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PREFACE: TAKING THE GARDEN

Sir Charles Renkins had found his Wonderland, a world full of pureness, wildness, untouched people, and little incivility.

It was a shame an outside ruler had already risen, a self-proclaimed Wonderlandian king, spreading his reign like an epidemic across the rugged lands, surging foreigners in, stripping the land of it's abundance, and building worlds on worlds.

This vision was no insight. Charles wanted the same torture, but in *his* name. He wanted these alien landscapes for himself, especially the paradises that belonged to the odd, but beautiful, Starbright beings.

These two separate parties, The Renkins, and Dongs; began to wage war against one another - two separate, oppressive voices, threatening the innocence of existing life.

The humans ran, the ferals fought, the mythics hid, and the Starbrights closed themselves away forever, into a world of cursed ice and snow, capsizing their own land and people into a waste-world of unmeltable gelicide ice.

The lush lands were gone.

With shock and anger in their hearts, the two warring forces abandoned their strifes to zero-in on recovering the prize they'd lost hold of, but no amount of fire power or detonation would remove the unseizable freeze.

While King Dong and his soldiers began to accept failure, Sir Charles Renkins and his small, but crafty group of crusaders, secretly started to experiment on the Starbright's ice, finding out that it was no material a great ruler would want to destruct... He would use it to engineer a progressive future.

Instead of going after the treasures it concealed, he went after the cage itself – Charles arranged slaves to be sent into the “Gelicide” lands, to mine the ice like gold. He proclaimed the Starbrights extinct. And he stealthily moved into these lands with the invisibility of a disease.

Over the years, none dared to stop this man, and few even knew of his crimes, but the lands cried out, and a messenger was sent out to the one and only creature whose mystic fire could knock the invaded arctic to it's bleeding knees...

CHAPTER 1

THE WONDERLAND WILDS

The jungle curled it's shadows around every stick and stone.

The wind in the leaves harbored a fresh rain storm smell, and the wet, dew-dropped ground leeched warmth into the chill of the night.

Clouds would rinse over the sky, dimming the sacred moonlight which showered down upon the Wonderland Wilds with three, amazing moons. When the mists did divert, the moons shone down like gentle spotlights, making the dark hour's hues muddled and gray, not allowing much to be at it's most brilliant – but within this harrowing jungle, smeared with fog and mystery, four creatures went sailing through the pearlized trees in their full state of glory...

Siti, the weathered, golden-furred lioness, led the pride in the shade of midnight. Zeldia, her golden daughter, prowled at her heels, followed not far by Amethyst, a blanche-colored lioness with deep violet eyes.

It was their last member that was most peculiar; If you dared to judge by appearance, that is.

She was human, yet smoothly, she trod on hands, knees, and toes, swimming the jungle like the other skilled hunters. Her anomalous skirt of white swan feathers spilled over her back, flowing behind her as she crept among the dead grass and ferns. Glistening blue-gray eyes gazed, dazed by the hunt, maybe darting at each new root and tree. Her body swayed just as elegantly as her feline familiars, heavenly in every curve and step, but her soul, was frozen.

This, was Dazzle.

Dazzle and her pride's territory reached far and wide. They'd become something of a declaration in the outback, and reined as queens of the jungle. Dazzle had met and

grouped with the strangers only a few years ago, unaware that they had true forms beyond their feline dress; but Dazzle was not concerned about the girl's secrets, for of whom she did know them to be, she clung to them like Mothers. They were the only beings that understood her divine savagery, and although Dazzle was still prey to the many faces in the Wonderland Wilds, she'd become a beast of a swan maiden – a very powerful creature that took care of itself, but did not know what she herself, had become.

Siti paused in the darkness. Dazzle and each lioness followed suit. Siti had found their kill...

Dazzle folded her tail as neatly as she could, setting back her crouched body, dipping beneath tall ferns and fairy grasses to conceal her fragrance which was loose in the breeze. Their frozen moment readied them to spring into the hunt. Fluttering moths took the chance to drink their tears before the hunger inside began to push the predators forward.

Siti charged.

She paused.

Amethyst rushed in.

She stopped.

Zeldia crept forth.

Dazzle weaseled her way through the under growth, pausing before the unsuspecting animal could catch her movement. She shifted her weight, blinking off the thirsty insects.

With perfect synchronicity, each hunter lunged, their countless practiced pounces instantly killing the unaware beast with a straddling grasp from each angle.

They quickly tore their way into the harvested animal. The lionesses squabbled over their favorite parts of the kill while Dazzle feasted below their might. In the end, nothing much but a heap of bones, and a frazzled pelt was left. The pride licked and wiped each

other's bloody faces clean. Of her more humanly of behaviors, Dazzle popped a few bones into her hide pouch for later carving.

With a full stomach, and a predatory craving, satisfied, Dazzle kissed her pack goodnight, starting back into the twittering jungle just as she had looked before, only, slightly woozy from her big meal.

With her peach hair and white tail tossing in her blinding speed, the swan girl bounded through the wild on all fours. Slowing to a canter near the edge of the brush, eerie orange glows from street lamps could now be seen through the foliage. She trotted into the cul-de-sac of the civilized neighborhood, peering up to a tall, stucco house, whose windows were not lit. Dazzle shook away the mosquitoes and moths as she scurried up to the porch, slipping through the dog door, where an electronic device beeped as it scanned her necklace.

On the quiet carpet, Dazzle wandered into the foyer, down the hall, up the stairs, past her younger sister's Ragdoll cat that hissed and flew from her presence. Dazzle dashed to the guest bedroom door, fluidly sneaking through as the cat's escape caused a midnight ruckus.

Dazzle jumped to the bed, hurriedly nestling down with her tatty swan-feather tail as a blanket, she watched from the blinds of her feathers, but no one awoke.

Relaxing, she groomed herself, stretched her legs, and fanned her tail contentedly. She looked out the window to her precious jungle below, then snuggled her wingless back into the pillows by the headboard, lastly lying her tail over her mostly naked body. She closed her eyes and watched it flutter about, taunting, teasing, and mesmerizing...

"I wonder how you woke me!

I ponder on your skill,

*but heavy sleep suspends me,
You sleep upon it, still!
The ringing of insomnia,
it chills me to the bone!
And when you dream of nothing?
The feeling is **alone...**"*

The chanting white bird would flicker past Dazzle's hypnotized eyes, childishly laughing at Dazzle's sorry, but eager attempts to catch it.

*"I hibernated in these walls!
Listened to the vibrant calls!
Or fall into my unarmed sleep,
into your dreamland I will creep-"*

Dazzle had had this dream for years, and each night it grew more and more maddening.

*"Horror, horror, catch me so!
There's one more thing that you should know-
all of sleep that frightens me,
there's one more thing that turns your key-
morning light, don't leave me beaming,
what is sleep without the dreaming?"*

The little ivory bird sang, dancing through snowflakes, laughing like a child.
"Come find me, Mother!"

She flew from Dazzle into a sea of imprisoned creatures.

Sunrise broke this dreaming.

Not haunted, but daunting, was the tall, bleach-stucco house in the dead end of the neighborhood called *Aldwyn's Lair*.

Up the steps, the mythical boy went, to the front porch, where a pair of Mulga parrots in a suspended cage, sounded the arrival with a shrill chattering. The dog door slightly swung, causing the boy to step back, but it was Euphemia, Dazzle's little sister, whom opened the front door, causing the parakeets to hush.

"I thought you were Dazzle." Shocky smiled nervously at the peach-haired, blue-eyed, fairy-bodied young woman.

"Good morning Shocky! Thanks so much for coming!" Euphy greeted him with excitement. "Aren't they beautiful? We got them from Diana as an engagement present." She gushed, referring to the birds in the cage.

Euphy's fiance, Snookie Bellhouse, could be heard in the kitchen, hassling with pots and pans. Euphy stepped back for Shocky to enter, and the stain-glass door was closed.

"Hey cowboy!" Snookie squinted an eye at the teenager, causing a bovinious ear to flick. Shocky's human face of white skin, black paint marks, and gray eyes reviewed the cookery... The fancy, coffee-scented, decorated kitchen was acknowledged with the swish of his brush-ended tail. He put his brown-papered package on the marble island.

"You sure Dazzle's not gonna have a fit about this? I mean, ferals aren't used to this kinda stuff."

Euphy's periwinkle eyes quickly glanced Shocky before turning to the cupboard.

"She lives her own way, I know, and we give her that space, but it's nice to give her a break from all of that hard feral work, you know? She's still my sister."

"Enjoy the best of both worlds, that's what my Mom's always telling me." Shocky fingered the silver cowbell around his neck; it sat beneath a bright, paisley bandanna.

“And you should.” Euphy remarked sweetly.

“I guess.”

Snookie interjected with unruly spirits, looking smug beneath his brown durag. His reddish-gold hair framed the sides of his sharp, short-bearded face.

“Nothin’ like bein’ an eternal camper, eh?” He pointed his spatula at Shocky.

Euphy batted her man’s arm.

“Well it’s better than being called a witch doctor... ” Shocky mumbled, but Snookie was too busy scooping Euphy up into a ball dance that flowered throughout the kitchen. Thirteen-year-old Shocky ducked as the couple finished it with kisses.

“Guys!”

“Okay, okay,” Euphy laughed brightly, returning to the plan. “so after the eggs are done, we’ll surprise Dazzle with breakfast. She’s in the guest bedroom.”

“She didn’t sleep on the patio?” Shocky said of her usual roost.

“I made her come inside for her birthday.” Euphy handed Shocky a Madhu Ras melon to slice.

“I thought she only ever ate meat?”

Euphy didn’t look up from her task of grating Gouda for the omelet.

“You know, sometimes I really think she’s gotten the hang of things, it’s just... the lionesses... ”

“You can’t take a magic wielder away from their enchanted forest. Nacres thrive off that energy.” Shocky grabbed a knife and flipped it.

“What’s with that mumbo jumbo?” Snookie rolled up his sleeves. “I know we live among the Wonderland Wilds, but what determines whether one can handle the curse or not?”

Snookie was referring to the magic of a Nacre, a sphere of light that could be taken into ones’ body to express a great power, but there were rules to them, and only the ferals of the Wonderland Wilds knew how to use the magical treasures – but were discriminated as witches because of it.

“It’s not a curse.” Shocky said grumpily, his brush-tail, flashing. “It’s a rare treasure that you’d be lucky to ever find. My Nacre was saved for me since Mom’s childhood, when her Mother had given her the choice between Nacre’s that held the spirit of Taurus, and the spirit of the Kangaroo.”

“Yep, kangaroo just wouldn’t have been you, Shocks.” Snookie chuckled. Shocky blushed, chortling thoughtfully.

“Probably not, besides, I’m excited about getting horns this year.”

Snookie poured the egg mixture into the frying pan, making the stove roar with steam. Jalapenos, Gouda cheese, and purple onions were artfully folded in. Within the hour, breakfast was ready, and the three went up the deep-blue carpeted stairs to the exquisitely furnished guest bedroom, where Euphy was confident enough to enter without knocking. She threw open the indigo curtains to let the lavender morning into the shady space.

“Goood morning! Happy Birthday!” Snookie congratulated in the doorway.

Dazzle sat up from a tangle of sheets, emerging from the “nest” she’d made of the human bed. Her blond hair and white tail were a disaster, but her cool gray eyes sparkled like she’d been awake since sunrise. Her peach skin, decorated with scars, was visible from head to toe. She fanned her tail, then arched her back like the big cats did after sleep.

“We made you breakfast! And got you presents!” Euphy blubbered as she kissed her nose while Dazzle’s seastar-pink lips blurted something hostile to Snookie. Shocky winced.

Dazzle then stood up like a biped creature, shaking her tail feathers into place. Her mud stained flesh practically made up for her lack of clothing.

“I have to work today, Euphy.”

“Work? Ferals have work?” Snookie shrugged. Dazzle shot him a dirty look even though he was turned.

“There’s been territory encroachment lately,” Dazzle informed, broaching through Euphy’s cajoling positivity, and reaching for her armored garments. “heard from Ramses there are Wonderlandian knights sifting through the East borders. It’s happening today. I’ll get back around five.”

“Euphy’s been plannin’ this for ages, sis, can’t ya just call a truce or somethin’?” Snookie suggested off-handedly. Shocky elbowed him.

“Hey, my Mom has patrol duties too, it’s serious business! While the kingdom weeds out “witches”, ferals do the dirty work of protecting the innocent, *including civilians like you.*”

“Even though we don’t give a damn to the ferals?” Snookie spoke on behalf of the general population.

“At least have a bite before you go...” Euphy insisted to Dazzle as she helped her lace up. Dazzle’s dry sigh fell as a curl of her hair did.

“I shouldn’t have bothered prattling to you...”

“My Mom didn’t tell me about the knights either,” Shocky said, ears pressed to his skull.

“She hates repeating the dastardly truth, Shocky,” Dazzle embraced him in a stinging gaze. “so long as there are magic wielders engaging foul play, all ferals shall be deemed deviled too.”

“But you, and me, and Mom, and so many other Nacre holders haven’t done anything wrong! It’s not fair!”

Dazzle only blinked, second eyelids sweeping over her slate irises; He was right.

She picked up her boots, making not a sound as her bare feet scaled the stairs.

In the kitchen, the gaggle argued about the party arrangements, which Dazzle was not thrilled for. Gradually, it was agreed everyone would meet at the local bar and grill that Snookie and his friends worked at, decidedly, around five-thirty.

Dazzle refused breakfast and tried to leave, but Euphy stopped her, fixing her hair and clothes to try and fit in more conversation.

Dazzle was resistant.

“You know you wouldn’t have to worry about the territory if you just stayed inside-”

“I can’t just abandon the lionesses.” Dazzle moved to get Euphy off of her. Snookie came up behind them, still with breakfast tray in hand.

“She’s kinda supposed to look rough n’ tumble, Euph.” He smiled at her fussing. Dazzle finally gyrated to leave, her armor glinting in the sunlight as the door was opened wide for her.

“Remember to walk upright,” Snookie smirked. “play nice.”

Dazzle rolled her eyes, caught off guard as Euphy stuffed the omelet in Dazzle’s mouth and sent her out the door.

Having heard a bellow on the wind, Shocky took his multi-hued hooves to the side walk of *Aldwyn’s Lair*. Moving towards the leafy jungle, distracted by the warm blue sky, he allowed an elaborately adorned spear to suddenly land at his feet.

His Mother came flipping out of the wilderness.

“Aye, Shockay! Moi stars! Oi thought you’er still at the Bellhouzes? Your gettin’ y’ Mum all worked uppabout nothin’!”

Shocky hadn’t even flinched. He knew her too well.

“Dazzle had to leave on patrol, doesn’t that mean it’s time for you to go, too?”

“Oh that? What’s another minute, ay? Oim fastah than any Wonderlandian knight Oi’ve eveh met!” Ramses’ honey-hued eyes burst into expression. “Woi o’ll be runnin’ t’ the Blue n’ back b’fore Prince Ding Dong ever steps one bloody paw on moi territory!” Her shells and beads clinked as she went about a pompish stroll, swiping her spear up and manning it. She was a genuine feral, but with the mouth of modern country folk.

“And if there’s a fight?” Shocky quizzed.

“Oh, you know how it goes, knights are so damn ‘fraida ferals-” Ramses spat, but threw Shocky a curve ball. “So anyways, what’s on the birthday agenda this year? Euphemia foind a way t’ annoy Dazzle outta her feathers?”

“We’re going to The Warren after five, when you guys get back-”

“It’s her twentieth, we’d hafta party this toime around.” Ramses ended up staring off into space for awhile. There was sweat on her bronze, tattooed skin, her fur-like hair was a mess, and her muscular kangaroo tail was lying limp in the weeds.

“Mom,” Shocky opened his palms. “things have been changing lately, haven’t they? People really mistrust the ferals, I have friends, but none at school, and no one in town would dream of apprenticing me... I’m starting to give up. Maybe I should just learn to hunt and fight and live like you and Dazzle.”

Ramses combusted.

“Live it up, an’ live it all! Don’ be payin’ attenchin t’ that galah rubbish yor ol’ cityslickers have t’ say aboutcha, you go on an’ show em’ who you are from the heart! Walk both worlds, hon, it’s our mission to unite the worlds!”

“But what about other ferals?”

“Us? We’ll be playin’ hide n’ go seek with the kingdom for a thousand years b’fore they ever laya finger on feral kind!” She threw her stick in the ground.

It was just a mindless, angry comment, for the kingdom already had.

Shocky knit his gloved fingers together, dumbstruck. Ramses’ outburst was done, and she was already rambling to herself while she ducked into a tree hollow where she and Dazzle agreed to store extra food. She tossed a large kiwi to Shocky, and to his own amazement, he caught it.

“So we’re goin’ t’ the bar tonight?” Ramses bit into the juice-filled berry. Shocky nodded, examining the fuzzy texture of the sweet n’ sour fruit.

“Guess oi needa spruce up. Dazzle get our gift?” She mauldered, throwing herself to a low tree limb to relax in. Shocky nodded again, pretending to be enthralled with his kiwi by throwing it in the air a couple of times.

“Mom?” He questioned. “How’d we become feral? Tell me again...”

“Shockay! Oi’ve toldja so many toimes! We were born this way, we’re feral b’cause we have a gift to offer this existence – the magic of our power animals. Never did it mean we were outta touch, if that’s where youer goin’ with this... Y’ only got y’ city escape b’cause of Dazzle y’ know.”

“Huh?”

“Believe it or not, Dazzle an’ her sistah are both of feral blood, but after her parents passed, Daz decidedly raised her sister on human grounds, goin’ t’ school, slickin’ the city, livin’ like them civilians. Daz made me realize that Oi could do it all, walk between the lines, and teach y’ how to do it too. Heh, even an ol’ feral loike me can learn a thinger two from you youngsters.” She added.

“Yeah, but she doesn’t do it much herself.”

“Well, the Wonderland woilds is jest where her heart is at, there with th’ pride an’ all.” She waved her big clawed hand.

“Do you think she’ll ever go back to the city?” Shocky mused sadly.

“Oi think the biggah question is, when will the humans go back to the woilds? Fertile ground? Their own Mother planet?”

Shocky chuckled before he even uttered his own joke.

“Once there’s no such thing as snakes, spiders, and mosquitoes.”

Ramses’ laugh was one you could love, she fell backwards, but didn’t fall – balanced on her tail, she twisted to land on her big feet, the drapes of her saris and skirts fell with her.

“All roight, lemme stop earbashin’ ya.” She dusted her palms, quickly rustling Shocky’s hair before gliding off into the tall grasses.

“O’ll see ya at the party! Be good n’ don’t be late!” The towering woman dove to her hands and toes, bounding into the bushy trees, disappearing from Shocky’s view.

“You don’t be late...” Shocky sighed in the stillness.

Ramses met Dazzle on the fly, whirring their way through the leafy fungi-flowered path towards the edge of the jungle, where fellow ferals awaited them. The opening of the canopy led to the scene of a bulldozed field, where the Kingdom’s soldiers quickly closed in...

CHAPTER 2:

THE ALDWYN FOREST KIDNAPPING

The Kingdom's army, unbeknownst to be under new rule, paused their marching approach as the many faces of the feral tribes' people began to appear on the jungle's boarder.

The knights stood in perfect rows, feigning proud courage behind expensive uniforms and sparkling bayonets. This man-made army was besmirched with technology and energy weapons, but every individual was of a different face – races of many a kind whom Charles Renkins grappled into his false promises, and because of it, stood on the opposite side of the line in the sand.

In the foliage, several dozen ferals were stooped to a crouch in their animalistic fashion; as they stood, a clatter of armor, beads, and stone jewelry shattered down the line of unique warriors, each with respectively diverse weapons carried upon their backs or hips. Animals, including the fierce lionesses, hung back in the grasses or trees. Birds filled the branches. Creatures watched from the shadows.

The decorated anthromorphs broke the silence.

“We come in peace, but with fair warning.” A large, manly, buffalo feral spoke. “Our tribes are at harmony. We do not wish conflict of any sort. We too, are weary of the black magic ferals, but we have negotiated with them for centuries. We politely refuse this patrolling that the kingdom has been commencing, as we are well aware you have misinterpreted feral kind in the past. Please return to your homeland, this territory is in the care of your feral brothers.”

The General tapped his bayonet in his hands, clicking his tongue as he shook an exasperated face, though it was all just a ruse.

“Come with peace? But never evidence! No ways to prove you are not the black magic folk who have terrorized both the kingdom and your own kind with sins beyond comprehension! Who is to trust these morbid hours? These lurid days?”

The man began to pace, which caused some ferals to rise and shuffle.

“Which of your families is responsible for the anomaly down past Lake Twenty-Eight? It’s been a real disturbance to the kingdom. A crime against Mother Wonderland. There’s been suspicious activity all over the Gelicide lands lately, a place completely off limits, and no one dare goes but murderous witch and warlocks of the feral waste lands, no? That cursed land of ice and snow...” He paused his march, which caused fidgeting from both groups.

“How many times do we have to tell you! We’re *not* black magic ferals!” A cat woman hissed.

Ramses hushed her, and the jungle people spoke quietly among themselves.

“Gelicide lands? What is that?”

“I’ve never heard of it before.”

“How are we sure he’s not lying?”

Dazzle pursed her lips. *Ice? Snow?*

The General took his designated posture of authority back, and continued to deliver the new king’s word...

“There has been an order from Lord... Dong,” He said the former royal family’s name instead. “A proposal – Normally, as you would know, the kingdom put all offending ferals to death for acts of black magic that injure the civilized lands or people, but because Dong has ranked this an emergency operation, he invites you, as ferals, to be recruited as his majesty’s soldiers to aid in ending this madness. Under the ID of the kingdom’s army, you would be treated respectfully, and given whatever means desired to aid in the restoration of area twenty-eight.”

What he really meant, was that they would all be slaves.

“Hey!” One of the ferals spoke up. “We can’t be waging war on ferals that you took land from in the first place! Even if they do wield dark magic, we-”

The General made a rash turn, smashing the bayonet’s lance into the dirt. The feral didn’t budge as they saw eye, to eagle eye. The human breathed his words.

“Do you not understand what is happening here?! The Gelicide lands were once a place you ferals roamed until a small number of blood-thirsty black magic gypsies usurped it with their destructive powers. *We are all next if we do not regain control.*”

The ferals exchanged glances, still unaware of these truths or fictions.

“Oi don’ think we should buy this.” Ramses said under-breath to the tribes’ people beside her.

“But we’ve not seen anything for ourselves.” Dazzle reminded. She turned to bare her teeth at the General who was leaning forward to get the feral’s attention.

“We give you thirteen nights to make a decision. Be astute. It is all the time we can give.”

The General frowned then shouted a command to get the troops moving. Dismissed from formation, the knights headed out.

With minds bogged and flying, the ferals immediately began seeking the truth through neighbors and honest word of mouth. They would come together and determine what to do once the icy black magic incident was proved fact or fantasy.

Snookie tipped his wrist to see his watch face in the blue and purple neon lights emanating from *The Warren*. They glowed on he and the others’ backs in the darkening of the day.

Ramses was seated on a bench next to her son, her arm around him in pondering... She hadn’t told anybody about the proposal. She hadn’t the heart. And she couldn’t ruin the night for Ephy.

The four awaited Dazzle who came flying from the forest from an unexpected direction.

“Aw beauty!” Ramses exclaimed. Euphy reached her arms out, smiling as Dazzle wove through her legs like a cat.

“Sorry I’m late, the knights-”

“Well we couldn’t rage on without the birthday girl, now could we?” Ramses stood, distracting Dazzle by opening the door of *The Warren* for everyone.

Inside, the commotion of a serving pan clapping to the floor, sent Dazzle darting under a table.

“So sorry!” A woman with dark-brown hair pinned into a bun, fussed. Her long red nails twisted along to the sound of her red lips and frouing zebra-patterned skirt.

“Ah! Euphy! Snookie – Lucky you comin’ to work on yer off day!” Diana excitedly fluttered, elbowing her co-worker. There was laughter from the regulars all over the bar. Jazz music invaded the background.

Euphy sympathetically coaxed Dazzle out from under the table; Dazzle peered up into the smoky room with caution.

Shocky’s Mother, on the other hand, looked down upon the room, completely at ease in her feral skin, standing out in exoticness, height, and beauty.

Shocky tried to mimic her confidence with his own style.

The manager of *The Warren*, Crowne Cowler approached the familiar crowd in good spirits.

“Ay! How y’ all doin’? Gettin’ ready for the big day?” He asked his old friends.

“Yep, but today, we’re celebrating someone else’s special day.” Snookie glanced back at Dazzle whose eyes pinned at the big man. She panted like a distressed owlet.

Crowne snickered.

“Ah, da little shy feral from Aldwyn.”

Snookie slapped him on the shoulder.

“Wouldn’t call’er shy...”

Crowne reached out to Dazzle as one would greet a dog – she lounged to bite, causing a craze of laughter and excitement from all over *The Warren*. Crowne just chuckled along, clearing a table for his old pals. Snookie ordered beers and cream sodas for the lot, giving a cheerful toast before digging in. Although it was comical, Ephy still shed a sentimental tear.

Jumping to a bar stool to sit like a frog, Dazzle took one tongue-full of the amber filled glass and withdrew in disgust. Snookie and Ramses gave a light-hearted laugh.

Happy Birthday was sung around a strawberry shortcake, and the candlelight was hushed by a brave pawing.

Heading back to the black and white checkerboard tiles, Dazzle rooted around curiously; most of the bar goers delighted in her beastly antics, relentlessly trying to feed her like some stray – She'd growl or skitter away, only to give people a kick out of it. She quickly learned to hiss at whispered gossip to prove she knew English; she lunged to remind the humans of her physical strength; and lastly, she was prepared to bite if necessary.

Finally content to lie under Ephy's chair, Dazzle ate ice cubes and watched the restaurant play out around her.

Shivering, she fell asleep.

Transfixed by her own reflection, Dazzle gazed into the spilled water... the ice cubes had melted, glittering in the blue lights... but then there was snow... specks of diamonds that floated in the air. She glanced around herself – there were crystals sparkling everywhere, reflective, like icy mirrors. Soft, white snow surrounded her, fogging up her perception.

Someone was laughing – A child's voice, sounding like twinkling silver bells.

It was the white bird – the bird that she could never catch.

It cocked its head while it stood in the imaginary snow. Dazzle barred her teeth, ready to pounce.

“You would never hurt me, would you? Not you...”

Dazzle had been after the illusion for so long, it was only reflex to leap at it in anger. She splashed into the snow as it disappeared in mid-air, giggling.

“You’re so silly! You must stop this! You cannot waste all your fire on me!”

Dazzle shook the snow out of her hair and feathers... She couldn’t understand this dream – the snow crystals clung to her skin and clothes as if they were truly real.

“Who are you? Where am I?” Dazzle demanded, lifting a snowflake-caked hand.

The dove skipped across the ice, laughing and flapping her downy wings.

“You are the Goddess! Don’t tell me you don’t know!” The bird’s satiny, little girl’s voice accused. “I thought grown-ups knew everything!”

“This is no time to mess around!” Dazzle snarled. “Tell me what’s going on!”

To Dazzle’s grief, the dove went on, singing.

*Under the ice, we skate upon this,
for under these mirrors, I see silver fish,
who tell me I’m right, though I’m out of touch,
you’ve been through too much, say, I’ve seen enough!*

*So put you to sleep, it gives me the key,
for love so evoking, you can, hardly breathe,
even over the mirrors, or go back, un-der ice,
there’s nothing like looking, back to sac-ri-fice!*

Dazzle pounced at the bird in a craze, she thought she caught it, but it wasn’t there.

*Didn’t know I was worth it, the water froze over,
yet this was the one life, that I had to show her,
it’s a shapeshifter, yes? Water-sprites are,
three forms of being, and it feels so warm,*

*in the presence of ice, underfeet, the fish glide,
and then you wonder why anyone, would take such a side...*

The bird's voice suddenly went eager with impatience.

"Under the ice? Over the ice? You can't decide, so they'll decide for you! You're going to the Gelicide lands, are you mad?"

The enslaved figures flashed like a thunder bolt.

Dazzle's eyes went wide. The snow drained from view, and the dove gave a teasing coo before flying rampant through the hazy room, to which Dazzle engaged a scurrilous chase.

Nobody could understand what was happening – Dazzle had gone crazy.

Chairs and tables collapsed as she ran through spilled drinks, ice, and glass. She skid to a halt as the bird took a sharp turn, slipping on the tiles, and slamming up against the wall with various pieces of furniture. The strangers were either screaming in fear, or roaring with laughter.

Dazzle's vision began to clear, though a few snowflakes remained falling from the dove's wings, seizing with the vanishing portion of the dove act.

Dazzle froze to the waking shout of Ephy's saturated panic.

"DAZZLE!"

Ashamed, and feeling controlless, Dazzle escaped the bar as a customer entered, streaming back to the jungle, dodging and dipping between branches like a torpedo. On hands and toes she soared back to her territory where she belonged.

Snookie stared at the ceiling, his arms were behind his head in thinking. The room was dark, but the faint glow of the halved moons allowed him to see shadows.

Euphy was curled up beside him, still in her evening dress. She'd finally fallen to sleep after worrying sick about what happened earlier that night. It made Snookie agitated and suspicious.

Baffled by Dazzle's actions, carefully he sat up, slipped out of bed, grabbed his coat, and went down stairs. He snatched a flashlight from the shoe rack by the door, and ventured into the open air. It was unusually cool.

Across the pavement of the cul-de-sac, Snookie trudged upon the wet grass at the forest's entrance. It was deep and silent, but chirruped with insects.

He cupped his hand to his mouth.

“Daaaazzle!!!” He called.

He paused, staring into the trees.

Dazzle could hear him from her shelter of reeds on the lake, where she hid from Siti, Zeldia, and Amethyst. She glanced up, but lously let her face drop back in the mud; crayfish scattered.

She poked at a passing minnow, then watched it swim away...

Snookie called Dazzle's name one last time.

Dazzle slapped the water. She didn't know why he cared – it was a nuisance that he worried for her, even if it were only for Euphy's sake.

Dazzle rolled over, covering herself in the thick, sloppy mud. Polliwogs and mud puppies used her as a perch while she lie there for a long time, trying to fall asleep. She eventually rose to her fours and shook the nocturnal critters away.

Kneeling towards the dark water for a drink, Dazzle gulped a quenching amount into her belly... Unexpectedly shooting up at a noise that rustled in the brush, water dripped from her chin, plinking back into the lake and making it ripple...

She tried to get a whiff of what was coming, for Snookie was long gone, and it was far too clamorous to be the lionesses...

It came.

And it was *huge*.

Graceful, maned in umber, with a coat of chocolate liger stripes adorning a background of golden fur, he glanced ambery eyes at Dazzle, making himself known at the edge of the bank, licking his muzzle as if he'd just tasted the fruits of an arduous hunting labor.

It was a giant, male liger.

Dazzle had never seen such a thing before.

With a flash of white feathers, Dazzle was out, leaving the dangerous situation behind.

Flying the soil, Dazzle whipped down her jungle highways, where the trees grew crooked enough to jump from one to the next, all the way to the top of the canopy. This advantageous environment kept her far from the ground where the monsters lurked, but unlike a true bird that soars effortlessly through the branches, Dazzle still had to scour the limbs, take leaps of faith, and make risky moves.

Her fanned swan tail dampened her fall to the rain forest floor, after missing a limb in the canopy.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the liger come scudding through the trees, running along side her - not after her...

Completely taken aback, Dazzle stumbled as she flew the soupy ground. Her gaze was taken by the massive beast... He returned a soft maple stare.

Something flung past the top of Dazzle's ear, breaking the awed connection. The whistling bullet jabbed into a stump as Dazzle dove past.

The big cat had been being pursued – and now, so was she.

Crashing through the waves of bottle brush, Dazzle sprayed up jungle litter as she ducked and squeezed under downed branches; some she could just barely scoot under to free herself.

With nothing barricading his great bounds, the liger leapt all of his obstacles, becoming faster than Dazzle.

Three times more, the two dodged shots that screeched alarmingly close, but then, Dazzle's odd, elegant gait was disrupted with a somersaulting tumble as she took a hit. Before she could even stand, the liger swiped her up in his jaws, holding her underweight body as though she were a cub. Dazzle was flippant in his grasp.

Why was he helping her? She was just as well prey to him. Had he met the pride? Just who was this animal?

Suddenly the two were sent flying into the air – snagged by nets that drew closed within seconds.

The liger transformed right before Dazzle's eyes, returning to an anthropomorphic man, looking just like any other feral.

Shape-shifts like this were rare to see even among the most magic of ferals, but Dazzle wasn't going to ask now – her wound was making her... Sleepy?

The liger man roared aggressively at the uniform soldiers who hastily came to take them away.

CHAPTER 3: CONCRETE JUNGLE QUALM

The Dong family had fled, leaving many nervous servants captives of their own life-long home: The Wonderlandian Castle, also known as the Dong Towers.

Gazing out of the lonesome windows, the servants mused over what would happen to Prince Lu Lu Dong, whom had just been crowned at the turn of the year. The unexpected reclamation would ruin his reputation for life, and the plan to undo all of the havoc his Father had caused was put to instant death. The future looked very dark for the Dong Family – but more importantly, Wonderland itself.

Just who were these infiltrators? The man whom called himself Sir Charles Renkins? He seemingly appeared out of no where and overwhelmed the Kingdom with a vast might and evil. He was after feral, magic, and mythic kind – even more rabidly than Dong's Father had been.

It was a grim world indeed.

The Renkin's best man, Conway Carry, grazed the aged castle up and down, rubbing his bearded chin in thought. He was a casual guy, but well fought, and well educated.

"Shall we title it the Renkin's Tower, now?" He shrugged off-handedly.

"This is no longer a castle," Charles stated harshly as he walked the marble stairs in complete presence. "we shall call it... *Camp Pinto*."

Snookie opened the front door, freezing in it's frame.

"Uh, hey ladies, you wanted something?" He said to the lionesses lounging around the porch. Each of them quickly sat up, swarming around the door.

They wanted to know where Dazzle was. She'd been gone for days.

“Whoa – *whoa*- “ Snookie turned and shut the door. He sighed.

“Dazzle... ” He muttered, both irritated and sad about her disappearance.

He proceeded to get ready for work.

Snookie distractedly approached *The Warren*, looking off to the side of the gravel parking lot, where two, well-groomed equine stood in the green, grazing the sea of tender grass, and wearing parade-worthy riding gear.

“Okay... Weird morning so far... ”

He entered the restaurant, where Diana stepped in his way.

“Aren’t they bee-u-tiful!?” She said giddily, kicking up a high-heeled foot. Snookie looked from the life-long horse lover to Crowne, whom was at the bar counter, still fixing broken chairs from the yester-nights. He pointed across the room at a table engulfed in color – or rather, the people who sat at it were.

A remarkably tall man with a mane of black hair, and wearing a worn, but quality, leather coat, along with variously colored garmets and sashes, gazed his deep-brown eyes into the foreigntongued conversation between he, and the young man with him.

The boy’s hair was pecan, his eyes, sweet-hazel, and his skin, well-tanned. He spoke with dark lips.

Both men wore tassels, satins, beads, and jeweled knives on their decorative belts. Their skin was sporadically painted with variously hued tattoos.

“Odd sorts, eh?” Crowne droned to Snookie. Snookie adjusted his durag.

“They look pretty well to do, but that’s not the kingdom’s style-” He whispered.

“Probably came from the Twenty-Eight area, tsk, gypsies. *Black magic* ferals.”

The tip of the boy’s long, furry mongoose tail, jerked at the words.

Remembering his main line of business, Snookie disappeared into the back room where Diana was mixing up a gross-looking concoction for the new strangers in town.

“Cacao and cayenne in hot water.” Diana answered before Snookie could ask.

“Hey, have you seen Dazzle today?”

The Asian beauty in Diana’s face, cringed.

“If I see that little monster in here again, she’ll face the wrath of my broom stick – but no, I haven’t seen her. I’m sure she’s fine, Snook, just a little feral impulse?”

“Did I hear somethin’ bout Dazzle?” Crowne called from the bar. Snookie followed Diana out of the double doors to the restaurant. Crowne tapped the newspaper in front of he to get Snookie’s attention.

“Heard from Ramses yet? Y’ might want to lookit dis.”

Snookie’s blue eyes quaked, snagging the paper in disbelief.

“Ferals kidnapped?! What the hell...” He paused to read the article.

Diana hurried back to the gypsies to serve them their peculiar order.

“Thank you.” The man’s quiet voice thundered out. The boy’s mouth spewed a language unknown, handing Diana money from an arm laden with bracelets.

Slightly opening her palm, Diana glimpsed the glint of gold, and slipped it back into his fingers.

“Why don’t you hang onto that, sweetheart.” She smiled.

A tad shocked, the boy let the friends return to the kitchen without any words.

“Not gonna be responsible for stolen property.” Diana mumbled, picking up a pot to scrub.

“How does one kidnap a feral? I don’t believe this...” Snookie rumbled, still buried in the article.

“Snook, you knew dis was gonna happen one day, ferals are unfavorable, that’s just the way of the world. You shoulda kept her inside.” The callous Crowne was glum in expression, but had no idea what he was saying.

Diana rubbed her hands dry, dusting the apron that lie over her favorite zebra-print dress. She put her hand on Snookie’s shoulder.

“Someone would have them banished one day.”

Snookie ripped away.

“*She’s Euphy’s sister...*” He smacked the paper onto the counter.

“She’ll find her way back, Snookie, don’t worry about it – and don’t do anything stupid.”

She added.

The moment was disarrayed by three boys literally crashing through the bar’s front doors; A teenager with green hair and parrot wings, and a pair of red-heads with fuzzy squirrel features.

“We’re okay!” Harvy and Sunny, the twins, cried in unison, hastening to their cavorting feet. Diana snapped her dish rag.

“Vera, how many times have I told you, don’t encourage this!” She scolded the half-feral children, who happened to be Shocky’s only friends.

The twins trippingly sped by, leaping from cart to cart, trying to avoid Vera in a heated game of tag.

“Guys!” Diana threw her painted nails out. “Chill! You might be able to help Snook out here.”

“Really?” Harvy bleeped, hopping from Vera’s grasp. “Well, we did see Euphemia today, she looked kinda sad.”

Vera threw himself over a trash can, missing Sunny’s furry tail by a hair.

“Yeah man,” Vera punctuated. “did you totally say the wrong thing?”

The twins scurried up the wall of cabinets, opening one, and vanishing inside, creating a whole new game to play. Vera’s beating wings sent lofty items flying as he climbed the handles with his zygodactyl feet. Sunny popped out of one of the drawers, withdrawing to Diana’s raised rolling pin.

Vera hung upside down from the wall.

“Okay, okay, what’s up Snook?” Vera prompted.

“Did you see Shocky today? Or any of the other ferals? Dazzle’s been missing... And some of the others could be, too.”

Vera dropped from the cabinets in surprise. Harvy jumped to Snookie's sleeve and hung there.

"Is that why Euphy's sad?"

"Yeah."

Vera blew a lock of hair from his tangerine eyes as he tapped at a wireless phone to scroll the news.

"It's circulating among the ferals that the Wonderlandian knights came for them a night or so ago, the witnesses say they escaped the whole ordeal just n' time."

The group wandered out of the cookery as Vera continued reading.

"Rumor has it, there were kidnapped ferals that were shipped off to the Lake Twenty-Eight area – tsk, "Frozen Sands", *hell on Earth*." He added his own dialogue.

"Nobody knows what's beyond Twenty-Eight now, except for the Kingdom, right?"

"Not the Kingdom – some one else."

"Not the Kingdom? *Who, but the Kingdom?*!"

"Shocky's Mom says something weird is going down with the Kingdom – the Royal Guard disclosed that there is life past Twenty-Eight, warlocks and monsters, and–"

The gypsies began abandoning their table; the young man flung a coin-filled pouch to Diana, whom caught it like a baseball. The group shared glances.

Snookie went after the gypsies.

"Hey, wait!"

By the time he made it to the parking lot, the two had already vaulted onto their steeds.

"Ghazi!" The boy shouted, his bay-coated horse excitedly threw it's weight around.

"Hey wait!" Snookie called again. "Do you guys know anything about the kidnapping?"

Before he could properly react, a huge, scarlet-red bird came swooping up to the boy's arm, startling both Snookie and the horse. The boy yanked at the equine's cocoa hair to get it to stop lurching around. Ghazi, the parrot, gave Snookie a dirty look.

“You’re not feral...” The boy’s eyes lit in confusion, his tongue now speaking perfect English.

“But I know a feral, and I *have* to help her-”

“Zita.” The man addressed the mongoose-nacred boy. His large ears and monkey tail twitched impatiently as he shot his glance.

Shadi clicked his tongue at the ebony cob; The black horse hurried off down the grass path with hulking footsteps. Zita’s steed kept nervously stepping until Zita finally decided to listen to his elder. He urged his horse to a gallop, and passed his companion, whom encouraged his massive equine to keep up.

Snookie’s arms dropped to his sides. Putting his hands on his waist as he stared after the strangers, dumb founded.

Everything was silent again, just the breeze, sunshine, and Snookie’s own breathing. The sky was a crisp blue... It just didn’t fit the mood.

The gravel parking lot crunched under Snookie’s shoes as he turned, his friends were just coming out of the restaurant doors when Diana pointed down the road.

“Ramses?” Snookie uttered, seeing the woman herself, jogging down the street with Euphy in her wake. Ramses’ gray and purple silks glimmered in the sun as she raised her free arm.

“Snookie! Y’ gotta get us over t’ Dave’s! O’ll explain on the way!”

Snookie reached for his car keys.

Snookie’s crimson convertible went zinging down the empty highway, the sun beat down on the three, while the cool wind seared by, there was vibrant green everywhere; everywhere but the black asphalt, and the blue sky.

Ramses sat above the seats in the back, her tail hanging over the bumper as it was too big and long to fit in the car. Her silks and saris flapped in the wind as she held on tight.

“Oi couldn’t believe it when oi heard! Th’ damn knights loiin’ to us at the boarder-”

“How come you didn’t tell us about the recruitment offer? What the hell is going on down in Twenty Eight, and why’d they go ahead and do that to the ferals without getting word back?” Snookie blurted.

“Oh bloody!” Ramses beat her own chest. “You know how the kingdom’s always been!”

“How did you and Shocky escape?!” Ephy twisted around as much as her seat belt would allow.

“We weren’t on the territory last noight, oi took us over to moi friend, Dave’s, t’ discuss the circumstances, an’ low an’ behold, oi come back an’ foind a-many ferals missing!”

Snookie glanced in the rear-view mirror.

“They coulda come for them maybe days ago now, how far do you think they coulda taken Dazzle by now?”

“That’s what oim hopin’ Dave kin tell us, he works for the train station that runs through the kingdom and beyond,” Ramses spoke over the breeze.

“It’s gonna take a bold man to defy what they’re doing.” Snookie’s brows creased. Ramses smiled lovingly.

“Dave’s a free man, he does what he pleases, don’ worry about a thing, hon, we’ll get Dazzle home b’fore y’ know it!”

Ephy nodded, but swallowed hard.

Snookie pulled off the highway into an intersection; a busy maze of roads collaged in colors, words, and signs. From the fuel stations, restaurants, and supply stores, cocky advertisements ruled the landscape. The city goers stared at Snookie’s oddly boarded vehicle.

Ramses tugged her earring uncomfortably at the stoplight.

“O’ll see you all at Dave’s!” She practically cartwheeled out the back on her strong kangaroo tail.

“Ramses!” Snookie shouted, but she was quickly gone in the pile of shining cars, some honking at her as they prepared to turn.

The future husband and wife sighed together at the same time.

Somewhere down the road, the traffic grudged in half-irritation, half-awe at the sight of Ramses, who bounded towards Dave's end of the neighborhood.

Two glamorous horses and their riders stood atop a flyover hill, waiting to cross the busy streets. Shadi's fierce gaze covered the area further than one could fathom, though he had only one direction he was aiming to proceed upon.

With a foreign word, Zita's eyes pointed to the fellow feral running the side walks.

It was an unusual sight in these parts.

Shadi smiled.

Snookie pulled into the rubble driveway of Dave Drac's house. There were train tracks running inconveniently through his own back yard, stretching right to left on either horizon. Shabby houses sandwiched Dave's own shabby living space, but his was far more welcoming, and short of rusty trucks that donned *feral hater* bumper stickers. In the city, this was supposed to be funny, but it rather shocked Euphy and Snookie.

Euphy jumped a little as she stepped out of the car – several small, prickly lizards went wriggling to their own safety. Snookie came around the vehicle to help Euphy to the door.

The brown, faded colors of the house were old and chipped, but the place was still well loved. A big sun flower in a terracotta pot, smiled at Snookie as he rung the doorbell. He turned to Euphy, both of his hands on her face to wipe her smeared make up away.

“Everything's gonna be fine, ‘K Euph?”

“But she must be so scared.” Euphy cried for Dazzle.

“Hey, *she's* the big sis-”

“But she's feral!”

“You may want to undermine your words for Ramses.”

Shocky answered the door.

“Hey guys, where’s Mom?”

“Took a different route,” Snookie explained. “She’ll be here soon, I’m sure.”

“Come on in,” Shocky motioned calmly, holding the door.

The inside of the house was very open and wide, all appliances and furniture were off to the side, under the roof – There was a huge skylight in the center of the room, along with a worn-out work bench and halved and crumbled cinder blocks lying around what used to be a zen garden.

Dave came flying out of the shadows.

“HIII-YAH!” He yelled out in his thick voice, which echoed through the house as he came upon a brick and smashed it with a balled fist.

Out of the blue, Ramses came through the roof, and the two encountered in friendly combat of mixed martial arts.

A dark skinned, dark haired, little pig feral in blue shorts and a striped shirt appeared between Snookie and Euphy.

“My Dad is da best at Kung fu, but when Ramsey is here, she’s better.”

The couple just stared.

Ramses paused in the midst of a self-defense posture, while Dave used so much force to execute a move that he missed by a mile. He fell over.

“Oh, you gois are here.” Ramses stood. She pulled Dave up by the back of his shirt.

“Whoo!” He said, dusting off his front. “You gittin’ better every time I see ya, Ramsey.”

“Ah, Dave, you remember Snookie and his girlfriend, Euphemia?”

“Mm, yes, of course I remember.”

Shocky and Ziba, the piglet anthromorph, watched from the couch as the friends caught up on life and all it’s endeavors. It was nice to hear about all the good things for a change, but the conversation quickly turned back to Dazzle and the missing ferals.

“Hmm...” Dave smoothed his mustache and beard. “I don’t think the Wonderlandian knights would be using an old transport like the Corella station, but if they’re bunkin’ ferals, there just may be no tellin’...”

“Come on Dave, y’ know they’d neveh send ferals first-class, yer train goes straight through the mysterious frozen Sands area.” Ramses offered.

“Worth a shot to take a look.” Dave glanced at Euphy. “I’ll do my best for your sister, but ahh... If the Kingdom sent her off in the first place, how d’ you plan on convincin’ em t’ give back?” He quizzed unexpectedly.

Snookie stepped in.

“She’s a person! Notta load of Earl Gray! We know the knights lied, we’re already doin’ crazy things – we might as well free all the ferals if they’re on that train.”

The group was quiet in acknowledgment.

“Yeh.” Ramses pumped her fist.

“Hooo...” Dave sighed then smiled at the crowd. “Guess that’s that.”

Night ascended over the Drac’s house, bringing drear and frustration to the long, solid hours. Snookie spent forever on his cell phone trying to get Crowne and Diana to understand the situation, while Dave, Ramses, and Euphy hovered over sketches Dave made of the train routes and check points. Shocky remained perfectly asleep from a headache as Ziba used him as a road for his toy cars.

Snookie finally came inside as the storm blew in, snapping his cell shut, just as it thundered.

Ramses was lighting candles as Dave set out a loaf of bread, a bowl of figs, and a block of cheese for supper.

Ramses could see the solemnness behind Snookie’s expression; She had already endured tears from Euphy.

“How’d it come t’ this, roight?” She hinted. Snookie gave a crooked smirk, but took off his coat, hanging it on the chair back as he plopped into the seat. Ramses puffed out the matchstick.

“Come now, we’ll all be back in our own beds by t’morrow night.” She confidently threw her chest out.

“Yeah, I’m thinkin’ we outta start keeping Dazzle in.”

“Yor not gonna tame a beast loike that.”

“We can try.” He pulled his hat over his eyes.

CHAPTER 4:

OFF THE TRACKS

The cracks of thunder and lightning screamed out like a cougar's roar, sending Dazzle's eyes flying wide open. There was a continuous throb being caused by the train tracks as well as the sky, pitching in it's angry voice.

It was dark, but she could hear and feel – Her wrists were tethered together, her knees chafed. She had a rope around each foot.

Startled, she backed away from the stranger in the crate with her – she could tell it was the liger man from before, she could smell him, along with her own scent, and the fragrance of damp, moldy straw.

Dazzle squeezed herself into a corner, touching her forehead to the wall of the crate. It felt soft enough to be rotted.

This could be broken. She thought *But not now...*

She could not see where she was. It would be risky to jump off the train without a sense of her environment, not to mention, shackled limbs. She peeked through the wood slots, but all she could see was the haze of rain when the lightning trickled.

She stayed in her corner, silently waiting...

The train went on forever... Nothing changed for a long time. It stormed and stormed and she could not grasp her bearings.

Before she was ready, the sleeping feral moved.

He growled in pain as he sat up. He shook. He rubbed his hairy face. In the flash of lightning, Dazzle could see the tiger stripes on the man's skin, like deep, dark, thick, tattoos. Long brown hair replaced a mane. He looked straight at Dazzle despite the dark. Dazzle could feel a sweat brake. She braced herself for a blind fight.

“Don’t worry darlin,” A sweet American-west accent sounded. “I can see perfectly fine. I’ll watch fer danger.”

“You stay back!” Dazzle snarled. “You move and I’ll-”

“What? Tear mah eyes out? Than we’ll both be in trouble.” He laid back in the hay and crossed his legs. The tip of his tail curled in hesitant contentment.

“Hmm... You don’t really seem like the peace keeper type, there, cygnet.”

“Believe me, I never was.” She catfully played along.

The man smiled.

“Someone told me y’ was.”

Dazzle shut her mouth then opened it.

“Who are you?”

“Call me Raggs.”

Dazzle blinked and cocked her head.

“Okay? I’m-”

“Dazzle, harnesser of the swan totem, queen of the Aldwyn area.”

She flinched.

“I know all about ya – well, not really, but at least that’s what the folk out in Frozen Sands thinks of ya.”

“What are you talking about?”

He just chuckled and shook his mane.

“Ho boy! I’ve got things to tell ya!” He grinned with giant white canines gleaming. He stretched his legs out to sit in a more human-like manner. “But first - that was the Wonderlandian knights back there, weren’t it?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure.”

“Nope, I think yer dang right...so I’m headed back to where I started...” He mumbled solemnly of his capture, but quickly exploded into an ardent life report.

The persuasive Raggs then launched into his fascinating story. He was one to use his hands, arms, tone, and expression.

Dazzle listened.

"I stumbled upon Frozen Sands back in it's heyday, b'fore they gave it it's spellbound name, and the people thrived in it's oasis. The feral chief that lived there is a shaman that traveled the world with his tribe, the Goldenpaws, but their home base was Opal oasis, where they had heavenly brothers; An alien race of beings different from the ferals in both form and power, but beloved by human and mythic alike-"

"My parents used to live in Opal oasis." Dazzle grew inclined.

"Then I guess you'd know the Starbright's blight-"

"Black magics and the Kingdom." They said together.

Raggs continued.

"One early Spring, the chief's daughter, Mazarine, warned all of a vision she'd had in the night – a vision that soon came to life. Over the course of the Summer, the oasis was plagued with a curse straight out from hell- no, no, not the ice, it was the Black magics and the kingdom first, working as one for the first time since the dawn a' The first War of Wonderland. *Then* the ices came – everythin' froze over in frost an' snow: the Starbright's effort to protect themselves. With that, the world they knew best was gone in the blink of an eye." He clapped his fist for emphasis. "These beings never awoke... But the Goldenpaws wouldn't give up, an' stuck it out in the arctic, trying to reverse the damage the war left in it's wake... They've not had luck." He said defeatedly.

Dazzle kept her mouth shut, but she was dared to ask about the ice, she was dared to ask what a Starbright was, the outcome of the war – She was dared a lot of things in that moment, but Raggs spoke on, tempting her even more.

"Mazarine who'd originally had the foresight, told the tribe that the cure for the Gelicide could be found in the Dream Time of a feral called Dazzle. Do you know what the Dream Time is?"

“Should I?” Dazzle turned away.

She did know of it. It was Ramses’ spirituality. She had spoken of it many times, but Dazzle always had a dismissal attitude about it. As a feral she should have worshiped it, but she was still new and naive.

“It’s the second world over, y’ know? The dimension of yer thoughts n’ dreams. Mazarine is well practiced in her Dream Time travelin’, she can tell when intentions tangle or collide, an’ she knows when destinies fit like a glove. It’s a language, really, which is why she knew the remedy to the Gelicide could be found within someone’s Dream Time.”

“So we all go to sleep to find the solution?” Dazzle rolled her eyes. Raggs scratched his head.

“That’s not exactly what I meant - or what she meant, but it did happen.”

“So they have their solution?”

“Kinda.” Raggs twirled a piece of straw between his fingers. He glanced his ocre eyes at her. “She saw *you* in the Dream Time, and she thinks *yours* will reveal the answer.”

“I don’t even know her.” Dazzle huffed.

“Can’t ya even consider it? Take some neighborly responsibility and help out? They’re ferals too-”

“Whose fault is it for having a nightmare come true?”

Raggs slapped the floor.

“Don’tchoo talk about the Dream Time like that – yer gonna getcher self in a whole world a’ trouble, girl.”

Dazzle bristled quietly in the corner. She didn’t know Raggs well enough to challenge him. She just hissed.

“I want to go home. I just want to go home. I have nothing to do with this.”

“You’ve got everything t’ do with it! The ferals are bein’ kidnapped, destroyed, just as the Starbrights were – you are one of those ferals – tell me ya got nothin’ t’ do with it.” Raggs leaned forward.

Air seeped from Dazzle’s lungs.

“Even if you took me to this tribe, I have no answer for them. How on earth could I be the one they’re looking for?”

“Weellp...” Raggs stroked his bearded chin. “Yer shorter than Shadi, ‘bout tall as Zita, peach hair, blue eyes, unusually fair for a feral, spirit-animal, swan, yer a feral-human halfbreed, scar on the left shoulder, good lookin’, and y’ got that dirty aura Mazarine was talkin’ about: An attitude.”

Dazzle’s brows narrowed.

“So this bad dog is supposed to be a peace bringer? I don’t think so. I can’t help you, I can’t. I’m just one feral out of a million others, I couldn’t possibly be the stray you want.”

Raggs leaned in real close, a hoarse whisper about his tongue.

“Listen real careful, girl, you gotta future hangin’ in this balance... *I’ve seen her, she’s real.*”

He meant the bird. The bird in her dreams.

Dazzle opened her mouth, but before she could say anything, there was a large snapping noise that came from above – a wood panel was completely wrenched off the top of the cart, and somebody came smashing in.

Dazzle recoiled in the dark, but Raggs could see very clearly who was there.

“Zita!”

The boy sheathed his twin blades of gold.

“Nobody gets left behind.” He stated. “Come on, ride’s over.”

Raggs stood.

“Don’t make me fight you.”

He was talking to Dazzle.

Before she could react, he grabbed her by the collar, flinging her to the roof of the cart. Zita and Raggs followed. On the top of the train, the wind was wild, a frothy haze loomed above, gushing down a sea of rain that did not fall heavy, but rather, flew from every direction. To make matters worse, the roof was slippery, and there was a dark, canyonous gorge all around them.

Dazzle could faintly make out other ferals crawling from their cages – Zita had freed everyone.

“We’ll wait for Dragon Rocks, we can jump off there.” Zita yelled over the storm.

“Jump?!” Dazzle asked, crouched on all fours, holding on for dear life.

“Yeah, it’s perfectly safe, the water’s deep.”

“Safe?!”

“Yer the only bird here, an’ yer afraid of a little free-fallin’?” Raggs kidded.

“I lost my wings five years ago!”

“Cool,” Zita spat. “I lost my mind five years ago – now jump!”

The gypsy boy went diving into the harrowing blue below, the clouds of mist enshrouding his glittering being as his beads and jewels were lit in the lightning.

Raggs grabbed Dazzle’s tethered hands, pulling her to her naked feet. Her hair and tail whipped in the blazing wind. Raggs threw himself off the train, dragging Dazzle with, and they danced as shadows disappearing into the space of darkness.

In that moment Dazzle closed her eyes... mist rushed on her face like sea-spray... It tasted like freedom... She could feel her wings again... She let go of Raggs’s hand.

“Dazzle!”

Dazzle’s tail feathers caught the billows, sending her into an uncontrolled twirl, she fanned her tail in hopes of gliding, but it only made her spin faster.

She folded her feathers – she dropped like a rock.

The three plunged into a wide pool of crystal-clear water, the bubbles were like gems all around them.

Down in the rocky gorge it was now raining; the slopes caught the water and cascaded it as waterfalls into the many blue springs below. Zita shot out of the water like a fish, instantly trying to shake himself dry.

“Come on guys!”

Bubbles were still simmering to the surface from the collisions, but Zita’s eyes were watching the dragons resting on the shoal.

Finally Raggs smashed though the water, crawling to shore with Dazzle squirming in his arms. She stumbled away, still turning dizzy circles from her tumble.

“Shake it off now, come on now,” Zita encouraged. He looked off into the desolate canyon, his hazel eyes surveying the smoothly carved wall of topography.

Pulling a loose fist around his mouth, he howled like a dingo into the sand stone maze.

A hollow howl called back.

Dazzle tried to sprint off, running, thinking she could escape the canyon on her own, but her body wouldn’t listen as she stumbled around in vertigo. She could hear Zita and Raggs having a foreignly tongued discussion before Raggs picked Dazzle up by each arm, and lugged her onto his back. She tried to fight him, but she felt too sick now and was still shackled like a prisoner.

Slowly, but surely, the men tread deeper into the trench, Zita hum-singing as they did.

*Don’t confuse me gradient world,
where I chose black and white,
don’t know my own unknown,
and don’t know my own insights,
where I cannot behold,
my baffling gradient earth,
where true polars meet,
and so I’d know my worth,*

*the opposites had merged,
and I was, no more,
a black and white, gray soul,
not a ceiling, or a floor,
I'll be so amused,
I'll have gradient be struck,
and I'll not have a clue,
how to ever fall out of love,
Oh gradient world...*

The waterfalls, droplets, the storm and all it's murmurs echoed on the stone walls. The travelers avoided the whispering serpents lying around the river banks, though they were too entranced by the loud quietude to care. It was lonely and lazy down here, deep blue, and womb-like...

Almost too peaceful, but still not home.

Dazzle could do nothing but accept this reality.

Through the street carnival, Dave, Snookie, Euphy, Shocky and Ramses ran, Ziba on Ramses' shoulders.

Through the confusing shapes and colors within the fair, the group bypassed the whimsical commotion of the carnival goers, heading for the train station that lie on the other side - the train that Dave surmised to be the feral's stop, but he'd gotten the news late.

As the friends slipped through the enchanting foot traffic, a graceless vendor pulled his stand out in front of Snookie, causing him to bump into the cart, spilling the candy and fruit off the racks. Snookie waved at the others to go ahead, and began cleaning up the mess.

“Whoops, sorry ‘bout that.”

The vendor shrugged, but grew squinty-eyed at a girl around Shocky’s age, who shyly emerged from the crowds to help pick up. She had small, triangular ears, and terribly big blue eyes that glanced shamefully around curly red pig-tails. Her spotted tail dragged on the ground. She wore the typical colorful top and girdle that most female ferals wore, though she wore her sashes higher to obscure her countable ribs. She stacked the fruits and sweet boxes nimbly.

“Thanks.” Snookie turned to her, but she’d already dropped to a quadrupedal scurry with a caramel apple in her teeth.

“Hey!”

The vendor tipped his fedora with a sigh.

By the time Snookie reached the station, officers were closing the area off, and it appeared as if the others had also just arrived.

“W-w-wait!” Dave gasped for air, grasping the fence in his dark hands.

“Sorry folks, but this isn’t a train to board. I’m afraid the subway is down the street—” The bemused police man blinked at Dave who was trying to breathe. Dave fiddled with his wallet to retrieve his ID.

“I work for the Corella Station,” Dave input. “these friends of mine were lookin’ for this young lady’s sister, she was uh, mistakenly boarded on the wrong train, do you, eh... Think we could take a look around?”

The officers turned to one another.

“I’m very sorry.” The man informed. “This station is being used as a temporary check point at the moment, and is awaiting approval for use. It is off limits to the public.”

“Our missing woman may be involved.” Ramses bravely pitched in.

The officer sighed through his nose, looking queerly at the feral before him.

“This check point is currently under investigation. There was a high-jacking last night over the Dragon Rocks area.” He dug into his clip board for a piece of paper.

“This young man, name unknown, was said to be seen before the train’s departure. He is the main suspect of this event, and has been wanted for years, ever seen ‘im?’

“Neh.” Ramses casually remarked. The officer’s partner stepped in.

“Your missing woman, may I please have a description of her?”

Euphy took care of the questions while the others persisted about the high-jack.

They quickly surmised that the “suspect” of theirs’ had freed the ferals on the train and then vanished. Shocky could hardly contain himself. The photo of the wanted man was a feral himself; he was a hero, not a criminal!

Ramses took the picture away from Shocky and handed it to Snookie instead. For a moment, Snookie was aghast – it was that Zita boy from the bar.

No one said a thing until they were out of the officer’s earshot.

The search for Dazzle continued.

“So what now?” Shocky asked as the group strolled down a weedy dirt path back to Dave’s house. Without facing Shocky, Dave spoke.

“You heard ‘um, they’re investigatin’ their crime scene, nothin’ we can do about that.”

“But they’ll report back to us if they find any sign of Dazzle right?” Shocky let his hand brush over the wildflowers on the side of the trail.

“Yeah,” Dave garbled. “but it could take months before they decide to disclose it since the Kingdom clearly lied to the ferals, *and* the people, you see today’s paper? “Ferals volunteer as patrol knights for the Dong family” *they didn’t do no volunteerin’!*”

Several throats groaned at the fibs. Shocky stomped a hoof.

“Why not just go to this Dragon Rocks place ourselves and look for Dazzle?”

Ramses was shocked at his courage. His light blue eyes were fixated on her.

“I’m not kidding Mom, you’re a skilled feral, you could get us through the canyons like nothing-”

“Sure, sure, an’ what about th’ knights? They’d be out scoutin’ the Dragon Rocks area, hell knows the consequences for ferals they encounter. No doubt they’re roundin’ them up again; or cuttin’ em down on the spot.”

The parade of people paused, dispirited. Shocky’s ears drooped in disappointment.

Euphy gave Ramses a sideways glance.

“I know she’s still out there, I know Dazzle’s alive... Please Ramses.”

“Euph, Oi’ve got a son t’ live for, Oim not walkin’ to moi death lika yahoot. The only way they’ll let me in is if oim with a true citizen of the Kingdom, think y’ kin lend me that much?”

“I’ll go.” Snookie participated.

“I’m going too!” Euphy broke in. “Don’t tell me I can’t!” She shut Snookie up before he could rattle on about the dangers.

“Me three.” Shocky saluted. Ziba did a little dance. Ramses raised a brow at Dave.

He waved a hand.

“Pfff, well I ain’t lettin’ y’all goda dragon land without me”

“Then it’s settled.”

“Yeah,” Snookie suddenly appeared skeptical. “so where is this place again?”

“Oi know where it is!” Called a melodious voice from the blossoming weeds.

The pretty, thin, female feral rose from the delicate branches, right in front of Shocky.

He jumped back, hiding behind Ramses.

The girl giggled, throwing back her curly red pigtails and beaded braids.

“Hey-” Snookie admonished. “You’re that girl from before-”

Her ears flattened guiltily, but she quickly tried to amend her first impression on the others.

“Moi name is Lullaby!” She bounced into the road. “Oi got off the train that they had to bring back to town, so oi know where Dragon Rocks is.”

“So you’re one of the ferals that got kidnapped from the Aldwyn area?” Ramses outstretched an arm in sympathy.

“Yeh...” Lullaby said softly. “It was anotha feral who’d come t’ free us, but oi don’ know who he was.”

“The boy from the picture!” Shocky snapped his fingers. The others nodded. Ramses took the feral girl’s palms.

“Even th’ young’uns loike you? What are they thinkin? Those knights are brutal men... Don’ worry about a thing, hon, we’ll get y’ home in no-”

“Oi don’ have one... Quolls live alone.” The girl stepped back from Ramses.

She was talking about her Nacre’s power animal; the quoll, a strange marsupial that hunted alone and was often a nuisance to farmers – and sometimes, candy vendors.

“Anyway, you needed help getting back to Dragon Rocks?”

“Yes, we need directions.” Ephy came closer.

“D’ rections? Oi can’t give you d’rections, oi don’t know how.”

Dave opened his mouth, but Ramses put out her palm.

“Itsa feral thing.” She mentioned, kneeling back to Lullaby. “Alright then, hon, *show* us the way.”

Lullaby nodded happily, diving back into the posies. Her head popped up to speak.

“This way!”

“Wait – she’s coming with us?” Snookie gushed doubt towards the little thief. Some were just as addled by Lullaby’s mannerisms, but Ephy over-rode the lackluster.

“I’ll do whatever it takes to find Dazzle.”

Ramses waded through the brush after the girls. Shocky followed his Mother. Ziba laughed as he ducked under the growth after the boy. Dave trailed after his son.

Snookie stood there thinking... Ramses was a smart woman, but her soft spot for children could make her do crazy things.

Hesitantly, he followed.

The lavish rain forest threw many obstacles in the traveler's path. Euphy and Shocky were first to fall behind, though it didn't discourage them enough to ever think about heading back. Snookie lingered to help them maneuver the spikes and vines that Ramses and Lullaby could swim through. Dave carried Ziba high and low and wherever they found themselves having to dance through the bodies of trees.

Lullaby had so far led them through a dense scape of jungle, where the greenery was springy and twisted. Verdant curls of vine wrapped around long-forgotten coral structures; an ancient ruin lying beneath the sea of forest floor. Algae and moss kept a warm mist low to the ground, the fog trickled eerily through the abandoned city. As the leader, Lullaby seemingly ignored it's haunting flavor.

Suddenly the group spotted the train tracks.

"Ooh good," Ramses stepped onto the rails. "we kin follow th' tracks from here."

Snookie frowned.

"They just come right through these old forts?"

"Forts?" Ramses spit. "Shrines. Sure. The Dongs neveh care about these amazing ruins."

"Who'd they belong to?"

"No one knows."

Lullaby stopped to smile grandly at them.

"Maybe you should ask them." She said, pointing at the tree tops.

Gazing up, they mysteriously spied a flock of emerald-green birds roosting upside down in the knarled roots, hanging by their feet like bats. They were just as silent as the stones...

Snookie glanced at Lullaby, but she quickly turned away, continuing onward.

As the band walked along the tracks, the fog soon took over, and everyone reached out to grab a hand.

“You sure it’s safe?” Euphy wondered. Snookie was holding her hand, and one of Shocky’s.

“Should be, the station this leads to is the one they shut down for the investigation.”

“It’s not trains oim worried about...” Ramses muttered curses at the Kingdom.

Lullaby whirled around, her sea-foam green silks flying with her.

“You mean th’ people who putus on the train?”

“Don’ fret,” Ramses confidently strut the tracks, hand-in-hand with Lullaby. “even if we do meet, wull makeshure those diggahs don’ take advantage of the ferals, anymore.”

The cloudy tracks suddenly took off as a bridge. Euphy let go of Ramses’ hand as she and Lullaby kept going.

“Do we really have to take this route?”

“You said you’d do whatever it takes, roight?” Ramses gave a cocky chuckle. Euphy bit her lip.

“I think I’ll crawl.”

Shocky gazed down at his hooves. There was nothing to see in between the cracks of the track boards, just the creamy white fog.

He tapped the metal with his pale hoof, then stepped onto the track with his brown one... All the sudden he kneeled down.

“I think I’m with Euphy, I’ll crawl.”

“Oll roighty then.” Ramses raced into the mist. They all started down the tracks, each at a different pace.

“Ouch.” Euphy groaned. “How does Dazzle do this all day?” She complained of her hands and knees.

It was a while until Lullaby emphatically leaned into the clouds.

“It happened roight here.” She waved. “Thisis where th’ train was when the boy broke inta th’ carts and settus free.”

Snookie raised a brow at her, and then the height.

“So whad’ ya do after that?”

“Oi said, won, two, three, jump!” Lullaby posed on one foot.

“Jump?” Dave wheezed.

“Jump?” Euphy asked.

Shocky’s ears folded as he peered down into the depths.

“And uh,” Snookie scratched the back of his neck. “hower we sure you’re not like, leading us to our doom?”

“Considah it cliff doivin.”Ramses grabbed her hips with confidence. Dave came up behind her.

“I’ll drop lika sacka patatas...”

“What’s at the bottom?” Shocky raised his hand at Lullaby.

“Just water.”

“Just?”

Suddenly there was a rustle in the mists, and the group realized they’d finally stumbled into the Wonderlandian Knights. Some one was calling at them from behind the fog drifts. Everyone exchanged nervous glances.

It was confront, or leap.

Ramses made the decision for everybody.

“All together now.” She grabbed Lullaby’s hand in her left, and Shocky’s in her right.

Shocky grabbed Euphy’s hand as she hugged Snookie. Snookie glimpsed Dave; he had Ziba strapped to his front as if his arms were seat belts.

“I’m coverin’ this baby.”

“Right.”

“Ready?” Ramses asked.

Everyone said “no.”

They jumped.

CHAPTER 5: LAND OF THE GYPSIES

There was a choir of female voices in the night, some were chanting, some were singing, some sounded as unreal as harps and violins. Drums, rattles and tambourines accompanied this, and the music raised into the canyon like phantom energy. There were campfires and torches all around, but their glows were powerless in the daylight-like substance of the ritual.

Zita and Dazzle watched this from afar, as they sped down the canyon's ally on the back of the huge liger.

There were washes of milky stars in the indigo sky, and the rocky horizon of red cliffs were touched by white light from the sweltering ritual.

The unidentified voices filled the air with excitement.

Raggs's big striped body came to a hulking stop, the spring wells along side the canyon walls had lime-green crocodilians resting on their banks, basking in the nightlight of the glittering incantation.

Sitting still as golden statues, they did nothing.

Zita gave Raggs a little kick in the ribs, as if he were riding his horse.

"They don't call this place Dragon Rocks for nothing."

Raggs began flying on his feet again, having to jump over a few dazed lizards on his way. Eventually he came to a stone wall, where he skillfully resumed an effective climb. At the top of the cliff, they could see where the glowing spell-binding was being performed; at the bottom of the canyon, where the wind, water, and human-carved walls had been shaped into a roofless temple; once belonging to what and who? Only Shadi knew, but it was not of importance now.

The feral gypsy women moved in mandala-like patterns, a breath taking kaleidoscope for all eyes in the valley.

*You were the celestial lily,
ethereal smoke,
let us pray for the witness,
and let this Goddess know,
we have chosen the chosen,
she sits on the throne,
mother of power,
maybe our only one,
cast life into deepness,
swim into, and feel it,
we call to her desperate,
in the times we most need it,
empty my soul,
and free your voice, weeping,
wake up the Goddess,
wake her, from her sleeping!
Rise!*

Zita jumped off of Ragg's back, leaving his travel bag at the lion's feet. He slid down to the bottom of the mountain, causing the females to part. He shouted in a language only the ladies understood; The verse meant: "The Goddess has arrived!"

There was chirping, howling, yipping and craze of all kind.

Raggs unmorphed, causing Dazzle to land hard on her hands and feet. She hobbled over to stare down at the ritual that persevered. It began again but in a whole new fashion and formation. Raggs dressed and joined her, leaning on a knee near Dazzle to observe.

She watched in awe as Zita joined the girls, all revolving around the canyon in what became gravity-insulting fluency.

“What are they doing?” Dazzle questioned, never having seen something so wholesome in her life.

“It’s a kind a’ ritual,” Raggs crouched beside her. “they’re welcoming the Goddess to the shrine with a blessing, an’ offering appeasement to the entire canyon so that the Goddess may pass through. That’s why the crocs weren’t bitin.”

“What Goddess?”

“In time.”

“Who are those women?”

“Family.”

“All of them?” Dazzle rudely supposed.

“Y’ see the gal on Zita’s left in the first halo?”

Dazzle looked. She was pearl-white with long ghostly hair, thin hocked legs ended in silver cloven hooves. She had a unicorn’s tail but a human face of turquoise eyes like the pacific, though her most peculiar feature was her shimmering antlers that curved elegantly around the sides of her skull. Her power animal was that of legend; The mythical kirin.

“I’m not short of sight.” Dazzle admitted.

“That lovely lass is the one and only Mazarine.” Raggs started laughing as Dazzle’s eyes lit up.

“I thought you said the Goldenpaw tribe was up in Frozen Sands?”

“Probably came down to help the captured ferals.” Raggs drew his claws through his facial hair. “an’ a’ course they had to come welcome the Goddess.”

“They came all this way just to free the ferals on the train?” Dazzle took a step with her locked palms for a closer look as the fires in the canyon turned blue. “but they’re ferals too right? Why go out of the way? It’s every feral for himself-”

“I’m proud of Mazarine.”

“Huh?”

“Her vision was spot on – she said you’d be difficult.”

“What’s wrong with what I said? It’s truth.”

“Oh it’s truth now, is it? Haven’t you ever been parta a’ tribe? Maybe you ain’t so feral after all,” He grew sly. “maybe I shoulda just left ya in Dragon Rocks, shackled n’ lonely, justa pile-o-bones left to be found of the great queen of the Wonderlandian jungle-”

Dazzle leapt at Raggs, and he hollered with laughter, pushing her away to avoid her biting and swatting. Raggs continued to mock.

The stones crumbled beneath their weight until Dazzle finally lost her footing and her prowl turned into a battering to the bottom of the hill, where she touched ground with the shrine floors – the place blew up in pink, white, and violet. The flames exploded into brilliant rainbows.

The girls and women gasped, Zita looked up as Mazarine fell to trance.

Dazzle fumbled to her fours, ribcage heaving, feathers fanned in panic. She found a hand reaching down to her, making her slowly turn sky ward.

Shadi.

He was tall, powerful, and unaffected by the seemingly erroneous magic that occurred, he held a big black and gold saber, but was focused on Dazzle with lazy eyes. She did not take his hand.

Accepting her decline, he stepped back, but only to get into position – he swung his sword, stopping it right before Dazzle’s shoulder. It was silent-still in the canyon.

“Stand, Goddess.” His voice boomed.

She began, and he moved his sword with her.

“Offer your name.”

“Dazzle...” She uttered.

“Dazzle...” He rolled it around in his mouth. “My daughter said you would come, and here you stand. We applaud her insights, and yours; the power that is to come.”

“Power? Goddess? What are you talking about?”

He lowered his weapon, tossing it to a better length for him to guide it. He began to circle the unarmed woman, and Dazzle followed with a gaze of contempt.

“Do you not believe in your powers?” Shadi asked. “Do you not believe you are a Goddess?”

“Raggs explained everything!” She spat. “You couldn’t possibly believe in all that hocus pocus could you? I’m just a feral from Aldwyn!”

“I will not believe you to be anyone but the person you present to me.” His eyes wandered toward the portal of sky. “... Dazzle, fair Goddess, we wish to accompany and accommodate you for as long as it will take to prove yourself the conqueror of the Gelicide. All you desire until the seed of superiority takes root, and the mighty Goddess takes her well-earned dignity back from the clutches of men.” He took a step back. “It is both my gift, and sacrifice, fair Goddess.”

Dazzle cringed.

“I’m no Goddess!”

“Shure ya are.” Raggs shouted down from the top of the stone wall. The gypsy ladies broke into giggles.

Mazarine breached her trance to speak. She was being held as carefully as a glass doll by Zita when she pointed to the canyon, yonder.

“They’re coming, allies of the Goddess...”

Shadi turned to listen, patient as stone. His eyes were unchanged as Zita returned Mazarine to the other women, who gladly took the little deer under wing. Dazzle watched with wear.

“What happened to her? What does she mean?”

“She has gone to the Dream Time.” Shadi remarked while Zita approached. Both men were at complete ease, even when Dazzle hissed.

“Tense?” Shadi said wryly, still strolling about circles.

She growled.

“Zita.”

Zita whipped his blade down so fast, before Dazzle could blink, her shackles were cut loose and she hit the ground in shock. This was the moment she would race away into the canyon, never to be seen again, but her wits had left her.

“They’re here.” Shadi stated before diving away.

Ramses came flying in with her stick.

“Wait!” An unfamiliar girl’s voice was shouting. “They’re the ones who freed us!” Lullaby called after the irrational combatants.

The tribe’s women scattered in an effort to make room for the two in conflict, otherwise they were placidly composed as if it were expected.

“Dazzle!” Euphy shouted ecstatically, trying to make it down the rock piles without tripping.

“Euphy?! Everybody...” Dazzle exhaled, amazed to see her friends, including the defenseless humans, who were now so far from home. “What are you doing here?!”

“Whaddaya think?!” Snookie came skiing down the slope. “We came lookin’ for ya, sis!”

“Me?!”

Ramses kept launching herself at Shadi in a ferocious craze, her legs and tail took turns holding her body up as she threw her best kicks and punches – but he was dodging everything. Out of the blue, a short, feral woman with astoundingly long, black hair in a multi-wrung pony tail, came leaping into the duel, taking Shadi’s place. Her long, thickly-furred gray tail and round ears waved in unison of her human body. Her red silks and

gold, flashed fiery, as she entered the affray with the kangaroo feral whom was probably four times taller.

The vicious pint-sized warrior princess was smacked away by Ramses' tail, though she landed on her feet in a defense posture, looking ready as ever. Zita was right behind her, poised with blades spread like antiqued wings.

Ramses paused.

"What do you think you're doing attacking our chief like that?!" The chinchilla woman dusted her palms.

"Well whaddaya think yer doin' takin' our friend here, captive?!" Ramses thrust her spear aside.

"Well what do-!"

"Cassandra." Shadi said.

She turned sweet.

Zita sheathed his swords and joined Shadi in apologies.

"Please excuse my tribe and I for our rushed actions, I am Shadi Goldenpaw, chief of the Goldenpaw unity, and this is my second lead, Zita."

Ramses took a sheepish breath, but glanced suspiciously. She leaned on her spear.

"Pleasures oim sure. Oi apologise for moi actions as well, but eh, kin y' justefy y'selves a little bit more b'fore we go on with th' formalities?"

Shadi wasted no time. He raised a gloved hand, clenched it, and closed his eyes... A fluttering radiance bloomed in the center of his palm, softly beating it's wings until it was clearly defined as the bird from Dazzle's dreams.

Curious, Dazzle went to touch it, and the apparition turned into a handful of feathers that blew from his grasp. She watched them go...

"The Dream Time... " Shadi affirmed. "It has been calling out to you, every single one of you, but Dazzle,"

She braced herself.

“It has been calling to you, most of all.”

Dazzle’s deep eyes glittered in ponderment, but Shadi gave nothing else away. Lullaby broke the tension.

“Uh, um, thank you for saving me!” She raised her hand at the tribe. Zita smiled.

“Don’t thank me yet”

“There is much to explain.” Shadi’s voice waved over the crowd, washing away Zita’s indignance. “Come, let us nourish our souls at the table then speak; we’ve been far too rude to our brothers and sisters already.” He added to Zita.

Before following the Goldenpaws, Dazzle hugged Euphy with shame.

They were all back together again, but now every single one of Dazzle’s friends was far, far, from home...

Under the constellations and rising moons, the band sat down to a stone table in a roofless cavern. A feast was fetched in brass wares, some dishes being prepared on the spot.

Starved, Lullaby picked up the large smoked roast no one dared to identify. Shocky slipped a leafy tabbouleh wrap into his mouth, smelling lemony and pungent. Even Ramses questioned the crusty, molasses-darkened loaf of herbal bread, complete with seed pods and stems. Euphy and Snookie coughed on the spicy tea as quietly as they could manage, and Dave test-tasted everything for Ziba, just to be on the safe side.

Luckily, the politely dining Goldenpaws didn’t seem to notice over Zita, Raggs, and Dazzle, who were indulging grossly on the brightly colored harvest of fat and sloppy witchety grubs, that they were eating as casually as bowls of cereal.

Shadi savored a small plate of food in the background.

“I like it.” Shocky finally said aloud. The quiet was over.

“Why thank you,” Gazelle, the elegant beaver girl gave a gentle smile. “it’s a recipe Zita brought back from his native home range, we often have to substitute the traditional ingredients, but it’s still pretty good, huh?”

“So uh, who usually does the cooking?” Snookie asked in further effort to break the ice.

The ladies ignited in laughter, agreeing that they all cooked, only, some better than others. The table was afire in their beautiful voices, passionately arguing. By this time, Raggs had finished feasting, and began to play romantic music on his acoustic guitar, which the Goldenpaws thoughtfully brought to him from home.

The gathering had warmed and finally ate like gracious guests, which Shadi allowed to go on before creating enough ambiance for an interlude. The Goldenpaws silenced when it was time, and the band seized their hungry gorging; though Dazzle remained gnawing on an animal bone from the left overs.

“Now then, brothers, sisters, I’m sure you are all eager to know the intentions for the swan maiden, but foremost, I’m afraid I must begin with a rather elegiac tale.” Shadi explained.

Raggs accented.

“What is now to be considered the Frozen Sands desert, is now a skeleton of a world collapsed upon itself. Opal Oasis, once fertile and sacred, was a blessed gift from Mother Nature who held many tribes within her arms, including that of the Starbrights. When the land was threatened with war, you can imagine the profuse discombobulation when the Starbrights chose to commit the ultimate sacrifice in order to preserve the treasured gem... though not all looked at the Starbright’s actions this way, many turned on them for destroying the paradise, handing themselves over to the ones who seeked to confiscate it before the battle had even begun.”

“And you think Dazzle kin make amends for somethin’ loike that?” Ramses said, slightly tongue-in-cheek.

“Her calling here,” Zita toned in. “was a holy one – and that brings us to the Dream Time.”

He dove right into it, crossing his legs distinguishedly.

“The Dream Time is a place that contains all realities, it’s where other realms exist, and fate and destiny is one the same - you get the idea. So when Mazarine looked into the Dream Time; her vision, that is, she saw a woman “defeating” the Gelicide.”

“Defeating an *element*? A stranger from moiles away an’ y’ pickerout loike a fruit ona tree?” Ramses hustled.

“That’s how the Dream Time works-”

“Yeh Oi know!” Ramses tattooed the sentence into his brain. “Oim a seasoned feral too, but oim not th’ one who needs convincing.” She gestured to Dazzle’s belief-extinguished face.

Raggs’s guitar music followed.

“Well, vision or not,” Snookie already attained a few exasperated looks. “how do you know it’s meant to be?”

“Because Mazarine saw it in the all-knowing Dream Time-”

“What exactly is the Dream Time?” Euphy innocently, further pondered.

Zita tugged his hair. He barely got a word out when Mazarine took over, her small, slow, hypnotized voice sounding like articulated bells.

“The world that you see is but one physical manifestation of the many realities embodied in the Dream Time. Each dimension of the galaxy is materialized by the ideas created by life that consciously and subconsciously supports it through the ex-plosion and implosion of will. Energy can be lended to these other realms upon connection to the Dream Time, thus telepathic communication, events of remote sight, fortune telling, psychic ability, sorcery, incidences of teleportation, dimension rips, and quantum timing. This was taught to us by the Starbright peoples long ago. The Dream Time is the word.”

Everyone was quiet, including Raggs’s guitar.

“What now?” Dave verbalized skeptically.

“You’ll get the idea,” Zita flippantly rationalized. “So the point is, Dazzle conquering the Gelicide rests within the Dream Time as a possibility, but now, here she is, with the awareness of that possibility, closer than ever to exceeding it. Do you follow me?”

“There’s no proof I’m the one who has to do it.” Dazzle spoke up. The room turned.

“There is proof.” Zita rang. “Mazarine knows what she saw.”

Dazzle furrowed a brow at the lovely, but teenaged feral.

“A child?”

“We believe her.” Zita stated religiously.

“I *don’t* and I *won’t*.” Dazzle said so apathetically it made Zita growl and show teeth. Dazzle returned the favor. Raggs’s music became dramatic. Dazzle shot him a glance.

“Look, I guess your Dream Time to me is no more believable than my bird, but it’s the bird I came for, not the Gelicide, not Opal Oasis, and certainly not saving the world. I am a ripped-ragged feral and nothing more. Don’t expect me to do something I can’t see in myself.”

“I will not expect you to be anyone but the person you present to me.” Shadi answered. “But it would be a shame to turn your back on a fight you simply *predicted* you could not win... Are you strong? Or are you weak?”

Dazzle was disgusted. She just wanted to go home, seeing that her troubles did not drag her family and friends on some chancy excursion. However, she could not shake the desperate curiosity of her dreams; the snow, the ice, the little white bird... Plus, Shadi did promise her whatever she wanted, so of course she’d request the protection of her friends...

“The Gelicide lands – it’s where I will find the dream dove?”

“What made you so savvy all the sudden?” Zita brandished fanned fingers. Gazelle elbowed him. “Ow. Why the question?”

“Because I need to know.”

“*Know nothing.*” Shadi’s voice fell upon the gathered souls. He conjured the holographic bird. “Explain.”

Dazzle took a breath.

“Five years ago, I began having dreams about a strange, little, white bird always flying through snow, always wandering a winterscape... It’s like she wanted me to help her, but I never entertained the thought that there was actually something I could do about it... I’d always assumed it was just a silly dream... ”

Shadi raised his hands.

“Do you doubt the signs, brothers, sisters? *A new chapter has begun.* Let that close this case. There are preparations to attend, and Mother Earth is calling us into the open. You may unite in this adventure, or you can regret having missed it.” He smiled.

“Sold yet?” Zita spat playfully.

No one said a thing, but they already knew: nobody was going home.

Dazzle made the deal to go with the Goldenpaws to Frozen Sands as long as they took good care of her family and friends. She was bitterly guilty to have gotten them caught up in the mess, but everyone was beginning to appear excited for their journey.

Resting her head on the sandstone, Dazzle glowed in the light of the moons, which cascaded into the canyons bright as sunshine. Tomorrow, everyone would leave for Frozen Sands together.

She didn’t know what it would be like, if she’d find her white bird, or what would happen at journey’s end, but she was growing more and more thirsty for answers.

Her eyes fluttered opened and closed, afraid to dream again. Eventually she succumbed, spiraling back into the world of the all-knowing Dream Time, dazily swearing that she would conquer the Gelicide, and put things right...

“*Mother, come find me...* ” The dove pleaded, making Dazzle squirm in her sleep.

CHAPTER 6: SWAN LAKE IN THE COPPER PLATEAU

“Rise n’ shine mornin’ star!” Raggs waved his cowboy hat in the air.

Dazzle leapt up like a house cat. She attacked him.

His loud raucous laugh could be heard by the tribe all the way from the other end of the hill. Dazzle embarrassingly withdrew.

“God, don’t do that.” She said, walking away on all fours. The two caused stones to wash off the sides of the drop. Chuckling, Raggs held his stomach.

“Heh, heh, well the tribe is ready t’ roll an’ yer still up here sleepin’ lika baby. I thought they made ya their messiah now?”

“Whatever they want.” Dazzle exasperatedly fanned her tail and stretched. Her gaze turned to the rising sun, second lids blinking as her pupils decreased in the hot pink glow. She licked her thirsty lips, and skidded down the rocks into the gorge.

“Hey, where ya goin’?”

“I’m getting water.”

“The crocs aren’t gonna be in their daze no more, c’mon, the tribe’s carryin’ all the supplies with ‘um.”

“I’ll provide for myself, thanks.” Dazzle snapped, carrying on with her climb.

“Suit yerself, the others are waitin’. And don’t even think about runnin’.”

“I’d never leave my sister.”

Raggs smiled before running off. He took the cavernous ridge; a quick but dangerous route back to the Dragon Rocks Hall.

Dazzle stared after, suddenly wondering who Raggs was in all of this – No one said he was a member of the Goldenpaws... No one called him a chief, and he didn’t seem to be, but who else *would* he be?

She flicked her tail in irritation, continuing to wander down to take care of her own business.

“There’s my girlie.” Euphy said as Dazzle obediently went to greet her.

“Morning, Daz.” Ramses unfolded her arms to Dazzle’s arrival.

“So,” Snookie said tenderly. “we ready d’ hit the road?”

To everyone’s surprise, Dazzle rose to her feet, her fingers grappling her own arm in pity.

“You guys, I’m really sorry you all had to get dragged into this-”

“Hey,” Ramses punted her shoulder. “you couldn’t know, couldn’ta done nothin’ different, so here we are.”

Dazzle sighed. Dave expressed concern. Ramses shook her head.

“Oi feel Daz needs to be here. When that mob started talkin’ about th’ Dream Time, oi knew there was something troiin’ to unfold. Faith or not, oi’ve been to that place, an’ oi know we kin trust it.”

“Yeah...” Snookie stuck his hands in his pockets. “but can we trust these...”

“Wanderers?” Dave offered his best inoffensive description of the gypsies. Shocky stood up.

“It’s like Mom said, but just think, if we can make this happen – stopping the Gelicide, and bringing back the people, it would be worth it all.”

“We’d be doing the right thing.” Euphy nodded at the boy.

“IF they’re telling the truth.” Snookie flinched.

“Oi believe in the Dream Time, Dazzle believes in her white bird; what more do you want?” Ramses complained cheerily.

Zita came treading out of the hall, Ghazi, his scarlet macaw, sat serenely on one of his inked shoulders.

“Come on now every body, the caravan is waiting...”

He sensed their hesitation.

“What’d you think? We’d be walking?”

“I do love stretching my legs.” Dave piped in, doing a few squats. Zita laughed, having the big, red bird step into his hand before jogging back into the dark of the hall.

“Come on! Come on!” The parrot’s caws echoed in Zita’s intonation.

Piecemeal, the group tagged after Zita, emerging from the shadiness of the hall, into the blasting sunlight of the open plane; the light came down from both the sky, and glaring off the silver sand.

The bird on Zita’s arm flew straight at Shadi, whom was bridling one of the riding ponies. He caught the pesky parrot and sent it to Mazarine, who lie it on its back in her arms like a baby. The other tribe ladies were still perfecting the wagons and steeds.

Zita took up the responsibility of properly introducing every one.

“If you all need anything, that’s Padma, Amma, Davida, Cardinal, and well, you met Cassandra.”

The group of women were chatting in a circle, speaking extravagantly to one another in their secret foreign language.

Amma stood out in bright orange silks, though her dark-brown hair and skin nearly blended her obsidian stones into her. She had a dark, dingo tail and ears, with which large apache tears hung.

Padma had apple-green cat eyes, entrancing as she moved with her words. Black cat ears reflected her emotions, raising or flattening against her short, curly, black hair and green bandanna cap. She wore a white, buttoned, blouse, and a green, silk, skirt.

Her sister, Davida, was a curly brunette, and well-tanned. Everything about her was earthy, rather than spacey. She wore bone adornments instead of jewels, and her silks were of chocolate browns and golds. She had darkly tabbed ears, and a matching, expressive tail.

Cardinal was fair-skinned, joyful in her big blue eyes, and had shoulder-length, reddish-brown hair. She donned, well, Northern Cardinal feathers, and wings. Rose tattoos, and ruby jewelry accented her.

Zita swung his bangled arm out to the three weaving baskets in a wagon.

“Gazelle, Primrose, and Abigail.”

Gazelle the beaver girl waved as she heard her name, her slender gaze was brown and soft. She liked her leather, and carried red-ink tattoos. She was sweet, as was Primrose.

Primrose was the more timid of the lot, she had pale, blue eyes, and short, curly, blond hair, where a polka-dotted bow rest beside one of her small, furry, chipmunk ears. Her poofy, cotton dress covered most of her chipmunk tail. Thanks to her size, it was hard to see that she was older than Mazarine.

Abigail the opossum girl had dirty blond hair, capped by a blue scarf. She wore blue silks and pearls, and had tiny, sharp teeth behind her smiling pink lips. Though she didn’t look the part, she was the Goldenpaw’s precious goofball.

“Annnd, our one and only Mazarine. That’s everybody – unless you’d like to ask the animals a favor, but I wouldn’t push your luck.” Zita chuckled.

Mazarine dully stared, appearing far too exquisite to break her train of thought. The parrot in her grasp once again, shot Snookie a dirty look.

“One big, happy family then, huh?” Snookie held back a crooked smile.

“Yep.” Zita replied. Euphy didn’t think Zita even realized that Snookie was being meanly sarcastic.

Shadi heftily returned from the Dragon Rocks Hall where he’d briefly disappeared during the introductions. He had a stiff expression and a quickness about his stride.

“The Wonderlandian knights are upon us.” He announced. “Let us be moving.”

“Oi totally forgottabout them.” Ramses murmured, watching the tribe ladies vanish into the wagons. Some were already snapping the reins at Shadi’s word.

“Grab a horse, my friends.” Said Zita, generously.

Euphy crept toward a corn silk Arabian steed, just barely giving it a hand to sniff.

“Don’t be shy!” Abigail pulled herself to the rump of Zita’s smooth bay. She sat side-saddle, wrapping her prehensile tail around Zita’s waist. Zita clicked his tongue to get the horse going. Meanwhile, Ramses put Dave, Shocky and Ziba atop a dusty-dapple stallion with thick hooves and a nickel mane. She put the tasseled reins into Shocky’s gloved hands.

“Why me?”

“Cuz y’ the cowboy! Thisis y’ steerin’ wheel, kay? Off you go!” She abruptly slapped the horse’s hindquarters and the three wailed as the equine went sailing away. Ramses bounded after like a good sports coach.

Lullaby climbed into a wagon while Snookie and Euphy mounted the amicable blond Arabian. The teams of socked, chestnut ponies pulled the wagons with a lone gray mule following behind – this was Mazarine’s beloved pet.

Shadi waited until everyone had gone, for Dazzle was still standing in the silence of the wind rushing past their ears. He offered her his hand up to his big, ebony steed. She looked away.

“I’ll walk.”

“You won’t keep up that way.”

She refused with a set of barred teeth, starting off at her own pace into the sparkling silver sand. Shadi urged his horse into a gentle stride.

The tribe women began to sing.

*Help us light the way again,
dust shadows deep and dark,
follow me into the sun,
I know it’s not that hard,
help me light the path again,*

*the one where you and I,
bring the joy into the sky,
where both of us can shine!*

*Let it snow the love of purity,
the beauty we become,
the grace that we now heed,
understood by only some,
let it rain the words of kindliness,
like orbs we see in deep,
of every single truth betold,
of no secrets that we keep!*

Hear us shout, I love earth too!

*So that they shout it back,
cause I can see a rainbow,
in places they see black,
so light the bows on fire,
for we are never sad,
we're the brightest path before us,
the best we've ever had!*

The simmering horizon was aglow with the washed out colors of the scrub land. The wagons, horses, and people shimmered in their own silks, jewels, and pearls of sweat.

Moving into the sparse landscape was like stepping onto another planet as the passing morning surrendered to a clean blue sky, saturating the environment in the glory of the sun. The silvery sand relayed gray and lavender pigments while the stones and grasses added depth to this world's vanishing points.

Strange desert flowers gave story and color, while here and there, one could catch a fleeting streak of scales, or the flick of an insect's wing, all new and unknown to Dazzle.

Shadi had been right; Dazzle found herself far behind and lost to her senses, gazing at every odd stem, stick, and creature. She was used to the jungle's broadness and abundance. To her, it seemed like the desert was naked and vast, curved and shadowed, like a nude. Life here was rare, so it made you look every time Mother Nature twitched.

Dazzle suddenly jumped after getting nudged from behind. She spun around coming face-to-face with Raggs in his big-bodied liger form. His amber eyes burned in the sun.

She growled at him for successfully spooking her again, but he just whipped his tail back and fourth, giving a coughing grunt of a liger laugh.

She pounced at his ribs.

He nosed her side, practically pushing her over.

Dazzle nipped.

He flashed his big cat teeth.

Through their game of tag, they made their way out to the caravan.

Ephy leaned on Snookie's back, glaring out to the desert with tired eyes. The rocking of the horse's body had been putting her to sleep, as she had not gotten great sleep for several days now.

Without realizing it, she found her stare on the graceful bay horse and its beautiful riders, who quietly chatted in their sumptuously exotic language; Zita was suddenly melodiously singing through a smirk, making Abigail laugh at whatever the joke was.

It made Ephy queer...

She was supposedly a prisoner of these Goldenpaws, but yet, something felt more human about them than she had ever felt in her own life...

She turned to the presence of silver dust floating by on the wind, and looked back to see Dazzle and Raggs' play-fighting becoming brutal. Smoky clouds of glitter wafted off the

desert floor, and the growling turned to screeching. Zita swerved his horse in aggravation.

“Come on, knock it off, you a monster or a mythic, Goddess?”

Raggs came bounding out of the dust with Dazzle latched to his leg with her mouth. Raggs reached around and plucked her off with his jaws.

“Sheesh.” Zita snapped his reins.

Raggs and Dazzles’ wrestling match was then interrupted by a sudden dimming cast down from the sky.

Zita’s dropped lip graduated to a grin, and he tapped his bay forward into an all-out gallop. He merged with the wing beats of the large, slate and rose-hued birds that overtook the sun. All stood in awe of being part of the massive clowder of psittacidae. Nobody could help but smile at Zita’s joyous whoops, running his steed at racing speed through the birds.

Ephy reached out to touch passing wings. Dazzle chased and pounced, but gave into the allurement, just standing by and drinking it in.

It was a wonderful occasion, but fleet as a holiday.

When all had blown through, the horizon was once again, bare to see, and in the distance, was a grand sight.

“The Copper Plateau,” Shadi announced, his beads and chains clinking like a rain stick.
“that is our first stop.”

As the caravan neared the red sand plateau, the rays from aloft were beginning to scorch. One could see the heat generating from the earth, and all the life they’d seen was now completely hidden from view.

Dazzle and Raggs docilely strolled alongside the wagons now, glittery sand clinging to their salty bodies. Dazzle’s tail was spread in distress of the heat.

At last the caravan stepped onto the rust colored flats, staring down a pathway that led to the plateau's hidden treasures. Before entering the crevice in which was their doorway, Zita called a halt, mostly for the human's sake.

"We go on foot from here, single file, watch out for rattlers."

He and Abigail slipped off their stallion, parting ways to go assist others with tack and leads. The other tribe members abandoned the wagons, instantly dismantling them into crates and canvas that could be carried by hand or horseback.

The band glimpsed the markings on the plateau's walls – there were thousands of red hand prints staring at them.

Lullaby sprang towards the entrance, blue eyes lit. Shocky approached more meagerly.

"What's with the stencils?"

Ignoring him, Lullaby gave a wile glance to the others.

"C'mon!" She giggled. "Let's go explore!" She dragged him off. Ramses noticed anyway, chortling as they went.

Not much to the band's surprise, the tribe sang and chanted and beat drums all the way through the ingress of the copper plateau. Amma spread a cinnamon tinted powder from a wool pouch along their path.

Black as sun drenched ebony,

and black as raven's fur,

black as water in the night,

and black as black occurs,

panthers or the prowess here,

so black as scalded bone,

coal as any other things,

be black, before white tones,

black as berries on the tree,

*and black as birds in flight,
black as vultures in the sky,
and black as will-be night,
black as eyes I've never seen,
but would like to, one day,
black as many things I know,
that seem to fade away,
no curses in these blackened rooms,
no ravens, hiding, shaded,
let us pass into this chasm,
only God created...*

Instead of taking the trail, Raggs whom was now in his bipedal form, and Dazzle, still on all fours, raced Ramses to the top of the gully, where the flat, boiling surface stood against the blasting breeze.

The scrub land continued weakly into a red sand desert, disappearing into an easy maze of wind-worn carvings; these plateaus jutted out of the land in strange patterns for miles and miles to come, but on the very horizon line, a mysterious, glittering oddity could be viewed. It was too far away for Ramses and Raggs to make out, but Dazzle's bird's eye-view could see it's curly cues and glimmering geometrics.

"What's that twinklin' oi see over there?" Ramses shielded her eyes from the heat. Raggs glanced.

"I can see nothin'"

"It must be the Gelicide" Dazzle said, low.

"Is it really ice? Kin y' tell that much?" Ramses asked.

"I'd have to feel or taste it first."

"Skeptic." Raggs bullied, trying to control his long hair in the bluster.

“Listen to you, Mr. Eye of the Tiger.” Dazzle gave a smirk.

“Hey, I’m blinded by the light here.”

The three fell to their hands, rushing out to the plateau face, leaping from one cracked bit of mesa to the next until they reached the back of the rock formation. From this angle, there was nothing but deadened desert and two remote stone pillars that cradled the Gelicide on the far horizon.

“Whatcha wonda those are for?” Ramses queried.

“Land marks.” Raggs said without a doubt. “They were erected fer the purpose of helpin’ travelers find Opal Oasis on Lake Twenty-Eight, now, they just serve as a warning.”

“Eveh think you’ll have any guests?”

“You *are* the guests.” Raggs smiled, but he was looking at Dazzle.

The three turned to the unexpected sound of gushing water that came from the crater that the plateau surrounded. They scampered over to inspect. In the space below, was a clear, clean, pool of stillness.

Ramses gazed down.

“A basin?”

“Where are the others?” Dazzle gave Raggs a worried glance. He smugly gestured.

“Yo Zita!”

Zita called back, from where, she didn’t know, but she could hear only a bit of what he was saying.

“...Down, by the ledge...On the left side...It’s perfectly safe, the water’s...”

“Like I’m listening to you!” Dazzle rasped.

There was laughter on the air.

“Let’s jump.” Raggs said giddily.

“No way.”

“I thought you weren’t a scardy bird.”

Dazzle growled at him.

Ramses smirked at their childishness, shrugged, then dove into the space below, somersaulting down into the chasm of quiet water. Raggs went hurling into the sky after her.

“Whooohooo!”

Dazzle readied herself, shuffled on the lip of the ridge, arms and toes spilling off – but she just couldn’t. She scrambled back to the bezel of the cliff, listening to the splashes from underneath.

Raggs pumped his fist out of the water.

“Hey cygnet! It’s yer turn!”

Dazzle stayed quiet, pretending she didn’t hear, and jerked away from the crater starting back down the mountainous trail.

While the travelers gathered around the fire, swaying to Raggs’s guitar, from out of the starry sky, they were granted company from a dozen dark strangers.

Alight in white wing tips until they settled on the lake in black, they whistled pleasantly from mouths of bright red and yellow. They were black swans.

“Oh look.” Euphy smiled, giving her abruptly timid sister a nudge. Dazzle’s attention was drawn, though she neared the water’s edge somewhat suspicious of these alternate versions of her power animal.

Gliding on the water’s surface, the elegant, crooning birds dabbled around in the fire and moon light, looking like warm, deep shadows. Three of these birds floated closer, curious and confused by Dazzle.

“Lookit ‘um,” Ramses tickled from behind. “they’re bloody stoked t’ meet ya.”

A swan reached it’s neck towards Dazzle, and bravely, she stuck her own face back; briefly, they touched noses.

“Aw, he digs ya.” Ramses simpered. Euphy beamed.

“Having fun with the ducks?” Zita was cheeky as he walked past, carrying supplies across camp. Before any of the ladies could scold him, the parrot on his shoulder, nipped his ear.

Dazzle sighed and turned back to the swans that swam off to the other end of the lake, their gestures and glances, beckoning...

As the fires reduced to embers, and breaths fell slow and calm, Dazzle sneaked off on her own, unknowing that a determined Shocky rose to follow.

Lullaby squeezed out from beneath Ramses’ arm, racing off to join in on the secret fun, which deliberately opened Ramses’ eyes.

She sighed in the dim light...

Shocky made his way around the crater’s shelves, creeping along the sandstone walls until he found a cavernous room to obscure himself in to observe Dazzle’s evening escapade. Unaware of his stalker, Shocky stepped into the cave mouth, a slick-surfaced tunnel that caused him to slip off his hooves into the cavern’s shallow pools. Lullaby came bumping into him.

Wet and agitated, Shocky hastened to his hooves, still standing ankle-deep in the crystal-clear shores that lapped due to the internal waterfalls pouring down the bouldered walls of the cave.

“Why’d you follow me?!” Shocky snapped. Lullaby giggled nervously.

“Oi want to know what youer doing! Oi loike adventures!”

Shocky let a breath go, peering out of the cave mouth at the moon-lit parade of ebon swans. Lullaby peeked from behind a hand-printed boulder. She made a face, both worried and confused.

“I followed Dazzle cause I wanted to watch her hunt.” Shocky admitted.

“Why?”

“Dazzle is the best example for me, she won’t pick and choose lessons like my Mom would.”

“Not listen to y’ Mum? What kinda feral are you?” Lullaby put her hands on her hips.

“I am too a feral!” Shocky took her words as an insult, but digressed. “Just not a very good one...”

The black swans now vocalized out of some disturbance, but Shocky impressed his argument.

“I have to become stronger – we don’t know what could happen on this journey – all I do know, is that I need to be prepared.”

“Why can’t y’ just ask y’ Mum?”

“I couldn’t do that... She wouldn’t understand.” He scuffed a submerged stone with his hoof.

The room’s water, rippled. Ghostly bats in the attic, twittered.

Dazzle had arrived, but her mind was too booked on the swans to notice the troublesome two in the cave’s shrouds.

Her eyes were possessed by the birds as she plunked her silkless body into the aqueous matter. Swimming through the reflected stars, she wrinkled the mirrored night sky as she dipped under water, moving through the empty space of crystal-clarity. The bottom of the springs could be seen, revealing pastel rainbows of baffling opalized fossils.

Dazzle surfaced near the swans, who were making sweet, flute-like calls beside the satisfying ruffling of plumes. They began to circle Dazzle, nodding long necks with the sheen of the moonshine on their silver-black feathers.

The hunt had been given up, either that, or it never had been Dazzle’s intention.

“See?” Lullaby twirled around. “Scavenge, surprise, or bust.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Shocky exhaled sharply.

“It’s th’ hunting code, silly! Come on, you’ll neveh be a feral at this rate. Let’s go get some Dream Toime.” Lullaby turned the corner, knocking into Ramses as she did. The kid’s let out mellowed shouts, sounding like “Mom!”

Ramses raised a sympathetic brow at Lullaby, but spoke to Shocky.

“Shockay, whadaya think y’ doin’? Oi’ve been lookin’ for ya a’ half hour now, let’s git. You too.” She pushed Lullaby along.

As the children scurried off, Ramses glimpsed the lake with a critical eye.

Dazzle was now dancing with the swans, making dizzying turns and circles in a wordless conversation. She even blew bubbles for them, and they bowed and beat their wings in response. All seemed well and harmless... But this made Ramses queer.

Shocky was not a trouble maker, he did however, have a flawless intuition for when a hunt was afoot...

She slowly turned to leave...

CHAPTER 7: THE HEALING TREE

Dazzle was lost in enchantment, her focus was on the birds that seemed to understand her so well...

She missed the bats flocking from the caverns, spooked by the waking of a dangerous cave-mate.

She missed the pallid body that sluggishly dropped to the flange of the spring, slowly, but surely, slipping into the cool water.

She missed the reptilian scales being lit in the moon's glow, which would have been obvious to those not spellbound by some other beauty.

She missed it all.

Dazzle was shocked as the charmed birds ripped away from the dance and song. Shimmying across the lake, they honked wildly. A few even took off, leaving the Copper Plateau for good.

Before Dazzle could squander in disappointment, she felt a leg be nabbed by a set of fangs; There would be no venom to worry about, but something much worse.

The pearlescent serpent whirled around her, squeezing these coils shut. Dazzle's head was torn beneath the surface, and before she could brace herself, she could feel a bone break.

Having heard the alarmed swans, Mazarine broke from her Dream Time knowing exactly what was happening. She grabbed her bow and arrow and went to the lake. There was nothing to question before taking aim and shooting.

She did not miss.

Dazzle came smashing out of the rippled moon, grasping for a ledge. She pulled her bruised body back onto land with the help of small Mazarine.

Coughing and expelling water from her nose and mouth, her hair poured over her neck as she sat squat, and heaving for air. She glanced to the side – the black swans were long gone.

“Lady Dazzle,” The barely malaised voice of Mazarine sang into the midnight. “Shall I go get help?”

Dazzle shook her head, this was unlike hunting wounds she’d gotten in the past – she’d been outdone.

“N-no, I’m f-fine.” She trembled, getting goose bumps in the breeze. “This is between you and me...”

She stared at the dead snake sinking to the bottom of the spring.

“Thank you.”

“If you did not know,” Mazarine empathized in her formal, dazed tone. “you are not defined or subject by the experiences of your reality, even if the Mother sphere has integrated it into the manifestations of both spirit and earth realms.”

“Yeah, thanks.” Dazzle cringed on her broken rib, sighing as she twisted her hair out and shook dew from her feathers.

“What were you doing up anyway?” Dazzle proceeded to dress.

“The Dream Time warned me of-”

“So where are we headed tomorrow?” Dazzle changed the subject, fastening buckles, and weaving her silks. Mazarine’s listless eyes blinked.

“Shadi will make you go to the Healing Tree. After that, we will leave the horses at Raggs’s homestead, build boats, and travel to Twenty-Eight by water”

Dazzle looked at the crazy little girl in question.

“By water?” Dazzle threw her head back. “In case you didn’t notice, we still have a whole desert to cross.”

Mazarine had no reply.

Dazzle began up the trail. Mazarine ambled after on soft-spoken hooves.

“May I ask a question?”

“Sure.”

“The messenger of the Gelicide, do you know who they are?” She was speaking of Dazzle’s Dream Time character, the white dove.

“Some dumb bird, I don’t know.”

“I too, am afraid of my weaknesses.”

“I never said I was afraid of anything.” Dazzle faced Mazarine.

“But aren’t you? Those from the Dream Time are beyond us, and superior to us.”

Dazzle blinked her second lids. She forged ahead.

“Mm, I don’t know.”

“They are superior until we transcend them, and accept the knowledge they bestow of us.” She argued blandly, though lively enough to chase her. “we are destined to-”

Dazzle stopped in her tracks and gave the girl a cold glare.

“I don’t care what it is I’m supposed to do – all I know is you had better be right, girl, because this journey won’t be worth a shilling if not a word of your prediction is truth. And by the way, if something happens to my family, your leader will have the honors of being buried by a swan maiden.”

She expected to see fear in Mazarine’s eyes, but there was none.

Mazarine watched a drop of blood slide from Dazzle’s nose.

Dazzle opened her eyes to another starry sky, she could hear wagon wheels grinding, horse hooves clopping, and the nice sound of the Goldenpaw’s unintelligible language. She was cushioned by handmade quilts that smelled like something between Egyptian cotton, sweat, and myrrh. She was in the back of a wagon, blearily staring up at Euphy

whom slouched on the sacks of grain, falling asleep though she still had a palm on Dazzle's aching body.

Zita and Primrose were jabbering away in the coach as if it were the first time they had ever seen planet earth. Their animated poetry was unexpectedly hushed upon Ephy's discovery that Dazzle was awake. Zita came rushing into the back to see what was the matter. Offering a calm assertion, he explained to Dazzle what had happened, and that they'd taken a detour to the Healing Tree, where they could get medicine for her injuries. Dazzle didn't take the news lightly, and even curled her lip at the thought of the strangling, pearl serpent.

"I still coulda taken 'im... Just caught me off guard..." She said weakly.

"Outta luck, ay?" Zita smiled back.

"I don't believe in luck."

"Well there ya go." Zita shared his amusement with Ephy. Ephy was still wiping tears as Zita pat her shoulder. Normally she would've been intimidated, but it was now unthinkable in this time of need.

For the rest of the ride, Primrose played nurse to Dazzle, and Ephy supplied a hand to hold. It wasn't too many hours later that Shadi proclaimed their arrival.

The dirt road ran through a hilly valley of tall, dark, grasses floundering in a fashion that made it look like waves on the sea.

One of these windy hills held a massive, lone tree, that practically introduced itself; The enormous trunk was topped with smooth, pale branches, and large, deep-green, glossy leaves. Its blossoms, were so big, they exceeded your palm, and they literally glowed in white and gold. The fragrance was intoxicatingly sweet on the breeze.

The tree was home to a mysterious creature.

The benevolent guardian of the healing tree resembled a dark fae, an alien insect, but more fairy-like. The color of its body was split down the middle; one side was slick and

dusky, while the other was froggishly splotched and green. The creature had large, spacey eyes, deeply indigo, and thickly lashed. It had small arms and legs with tiny hands and feet, while it's head was bulbous and over-sized to fit it's alien eyeballs. It's wings could have belonged to a dragonfly, and it's voice sounded like not one, but an entire flock of budgerigars twinkling at once.

In the crispness of the night, Zita went to the magical tree to "speak" with it. He requested medicine from the creature, and it obliged.

With a flittery flight, it went soaring high into the tree branches and bought back a showy, luminous blossom.

Instead of presenting it, the little alien buried it at the foot of the tree; as if in time-lapse, the buried bloom sprouted up, swelling into a sapling that quickly produced a single stony nut that looked very much like a bone. The seed is what Zita received.

He bowed earnestly and returned to the wagon where Dazzle lie, already knifing open the seed to scoop out the stringy, marrow-like contents. Dazzle was tenderly fed this strange food which had her rising in minutes.

The tribe's applause was contagious.

Ramses, Snookie, Dave, and Shocky joined in as Lullaby and Ziba danced. Ephy embraced her sister. Raggs breathed a sigh of relief.

Song, dance, and drums filled the hills as the tribe did what they did best.

*Wide-eyed on a mission, Mr. Blue-eyed baby brother,
out to find the promised world, a promise like no other,
paradise of everything, in white-flash of the sky,
I cripple every illness that has flaunted it's red eyes,
he's a nomad of a young face, his hands are small and fine,
Healing Tree we owe you, for your wisdom, health, and time,
the loss is not forgotten, but the pureness that he gives,*

*falling to your knees, when the story was not his,
do you really think that God, waves a hand of pure control?
He gave us everything, hence this universal soul,
good fortune is upon us! Fair the creature we are due,
love is ever lasting! Heal the healer within you!*

Now sing!

Before getting back onto the road for Frozen Sands, Dazzle went to thank the mysterious, little tree guardian for his service – but he was no where to be seen.

“Not to worry,” Zita read Dazzle’s disappointment. “He knows you are grateful, you may give thanks to the tree, they are one the same.”

Dazzle sadly cocked her head. She walked up to the tree’s impressive trunk and rested her forehead against it. She whispered so that Zita could not hear her private words.

“Thank you... Please let me live... Let me live long enough to show myself what I’m truly made of... I’m better than this, I swear... ”

She meant that she wanted to be a powerful, smart, long-lived feral. She wanted to be a good woman, a better person, and she wanted to find her honest strength; A reason to be *all* of these things.

Zita gave a trill howl: The tribe’s signal to move out.

They would leave the Healing Tree at peace.

Across the grassy meadows they trod and rode, through the starry night, with the moons straying farther and farther down the horizon.

The tasty, fresh breeze, and cool, wet grasses, would be the last of their kind of beauty they’d see until the band returned to Aldwyn.

If they were to ever make it back, that is.

CHAPTER 8:

KNOTT'S BAZAAR

Again, desert. Red and dry, for paces on end. The scorching stone floors held nothing to see for hours and hours.

It was hot.

The scrub returned to the traveler's fortune; at first sparse, it later took off in clusters of cacti forests that the tribe ladies foraged for fruit and edible cactus pads. Some of the girls came back to the wagons licking scorpion stings, but for the Goldenpaws, these were no worse than mosquito bites.

There was no real trouble for a long while until Zita sniffed the scenery ahead of them, and prevented his steed from going forward.

“Wait... This doesn’t look right-”

Before actions could be revised, the caravan tripped transportation-first into an insuperable pool of sinking sand.

The tribe ladies knew exactly what to do to save themselves, and were already on shore with Shadi and Zita, trying to help the humans back to their feet. It was a hectic moment as Zita screamed at them to stop moving – it was a natural instinct to think you could swim yourself free, but it wasn’t going to save their lives.

Ramses lended her tail and pulled both Dave and Ziba out. It was Euphy and Snookie who were in the deepest scourge, leaving Dazzle to pace and crow in distress at shore.

Raggs had to hold her back from jumping in after them.

“This ain’t no water, y’ got that?!” He scolded.

Shadi and Zita held a walking pole out to the stranded individuals, but Zita feared they were caught on the horse's tack, which would quickly sink them deeper. Euphy was already up to her chest, and the horse, was gone.

Zita growled in frustration.

"I'm doin' something crazy" He warned Shadi.

"I know."

Zita tied a rope to himself, just like any other seafaring lifeline, and plummeted into the sinking sand with an extra rope in his hands. Digging even faster than the sand was swallowing him, he drifted beneath...

Snookie could feel his ankle be freed from the stirrup – The rope was knotted to his foot instead. He grabbed Euphy tightly.

Shadi, having both lifelines in his grasp, pulled.

Everyone was safe.

There was still tension in the air, and the rescued rested for a breather – except Zita, whom was dead set on recovering the other horses that had fallen in. Raggs joined the Goldenpaws' efforts, putting his lassoing skills to the test.

Together, they salvaged a couple of good draft ponies after a long, hard, sweat in the beating sun. All this while the tribe's macaws perched contentedly atop the three remaining wagons, one of which had significant damage after reversing it's direction.

Two wagons and three horses had been lost that day, including that of Shadi's dear friend, Ebon Star, the big, black horse he'd had for almost forty years.

The Goldenpaws gave a proper blessing and farewell to the animals that had served them and kept them company for many seasons. They chanted, sang, and made noise as they usually did, but their attention quickly turned back to those still with them.

"Let us carry on." Shadi announced.

Zita picked up the broken wagon to act as their lost horse power. Raggs became quadruped, and was ridden by Shocky, Lullaby and Ziba. The ladies entered the wagons, or opted to walk. Mazarine rode her trusty mule, gratiated that it was still with her.

Still a bit shaken, most of the band slowly strolled by foot, still digesting what had just taken place.

Dave raised his hand at Shadi, whom was at lead of the herd.

“I... Uh, isn’t this the wrong way?”

“We must have the wagons repaired, the steeds and supplies, replaced. We shall take, yet another detour... To Knott’s Bazaar.”

“Not bizarre? What kinda a place is that?!”

“We shall soon see.”

Shadi spoke no more.

The strangers of the tribe who had doubted them before this, instantly metamorphosised their suspicion into respect. They walked into the desert, knowing that they’d be taken care of.

The tall, thin, researcher in his beige khaki, and panama hat, was so engrossed in his technical instruments, that he didn’t even hear the caravan coming until Zita’s macaw, roared.

The witty man jumped at the sound, diving into his tiny, open tent with a wail, knocking over his spotter’s scope and tripod as he flailed.

He peered out at the monstrous creature that hulkily stepped into his camp; Shadi.

“Wh-wh-what do you want from me?! I don’t have any money – whatever you do, don’t take the instruments!”

Shadi did nothing. The rest of the gang harmlessly peeked over Shadi’s shoulder.

Seeing that a whole hoard of foreign ferals had come his way, the researcher jumped up with a sudden bravery.

“Ah, I see!” He leafed at lightning speed through a booklet taken from his pocket then began doing what seemed like some kind of dance; throwing in gesticulations of sign language so flamboyant, even the Goldenpaws could not understand.

The man then bellowed like a whale, hooted like a monkey, and did the funky chicken for good measure.

Zita dropped the broken wagon while the ladies held back a giggle.

“Greetings, we’d like directions to the nearest town.” Zita said in perfect English.

The researcher stopped.

“Eh? Oh... This is embarrassing...” He muttered. “Well then, town...” He pulled out a compass and pointed his finger until the needle seized. “Town is north from here, that-a-ways. However, I’d step lightly men, it’s the wildest, craziest trading post I’ve ever laid foot in. Watch for pick-pockets, and I wouldn’t suggest staying overnight.”

“Thanks.” Zita deemed. The caravan was on their way.

Curious, the humans lingered to talk to the frazzled, scientist.

“Ah yes, I am Sebastian Izinski. I am a teacher and researcher for Donogan Academy. As you can see, I am on vacation, which of course, I have just made into more work. I cannot rest you see, I am here on an all important mission to photograph the rare animal, bird, and insect species of this region, so that I may complete my book and return home to educate others on the subject.”

“How noble!” Ephy offered sincerely.

“Well yes... I mean yes, thank you!” He swiped his hat off to bow. “I owe that motivation to a boy in a red jacket... Should you ever meet Jade, pay good to that free spirit.”

The two parties bid farewell, and the band began on their way again.

“Oh! And one more thing-” Sebastian called out. “My acquaintance, Sir Child said there was a behemoth perusing through not so long ago – I’ve not a clue what in the heavens that is, but he says it’s not something to make cross!”

“Understood!” Dave waved.

The unarmed humans and younger tribe members were a little disgruntled by the thought of coming across the behemoth, but it happened before anyone knew it was coming to them.

The earth-covered back of the creature had duped the caravan into trodding right across it, and as it rose in annoyance, all ran for cover; The women driving the last wagons rushed away, saving their draft ponies, and the last of the caravan's supplies. Zita's broken carriage slipped from his fists, and was crushed under the behemoth's body as it rolled over. Everybody sought to abandon Mt. Behemoth, but it was rather hard to discern where it, and the land, parted.

Rising to it's feet, everybody just had to jump for it – but poor Primrose was too scared and hesitated. The behemoth reached it's trunk around to grab the intruder – but not before Zita could unsheathe his sword and stab the creature into distraction.

It roared and seized him, instead.

Zita was squeezed just so he could barely pant, his arms obstructed that he could not grab his second sword.

On the ground, Primrose ran back to her tribe, where the humans frantically urged Shadi to speak or act or do something with his own sword.

He saw no need. The behemoth he knew was a forgiving creature.

The behemoth pulled Zita to the side of it's face to glare at what villainous youth had wounded it. Zita spoke with a shortness of breath.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I was just trying to save her!”

The behemoth surprisingly talked back, the ground grumbling as it did so.

“SOOO MUUUCH FEEEAARR...”

It dropped Zita back onto the sand, Zita rolling out of the way as it plucked the sword out of it's rocky body and released it beside him.

The behemoth mosied on.

Zita looked ashamed as he resheathed his saber and dusted the sand off himself – though it became meaningless as Shadi came after him with a fury, shouting in their native tongue, words that meant such things as “reckless!” and “foolish!”

Now, having drawn his own sword, Zita was forced to reactively purpose his.

Zita ducked as Shadi swung, then hit him with a double strike while Shadi’s weapon was in a weaker position. Shadi lost grip of his blade, but automatically resorted to hand-to-hand combat. With a swift kick, Zita misplaced his sabers and was forced into self-defense.

While the humans panicked, the tribe women stood around like it was a boring spectacle that the men had to figure out themselves.

It ended in Zita’s defeat. So much so, he was wordlessly begging for mercy, curled up on the ground, covered by his long, plush, mongoose tail.

Despite the ruckus, the scuffle had only lasted a minute, and no one was hurt; it was only a sheer battle of discipline.

Shadi returned to his caravan, unmarred in both body and spirit. He told them to move out.

Primrose daintily went to Zita.

“Behemoth was going to put me down...” She blinked meekly, touching her nose to his, like an apologetic dog.

“Yeah, I get that now, I acted too soon. I’m sorry.” Zita finally got up, but only to his fours. He tread low like Dazzle, slinking around in an ermine-like fashion to avoid Shadi’s threatening glances. This went on for some time until all could feel Shadi’s thunderous vibration go smooth again. Zita attempted to illicit favor once more by nosing a gloved hand. Shadi looked at him pitiful, and sighed.

Zita was pulled up to his feet, legs knocked even, chin turned up, and he was given a push forward. This correcting of posture seemed to be all Shadi needed in terms of forgiving and accepting the apology.

Zita gave a shake and let his breath go.

Knott's Bazaar was in the distance.

Shadi approached town with a grinding step – he wanted to be sure his family was headed for solid ground and not just another desert mind game.

But of course, as they drew close, they could not deny the linearity of the parked wagons, resting livestock, and bustling peoples. They were welcomed with colorful gusto, attractive gestures, and high spirits, albeit, a few suspicious glances, but what were bazaars for?

Shadi waved his leading hand. The men and women were free to roam.

Davida and Padma stayed with the wagons while the rest of the tribe went confidently into the bazaar with bartering items in hand, on hip, and head. Dazzle and her friends were not far behind.

They entered the crowded streets, awash in tantalizing elements; hues, music, patterns, faces, laughter, and voices of many language. The smells of freshly harvested foods and sweet hay could be recognized. There were vendors steaming and frying over campfires and clay ovens in the food corridor. One could taste the perfectly seasoned breads, meats, and curries on the air.

Shadi and the other women minded the errand of purchasing new livestock, and wagon. The band was sent with Zita and the girls to collect ingredients, spices and other edibles from the other side of the market.

Raggs went his own way.

After filling a sack with oddly colored potatoes, sachets of exotic spices, and unidentifiable fruits and veggies, Zita led his team to the entertainment ring.

The girls danced and sang as they played their drums and rattles in tune with Zita's parrot trick show. While everyone else was enthralled with watching, Shocky slipped back out into the busy aisles. Lullaby, of course, tailed him.

He was on the hunt for a vendor who would sell him a weapon only a real feral would wield, but Lullaby worried that he'd get into trouble or do something he'd regret, especially since he'd just complained of another headache.

Shocky was first determined to get a hold of a coppery, emerald-encrusted throwing knife that was on display, but no matter how many trinkets or coins Shocky showed the vendor, he didn't want to give it up to the mere boy. The foreign-prospered feral finally spoke in wore English.

"Sorry. Thank you for coming." He granted.

Shocky tried for a well-crafted bow and arrow set from an atlatl and wood weapons collector, but the connoisseur saw the desperacy in Shocky's face, and refused him.

Shocky gave up. He was about to head back to the entertainment ring, when he spotted an old woman with a crystal depot.

Quartz, citrine, and amethyst points the size of footballs, sat at the woman's feet. Enormous geodes were displayed at her sides like shimmering ushers. She had pans of polished stones such as agate, mookaite, jaspers and moonstone. She even had polished rubies and sapphires.

Shocky was not interested in the keep sakes - he had his eye on the jade knives.

"You know you can't hunt with a flimsy jade skinning knife." Lullaby input as Shocky took a closer look.

"Yeah... But it might be the only thing I can afford..."

"Why do you want to be a warrior so badly?"

"Because I want to help - what's gonna happen if the Kingdom catches up to us? Or if we get lost in the desert? Or meet more monsters or bandits?"

“Not all ferals become warriors, y’ know, some are expert trackers or foragers, ground keepers, gardeners, herders, flock keepers. Some are artesians, y’ know? They make all the pots n’ baskets, n’ skin bags-”

“But I don’t want to be any of those things! My Nacre holds the spirit of the bull – aren’t I supposed to fight?!”

The old woman was now cackling at the youngsters. Her tickled throat coughed her words.

“Child, my husband’s Nacre had held the power of the bull, but he’d not a violent bone in his body. His best quality was the ability to stand his ground. That, he did so well, he never even had to fight. His presence was his might, so much so, that nobody ever messed with Ramu the Great...” She chuckled. “well, no one except me, of course.”

Shocky paused indifferently.

“Stand my ground?” He mused. Lullaby tugged at him.

“C’mon, let’s go b’fore the others get worried. Thank you ma’am!” Lullaby waved goodbye to the crystal vendor.

The two returned to the show ring where the Goldenpaw artists and pets performed stunningly.

Zita and the ladies performed juggling acts, first with fruit, then with knives – which cut the fruit as they served the items back and forth, and then the sweet bites were handed off to the children in the crowd.

The talented team made quite the bounty for their gifts, returning to the outside of the bazaar richer than when they’d come in.

Zita had just finished dubbing the new camels with names that would help shape-up their blossoming personalities, when Ephy glanced around at the gathered caravan. Dazzle and Raggs were both missing.

“Raggs lost his guitar in the sinking sand.” Cardinal recalled. “He said he was going to buy a new one.”

“Still haggling ay?” Zita turned to the bazaar. “What about Dazzle?”

“Eh, she probably followed him,” Ramses made herself apparent. “she’s curious ‘bout him, y’ know?”

“You think so?” Euphy smiled a little. Zita rolled his eyes and gave a howl, but it was doubtful the stragglers would be able to hear him amidst the cacophonous bazaar.

Raggs sat on a quiet edge of the bazaar, where the retired crates were piled almost two stories high, he was perched in such a way that the shoppers could see him as he tuned up his brand-new, red-varnish guitar. He then sang along to the full, rich, instrument, his sweet, melodic voice saturating the air.

His tune, and style was exotic in this place, so people stopped to stare.

Dazzle had creped up on Raggs, but was shocked to a softened heart at his vibe.

When the song ended, the crowd cheered and threw coins into Raggs’s cowboy hat. Raggs looked back at Dazzle, who ducked, but she couldn’t hide now.

“Now it’s yer turn, ladybird”

“What?”

The two contended with excuses, but despite Dazzle’s more serious way of being, Raggs’s music won her over. Song and dance was far too ingrained in the feral way of life.

Their love duet was more like a duel of “I love him – her, I love him – her, not”, but no matter, Dazzle’s decadently beautiful voice was floating over the bazaar when Ramses and Zita came to find their missing caravan members.

Zita closed his eyes as he experienced the beauty of the two’s song. Ramses glanced from Zita to the rest of the show – and the ringing applause at the end.

Dazzle lifted her own lids in surprise, as she’d been so wrapped up in her part.

Raggs smiled back, warmly.

“Yep.” Ramses determined when Zita had finally opened his shiny eyes. “They’re in love.”

CHAPTER 9:

THE DESERT CASTLE

For the humans, it was rather cringe-worthy to watch the bazaar grow smaller and smaller on the horizon. When this was all over, they will have been ready to never see the red stone or rust mesas of the desert, ever again. But deep into the naked waste lands they went, following the Goldenpaws with the only ounce of courage they had now: Trust.

For many grueling hours there was nothing to feel but heat, and nothing to see but stone and breeze-tossed sand.

The smothering desert was becoming redundant beyond measure.

When the first signs of civilization appeared, the non-ferals glanced up in bored disbelief, but Ramses confirmed what they were seeing with a nonchalant comment.

A rickety, hand-sawed, two-wrung fence ran for several acres as the caravan gradually passed. Huge, long-horned cattle grazed on the tough, dry, grasses while a few wild boars sloppily gorged on the more abundant cacti.

There were soon remnants of a hand picked cotton field to be seen, but it was crisp, and morphing into windswept tumbleweeds. Mesas still crept over the horizon, as did a soft, pleasant breeze.

The travelers could now spy the double-deckered mansion that Raggs called his home on the range. Overhearing this, Dazzle recalled that this was the homestead Mazarine had mentioned awhile back. She was curious to know more, but Raggs had her covered.

“Gosh, dang. I hope them boys were cordial to our guests. This place is lookin’ a little lazy, heh, heh, I wouldn’t be surprised if the ol’ hut is burned down.”

The ol' hut was clearly standing, and far from being a shabby little shack. His exaggerations made the others wonder just who his boys and these special guests were...

It wasn't long before the caravan rolled up to the worn, but sturdy brick house, a wilted garden kept the area somewhat green and the loose chickens that clucked about the yard added color; they were bright with reds, buffs, whites, and blues. Euphy grabbed Dazzle's collar to keep her from chasing the garden birds, but Dazzle was too distracted by the big, fancy, old-fashioned home.

She couldn't believe a feral would, or could, own such a thing.

Large glass windows revealed a marvelous living space in wood; polished floors, polished stairways and cabinetry. There was a crystal chandelier overhanging a beautifully carved dining room table and chairs. There were antique oil-painted canvases on the walls, depicting native peoples and their intricately clothed steeds.

It was glamorous.

The Goldenpaws minded the care of the wagons and animals while the humans were far more drawn by the familiar sight of the modern structure.

Dave tapped his foot and nodded his head to the violin music that drizzled from an open window somewhere on the second floor. The music did not stop, even as the front door swung wide open.

Two children, a boy, and a girl, came rushing out with excited, smiling faces.

The boy had dark hair and slender eyes of peridot. His lovely, lightly toasted olive skin was dressed in dark, silvery clothes. He was moderately adorned in jade and sterling silver; jewelry of a very modern tone, unlike the ferals at all.

The little blond girl had stunning ice eyes, fair skin, and pearl necklaces. She wore a pale, poofy blue dress with white stockings and glossy black shoes.

The two did not look like siblings, much less related to Raggs, but it was Raggs they ran to, crying: "Uncle Raggs! Uncle Raggs!"

He swiped them up under each arm, swinging them around in circles, all the while they laughed and cried; they were relieved he survived the trip back, and it caused Elsie to sing a happy, little, rhyme.

It was then that Raggs's cowboys stuck their heads out of the workshop and applauded the main man's return.

The commotion caused the musician to seize, and a well-dressed man appeared in the doorway; slick black hair, mustache and beard, aged skin, also of olive, but pale. He had the boy's peridot eyes – or rather, the boy had his, and the man used them to throw a piercing gaze at the weary travelers.

“Buena Sera,”

It was this man that had the Goldenpaws attention. The ladies knelt down to the ground where they stood, as Shadi and Zita went so far as to fall before him, kissing the tops of his shining, black leather shoes. As they rose, they kissed his jewel-encrusted knuckles, and finally stood, molding their greetings into more familiar hugs, howls, and pats on the back, unafraid to call the man, “brother”.

While Raggs would have called this behavior flattery, the Goldenpaws only wished that the man see the light in it...

Stiff-faced, well-groomed, well-mannered, and rather sinister, the character introduced himself to the onlookers as Sir Charles Renkins.

The boy was introduced as his son, Charles Shasta Tamaki Renkins jr., but the boy made it clear he was to be called Charlie.

The young girl, named Elsie Isle Ebenezer, was Charlie's childhood friend, and bride to be. All three appeared human, though Dazzle smelled a bit of magic in the air.

Although no one mentioned it, the three gushed the atmosphere of sangfroid royalty.

Raggs's relations was simply that of a good neighbor, he was housing them in secret, as a potentially dangerous personal matter wore on. It was explained that Sir Charles wanted to protect his children. That is all that would be said of the situation.

With introductions out of the way, Sir Charles invited the strangers inside for a glass of cold water, iced tea. Elsie happily made the new arrivals a platter of nut butter sandwiches using Italian spreads and french bread. The humans were delighted to eat delicious, familiar food, while Lullaby, and a couple of the tribe ladies could not stand the texture or flavor of the “exotic” PB and Js. Something told the tribe that Shadi only ate his alien offering just to be civil. Zita laughed; he enjoyed the sandwiches very much.

Elsie obliged to also fetch tea and sweets, though Charlie stepped in to offer coffee because he liked coffee more than tea, and so did Raggs, “because he is a cowboy”.

The two grinningly argued as they went to seek refreshments, and Sir Charles seemed content that they were no longer lonely and bored. However, Sir Charles still seemed to have an impatience about him – something was on his mind, but none of the guests knew him well enough to ask. Dazzle sensed more... something perhaps very evil.

Every one was chatty and restless, minus Dazzle, whom was heckled and just wanted some place quiet to sleep. She invited herself upstairs and entered what looked like a family room. There was not much in it given the fact that Raggs had no wife or children; only cowboys to entertain, but the personality of the place told Dazzle that it was still well-lived.

A fire pit was embedded in one wall, along with marble shelves, sparsely decorated with random natural objects made of stone, wood, impressive fossils, and large clusters of crystal. There were a couple of taxidermed ungulate heads and a few oil paintings on adjacent walls. The prized masterpiece set above the fireplace, was a large, full-body mirror framed with carved ash lumber, depicting the dawn of a religious age. The mirror, however, still fit into the old west scene, unlike the oddball conversation piece placed over one’s view of the temperate outdoors. It was a majestic, elegantly curved, silver-

hilted samurai sword with a name engraved into it's blade, but Dazzle could not read kanji.

In the corner was a small table, two thrones, and a chess board, the game, unarranged, as Charlie and Elsie had evidently been playing on it.

Unfamiliar smelling, but quiet, Dazzle lie at the foot of the dusty fireplace to cat nap on the bearskin rug. She had just snuggled down when Sir Charles entered with a cup of Elsie's black cinnamon, white strawberry tea. He placed the saucer on the floor next to Dazzle, and poured a taste of it from his own cup. He then let Dazzle at peace, taking the goose feather arm chair to embark on a long, satisfactory stare out of the window.

Dazzle kept her eyes shut, though in truth, she was awake.

By the time Raggs approached the "lone" Sir Charles, Dazzle was wholly ignored but admired as one does their precious hunting dog after a hard day of work.

"Sir," He addressed. "What's the stat? What kinda time we talkin'?" Raggs inquired, almost in a whisper, intending for Charles to have to construe his mild contravention. Charles pretended not to notice the traitor's casualness.

"You've made exemplary progress my friend, but it is not you who is running out of time. King Dong has his own cunning - you were foolish to come back Raggs, you do remember these children require zero exposure to the kingdom?" He drove this as a punishing statement, yet was ironically unaware that Elsie was hiding in the hall with her back against the wall.

"Not to worry, we lost the Kingdom eons ago. The tribe needed some time to plot our next move, my crib here had all the man power and supplies required. Shadi's bent on sailin' t' Frozen Sands."

"Sailing?"

"The storm's upon us, as Mazarine would say, but hey, we'll be in an' out b'fore ya know it, no harm done."

“I should see to that.” Sir Charles nodded over the rough estimate. It was a warning – and Raggs did not know how severe of one.

Raggs, in his own cleverness took advantage of Charles’s brief, distant glance at the weapon in the room. He was determined to play a mind game with the dangerous man.

“You outta take that, I ain’t fightin’ no one no more, it’s yours if you desire, your majesty-” Raggs slipped.

Charles was absolutely of royalty – but certainly not of the Kingdom’s blood. He’d taken Wonderland by force, and it was only a matter of time before he revealed that to the world.

“I could not dare to take it from you. It belongs here, it is waiting for some one whom is not I... though I wouldn’t be shy to exercise it.”

“Be mah guest”

“I think I shall. Does Chief Shadi entertain the duel?”

“I’m sure he does, but it’s the swan maiden y’ want.”

Dazzle resisted the urge to leap up. She shut her eyes instead, shutting out Elsie’s one last peek around the corner.

Sir Charles mildly laughed at Raggs’s comment.

They continued to discuss preparations needed for the trek to Frozen Sands, but the details were slowly drowned out by a singing, rhyming, dove...

The merciless morning began at four-o-clock. The tribe ladies were keen on canning goods, and cooking over the earthen oven. They washed clothes, and cleaned up the livestock before loosing them into Raggs’s large pasture where they would have to stay until the Goldenpaws’ return. The parrots were put in Charlie’s care.

Meanwhile, Raggs, his cowboys, and the chiefs, raided the tool barn to begin hacking, sawing, and sanding busily at a project necessary to transport the caravan to the Gelicide lands.

Ramses, Lullaby, and Shocky, harvested eggs and vegetables from the garden; some for the big crowd's breakfast, and some for their later supper.

Dazzle was glad her unferal kin were not awake yet to feel the need to pitch in; she could tell the journey had wore them. Their sleep was much deserved. But as for herself, she decided to help out by doing what she did best.: Hunt.

She disappeared for quite some time.

Sir Charles arose at about the same time the other humans did. He offered them a moment to sip coffee with him as they watched the breath-taking sunrise peer over the horizon. The occasion was interrupted when Charlie stumbled from his bedroom dressed in socks and shorts, half-irritated, half-worried as he held up a clunky, black, 50s style phone.

“Papa!”

Sir Charles abandoned his guests to take the call, and derided the prince for showing up in public in his underpants; though no one knew this because he said so in Italian. Sir Charles did not return from his own room for breakfast or beyond.

Elsie was a whole other story. She emerged from she and Charlies' room in a beautiful little champagne, silk, day dress, disappointed that she got up too late to serve her guests coffee, so she marched into the kitchen to find out what she could make for breakfast, singing, all the while. Euphy rushed off to help her with the oven and stove, but Elsie was quite the refined chef. She tackled several complex recipes she knew by heart, and didn't bat an eye when Dazzle burst through the dog door and deposited a freshly killed desert hare onto the stainless steel counter.

Euphy cringed and put it aside. The hare would be for dinner.

Soon the aroma of cheese danish, baked apples, and blackberry tarts, woke Ziba from his slumber. Not all returned for the carefully crafted meal, but those who did, relished Elsie's luscious cooking.

Not only was Elsie talented, articulate, and mannered, but she was innocently curious, and enamored by the exotic beauty of the ferals and tribe women. She attempted to mimic their songs and dances, and in turn, introduced them to ballet, salsa, swing, and tango. She made a fast friend of Mazarine, and the two spent afternoons riding Mazarine's mule around the gardens. Of all the guests that appeared in Elsie's life so suddenly, Elsie hunted Dazzle the most. She adored her, and no one knew why.

Dazzle had even brushed her off in ways to shake her, but there was nothing she could do to defame herself.

It was only because of Elsies's outgoingness that Charlie shared himself at all. He too, was a fine dancer, played his Father's violin, showed good horsemanship, and delighted in animals, especially exotic ones. He was a hard worker, both physically, and as a student, but it was broad as day that Elsie was the one who brought out the best in the boy, whom, without her, would be off brooding like his Father. He was painfully shy.

If there was nothing else to do or get done, Elsie's grasp was always in Charlie's palm. The two disliked being apart, and weren't embarrassed to show it. They were already two peas in a pod, though it was a sad inkling that they probably had very difficult lives ahead of them.

Dazzle was crouched in the black-purple plants that grew row after row in an unnatural, some what disorienting way.

She was on the trail of a prong-horned buck, who'd been wading through the cotton fields in search of weeds. Dazzle advanced as quiet as she could, but the crispy leaves of the sick crop kept making the antelope look up. It bolted without a chase, for a pair of foot steps came snapping up from behind.

Dazzle expected the heavy male steps to be Raggs, or even Shadi, but it was a complete stranger – one of Raggs's cowboys.

He was tall, blond, fair, but sun-kissed. Blue-gray eyes like hers, but bluer, made his face hard to read. He wore dirty beige jeans, a stained white tank top, and a bleached leather cowboy hat. His hand was in his pocket while the other fondled a scar on his neck, which looked out of place against the youth in his face. Like the Renkins, he also smelled of magic, but Dazzle was even more clueless as to what that was about, than even the fishy royalty. He had far less of a western accent than Raggs, almost unapparent, except for words that really curled his tongue. And last, he had an odd air about him – not good, nor bad, which confused Dazzle, as she usually quickly decided whether she liked people or not.

“Hey cygnet, you’ll talk to a non-feral like me, right? The name’s John Gingerfoot, you’re Dazzle, right?”

Dazzle only popped her head above the cotton plants, it wasn’t really an answer, but he kept talking.

“The main man’s entertained. You got something with ‘im? Just askin’ cause... I think y’ better know that things’ve been a lot different around here these last past few years. Raggs isn’t exactly like you – not exactly of your kind. But listen, I think the two of you have the same intentions, it’s just, you gotta watch for-”

Charlie happened to come running up to hang off the cowboy and tell him something. John didn’t seem to mind at all, but it left Dazzle in suspense.

The pretty child was shouting in German as he went back the way he came, which gave the approaching Sir Charles an exasperated stiffness about his expression. John was headed after Charlie now, calling out in beginner Russian, which made Charlie laugh, but he gave something of a bow to Sir Charles before giving Dazzle up to him. John gave her a pointed glance to let her know that they were not finished.

“Popular, are you not?” Sir Charles commented, assuming John had been out to flirt.

“Stand.” He quickly changed the subject.

Dazzle was hesitant, but had no choice when he threw her a weapon. He kept the samurai sword for himself and poised.

“I hear you are going to the Gelicide lands for a little vacation... Mind showing me proof of that?”

Dazzle unsheathed the blade. It was encrusted in a modern fashion with a very civilized stone arrangement – likely a sword that had been made specifically for Charles himself.

She let the sheath fall wayside and braced herself, she was not at all surprised since she'd overheard Raggs and he talking when they'd first arrived, but she played dumb.

“Are you implying that this is how I defeat the ice? Just slice it down the middle, ay?”

He did not accept the small talk – besides, how could one defeat an element?

Charles had speed, strength, and agility quite well for his age – strikes and positions had near to perfect form. Dazzle could not believe his thin, flexible samurai sword was deflecting the stone-heavy, stone-still blade in her own hands. It was all in his deceptive, unpredictable moves that won him the match.

When Dazzle looked up from her defeat, Shadi was standing there... It almost made her angry.

Shadi wasted no time. He pulled his own sword off his back.

“Why do *you* want to fight me?”

“To strengthen you... Do you know why we keep our loves close, but our enemies closer? To find our true power: *Rage*.”

“You aren't seriously implying that a sword is going to put an end to a hexed chunk a' ice, are you? That makes no sense!”

“Would you believe that the burning blood of a feisty swan maiden will?” Shadi gave a smirk.

Sir Charles stood back, deeply cut by what he was hearing. He minded the cleaning of his weapon in staggering silence...

Dazzle poised herself.

“I am a feral warrior you know.” She boasted her strength.

“Oh?” Shadi raised his blade. “And how powerful is that title when you are judged?”

Dazzle raised a brow, but ducked as Shadi swung.

His first few blows knocked her back, to her knees, and to the ground.

Taking a few breaths, she raised her clunky blade again and again. Shadi allowed the attack – then blew her off in one.

She offended again, again. This time, she had an opening, but Shadi was too fast.

“Say, you cannot defeat me?” Shadi pushed his blade against Dazzle’s. Dazzle regained some height, pushing back even more viciously. He countervailed.

“Then it will only make me stronger!”

Shadi had to step back.

“In body or mind?” Shadi suddenly asked, forcing several steps forward. Dazzle faltered, losing her hold. She sent she and he away from each other with a slash.

Shadi fought zealously, whereas Dazzle fought jealously, trying to prove her worth.

With clenched teeth she laughed her way into a move she knew would knock him down to size – but he avoided it. Slipping past, he nailed her between the shoulders with his palm. She fell on her hands and knees.

Her voice came through an exasperated sigh. She let her head down.

“Alright, alright, what was your point?”

She glanced up to see Shadi’s blade raised above her – Shadi was aimed to kill.

“Any last words?”

Speechless, Dazzle felt for her sword, wide-eyed, disbelieving, and panicked. But suddenly, Shadi and Sir Charles were laughing.

Sheathing his sword, Shadi offered a hand that Dazzle took out of stupor.

“Zita had the same reaction.”

“As did my Charlie.” Charles smiled wryly. “They never learn.”

Blinking back to consciousness, Dazzle dusted herself off, shaking her tail feathers back into place.

“Real mature you guys, can’t you pick on some one your own ages?”

Shadi grinned, but it was a celebration that quickly faded, he finally got to the moral of the story.

“Belief,” He said in his booming, rich voice. “is the spell. You listen to one’s lies enough, and you will fall to it’s hold of power and consume you. *It will eat you alive.*” He growled. “It will gnash at your ears and heart to drain the blood it’s looking for... Always remember, the Dream Time holds the truth – while no other thing does.”

Dazzle was queer, but he did not let her question him. Shadi had Charles and Dazzle trade blades.

The Asian weapon felt much more comfortable in her female hands.

“Again.” Shadi proclaimed the duel and stood back to observe.

CHAPTER 10:

FROZEN SANDS

Dazzle dove into the star-flaming night, she had found a way to climb to the top of Raggs's romantic mansion on the desert range. The flat nook of roof was good enough for her to sleep on. She had escaped from the loud, after-dinner jubilee, and the nagging charmer, John, whom still thought his poetry was more urgent than her time alone.

Dazzle could hear Charlie and Mr. Renkins speaking quietly on the uppermost floor, first in frustrated Italian, then in harsh English. Charlie muttered something in Japanese (because his Father knew less of that language), and by the time Elsie came into the room, all three tongues were wagging in French. The hum of a violin lesson began to quell the arguing voices, slowly crawling into a fully-flighted, magical, and haunting, solo, gently guided by Charles's corrections of Charlie's posture and bow strokes.

With the night's colors, and glimmering planets toiling above, Charlie's music grew intense. Dazzle was ready to close her eyes to this inspirational moment, when suddenly, the steps of another creature could be heard coming up the fire escape.

Raggs's muscular, feline form landed elegantly on the rooftop, he stood to full height in greeting, moonlit like a handsome beast from some dulcet fairytale.

“Fair evenin’ ain’t it, ladybird?”

“Mm...”

“Tomorrow we head out to Frozen Sands says the chiefs, y’ ready for it?”

“Do I have a choice?”

Raggs sauntered near to Dazzle, his golden eyes going from one moon to the next... He let out a sigh only a liger could.

“Y’ know, I wish we weren’t headed to such a hell... but it makes me wanna live in the here an’ now, all the more.”

Charlie's playing was crawling out the window like ivy, the violin's emotion had touched Raggs. He offered the swan maiden a hand.

"Care for a dance, darlin'? Could be our last... "

Dazzle remained stony.

"I don't like you." She lied.

"Like me now, or like me never." Raggs reminded, but she let him take her hand.

She could not refuse such a feral thing as dancing, but as she began to take the position of a traditional feral ritual step, Raggs pulled her into a different shape...

They danced like they had always known each other... Like Dazzle had always known this dance... She could follow the voice of the rising and falling instrument; and Raggs helped her to do it, going round and round as she was lifted and let go, flying, turning... They were instant artists of the night, and Dazzle had not a clue how Raggs knew of these refined arts.

He was the most cultured feral she'd ever met, and yet, he was rugged to the bone. He was spontaneous, strong, full of life...

She couldn't believe she was thinking these things, but she danced into her own blissful ignorance anyway... Maybe Raggs truly was *the one*.

The next morning was full of good byes, some long, some short, some sweet, some bitter.

In private, the children solemnly came to Dazzle. Charlie thanked her for the "deed" she would be accomplishing – and she hoped for the boy's sake that she would. Elsie simply hugged the woman, tearily.

"I will see you soon." Elsie said, making Dazzle feel sorry that she wouldn't.

John caught Dazzle one last time before he was called back to tend the ranch. All he could throw at her was: "The good creatures are counting on you."

Dazzle didn't understand – or maybe she just didn't want to.

The humans and ferals and gypsies left the cowboys and royalty to their fate, as they did, theirs.

They entered the desert once more.

Too tired and worrisome to speak, the others had not questioned the luggage the Goldenpaws had carried on their backs all the way out to the bronze cliffs of the rich midday. All stared into the mouth of a sudden drop – a gully that could not be crossed by foot, even if they had horses or hiking gear. What they needed were wings – but that's not what the Goldenpaws pulled out of their packs.

Zita didn't even have to test the wind. Everybody could tell strong wafts were coming at their backs.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” He pronounced as he swung the wooden contraption off his back and onto the edge of the cliff. He unfolded the mechanism, unlocked it, and it snapped into being. Snookie laughed before anyone else even knew what it was. “a little something the boys cooked up this week.” Zita progressed, fluffing up the strange, sail-like fan on the mast of the board.

“These, my friends, are gonna get us out into the Gelicide lands faster than you can say, “I’m gonna git me a Cremello Akhal Teke,” alright, so first, you got your wheel-”

“Now wait a minute,” Shocky interjected. “what is it, exactly?”

Zita laughed at himself for forgetting that part.

“It’s a mud surfer!” Snookie input. “State of the art, too! How d’you guys know how to build these?”

Dave raised his hand.

“Ehm, more n’ portantly, whater we gonna do with ‘um?”

Zita gave a cute smirk.

“What else? Surf mud.” He shook his thumb and pinky. His beads jingled.

Shadi was now unfolding the other mud surfers.

“We wait now for our moment, the floods will meet us where we can take our next step.”

“Flood?” Dave peeped. Most heads turned to the sky, it was gray, but the winds were still hot, and parching.

Padma, whom was leaned on the rock wall, came undone, her wide, slit eyes glowed with foretelling.

“It will rain, I assure you.”

As Zita’s physics class proceeded, it did start to rain, in fact, it was beginning to pour. Obvious clouds had set in, casting an eerie light across the planes.

The storm began to growl as the sky grew darker, a deeper silver, which thrust excited fear into the amateur travelers. The gypsies just seemed to take the situation as good fun.

They awaited at the edge of the crater to catch the wave, watching as the desert before them became one, big, reflective puddle. The roar of the rain drops against the sizzling desert stone was so loud, people had to shout to be heard. Zita edged out onto the water, Mazarine calm as ever, on the tip of his board.

“Okay,” Zita signaled. “don’t make me come back for anyone!”

He pulled the sail into the flow of the breeze, and they shot off, looking like a porpoise fin skimming the surface. Others took the example, and began flying the flood. The rush jolted competition into the fun-loving.

“Yee-haww!” Raggs yelled, darting through the crowd, who was now swamped in the copper-lighted rain and shimmering gold waves of rust-reddened sand.

Ramses challenged the liger man, Snookie joined in, even Shadi was speeding up, not to be left in Zita’s wake.

Dazzle whom was perched on the end of Shocky’s board, rolled her eyes. She was focused on the Gelicide’s peaks, which sparkled behind the fog of rain-sheets.

All of the sudden, Shocky and Dazzle hit the water hard, Shocky strained to keep the sail's angle right, so Dazzle backed up and pushed into the sail. With the lent muscle, Shocky cruised them back towards the others for safety. Ramses came surfing by.

"Whooohooo!" She hollered. "C'mon Shockay, youkin do better than that! Don' let y' ol' Mum beat ya!"

Lullaby who was on the end of Ramses' board, looked horrified, she shrieked as they zoomed off.

Shocky didn't look strong enough to be playing games, but Dazzle mischievously smiled at him – she let her haunches down, fanned her feathers, and they caught the wind like a fly away kite. Their surfer sped right past Ramses, making her laugh. She tried to keep up.

Ahead, Raggs and Snookie relentlessly raced one another, Ephy, on the tip of Snookie's board, screamed the whole way.

Cassandra led the rest of the women, braiding waves as they wove between each other, though the sporting Amma, split from the group to try and take Zita's ultimate lead.

With Ziba blubbering to the bumpy ride of his Dad's board, Dave just focused on his destination, unaware of his place in the non-verbalized surfing competition.

As the surfers neared the indistinguishable Lake Twenty-Eight, they noticed the odd aura about the air. The water gushed colder around the old, giant, black stone pillars erected on the lake's invisible margin. They stood hauntingly high and skyward; bone-chilling obelisks placed as warnings to travelers that danger lie ahead.

The rain was still wild, but no longer poured like dumped buckets. It had become more of a fluffy tossing of sprinkles, and was increasingly lit by the glowing, copper-tinged light.

Before they knew it, the sea pilots had come to a dead end.

Zita and Mazarine gracefully slipped onto the onyx shore, Zita lifting the mud surfer just before it would have crashed to pieces. The other Goldenpaws did the same. Dave

and Shocky drove their surfers right up into the coal-colored sand, whereas Snookie, Euphy, and Ramses had to jump for it, or else crash into boulders that sat in their line of landfall.

Ramses leaned in the knee-deep flood water, chuckling.

“Coulda told us ‘bout that part.”

Zita was shaking his hair out.

“Mud surfers don’t have breaks, everybody knows that.”

The whole group of ferals moved in unison, ears flicking all in the same direction, bodies grew tense, though all turned expressively towards the sky.

There were three ugly choppers humming above the ruddy flood – the kingdom’s chaperoning service seeing off that the caravan had made it to Frozen Sands with some kind of welcome. Seeing that all had gone as planned, the choppers went back the way they came.

“Can’t the royal guard moind their own bizzo?” Ramses ranted as she wrung the soaked burlap bags of supplies.

Raggs squinted in the brightening light, watching as the air crafts turned around... As long as they were still fooled, it didn’t concern him whose scent they were on. He put up his hat with satisfaction, marching from the dark shoreline.

“Heh, heh, they think we’re gonna perish in the snow...”

Everyone took his lead into the frothy, willow light, leaving behind the black-stone beach line of murk, that grossly stank of dead fish and flood water.

The clouds had become golden and dry, the thunder dying across the drenched planes. It was a grimy still with a calm tone.

Ionic air, sounds of wet feet, and tired breaths, invaded the tentative parade.

The soaked Goldenpaws began to hum and chant.

“Come find me.”

It was not part of the Goldenpaw's song.

Dazzle opened her eyes wide as a snowflake fell onto her bare skin – she could see the snow for real this time, falling from the smoky sky.

Completely mesmerized by the airy glitter that was beginning to fill the wind, Dazzle went cantering off into the sunlit mist.

“Dazzle!” Euphy pulled ahead. Zita grabbed her arm.

“Let her go.”

“But...” She waned at Zita, but chose to rip away, losing one of her rose barrettes as she ran.

Snookie jogged past, snatching up the cloth flower as he went. Zita's breath sank from his lips, sorrowfully.

“Y'all keep yer cools, now,” Raggs tipped his cowboy hat. “they'll be plenty a' room ta goof off once we settle in, but fer now, let's see some order.”

“So what exactly is here, then?” Ramses' golden eyes glimmered beneath the shade of her brow. Raggs cleared his throat in exhaustion.

“Whellp... I guess it's every thing ya never wanted to know, rolled into one big silver screen.”

“Such is the Dream Time.” Ramses sighed.

Dazzle plunged into the fog, she could see the Gelicide's formations through the muddy mists, glistening blue as arctic ice, above the black rock beneath her cold feet. The warmth of the rain storm had been entirely erased by the bitterness... Suspension burned.

Things were beginning to look very familiar...

She ran faster.

The snowflakes thickened.

Dazzle could hear the voice – the little bird, coaxing her forward, tempting her further, calling her in...

Dazzle took her last stone-crunching bound, landing herself on solid ice, sending a chill through her limbs. The frost rapidly blew away, revealing the world of the perpetual winter she had always been dreaming about.

And it frightened her.

She stood atop frozen lake water, which stretched as far as her telescoped-swan vision could see. Fish danced beneath the surface in rainbows of hues.

The snow dunes were piled high, hill after hill, interrupted by abstract ice structures that grew from tides in, and tides out – when there had been a tide, that is.

The blanched valley below hoarded fields of eternally frozen yellow tulips that twinkled in the breeze.

Starstruck, Dazzle saw her breath on that wind, having to believe that years of senseless dreaming had finally led her to this surreal fruition.

But what did it mean?

Unexpectedly, Dazzle was pushed from behind – it was barely a shove, but she was so caught off guard, she slipped and slid on the freezing glass, and the emptiness filled with laughter. Dazzle whirled around.

Broad as day, the rhyming dove beat her wings and skimmed the ice on her pink feet.

“You made it, Mother! You’re finally here!”

Dazzle pulled back, her gray eyes genuinely befuddled.

“Am I supposed to be here? What do you mean by *Mother*?”

“Of course you’re supposed to be here! We’ve been waiting forever!” She cooed, whipping away so fast, Dazzle failed to keep up.

The dove came back to fly aimless circles around Dazzle’s head until both spun out of control, the two collided, and below the iced pond, fish scattered away from the calamity.

Dazzle rubbed her dove-punched forehead before sniffing the twitching bird. The dove squinted an eye before puffing into the air again, and diving at Dazzle's face.

Shadi came tramping to the edge of the ice, sighing at the circus act that had just taken place. He took a sliding step onto the ice to make himself known, but all the dove did was shoot straight for his long, black hair to tug at strands and steal their shiny, colorful beads. As usual, he wasn't phased, and his seriously set expression melted the bird's extroversion. He reasoned with a friendly wave of his palm, but could do nothing about his booming voice.

"Greetings again, my friend, we have now come to aid you and your peoples, lead us to the heart of these Gelicide lands, and show the Goddess what must be done."

The bird got quiet under Shadi's transparent presence; it was a childish gratitude that ironically brought her back down to earth. She flew off with wings clapping over the ice waves, a direction that seemingly held nothing but ice forever on...

Dazzle glanced, exuding the exact opposite of longing at the mind-blurring arctic before her. Shadi broke her chain of thought as he dropped to his fours to run, scampering the crunchy, white snow on ape-attuned knuckles.

With a little fear, she jolted forward into the blinding ice-scape, not challenging or racing Shadi, but simply keeping at his side. For this moment she actually felt like she was one of the Goldenpaws, here in this land that was a stranger to her.

It was cold.

With flickering, aching muscles, Shadi and Dazzle penetrated the dense, towering, ice forest, where the sun was faded out by frosted trees. Every trunk, root, and branch was fossilized by ice.

They swept through the intoxicatingly cold shadows. The canopy above grew bluer and bluer as they sank deeper. Dazzle thought she may have heard a kookaburra laugh, but it was just her hopeful imagination.

Dazzle ran as fast as she could, to keep in step with Shadi, whom was surprisingly, and elegantly, skilled at conquering the fallen trees and broken ice. She watched his every suave move, adding them to her own repertoire. She had utterly lost track of the dove now, and trusted Shadi to be her guide.

The temperature continued to drop as they flew.

Dazzle took Shadi's example to slow her pace near the huge wall of ice that blocked their twisted path. Everything had a purple-blue cast to it.

They took a second to shake the snow off their bodies, then stood, breaths clouding their faces.

Shadi grabbed hold of a craggy ice formation, indicatively, he would use it in the manner of a ladder, only problem was, it was somewhat incomplete.

"Get on." Shadi stated. He meant his back.

Dazzle cringed, but she wasn't going to sit there and argue. She grasped his back like an infant primate, and he climbed.

Where Dazzle thought the ladder ended, Shadi didn't stop – he crawled upside down.

Dazzle hung on for dear life, but they were soon turned up right again and messily deposited onto a frozen plateau. Like the Copper plateau, there was a deep crater in the middle of the otherwise, flat surface, but there was more frozen water to cross to get to the cliff ledge. Dazzle tested the frozen stream with a hand – it lightly squealed under her weight.

She recoiled and waited to see what Shadi would do – he stepped onto the ice, ignoring every snapping sound made by his, and her, following feet. They made it to the ridge.

Inside the ice gully were ragged strips of watery curly-cues that had once been falls that dropped powerfully into a cerulean spring below.

Now, it was a frigid flat with a road eroded into it's surface, carrying the most disgraceful sight of all: People.

Hundreds of people, not just ferals, but humans too, mythics, magics, draft animals, men, women, children. Black, white, red, blue. No creature was exempt.

But most shocking of all, was the sight of the supposedly extinct Starbrights, shackled and marching along with the rest of the captives.

All played some role in the scene, removing sheets of ice from the Gelicide mines, and carrying it away for some mysterious purpose.

They were slaves, all of them. Hungry, cold, and traumatized into submission.

The dove alighted on a spine of ice, folding her wings in the silence.

“Why are they doing this?!” Dazzle breathed. “Why don’t they run? We walked in here, one can walk out, right?” Dazzle balanced on the tip of the cliff, unable to peel her gaze from the maniacal motions of the enslaved.

She wanted to scream at the ferals she knew so well to be rebels. She also could not believe the humans here thought of themselves as subjugatable. And the beasts and creatures were too powerful to be harnessed, yet here they were, weakened.

She was too shocked to feel her anger yet, but a fire was kindled...

Shadi’s expression did not change as the bird looked to him for reassurance.

She hopped from her perch, transcending her feathers for a humanish figure: She was a blond, ice-eyed, little girl in white garments. As she settled into her humanoid form, a brightly, glowing Nacre, appeared in her hand. Tears welled into her familiar face.

It was Elsie.

“Help me, please help me...”

Dazzle’s fierce gaze was sorrowed, she spent a long time looking into the child’s eyes before gyrating at Shadi with a bursting heart.

“What has happened here?”

Shadi didn’t move – physically, or energetically, he was eerily calm, even as Elsie began to twitch with sadness.

“Come,” He said. “both of you. The Goddess has seen what she needs to see. Let us go back and make camp; refuel our souls. This demystification requires several story tellers.”

He began his leave and Elsie eagerly toddled after, only looking back to be sure Dazzle wouldn't disappear from her sight.

Gradually Dazzle pulled herself from the scene of all the world's creatures dragging their feet.

Now that she knew what lie within the Gelicide lands, just what exactly was she supposed to do about it?

CHAPTER 11:

INSIDE IVORY

As Dazzle entered the village streets, she was ambushed by the Goldenpaw's hospitality. Perhaps hospitality wasn't even the word for it – they were *worshiping* her arrival.

The Goddess had made it to the Gelicide lands, and it was a cause for celebration.

Each guest was gifted with a coat or pelt to keep warm. Dazzle inherited a large, gray-blond wolf skin, still with a well preserved face, making Dazzle appear to have tall, sandy, canine ears every time she glanced up.

Half the tribe prepared camp and feast, while the others lay golden tulips at Dazzle's feet. Spice was thrown into the breeze, and Dazzle was showered with a rain of gold flecks.

She was nothing short of annoyed, but she wasn't so lost in the fondling anyhow, her mind was still deep down in the ice gully, where the abused beings didn't stop treading. She walked through the ritual arrival in a dismay stroll, rolling around in her head, just what she was going to do about this mess.

The night was filled with chanting, tambourining, and Zita's clay-fired ocarina. Ragg's was on drums as the tribe ladie's pretty voices elevated the savory blend of instrumentation.

Camp was lit by torch and bonfire, causing the snow to glimmer wildly.

People sat down to the melodies and feast, with an occasional dance breaking out among the children and tribe members. Eventually the dance morphed into play, and a powdery game of tag ensued; there was frolicking, snow sculpting, and snow ball fights. Even Shadi whom looked far too distinguished to do such a thing, tossed a snow ball or two, namely, at Zita.

To dodge them, Zita threw some snowflake-spraying back flips into the equation, and the evening became a wave of sparkling, spiraling, unmelting crystals of Gelicide mist.

Dazzle was not pleased. She wandered the shadow-casting, fire lit village with suspenseful questions hiding in her throat. How could she relax when Wonderland's inhabitants dragged their bones through the ice caves beneath her feet? Her irritation caused her to impulsively dash into the craze of gallant, gleeful, ferals, the Goldenpaws momentary carefreeness only caused them to scatter, automatically electing Dazzle "it". She magically gained a speed and resiliency from the unknown, tapping into the fun against her will.

Ephy chuckled at how easily Dazzle had been whisked away by the rough-housing. For her, it was good to see everyone having a blast, even though there were known challenges on the horizon.

The play, fun, and merriment would become a distant memory in a matter of days...

Cold, wet, and tired, Dazzle plopped down beside the log benches, where Dave, Shocky, and Ziba sat, eating, and watching the foreign activities.

Shocky just barely acknowledged her presence; He tried to smile, but his headache overwhelmed him – He was finally getting his horns in!

Dave offered Dazzle his left over piece of emu leg, and she took it between teeth, dropped it in the snow and began stripping the pungent meat from it with a starved attitude. Dave let her finish before speaking.

"So..." He began on a curious note. "What's the plan?"

"I assume the Goldenpaws have a plan." She licked her lips. "But I'm beginning to doubt... You have no idea what is down in those caves. This is no battle between a Goddess and a bad guy – Heaven knows what the Goldenpaws are expecting me to do."

"Is there anything we *do* know?" Dave was half-asking. Half-stating.

“This place, the Gelicide lands, was Opal Oasis, home to so many peoples and creatures. It was a paradise beyond anything one could ever imagine...”

Dave made a firelit face. It wasn’t like Dazzle to be so passionate.

“And eh, how you know that, hm?”

Dazzle’s eyes were busy rocking over the musicians and sherares.

“My parents had told me stories of it... Said we’d go there one day, after the war was through. But I’d been so obsessed with their fascinating tales of this garden of Eden, I didn’t want to wait – I marched straight across Lake Twenty-Eight back when it served as mud flat battle field for the great war, not knowing the paradise had already been lost. My parents came looking for me, and never returned, so I was left to care for Euphy, and mourned my stupidity by cutting my wings off, swearing that I would never stray like that again... But I did... I don’t know myself.”

Dave’s dark eyes glinted in the fire light, a look of innocence crossed his aged face.

“Your parents would still be proud of what you did for your sister.”

Dazzle’s nape hair bristled.

“Don’t even mention it. I was the one who led them to their end. Euphy’s care was just what I got in return.”

“Butcha love’er , right?”

“Of course I do, she was the only thing that made it alright in the end.”

The ceremony began as the Goldenpaws arranged themselves from celebratory disarray, to orderly council – still fraught with music of course. Zita had revealed his snake charming flute, which shared it’s accent with Amma’s singing. The fires had died to a creepy orange glare, and all had taken on the attitude of precarious business men making a deal – only, it was not a deliverance of an offer, but rather, a deliverance of truth.

Elsie as a dove, was perched on Raggs's shoulder. He entered the center of camp, and began with a sentimental welcoming. He reintroduced the Goldenpaws, himself, and Elsie.

"Elsie Isle Ebenezer, or better known to me as, Kristelle MoonFire, is a very special friend of mine." He said in a serious fashion. "She is also a very special friend of yours, for she will be, in fact, the last Starbright on this soil."

Figures gasped in surprise of her transformation from avian to humanoid, only it was not the twisted form she took to please Sir Charles's desire for secrecy, she allowed her true expression to show: She was a globular eyed, elvin-eared, gilled, and melon headed Starbright. As odd as she was, she was one of the most lovely and delightful beings at the party.

Then it was Raggs's turn.

He lifted a fist, straining a clawed hand until a Nacre presented itself, held high above the crowd as his body devolved. His "feralness" was gone with the removal of the Nacre. No liger stripes, no cat eyes, no claws or sharp teeth. He was human.

Dazzle swallowed. Was this what John had been trying to warn her of?

"This right here is the epitome of the Gelicide's destructive misunderstandin'. This Nacre is no ordinary Nacre. It is an *Ice Nacre* – Sir Charles's experimental technology, tainted with sorcery, and founded on evil. We ain't no longer dealin' with spellcasters and Black magic folk – we've got scientific company, and it ain't pretty, but I pre-warn ya, this Frankenstein of a mystic catastrophe is just the tip of the iceberg – no pun intended. And so, that's where *you* come in." Raggs gazed Dazzle in the eye, but she didn't cave.

"Wait, so if Charles is so evil, than what were you doing protecting him in your home? And what about these fake Nacres?" She choked heatedly.

Raggs answered unashamedly.

"I work for the jealous Kingdom – the one who stole over the Dong's, and was replaced with the God-forgotten Renkin's family. It was only until I met little Elsie that I found

out what the hell all this was for. So to answer your question, I housed the Renkins to keep an eye on them for the sake of Wonderland." He nudged Elsie whom shyly smiled through her trembling. "I also made a promise to this little darlin'... I'm takin' her an' Charlie with me once this mission is through. They are like my own. My brother will never be a real Father"

Dazzle didn't know whether to admire him or flash disgracefully with anger that she'd been fooled by a human.

"And the Nacres?" She stayed on point.

"A false Nacre that allows a normal human being instead of a feral to use it's almighty power? There are far worse trips than this little old thang." Raggs turned to Shadi with a dire tone.

"Come." Shadi said. "Your call to the Gelicide lands still await in the fortress yonder. It is time you be the rightful judge of Ivory."

"Ivory? Who is Ivory?" Dazzle shot quizzically.

Mazarine stood at attention, a plain, but victorious note in her voice.

"The Dream Time, manifest."

Dazzle's shivering body quaked. The staring contest relinquished in Dazzle's loss.

It began at the foot of a small, but tall, white, concrete building set in the centre of the snow-covered village, where everything was colder and darker. One could see the sapphire night above, stars blinking in whites, pinks, and greens, while moons began to fold. Every one's breaths could be seen as a delicate puff of mist against the torch light, though it was only Dazzle whom shivered like crazy, suspicious and reluctant of her fate.

Frozen shut, the door was busted down by Shadi.

Raggs, the Chiefs, and Mazarine were the leaders of the group, and entered the foyer of the church, where a lacey railing bordered the few steps up to the porch. A tin wind harp fluttered introvertly at their arrival.

Dazzle glanced up in time to see Elsie whiz by in her dove form, flinging herself into the second story window, and vanishing behind a sheer white curtain.

The awkward silence was not neglected, but rather, begged patience.

The first room was shadowed, icy, and dirty, there was sand on the floor back from when Frozen Sands still had sand, and not snow.

Petrified pews faced the enormously ransacked stage of sacredity, missing all of it's pillars, statues, and arrangements. The place looked like it had been cleared up since the war, but not attended to, here in the freezing temps.

Dazzle paused at the bottom of the staircase, gazing up at the stain-glass window that still reverberated warm, loving, colors. Elsie awaited on the banister.

Suddenly thrown back into the old days of chasing a small, white bird around her dreams, Dazzle shuddered painfully. She crawled up the steps speedily, taking an intuitive sharp right, smacking straight into a sad, empty chamber that held a sumptuous, pulsating energy.

The window where Elsie had pushed her way in was still open, snow timidly piling on it's sill, letting in the gentle, frigid breeze. The only object in the lonely dim room was a huge, spotless mirror in a well-carved, well-polished ivory frame. Two, large, behemoth tusks were set on either side of the tall, oval, sheet of Gelicide glass.

Finally, Dazzle was unable to contain her words – the mirror's heartbeat was far too loud.

“What is this?”

“Just as Mazarine said, the Dream Time, manifest – that doesn’t make it God, though...” Zita said softly as he held the torch up for a closer examination.

“This is one of Sir Charles’s greatest sins. Essentially, it is a time machine, an invention he transported across our world and others, to use as a worm hole for war. That is what we mean by the “Dream Time, manifested.” Enter one of these, and you’ll have access to

all and every thing. The ingracious, indignant use by the Renkins twisted Time and Space into a knot, which was the extinguishing of the denizens of Opal Oasis.”

He wrapped an arm around the top of the man-sized mirror as if it were an old buddy of his.

“This mirror is the only mirror, we, as “slaves” of the Renkin’s, have in our possession – for how much longer, I do not know. The ice and all of it’s powers should have belonged to the Starbrights... but then we lost them, their wisdom, and their word of how this land should be redeemed.”

“What about Elsie?”

“Charles used a mirror to pull her out of the destruction, intending to preserve her as the last Starbright in the Renkin’s name – but that was a mistake, because Elsie found a way to reach you, and now you are here, and can change everything.”

Dazzle glittered furiously.

“*And what if I can’t?!*”

“Dazzle,” Shadi said her name in such a way a dedicated Father says his daughter’s name the day she is given away. “I believe it is in you, to take it all back, Elsie is depending on you. The Starbrights are depending on you. There is nothing you can do to defy what is great and good – especially when that greatness is your own. When you are ready, Ivory would like to tell you something... ”

Dazzle stared a long time, her eyes both hard and soft, her stare, twinkling. She turned to the mirror and pawed it ever so gingerly, it was indeed, cold as ice, but it did nothing under her weight.

Backing up, she lunged at the portal, readily plunging into it’s doorway – all it did was splinter like lake ice, and leave her to shake her head. She withdrew in shock, but the spider cracks simply healed right back up.

She looked at every body who looked at her. They gestured for her to try again. Her friends and family gave her telepathic permission... It was about time she find herself.

Elsie took the lead this time.

Losing her bird mask, the child pressed her fairyish, human hands into the ice mirror, making it crinkle as it gave way. Before completely disappearing, Elsie took Dazzle's arm and guided her through. Slithering their way into the pool of dimensions. The two were gone, and the cracks sealed behind them.

Uncertainty gambled in the heads of the witnesses, but all hearts were exactly where they needed to be...

Euphy rose.

She'd completely lost track of time. She didn't know if it was night or day, days later, or minutes later. The cold had drained the strength from her body, but she had a new found courage in the heart of her curiosity. Getting off the animal skins of the tent floor, she pulled a coat on at the door, and exited.

She stepped into the snow. It was evening. The moons shone down on the crystally ice, offering it more than just an extra glint, but a quality of beauty that made you forget you were still on Earth. Snowflakes fell wordlessly from the deep periwinkle sky, while the frosty ground dared not crunch under her boots; it was too soft and dry.

Searching for signs of life, she found one right in front of her; Zita lie asleep in the snow, his long, graceful tail wrapped around his body and dusted with snow, proof that he'd been asleep there for awhile. He was slumbered deeply and peacefully – or so she thought.

By the time she'd walked a pace or so into the village, she heard him call her name.

"You were supposed to be asleep." She scolded him, annoyed that her cloistered stroll would no longer be so.

He gave the expression of a sassy back-talker, but he did not comment. He stood, shook off the snow, and tagged alongside her toward the field of frosted yellow tulips. They paused on the out skirts and just stared.

“It was a beautiful place, I’m sure... “

“Still is.” Zita mentioned.

“That is true. Just maybe a tad lonlier... ”

More silence...

“Thanks for following me.” Euphy said, realizing she did not want to be alone in this desolate place. She’d come to mourn Dazzle’s absence, but it was more than she could handle by herself.

Dazzle had been gone many days now – even the Goldenpaws thought she’d have been back sooner.

“Well that’s a first.”

“What is?”

“I thought you really didn’t like me.”

Euphy giggled embarrassedly.

“Yeah, but after the sinking sand incident, well I couldn’t help but admire you, you know the lay of the land like our Mother and Father did, you know how to get around, how to handle things, you’re like a part of the land... no matter where we go.”

“And so are you.”

She blushed.

“I used to think you were a no good gypsy thief.”

“I still am, aren’t I? I took your sister away from you, didn’t I?”

“You said she’d be back.”

“Yeah.”

“Honestly – have you ever stolen anything in your life?”

Zita scuffed the snow.

“Not things, per se, but I’ve committed worse crimes... I’ve stolen hearts before.”

“You mean all of the ladies?”

“Since when did I say I looked at them through that kind of lens? We all met each other through the slave trade, and ran away together as a tribe.”

Ephy's judgments had been debunked again. She blushed harder, but Zita remained casual.

“So you tell me now, have you ever stolen anything?”

“Oh... You know, just stupid stuff from in my youth.”

Zita laughed at her truthful answer, but suddenly switched gears – his head cocked at the horizon. He scanned it like a sensitive instrument, laser-focused.

“What is it?” Ephy queered. Zita hushed her before freezing in circumspect.

“Choppers... We gotta go warn the others-”

“I can't hear anything – whoa!” Ephy exclaimed as her hand was snagged.

They met the Goldenpaws and ferals at the bottom of the hill, for they had already awoken to the hum of trouble. Dave and Snookie had been shaken awake by those with feral ears.

All too suddenly, the sentimental night had gone spooky.

“It's the Kingdom!” The feral women hissed.

“The Kingdom?!” Snookie barked. “Well what the hell does that mean?! Dazzle's not back yet!”

Zita drew his sabers with a characteristic metallic ping. Ramses grasped for her own weapons.

“We may be facing them up.” She admitted. Snookie beamed grouchily.

“What do you mean?!” He demanded to know more.

“B-b-but, Dazzle-” Dave sputtered. “She ain't gonna know what's happening here – some one outta go get 'er, right?!”

“We can't do that,” Cassandra batted her eyes as she drew her throwing knives. “We could damage the time line.”

“You!” Snookie projected to the Chiefs. “Then you! You guys are the ones who started all this!”

The men stood calmly at the tending of their accusation. Zita averted his gaze smartly.

“Actually... Yes, yes we did. Because we were once slaves down in that ice gully, mindlessly beaten into zombies who feared for our lives, and not the lives of others – but we found our way out... And all because of a young, little, white bird who had the courage to come find her people and awaken the other sleeping Gods and Goddesses. I hope you’re still one of them... ***Trust that Dazzle is doing what needs to be done.***”

Zita took off in the direction of the helicopter’s ringing.

Snookie sighed. Dave looked at Ramses who unsheathed her daggers.

“Ahh... Yeah, but eh, well, there’s this n’ stuff...” Dave circumlocuted about the upcoming battle.

Raggs was peering through a spyglass that was handed to him by Shadi. The eye-aid had a hummingbird grafted into it’s metal. He gazed across the night world with a held breath, letting it go only until he saw the Renkin’s insignia glinting on the side of the air craft.

“Ain’t know how to fight?” He growled his words. “We may not have to... It’s the new king.” He stated. “He needs his Gelicide ice in sheets. They won’t shoot down their own precious gold mine – shattered glass don’t make their world go round.”

“But if *we* can’t fight, and *they* won’t fight, then what are we supposed to do?!” Snookie commanded clarity.

Shocky stepped into the gathering, pride reverberating from his new horns.

“*Then we stand our ground.*”

All agreed.

There was no running, and no where to hide. Be a battle if there may, but there was no stepping down. Dazzle needed time.

Dream Time.

As they took to the valley, they all prayed in their souls for Dazzle's safe, and heroic return.

Dazzle didn't understand.

It was beautiful.

There were no evils or monsters to slay, no darkness consuming the world...

Everything was exactly how it was meant to be. All was still alive and free. Opal Oasis was still the paradise it had been, all those years ago, plentiful for all creatures. There was a happy gleam in the eye of ferals, mythics, magics, humans, and the reappearing Starbrights. Every being worked, romped, and strode amongst one another, children laughing, parents beaming, the community moving as a positive unit through this sacred space.

It was the garden of Eden before all hell broke lose. It was perfection.

Except for one thing.

Dazzle herself, was nonexistent. She was a filmy ghost in this maze of a blissful island. No one could see or hear her, not even she. All she could do was watch this fairy tale of a world go by... Sunrise after sunset, after sunrise...

Time flashed like lightning, day, to day, to day, but no where she caught any clue as to what was coming.

Quite soon, the fast-forwarded dimension blew up in a terrifying explosion of a flying blood bath. The paradise was blanketed in arctic blue as a war waged outside of it's walls, and then was gone... The Renkins slaves flooded in, ice came out, and for countless snapshots, all of the ice mirrors ever created were shown to Dazzle at once, ending with the regal, and powerful, ivory-framed time machine.

Finally, there she was, in the reflection of the mirror, still as a pond lily, but breathing in such a way to keep up with her anxious heartbeat.

"This was the past." Elsie said from some where within the Dream Time.

Another scene unfurled like smoke, meeting Dazzle's vision as a nocturnal, fire lit stand-off on the edge of the Gelicide lands. Her friends were dead locked on the Gelicide's shores.

Sir Charles had a message delivered through his pawns: The Dong Kingdom had been over-thrown, and manipulated by Charles's hand since the great war.

As sure as Raggs had been of himself, as sure as the Goldenpaws had been of their freedom, their painfully humble last acts still ended in Raggs's capture, or more so, surrender. They were all met with the truth that Sir Charles had never been fooled by any of them – he'd been watching them this whole time.

Raggs never returned. Execution had befallen him.

"NO!" Dazzle screamed, but the scene left her.

"This is the present." Elsie's voice echoed. *"But don't assume it's the end."*

The "present" shattered into a million particles, leaving Dazzle to see what the future held in store for she, her friends, and all of Wonderland...

Ephy and Snookie had finally gotten married. They opened a shop downtown, hiring Shocky as one of it's first employees.

Shocky enjoyed a life between worlds, having friends to entertain both in the city, and back in the woods, where he contentedly lived with Ramses and his new sister, Lullaby, whom finally warmed up to the idea of quolls not being so solitary.

Dave and Ziba moved into a feral village, where Dave found the love of his life, and Ziba could be among his heritage once more.

The Goldenpaws returned to traveling the worlds, but never forgetting of their new found friends. They still visited often and made quite the scene at the Bellhouse's baby-shower, parading in with gifts fit for princesses, which is exactly what Ephy gave birth to.

Throughout all of this, Dazzle watched herself wander idly through life, wishing, yearning, grasping, and praying for Raggs's return. But he never did.

And then a curious thing happened.

In this vision, Dazzle had been gifted Raggs's home on the range, and she migrated there with the lionesses in tow. She spent many moons there, mourning Raggs's departure. With the Renkin's gone, the place had become a magical, desert island – and John Gingerfoot was there every step of the way.

He grieved with her, he comforted her, he told her stories, and kept good company. He knew when to push her, and when to recede, when to cheer her, and when to hush and listen. He taught her about his way of life, and she taught him feral ways in turn. And finally, Dazzle learned to trust again.

And then he revealed *his* biggest secret – that he had been a Starbright all along.

“Did Raggs know that?” She tenderly asked.

“You bet he knew. He damn well, knew.” The ice-eyed creature smiled.

It was too tender and visceral, as John whispered these deliciously rare words into her ears, but the vision began to fly into the next chapter...

Dazzle found herself struggling in a sparkling reed bed on a balmy, sunny, spring day, giving birth to whom would be the last StarBright in the world.

Elsie.

But time and space was then ripped from Dazzle and John. The Renkin's troops piled into the emotional massacre, leaving not blood stains, but a tragic kidnapping in their wake.

Elsie's capture.

It was a moment that happened so fast, and was so majestically unfair, Dazzle could scarcely breathe as she watched Elsie be plucked from the future and pulled into the past.

“*This... is the future?*” Dazzle breathed.

But no one answered.

CHAPTER 12:

FLAMES

Dazzle did not stop what had been coming to her, but her sacrifices revealed what was true.

Raggs had fallen for a cause he had worked so hard to preserve.

It was true.

Sir Charles Renkin's had gotten away with murder.

It was true.

Elsie would live her life separate from the one she called home.

It was true.

It was a terribly, horribly, wonderfully, executed victory for the vile Mr. Renkins.

However, there was still one thing that Sir Charles had not predicted...

The Mother's rage.

Sir Charles never made another Gelicide mirror, ever, ever, again.

EPILOGUE:

THE OPAL SEA

“... All of Wonderland came to know how the grounded, wounded, and disempowered feral overcame her belittlings to do her part.

The Goddess of the Wonderland Wilds became harsh and cruel, kind and gentle. Never-ending putting to sleep, all evil that stepped in her path. She'd never stop until she got her work done, and she would hunt for justice day and night.

She was the beast of a swan maiden who rose from her own flames to become a fire-breathing phoenix who let the whole world know that a Mother is not to be messed with – and with that eternal fire, the Gelicide became a sea. The Opal Sea. A sea that put distance between the forces of good and evil. A mark on the map that would one day lead the honest peoples back to the returning oasis, and back to one another.

The Great Shadow could never again make another magic mirror in all his days... and he would never forget why.

And neither would the wonderful, beautiful, princess Elsie... The end.” Charlie innocently finished with a smile, turning to see Elsie beam with hope.

But Elsie was already asleep.

IN DEDICATION OF...

I had not realized until the end of this story, that all of the time and energy spent on this book would be dedicated to Mothers... Raising children in the shadows of war, greed, and evil is not an easy thing.

Whether they feel like they've failed us or not (or us, or them), Mothers have always deserved better than this – Your Mother, my Mother, and Mother Earth.

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