

Voices of Ilya

By Yangi

A Life of Magic

The Congregation of Wiseman, the main building of the Council. A realm within worlds, an uncharted space, a void with a name.

Frightened the young girls clung together. Only Kia seemed in the mood of exploring and led the group on through a well-lit hallway. Strange plants were growing from the pictured walls and starry patterns glistened from the ceiling. Under Kia's feet a slight shift, soft as drifting sand, moved slowly in endless trails. It was irritating, like a far away hum one can't allocate, repeating itself over and over, making it impossible to ignore. The air was heavy with a mysterious scent that drowsed their minds.

"Must be the plants.", Olivia concluded, moving exceptionally careful not to touch one of the violet flowers. Her sister agreed. "Yeah, probably. Though I don't know what kind of green this is. It doesn't... live like normal plants do. I can't feel anything."

Olivia's eyes grew wide. Slowly Kia's finger reached out and brushed one of the leaves. A sharp sound raced through the passage, making their ears ring and Kia backed away. Immediately Olivia was with her.

"Don't worry", the young Tenner assured and held her hands up as proof. A sigh of relief travelled through the group. Only CC's brows grew closer. "Maybe it's some kind of alarm-system.", she said more to herself, surveying the walls more thoroughly. The others joined her in that thought. After a moment of silence, Rhinoa added for consideration: "I'm not so sure. This place is practically non-existent. What do they need alarm-systems for?"

Hyona nodded slightly and walked over to one of the walls. The picture there, framed by violet spikes of plants, showed a woman, caught by something that looked like fire, the face distorted by pain. It gave her a chill. Quickly Hyona moved onward thinking out loud: "True. Who would gain anything from breaking into a Council? We don't know much yet, but if this is like a center for magical-talented, they sure have something of value."

"They sure do."

Josephine walked past them. When she turned, her face looked sly and knowing. "But that's not for you to know so keep moving. We're late already."

The others shared a confused glance but did as they were told. The end of the hallway appeared out of nothing, as did the two hooded figures guarding it. Their countenance lost shape in a deep darkness that made Jessica fear the face hidden underneath. Uneasy she sped up to pass them as fast as possible. The doors opened without a touch, the figures staying still like statues and when Jessica turned around, a faint whisper reached her ear. Josephine saw her and grinned. She didn't enter the room and the doors fell shut.

The heart of the Congregation building drew a perfect round, white pillars holding the high ceiling, white benches spreading out in multiple rows like an amphitheater. The ground was strewn with dark blue lines leading towards the center where another gigantic head light made the incoming rays look like spotlights. Many faces, many pairs of eyes. The girls noticed four main balconies that were highest and reached over the others. The people sitting there looked different but it was hard to make out much in the high contrasted light. There were some that looked human just that their hair was white as snow, the faces delicate, young and of a light heart. Most of them wore brown clothes except for a pair of beauty. The young man was draped in a feathery, very detailed white robe, shrouded by what looked like a heavy blood red cloak.

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Beside him a woman sat even more dashing. Her looks were like a portrait. The ideal, the unreachable, the undoubtedly perfect. CC couldn't take her eyes off that woman. There was something playful around her lips... The second balcony was draped in shadows, except for few pieces of clothing, shining in bright colors. The heads were hardly to make out. Just the eyes gleamed in a strong green out of the darkness. The third balcony had very large and small figures on it and Kia would later swear, they had been shimmering, limbs covered in foreign paints, but right now there was not much to make out. It was the farthest and lay right behind the beaming rays. Hyona found a fourth one but it was empty. On the fifth and biggest of them all, the Guardian sat enthroned between long yellow flags. Beside her, serious looking officials stared them down. CC felt how stage fright rose and with it, excitement. She knew exactly what to do. A laugh on her lips, she starlet lightly jumped ahead and turned around.

"Come on, guys! This is our moment. I bet this is some kind of initiation so let's just get over with it."

"You can talk", Hyona grunted but one after the other the five girls got under way and entered the circle of light. Olivia wanted to follow but a hooded person like the guards outside, held her back. Instead she was led to an empty space of the front bench. Not far from her, a group of young women about the same age were grinning. Their clothes looked normal except for one who was merely covered by a towel. Olivia breathed. In and out. With every breath she took, Kia was farther away and finally swallowed whole by the gleaming light. Nothing but silhouettes and a play of shadows, a wisp of life.

The Guardian rose and greeted the Congregation in a language that resembled Gaelic. Her moving head finally came to rest to confront her youngest guests. Arms opened wide, the chant of her voice filled the air: "Children of Earth, this is the Congregation of Wisemen. This is where each of you has been chosen, this is where you will gain the title Paragon and here it will be taken from you when the time has come."

Her eyes flickered over to the four women. They narrowed to a smile. "And would someone be so kind to provide Elly with proper clothing?"

Elly, a short but slender woman with shoulder-long brown hair and light skin, stood up widely grinning and bowed to the hooded figure, bringing her a white cloak. With one quick move the soft cloth wrapped her up and the towel fell to the floor. The other three women watched, having a hard time holding back their amusement. With relief, the young girls felt how the atmosphere lifted. Stares grew to gay glances and released the five young ones of their worries. After the bright rays had closed around them, Jessica had been very thankful for the head light. She knew the Congregation wouldn't be able to see her reactions very detailed, neither was she able to recognize any of the faces, even if she tried. It comforted her. From the corner of the dark blue eyes, Jessica noticed a shadow. Kia had moved. Suddenly the blond curls were covered with a hood that hid her upper face well. Hyona's eyes nervously changed direction, unsure on what to focus on, while Rhinoa's contently lay on the Guardian. When the Swedish checked for CC, her heart made a jump. She looked marvelous in the light and very confident. It was easy for her of course. She'd been through this a thousand times. Before she knew it, Jessica found herself jealous.

"In due time you will learn more about the members but today" The Guardian paused to commend everyone with an effective glance. "...we gathered to celebrate the dawning of a new era. Behold! The gift of Arienne."

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Something was happening. The first thing Rhinoa noticed was the uproar of the audience. They were murmuring and humming like a swarm of bees. Jessica's hands shot to her ears. The whispers had become loud, breathing in strange tongues. She was certain of it now. They weren't human. Kia tumbled against Rhinoa. The slow motion under her feet had abruptly changed direction and thrown her off balance. Now it was like a wild river spiraling closer and closer until it shot up her body. Hyona felt an icy heat crawl up her skin and CC's soul was pulled into different directions. Concurrent, a bright light beamed from their left shoulders and grew to six different symbols. Their clothes lost color and shape, dissolving into fragments, then put back together into something new. Dark teal cool cloth spread over their breasts, each ending differently over throat and shoulder. Right under their chests, a lighter fabric in a lighter color emerged, twining itself close around the girls' waists to end in pant legs, tight or wide skirts. Their shoes turned into teal boots and their arms were covered in white. In a flash all light was gone. Feathers danced, like stars in the night. One by one they rowed in to a whirl around the girls until nothing could be seen. With a heavy wind the feathers burst to pieces. Only some of them, pure as crystal, decorated arms, boots, hair and chest. On the back of the young girls, a pair of light crystal wings slowly came to rest. They looked like a fan of single feathers, spiky and asymmetrical.

Hyona remembered to breath and opened her eyes. Something was different. She felt different. When she turned, she couldn't believe her eyes. Everyone had changed! They looked older, more grown up and their hair had become longer. CC's brown-red hair had become a strawberry brown, pinned up at the back and Rhinoa's originally short locks had become a waist long black mass. Kia's hair was shorter on the sides and had one long lock curling over her left side of the face and Jessica's was parted into two low bunches. Frantically, she reached for her own head. At first she was relieved. Still there, still straight. However her fingers could run down quite the distance before reaching the ends.

"What the hell is going on?!"

All eyes on her. Except for Rhinoa's who struggled with the high stilettos of her over-knee boots. The four women finally stood up to meet their successors.

"The gift of Arienne: Magic.", Elly said with a wink. Jessica made a jump when her wings decided to flat a little. Fascinated, Kia took them between her fingers to examine them.

"Hey stop, Kia that's not funny!", the Swedish yelled but Kia just laughed and continued fiddling with the big feathers. The women grinned. The tallest of them, a blond, strong person with an aura entirely filled with self-awareness, let her arm rest on her hip and said: "We know that's a lot to take in at first but it'll prove practical. I'm Cordelia by the way." She pointed towards a typical irish woman, red head with messy hair and green eyes "That's Anabel" then over to a pretty Asian with chin short hair, two curls framing the porcelain face "Lily and Elly of cause." Elly waved casually with the cloak.

Hyona looked down on her new outfit. She didn't look pleased.

"I feel like I'm in a stupid Anime!"

Elly was right at her side with a quick: "See! That's what I said back then! It really looks that way too from the outside. All that magical transformation and stuff." She patted her on the back and Hyona growled. "Great..."

"I think it's pretty hot!", CC exclaimed, throwing herself in a super star pose. The girls laughed and Rhinoa fell. Immediately, Kia and Lily were there to help her up.

"Could I change these shoes? It's terribly exhausting."

Kia grinned and said: "Oh, come on. Think of it as training, huh?"

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Pouting, Rhinoa threw her arms towards the Australian's feet with a loud: "Not fair! You don't have heels at all!"

"Duh, I'm earth talented. I need my feet free from any distraction and close to the ground.", Kia explained self-satisfied and they bickered on a while. In the meantime, Hyona started accepting her fate: "But I do change back, right?"

The women laughed. With one nod towards the Guardian on the balcony, Cordelia answered: "Actually you can change back anytime but if I tell you how, I'll get scolded."

CC and the Korean exchanged glances but kept it at that. In the background, Jessica tried to get the two squabblers apart. CC leaned in closer to Hyona to get a good look at her symbol. It resembled a twirly U with a dot above. She twisted her own arm. Hers had more of an inside out S with the upper swirl being bigger than the lower one.

"You're the former Paragons, right?", she asked without looking up. The women nodded. Hyona jumped into the conversation and demanded to know who was the fire-talented. The four women looked at each other and laughed. Irritated Hyona crossed her arms.

"What's so funny?", she demanded to know. Elly wiped away one tear and put her hand onto the girl's shoulder. "None of us, deary. But I can tell you that I had the same symbol as you and my power is metal."

"Metal?", Jessica repeated, listening attentively. Seconds later she was flung to the ground by Rhinoa who tripped again. Elly made an ugly face before helping them to their feet. Anabel tapped her hand thrice and whispered: "That's why she's always late. Can't carry a watch!" The redhead giggled to herself hideously and CC couldn't help but think how cute that was. The symbols bothered her still, though. Thoughtful, one hand went up to touch chin and mouth. "Not the power then..."

Elly heard her and grinned. Her hand made a fast row of signs and the others nodded. The Guardian smirked too and silently came floating down from her balcony. It was only then that the girls realized, they had entirely forgotten about the Congregation. The moment the dark woman's feet touched the stone floor, the girls went quiet and turned, ready to listen. The Guardian each thanked them with one elegant nod and stopped at the outer circle of the room's center where everyone could see her.

"The symbols on your shoulder are the reason for your current appearance. They work like a seal. In your normal lives, they will hold back a certain amount of your powers to make control an easier task. At the same time, it saves up energy that will be unleashed as soon as you transform. This energy, combined with the held back power will make you mighty. It is vital that you learn to use that extra power which is why you will train with Josephine and Olivia from this day on."

Olivia flinched, feeling eyes on her back. The Guardian continued in a lower voice, talking directly to CC: "Well? Tell me what you think."

The girl blinked. "Uh...t-the symbols?"

The Guardian nodded smiling. CC repeated the gesture sternly. "I thought they would represent our powers since... some of us make use of the four elements that are known in mostly Europe and other 'western' countries. But E-Elly" she was clearly uncomfortable not knowing her last name "said she had the same symbol as Hyona. I guess one could argue that metal is somehow connected to fire but I think..." A hand went up to a thinking pose while CC concluded: "I think they stand for some kind of task or position."

Expectantly, the five girls looked at the dark woman. She allowed herself plenty of time before gifting them with a proud smile. Happily, the Guardian held her hand towards CC and

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announced: "Clara Christin Arlin, the strategist. You've proven yourself a smart thinker with wide imagination and your flying skills will serve you well in staying on top of things."

The hand traveled over to Hyona. "Hyona Park, the raider." Hyona's head swirled around to Elly in astonishment. The funny woman cheery held her thump up. She didn't look violent at all!

"Your passionate attitude and quick reaction made you first choice. Work on your accuracy and open your mind for the creativity of combat like your predecessor."

Elly excitedly gesticulated in silent joy over the sudden compliment. Anabel smiled, nodding approving, while Cordelia patted her on the head. Lily had been quiet and stayed so.

Kia, Rhinoa and Jessica meanwhile had stepped closer. Rhinoa was next: "Rhinoa Tinbau, defender." Before the Guardian could continue, the black locks jumped while dark hands clapped fast. "Yes! Yes!" The woman gave her one deep look and Rhinoa stopped. Embarrassed she tried a laugh and failed.

"Your unshaken sense of justice and protection convinced us of your abilities."

The two remaining girls shared a glance. Both wanted to be next, neither the last. Kia won. "Kia Tenner, the scout." There was a strange pause and a certain flicker in the Guardian's eyes but she kept it well hidden and so the true meaning behind it escaped CC after all. The voice a bit stronger, a bit more sonorous than before, the Guardian carried on: "You are a very talented young girl. Not only were you the first to awaken, but also the strongest both in physical and mental power." Silence suddenly filled the air. A roaring silence, like the calm before the storm. Negative emotions mixed with wonder circulated above them and before she knew it, Kia had become the center of attention. She tried to distract herself by focusing on the slow drain of energy under her feet. Jessica's ears rang. There they were again! The voices. Hundreds and thousands of them, crawling from the ceiling, the pillars, the floor. They rushed past in whirls and circles, hushing secrets into her head! Sweat ran glistening down a cheek. 'Just ignore it', her mind told her. There was something about this place... and she would make sure to ask the Guardian about it. Later. Right now the worry about the sudden aggression and outrage of the attendants towards Kia were far more threatening. Even the former Paragons seemed irritated and one face was gleaming with charges. Cordelia, if she remembered correctly. The Asian beside the blonde caught her eye and they exchanged a long glance. A moment of connection, understanding. Then the Guardian's voice rose once more and the contact was lost. "With your sensibility you will keep your team members safe, ensure their forthcoming and gain information about your enemies. And Jessica..."

As she spoke, the Guardian's tongue had gotten sharper, her glance piercing, demanding. The girl decided to hold it. "You're the diplomat. You" she started wandering around Jessica in a circle, stopped and floated back to her balcony with a dismissive wave. "... will be responsible for all communication in and outside of your team. If anything goes wrong, you're the one to blame." Cold brown eyes stabbed Jessica over and over again. What was her problem? Not far from the Swedish, Lily retorted the attack with disbelief and pure anger. Her mouth opened. A hand landed on her shoulder. Cordelia slightly shook her head and the mouth closed again. CC's watchful mind had captured the silent dispute and searched for Jessica's eyes. It took a while but finally they met. Serious wonder and frustration flashed back at her and something else. Memory. It was so intense CC couldn't hold onto the comforting smile she had wanted to pass on and her face fell back into shadows.

On the balcony, the Guardian made a half-hearted attempt of a wave and said: "Lily? If you would be so kind."

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The Asian fired deathly glimpses towards the grand flags but they were ignored. Luckily, she knew better than to challenge that woman. Lily took one deep breath. The others gave her room and the beauty started talking: "Six years ago, a dark kind of magic flooded Earth. It enabled non-magical people to develop powers in an unpredictable pattern. Most of the victims show an increased aggressive behavior and fragile moral understanding. The Council is still investigating the cause of this incident but while we were..." Sadness swayed with her voice. "...trying to find a solution, some naturally talented, called Cheshi and accidentally talented, the Cian, started working together and build orga-" Her throat had run dry. But even without her finishing, most attendants knew what she was going to say. Jessica stiffened noticeably. Delicate porcelain fingers restive pulled on the black dress Lily was wearing. She hawked and tried again: "Organizations." Hyona's eyes blazed. Lily looked onto the floor before her feet. When she spoke again, her voice wavered slightly but she faced the listeners with bravery: "Some of those claim to be peaceful and that might have been the case at first. But I warn everyone in this room to trust too easily. Over the years, motives have twisted and justified actions of sinister character. The more the foreign magic spreads, the more chaos and madness are taking over and people we once knew might change within seconds. So far, the magic doesn't seem to affect Cheshi, however the organizations strive for power and are willing to take their members by force."

Lilies voice died away in the deep silence that unfolded merciless. After a time that seemed like forever, the Guardian's chant filled the air with new life. "That's enough. Thank you, Lily." Lily didn't move, she just looked down on the floor. Jess studied the dark woman curiously. All anger and sharpness had left her, leaving the welcoming honey-sweet melody that she had felt when they had first met by the fountain. A smile widened across the Guardian's face, than parted for a speech: "Members of the Congregation. You have heard about Earth's situation and I will use this ceremony to beg for your support. It is unusual for new Paragons to be selected at such times but we must have faith in Arienne and trust that it happened for a greater purpose. You, young paragons:", her gaze fell upon the girls. "Listen to your tutors. Beside their youth they have proven more than worthy of this position and will provide you with all the knowledge you need to face these enemies. You will learn to fight and to battle as a team. Once you are ready, Josephine will bring you to me. Until then I must insist, you stay out of trouble. These are dangerous times. An early exposure could cost us everything."

She held their eyes for a moment longer, before ending the ceremony. "Thank you all for joining us on this eventful day and may Arienne's spirit guide our Paragons to wisdom."

Some words in the Gaelic resembling language followed and the loud murmuring and moving of a crowd parting from an event echoed through the room. Kia tried to get a better view of the strange figures on the other balconies but except for the white haired, they had vanished.

The beautiful couple gifted the four women with the kind of attention one would grant an old friend and descended further into the shadows. Cordelia waved absent minded. Elly had joined Olivia by the time. Her mouth moved so fast, it was unbelievable she was still able to breathe! Even Olivia seemed overwhelmed by the young woman's enthusiasm. When Kia walked up to them, Elly stopped to greet her. "Hullo! You're Kia, right? Come on, sit down, sit down." Her hand fanned the air frantically before her head swirled back to the older Tenner to continue her monologue: "It's amazing, right? I mean, I'm excited even though I've been through this already but it really brings back memories. Anyways, how's our element ring working? Wait. Where's that other woman?"

Olivia blinked irritated. Her brain was busy processing the information, filing most of it as 'unimportant', while her head aimlessly turned around to find her co-tutor missing.

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"I... don't know." She seemed surprised herself and once more her mind started working. Kia decided to give her some time. "'Your' element ring?"

Elly turned around. "Huh? Oh, yes, yes! We built the element ring that Frenchwoman is wearing. Lily and me that is. It's tradition that each paragon generation leaves a gift to their successors. After we heard how young and unexperienced you guys were, we decided to make you that warning system."

Unintentionally, Kia had to think of the incident on the plane. "It sure works, alright.", she said blushing.

Near the big door they had entered through, CC, Hyona and Rhinoa were talking with Lily and Anabel about their powers. Lily struggled with herself in quiet until she revealed her talent. She was an Empathist and the diplomat of her team. She could practically look into other people's heads, see their emotions and even influence them. The Asian insisted that she would never do the letter if it wasn't absolutely necessary. Hyona couldn't help but wonder why Lily seemed so uncomfortable with it. She would know lot's to do with powers such as hers. Elly was a Metal-Wielder. She could sense and use any wee bit of metal in up to 1 kilometer distance and make use of it. Even after hearing this, Hyona couldn't imagine the joyfully blabbering brunette being the raider. Their powers and characteristics didn't match in the slightest. Frowning, the Korean fixed her glance onto the white robe between the Tennesseans. Cordelia turned out to be the strategist. CC immediately pricked up her ear's in excitement.

"What power does she have? Is it like mine?"

Anabel shrugged her shoulders apologetic while her rolling accent chanted: "Sorry, not in the slightest. She's an Illusionist and a true joker. Better stay away from her when she's angry."

It wasn't what the starlet had hoped for. Disappointed, CC joined Hyona in a pose of disagreement. Anabel herself was a true flower spirit. Not only had she a green thumb but had few trouble adapting to unknown terrain and knew a lot about healing arts. She had been the healer of the former paragon team. Hyona raised an eyebrow. Anabel smiled kindly and waved a finger from left to right. "We were more than you, you see? We had six members but not everyone could attend today's ceremony."

"Wait, so who was the defender?", Rhinoa demanded to know. She had been patient all this time because she had hoped to gain more information about her mission but she would soon join her two comrades. "Sorry, we're not allowed to tell you much."

Lily, who had been spacing off somewhere, directed her gaze onto her friend. "You know, actually we were seven."

"Ah, you mean..."

The three younger girls crossed their arms and threw a questioning look at their predecessors.

Lily had to smile. It was the first time they saw her joyful and it made them wonder why.

"A long time ago, we had help from someone. It wasn't a paragon but it was thanks to that person, that we came this far."

"What happened?", Rhinoa asked.

Anabel threw her arms into the air to express her lack of comprehension. The red massy curls jumped with them. "We don't know! Our helper simply disappeared one day and has never been seen since."

"G-Great Guardian! Please wait!" Jessica hurried over to the root of the balcony. The only way up was through climbing over the benches, up the rows and over the outer edges of the other balconies. From above, the dark woman gleamed at her, then stepped away from the banister.

"No, wait! Please! I have a question!"

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“Kia... Kia!” Olivia was getting impatient. Beside her, Elly giggled into the long sleeves of her lent coat and got up to stroll over to meet the rest of the bunch at the grand door. Indecisively, Kia looked back and forth between her sister and Jessica, who seemed desperate to get the Guardian’s attention. After a moment of thought, she finally decided: “Sorry. You go on ahead, I’ll wait for Jessica.”

Olivia raised one eyebrow, then turned and walked away with the words: “Alright. But make it quick.”

The hall was nearly empty by now so the short haired Australian didn’t have to strain her ears. Jessica’s voices reached her well enough, thanks to the acoustical built of the Congregation. Over the many benches, Jessica made her way up towards the fifth balcony. There was a man, young and handsome, who stepped to the Guardian from out of the shadows. He whispered something and delayed her departure just long enough for Jessica to catch up. With one last jump, she caught grip on the railing and pulled herself up. When their eyes met, there was a glimmer of surprise in the Guardian’s but it faded quickly to be replaced by something unpleasant. Jessica held out her hands helplessly and made a small attempt of a bow.

“Please, I really need to speak with you.”

She hoped it would show her respect. The Guardian scrutinized the young girl for a long minute. Then her features softened a bit. With one hand she released the man beside her who turned his orange-golden locks, before entering the blackness just to throw a charming wink at Jessica. After he was gone, the Guardian directed her full attention towards the newly selected paragon. “What is it you need to ask?”, she asked with her honey-voice, lifting one hand to signal Jessica to proceed.

“I... I...” Now that she had gotten so far, doubt started twisting thoughts, leaving the girl speechless. ‘This might be my only chance!’, a voice rang from within and all chaos was blown away. Jessica inhaled once and started anew: “I’m sorry. The others all seem to know what their power is but... I don’t. You said I was to be the diplomat but...” she sighed, eyes to the floor. “I’m just not sure if I’m fit for this task.”

At this the Guardian smiled. It was more of a knowing, then a hearted one but anything was better than being stared to the ground.

“On this, we agree, young one.”, the dark woman grinned. Again those deep eyes ran over Jessica, however, this time with curiosity. “You hear things, don’t you? That was your question.”

Jessica’s head shot up in astonishment. “You knew?”

“Of course I did, sweetie. I am the Guardian. You could say it’s my job to know things.”

Gracefully, the Guardian sat down onto her throne once more, patting the small stool beside it. Jessica sat down, careful not to break the fragile looking object.

“I was wondering, how much you already knew but I guess I’ll have to enlighten you after all.”

Her tone had slipped to a normal vocabulary and a less perfect melody. Jessica asked herself if it might be her true self that showed. She didn’t mind the negative connotation, nor the annoyed glances she was darted with every once in a while. She needed answers, the sooner the better. The Guardian’s look hazed, traveling to a place far beyond the walls of the Council. When her lips parted, a voice so strange came out, Jessica froze out of shock.

“You’re hearing voices no one else can hear. Ilya, they call them. Spirits comprising of pure magic, so it is said. Their intentions, we do not know. Legends tell, they need a true voice. A being, able to understand them and to act in their place. All I know is...”

Slowly, the Guardian’s consciousness seemed to be returning from whatever place it had left to and at last, their eyes met. “...you’re not the first paragon with this power. Some call it a curse, some see it as a gift. There’s a tale of an object, a magical item forged by a paragon many years

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ago. What it does, I do not know but it was a Listener who made it and it was meant for Listeners to come. In other words, for you.”

Jessica couldn't believe it. Perplexed from the weight of the new information and the lack of solutions for her problem at the same time, she waited desperately for the Guardian to continue but she remained silent. Bewildered, the girl exclaimed: “That's all? I... I still don't know anything! What happened to that object? What does it do?”

“I told you, I don't know. The Wiseman say it was lost many years ago, long before my time as Guardian. No one knows of its whereabouts.”

Frustration held a tight grip around Jessica's heart and brought her to tears: “Then, what am I supposed to? What am I supposed to... to do with this power?”

“Listen.”, the Guardian answered calmly, pointing upward. “I'm afraid there is nothing more I can do for you.”

Jessica relieved her stress with a sound of dissatisfaction and turned away from the dark woman. Hurriedly she brushed over the small tear that had made it down her cheek. She halted to look at her hand where the dark teal twined around her ankle. ‘A paragon’, she repeated in her mind. ‘What does that even mean?’ She had no answer and when she looked back, the Guardian had gone.

“What were you talking about?”, Kia asked later, after Jessica had joined her. Together they crossed the hall, stepping over blue and white marble towards the rest who was waiting at the exit. Jessica seemed worried enough. Kia didn't want to make it worse by making her eavesdropping known. She hadn't intended it after all...

“Nothing really”, the Swedish girl lied, her footsteps growing further apart as she marched on.

“I see. Well, the others are waiting.”

It was a dull reply, Kia knew that but there was nothing else to say and if there was one thing she disliked, it was the queer silence. The group of people was only few meters away, when Jessica suddenly realized: “That's a different door, isn't it?”

Kia followed her gaze and checked along the circled wall for other entrances but there was but this one. Her eyebrows drew a stern line.

“You're right. Something's different. We came from another angle...”

“Yeah.” Serious, Jessica slowed her tempo until she was head-up with the earth-talented. In a low voice she whispered: “What of Josephine?”

“No one has seen her since we entered the room.”

“I thought so. I saw her just before the door closed behind us. She was whispering with those guards in the hallway.”

That hit Kia off guard. Something told her, Jessica's suspicion was justified but too much had happened and the possibility of Josephine plotting something seemed so improbable that the thought got brushed aside the moment they joined the others.

The old paragons had left earlier and without any sign of Josephine, it was up to themselves to find a way back. For a while the group of teens and Olivia wandered the many similar looking hallways, stairs and rooms until they finally found a way out. Josephine waved smiling at them from the outer edges of the grand square that surrounded the main building of the Council. CC waved back. From the corner of her eye she saw Jessica flinch. When she turned her head some more, distrust was written in the girl's eyes. Interested, the green eyes searched for more clues. Both Tenners shared the expression, though Kia seemed mainly confused. Had something happened? It wasn't until the tutors had exchanged some words that it hit her. Josephine hadn't

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been there. But why? CC didn't have to wait long for an answer. Shortly after the platforms rippled into multiple staircases, Jessica positioned herself next to Olivia, throwing glances at her. The Australian didn't react immediately. It had been part of the agreement, not to ask anything of Josephine or her whereabouts, but she had to confess, she too was curious to know.

In the end, she slightly nodded in Jessica's direction. Observing the situation, CC frantically hit the other girls in the shoulders, signaling them to speed up so they could hear the upcoming conversation. Hyona showered her with complaints but followed up anyways.

"I didn't see you at the ceremony.", Jessica said. She had meant it to sound casual but it turned out an accusation after all. Josephine's smile went even wider, her eyes turning to slits.

"No reason to hide it. I know you've seen me."

The other four girls threw questioning glances at each other, then stared down Olivia who waved them away without even looking. Jessica felt how anxiety clawed at her wit. She would have to hurry before all courage left and the Frenchwoman didn't make any attempt to clear the matter herself. In fact she seemed shamelessly amused by the young girl's show.

"Why weren't you with us then?"

Josephine drew an oval into the air with one finger. A random gesture that was surely meant to confuse her, Jessica thought. "I was simply catching up with some old acquaintances.", the woman chattered nicely. "You might have noticed, I've been here before. How else could I know my way around so easily?"

This being said, Josephine abruptly changed direction, forcing Jessica to stop and lose connection for a second. It was enough to end the discussion. The rest of the way, the other girls drilled Jessica with questions. Even Hyona was eager on the matter but the blonde wouldn't give in. Nobody spoke after that.

It was strange coming back to Earth. Back into the messy dressing room, the ruckus of the broken sprinklers still audible through the door. Slowly, the girls stepped away from each other, in search for what to do next. "It's like we never left", Hyona stated, lifting a dress from the floor. Olivia started cleaning up and pointed at Rhinoa and Kia to help her out. Her sister pouted but obeyed.

"Technically, nothing *has* changed. When you enter the Council, you're out of time. You're entering a realm where the rules of time don't apply so it's as if everywhere else..."

"...the time is stopped.", Hyona ended the sentence and hung the dress onto a hanger. Olivia nodded. Bored, Josephine watched how silence spread among them once more, each of the girls busy with their own thoughts, absent-mindedly cleaning the room. When the mood grew to heavy for her delicate shoulders, the Frenchwoman shook her hair to perfection and jumped from the red couch at one wall. Automatically, the light hands went over the tight skirt to drive out any wrinkles until she stepped over to her colleague.

"Still plan A?", she asked with a wry smile. There was a small enlightening in Olivia's eyes, as if she had forgotten about something entirely that she now remembered. "Ah, yes.", she said.

Searching for her sister's eyes first, the woman rose her voice so everyone could hear her:.

"Since the organizations are very eager to gain powerful members, Josy and I agreed on us all traveling together with CC for the time being. The constant location-change hopefully will keep us secret just a while longer until you've worked on your skills."

The girls exchanged a glance. Jessica couldn't decide to cry or laugh. She would be super-close to her idol but she also wouldn't be able to see her family and friends. Hyona simply made a disapproving sound and turned away.

"How are we going to explain that to everyone? I mean for financial matters it's not that big of a

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deal but I don't know what my manager will say about that. Not to mention everyone's family." CC looked around leaving the clothes be for a moment. The others slightly moved their heads in agreement. Before Olivia could answer the question, Josephine smirked widely and sang: "I'll take care of that. You better start worrying about getting your powers under control."

She winked at the gang then turned on her heel and pranced out of the room. Kia and Rhinoa looked at Olivia but the woman only shrugged her shoulders explaining: "She has her ways. Better don't ask."

It didn't take long, until the voice of the manager accompanied a loud knock against the door. CC got up and moved towards it, when Olivia told her to wait.

"You're still Paragons. If you want to turn back, draw a clockwise circle with your hand onto your tattoos. If you want to transform into Paragons again, do it the other way around."

Rhinoa was the fastest. With one swift motion, the circle was completed and the symbol illuminated the room. The teal texture and boots vaporized and deformed into her former clothes. The hair grew shorter, her appearance lost a little bit of height. Fascinated, she scrutinized her hands and arms. CC was next and the others followed. Jessica was surprised how accustomed she had become already with her new taller self. Her mind was irritated by the sudden change of eye-level. When she looked into the mirror the strong woman had gone, leaving the fragile and pale girl to herself again.

When CC opened the door, the manager had already heard the news and expressed his full support in the matter. It caught the starlet aghast and for a minute or two, all she could do was stand by, mouth open and listening to the many benefits the man saw in the situation. He left the room with a smile, which, according to CC almost never happened. With the bang of the shutting door, time seemed to speed up. People came flooding in, dragging CC to her dance and singing sessions, cleaning the room and pushing out everyone who was left. They were replaced by a group of stern looking men in dark suits asking the girls to follow them to their Hotel. Olivia stayed back to wait for Josephine so the Hyona, Kia, Rhinoa and Jessica were hurriedly brought to a dark van that turned out to be far more comfortable than any car they had ever been driven in and thrown out in front of a fancy hotel entrance. The doorman ordered some younger people to take care of the luggage while one of the suit-men accompanied the girls inside to take care of the booking matters. Dinner time had already passed but they were assured to order anything from the room service. That being said, the man dropped two room keys into Kia's hand and left. Kia blinked. Questioning, she held her hands up to the others asking: "Uh, how do we split?" Hyona had been asking herself the same question the entire length of the drive. Who would be able to tolerate the most? She was pretty sure Kia wasn't her choice... Jessica was very quiet but if she really was a fan of CC, sharing rooms might become annoying. That left her with one choice: "Rhinoa's with me."

The island-girl was as surprised as the others but smiled contently and followed the tall Korean to the elevator. Jessica seemed to be a bit out of it, so Kia tried to get her attention. The waving didn't work well so she took the key and clanked it against the reception desk. After the blonde had turned into her direction, she flashed a smile.

"Wanna go? I hope it's okay with you. I don't snore or anything so sleeping should be no problem."

Jessica sighed. She looked tired but a weak smile tattered across her lips. Rhinoa waved friendly as the elevator doors shut. Kia grinned and pointed towards the carpeted staircase leading to the next level.

"Should we take the stairs? Might take a while 'til the elevator comes back."

"Fine with me", Jessica replied. It was a longer way up than anticipated but the two girls used it

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to chatter about sports and family, movies and music. It turned out they had quite something in common. With every level they passed, Jessica seemed to blossom more and more and as they had reached their room she laughed out loud when Kia dropped the key by mistake.

In the room across the hallway, Hyona threw her luggage into one corner, dropped onto her bed and flipped her smartphone from out of her pocket. Frantically her fingers started typing, eyes fixed onto the screen. Rhinoa at first tried to start a conversation but it died out very quickly so she got ready for bed and shut the lights. From outside the giggling of the other two was heard, while the dark girl tried to sleep with the blue-ish screen light enlightening the room.

“So!”, Kia exclaimed, throwing herself onto the bed, crossed arms behind her head. “You’re CC’s fan, huh?”

Jessica blushed, her fingertips tapping together repeatedly. “I guess so... I know a lot about her a-and she’s a really good singer!”

Kia grinned widely. “Why good for you! You’re the first fan ever to get that close to her!”

The fingers stopped in mid-air, Jessica blinked, realizing the situation she was in. A smile of pure happiness rose from ear to ear! But before Kia could say anything further, it faded just as quickly and the blonde turned to unpack the few things she had brought for the concert trip.

“That might be true... Don’t get me wrong I’m super happy being able to see her all the time but... It’s just everything else that... This whole Paragon... thing!” A shirt landed on the bed by the window, then Jessica followed covering her eyes with one arm. Kia sat up to watch her. For a moment, she struggled to continue the course the conversation had taken or swing in another direction to lighten the mood. From what she’d heard Jessica was entirely knew to the existence of magic. No wonder she was confused. After another minute of consideration, she finally opened spoke up: “I’ve hear what you’ve been talking about with the Guardian. Back in the Coucil. I didn’t want to but your voices just travelled real far...”

“It’s okay”, Jessica’s voice said from under her arm.

Kia took that as a sign to carry on: “I would lie if I told you ‘I know how it feels’ because I don’t. My sister is magical and I was real young when my talent showed so I had plenty of time to adjust to it. But I might know a bit of those voices you where talking about.”

The arm lifted from the blond mass and Jessica turned her head to meet Kia.

“It’s probably not the exact same thing. I mean I didn’t *hear* anything but... I felt something. Under my feet. It was like a stream of sand that flows in flat water, changing direction every once in a while.”

“Hm... I didn’t feel that.”

Kia grinned: “See? I’m earth-talented so my sense of feeling is somehow extended by the earth around me. I can feel things others can’t. Maybe those voices are some kind of a side effect from your actual talent too, you know?”

Jessica turned to look at the ceiling. “That sand stream you felt... couldn’t it be the stream of time?”

Kia hopped on her bed in excitement: “Yeah, right? That’s what I thought too! Josy told us it doesn’t have a straight flow so maybe it changes directions. In other words, I felt the movement of time. Maybe those voices are connected to some kind of magic too!”

Jessica smiled a bit and looked over to her roommate. “Could be... That would be cool.”

They grinned at each other and one after the other, the paragons drifted into sleep, dreaming about the new life that lay ahead and what the next morning would bring. For magic never stayed the same, but changed like time and every living thing in this world.