The lightning glanced uselessly from it and left a hole in the ground. Rana and Alanis grabbed Lirael's shoulder and lent her raw power—Lirael felt them dropping into her, Rana a blossoming jungle, Alanis a raging tempest, and felt the solidity of nature and the radiance of the wind merge with her vast power of darkness—and the small, black-haired girl unleashed a blast of iridescent energy that blew Gram into the wall.

But Gram was still not done for. Because when he peeled himself from the wall again, blood streaming ever more copiously down his throat, there were two eyes staring at the group. One was the staring green eye that they had seen before. But his other eye, the eye that not even Miss Tiara had ever seen open...

The "white" was blacker than the depths of midnight. The pupil was redder than the blood coursing from his wounds. And the iris was the color of fire, reds and oranges and yellows flickering around the blood-red pupil like a hellish inferno.

Before Rana, Lirael, or Alanis could move, his eye had widened just slightly—and immediately all three were blown backwards with a triple shriek of pain, singed by a flame that was not there, struck by a hand that did not exist.

Miss Tiara screamed. "Lirael!! Rana!! Alanis!!"

Miss Lena returned to the ground and stared at Gram. "Tiara, it's time."

Miss Tiara's eyes were wet, but her voice was resolute. "Yes, you're right."

Miss Tiara crossed her arms in front of her. Miss Lena held her arms out away from her.

"Powerful spirits of the Guardian World, show me the source of your mystic energy!" Miss Tiara shouted.

"Messengers that bear the legends of antiquity..." Miss Lena chanted, bringing her hands in front of her.

"Fulfill your contract with me! Bring forth the powers of the Scriptures and place them on Tiara!" Miss Tiara shouted, drawing a circle around her head with her arms. The circle shone with magic, and symbols appeared, drawn over her body within seconds.

"Come forth to this symbol with your powers...and offer those powers to me, Lena!" Miss Lena raised her arms into the air and linked her fingers together.

"Fulfill your duty! I command you! Heil Endo Sabbath!!" Miss Tiara dropped her arms and a tornado of magic whirled up around her.

"I order you to fulfill your contract! Helia Sum Lade!!" Tentacles of power wrapped up around Miss Lena, whirling madly for a moment before snapping tightly like a cocoon around her.

Magic exploded out from them in a great wave. The tornado whirled up, thinner and thinner, and from the top emerged a lady with amber eyes and red hair like two huge wings, clad in tight black leather, magical runes flowing upon her forehead. The tentacular cocoon quivered slightly, then reversed its

creation and soon disappeared, revealing another lady with long golden hair and eyes the shade of amethysts. Violet cloth swirled and twisted over her body.

Heil Endo Sabbath whirled up into the air and plunged down towards Gram. Gram stared up at her, and his bizarre, never-before-opened eye met her amber ones stonily. Then the pupil widened just a fraction of an inch; and a column of bleeding flame exploded up around him and flew to meet Heil.

Spirit and column collided in midair.

Heil was thrown back by the sheer force of the flames, tinged with boiling blood that was dripping onto the floor. Although Heil seemed unharmed, droplets of blood from the flames (flames bleeding?) had splattered her face and chest. Incredibly fortunately, Heil Endo Sabbath was a Spirit of fire and darkness, and neither the searing flames nor the boiling blood could harm her. However, the simple force of colliding with ten tons of flame sent her flying backwards, into a wall.

Gram's tentacular arms reached for her.

A storm of violet tentacles exploded upwards and attacked Gram's own. Gram shrieked a violent curse and turned his attention back to his other foe.

The tentacles had all come from Helia Sum Lade. The violet silk covering her body had somehow fired long, thick streamer-like ribbons of cloth (without detracting from the whole, which was good, because if Helia had a mere half-inch less on than she already did, she would be showing Far Too Much [as Lirael's mother would say]) which were now grappling with Gram's "arms".

It was then that Heil dug herself out of the wall and lunged again.

Lightning crackled and rose up around Gram, snickering along his appendages and radiating out into the air like malevolent breath on a winter morning. Helia's cloth tentacles fizzled and fried—she was forced to release her hold on Gram before the electricity could catch her on fire. Seeing her friend in distress, Heil dived, and a burst of golden flames surrounded her like a shield.

Then, as she came within ten feet of the lightning, she fell.

Imagine the force of static electricity created by rubbing a balloon against your head multiplied by several hundred times, focused on one single person. Heil's hair stood straight on end; and Heil plummeted, because her hair was her wings. Without her wings, she could not fly; and with her hair standing straight up, she had no wings.

Heil slammed into the ground and sat dazedly up, her hair sticking out in a fuzzy corona about her. Had Helia or Gram had a sense of humor, they might have laughed. Gram's strange, inverted eye flickered to the side, looking at Heil, and the pupil began to contract.

Then a small silver blur came zigzagging out of nowhere.

Japolo, wreathed in silver flames, went flying into Gram's face and gouged deeply into his eyes. Gram shrieked and lashed out with an explosion of tentacles. Japolo hissed something incomprehensible and the silver fire about him flickered into a shielding globe of blazing silver.

Gram shrieked again as the silver flames exploded up in his face. He tried to rip Japolo off his face with seven different tentacles, but Japolo's silver shield flared brightly, and any tentacle that touched it was toasted.

A single, pure note sounded.

It started low, almost inaudible. But it grew, and grew, and grew, cutting through the melee with the clarity of perfection. It was just a single note; one long, pure, perfect, sweet tone, climbing in volume with every second.

It was Helia Sum Lade. Her tentacles were moving, weaving slow, sensuous symbols around her willowy body—her crimson mouth was open, releasing the long, pure, perfect note that did not die away, but grew louder and louder until the glass of the stained glass window was vibrating with it.

Heil pressed her palms against her ears and screamed, trying to drown out the sound. Japolo bounced away from Gram, trying to stuff his paws into his ears. Gram swung round and stared at Helia.

The note was by now so loud that the very ground rumbled with it. The giant stained glass window cracked. The strings above screeched together in protest, but nobody could hear them. In their unconscious sleep, Lirael, Rana, and Alanis covered their ears and rolled over, trying to escape it. But it was Gram that the force of Helia's song was focused upon. For now it was a song—Helia's voice began to rise and fall, alternating between notes higher than the tallest mountain and lower than the center of the planet. The entire cathedral shook with her voice.

Gram shrieked, a silent shriek that was far from silent, and seemed to thin, stretch slightly, become tenuous, then vaporous. Then he was gone.

But the mighty effect of Helia's voice was not over yet. Just as Gram disappeared, the entire cathedral shattered as if it were made of glass. It was like the sky breaking—huge, sharp-edged pieces fell, the entire cathedral dissolving into glassy shards that melted into darkness and became, instead, a huge forest of briars, black and thorny, a turquoise-and-amethyst sky covered by lace of clouds stretching above them. And Sarah was standing there, a luminescent candle amid the darkness of the brambles.

8 - Meirene

Heil dragged herself painfully to her feet, morphing back into Tiara as she did so. "Sarah!"

Sarah held up her hand. Her face was grim. "Stop, Tiara."

Tiara froze. "Why?"

"There is much I need to tell you, and there is very little time to say it in," Sarah replied. "You must listen carefully to what I have to say."

"Sarah—" Tiara attempted.

"Tiara, there are things I must tell you which other mortals have never heard," Sarah said urgently. "Please, I know this will sound like a history lesson, but you must let me explain what is going on to you."

Tiara looked like she wanted to protest, but she did not, and Sarah's grim expression softened just a little.

"Yord is a Demon, one of the great Powers of the universe that manipulates a Force of Nature. They are not called Demons because they are evil, but because they are mysterious creatures no mortal knows much about—and anything we mortals know nothing about, we consider as an evil force.

"Yord controls the forces of Magic in the universe, which is why I, as his vassal, have the task of keeping the lines of magic straight. The lines radiate from his being and pervade the universe, bringing magic to every planet, every sun, every drop of dew. We of the Guardian World have the unique ability to tap into the force of Magic and weave it as is our will."

Tiara opened her mouth to speak, but Sarah continued quickly.

"Yord is not the only Demon. There are many others, and their stars and planets are named after them. The Demon Earth, who controls gravitation; the Demon Saturn, who controls dimension; the Demon Betelguese, who controls antimatter—but these need not concern you. The Demon who is of concern to us is named Meirene."

"Meirene?!"

Tiara and Lena whirled. The three little girls had risen, clinging to each other for support. Lirael, who had just spoken, coughed and continued, "That's the lady who was on the Plateau of Ribbons!"

Sarah nodded briefly and continued, "Meirene and Yord fought each other many, many eons ago, and this planet was their battleground. The battle raged on for decades, with each Demon taking the form of an avatar. Meirene became a golden-haired goddess with aquamarine skin and armor of pure light, and Yord became a form of darkness and eyes. Yord triumphed over Meirene and swallowed her power, placing it into a sword called the Vaineire, which he sealed upon the Plateau of Ribbons."

Alanis blanched, remembering the visions they had had during the Festival of Wind.

"But Meirene formulated a plan to retake the Vaineire," Sarah went on. "She cast a powerful glamour over the people of the Guardian World, a glamour that made them believe that she, Meirene, had actually won this planet and then given it to the Throne of Yord as a gift. You celebrate this event each year, in the Festival of the Wind."

The ground beneath them shook, ever so lightly.

"Although Yord ignored it, in truth, the power of our belief in the Wind Dancer of the Festival did indeed strengthen Meirene, bit by miniscule bit. Slowly, over many thousands of years, Meirene amassed a great power, augmented by power borrowed or stolen from many of the other Demons. And

one month ago, on the day of the Festival of the Wind, this great effort paid off, and Meirene stole onto the Guardian World and took the Vaineire back from Yord. Yord was careless and overconfident—he did not believe Meirene had the power to break the seal he had placed upon it. But she did. And with its breaking, all of her great powers have returned to her.”

“The Festival!” Tiara exclaimed. “Lena and I were on a mission—we had no idea that anything—”

The ground began to quiver. Lirael cast worried glances at Rana and Alanis, and all three moved closer to Miss Lena.

“For a month, Meirene has been quiet, making no move or motion,” Sarah said, speaking faster now as the ground continued to vibrate. “And Yord is preoccupied with all of you instead of the true danger of Meirene; he is very possessive, and he does not want me to be friends with you.”

“Then I think he’s a big meanie!” said Lirael boldly.

Sarah smiled slightly, but worriedly. “Tiara...Lena...my friends, please take these girls from here. Tiara, tell my brother I love him if...” Sarah stopped, then said with forced lightness, “...I mean, when you see him again.”

“How can we get out of here?” Tiara demanded. “And...is there still no—”

“No,” Sarah interrupted as the ground began to groan softly. “I know what you are going to ask, Tiara, and don’t. Take the girls and teleport, as if this were just another world and you’re returning home. Go quickly, before—”

Then a sudden gale ripped through the briars, pulling at them all. In it was a hint of strong power, power that tasted—no, smelled—no, felt—no, was simply imbued with threat.

“Teeahra!” Japolo barked, his accent blurring his voice even worse than usual.

“Grab hold of me, girls!” Miss Lena shouted, gathering Lirael, Rana, and Alanis closer to her. “Tiara, we must go!”

Miss Tiara grabbed Miss Lena’s hand, and there was a great sparkling blast of magic that obscured their vision briefly. In it they could feel the passionate burn of Miss Tiara’s magic coupled with the swirling silkiness of Miss Lena’s, and almost at once the outlines of Lirael’s house reappeared through the sparkles of teleportation magic.

Then there was a wrench. Another strong wind began to blow, this one cold and biting like the teeth of a winter wolf. The outlines of Lirael’s room were snatched away, and the girls knew instinctively that something had gone wrong. Something had gone terribly wrong.

* * *

They plowed into the rocky ground.

Immediately Miss Lena flung out her hand and conjured an orb of air. If she had not reacted so quickly, all five of them probably would have died immediately.

They were standing on the face of a tiny moon, barely three miles wide. It was orbiting rapidly about a large blue jewel of a planet, across which winds and clouds tore across at a feverish pace. Farther away they could see the dazzling brightness of one—no, two suns, one a yellowish berry and the other a large red tennis ball. And all around them spread the darkness of space, pinpointed by the diamond stars.

All this Lirael’s bewildered mind took in at a glance. Then she saw the other light.

There was a light glimmering on the horizon of the tiny moon. It expanded, shimmering angrily, and somehow familiarly. Then Lirael realized what the light was coming from, just as Meirene burst from the horizon like an avenging sun.

She was far more spectacular than she had been the last time Lirael had seen her. Then her beauty and brilliance had been dulled and somehow wanting—now they were back in full flower. Her yards of thick golden hair, like spun sunlight, flowed across her skin, pale and delicate as a fine aquamarine. Her

armor shone brighter than the suns, and in her face, her jet-black eyes were wild and taunting.

In her hand she carried the crystalline sword, the Vaineire.

“So, children of Yord!” she cried, her voice the harsh wind that had torn them from Lirael’s house. “I have found you at last! You, who know the truth.”

Paper-white, Rana squeezed Lirael’s hand until it hurt. “Please, Miss Meirene,” she said, her clear voice strong as a curving vine, “would you let us go home?” Lirael marveled at Rana’s composure—ordinarily, she would have been a blubbering, endlessly-repeating wreck. Was Ceres strengthening her, as Erian had Lirael herself? “Our parents are surely worried about us.”

“It would not do for you to return to the Guardian World, my dear child,” Meirene said mockingly. “I fear you know far too much. Of course, I could perhaps wipe your memory—but memory charms are so difficult to remember. I’m afraid the only spell that springs to mind is the Curse of Flame.”

Rana swallowed hard. The Curse of Flame brought about untold pain, usually causing insanity, before causing its victim’s blood to erupt into flames.

Meirene raised the Vaineire and lazily traced a rune in the air, one which Tiara recognized as being the first in the series that would bring about the Curse of Flame. She raised her arms to call for Heil Endo Sabbath again—but Lena caught her hand.

“What are you doing?” she hissed, her brown eyes burning. “You know you don’t have enough power left to transform. Neither do I. We cannot use our Spirits!”

“We have to protect the girls,” Tiara said stubbornly.

“And what will we be if we burn ourselves up trying to morph?” Lena snapped. “Burnt husks, unable to shield the girls with even our bodies!”

Tiara ground her teeth together in frustration. Meirene, watching her, sketched another rune of the Curse of Flame, a cruel smile growing on her face.

Then Erian Pyr Umbra moved inside of Lirael. Encouraging, empowering warmth spread through her body, and the little black-haired girl knew what she must do.

“We can fight her instead.”

Tiara and Lena both swung around to stare at Lirael. “What?!?!”

“We can fight her!” Lirael said. “Rana and Alanis and me. We have our Spirits and most of our power still! We’ll fight!”

“By ‘we’, Lirael, do you mean ‘you and me’?” Alanis whispered.

“Know any other definitions for the word ‘we’?”

“Absolutely not!” Lena exploded. “You must not fight this opponent! She is a Demon, far beyond any of our powers!”

But Tiara and Rana were both nodding, though their faces were very grim.

“You have to let us, Miss Lena,” said Rana.

“Face it, Lena, the only hope for them and us is if they fight,” Tiara said. “We may not win even with their help—but we definitely can’t win without it.”

“And if we don’t win, we’ll die!” Alanis squeaked.

Miss Lena looked at them all for a long moment, then yielded. “All right. We’ll fight her together, then.”

“Are you finished yapping?” Meirene demanded. “Finish your conversation in the next world!” She traced a final rune and thrust her sword out at them.

Quickly Miss Tiara flung out her hands. Smoothly Miss Lena brought her flute to her lips. The seven runes of the Curse of Flame rebounded off an invisible wall, shook themselves like dogs, and flung back against the barrier Miss Tiara and Miss Lena had created.

Lirael, Rana, and Alanis took each other’s hands. Magic cocooned them.

The barrier of the two older Princesses wrapped back and around them, creating a sphere of

protection. The runes of the Curse continued to slam against the barrier, and were now sending showers of red sparks when they collided, sparks which left marks like burns over the ground and the invisible shield.

Then Erian Pyr Umbra cast her own runes at Meirene's.

There was a shuddering scream of an explosion that vaporized the Curse of Flame and shattered Tiara and Lena's wall.

"Decent for a child of Yord!" Meirene exclaimed with mock surprise. "Then how do you take this?" From the Vaineire sprayed a shower of icicles like broadswords.

Myre Baara Kaze pirouetted and kicked out faster than the eye could see. Sheets of wind arrowed from her leg and struck the icicles head on, shattering them into diamond dust.

"You are capable. But the numbers are not even," Meirene said. "For five of you, we must have..."

Meirene doubled. Then she doubled again. Then again. And again. And again...

"At least fifty of me!" the Meirenes roared, each brandishing the Vaineire.

"But the numbers still aren't even!" Tiara protested.

"But now they are in my favor," Meirene #36 shrugged.

"That isn't fair for us!" Alanis/ Myre yelled.

"Who cares about you?" Meirene #22 questioned.

"Certainly not us!" they all snickered. Then they raised their swords as one and slashed straight down.

The moon itself split.

Meirene floated in space, laughing so hard her entire body shook. Those pathetic children of Yord. Surely they had realized no mortal could prevail against a Demon, certainly not one in her native system? When bolstered by an artifact such as the Vaineire?

Meirene kicked a drifting piece of moonrock with a scornful boot. The only thing she had been hoping was that she might have gotten those Spirits' blood on the Vaineire. Spirit blood had all sorts of useful properties, and was so difficult to get.

Then a burning she had felt before lashed across her back.

Meirene was flung face-first into half of what had once been the moon of her planet. Jet-black blood sprayed from a gaping wound in her back, a wound that could only have been caused by...

Meirene raised hate-filled eyes to space. A massive, formless entity of black darker than the void about it covered with crimson eyes that undulated and roiled across its surface boiled there above her. Clutched in tendrils of its darkest night, ruffled but unharmed, were Tiara and Lena and Lirael, Rana, and Alanis, once more returned to their regular selves. And seated on what might have been the shoulder of the giant black nothing was the glowing candle-form of Sarah.

"You may not care about them," Sarah said mildly. "However, I care a great deal."

And what Sarah cares about, the mass that was Yord rumbled in a voice that reverberated in the bones, I am naturally interested in.

"YORD!!!" Meirene shrieked, her voice warping strangely. "What aRe yOU DoiNg HERE?!?!"

"I brought him," Sarah said. "Tiara and Lena are my childhood friends. Lirael, Rana, and Alanis are my first new friends in years. I refuse to allow you to take their lives for yourself."

"I WiLL TAKE WHAtEVER I liKE!" Meirene bellowed, gaining size and stature somehow. "THIS IS MY doMaiN!!!"

You intruded my domain, I intrude yours, MEIRENE!!! Yord exploded, so loudly Rana felt her bones creak.

Then suffer the consequences!!!! Meirene shouted, somewhat irrationally. She was now at least thirty feet tall, covered in armor of light from head to toe, yards of golden hair floating out into space. The

Vaineire had grown to the size of the mythical Earthian creature called a “steamboat,” and shimmered all over with the colors of death.

Lirael went white. Rana moaned softly.

“How can we fight something like that?” Alanis asked in a tiny voice.

Even the massive, shapeless Yord around them seemed somewhat daunted by the warrior Meirene had become.

THOUSANDS OF MILLENNIA AGO, WE FOUGHT OVER YOUR CONTROL OF THE FORCE OF MAGIC, YORD!!! THEN, YOU SEALED MY POWERS INSIDE OF THIS SWORD, THE VAINIRE. BUT NOW, I WILL DESTROY YOU WITH THE MIGHT I NOW POSSESS!!!!

“Brace yourselves!” Sarah shouted.

Meirene swung the Vaineire through space. The mighty slash split the void, sending an arrow of energy at Yord, but Yord cupped its people within tendrils of darkness and deflected the immense blast.

“What can we do?” Rana asked, panic rising in her voice. “What can we do? What can we do what can we do?!?!”

For once, Miss Lena’s voice was frail and trembling. “I don’t...know...”

Then Miss Tiara gasped. Lirael looked up at her and saw, to her astonishment, that Miss Tiara’s eyes were glowing with repressed...happiness?

“There is something we can do!” Miss Tiara exclaimed.

“How can there be?” Lirael asked.

“When I fought the Throne of Yord—this was after you were knocked out, Lena—Sarah came to me and fused with me and Heil, making some kind of combined Spirit-like being from us both. Maybe, if you three transformed and Sarah joined with you...you might be able to make a Spirit that could fight Meirene.”

“What?! We can’t let them do that, Tiara!” Miss Lena protested. “It’s far too dangerous! They can’t have the power to take on a goddess like Meirene!”

“She’s not a goddess, she’s a Demon!” Miss Tiara snapped. “And if these girls are boosted by another Demon—that is to say, Yord...”

“But we can’t...” Miss Lena began.

“She’s right, Lena,” Sarah said quietly.

Miss Lena jumped. Sarah had appeared next to her, her face set.

“Meirene has borrowed—or perhaps stolen—the force of the Demon Orion,” Sarah said. “Yord is not powerful enough to fight her on his own, in her own domain. In the Guardian World, Yord would have a chance—but here, in Meirene’s territory, she has far more power than he.”

“But if Yord can’t defeat her, how can these girls?” Miss Lena demanded.

“You are mortals, not Demons. You carry our powers with yourselves—they are not bound to forces and locations. If the girls join—and I can join them together, Tiara—they will be like an island of the Guardian World for Yord to draw from. If Yord can channel his power through these girls, Meirene may fall.”

“But what if she doesn’t?!” Miss Lena asked angrily.

Sarah met Miss Lena’s eyes steadily. “Then they will die. You will die. Yord will not die, because he cannot die—but Meirene will seal him away, and take his power of Magic for herself. The entire Guardian World will be hers to control. What will happen to the Guardian World will depend on Meirene’s slightest whim.”

“If we don’t fight, we’ll die, Miss Lena!” Lirael said desperately. “If we do fight, we have a chance of living!”

“A good chance, Miss Lena,” Rana jumped in. “Ceres says we have a 31.79 percent chance of winning with Yord behind us.”

And to everyone's surprise, Alanis added tremblingly, "It's scarier to sit here and wait, Miss Lena. I'd rather fight and get it over with."

Miss Lena opened her mouth, seemed to wrestle with herself, and then said reluctantly, "All...right. Go, girls. And be careful."

"We'll help you from here," Miss Tiara added. "We'll transfer power into you. But we don't have the strength to transform, so we can't really be with you."

"But you will have each other," Sarah said, holding out her hand. "And that is all you will need."

Lirael grabbed Sarah's hand. Alanis slowly laid hers on top of Lirael's. Rana hesitated, then gulped and wrapped her fingers around Alanis'.

"Call them," Sarah murmured.

"Erian Pyr Umbra!"

"Ceres Hi Kirame!"

"Myre Baara Kaze!"

A beam of light split the darkness of space, reaching far out into the nether reaches of the universe. Yord buckled beneath the power of the light and Meirene's assault, but stayed firm. Miss Tiara and Miss Lena lurched, but kept their feet.

The three little girls felt the warmth of their magic flood their veins, as they had before when they transformed into their Spirits. However, now the warmth grew far greater than before. It felt like fire in them, heating them, and heating, growing hotter and hotter, and then suddenly there was a moment when they could grow no hotter—and they began to melt together.

The only thing that kept their minds focused on their magic and not on the pain of the heat, the fusing, was Sarah. They could feel Sarah's light touch in their minds, weaving them together quickly and strongly like threads into a tapestry. They became, not themselves, not even their Spirits.

They all became One.

The light exploded. Yord threw its tendrils aside, and Meirene recoiled with a scream of confusion and rage.

Standing on the darkness that was Yord was a figure fully as tall as Meirene—another woman, golden-skinned, with miles and miles of flowing, flying crimson hair. Her halter top and sheer skirt panels were of black silk. Her shoulders bore cherry blossoms fully two feet in diameter. Her skin and thigh-high boots were golden. And the ribbons that drifted around her arms, around her throat, about her legs, were the same that had formerly been wound around Sarah's wrists and ankles.

In one golden hand she held a long, slender, slightly curved sword. On its hilt were three gemstones, one pitch black, one rose-red, and one translucent as the wind. Set in the blade was a large, perfect pearl, black on one side and white on the other.

This new woman stared at Meirene, and stepped off of Yord's cushioning tentacles to stand unsupported in space. Her eyes were like opals, scintillating with brilliant colors.

"Meirene, I am your challenge," said the woman. "I am Kaze Hi Umbra."

She raised her sword and rushed at Meirene.

Meirene barely had time to raise the Vaineire before Kaze Hi Umbra was upon her, slashing swiftly, without wasting an inch of movement. Kaze's sword hit the Vaineire and rebounded off with a clang like a hundred church bells, sending both women backwards. Kaze recovered first, with the speed of the wind, and flew at Meirene again. Meirene swung furiously at her opponent, who parried with her sword, producing another head-splitting bang.

Now Meirene leapt to the attack, swinging the gigantic Vaineire in an attempt to cleave her foe in two. But Kaze avoided the blows skillfully, like a shadow on a wall, and struck back at her with the strength of a falling tree. The two warriors spun and chopped and slashed madly at one another in space, but

neither seemed to be gaining an edge over the other.

Meanwhile, Tiara and Lena, their eyes closed, muttered incantations under their breath, forcing their remaining power from their bodies into the fusion of the three little girls and Sarah. Yord pulsed silently around them, immense red eyes blinking.

Then Meirene lunged at Kaze Hi Umbra—and Kaze, moving backwards, “stepped” on a piece of the shattered moon.

Although this was outer space, and therefore gravity-less and impossible to trip in, Kaze did stumble over the orbiting bit of moon, and this was just what Meirene needed to bull aside her sword and drive the Vaineire down for the kill.

Yord moved so fast that he had clearly been waiting for something like this to happen. His entire black, formless, eye-covered mass slammed into Meirene and sent her reeling backwards. The immense dark bulk of Yord coated Meirene as though in sludge, and as Meirene screamed and raised the Vaineire to blast Yord away, Tiara and Lena forced out a great wave of magic to Kaze

and Kaze lashed out with her sword
collided with the Vaineire
shattered
shards flying
Meirene scream

scream

great wave of magical energy

Meirene’s power

wind through the universe

gone

* * *

She wasn’t in her room anymore. She wasn’t in that terrible cathedral anymore. She wasn’t in space anymore.

Where was she? Lirael opened her eyes.

She was face-down on a carpet of soft, springy grass. Carefully, she raised her head, and saw that she was on a tiny island in the middle of a small pool of crystalline water, set in the middle of a forest glade. With a jolt of shock, she realized this was the island on which she, Rana, and Alanis had confronted their Spirits. But now it seemed to be night, and the glade was bathed in lilac moonlight from a large moon that hung in the dark sky like a pale amethyst.

Rana and Alanis were on the grass beside her. Neither of them stirred.

Lirael looked slowly around—it hurt to turn her head—and saw Sarah sitting on a rock at the water’s edge. She looked very tired, and was suffused by an ethereal glow that seemed to come from beneath her pale skin.

“Sarah?” Lirael asked, her throat feeling raw.

“We did not kill Meirene,” Sarah said, anticipating Lirael’s question. “But we shattered her power, when we shattered the Vaineire sword. Meirene shall not bother us again for many millennia.”

Even her voice was tired, a mere shell of its former silvery melody.

“What was that explosion?”

“Part of it was the release of Meirene’s power of Photon. Meirene controlled the racing and speed of light—it was her force. Now Yord has swallowed it, and it is his to command. The other part was of the Demon Orion reclaiming her own power, of the Song.”

“Song?”

“Somehow, through guile or theft or combat, Meirene managed to steal Orion’s power from her,” Sarah explained wearily. “Orion had the power of the song that is sung by the soul of every living being, the Music of the Spheres. Meirene took it from Orion and used it to battle Yord. So when you shattered the Vaineire, Orion reclaimed her force.”

“Oh...I get it.” She didn’t, really, but Sarah sounded so tired that she didn’t want to push her.

“Now...” Sarah stood up, brushing hair out of her face, “I think it is time that you all went back. I will send you through a gate...Yord already sent Tiara and Lena and Japolo, but I wanted to make sure you were all right first. Now then...”

One of Sarah’s ribbons drifted forward and swirled slowly about, creating a large circle. Sarah waved at the circling ribbon, and it became a circular door of light, a gateway back to the Guardian World.

Lirael was aware of Rana and Alanis waking up behind her, but suddenly an important idea had struck her mind. She walked up to Sarah and took her hand.

“Come with us.”

Sarah looked astonished, then tiredly resigned. “No, my dear, I’m afraid I cannot. I must stay here with Yord. He wants me here.”

“Come with us,” Lirael urged. “Kagetsu wants to see you.”

“And I’m sure Miss Tiara and Miss Lena will want to again, too,” Alanis piped up, coming forward and taking Sarah’s other hand.

“But...” Sarah demurred.

“Look,” said Rana in a gravelly voice, limping up as well. “Listen. Yord is not protesting. I think...well, really, Ceres thinks...that he might understand you a little better now.”

“I don’t...”

“Myre says it’s Orion,” Alanis declared suddenly. “Orion is restoring the Music, and it’s making Yord better.”

“Better?” Sarah shook her head. “No, I really can’t...”

“Yord was possessive and crabby and lonely because Meirene cut him off from the Music when she took it,” Lirael said, although it wasn’t really her saying it. Erian was speaking in her mind, telling her what to say. “Everything needs the Music of the Spheres, because without it, everything becomes...” Lirael shrugged. “We don’t know the right word. Bad. It made Yord hurt not to have the music. But the Music is healing him now. Try it. Walk closer.”

Sarah stalled. “But...”

The three little girls pulled her forward. One step. Two. Three. And they were in front of the dimensional gate. And still Yord made no move to stop them.

“Come on,” said Rana quietly, stepping into the gateway.

Lirael and Alanis followed her. There was a rushing of wind, and of color and light and sound, as they crossed over three dimensions to return to the Guardian World, landing in Lirael’s room with a thump that shook the house.

And when Lirael, Rana, and Alanis’ parents, Tiara, Lena, Japolo, Leon, and Kagetsu burst into the little girl’s room a moment later, they found the three little girls looking very windswept, clutching the

hands of a woman with long lavender hair, dressed all in white, with white ribbons floating around her wrists and ankles.

Her smile illuminated the entire room. "Brother."