

LORI OF ZIRIT

BOOK 1

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Excerpt:

Inky clouds embossed in an eerie glow shrouded an ominous crescent moon, that flickered over a grove of Sakoya trees in the Zinolin Jungle, where a pride of Yuri lounged in languid dalliance. A distant lull that originated from the ebb and flow of the Zinta river chimed over their lazy muzzles and full bellies. Sounds and cries of a rich variety, emanating from creatures of many an ilk, echoed throughout the lush verdant coverture of Zinolin. Adults of the Yuri pride squatted away Flying-fluffs as they lay on the soft earth, while the younger ones scampered about, playing their usual games. Some distance away, hidden from their view, a pair of bloodshot eyes observed their every movement thirstily from the elevated foliage of a Baobab tree.

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Bora

*There was once an enchantress called Bora
She had thick, long hair that she wore in a bun
She collected bright stars to sparkle her tresses;
With the sweetest flowers bloometh in the sun
Entwined the greenest leaves, forming a wreath
To adorn atop her glittering crowniun*

*She then went forth to the silver-most cloud
Gathering its purest, loftiest dreams for fun
And skipped upon a bubbling ivory waterfall
Drinking freedom and zest from its fluid run
And thus Bora came to be known for a brilliance
Hitherto unknown and unseen by folk common
Using her magic bun to save those in need
Contesting struggles that needed to be won*

*Her radiance and joy was short-lived however
For jealous betrayers were wrought and overrun
They convinced the King and Queen of her villainy
And of the unholiness of her wicked big bun
She was summoned, ordered to concede her mane
Or perish inglorious, dishonoured and down run*

*Broken and downcast Bora pleaded fair justness
But was unheard, unheeded - the web was spun
Dragged to the mountaintop with her arms bound
Her locks snatched in disarray and shunned
Were viciously sheared, her wreath broken
All she believed in was wrecked and undone*

*Chastened, torn asunder she vanished into oblivion
Leaving behind nothing less than the very sun*

*For in the valley where fell her starry adornments
There grew a land of great harmonious rhythm
Of liberated soulful dreams and luminescent nature
The land of magic itself if magic ever begun
This land was called Zirit for those true of spirit
It held charms, enchantments, miracles to stun
And so Bora the enchantress left a legacy for realms
Such as was neither seen nor known to but none*

*

Prologue

In The Dead of The Night

It was almost midnight in the land of Zirit. As the clock struck twelve, a bird with dark-blue feathers and a black beak flew deftly over a sleeping town. The suburb snored together, as if drawing in a collective breath, wrapped comfortably in the velvet of the night. At the edge of the town, the bird soared higher – swerving into a wide arc until it reached the back of a huge castle. Here, it perched upon a silhouetted tree, sitting still as a statue. As the moon shone on its face it neither blinked nor moved – it was blind.

Almost directly across the same tree, there stood a wall entirely covered with ivy. At its bottom, in the middle, stood an old, rusty little door – unused and indiscernible to the casual passer-by. Suddenly, it vibrated as if hit by an unseen force. After some muffled mumbling and stumbling from within, it burst open and a figure cloaked in blue velvet sprung forward. With a little bundle in his arms and great urgency in his steps, he made his way to a pathway on the castle grounds that led straight to the thick forest behind. Bordered by tall, overarching trees and lit by flaming torches, this path was used by the night guard on duty in the forest. As soon as the passage forsook the castle grounds, however, the figure felt two dark shadows descend outside its borders on either side, in the surrounding forest. Taking a deep breath, he increased his pace and kept going. The soft padding of the shadows – nearly imperceptible – quickened. The man with the bundle was now sweating – which was not entirely un-strange – given that it was a chilly night. As he looked out from the corner of his eyes, he thought he saw the gleam of something sharp and white where his pursuers scooted.

He broke into a jog, his hood falling away to reveal a thick mass of curly, white hair. Up ahead, the lamps on the path suddenly disappeared. Without much ceremony – he began to run. Even as the thin, peasant shoe on his right foot broke, he felt the dark shapes on either side sprint. They were now gaining on him. As he entered the lightless patch, he felt a third shape descend, joining the others behind him. He threw off the other shoe and dashed on, running as fast as his legs could carry him. His faithful pursuers now crossed the trees, entering the unlit path and flanking him on either side. Their proximity hit him like an icy draught to his heart – as if flanked by

death itself. His cloak fluttered to the ground as he ran barefoot, sweating profusely, but taking great care to not drop the bundle in his arms.

The two figures were almost touching his arms now. He needn't have looked them in the face to see the gleam of their long, sabre-like teeth or feel the strength of their forelimbs. No harsh panting emanated from their wide jaws as they ran alongside him – their enormous, supple physique built entirely for precision-killing. Enveloped in the darkness, drenched in sweat – his heart a pulsating, icy prison – the man could hardly gauge what lay ahead or where he was running to anymore. He felt the creature behind him come closer with a growl and a sharp slash ripped his back open. As he writhed in agony and felt the slimy hand of hopelessness groping his chest – the path suddenly expanded into a wide circular opening surrounded by trees. A small bonfire burned in its centre. Immediately, the predators fell away.

This was the spot where the night guard kept watch, but tonight it was empty, save the fire. He picked up a burning log of wood and held it steady, ready to fend off oncoming attackers, but none dared to come near the fire. Swaying slightly, he ignored the pain in his back, looking up at the sky with wild expectancy. The bundle in his arms stirred and the covers fell off to reveal the glistening forehead of a baby. The old man's expression softened and he blew a cool breeze gently over the baby's face, who yawned and miraculously, continued sleeping. As he backed up against a tree near the fire – an alert, watchful eye turned to the sky, the sleeping baby turned in her blanket. She stuck out a chubby arm that brushed against the tree, the cracks on its bark lighting up as if with molten gold. Any voyeur would have marvelled at the way it snaked upwards like tiny tributaries of a river, spreading in all directions – pervasive – as if the essence of transcendent life itself flowed through the veins of this giant, rooted, wooden sentinel of the ground.

Abruptly, a loud crack resounded in the sky and the man moved instinctively towards the fire. The baby's hand lost touch with the tree and its fissures were dull and barren once again. A large shape came flying towards them, and as it got closer, the man threw away the log of wood, stepping aside. They landed inches from him – another man seated on a Quinx – a creature resembling a huge, flying wolf. The rider's rimless, rounded rectangular spectacles did little to hide the piercing gaze that darted from his misty, blue eyes. A flat, ivy cap covered his head from

which a mass of silver hair shone in the fire's dancing light, giving the impression of a topless umbrella wrapped shabbily around his head.

“Brezno!” cried the man with the baby. “Finally! I was followed almost as soon as I stepped out ...”

Brezno held up a hand as if to silence the man. He looked around intently in the darkness encompassing the clearing. Then, quick as lightning, he grabbed a handful of mud from the ground and threw it in the bonfire, muttering something inaudible under his breath. As soon as the particles came in contact with the flames, they leapt up forming a giant column of fire that rose towards the sky. The outer edge of the clearing was harshly illuminated, revealing a blanket of shiny, black shapes that prowled around it. They hissed and wheezed as the fire rose. Soon enough, it returned to its original form, crackling merrily.

The curly-haired man gasped. He turned to Brezno in horror, “How many do you think there are?”

“I don't know,” Brezno replied, “more than we anticipated.”

The creature he sat on softly growled with its head down, steadily pawing the ground. Glancing swiftly towards it, Brezno whispered, “We'll have to work together Buno. None can escape.”

Buno the Quinx growled in response.

Looking at the other man Brezno said, “Climb onto Buno and hold tight, Belen. We haven't much time.”

Belen did as he was told. Brezno muttered some words under his breath, and a log that was ablaze rose into his outstretched palm. Buno swung his hefty wings and lifted them slightly above the ground. The entourage of dark shapes surrounding them rose at the edge of the clearing – their black wings silent windmills. Higher and higher Buno went, further from the fire, and all this while the silvery-black blanket moved closer around them, keeping an even level. They were much higher than the trees around the fire, and yet they rose. Belen looked around

with growing fear and apprehension. What was Brezno's plan? They were going to be ambushed! He held the baby close to his chest. The fire below was a dancing dot now and the grotesque shapes were so tightly knit around, that he was sure they were done for.

Suddenly, without warning, Brezno shouted, "Now!!!". With a deafening growl, Buno dived headfirst, his wings outstretched. Their sabre-toothed predators followed, diving alongside, determined to ravage them as one. Belen squinted below and his eyes opened wide. They were going to land right in the middle of the fire! But before they could touch it, Brezno threw the log of wood into it, exclaiming, '*Libera Quema!*'. Buno halted mid-air. The fire instantly expanded wide, almost touching the trees on the edges. A bluish wave rose above the ground from this sheet of flame, sweeping everything in its path. To Belen, it felt as if the world had slowed down. He closed his eyes, expecting to be scorched any moment – but that moment did not come. Below him, Buno the Quinx felt extremely cold. He felt a dull ringing in his ears and then the fire went out altogether. The black shapes seemed to fade and then completely vanished, with a few soft splats on the ground. It was pitch-dark.

Buno stood stock-still where the fire had previously been. The silence in the woods was deafening and Belen felt uneasy. Brezno touched the back of the creature's giant, white head as if awakening a beast in slumber. Buno took a deep breath and raised his head. His bright, grey eyes seemed to pierce the darkness. Then, with an ear-splitting howl, he leapt into the sky.

Clutching the bundle tightly, Belen looked over the castle grounds and its outskirts long after they had taken flight, for hidden signs of trickery, but could not conceive any pursuers – or for that matter, any movement at all. It was a while before he could overcome his edginess, but when he did, he felt a mixture of great relief and sadness. He looked at the back of his saviour's head, unseeingly contemplating the events of the night.

"Brezno," he said suddenly, "do you know what became of the others?"

"Not yet," Brezno replied.

They flew in silence until Belen sensed they had company. A bird with dark-blue plumage and a

black beak had joined them. It blended in so well with the night, he couldn't be sure how long it had been there. It alighted on Brezno's shoulder and gently grazed its crown on his temple, letting out a deep guttural sound. They flew onward until Brezno finally sighed, "Thank you Byana."

Byana took off, flying ahead in the same direction. Brezno did not say more, however, until they reached a mass of thick clouds and the air felt distinctively cooler. Here he let out a satisfied, "Ah!". They flew over a jungle with dense undergrowth and vegetation, traversing a vast river before descending and landing on a small, dark and foggy street. Buno trotted nimbly towards the centre and came to a halt, even as Brezno got off with Belen at his heels, walking swiftly ahead.

"I have grave news Belen. None of the others survived. As soon as you alerted me, I sent Byana ahead to keep watch. If you were unable to break out the back door I would have known thus. After your escape however, she flew out to the front of Castle Benzique, where she sensed all that took place."

Belen halted and looked steadily into Brezno's eyes as if searching for a faint glimmer of hope. "Are you sure?" he blurted when he could find none.

"It is done, Belen."

Belen looked down slowly, struggling with his emotions. Brezno reached out and squeezed his arm reassuringly.

"Come now, all is not lost. The natural flights of a wise mind are not from loss to dereliction, but from despair to hope. We must have purpose. And as long as we have her," he gestured towards Belen's arms, "we have hope – the brightest we have had yet."

Belen nodded. The night's unfortunate events weighed heavy on his tired frame and he seemed to stoop under it. Only now did Brezno realize he was gravely wounded.

“Belen!” he cried, “This should have been tended to sooner.”

He set to work, muttering incantations and running his palms over Belen’s back in an intricate pattern. When he was done, the wound was as good as healed. An ugly, long scar stretched across his back instead.

Belen seemed to regain some of his vigour. “Brezno, where are we?”

“Oh, that’s right! This ... is the village of Quaint Quillin. I have arranged for you to stay here. I had it planned ever since I heard that Efovic and Eldin wanted a child. You know ... just in case. It is, as yet, unknown to Zirit. This was where an ancient civilization of early Ziritians once lived. They eventually divided into two tribes due to a difference in fundamental beliefs. One of these settled in present-day Zirit. The other tribe – the Yudlings – formed their own land. We call it Yudland – a land without magic. But I daresay,” Brezno turned to look at Belen with a small smile, “you already know of this land.”

“Of Yudland I am aware. But this village ... I thought it was but a myth,” Belen said looking around curiously.

“It has long disappeared from the face of Zirit and is considered a part of folklore. But it does exist. And this is as hidden as you can be. You will not be found here, at least not for a while.”

They had reached a little cottage at the end of the street. A small garden greeted them at the entrance, atop which Byana sat, unmoving.

“Here we are at last. Now, remember Belen, no one must know who you really are. Not a single soul.”

Belen looked puzzled, “What do you mean? Who will I need to hide it from here?”

“Why the residents of course!”

“You mean ... people live here?”

“Why of course they do!”

“But I thought you said it is hidden and unknown to Zirit. Who would live here?”

Brezno smiled and replied with a mysterious sparkle in his eyes, “Those who want to stay unknown Belen. Those who want to be hidden.”

Before Belen could react, the bundle stirred in his arms.

Brezno exclaimed, “Noses and pies! What a rough night it has been for the new-born. Come, let us see the little one.”

Belen brushed off the covers to reveal a round, caramel-coloured face. Warm, chestnut eyes peeped from under the lids drowsily. He blew a soft, comforting breeze and the baby closed her eyes again.

Brezno smiled, “Do we have a name, Belen?”

Belen looked up, “Yes. Her mother knew as soon as she was born.”

“Well let’s have it.”

“Lori. Her name is Lori.”

Brezno looked down at the baby and gently brushed the tip of her nose, “Welcome to Zirit ... Lori.”

* * *

*Hippity Hoppity! Higher and higher she went
Brave or foolish? We shall see in the end*

Chapter 1

Twelve Years Later

The sun rose magnificently over the village of Quaint Quillin as if determined to outdo its own brilliance. As its rays gently illuminated the flora and fauna in the surrounding forest, it gradually filled with the sounds of its inhabitants that were slowly rising from their entangled dreams into a strikingly wondrous reality.

Nestled in the midst of a huge Banyan tree, a pod of Indigoes – little, blue sparrows – were twittering madly as part of their usual morning ritual. Perched atop a giant oak nearby, another group of Laryn were engaging in their own brand of trilling. They had red heads, bronze wings, light-green tails and lithe, white bodies. Some caring mothers were looking for food for their young ones near the river. There, near the marshy waters, Mire-minkies were found in abundance. Mire-minkies were creatures with ant-like heads in the middle and half an ant's body on either side. They were found either on trees or under marshy grounds where they worked together to collect food and build colonies. The Mire-minky with the largest and smelliest excrement was elected the King or Queen for five full moons. This made sense because it was the smell of their excrement that kept predators at bay. Today, however, they had lost their queen to ill-health and the Laryn were making good use of their queenlessness.

On the opposite bank of the river a horde of Kushnags were busy burrowing into the ground for as deep and cozy a hole as they could manage. Kushnags were golden-yellow hamster-like creatures with tiny-white polka dots on their fur.

All of a sudden, the ground shook. The animals and birds stopped their foraging about and looked up. A foreboding gale of wind blew down the river from a bend in its natural route. The ground shook again, this time louder than before. The Laryn flew back to their nests, leaving the Mire-minkies in peace. A few of the Kushnags scampered back into their holes, and the Indigoes stopped twittering – except for a baby Indigo that did not really understand what the commotion was all about. The ground shook a third time – the loudest yet. This time there was no mistaking it – there was a giant beast adrift. With a loud splash around the river bend a panting girl came into sight. She had waist length, jet-black hair that had been tamed with the help of a thick, intricate braid. Her milky-caramel skin was muddied and her dark-green tunic – soiled. She wore a slingshot around her neck and was constantly looking over her shoulder as if running away from something. As she came closer, the remaining Kushnags jumped into their new hole, the Laryn cowered in their nests and the baby Indigo’s twittering ceased. The girl looked ahead – her bright-gold chestnut eyes searching the forest, and coming to rest on the Banyan tree. She jumped from rock to rock, reaching the river bank where the Mire-minkies had been moments ago, and started climbing the tree. As her hands and feet touched the tree, its cracks filled with molten gold and it propelled her from branch to branch, almost helping her ascend.

Around the same river bend, there now came a creature unlike any other that had wandered there this morning. It had a gigantic bearish body, a huge head with a pig-like snout, delicate fanlike ears, sharp claws, a thick, curly tail and was covered in maroon fur. This creature was known as a Porskin. The Earth shook with every step it took. It moved about in the water, aimlessly searching, looking in-between trees and snorting loudly. The girl, now seated high on the Banyan tree, peered out from within its overhanging roots, hardly daring to breathe. The Porskin looked toward the bank where the Kushnags had dug their burrow and started trotting in that direction. Without warning, infringing upon the silence and almost unseating the girl from her branch, the baby Indigo began twittering furiously. The Porskin stopped in its tracks and half-turned, grunting. The girl quickly scooped up the bird, holding it tenderly in her hands, and planted a soft kiss on its blue forehead. The twittering stopped. The Indigo looked into the girl’s eyes for a few moments, then cocked its little face to one side, picking a bread crumb from her tunic and nibbling at it. The girl sighed with relief and placed the Indigo back in its nest. She turned her attention back to the Porskin. But ... where was it? She couldn’t spot it on the opposite bank.

Before she had time to react, the Banyan tree shivered. Looking down she realized it was too late – the Porskin had found her. It hit the tree again with all its might. The girl slipped down a few branches. Holding on tight, she placed her foot in a hollow in the tree trunk to steady herself. Unfortunately, the hole was wet with dew – making her slip – thus falling right under the Porskin’s nose! At first, they both seemed taken aback, then she felt a fat, pink tongue slop over her entire face. The creature was licking her with vehement affection.

Pink with laughter she pushed its face away, yelling, “Okay, okay. You win this time. But that was pure luck! No way you would’ve found me otherwise.”

The creature grunted loudly in response and softly rubbed its head on her stomach. She petted it with a radiant smile.

“Lori! Lori! Are you in there?”

Lori sat up straight with a jerk. *It must be Bu*, she thought, and sprang up on her feet. She grabbed the Porskin’s face in her hands and said, “I got to go. You won’t catch me next time Slosly. Be good until then.”

Slosly snorted and turned its attention to the ground, scouring it for food. Lori turned and jogged towards the village. At the edge of the forest, a glinting, smooth and perfectly oval stone caught her eye. She bent down and pocketed it with a smile. On her way out, she heard Bu’s voice calling again and shouted to let her know she was coming.

Lori unknowingly entered the same street where Buno the Quinx had flown Belen and Brezno almost twelve years ago, when she was nothing but a nonchalant, little sleeping bundle. Even though more than a decade had passed, some things remained unchanged. She still fostered a loving fondness for her grandfather and fell asleep as soon as the wind brushed her face. The round-faced baby had grown into an adventurous, buoyant girl with a zest for life and an unusually insatiable thirst for nature.

A little girl of around nine years came into view. She was slightly chubby, with an oval face and

shoulder-length hair. Lori ran up to her as Bu chided, “Where have you been? We need to be in the centre in an hour. Belen has been looking all over for you.”

“I was in the forest with Slosy.”

“Ah! Did you win again?”

“No.”

“What?” Bu looked aghast.

“I went early because I didn’t want to miss the event. The tree was wet with dew. So I slipped and fell.”

“Oh, okay,” Bu looked bored again. “So Belen says we are to have breakfast at once and then leave together for the main square.”

“Sounds about right, I’m starving.”

They had reached the cottage where Brezno had left them on that fateful night. The air smelled delicious and Lori ran to the kitchen where she was greeted by a mane of familiar white, curly hair.

“Apa! What’s cooking?” she skipped around excitedly, trying to get a peek at the frying pan.

Belen laughed and the skin around his eyes happily wrinkled.

“There is my angel. Watch out now, the pan is hot.”

“What is it?” she asked again, breathless.

“Cleva. Served with a huge mug of Clava of course.”

“My favourite! Apa you’re the best!” she hugged him tightly around the waist.

Cleeva was a Ziritian breakfast speciality. It was a palm-sized pancake, containing vegetables and flavoured with spices – served with an onion-tomato sauce. Clava, on the other hand, was a coconutty drink made with condensed milk, thick dairy cream and vanilla extract. Belen’s Clava, however, had a particularly savoury taste, for he added chocolate syrup and an ingredient that he kept secret: a touch of ‘Baminy’ – a viscous form of sugar cane extract. Made by Bamboo bees that lived near sugarcane plantations, this was not the easiest to procure. But Belen was highly skilled in finding rare herbs and plants with healing properties. He had earned quite a reputation in Quillin as Physician.

Clava was known to be immensely filling and energizing; with Cleeva it made for a healthy, sumptuous meal. The girls dug into their plates hungrily.

“So where was my granddaughter this morning?” Belen asked.

“Oh I was playing with Slosy,” Lori replied through a mouthful.

“Of course. Did you evade him again?”

“No,” she replied offhandedly, chomping on another mouthful.

Belen looked up from his plate, bemused.

“She went early because of the event. The tree was wet with dew, so she slipped and fell,” Bu recited automatically.

“Oh, now that makes sense,” Belen mused, returning to his Cleeva.

Lori washed down her food with the thick straw-coloured drink and looked at Belen. This was one of the things she adored about her grandfather. How easily he accepted her so-called

peculiarities. She could as easily talk to him about playing with a huge Porskin as with a cuddly Kushnag. Other village dwellers were alarmed, even appalled, at her affinity to wilderness and wild beings. They shook their heads at her muddy knees and soiled clothes. Little girls should learn knitting or be helping their mothers in the kitchen, not be running around with Porskin! How abhorrent. But to Lori none of them were wild – just beings. She enjoyed learning their habits and communicating with them. Belen not only knew, but well understood his granddaughter’s love for the woods. If there was one place she felt truly at home, it was in the midst of nature. What was more, he trusted her instincts when she was there. For Lori spoke, or rather *felt*, Florian – the language of trees.

“Did you-” Belen started

“-cross the river?” Lori interjected, “No Apa. I stayed on this side of it. Don’t worry.”

“Or on it for a little bit,” she added in an undertone.

“Good,” he held her gaze for a moment and then let out an exclamation, “Jolly Poppins! Look at the time, we must be there in a quarter hour. Come now.”

They hurried along and made their way to the main plaza of Quaint Quillin.

The ‘event’ was a celebration of the festival of Zoki, which was enthusiastically celebrated by Quillians. Every year an earthen pot was magically placed at a great height the day before. Legend had it that Zoki (the boy after whom the festival was named) visited Quaint Quillin at night and left a blessing in the pot for the village and its people. The pot had to be retrieved by hand – without the use of magical spells – the next day. And this was to be achieved in no more than six attempts. If magic was used or six attempts exhausted, the blessing would disappear.

Every year the young men of Quillin formed a human pyramid, which the lightest, most supple boy (representing the Zoki) would climb – breaking the earthen pot and obtaining the blessing. The women supporting the participants danced and sung around, encouraging their husbands or friends, while others flocked in great numbers to observe the spectacle and eat Ziritian delicacies.

This year too they were gathered in the main plaza, chattering loudly. Once everyone had arrived, Doga – the drummer – beat his drum vigorously and the youngsters began to form the base of the pyramid. The hefty, muscular ones formed the bottom, with the lighter ones climbing their shoulders, and so on. Lori stared in wonder. She was awed how year after year, even if they fell repeatedly, they always rebuilt the pyramid. They always got to the pot. Her adventurous side secretly wished she could be the one to win it, but girls never participated. This year however, the boys were having more than their usual share of trouble. They built the pyramid bit by bit, but toppled every time they reached the last rung. The fact that the pot had been placed higher this year did not help. Every year they had obtained the blessing with much aplomb, and in their over-zealousness the boys had perhaps over-reached their goal. The cheering continued. Toshi, an eighteen-year-old, was this year's (symbolic) Zoki. They were tired and now had two attempts left, having tried four times already. They began rebuilding the pyramid and Toshi hoisted himself up on their shoulders. Their breathing was heavy, their stamina tested by Zoki. Before long, however, their exhaustion got the better of them and Toshi fell on sweaty heads for the fifth time. The crowd gasped. They started to murmur in hushed voices.

The village barman stepped forward and shouted, “Come now, have some rest! Have some Clava! You need your energy back, that's all.”

Everyone sprung to action, determined to do their bit in assisting the youngsters to get Quillin its blessing in this final attempt. Refreshments were brought, big jugs of Clava set down and cooling towels produced.

Once the lads were recharged and stronger, they proceeded once again towards the pot. Slowly, with determined glances towards the top, they started reassembling the pyramid. They climbed steadily and cautiously upon each other's shoulders, with calculated movements. The formation looked stable. As the final trio of the smallest boys started stationing themselves at the top, Toshi began his ascent. He heaved himself nimbly, placing his foot warily on empty shoulder nooks, but taking care to not overburden the heavy-lifters. The villagers held their breath, not daring to blink. The drumming had stopped as Doga stared open-mouthed. Lori inched forward to get a better look. Toshi was around the middle of the pyramid, as light and flexible as a simian. The

three boys at the top waited for him patiently, ready to hoist him up. As luck would have it, it was this very moment that a common housefly chose to hover over a heavyset man at the bottom of the pyramid buzzing around his ears and settling on his nose. He blinked but did not budge, holding the person on his shoulder steady. Toshi was at the top, climbing onto the final set of shoulders. At the foot of the pyramid, sweat trickled down the man's forehead, over his nose, and the fly inched closer to his nostril. Toshi steadied himself at the peak of the pyramid now, having planted his feet firmly on his friends' shoulders, he looked up and reached for the pot. The crowd watched with bated breath, all eyes on him, the blessing inches from his outstretched hands. Far below, the fly circled the man's nose and abruptly entered his left nostril. Before he knew it, he had sneezed loudly, shaking uncontrollably and upsetting the footing of the youth on his shoulder.

Lori looked on in shock and realized, *They aren't going to make it!* She turned and saw sad, disappointed faces staring back. A group of aged women stood clutching their handkerchiefs, tears streaming down their wrinkled cheeks. Her grandfather shown at a distance, a look of uncertainty upon his face. *No!* And so it was that Lori found herself sprinting towards the youngsters and hopping on their bewildered shoulders towards the pinnacle of the collapsing pyramid. Once at the top she jumped long and high onto a nearby tree, just as the entire reassembled formation gave way, falling to the ground. She heard surprised gasps all around but hardly noticed. Looking at the pot, she realized she was still not high enough. Spotting another tree with a high branch jutting out, Lori jumped and the tree she was on thrust her onto the desired direction. She landed hard and scrambled on the trunk – hanging onto the branch with one arm. Someone below screamed.

Ignoring this, Lori put a foot on the bark of the tree and thrust herself upwards with all her strength. With the tree's help she swung in a clockwise direction and landed deftly atop the branch she had been hanging on seconds before, like a graceful spider spinning a web. She was high enough now, but not *close* enough. There was a tree near hers and to the pot, but it had no branches. There was no way she could hold on to it. Thinking quickly, Lori realized that tree was her only chance of getting to the pot – she would have to swing by it, at the same time getting the blessing. She touched her forehead to the tree trunk and took a deep breath. Instantly, she felt more confident. Facing the bough-less tree and crouching slightly, she pulled out the stone from her pocket. And then, she jumped.

* * *

*Lookey here, we got us a bright blessing
Whence it cometh? You must be a-guessing*

Chapter 2

Zoki's Story

Everything dramatically slowed down as Lori focussed on the task at hand. As if in slow motion, she dexterously bounced her right forefoot off the bare tree, using its force to swivel herself left, while aiming at the pot with her slingshot mid-air. She hit the pebble right on its mark before completing the about-turn. Balanced precariously in the air, with nothing but the tree's nature-force to hold her hands and feet - she now used the sole of her left foot to propel herself onto the overhanging branches of the tree standing beside the bough-less one. She swung from these, coming to rest on the thick tree trunk and becoming aware of her thundering heart. While recuperating in the comfort of its dense foliage, Lori saw something lustrous fall from the broken pot over the heads of the residents of Quillin. And thus, the sixth attempt to secure the pot ended and Lori won the blessing for all of Quillin.

As she descended from the tree, the crowd stood transfixed, gaping in wonder as if Lori was a queer creature that had just dropped from the skies. She slowly made her way through, trying to locate her grandfather. She could hear hushed tones behind her back.

“How could she jump that high?”

“What was she thinking, hopping over the boys like that?”

“But she got us the blessing!”

“Will the blessing work if a girl gets it? Zoki was a boy.”

Lori was starting to feel very uncomfortable, when someone stepped forward and put a hand on her shoulder. Relieved, she looked up expecting to see her grandpa, but instead found herself looking into the face of the village barman. Her half-smile was replaced with apprehension. But within the barman’s burly face his eyes gently twinkled.

“Young lady, today y’got Quaint Quillin its much awaited blessin’. And after we were this close to losin’ it. I think a celebration is in order!”

The crowd all around murmured and bristled. Someone at the back shouted, “How do we know the blessing works?”

To this the barman promptly replied, “Why musn’t it work? Let me tell’ya somethin’. This filly is better ‘an tens of y’lads put together. In all of me time in Quillin, never ‘ave I seen anyone leapin’ around like that. That was plain gutsy, that was.”

With that he held out his hand and from it shone a few particles, as lustrous as diamonds and smooth as flowing water.

“Me old man always said,” he continued, “you either get ‘em blessin’s or miss ‘em. There doesn’ exist a thing such as a blessin’ ya’got but don’t work. Zoki helped all children in Zirit, *both* girls and boys. Won’t he be a glum, gloomy soul, seein’ what we’re makin’ of his toilin’.”

He shook his head in dismay and strode to a wooden table, spreading the particles on it, clearly visible in the light.

“This lassie just risked ‘er neck to bring us our blessin’. I say we show ‘er some well-deserved

respect.”

Everyone stood in silence, lost in the ethereal glow of the specks on the table. His powerful speech and the glowing prize had had the desired effect. There was shy, scattered clapping from the crowd which soon burst into enthusiastic applause from the entire village. Lori was startled to feel many grateful and encouraging pats on her back. Suddenly, Belen appeared at her side. He looked shaken but proud. “Lori,” he said weakly. She threw herself in his arms. They stood for a few tender moments, locked in warm embrace. Then Belen started rambling on about how she should be more careful and less impulsive. Lori could only but affectionately smile, as he tried to be stern and doting at the same time.

* * * * *

It was late evening. The villagers were gathered around a huge bonfire, discussing the day’s events and chatting merrily. A group of rotund men were laughing raucously over mugs of Ginger Yin at the far end of the circle. Yin was a fermented drink, prepared with a lemon-ginger flavour, and popular among Ziritian folk. They were discussing last year’s celebration. The pot had yielded a fine, unusually soft, bluish-white thread. As they spun it into yarn on their spindles, the people of Quillin found the clothes made from this fibre kept them warm in winters and cold in summers. They rejoiced at the ingenuity of Zoki’s blessing.

Lori turned to her grandpa excitedly, “Apa, what was in the pot this year?”

“We are not sure yet,” Belen replied, “but they seem to be a unique brand of seeds. I’ve never seen the likes of them. We will plant them in the fields next to the river and see what they yield”.

Bu, who was there with her grandmother, chimed in, “Belen, why do we have only six attempts to get to the pot?”

“That’s a good question, little one,” Belen’s eyes crinkled as he smiled kindly, “the number six is considered auspicious due to many reasons. Zoki himself was born on the sixth of January, which is why we celebrate the festival on this day. It is also said he was fifteen years old – which

adds up to six – when he rebelled against the biggest tyrant Zirit has ever seen and put a stop to his oppression.”

“You mean the *King*?”

“Hardly a king. He was more of a cruel dictator. None were happy under his rule.”

“And Zoki freed Zirit? What did he do?” Bu asked, her interest piqued.

“Well, now that’s a long story. And you should know, Zoki was no ordinary boy.”

When Lori and Bu insisted on hearing the story, Belen began to hum a tune known to all of Quillin. One by one all those around them joined in and sang.

*Once in ancient ‘Zirithian’
Fields greened with harvest
Rivers blued with nutrition
People prospered in rest*

*But Alas! Came a Barbarian
With greed-full dissidence
Thunder in his stomping steps
Gnarled in stormy vengeance*

*He plundered on and looted
All pristinely earned wealth
Made slaves of the suited
With vileness and stealth*

*Savoury meals were luxury
Milk and butter so rare
Comfort turned catastrophe*

With nothing at all to spare

*Children got precious little
With sweets and toys banned
Their poor hearts brittle
Tears with soot on hands*

*All feared this big despot
They trembled at his sight
Except for one non-bigot
Who saw the levied plight*

*It was Zoki, his only son
Righteous, kind and just
Eliciting from his father
Something close to love*

*He harboured a deep dislike
For ever mounting injustice
It needed to be put right
By those not unsmart nor gutless*

*And so fifteen-year-old Zoki
Set out to help the oppressed
Gathering kids in low-key
Bringing about some redress*

*They scampered and skipped
Hidden, agile and lithesome
To steal cheesy buttermilk
From goblets that glistened*

*Shone high up and pompous
Hanging around the evil manor
To taunt and cause a ruckus
Tempt in an unseemly manner*

*Navigating with Zoki's help
The bold lads came and went
Escaping the despot's belt
Raiding the lion's own den*

*And so with great daring
They got scarce delicacies
That needed rightful sharing
For starving stricken families*

*But the guards joined the dots
Of their diminishing reserves
The many shining empty pots
That were meant to be preserved*

*The Barbarian set up watch
Catching the lads red-handed
Their efforts all for naught
Being off-guard and off-handed*

*He ordered them be revealed
This preposterous group
Shocked to see unconcealed
Zoki, head of the troupe!*

*Appalled and livid he glared
At the culprits one by one*

*Feeling a betrayal unfair
By his one and only son*

*His face set and hardened
His heart stony as ever
'None shall be pardoned!'
He bellowed in a mighty tremor*

*'The penalty applies to all
More so for the lead ruffian
None shall stand strong or tall
Throw them into the dungeon!'*

*'I shall never back inequity'
Replied Zoki unperturbed,
'And do it again if need be
For justice is well deserved'*

*All of Zirithian but marvelled
At the lad's plucky fine heart
Resolving to land a solution
Planning an escape for a start*

*For unlike the other fellows
His charge was more severe
He was to burn at the stake
For treason high and drear!*

*All gathered from near and far
With knowledge deep and vast
Necromancy, spells and devilry
Getting what they sought at last*

*They stole into the dungeon
In the dead of the dark night
To find Zoki the young felon
And set wrong deeds right*

*Though he couldn't break out
They left bewitchment strong
Which was not only devout
But could hold on for long*

*Next dawn the stake was ready
For the lad to harshly burn
His father callous but steady
The masses sorrowfully stern*

*The flames leapt high and dry
Damsels looked away sobbing
Who knew all would run awry?
For innocent moral robbing*

*But even as the fire swelled
Zoki remained untouched
It huffed, surged and melted
Doing him no harm as such*

*The Barbarian was enraged
His eyes slits of crazed fury
Try as they might to reignite
Zoki stayed clean as a jury*

Seeing this the crowd rejoiced

*There rose a colossal rebellion
Without fear, they stood poised
To win back good old Zirithian*

*The guards aghast, pelted away
The despot alone and helpless
Finally bound - murky and grey
Into a grim, stark messy tempest*

*Banished for all of eternity
From Zirithian, land of magic
Never to be seen or heard again
His absence anything but tragic*

*Thus magic, virtue and goodness
Overcame debauchery and pillage
With Zoki made King in fullness
A just, devoted, humble visage.*

The song ended and gave way to silence. There was no sound or movement except for the victorious crackle of the bonfire, around which everyone was seated. Lori and Bu were frozen in a wide-eyed, open-mouthed trance. The verses they had all hummed together had been more of a rhythmic chant. They might as well as have been marching. Lori felt a strange exhilaration and sense of victory as she heard the end. She could see a calm fire in her grandfather's eyes as he turned to her and Bu and said, "So we celebrate Zoki's victory every year as a festival on the day he was born. The earthen pot represents the goblets that he and his group of rebels stole from the evil manor every night. The pyramid a symbol of teamwork and discipline. We celebrate togetherness and goodness, remembering that collectively we can achieve anything. Winning the blessing in the pot shows victory as a result of wit and perseverance. Now, which of you will tell me the moral of Zoki's tale?"

Bu and Lori looked at each other. Bu replied dubiously, "Umm ... magic defeats evil?"

Belen smiled and looked at Lori.

“Don’t turn a blind eye to injustice?” she said.

Belen’s eyes crinkled, “Almost. Righteousness, not magic, triumphs over wrongdoing or harmful intentions. Though the residents of ancient Zirithian used magic to save Zoki, they always had the knowledge of magic. It was not a new skill. But Zoki’s virtuousness united them like never before. For the first time since the Barbarian arrived – they believed. In themselves, in freedom, in victory and that ... made all the difference.”

Suddenly, the man with the Ginger Yin burped very loudly. At his side, his partner was red-faced and wore a deeply contented look. Everyone seemed to wake up from their trance.

“Jolly Poppins, look at that! How time flies. Come now Lori dear, I’m going to tuck you into bed.”

The crowd around the bonfire thinned. Bidding Bu and her grandmother goodbye, Lori treaded home slowly but gladly, for the day had left her exhausted.

Once in bed, she asked her grandpa, “Apa, where did the Barbarian come to Zirit from?”

Belen let out an amused chuckle, “You are a bright one, aren’t you? Well, we don’t know that for now. But someday, my dear, you will find out.”

With that and a loving kiss on her forehead, Belen blew out the candles and left. Lori turned in her bed with a happy smile and was snoring contentedly within minutes.

Above the cottage, the clouds thickened. A murky sheen enveloped them in the sky.

* * *

The afternoon sun blazed mercilessly on the vast, barren expanse that was the Shintazz desert. Formidable, stupendous sand dunes stretched as far as the eyesight could reach – pervading a sense of awe and magnanimity. Within its sandy crevices, countless untold tales unfolded amongst a multitude of beings.

A red-tailed, purple-furred fox hunted a family of rodents, while a caravan of three-humped, spotted camels made their way to one of the many desert oases for some respite from the heat. Further away from the freshwater pool, a blue-tailed scorpion was locked in battle with a three-tongued snake, even as a lazy, black-horned armadillo made its way to rest inside its burrow.

Yonder, amid the hot, sandy wasteland - buried deeper still - there lay a surreptitious cavern. It was silent save the soft, rhythmic intonations of three blind, withered women. A raspy voice from the rear end of the cavern barked instructions for the ritual, even as they chanted around a small, sinister-green flame. These women were Banshees – exiled in the desert for one immoral, cruel sin – that of drinking the blood of Ziritian tribes. A Banshee could live her entire life on raw meat and animal blood. But if, heaven forbid, they were to even taste tribal blood, this was a drug that they could not forgo.

These banished voodooists had very limited options – perish in the desert after living the remainder of their lives in abstract misery and destitution – or create a world where their habits would not be looked down upon. A world where their craved tonic would be easily available – one despoiled by Ruby magic.

The voice guiding the ritual emerged from the darkness, revealing a hag-like old woman. She

was the eldest, yet displayed most signs of life. Her narrow, button-like eyes betrayed cunning and vile, as she hobbled around the cavern on her spindly legs. The three blind Banshees bowed their heads in reverence at her gnarled toes. Fearful, irascible whispers emerged from their knotted, notched mouths –

“Holy Oasis ...”

“O matron ...”

“Help us ...”

She shambled on, holding out an arm and ignoring their pleas. A greenish-orange flame appeared on the palm of The Oasis’ upturned hand, revealing previously unlit parts of the cavern. It was littered with a spooky assortment of eerie objects, some of which were moving. In the centre, she waved her hand so that a large crystal ball appeared. At first it swirled with foggy mist and then almost at once - various images began to move in the haze one after the other – a beautiful, expressionless woman dressed in red sat on a throne ... another, as hideous as the other had been alluring, gnawed on the ground surrounded by rats ... a third, with a sad, elegant face stood in a foreign land, holding a glowing orb in her hands ... and a fourth – a girl - played betwixt magically lit trees in a hidden village.

The Oasis closed her fists and the light went out. The crystal ball disappeared. She limped in the darkness to a corner of the cavern where a large Troll-like puppet stood, and planted a wet kiss on its chest.

“It is time, my peach,” she whispered, looking into the puppet’s eyes with affection, “Vivo!”

It immediately sprang to life, the ground quivering under its huge, smelly feet. The three blind Banshees recoiled, huddling together in horror.

“Take me to the Ruby Queen,” said the Oasis to her puppet.

The Troll-clown buckled down onto all fours, letting her climb on. Once she was safely on its back, it climbed up the rocky wall which opened into a long, airy tunnel – the end of which shone

bright with the rays of the desert sun. A blast of hot wind chafed at their faces, ruffling the billowing, white sheets that lined the roof of the tunnel. The puppet thundered through, its giant leaps raising dusty clouds in its wake, while the Oasis uncorked a foul-smelling glass bottle and took an urgent gulp.

As they exited the tunnel, leaving behind the cowering blind dames in the cavern, the animals scampered away from the much-younger shrew-like woman seated on this strange, unshapely brute. Her face shone in the blazing sun with fewer wrinkles and her hunched back seemed to straighten almost grotesquely even as her mount leaped over the slithering sands in hurried frenzy.

*Look high, look nigh - all is not what it seems
For where you see light there must be dark dreams*

Chapter 3

Light and Darkness

Lori awoke with a start. She heard the rhythmic pitter-patter of raindrops and saw water rivulets on the foggy window. She could tell it was still early.

A crunching noise at the foot of her bed made her turn over and look down. There, in a tray on a soft cushion, sat a Puffin. It was a round, furry, dark-brown creature with large, strong wings. While it happily munched on some groundnuts, Lori stroked it gently, “Morning Kif. When did you get up?”

The furry ball let out a little burp. Realizing she wouldn’t be able to sleep much more, Lori got out of bed and made her way out, yawning. Kifli, the Puffin, followed suit.

She had barely stepped out of her room, however, when a loud pop made her jump. Lori looked around groggily. The hall outside was full of floating balloons. She had accidentally burst one that had been wedged under the door. Completely addled, she looked around wondering what

was going on. Was she still dreaming? As if in answer to her musings, Belen materialized from the kitchen.

“Look who’s up early!” he beamed.

“Apa, Why do we have balloons in the hall?”

He gave her a look of surprise and then burst out laughing.

“What a feisty yet absent-minded granddaughter I have,” he said walking up to her. “The balloons, my dear, are for you,” Belen explained, putting an arm around Lori. He smiled warmly into her sleepy eyes, “Happy Birthday my angel.”

She clapped her hands over her mouth, “Is it the ninth already? I can’t believe I forgot my own Birthday!” Suddenly wide awake, she ran around the hall playing with the balloons. Kifli flew behind, flapping his wings with joy. Belen chuckled and disappeared into the kitchen. He returned carrying a tray full of food and drink. There was Lori’s favourite meal, Cleeva and Clava. Next to it was a round, white dish with a candle on it. This was ‘Miliki’, a Ziritian dessert prepared with condensed milk, almonds and walnuts. Topped with ice-cream, it made for a mouth-watering delicacy. There was also a little bowl of milk for Kifli, which he began lapping thirstily.

Lori was jubilant, “Apa, this is brilliant!”

“Happy twelfth my dear. Come now, blow your candle and make a wish.”

Lori did as she was told.

“Now eat your Cleeva before it gets cold. Yes, there is more Miliki for later,” he added, as Lori opened her mouth to ask. “Get ready once you are done. We are going to the river.”

“The river?!” exclaimed Lori, “What for?” It was rare for her grandfather to go with Lori into the

forest. He never had a problem with her scampering amongst the creatures there as long as she did not cross the river, but he hardly ventured that way himself, unless to collect some very rare herbs. Lori brought back the usual ones he needed for treating the prevalent health issues of the villagers.

“To give you your birthday present, if you will let me,” Belen replied with a smile.

“Oh! Can’t I have it now?”

“Well ... no.”

Before Lori could ask more, Belen said, “Now-now, no more questions, finish up and meet me outside. I’m going to get the boat ready.”

Hearing this, Lori looked alarmed, but Belen turned calmly and went out to make the arrangements. She ate her birthday meal greedily, pondering over what her grandfather had said. The last time they had taken out the boat, it had been to retrieve some unique weeds that grew at the bottom of the river. Lori was sure she wasn’t getting herbs or weeds as a birthday gift. All the same, it was a gift that needed them to take the boat out to the river. But why?

She finished her meal and got ready, mulling excitedly over what her present could possibly be.

It had been three days since the festival of Zoki. Lori’s win was still the most talked about event amongst the people of Quaint Quillin. The weather, however, did not seem keen to share in their joy, but appeared instead, to be lamenting unknown sorrows of its own. It had rained incessantly for the past three days, punctuated only with further cloudiness. Some miles away from the cottage, further up the river from where the blue Indigoes nested and around the bend where Slosy the Porskin had rampaged about on the morning of Zoki – large, overdrawn clouds gathered above the river and the surrounding forest; looking more grey and foreboding than the weather warranted. Across the river and deep into the forest where Lori was forbidden to venture, the mud on the ground cracked in a particularly marshy spot.

There was a loud thud from below and the mud scattered all around into uneven blocks. From within the hole rose a ragged figure in faded clothes. The frayed ends of damp, thin, greyish-brown hair stuck out from under its hood. Its nails were filthy and scavenging rats from underground tunnels clung onto its robe. As the figure climbed out, it looked around as if taking in the surrounding terrain and then, immediately, started sniffing the ground on all fours. It began communicating with the many rats, using a series of strange squeaks and grunts, as they scampered around following instructions. This continued for several minutes, until a rustling sound nearby caused the creature to stop and look up. Someone was standing behind the undergrowth, hidden in the shade of the tree.

“Having fun there, Giza?” a voice from the shade asked, mockingly.

Giza stood on her legs and a lop-sided, almost lunatic grin spread slowly across her face. She made a grunting noise in her throat and asked in a raspy whisper, “Wha-ht da matter, Tizoc ... are you s-caredd ... ov m-he?”

As if in reply, another figure draped in a scarlet cloak, stepped out and took off his hood. He had a tall, stout frame with bright blue eyes, a belly – not too prominent due to his height – and thick, greasy-black hair that stuck to his forehead. His big, round face shone with a look of pure hatred.

“I’m not *scared* ... of anything,” Tizoc spat. “Especially not of part-animals.

A sinister sneer replaced Giza’s grin, “Ah-nimal iz it?” she stepped closer, “Too ... *low-h-ly* for you ... am I? Let ... uz ... see,” she stepped closer still, “do you-h knoe ... how to ... find da plaze?” their noses were almost touching now, “may-h-be I kould uze you ... to find it-h ...”

Tizoc, nose wrinkled, leaned back hastily, “Keep your grubby paws off me! I don’t know anything yet!”

Giza smirked crookedly again. Her teeth shone dirty and caked with mud as she sniggered, “Aye-h ‘av zumthing, lyk alwaz. Let ... uz ... see ... whom Zora findz more ... uze-h-ful.”

No sooner had she uttered these words, that the clouds above them growled angrily and a third figure appeared in the sky with a booming crackle of thunder. It hurtled downwards at blinding speed, forming a swift arc amongst the steely clouds and landing beside them with a loud thud. Up close, they saw a slender woman seated atop a giant creature with large, black bat-like wings and a brown, foxish face. She swept her cloak with one hand, as she dismounted and turned to face Tizoc and Giza.

“Do we have the location?” she said in a cold, deep, ungentle voice.

Tizoc shook his head.

Giza smirked wickedly. “Aye caught ah hyuman scent. In thath direction ... Thiz side it is-uh only animals ... Whotever you look for iz-uh towardz ... da river.”

“Let’s get to it then, we have no time to waste,” demanded Zora. She turned to her mount, “Sasha, stay here on guard and let me know if anyone ventures in this direction.” Sasha responded with a soft growl and the three of them set off in the direction of the river.

“We have been trying to find it for almost a year now,” Tizoc said, “what makes you think today will be any different?”

“Because,” replied Zora, “this place comes highly recommended by the Oasis herself.”

Tizoc stopped in his tracks and started, looking aghast, “The *Oasis*??”

“Yes. So we stick to the plan. Remember,” she turned gravely to face them, “our priority is to get the Mistill. If something goes wrong,” her jaw stiffened, “you know what to do. And whatever happens, *don’t* forget to leave before twilight.”

“What if we can’t?” asked Tizoc.

“You will instantly be turned to ash,” Zora replied without flinching.

* * * * *

At the opposite border of Quaint Quillin, Lori and Belen had walked to the bank of the river and were unloading their little boat from its trolley. They pushed it into the water and got in. Belen rowed until they were in the middle, away from the rocks on its side. From then on, the natural flow of the river carried them steadily forward. They floated next to a green meadow and Lori caught sight of a sparkling young tree. She stared at its branches and leaves. There was an ethereal beauty about them, the likes of which she had never seen.

“Apa,” she said curiously, “Which type of tree is that in the meadow? I’ve never seen it before.”

“That tree,” Belen replied, “is there because of you. We planted the seeds you collected from the pot on the day of Zoki. It’s been just three days and look what it has grown into. Not an ordinary tree after all.”

“What does it do?”

“It seems, it gives the wayfarer that taste which he or she would savour the most.”

“Have you tried?”

“I have.”

“And ...?” Lori pressed on.

A familiar crinkle appeared around Belen’s eyes as he smiled, “A long, long time ago, I tasted a fruit in another land. There they called them Mangoes. I never quite got over their flavour. What I plucked from that tree tasted like those Mangoes ... but even better.” Belen looked at the tree broodingly, “What’s interesting is that I had a backache that morning and it disappeared after I ate the fruit. I suspect the tree also supplies the traveller whatever he *needs* at that time. So if you are tired, for example, its fruit will rejuvenate you. How very extraordinary.”

“Can we go to the meadow? I want to see what it gives me!”

Belen laughed, “We most definitely shall. But first, wouldn’t you like your birthday present?”

“Oh right! Sure I will,” Lori was on the edge of her seat with anticipation.

“Very well.”

Belen rowed to the riverbank opposite to the one that led to Quaint Quillin and halted under the shade of an overhanging grove of willows. He reached into his bag and handed Lori a glass case.

“Go on, my dear, open it,” he said with a nifty smile.

Lori opened the case and gasped.

* * * * *

On the other side of the village, Zora, Tizoc and Giza had encountered somewhat of an obstacle. An invisible barrier prevented them from proceeding to where Giza perceived the river would be.

She pushed against the invisible wall with her hands, clearly dismayed, “That iz-uh impossible. I smell ... fish.”

“Is it?” Tizoc interjected rudely, “Or maybe you mistook the stench of mountain trolls for humans?”

He turned to Zora, “Why are we trusting these *smells*? Let’s try the usual, let’s try Ruby magic.”

“Hush!” Zora replied. Her palms were pressed hard on the barrier and her eyes closed in concentration.

After some beats, she opened them, “This is some very advanced Emerald magic. I suspect the entire village is protected with not one but many enchantments,” she paused, thinking deeply, “for Ruby magic to truly work, we’ll need a prop, or someone from the inside. Until then we have no choice but to try and weaken this enchantment.” She now faced the ragged woman, “Giza, continue searching for any other scent you can pick up. Or sounds of anything close on the other side. Maybe there’s another way to get in through the ground? Tizoc and I will look for anything else we can find.”

With that, they all promptly set to work.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, under the shade of the flopping willows, Lori gaped at her open case. Inside it lay a Harmonica made out of the smoothest wood with intricate markings on its surface. It had four sides - the one used to blow air in was cut in a straight line, the two adjacent sides were perpendicular to it, but of different lengths. The fourth side sloped gently inwards connecting both the adjacent ones. She took it out carefully, feeling its smoothness.

“This my dear, is no ordinary Harmonica,” Belen said, “as you will soon see. This instrument is made from ancient Ziritian wood. It will not rot or go bad under any circumstance. Now to use it, you must remember its symbols. Go on, reveal them.”

Lori covered the face of the Harmonica with her palm and said clearly, “*Revela*”.

Three symbols appeared on its face. The first was a set of majestic wings that shone in silver. The second was the upturned head of a woman looking towards a large palm leaf – high up in her arms. This image shown in blue. The third symbol was that of a perfectly proportioned, big, rounded tree. This one, however did not have any glow. In fact, it seemed not to be functional at all.

Lori looked up, meeting Belen’s eyes, hardly believing her own. He beamed down at her. “Now, Lori, I want you to listen to me very carefully. What I’m about to tell you is very important. I

know that I have not told you much about our family ... your parents ...” Belen paused, and a look of deep grief passed over his face.

Lori’s eyes shot up, startled. She had never heard her grandfather talk about their family.

“I have been advised time and again to not burden you with information this early. But I promised myself that one day, when I deem it well, I shall share with you that which you must know. It might be in the past, but it defines who we are – it is our heritage. It has shaped your entire childhood. Seeing you grow into the beautiful child you are – with a sharpness to question that which matters, keenness to learn and an acute fearlessness that has shaped you entirely – has been the greatest pleasure of my life. I could not have asked for more. Today, I think is as befitting a day as we could hope for.”

Lori looked on, waiting, her face carefully arranged into what she hoped was a politely interested expression.

“But before that,” Belen continued in a more cheerful tone, “I brought you here for a reason. Let me explain to you the complete significance of your present.” He held up a hand as Lori opened her mouth to argue, “and I *will* tell you everything in the comfort of our home. I promise.”

Lori sighed. But as she opened her palm she was once again enraptured by her present.

“I want you to pay heed to my words now,” said Belen seriously, “for it is time. That you learn of certain things, in case of ... unforeseen circumstances.”

Lori was puzzled.

“What do you mean Apa?”

“All in good time, dear one,” he replied, “Now ... the Harmonica is a wind instrument. However, apart from producing music very soothing to the ears, this particular one does much more. Every symbol on it has a special significance. When you think of one of the symbols on it and play it

simultaneously – well it makes things happen. The first symbol you see here, these set of wings, I want you to think of those and blow into this when you are in danger or need of help.”

“What about the third symbol?” asked Lori.

“Ah, the Tree of Purity. Due to a very unfortunate series of events, that is no longer functional. Nothing will happen if you think of the Tree and play this Harmonica. You can forget that one for now.”

“Okay,” Lori said. “So what does the second symbol do?”

“The second symbol – the lady with the palm leaf – takes you to another land. A place very different from our world. But where people live and exist all the same.”

Lori was bewildered, “Is it another place in Zirit?”

“Not in Zirit, my dear. It is nothing like Zirit. It is a land ... without magic.”

“Without magic?! How is that even possible? Apa, it sounds like a horrible place!”

“Well, so it would seem. Every place has its own light and its own darkness. Do you remember the land where I told you I tried the fruit known as the Mango?”

Lori nodded.

“It is that very land. They have their own beauty, but also their own plight. While magic is our pride and our freedom it is also a lethal weapon in the wrong hands. So the question is ... is it magic that is the culprit?”

Lori seemed lost, “Erm ... I thought it is impossible to survive without magic.”

“My point is that there is good and bad in every place. Even in Zirit. And magic is nothing but a

kind of ... belief. What you believe in becomes who you are. If you don't believe in magic ... you will find a way to live without it ... and it will cease to exist for you."

"So this place, what is it called?"

"It has been called different names, the Other World, the Barren Land ... today it is referred to most commonly as Yudland – land of the Yudlings."

"And this Harmonica will just transport me there?"

"Yes, that's exactly what it will do. Now, I am not saying you *should* go there. This is only a precaution. For a day when you feel the need to escape from Zirit or visit Yudland for another reason."

"Apa, why did you go to Yudland?"

Belen's eyes crinkled, "Let's just say it was on a fool's errand. There was someone there whom I loved very much."

"Grandma?" Lori ventured.

"Yes, grandma," Belen answered sheepishly.

"I wish I could meet her," said Lori.

"I wish you could've met her too, my angel," Belen sighed.

"So are there other Harmonicas like this one?" Lori asked, turning it over and examining it closely.

"There are other instruments with ancient magic, but there are very few left in Zirit. We call them Mistills."

* * * * *

Many furlongs away, the labour of Zora and the others had borne no fruit. Tizoc hopelessly threw his arms in the air, when Zora succinctly caught his shoulder and put a finger to her lips.

A strange shuffling sound came from the trees to their side. Giza froze on the ground. There was someone in the woods – someone who didn't seem to be walking straight.

Suddenly a flustered, aged woman burst out of the foliage, limping in no particular direction – one hand on her hip, the other above her glistening forehead. She looked around absent-mindedly, and noticed the three strangers.

“Hello my dears,” she smiled genially.

Zora nodded stiffly, even as the mud fell off Giza's grimy fingers.

The woman did not seem to notice. She continued in a feeble voice, as if having a most heartening conversation over tea, “My house pet seems to have eluded me again. She is a feisty one, my Nutsy,” she postulated affectionately as the grey bun of hair on her head jiggled merrily, “not idle for a moment, not one!” she chortled. Then remembering her dilemma, “Have any of you dears seen her? She is a Jellymuff, about this big.”

The woman set her wrinkled palms about a foot apart.

“No ma'am, we haven't seen her around here,” Zora replied, “we'll make sure to get her to you if we do.”

“Ohhh,” the woman put a hand to her chest, her face overcome with emotion, “how very kind of you dear. I'm the second-last house on the main street of Quaint Quillin. Do come by for tea.” She stood there a while looking at nothing in particular.

Tizoc and Zora looked at each other, while Giza seemed to unsuccessfully shrink into the ground.

Before they could utter another word, however, the woman awoke from her reverie, looking like her prior ruffled self, “Well now, I’m off, must find Nutsy you see. She is so little, just a child.” She limped to the opposite direction and disappeared into a grove of trees on the right, still muttering about Nutsy the Jellymuff and her idiosyncrasies.

When she was out of earshot, Tizoc spoke in a low voice, “I think we found our prop.”

Zora did not reply. She seemed to be considering their options.

“Meeh!” Giza said from behind and they both jumped. “Let it be-h meeh.”

Zora nodded, understanding, “Alright Giza, you’re on.”

A base grin spread over Tizoc’s face, “Finally, Ruby Magic!”

“Do you have a plan?” asked Zora.

“This jungle is teeming with wild animals, many of them regular inhabitants of the village,” Tizoc replied, his eyes shining with malice, “I’m going to find one. We’ll have the Mistill in no time.”

“Okay, let’s do it.”

“What about you?”

“I have Sasha,” Zora said with obvious superiority, “I can merge with her and keep a watch from above.” Ruby magic enabled you to merge with a mount you had a bond with, so that you saw, thought and moved as one.

They agreed and went over the plan again.

“Remember it is the last house on the main street,” Zora recounted. She looked at the sky, “we don’t have much time before sunset, so let’s be quick.”

The horizon darkened. Even as the Indigoes happily twittered, the Mire-minkies celebrated their new King, the Kushnag burrowed deep in the ground with jest – an unseen bewitchery threatened their safety. Unbeknownst to Quaint Quillin – a pewter, crepuscular doom stood at its fore step. One whose pallid blanket of gloom had already begun to spread its slimy tendrils over the little, chaste village – once considered the most secure haven of Zirit.

* * * * *

Back in the little boat, Lori examined the Harmonica again and again.

Belen adjusted the boat’s oars, readying it for return, “Let’s row back. Oh and don’t forget to conceal the symbols, dear.”

Lori covered the glowing symbols with her palm and said clearly, “*Encubri*”. When she removed her hand, they had disappeared. She pocketed it happily, when a thought occurred to her.

“Apa, why did you bring us to the river? You could have given this to me anywhere.”

Belen looked up, “Couple of reasons. For one, I wanted to be some place we could not be heard. Quillin has many protective spells for its inhabitants, but I wanted to be safe.” He looked at the Harmonica as he continued, “For another, Mistills are incredibly rare and powerful objects. In case of a mishap, I would have been more at ease in the forest. The Earth makes it easier for us *Kindred* to use our magic.”

Lori understood. Ziritians performed their daily activities using magic based on the four core elements of Nature - Earth, Water, Air and Fire. Zirit had various tribes based on which element they had a stronger inclination to perform magic with. Though Lori was yet to meet a non-Earthen – she and Belen were from the *Kindred* tribe, like most of the other folks in Quillin.

“And,” Belen concluded, “I *have* been missing an important weed that grows in this part of the river. It helps healing chronic pain and illness.” He showed her a large lump clutched in his hand, “Got it while you were ogling at your gift.”

Lori pocketed the Mistill with a sheepish grin. Once back, they climbed out, dragging the boat onshore and lifting it onto the trolley. As they walked to the outskirts of the forest, Belen stopped short in his tracks.

“Jolly Poppins! I completely forgot. Old Mrs. Rig was to come by today evening. Something about that bad hip of hers giving her trouble. In fact,” he looked up at the sky, “she might already be there, waiting. Lori dear,” he turned to his granddaughter, “could you run to the meadow and bring me the usual herbs I need for treating limb pain?”

Lori nodded earnestly.

“I’ll take the trolley. You can visit the tree of Zoki while you’re there. Don’t be too long though!”

Lori made to hurry, but to Belen’s surprise, she wheeled back and hugged him around his midriff.

“Thanks for the gift, Apa. I really like it.”

Belen chuckled softly and hugged her back, “You’re welcome child,” he patted her head, “run along now. I’ll see you back at home. You never know, there might be another surprise waiting for you when you get back!”

Lori turned with a bright smile and began jogging towards the meadow, leaving an emotional Belen behind.

This was Lori’s favourite meadow. She liked walking barefoot and feeling the soft grass under her feet. It was huge, airy and comfortable. She walked around, picking out the herbs that her grandfather always used from their usual spots in the meadow, humming to herself and thinking

what a wonderful day this had turned out to be.

Back at the cottage, Belen arrived to find a misshapen Mrs. Rig waiting at the doorstep. Her grey-haired bun stuck out erratically at the edges.

“Ah, Mrs. Rig,” he said apologetically, “So sorry to keep you waiting. Please, come in.”

As they entered the cottage, Belen noticed a faint stench around him. He frowned. Had a drain inside burst?

Then turning to Mrs. Rig, he said, “Please have a seat. How is the pain?”

Mrs. Rig blinked and then winced without replying.

“That bad?” he said sympathetically, “Not to worry. Lori will be here with the herbs soon. They are very effective. Last time it was this bad was what ... half a year ago?”

Mrs. Rig nodded haphazardly and stiffly in her armchair.

“Would you like to lie down a little? This reclining chair is very comfortable,” Belen offered with conduciveness, “here, let me help you”.

As he came closer to adjust the chair, Belen wrinkled his nose. The stench was coming from Mrs. Rig.

Once done, he stepped back, “Would you like some tea, Mrs. Rig?”

Mrs. Rig gave the same disorderly nod.

“I’ll put the kettle on then. Be back in a minute.”

Belen left the sitting room and closed the door behind him. He had a deep, unsettling feeling that

something was not right. Instinctively, he reached into his pocket for the Harmonica, before realizing he had given it to Lori. While he made tea, his thoughts turned to his granddaughter.

There was a crashing noise from the sitting room. Belen poured the tea in a cup and walked out of the kitchen, hoping against hope that Lori took all the time she needed in the meadow before coming home. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and opened the sitting room door.

In the meadow, Lori had finished collecting the herbs. She took out her handkerchief and tied them in with a knot. Next, she hurried to the farthest end near the river to have a look at Zoki's tree. As she approached, a refreshing breeze flew from where the it stood. Curious, she walked up to it and looked at the branches. But she was mystified, for there was no fruit there.

That's strange, she thought. She ambled aimlessly around it and then strolled to the tree trunk. Instinctively, she put her hand on its bark. Suddenly, Lori had a strange feeling - as if this tree was different, as if it were more ... *alive*.

Hello Lori, a voice said in her head.

Startled, Lori removed her hand, looking wildly around. There was no one there. What was that voice, had it been the *tree*? Perplexed, but inquisitive, she put her hand back on the tree trunk. It lit up once again.

Don't be afraid, the voice in her head said again, *I am not harmful. Usually, I am not able to interact with visitors. But you are different.*

Because I speak Florian, thought Lori, her heart beating faster. He grandfather had explained to her long ago, why she could interact with trees in a way that others couldn't.

Yes, replied the tree, *you are a Florus. It is uncommon but ... pleasant to meet one. Would you like to sit on me?*

How? thought Lori.

As if in answer to her question, the branch above her head lowered itself down to her hip. Surprised but intrigued, Lori sat on the branch. It returned to its original position. From this point, the view was beautiful. She could see the meadow on one side and the river on the other. In the surrounding leaves, Lori could smell a mixture of intoxicating fragrances – the scent of lavender and fresh parchment mingled with freshly cut grass ... But better than she had ever imagined. If she had to envision the fragrance of sunshine itself, this is how it would be. She inhaled deeply, at the same time thinking, *What do you ... do. Are you a tree of ... blessing?*

I have been called different things. The wishing tree, tree of bestowal ... But I am none of these ... and all of these, the tree replied.

Lori frowned, *I don't understand.*

Well, said the tree, *I give those who come to me what they most need at that moment. If they are tired, I give them strength. If they are sad, I provide tastes and odours that bring happiness. I can sense ... energies. Of all that is around me.*

And me? asked Lori, *What do you have for me? What is my energy like?*

It is transparent and pure. Therefore, for you, replied the tree, *I have ... a warning. And also ... hope.*

Once again puzzled, Lori asked, *Warning? For what?*

Before that, a piece of advice, the tree continued, *take some of my leaves. They will give you comfort and hope when you need it.*

Lori plucked some leaves and stuffed them in her pocket.

Now if you touch my bark, I can show you what you need to know, the tree offered.

Baffled, Lori put her hand on the tree trunk. Immediately an image floated into her head. In the midst of the forest, a large creature was asleep. The plants around its face quivered. At a closer glance, she saw it was Slosy. A slight smile passed Lori's lips. The image moved further up the river towards the Banyan tree. Here the energy was dark and glum. At the foot of the tree lay a tiny blackened body. It was a dead Indigo. All around, the ground was littered with feathers. On the Tree of Necessity, Lori twitched uncomfortably, but did not break contact with the trunk. The imagery continued. Now it moved outwards, on the street that led to their house. In the middle, a giant silhouette moved towards the cottage menacingly, while a shadow circled high above in the sky. At closer glance, the silhouette revealed itself to be that of a Chizantus – a horned, maned beast of the jungle that was almost never found near Ziritian habitats. The energy around them was wicked and evil. Behind the cottage, rats poured out from a large hole in the ground. Lori's hand jerked away from the tree, her face ashen. She did not completely understand what she had seen but she knew instinctively what she needed to do.

I ... I need to leave. Now. Please put me down.

The tree did as was requested.

Without another glance backwards, Lori ran home as soon as her legs could carry. She ran and ran and ran. Until finally she was outside the forest. Clutching her chest for breath, she sprinted up the street, finally arriving at the last stretch, panting. When she arrived, she saw a small crowd gathered outside their cottage. She did not notice the blind bird perched on the rooftop. Ignoring them all, she made her way through, pushing forward, until eventually she caught a glimpse of the front door. It swung off its hinges, half-broken. As she edged further on, her heart skipped a beat. Just outside the door there lay a limp body facedown with its palms touching the ground. Nothing was visible except a dense mass of curly white hair. Lori walked towards it in a haze, barely hearing the voices around her, and then slowly – very slowly – hardly daring to breathe, turned the body over.

She froze, her bones leaden. Gazing down at the only person she had ever known love from, Lori's entire world came crashing down. Looking up at her with an expression as peaceful as if he could as easily have been sleeping, was the lifeless face of her beloved grandfather.

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