

Magik- Reincarnated

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The rewritten version of my original story, "Magik?"

Milena and her friends, Trixie and Jewel, are three normal teenage girls. During the summer after thier Freshman year of highschool, they decide to go on a trip to a certain cave; a decision which will change thier lives.

With old faces and new, the girls must cope with frightening powers and an ancient enemy. Will they survive the forests of this new world? Read and find out!

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Magik?

Reincarnated

Chapter 1: *Preparations*

*"Closing your eyes to disappear,
you pray your dreams will leave you here.
But still you wake and know the truth;
no one's there."*

-My Last Breath, *Evanescence*

It was the end of the school year in the small rural town called Raventon in northern New Hampshire, but for the teenagers still stuck in Raventon High, the few hours left until summer freedom seemed to last forever. The fact that the town was being hit by the first major heat wave of the summer didn't help, either. Even the teachers were antsy and longing to go home: you could see it in the way they distractedly answered the questions directed to them, as if their minds were already at home lounging in the living room recliner and cranking up the air conditioning.

For one class, however, the Final Exam meant something a bit different than multiple choice answers or fill-in-the-blanks. You see, Raventon was large enough to have a community pool, but just small enough not to have the budget for a football team. Not that they really wanted one, in any case; in this town soccer, baseball, and basketball was the name of the game. Literally. And, for most of the sports players in this place where not much else was available for entertainment, they were an obsession.

But due to a determined (and slightly eccentric) teacher, and a tidy sum of money the school had set aside for such an occasion, Raventon High produced a recreational pastime that was less costly than football and much more entertaining than schoolwork: fencing.

That was why this group of students, instead of pouring over tedious textbooks and frantically jotting down essays, were standing in the gym. They watched from the sidelines as two people fought before them, each clad in the white uniforms and wielding the thin rapiers that make the sport so unique.

The gym rang with sound; the cheers of the onlookers, the humming of the A/C, and the scuffing sound their shoes made across the wooden floor echoed in the high expanses of the room. But the only sounds that interested these two were the metallic crash their swords made as they met, and the panting sound of their own breath. Outside sounds were only a distant distraction; much less irritating than the sweat trickling down their bodies beneath the uniforms, or the bruises they had received in spite of them.

One of the fighters was taller than the other, and their longer reach seemed a clear advantage. But the other, shorter foe was undaunted, moving with swift, fluid movements that any athlete would envy. They went back and forth, exchanging parries, thrusts, lunges, and other classic moves that passed before the eyes of the spectators like steps in some strange, deadly dance.

Suddenly, as if by some unspoken signal, the battle intensified. Attacks and blocks came in flurries nearly too quick for the eye to follow until finally, with a strong twist of wrist and sword, the shorter combatant disarmed the other. The sword was flung away, and some of the audience had to move to avoid being hit by it.

The victor tapped the end of the blade beneath the other's jaw. "Yield." she (for the voice issuing from behind that barred mask was too light and sweet to be male) ordered firmly.

"I yield, I yield." After raising a hand in surrender, the other fighter took off her helmet and grinned at the girl. She looked to be still on the twenties side of thirty, with back hair cropped around her earlobes and hazel eyes sparkling with surprised mirth. "I see you finally mastered that move, Lena. Excellent work."

Lena (short for Milena Caloreic) had since taken off her mask as well. Her deep brown hair, tied back in a ponytail low against her neck, stuck to her skin in dark curls from the sweat on her skin. The bangs in front, dyed a rich scarlet, clung to her face as well; they were exactly the same shade as the striking eyes below them. Her fair skin was already faintly touched with gilt from the strengthening summer sun; right now, it was also flushed a rosy from the practice bout. "Well, you *did* help me a lot, Ms. Parray." she said, smiling. "Practice makes perfect!"

"Ah, you were always too modest for your own good." Ms. Parray stretched for a moment, cooling down her muscles. "But, in any case, that was a good match. And I believe . . . She reached over and snagged a list from where it rested on a bleacher nearby, " . . . that we're all done." She put her hands on her hips and surveyed her students appraisingly. "A few of you have some more work to do if you mean to participate in the contest next year . . . but, as a whole, you've done very well this year. For Freshmen." She grinned and made a shooing motion. "Now, go on. I *know* you guys have more classes to go to. Especially you, Adrienne. If any of you need help with something this summer, you know where to find me. Now scat!"

With laughs, groans, and farewells, the class shuffled out of the gym. Milena stayed behind, peeling off her uniform. "You know, I don't get why we have to wear these in summer. They're so *hot*!" she said, flapping the front of the T-shirt she had worn underneath in an effort to cool herself down.

Her teacher leaned over and poked a quarter-sized bruise on her arm, which had b]definitely not been there thirty minutes ago. Lena yelped and jerked away; Ms. Parray just grinned. "*That's* why. I don't know about you, young lady, but I dislike walking around festooned with bruises and scrapes. Especially

in summer." She winked. "Who knows what handsome boys will be watching?"

Milena grinned. Ms. Parray was unique out of all the teachers she'd ever had; unlike the uptight aides or strict teachers, she acted like she was a teenager herself. But she dealt out discipline like a teacher, and that was the truth; no one fooled off more than once in her classes.

"Well, I'd better go wait for my friends now." she said, taking the scrunchie from her hair and shaking it out. Once that was done, it hung nearly to her waist. "I'll probably see you this summer, right?"

"Most likely. You're coming to the Festival, right?" Ms. Parray knelt to pick up her sword from where it had fallen; if its point had been a little sharper, it would have been sticking up from the pad on the floor rather than just laying on it.

"Most likely." The Festival was the yearly summer celebration in Raventon; the whole stretch of Main Street would be blocked in and filled with everything from food vendors to live musicians, to a clown doing balloon animals. (Milena didn't like that clown. Reminded her too much of Steven King's *It*. She disliked clowns in general, but Mr. Happy Slappy there was just . . . creepy. Damn clowns.) There would be demonstrations of local talents; for example, there was nearly always a square dancing or martial arts exhibition at some point. Milena wasn't exactly the social type, (too many people made her uneasy) but she did enjoy mingling at the Festival. Everyone was **happy!** And being able to walk around in the middle of the road (legally) was pretty cool, in any case.

This year Milena would probably just go to watch, but next year she might be part of the show herself. Sophomores, or anyone who had completed more than one full year of Fencing could enter a statewide contest. It occurred during the summer, and anyone who wanted to enter would put on a show for the town during the Festival. The school had one a few awards before. It would be exciting . . . but nerve-wracking, as well. With her lack of self-confidence, she doubted she would do it. But, maybe someday. You never knew.

"Alright then, Milena." Ms. Parray's voice brought her back from her thoughts. Her teacher gathered the uniforms up in her arms and stuffed them into a bag- the school would pay for them to be cleaned later. "Do **you** have another class to go to? I hope I'm not making you late. Should I make a pass?"

She shook her head. "Nope, I don't have anywhere to go. Had three exams yesterday, and two the day before that, so I'm finished." *Thank god*, she thought with relief. Exams, especially Algebra I, had sucked big-time. Damn math; it should die. Or at least go away somewhere where it couldn't bother people. "I'm gonna go to study hall to wait for school to let out. Trixie, Jewel, and I are having a sleepover tonight."

"That's great! Well, I'll be in touch." Ms. Parray reached out and shook Lena's hand. "Say, what do you think about helping me teach this class? You could be my assistant."

Milena blinked; for a moment, the information didn't get through. Then, as realization hit, her face flushed red again and she shook her head violently. "Me?! But, Ms. Parray, I'm just a freshman, I couldn't-"

"A Freshman who's going to be a sophomore, and one who just happens to be a natural." her teacher said calmly, arching amused eyebrows at the girl's antics. "You've learned more in this one year than many of my sophomores learn in two." Her voice gentled a bit; by now, she knew about Lena's

self-confident problem, and was fully aware of the pressure. "I'm not asking you to decide now. Think about it, okay?"

"O-okay . . ." Milena nodded, dragging a hand through her bangs. What a day this was turning out to be! "I will. Um . . . I guess I'll talk to you later, Ms. Parray. Thanks for everything. Bye!" With that she turned and strode out of the gym, waving good-bye to her teacher as she went.

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She had stashed her backpack near the stairs and picked it up as she went. After a brief stop at the water fountain, she carried on through the hallways. No one noticed her; barely anyone was here on the last official day of school. It was a little strange, being in this old school without all of her fellow students. The wooden floors seemed to creak more loudly than usual, and much of the furniture and bookcases were covered for the summer already, making strange shapes in the shadows. She finally found the study room she was looking for. It was right next to where her friends were testing, so they would know where to find her when they got out.

She peeked in through the doorway and, seeing no one, she walked over to the desk. A sticky-note proclaimed that the teacher was out for a moment; she could deal with that. Mr. Crehr knew she was coming anyway. So she simply picked a spot on the long tables he used for desks in her Earth Science class and threw down her backpack. She would be so happy to get *rid* of that thing for the summer! She only brought it today because she'd thought she'd be bored and had stuffed a bunch of books and things inside.

Now that she was sitting down, though, she didn't feel like reading. In fact, she wasn't feeling like doing *anything*. She'd had to get up early to get to school, and, since the school wasn't serving it these last few days, couldn't have breakfast. That was a major thing; though she got up readily enough, she often was fully awake until after lunch if she didn't have her breakfast. (Food: it rocks.) That, the long duel she had just battled, and the lazy heat combined to make her feel extremely sleepy. She put her arms on the table and rested her head on them.

I'll just rest my eyes a moment, she thought muzzily.

Moments later, she was sleeping peacefully.

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She peers out from the alley, scarlet eyes wide with amazement at the sites all around her, excitement at being in the city . . . and fear, from being lost. She does have a map in her purse- she knows that, in a fuzzy sort of way- but what use is it she doesn't know where she is right now? It makes her want to cry. But, no. Daddy said big girls shouldn't cry, and she would prove him right.

Hearing a sound behind her, she spins around. A huge man stands behind her. He reminds her of one of her father's friends, big, with a beer belly growing, a beard, and truck-driver's clothes. Her child's eyes don't register the bleary, glazed look in his eyes or the beer on his breath; she simply walks up to him with a shy, gap-toothed smile on her face. "Excuse me sir, but I think I'm lost." She rummages in her purse for the map her father gave her. She gets it, but ends up the spilling quarters and dollar bills her father had given her to buy mementos with and everything else in the purse on the ground as well. "Can you please help me get he- oh, no!" She cries out in dismay and falls to her knees, scooping things back into the handbag.

The man- she can tell he's drunk now, is close enough to smell his reeking breath- lunges toward her and snatches the purse. "What are you doing?! That's mine!" Without even thinking, she grabs it back and backs up, now frightened and angry.

The man growls and comes after her, swinging a ham-sized fist at her head. She dodges, but just enough so that it slams into her shoulder instead of her head- either way, it still smashes her into the wall. She cries out in pain and ducked again. When the man grabs for the purse again, the strap he's holding snaps, and she throws it behind one of the huge green dumpsters lining the alley.

She's fast enough so that the man couldn't hurt her a lot again; she doesn't like pain, and **especially** doesn't like the Bad Man that was making her feel it. She still gets hurt, from dodging and getting knocked into things. It's like playing with her brother, Jake- but much, much scarier. For some reason, he won't touch her skin; whenever he does manage to touch a part the sea-green dress doesn't cover, he yelps and pulls his hands away, like he touched a stove.

She doesn't have time to think about it, because then he catches her and hauls her up by the front of her dress. It hurts, and she can barely breathe with the collar that tight around her throat. She kicks her feet wildly, tiny fists pounding against his arms. None of it seems to make any difference.

Suddenly, a girl says something from over near the street. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Git out of here, this ain't none of yur business!" the man says in a rough, slurred voice. She kicks more frantically, because she hopes she can get free while his attention is taken up by the two people in the alleyway.

She can see them now; a boy and a girl, with similar-looking faces and weird mismatched clothes. The boy has on something that reminded her of her father's trench coat, with a baseball cap and had sneakers on his feet beneath the jeans. The girl is wearing a dress like hers, yellow with blue flowers, with boots, a flower-covered straw hat, and a green knitted shawl. Not something her Mom would pick out for her.

The boy steps forward now. "Let her go. Right now." His voice is so calm and steady; it makes her calm down slightly.

"I told ya, git out of here! D'ya shrimps wanna beatin' too?!" The man yells at them again, but they keep coming. No, don't! she wants to yell, but doesn't have the breath. Don't, he'll hurt you too! But they don't stop. The man roars in anger and goes to hit the boy's head.

All it does is knock his hat off his head, and then she's able to slip out of his grasp- it weakens as he stares in shock. From behind the green dumpster, she stares as well. Two ears, the same blue-black color of the boy's hair, are on his head. Little red tufts are on the end of them, like the ones on the lynxes she sees on TV. A tail the same color as the ears lashes back and forth under the trench coat.

The Bad Man seems shocked, for some reason. "C-cat ears?" He says, stumbling backward and crossing himself. "Demon!"

"Oh? You thought **that** was scary?" the girl says this with a mocking look in her orange eyes, and pulls off her hat too. The other girl sees with interest that she has ears too, these ones with little feathers on them. A tail, the gold-orange color of her hair, comes out from under her dress.

"Then you **definitely** won't like what's coming up next." The boy speaks this time, and his smile is as sharp-toothed and vicious as hers.

Suddenly, in the midst of orange and earthy brown/green light, the boy and girl change. They both become cats- not cute, like the ones at her friend's house, but more like the panthers she'd seen on the same TV special with the lynx. Both have fur the color of their hair (his is short, hers is long and silky), and gold or silver collars with a half-moon, half-sun symbol on them. They also have other jewelry; he a silver moon between his eyes, she a gold, jeweled sun. He has red and black bat wings, while hers are angelic, shimmery light green and blue like the tufts on her ears.

They both jump on him and that makes him crash to the ground. Scared, he screams and gets to his feet- the boy slashes his face and leaves long slashes on his face. The blood looks really bright against his pale skin; for some reason, she noted that particularly. He then runs away, and the boy and girl turn back to normal.

The girl who had been watching all this came out from behind the dumpster, holding her purse and their hats. She hands them to the two. "Thanks for saving me." she says shyly.

No problem." The other girl says brightly, smiling. "We probably shouldn't have done that, but I couldn't resist. The look on his face!" All three children giggle. By this point the original girl has many bruises and feels filthy, but she's happy for the moment, just being with these two people.

Time slips, and suddenly they are in front of the apartment building she is staying at with her parent's friend. She turns to talk to the others, to ask if they could come in, but they say they have somewhere to go themselves.

This makes her so unhappy. "Will I ever see you again?" she asks, looking at her clasped hands.

"Probably not." he murmurs sadly. All three were holding hands until now, but their hands slip apart as they face each other.

"I can't thank you enough. You saved my life!" Tears are starting to come in her eyes, but she doesn't want to cry in front of her new friends. "I'll miss you so **much!**"

The other girl hugs her tightly. "I'll miss you too." she admits, pulling back. "But we'll never forget each

other, right?"

"Right." she says, sniffing.

The boy pulls a smooth river rock, deep crimson red with gold flecks, and presses it into her hands. "This comes from where I'm from; this way, you really **won't** forget us! It's for good luck." He smiles sadly at her, and she can see that he's missing one of his front teeth too. She never noticed until now, but his eyes are an earthy brown, with green specks, like freckles, all around them. She's never seen any like them.

"Then, take this." She hands them some things from her purse: a hard plastic key chain with the words "Boston Aquarium" on one side and a leaping dolphin on the other goes to the boy, while the girl gets a handmade bead necklace of rainbow colors. "This way, **you** won't forget **me**, either." she says firmly.

They hug one last time, then the two strangers leave. She watches them leave, holding the stone close to her heart. It thrums gently. As such a young child, she doesn't question the strangeness of the twins or their gift; she simply accepts it and the fact that they must leave in a way that only young children can.

I'll never forget you.

~ ~ ~

"Milena? Hey, Lena, wake up!"

Someone was calling her name and shaking her shoulder, but she didn't want to get up. "Mmmph." she said simply, not willing to wake yet. Even though she knew whom the owner of that voice was.

"Le-naaa, school's over!!! No more sleeping through Algebra II! We can do that next year! Rise and shine!"

That struck warning bells, and Milena abruptly got up. The surface of the table underneath her head was moist from her breathing. Wait, those hadn't been **warning** bells- those were the actual bells of the school, ringing for the last time that year, signifying freedom for a whole three months.

Lena, rubbing her eyes sleepily, turned to two people who had shaken her awake. "How was the French exam?" she asked.

Trixie rolled her eyes. Light brown hair, streaked with a blue the same color as her eyes and pulled back into a high ponytail, swung as she shook her head violently. "I couldn't understand a word of it. Guess I didn't study hard enough, even with Ms. Walking Dictionary here to help." She put a hand around the next girl's shoulders. "It's all Greek to me."

"But, Trixie, you **are** Greek." Jewel said, golden eyes puzzled behind her large glasses. She often didn't get Trixie's jokes. "Half-Greek, half-French, actually. By all rights, shouldn't you **know** this stuff?"

Trixie flung her hands up in the air. "Where your blood comes from doesn't mean a thing! I might be half French, but I'm a hundred-percent **American!**" She grinned mischievously and tugged on Jewel's braid, black hair with bright blonde highlights.

The other girl yelped and snatched it away. "Knock it off!" she snapped.

"Whatcha gonna do, deport me?" Trixie got on her knees and stared wide-eyed up at her bespectacled friend. "Please massta, I **swears** that I ain't done nuttin' wrong!"

There was silence for a moment, then everyone burst out laughing. "You need to watch out who you use that impression on." Milena told Trixie as they left the room and began walking down the hallway she had come through before. This was the first floor, so no stairs were needed. That was good- the old, creaky stairs in this ancient building crept her out. "It's no good unless you're actually, you know, African-American. Otherwise, it's racism. Or so our oh-so-wonderful principal believes."

The stupid woman had given her brother a detention only last week for exchanging black jokes with one of the few African-American kids in school. She just didn't seem to realize that they were **both** saying black jokes, and having fun doing it. Again, stupid woman; in her quest to stop racism in their little corner of the universe, she was actually being prejudiced against everyone else.

"Jeez woman, you still look worn out. How hard **did** Ms. Parray work you, anyway?" Trixie said, taking the backpack from her friend and slinging it over her shoulder. "I'm really surprised that you fell asleep. Normally, you're an insomniac even at home."

"Yeah, I know." Milena said, smiling a little sheepishly. "But we had a really long fight this time. Plus, it's **hot** in there."

Jewel raised an eyebrow at that. "But, that usually doesn't bother you. In fact, most of the time, you get **more** energized when it's hot." she pointed out.

Trixie grinned. "It's like you're a flower, and heat's sunshine." She clapped Milena on the back, then got a thoughtful look on her face. "Wonder what kind of flower you'd be, though . . ." She suddenly snapped her fingers. "A rose, of course! Pretty, but deadly! And it's red, which fits perfectly."

Milena just shook her head, smiling. "I think you'd be a blue tulip. Something colorful and loud, because you never shut **up!!**"

Trixie didn't seem offended; on the contrary, she bowed as though it were a compliment, then turned to the last girl. "Hmm . . . Ms. Waibelle here, what should she be . . . ?" she mused.

"Black-eyed Susan, definitely. It's black, yellow, and tall, which fits our girl **just** right." Milena elbowed Jewel, the tall and slim one of the group, gently in the ribs.

Jewel pushed her away good-temperedly. "I suppose, but we're not flowers. Flowers don't have to take exams."

"Lucky things." Milena agreed, but her mind was on other things. She absently rubbed the rock in her pocket; a smooth red river rock, speckled with gold that, someone had once told her, was for good luck.

Her fingers glided along its water-polished surface like it was glass; much like her mind glided along the plane of memory in her dreams.

Trixie noticed this and, lacing her fingers behind her head, looked with curious azure eyes at her friend. "What's up? You seem a little preoccupied."

"Nothing much. I just had that dream again." Lena replied a little sheepishly.

"About those kids that saved you when you went to Boston when you were younger?" Now even Jewel was interested; she enjoyed analyzing her friend's frequent, vivid dreams almost as much as she liked her textbooks and autobiographies.

"Yeah." Seven years ago, when she had been eight years old, Milena and her family had taken a trip to Boston and stayed with her father's friend. One morning, she had gotten it into her head to go out and shop for some souvenir for her friends- and had quickly gotten lost. The drunken attacker (*the Bad Man*, her mind corrected her softly) had been there . . . but what happened afterwards seemed, to her older mind, a hallucination. And, yet, here she was, with that same rock in her pocket . . . a rock that even Jewel, the great Walking Dictionary and straight-A student, couldn't identify as any kind she'd ever seen. "I seem to be having it a lot lately; at least four times a week, I think."

Trixie, arms still behind her head, shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe your subconscious is trying to tell you something. Like, *'buy Trixie ice cream! I command you!'* "

The others laughed. Milena pushed Trixie lightly on the arm, causing her to stumble slightly; at that moment, she was balancing on the very edge of the sidewalk. But she had amazing balance, and righted herself, giving Lena a wounded look. She responded by saying, "Free ice cream? In your dreams, woman," and grinning.

"But we're talking about yours, at the moment." Jewel reminded her.

Milena shrugged. "Not much to talk about, really. I don't have any explanation for it . . . but even if I didn't have the rock as proof, I know it's real." She paused. "I just wish they'd told me their names. They never *did* introduce themselves." She had this idea that, if they'd just told her their names, they would seem more real. A crazy idea, but it had stuck for seven years. It was strange, but in the few minutes that they'd spent together, they had become friends so quickly.

(Will I ever see you again?)

(Probably not.)

Even now, she felt a pang of loss, thinking of them; the same sort one would feel for a friend that's moved away. But then, everyone made friends quickly as a child. Or, so she'd been told. She hadn't had much luck with it herself since . . . except for with a certain two girls.

The subject was dropped (it was one that had been gone over too many times to be interesting anymore), and went on to talking about their exams. Milena listened to this exchange quietly, still rubbing a thumb

along the surface of the stone in her pocket. Thinking of those two strangers always made her value the friends she had now even more.

Trixie Avails, like many of the kids around here, played sports; she, in particular, was a starter for the Raventon travel team, also known as the Raventon Rocs. She was never still, always doing something, and always with a wisecrack or joke on the tip of her tongue. She was also the resident daredevil: it was she who suggested that they streak their hair the color of their eyes. Milena grinned at the memory: her parents had been angry that she hadn't asked them first, Jewel's had been absolutely furious (but eventually accepted it anyway-it wasn't as if grounding her would bring her hair back to her natural color), while Trixie's parents just didn't care. Mr. and Mrs. Avails knew by now that preventing Trixie from doing something was a surefire way to force it to be done.

Despite the fact that she was pretty and had many other friends, she had never let that come in the way of her friendships with Milena and Jewel; quite the contrary, she defended her friends fiercely if anyone against those who would insult them. That was how they'd become friends in the first place. She smiled, remembering the incident with bittersweet feelings.

A teacher pulled the girl away from the boy, still swinging her small fists. "Milena, stop this right this minute!" she snapped.

*"I won't!" the child snapped, scarlet eyes flashing. "Not until **they** stop it!"*

"Stop what?" the boy whined, rubbing what soon would be a black eye. "I didn't do anything to you!"

"Yes you did!" she shrieked.

Before she could say anything else, the teacher knelt down to her eye level and spoke sternly. "There's no reason for this, Milena. No one saw him do anything to you, and yet you hit him."

*"That's it! They don't do **anything**! That's why I did it!" she protested, eyes filling with tears.*

The teacher shook her head despairingly. "Go to the corner and think about what you've done!"

"But-"

"Now." she said flatly. But this had no effect on the girl, and she only stood there, arms folded, face tight with anger. In the end, it took a threat of a call to her parents to get her moving. Even then it was a sullen, slow shuffle that took her to the corner.

*A few minutes later (and a few minutes can feel like a **long** time to a child), Milena snuck a look around. Two girls were standing behind her; she recognized both of them as being in her class. One wore spectacles- Jewel, that was her name- and the other was Trixie. She wasn't so bad; she'd let her join in her games once or twice on the playground; but she was still one of **them**.*

"What? What do you have to say? Or are you just gonna ignore me or make fun of me again?" she snapped.

Trixie shook her head. "Actually, we wanted to ask you something."

Milena turned her head back into the corner. "Well? Say it already, and leave me alone."

Jewel touched her arm, and she turned around to face them again, startled. "Actually, we wanted to know if you'd consider being our friend." she said softly.

It had taken Milena days to realize that they were telling the truth. But after that the three had been inseparable; they ate, played, read, and did everything together. They hardly ever argued, and made up quickly if they did. Teachers always found themselves putting them in the same classes together, if only for the fact that there were less fights between Milena and her tormentors if all three were in the same room together.

Having burning-red eyes and a hair-trigger temper had made her an outcast from her peers since the beginning. As a Kindergartener, the kids would often just ignore her, pretending she didn't exist; some of the kids parents (the deeply religious ones) would even cross themselves if she came near them, protecting themselves from the "demon." Having to deal with these things had changed her personality somewhat; unless she was with friends and family, she was introverted, moody, and self-conscious. A great lover of comics of all kinds (she'd get into anime and manga, but that was in the future), as a child Lena had identified herself with the X-men Gambit and Cyclops; both had to deal with the same problems as she did.

That didn't seem to be a problem for her friends, though. Trixie, well, she just didn't care. She had looked past Milena's differences and seen the girl within, and had become her friend almost instantly. Jewel also had unusual eyes, but their tawny-gold color wasn't unheard of: there were a few other people in the school who shared the same characteristic, though the color wasn't as vivid. In any case, she didn't care either: she saw immediately that here was someone who would be loyal and a good friend to the last.

Jewel . . . Milena glanced over at the girl in question, who was at the moment trying to explain something about math to Trixie. Jewel Waibelle was bookish and quiet, with a tendency to make long speeches about what she liked. People sometimes mistook her for being timid (and she was, a bit) but mostly she just preferred listening to talking, like Lena herself, filing away information in that intelligent brain of hers to use for later.

One of her weak points was thinking outside the box; if there wasn't any proof something existed, she ignored it. That was why Milena's saviors had been such a paradox for her; there was proof, but the idea of transforming children just seemed impossible. So she simply gave the excuse that Milena had, A)hallucinated slightly from lack of air and B)seen kids that had been in costume at the time. Milena had her own thoughts about that, but kept them to herself; if you got into an intellectual argument with Jewel, chances were it would stretch on for hours. That was pretty much the one time she talked for long periods of time.

Despite how quiet she was, Jewel had a healthy amount of friends as well. Being a writer for the school newspaper and part of quite a few clubs often did that for you. But, like Trixie, her friendships with Milena and Trixie were stronger than any other ones. Milena alone of the trio had no other friends, but that was fine with her; with these two, she never felt alone.

A lull in the conversation brought Milena out of her thoughts, and she looked up to see that they'd arrived at her house. At the moment, she lived in one half of a duplex on main street, near Trixie's house; at the moment because they'd had to move a few times already this year, after their land was bought and their home torn down. After frantic, busy months of moving and transporting things, they'd finally moved into this new place. It was bigger, true, but people always miss their homes if they move. She especially missed her home of fifteen years, no matter how small it had been.

She took back her backpack from Trixie and peeked into the living room. Her father was sprawled on the couch, tired from work. Her brother was nowhere in sight. "Hi, Dad! We're home!" she said cheerfully.

"Yo, Ken!" Trixie said brightly, waving as she and Jewel followed her in. "How's it going, man?"

"Good afternoon." the other girl echoed more seriously.

Ken turned his head and smiled. "Oh, hello girls! Have a good day at school?"

"Do we ever, Dad?" Milena asked dryly, and he laughed. Putting down the backpack for a moment, she looked around, raising an eyebrow. "Where are Jake and Mom?"

"Your mother's bringing Jake to one of his friend's houses." Ken shrugged. "Says he's gonna stay there for the night. Would you girls like something to drink?"

"No thank you, we're good." Jewel said; she then followed Trixie, who was climbing the stairs. "Thank you for letting us sleep over!"

Her father turned back to the TV as his daughter went up as well. She heard his voice follow them up; "No problem. You guys know the door's always been open. Have fun."

~ ~ ~

The three certainly managed that during that night. They spent a few hours playing video games; Trixie particularly enjoyed beating both Milena and Jewel in one of Jake's many racing games, but Jewel got revenge later by throwing her character off the platform in Soul Caliber 3. Trixie's jaw dropped, but a lesson was learned that day. Never underestimate the Walking Dictionary, especially when it comes to kicking major butt in video games.

After that, they watched a movie- Austin Power's Goldmember, one of their personal favorites; they watched it at nearly every sleepover. Trixie got her free ice cream after all; Milena's mother poked her head in during the opening credits and passed out tiny tubs of Ben and Jerry's ice cream. Milena just had to laugh; Trixie's face had lit up like a child's on Christmas morning. (Ice cream: it, like food, rules.) Still, she envied the others- the only reason she wasn't fat was that fencing was strenuous work, and it kept her active. Trixie and Jewel, on the other hand, had naturally fast metabolisms- they could eat fatty food continuously and not gain a pound. Especially Trixie, who was also involved in sports. Lucky women.

The movie took up a few hours, but they still weren't quite tired to go to sleep- it was, after all, the day they'd gotten out of school for the summer- so they fooled around for a while, ate dinner, then put in another movie: Spirited Away. They'd considered Princess Mononoke, another Miyazaki film, but decided to stick with the former- like Goldmember, it was a classic.

By the time the movie (which was over two hours long) was over, Trixie was nodding off over her half-eaten bag of popcorn, and Jewel was frequently taking off her glasses to rub her eyes. Milena was feeling quite tired herself, so she put out blankets on the floor for her friends to sleep on and climbed into bed herself. Everyone called out their goodnights, then there was silence. She faintly heard a screeching thunderstorm warning from the TV still on downstairs; from the dark clouds they'd seen on the way home today, she wasn't surprised.

As always, her friend's breathing had audibly deepened and slowed down long before she fell asleep, but Milena finally managed it. Before her eyes closed, they alighted upon a certain stone, which lay upon the table next to her bed. Golden bits caught faint light coming in from the orange streetlamps and reflected onto the walls like a kaleidoscope. In that brief moment between waking and sleep, a fuzzy sense of nostalgia colored that last thought; then, all thoughts were gone, and she dreamed.

~ ~ ~

It was the thunder that woke Jewel up; thunder, and the flash of bright light she could even through her eyelids. She opened her eyes and sat up, looking around. Everything was dark and blurry; she swore under her breath and reached for her glasses, folded up on the table nearby. *Of course something like this would happen*, she thought grumpily, mind still muzzy with sleep. *The first day I can actually sleep in, and Mother Nature decides to come calling. Fun fun fun.*

Jamming the glasses onto her nose, she peered around again. It was still dark, besides the light from the street outside, but this time she could see the sharply outlined shapes of the room's furniture. Lightening flashes again, showing them more distinctly; she could see that Trixie was still sleeping. *Jeez, that woman can sleep through anything*, she thought, affectionately annoyed. But in that flash, she saw something else that disturbed her a little more than her friend's sleeping habits. Milena was standing near the window. She couldn't say what it was that tipped her off that something was wrong; her posture, maybe, or the way her hands hung limply at her sides.

"Lena? What's the matter?" she said softly, trying not to wake Trixie (though she **does** kinda want her to wake up.) She winced as thunder crashes overhead. It sounded like it was right nearby.

Trixie grumbled and opened her eyes, rubbing at one eye sleepily. "Turn down the damn volume on that thing, 'Tony!'" she growled: still half-asleep, she thought the thunder was her older brother blasting his music. Then she apparently caught sight of the scene. "Jewel? What-"

Jewel pressed a finger to her lips. She was sure now that Lena was sleepwalking, as she often did; and when someone is sleepwalking, it's best not to wake them up.

She was, however, startled when her friend turned to them. Another flash of lightening lit the room, and she could see that her friend's eyes were wide and blank. She shivered slightly. Though she didn't much care about what color they were, unlike some of their classmates, for a moment she **did** see why they would be freaked out by them. Lit from behind, they almost had their own fiery glow. What surprised her most, however, was when she started to speak.

"He's free." Milena whispered, and her voice held such fright that it held Jewel and Trixie captive.

"**Who's** free, Lena?" Jewel asked gently. Normally she'd just dismiss whatever she said as sleep talk, but this . . . these words sent shivers up her spine.

"The **Dark** one." Her eyes stared at the girls, but seemed to go right through them. "He's awake and he's . . . searching."

Another cold chill ran up and down Jewel's spine. "Lena, are you dreaming?"

"No." she said, almost absent-mindedly. "Seeing." She then turned back to the window, and for a few moments all three stood still.

Thunder (the loudest yet) came again, and Milena flinched and jumped. The spell of stillness was broken; with quite a bit of relief, Jewel saw that the spark- the essential essence- was back in her friend's eyes. She blinked, looked down at herself, then over to the others. "What am I doing here?" she asked, sounding bewildered. "Guys?"

"Sleepwalking." Trixie said simply. "You said some weird stuff."

She blinked again. "Like what?"

Trixie shrugged. "Said someone was awake and searching. You have a peeping tom or something, woman? Maybe your subconscious is trying to tell you something." Despite the lightness of her voice, Jewel could see that she seemed a little wierded out as well. Good. She didn't want to think that **she** was the only one who thought things were a bit odd. Then again, these sleepwalking incidents were **always** strange.

Lena thought for a bit, then shook her head. "I don't think so . . ." Lightening flashed again, and she jumped. "Jeez! How long has **this** been going on?" she exclaimed, kneeling down and pulling aside her curtains.

Jewel and Trixie came over as well and looked outside. "Dunno. It woke me up; that's all I know." the bespectacled teen admitted. Thunder once again crashed; at nearly the same time, heavy raindrops started pounding against the window. They hurriedly shut it as some began coming through the screen, and laughed as they brushed water from the sill.

For a long time they simply knelt there, watching with childlike amazement and wide eyes at the thunderstorm outside. Howling wind, claps of thunder, splattering rain, and their own breathing filled their ears. It almost felt like a tornado was on its way. Jewel gasped with amazement at the lightening; one

flash would light up the area like daylight, bringing the clouds and mountains surrounding the town into sharp relief. Another flash moments later, however, let her see something else; she shuddered, feeling her blood turn to ice within her veins.

Milena, sitting shoulder to shoulder with her, looked over. "What's the matter?" she asked, concerned.

"Nothing, nothing." Jewel reassured, but couldn't get what she'd seen out of her head. It remained with her even when, a few moments later, the novelty of watching the storm faded and they went to sleep again.

She knew it was just chance, that the strange conditions of the thunderstorm; that, combined with wind, the position of stars, and other factors, it had just been a random occurrence. But something there was something . . . sinister . . . about how it had looked.

A vague foreboding filled her thoughts as she remembered the shape she'd seen in the clouds above the mountains to the north. Two slitted holes like staring eyes, with a strip of clear black sky in the center of each, broken only by a star glinting near the center. The stars had looked, oddly, red. Something to do with the dust carried on the wind, perhaps.

Still, she couldn't get those eyes out of her head. Milena's words seemed to follow her down as she slipped back into sleep; those, and a pair of glaring, looking eyes.

*"He's free. The **Dark** one. He's awake and he's . . . searching."*

~ ~ ~

The next morning found all three girls sprawled out in the living room. All were dressed in comfy pajamas, and paper and pencils were flung around the chair where Milena sat, curled up with pamphlets in her lap. Trixie was on the couch watching cartoons- at the moment, she was watching was sounded like "Ed, Edd, and Eddy." (Not one of Lena's favorites- she liked the Grim Adventures of Billy and Mandy better- but it was fine as long as she didn't have to watch it.) As for Jewel, she on the other end of the couch and was, of course, reading. A psychology book, by the looks of it.

"Better decide where's the party's gonna be, woman, before your bro gets home." Trixie said, not taking her eyes off the TV. "Otherwise, he'll blackmail you into somewhere we don't wanna go. Like, ChuckE Cheeses or something."

There was a pause at that, and all three laughed at the image of her sixteen-year-old brother at ChuckE Cheeses. "Nah, this year's gonna be good." Lena said finally. "After all, this was our first year of high school!"

The party mentioned had been going on for a few years now. Since Milena and the others couldn't have parties on their birthdays (Lena's was December 9, Trixie's was February 15, and Jewel's was October 21), they always went somewhere together during the summer. Each took turns picking the place; this year, it was Lena's. Their parents had mentioned something about them picking it on their sixteenth

birthday, but that was another year from now and thus had no bearing on the current party.

Of course, some choices had been duds; one year, the amusement park they'd wanted to go to was closed down, while in another the place had turned out to be exceedingly dull. But they always made up for it later; after all, they had a whole summer! Whoot!

"We're sophomores now, right?" Jewel said; she was, wonder of wonders, looking up from her book. "After all, I think our teachers would tell us if we failed. But none of us should; I think we did okay this year."

"Speak for yourself, oh wondrous scholar." Trixie groaned. "Let's count my failed classes, shall we? French, perhaps World History, and almost certainly Earth Science."

"But that's only last quarter. You'll pull through." Jewel reminded her, turning back to her book. Trixie shrugged and turned the channel to Comedy Central. There were more sympathetic people there, for sure.

Milena, meanwhile, ignored this (except for briefly considering that she might have failed Algebra I), and began leafing through the packets in her lap. Let's see . . .

She picked up one. Story Land? No, they'd gone a few years ago. Didn't feel like going again. She set it down on her armrest. Santa's Village? Ah, no. Definitely not. She just wasn't in the mood for little kid rides.

And so she went on and nothing seemed *right*. They didn't really have to worry about money, because each parent would pay their kid's way- not that everyone was rich or anything, but they'd set aside a little cash for this every year. She'd paused at Whale's Tails for a moment but, since they almost always went there once a summer anyways, it wasn't really special. And Six Gun City was supposed to be really crappy; perhaps some other time, they'd see just how bad it was, but not right now.

The last one she looked at was for the Polar Caves. Although this one didn't feel right either, it *did* give her an idea . . . and made her think about a much more *local* place they could go.

As she was pondering this, Trixie, impatient as ever, called over. "Yoo-hoo, earth to Milena?!"

"Hmm?"

"Houston, we have a problem." Trixie said, rolling her eyes. Getting off the couch, she walked over to her friend. "You decided yet, woman?" she asked, sitting on the arm of the chair not currently taken up with pamphlets. Jewel, mostly absorbed in her book, looked up once, an eyebrow arched over one golden eye, then resumed reading, ears sharp to hear the answer.

Milena smiled, meeting her friend's sky-hued eyes with her scarlet ones. "Yes, I believe I've got an idea. I think you'll like it."

2 - The Turning Point

I'm sorry, everyone, for not having updated sooner. I started writing this one the date below- and just never really got around to finishing it. ^^;; Don't worry, I'll try to update more now- it's just that it's hard to find time and inspiration. I haven't exactly been writing much lately. ^^;; You'll find that this chapter is quite different from the original, but I hope that's okay. This whole Reincarnated is going to be quite a bit different.

Anyways, thanks for everyone who keeps reading, and I look forward to comments and feedback from all of you. :) I've started Ch. 3 and I'll try to get it finished as soon as possible for you. Alright, enjoy!

11/29/06

Chapter 2: *The Turning Point*

Listen as the wind blows from across the Great Divide.

Voices trapped in yearning, memories trapped in time.

-Possession, Sarah McLaughlin

"A camping trip?! Of all the cool places we could go this summer, you chose to go on a **camping trip**!?"

Milena wished her brother would stop yelling in her ear. They'd been repeating this same conversation over and over for the past few days. Jake just wasn't getting it. Well, that was a guy for you; they could be slow, so sometimes you had to explain things to them slowly.

Lena, however, wasn't in the mood to do so. "Yes, I **did!** We've already gone through this a million times, and why are you even coming with us if you aren't camping?" she snapped.

At the moment, they were driving up a steeply sloping hill in her parent's van. Bits of light that weren't blocked by the thick foliage of the surrounding trees would flash into their eyes every now and then, and the sky (what little they could see of it through said trees) was a brilliant blue. It showed no sign of the thunderstorm that had struck a few days ago.

All the kids were in the back seat, with her father driving and her mother in the passenger side. Since

Jake was incompatible with either Jewel or Trixie (if seated next to them, he would purposely irritate them to the point of insanity), they were in the furthestmost back seat. Meaning that Lena was stuck next to her loud, irritating older brother.

By all rights, Jake shouldn't even have been in the car. When told that the girls were going camping (instead of to some amusement park where he could tag along and go on rides), Jake had sulked for days and refused to come. Which meant that he'd been completely useless during the entire planning and packing process. As usual.

And yet, here he was; sitting, glaring at her, and basically just irritating everyone in the entire vehicle. It was like having a particularly obnoxious snake coiled up in the next seat, ready to strike at any given time. Except, this snake didn't attack with fangs and venom. No, this one's weapon was a lot slower and more painful: the sheer annoyance of having a male teenager in the same car with his sister and her friends. She'd rather get bitten by a rattlesnake and have it over with.

"I needed to make sure you don't do something dumb while setting up camp. We all know how stupid you are." Jake sneered.

There! It strikes! Milena thought, rolling her eyes. Being cooped up in a car with Jake wasn't something that was high on her list of fun activities. She'd learned by now to just ignore him when he started acting like an idiot.

Her friend, however, didn't much care. "Translation: your friends abandoned you and you have nothing else to do." Trixie drawled.

"For your information, no, they didn't." he scowled. "I'm going somewhere near this after we drop you losers off, so I needed a ride."

"**Sure** you are." Trixie said, giving a conspiratorly wink, and turned back to her Gameboy DS. Jake gave her an extremely rude hand gesture and, when she didn't respond, growled and turned around to look out the window. Jewel, meanwhile, had her nose stuffed in a book and hadn't so much as twitched during this whole exchange. She was an **expert** at ignoring idiots.

Milena, freed at least temporarily from dealing with her brother, also looked out the window. There were a lot more bits of rock and boulders protruding from beneath the moss and undergrowth than it did where she lived; this place was known in their area for having a huge amount of natural caves. That was what had drawn her to it in the first place.

She let her mind drift, daydreaming as she so often did these days. Doing that seemed to make time pass a lot faster than just sitting and twiddling her thumbs did. It also gave her time to think, and stretch her imagination, which was good- she'd found that people who didn't allow themselves to daydream or use their minds were often dull and generally had a **lot** less fun than people who did. Those were the sort of person you'd find illegally drinking and smoking in friend's houses just to take the edge off their boredom.

How you could be bored when you weren't in school Milena didn't know. She hardly ever was. There was too much going on in her life- friends to talk to, books to read, places to see, activities to do- that

she didn't have any time to waste in idle idiocy, unlike many of the kids at her school. This was another reason she didn't really hang out with anyone other than Trixie or Jewel. All those other people just seemed so . . . bland. Okay, maybe she was being judgmental, but she really didn't care at the moment. Those thoughts were boring; she'd rather just watch the scenery fly by.

A few more minutes passed without incident as they continued driving. Milena started noticing that more and more blue patches were visible through the treetops until, finally, they came out into a clearing. The trees on the right side of it were sparse enough to allow view of the land below, a vast green and brown landscape topped by the sloping mountains miles away. Living in the North Country, Milena couldn't remember ever waking up and not being able to see at least some parts of those mountains- they were like a constant guardian, steady and ancient.

The van came to a stop in the center of the clearing; they'd finally come to their destination. There was a large mound of rock in front of them, wide and a foot taller than Ken's six feet. Sunlight shined in but disappeared within few feet of the entrance as if it were being swallowed by the shadows lurking inside.

"Crystal Cave! C'mon, let's go!" Trixie crowed, flinging off her seatbelt and jumping out the door as soon as Milena had opened it. The other two girls followed at more sedate rates, while Jake just sat back, crossed his arms, and remained planted in his seat. Again, typical of him.

Her father had already unlocked the trunk and was handing a large cooler to Trixie, who went over to the cave. They'd already decided to store their things just inside the cave's entrance and camp right outside it- they couldn't exactly have a campfire inside it, now could they? To protect their things from wild animals, everything inside would be covered in waterproof tarps. Milena caught a glimpse of a bright blue one right before Ken placed the box containing the unassembled tent in her arms. Not having expected the weight, she almost dropped it; but she refused to knowing that Jake was watching and would mock her if she showed any such weakness.

So she grabbed the tent and two of the fold-up chairs and marched over to the cave entrance. Trixie passed her as she raced back to the car. Lena just shook her head at the other's energy- she hoped it'd last, because setting up camp was probably going to be a tiring business. There were some remnants of a picnic table on the other side of the clearing that had long since succumbed to rot and disrepair. That was a shame; now they'd have to eat their meals on their laps. Ah, well, they could probably use the splinters for tinder in any case.

Milena leaned the box and chairs against the wall alongside the cooler- they'd organize things in a little while. As she walked back to the car she noticed that her father had ordered Jake out of the car at one point and was now making him carry things. Not that Lena actually trusted her brother with carrying anything of hers, but it was still funny to see him **working**. She grinned at him as he passed, earning herself a scowl.

They all busied themselves with carrying things to and fro, delivering the cooking gear, Coleman stove and lantern, and numerous other essential things to the cave mouth. It was a relief to hear the trunk finally close as they carried their final load, spelunking gear, to the cave mouth.

Her father folded his arms and looked at the spread, frowning. "I guess it's too late now to ask if this is **really** what you want to do, right?" He was joking, but Milena could see worry the worry in his face. "If

something happens to you guys up here, there's not we can do."

"No worries, I have a cell phone!" Trixie said, flipping out of her pocket. "So, we're all good! A bear attacks, we phone 911." She rubbed her neck sheepishly. "Of course, that's providing it **works** up here . . ."

"The odds of a bear attacking are moderately low- there haven't been bears around here for a few years- but we'll keep that in mind, Mr. Caloreic." Jewel said, shooting a glare at Trixie. "The only worrying factor is the fact that the last few people who came up here to camp disappeared for no good reason. Like, this one case in the 1980's-"

"Oh, we don't need to hear about **that**, Jewel." Trixie said loudly, clamping a hand over the teen's mouth and dragging her off to the cave. "C'mon, let's go get this stuff put in place, shall we?"

Unfortunately, she hadn't done it quickly enough. Ken turned and looked at Milena, raising an eyebrow. "You three didn't say anything about that when you asked to camp here." he said sternly.

"I'm not sure this is such a good idea, Lena." Her mother said, frowning. "This place doesn't sound safe."

"Mom, Dad, we can take care of ourselves!" Milena said, exasperated. Sometimes Jewel just didn't understand when to keep her mouth shut. "And besides, we have that phone if something comes wrong or we want to come home."

"What about those missing people? What if something happens and you can't **get** to the phone?" Now her father was angry, both at her seeming indifference to their situation and the fact that they hadn't told him these certain details.

"C'mon, Dad. Those people were probably druggies or something who came up here to smoke and got lost in the woods." Jake said, rolling his eyes. "These guys aren't **that** stupid . . . **Are** you?"

"**No**, were **not**." Milena snapped. "Dad, please? We'll be fine! I promise, we won't even go very far from the campsite, and we'll be extra careful."

It took a few more moments of convincing from all the kids there for her parents to allow them to stay. It had been bad enough convincing them the first time but, due to Jewel's outburst, now they were set against it. Eventually, though, her father just got tired of talking and agreed. He did want to have a look around the cave, though, before they left.

Milena hung back for a few moments to speak with Jake. "Why were you helping out back there?" she asked suspiciously. "Usually, **you're** the one telling them my secrets." Over to the side, Jewel flinched- though they'd forgiven her readily, she still felt guilty about causing trouble.

"I just want you the heck out of the house for a while. You're a pain in the butt." Jake said, smirking in a way that made Milena want to smack him. He abruptly sobered up and looked away, however.

"Anyways, there's been kids up here all the time from school that are a lot dumber than you guys and they don't disappear. You'll be fine." He said quietly.

Well, it was nice to know that Jake thought they could take care of themselves, at least. Now that her parents were close to leaving, she realized she'd feel a lot safer if Jake would stay- he'd taken a lot of courses in Boy Scouts that would help in situations out here- but knew that if she asked him to she'd be arguing with him before the day was out. And that would spoil their whole trip, so they'd just have to tough it out on their own.

Jake obviously wanted to leave them as soon as possible because he snatched a flashlight from the pile of objects at the cave's entrance and dashed inside, following his parents. The girls stayed outside for a few moments, planning where to put things. Curious as to what her family was doing, Milena picked up a flashlight of her own and all three stepped into the cave.

The moment she stepped over onto the stone, a deep shiver went through her entire body, accompanied by dizziness. It was similar to the sensation when someone walks over your grave, but deeper and more inexplicable. Despite the heat of the day goosebumps broke out everywhere on her body and the hand holding the flashlight shook, causing the beam of light to waver. From the look of Jewel and Trixie the same thing had happened to them as well.

"Woah, **that** was weird." Trixie said, laughing a bit nervously and rubbing her bare arms.

"Must've been the change in temperature." Jewel countered as they walked further in. She pushed her glasses further up on her nose, frowning. "The only problem with that is that there isn't much of a temperature difference. That's strange."

"It's probably nothing. Let's just go catch up to my parents." Milena said, but she didn't believe her own words. Jewel was right- the cave was only a little cooler than outside, though the temperature dropped slightly as they continued on. So, what had that been? And why had she gotten light-headed? Maybe there was bad air in the cave somewhere. It was something to consider if they were going to be camping and exploring here. Then again, figuring these things out was Jewel's thing, so she'd leave it alone. Still, Lena couldn't help but wonder about it.

Little flecks of mica in the granite walls sparkled as she swept her light across it, which made Jewel go off into thinking aloud about the number and type of minerals that could be in the cave itself. Milena actually listened this time, as she liked that sort of thing, but still walked a little faster for Trixie's sake- even in the darkness, she could see that her eyes had glazed over. Trixie didn't exactly care about science and especially not about rocks, unless they were gemstones.

The passage soon opened up into a small cavern about the size of Milena's room at home. Fantastic stalagmite and stalactite formations graced the walls, floor, and ceiling, creamy white with some other pastel colors occasionally mixed in. Light from all three of the flashlights was caught and reflected back by minerals, which made the room shine like a huge disco ball. Her parents were looking around, while Jake was trying to break the tip off of one of the stalagmites. Jewel immediately rushed over and started lecturing him about why he shouldn't do that, while Milena and Trixie went over to Lena's parents.

"Pretty cool, right? You don't get to see **this** every day". She said, raising her eyebrow at her father.

Ken nodded, looking around. "It **is** pretty interesting, but you need to be careful in here. I don't want any of those things falling down on you." He pointed at the stalactites, whose points seemed unusually

sharp.

"Yeah, good idea." Lena could just imagine one of those crashing down on them, and it wouldn't be pretty. If the point didn't kill one of them, its weight might. **Not** a happy thought. "We'll be **really** careful around these things." she assured.

"And that means **you**, Jake!" Her mother turned around and looked at the boy in question, who was, despite Jewel's warnings, still fiddling around with a stalagmite. He rolled his eyes and looked at them, impatient to leave.

Her father saw this and, deciding that he'd seen enough as well, walked back out. After picking up a few pretty rocks, Violet led everyone else to the cave mouth. Nothing happened this time, which was a relief. Lena hadn't liked that sensation they'd felt before one bit.

After going over things again with the girls, her family got ready to leave. Lena hugged her parents and they all said good-bye for the time being. To her surprise, Jake even came up to her instead of yelling his farewells from the car, like she'd expected.

"Just be careful, alright"? he growled and crossed his arms. " If you guys get hurt, it'll be on my head for helping persuade them to let you stay."

"You got it, Jake. I'll see you in a week or so." She grinned and held out her arms and, after a few moments of hesitation, Jake gave her a quick hug. He waved good-bye to Trixie and Jewel and climbed into the van. They took off down the road and, within moments, had disappeared from sight into the forest.

Right. Lena said, feeling a little intimidated now that her family was gone. "So, are we gonna get camp set up or what?"

"We'll put up the tent if you organize the rest of the stuff." Trixie said, tossing the bag with the tent's frame in it to Jewel as she took the tent itself from the box. She looked back at Lena and raised her eyebrows. "Or is that too much for you?" she asked, grinning.

"Oh, just get the tent, dummy". Milena said, shaking her head, as she went to their things and started arranging things. Food and the Coleman stove went in one spot, the lantern in another, and the spelunking gear she covered with a tarp a few yards into the cave. She'd probably store the food somewhere else later- maybe that cavern further in. By the time she was finished hauling the stuff around, the tent had been pitched and her friends were in the process of fastening it into the ground.

" Beat ya." she teased, holding the bag of stakes and handing them to Trixie and Jewel as needed. "Just for that, **you** get to make dinner tonight, Trix."

The other girl stuck out her tongue at her and took another stake. "And just for **that**, I'm gonna make sure that your food's cold."

"As you're probably going to make all of our suppers at the same time, they'd all be cold." Jewel said, pounding a stake into the ground on the other side of the tent. "And I don't feel like cold food."

"Traitor!" Trixie exclaimed, giving Jewel her best mock-angry glare. She then got up and looked at their work, hands on her hips. "It should be okay. Provided it doesn't hurricane or something." She said, nodding. Lena agreed- the tent actually looked good and Jewel had made sure to put on the rain tarp just in case.

"Oh, I don't think there's much chance of that." Lena said, looking at the sky. Only a few clouds were drifting lazily across the sky, testimony to the perfect weather.

"Maybe not of a hurricane, but what about rabid bears?" Trixie asked, grinning. "I doubt a tent, even one so pretty as this, is going to do much of anything against a rabid bear."

"Need I remind you the odds of that happening"? Jewel said sternly as they headed to the cave mouth to collect their sleeping bags.

"No, I'm pretty better off not knowing what percentage there is of a bear ripping me to shreds." Trixie said cheerfully, hoisting a bag with her blankets onto her back. "That way, when I **do** die, I can have unfinished business and come back as a ghost! And haunt any of you who happen to survive." She gave her blankets to Jewel, who was spreading them out in the tent.

"Ghosts don't exist." Jewel replied simply, smoothing down the base blankets.

Milena sighed and handed over her sleeping bag. "Yeah, we know. And neither does the Bermuda Triangle, reincarnation, magic, or anything else cool and supernatural."

"Magic?" Jewel snorted derisively from inside the tent. "Yeah, right. And pigs can fly."

"Well, with the research they're doing nowadays, you never know". Trixie said brightly. "C'mon out, Jewel, let's go look around!"

The rest of that day was spent exploring the area and making plans for the tomorrow. Trixie discovered a good-sized stream nearby and spent a good amount of her time trying to get both of her friends wet, which led to a water fight on both sides. This resulted in getting them all completely drenched, but it was sure fun while it lasted. Luckily, the day was warm enough so that they dried off before the sun went down.

The sunset over the mountains was beautiful, the first one of the summer they'd really had a chance to enjoy. Jewel took no time at all to start snapping pictures of it with her digital camera (which she hadn't actually been allowed to bring by her parents, as it was new, but she'd been determined enough to sneak it into her backpack.) Lighting the fire was another adventure altogether- they'd gathered tinder and wood long before twilight, but it was fully dark outside before they got it going. Mainly because they'd forgotten to bring along anything that would help jumpstart the fire besides some newspaper and sticks as tinder.

After the fire was fully going they roasted hot dogs over the flames. This turned out to be an interesting experiment in itself, as none of them had cooked anything over an open fire in ages- which meant several half-cooked or completely charred and blackened hotdogs before they figured out the right length of time to hold them in the coals for.

Trixie couldn't stop cracking jokes the entire time, especially after they made s'mores. Well, she had an excuse- chocolate is proven to have the same effect on people as marijuana. So that entire night of ghost stories and jokes was powered by the fact that they were high off of chocolate.

They didn't end up going to sleep until after midnight as they stayed up for a while longer to look at the stars. Jewel pointed out several constellations, while Trixie made up different and ruder names for them that had Milena laughing and Jewel indignant. When they finally did manage to sleep, though, Lena's dreams were uneasy and plagued by the feeling of being watched, as they had been for the past week since school had let out. It was only when the reoccurring dream of her time in Boston came up that she stopped tossing and turning, and then she slept peacefully until morning.

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The next morning found them standing in front of the tunnels leading further into the cave. "Are you sure this is a good idea"? Jewel asked nervously, shifting her feet as she looked into the darkness. "It's dangerous, and what if we get stuck in there or something?"

"That's what these are for, Jewel!" Trixie said, tapping the bag on her back. Identical to the ones the other girls were wearing, it was loaded with food, flashlights, batteries, ropes, and other equipment that might come in handy as they explored. "C'mon, what other time are we going to have to flirt with death in an underground deathtrap? Relax!"

"Thanks, that just makes me feel *loads* better." Jewel said dryly, rolling her eyes.

Lena flicked on her flashlight and took a step toward the opening. When no one followed she looked back at them and raised an eyebrow. "Coming? Don't worry, guys, if it gets dangerous or we get tired, we'll just turn back. Got the phone, Trix?"

"Aye aye, captain." The teen replied cheerfully, saluting and dragging Jewel in by the arm as she hesitated again. "Forward *march!*"

Crystal Cave was known for its internal structures being very stable and seeming almost man-made; this was one of the reasons Lena had chosen to camp here, apart from sheer curiosity. This turned out to be only partially true; the tunnels started out normal, but become very curvy and sometimes cramped enough that they had to crouch or crawl to make their way through. There were a few near disasters when they nearly walked into holes that plunged deep into the depths of the ground. Lena doubted she would be able to do this alone but with her friends, exploring these caves was reduced from a daunting challenge to an eerie experience. The stone was cool to the touch and slightly damp, which was refreshing at times when, sweaty from toil, they stopped for breaks.

"Y'know we're all crazy, right?" Jewel said conversationally on one of these stops as they drank from their water bottles, stretching out in one of the wide ledges they'd found. "Here we are, going deeper and deeper into an unexplored cave where, if we should happen to get trapped or fall to our miserable deaths, no one would find us for weeks or months? Or maybe never at all?"

"Ah, don't be a spoilsport, woman!" Trixie said, swishing her mouthful of water around in her mouth like a five-year-old with Jello. "That's half the fun! And you have to admit, this **has** been pretty cool. I don't think we could stop right now if we wanted to, anyways."

"I know. Weird, huh?" Lena agreed. And it really was- especially considering that her fear of the dark and slight claustrophobia would normally have sent her running for the exit. And yet, for some reason, she didn't want to go back. **Strongly** didn't want to turn back. It defied common sense, but it was almost as if something was pulling them onward, aided by the spurring effect of youthful recklessness.

They'd occasionally come across part of the tunnel that had partially caved in or was mostly blocked by rocks and boulders, which meant that they had to scramble over them as best they could. Trixie almost got stuck for good once when her backpack snagged on a huge stone and they had a very hard time getting it undone. When they stopped again, an hour or so later, everyone's elbows and knees were scraped and stinging from constant contact with rock. Jewel (who was the only one with the First Aid kit) tended to the deepest ones, mumbling angrily about the sheer stupidity of the situation.

The girls finally reached a corridor that they could walk upright in, and wide enough to stretch one of their arms out fully. Trixie was making the best of it, walking happily back and forth as Lena and Jewel came up the rear. "See guys? Told ya it'd get better, Jewel. What could possibly go wrong?"

Typically, at the exact same second she said that, a deep rumbling started up from below them. Stones began falling from the trembling walls like a solid rainstorm as the ground lurched sickly back and forth. The three immediately rushed to each other, crouching in the center of the tunnel as the earth shook around them. There was really no point running- if this was a real earthquake, the tunnel was as apt to cave in at any point as another. That didn't stop any of them from wanting to- Lena could feel the tenseness in her friend's bodies as they huddled near each other.

However, the quake stopped almost as soon as it started. The roaring noise stopped and the movement gradually lessened until it stopped entirely. It was still some moments before they moved, though. Jewel pushed up her glasses shakily- she hadn't stopped trembling when the ground had. "What was **that?!**"

"Um . . . earthquake, looked like." Trixie said, falling on her back and looking blankly at the ceiling. "Except, I didn't think we had them all that much up here . . ."

Milena leaned against the wall, brushing her bangs out of her eyes. "I swear to God, you jinxed us. You said, 'what could go wrong?' Trix, you never, **ever** say that in a situation like this! It's bound to get you killed!" She was joking, but still wierded out by the episode. It was just . . . bizarre. Earthquakes hardly ever happened in the North Country, it not being near the edge of any tectonic plate boundaries. They got vibrations from strong ones down south occasionally but those were barely even noticeable. So, what the heck had that been? Some freak event of nature?

"Let's turn back." she said, climbing to her feet and helping Trixie up. "This is too weird." She just hoped they'd be able to find their way back- she'd left markers at every turn, but, considering the circumstances, who knew if they'd still be there? Not her, that was for certain. And what if the tunnels had been damaged?

Jewel looked utterly relieved. "Finally, you listen to **reason**!" she exclaimed, leading the way. "Let's get **out** of here!"

When they'd backtracked a good ways, however, they discovered that they couldn't go any farther. It was as Lena had feared- part of the tunnel had caved in completely, leaving an impenetrable wall of rock and soil. They just stared at it dumbly for a few moments, not wanting to believe their eyes.

"I **warned** you guys!" Jewel moaned, putting her face in her hands and shaking her head violently. "But no, you had to be **adventurous**! Now we-re trapped down here!"

"Relax, there's gotta be another way out somewhere." Lena reassured, thinking hard about the route they'd taken. It was possible that they might backtrack to another tunnel nearby- but the only one she'd remembered seeing dropped out completely in the bottom, making too wide a hole to cross by any means. And who knew what the quake had done to the other tunnels?

"Wait, wait, I still have my cell phone!" Trixie exclaimed, fishing it out of her pocket and holding it up triumphantly. The others waited expectantly as she switched it open and stared at the screen. Within a few moments, however, her expression went dark and she thrust it back into her pocket. "There's no signal whatsoever- the walls are blocking it." She said, exasperated. "So, unless we get to another area where we can **get** a signal, we're screwed."

Jewel looked like she was going to cry at any moment, so Milena decided it was time to do something. "Alright, let's just . . . keep going, okay? Maybe there's an exit up ahead." She took a deep breath and kept going, thinking aloud as they started walking. "Besides, my parents will be back to get us in a few days, maybe sooner if they felt the earthquake. We're got food and light- we'll be fine." She said, trying to convince herself and them at the same time.

"For now." Trixie said darkly, looking at the flashlight in Lena's hand. "But what about when it runs out?"

For once, none of them had an answer to that.

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By a few hours they still had no answers and things looked worse then ever. They'd had to replace the batteries in Lena s flashlight after it had abruptly quit, leaving them to scramble blindly in their packs. **Not** a pleasant situation. They'd run into a dead end once and nearly fallen into a gigantic hole in another tunnel- from the roaring sounds of a river deep below, they wouldn't have survived even if they'd lived through the fall.

For the first few minutes after the earthquake, they'd tried to keep their spirits up as much as possible, singing marching songs and getting their minds off things. This soon faded as they became more and more tired and their moods dropped straight down. By this point, even Lena, the most optimistic of the bunch, doubted their ever finding an exit. It was with a weary fatalism that she led the way, cursing herself every step for even suggesting they camp in the Crystal Cave. If her friends got hurt because of her stupid decision . . . well, she sure as hell hoped they wouldn't. Because she doubted she could deal

with it.

Because of their doomed attitude, none of them could quite believe their eye when light started shining from further up in the tunnel. They just stared, dumbstruck, and then raced forward. The fresh breeze that was also coming from before them was just a different from the stale, crypt-like air that lingered in the tunnels that they could've cried with sheer relief.

When they finally stumbled into the source of the light, they had to blink and rub their eyes like mad just to be able to see. When their eyes finally did adjust, the sight was a welcome one- a large, spacious cavern, with a hole at the top that showed a blue sky, just dark enough to be late afternoon. There was an odd ring of discolored rock just below this hole, with a strange clear crystal jutting up in the center. Lena took all this in with one glance, then moved on to try and look for an exit. Unfortunately, there was none- the walls just stopped short, lined with sparkling bands of minerals as well as the normal stalactites and stalagmites.

This, however, was enough for Trixie. She immediately started jumping up and down with joy, pumping her fist in the air. "Yes! We **live!**" she cried triumphantly, thrusting the hand clenching her cell phone up toward the ceiling. "Mother Nature's not gonna keep us down!" She then turned it on, waiting for the screen to light up. When it didn't, she frowned and then slapped herself upside the head. "Oh, for heaven's sake, I forgot to **charge** it!"

Jewel just stared at her blankly, too tired to react the way she would've earlier. "You **what?**" she said wearily, then groaned and sank to the ground in despair.

Trixie slung down her backpack and started digging in it wildly, frowning. "I **know** I've got extra batteries in here somewhere! I made **sure** before I packed my bag!"

Lena just started laughing wildly. It was quiet at first- a few giggles, but that quickly escalated to full-blown guffawing until tears started running down her cheeks. Her friends were looking at her like she was crazy, and she just waved them off until she could get the breath back to speak. "I'm sorry . . ." she gasped, ". . . but I can't help it! You forgot to **charge the batteries!**" They stared blankly for a few minutes, then joined in themselves. Anyone hearing the sound they made would've listed them as officially crazy or hysterical, but this was just a way of getting off stress.

When she could actually breathe again without hurting her sides, Milena felt much better. She could tell everyone else did. Jewel had actually gotten to her feet and was looking around- now **this** was the Jewel she knew, interested in anything in the world of science that was even slightly out of the ordinary. This meant digging out her notepad and jotting down notes on the strips of minerals in the walls, getting so close to study them that her nose almost touched the rock. Yup, she was her old self, that was for sure. And Trixie's frantic search had slowed down- she was taking her time, laying things out and making sure not to break them. Now that she was taking a more reasonable approach, she might actually **find** those dang batteries of hers.

As for Lena herself, she wasn't sure what to do. Resting felt like a good plan at the moment, so she took off the backpack and sat on the floor. It felt oddly flat for a cave, as if the movement of many people on its surface had worn the stone smooth. That, of course, wasn't possible, because these caves were unmapped and extremely difficult to navigate- hadn't they already found that out themselves? Maybe

they'd discover the reason for that later.

For the moment, she drew a packet of crackers from a side pocket of the bag and started munching, using only small sips of her water. Even if Trixie could find those batteries, there was no guarantee the thing would actually work, so they'd still have to be careful with their supplies. Said teen had stopped and was looking at her crackers with a longing expression when her own stomach rumbled, followed closely by Jewel's. This made them all giggle, and her friends joined her in the snack.

"So, what'd you find out about that rock, woman? You seemed to be looking at it hard enough." Trixie said, still fishing half-heartedly for the batteries as she ate.

The girl in question frowned as she studied her notes, pushing her glasses back up her nose. Here in the sunlight, the smudges, bruises, and scrapes they'd all gotten were more apparent, and Milena was surprised that her glasses hadn't fallen off or gotten scratched at some point. "Well, these types of stone aren't usual existent with the granite that forms the bedrock of this area." She explained, pointing out various stripes with vastly different coloring than their neighbors.

"Ah . . . meaning?" Trixie said, smiling sheepishly.

"Meaning, that this cave's a lot weirder than we thought it was." Lena answered for her, leaning back against the wall. "But I don't think right now's time for an earth science lesson, Jewel."

"Yeah, I guess you're right." She said regretfully, tucking the pad back into one of her bag's pockets. "Besides, I'm probably wrong. I'm not exactly the smartest person . . ."

Trixie and Lena both leaned over and cuffed her lightly across the head at the same time. "Dummy! You're smarter than we are!" Lena exclaimed, at the same time that Trixie said, "Yeah? Then who made it so we could pass this year, hmm? If I hadn't copied half your homework, I would've failed miserably!"

This sent them all off into another laughing fit. As Trixie scooted back to her seat and her hand was absent-mindedly roaming over her pack's surface, she looked at it in surprise and zipped open a small compartment none of them had noticed before. The things she pulled out were undoubtedly batteries. She looked at them sheepishly, rubbing her neck. "Well, I hadn't expected them to be **there**."

"Well, no, stuff like that's always in the last place you look." Jewel said, but a fresh surge of hope sparkled in her amber eyes as she saw the batteries.

Trixie just rolled her eyes and used the tiny screwdriver in her tool kit to open the back of the phone. "Well, duh, silly! Of course it'd be in the last place you look! Who'd keep looking after they found something?"

"She's got a point." Lena said, smiling with relief. They were fed (at least partially), they were all much better moods, and Trixie'd finally found those damn batteries. Maybe there was a hope in this, after all.

After she inserted the batteries, Trixie turned it on and stared at the screen. A few seconds later she whooped in joy and jumped to her feet. "All **right!** We're got a signal! Boo-ya! It's not much of one, but if I move around a little . . ." She then immediately started circling the cave, keeping her gaze locked on the

tiny screen.

Jewel looked at her, grinning. Lena gave her thumbs up and climbed to her feet, helping her up. She immediately rushed over to Trixie and looked over her shoulder at the cell phone, as if by just being there she could raise the signal.

Milena smiled and decided to have a look around for herself. She wandered slowly around the cavern's walls, scanning them as she listened to the amusing sounds of false alarms and exclamations behind her. She trailed one vein of mineral with a finger as she passed- the flecks of gold in it reminded her of her river rock. She took it out and rubbed it absently as she walked along. It almost seemed to be . . . **thrumming** at her. She frowned, wondering what had set it off.

When she reached the place just in front of that strange circle on the floor, she noticed a dark stain on the rock. When she touched her hand to it, she had to snatch it away quickly- there was something creepy and somewhat chilling about that stain. It almost looked like dried blood.

If she looked close enough, she could see seven tiny flecks of color around it in a ring around it. *What in the world is this?* She thought, frowning. *It's just . . . weird.*

Just when she was considering getting a closer look, she heard Trixie speak behind her. "Lena, come over here! We got a signal, and a **good** one!" When she turned around, she saw that they were standing in the center of that ring of discolored rock, right below the opening in the rock above.

She smiled and started walking over. "Well, what are you waiting for? Call!" she said, raising an eyebrow at them. "Surely you don't need **my** permission." She teased.

Trixie just rolled her eyes and grinned but started dialing what looked like the number to her house. Just as she dialed the last number, Lena took a step into the circle. She immediately felt inexplicably dizzy and tripped, falling hard on her stomach. The hand holding the stone stretched out to stop her fall and instead hit the crystal.

A spark leaped from the collision of crystal with her stone and sank into the prism, which abruptly began to shimmer with an array of dazzling colors. Jewel, who'd knelt down to see if Lena was okay, cried out and shielded her eyes. Somehow, though, the light didn't bother Milena- in fact, she couldn't look away. Her eyes were locked on the center of the crystal- she could almost see two figures inside it. One wasn't just dark; it was the utter absence of light and matter itself, like a tiny black hole, while the other was made of all light and warmth. It was only when this second being's gaze met hers that she had to look away, blinded by a radiance she couldn't comprehend.

The light enveloped the area in and around the circle. When it finally faded, the only sign that anyone had been there at all was the packs abandoned near the doorway and a few objects randomly scattered everywhere. The screams and loud humming of before were totally gone, replaced by the slow, crystalline sound of water dripping somewhere and the faint noises of birds outside. The natural light of a day approaching its end slanted in. All was peaceful.

All except for the cell phone abandoned in the center of the circle. A faint ringing could be heard until someone picked up on the other side. "Hello? Trixie?" a woman's voice asked, confused. ". . . Is that

you?"

Unfortunately, there wasn't anyone there to answer Mrs. Avails. Nor would there be for a good long while.