

# Voices of Ilya

By Yangi

## The Journey Begins

The afternoon sun threw dancing shadows over a green garden. Everywhere flowers blossomed, colorful and sparkling in joy of life. Under a group of trees, Kia Tenner, a tanned teenage girl lay in the grass dozing off to some dreamy place, her bare feet moving every now and then, the red streaked hair swaying with the wind. Few meters away an older version of her sat in front of a laptop at a green garden table, fingers dashing the key board, blue eyes fixed onto the screen. Olivia was the oldest with her 20 years of life experience and she took her responsibilities more than serious. Three years had already passed since the two sisters had left their parent's house for the Australian coastline and only one month ago Rhinoa and Josephine had joined them. The two spend most of their time at the beach.

Down a natural staircase heavy wind and rain had hewed into the cliff side, the ocean whispered with every rolling wave that hit the shore. Water wiped through the warm air, dainty fume rising up as soon as it left the cool ocean to twirl around in circles and bows. A black mass of hair, as wild as the ocean itself, glistened in the light. Rhinoa's dark hands barely moved while a great wall of water arose before her, rolling up and down the shore just like the girl commanded. Josephine observed with caution. She was a Frenchwoman and at the edge of 25 by now. Unlike Olivia, she was patient and therefor more suited as a tutor even though Rhinoa already did great on her own. One stroke through the short brown hair and Josephine made a hip-swinging walk over. Rhinoa loosened her hands and the water crashed back into its origin.

"Amazing! Really. I'd never thought your abilities would go this far."

The girl replied with a proud grin before her tutor continued: "Now. We know you can create strong and big waves but what about finding water? Ever tried that?"

The grin faded into an expression of deep thinking.

"What do you mean? I've only ever been at the ocean... Where else should I get water? You mean like a shower?"

Josephine laughed. For a second their brown eyes met. She liked this girl, Josephine noticed once again, then stowed away the discovery at the back of her mind and smiled: "A little, yes."

For a moment the words flew untranslated and chaotic over the Frenchwoman's tongue until her glance halted at the edge of the cliff. Right behind it, she knew the house of the Tenner's lay. With one finger the woman pointed upward saying: "Let's try this. Up there is the house. Where there's a house there's water. In pipes, glasses, vases, weird decoration objects..."

"Okay, okay I get it", Rhinoa giggled and the black eyebrows lowered in concentration. Five long minutes they held their position and the girl exhaled in exhaustion. Josephine gave her a questioning look.

"And? How did it go?"

"Not a drip.", Rhinoa replied akimbo. "The ocean's too close I guess. Can't sense anything but big mama."

They smiled at each other.

"Well then let's go upstairs. I'd like a sip of my drink too."

Said and done. Few minutes later they joined Olivia at the table under a white sunshade and leaned back in their chairs. Josephine sighed in delight: "Shade! Finally!"

Beside her, Rhinoa fumbled around with the adjustment until the chair had her desired position. Relaxed she leaned back, strong muscles showing themselves as she rested her hands under the head. For a moment the brown eyes closed. Then they opened again to search for a well known

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face. Rhinoa found it under a tree. Grinning she watched her friend doze in the sun. One month ago, when the Tenner's had come to her island, she had been so excited. Being taught in an art most people didn't even know existed sounded like a great adventure! Ever since, the two girls had become good friends. After training they spend most of their time together, visiting the nearest towns, going for a surf or simply hanging out in the sun. The only thing she regretted was the fact she wasn't allowed to visit the school in the next village. The reason the Tenner girls lived so far from all civilization lay in Kia's temporary lack of control. Her powers matched up easily with Rhinoa's and therefore bore a threat when unleashed by accident. To prevent the world in finding out their secret, the two sisters had agreed on avoiding any assemblage of people that might cause stress or fear and school was definitely one of them. Rhinoa on the other hand had lived a very familiar life. The ocean surrounding all edges of the tiny island, no one had ever noticed her secret doings when helping out with the waves for surfing. Her school had been very small and almost tentative with its wooden walls. The girl had hoped for a more varied education than sitting in the living room of the Tenner's big house being lectured by an elder woman.

Under the tree, Kia moved and drew her knees closer. Rhinoa blinked, than leaned back in her chair again. After all this might be the only pause she'd get for the day!

Josephine slurped on a colorful cocktail fancily decorated with fruits. Over its top her eyes lost focus on the far horizon. A warm breeze blew threw the thin hair. After a while she raised her voice: "Something important?"

Without looking up, Olivia answered: "We got the 'Go'."

Josephine's eyes widened. Surprised she turned away from the ocean and towards her colleague.

Olivia's fingers still flew over the letters of the keyboard. "What? You had the dream, right?"

Josephine slightly nodded, still puzzled. "I wasn't sure if it was the real thing. I hadn't expected it... so soon."

Olivia sighed busily: "Well, me neither but what can we do?"

The Frenchwoman opened her mouth and closed it again.

"What dream? Something important?"

The women looked up. Rhinoa had raised herself to take part in the conversation. Without them noticing, Kia blinked from under her hood as well. For a moment only the ocean's constant whispering filled the air, then the tapping started once more. It meant Olivia left all explanation to Josephine. The Frenchwoman thoughtfully drew a big draught from her drink before she began: "Remember what you were told when we first met?"

Rhinoa nodded heavily.

"About the others like you?"

Another nod.

Josephine twisted sentences around in her mind. Where to begin?

"There is a woman. She's called the Great Guardian. Upholding the balance of magic and no-magic is her purpose. She's also the one who decided on you and Kia to receive the honor of..." her hands tried to grab the right word "visiting the Council." It wasn't poetry and probably didn't help the girl one bit but she couldn't do any better at the moment. Indeed Rhinoa lifted one eyebrow but kept silent to give her tutor the opportunity to continue in her explanation: "We were allowed to bring you and Kia together because you both had already discovered your powers and your current locations lay close to each other. We were supposed to be contacted by the Guardian when the time had come to unite all of you and ultimately take you to the Council."

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Kia swallowed. Some words had gotten carried away by other sounds from the table to the tree and the girl had to prick her ears hardily to get the important parts. She had known about the Guardian but not about the planned visit to the Council. Whatever that was it didn't sound pleasant.

Josephine's lips moved again and all thought was repressed by concentration.

"Last night I..." The woman glanced over to the long-curved blonde and corrected: "We had a dream. It was sent from the Guardian to tell us that it's time to find the others and get you together."

Rhinoa had grown astonishingly silent. Usually she was a fond question-asker but this seemed too much for her. All she could come up with was a slow "I see."

Finally Olivia chimed in, hitting the enter button and instantly flapping her laptop shut: "There seems to be three others. At least that's the ones we are supposed to collect. The first one's in South Korea. If we hurry, we can still catch flight in the evening."

Suddenly Kia was right at her feet, mumbling something like "have fun" and rushed away.

Silence. Everyone watched the small figure vanishing behind the house. Josephine slurped her drink. She paused for a "Shouldn't we stop her?", then turned back to her glass. The older Tenner stored the laptop away into its case.

"No. It'd cost us a fortune last time we tried to get her into a plane. The repairs' just finished."

Rhinoa tried to imagine the scale of the earthquake. The typing stopped and the blond curly mass turned toward Josephine: "We pack, you guys drive ahead, I get my sister somehow and we meet at the airport."

The drink clanked when it touched the table.

"If you say so. Come on Rhinoa. Looks like training will have to wait."

Rhinoa clenched her fists in a notion of joy and followed her trainer into the house trying to ignore the slight motion under her feet.

## *Two hours later at the airport*

People bustled from left to right, bags, backpacks and trollies of all color and size passed the two foreigners. Rhinoa bobbed from one leg onto the other.

"Where are they?"

The Frenchwoman looked at her watch: "Don't worry, we still got half an hour 'til check in."

"How long do we fly?"

"19 hours and 55 minutes."

"Wow! That's pretty long!"

Josephine gave her a sideways look and smiled: "Say Rhinoa... have you ever been on a plane?"

The girl chuckled then shook her head. A hand tousled through her dark curly hair and Josephine smiled warmly: "It'll be fun, for sure. Ah! There they are!"

The slim figure of Olivia sloughed from the mass of passengers, closely followed by Kia whose eyes were covered with a dark cloth. Even though the stone floor was cool, only sandals covered her feet. Few meters away Olivia stopped, talked to her sister and then went over to meet Josephine.

"So? How did you do it?", the Frenchwoman wanted to know.

Olivia sighed of exhaustion: "She thinks we're on a dance contest."

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Rhinoa lifted her eyebrow to show her distrust in the plan: "How do you plan on getting her into the plane?"

Olivia started waving wildly with her arms, explaining: "Not plane, backstage area. Therefore the identity check.", then winked twice and swirled around to get her sister. Rhinoa snorted.

Immediately Olivia jumped back to her side: "Shh! Just play along, okay?"

With that she dived back into the crowd to her excitedly dancing sister, coming back forth with her towards the check-in. The lie worked. Kia even got happier because of those super comfortable seats they got for her, while Rhinoa was practically glued to the window, watching the flaps go up and down. If the captain wouldn't have given his welcome, the flight might have been a pleasant one.

"AAAAH!"

With one move the cloth was down and Kia started to revolt in her seat. A hand squished her arm. Olivia flashed in fury, muttering between her teeth: "Not one move, or do you want us to crash?"

"I hate flying!"

"I hate cheese, but I still eat it. Look at Rhinoa, she's flying for the first time and already has fun." One row behind them Rhinoa really was filled with excitement, so much she didn't dare to move. Eyes wide she stared out of the window, drawing her breath while the metal bird slowly rolled onto the tarmac. Josephine grabbed the hood in front of her. On her bracelet a strange sign gleamed in alarm.

"You know we wouldn't do this if there was a boat to take. Be a good girl, it won't be long."

No reply, no trouble. For now. The women nodded in appreciation, and then the plane took off. Rhinoa shrieked when gravity changed and the plane took course in direction of Sidney. Olivia studied her sister. Eyes shut, hands drilled deeply into the seat, sweat glistening from her forehead. It didn't look good. Suddenly the plane pounced. The gleam of the sign on the bracelet went brighter, steel crunched, passengers anxiously moving around as the flight got more turbulent by the second. Olivia jumped around in her seat and shouted directly into Josephine's face: "Damn it Josy, hurry!"

"Got it!"

## *Much later, Seoul, South Korea*

Rhinoa had gotten paler but other than that, she was fine. Josephine poked against Kia's limp body, hanging in the plane seat. No reaction.

"I think that was too much valerian...", she commented dryly.

Olivia huffed and continued in throwing luggage onto her unconscious sister from the compartments.

"That's not my fault! She was tearing the whole plane apart! There!"

A bag hit Josephine on the head. One good shaking and the light brown hair was as beautiful as ever. Loading the luggage under her arms and onto the surrounding empty seats, the Frenchwoman mentioned: "We can't put her under medication every time..."

"Maybe YOU can't but I do!", shouted the blonde and heaved Kia onto her back to make way for Rhinoa as they got in line for the exit.

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Forces united, the group managed to leave the airport, taking a taxi south. Few kilometers out of Seoul a smaller town named Doung-ri shone welcomed them in late daylight. Hyona Park surely lived grand. The taxi halted in front of a huge mansion, an electronic gate parting the entrance from the street and a tall butler answering their ring and leading them into the living room. Her father owned a chain of amusement parks all over Asia, how they learned later. Instead of a girl, Soo-Jung Park, the handsome brother welcomed them. In perfect English he introduced himself and set down on a sofa opposite to his guests. Rhinoa immediately saved all the new impressions in her mind. She had never seen so many sparkling things in one room before. The young man eyed her with a bit of amusement, then turned towards the two women.

"Now, may I ask, what you came for?"

"Your sister.", Olivia answered promptly.

A shadow crossed his eyes. "Oh, I'm sorry. Heyona's not home. Maybe I can help you?"

The women exchanged a glimpse. They would have to remember how to pronounce the girl's name. Josephine nodded in consent and Olivia spoke: "We know... Heyona" She paused to make sure the name sounded correct before continuing: "...has certain abilities. Something normal people aren't able to do. Josephine and I are commissioned by a place called the Council to form a group of such talented people and train them to hopefully enable them to protect others like them. My sister here is one too. She's... good at making earthquakes." After her last sentence, Olivia hawked awkwardly. Soo-Jung surveyed the sleeping girl a moment. "I presume she's not much into flying then."

"We had to... tranquilize her..."

"I see.", Soo-Jung nodded slightly. It was the first time Olivia didn't get a strange reaction and the first time she felt ashamed about it.

"And who might you be?", he waved politely at the dark girl, scanning his furniture.

"Rhinoa Tinbau. I'm love water.", she babbled without looking up.

"Ah. And my sister is supposed to be..."

The man didn't seem convinced in the slightest. Unimpressed he had been listening to his guests, presenting sheer politeness on the outside, but at the same time urgent to make them leave as soon as possible.

"exception in terms of fire.", Olivia added, fixing his eyes. A blue shimmer enlightened the room. The earth crystal had awakened. Around Olivia's neck a star formed crystal lifted into the air, its prongs sliding apart soundlessly and a hazy image of the earth appeared. A red sign shone over South Korea. "Hyona Park.", commanded Olivia and the image changed to the town and finally the house. Somewhere over their heads, the red sign blinked. With the wink of an eye everything was over, the crystal hanging innocent from Olivia's neck. The man sighed.

"So that's how you found us."

"Why did you lie?", Olivia asked. From the sofa a soft mourn distracted her. Josephine helped Kia to get up. Slowly, her conscious came back. Soo-Jung got up and went over to a pompous fireplace. Right above it hung a big family portrait. With one finger, he shoved it to the side until a black mark showed itself on the wall.

"Hyona doesn't have her powers under control. You're not the first ones to ask for her. Believe me when I tell you, that I just want what's best for her."

"Then let her join us."

All eyes on Kia. Wavering she took the glass of water Josephine had ordered for her. After taking a few sips, the young girl continued: "I know my sister can be annoying."

Olivia's eyes immediately narrowed to slits.

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“But she takes good care of us even though we cause quite some trouble with our powers. And Josephine... with that bracelet she recognizes any trouble one of us is in. I kind’a... tested it a lot...”

She sighed and one hand rose to her forehead. “I’m a bit drowsy...”

This time Olivia averted any eye contact trying to ignore the screaming voices of her bad conscious but what her sister then said made her wonder: “It might sound stupid, but we really need your sister. I know what you’re afraid of. But we’re not one of them. I’m not sure what the Council is but they can’t be too bad if they send Olivia and Josephine to teach us. This could be her chance to learn how to handle her powers.”

Olivia blinked in astonishment. A spark of pride twinkled in her eyes. Rhinoa and Josephine smiled at each other, the island girl softly patting Kia’s tired head. Soo-Jung reflected. He got up, went over to the sofa and drew on a cord. Soon after, the butler entered. Tense the group of strangers prepared for the worst.

“Get my sister down, she has guests.”

The night air was filled with the scent of rain, wet earth and the odor of hidden flowers. Somewhere a dog barked and the stars disappeared behind grey clouds. Wind rushed over the many tree tops of the city, up a steep hill until he reached an eastern mansion, big enough to hold a princess in a golden cage. Inside, a group of shadows formed before the window of the living room. The wind found entrance and blew through the curtains and a pair of black curls until Soo-Jung closed the window shut.

“I’m sorry.”, the young master said, moving back to his seat in front of his visitors, “The wind’s strong this time of year.”

Olivia watched him curiously. Every step the handsome man made seemed elegant, well thought-of, as if he considered every single motion before doing it. She couldn’t imagine how tiring it must be to live like this. The butler appeared in the door and gestured silently to the side before making way for the princess.

A tall, slender girl stepped into the room. Under an asymmetrical long shirt in white, red shorts peeped out, while her feet were tucked into fluffy house boots slurping over the floor. Her brown straight hair waved from side to side, as Hyona made her way to the sofa. One glance at the pack of strangers and an icy discussion started between the siblings. Rhinoa was fascinated by the sound of korean language. Beside her, Kia shifted down her second glass of water, just to fall back into the white set of the sofa. Josephine fanned the girl a bit of air. It got louder. The flames of two tea lights reached critical extent. Then, suddenly, everything was over. One last time Hyona glinted at her brother through blazing eyes, then turned with a drive towards Olivia.

“Hyona Park. Please take good care of me. If you’ve got a moment, I’ll go pack.”

Off she went. Soo-Jung sighed, covering his forehead in exhaustion. Meanwhile the butler left the room, his footsteps echoing up the staircase. Josephine checked the candles, but they had went out completely by now and a tiny trail of smoke lifted to the ceiling.

“Guess that didn’t go well...”, Rhinoa finally said, breaking the silence. Kia groaned.

The two women turned to Soo-Jung. He looked devastated: “She’ll get used to it. Probably faster, then you might think.”

Olivia doubted he was in understanding of the full consequences of this debate, but she decided not to interfere. Instead she nodded slightly, replying: “I really hope so...”

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After a terrible concert of rumbling above their heads, Hyona stormed back in. Ignoring her brother entirely, she followed an even beeline across the living room, threw her luggage before Olivia and said: "Isn't there someplace we need to go?"

The blonde exchanged a glimpse with Soo-Jung but Hyona blocked her view and faced her straight on to leave her no other option then to admit: "Eh, yeah. The airport. 3 hours 'til the L.A. flight."

Within seconds Kia had fully recovered and was back on her feet, taking leave. Unfortunately her sister could get hold of the hood and any escape was impossible. Rhinoa came prancing in to announce the taxi had arrived. Josephine was already directing the storage of their luggage. The Tenners thanked her in unison and the island girl hopped off giggling to herself. The older sister resumed to their debate: "I'll buy you those protective sleeves you wanted so badly... You know... the glowy ones."

That was thought provoking. Kia really wanted those. Hyona waited in the hallway, her foot tapping impatiently against the brown marble. After a minute she grabbed her bag herself and went out into the fresh night. Olivia motioned her sister to follow up and they relocated their discussion into the hallway. Through the glass door, Olivia recognized the blurry shadows of Josephine, Rhinoa and Hyona. Relieved she turned back to the bigger problem. Kia was still weighing reward against challenge. The door opened and moments later Rhinoa's strong arms clung around her friend grinning wide. "Come on, come on! L.A. won't wait forever!"

In a moment of delusion, the earth-talented girl seemed encouraged and before knowing, her mouth formed the words: "Let's go!"

"Let's go CC! Your call!", the woman patted her star on the shoulder, then walked off hectically talking into the mike of her headset. Bass dinned rhythmically; the guitar gave noise; the light dimmed into one single spot. Cheers broke loose and swept over the gigantic mass of people like a wave. Thousands of flashes flickered, a star was about to appear. The rocky blue-black outfit started glowing as CC stepped onto the stage, reddish hair twirling shiny on the way to the microphone. Behind the singer, dancers appeared before a fiery background and took positions. "Hello LA!", her lips motioned and within an instant the sound shot over the mass of people and they made noise. Very loudly. Somewhere amidst thousands of hopping and screaming fans, Hyona couldn't believe her eyes.

"CC Arlin? *The CC Arlin* is one of us?!"

Olivia heaved Kia puffing and blowing up her back so she wouldn't fall down. It got loud on the stage, the concert began. "That's her alright. And we got to convince her of joining.", the blonde answered, trying to get a glimpse of the famous idol but not a chance. It was complicated enough to keep Kia safe in this constantly swaying mass of people besides, everyone but Rhinoa seemed exhausted by the flight. Shoving herself dancing through a group of people, the dark girl screamed over the noise: "Do we know where the last one is?"

Olivia shook her head: "It's strange. The crystal says she's here but I can't get a clear signal." The dark girl shrugged her shoulders: "Maybe she's just dancing?" Off she was again, moving to the melody of a rock song.

With one hand Olivia opened the earth crystal round her neck. People were pushing from every side and she had a hard time not to fall down along with Kia. She boggled. A tiny symbol shimmered not too far away. Josephine watched from over her shoulder.

"D'you think that's it?", the Frenchwoman said in a hush tone. Without answering Olivia took

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direction like a hound: “Her signal’s weak. Let’s hope it’s because of these many people.” Soundless, the earth crystal closed back into its original form. As long as the concert was still going, they wouldn’t have a chance of finding that girl. Patience was indicated.

Rhinoa and Hyona were enjoying the concert more or less, Rhinoa dancing wildly, Hyona merely smiling but Josephine blamed that on her sudden departure. She would warm up, after a while. Everywhere people urged on the Frenchwoman and, what was worse, on Olivia with her sister on the back. Cautiously Josephine took hold of her co-coach and led her to the outer border of the concert viewers.

“Thanks.”, Olivia admitted and released herself from her sisters’ weight, letting her rest against a fence. They sat down beside her. For a long moment nobody spoke. The bass pulsing under their bodies, CC’s voice ringing in their ears, blowing away every unpleasant thought. And then that moment ended. Something else was festering the Australian. Josephine knew that.

“What’s troubling you? We’re almost done, aren’t we?”

Olivia nodded. It was a tired move of her head using gravity not willpower. She opened her mouth, then closed it again, uncertain of what to say. “I don’t know it’s just...”, she sighed. Josephine waited patiently until she made another attempt: “What if, she’s weak? Her signal sure is. What if... the Council turns out different then we had thought? Their intentions... I couldn’t bare losing my sister.”

A hand touched her shoulder. “Don’t worry”, Josephine said softly, “I’ve been to the Council many times and I promise you, that your sister’s in good hands. And if the Great Guardian chose that ‘weak’ girl, there must be something about her.”

A thought crossed her mind and she grinned. With a thumb Josephine pointed at Kia: “We survived the earth’s quarrel, what’s a weakling against that?”

They laughed. On stage CC threw her long hair back and forth, her voice chased over the clamoring crowd like a storm. And somewhere, between those fanatic fans, music lovers and passionate dancers, one little heartbeat sped up.

“Kia... Kia wake up!”

The girl opened her eyes and turned her head. Music, crowd, stage... A concert, her mind concluded. Slowly she crawled up against the fence until she was sure her legs would carry her. Olivia was getting impatient again: “Josy and the others are already backstage. We got to find the last chosen one before she leaves the concert.”

That having said, she went off into the crowd, Kia – still a little drowsy- staggering behind her.

“The last chosen one? You mean she’s here?”, Kia asked between a hand full of squealing girls and the monstrous backside of a man. In front of her, Olivia just passed the man to disappear into another group of youngsters. Kia had to listen hard, to hear her sister over the noise: “Yey-yes, what else! Now help me look, she has to be here somewhere. Argh, screw all theses people!” Even though the concert was already over most of the visitors where still there, hanging about, stuck in their memory, in the atmosphere of the latest events. The crystal relocated the glowing symbol anew every three seconds, as if it was wandering about in a radius of 15 meters. Olivia cursed. Kia sighed. She had to take a breath and stopped for a moment. Suddenly her feet signaled strange vibrations. There was something in the earth. Kia closed her eyes and let her toes reach out, the senses wide open. Annoyed her sister whirled around after noticing the still-standing of the younger Tenner and reached out her arm to drag her onward: “Kia! Come on!” “Something’s pulsating...”, after focusing a little more, Kia added: “like a heartbeat...No it’s more



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like... a whole bunch of hearts!"

"What?"

The hand let go. Kia concentrated harder, both feet evenly on the ground. Suddenly her arm rose up pointing into one direction.

"That way."

"You can't go through."

Josephine stared demanding at the haggard man. "Why not?", she asked with a fake French accent. Her English was near to perfect, but experience had proven that she could get through with practically anything as long as she made her roots clear. The man in front of her wasn't an exception. His eyes showed interest but his fingers fiddled with the tie indecisive.

"Well, you see... this is the dressing room of our starlet and, how do I put it? She doesn't like being disturbed."

Josephine's gaze grew stronger: "How am I supposed to do an interview with CC Arlin without CC Arlin?!"

The man nervously loosened the collar a bit. "Well, that's complicated, I...", he went on with many explanations. Hyna rolled her eyes. They had managed to get backstage, past several question-askers, bodyguards and what not. Everything that was left was that stupid door and the man guarding it.

In the background Rhinoa played with a hideously little dog, japing around. Josephine interrupted the agent in his flood of words: "We've been waiting for this interview for days now."

The man waved his hands into the space between them and answered nervously: "I know and I'm really sorry about that but at the moment... why don't you wait just a little longer. I'm sure she will come out anytime soon."

Everything pointed against that. Josephine sighed.

In the meantime, the Tanners had narrowed down their suspects to five. The earth crystal still couldn't make clear statements, but at least Kia got some training. A bit of listening and the turquoise eyes confronted a flood of golden hair... of three kinds.

"Hi!", Olivia used her nicest voice. The three very Scandinavian girls turned around in wonder. On their faces the moment of eternal happiness still lingered, the fan shirts lightly sweated.

"Jessica Vierson?", She tried randomly, eager to any reaction.

"Yes?", the most petite one of them answered. The massy blond hair was a bit yellower than Kia's and tamed in a queue on the side of her head. A thick fringe kept the viewers eye away from the forehead and focused any attention on the clear and dark blue pair of eyes. Her mouth spread wide over both cheeks which gave the girl an indistinct feel of true happiness. The resemblance of the other two girl's nose and cheek bone's indicated their close relation. What followed, made Kia blink in astonishment. Without second thought, Olivia fed the girls a line and a good one with that: "The ticket sales went along with a lottery for a meeting with CC. You are among the winners." Minutes of screaming and hopping followed. That was all it took.

The second time in two days. Kia felt embarrassed even though this time it didn't directly involve her. The older Tanner lied with scary conviction.

Joyfully grinning, the newest victim named Jessica trotted obediently after the Tanners, her two cousins in tow. Kia gave her sister a dark side glance, which was ignored. After some minutes

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and a lot of jam, the group finally reached the stars' dressing room. Josephine nodded to Olivia, then gave Rhinoa a sign and soon after the sprinklers went on. In the up roaring chaos nobody noticed how a group of girls disappeared behind a starry door.

Within seconds the racket descended into a silent mumble as the door went shut. Josephine scanned the room for CC. She wasn't there, the window closed. A door lead away at the other end. The dripping of a shower became clear and she signaled Olivia, who went over positioning herself in front of the bathroom. While Rhinoa and Kia sneaked further into the room, Olivia commanded Hyona to lock the front door. One grip from the Korean and the lock began to bubble.

"I said lock not melt!", Olivia shouted.

The girl shrugged absently: "Yeah... still got to learn that."

Olivia smacked her forehead. She was overtired and peevish. From a corner a metallic sound made her jump. She turned around just to see Rhinoa at a stack of dresses, one half in her arms, the rest down on the floor together with the metal hangers. The emerging hunger did the rest. Before she knew it, Olivia crashed the bathroom door open with one kick and a flustered CC glanced at her. Kia laughed. She laughed hardly. The others were too scared to move. While her sister was occupied with dragging CC away from the mirror, Kia realized a tremor in the atmosphere. Jessica was shaking badly, eyes as big as plates, clinging to the wall. She had totally forgotten about her!

The Scandinavian shook her head until the long queue smacked her in the face. "Who are you people! Where are my cousins? I wan'na leave right now!"

Kia scratched her head, uncertain of what to do. "So you really don't know much yet... Eh...", she started, then hesitated in search for the right words. Behind her, Josephine and Hyona tried to pull Olivia from CC who was bitterly screaming. For a moment Kia was distracted by the commotion. When she turned back, Jessica had moved a few inches closer to the door knob.

"Oh, I wouldn't do that. Not... that I wouldn't *let* you do that but... I'm afraid the door's lock was pretty much destroyed by our friend Hyona there."

It took a moment to sink in. Jessica's eyes grew even bigger!

"You-you're one of them! I'm not talented, really! Not at all!", she was shaking terribly, then with a mourn her legs gave away under her and she sank against the melted door, face hidden in her hands. Kia wanted to sooth her, but Hyona was faster. In a wink she was kneeling before the blond. When she spoke, it was a sweet, calming melody: "No, don't worry. We are talented, yes, but we're not from an organization."

Jessica authored a sob. Astoundingly patient the Korean girl kept talking, making the tremble of the girl disappear more and more with every word she produced: "I know you are afraid. I was, too. But trust me, these people are... anything but an organized hiring squad."

With the last sentence she threw a cold gaze at Kia. Instinctive the dancer clenched her fists.

What was that idiot thinking? They were all in the same boat. Luckily other matters were in need of Hyona's attention and the girl cleared off. Watching her back for a while, Kia tried again: "Please, don't freak out. You're here for a reason, like we all are. I'm not entirely sure what it is, but it must be important to make us fly all the way from Australia just to get you guys."

There! A spark of curiosity flashed between a terrified mouth and a pair of angry eyebrows. For an instant, Jessica even dared to look behind Kia to get a glimpse of her idol. Kia saw that as a good sign. "How about we start again?", she offered. "I'm Kia and the long-haired version of me there is my sister Olivia. We're Australian. The other woman is Josephine. France. The 'model' is

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Hyona from South Korea and the strong black girl is Rhinoa from a tiny island in Polynesia. And the last one... well I bet you know more about her, then me." With one hand, she invited Jessica to continue.

"Clara Christin Arlin, known as CC Arlin. Famous rock and pop star. Born in Chicago. 16 years old.", the awed girl said, eyes wandering between the knot of people in the back and Kia right before her. Unsure, which one might be the greater threat, Jessica decided on Kia for the time being. After all she was closest. Kia took a knee to seem less minatory and countered the other girl's gaze with her open turquoise eyes. "And you are?"

Jessica opened her mouth to speak.

In front of the bathroom, door splinters covered the violet carpet where the group of three were still jostling around silly. Finally, Rhinoa decided to step in. With one tight grip, she ripped Olivia from the singer and threw her onto the carpet. The Australian huffed. She blew blond curls out of her face. CC glared at the woman, holding her arm where a red mark glowed in the shape of a hand. Just as the two went for another round, Josephine threw her arms between them:

"Enough! The Council! Now!"

Before anyone could react, the earth crystal flashed brightly and a second later, they were gone.

The bright light slowly faded. When a warm dry wind got caught in her hair, Jessica opened her eyes and stifled a scream! Before her feet the ground fell into nothingness. Carefully, Jessica stepped back until she bumped into someone. CC barely turned to meet Jessica's astonished gaze. The others were there too. All except Josephine seemed petrified with awe! Jessica ran her hand over the face and looked again, this time, following the gaze of the others towards something else. Something big. Jessica's mouth fell open.

Before them a beautiful waterpark extended towards a city of white stone. Rhinoa bent down to touch the surface of a surreal blue color. Her hand met the ground fast and a tiny cloud of sand twirled around her fingers. As the girl pulled out her hand again, the water stuck to it a while longer as if in embrace, unwilling to let her go. Patiently, Josephine gave the group a moment to accustom themselves with the view. When their facial features more or less hit a normal expression, she pointed towards a stone path on water level that led towards the great buildings in the distance. "Shall we?"

"What is this place?", Hyona murmured more to herself, eyes following the strange floating sky. On closer inspection, the soft motions resembled swirling fog, churned by an undetectable wind. Nostalgic dominated the Frenchwoman's face. In remembrance the brown eyes wandered over the paradisaal landscape. "This" she announced in a loving voice. "is the Great Council."

The stone path was just too narrow to go in twos but the girls still had so much to discover, no word would have left their mouth anyways. Fascinated their heads moved from left to right and back again, seeing so much wonder. After a while of marching, what had looked like an entire city had now close enough to be recognized as one grand palace. Every little building was connected to another bigger one which was connected to another even bigger and so forth. From the sky it must look like a star with the main building as a center and the outspreading paths and stairs becoming smaller and smaller like the houses they lead to as prongs. The main building was, in contrast of the others of gigantic structure: A massive edifice rising into the air, divided into three main parts. The lowest was the biggest and seemed to be used like a cross road where most of the sub-buildings' stairs and paths went to. There was a wide rind around it like a

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balcony that could hold thousands of people. The second part was smaller and held two pompous balconies with white handrail and a stone carved symbol resembling a pair of wings. They seemed to have been made for events of great importance like the announcement of a ruler. Their dark blue color repeated itself in all the roofs of the palace. In the middle among the girls, there was a grand window front with two long yellow flags flanking them. The third part was the upper platform from which several smaller towers grew into the sky. The whole thing reminded Kia of a tart.

“Everything you see”, Josephine explained, “is actually a floating island in the middle of time.” Hyona listened attentively and opened her mouth before thinking properly: “How can something be ‘in the middle of time’? Do you mean there’s no time here?”

The Frenchwoman laughed and threw a side glance at Olivia. The Australian had only once before entered the walls of the Great Council and it had been very dark back then. She looked just as astounded as the other girls. Focusing back on the stone path, Josephine answered: “Of course there is. Just that it changes direction every now and then. Sometimes it goes forth, sometimes back and sometimes it stands still. But that’s a bit more complicated. The important thing for you is: As soon as you enter this place, the time where you came from stands still or at least runs really slow.”

They continued on their way. Jessica, who had, for a moment, forgotten all her fears, trotted behind the others as the path drew a big curve. The palace with all its glory was now in full sight and so were the inhabitants. At first they had looked like strange birds, tottering between the walls but when the group had gotten even closer, Jessica noticed they were working on one of the greater stairs running through the air from building to building. She hadn’t thought a place like this could actually become knackered at all. The stone path twined onto shore and the first white walls blocked their view. Josephine gestured upward where the roof began. Small embellishments had been cut into the stone, showing wavy creatures and flowers, stars and sceneries. The pattern repeated itself around each window and door of the following houses until the first stone stairs lifted from the ground. Josephine guided them up and with every turn they made, the stairs lead them higher and higher over the rooftops. Soon Kia’s eyes were solely fixed onto the stone before her sandaled feet, knees slightly bended to feel the sturdy bridge under her. She had never been too fond of heights. After entering the inner ring of the palace, each of the girls had expected to see more of the inhabitants but everything held a ghostly atmosphere or silence and liveliness here so that Olivia finally asked: “Where is everyone?” Josephine nodded towards the main building.

“Most of them are in there. It’s work time so everyone’s going on about their business.”

“Huh.”, Olivia commented in slight disbelief. Jessica remembered something she had been wondering earlier and got a move on until she was at a level with the Frenchwoman.

“So there is some kind of time here after all?”

“Yes and no. There is no actual continuous time flow like our earthen day and night. But the body of most beings is dependent on some kind of time rhythm so the Wisemen created an artificial change of light, symbolizing day and night.”

A wave of understanding “Ah”s ran through the group. Obviously they had had a similar if not same question in mind.

The main building was only one more crossroad away and excitement, of what was to come, rose to a critical maximum. Suddenly Josephine turned left and followed a staircase up to a big round building. Olivia obediently followed, while the girls seriously considered moving on without

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them. Too close was the center with its promising secrets. But after some exchanged glimpses, they sighed and climbed the stairs. Entering the building, Hyona asked: "What do we want here? I thought we would go to the center?"

Some of the other girls nodded in agreement. The walls inside seemed almost brown in the dim light that shone through two smaller slits under the ceiling. The air was heavy and wavering. Cautious they moved on, trailing after Josephine further into the dark.

"Before we go there, you'll have to meet someone.", her voice echoed through the dark and the girls had a hard time stumbling through the thicket of shadows until it broke up into a green and yellow lighted place. It was then, that the group realized they had been wandering through tight standing group of trees, circling an old looking fountain like a protective shield. Over their heads, the orange sky fell upon them through a skylight that resembled the wing shape they had seen on the balconies of the palace. Carefully, one after the other, the girls started exploring. Hyona went, like Rhinoa and CC directly to the fountain. The rim was broad enough to sit on but, like everything else in this place, had been overrun with hassock, fighting their way to light between the joints. On one side one very proprietary tree had thrown his many thin but long branches into the basin, building a shape like a gateway. Hyona touched the twigs and the whole tree wiggled in respond. A Korean word slipped her tongue before backing away. Rhinoa and CC were mostly admiring the three meters tall statues of two centaurs fighting over a fish. The discoloration of one of the centaurs' back indicated that the water fountain usually hit it, no doubt creating a loud noise. But the water hadn't been moving in a while and the basin was full of green sediments. Kia, who had stayed at the entrance like Jessica, clearly shared the Swedish opinion on this place. Something wasn't right. But when they turned around, the grown ups had gone and the trees had closed, forming a sturdy wall.

"Hey!" What had left her mouth out of surprise, now repeated to alarm the others: "Hey! Olivia and Josephine are gone!"

"The entrance too", Jessica added, equally disturbed. Immediately the three girls joined them to check. They pulled and hit but the trees wouldn't give in. Hyona growled angrily: "A trap! You! Kia!", her finger flew in front of the Australians nose. "You're an earth-talented. Make them move."

Kia slung down the evil comment, her mind had prepared to take another look around before answering: "No. There's something strange about this place. I don't think using our powers would be good. Besides, if you're so eager in leaving, why not burn the whole stuff down?"

The tall girl looked away in defeat. A strong mood started pressing down on them, like an unknown force, preventing them from any movement. With it and growing stronger by the minute, an eery choir of whispers chased Jessica's ears. A piercing sound, disbanding any other thought. Jessica covered her ears, her face filled with fright.

From the corner of her eye, CC sensed a motion. Behind the fountain the trees parted to let in a figure. "Watch out!", she yelled, jumping closer towards the other girls. Muscles tensed, they stared onto the unknown.

Yet, the fountain blocked their view and kept the intruder from revealing itself. However, before the figure left its lair, a woman's voice was carried across to meet their ears with a melodic hum: "Welcome young ones, to the Great Council. Fear not."

A young woman of Josephine's age stepped from behind the fountain. Her dark skin was covered by a slight transparent gown in crystal patterns and exceptionally long, bulky hair that was close to blond on the top and dark brown at its ends. "I am the Guardian. Protector of Balance and Leader of the Council of Wisemen." The rays from the sky light hit her skin. Suddenly a complex

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pattern shone forth. "I'm honored to finally meet you." The guardian's eyes gleamed when her lips widened to a joyous smile.

The five girls exchanged glances. Unsure of what to do next they fought out who was to speak first and meet this strange woman. Even Hyona held back. Jessica slowly lifted her hands from her ears. The whispering had gone leaving a queer silence. One that made every sound reach her hearing with such clarity she would have been able to distinguish between an ant and a lady bug crawling over the floor. The Guardian patiently sat down onto the fountain's edge, her gown swaying with the slightest movement like veils of fog. Kia lost the soundless debate. With one push by the Korean the blonde tumbled forward a few steps. Hurriedly Kia caught her balance and the stumbling ended with the controlled steps of a dancer. Two meters from the black woman, Kia came to a stop. She drew her breath, felt how courage grew within her chest and spoke: "H-Hi."

In the background Hyona slapped her forehead. The 'smack' reached Kia's ears without delay and red rushed over her cheeks. "W-Where is my sister and... why are we here?", she managed to get out of her mouth before all air left her with an exhausted puff. The Guardian surveyed her with interested eyes, then smiled again. "Your sister is safe. I wanted a moment with you alone before... well. We'll come to that in a moment. Surely, you must have questions and today is the time for answers. But let me tell you about this place first."

The woman merely moved, resting within her posture with calm and knowing eyes. It made her unnatural, CC thought. While her body gave the lofty image of a goddess, having seen too many wonders to ever be caught in surprise, there was something hidden in her features. Excitement? Tension? She couldn't tell from a distance. Observant, the starlet fixed her view upon the Guardian, eager to catch even the slightest motion.

"Most of you know already, that there are others like you, people with exceptional talents of various shape and intensity. Now, the Great Council was founded a long time ago to ensure an equilibrium between magical and non-magical talented. Members of the Council, the Wisemen, made a vow to protect their fellowmen and to do so without force or violence of any kind. In times of need, they soon realized they had been bound by their own rules and kept from intervening. Helpless they had to watch chaos grow until a group of courageous young people rose from the world to fight for justice. They became the first Paragons and thereafter, were entrusted in the active preservation of peace and balance."

Hyona exhaled with tension. But when her eyes drove around to meet the others', they looked as if in trance. A spell had befallen them, the kind that made children quiet down when a story of fairies and princes was told. They'd got to be joking! Annoyed, she turned to meet the wake Guardian's expression. Startled, the Korean had to blink a few times to disarm the spell and confront that strange woman with her question: "What about the Guardian? I thought you were... I had thought you were part of this from the start."

The Guardian laughed. A bit too heavy for Hyona's taste and she pursed her lips in disapproval. Noticing so, the black woman quickly restrained herself. The warm smile reappeared. "Pardon me, but do I look that old? I'm the 46<sup>th</sup> Guardian so I'm sorry to disappoint you."

"46 guardians?", some of the others exclaimed and murmured something in wonder. Even Hyona hadn't expected that. At least she had had the decency to blush a little concerning the age-matter she had brought up with her question.

"I may not have been there, but from what I know, the first Guardian was one of the first Paragons."

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She winked! For a second, CC snapped out of the enchantment of that melodic voice, just to witness this tiny demonstration of humanity.

“The time has come for new Paragons to take over. After many years of observation, you five have been chosen to fulfill that task and that is why you are here today.”

Jessica finally remembered to breathe and inhaled deeply. Rhinoa caught her eye and tried to grin. Her hands were shaking. Right, they were in this together. The Guardian stood up to face Kia who hadn't moved an inch. She wasn't particularly tall so the woman had to look down to meet her eyes. She smiled her smile, then rose her head to let the others be part of this moment.

“Now. Are you ready to become Paragons? Then follow me to the Congregation of Wisemen. The first step to a new life.”