

**EMMA BLUE**

**DE CÉLINE HERVÉ-BAZIN**

*Volume One: Daniel's Discovery*



# SUMMARY

## IT WAS AFTER THE WAVE.

*Mankind had polluted its springs, its lakes, its rivers, its oceans... Nature suffered from human activity and water temperatures rose. The heat radiating from deep within the earth's underground layers and the increase in temperatures created a seismic fault in the most profound depths of the Earth, gradually destroying the seabed. The ocean was in danger, threatened by its heightened temperature, the end of marine life, the extinction of species...the ocean suffered in silence while Man just ignored.*

*Out in the Pacific, in an area isolated from the ocean's currents, the seventh continent emerged, a continent of plastic extending for thousands and thousands of miles. One day, the waters woke up. The joining of the rain and salt water gave birth to a new people: the « Wastikis », beings born from Man's abandoned waste. The first people that emerged from the seventh continent were being surrounded by the wasteful people of the six other continents. Proud and determined, the Wastikis marched toward Man. They wanted to change him, slow down his consumption and end life dictated by screens. The Wastikis wanted to save the lands and Mankind from their most certain destruction... But it was too late. Man had fallen under the domination of the 5G people, Nature's enemy.*

Emma lives in Bourbeau, a seaside village in the new Emerged Lands. She teaches primary schoolchildren the tales and legends of the Ancient Era. This independent young woman is unhappy with her life, suffocating in her village ruled by the terrible Bacillus a white-skinned man. So, after once again breaking community rules, Emma is exiled by Bacillus. She narrowly escapes the Gong Gong, merciless men sent by Bacillus to capture her. She finds shelter in the Potoma Forest, an unexplored and dangerous place. For her, it's the start of the quest that she had always longed for: to meet up with the Angelrie, the establishment that trains the Angels, those protecting the Emerged Lands, bequeathed by the Wastikis.

*Emma Blue is an adventure novel. It takes place during an imaginary era most likely in the future. Of the 30% of the Blue Planet's lands, only 1% remains, however Man holds within his grasp the possibility to reconquer the lost lands if He accepts to live in harmony with Nature. Emma, the novel's heroine, brings us into this imaginary world, a young woman destined to reestablish Natural Order in the world.*

# A FEW WORDS ABOUT

## EMMA BLUE

I wrote the first version of Emma Blue, I was 20. The story was named Isilianne, a first name I created, and I was pretty proud of it. Already in 5 tomes, Isilianne was part of my younger writing when I was endlessly writing tons of new novels, afraid of losing my imagination. Years went by, I kept writing but for professional reasons, when I finally decided to write stories again.

Last year, I reviewed Isilianne. The story, characters and world didn't change, I however, added the cause of water within the storyline. I've been working in the world of water management for 12 years and water is part of my life. I've always wanted to fight for her, to make it a universal unifying cause. Isilianne logically became Emma Blue... Emma, a simple first name, and Blue for the color of water (or at least, the color most people associate water with.)

Now, looking at Emma's story and adventure, it became more than a simple book, it became a part of more personal self discovery. After writing Emma / Isiliane for a second time, I took a break. My life completely changed during this break and when I decided to get along with Emma Blue and to publish it, I read the story with a fresh eye as a premonitory writing of what I actually lived while breaking from writing.

I hope you will enjoy the ride and Emma's story will make you travel, dream and pursue whatever your heart is telling you.

**HAPPY READING!**

*To the small bird  
Listen, listen to the song of rising,  
an angel guides your steps  
towards love.*

*Sing, sing with owers  
a necklace drawing your light*

*Fly, fly with your soul  
where a rainbow shines  
through your flame.*

*Pass, pass the door  
of a mysterious and familiar coral  
to your being.*

*Change, change the colors of  
The message whispering to your heat.*

*And be. Be the present. Live today.*

# PREFACE

A blue light was hovering about. It pierced through the room. The light was strong and powerful yet surprisingly soothing. It fell upon a golden mane dotted with reddish highlights. A young woman was lying prone in mid-air, her body floating in space. She was sleeping, one hand gently resting on her chest. She was wearing an emerald green tunic which covered her golden skin. She lay motionless, breathing peacefully. She looked so beautiful and so serene. Daniel sighed then closed his eyes.

“Concentrate, concentrate,” he told himself, trembling at the thought that she might wake up. “Don’t wake her up... Whatever you do, don’t wake her up.”

Daniel hung onto these words. He knew that if she were to wake up the nightmare would begin. If she awoke, everything would be destroyed and he would have no chance to retrieve the gem she was wearing.

He took a breath and timidly stepped toward her. To his great relief, she didn’t stir. His face relaxed into a smile. Her beauty was simple and pure, yet alluring and captivating. Daniel breathed slowly, trying to keep hold of himself. For an instant, he felt his body shiver, magnetized by the young woman’s aura.

“It’s her.” The whisper escaped Daniel’s lips. Saying the words was like confirming it. He thought better of it.

“Stay focused for goodness sake! You have a task to perform.”

He took a step closer until he was within a few inches of her. The closer he got to her, the more his heart raced. She was laying there, in front of him, motionless and asleep, her tender lips seemingly waiting in expectation. Daniel shook his head to get a hold of himself.

“You have a mission to accomplish. Your duty! Remember your duty! “

He let his mind drift elsewhere and felt his body calm down. He slowly bent over her, his heart pounding. The young woman had fine features, distinguished by prominent cheekbones dotted with discrete freckles. Her nose was delicate, straight and slightly

curved upward at its tip. Her rose colored lips were ever so lightly pursed into a charming smile. From her neck hung the Rainbow.

“The stone that beholds all powers,” he said out loud. He gazed at the stone with an appraising look. “So, a small stone like that can hold the key to the universe?” He lingered over the young woman, watching the innocent expression on her face. “Of course, it could only have been you who wears it... how ironic!”

Daniel studied the stone with an amused smile. The Rainbow, with its unique round yet and pointed shape, was the stone of all stones. It was made of water and silex. *Multicolored, it had the ability to reflect light with incredible intensity. Its' rays were capable of making the concepts of both time and space disappear, and even, said some, weightlessness.* Others maintained that it had the highest density in the world and that its' power was limitless, unlike any other.

Daniel had been looking for the Rainbow for years and he wasn't the only one. Now that he had finally found it, he just wanted to grab it, but how? How to get a hold of it without risking his life and that of this complete stranger? Daniel knew that the second he grabbed the stone, anything could happen. He who touched the Rainbow could either be responsible for the world coming to an end or for liberating the lands. Daniel was among those who believed that the Rainbow could save Mankind.

Daniel sighed. He had to admit it... He didn't come all this way to just sit there and stare at this mysterious young woman. The Rainbow lit up her face and showered her skin with rays of soft light. The stone was attached to a thin chain resting on her chest. While gazing at the stone, Daniel noticed three small marks embedded in the girl's skin. They formed a tiny crescent moon in the hollow of her right clavicle. Daniel studied them, intrigued by the unusual color of these superficial cuts.

“But where do these mysterious marks come from, young lady?”

As Daniel uttered the words, he was overcome by the girl's magnetism. He had the impression that she was smiling at him. Captivated, Daniel slid his hand toward the sleeping girl, his eyes blinded by the stone's reflection. Forgetting about the guidelines that he had set for himself, he found himself seduced by a mirage and under the influence of the Rainbow's power. When he found his index finger pointing at her, Daniel realized that he could no longer control himself. He was trapped by the spell that the stone held over him. Suddenly his outstretched hand was covered in a creeping liquid

while another invisible thread wrapped up his free hand. Trapped, he desperately tried to free himself from the transparent web that was trying to drag him away but it was too late. The liquid oozed out like an invisible spider's web woven by a predator. In spite of all his struggling, Daniel was entangled by a mass of water much stronger than him.

In a matter of seconds, his entire body was enveloped and he was flipped and twirled in the air by the invisible cords. All of a sudden, Daniel found himself hanging upside down in the air, taken hostage by the transparent liquid ties. He let out a muffled gasp when all hell broke loose right before his eyes.

"Not again!" he angrily shouted to himself. "Trapped AGAIN, you stupid idiot!"

The ground opened up, showing a glimpse of the bowels of the earth, where all was aflame. The fire, the abyss, human waste - all exploding into thousands of sparkling shards as the temperature instantly rose. Daniel glanced over at the young woman with a defeated look and saw that her appearance started to change. Little by little, the cords holding him prisoner transformed into a black and sticky liquid. Daniel fought with all his strength but nothing gave; he was stuck by the black liquid that enshrouded him entirely.

"Why struggle! It's over." Daniel realized that he had failed once again.

Helpless, he watched as the girl's body began to decompose. Her once soft face became crimson red as if fire was boiling inside her flesh. Her eye sockets were swollen with blood and her chest spewed out a bubbling and infectious lava which spout in his direction narrowly missing his face. A dark and gloomy light pierced through her body with a thud. Her burnt face scattered into millions of tiny pieces and her skin turned into a grey dusty crust.

Daniel watched on helplessly as the girl transformed. The slime continued to creep up his body and reached his torso. Soon it would reach his neck. Right before him, the young woman's face burst apart and the Rainbow broke free from the chain around her neck. In a flash, the girl's body fell into the glowing abyss. All of a sudden, Demone appeared holding the Rainbow in his hands. Daniel screamed, his worst nightmare unfolding right before his eyes as he felt himself being swallowed by a coating of filthy slimy muck.

Demone the Master of Shadows and Darkness was Daniel's arch enemy. His eyes were black, his hair a dark ebony, his features severe and mocking. Demon gloated as he

held the Rainbow between his fingers. The stone opened up. Instead of unveiling its' luminous power, it emitted a spectral black light. Daniel knew that the power that was supposed to have saved them was now going to destroy them. He squirmed again and his trap loosened, allowing him to fall into the darkness. Daniel watched as he fell into the depths of the waiting inferno. He screamed but nobody was there to save him.

A shrieking sound pierced his eardrums and Daniel woke up in a sweat. Panicked, his eyes fluttered and a few seconds passed before he realized that was he was awake. He looked around. Everything was calm and peaceful. His heart rate started to slow down but he continued to pant. He started to regain his composure when a sudden knock at the door startled him.

“Daniel! Daniel! Is everything OK?” Noah was calling out to him.

The young man sighed, cursing the fact that he was covered in sweat. He pushed away the silver cape under which he had been resting and got up off the table. He was angry with himself for having failed again. He grabbed a cloth to wipe himself off which immediately became soaked with sweat. He shook his dripping hair and nervously tilted his head back and forth in an effort to look natural.

Daniel opened the door without so much as a nod to his friend who looked him over with a raised eyebrow. Daniel bent over the porcelain sink that was near the table. He turned on the faucet and splashed his neck with water. Noah studied his colleague carefully while gently closing the door behind him, making sure that nobody had woken up. Daniel stood still waiting for the door to shut. He waited for Noah to sit down while he toweled himself off. By the time he turned to face his friend, his appearance had returned to normal.

“So?”

“So... I saw her. FINALLY! I know what she looks like.” Daniel had a smile on his face while Noah gave him a wary look.

“Good, good... and...?” Noah asked with a wave of his hand. “What does she look like?” Daniel looked closely at his friend and then shrugged his shoulders.

“Well... I don't know... A young blonde, she was sleeping... you know...” Noah gave Daniel a questioning look.

“What?” asked Daniel.

“What? What? Daniel, I’ll ask you again. What does she look like? You can at least describe her, can’t you?”

“Describe her?”

“Yes!” insisted his friend. “Is she tall? Does she have blonde or brown hair? Did you talk to her?” Daniel thought about Noah’s questions with an amused look on his face while looking.

“She is... she’s pretty,” he blurted out as if still under her charm.

“Pretty? The young woman that you’ve been searching for for months is ‘pretty’?” Noah hung on the word to express his disappointment. “Excuse me, but I thought that you were going to tell me a little bit more about her...”

“I don’t know who she is,” Daniel said hastily. “I couldn’t speak to her, as you can probably imagine... And I never saw her before either.”

“Really? What a surprise! Of course it would have been much easier if she had been the girl next door!”

Noah crossed his arms and continued to sport his childish grin which continued to annoy Daniel.

“We still have to find out who she is.”

“Identify her?”

“Find her, I mean.”

“Find her, that’s obvious... Might as well forget about the Rainbow or Demone” remarked Noah, disturbed to see his friend so uneasy.

“Exactly! It’s definitely her, she was wearing the Rainbow. She’s the Rainbow’s keeper.”

“Daniel, are you sure you’re not mixing up the Rainbow and the girl? You see the difference, don’t you?”

They remained silent while Daniel paced the room like a caged lion.

“Am I mistaken or is something bothering you my friend?”

Daniel turned away and stepped toward the window overlooking the forest. Far off in the distance the lights shined down upon the sleeping village. For a split second he saw Demon with the Rainbow in his hand. Daniel shivered and looked at his trusted friend.

“There’s no doubt about it. It’s her.”

“Her? What do you mean “it’s her”?”

“The Chosen One.”

Noah sat up and frowned. “What do you mean?”

“What do I mean? It’s crystal clear,” answered Daniel with certainty.

“I don’t know... the chosen one... Let’s see... if she’s pretty couldn’t she be the one your heart has chosen?” asked Noah while batting his eyes in a doelike fashion.

Daniel blushed slightly and caught his breath to hide his emotion. “Nice try Noah,” replied Daniel. “No. The Chosen One. “The Mickael!””

This time it was Noah who switched hats to return to the role of political advisor rather than close friend. “My dear friend, the Well Destined One, what are you trying to say?” Daniel took the notebook that was sitting on the desk opposite the sink. “I thought it was you, the Chosen One,” replied Noah.

“No. That’s where everybody’s wrong. It’s her,” said Daniel. He gave Noah a sharp look. “I’m absolutely CONVINCED,” Daniel insisted as he walked out of the room, leaving Noah in stunned silence.

Noah nodded his head. “I would’ve preferred if she was the one chosen to be your sweetheart; it would have been much easier.”

Noah left the room. The moment the door shut, water appeared on the very spot on the table where Daniel had been sleeping. It formed the exact same three marks as those found on the girl’s clavicle. Suddenly, the water transformed into a liquid green ink which etched marks into the ebony table of visions.

# CHAPTER 1:

## THE LEGEND

“Once upon a time...” Emma burst out laughing. This simple phrase, how many times had she read it? She lifted her eyes from the book and looked at her class. Her students’ eyes were gleaming in anticipation, impatient to hear the story they knew by heart. They gave her knowing smiles and then laughed.

“It’s the story of a young woman,” they chorused.

“Very good children,” said the schoolteacher approvingly. “Because it’s not...?”

“... a fairy tale but a true story!” replied the 5<sup>th</sup> graders, mocking their schoolteacher who repeatedly said the same thing at the start of each story.

“It’s the story of our Kingdom... the Emerged Lands,” continued Emma solemnly. “Today we’re going to talk about Namaka’s vision.”

“You’re not going to tell us about the legend first?” asked Poema.

“No, Poema. Today we are going to start with Namaka’s vision.”

“Oh no, please won’t you read us the whole story first? Please?” Poema looked at her teacher with pleading eyes that Emma couldn’t ignore.

“Please teacher? Pretty please?” chimed in the children all at once.

“O.K.” said Emma, giving in, aware of the fact that she was being manipulated by a bunch of young schoolchildren. “So we do the quick version then?” The children laughed in approval. She inserted a tear dropped shaped rose colored stone into a slit carved into the book’s binding. The stone lit up when it came into contact with the book, emitting a ray of pink light reaching as far as the ceiling. Emma turned the book so that the light beam projected itself on the wall. This was one of the only Ancient Era approved technologies that they were allowed to use and of the most spectacular. The stone could project images several yards wide in the sky or on any flat surface at any time to the delight of its’ audiences.

The children were seated on the ground which was covered by wicker matting. They'd found bundles of cotton to either sit on or to lean against the stools made of cherry wood. The wood was renowned for the softness of its essence. They lit naturally made wax candles lightly scented with jasmine and spiced apple. They watched as the Technicolor animated story unfolded before their eyes. It was the legend of the Rainbow, Emma's favorite story. An image of the planet covered with water materialized. There was no more land, just water as far as the eye could see.

"It was after The Wave," began Emma, who no longer needed to read because she knew the story by heart. "It was after Mankind had polluted its springs, its rivers, its lakes, its oceans. Because of human activity the water temperature rose. The heat radiated into the planet's subterranean layers which sped up the increase in temperature. This boiler effect created a new seismic fault in the depths of the Earth, gradually destroying the seabed. Seeing the ocean in danger, the plastics from the seventh continent transformed themselves into men. They called themselves the "Wastikis". They gathered all the earth's waste around them, tons and tons of waste left behind by Man. The Wastikis were a strong willed and peaceful people. They wanted to modify and protect the water... It's even said that they were born of the union of rain, fresh and salt water. All these new beings wanted to do was to save Mankind. They believed that technology, computers in particular, wrecked the nature of Mankind. They marched on towards the Americas... towards New York, the city where the Council of Man called the "United Nations" was located. The Wastikis went there to negotiate with Man in an effort to save lands and Mankind... But it was too late.

As she turned the page, the children jumped when they saw robots popping up on the screen. They were the "5G", robots created by Man and nourished by the Internet.

"The 5G wanted to seize all control over Man, over the planet... over all living beings things." Emma sighed. "In the beginning, they maneuvered slowly but they were very sly." Emma imitated the machines. "The 5G are were sneaky and mean. Man believed that the rise in temperature and water levels was what was called "climate change" while in reality the 5G were stealing the Earth's resources. Then one day, all of a sudden, all hell broke loose when and things got even worse. The 5G unveiled their plans: to destroy Man and take over the Earth. They started a conflict against Man and the Wastikis. This war damaged the planet even more... Tornados, hurricanes, earthquakes... Nature suffered so terribly from this violence that the lands began to disappear."

Emma started reading faster. The pictures first showed the continents disappearing one after the other, first the Americas then Asia and so on. The children looked on, holding their breath when they saw the Himalayas collapsing... the fall of the highest mountain range caused the flooding of all the lands of Europe and Africa. Nothing remained of Planet Earth except for water.

“Everything was destroyed,” declared Emma with a lump in her throat. “Including the 5G since they couldn’t survive without electricity... But this is rather good news, isn’t it? ”

The children laughed at the mischievous expression on the young woman’s face. Emma took a breath and quickly removed the images showing the end of the world so as not to scare the kids. She knew that some of them had had nightmares after having seen the terrible images of the 5G with their merciless expressions and their body armor. These machines were filthy things; Emma herself shivered at the sight of their cold eyes which emitted a blinding white light.

“While Planet Earth was reduced to just a small patch of land the Wastikis managed to save the last few men thanks to rafts made of waste. They led these men to the last of the remaining Emerged Lands...”

On the screen, men and women were shown landing on an island, the last piece of land spared by Nature’s wrath. Emma flipped the page. A procession of a few thousand men and women honoring the Wastikis appeared on the screen.

“It’s ironic, isn’t it? The words slipped out of Emma’s mouth. For an instant, she forgot that she was in class.

“What do you mean?” asked Rere. Emma saw 20 pairs of eyes staring at her rather than at the screen.

“I just mean that men were saved by their own garbage, the very thing they just ignored for centuries.”

The children gave her such quizzical looks that she hastily turned to the next page. A beaming rainbow lit up the eyes of her group and they became instantly mesmerized by the luminescent colors.

“The survivors received the Wastikis’ prophecy. The plastic men told them to form a new society... a society harmonious with Nature so that one day the water would accept to recede. If Man were to behave better Planet Earth would go back to normal like it was before “The Wave”, the name which was given to Nature’s revolt against the 5G... against all Humanity in fact.

Emma clicked to the next image which showed the revolving globe. The Planet was totally blue and little by little the continents reappeared before the captivated eyes of the schoolchildren. Emma pouted, thinking nostalgically about all these countries, all these cultures and all the riches just strewn about underwater.

“To help the survivors, the Wastikis offered Man five stones which beheld man-made technology. You must understand that the Wastikis didn’t want to deny the existence of everything that had been invented by Man... actually what they wanted to do was protect them from the dangers of the Internet, televisions, newspapers, the Media...”

“Teacher, you always tell us this and then you always tell us to forget what you just told us,” remarked Poema while Emma remained visibly lost in her thoughts. The class began to laugh.

“It’s true,” admitted Emma, embarrassed. “Let’s just say that the most important thing is that the Wastikis offered us 5 stones, 5 fabulous powers and... the Rainbow!”

The Rainbow stone, sparkling and fiery, appeared on the screen. The children’s jaws dropped and they let out a collective “WOW”.

“The Wastikis entrusted Man with the ‘Rainbow’, the stone of all stones which was to guide them on their quest. “This stone is a promise... It’s our promise. One day Mankind will find the Planet as it once was. One day, we will have more land to live on...” said Emma nostalgically.

The Rainbow glittered, hypnotizing the children with its magnificent multicolored sparkles.

“This stone marks the end of the Ancient Era. It symbolizes hope and our new way of life.” Emma smiled. “They say that the stone is the densest and the most powerful stone in the whole world... Thanks to the Rainbow, men and women keep the faith, they believe that we are all capable of building a better world when we’re united together.

Emma exhaled deeply in order to mask her emotions. She always felt the same tightening in her chest when she spoke of the Rainbow. Her stomach tied itself in knots and her heart started pounding. She couldn’t help but feel connected to this stone in some way. She quickly turned to the next page and five drops materialized.

“Oh my, it’s time for a quiz!” announced the young woman joyfully. The children groaned. “Who can tell me what each drop stands for?”

Rere raised his hand. “Yes Rere?”

“They aren’t drops; they’re stones in the shape of drops!”

“Very good Rere,” said Emma, satisfied to see that he had remembered the lesson. “And what are their characteristics?” She addressed the class but only Rere raised his hand. “O.K. Rere, even if you aren’t the only one in the class.” Emma gave the class a stern eye which was a warning for them to participate.

“They contain magic water inside them which gives each a special power.”

“Precisely, Rere. Now everyone, here’s an easy question. What kind of power is in each of the five stones?” Emma scanned the room, eyeing the silent intimidated faces. “Come on now, it’s easy.” The children remained dumbfounded. “O.K. fine... so, let’s start with the pink one then?”

All the hands shot up. “Ah, I see. Taitai?”

“It’s the power to project. You’re using it right now so it’s true that it’s an easy one.” The children laughed and Emma enjoyed watching the mischievous expressions on their faces.

“If it’s so easy, can you tell me tell me what the red one does?”

Taitai flashed a big smile. “That one’s easy too. It’s for chatting with friends.”

All the children burst out laughing and Emma joined in their innocent fun.

“So now, here’s a harder one for you. The blue drop?” Rere raised his hand but Emma ignored him. “Poema, I’m sure that you know this one.” Poema scratched her head, thinking.

“It’s... for the doors?”

“Yes, for the doors and what else?”

“The chests!” replied Emma proudly.

“The chests, the locks... It’s a key that opens anything you want. Practical, isn’t it?”

The children started giggling again. They adored Emma. She was the only teacher that made them laugh. “Haha, you can all laugh, but which one of you gigglers can tell me what the yellow drop is for?” Silence followed. Even Rere didn’t know. “Well, how about the turquoise one then?” Rere raised his hand and Emma sighed while motioning for him to speak.

“It’s for the water.”

“For the water?” asked Emma.

“Yeah, you know, it’s to see if you can drink it or not.”

“Ah, yes, now I understand better.” Emma gave him a wink. “Rere is right. The turquoise drop is for checking the water quality while the “yellow” one becomes your best friend when you need to pass your exams... It’s an incredibly useful instant dictionary.

The children’s eyes opened wide, puzzled.

“Hmm, I see. I’m speaking Chinese. And what happens after that?” Poema raised her hand.

“The Wastikis gave the men *the* five stones and then they left.” Poema inhaled deeply to catch her breath after spitting out the reply.

“That’s very good Poema,” replied Emma with a soothing voice. “They left, it’s true. And with them, the Ancient Era, the age of mass consumption was over.”

The following page displayed a peaceful and immaculate landscape. The Age of Nature had begun. Emma tapped on the book and the hologram of a young woman with a golden mane of hair appeared. The girl was wearing a green tunic and had a thin chain

around her neck from which hung five different colored stones, the ones that the Wastikis had offered to the men.

“Maeva in the world of Emerged Lands” accompanied the image.

“Aloha Namaka,” the children solemnly replied. They remained silent and the smiling young woman turned to face Emma. As always, Emma couldn’t prevent herself from shuddering. Namaka looked so much like her. Emma had long blonde hair with a discrete Venetian tinge to it, prominent cheekbones, a thin nose and a lithe silhouette just like Namaka. Emma stood out from her animated counterpart with her green eyes, freckled cheeks, thin lips and highly arched eyebrows. Her hair was wavy and untidy whereas Namaka’s was straight, stiff and silky. Namaka looked shorter and more petite than her. Despite the differences, Emma still had the impression that she was the spitting image of Namaka. She smiled to hide her embarrassment.

“Ia Orana Namaka,” said Emma to the virtual image.

“Ciao, Emma,” replied the young woman mischievously.

“So, tell us Namaka, why is your story so important?”

“Ah, that’s quite a question that you are asking me Emma!” She turned toward the children. “You see children, I was born on the first day the water started to recede. That day, the moon changed color... It turned blue. The Wastikis told Man that on the first day of the blue moon, the lands would start to reappear.”

Emma showed the territory of the Emerged Lands. The Chosen One smiled as the land surface increased little by little, gaining on the Ocean.

“One day, one of the Wastiki came back to the land to meet me... I know I’m keeping you on the edge of your seats! The pressure’s building!” The children laughed out loud. “Anyhow, we all have a destiny... Mine was to create the Angelrie. In any case, that’s what the Wastiki told me. He also told me that I was the “Chosen One”, the one to set up the institution of protectors.”

Namaka snapped her fingers and a magnificent palace popped up on the pink wall. It was nestled in a mountain range overlooking a plain. The edifice, with its grandiose windows and carved stone walls shimmered in space. It emitted an indescribable halo as if it possessed an invisible energy. The kids marveled at the image that they’d already seen numerous times. As always, they noisily raved about the gut-wrenching beauty of the building. As for Emma, her heart began pounding, her stomach starting tying itself in knots and her ears started ringing. She inhaled deeply...

For Emma, the Angelerie was the most respected place in the world. She admired every detail of this magnificent institution and couldn’t help herself from feeling seized by the palace’s energy. Every time she saw the Angelrie, she felt her destiny awaiting her. She felt a mixture of resentment and hope, yet she struggled over the ever-present feeling that her life was nothing more than a lie overpowering her sense of reality. She forgot about her students, about teaching... She had only one thing on her mind... to join the

Angelrie. She envied all the Angels who lived there, secretly hoping that one day she herself would be at the service of the institution that she so greatly admired.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” asked the Chosen One. “To make it simple, the Angelrie is the Angel’s institution. They are there to protect us and to guide us toward peace and respect for Nature. They want the Emerged Lands to expand and for the planet to become as it was before. They’re there to find the Rainbow which was of course lost by Man!”

The children laughed at the Chosen One’s desperate expression.

“I can’t tell you exactly when the Rainbow disappeared... We don’t exactly know what happened... It’s downright irritating.” The Chosen One sighed. “Man, I assure you, is always absent-minded and careless! Nobody knows where the heck this damn stone is.”

“Some say that it just vanished all by itself,” retorted Emma to the skeptical Chosen One.

“Maybe Emma, but now isn’t the right time to argue about it.” Namaka turned to the children. “It doesn’t matter, what’s done is done... Now our job, I mean us, the Angels’ job, is to find it because... Well, since it disappeared tensions have been running high among Men.”

Emma winced when she saw Reva raise his hand as the Chosen One addressed her. She was wary of this child whose father with whom she had a bad relationship. The young woman pursed her lips into a forced smile.

“Yes Reva?”

“My dad says that the Rainbow doesn’t exist. That nobody ever saw it, even during the Wastiki’s era.”

“It’s a legend Reva, believe whatever you want,” retorted Emma.

“But, I’m real!” affirmed the hologram, offended. “It shows, doesn’t it?” She snapped her fingers and multicolored sparks flew across the room. The children laughed.

“Do you believe that someone will find the Rainbow and that one day we’ll be saved?” It was the little Poema who had spoken.

Emma and the Chosen One looked at one another. Emma raised her eyebrows, urging the young woman to answer the little girl.

“You know,” began Namaka, scanning the room to find Poema. “What’s your name, please?”

“Poema,” replied the child with a broad smile, proud to have captured the attention of the Chosen One.

“You know Poema... When the Wastiki came to tell me that I had to set up an institution to help Man retrieve the Rainbow, I took him for a fool.” The children burst out laughing. “It’s true. I really thought he was crazy. Then I saw that Mankind wasn’t getting along together. I saw how much Humans were fighting and I said to myself... Perhaps I should listen to him, this Wastiki, even if...”

A grand silence hung over the group and the Chosen One pouted reflexively. The hologram seemed perplexed, as if she couldn’t even tell her whole story.

“So, to answer your question Poema,” continued Emma, “I think like Namaka, that we must get the Rainbow back... And yes, I believe that the Angels can do it. There’s no guarantee but at least this is what we can hope for... Even Bacillus, our Master wants that. Remember, Mankind wants to rediscover Mother Earth... It’s everyone’s goal. Thanks to Namaka and the Angelrie, our lands continue to expand and the surface area occupied by water has diminished significantly on the planet... Emma eyed the children; they already knew the question that she was going to ask them. So, what is the percentage of land on earth today?

“1.17 %” chorused the children without any hesitation.

“And what’s our goal?”

“To have 70% water and 30% land instead of the 1% we have today,” answered the children in unison, proud of their knowledge. Emma nodded her approval.

Emma rubbed her left thumb against the tip of her index finger. The Chosen One received an electroshock and smiled broadly before she bowed and waved goodbye.

“Goodbye, farewell, auf wiedersehen, bonsoir les enfants!”

“Goodbye!” answered the children. Namaka vanished and everything went dark. The children were startled by the bolt of lightning that streaked across the theater. They stared wide eyed as the silence settled in. The story was over.

“Teacher, why did men from the Ancient Era believe they were on Planet Earth?”

“What are you trying to say, Rere?”

“Well, if I’m right...” Rere took his ‘I’m the best student in the class’ attitude. “Before land made up 30% of the Earth’s surface, right?” Emma nodded and he pointed his finger to the ceiling with a gloating look of certainty that made his fellow students laugh. Emma played along with them. Why did they believe that they lived on the Earth... on solid ground while in reality they lived on a Planet made of water! The child stood proudly with a triumphant look on his face as if he were a public speaker who had just ended a monologue aimed at convincing the crowd around him. Rere’s boastful observation made the students jaws drop. “Am I right teacher?”

“You’re right Rere, but lands were vast... more than 58 million square miles, can you imagine?” The child shook his head as numbers meant nothing to him. Emma thought

for a moment. That's more than 89 times the size of our Emerged Lands, can you believe that?"

"No, he can't!" laughed Poema. "He's already afraid to go ~~get~~ out of his own neighborhood!" The children burst out laughing. Emma signaled for them to calm down.

"Rere is like us, Poema. Men believed that they lived on land while they actually lived on the water... We live on land and we're having a hard time imagining the ocean around us." Emma breathed in slowly, a kind smile on her face. "What can I tell you? I think that the men from the Ancient Era cut their ties with Nature and with water... It's as simple as that and I think that we're a bit like them.

She shrugged her shoulders and smiled at Rere. The children did likewise and they all laughed. After everything calmed down, Emma displayed the symbols of water for the children to see: spring water, rain water and sea water, the three types of water found in nature. She watched the children as they gazed at the clear round blue symbol for spring water, the light green thin lines representing light rain and the dark blue wave which portrayed the force and the power of the oceans. She was just about to close the book when Madiba raised her hand.

"Yes Madiba?"

"Do you really believe this story?"

"It's a legend Madiba..."

"I heard that the people that live in the Center region, they do fundraising and research to help the Angels find the Rainbow..."

"People from the Center believe in the Angelrie, so it's normal that they believe that the Rainbow exists."

"And you, do you believe in the Rainbow?" Madiba asked inquisitively.

Emma felt her heart begin to race and felt the embarrassment rush to her cheeks. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Reva listening to her attentively.

"What does Bacillus say about the Rainbow Madiba?"

"That it doesn't exist... That this search is useless."

"There you go Madiba, you have your answer."

Emma shut off the pink light beam, abruptly ending the conversation.

"Hmm," said Reva. "It's a legend, and legends aren't real."

"True, Reva. We know that Bacillus doesn't believe in this legend. Now... imagine that it's the legends, fairy tales and myths that shape our memory... True or not, that's not the question... What's important in these tales are the morals that they teach us... and so what is the moral of Namaka's legend?"

“Water!” blurted Taitai. Emma smiled at her nodding her head. “What I mean is, protect water so that we can get our lands back!”

Emma found the young boy’s hasty reply amusing. The bell rang and Emma motioned for them all to stand because the class was over. She watched them gather their belongings as she fingered the five stones attached to her necklace. She didn’t really like this charade, to have to lie to the children in the name of Bacillus, the man she detested. Poema walked up to her and stood still, watching her as she toyed with the stones.

“You know that you shouldn’t be playing with your Rosary beads.”

“You’re right,” admitted the young woman who immediately let go of the stones and hid them under her tunic.

Emma’s hands drifted purposely to her right clavicle the moment she freed her hair that was stuck in the buttons sewn diagonally into her tunic. Poema pointed at the three tiny marks previously hidden by the fabric.

“What are those Teacher?” Emma looked down and blushed as she quickly hid the three marks.

“Oh, that’s nothing Poema. Just three little burns I got when I went too close to a candle... you know me.”

“You are always so clumsy Teacher!”

The child laughed out loud and left the room. Emma caressed her clavicle through the cotton that covered her skin. She took a long sigh. How she wished that these three marks were burns but ~~this~~ it wasn’t the case.

## CHAPTER 2:

# THE CHEIR OF BOURBEAU

Far from being a fantasy land, far from being able to enjoy the good old times of a fabulous era, far from having a fairy tale existence, a lively and peaceful village slept, cradled by the green foliage of a luminous ochre painted desert, sleeping to the soft whispers of the magnificent and forgotten countryside. Lost between the gorges of the Three Crests, the mysterious Potoma Forest and Peace Valley rich in olive and almond trees dotted with silver, Bourbeau reveals itself to the passing traveler as an empire whose greatness was long gone. Governed by Bacillus, the town appeared as though everything was at a standstill, waiting for a new era to begin.

The rain was falling over Bourbeau. It was the drizzle that preceded the rainy season. Bourbeau was a town where water was present everywhere, a village located along the coast of the Emerged Lands. Canals crisscrossed the village, fountains decorated the center of each of the public squares, stone gutters flowed with water along the paved roads in a labyrinth of adjacent houses, colorful bridges stood and earthenware vases were set out to catch the first rain showers. The cool raindrops silently pelted the old grey cobblestones when Emma entered Venice, the shopping district. She walked along confidently.

Her smile quickly faded when she encountered a figure she immediately recognized sporting a chilling smile. Bacillus, otherwise known as the “Cheir of Bourbeau” was the leader of her native village and he was the person that she despised more than anyone else in the world. Immediately, she readjusted her cape over her dress and put on her hood to hide her face. Her usual rosy cheeks paled and she immediately became withdrawn. Emma lowered her eyes and tried to look in the shop windows to her left, hoping he wouldn’t recognize her.

Out of the corner of her eye, she scrutinized his frail yet imposing frame. He had a moustache that pointed outward perfectly from each side of his cheeks. He had thick, black severe looking eyebrows. His skin was covered with tiny pink pimples although his complexion was unmistakably grey and sad. He had stopped in front of a bookshop and appeared to be checking out what was for sale.

“There are only your books in there... your rubbish,” said Emma angrily, impatient for him to leave.

Bacillus blinked, glancing sideways. Emma’s heart pounded; she couldn’t move for risk of attracting his attention. If he spotted her, she’d be punished. Emma was at the market located at the Eastern end of her village. This market was off limits to all young unmarried women. Emma knew that if the village chief found her in this forbidden area, he would follow through with his threats.

Emma and Bacillus had a complicated past. She had never respected this man that she considered only as a crowd manipulator. She opposed his news pamphlets by writing her own notes instead which she anonymously distributed in mailboxes. She'd organized a group of trainees to learn martial arts to fight against the Gong Gong. She'd brought her students to the outskirts of the village... In a nutshell, she had undermined the Cheir's authority on several occasions and as a result she had received several punishments. Now, however, Bacillus had thought of a punishment that had really given her a scare... he promised to take away her horse if she disobeyed again.

This punishment was far worse than any other in Emma's eyes, for she loved her long rides in the countryside; it was the only time when she could leave the village and wander around near the Potoma Forest where nobody dared to venture. Emma wasn't the type of person to be afraid. If it was only up to her, she would have already been long gone from Bourbeau. If she hadn't been subject to her father's strict authority and if she wasn't so deeply attached to her nanny, her friends and her students, she would have already joined Stad, the capital city where the Angelrie was located. Emma knew that it was her own fault; she always found excuses to avoid fulfilling her dreams.

The young woman brushed aside her dark thoughts and inhaled softly. She had to manage the situation and not attract the attention of the formidable Cheir. She stared absent mindedly at the black spot near Bacillus' ear. The spot looked like coal. From the teacher's perspective, this spot represented all the venom of the man that she detested. She stood motionless in front of the shop window and closed her eyes.

"Control yourself." She took a breath. "Release positive energy." Emma exhaled. "Listen to the sound of the rain and let the feeling pass." She concentrated and repeated these words to herself: "Bacillus will be called upon. Bacillus will be called upon."

The chief of the village stopped to look into the shop window, but his eyes fell on Emma. He tried to make out who she was.

"Master Bacillus!" called out Vaiari, Reva's father.

"That's all I needed," Emma thought to herself.

Bacillus turned and answered the man. Emma felt little droplets of sweat form on her forehead. She couldn't allow herself to be discovered. She discretely bent forward to hear what they had to say.

"Yes. She was teaching them about Namaka's legend..."

"Did she tell them that she was real?"

"No, I don't think so... I really don't know."

"Reva!" exploded Emma, fuming inside. He had obviously already told his father everything.

Emma couldn't hear any more of the conversation because the two men started to walk away. She stood there motionless, smiling slyly... The men were gone. No matter what their little schemes were, she was free to continue on her path. She waited for an instant listening for footsteps. The street was silent so she decided to leave. She hurried along and entered one of the shops. Hidden by her hood that she had stretched to cover her face, Emma passed the counter where shoppers were asking for Cherokee's remedies. Cherokee was the shop's owner and renowned potion maker, a woman as secretive as she was mysterious.

Emma walked into a deserted room. She looked around making sure that nobody had ventured into this woody and floral scented room. All the clients remained in the other part of the shop. She took off her hood allowing her wavy mass of hair to fall free and gave a sigh of satisfaction; this was exactly where she wanted to be.

She observed the huge room filled with rows of mahogany shelves. Each small compartment contained a jar. Each one was different and Emma loved studying their uncommon shapes. When she was little, she used to spend entire afternoons in this room, sheltered from the commotion and curious stares. She invented a game in order to remember what was contained in each of the jars. She stopped in front of the aisles of shelves and counted to three, just as she liked to do when she was a child. The aim of the game was easy; she had to recite the name and the contents of every third jar. Her eyes sparkled as she began. The first compartment contained a wooden cube that had stalks of bamboo planted on its top.

"Decandra! It's for treating rheumatism!"

She giggled with delight and continued on to the next one, reliving the joy of her past, spending the time to learn, to repeat and to recite the bizarre harebrained names for the potions that Cherokee made.

"A tue-solanine," she declared, pointing to a stone sweating with drooling foam which was trickling onto a plate. On its top sat black morelle whose fruits were toxic but known for reducing fever.

Emma remembered how Cherokee had shown her how to pierce a stone with a needle and to slide out the fruit and the yellow flowers from the plant to render it non-toxic. She placed her yellow stone onto a sticker stuck near the bowl. On the label it read: "Tue-solanine, burning elixir from Solanum Nigrum made of andesite, a volcanic rock rich in silica and minerals." She withdrew the stone, pleased with herself, as it had proven itself to be a very useful technology bequeathed by the Wastikis.

The young woman pointed to the third compartment where she found a crystal saucer with a linen cloth serving as its cover. Tiny red bubbles escaped through the stitching and were flying gracefully near the ceiling. Under the saucer, spidery threads formed a dome against which the bubbles popped. The droplets were collected by the cloud of threads which then slid slowly into flasks. "Rosacea" was written on the sticker label under the saucer. This was just a mixture of flower extracts, supposedly giving a perfect pink complexion to young women.

“Yet another invention for subduing women,” muttered Emma.

Emma knew these wooden shelves by heart, having passed many an afternoon rearranging them, replacing the jars or filling them up again.

“Enough playing!” Emma declared, leaving behind the nostalgia of her happy childhood.

She took out a notebook from inside her cape and untied the cord securing the brown leather cover. She opened it to check which ingredients she was missing for a new potion that she was trying to make.

“Stardust, copra, bougainvillea water...” She looked up. “O.K. Copra, that’s easy.”

She walked over to the far right end of the room and found a bowl full of white coconut milk shredded the Polynesian way. She lifted her tunic and pulled out the first empty tube that was attached to her belt. She glanced toward the entryway to make sure that no one was watching her. Reassured, she opened the top of the container. She poured the liquid into the tube and put the heavy container back in its place. She hurriedly closed the jar.

“Tell me, young lady...”

Emma was so startled that she nearly dropped her tube. She hastened to attach it to her belt in an attempt to hide her handiwork. She turned around to find an old woman standing behind her. Emma smiled at her with relief; for a moment, she thought that Cheroki had caught her stealing precious ingredients and potions without her permission.

“Can I help you with something?” Emma stepped towards the woman who was feverishly holding a prescription from Bacillus in her hand.

“Yes, perhaps,” answered the old woman, seemingly to be trembling with fear.

Emma quickly grasped the woman’s wrist, putting pressure on it to calm her anxiety. The woman smiled with gratitude and remained silent for an instant. Emma studied the small and delicate hand of this elderly grandmother. Her skin was aged and spotty, slightly rough and lined with deep slender wrinkles. The old woman had tiny eyes that sparkled emitting a soothing softness that Emma often noticed in elderly women. She was wearing a silky gray tunic and traditional *getas*, Japanese flip-flops from the Ancient Era. Emma rapidly lingered over her tiny feet, evidence that the old lady belonged to a line of Japanese people that she considered to be representative of the inhabitants of the Asian continent, the largest continent from the Ancient Era.

“Are you feeling better?”

“Yes... thank you. It’s just that I’m not used to coming here,” explained the old woman hastily. She hesitated when she saw Emma looking doubtful. “You know... to be here in Venice, without my husband. I haven’t been a widow for long... It’s overwhelming to be here, you know what I mean?”

"I understand," Emma assured her. "You have nothing to be worried about; you have every right to be here." The old woman sighed with relief, her face filling with gratitude as Emma continued to gently squeeze her hand. "Tell me now; is there something I can help you with?"

"Oh yes dear, yes. I am looking for Djadid powder... I was looking in the aisles so as not to disturb Mrs. Cherokee and this is what I found. This is the right thing, isn't it?" The woman held an iron box etched with green. Emma immediately recognized the Djadid powder.

"Yes, that's it," answered Emma, taking the box from the woman's trembling hand, and with it a crumpled paper that was stuck between her thumb and the box.

"May I?"

The old lady nodded, relieved to have someone's assistance. Emma read the instructions on the paper. It was a prescription from Bacillus. Emma had been waiting for this, the village chief prescribing Djadid powder to enable the woman to extend her life... He had, as usual, "forgotten" to prescribe Hebe oil.

"I see that our Cheir Bacillus has forgotten to prescribe Hebe oil," announced Emma in such a way to win over the old lady's confidence.

"Oh, really.... I see. Are you sure?"

Emma gave the old woman a reassuring smile and squeezed her hand one last time before letting go. She headed toward the aisle where ~~with~~ all the oils were located. She passed over different oils, none of which had a label, just drawings showing what each multi-shaped jar contained. Emma stopped in front of a section of golden oils where she found a platinum colored flask. It had a rounded form that appeared to be smiling as it sat center stage on the shelf.

"You're lucky, it's the last one. Just as if it was waiting for you." Emma grabbed the flask and the woman came next to her. She handed the flask to the skeptical old woman. "How many more years would you like to live for?"

"Three!" exclaimed the old woman. "I must go to my great grandson's wedding. I must give him the blessing, you understand?"

"I see... so this is what you'll need."

"What is it? Oil you say?"

"Hebe oil," answered Emma, pointing to the amber engraving nailed to the inside of the shelf.

The engraving resembled a man who looked as if he was fighting some kind of mysterious beast. Emma opened the flask and let the woman smell its contents.

“Spangled, strong tasting, but easy to inhale. You add a drop of this oil to your infusions of Djadid powder and you’ll be certain to gain eternal youth!”

“Oh! Eternal youth! God forbid! I just want to go to the wedding and pass on.”

“That’s what I mean...” Emma took a closer look at the prescription. Mrs. Anicetos, eternal youth before your great grandson’s wedding. “You know that the charm granted by Bacillus will not exceed the limit in any case.”

The old woman blushed, feeling guilty for having doubted her. She placed the flask into her basket with an amused smile.

“That’s right, dear. Nobody can overpower the will of his Grace, he’s so kind.” The grandmother put away her glasses and said goodbye to Emma. “I’m going to go pay now.”

Emma nodded and watched as the old woman left the room.

“The will of his Grace, except that his Grace, in “forgetting” to prescribe the Hebe oil, condemned you to death in six months!” Emma thought to herself. “But for that you needed to know the secrets of all the mixtures, those which Bacillus has forbidden to all the inhabitants of Bourbeau!”

She cursed out loud this man that she hated although it was useless. She was disgusted. She shook her head and retrieved her notebook. She didn’t have any time to lose; the shop would soon be closed. Emma was looking over her list when she heard the door of the shop creak. She immediately knew who it was. She hastily put away her notebook and her tube then stood still to catch what was being said. She realized that she could be seen if she stayed where she was. She advanced as silently as possible to the edge of the door and leaned forward to overhear the conversation.

“It’s true. Cherokee was right to recommend that you take Hebe oil. It’s an upsetting oversight on my part.” It was the voice of the hypocrite Bacillus speaking to the elderly grandmother.

“But no, it wasn’t...”

“As you know Bacillus, infusions are much more effective when combined with Hebe oil. You must inhale them also, isn’t that right Anicetos? Don’t forget, you must inhale twice a day.” Cherokee handed the woman her change and her package.

“Yes, I understand, but it’s thanks...”

“Yes, thanks to our Excellency you can live longer,” finished Cherokee. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’m going to take care of our dear Cheir before the shop closes, okay dear?”

“Yes, yes, of course. Thank you again...”

“Don’t thank me Anicetos, we will see one another again at the end of your treatment... in 8 weeks. Goodbye.”

“Yes, yes,” mumbled the woman. She was visibly distressed by Cheroki’s nonchalant attitude which was otherwise normally welcoming.

Anicetos decided to leave against her better judgement timidly saying goodbye to the Cheir. His face was emotionless and he observed the scene without missing a crumb of Cheroki’s discomfort. If he had been enraged by the fact that she had prescribed Hebe oil to the old woman Anicetos, he was also surprised by her cavalier attitude. Cheroki turned to face him with a questioning look. Bacillus frowned, so annoyed by how slow the old woman was that he rushed to the door to get her out of the shop as fast as possible. He wanted to reassure himself that Anicetos was gone before he began speaking with the chemist.

Once the door was shut, Bacillus gave a childish smile, embarrassed. Emma, still hidden, couldn’t help herself from noticing how the Cheir of Bourbeau looked uncomfortable in front of Cheroki. The woman gave off an impressive aura and even if Emma was convinced that the chief of her village was jealous of Cheroki’s knowledge, she still had the impression that something else was going on between the two of them. They shared some sort of secret past that was hard for Bacillus to hide when he found himself face to face with Cheroki her, a woman that Emma admired and loved with all her heart.

“So,” pronounced Bacillus coldly. “Cheroki, I thank you for your contribution but must I remind you that you are working here under my jurisdiction...”

“Bacillus, I...”

“I forbid you to call me Bacillus!”

Bacillus looked threateningly at Cheroki and the woman with the long black hair and welcoming face stood still. Emma clenched her fists to hold in her anger. Bacillus felt himself superior, but as far as Emma was concerned, Cheroki was by far much more intelligent than this shady and dangerous man.

“Excuse me... your Excellency.” Cheroki’s expression became obedient as she readjusted her earring made of a feather and an urchin bone. The movement only served to stir up Bacillus’ annoyance and distrust.

“Well.” Bacillus took a sideways glance. He looked around; he wanted to make sure that they were alone.

“There’s nobody here,” assured Cheroki, straightening herself.

“Well.” Nevertheless, Bacillus looked over his shoulder before moving closer to Cheroki. “It’s raining,” he whispered to her.

“Yes, it’s raining,” repeated Cheroki with an inquisitive look. Bacillus stared deeply at the chemist who seemed as though not to understand. “So?”

Emma couldn't help herself from bursting out laughing, so loud that it attracted Bacillus' attention. The man immediately understood what was going on and Cheroki closed her eyes, unable to hide her exasperation.

"And the young lady banned from Venice, how much time will she need to learn that if she wants to stay living under my jurisdiction she must bend to MY rules?"

"Come now, Bacillus, it was just some laughing animal; I received new ones this morning to ready the inhabitants for the rain."

"Really?"

Bacillus looked deeply into Cheroki's eyes. He knew the chemist well enough to know that she was incapable of lying.

"All you need to do is to throw me out, your Grace."

Emma came out from her hiding place and was standing on the doorstep. Her heart was beating furiously as she stepped forward to confront the Cheir of Bourbeau.

"If that's what you want Emma..." Bacillus stood up straight and faced Emma, but she wasn't scared of this man that she so detested.

"That's what YOU want Bacillus, so why don't you just do it? Many have been chased out of Bourbeau and they haven't committed half of the crimes I have. Why not get rid of me once and for all?"

She stood in front of him and stared. They stood for several seconds sizing each other up and Bacillus cleared his throat in an attempt to avoid her gaze.

"Come on Emma, let's not talk about crimes..." whispered Bacillus as he pretended to look for something on the counter. "As far as exile is concerned, that's a sentence far too serious to be taken so lightly and against someone as oblivious and disrespectful as YOU!"

"Emma, don't insist. Leave Bacillus to do his work as Cheir," protested Cheroki in an effort to calm the atmosphere.

Emma studied the woman who had been her nanny and her guardian. Cheroki held out a glass of water to Bacillus to interrupt the quarrel and to try to change the subject. Bacillus thanked her and took a mouthful of the clear liquid.

"Both of you, as soon as it's about giving me back my freedom, you dodge the issue. All this just because of my father. Why are all of you so afraid of him?" They remained silent. "What Bacillus? Am I going to stay unpunished? Me who's in Venice, the neighborhood forbidden to young unmarried women? Me who gave the Hebe oil to the old woman Anicetos? Me, who tells the secret stories from the book of fairytales?"

"It was you of course." Bacillus gave Cheroki a threatening look. "I knew that you wouldn't have the courage to overstep my orders..."

“It happens every now and again to make exceptions Bacillus,” remarked the chemist calmly.

“I’ve had just about enough of you, Cheroki! You know that I can destroy you if I want to!”

“I forbid you to lay a hand on Cheroki. It’s not...”

“Be quiet!”

Bacillus shouted with rage. His ordinary gray complexion had become brown, almost black. His skin turned this color only when he was angry. His face became so threatening that even Emma feared him. But this time she was ready, ready to confront him. She stared at him without speaking, their mutual dislike for one another evident. Cheroki started reciting incantations as she looked from one to the other, hoping it would calm them, as if words could soothe the situation.

Silence settled over the shop when the bells began ringing loudly, announcing the town meeting. The shop stayed silent while Cheroki continued her chanting. The Cheir was busy thinking about how to calm his hostility toward Emma. At the sound of the last bell, Bacillus’ face abruptly lit up as he distanced himself from her with an air of self-importance.

“I’ve got an idea,” said the Cheir, trying to gain time. He displayed a devilish smile. Just then a streak of lightning lit up the shop. Bacillus gave Cheroki a shifty and satisfying look after initiating a deafening thunder clap. Cheroki remained visibly fearful and anxious. He handed her the glass and wrapped his scarf around his neck.

“I’ll be waiting for you under the palaver tree. BOTH OF YOU.”

His tone was direct and dismissive. He left the room. The door closed behind him and Emma looked at Cheroki. She stood motionless. Her face was frozen; she held the glass of water in one hand and was taking a sip. She exhaled as she set the glass down, staring at the door, her mind absent and preoccupied.

“What does it mean Cheroki?” Cheroki remained lost in her thoughts. “Cheroki?” Cheroki gave Emma a faint smile while grabbing her coat.

“That means that we must go.”

“Go there for what? To listen... to respect this man?”

“This man welcomes you in this town Emma, and if you want to stay here, you must respect the rules.”

“That’s just it. I don’t want to stay here.”

“This isn’t the right time to be having ~~have~~ this conversation, do you hear me?”

“You can’t keep me here forever!”

“Emma! You heard Bacillus! We’re expected under the palaver tree.” The woman closed the cash register, took her purse and headed toward the door.

“Cheroki!” The nanny looked back over her shoulder at Emma.

“It’s time, Emma.”

“Time for what?”

“It’s time for you to know where your the three marks come from and why your father and I always stopped you from leaving Bourbeau... until now.”

# CHAPTER 3:

## UNDER THE PALAUER TREE

Emma hated the palaver tree. For her it represented all the lies, the fraud and the authoritarianism of Bacillus. Although Cheroki had explained to her that the tree was traditionally the symbol for discussion and understanding, Bacillus had transformed its beauty and dirtied the significance of its name for the sake his own fake and ridiculous power. The Cheir demanded that Emma be present for his announcement so for once she sat down near the tree. Usually she liked to hide herself at the back, near the shrubs so that she could make her escape as quickly as possible. This time, Emma had a hard time trying to figure out how she could slip away... Even worse, she had absolutely no idea what the Cheir had in store for her. Cheroki hadn't said a word, using the excuse that it was to remain a secret, but even she couldn't manage to hide her anxiety from Emma. By nature, Cheroki was a serene and even-tempered person.

Night had fallen and the inhabitants of the village had spread out their pewe, woven cotton fabric mats that they used to sit on the ground. They had all taken out their big umbrellas made of Pandan leaves and their traditional lanterns, whose candles were lit thanks to energy produced from the day's sunlight. Everyone was plugged into the red thread *œrd*, which was connected to a special screen that Bacillus had developed so that his citizens could follow all the latest news of the village. There was only one restriction: they were not to exceed 20 minutes a day.

Emma looked over the shoulders of all the seated men and women; all were captivated by the latest news:

*“Not to be missed.  
Special news exclusive tonight!  
His Excellency is going to make an announcement.”*

*“At noon, his Excellency was at the Aubergine.  
He found the eggplant ratatouille delicious.  
Exclusive photos!”*

*“This morning Miss Bourbeau inaugurated the flower show.  
Her personal thoughts.”*

Emma sighed as she watched everyone stare at their hands which served as their screens.

“At least hands pollute less than plasma screens,” she admitted while she walked alongside Cheroki.

“The New Era is perhaps about Nature, not change. Men will remain men...”

There was a time when we all lived without the constant flow of images and information, wasn't there?

“Yes, the Elders called it the ‘Middle Ages’ and ‘under-development’,” explained Cherokee.

“I never understood what was so magical knowing that “Miss whoever she is ate too much” or that the “Cheir family recently bought a toy for the son of whatever his name is.””

“It's because you never take an interest in the lives of others, Emma,” answered Cherokee sarcastically, putting her finger to her lips. Although people were sitting there staring at their screens, they could still overhear them.

All the inhabitants were gathered around the Flamboyant, a majestic tree that dominated the plain at the East entry point of the village. At the foot of the tree a circle of stones defined this particular palaver tree, making it a sort of house made of stones and long carved sticks.

The height of the structure was not to exceed one yard. Cherokee explained to Emma that in ancient times, the inhabitants and the chiefs met inside the house to talk. If one of them got angry he couldn't stand up without the risk of banging his head. The elders believed that to remain seated calmed one's behavior and avoided conflicts. Today, Bacillus had sealed off the interior and had replaced the traditional meeting area with a metallic structure where he had installed a podium. He addressed the public while projecting images or writings with his pink stone. He used the sky as the background and it gave everyone the impression of attending a Mass given by “his Excellency, the Master of Nature and of our village...” Such was Bacillus' complete title, something which always amused Emma.

Emma looked around. The Cheir was in a corner talking; he waited until the villagers were seated before making his “grand entrance.” Emma was muttering to herself when she saw a hand waving in the crowd. Her face lit up when she saw her childhood friend Charlotte waving to her. Emma smiled and started to get up but Cherokee held her back.

“Stay right where you are,” hissed her former nanny.

“I'm not 5 years old anymore, I can do whatever I want,” replied Emma defiantly.

“Do whatever you want, but just be aware that the Gong Gong army has just arrived.”

“The Gong Gong?”

Hooded men and women marched around the audience. Each wore a headlamp and held a staff as their official weapon. As they approached center stage Emma understood that they had come to take part in the “special” evening that Bacillus had organized for her. Why were they here? The Gong Gong served the heirs of the Black Master and

inviting them to a local reception could only mean that it was a warning sent by Bacillus to display his ties to the Black Master.

Emma's heart rate slowed as she examined the shadows of their silhouettes. She knew that she could beat them. Instinctively, she saw right through their weak and lazy nature. Her eyes settled upon a man. He wasn't wearing a mask but he had a hood. His eyes had been painted in the form of an oddly shaped silver black mask. She had a hard time trying to figure out what it was. Suddenly their eyes met and Emma couldn't keep herself from shivering. Fear instantly overtook her body, and a shiver ran down her spine at the sight of his icy blue eyes. Instinctively, she knew that he had come for her; she was the one he wanted.

Emma turned away from his penetrating and chilling stare. What did this man want? Emma wanted to leave and go as far away as possible. This man had terrorized her with one single look. She desperately tried to calm herself down. Consumed with anxiety, she turned to her old nanny.

"Did you see that man?"

"Which one?" Emma pointed toward the man, but he had disappeared. Emma swallowed and took a deep breath as she continued looking for him. Cheroki looked at her inquisitively.

"He's gone."

"What did he look like? Was he one of the Gong Gong?"

"No. He was wearing a mask..."

"Excuse me?" Cheroki frowned.

"His face was painted or tattooed like as if he was wearing some kind of mask or something. You know what I mean?" Cheroki shifted her body in a bizarre manner and Emma tried to guess what it meant. "Uh-huh... I see. So now do you still believe that having kept me rotting here was a good way to protect me?" asked Emma bitterly.

"Be quiet Emma. His coming here is a very bad sign."

"To say the least."

Emma turned to face the crowd and found Charlotte's welcoming face. Her friend motioned to her that she wanted to speak after the ceremony, which Emma joyfully accepted. Charlotte smiled broadly as she arched her back which accentuated the shape of her growing belly. She was 5 months pregnant. Emma pondered the idea that her future godchild would soon be born. She gave Charlotte a thumbs-up sign and a big smile. She looked back at Cheroki and immediately stopped smiling.

"Why are the Gong Gong here, Cheroki? Who is this man?"

"I don't know."

“The Gong Gong, they didn’t come here just for me, I hope?”

“Bacillus has nothing against you.”

“You make it sound like I have some kind of special protection.”

“It’s true. And the Cheir had better remember it or he risks losing it all.” Cheroki was angry. It was rare to see Cheroki angry. Emma looked at her inquisitively. “Your father isn’t going to appreciate this, that’s all.”

“My father... as if he were a powerful man!” Emma watched as the musicians got ready. “Only an Angel can make Bacillus worry and even then, he’s not afraid of anybody now that he’s teamed up with the Black Master.”

“Shhhh!” interrupted Cheroki. “Don’t say his name in public.”

“What? As far as I know he hasn’t been censured! What am I supposed to call him then? ‘The one whose name we don’t pronounce?’”

Cheroki rolled her eyes, irritated by her pupil’s foolhardiness just as the trident sound of a flute announced that the meeting was about to begin. Drum beats sounded followed by the discrete playing of the percussions. Men waved their lanterns while the women clapped to the beat. Gradually, the lights streamed out of their glass compartments to join with the sky, forming a vaulted rainbow over the rainy coated evening.

Emma couldn’t stop herself from gaping, dumbstruck by the beauty of the colorful rays in the sky. The percussions started playing brass band. Bacillus stepped forward onto the stage as the audience cheered. He gestured for the applause to go to a pompom girl arriving on stage. She was wearing a blue and gold costume. She thanked Bacillus, who took a step backwards, allowing her to take center stage.

The girl was wearing a hat and had a baton that she twirled in the air, accompanied by an impeccable smile that was pasted on her face. She did several routines which she finished by forcefully throwing her spectral baton in the air. Whilst in mid-air, the ends of the baton lit up under the captivated eyes of the audience while the rain continued to shower the stage. The raindrops were streaming down her pale white skin; she was the only one to get wet-everyone else was protected by their umbrellas, tents or transparent protective wraps.

As a rule, she would normally have done her routine sheltered under a temporary structure but Bacillus seemed as though he wanted to tell a tale. With the sound of the percussions and the drums, the young girl ended her show to the warm and admiring applause of the audience. Bacillus reappeared, clad in a light blue coat and a turquoise pointed hat. A porter followed him, holding a giant dark blue umbrella which protected the Cheir from the water. Bacillus stopped at center stage and began his traditional chant.

“Obviously, Bacillus knows the color of water,” sighed Emma. “And next he’s going to tell us that water is life and that it’s all thanks to him.”

“Shhh,” scolded Cherokee.

Emma rolled her eyes. These displays annoyed her and she couldn't wait to know what Bacillus had cooking for her. She smiled devilishly, while on the inside she realized that the Cheir had something much more dangerous and sinister in mind for her than just taking her horse away. She glanced over at the Gong Gong, watching them as they surveyed the crowd with stone-faced expressions. For a brief moment, she had the impression that they were staring at her and she began to grind her teeth. Emma made up her mind: she would leave the boring life in Bourbeau and the Gong Gong couldn't stop her. It was about time she fulfilled her dreams.

“Stupid me,” Emma thought to herself as she recalled the terror that she'd felt a moment ago, when she'd spotted the mysterious messenger who seemed to have now disappeared for good. How could she even think about succeeding if a single stare terrified her?

“Everything comes to those who wait,” replied Cherokee, as if she had been reading Emma's thoughts.

“I'll never succeed in getting into the Angelrie, I'm too old,” retorted Emma, not caring if her nanny understood what she meant or not.

“Never say never.” Cherokee was calm, watching Bacillus' charade without displaying any emotion. Her anger had disappeared and she looked as if she was somewhere else far away.

“I can see that you're inspired... and what about the ban put upon me by my father? I'm stuck living here, I remind you.”

“We are there to give those we love wings to fly, roots to come back to and a reason to stay.”

“Well... I see you're still in a great mood.”

“It's a quote from the Dalai-Lama, Emma,” explained Cherokee, looking at her sweetly, “A wise man with unquestionable faith.” Cherokee gently caressed the young woman's cheek. “Have faith, Emma. You'll be surprised by what it can bring you. And now, be quiet, because what you don't realize is that if Bacillus called the Gong Gong, then the situation is serious... VERY SERIOUS.”

Emma wanted to answer, but the threatening and fearful eyes of the chemist stopped her. She had learned to respect Cherokee's many secrets and mysterious phrases while not always necessarily understanding their meaning, but this time there was no meaning to find, it was just obvious.

“My friends, look! Look at the water! The water my friends!” Bacillus opened his arms and launched into his discourse. “Water is life...”

“There, not even 15 seconds,” murmured Emma. She took out her pencil and opened her precious diary. She added a line to the squares that she had already jotted down in her notebook. She had scrupulously counted the number of times that she’d guessed what Bacillus was going to say during one of his meetings. Too absorbed in admiring her handiwork, she hadn’t noticed that Bacillus had pointed in her direction. Cheroki elbowed her but it took Emma several seconds to realize that Bacillus was waiting for her.

“What already?” she exclaimed.

“Emma!”

Bacillus’ glaring stare made her think it better to hold her tongue and behave correctly. The hot-headed young girl nodded her head respectfully and caught the chief’s outstretched hand with grace and smiled to the crowd. The band started playing in an effort to break the uneasiness of the audience. She joined Bacillus on the stage to the crowd’s applause.

“My friends, I present to you Emma Herevai-Batala, our source of life!”

The crowd cheered and it was at this moment that Emma understood that her fellow citizens would believe anything. They had absolutely no idea why she was there, but already they were soaking up Bacillus’ words as if they were gospel. Bacillus silenced the audience with a wave of his hand.

“As you have seen... the rain.” Bacillus raised his hands up towards the sky. “My friends, the rain has returned. Earlier than expected.” Whispers among the crowd heightened their nervousness. “Calm yourselves, my friends. It’s a blessing. The rain, the water, the sea are all sources of life. They bring us back to our very essence of being, to our purest state, to our birth. My friends, remember that the rain plays an integral part in our quest; it doesn’t mean the water will rise, it means the water will fertilize our future lands!” The crowd went wild and Bacillus was obliged to stop speaking and calm them down. “My friends, since the rain came earlier this year, I have decided to give thanks.” The crowd hung on his every word, but Emma remained skeptical. “As you all know, we must think positively and never resign ourselves to being spiteful, full of dark thoughts and doubt. My friends, I have decided to give you Emma Herevai-Batala, our source of forgiveness!”

Once again, the crowd cheered and again, Emma felt desperate inside. Neither she nor anyone else knew what Bacillus wanted... with the exception, perhaps, of her old nanny. She looked over at Cheroki and remembered her words. She looked peaceful and not worried in any way. What did Bacillus want? What was hidden in those three marks? What had she been trying to say when she was explaining where the three marks had come from?

Emma put her thoughts aside as Bacillus finished his prayer. She studied the people, their eyes wide open and shining with hope and faith, full of blind admiration for

Bacillus. He took hold of the young woman's hand and lifted it high as if proclaiming victory.

"My friends, Emma will go to the Potoma Forest."

The assembly gasped as much in fear as in surprise. Potoma Forest bordered their village, isolating it from the rest of the world. The only link connecting it with the rest of the outside world was a path which ran along the lengths of the cliffs overlooking Peace Valley as far as Concourray Harbor, a small town located about 15 miles away.

"She will go to Potoma Forest, and using my messages to guide her, she will go to the Spring of all springs. Yes, my friends, Emma will go to bless the water, our water! Let us pray again my friends!"

Immediately the townspeople bowed their heads, placing their right hands over their hearts. All together, they recited Bacillus' prayer. When they looked up Emma saw how absurd the whole spectacle was. Her face darkened as she saw the men of the Gong Gong army approaching her. She looked for the hooded horseman, but much to her relief he was nowhere to be seen. She looked questioningly at Cherokee, who discretely motioned to her to find a way to avoid getting caught by the men.

The cheerleader brought out a golden trophy decorated with blue gemstones. Emma immediately recognized the Union Cup. The Choir only took out his precious chest which contained the trophy on special occasions. Emma looked on wide eyed, but couldn't hold her disapproving tongue.

"You know, you must be really bad off if you need to bring out the Union Cup!"

"Emma!" thundered Bacillus.

"What? Me, Emma Herevai-Batala, I need a trophy? Really?"

"Be quiet," commanded Bacillus icily, "or do you really want me to put you into the hands of the Gong Gong?"

"What? Haven't you already done so?"

"You're nothing but an outcast, Emma."

"You have no idea what the children say, do you? You're the one who's the outcast, not me; you're the one who said it first."

Bacillus grabbed her arm in a fit of anger, only stopping when he realized that all eyes were upon him. He masked his anger by gesturing to Emma to kneel down before him, much to her disgust. Emma did as she was told, pressured by Cherokee who had given her a commanding look which clearly told her to play along with Bacillus' game.

Bacillus let go of Emma's arm and took the trophy. He stepped forward holding it up allowing the cup to fill with water as he mumbled something undecipherable. The crowd didn't miss a thing, literally soaking up this man and his every move. Emma waited

there, motionless, asking herself what the next step would be. She had to think of an escape plan.

Bacillus finished spewing out his chants and lowered his head respectfully. He turned to Emma and held out the trophy to her.

“My friends. Bless Emma. Bless her before she leaves... Before she leaves and goes to save us.” Bacillus gestured with his free hand and the people began reciting the town motto:

“Bourbeau, don’t sleep, Bourbeau you are open to Nature, that which governs and protects you.”

Bacillus raised his arm and made the sign of the cross. As for the armed men, they tightened their circle. Emma understood that they were waiting for her, that they had come to escort her out of the village... with them. Her heart began to race. Bacillus had promised to hand her over to these men. She would become their prisoner if she didn’t find a way out of this mess.

Emma bowed her head like the others and when she looked up, Bacillus sprayed her with water. Even though she was caught by surprise, she didn’t blink. She opened her eyes which were still wet to see the Cheir’s mocking scowl. He was overjoyed with himself, the villagers totally oblivious to the fact that they were being manipulated.

“Go, my dear Emma, go. Bring life! Bourbeau is in your hands!”

The band broke out into a victorious march accompanied by the inhabitants’ applause. Bacillus smiled and walked toward Emma.

“You see my dear Emma Herevai-Batala, I know how to punish wrongdoing.” Victory was emblazoned on his face. “Go and leave Bourbeau and never return. Emma Herevai-Batala, I hereby place you in exile. I wish you good luck.”

The thunder rolled as Bacillus lifted his hand to the young teacher’s forehead in a gesture of blessing. He placed his hands on her shoulders and appeared as though he was giving her a kiss.

“Thank you, Bacillus,” she whispered sarcastically.

Emma gave Bacillus such a cold-hearted smile it made him shiver. Emma wasn’t afraid. She wasn’t worried, quite the contrary. Emma thanked Bacillus for having given her the opportunity to leave this town which suffocated her. Now exiled by the Cheir, Emma could leave and to conquer her destiny. She turned around and continued to smile even as she saw the Gong Gong waiting for her. She wasn’t afraid; she was ready to fight right before the eyes of Bourbeau’s townspeople if she needed to.

For the first time in her life she was ready to confront her fears and chase her dreams.

“Emma!” Charlotte’s voice broke the uneasy silence which followed when the band stopped playing. Emma turned and exhaled deeply. Charlotte was moving moved

toward her. She was out of breath. Emma stole a quick glance at Bacillus and the Gong Gong who, caught by surprise, remained motionless. Emma flashed a victorious smile and stepped down off the stage. She headed toward Charlotte to the crowd's applause. All the townspeople knew that the two friends had been inseparable since childhood. Emma joined her friend without giving Bacillus a second thought. Bacillus looked over to the Gong Gong chief who looked back at him with raised eyebrows. Bacillus motioned for him to stand by; he couldn't afford to lose control of the situation. Emma found her friend breathless.

"Charlotte, you're five months pregnant, you should be taking it easy!"

"That's OK, I'm not sick you know!" puffed Charlotte, scarlet faced. "Just let me catch my breath for a minute." She took several deep breaths with Emma's assistance. The audience was captured by the scene. The public's applause grew when Charlotte stood up and smiled.

"Feel better?"

"Yeah, thanks." Charlotte took Emma's hand and said to Bacillus: "Cheir of Bourbeau, I beg you, allow me to accompany Emma back home so that I can help her pack her things."

Loud undertones filled the audience and Emma's eyes sparkled. Charlotte was her means of escape and there was nothing that the Cheir of Bourbeau could do to stop her. Bacillus glared at her. A bead of sweat formed on his face. His plan to hand over Emma over to the Gong Gong had failed and he couldn't refuse this favor to Emma's pregnant friend. His eyes settled on Emma, who glared at him defiantly, ever so happy to have been let go. For Bacillus the game wasn't over, there were still moves to be made. He nodded his approval without so much as a word and the audience applauded. He motioned to the army to stay put and wait.

The two girlfriends left the meadow and when they reached the path that led to Emma's house, Charlotte stopped still in her tracks.

"Emma, whatever possessed you to volunteer? Potoma Forest! You're nuts! Do you have any idea how dangerous it is?" Emma made a peace sign in an effort to prevent her friend from going off on a long tirade about the dangers of the forest.

"Volunteer? I must have missed an episode somewhere. I'm not a volunteer, Charlotte."

"What do you mean you're not a volunteer? This isn't one of your brilliant ideas to get out of Bourbeau? You didn't ask Bacillus to send you away?"

"No," Emma replied flatly.

"And the Gong Gong, what were they doing at our meeting if it wasn't to help you to conquer the 'demons' in the forest?"

"I don't think that the Gong Gong would ever help anyone to defeat the 'demons' in the forest... They're demons themselves," added Emma bitterly.

"That's true," admitted Charlotte. "But why were they there then? Bacillus is crazy to bring them here!"

"You are not being a good little Bourbeau citizen, Charlotte! Everything that Bacillus does is good, you know that!"

"Emma! Come on," scoffed Charlotte, glaring her eyes.

"I thought that they were there to... take me prisoner."

"Take you prisoner? What on earth for?"

"I thought that he was going to give me to Demone."

"Demone," replied Charlotte, her face turning white with fear. Emma grazed her hand tenderly over her friend's cheek in a reassuring gesture.

"I don't know Charlotte. I think Bacillus had other plans for me and that you screwed them all up."

"So much the better," said Charlotte after a moment. She took hold of Emma and they continued walking silently arm in arm. "In any case, it's what you always wanted, isn't it?"

"I'm just not made for staying in Bourbeau, it's true... but that's not all." Emma suddenly stopped. "Charlotte, Bacillus exiled me... I don't have any other choice. It's time for me to leave Bourbeau."

Charlotte listened to Emma's words with sadness and resignation. She couldn't hide her sorrow and heaved a sigh as she wrapped her arms tightly around her friend.

"I always knew," she confessed. "In spite of everything, it's always one thing to know something and quite another to see it actually happening."

Emma squeezed her friend. They both laughed when she bumped into her friend's bulging tummy. Charlotte wiped away her tears and grasped the chain hanging round her neck on which five colorful stones were strung. Emma did the same with hers and took the red stone into her right hand. The two of them knew what they had to do.

Emma placed her stone close to the edge of Charlotte's. When the two stones made contact a thread formed at the outer edge of each stone which then connected to each other joining the two stones. Charlotte and Emma exchanged looks of satisfaction as they raised the palms of their right hands to eye level. Emma stopped watching Charlotte and focused on her hand which began to change color. A cloud formed in the crux of Emma's hand and the young woman watched as the image of Charlotte appeared on her skin. Her right hand now served as a mini screen where Charlotte could be seen concentrating on programming her own screen.

“You’re looking good tonight,” joked Emma as her friend blushed. Two smiling suns appeared on either side of the cloud.

“Stop kidding around and set up your connection,” chided Charlotte, who was busily tapping the upper edge of her palm to access her list of contacts.

A red tower lit up her finger showing the faces of 5 contacts, the first being that of a smiling blonde man listed as “Honey” and beneath him, that of an older couple listed as “Parents”. She glanced over at Emma whose red tower had also materialized except that there were no images present. Emma tapped on the box; her heart was beating wildly, for it was the first time that she had ever linked herself with someone. It was an application which gave someone else access to the goings on of someone else at a distance without having to write to them. The system searched for Charlotte and her face appeared on the tower. Writing appeared on her palm.

“Charlotte volunteers to become your first link, press to accept or cancel.”

Emma took a deep breath and glanced at Charlotte who was already tapping on her palm. Emma did likewise and all of a sudden, the threads connecting the two stones lit up multicolored, flashing before finally turning red.

“Operation completed.”

Charlottes’s face displayed itself on the tower and her name inscribed itself on Emma’s finger.

“What? Charlotte, why? I can’t call you Prunette like everyone else does?” Charlotte made a funny face. She closed her hand and waited. The threads retracted, the two stones disconnected themselves from one another and turned off.

“Very funny.”

“What? It’s your name,” retorted Emma, hiding the stones beneath her tunic.

“Uh-huh,” said Charlotte, smiling at her friend. “You can change the name later if you like,” she added, as if needing to reassure Emma who was just teasing her.

“I know.” She held her friend tightly against her. “Feeling better now?” asked Emma.

“Yes. Even so I would’ve preferred you be here for the birth of your godson.”

“I will be... at least virtually.”

“I know,” admitted Charlotte, “I know.” Emma took her friend in her arms one last time. “Go on now, go. So that I don’t have to think about the dangers of Potoma anymore, or you leaving, or of everything that could happen to you.”

Emma pointed to the red stone beneath her tunic.

“You’ll be the first to know. The first one and the only one.”

“Not for long, Emma! Soon, there will be someone else, then another and another who’ll be connected to you.”

“Hey, not too many! You know the rule: only five!”

They arrived in front of Emma’s house, lost in the middle of nowhere. Charlotte looked back uneasily at the path that she had to take to get back home. Emma knew that Charlotte was a worrier by nature and scared of the idea of returning home alone after dark. Emma whistled to Zigzag and her faithful Labrador materialized.

“Go with Zigzag. He’ll stay with you until you reach home.”

“Thanks Emma.”

“Go Charlotte. Emilio’s waiting for you. And your in-laws. Go and don’t be worried, we’ll see each other soon.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

Charlotte returned to the path with Zigzag alongside her, happy to go for an evening walk. She disappeared into the night and thought about Emma Bluet, the friend that she’d never see again and who would never return to Bourbeau... except through the powers of the red stone.

# CHAPTER 4:

## A RAINY NIGHT

Emma was in her room. She was taking an inventory of her belongings. She wanted to get rid of most of her things. She had no idea where she was going but she was getting out of Bourbeau. She was leaving behind her father's deserted manor house and her childhood to face a destiny like all those travelers that she had read about who had gone before her. She wanted to be courageous. She wanted to be ready. She sighed and looked at the clothes and the things that she wanted to bring that she had piled up on her bed.

To the right were her notebook and her book on the powers and virtues of plants, her father's dictionary, her books of tales and legends that she didn't have the heart to part with.

"So many books!" she exclaimed. She bit her lower lip. She treasured her books. For her, they represented knowledge and one of the rare possessions the men of the Emerged Lands could pass on or exchange with one another since quantities were limited.

She knew that the weight of all her things would be much too heavy for her horse, but intuition told her that she'd need her writings. In the middle of the bed were lying her stones, her flasks, her tubes of potions, some herbs, thread, dried flowers...

"Ingredients, more and more ingredients! It would've been much easier to have made all the mixes before," she thought to herself.

There too, Emma had the feeling that she'd need all her ingredients. To her left were her clothes, two skirts, a pair of pants, two blouses and a pair of shoes. There at least she could save some weight. She turned around, her hand to her forehead as she eyed her weapons.

In front of her on the table lay two knives, one large and one small, as well as a Swiss knife, a crossbow, some darts, a bow, some arrows, a green stone, sharp nails, blades and a net. Since The Wave, firearms, chemical products and explosives had disappeared, leaving only the five stones. Emma knew that she had to learn to fight without weapons, but how to get all that stuff into a 25 pound bag as every other traveler managed to do? She thought about adding another bag but she had to do what was best for her horse.

Without thinking, she sat on her bed caressing the stones hanging from her necklace. She took out her last notebook and opened to the page with the recipe laomai potion, a mixture which accelerated the healing of wounds.

"So you're leaving Bourbeau!" Emma jumped. Her father was standing in the doorway. She gasped for air.

"How?" she stammered, mystified. "What are you doing here? You can't be here. All the roads to Bourbeau are closed."

"You listen too much to Bacillus which surprises me." Emma couldn't hide her surprise.

“No Emma, all the roads aren’t closed. Bacillus makes everyone believe that they’re all closed to control the villagers going out, that’s all. Look...” Shuilu showed her his wet and muddy boots. Emma frowned. “You know full well that I came by the road.” Emma couldn’t help but think that he was lying.

“What are you doing here?”

“Since when a father doesn’t have the right to see his daughter?”

“You were supposed to come back in two weeks!” she replied coldly.

“Because I always kept my promises and I always came when you expected me to?”

Emma kept frowning because she knew that her father continued to lie. Something was wrong, his being there wasn’t normal.

“Cheroki’s downstairs,” interrupted Shuilu as if to divert her thoughts. “She told me all about Bacillus’ show.”

“And the Gong Gong?”

“The Gong Gong. You have nothing to worry about. The problem will soon be fixed.”

Shuilu smiled warmly at Emma but she coldly turned away.

“Really? He put me in exile Father. From now on you don’t have any more excuses to keep me from going with you to Stad.”

“And the masked man? What’s that all about?” Emma shuddered.

“I have no idea what he was doing there...”

“He scared you, didn’t he?” Emma nodded silently. “He came to spy,” warned Shuilu. “And the Gong Gong were supposed to take you.”

“He isn’t a Gong Gong?”

“You were lucky to get away.”

“Of course,” rebuked Emma. “And without Charlotte, I’d now be chatting with them instead of packing my bags!”

“True,” said Shuilu solemnly. “Bacillus made a deal. You in exchange for God knows what.”

“Oh! So he failed then.”

“Bacillus doesn’t like to fail,” answered Shuilu as if he was issuing a verdict. “He’ll find another way to hand you over to the Gong Gong.”

“You don’t seem so worried about it...”

“Bacillus forgot that he has certain debts to pay and commitments to honor.”

His daughter stared at him. His expression was serious and there was a heaviness in his voice which she didn’t expect. He smiled despite himself and took a step toward Emma stroking her cheek.

“So... It’s time for dinner. Cheroki’s waiting for us.”

They went downstairs silently and found Cheroki sitting at the table, where three bowls of soup were laid out. She had lit a fire in the chimney. A book was laying front and center on the beechwood table. Emma solemnly crossed the room. The moment that she had been waiting for had finally come, the moment when her father and her former nanny would answer her questions. She took her seat quietly and studied the dark haired man with fine features and green eyes. She couldn’t help but think that she was looking at a stranger. Shuilu handed Emma her bowl and watched as she took a sip.

The soup warmed her and calmed her nerves. Emma absently stared at the bowl thinking about Shuilu. Her father. Her father, the traveler who was doing business throughout the kingdom. The father that she loved with all her heart. The father that she often took for a stranger, so often away that she didn’t really know anything about him or his business. Her eyes settled on him and she lost all track of time and space. Her vision blurred and her eyes shut as if her mind was pushing her into another dimension.

“This father isn’t really my father,” she whispered after several seconds. All of a sudden her intuition spoke to her and she immediately understood.

Her heart pounding, Emma looked at Shuilu and Cheroki, whose eyes were closed as if they were praying. But they weren’t praying, they were communicating somehow. She was convinced that it was them who had put this thought in her head. Both of them looked at her.

“I see that you’re familiar with the power of thought,” Shuilu said soberly. He took his spoon and stirred his soup. “After having seen everything that you laid out on the table, I believe that you’ve read my dictionary and that you probably excel in the art of making potions, elixirs and other mixtures out of essential oils because of Cheroki.”

“Because of?” replied Cheroki. “Thanks to me, yes!”

“You’re not my father,” repeated Emma out loud.

“Emma!” said Cheroki showing her anger. “Shuilu is your father.”

“It’s not me, it’s you! It’s that power of joint thinking of yours that’s louder than a Rock concert...”

“The power of thought,” replied Shuilu. “the ability to read someone else’s thoughts.”

“Thoughts or truths?” asked Emma.

“Emma!”

“Cheroki, please.” The woman nodded but her eyes flared with disapproval. “It’s true that I’m not your father.”

Emma was both shocked and relieved that the truth had finally come out. She always knew that she wasn’t the same breed as Shuilu.

“It was just after the Angelrie was created. The Black Master appeared. He was a power hungry man who only wanted to overthrow the order established by the Chosen One and the Wastikis. He was jealous of Namaka’s success and worst of all he wanted to possess part of the Emerged Lands and have them all to himself. To make a long story short, he took converts,

convicts and people born on the Dark Side... He prepared his followers for war and most importantly, he created some sort of unknown and feared form of magic. Black water magic. As soon as he was ready, he declared war on the Angelrie. On the day the war started, the moon changed color...

"The moon turned green," finished Emma.

"I see."

"Shuilu, Emma hasn't just read ~~only~~ your dictionary, you know," said Cheroki, motioning to Shuilu that it was about time he realized that his daughter wasn't a child anymore. "She knows the legends and the stories of the Emerged Lands better than you do, I can assure you."

"I see," said Shuilu stoically. "So what do you know about the Division of the lands?"

"I know that one day, the moon became black. On that day, the Chosen One was badly injured during a duel with the Black Master... the Angels saved him and they fled to the shelter of the Angelrie. They had lost. The Black Master declared himself the new "Master" of the Land. He changed the laws... The cities were cut off from one another and all means of transportation were banned..."

"Restricted, that is," corrected Shuilu.

"That is, only transporters were authorized to move goods from one city to another. Each city governed its own proper citizens. People were separated and mixing among groups was forbidden..."

"And one day," interjected Shuilu, "the moon turned red and the sea level rose for the first time in hundreds of years. The Earth trembled; the water roared and began pervading into the lands once again. It's said when the water wants to bury itself, nobody can get in its way... and the Black Master's men disappeared."

"And the Division of the lands was declared," concluded Emma bitterly. "Why Father? Why did the Angelrie accept this when it was obvious that the water, Nature and the Wastikis were on their side?"

"The Angelrie is nothing but a concept, darling. It's a value. If men doubted that what is good is to live in harmony with Nature to get hold of the power... then there's nothing to do except wait until they figure it out by themselves."

"And accept the Division of the Emerged Lands?" asked Emma, although she already knew the story.

"After the Black Master's failure, the spokesmen arrived at the Angelrie and told the Angels that they wanted to divide the lands into three territories: in the center, the "Believers", those who believed in the Angels, the Wastikis and the Rainbow; in the Southeast, the "Alterbats", those who didn't want institutions or to be governed; and finally, the North, the "Superiors" those who wanted to be governed by the Black Master.

"That's more or less the idea," conceded Shuilu.

"That was centuries ago, Father..."

"I know."

"Why are you telling me this story?"

"This story is important in order for you to understand your birth."

"What? Why? Was I born back then? Are you going to tell me that I'm several hundred years old?"

"No you're not hundreds of years old," laughed Shuilu. "Let me tell you the story, please."

Emma gave in and started listening intently as her father told the story.

"What the books don't say... is that there exists a fourth group of people, a community of people living parallel to our lands."

"In parallel?"

"It's called the Fontanelle Lake Community where only those who have been inducted can go. That's why I call it "parallel". Anyway, one of its members was impulsive and impassioned... like you."

"Like the Chosen One and all the Angels if I'm not mistaken," corrected Cherokee. Shuilu nodded.

"It depends on which Angels though. I don't see the Havel as impulsive and passionate people," interrupted Emma thoughtfully.

"I see that you've read my secret books," said Shuilu.

"If you mean the books hidden in your secret library, then yes!"

"I don't even want to know how you managed to get in there." Shuilu looked at Cherokee.

"Ha! Don't give me that look Shuilu, I didn't have anything to do with it."

"I should have never allowed you to teach her the power of potions!"

"And what? Not allow her to learn, never!"

"Stop arguing you two. I would've learned all by myself anyway."

Cherokee and Shuilu looked at Emma, astounded. They gave one another knowing looks. They wouldn't have been able to prevent Emma from learning or discovering things by herself. She was too stubborn and intuitive not to.

"In any case, who could argue against stubborn old Shuilu?"

Shuilu raised his eyebrows in exasperation as Emma continued her protest with her former nanny. Emma studied them both, again staring at each other as if they were secretly communicating in a way she couldn't understand. Emma got annoyed.

"That's enough, you two. Tell me the truth right now! Enough of the history lesson."

"You belong to the Lake Community," blurted Cherokee.

"Cherokee, please... It's not that simple."

"The parallel community," repeated Emma, dumbfounded.

"As easy as that? What could be easier than that?" Cherokee pointed to Emma's three green marks.

"It's not because she has those marks."

"And then what? You want to tell the whole story of the legend again so that you can explain that it's 'possible that'. I'll say it AGAIN. Emma knows the story better than you Shuilu!"

"Um, could you slow down a bit," said Emma, trying to cut in, as she barely understood a word the two were saying.

"Let me remind you that you haven't the time for that," spat Cherokee.

She turned to face her pupil. "You were born into that 'parallel' community, Emma. The Fontanelle Lake Community, the one that beholds ~~beholding~~ all the secrets of the water."

"It's a possibility," mused Shuilu.

"Yeah," replied the chemist, frustrated. "Regardless of what your father so carefully says, one thing that's for sure is that the marks on your skin are their marks."

"My marks are the same as their marks?" repeated Emma.

"Nobody knows, Emma," said Shuilu. "What I mean is, even at the Angelrie, very few people know about it. And nothing is for sure."

"Know what exactly? And why is that, nothing is for sure?" Emma was annoyed getting information in little bits and pieces.

"That the marks on your skin are those of the Fontanelle Lake Community, a community that still exists," added Cherokee while looking at Shuilu with her dark eyes.

"And you, how do you know about the existence of this community if nobody else does?" asked Emma, dying to understand what they knew.

Shuilu blushed just as someone knocked at the door. Shuilu turned around suddenly looking defeated.

"It's time." He motioned to Cherokee to open the door. Emma frowned. This presence, she knew it's energy.

"Bacillus!"

Cherokee opened the door and there stood the Cheir of Bourbeau. A lightning bolt streaked across the sky and Emma angrily stood up.

"You invited him here? You're crazy! An hour ago he wanted me taken prisoner by the Gong Gong and now you're welcoming him into our home?"

"Relax," whispered Shuilu. "Sit back down."

Shuilu stood up to face Bacillus. Cherokee closed the door and stood behind Bacillus who was sweating profusely. He looked fearful and as if he were in some kind of trance. His skin was so

white that it was almost purple. Emma had never seen him like that. Shuilu cast some kind of ceremonial spell on him while Cheroki recited incantations. Shuilu took his turquoise stone and beamed Bacillus with a ray of light and immediately Bacillus began gasping. Finally he threw up a white liquid that Cheroki hurriedly wiped up into a flask before heading into the kitchen. Bacillus lost all his strength. Shuilu put him in a chair and waited. Emma studied the scene wide eyed. Cheroki returned holding two cups of hot liquid, one of which she handed to Emma.

“Drink,” she ordered.

Emma, stunned, immediately did as she was told. Cheroki waved the other cup under Bacillus’ nose and made him drink. Bacillus appeared to come to and swallowed the mixture. By the time Emma had finished drinking, Bacillus had recovered. He coughed and spat up black phlegm. Cheroki let go of him. Emma was stupefied. Bacillus abruptly stopped coughing. He took a deep breath and looked around. He understood what had happened. Immediately, he stood up.

“Shuilu, you were wrong!”

“What? You believe that I’m going to let you hunt my daughter down to give her to the Gong Gong? To Demone?”

“She’s a pariah,” shouted the Cheir as he pointed pointing to Emma. “She bears the marks of the Demones and you know it!”

“It’s you the demon,” threatened Cheroki, losing her temper for once. “Must I remind you who you are talking to?”

Bacillus took a step backward. He downright feared Cheroki, a fear that Emma had already witnessed, but couldn’t find an explanation for.

“You’ll see Shuilu, I haven’t finished yet!”

The Cheir left. Shuilu sat back down and stirred Cheroki’s soup as if nothing ever happened. Emma was in shock.

“Sit down,” ordered her father brusquely. “The water he sprayed on you wasn’t just ordinary water... That water enabled water the Gong Gong to follow you anywhere. Your exile is cancelled, Emma, you can stay in Bourbeau.”

Emma set down the bowl that Cheroki had given her with such force that the glasses on the table shook.

“I’d rather die! You, you want me to stay in a town where it’s leader wants me dead, are you crazy?”

“I’m there to protect you Emma.”

“Nonsense! You’re not my father! You lied to me about my past, you lied to me about your powers, you lie to me about everything and you continue to keep doing it! Why do you want me to stay here and rot in this town? I’m leaving whether you like it or not!”

She headed toward the stairs that led to her room.

“Emma, be careful, that potion makes you weak,” warned Cheroki but it was too late. The young woman became dizzy and fell unconscious. She fell at the foot of the wooden steps.

Emma woke up. She was lying on the couch. Cheroki was beside her. She had prepared cold compresses for her that she placed over her sweating body. Emma made out the fire in the chimney. The rain continued to fall. Emma sat up startled, as if she had seen lightning streak through the house.

“Shuilu left. He’ll be back later.” Cheroki gently beckoned Emma to lay back down.

“What happened?”

“You had a vision, Emma. It’s very rare for someone your age. Very rare indeed.”

“It seems as though it’s a bad habit that I have.”

“That’s true,” said Cheroki, smiling. “You know the powers of the plants... the secrets of the plants and the potions, all thanks to me,” sighed the humble old woman who couldn’t stop herself from being proud to have been the one to teach her. Cheroki placed a cool cloth on Emma’s forehead.

“You have intuition, telepathic thoughts, visions... One could say that you’re familiar with the power of thought... and I’m sure that you could very well manage with the power of transporting oneself.”

“Transport oneself?”

“In thoughts... In time and in space.”

“In time and space?”

“Yes, but it’s only for those who’ve been inducted.” Cheroki stopped talking and looked at Emma. “Please go back to sleep. Your brain needs to process all the information you received today.”

Emma protested but Cheroki blew on her forehead, her breath making Emma uncontrollably dizzy. Cheroki squeezed the cloth so the fresh water fell on her forehead and Emma noticed that she had added a few drops of Morphee oil to the water which was an aid for sleeping. She had also added Scriptum oil, an odor Emma recognized which inscribed events into memory, also allowing access into the subconscious. Emma dove back into the throes of her unbeknownst powers. In her dreams she saw the rain. The rain fell on her shoulders. She was under the rain with Bacillus standing behind her. He laughed as he saw her caught in muddy quicksand. She noticed a woman with blonde hair in front of her. She looked just like her. Emma knew that it was her mother. The woman hurled a flash of lightning which pierced across the sky. The rain and Bacillus disappeared and Emma found herself on a plain in broad daylight.

Emma looked around and spotted a headstone, a mysterious headstone. Hopping next to it was a blue parrot with a colorful beak. A stag ran past with Namaka straddled on its back. She didn’t look in Emma’s direction. They vanished and Emma noticed that the parrot was facing her, staring at her. Its eyes sparkled as if a bright light had lit up the animals pupils. It turned away and shrieked before flying off. The young woman watched its flight when the bird suddenly transformed itself into sparkling water. The liquid circled the headstone before morphing into a crystal stone. When lightning struck, what had been the bird dissolved into the headstone. The peaceful and quiet universe transformed into a black and threatening hell. A wind swept up ~~that~~ came from the depths of the forest projected a face disfigured by the wrath and ~~that~~ was

bounding towards her as if it wanted to eat her. Emma jumped with surprise and suddenly woke from her dream.

“There, there. Calm down. It’s over. The vision is out.

# CHAPTER 5:

## THE FIRST VISION

Emma was sweating like crazy. She'd lost a lot of water and looked exhausted. Cherokee dipped a cloth in a basin of fresh cool water and splashed Emma. She laid the wet cloth on the young woman's chest and served two glasses of water. She handed Emma a glass and she immediately gulped it down while her former nanny slowly swallowed a couple mouthfuls. Emma exhaled forcefully, the water had immediately calmed her senses. For a second, she had the impression that the room was swaying and she had to squint in order to regain her composure. She turned to Cherokee who was staring at the carafe. Her nanny turned to look at her and absent mindedly took the glass from her hand. Just then Shuilu returned.

"Good, you're awake." He looked over at Cherokee who nodded to him as she stood up.

"I'm going to go get some fruit and the banana jellies."

She stepped out and Shuilu took a seat.

"I can't stay for long," said Shuilu, getting directly to the point. "I have to know what you were dreaming about Emma... what you saw."

"What I dreamt about? What I saw?" repeated the young woman, confused.

"Yes, what you saw while you were sleeping."

"How do you know that I saw something?"

"Emma, this isn't the time. I have to know."

The young woman remained wary. She felt the anger rise within her but her body remained weak. She was thirsty.

"Can I have some water please?"

Shuilu took her empty glass. He refilled it and handed it back to his adopted daughter. She swallowed it in a single gulp and sighed with relief. The water helped her to come back to her senses. She got up and grabbed a hot towel that was lying near the chimney. The sheets that Cherokee had laid over her while she was sleeping were soaked.

"Don't get yourself too hot, you..."

"What, I'm going to catch cold? Go into thermic shock?"

Shuilu's face darkened, he couldn't tell his daughter that she would have less of a chance of remembering her vision if her body cooled to room temperature. But what he didn't know was that his daughter had the images engrained in her head as if she had actually lived through the scene in the forest. Emma warmed up and dried herself off while performing deep breathing techniques that she had learned. Shuilu blinked as he studied his daughter who knew about Prana's power, the art of breathing in order to control one's emotions and regain one's senses. He had to admit that Emma knew a lot more than any ordinary Bourbeau citizen. He asked himself to what extent she'd read his personal works that she had found in his secret library.

"I..." began Emma.

By instinct, she knew better than to disclose anything to her father. This vision, it was her destiny and her father was going to get in her way. Emma felt the weight of all the frustration and all the secret grudges that she harbored against her father; as if this vision, this wakeup call and this conversation revealed the deepest and darkest part of her soul. She inhaled and laid down the hot towel, letting the fresh air cool down her mind which was boiling. She drank some more water before turning to face her father.

"Why did you adopt me?"

"I'm not here to explain to you what I already told you earlier..."

"You were cut off," noted Shuilu's daughter coldly.

"I..." A cloud was drawn over Shuilu's face. "Unfortunately, I don't have a lot of time, you understand?"

"OK, fine. Leave. Go back to your convoys. I have nothing to say to you. My dream, my vision is none of your business."

"Can't you understand that..."

"It's you that doesn't understand! You don't understand that I need to leave! I need to get out of here! I..."

Emma choked. She so wanted to share her projects with her father. She would've loved to tell him that she wanted to study at Stad, to be part of the Angelrie... She sometimes even saw herself becoming Kamel, the leader of the Warrior fighting Angels.

"Emma wants to join the Angels," said Cherokee with a nonchalant air of indifference.

Cherokee entered the room with a plate full of fruit and dried banana jellies. Emma was dumbfounded when her former nanny handed her a stick of dried fruit.

"Eat," she ordered with such authority that Emma didn't dare defy her.

Emma readily complied. She loved banana jellies. Shuilu, for his part, was shocked by Cherokee's words.

"You see, Cherokee, Shuilu doesn't want me to be part of the Angels," said Emma, loudly chewing her fruit.

"Don't speak with your mouth full," scolded Cherokee. Emma rolled her eyes.

“As if now is the time to speak to me as if I were a child,” retorted Emma.

“But you’re still a child!” Shuilu pounded his fist on the table. He allowed fear to get the better of him, he who was always cool headed.

“I’m 25 years old!”

“Age doesn’t make you responsible, you still act like a 15 years old!”

“You see me pleased because I could set my sites on entering the Angelrie.”

“You won’t leave here, do you understand me? It’s too dangerous!”

“I’ll go with or without your approval.”

Emma shouted with such force that Shuilu had taken a step backward. Cheroki placed the basket of fruit between them in an effort to calm the mounting tension. Cheroki had also brought out the buckwheat pancakes with olive oil and salt that Shuilu so loved.

“Emma, your father is there to protect you. You saw how the Gong Gong wanted to go after you. We want to understand what they are after before letting you go to Stad.”

Emma sat openmouthed, taken aback by Cheroki’s nerve to breezily announce her future without even having consulted her first.

“I’m not a child anymore, karma or not, Cheroki. I’m an adult, free to do what I want.”

“Not in Bourbeau,” reminded Shuilu. “You will answer to me until you are married...”

“Nonsense! You always said that it was a stupid law!”

Emma got up, popping several pieces of banana into her mouth while staring at her father challengingly. She crammed the pieces into her mouth as if her life depended on it. She had to find her strength as fast as possible. Her intuition was telling her that she was in danger.

“Don’t eat so fast,” said Cheroki with a maternal air.

“I have to,” said Emma, turning to face her nanny.

She looked at Cheroki and saw the shock on her face. In the bat of an eye she realized that something was terribly wrong. Her eyes were drawn to the window where she saw their courtyard on fire. Emma cried out but it was too late; a burning stone flew into the room and exploded.

Emma and Cheroki were thrown backwards. Emma landed on a wicker sofa while Cheroki fell to the floor, her head knocking into a piece of wooden furniture. Emma barely had time to stand up before new projectiles flew into the house setting it ablaze. She was finally able to get herself up and look around for her father, but the flames were already too dense. Suddenly she heard something move nearby.

“Papa!”

The silhouette that she had taken for to be her father turned around. Emma froze. It was the mysterious soldier. He was wearing black makeup around his eyes. He also had two red lines painted on each cheek. His eye sockets were purple and white and his blue eyes were

terrifying. The blazing fire separated the two of them but Emma thought that it wouldn't protect her from the threatening horseman. In a flash, she grabbed a log from the fire and threw it forcefully at the man who got it right in the face, surprised by the swiftness of the woman's movement.

The man cried out, blinded by the fire. Emma took the opportunity to grab the tablecloth and douse it with the remainder of the olive oil. Emma went near the fire and the fabric went ablaze. When the man tried to get near her, she threw it in his face. She picked up another log and smashed it over his head knocking him unconscious. He fell to the floor with a resounding thud. She huffed in anger when she heard a whisper; Cheroki had regained consciousness. Emma moved toward her, holding her left arm tightly. She had burned the exterior edge of her palm and squealed in pain, cursing her awkwardness. She squatted next to her nanny who was lying on the floor. Cheroki was holding a purple stone in her hand and reciting spells while spraying herself with water.

"Cheroki, this really isn't the time!" yelled Emma, trying to lift her back on her feet.

"Here Emma. Take this stone. It's the stone for the storeroom; you'll figure it out by yourself..." The old woman started choking on her own saliva.

"This isn't the time, Cheroki. Stand up." The nanny gave her a weak smile when she saw the hope on her pupil's face.

"Leave Emma. Leave. I can't move anymore. Go. Flee before the Gong Gong get a hold of you..."

"Cheroki, I cannot let you die here!"

"Who's talking about dying..." Cheroki caressed Emma's cheek. "Trust your instincts, Emma. Always. Do you understand?" The young woman nodded as a drop formed on her face. "Listen Emma, listen to your intuition."

The chemist closed her eyes. Her breathing became heavier with each passing second. It became more and more difficult for her to breathe. Emma watched the fire. She realized that it had reached Cheroki's legs. She wanted to get closer but an explosion blew the flames toward her and she narrowly missed getting burned. She observed the wooden ceiling beams and remarked that the house was soon going to collapse. She turned around with the intention of lifting Cheroki and saw that she was no longer breathing. Her body was lifeless on the floor. Emma noticed the purple stone glowing in her hands. Emma grabbed it and attached it to her rosary.

"Leave Emma, leave," whispered a voice.

Emma looked up and saw that the ceiling was about to cave in. She ran to the kitchen which was less ablaze but had also been hit by flaming debris. Emma concluded that the Gong Gong had circled the house. She thought about how her yard was laid out but didn't see any way to escape without confronting the Gong Gong. She cringed when she heard whining.

"Zigzag!"

The dog snapped to attention and found ~~saw~~ his master on the floor on all fours. He moved towards Emma and licked her face.

"Easy, Zigzag," said Emma softly in an effort to calm down her Labrador. The animal stood at attention, watching her. "I have an idea and you're going to help me Zigzag. Go get Edith. You understand?"

The dog whined and paced back and forth, impatient wanting to go outside.

"You have nothing to worry about. They're after me, not you! Understand?" The dog didn't twitch a muscle. "Good. And for sure, don't dare bring Edith here. Let me know when you reach the shed, OK?" The dog barked his agreement and headed to the door. "OK doggie go, go!"

Zigzag obeyed, bounding outdoors as Emma opened the door while carefully hiding herself behind it. One of the Gong Gong fired an arrow which hit the door. The dog took off. Emma watched as the fire grew, completely destroying the living room. She just couldn't believe that her childhood home, her house, was engulfed in flames right before her very eyes. She thought about all her belongings... her books, her weapons, her travel bag. Nothing held any importance anymore and she wondered how she was going to make do without all her things.

A dark cloud cast a shadow over her face and she shuddered as she thought about Cherokee. She just couldn't believe that she was dead. She heard Zigzag barking outside and she knew that the time had come. Emma found a kitchen knife, some string and a metal bowl which she put on her head as a makeshift helmet before joining her faithful companion. She grabbed a stack of kitchen plates while activating her pink stone. With the door barely ajar, Emma rushed outside. Using the light beam from her pink stone, Emma immediately projected images of her students making collages. The light formed a temporary wall separating her from the Gong Gong. The shouts of the children pervaded the yard and the noise disrupted the soldier's concentration. The young woman took advantage of the fact that they were distracted and started to throw plates at them. There were only 15 feet separating the kitchen from Zigzag's shed and she hoped that her dog and her mare Edith hadn't captured the Gong Gong's attention. She started running toward them but the arrows had already begun raining down on her. The first of the Gong Gong soldiers headed for the shed and Emma shouted to Edith to stand ready. She hopped into the saddle of her faithful mount before giving the signal to take off.

"Zigzag, go! Go to Charlotte's! Please, now! Go! Hurry!"

She barely had time to bid her dog farewell as she raced off to the Potoma Forest. The Gong Gong continued shooting arrows at her while chasing after her on horseback. Emma looked back over her shoulder to see that there were ten of them following her. She saw her house; the southernmost part was engulfed in flames. The fire was now swallowing the second part of the manor house and it would soon be reduced to ashes. Emma felt her chest tighten. She, who had always wanted to leave this house, never imagined that it would end like this... Cherokee was gone, her father had disappeared and her belongings had gone up in smoke.

"Anyway, this house was much too big for you three," lectured the voice.

"Who is this? Am I becoming crazy or what?"

"One day you will understand Emma. Go to the East where there's a river and you'll get rid of the Gong Gong."

Emma shook her head, asking herself whether she was hallucinating or if the voice was for real. She thought about the advice. The voice was right; the Gong Gong were afraid of water. Crossing a river was the best way to get away from them. She hurried to the East and reached

the Potoma River which separated the Gong Gong army and her destiny. After a few hundred yards, she reached a clearing where she found a cave. She was distraught and exhausted by the day's events.

"Good, we'll camp here," said Emma to Edith, thanking the horse by stroking its mane.

"That's a good idea." Emma Blue jumped.

"Who's that? Who's talking to me?" Emma looked at Edith who remained still as if everything was absolutely fine.

"Now we are finally going to meet one another."

Emma took her knife and looked around. Not a soul.

"Who's there? Who's talking to me?"

She felt her skin burning and bent over her rosary. The violet stone was lit up and dazzling.

"Hello, I'm the key to the storeroom... Mama Pape at your service."

## Chapter 6: The key to the storeroom

Emma looked at the purple stone scratching, her head. The voice had told her that she must activate the secret code in order to access the “full range of Mama Pape’s services”. The voice stopped and the stone went dead after having given this short and precise explanation. She thought about trying to use the blue grey stone, the one she usually used for opening doors, windows, trunks and things of that sort. This stone was the “open sesame” key to all kinds of simple devices, but just as Emma figured, the purple stone was protected by a double security system rendering the blue grey stone useless.

“Tell me, pretty stone, do you operate like your friends, the other stones?”

She touched it as if to unscrew it, but the stone wouldn’t light up. Emma stroked it, rubbed it and scratched it but nothing worked. Emma remembered the words Cheroki used to find a hint but there was absolutely nothing to indicate how to unlock the power of the stone. Emma didn’t give up and continued to try. She tapped the stone against the floor, shook it in the air like a pendulum and dipped it in water... Nothing worked. The stone stayed shut. She began to pace back and forth thinking out loud.

“Let’s see... What could open a storage space?”

She stared intently at the stone as if it could answer her. She sighed helplessly. She recalled the day that she decided to attack the codes of her father’s secret library. It took her several weeks before she understood their sequence.

“I hope this will go faster,” she sighed as she tried to put herself in Cheroki’s shoes. What password or code would she have chosen that only Emma would have understood? Come on... Mama Pape’s storeroom... Mama Pape. Emma remembered. Mama Pape, why of course!

Emma stood up happily.

“Edith, Mama Pape, the fairy tale!” she said triumphantly. “Why didn’t I think of that before? Mama Pape has a secret chamber where she hides all her treasures!”

Emma finally remembered the story that she loved hearing as a child. She was a one of a kind nanny who changed the lives of underprivileged children. She came up with all sorts of different ways to reach the children.

“The treasure library,” said Emma. “Edith, it’s obvious... the code is the song that she sings!”

She started pacing again as she tried to remember the song.

“I te puna... puna...?” she said out loud, surprised with herself. “Oh, I can’t remember the lyrics!” She giggled and watched the stone as it started emitting a faint light. She sat upright. “Oh! At least that shows that I’m on the right track.” She picked up the stone and sighed. “Come on... Te puna te pape?” The faint light emitted by the stone was insufficient to transform itself into a lightbeam. “Oh, what is that synonym for water again? If I had her book with me it would be so much easier.”

Emma concentrated while waving her rosary around in the air. She straightened herself while taking hold of her yellow stone.

“Maybe you can help me.”

Emma had a particular liking for her amber stone whose illumination emitted a calming softness. She hoped that her instant dictionary would help her to remember the song's lyrics.

"A synonym for Pape in ancient Tahitian?"

The stone displayed the word "vai".

"Obviously, it's 'vai'." She inhaled and started to sing... "Te punavai te pape."

This time the stone lit up but nothing else happened.

I'm missing some prepositions. She stared at the yellow stone and concentrated. "A saying similar to 'Te punavai, te pape'?"

The stone displayed an occupied sign, showing that it was processing the information. Emma closed her eyes and prayed that she would find the words to the chorus of this old Tahitian song. Finally, a prompter indicated that the stone had found an answer.

"I te punavai te pu te pape..." read Emma. Suddenly the purple stone emitted a large and generous beam of light.

"Well done," said the voice. "You have entered the system. You have nothing else to do except activate me and then you'll be able to see me."

"Activate you? And where's the switch?"

The voice huffed with indignation while emitting its beam more powerfully. Emma hesitated to touch the purple zone that had been presented before her. The general rule for all the stones was to never anger the light spectrum to avoid the risk of electroshock or getting burned. She changed her mind.

"They should've left me the operating instructions. It's not as if I was fluent with Mama Pape's language!"

All of a sudden, a list of instructions several yards long unraveled itself right before ~~in front of~~ Emma's dumbfounded eyes. It settled on the floor and formed a circle many layers thick like a garden hose coiled on the ground.

"Me, who has never read a set of operating instructions, it's not now that I'm going to start! It'd be easier to talk to me in Maohi (Chinese)!"

She was speaking angrily to the light beam when a single page suddenly displayed itself in front of her. Emma carefully scrutinized it.

"Don't tell me it's the instructions in Maohi! Chinese!" The acknowledging image of a smiling sun appeared.

"OK. I get it. You think you're really funny. And in English, if you please?"

Several pages quickly spewed out until one finally appeared in the language of the young woman.

“To operate me, you only need to press on the arrow on the side while saying Mama Pape’s favorite magic formula. Don’t forget to dip the stone in water to get it to work,” read Emma attentively.

An additional line of instructions popped up.

“PS: no stock options, all money will be refused!” A smiley winked at the stupefied young woman.

Emma went to the riverbank and wet the stone. She gazed at the stone shining in the water and noticed the little tadpoles that were swimming in the direction of the light rays as if being fed from the light. She took the stone which left a luminous circle in the water. She trembled as she inched her finger to the light beam. On contact, a window appeared with an arrow on its lower end which had transformed into a screen. She slid her finger to activate the arrow which opened the window.

“Open sesame,” she said with confidence. Emma hadn’t forgotten the words of the fairy tale that she’d often repeated as a child when she had hoped to open the doors of the house.

The screen vanished. The system announced “recording saved” followed by the apparition of a woman. Short and chubby, she wore a tight fitting corseted red dress with white flowers. She had long black hair which fell to her chest and a crown of flowers set atop her head. It was Mama Pape.

“Hello Emma. Cherokee told me that I had to give you some information on how to operate the storeroom.”

The woman stopped when she saw Emma gaping at her with her mouth wide open.

“Close your mouth; it’s bad manners to stand there with your mouth open, certainly at your age.” Emma complied, immediately recognizing that same authority Cherokee had over her when she was little.

“You are...?”

“Mama Pape la Orana. I’m here to help you manage your belongings.” She opened the folds of her dress and graciously took a rapid bow. “First rule: organization! I’m not saying that your weapons and the clothes aren’t arranged, but the furniture, it’s a total mess!”

“Furniture? What furniture?”

“I see. Cherokee sent me a beginner!” answered said Mama Pape irritably. “What am I supposed to do then?”

“Cherokee is dead!” howled Emma bitterly, infuriated by this revolting and egotistical woman, Mama Pape.

“Dead?” Mama Pape felt as if the wind had just gotten knocked out of her. After sulking for a moment she said: “But the Angels never die.”

“The Angels never die! Do you hear yourself? So maybe Namaka isn’t dead! And she’s the first angel in our history!”

“Nonsense. There’s no need to shout like that. Relax! You need to stay calm, young lady!”

“Calm! You want me to stay calm??” Emma exploded with rage. “Today I lost my nanny, the person who raised me! I lost my house. I saw it burn right before my very eyes. I was exiled from my village and I said goodbye to my only friend! My father disappeared and I don’t even know if he’s dead or alive... And I say it’s my father! It’s not even my father but my adopted father! Do you actually think that I feel like staying CALM?”

Emma was torn between tears and rage. A look of sadness overtook Mama Pape’s face. She understood that the young woman that Cherokee had confided to her was on the verge of a breakdown.

“So! Any more advice for me?” said Emma harshly. She could have jumped down the woman’s throat if she hadn’t been a hologram.

“I’m your friend Emma. I suggest that you get some sleep. Shhh!”

She stopped Emma from answering by widening the violet lightbeam around herself. Emma was overcome by the heat of the light which immediately calmed her down. She let the tears fall as she felt all the emotional and physical exhaustion that she had accumulated over the last few hours begin to subside. She closed her eyes, her soul suffering. One big teardrop formed on her cheek and it embodied all her emotion. It glimmered feebly with an unusual violet glow as if Mama Pape had thrown her a lifeline with which Emma could dispose of her bitterness. Emma relaxed.

Mama Pape took out a wand and made reflective circles in the air. She activated the powers of the wand and soon made Emma’s bed, the table in her room, a basket of fruit and dried banana jellies, the remainder of her lunch that Cherokee had prepared for her, some clean clothes, soap and a wash basin, a towel and some decorative flowers from her father’s room all appear. Emma immediately recognized everything from her home.

“I don’t get it... Everything was burned right before my eyes.”

“You didn’t notice that Cherokee was reciting a list before leaving. She was reciting magic spells, wasn’t she?” Emma nodded in agreement. “She told me to organize your furniture and your things in the storeroom.”

After a moment, Emma understood.

“Water... She splashed water on herself...”

“Water. Without water the purple stone doesn’t work. You see, it’s not a magic drop like the stones on your rosary. It’s a stone and thanks to water, it beholds magic powers.”

“So that means that it only works with water?”

“Yes... except that I really work as a functional android,” winked Mama Pape mischievously. “I’m a woman and it shows.” Mama Pape jiggled her generous bust and her voluminous rear end while joyfully singing a few lively notes to the applause of a nonexistent crowd. “Oh, oh. Thank you, thank you.” Emma didn’t raise an eyebrow.

“OK, so a sense of humor isn’t one of your strong points, it’s true. But I have the same capacity a human robot does as well as storage space.”

"I don't doubt the human part, Mama Pape and I see that you are quite remarkable... One thing I doubt, though, is your storage space."

"So my dear, get ready for something truly incredible! My ability to store away things, and even more, to get rid of things, is downright baffling you'll see."

"You're talking about the "storeroom", right?"

"Exactly! The ability to store your belongings in something that has a storage capacity almost as large as that of Bacillus' famous trunk," explained Mama Pape with delight.

"With things that are much more precious than those belonging to Bacillus I hope..."

"All the books, the notes, Shuilu's and Cheroki's notebooks of course..."

"Freely accessible?" asked Emma, unconvinced. Mama Pape nodded her head.

"On the other hand, I can't save living things, nor can I store water... it's forbidden. Food is OK except that I'm limited in the amount... It's the Law of Nature and I'm not a walking fridge unfortunately."

"If I have access to my father's books, does that mean that my father's dead?" asked Emma without listening to what Mama Pape had to say.

"I don't know. But Cheroki isn't really dead."

"She died right before my eyes Mama Pape. Her body was taken by the flames and..."

Emma detached herself from the conversation and sat on her bed. She put her hand to her forehead under the watchful eyes of the doubtful Tahitian Mama. She just didn't believe what this new teacher of hers had to say.

"It's time to wash up, eat something and go to bed."

"Are you always like this?"

"Like what?"

"So direct! I didn't leave my house, my nanny and my father in the hands of the Gong Gong and in flames from hell just to find myself under someone else's care."

The woman, usually so cheery, suddenly lost her sense of humor when she heard Emma's hurtful words. She felt all the anger and the darkness locked up inside the young woman. She remembered Cheroki's warnings about how Emma could be nasty and destructive.

"Emma, you're not a child anymore and I'm nothing but a hologram, at yours and Cheroki's disposal."

Mama Pape bowed and handed over the violet stone before vanishing. The stone extinguished itself and all of a sudden Emma realized that night had fallen. She surveyed the silent forest. Edith was already asleep. Her eyes wandered over her furniture that had no place whatsoever outside in the open air. She got up to eat bananas and fruit. She appreciated their freshness. She licked her lips. She didn't want to go to sleep, she was afraid of sleeping. She didn't want to

see the images of Cherokee dying in the flames, the frightful eyes of the man's painted face, Bacillus' threats, the enigmas or Shuilu's disappearance.

Emma laid down on the ground gazing up at the starry sky between the branches of the trees as they slowly swayed to the rhythm of a light wind. The air, almost hot, blew over her face and she closed her eyes trying to think of all the good times she spent with Cherokee, her cherished nanny that had taught her so much. She remembered the long afternoons spent preparing potions together, nightly readings, the games with Zigzag... Emma recounted her past while holding back her tears and remaining calm. She fell into a slumber when the shrieking cry of a parrot spoiled her tranquility. She saw the enflamed headstone with the lifeless Cherokee laying in front of it. Again Emma saw Namaka galloping across the plain on the back of a stag. She flew past and the parrot burst into flames before her eyes. The plain was ablaze and she saw black shadows dancing in the flames. The man with the painted face came toward Emma and she screamed. She woke up in a sweat. It was early morning.

## Chapter 7: The call of the headstone

Emma took off. She rode across the plains visibly delighted. She gulped in the fresh air, enjoying the feel of the light rain falling on her face, touching the branches that came across her path with a loving hand. She was free, facing her destiny. The fear that she had felt when she had been saddling up her faithful mount was erased by the unfathomable sensation to leave, to choose, to finally live her life as she wanted to. She remembered the first time that her father had put her on a horse. Right away, she knew that this means of transport was a synonym for liberty.

She carried on into the forest following the road that Mama Pape had mapped out for her to reach Stad. It was the first time that she had entered so far into the dense Potoma Forest that so terrified the inhabitants of Bourbeau. She had never believed in the ghosts, the monsters or the spirits that Bacillus had used to boost his glory. The Cheir would tell them how he had defeated them with his bare hands and his blue arrow that he liked to twirl around in the air during the town meetings under the palaver tree. He threatened those who dared to challenge his power or his words with his sharp tiny blue arrows.

After riding for several miles at a full gallop, Emma slowed down to find the right path. She looked for the Potoma River which would enable her to join up with a dirt road. She took out her violet stone and wet it with water from her flask.

“Here we go, the time has come for a test. Potoma River map.”

The violet beam of light displayed a hilly landscape with an enchanting river running through it. The stone that the young woman was wearing lit up to the left of her mount and pointed out where she was and where she wished to go.

“Straight in front Mama Pape, it’s easier to read that way.”

“It’s easier, but much more dangerous! You won’t be able to see the obstacles or the enemies as easily if I put the map straight in front of you.”

“The enemies? Because the enemies come straight at you and never from the left side.”

“I have a better view from the left, I can assure you.”

“I have the impression that I don’t really have the choice.”

“Not really, no. At the next trail, pass near the cliff, it’s less muddy.”

“Oh, Mama Pape I’m not going to be able to let you come on this ride. We’re going into the muck, it’s the shortest way.”

“Obviously... and who’s the one that’ll be doing the laundry by the way?”

“Why, don’t you do all the laundry?”

“As a matter of fact, no I don’t. And I don’t have any intention of doing it either !”

The old Mama folded her arms. She was offended. She watched as Emma neared the muck. Mama Pape barely escaped receiving a splattering of mud.

"If it's like this, I'm going home!"

"RELAX! In any case, I don't need you to warn me about the dangers!"

Just then, Emma got caught by a tree branch. She was pulled into the air while Edith and Mama Pape continued along the path.

"Needless to say, I'm not going to break from her Majesty's orders," answered Mama Pape turning back to Emma only to find her saddle empty. "Edith! Stop! We've lost Emma."

The mare stopped. Mama Pape heard a shout and looked up. She saw Emma high up in the air held by a powerful branch of a majestic Baobab tree.

"Goodness gracious ! Kalifa, this isn't the time to be playing around!"

Emma was tossed to the center of the Baobab then set down on a piece of wood which resembled a chair. She was a bit dazed when Mama Pape appeared by her side.

"It's OK. Edith's waiting over on the side."

"Of course, we save the horse!" huffed Emma, her heart beating wildly. "Mama Pape, I just got kidnapped by a Baobab and the first thing you worry about is the horse. Honestly?"

Kalifa burst out laughing while Mama Pape ignored Emma's outburst.

"Fine Kalifa, you won! You've made your grand entrance." Mama Pape motioned to Emma to look in the opposite direction.

Emma turned around to discover the man that was standing behind her.

"Mama Pape! How wonderful to see you!" The hologram and the man embraced one another and Emma understood that Kalifa was not in fact a man after all.

He had a melodious voice and a strong accent which contrasted with the fact that he had a small frame and a weathered look about him. He was wearing a white tunic with stitched golden borders. His white hair stood out against his black skin marked by the wrinkles that defined his life's history.

"He's one of the Invisibles," murmured Emma out loud.

"Why yes Miss Herevai-Batala, I'm one of the Invisibles!" he laughed warmly which only emphasized his good mood. "I'm delighted to meet you Miss." He approached Emma and held out his hand. "I'm Kalifa, Invisible N° 357, probably one of the last remaining from the Ancient Era."

Emma hesitated to take his hand; she was always reluctant to touch something she didn't know.

"I see you learned well." Kalifa withdrew his hand. "So you're looking for the headstone, is that right?"

"A headstone?" repeated Emma. "I'm going to Stad! Why doesn't anyone want to believe me?"

"Ah, terrible mistake Miss Herevai-Batala. I highly advise you not to go to Stad!"

“Oh no, not you too? You’re not going to meddle in this as well! I’m going to Stad. It’s not so difficult to understand.”

“Yes, yes... I know. But it isn’t a very good idea and you know that very well.” Emma shifted uncomfortably. “What did Cherokee tell you? Follow your instinct, not your dream. What did your instinct tell you?”

“It told me to go to Stad.”

Mama Pape sighed deeply and Kalifa frowned.

“Oh yes. We’re not out of the woods with this.”

“She’s a stubborn one,” added Mama Pape. Kalifa gave a faint smile.

“Okay then,” said Kalifa without getting discouraged. “Tell me Emma Herevai-Batala, are you sure about your decision? I mean sure-sure? 100 % sure?”

Emma was taken aback by the question. She wasn’t sure of anything. She thought about her feelings, about how she managed to chase away the memory of this nightmare which kept repeating itself in her sleep. She sulked as she thought about Cherokee. Her instinct. She closed her eyes when she thought of the headstone that she had been dreaming about.

“Potoma Map.”

Kalifa laughed. “We’re getting there,” he whispered to Mama Pape who smiled after displaying the image.

“Sorry, it came out all by itself,” apologized Emma. She scrutinized the map, trying to take it all in. “I need to find a headstone, you say?”

“Do you really think that I’m going to understand anything with your lifeless synthetic image?” protested Kalifa as he looked at the map projected by Mama Pape.

“Lifeless? But it comes to life, look!”

She gestured to the and rows of tiny dots pointed out the way to the Potoma River. The wise man laughed and gave a wave of his hand.

“I couldn’t care less about your pathetic technologies! There’s nothing better than using the old methods.”

He struggled to get up and walked over to the Baobab. He touched the bark and a shelf came out of the tree. He rummaged through some papers and pulled out a printed map. Emma got annoyed, the virtual screen seemed to her much more efficient than some old map on recycled paper, but she kept herself from saying anything to the old man.

Kalifa sat back down and unfolded the map of the Potoma Forest which stretched for hundreds of miles.

“The headstone that you are looking for is hidden. It’s very rare and has been searched after for over a decade... almost no one has been able to find it and those who did have died before reaching it.”

Suddenly a shiver went down Emma's spine. In her mind she saw the parrot over the headstone, she had to prevent it from burning, she had to enable it to transform into water like it did the first time that she saw it. She placed her hand to her forehead under Kalifa's attentive gaze. He offered her a glass of water which she gratefully took and swallowed it in one gulp.

"What did you see in your vision, Emma?"

Foundering into a state of unexpected sadness, Emma wiped away the tear rolling down her cheek. Her instinct finally told her that this meeting with Kalifa was her destiny and that she must find this headstone. Her stomach was in knots as she looked at him with acceptance. Kalifa nodded and sat down. The meeting that he had long been waiting for was at last going to begin.

"Where is this headstone?"

"Near a forest..."

"In a clearing?" She nodded her head. "And were there people and animals in this vision?"

"With..." She didn't dare to confess what was in her dream. "There was a stag... and a parrot."

"A parrot?" asked Kalifa frowning.

"It transformed itself into water," she added hastily, trying to explain.

"A totem!" Kalifa understood. He laughed when he saw Emma blink. "A totem is an animal which appears when somebody's trying to point something out to you Emma. In dreams like in reality, it's the symbol from the netherworld that's trying to communicate with us."

"To communicate with us?"

"Yes. And having a parrot as a totem is very rare. I don't believe that I've ever heard of anyone speaking about a parrot before you." Kalifa turned to Mama Pape. "And I assure you, I've had visitors." He thought about all the information and looked again at Emma. "What else?"

Emma swallowed and bit her lower lip.

"Emma, I can't help you unless you tell me everything you saw in your vision. Each element has a meaning."

"How do you know that I saw something else?"

"Each vision operates as though it's a trilogy having a main character. Here, we're missing either the main character, or the clue of the headstone, the headstone being the center of the trilogy."

"Why do you want to know all that?" Emma started to get annoyed. "If you know where the headstone is, just show me so we can be done with it!"

"It's not as easy as that, Emma." Kalifa softened his voice in an effort to calm her down. "Already, do you know how many headstones there are in the forest?" Emma shook her head. "There, look." Kalifa underlined a point on the map. "There lies an ancient cemetery where four headstones can be found for each compass point."

On the paper map, Kalifa made the tombstone and four headstones appear. He did the same with several monuments.

“Here you have the Gourou headstone, near a cave. There, near the lake is the headstone of his goddess... You see?”

“There are lots of headstones in Potoma...”

“365 to be exact. The number of days in a human being’s calendar year. One tombstone to pray to each day just like in Fes where there are 365 mosques!”

“Emma didn’t know anything about Fes or about any mosques. She only understood that the task would be much more difficult than she had ever imagined.

“But I thought that the headstone I’m looking for was rare and couldn’t be reached by Man...”

“Ah, everything is rare when it’s being bargained,” he replied, eyeing her as he took a gulp of air. Emma looked at him with a blank stare. She didn’t get his joke.

“Emma doesn’t really have a sense of humor,” explained Mama Pape.

“Oh... but’s it’s one of her innate traits,” answered Kalifa mysteriously.

“Anyway... so why is this headstone rare? Where is it?” asked Emma losing her patience.

“Okay, okay, calm down. Yes this headstone is rare Emma, extremely rare,” stressed the wise man. You must find “the headstone” but I must know what your vision was first.”

Emma thought about Kalifa’s words.

“What you’re trying to say is that it’s like a deal... I tell you what I saw and you tell me where I can find the headstone.”

“Everything in life is a deal,” he answered with a shifty smile.

“And why? Why should I trust you?”

Emma bit her lip as she finished her phrase. Her anger had spoken for her. Kalifa had no reason to answer so he left the young woman a few minutes to think things over.

“There was the Chosen One... Namaka was in my vision,” admitted Emma. “Is she the one who’s supposed to be the main character in my vision?”

“The Chosen One? The Chosen One...” he repeated smiling mysteriously. “How do you know that it was her?”

“It’s her,” affirmed Emma abruptly. “In any case, it’s the same woman that’s in my storybook... So now it’s possible that my book of legends was lying about her appearance.”

Kalifa raised his hand in a calming gesture.

“All books don’t lie Emma. The one about the Legend is probably the purest one existing on our Planet Earth.”

He thought for a minute before waving his hand over the map.

“Okay, so now it’s time.”

He laid his hands down and closed his eyes as if starting to say a prayer. He opened his eyes and placed his hand over a dense region of the forest. He rubbed his thumb and index finger gently together and the tombstone Emma saw in her dream slowly emerged much to her astonishment. Her eyes opened wide. She was dumbfounded.

“The Potoma Headstone... No one can reach it. Nobody can get in there, not even the Angels from the Angelrie, nor the Black Master or even Demon, and God knows they’ve all tried.”

“Ho... how is that possible?” stammered Emma.

“They never speak with good old Kalifa first!”

He started laughing; it was thunderous and warm all at the same time. Emma asked him to turn down the volume which only made him laugh even louder.

“Oh my dear, you’ve forgotten that nobody can see me... besides you! By the way, if any human ventured into the forest right now, he’d take you for a crazy woman!”

He smiled at her proudly. Emma recalled that Kalifa was invisible, a man from the Ancient Era whose soul stayed on Earth while awaiting passage to the next world. The old man rested his hand on hers and immediately her body started shining like a hologram. The old wise man concentrated and sent her a warm and soothing wave of encouragement.

“You aren’t any ordinary child Emma, you’ve always known that. Why, in your opinion, have you hidden these birthmarks?”

“Oh, you aren’t going to get started on that too are you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about...” Kalifa gazed into Emma’s eyes and she understood that she wouldn’t receive any further explanation.

“And you. How is it that you are here by the way?” jabbed Emma, fed up with all the secrets, the mystery and the impression that everyone around her understood more about where she came from and what was in store for her than she did herself.

“All things come to those who wait,” said Kalifa. Unceremoniously he brought up on the map a chain of mountains, a banana plantation, reeds, a lake, a cliff, a waterfall, a chain of rolling hills parallel to a wide stretch of sand and at last, a small plain before the clearing in which sat the Potoma headstone. “That Emma, is your battle plan.”

“My battle plan?”

“Ask Mama Pape for a notepad. You’ve got a lot to do if you want to arrive in one piece and answer the call of the headstone.”

“The call of the headstone?”

“Yes Emma. The hero of your first vision is the headstone. It’s there that destiny will tell you what you need to accomplish.” Emma was wary. “What? I’m not a magician; I’m just an old man who lived a thousand years of Humanity. I know it when I see a young woman impatient to discover and to accomplish something and in this case, it’s *her own destiny*.”

His look was as confident as it was reassuring and protective.

“Yes, a great future is awaiting you Emma Herevai-Batala, and my role is to help you get to the headstone as quickly as possible... and if possible... alive.” He sighed. “There’s still a long way to go.”

## Chapter 8: The Kadali Path

“Did you understand everything? Are you sure you’ve got it all down?” Emma nodded her head. “Good, so show me.”

Emma gave Kalifa a quizzical look. He repeated the movement of his chin while leaning back against some stretched creeper vines which instantly transformed into a comfortable natural sofa for him.

“I need to reach the Constance chain and attack from the East otherwise I risk falling over Death Cliff...”

“Well deserving its name,” added Kalifa.

“That may very well be the case but it’s a shortcut to the waterfall.”

“Which you are NOT going to take because you must go through the banana plantation.”

“Yes, yes. I must, I must! Only if I feel like having bananas though!” Emma shook her head doubtfully. “But then again, I can do without bananas,” she replied with a hint of sarcasm.

“Emma,” groaned Kalifa.

“Yes, I need food and strength, I get it.”

“Good. I know that your legendary know-how, grace and agility will enable you to easily slip through, but it’s too dangerous, do you hear me? That goes for Mama Pape as well! I’d better not see you get sidetracked,” shouted the man persuasively.

“What are you doing Kalifa? Mama Pape isn’t here, and I’m saving the water for later.”

“Hmm. The chances of dying are much greater if you don’t know the area, understand?”

“Yes, but it’s a way to save time!”

“Sometimes patience is the ransom for over eagerness! Don’t let me catch you passing by Death Cliff!” he shouted forcefully.

“In any case you can’t see me!”

“I’m invisible Emma, but I can see everything if I want to.”

“What is it with everyone that wants to see and know everything?”

“It’s called the omnipotence syndrome,” cut in Kalifa stoically. “After the mountains, what’s supposed to happen in the banana plantation?”

“I rest. I spend my first night there, right in the middle of the banana plantation.”

“Good, very good. From there, you’ll see, you’ll follow Kadali Path.

Kalifa accidentally made a banana tree shoot up as he traced the path on the map. It almost reached his nostrils. Emma giggled. A sign suddenly appeared on the banana tree.

“The Kadali Path,” read Emma.

“Yup. It means banana in Sanskrit”

“In san what?”

“In Sanskrit. You’re not very good with languages are you?”

“I know Chinese.”

“That’s good, it was spoken by over a billion people... but they’re all dead, so what good is that going to do you when you find yourself face to face with a Gong Gong?”

Emma frowned. Kalifa was making fun of her.

“It’s a language from the Ancient Era. A very beautiful language, spiritual and complex... Anyway, just remember though, Kadali Path is the safest route for joining the summer waterfall. The only risk is the Gong Gong and you want to avoid them at all costs, don’t you?”

Emma started sulking. The only person she wanted to avoid was the man with the mask painted on his face. Her instinct told her that he had survived the fire at her house.

“I need to cross through the reeds paying attention to the swamp. There, there’s little chance of running into the Gong Gong, even the good ones, but so what? These guys don’t scare me! They’re cowards.”

Emma sighed. She didn’t understand why there were all these precautions for avoiding these men with no souls.

“These ‘guys’ as you call them are dangerous,” replied Kalifa. They have weapons, they are merciless... until death do you part as they say. There are many of them along Kadali Path and you are better off avoiding running into them.”

“Am I dreaming or are you imitating Yoda?” asked Emma as she rolled her eyes in disgust.

“I see that you know the classics.”

“Bacillus loves Star Wars.”

“Even our worst enemy can have good taste.”

“Okay, forget about Yoda already, can you?”

“It’s a being full of wisdom.”

“An imaginary person!”

“Yoda, you should stop doubting!”

Emma shook her head. “I’ll never get it! I’ll never understand why men from the Ancient Era loved characters that didn’t even exist!”

“It’s what they call: projecting. It’s human Emma, come down from your ivory tower, please.”

“Mmmmh... I’m not convinced.”

“Convinced or not, Kadali Path, you’ll take it?”

“Yes Master Kalifa. Insistant and overbearing as you are!”

“And the Gong Gong, how come they don’t scare you?”

“They’re weak, you can see it in their eyes... I fear nobody!” She pounded her chest and started coughing; some dust had caught in her throat.

“Ah, so then we’ll talk about that again later.”

“Then”, said Emma ignoring him and clearing her throat, “I arrive at the waterfall where I must pay tribute to the Nymph Tetis.”

“It’s very important that you see her, understand?”

“Understood Chief, it’s her that’s going to open the linking corridor.”

“Among other things,” answered Kalifa, his mind wandering. “In fact, by doing so you’ll avoid having to pass through the salt desert.”

“I thought that it was sand,” remarked Emma.

“No, it’s salt. It’s all coming back to me now.” Kalifa changed the map to shown an expanse of salt. “It’s hot there, very hot. Regardless of whether it’s salt or sand, the result is the same. Everyone who tries to pass through there dies. Only two people have survived crossing this desert.”

Kalifa’s words left no room for argument. Emma had to avoid the area at all costs.

“Ummm, any other pointers like that you can give me? It’d be nice to let me know.”

Kalifa shrugged his shoulders, looking at her with a hint of mischief in his eyes.

“Hey, I’m not just some old man without a soul, ya know! Anybody can make mistakes!”

Emma took a deep breath then rolled her eyes. She pointed to the lake which would help her reach the cliff where she’d sleep. She changed her mind to do as he said and accepted to take the path as if it didn’t make a bit of difference to her.

“And the parrot, what was it trying to say?”

“What’s that? What was it trying to say? Emma, concentrate please, you must explain the way to me once again.”

“You explained to me that the image of the stag and the Chosen One was a sign telling me that they were waiting for me over there, but you never told me what the parrot meant. It’s a totem, isn’t it?”

“I didn’t tell you?” exclaimed Kalifa loudly. “Oh my, what a mistake!”

“Kalifa, don’t make fun of me! What is the totem of the parrot supposed to mean?”

“Fate!”

“What, whose fate?”

“The parrot, it’s the totem for fate. It symbolizes that your fate is to go to the Potoma headstone.

“You couldn’t have told me that any sooner?” she asked as she started to get up.

“What? Now you’re in a rush to leave?”

“Yes, it’s already noon.”

“Oh Emma, always in such a hurry. In a hurry to live, in a hurry to leave... But, where are you going? Do you have any idea?”

Emma stopped. Kalifa observed the young woman, his eyes full of compassion. He could see her demons, her beauty. He would have loved to have been able to help her accomplish her destiny faster... but that wasn’t his role. Kalifa recalled her mission.

“I never told you why my soul stayed in the intermediary world of Invisibles, did I?”

“No, you just told me “all good things come to those who wait”.”

“Ah yes, that’s true. So you’ve waited long enough, then.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re leaving... and since you’re leaving I can tell you. Do you want to know?”

“Yes, yes! Of course!” she replied, realizing that she could hurt the old man’s feelings.

“It’s nothing really important... unless...”

“Unless you are one of those condemned.”

I was one of those condemned, one of the ones who really did commit crimes... Personally though, I didn’t commit any crimes... very big.”

Kalifa looked off into the distance, wistfully thinking about his past, about what he had done to become an Invisible, about being condemned to live in a kind of purgatory watching others live while waiting his turn to join Heaven.

“What did you do Kalifa?”

“I was young. Too young. I didn’t realize... I wanted to become rich, I wanted to get married, I wanted to impress a woman. I started a wood company.”

“Oh, I get it. It only took that to become an Invisible?”

“No, that wasn’t just it. If you did it while protecting Nature... you were forgiven...”

“So, what happened?” Emma looked at him curiously, wanting to know more.

“I did that for ten years of my life... and lots of it. I sold thousands of logs from the primal forest in my country.”

“Oh,” Emma shivered.

“Yes... Perhaps I should have been condemned... For some people, I had committed a crime against Humanity.”

“Yes, I agree with them,” said Emma almost inaudibly.

“Except that I made up for it... a bit late but just the same. When I realized that I was destroying the gorilla’s habitat... I stopped. I planted trees for twenty years... You see, I always loved the gorillas as a kid. I wanted to be as strong as King Kong.”

Kalifa had tears in his eyes.

“Kalifa, I didn’t know you were so sensitive!”

“Oh, I am sensitive... and romantic! Be careful my beautiful Emma, don’t let anyone play with your feelings, you promise?”

“My feelings? Who’s talking about my feelings? I don’t have any time to even think about it!”

“He’ll come to you Emma. He’ll torture you, believe me. Please be careful, won’t you?”

“Kalifa, will you always be there to help me?”

“I won’t be there to help you, my angel,” croaked the old man, his throat tightening.

“Oh Kalifa, but we’re going to see each another again.”

A silence fell upon the two friends. The man remained silent for a few moments, the silence was so awkward that Emma starting batting her eyes, embarrassed and startled by Kalifa’s behavior.

“Emma, take me in your arms!”

“Kalifa, you’re trying to play tricks on me and you’re going to electrocute me!”

“It’s not a joke my dear. Forgive me my child, but I must leave you now.”

“Leave me?”

“You know how much I want you to achieve your destiny. I waited. I waited for centuries before being able to reach the world of souls. And now I wish I could stay to see you achieve your destiny.”

“Kalifa, you’re leaving?”

“Yes Emma.”

“Why Kalifa? I need you! I need you to show me the way again.”

“You know the way Emma. Mama Pape knows it too.”

Emma listened to Kalifa’s words. She knew that she’d continue her path without him.

“It’s you Emma. You were the soul that I had to help.”

Emma inhaled, taking it all in. Thanks to her, Kalifa could pass on to the next world, the world of souls.

“I had to help you answer to the call of the headstone. I waited in order to guide you to it and now that it’s done, the souls are calling for me.”

Emma was touched. She felt a tear fall down her cheek, moved by this old man who had spoken to her with so much wisdom and emotion. She bit her lower lip and nodded to him. She allowed Kalifa to hug her. First she felt his coldness and she saw his image turn from grey to a shiny and transparent turquoise as it progressively filled with water. Emma closed her eyes, listening to Kalifa as he repeatedly thanked her while the water slowly filled his body. Emma understood that Kalifa was giving her protection, the gift which Invisibles gave before leaving to join heaven.

His transformation completed, he turned into a crystallized stone. He emitted a warm and regenerative light beam which transformed itself and permeated into Emma, protecting her. She felt Kalifa's gift as it entered her and she shivered with joy and fear. Suddenly, the beam's energy circled around her like a whirlpool before being totally absorbed by her body. The beam disappeared and Emma opened her eyes. Had she been dreaming? She looked around. The map had disappeared, the tree no longer formed a table, the creeper was all mixed in with the rest of the foliage and the Baobob seemed to have lost its unusual green color.

Emma studied the tree and she understood what had made the stems of the leaves of the Baobob so unique: it was their turquoise reflection. After Kalifa had gone, the leaves had returned to the same color green as the other trees in the forest. She sighed as she realized that she must now face the obstacles before her and reach the Potoma headstone to honor the gift given her by Kalifa. As she turned she noticed something shiny reflecting on a leaf of the Boabob tree. She walked over to it and saw that it was just a piece of paper. She grabbed it and on it discovered the path that she had to follow. Words written on the bottom in delicate handwriting drew her attention:

*"Follow your path Emma, it'll bring you to where you'll meet your fate. Sukran alikoum Emma, I'm returning to my people." Kalifa.*

## Chapter 9: Death Cliff

She left Kalifa's Baobab after having gathered her provisions, her clothes and some of her weapons. Most importantly, she took the old wise man's books. She knew that he would have wanted her to keep them. Mama Pape hollered after her, impatiently waiting to examine the books which were genuine cultural and historical treasures. Some of them even dated back to the time before The Wave. Emma wondered how the old Kalifa had been able to save them, and she was happy to count such a priceless collection among her possessions. Emma knew that she was in for a fight, a merciless fight, and everything that she hadn't been able to learn from Kalifa himself she hoped to learn from his books, his notes and his paper maps.

Ignoring Kalifa's instructions, Emma headed toward the Mountain veering off towards the path which led to the Cliffs. He had shown her this dangerous pathway even though he had strongly discouraged her from using it. It was, however, the fastest and easiest way to go unnoticed... Kalifa had written in his notes that this path was safer than Kadali Path where the Gong Gong were prowling about. With them, the eyes of their master, Demone were never far away.

Without hesitating, Emma headed off taking a more direct route. She rode through the steep paths which became more densely overgrown as they narrowed. When she neared the cliffs, her faithful mare refused to keep going. The lush ferns were scratching her and preventing her from advancing further forward.

"What do you think Mama Pape? Do we turn back?"

"You'd be better off getting your butt off your horse to clear the path," answered Mama Pape, handing her a Maohi machete.

Emma sighed, cursing Edith. The horse who was exhausted after from plowing through the branches and the slippery track. She got off and took the machete from Mama Pape.

"Bossy as usual, I see."

"Well, it's not as though you know what you're doing."

"Well, at least it's clear." Emma sighed and started cutting.

"You have to understand that I'm doing this for you. I'm here for your safety and well being."

Emma nodded without thinking. She wasn't unhappy to have someone around her that she could talk to in this deserted area full of overgrown foliage.

"Did you travel a lot before, Mama Pape?"

"Ah. I see your curiosity is awakening. I was wondering when you were going to start asking me questions about the Wise Angel and me."

"The Wise Angel?"

"Cheroki! You mean to tell me that you didn't know that she used to be an Angel?"

Emma was so taken by surprise that she dropped the machete.

“As if you didn’t know... and I told you once already. It just shows that you’re not listening.”

“Cheroki, an Angel?”

“Yes. She was even nominated and knighted Razel. That shows how gifted she was. Due to a casting error and the chauvinism inherited during the Ancient Era, she should have been an Alchemist and then Raphael.”

“Excuse me? The Angelrie, macho?” Emma’s eyes met Mama Pape’s. Mama Pape nodded in agreement.

“It’s a long story.”

“So, Cheroki should have been an Alchemist...? Excuse me Mama Pape, but you’d better start explaining!”

“Okay. Keep on cutting and I’ll play you a video. That’ll be the easiest way.”

Mama Pape pressed on an invisible switch and an image projected itself in front of Emma. A documentary pompously entitled “The secrets of the Angelrie: Everything you always wanted to know” began to the tune of lively music.

“The Angelrie was founded by Namaka, the Well Destined One who became known as Michael, the chief of the Angels...”

“You can skip the history part. I know the Angelrie was founded by Namaka!”

“Don’t get offended, I’m just doing a little summary! Don’t be so impatient, the video barely takes ten minutes.”

“Barely ten minutes!” repeated Emma mimicking Mama Pape.

“Ah, you young people, asking for more than thirty seconds of attention is like asking you for the moon.”

“Killjoy,” answered Emma, now sweating from all the cutting. The video restarted.

“The Angelrie is an institution which oversees the well being of Humanity. It’s divided into ten congregations. Starting with the Angels, how does one actually become an Angel? From an early age, “candidates” are integrated into the Angelrie after having completed a series of tests. They then take classes and go through a complete training program in order to determine if they will qualify to join the Angelrie and become a member “Angel”. If they’re chosen, the Angelrie ranks them and they are inducted into one of the ten congregations of Angels.”

The narrator commented on the images of young people wearing different colored uniforms corresponding to the order they belonged to. One order stood out: the “Deciders”, sometimes known as the Kings, those who ruled and made decisions. They were led by Michael, the Chief of all Chiefs and the symbolic authority of the Angelrie... whose power could only be put to use with the others in charge of the institution. A young woman dressed all in white appeared, representing the Beings, those who were responsible for keeping traditions. They were led by Hazel. Although Emma understood the role of this order, she felt it to be of little importance. The music changed and the screen showed Angels dressed in dark blue sitting around a table.

“The “Strategists”, continued the narrator.

This was the congregation that she envied the most, she who loved to plan everything, to understand the art of combat and who was continually coming up with plans for which Bacillus was generally the target. The men in blue were then replaced by men in yellow representing the Mediators, the masters of dialogue and diplomacy.

“That’s not for me! Oh my! I’m not patient enough to do that!” exclaimed Emma as she fast forwarded to the next chapter. She found mediation much too boring to suit her taste. The fifth congregation, however, was something she fantasized about. The Alchemists,” she shouted with enthusiasm.

She respectfully watched the specialists known for mixing potions, just like Cherokee whom she loved to watch concocting new recipes. The images showed them hard at work in their laboratory.

“How did she become Razel instead of Raphael?” asked Emma.

“It’s a long story,” said Mama Pape. “It was Warrior’s turn,” she added hastily.

“Oh, that’s my favorite congregation,” replied Emma enthusiastically.

“Why am I not surprised,” replied Mama Pape as she watched the red clad men and women.

Emma so often dreamed of being given the Angel’s uniform, of serving Kamel and of becoming a Warrior of the sixth order. She felt the Warriors most closely resembled her own personality.

“Stop dreaming.”

Emma skipped the chapters on the Messengers, the Repairmen, the Nourishers and the Readers, the last four of the Angel congregations. She fast forwarded to the description of the magnificent Angelrie Palace also known as the University of Angels, the institution where the Angels worked and did their training.

The video showed the Angelrie’s classrooms, including the areas dedicated to warlike combat practice, the library which held all the data storage archives of the Emerged Lands and finally, the rooms where the youth passed their tests before being “nominated” in a ceremony held in the Angelrie Ballroom. A shiver went down Emma’s spine when she saw the image of the magnificent hall that could accommodate more than a thousand people. She continued daydreaming about her future as she cut through the dense ferns. She saw herself being nominated an Angel with others in her class. One day would she serve the most noble institution of her time?

“Emma?” Mama Pape stopped the video when she saw Emma lost in thought.

“What?”

“Pay attention! We’re almost there!”

Just at that moment, Emma cut a fern and felt her arm fall into the emptiness. Her mare grabbed her by the tunic and tightly held on to her. The young woman started; she found herself standing atop a majestic cliff. A dizzyingly high mountain and stunning landscape stood before her. Below was a green canyon. The sight took her breath away.

“Welcome to Fara Canyon!”

“Mama Pape! You should’ve warned me! I could have fallen!”

“Oh, come on. You weren’t in any danger. The ferns were holding onto your legs! Look... you’re caught in their branches.”

Emma surveyed the situation. She was standing a few inches from the edge of the cliff and when she tried moving her feet, she realized that her right leg was held tight by feisty branches. She grinned as she took in the splendid gorges and majestic surroundings. She made out the famous waterfall of the nymph Tetis and asked herself how she would get there. Between the waterfall and the area where she was standing the emptiness mocked her.

“Tell me, Mama Pape, one small detail... How do we reach the other side again? We walk along the cliff?”

“Walk along the cliff? Are you trying to get yourself killed? Don’t you think there’s a reason they call it Death Cliff?”

Immediately Mama Pape waved her wand and traced a red line the length of the ridge path leading to the waterfall. Little by little, silhouettes appeared on the screen.

“Justin, a Gong Gong of little virtue, I must say,” said Mama Pape as she pointed to the first silhouette. “He fell after about 450 feet. But at least he tried an ingenious trick. He threw a rope and managed to hook it to Point Pleasant, the point that you see to the extreme east of the canyon.”

Mama Pape pointed to the mountain in question. The peak soared in the air dominating the rest of the range below.

“Poor guy. He didn’t plan on having a rodent cut the rope. He crashed flat as a pancake against Point Pleasant.” Mama Pape laughed maliciously. “One story that I really like though is the one about the young guy Alvara. He was holding onto the ferns, somewhat like you are right now. He wanted to stop to take in his fill of water. An eagle swept within a few inches of him and he stepped out of its’ way.”

Mama Pape drew a young man’s silhouette which fell into the void and seemed to disappear into the depths of the crater. There was a muffled sound followed by a splat.

“Oops. He fell into the river.”

“You’re all crazy!”

Mama Pape placed a hand over her mouth as if to stifle a laugh. Emma took a deep breath in an effort to avoid blowing a fuse.

“Good. Good. Thanks for the history lesson Mama Pape, but that doesn’t tell me how I can get there!”

“Wait a second. I didn’t even get the chance to tell you about Pisa Woman, a witch, who stupidly slipped on the muddy ground and burst into thousands of pieces at Sun Crater. That’s my favorite one!”

Emma rolled her eyes. Why did Mama Pape always have to be so heavy? Mama Pape herself sighed when she saw that the young woman appreciated neither her explanations nor her sense of humor.

“You always have to be shown everything, you young people!”

She giggled as she activated her wand. The stick of wood emitted a ray of light which exposed a rock that was hidden among the ferns. Emma understood and cut fiercely through the foliage. She freed the stone and lifted it up while looking at the Tahitian Mama inquisitively.

“There. Push the black button.”

“The black button? What black button?”

Mama Pape raised an eyebrow but Emma didn't give up. She studied the rock and discovered a black cavity into which she pushed her thumb. Suddenly, the rock moved and Emma pushed it. The stone revealed an underground passage carved into the cliff.

“It's the Gong Gong's passageway!” said Mama Pape with delight.

“The Gong Gongs?” stammered Emma. “You mean to tell me that you're bringing me to the Gong Gong's passageway, controlled precisely by those we're trying to avoid?”

“Don't be so silly. They haven't been here for decades! Why else would have Kalifa mentioned it?”

“Kalifa? You weren't there when Kalifa showed me the path.”

“You think I didn't hear your conversation?”

“You listen in on conversations too? Aren't you ashamed?”

“You left the stone on!”

“And silly me who thought I was saving water, my foot!”

“Yeah, yeah, except that it's thanks to me that we're taking the shortcut and not Kadali Path!”

“Oh my God, you never stop! I can't believe it!” Emma was infuriated.

The hologram abruptly disappeared and with it, the map of the underground passageway. Mama Pape was offended but Emma sighed with relief. Mama Pape started typing on the system with her “know it all” attitude.

Thankful despite everything, she walked through the Gong Gong's tunnel without further incident, her mare obediently following along behind her. They moved along inside the dark and silent cavern, spotting rays of light here and there from windows that overlooked the Death Cliff's majestic landscape where the crater was. On the walls, Emma made out ancient writings. They had been etched by the Gong Gong, the enemies who had allied themselves with the Black Master during the war. Emma didn't know much about them other than that they were excellent warriors but were notoriously known for their cowardice and fear of being injured. Emma had read in her father's notes that these weaknesses made them particularly vulnerable so it was easy to destabilize them or counterattack.

“That’s not the case for everyone.”

She stopped to think about the mysterious man. She felt afraid every time she thought about his eyes and his makeup. Looking at the wall, she wondered what battle was portrayed. She followed the fresco to where an imposing and somber silhouette stood out from all the others. He was wearing a helmet with two shiny horns and a cape which hid his body .

“The Black Master.”

Emma recognized him easily. He was the one who wanted to challenge, injure and destroy Peace. Next to him was the lifeless body of a woman. Emma shuddered and her entire body shivered as she was overcome by a vision. She found herself under the pounding rain of a violent thunderstorm and saw the bloodied bodies of her parents on the cobblestones. Immediately, she felt weak. She leaned against the wall trying to regain her strength telling herself to get it together. She didn’t want to succumb to the vision.

“You have got to control yourself, Emma Herevai-Batala. You need to watch yourself.”

Emma had no idea how these visions appeared or how they invaded her thoughts, but she understood that allowing them to overtake her would make her weak. These visions seized her emotions, overwhelming her with anger and resentment, she who was just an ordinary young woman known for her zest for life and the pranks she liked to play. She took several deep breaths and regained her composure. Edith loyally stood by her side, with an understanding look in her eyes. Emma smiled tenderly at her horse.

“Edith, don’t worry. I promise I’ll be able to control myself... For the time being I don’t know how, but I’ll find a way.”

The horse whinnied and Emma set off again with her trusty four legged companion following closely behind. After several hours spent in the passageway dug into the cliff, they reached the exit and discovered the splendor of the landscape before them. Emma easily covered the distance which separated them from Tetis Waterfall, a magnificent cascade of water falling from 350 feet above. At the foot of the waterfall Emma fell silent in admiration. Overwhelmed by one of Nature’s amazing creations, she decided to sit down on a rock to take it all in. Suddenly the rock moved and Emma remembered Kalifa’s instructions. She immediately got up and took out her blue grey stone.

She began to shout: “Tetis, her Majesty Tetis, nymph of Fara’Ura, drop your red tiara and open your water. I’m nothing but a passing traveler asking to meet you.”

Just then, the water doubled its force and Emma got sprayed with such force that she slipped and tumbled into the cold water. She cried out as she hit the water. She fought, convinced that she was going to drown. Emma was angry with herself for having offended Mama Pape, even if the virtual woman wouldn’t have been able to come to her rescue. She looked at Edith who was calmly taking a drink of water and seemingly undisturbed. Emma called to the animal who gave her a “don’t bother me” look. Emma didn’t understand that the water was keeping her afloat and bringing her near the waterfall’s edge. She calmed down when she realized that it was her that controlled the flow of water and that its Queen, the Nymph Tetis, was welcoming her.

The water set Emma down at the entrance to a cave just as a water-maid woman appeared.

“Maeva Emma Blue. Welcome.” Leaning in closer to her, Emma realized that this liquid shape was in fact Tetis, the famous nymph of the waterfall. “What can I do for you?”

The nymph stood facing her, imperial and stunning. Emma was captivated by the nymph’s beauty. She had soft features and a sparkling liquid body. “I’m sorry, could you repeat that?” asked Emma, stunned.

“In what way can I be of service to you, young Emma Blue?” she asked as she bowed before her obediently.

“I... I don’t know. But why are you calling me Emma Blue? My name is Emma Herevai-Batala.”

## Chapter 10: Tetis' Secrets

Tetis the nymph showed Emma inside the cave to an area which was sheltered from the waterfall. It was some kind of sparsely furnished cavern where she welcomed her guests. Inside was a bed of leaves, a circle made of hot stones, some logs, some almond oil lamps and a few pieces of fruit. The area was decorated with forest flowers which gave off a delicious scent.

Emma was wrapped in bamboo fabric which absorbed water with an efficiency that she had never seen before. She was seated on the bed of flowers which was much more comfortable than it appeared. She watched as the water woman busily went about her tasks. She prepared a fire so that Emma could warm herself. It was odd to think of a water goddess making fire. She sighed in frustration, realizing that she knew nothing about the world around her.

"There, Angel. This will warm you up."

Tetis snapped her fingers and a roaring fire spontaneously lit up. Emma immediately felt its heat and closed her eyes as she sniffed the scented wood. She shivered, and with a smile of satisfaction, exhaled loudly. She looked at the water woman with gratitude.

"Gosh. I feel much better. Thank you, Your Majesty."

"Don't call me Your Majesty, Angel. It's me who's at your service."

"Umm. You call me Emma Blue, you call me Angel... I really need you to explain because I'm neither one nor the other."

Tetis made a sign of peace and sat facing Emma. The water at the bottom of her body shaped her sparkling scaled tail just like that of a mermaid.

"Herevai-Batala," she declared, her eyes lost in the flames, "the water tiara from the heavenly gardens. You're father predicted well."

"You know my father?"

"Of course I do. Who doesn't know Shuilu?"

"Yup," replied Emma shyly. "That's true."

"They obviously didn't tell you everything. Even before you left..." Tetis looked Emma straight in the eyes. She looked embarrassed.

"The truth is that he didn't really tell me anything, he didn't have the time... I don't even know if he's still alive..."

"Oh, then I don't know what to say."

"Why? Do you belong to the Invisibles as well? You're waiting to be reunited with your soul?"

Tetis laughed out loud. She'd never heard of such a thing. She'd never expected to be having this discussion with Emma Blue. She studied Emma closely. Seeing as Emma was oblivious of the situation, Tetis knew better than to press.

“It’s strange, you really look like him. It’s hard to believe.”

Tetis got up, her tail turning itself into a pair of legs before she took a few steps. She pressed on a stone which opened onto a library. Inside there were drawings, books and papers, and stones of all kinds. She took out a pile of boxes and began looking for a specific drawing. When she found it she handed it over to Emma with a smile.

“Your mother, Emma. Her name was Nancy Su, a wonderfully kind woman.”

Emma took the image and studied the smiling woman with the blonde hair and prominent cheekbones. She did a double take when she recognized her, the same woman who lay bloodied, dying right before her eyes. She remembered seeing the blood as it spread across the ground and feeling the rain as it washed the red liquid away. Suddenly a shiver shot down her spine. She shook her head to rid herself of the thoughts and looked directly at Tetis.

“How did you know my mother? Did you actually know my father? His name was “Su” wasn’t it?”

“So many questions, so much impatience you have, Emma Blue.” Tetis seemed so full of compassion that it troubled Emma. “Let’s start with your name then, shall we?”

Tetis took back the photo and put it on the pile. She stood motionless in front of the stack of printed sheets as she thought about her past.

“Shuilu explained to you where you came from, didn’t he?”

“I don’t know... yes, in a way. Cheroki said something about my marks, which were the same as those from the Fontanelle Lake Community... but Father said otherwise.”

“That’s understandable.”

“What do you mean?” Tetis smiled feebly.

“There’s a lot of mystery surrounding this community... Not all the stories are pleasant ones.”

“What do you mean by not pleasant stories? What are you trying to say?” Emma looked distraught.

“Don’t worry Emma, there’s nothing to be ashamed about,” reassured Tetis. “In a certain way, we are all children of the Universe, so that makes each one of us unique, right?”

“You’re in a class of your own Tetis,” joked Emma, as she looked at the wavy curves of Tetis’ silhouette. The blue crystalline water, with its ever changing blue and shiny reflections danced as she moved.

“You’re wrong Emma, there are thousands of us nymphs living in the Earth’s waters. All you need to do is follow the river leading from the waterfall until you find my friend Cassandra. Soon the day will come when you’ll know us all.”

All of a sudden, an electric pulse tickled Emma’s chest near her stone rosary. She casually shook the stones when a light beam hit her hand and suddenly projected an image on her palm. Tetis knew immediately who was inside the purple stone and she smiled to herself as she sat back down.

“She’s allowed to do that? I mean, I didn’t ask for her to come!” exclaimed Emma with exasperation.

“Mama Pape is at home wherever the water flows and she has the right to be there.” Emma read out loud.

“People say that you’re the mother of the Nymphs, the most senior of them all.” Emma looked at Tetis. “Sorry, I don’t understand what’s going on... but it’s true, you’re the most senior of all the nymphs aren’t you?”

“How about asking Mama Pape to join us?”

Tetis had barely spoken the words when Mama Pape popped out of her stone. She gave Tetis a kiss and the two women immediately began catching up on all the latest news. Emma couldn’t believe her own eyes.

“I’m sitting here in the middle of a conversation between a nymph made out of water and a virtual granny,” Emma whispered to herself, amused.

“Mama Pape, I’m so happy to see you again,” said Tetis graciously.

“Me too. Let me just tell you how beautiful you look. You haven’t changed at all. You’re still as young as when I last saw you.” Tetis blushed.

“It’s the water Mama Pape. You know that hydration is the secret to staying young.”

“True, I should think about hydrating every day because I’m starting to get some wrinkles.” Mama Pape pointed to her forehead where fine lines were beginning to appear although she had always managed to keep a youthful appearance.

“Uh, excuse me to interrupt you two, but I think we need to get back to the subject here.”

Tetis and Mama Pape turned to Emma. She was dumbfounded by the women’s behavior. She was actually irritated, tired of always having the impression that everyone she met knew so much about her, her past and her destiny while she knew absolutely nothing about them.

“Always so many questions and so much impatience Emma Blue,” repeated Tetis.

She took out a tea kettle from another cabinet which was hidden behind a dark grey stone and put it to boil on the fire.

Tetis handed Emma a cup. “Drink a little tea, Emma. The hot water will calm you.” Emma was impressed by the nymph’s sense of presence and natural authority.

“I feel much better thank you.”

She felt her body calm as the warm liquid traveled down her throat.

“Emma Blue. Blue is the color and the word that your mother loved so much. She called herself Su but she wanted to hide your ancestry.” Tetis smiled graciously and Emma wanted to ask her more but she was too shy. “The name “Su” means water in Azeri, one of the Ancient Era languages.”

“Azeri?”

“Yes, it was one of the languages of the Ancient Era that was spoken in Asia.”

“Oh, like Anecetos in Japan?”

“Asia is huge Emma!”

Mama Pape was shocked by Cherokee’s pupil’s ignorance. She projected the map of the Ancient Era and Emma marveled at the size of the Planet, 30 % of it covered by land. Emma couldn’t imagine such a vast piece of land.

“Tetis is talking about a region that’s found between Europe and Asia. A magnificent piece of land where sparkling water flowed from the rocks.”

Mama Pape pointed to the area on the map and Tetis began telling stories about Armenia, a country that she had traveled to several times before becoming a nymph. Emma caught a glimpse of the mystery surrounding this woman that she had just met. She desperately badly wanted to learn things from her.

“Your family, Emma... They’re water guardians,” explained Tetis.

“The guardians of the Water? What do you mean by “Water”?”

Tetis and Mama Pape laughed. Emma started to realize the importance of her heritage. Her eyes opened wide and her heart began to beat faster. Tetis felt the young woman’s anxiety and stepped closer to her.

“Don’t be afraid Emma Blue. You are the Water’s guardian. Your destiny, what you came to accomplish by going to Potoma, is to reestablish peace in the Emerged Lands. Emma Blue, you are the one who will enable the Earth to recover her “lands”.”

Suddenly, Emma was blinded by a flash of light. She’d barely had the time to listen to Tetis’ prophecy before being struck by a blue ray. It was a vision. She was transported back to the plain, the one where she’d seen the Chosen One. She saw the woman on the stag’s back. Emma shouted to her. She had so many questions to ask her, but Namaka disappeared. The parrot shrieked and Emma turned towards it, waiting for it to transform into a totem, but this time the animal was struck by lightning. The plain became black, everything went dark and a terrifying sound rose from the Earth which started shaking. Emma cried out in horror as she watched the bodies of her parents replace that of the parrot. A dark tornado swept over the plain coming closer to Emma. Emma saw a face, a face so dark with anger that she couldn’t make out the features. It came closer to her and the bodies of her parents started bleeding. The wind transformed them into fire and they vanished. Emma wanted to get near them but the tornado violently pushed her back.

Emma woke up in a sweat. Tetis was by her side, spraying her with cold water which had an odor she immediately recognized. It was the same water Cherokee used. Emma tried to protest but the Morpheus oil took effect and she fell asleep.

Tetis was adding some branches to the fire when the Tahitian granny stirred. Seated on a stone, she double checked to make sure that Emma was still sleeping before she spoke.

“She has gotten a lot of information over these last few days. It’s been very tough for her.”

“She can’t get her visions under control. That’s not good.”

“You’re forgetting that she’s not an Angel yet.”

“She must learn, otherwise he’ll get her.”

“You think that Demone...”

“No. It’s too soon,” confirmed Tetis. “The Gong Gong that were supposed to have kidnapped her must have informed him by now of their failure but it’s impossible for them to find out where she is... They must be waiting for her along the path to Stad. Unless...” Tetis turned to Mama Pape. “The stone, you followed all the rules?”

“Yes... Even though I’m sure she’s already forgotten them all. She’s not always listening, so that could happen.” Tetis frowned as she thought it all over.

“Which path did you take? Kadali?”

“No, we took the Gong Gong’s tunnel, the one that’s supposedly buried.”

“Good.” Tetis smiled. “You gained a day, maybe two.”

“No more than that?”

“I think the Gong Gong will be waiting for her along the path. Even if they don’t use the frescoed tunnel, they’re keeping a close eye on it. It won’t take them long to realize that someone used it. I imagine that Emma cut her way through the ferns.” Mama Pape nodded. “They’re going to know that she came here.”

“Are they going to figure out that she’s looking for the Potoma Headstone?”

Tetis smiled and her eyes sparkled.

“Do you know how many headstones are in Potoma Forest?”

“I believe Kalifa mentioned it,” replied Mama Pape with a hint of amusement.

There’s only one which is truly rare and unattainable. Even if they realize that she’s trying to reach it, they won’t venture any further than the Hirundine Plain. They’re too afraid.”

“If Demone is with them...”

“Demone can’t enter Potoma Forest; he’ll only stay within the area,” confirmed Tetis. Mama Pape didn’t understand. “You know Mama Pape, he can’t run the risk of getting himself buried. Don’t forget about Fontanelle.”

“That’s true,” replied Mama Pape, remembering that the Black Master’s heirs remained fearful of the place that had drowned their armies and brought them to their downfall prior to the Division of the Emerged Lands.”

“The Gong Gong will go though. They’re too afraid of Demone not to, Tetis. They wouldn’t dare disobey his orders.”

“That’s true,” said Tetis sadly. “But they wouldn’t be able to get past the clearing... Nobody can... except her.”

Tetis looked at Emma with tenderness.

“They’ll still have plenty of time to capture her... She needs to decipher the headstone,” recalled Mama Pape.

“I know.”

“That’s why you must help her.”

“I will help her but you can too. Emma has gotten a head start on them but she must pass the Hirudine Plain before they get there.”

Tetis glanced sideways. She knew what Mama Pape was talking about.

“Of course I’ll open the path to the range in the hills. There’s no way Emma can pass the salt desert. She has to keep her strength in order to reach the headstone.”

Tetis leaned over Emma. She was still asleep. With a quick and fluid movement, Tetis floated over to the cavern’s exit. The sky started to clear and the sun would soon be up.

“She must reach the headstone as quickly as possible, you understand Mama Pape? It’s urgent.”

“It’s not like I can guide her or force her there, Tetis, I’m just a hologram.”

“I know. The most important thing is to prevent her from having visions, they make her weak... Weakness makes her vulnerable.”

“Sure, I know but I can’t really do anything to ...”

“Force feed her dried bananas,” advised Tetis, who was busy cooling the room to insight Emma to wake up.

“Wake up Emma,” she whispered. “Daniel’s waiting for you.”

“Daniel’s waiting for her?” repeated Mama Pape. “You mean to say...” Tetis gave Mama Pape a wary look. “The stag, of course it’s him... You really are a psychic. The legend isn’t lying.”

“Let’s just say, I know a lot of things. I know what the legends say, including those about the future, but no, I certainly don’t know everything.”

Tetis gave Mama Pape a hurtful look.

“I’m not asking questions,” replied the Tahitian mama digging her heels in. “I know that you only tell human beings what you want them to know... all the more so with us virtual types!”

Tetis smiled as she poured water on the fire to put out the last log.

“I can tell you one more thing Mama Pape. Emma’s journey will be long, difficult and full of hardship but she will come back here. When she does, order will be reestablished.”

“I believe you even if I’m doubtful... and I’m doubtful.

## Chapter 11: Fontanelle Lake

At sunrise, Tetis opened the waterfall's gates. Emma discovered a parallel valley, hidden within the depths of Potoma Forest. Tetis explained to her that it was a fault, one of nature's cavities carved out by the water that protected the entire aquatic system supplying water to the Emerged Lands.

"You are at the spring of all springs," Tetis explained to her. "From here comes all the water in the world. It's the start of the water cycle. The rain recharges the lands before being filtered by the basalt rock. It feeds the trickles of water that join Fontanelle Lake.

"So then it's you who's the water guardian," said Emma, awed by the green and rocky passage that lay before her."

"I'm the guardian of springs. It's not the same thing Emma Blue."

Emma nodded at her, but not without reservations. She had accepted her destiny and above all, she had accepted the fact that she wouldn't learn any more from Tetis. The young woman now understood that her destiny would reveal itself little by little and that the answers to her questions would come only in due time. She hated the idea of waiting and she wasn't a naturally patient person but she knew that from now on she had to learn to be. She had been sufficiently shocked by the previous night's vision that she was now more than willing to accept the wait. Now her goal was clearly defined. She wanted to reach the headstone as fast as she could.

"Do you know what the Fontanelle is?" asked Tetis pulling Emma from her thoughts.

"It's the soft membrane on the top of a baby's head."

Tetis laughed out loud.

"You sure know your dictionary. I'm talking about water though. What does it mean with respect to water?"

Emma shook her head from side to side, smiling shyly at Tetis.

"It's where everything started. The image of the baby is good. Fontanelle Lake is the birthplace of the Emerged Lands. It's there where the Earth took shape."

"And how is it that there's a salt desert right next to it?"

"It's a kind of protective shield. What better logic than to put the oasis near the desert?" Tetis smiled warmly at Emma and looked deep into her eyes. "Don't forget Emma, Fontanelle Lake is the origin of the springs."

"The origin of the springs," repeated Emma.

Tetis motioned to Emma that it was time to say their goodbyes.

"Your destiny awaits you, there's no time to waste. Follow the current until you reach Benevolent Cove and there, you'll reach the junction between the passageway and the salt desert, Salar.

Whatever you do, follow the first passageway, the hilly range. Once you're inside you have nothing to fear. It's getting in there that's difficult, especially since..."

"Especially since?"

"I'm warning you, the Gong Gong monitor the area. Demone will soon know that you came to see me and he'll know that you're trying to reach bloodsucker plain and the Potoma Clearing."

"Demone, the Black Master's heir is keeping me under surveillance?"

"They're your enemies, Emma," Tetis solemnly pointed out. "Of course Demone is keeping a close eye on you... He'd even kidnap you. Why do you think the Gong Gong burned your house down?"

"Silly me to think that Bacillus was my enemy and that he wanted the fire... I really had the rug pulled over my eyes."

"Don't underestimate Bacillus, he's also your enemy," warned Tetis.

"That sure makes a lot of enemies for one person," retorted Emma as she adjusted her outfit.

"It's your destiny, Emma Blue."

"You said it... my destiny." Emma looked resigned. "Thanks Tetis. I know the next time we see one another I won't be the same."

"Goodbye Emma Blue. Next time I see you, you'll be an Angel."

Emma shuddered when she heard the word. Her destiny as an Angel seemed so farfetched. Tetis made a gush of water which swept Emma and Edith toward the passageway. The wave lifted them over several hundred meters to the delight of the horse and its rider.

Emma crossed the fault as she mulled over the uncontrollable visions that kept gnawing at her. She would've loved to talk with Tetis or Cherokee or even her father about them. She regretted having been so angry with him. She headed toward the enchanting and inviting foliage and noticed that as the ferns became more and more scarce, the trees became drier and the ground became sprinkled with grains of sand. Just after she passed a winding curve she entered a crater full of fallen trees, whose branches hung over a purple rock. Emma stood openmouthed.

The last trees unveiled a unique and amazing show. She discovered a succession of interlaced pink rock passageways. Lingered over what was remaining of them, she had the impression that these stones told stories, stories of men and women who had gone through this passageway of marvels. She was asking herself where the path would bring her when she caught sight of an enchanting patch of green water in the middle of this majestic rocky range.

"Benevolent Cove," gasped Emma.

She immediately understood why this name had been given to this natural formation which resembled a precious jewelry box. The water, the striations in the rock, the few trees mixed in with the palm trees and the tropical ferns gave off a warm and calming form of energy. Edith continued forward and got off the winding path. Emma closed her eyes, reveling in the pleasure of breathing the hot air. All of a sudden, something clicked in her mind. She was in danger.

Emma barely had the time to tell her horse to back up when an arrow flew in her direction. Thanks to her quick reflexes she narrowly managed to avoid it. It planted itself into a rock.

“The Gong Gong! They’re already here, the bastards!”

Emma positioned herself behind the rock. Hiding, she stole a look at the cove which would give her access to the path. She caught sight of a man hiding among the ferns. She opened her flask and dipped the purple stone in water.

“Bow and arrow, now!”

All of a sudden, the weapons appeared and Emma grabbed them. She drew back her arm and aimed. She let go and heard the man cry out.

“Go Edith, towards the palm trees to the far right.”

“I see that I serve absolutely no purpose,” whispered Mama Pape.

“Tetis spoke about the oasis. The way to reach the passageway is found behind the palm trees,” explained Emma to Edith. Her mare immediately bounded off in that direction.

Emma shot another arrow injuring a second Gong Gong who had entered the cove. He’d been alerted by his comrade.

“Really, I see that I’m of no use,” complained Mama Pape.

“Now isn’t really the time Mama Pape,” retorted Emma, leading Edith toward the palm trees.

She found a gap, a passageway between the trees that led to the path. Just when Emma thought that she had reached her goal, they were showered with arrows. Trapped, Emma spotted a net rigged between the palm trees and the rock blocking the entry to the passageway. Just at that moment, Emma took an arrow in the calf. She cringed in pain as she grabbed her rosary. She took out the pink stone so as to project a shield between herself and the sky, temporarily protecting her from the onslaught of arrows. She saw a second passage, the one that would bring her to the salt desert. 15 or so Gong Gong were coming out of hiding. She had to act fast. In a split second she decided to change course.

She commanded Edith to head in the direction of the entryway to the salt desert. Her tactic took the Gong Gong by surprise. They who thought that she was going to attack the hilly range instead. Emma went past the cove and entered into a clay passageway. After several feet, the green foliage faded away. The ensuing light blinded them to such a point that Edith stopped in her tracks and Emma had to shut her eyes. Little by little she cracked them open to see the vast expanse of the salt desert facing her, naked and deadly.

It was a void. It was a vast white plain where the heat pounded the salt and sent back a dazzling light. She closed her eyes again in pain.

“Rats! I wish I had sunglasses!”

Just then Mama Pape took out a hat and sunglasses for her.

“They belonged to Cherokee, they’ll be small for you but they’re better than nothing.” Emma took them, although she didn’t understand what Mama Pape meant. “What? Who do you think the two people that succeeded in crossing the desert were? Frick and Frack!”

"You crossed the desert with Cherokee?" asked Emma.

"Where do you think she found all her precious stones? It's a goldmine here!"

"You couldn't have told me that sooner?"

"No. I like to keep some aces in my hand." Emma heard the Gong Gong approaching.

"Uh, it might be a good idea to tell me where to go... like now!"

"Edith, go West! Aaaayyyyyyy," exclaimed Mama Pape, overexcited.

They galloped a good distance passing a great block of salt several feet high, until they finally got a solid lead on the Gong Gong.

"Slow down Edith," summoned Mama Pape. "The time has come to get hold of the situation."

"Good. So can we take a break first?"

"A break? Emma, I don't know if you've noticed but we're out here in full sunlight and it won't take long for our skin to beget burned like lobsters."

"I don't have any choice Mama Pape. I don't know if you've noticed, but I got hit in the calf. Pass me some arnica and honey."

"Arnica and honey, you're joking I hope! Where's the green stone?"

"The green stone? You think there's anybody living in Bourbeau who has access to the green stone? We can barely keep our rosaries... A healing stone invented by the Angels, I hope you're kidding!"

Mama Pape disappeared and reappeared in a flash. She snapped her fingers and a green jade stone was added to Emma's rosary.

"So then, you're going to take out that arrow and rub it. Fast!"

Emma did as she was told without a word. She grimaced as she pulled out the tip of the arrow that had lodged itself in the back of her calf. She started bleeding. She pressed the green stone on the open wound. In a matter of seconds the bleeding stopped and the flesh immediately repaired itself. Several seconds later, Emma's leg looked as though nothing had happened to it.

"Not bad, Mama Pape. Not bad at all..."

"Very practical indeed!"

"Perfect. Edith let's go." Emma pointed to the desert and bit her lower lip. Mama Pape had disappeared. "Oh yeah... The water evaporated." She opened her flask and wet the stone.

"I strongly advise you not to use my services much for this crossing."

"Great, coming from you! You're the one who knows how to cross this DEATH VALLEY!"

"Relax. I'll leave you the map." She handed the paper to Emma. "Above all, put away the stone and call me BEFORE you enter the plain, do you understand me?"

Emma agreed as she unfolded the map. There were skulls and crossbones in every corner.

“We don’t need to go back to the cove and fight the Gong Gong?”

“No, we’re not going back to fight the Gong Gong.”

“You want us to die?”

“As a matter of fact, no,” said Mama Pape as she started to disappear. “Follow the path Emma, everything’s going to be fine. Leave it that way. The Gong Gong aren’t going to follow you.”

Emma shuddered. She opened up the map and wanted to ask Mama Pape something else , only to realize that she had vanished.

“Fine, I decide. Let’s go Edith, the Salar is all ours... we should be calling it Death Valley instead.”

Mama Pape pointed them in the direction which followed furrows of salt rows which didn’t reflect the sunlight as much as the others so they were less hot. The path seemed hillier than going continuing on straight ahead thus offering them precious moments of relief from the burning heat. Soon they arrived in a dense area at a higher elevation which soon gave Emma the feeling that she was suffocating. She was dripping with sweat while she watched as poor Edith struggled against the heat. Thanks to Mama Pape’s map they managed to avoid the searing areas of Salar. Even with Mama Pape’s help, Emma was surprised by the level of difficulty she and Edith had to face. Emma started to think that Mama Pape had misled them until she spotted grey reflections and black rocky mountains far off in the distance. Little by little the white immaculate steppe gave way to granite hills. The temperature started to cool down and Emma managed to catch her breath. Fresh air blew between the teeth of the anthracite stalagmites. Emma realized that they had made it across.

“Slow Edith, slow,” Emma said softly. “This slope looks dangerous.”

The terrain started to resemble more a rocky desert than a salty one so Emma knew that they had reached the end. The last salt dune opened onto a winding descent of several hundred feet, giving the impression that man had dug into the mountain to get to the thick dense forest below. Immense pine trees reached the height of the mountain summit where Emma was standing. Emma pondered over them and deduced that in order to have attained ~~reached~~ such heights they had to be Sequoias that were thousands of years old.

“O.K., so where exactly is this famous Hirudines Plain?” Emma asked, raising an eyebrow.

She looked at the map and placed several drops of water that she had preciously saved in order to contact Mama Pape.

“We’re here,” stated Emma.

“There, you see? It wasn’t that bad now, was it?”

“Easy for you to say. I’m exhausted.”

“I still have some bananas.” Mama Pape took out the last of her supply. “Eat.” She handed them to Emma who hastily stuffed them in her mouth.

“Can you tell me where I can find this so called famous Hirudines Plain?” asked Emma with her mouth full.

“Right in front of you!”

Emma surveyed the landscape but didn't see any sign of a plain nor any danger.

“Mama Pape, what I see is a spiral staircase leading us to the forest. I don't see any plain nor do I see any apparent danger.”

“Do you know where the word “Hirudines” comes from? What it means?”

“No, but I can look in my dictionary.”

Emma took her yellow stone and inquired as to what the word meant.

“Hirudin is a naturally occurring peptide in the salivary glands of medicinal leeches that has a blood anticoagulant property,” read Emma out loud.

“So, you get it?”

“No.”

“ ‘Hirudo’ is the Latin word for medicinal leeches and ‘hirudinea’ is the word for the anticoagulant enzyme.

“Natural anticoagulant? Pretty cool, isn't it?”

“You only listened to a part of my explanation.”

“What? Leeches? Where? They live in damp areas don't they? But here we're in a desert.”

Mama Pape gave Emma the eye. Emma certainly had selective hearing and memory.

“So what we can say is that right in front of us are “coagulated” leeches, monsters that suck blood as soon as they come into contact with water... and HUMAN FLESH as well, which is actually made up of 70% water like you!”

Emma took a step back.

“So what you're trying to say is that they want to suck up my water? Not my blood?”

“They're a kind of special “hirudin”... The second you put your foot in their path, they're going to want to give you a “kiss”. I highly advise you to smear yourself all over with your green stone before you head off.”

“They don't scare me,” replied Emma with a shrug although she readily complied.

“We'll talk about it again later. I want to conserve myself because you're going to need me later if you survive their greedy suckers.”

Mama Pape vanished and Emma pouted as she observed what looked like a simple stairwell made of sharp rocks and sandy ground. She shrugged her shoulders and gave Edith a gentle pat while whispering reassuringly to her. The mare, exhausted from the Salar crossing, wasn't very willing. She obeyed her master without her usual enthusiasm. Emma cautiously started the descent, worrying about what the Tahitian granny had said.

“So... where are you, you stupid little vampires?”

Edith took several steps and the ground started to move. Slender interlaced earthy forms slithered around as several slimy snakelike objects appeared. They were sand colored and had black sticky scales. Some kind of hairy legs came out of the ground and like vines, they started to intertwine themselves as they crept up and around the horse's hooves. With lightning speed several dozens of the crawling creatures grabbed hold of Edith's hocks, little by little inching up her legs. Edith reared up and Emma almost fell off.

"Edith, calm down!"

The animal was terrified, sinking further and further into the ground as the leeches engulfed the mare's body. Edith whinnied and toppled over when she got bit by a *dinobdella ferox*, the most dangerous and ferocious type of leech. Emma found herself on the ground at the summit of the hole where Edith had begun sinking.

"Sorry guys, the meal is over. Open sesame."

The mare vanished. She got swept away by the stone's purple beam that Emma had directed towards her horse. Emma smiled with satisfaction as fireworks exploded before her eyes. Emma squinted and saw Edith fly through the air before suddenly being let go by the beam. She then vanished into the Sequoia forest.

"Edith!" Emma looked at her stone to ask Mama Pape for help but she saw that the water level was almost at zero. "This just keeps getting better and better!"

"She's there. Up and at 'em!"

Emma turned to see three Gong Gong about to reach the plain. On the ground, the aggressive worms lay motionless and partially burned by the purple ray. All of a sudden, Emma felt the ground move. The sandy creatures started to wake up as they came into contact with her warmth.

"Great. No more horse, almost no more purple stone, transformed leeches ready to gobble me up and the Gong Gong on my heels. Life is wonderful. Now what do I do?"

"The shouting of one of the Gong Gong disturbed her thoughts. He was caught by thousands of the creepy crawlers which seemed to multiply by the second. She watched as the ground moved around her but the leeches couldn't penetrate her skin since she was protected by the smears of the green stone. Suddenly she felt a sucker bite into her right tibia.

"Well, that about does it. Soon they're going to break into your survival cape.

Just a few feet away, the first Gong Gong started slipping underground.

"You'd better get out of here if you want to avoid being next. Saber in the left hand."

The weapon instantly appeared on the ground. Emma decided to leave it where it was while she sized up the animal that had wrapped itself around her leg. It got bigger as it filled with her blood.

"Tie rope to my arm and place the arrow at the opposite end. Bow ready to open fire in my right hand." Emma closed her eyes, hoping that Mama Pape could carry out her last order.

Barely has she said her request than the weapon appeared in her right hand.

“Good.”

She took a deep breath and simultaneously fired on a Sequoia while with her other hand she expelled the flesh of the animal with a swift chop of her saber through her muscle. She cut through the top layer of skin without flinching. Suddenly she got pulled by the rope as it tightened. She flew through the air while the animal full of blood exploded as it smacked itself on the ground. Emma winced, disgusted by the site of the blood sucking centipedes.

She was found herself falling into the void when her right arm got pulled toward a majestic tree. She held on tight to the rope with her left hand and pulled her knees up to her chest before she hit the tree branches. She tried to hide her face but she couldn't avoid getting scratched by the needles and the branches. She got the wind knocked out of her when she collided with another branch. It took Emma several seconds to realize that the very branch that had slammed her had also saved her from the blood thirsty leeches. The rope snapped and Emma grabbed onto the branch using the survival instinct that she was thankful for. She managed to hoist herself onto the top part of the branch. Her body was a wreck but she was safe.

“Not bad,” she congratulated herself even as she winced in pain.

She managed to settle onto the branch and examine her injuries. She took out the green stone and rubbed it over her body. It didn't work.

“Of course, you need water too.” She sighed. “I'm thirsty too.”

She gathered her courage and climbed down from the tree. Her legs were bruised and her muscles were sore. Her face was on fire and she had the impression that she was in a mine field. She reached the ground and gazed into the forest. She headed toward the rock hoping to find water inside it. She limped and her entire body cried out to her telling her to take a break. After hobbling for several minutes, she found a trickle of water near a green mossy area. She immediately rushed over to it and the first thing she did was shake her green stone under it.

Emma rubbed the stone over her wounds and started to feel a little better. She took a few drops of water to drink before calling upon Mama Pape.

“Way to go Emma!” groaned Mama Pape, readying herself to make Emma feel ashamed for having sent Edith off to the storeroom. But when she saw Emma's pale face, she changed her mind. “Oh dear, no more dried bananas.” She took out some seeds instead. “Here, have these, they're from Cherokee's supply.”

Emma swallowed the seeds and greedily drank from her flask. She was drinking faster than she could fill it. She slowly started to regain her composure.

“How's Edith?”

“Don't worry about her. She's waiting for us a little bit further on, near the clearing. You know you broke the rules of the purple stone.”

“So what?”

“I had to get Edith a parachute and I'm not allowed to do that!”

“Yes Mama Pape, I understand. It won't happen again.”

“But...”

“It’s O.K.,” interrupted Emma who still had a headache. Her legs were numb with pain and her ribs still hurt but her wounds had already started to heal. She winced every time she tried to move. “What’s to risk if we break the rules of the purple stone?”

“We lose some of our functions. You’ve definitely lost your fridge option.”

“Oh,” said Emma, amused.

“And you got yourself spotted! There! Happy with yourself ?” said Mama Pape angrily. “Demone knows where we are now.”

“He would’ve ended up knowing anyway,” said Emma as she tried to get up. “Thanks, Mama Pape, for having broken the rules for Edith... and me.”

Instinctively, she headed toward the middle of the clearing. The Tahitian granny was disappointed that Emma didn’t need her services or her maps to know which direction to go. Emma used her instinct; she knew exactly where she was. The area was familiar to her, she knew the surroundings. She passed some pine trees and immediately recognized the place. Emma found herself in the clearing, the one that preceded the plain. On this plain was the headstone. Unconsciously Emma looked for the stag and the parrot, but nothing happened. She was no longer in her visions, she was in front of the Potoma headstone. Emma had reached her goal.

## Chapter 12: The Visitor

Emma set up camp at the edge of the clearing, near a block of granite from which she could observe the headstone and any movements on the plain. Contrary to what she thought, there wasn't any sign of the Gong Gong. Maybe they were preparing an attack and wanted to head to the clearing together. In any case, Emma knew that she didn't have a lot of time. She had had a good night's sleep thanks to Mama Pape's seeds which spared her from having any nightmares. Emma felt ready to confront the headstone.

She meticulously prepared her equipment, as did the Angels and the Kamel according to what she'd read. She wore loose pants and a tight fitting but flexible tunic which allowed her to move about freely. She had flasks containing emergency remedies, a knife attached to her belt, a rope draped around her shoulders and a backpack containing a bow and some arrows. She strapped a dagger to her right leg and hid nails in both of her shoes. She was ready.

She took a deep breath as she stared at the headstone. A light breeze blew across the plain. There was nobody around. Edith, who she'd found at the base crown of a tree, was staying in the background. Despite everything that had happened, her mare stood ready to join her. All Emma had to do was give the command. Emma checked her surroundings one last time, her heart pounding wildly. She exhaled and set out.

The young woman took regular strides as she walked toward the headstone. With each step, she felt as if all her past, her questions and her expectations were adding more and more weight to her shoulders. Her muscles tightened and she struggled to stay alert.

"Keep it together, you must succeed. Do it for Cherokee. Do it for Charlotte. It's your destiny," she said to herself as she clenched her teeth.

Emma struggled with all her might to fight off the onset of a vision. The headstone was but a few meters away. She walked on flat grey stones that called out to her. She heard an ear splitting cry and then she knew that it was too late. Her body gave way under the pressure and she fell to the ground. Her mind was already in the grips of unconsciousness.

A blue light floated in the air, passing through the area. The light was strong and powerful yet soothing. It fell upon a blonde mane of hair tinted with red highlights. A young woman was lying down on something indistinguishable. This time she was in a crouched position. Daniel noticed how she had changed. She still had that golden skin with a pinkish tint to it but she was wearing a pair of pants and a tunic. He saw that she was armed. She was motionless and breathing peacefully. She looked so serene and so beautiful. Daniel sighed then closed his eyes.

"Concentrate. Concentrate," he kept telling himself, trembling at the thought that she might wake up. "Don't wake her up. For heaven's sake don't wake her up."

Daniel held onto this thought. He knew that if she were to wake up, his nightmare would start all over again. He focused and noticed his mouth was dry. He blinked, asking himself how he could be thirsty after just having drunk an entire carafe of water. He closed his eyes again and felt a light breeze caress his cheek. It happened so fast. He blinked again but couldn't resist giving in.

"Concentrate you fool, you have a task to accomplish for God's sake," he said, trying to convince himself that he was just doing something routine. He reopened his eyes.

He slowly moved forward and noticed a block of smooth stones on the ground. He arched an eyebrow and turned away from the young woman. He wasn't in a lit up room but actually on a plain surrounded by forest. The wind was blowing. All was peaceful and calm. The young Angel didn't understand why the vision had changed. What did it mean? He turned back to look at her and noticed that she wasn't wearing the Rainbow. Daniel understood. He had succeeded.

He knelt down near the young woman's body and gestured in her direction. He stopped himself, overtaken by doubt... He took in his surroundings 360 °. There was nobody else around except for a horse that was waiting at the edge of the clearing, probably the young girl's mount. Its presence reassured the young man. He overcame his fear and shook Emma's arm to wake her up.

Emma Blue was so startled with fear that her vision vanished. She saw a man standing over her. She realized that she had fallen asleep despite herself.

"Don't be afraid," said Daniel, making a peace sign.

Emma thought better of it, placing her hand firmly on her knife.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" Emma looked around. "You're alone?"

"I'm alone... and unarmed."

"What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing..."

"You're not invisible!" Emma took a step back when she realized that it was a man she was talking to. She looked him over, at his tunic, a simple black colored jacket. This guy wasn't a Gong Gong either.

"No, I'm not invisible," chuckled Daniel. "You know a lot of Invisibles?"

Emma eyed him cautiously. Without taking offense, Daniel smiled warmly and offered to help her get up. She took his hand and they found themselves side by side near the headstone. Emma was intrigued by the silvery light reflected by the stone. She immediately went towards it, forgetting all about the stranger beside her who had woken her up. This time it clearly wasn't a vision and she was able to touch the granite.

"All that for a block of granite," she said, disappointed that nothing happened.

"But what a block of granite it is!"

"You know about this headstone?"

"Yes, of course. It's the Potoma Headstone, which is really strange because... nobody ever managed to get to it before."

"And here you are."

"And you too."

"Yes but I..." Emma stopped herself. She still didn't know who she was talking to. "I don't know who you are."

“Nor do I know you. But we have to admit we have something in common, we were both able to reach the Potoma Headstone... without dying.”

“What a victory,” admitted Emma ironically.

“It is a victory... Nobody has ever even gotten close to this headstone before us.”

She turned away as she studied the stone. She knew that she had to find something, a clue that would bring her to the next step. Daniel didn't miss a thing. His heart was beating wildly. She was there, giving off the same fascinating and mysterious energy that he had felt when he had seen her in his vision.

“My name's Daniel,” he said hesitantly, trying to win her trust. He went over to her and thrust out his hand.

Emma was taken a bit by surprise by his gesture and she stood still for a moment, observing him. Daniel had a natural air about him which she found charming. She was particularly drawn to his captivating blue eyes. She realized that they sparkled with hints of grayish green which she found as mysterious as they were intoxicating. Realizing Daniel was still standing there waiting, she blushed and accepted to shake his hand.

“I'm Emma.”

“Nice to meet you, Miss.”

“Same here,” she whispered.

Daniel flashed a smile. He felt like forgetting everything... Forget that their time was counted, forget that the Angelrie was waiting for him, the Rainbow, Demone... All he wanted was to get to know her.

“I got here by the cliffs. Nobody thinks about it but it can be done... it just cost me some gymnastics routines and twisted ankles.” Emma listened to him with a poised and curious expression on her face.

“I came by the Hirudine Plain... by holding onto a Sequoia and jumping.”

“Oh, I didn't think about that.”

“Yeah and as you can guess it wasn't the easiest way to go unnoticed...”

“Were you followed?”

“I had some run ins with the Gong Gong.”

The joy left Daniel. The magic of their meeting was gone.

“The Gong Gong. It's usually unheard of for...” Daniel held himself back from saying for someone so ‘commonplace’. “So, what are you doing here, Emma?”

“I can ask you the same thing Daniel.”

“I came to see you.”

“And risk your life?”

“That’s my job! To risk my life.”

“For who exactly?”

“Believe it or not, for a better world.”

All of a sudden they heard something snap. They looked at each other, nothing needed to be said. Daniel grabbed Emma’s hand pulling her quickly in the direction of the clearing. They made it a few hundred feet when they saw Edith who had come to their aid. Emma held on to Daniel and hopped on her horse. She helped Daniel up and they took off. Daniel took Emma’s bow and shot some arrows at a group of Gong Gong who were gaining on them.

“Go to the East, there’s Fontanelle Lake there.”

“You’ve been here before?”

“No,” answered Daniel, “but everyone knows that the lake is to the east of the clearing.”

“Everybody!” exclaimed Emma... “Where exactly are you ~~do you~~ come from?”

They galloped until they reached the water, getting a solid lead on the Gong Gong. Daniel pointed to a patch of flowing water that could be seen underneath the branches. Emma felt her heart pounding. She was at “the spring of all springs.” Emma suddenly had the impression that she had returned to her birthplace. Fontanelle Lake was in view. It was there facing them, serene and protected. Emma slowed Edith when she heard the Gong Gong’s abandon chase, blocked by the water they so feared.

“They probably won’t follow us this far,” said Daniel, in a hurry to get off the horse.

He helped her get off, but Emma, not used to having anyone assist her, fell on top of him. They found themselves nose to nose and Emma blushed. Another sound broke the silence, pushing them to separate from one another and head toward the lake.

“The Gong Gong? No kidding! I’m impressed.” He couldn’t believe that she had been Demone’s target.

“I had some problems in my village.”

“In your village?”

“Yes.” Emma didn’t want to tell him anything more and Daniel felt that it wasn’t going to be easy to earn her trust.

“Listen Emma. I have a proposition for you.” Daniel led Emma toward a hidden cave accessible from the outskirts of the lake. “I’ll take care of the Gong Gong and get them far away from here. In ten minutes or so, you’ll have about an hour to get to the headstone and open it. I’ll come back in two days.”

“What for?”

“You must decipher what’s on the inner door.”

“Because there’s an inner door?”

“Yes. You need to get into the headstone, decipher the first door which is the antechamber of the headstone so that you can enter into the main room.”

“That’s a lot of rooms and a lot of deciphering.”

“You need me to write it down for you?” mocked Daniel.

“What...”

“I know it’s a lot. I don’t have time to explain.”

“I thought that nobody could get in.”

“Nobody, Emma. But that’s not a reason to ignore what’s locked up-inside.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The legends, Emma. You know them, don’t you?”

“I thought I did, but now I must admit that I don’t know anything,” said Emma, vexed, as she naively recalled that she once thought she’d mastered the secrets of the legends of the Emerged Lands.

Emma kept asking herself how Daniel could know so much. Nobody was supposed to even be able to get near that headstone and yet... She couldn’t even begin to imagine how she was going to open it but she didn’t see any way of getting herself out of it. They reached the cave opening. Daniel stayed outside while Emma went in. Something loud rumbled outside in the sky.

“So it’s a deal?” shouted Daniel.

“What? You’re leaving?” protested Emma yelling in an attempt to speak over the noise.

“Decipher the headstone, Emma. I’ll be back in two days and then you’ll understand,” assured Daniel and then he left.

Emma remained wary when suddenly the entry to the cave was blocked by a flood of water. Daniel was going to fight the Gong Gong without her.

“You’re crazy! You don’t have any weapons!” Suddenly Emma realized that Daniel had used the power of the water. “He created a wave to drown the Gong Gong. He’s an Angel! And if he held the power of water, that means he’s...”

Thinking it over, Emma realized that Daniel couldn’t be anything other than one of the Angels under the Kamel’s order... She swallowed hard. She was facing her destiny. Her meeting with Daniel wasn’t just a coincidence. She shivered as she realized that her dearest wish, the dream she had gone over and over in her mind so many times was going to come true... on the condition that she get inside the Potoma Headstone and decipher its hidden doors.

## Chapter 13: The Wisemen's Council

Daniel left the vision room chewing on a piece of dried banana. He was walking confidently when Noah caught up with him.

"What? Already finished? Usually it takes you a lot longer..."

"I saw her," said Daniel as he continued his steady pace.

"How's that, you saw her? You tell me that every time."

"No, this time it's true. I really saw her. I met her. I was in the forest with her."

Noah stopped abruptly. Daniel grabbed hold of the Strategist's arm, obliging Noah to accompany him because he couldn't afford to lose any time.

"Can you tell me where we're going?"

"To the Council."

"How's that? Without giving advance notice? Without being included on the schedule?"

"Emergency procedure," explained Daniel. "How's Gabriel?"

"Better. He's supposed to attend the Council... If he's feeling up to it."

"Good. He has to be there, make sure of it," ordered Daniel who continued to race through the Angelrie's hallways.

"Fine, fine," agreed Noah who stopped again.

Daniel wanted to grab hold of him but Noah sidestepped out of the way.

"There, there! You got me once, but you won't get me a second time! Otherwise I wouldn't be a good Strategist."

"You're the best strategist of your generation," said Daniel annoyed.

"That's easy to say if my generation's known to be just mediocre."

"But that's not true!" Daniel stared angrily at Noah. He didn't feel like playing cat and mouse.

"I want to know."

"Know what exactly?"

"Who is she?"

"I don't know."

"How's that? You spoke to her, didn't you?" asked Noah gesturing with his arms.

"Her name is Emma. She's from... I don't know where she's from, honestly. From the North I guess. From a village supporting the Gong Gong army I suppose," he said out loud. "She's very wary, which I can understand, given that she's being chased by the Gong Gong."

“Gong Gong are chasing after a girl from the North?”

“It’s not every day that someone gets chased by the Gong Gong!” replied Daniel, infuriated.

“Even more so if you’re from the North. The Gong Gong don’t like dissidents, especially female ones.”

“Let’s go. I’ll tell you while we’re walking... slowly,” said Daniel, before Noah could come up with any more questions or make up excuses.

Daniel told Noah how he had found himself transported to Emma’s side near the Potoma Headstone. It had been several days that he had been looking to speak with her, but he didn’t actually expect to meet her. He explained that she hadn’t given him much information and that they’d gotten interrupted by an attack from the Gong Gong. He brought her to Fontanelle Lake where he had found a cave and was able to place her into safety. He managed to make a deal with her telling her that he’d come back in two days and then he created a wave to drown the assailants before returning to the vision chamber.

“Did you have some dried bananas?” asked Noah as he thought over Daniel’s story.

They had reached the door of the Council.

“You take me for a beginner?”

“I wouldn’t like to see you collapse during the Council meeting.” Daniel raised an eyebrow. Sometimes Noah could be quite the joker. “ And in two days, what if she hasn’t deciphered the headstone...”

“She will have deciphered the headstone,” said Daniel, making it clear.

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because it’s her!”

“Her?” Noah’s eyes sparkled. “Your sweetheart, your chosen one. She’s the one, isn’t she?”

“You and your nonsense with sweethearts! Are you ever going stop bugging me with that?”

“Not before someone’s taken your heart Daniel. So, we’ll help you so you can see her again... the one your heart’s chosen?”

Noah gave a knowing smile as he knocked on the Council’s door. Daniel was elated. He had succeeded in convincing his friend that his case merited an impromptu hearing before the Wisemen’s Council. The council was comprised of the Strategists, the Angels capable of planning and advising on the actions to be undertaken by the Angelrie.

The clerk opened the door and they entered an oval room with dark blue walls. Dark blue was the official Strategist color. In the middle of the room a group of men were seated talking at a glossy mahogany table. An attentive audience was seated in a crescent shaped amphitheater which took up half of the room. At the far end, a large screen was projecting videos and text which highlighted the talking points of the Council. Daniel immediately checked to make sure that Gabriel, the Chief Strategist, was present and presiding over the Council as Noah had suggested.

He immediately saw his former master, the one who had discovered him, sponsored him and had made him one of the Angelrie's most indispensable assets. Daniel was unconditionally devoted to Gabriel and had blind trust in this wise and discrete man. Gabriel looked drawn although a bit better than he had two days before when he had returned from a secret mission. Daniel never truly understood why Gabriel continued doing field missions but he knew that he acquired his knowledge through his exploits and contacts with communities located far away which were under the Black Master's control.

"Before addressing the issues which concern the candidates, it appears as though Noah the Well Advised One wishes an impromptu hearing and..." Shuilu looked questioningly at Daniel, for it wasn't common practice for an Angel of a different congregation to attend another's council. "Daniel the Well Destined One?"

Noah granted Daniel the permission to speak. Daniel approached the screen and turned to face the audience and the Strategists seated at the table.

"Yes Gabriel. I have a notice to submit concerning a recent event... an event which occurred this morning in fact."

"Go ahead," said Shuilu.

He smiled weakly. Shuilu couldn't really concentrate on the discussions at hand. His mind was still focused on the discussion that he'd had with his daughter sitting at the dinner table. He had seen her anger, her will and then her courage as she faced the flames. Shuilu had left the area soon after the first blast, just in time to see Emma fight Demone's Black Horseman, the man with the painted face that she had set on fire with the tablecloth. Shuilu had returned to the Angelrie with a burned arm and was very weak. He tried to wipe it all from his mind as he began listening absent-mindedly to Daniel who had projected the map of the Potoma Clearing on the screen. Shuilu jerked upright when he recognized the area situated not far from Bourbeau.

I was transported near the Potoma Headstone. We all know that nobody has ever been able to get near it. And yet, it was there that my vision came to life.

"Your vision came to life?" asked Shuilu.

"Yes. The one in which the young woman is carrying the Rainbow. I found her. Well no, I mean I met her. Without the Rainbow of course." The audience held their breath at the mention of the stone of all stones.

"You met her?"

"Yes, I wanted to talk to her... well at least identify her."

"I'm trying to understand Daniel... You asked to speak to your vision?" Shuilu changed his line of questioning.

"I didn't see any other way to figure out who she was. You must understand that this girl, I had no idea who she was..." He stopped himself, amused, then winked at Noah. "After all, I couldn't just stay there waiting for her as if she was the girl next door."

The candidates laughed. Shuilu started to piece it all together. He foresaw what was going to happen next.

“And what was this young lady’s name?” asked Shuilu although he’d already guessed the answer.

“I’m getting to it Gabriel. I must point out that she was very wary and distrustful. She didn’t answer a lot of my questions... I was obliged to reveal a little of myself to get answers out of her.”

Daniel was confident. He was sociable and loved speaking in public and it showed. The candidates were hanging onto his every word. Noah studied the audience with a pang of jealousy. Daniel had won them over. The boys both admired and envied his strength and his presence. Young women instantly succumbed to his charm and natural magnetism. His eyes then fell upon Shuilu who appeared uncomfortable. Gabriel wasn’t the same after he’d returned from his last mission. It seemed as though he had not only suffered physically but psychologically as well. Noah had seen him shudder when Daniel had pronounced Emma’s name. He had been able to hide his discomfort with a smile but Noah remarked that nobody else had noticed... The audience wasn’t looking at Shuilu, they were all focused on Daniel and his story. Noah understood. Shuilu had some kind of link to this girl. Noah trusted his intuition and promised himself to figure out what it was.

When Daniel finished telling of his adventures in the Potoma Clearing, he turned his back to the audience to face Gabriel. Only Daniel had permission to do so since he’d been previously represented by Shuilu when he’d been a candidate himself.

“He’s allowed to do that?” asked one of the candidates under Noah’s responsibility.

“No, but Daniel can...”

“Why?”

“Because Daniel’s Daniel,” whispered Noah as he watched Daniel in action. Daniel was a natural born leader.

“I am asking the Council to study the best solutions for extracting this young woman from the famous valley of death.”

“Well Daniel. Thank you for this detailed presentation which was... captivating,” said Noah scanning the amphitheater. “We know that there are three ways to get out of the clearing... Well, what we know according to the Angel’s writings and their visions although none of them has ever actually gotten near the headstone. This adds an additional danger factor.”

Noah got up and projected a map of the area on the screen. The least dangerous solution would be to climb the waterfall but it was the least practical should there be a fight. The second way would be to go backwards and throw oneself into the unavoidable hirudine hell.

“It appears that young Emma succeeded in getting past them once already,” remarked Noah. Shuilu was grinding his teeth. He just couldn’t imagine his daughter in the throes of these mutant beasts and the ingenuity with which she had managed to defeat these renowned bloodthirsty leeches.

Noah finished by explaining that the third solution would be to flood the area and escape using a boat or some type of lifeboat.

“Flood the area?” asked Shuilu, taken off guard by this far-flung idea which he thought had come from Daniel. He turned to Daniel. “Don’t abuse your power Daniel. Must I remind you that we’re to live in harmony with Nature?”

“Well, you never know unless you try.”

“And if you play with fire, you get burned.”

Shuilu closed his eyes and began rubbing them. His sleeve slid back slightly, revealing the bandage which covered his burnt arm. He pressed his fingers together and studied the two inseparable young men. He knew them since they were kids. They had gone on to be the most talented Angels of their generation. He knew them only too well to know that none of the solutions were theirs.

“You haven’t a fourth solution?”

Noah winced while Daniel’s eyes lit up and he smiled at his mentor.

“Yes. And I know that she’ll find one.”

“Obviously,” stated Gabriel wearily. “A young woman who escapes the Hirudines, is capable of outrunning the Gong Gong, and who, most importantly and which you seem to forget, is able to reach the Potoma Headstone without being expelled from the valley... You have to admit it’s rather unusual.”

“It’s her, isn’t it?” asked Daniel, boiling with impatience to hear Shuilu’s confirmation.

“Her, is it?” Shuilu shot back as he gave Daniel a look that told him to cool it down. “I don’t know what you mean Well Destined One.” Shuilu emphasized the “destined” reminding Daniel of his unique status. “However, I think it’s obvious.”

“Emma must be introduced to the Angelrie,” concluded Noah.

Shuilu approved the conclusion with a certain satisfaction. A weight had immediately been lifted from his shoulders, as if this acknowledgement from his equals allowed him to finally accept what had always been evident to him, that his daughter should become an Angel. He thought about Emma with tenderness. Her wish would soon be granted and she would join the ranks of the Angelrie. She would serve the most dignified institution of the Emerged Lands. Shuilu considered the options. She probably saw herself as a Warrior but her powers would make her a better Reader or then again, should she become an Alchemist, following in Cherokee’s footsteps? He saw her as a Strategist, but would she accept to follow in her father’s footsteps? Her rebellious disposition would probably contradict him and common sense.

“Gabriel?” Noah brought him back to the present. Shuilu turned to face him. He understood that something unusual was going on.

“What’s happening?”

“The Bell Shuilu,” whispered Daniel.

The Bell was ringing. It chimed several times.

“Six times,” counted Noah, becoming noticeably pale.

He turned to face Daniel at the same time as everyone else in the room. Silence reigned over the audience, waiting for the Well Destined One's reaction. Daniel was taken aback. His joy, his impatience to meet Emma again, his desire to see her as the one who was going to change his destiny... Everything was cancelled by six chimes of the Bell.

"Well." He straightened himself upright and gave a fake smile to the audience. "I have taken note of your recommendation and I will forward my request to the Council of Deciders with the hope that our visitor will not disrupt my plans."

"Everyone has his duty," murmured Shuilu. "If necessary we'll get a team together to give Emma back up for getting out of the Potoma Clearing.

"It's me that must go there and nobody else. You know that as well as I do!"

Daniel's cold and bitter response surprised the audience but Gabriel remained unmoved. Shuilu knew that Daniel was right. Nobody would be able to get near the stone except for Emma and Daniel. It was his paternal instinct talking to him; he wanted his daughter out of that quarry and Shuilu just had to admit it... Nobody besides Daniel was better qualified to get Emma out of Potoma Clearing and bring her to the Angelrie.

"Okay, then. I will do everything in my power to plead your case Daniel." Shuilu got up. "The session is adjourned my dear friends. As you've heard we'll soon have a visitor... well a female visitor, in any case." The audience relaxed. "Come, come, we're going to prepare a warm welcome for Auroura, the Princess of the Black Master and our Promise. She is the one who shall marry our next Mickael... If, that is, the next Mickael turns out to be a man.

This last sentence was unexpected and nobody understood what it meant except for Daniel and Noah. Daniel saw a glimmer of hope and his eyes twinkled. He knew. He immediately understood what Shuilu also believed, that Emma was the Chosen One. Like him, Shuilu didn't believe anymore in the Angelrie's Prophecy which would have made Daniel the next Mickael, the chief of the Angels, the Chosen One.

## Chapter 14: Deciphering

Emma was in what Daniel had called the headstone's antechamber. She lit up the area with a candle while Mama Pape also used light from her glowing purple beam. Just after Daniel left she left the cave at Fontanelle Lake and went back to the clearing where she found Edith. She returned to the headstone and when she was directly in front of it she asked herself what Daniel had meant by "deciphering" the headstone's door because it opened all by itself as she got near it. She entered a hallway that was so small she wondered if Edith was going to get stuck outside in Potoma Clearing. Luckily, the mare managed to squeeze through and they found themselves in a large round room where there appeared to be just one flush door that seemed to serve as an emergency exit.

On the granite wall Emma discovered the mysterious signs that she was supposed to decipher. After studying the images for several minutes, she took out her yellow stone in order to figure out what language it was. She conscientiously took notes under the watchful eye of Mama Pape who admired Emma for her intelligence and efficiency. It took her less than one hour to understand that the gateway was actually a series of words in different languages which all signified "water".

"Hindi". Emma read the answers given in her pocket dictionary. "And let me guess, "Paanee" means water?"

"Yes," replied Mama Pape, not needing to verify the writing on her yellow stone to see if it was correct.

"We're at 125," panted Emma, exhausted by working in total darkness.

"More than 70 to go."

"Are you sure there were 195 countries in the Ancient Era?"

"There were more, but I'm using the number based on the official declaration of the Rights and Laws of the Ocean, whose goal was to save Mankind. It was declared in a rush during one of their "Planning committee number I don't know which", marathon meetings which cost a fortune and only benefitted the politicians trying to make their marks."

Emma raised an eyebrow, looking Mama Pape straight in the eye. She loved when Mama Pape got riled up over the Men from the Ancient Era.

"Do you think that Daniel's an Angel?"

Mama Pape ignored her young friend's question and as she pointed to the next sign. It resembled something from the Russian language.

"I would say it's a country somewhere in the "stans".

"A stan country?"

"Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan... There's a whole list of them, just ask your stone."

Emma activated the stone which immediately started searching. She appreciated Mama Pape's help, knowing that she was extremely gifted in foreign languages.

"You didn't answer my question," remarked Emma.

She drew the new word under the grouping of symbols that she'd listed with the language and the country they represented. She found it strange that the headstone's secret code made reference to the Ancient Era but then again, why not. The Angel's mission was to enable Man to get back to the former Emerged Lands, to rediscover the Blue Planet as it was before The Wave.

"I can't answer you," blurted Mama Pape.

"You can't answer me? Are you kidding?" Emma shut her notebook, flabbergasted by the lame excuse that came out of the mouth of someone so intelligent.

"I'm not authorized to tell you..."

"I get it," answered Emma, cutting her off. "If you're sworn to secrecy, then the answer is yes... Daniel's an Angel. Dressed in black as well..." Emma paused. "He can't be the Mickael, the Mickael is older than that..."

"Angels wear black if..."

"You see, he is an Angel!"

"The Gong Gong are also dressed in black," chimed in Mama Pape, finishing the sentence.

"Except that he would've killed me if he was one of the Gong Gong!"

Emma stopped speaking and finished drawing her "hindi" letters for water. Mama Pape studied Emma's regal and imperturbable expression. She seemed to take everything that was thrown at her with a grain of salt.

"Kyrgyzstan!" declared Emma victoriously. Once again, Mama Pape got a brownie point. "I'm impressed... to have such linguistic knowledge of a long gone era."

"And I'm impressed by your ability to adapt and to remain calm while knowing the destiny that awaits you."

Emma chose to ignore Mama Pape's last remark. She no longer wanted to hesitate or to ask any more questions. Her immediate goal was simple: she wanted to finish translating the headstone and understand how to open it. She only had 36 hours remaining before Daniel's return and night had already fallen. She saw right through the hologram's stare.

"Your destiny is no longer just to become an Angel now, is it? At last you understand... am I right?"

"I'm tired," apologized Emma. Her eyes started to burn with all the effort.

Mama Pape didn't need to ask why. She said goodbye to her master and returned to her quarters. Emma quietly packed her things. She started to feel another vision coming on but this time she was ready for it. She was even impatient to see if she had changed. She lay down on a carpet of leaves and waited. She waited patiently as she listened to the noises outside. The

Gong Gong had been trying to get near the headstone, but each time they tried they sunk into the quicksand where they were sucked into the depths of the Earth by the viscous masses to a destination that Emma didn't envy.

Emma desperately tried to align her thoughts to get the vision back, but nothing worked. She got up and walked around in the darkness. Her thoughts kept coming back to Daniel.

"Daniel! Daniel! Get out of my head! I need to dream... or have a nightmare!"

She contemplated the evening's calmness from where she was. Edith was sound asleep which comforted Emma, reassured to see that her mare had regained her strength... They had no idea what was awaiting them after they opened the headstone... Where would they find themselves?

"Or Daniel?" corrected Emma. It was obvious that he knew where the passageway led.

Emma had the sudden desire to reread her father's books or those of Kalifa. She knew she'd find the answers... But that would mean that she'd have to wake up Mama Pape and Emma couldn't bother her again after having been so short with her. Mama Pape believed that Emma she possessed unique skills while Emma doubted herself. Emma accepted the words but didn't believe in herself. She was often surprised by her own actions and abilities. She would have never believed herself capable of challenging the Gong Gong fighters, crossing a salt desert or escaping from voracious leeches. She sighed. Fatigue was heightening her nervousness.

"Who are you Daniel and where are you bringing me?" To the Angelrie?"

Emma felt an electroshock as she turned towards a slit in the headstone which allowed some of the moonlight to penetrate the interior. Suddenly she found herself on the plain. An early morning breeze was blowing although it was nighttime. Emma's heart began to race. She was outside the headstone in the middle of the night. She gazed over the sleeping plain not knowing whether she was dreaming or if it was reality. She heard noises in the bush and turned back to look at the headstone. There was no stag, no parrot, no Chosen One. Emma panted. She didn't understand the situation. She moved toward the headstone.

"I'm here to open it. I'm here to decipher the door leading to the antechamber. Please, open up."

Unlike the last time, the headstone didn't move. Emma surveyed the edge of the clearing where she saw the Gong Gong preparing fireballs from a camp situated to the North. They were trying to block the passage to the Hirudine Plain.

"Really, that's so like you. Mama Pape, you hear me? Open up the headstone!"

Emma didn't get any reply. She placed her hand on the inert stone just as the first fiery arrows struck the ground around her. She knew where to find shelter so she decided to get away by following a furrow traced by the arrows. She needed to get to Fontanelle Lake as fast as she could.

She zigzagged among the burning fireballs in order to hide her progress. The Gong Gong kept up their assault blindly giving it all they had. She left the plain and started to run towards the lake. Emma ran with wild abandon towards her destination. She arrived at the lake just after midnight.

“So much for turning in early,” she sighed as she watched the reflection of the moon on the water.

She went to the waterfront and dipped her turquoise stone in the water. The stone analyzed the water’s composition, first displaying that the temperature was about 58°F. Emma waited for the stone to finish processing but she thought that it was taking too long. Her gaze wandered across the water and she thought she saw something twinkling in the middle of the lake. She was intrigued by a soft light that she saw emitting flashes with a particular regularity. She dropped her rosary while the turquoise stone continued to scan for the water’s characteristics and quality. Emma stepped into the water.

Emma took a dive and started to swim toward the light. As she got closer she made out the white stone that was emitting the soft ray of light. For a brief moment Emma had the impression that the stone was singing. Emma estimated the water depth to be about 15 feet. She took a deep breath and dove down into the water. She grabbed the stone before swinging her feet to the bottom to push herself back to the surface.

Emma reached the surface, certain as to the reason why she had so suddenly found herself away from the headstone for no apparent reason. Her teeth chattered as she got out of the water and she wasn’t looking forward to staying in her wet clothing. She picked up the turquoise stone which should have finished processing. She added her new talisman, the white stone, to her rosary collection and it lit up immediately. She was surprised as she read the water analysis.

“Perfect water. How’s that, perfect?”

Emma didn’t know that “perfect” water could exist. She pondered this discovery as she generously drank the “perfect” water.

“Hmm. You taste like something...” Emma tried to figure out what it was but she hadn’t the slightest idea.

Having found her strength and her courage, she headed off in the direction of the headstone. She absolutely had to get there before sunrise to avoid the Gong Gong. She sped up and made her way easily despite the overwhelming fatigue that was dragging her down.

Arriving at the outskirts of the clearing, she saw the plain spread out before her, peaceful yet formidable. The Gong Gong’s arrows laid out a morbid path enabling Emma to get past unnoticed. She walked slowly, sometimes bent over, sometimes on all fours, paying close attention to the slightest sound. She frowned when she reached the headstone. The Gong Gong had to be sleeping like logs. Everything was just as she had left it. She touched the headstone as if she were meeting a long lost friend. At her touch, the headstone lit itself up in white light as it noisily opened. Music chimed and Emma paled.

“What is this? I didn’t do anything!” She hurried inside. The Gong Gong camp woke up at the sound of the music. She flew in, waking up Edith. My dear, we’d better decipher this door and fast! The headstone is really doing a number on us tonight!

The horse whinnied as the white stone shined upon the symbols engraved in the door which flashed to the beat of the music. Emma watched the as the scene unfolded.

“Mama Pape, my notes. I need to translate these symbols.”

Mama Pape handed her the paper. As Emma neared the door she noticed that all the symbols had been translated. Mama Pape finished by linking each inscription with a corresponding country.

“Mama Pape, you’re an angel!” exclaimed Emma as a first blast was heard outside.

“You’d be better off if you’d hurry it up. Copy the words onto the white stone before going onto the next symbol which corresponds...”

“Of course, now I get it! The electroshock. It was you! You put me outside because you knew that I needed to leave in order to get the white stone.”

“I didn’t do anything Emma, you did it all by yourself...”

“But...”

“Emma, this isn’t the time!” scowled the old woman. “Time’s passing and the explosions are getting closer. Concentrate, the order is very important. There, the first state, it’s Egypt.”

“Egypt?”

“The first state built around water, around the Nile, the most fascinating river in the world.”

Emma complied and with Mama Pape’s help, she finished organizing the puzzle by linking the countries in the proper order. The explosions grew louder, but the army didn’t seem to get past the edge of the clearing. She touched the last symbol and the door started to move. Emma breathed a sigh of relief. She whistled for Edith and barged into the corridor which led to the antechamber. They were barely inside when the door slammed behind them. Emma exhaled as she heard the sound of the explosions fading away. She knew now that they were safe. She got up and walked around the room which was shrouded in darkness. Only with the light from the white stone was Emma able to make out a few shapes.

“Mama Pape, candles please.”

Mama Pape happily came out with the candles herself. First she lit up one door and then another and another... until she did ten of them. When she was done she’ll smiled at Emma.

“Look, the most beautiful one is up there.”

She snapped her fingers and sent a ray of light to the ceiling which was adorned with 100 animals.

“So, where are we going?”

Emma squinted.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

She found herself in a round room with ten closed doors and the entire set-up appeared to be mocking her. Each engraving represented a new symbol which needed to be deciphered.

## Chapter 15: The Visit to the Angelrie

Daniel woke up before dawn. He was sweating. He had had a bad night. He couldn't stop thinking about Aurora's unexpected visit. It was a bad sign. He was pacing back and forth in the courtyard when he spotted Noah leaving the Strategist's quarters. Noah spotted him, nodded and motioned for Daniel to follow him to a remote corner of the grounds away from the Institution.

"She arrives at 8 am and then leaves tomorrow night."

"Who gave out the information?"

"Her steward. He wanted an escort to go to Bourbeau. It seems as though she wants to meet up later with Démone."

"Démone's in Bourbeau, I'm sure of it. I would even say he's in Pomona by now given what time it is."

"Daniel, Démone can't just show up in Potoma like that, it's too risky."

"For him yes, but not for that Gong Gong gang of his that he couldn't care less about... fearful or not they are of getting buried," concluded Daniel. He was referring to the time when the Black Master's soldiers were buried alive.

Daniel sat down on the wooden bench cursing the heir to the Black Master under his breath. He was probably the one who had sent the army into the region of Potoma. He feared that they were now on Emma's trail.

"When are you supposed to meet up with her?"

"Tomorrow, preferably in the morning." Daniel stared at the ground trying to contain his anger and his resentment. "She has..."

"I know."

"Of course you know. Do the others know?" asked the Well Destined One, immediately overcome with worry.

"I don't know. I don't think so. I mean there shouldn't be any reason for them to know and it's not an area that's usually patrolled... it's impossible to get to. Nobody has the time to stop and think about it right now anyway. They're all too busy with Aurora's visit."

"Aurora's visit, what a sweetheart," said Daniel sarcastically.

"You're too preoccupied with HER," corrected Noah. "The Angelrie is used to having unexpected visits from the Black Master's heirs."

"But not a visit by Aurora," said Daniel, reminding him that Démone's sister had yet to set foot in the Angelrie. "Then again, you say that because you're a member of the Strategists..."

"Indeed, that may very well be true."

A silence fell over the two friends. Daniel was boiling inside but he didn't know what to say nor how to start.

"Gabriel defended your request with the Council..."

"If my case can be defended. You, who's used to these impromptu visits, you know that they never come without a price."

"Which you know yourself, if I'm not mistaken."

The Gong chimed twice. The day had begun and it would soon be 8 o'clock. Aurora's entourage could be seen on the outskirts of Stad.

"I just hope that she won't want to..." Noah laid his arm on Daniel's shoulder.

"Don't make up things in your head for no reason. She's coming, you'll know soon enough."

Daniel agreed and followed his comrade. Most of the Angels were awake and heading to the grand ballroom. Daniel left Noah and headed toward the grand staircase that overlooked the plain. He went halfway down the stairs as tradition dictated to welcome the visitor. Julian, the Mickeal and current leader of the Angels, was already there. Around him, the other Angels were aligned on the same step.

Taxane, the Chief of the Conservatives, was next to Julian. She was talking to Darbihar, the Kamel, who represented the Warriors. Daniel had had many altercations with this young man. Daniel noticed that Shuilu hadn't yet arrived. Daniel hoped that his health wasn't keeping him from taking part in Aurora's visit. His place to stand would be between Taxane and Darbihar who were currently deep in conversation.

"Enough," he thought to himself. "It's not that bad."

The boisterous laughter of Sheela, the head of the Alchemists and Leigh, the leader of the Sparkling Angels, reassured him. At least all the Angels didn't appear to be alarmed by the visit. Daniel looked at the two women tenderly. They had protected him in the past and he had learned a lot from them as well. The last trio, speaking in hushed voices, were Falbala from the Messenger Angels, Boris who headed the Repairmen and Nemo, in charge of the Nourishers. Nemo always spoke with his hands, something which greatly amused Daniel. The place reserved for the tenth Angel next to Nemo was empty. Nausicaa wouldn't be present for the visit. The chief of the Readers was currently stationed in the Southeast of the country and hadn't wanted to return for the Princess's visit.

"In any case, that grouch wouldn't be useful anyway," grumbled Daniel as he thought about the woman who represented the members possessing supernatural powers.

Nausicaa had always been strange, elusive and somewhat of a paradox in Daniel's opinion. She was ambiguous and spoke in codes, things which the young Angel rarely understood.

The Gong chimed once and the Princess's entourage could be seen entering the plain which separated Stad from Angelrie Palace. Daniel sighed. His heart was on standby. He watched as the horses marched solemnly forward. The young woman's carriage was in the middle of the procession. He recalled the one and only time that he'd ~~had~~ seen her before. She'd been an infant and he a teenager. At that time he didn't know if he'd ~~would~~ be called upon to become a

Mickael and a possible candidate to take her hand. Ten years had passed since this last encounter and the next was just moments away. Daniel wondered what she looked like now.

“Articulate when you speak,” whispered Shuila who had just joined the welcoming committee. Aurora’s entourage came to a halt at the foot of the staircase.

“I’ll do my best.”

“Aurora has come to do what she has to do, don’t worry. It’s up to us to figure out what her real intentions are.”

“Yes Gabriel,” said Daniel. He felt his heart jump a few beats.

The door of the carriage opened and out slid a delicate foot followed by a lacy beige dress and finally a mane of long blonde hair which swayed in the wind.

Daniel set his eyes upon Demone’s sister, one of the Black Master’s heirs. She had a lithe figure and was dressed in such a manner as to accentuate the harmonious curves of her body. His blood was boiling and he broke out into a sweat. He was surprised to be having these reactions toward a young girl who wasn’t not at all as he had imagined.

Aurora looked in his direction and flashed a smile. Daniel fell instantly under the charm. Her lagoon blue eyes scanned the audience before drifting back to the Angels who were greeting her. With poise and grace, Demone’s sister had captivated the audience simply by her charming and charismatic presence. She nonchalantly climbed the stairs with unsettling self-assurance.

Julian stepped forward and took a step down as custom dictated. He gave Aurora a kiss and placed a wreath of red flowers around her shoulders. The princess continued receiving to wreaths of different colored flowers which represented each of the Angel’s brotherhoods. Her steward whispered the names and positions of each Angel before Aurora accepted them. They were symbols of welcome given to all Angelrie visitors.

Shuila, who was standing close to Daniel, was the last to offer a wreath of blue flowers representing the Strategists. Daniel studied the scene with a sideways glance. He observed how his former master championed his emotions and appeared stone faced. In reality he knew the whole thing was a charade. Instinct made Shuila prudent. Aurora was beautiful, known for being naïve and kind, but the wiseman didn’t fall for it. He didn’t trust her at all.

Gabriel watched Aurora as she approached the Well Destined One, the person he had trained and introduced to the Angelrie. For a moment he thought about his daughter. He had of course refused to let her be part of his institution although he had just as easily recommended Daniel. He had and pushed Daniel to become a candidate then a member and finally, to become the next Mickael, the Chief of the Angels.

“Maeva Aurora, I’m Daniel, the Well Destined One,” said the young man as he bowed down before her. Shuila muttered under his breath. Daniel had fallen under Demone’s sister’s charm.

“How about you, you don’t give flowers?” asked Aurora with a sly grin and a tender voice.

“I’m not one of the Council’s wisemen Princess. I’m just a member. Only the wisemen give offerings to visitors.” Daniel felt himself bowing again, caught off balance by her voice that he found so seductive.

“You’re a member but you’re also the next Mickael, aren’t you? Can’t you just kiss me or must I satisfy myself by with seeing you bow before me?”

Daniel smiled awkwardly and then blushed. Aurora was visibly ~~all~~-pleased with herself as the two of them exchanged knowing smiles. Daniel turned to face the Angel’s Council who appeared cold and distant. His heart skipped a beat and, acting on impulse considering all the resentment he held towards them, he decided to break the rules. He went straight up to Aurora and kissed her on the cheek.

“I have no right Princess, only the duty to satisfy you.”

Aurora looked satisfied as she turned to Julian who escorted her to the top of the staircase. She was taken in by the one who was destined to become the leader of the Angels Institution. Daniel was exactly as she had remembered him. He had more charm and charisma now than when he was a teenager. Aurora had never forgotten their first meeting when her brother had introduced him to her as a possible suitor. In the race for a husband Aurora had met several potential candidates over time but Daniel had always been her favorite.

It had been a summer afternoon. She was celebrating her fourteenth birthday when her brother brought her to attend one of the Angel’s games. She had seen the seventeen year old boy riding an elephant and she knew right then that she wanted to marry him and nobody else. Since that day, she had waited and prepared for the day when her brother would oblige her to meet Daniel again.

She looked up and couldn’t hold back her surprise. A grand “Ohhh” escaped her lips. Just in front of her was the mighty façade of the Angel’s Palace. It was covered with shiny dazzling stones which reflected the sunlight. They lit up everything around them. Together they formed ten colored stripes ~~blocks~~, each representing one of the Angel’s congregations. The bands ~~stripes~~ stretched from top to bottom between the windows making rainbow reflections. One could only imagine what lay beyond the interior mirrors of the Angelrie’s Grand Ballroom, the ceremonial room renowned for its beauty and elegance.

Aurora delicately lifted the folds of her lace dress, taking care to accentuate the finesse of her gestures. The Angelrie’s members followed each of her movements much to her delight. She loved being the center of attention, setting the tone of the meeting and making them all wait. Aurora knew all too well that the Angels were waiting for one thing... to find out if she had come to make the Compromise between the Black Master and the Angelrie official.

Julian brought her to the Golden Door whose magnificent gate replicated the symbols of the three waters. She gazed upon the blue, turquoise and dark blue glass sculptures.

“Are these made of natural materials?” she asked in an effort to break the silence and continue capturing their full attention.

“Everything is nature made,” answered Julian. “Of course, everything is made by hand, respecting traditional construction methods.”

“Huh? You mean to say that there aren’t any chemical formulas used for all that?” teased the young woman. Julian raised an eyebrow and glanced over to Raphael, chief of the Alchemists.

“Princess,” began Taxane with her hearty accent. “Chemistry is nothing other than the inventory of the elements found on our Planet. The Ancient Era concocted all these chemical

combinations to make pills, weapons and harmful products... Our role at the Angelrie is to explore, develop and promote a combination of ancient and contemporary knowledge in order to come up with solutions which preserve our harmony with the Planet.”

“I understand,” agreed the Princess.

She didn't expect such a detailed answer. She studied the woman who stood facing her. She was slender but she appeared to have an impressive amount of strength and reacted according to her instincts. It seemed better not to contradict her. Aurora scanned the audience which was waiting for her to enter the palace. She was thinking about the ten Angels accompanying her. She looked for Daniel. He was still standing behind the man with the curly beard. This was the man who intimidated her most of all. She couldn't understand why Daniel hid himself behind him.

“After you, Princess.” Julian drew Aurora from her thoughts and she understood that it was time to make her entry into the Angel's institution.

She passed through the entryway and abruptly stopped. She stood on a stage at the far end of the mezzanine which enabled her to look out over the room. Across from her were the members of the Angelrie.

“Oh wow, what a sight,” exclaimed Aurora as she looked out at all the curious faces. They were all standing obediently aligned in rows in front of their chairs. All eyes were upon her. “A thousand pairs of eyes, all of them focused on me. This isn't the time to have something caught in my teeth!”

Texane let out a laugh, appreciating her sense of humour.

“What, do I have something in my teeth?” asked Aurora.

“No, don't worry Princess. You are absolutely stunning. There are actually 977 of us at the moment. We haven't started recruiting yet.”

“Thirty-three new members to be inducted this year,” noted Aurora, “Many candidates, but only a few are selected, isn't that right?”

Texane nodded and Julian stepped forward to address the audience. The nine Angel chiefs were lined up in front of armchairs that had been specially placed for them. When she realized that the empty seat meant for her was next to Julian she became annoyed. Daniel had gotten off the stage and was seated in the first long row of chairs. Aurora took advantage of the traditional opening speech to observe the room.

The ceiling was painted with natural landscapes which alternated with scenes of humans that she'd recognized from the legends of the Emerged Lands. She spotted the purifying wave, the Wastiki's raft and the Chosen One's vision... and of course the Compromise. She shivered as she recognized paintings of her forefather.

She looked away from the wall decorations to focus instead on the crystal structures hanging overhead. The chandeliers were absolutely magnificent, majestically reflecting in the dazzling mirrors which filled the room with soft natural light. Aurora frowned as she thought about her brother's palace. He was always in a race to be first, to be the best but his residence was nothing in comparison to this unique marvel.

“My dear colleagues!” began the Mickael after a moment’s silence. “We have the great honor of welcoming Princess Aurora.” Julian pointed to the young woman standing next to him. “There’s no need to introduce Jussi’s heir, the sister of Demone and Vodyano and the Princess of the Deep Water Lands otherwise known as the Northern Lands.”

Aurora blinked. Her title changed all the rules of the game. She would have preferred not to be a Princess, the “sister of” or the “heir to”. She would just prefer to be known as Aurora, a young woman who had nothing to do with treaties, territorial divisions or water attribution. Her eyes drifted to Daniel and she watched as he listened to Julian who was talking about the peaceful history of the links between the Angelrie and Jussi’s heirs, the diplomatic name given to the Black Master. Despite the fact that Daniel’s eyes were shining, his expression remained stone cold as he concentrated. Aurora knew that he was opposed to the Compromise and that he didn’t trust her brothers. Aurora knew all too well that the Angelrie feared those who were heirs to Jussi. She clenched her teeth and made a fist in order to control the anger that was building inside her.

“Why not just say the Black Master,” she scoffed, her voice much louder than she would have wanted it to be.

Julian and the others in the first few rows turned and stared at her. People started whispering. Aurora smiled weakly but she felt immediately reassured when she saw the amused smile on Daniel’s face.

“What? You can say it. My great-great whatever grandfather was the Black Master.”

“Of course,” answered Shuilu softly. Julian, however, was speechless. “His heirs knew how to behave differently, isn’t that right Julian?”

The one otherwise known as the Peaceful One paled. Twenty-five years earlier, this man, convinced that peace was possible between the Gong Gong and others who had served the Black Master signed a treaty that stipulated that the next Mickael and one of the Black Master’s heirs would marry in order to join their shared knowledge. Julian had gotten to know the Black Master’s heir and he knew that this line of demons didn’t want peace, it wanted power... Its descendant, Démone, Aurora’s brother, was her trusty representative.

“Of course you aren’t your ancestor,” declared the chief of the Angels with tightness in his throat. “But since we’re all being honest here, why have you come to pay us a visit Princess?”

The abrupt question took ~~gave~~ Aurora off guard. She hadn’t been prepared for this type of confrontation. The audience had been taken by surprise by Julian’s nerve. It showed his lack of respect for the rules of diplomacy. Daniel smiled broadly. Not one word was uttered by the audience.

“I... I...,” Aurora struggled to find her words. “I came to the coast to make a courtesy call, Julian. My brother decided to go hunting around here and I didn’t know the area. Everyone says it’s beautiful so I came.”

“So you have nothing to announce to us then?” asked Daniel.

He glared at Aurora, challenging her. The young woman quickly lost her regal composure. She would have much preferred to avoid the conversation and have an intimate face to face talk with the Well Destined One instead. Daniel stared at her as ~~while~~ she stood there looking ashamed.

“Dear colleagues, I suggest we proceed to the grand reception room where a delightful meal awaits us.”

Shuilu cut short the awkwardness and no sooner had he spoken the words than the members of the institution got up to leave, ignoring the intense stares being exchanged between Daniel and Aurora.

The young Angel’s expression reflected all his frustration. Aurora suddenly realized that she had come without thinking about the consequences of what such a visit meant. Aurora’s pride was wounded. She was now the object of the anger of the one person that she had waited for so long to see. She decided to get tough.

“I’m here to announce my brother’s intentions,” she shouted. She wanted to silence the audience and get their attention before they all got up.

Suddenly all went silent. Nobody moved. Nobody made a sound, not even a sigh broke the heaviness of the moment. Aurora stood up, pumped up by the power of her position, recalling the mission that her brother had given her. She would have preferred not to give a formal announcement but Daniel had hurt her feelings and Aurora hated any kind of insult. Proud and arrogant, it didn’t take her much to come back to her roots. She was one of the Black Master’s descendants, and as such, the young woman wanted to get what she desired... She wanted Daniel. She turned away from Daniel and addressed the assembly.

“I came here to tell you that his Highness Demone has acknowledged the nomination of Daniel the Well Destined One to succeed Julian, the Peaceful One. Aurora looked at Julian. “He asked me to tell you how much he admires your Mickael who succeeded in keeping the peace between the divided people of the Emerged Lands.

Aurora stood facing the audience. She was no longer the spontaneous and flirty young woman who’d arrived just moments before. She was the Princess of the Northern Lands. She was sovereign, she was relaxed and she easily dominated the crowd with her natural aplomb.

“You’re preparing the nomination of Daniel as the head of your noble institution.” She paused. Her heart skipped a beat as she quickly thought over her emotions and her fears. Aurora swallowed hard. The Angelrie was literally hanging on her every word. “My brother asked me to tell you say that the Compromise Treaty is to be instilled. This is why I came to meet your future Mickael.

Aurora was trembling as she took her seat. She took deep breaths and forgot all about the audience. Sounds of the audience began to rise while Shuilu stared at the floor cursing to himself. Noah, seated behind Daniel, grit his teeth. As for the Princess, she sat stone-faced. Daniel studied her as she sat there facing them. She’d changed and he immediately regretted having asked her the question. He crammed his fingers into the palm of his hand, digging his nails into his flesh as if trying to punish himself in order to relieve some of his frustration. He managed to get Aurora’s attention. The audience fell silent, captivated.

“Princess, you came to fulfill your duty,” said Daniel in a soft voice. He bowed in front of her. “And none of us can do otherwise.”

Aurora lost her regal attitude and once again became the restless and carefree young woman falling under Daniel’s charm.

"I would've preferred if things had turned out differently," she said.

"Like what Princess?" Daniel went up to her.

"That our marriage wasn't a request to be signed off by anyone other than ourselves," she whispered.

"Marriage is never a given and it's always a conquest," said Daniel with a mischievous smile.

Aurora nodded in agreement and she stood up. She turned to Julian who remained impassive.

"So, how about that, pacifism can change the world, can't it, Mickael?"

"Of course, Princess." Julian opened his arms and scanned the crowd. "My friends, please proceed to the luncheon and during the meal, celebrate. Celebrate the Compromise Treaty and the wedding engagement of our Well Destined One and his betrothed, Princess Aurora.

## Chapter 16: The Decision

Daniel was sitting at his favorite desk in an isolated corner of the Angel's library. He often stayed there until late in the evening and even if he didn't spend much time there during the day, nobody ever dared take his place. It was his universe. He was studying maps and notes of Potoma when Noah joined him.

"Daniel, it's almost midnight, why are you still here? Why aren't you in bed?"

"I could ask you the same question, my friend."

"It's not me that has a Princess to bring to a public event."

"I won't go and you know that as much as I do."

"Really? Your little show this afternoon and your eye contact would say otherwise."

Noah sat facing Daniel with his usual composure and cool headedness. The Strategist made no reference to the questions that had surfaced since Aurora's arrival, including those that had come up with regard to Daniel's being chosen as the young woman's future suitor.

"Don't tell me you were pretending all day long," suggested Noah without any emotion.

"And if I answer you, would you believe me?"

"No." Noah answered, his eyes fixed, as if it were a judgment.

"I see," said Daniel. He stopped writing. Daniel felt how much his friend, the only friend he trusted, was put out by what had happened earlier in the day. "And me who was counting on you to help me tomorrow."

"Help you?" Noah frowned as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing. The impossibility of what his friend was asking him to do.

"What's the matter Noah? You're my friend. You know me... Do you truly believe I'm made of stone?"

Noah looked up to study the one who was destined to govern his institution, the one who was supposed to bring balance, the one who was supposed to help Man find his planet of yesteryear. Like all the Angels, both members and candidates, he had been shocked by Daniel's attitude. The Well Destined One had laughed with Aurora, he had been more than courteous to her as he showed her around the Angelrie with downright pleasure and enthusiasm.

"You're not made of stone, my friend. I know your fate and I know how difficult it must be to have all that on your shoulders."

"Hmmm. And with all that, am I allowed to find Aurora attractive?"

"No... I mean yes, of course. It's just that you give the impression that you're making friends with the enemy."

Daniel was saddened. There was no middle ground. Either he would be Aurora's friend or her enemy.

"I just thought that we needed to show a little bit of diplomacy with Demone's sister."

"Diplomacy yes, lewdness, no."

"Lewdnness!" Daniel scoffed. "Now that's the word." He stopped to think about the destiny that had been set out for him by the Angelrie. "Aren't I the one who's destined to marry her? And in this case, aren't I the one that's supposed to love her?"

Daniel gave his friend a challenging look.

"Just accept that this situation is a paradox," said Daniel with a defeated look.

"Marry Aurora, become Mickael and reestablish order, all of which implies... the end of the Black Master's heirs? Yeah, it's a bit ironic."

"No, I was more thinking of keeping my distance from the one who's supposed to become my wife."

"You like her, that's a fact." Daniel was chilled to the bone by the his remark. Even so he'd fallen under Aurora's charm, the promise that he'd made to Emma hadn't left him the whole day. He had to go see her as fast as possible, regardless of Aurora.

"I have to go back, I haven't the time to sit around and be polite with Aurora, you understand?"

"I love when you talk business, Daniel."

Daniel smiled and Noah picked up one of the maps that Daniel had been studying earlier.

"I see the Angel Council tomorrow morning," whispered Daniel.

"I know, Shuilu asked me to attend."

"So then, you have the nerve to come and ask me if I was fooling around all day?"

The two friends exchanged looks. Together they studied all the maps and writings in order to put the finishing touches on their plan and their presentation for the Council. The night was short but by daybreak Daniel felt ready. He had to convince the Council to allow him to go to Potoma Clearing.

Before presenting himself to the Council, he went back to his room and found his ceremonial uniform ready. He was supposed to give a presentation to the inhabitants of Stad to announce his official engagement to Aurora... Just thinking about it gave him a stomach ache. He didn't know what he really thought, but his instinct told him that he had to see Aurora first. He had to give her an excuse for his absence...

Rather than put on his ceremonial uniform, Daniel chose his conquest uniform. It was a reddish-purple color conceived for exploring unknown regions without intending outright combat. The uniform reminded Daniel of his former days as a Warrior Angel before having been named as Mickael's successor. He often regretted not having his red outfit that he found so much easier to wear than the black tunic that he found sad. Even worse was the rainbow-colored clothing which supposedly symbolized the symbiosis of the ten Angel orders.

He left his room without worrying about appearances or the consequences of his decision. He presented himself at the guest quarters and asked for a meeting with Aurora. The Princess's steward had him wait in the lounge and Daniel realized that it was only 6 in the morning. He sent someone to find them breakfast and then waited for the young woman.

"Hello Daniel," said Aurora, who appeared after a 45-minute wait. Daniel stood up to find her clothed in a blue pastel dress decorated with shiny gemstones and lace.

"Sorry Aurora, I didn't realize that it was so early."

"I thought that we had a meeting at noon..."

"Yes I know. I lost track of time and we're all early birds here at the Angelrie," explained Daniel.

"Well, certainly me in any case."

"And me, not at all. I'm a late riser."

She yawned and smiled. She took a seat across from him and looked at the table where fruit juice, dried fruits and nuts, cold vegetable soup, grilled tofu with sesame and a variety of hot drinks had been set out. She frowned when she realized that Angels didn't eat meat. She eyed a few biscuits which were the only things which tempted her although they were surely made with coconut flour and other natural ingredients that she surely didn't appreciate. Aurora liked salty breakfasts, with sausages, ham and eggs.

"I'm sorry Aurora, but I can't come with you to the presentation."

"Oh, and I thought you were going to apologize for the breakfast," replied Aurora as she gazed over the table.

"Ah, well," smiled Daniel. He pushed the plate of dried fruits and coconut cakes towards her.

"Try and you'll see. They're delicious."

Aurora pursed her lips to show her distaste but she accepted a piece of cake and a dried apricot. The fact of having woken up early heightened her appetite. She nodded her head as she chewed, her taste buds coming to life as she swallowed a bite. She liked the unexpected taste of the spices.

"O.K. I'm listening," she finally said after she finished her cake.

"You agree that your visit wasn't planned?"

"Yes, I agree," she replied as she sampled a piece of tofu.

Hunger invaded her as she tried to suppress the anger and anxiety that she felt since the moment Daniel told her that he wouldn't be present for the announcement of their wedding engagement.

"I've been preparing a recruiting operation for the past several weeks for new candidates..."

"I thought it hadn't started yet," interrupted Aurora.

"That's why I used the word 'preparing'." Daniel served some juice and he looked into her eyes. The joy in Aurora's face was visible. "This preparation helped me to start the selection process of the first potential candidates."

"I thought that they had to present themselves to the Angelrie to pass entrance tests..."

"Yes, there are those that present themselves for the entrance tests," agreed Daniel cocking his head to one side. "However, experience has shown that the best candidates don't show up."

"Oh... But how is that possible?"

"Believe it or not, our Emerged Lands are large and vast."

"Yes, I know. More than 772 million square miles, as my brother keeps reminding me all the time," declared Aurora. Just the mention of Demone gave Daniel a chill. He understood that for this young woman, Demone was a man just like any other. But for Daniel, he was his arch enemy. His heart began to race and he took a few deep breaths to calm down.

"In fact, you brother is right... nearly 775 million square miles with more than 1 million inhabitants. That makes a lot of people. We have little if any means to get the word out to encourage potential candidates to come and join us."

"Most certainly in the North," answered Aurora rudely, knowing full well that the North was the territory which was the most opposed to the principles and even the existence of the Angelrie.

"Oh... and we don't have only supporters in the Southwest either."

Daniel stared at Aurora as he recalled the members of the Alterbats who lived in this region of the Emerged Lands. She nodded. Her eyes drifted to the food laid out before her, and she realized actually just how much she and Daniel belonged to two different worlds. How could she even begin to imagine that one day Daniel would be her husband, her friend, her equal and her lover?

"Daniel, are you playing games with me?"

His eyes lingered over the young woman. She didn't correspond to any of the images that he'd made up of her in his mind.

"No Aurora, I'm not playing games with you," answered Daniel calmly. "Quite truthfully, I find you to be a charming woman... and full of paradoxes."

"Mystery," replied Aurora.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Mystery is more romantic than paradox."

Aurora had a strand of hair falling in her face and a few others caught between her lips. She tried to blow them away and in the process a few crumbs of cake sputtered out of her mouth which made Daniel laugh. They smiled at one another.

"Mystery then," he conceded. "And funny too." He raised his glass as if to make a toast and then took a sip. He then became serious. "I'm not lying to you when I say that I organized a very important meeting this morning with a potential candidate for the Angelrie... A gifted young woman that I can't wait to see enter the Angelrie and who'll..."

"A young woman?" Aurora placed her hand on the table trying to keep a neutral expression on her face. She felt a hint of jealousy rise within her.

“Yes, a young woman Aurora. And your brother knows exactly who she is.”

Aurora squinted as she clenched her teeth. Her jealousy, her anger and her frustration started boiling inside her. Daniel had the art of bringing out the worst in her.

“I don’t know Daniel. I suppose I’ll know if my brother tells me.”

Daniel slightly raised his an eyebrow slightly. He couldn’t figure out if she was lying to him. He couldn’t tell if it was all just games and false pretenses. Aurora stood up as she felt the anger rising within her. She wanted to avoid repeating yesterday’s scene and adding to the discomfort already existing between them. It was her heart that told her what to do and she hoped to become Daniel’s friend, his sweetheart. She also understood that certain subjects must be avoided in the future.

“O.K. Daniel. So if you’re sincere and you want us to become friends and husband and wife one day...”

“It’s our destiny, Aurora” teased Daniel without any thought for her feelings.

“I mean it, it’s for real Daniel. After all, you’re the one who said it. You’re attracted to me and I you, and it’s as unexpected for me as it is for you.”

Aurora’s blue eyes settled on Daniel’s and he was taken aback by her courage. She hadn’t been afraid to show her hopes. He got up and continued to look into her eyes as he approached her. He knelt down before her and took her hand in his own.

“Princess, I am your servant and I am at the service of the Angelrie. Our destiny has been written by others, that’s a fact... But I respect your wish to write it down in our own way and so be it.” He placed his fist over his heart as if to pray and then stood up. His gaze met her trembling eyes and he caressed her cheek with his finger. “See you soon, Princess.”

Daniel left the room, leaving Aurora full of hope and expectation. He headed straight to the Angel’s Council whose meeting had surely already begun. He went in and slammed the door. Everyone turned around, surprised by the noise.

“Sorry,” said Daniel. “I was just with Aurora a minute ago. There won’t be any official announcement.”

It was as if someone had dropped a bomb. The Council had begun the meeting with a debate on how to announce the engagement to the public. The Angels were busy exchanging their thoughts and Daniel noticed that Shuilu remained silent. Noah was speaking to Darbihar, the young new Kamel who represented the Warrior Angels.

“Excuse me Daniel, but we must follow through with this presentation, it’s already been announced and I think Demone is waiting for it.”

“Excuse me Kamel, but Demone is in Bourbeau and the Gong Gong are in the Potoma Clearing... And we very well know what’s going on over there.”

He gave Shuilu and Noah questioning looks. They nodded. They had explained the situation to the Council earlier.

“About that subject,” interjected Leigh, the chief of the Conciliatory Angels, “we thought that some of the other members could go in your place so that you could stay with Aurora and keep up the spirit of good relations that seemed to have worked so well yesterday.”

“No way,” said Daniel forcefully.

Daniel’s stern reply caused further whispering among the members. Leigh was left speechless as he studied Daniel’s face. Leigh and Daniel were allies and they shared mutual respect for one another, however this 40-year-old woman knew all about Daniel’s passionate urges as much as she knew about his somber and bitter ones.

“What do you suggest Daniel?”

She eyed him closely. Their casual way of speaking did away with conventional protocol. Daniel laughed to himself. He loved when Leigh broke from convention and put her two feet in... He immediately sized up the reactions of the more traditional Angels. He wasn’t spared from Taxane’s look of disapproval and Darbihar’s sighs. Seeing that the young man was outraged, Daniel had an idea.

“I was thinking of going to the Potoma Clearing to get into the antechamber of the headstone... We all know that I’m the only one who can get in there so sending anyone else is of absolutely no use.” Daniel’s charisma won out and the Council reluctantly agreed. “I am the Well Destined One, my duty is to take decisions with your approval, but on this subject, I know I’m right.”

The Council members trembled upon hearing solid confirmation of what had been written several months earlier when it had been decided that Daniel would be Julian’s successor when Julian decided to step down. Daniel remembered the day when the Council had received the vision. Julian would give up his position as Mickael, and the new Master of the Angels would bring balance to the Emerged Lands. That very day, Daniel had been nominated without hesitation. The Angels were convinced that he was destined to accomplish the task based on the impulsion which followed Shuilu’s vision which saw Daniel as “the Chosen One” or “the Well Destined One”. Daniel had become the most envied, the most respected and the most disputed person in their institution.

“And what will you do about the presentation?” asked Julianto his successor.

“I think that Darbihar can escort her as the new Kamel and representative of the Warriors. What better symbol, don’t you think?” Daniel’s eyes met those of Darbihar, the latter’s outright challenging him. “After all, Darbihar is a man of peace.”

“Darbihar?” asked Taxane. “Not Leigh or Julian?”

“Of course it should be Darbihar who escorts Aurora,” interjected Shuilu.

The members turned and looked with surprise at the Strategist. He was amused by their reaction.

“A young man who symbolizes the future will be the perfect substitute for Daniel as well as the one she should marry. He embodies the future whereas Leigh and Julian are the masters of compromise and the holders of the secrets of the past. I would even go so far as to suggest that Noah accompany her but he hasn’t officially been called upon to replace me yet, even though we all know that it’s about time.”

Shuilu calmly took a sip of hot herbal tea, unperturbed by the impact that his words would have. The Council was in shock. Noah took the news as if he'd been slapped in the face. After a few seconds of silence, Darbihar shouted out to Taxane and all the Angels started speaking at once which only added to the confusion. Daniel clenched his teeth, time was flying by and he couldn't wait to go into the vision chamber. He didn't know if he'd succeed in communicating with Emma, if he'd be able to teleport himself... But there was no way he could fail. He had to leave. Suddenly, he pounded his fist on the table.

"Angels of the Emerged Lands! Calm yourselves, please!"

His gesture made the bells, which were in front of Julian, start to chime. They were used to silence the council when debates got overheated. All the chiefs turned to face Daniel, speechless. Daniel had broken the code, he had asked for silence, a request that only the Mickael had the right to make. The Angels shifted their looks back and forth from Julian to Daniel. The Mickael's face was amused.

"Relax, my friends. Daniel is preparing for his role. Soon you'll have to quiet yourselves whenever he asks you to. He gave his colleagues a meaningful look before settling his eyes on Daniel. "It is a given right but you must master it all the same, my dear friend. Otherwise you'll be a dictator, not an Angel."

Daniel understood and excused himself.

"I'd like to..."

"Yes, we know," cut in Julian. "You'd like to leave so that you can go and find her, isn't that right?"

Daniel nodded.

"Good. My dear colleagues, we have two decisions to make as of right now. The first is to allow Daniel to meet up with this young woman named Emma... whom we hope has a last name," added Julian, looking pointedly at Daniel.

Daniel understood. He had to learn more about Emma but he was hoping to come back with her so that the Council could ask her all the questions they wanted to. The Angels, Leigh, Sheela, Falbala, Shuilu and Boris pounded the table three times. Julian noticed that the others had abstained.

"I suppose you're waiting for my second decision before giving Daniel your approval?"

"I believe this to be a very dangerous undertaking. If Demone is in Bourbeau and the Gong Gong are in the Clearing, Daniel shouldn't go alone," objected Nemo, the Angel of the Nourishers known for his prudence.

"It's your role to look after life and survival," replied Daniel without permission from Julian to speak. "If Demone sent his men to Potoma, we'll be protected by the headstone. They'll never be able to get near it."

"You really have no respect for rules, do you? Are you going to respect them once you become the Mickael?" challenged Darbihar.

“Daniel will learn and he will respect the rules, Darbihar. Now isn’t the time for bitterness and settling disputes,” warned Leigh firmly. Darbihar withdrew into the background, pursing his lips into a forced smile.

“Good,” continued Julian. “The second decision concerns you Kamel. I think it’s your duty to escort Aurora. In the eyes of this young woman I represent discord and she seems to want peace. Go and make us an ally.”

Much to Daniel’s surprise, eight angels pounded on the table. Julian gestured for Daniel to make his exit. Noah and Shuilu asked permission to accompany him which the Mickael granted.

“Come back alone Shuilu. Your decision to leave the Council must be discussed without the presence of your potential successor.”

“True, however you know as well as I do that there are no other candidates capable of taking my place.”

Shuilu left and caught up with Daniel and Noah who were heading towards the vision chamber.

“Do you really think that she won’t make the announcement?”

“She’ll make an announcement, but she accepted the fact that I wouldn’t be there and that’s all that I wanted,” explained Daniel. Shuilu had caught up with them.

“Good, Daniel. It looks like you got what you wanted.”

“I achieved my destiny,” protested Daniel.

“Hmm... and me who thought that your destiny was to marry Aurora and become the next Mickael without making waves or throwing oil on the fire between Demone and us...If I understand correctly, you are going to meet a young woman who caught your attention and you are going to fight Démone in order to bring her here.”

“You’re wrong Shuilu. It appears as though Aurora’s charm is working on our Well Destined One,” shot back Noah rudely.

“There then, just let it be,” answered Shuilu. “Break enemies and not hearts... This young woman is sensitive and she deserves to be treated fairly.”

“Me who thought she was nothing more than the heir to the Black Master, without emotion or concession,” mocked Daniel.

I was talking about Emma, Daniel”.

Daniel felt as if someone had thrown a pail of cold water over him when he heard his former master’s cold and threatening remark. Shuilu gave him the impression that he knew Emma and well enough that he wanted to protect her.

“But, what do you think about Aurora?” asked Noah who hadn’t been paying attention to the exchanges between his two colleagues. “Could she really be an ally or is she perhaps playing a role for Demone’s sake?”

“I think that she wants to be in love, that she’s a princess in her ivory tower and when the moment arrives, she will be what she has been called upon to become.”

“That didn’t answer the question,” said Daniel.

“Aurora is Demone’s sister,” uttered Shuilu coldly. “And never forget it. And now you’d better go. You have a mission to accomplish.”

They watched as Daniel left with a spring in his step.

“Emma’s your adopted daughter, isn’t she?” said Noah as he continued following Daniel with his eyes.

“Does Daniel know?” asked Shuilu after several moments of silence. He wasn’t that surprised that Noah had guessed his secret.

“No, he doesn’t know anything. He’s blind sometimes...”

“As are we all,” admitted Shuilu. “In this case he’s blind for good reason.” Noah looked questioningly at his Master. “He’s following his heart by going to find her... not to do his duty. We all know that love makes us blind, isn’t that right my friend?”

Noah smiled with contentment. He had always known that Emma was Daniel’s chosen one... And with all that, he asked himself when the Well Destined One would accept to listen to his heart.

## Chapter 17: The Secret Door

Daniel looked at the table of visions, a simple wooden plank on which the members of the Angelrie learned to master the visions sent to them by Nature. With practice, they could teleport themselves and maneuver according to specific established procedures. This power was incredibly difficult to master and was the envy of the Heirs who didn't know the technique. His heart was beating unusually fast and this time he felt knots in his stomach. He took a drink of water and then inhaled deeply.

"You'll never achieve anything if you let your fear get the best of you." He stood across from the table and took a deep breath as he raised his arms, calling on his body to calm down. "Your mission is clear. Your mission is your destiny."

He stepped forward and noticed imperfections in the wood. He frowned as he passed his finger over the three small marks engrained in the material.

"The marks... like those in the vision."

Daniel thought about his discovery. How could they get embedded in the wood that was supposed to be so pure.

"I don't have time for this now. The time has come."

He got up and lay down on the table trying to put the thoughts of his discovery out of his mind. He would figure that out later. He placed sapphires, beryl, and moonstones on the table which were known to facilitate communication and intuition. He spread tourmaline oil on his forehead. It was a mixture which boosted the body and the mind and was proven by the Angels to aid them in entering their visions in order to find answers. He put his glass of water down and closed his eyes.

It was hot and Daniel felt drops of sweat running down his forehead when he finally opened his eyes. He looked around and saw the plain bathed in the heat of the midday sun. He scanned the landscape and saw that there were three camps on each side of the clearing.

"Nothing but Gong Gong," grumbled Daniel.

He noticed that the headstone was wide open and that there were marks on the ground in front of it. They had bombarded the stone but hadn't been able to reach it, just as Daniel had predicted. He didn't take the risk of waiting around to attract the attention of the Gong Gong who were surely sleeping in the heat of the afternoon. He entered the headstone and found it shut.

"Great, but you could've left the door open," sighed Daniel as he discovered the inscriptions on the stone.

He grabbed his notes and remembered that Noah had mentioned the possibility of a series of symbols which represented the languages of the Ancient Era being there.

"You are truly the best, my friend," declared Daniel when he found one of Noah's drawings. "Where on earth did you find all that? I don't even want to know..."

Daniel leaned over and found the white stone that Emma had left with the intention for him to find it. He went through the exercise of decoding the symbols and the door began to move. He entered the corridor which led to the next room. He heard voices. He stepped forward and saw Emma sitting on the ground surrounded by books and papers and notebooks.

“No, that’s not the symbol for pollution, look!”

“So then why is the color light blue then?”

“Anyway, you always know everything! It’s thanks to you we got in here, isn’t it?”

“O.K. Mama Pape, you brought us here. But translating a language isn’t the same thing as interpreting symbols... And excuse me, but in this area, I know what I’m doing! This sign is from the Messengers!”

“You’re good at interpreting symbols, why am I not surprised?”

Daniel stood near the door. Daniel said hi to Mama Pape who stared at him wide eyed and horrified. She instantly vanished.

“That’s great, you scared her away!” scolded Emma. Daniel tried to apologize as Emma got up. She felt a tingling in her legs. “Don’t worry about it, she was getting on my nerves anyway... I don’t mean to offend you Mama Pape,” added Emma as if to reassure herself that the guardian of the storeroom was no longer listening. Emma waited for a moment. “She’s really gone.”

She turned to face Daniel and he smiled at her. Daniel handed her the white stone which she automatically put in her pocket. Daniel was disappointed. He would’ve loved if she had opened her tunic to attach the stone to her rosary. That way he would have had the opportunity to get a glimpse of her clavicle to see if she had the same three marks in the shape of a crescent moon. The young woman was hot and seemed to be perspiring more with each second that passed. She ran her hands through her hair and walked towards Daniel.

“You’re early.”

Daniel looked absently down at his hands. To see her again in the middle of this room where no one had ever been able to enter before her, to find her arguing with a hologram and seeing that she had already deciphered 8 of the 10 doors was sound confirmation for him that she was no ordinary individual. He asked himself again if she had the same three marks like those he’d seen in his vision but Emma was wearing a buttoned-up shirt. He put the thought out of his mind and turned around.

“Early? I told you that I was coming back today.”

“Early because I haven’t finished deciphering the last two doors, but with your help that should be easy to do...”

“I don’t think it’s too difficult...”

“Oh, O.K. The animals, piece of cake... But I have to admit that for the first door, Mama Pape... I mean, the hologram that ran away from you did all of the work. She’s an “ace” when it comes to languages, which isn’t the case for me.”

“But you’re an expert in interpretation.”

Emma was amused. She stood up straight, wiped out by the heat and dirty from being hidden in this room for two days, but still she radiated with an appealing charm.

“And so, what have you done for the past two days?”

Daniel made a face. Back to reality. He thought about Aurora. What could he tell her about these last two days?

“Oh, you know, the usual stuff.”

“What do you mean, Angel work?”

Daniel grinned. His eyes lit up and he pumped himself up with unexpected pride. Obviously she had guessed.

“Oh, the water, is that why?”

“You agree that’s it’s not usual to have a man offer you an emergency exit by creating a wave that would drown several men and chase away ten or so others.”

“They’re still there.”

“Yes, well no. Three groups of Gong Gong are gone. They were replaced by another group of Gong Gong who are masters in explosive devices... and sleeping. They don’t seem to be especially intelligent and they haven’t been able to get into the Clearing, but they will at one point or another. So, I guess that means that other groups of Gong Gong are waiting for us elsewhere. I don’t know where because I don’t even know where we’re going to get out.”

“That doesn’t matter. They probably sent scouts everywhere in the region.”

Emma nodded as she thought over the situation. Since that night that she had spent under the Palaver tree, she hadn’t had any time to think about what had happened to her, but the last two days isolated in this room with its 10 doors had enabled her to take a step back. She knew now that it was Daniel that would take her to the Angelrie.

“Last time you were wearing black and this time you’re wearing red...”

“I don’t need to explain anything else to you then.”

“You can confirm my intuition which would be helpful.”

Daniel nodded in amusement. He stood up straight before her.

“I’m Daniel, a Warrior. I entered the Angelrie at the age of 15 as Gabriel’s candidate, the Well Named one. I became a member at the age of 17 under the direction of Kamel, the Well Valliant One and...” Daniel was about to tell her that he was to become the next Mickael in 6 months but his heart told him not to.

“You were nominated, not knighted?”

“No, not yet.”

“Oh, so you agree that knighted is when you become Chief, right?”

“That’s right... Or when you enter the Council.”

“And you’re going to become Chief one day? What I mean is, is that possible?”

“Yes, it’s possible actually.”

“And making a wave, that’s allowed?”

“You don’t miss a thing!” Emma grinned. “No, it’s not really allowed, but when you serve the Mickael you have a certain latitude with respect to certain rules.”

Emma nodded her head and she understood. Daniel stepped in front of Emma and started to read the labels that she had stuck to each of the doors.

“What? You’re a candidate, so you have the right to do what? A river? And the Mickael can provoke a tsunami?”

“That’s sort of the idea,” answered Daniel as he continued reading Emma’s notes. “You’re right, this is definitely the Messenger’s door. But this, however,” Daniel stood in front of a door whose drawing depicted an expanse of water, “is the door of the Deciders, not the Readers.”

Emma pointed to the door to the left of the gallery that had led to the antechamber. Daniel went to it and studied the expanse of water, this one showing a horizontal flat surface without any waves which signified stable water, that which separated the world of men from the world of powers and Nature.

“So, there’s only one left to do, then?”

“That of the Repairmen.” Emma pointed to a door having an engraved spiral. “Well, it’s logical. The wheel, the ability to suck up and make clean.

“You know the Angel’s world really well.”

“Only through books, Daniel. I don’t know them in real life.”

“It’s not going to take long for that to change.”

Daniel gave her a meaningful look and turned to the pile of books lying on the floor.

“It’s about time we organize all that.”

Daniel knelt down and started piling up the books.

“Where are we going?” asked Emma hesitantly.

“Where do you think?”

Emma swallowed hard. She still couldn’t believe it.

“To the Angelrie...” she whispered, full of emotion.

“Yes Emma, we’re going to the Angelrie. Perhaps I haven’t been knighted yet but seeing as I’m on a special mission for the Mickael, I assure you that I’m granting myself the right to present you as my very first candidate.”

Emma gulped loudly; her eyes opened wide. She was a bit taken aback by the convincing yet almost bad tempered tone that Daniel had used to answer her. He seemed to have become agitated and overtaken by some dark thoughts.

“Your first candidate,” repeated Emma. “Well then, so nobody’s under any pressure then!”

Daniel continued to pile up the books without commenting.

“One thing is sure. You have a certain interest for knowledge and a gift for interpretation and deciphering.”

“And that means?”

“That means that you could become a good Strategist.”

“My nanny taught me the secret of the power of the plants. I could be a good “Alchemist”, continued Emma as she finished arranging a pile of notes.

“Your nanny taught you the secrets of plants...” said Daniel. “Are there any other things that I should know about your natural aptitudes if you’re planning on becoming an Angel?”

“Well, I was a teacher and I know the history of our Emerged Lands... My father always stressed the importance of knowing the codes, the rites, rituals and customs of Humanity.” She stopped when she saw that Daniel was serious. “Oh, I see, I need to go faster, is that it?”

“Emma, I’m delighted that your father taught you traditions, that your nanny taught you the power of the plants and natural chemistry, that you love deciphering with the help of your hologram, but all of that doesn’t answer my question.”

“Well, I didn’t really understand your question then...”

“What are you good at, Emma? There are 10 orders of Angels, each of them protecting a specific category of water... Everything reverts back to one skill, one character trait which incites you to want to fight to protect our Planet’s water.”

“I’m a natural born reader, I understand things very fast.”

“A Reader Angel?” Daniel was dumfounded. He had detected Emma’s skills but he didn’t see her becoming an Angel in the service of supernatural powers.

“Yeah, I know, that’s not really me is it?”

Emma was amused. Daniel frowned and didn’t realize that she was making fun of him.

“Enough talking for now, we have to go!” Emma took her purple stone in one hand and snapped her two fingers with the other. “Open Sesame.”

All the books, notes and papers disappeared, stored away by the powers of the purple stone. She repeated the gesture three times with her two hands and a table appeared with two chairs beside it. On the table was a package of sesame seeds. Emma gestured for Daniel to take a seat. She sat down and took a handful of seeds telling Daniel to do the same.

“Seeds?” Daniel refused. “Sorry, we don’t have any more bananas or dried fruit, but we still have some seeds... My nanny has a huge stock of them.”

“No thanks, really.”

“You’re not hungry? Mustn’t you eat in order to... move?”

“It’s a long story Emma. Let’s go back to what we were talking about earlier if you like. If I tell you that you need to choose a door which corresponds to your natural abilities in order to become an Angel, would you choose that of the Readers?”

Daniel pointed to the door where he’d stood just moments before.

“No, I’d choose that one.”

Emma pointed to the fifth door without hesitation. Daniel turned and studied the symbol drawn on the wall. It was a reproduction of water settling over dots which symbolized stones. Daniel broke out into a broad smile.

“Warrior, huh?”

“What? You’re a Warrior, aren’t you?” Daniel nodded showing his joy.

He knew it. He knew it the instant that he’d met her. She had fire, energy and passion within her, all the traits for being a protector of the environment.

Emma blushed despite herself, taking Daniel off guard.

“Yes, I’m happy because that’s what I saw in you myself,” he explained to her, trembling slightly. He tried to hide his embarrassment with a clap of his hands. “We have to go.”

“Good. Can we go to the Lake first? I need to take a bath.” Daniel’s shoulders dropped, as if he was about to lose his calm. “What? I haven’t been able to bathe myself for two days since I was too busy with the doors. I can’t present myself at the Angelrie looking like this.”

Emma gestured for him to really look at her. She was dirty, she was sweating and she had dust sticking to her. Her tunic was covered with dirt and her hair was all knotted and it resembled some kind of monstrous mane.

“Emma, just how do you think that we’re going to get to the Lake? Did you forget about the Gong Gong?”

Daniel’s question ruined Emma’s good mood.

“What? We can’t... I don’t know, how about you, with your power of transmutation.”

“Oh, I see.” Daniel looked at her with an air of mystery. “Do you have any more water?” Emma nodded and showed him her precious flask. “Make do with that, it’s better.”

“What now?”

“It’s you that wanted to take a shower!” said Daniel exasperated as he turned away.

“You don’t need to turn around,” lectured Emma, disappointed that he wouldn’t share anything else with her.

Emma snapped her fingers and a big white shower curtain with red flowers materialized and separated her from the young man. Daniel stood gaping as he could do nothing but

congratulate the services of the purple stone. He sat back down and stared at the table. He knew that they didn't have much time left and he started to get impatient. The sound of the water distracted him and he started focusing on Emma's silhouette that he could make out through the curtain. His heart started beating wildly as she rubbed the soap all over her body, the curtain leaving her gestures to his imagination. Daniel forgot for a moment what was awaiting them and allowed himself to be lulled by the show of Emma getting ready.

Daniel tried to stop looking in her direction and instead started to play with the seeds when Emma appeared clothed in her dusty emerald green tunic. The tunic married perfectly with the shape of her body. She had attached a dagger to her belt.

"Sorry I didn't have time to do the laundry."

"Don't worry, that'll do just fine. In any case, we'll be stopping at an Inn this evening."

"What! You mean to say that I could have taken a shower tonight?"

"Yup," Daniel bluntly replied.

"Oh, if I'd known that I could have waited 'til tonight... if you weren't keeping our itinerary such a mystery."

"I'm not keeping it a mystery, I'm improvising! Like you!"

"O.K. So we improvise? So, let's see, we have 10 doors. We choose the one we want? Just like that? On instinct?" Daniel looked at her, completely under her spell. "None of the doors will bring us directly to the Angelrie, obviously."

Emma avoided Daniel's gaze and she snapped her fingers. Everything disappeared except the chair Daniel was sitting on. Emma pointed at him and the Well Destined One finally understood. He got up and the chair vanished.

"Mama Pape really likes you. I'm sure that if it'd been me, she would've let me fall on the floor."

"It's called courtesy Emma."

"True, but that doesn't answer my question."

"You should already have the answer Emma," joked Daniel, testing her. "Why haven't you eliminated the possibility of going out to that valley of death or climbing over to Lake Fontanelle?"

Emma turned to Daniel.

"The answer? Really?" Emma sat in the room and thought about it. She turned back to him. "There isn't an answer to my question because there aren't 10 doors, are there?"

"Continue," encouraged the young man.

"There isn't any choice. There's only one way to go." Daniel was overjoyed to see that she had found the answer by following her instinct. "There is only one passageway... through this door."

Emma pointed to the door that had stemmed the argument between her and Mama Pape earlier and which symbolized the door of the Messengers. Daniel didn't move an inch, waiting for her to

make the move herself. Emma fingered the drawing engraved on the wall. She took out the white stone that she had retrieved from the lake and studied the door's reliefs. She felt her pulse speed up, she mustn't count on Mama Pape's help or Daniel's; she had to decipher the secret all by herself... She closed her eyes and started taking small breaths. All of a sudden she saw the parrot.

"The parrot, of course!" She turned and looked at Daniel. He didn't understand. Emma looked up at the ceiling. She studied the various engravings and spotted a parrot next to a stingray. "Help me."

"To do what?"

"Touch the parrot with the white stone."

Emma gestured to him to lift her onto his shoulders. Despite the fact that he was weakening he did so. If they didn't get out of this room soon, he'd be brought back to the vision chamber. He found the strength and lifted her up.

When the white stone made contact with the parrot it immediately lit up. The contours of the parrot filled with a white light and spread out until all the other engravings on the ceiling were lit up. The two young adults were wide eyed and dumbstruck. A luminous beam darted across the room and finally ended its journey on the Messenger's door, just as Emma had thought it would. The beam entered the stone and left the room phosphorescent. Emma got down on the ground and went toward the exit. She didn't realize how pale Daniel was and that he was using the last of his energy in order to stay with her.

After a few seconds, the locking system clicked and the door opened all by itself. Daniel breathed a sigh of relief. Emma, overwhelmed with pride at having succeeded, took him by the hand and lead him out of the room with the ten doors. Daniel stepped through the doorway with his eyes closed. He rubbed his palms together as he whispered incantations. Suddenly he received an electroshock and he smiled. He immediately grabbed hold of some dried bananas that he'd hidden in his uniform and started chewing on them. Just as Emma had suggested, he had performed a transmutation without her suspecting anything.

## Chapter 18: The Gong Gong Field

The door of the room shut the moment Daniel rejoined Emma. It slammed so forcefully it made them feel like prisoners.

“Edith?”

“There’s no time for the horse now, it’s too late.”

A cloud fell over Emma’s face. The last beam of light went out and everything went dark. The pair found themselves in a hallway in total darkness. Daniel, worn out by the transmutation, was propped up against the wall breathing heavily. Emma could only hear him. She waved her hands around to find the cave walls. Her fingers touched something and she examined what she found to be a wall. She found a hatch and she pushed on it. It opened up giving them a faint light which was sufficient enough for them to see. She found Daniel leaning back against a wall eating.

She rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. This wasn’t the moment to be eating. She stepped forward and banged herself on an irregular slab of the wall partition. The light wasn’t very strong but Emma was able to make out an odd pentagon shaped cavity. She immediately took out her blue grey stone and inserted it. They heard the locking mechanism of the door click shut and the young woman frowned. They were officially out of the headstone and their emergency exit was a dark hallway of some unknown length.

Daniel hadn’t moved an inch. He was still sitting there chewing on his banana jellies. When she recognized what he was eating, she realized that something had happened to him. Had he had a vision? That would explain why he wasn’t speaking or moving about anymore and stayed there happy to have as much nourishment as he could get his hands on. She looked away from him as she thought about the fact that he hadn’t said anything to her in a while. She put away her stone in her rosary which was hidden inside in her tunic.

She looked down the hallway to find a fistful of iron hanging there where the light was strongest. She was certain that it hadn’t been there just moments before. Emma understood that the key had made the iron hang down. She moved towards it and seeing it at eye level, the daughter of Shuilu turned to face the Well Destined One with her eyes sparkling and an air of victory on her face. Daniel’s eyes were closed and he seemed to be elsewhere. She got impatient and felt as if she’d been dismissed. After all she had to learn to manage things by herself. She lingered around the ball of iron, and like a child out of sight of his parents, she pressed on it staring at it as if she hadn’t done anything. She stepped back, whistling as she stared at the ceiling, listening to the mechanisms at work.

All of a sudden, much to her surprise, there was a sound of rollers and Emma discovered wheels which were part of a complex system hidden by the obscurity of the corridor. The wheel turned energetically and a mirrored panel came down to the level of the light. Just then, the light beam reflected in the glass which projected itself into the mirror. With a complex game of reflections, the entryway of the corridor where they were standing began to light up... The rolling continued and all of a sudden, the entire hallway lit up... an enormous hallway that appeared to be endless.

Emma was breathless. She was elated with her discovery. She allowed her eyes to zigzag across the sunny reflections with so much enthusiasm that she found herself blinking, blinded by so much light. She felt a searing pain inside her pupils so she closed her eyes. She placed her hand on her forehead, sickened by the persistent light held in her memory. She stayed there for a moment, not moving and when she opened her eyes again, she saw Daniel staring at her, half furious, half amused.

“So, I see you found the switch.”

Emma burst out laughing and the young man took hold of the situation. He seemed to have regained his strength and his composure.

“You know this hallway?”

“No Emma, I don’t know this hallway... How many times do I have to say it? Nobody has ever gotten in the headstone except you.”

“Yes, but you knew that there was only one exit...”

Daniel stopped and turned to face Emma.

“Who said that there was only one exit? If I remember well, there were ten doors in this room... You chose the Messenger’s door. Why?” He started walking again.

“You told me that there was only one door.”

“I told you to follow your instinct Emma. Your instinct told you to open a door. You opened it and here we are in this corridor, it’s as simple as that...”

“You mean to tell me that... the other doors can open too?”

“I don’t know Emma.” He stopped to face her. “I’ll tell you this one more time Emma, nobody has ever entered into this headstone before. Now, if you’d like to, we must get out of here and go to the Angelrie.”

Daniel’s tone suddenly became curt. Emma studied him as he distanced himself from her walking at a fast pace. She realized that visions had the ability to harden someone, to reveal the dark side of oneself. Each time that she’d had a vision, she always felt more brusque and bitter. But why had Daniel had a vision? Had he been trying to help them find a way out?

They walked along the corridor in silence while around them they heard water flowing as if they were under a river or a waterfall. Emma thought about Fontanelle Lake and she had the impression that they were passing through the secret chambers of the spring of all springs. She would’ve loved to be with Tetis or even Mama Pape. If she’d been with them she would’ve dared to speak and ask questions. With Daniel, all she felt was shame and fear as if he was constantly judging her. And then again, several times she found his eyes on her, looking as if he wanted to kiss her.

Daniel coughed and Emma took hold of herself. She wondered for a minute if he’d been reading her thoughts. Daniel turned and pointed in the direction of a yellowish light. It was as if the orange array of light was finishing its race to the horizon marking the end of the day as the light became weaker.

"It'll be dark soon," observed Emma.

"No, it's not that. We're almost there."

What she had taken to be light was actually stalagmites and stalactites made of amber.

"Don't tell me that we're almost at Salar," said Emma desperately, thinking back on the horrible crossing through the salt desert.

"No, we're coming to the plain full of ditches, the entryway to the Center region."

"Oh, so we're getting closer to Stad, then?"

"Yeah, except now's when we're really going to start having problems."

"What are you trying to say?"

"The plain of ditches is about 70 miles long."

"Let me guess, it's the easiest place to be spotted by the Gong Gong."

"Exactly, you got it. And I'd better warn you... the Horsemen, Demone's elite army, is also waiting for us. They must be very impatient to meet you."

"The Horsemen?" Emma paled. Cherokee had spoken of them once, telling her that they were almost as dangerous as the Black Master's servants. She wondered if Demone himself would be there.

"Don't worry, everything will be okay. I know Demone's Horsemen well."

Emma inhaled. Daniel quickly squeezed her hand to reassure her as they walked through the orange colored rock formations. The stalactites hung, lacy and elegant, imposing despite their fragile appearance. They were full of imperfections but they were magnificent. They played with the reliefs of the walls in such a way that Emma couldn't tell if they were jutting out into the hallway or hanging freely in the air.

"We need horses," declared Daniel.

"Easy to say, except that I left my mount outside the headstone as you'll recall."

Daniel looked out over the horizon. He spotted ferns and some shrubbery to the West of the plain.

"Over there. There's a group of Gong Gong."

He headed directly toward them.

"You're crazy, you want to throw us to the wolves?"

"The elite Horsemen will be here soon. They're experts in scouting... standing here like this we're like a red stain on a white uniform."

"Thanks for the image," sighed Emma as she started following Daniel despite her misgivings.

"And going to see the Gong Gong, what purpose will that serve?"

"To steal their horses. Next time ask Mama Pape to keep a stable handy for you."

“Ah, and since we’re talking about it, I’ll have you know that she can’t keep any animals, she’s not allowed to.”

Just then an arrow passed over their heads and dug into the ground behind them.

“So, take out all the weapons you have. Are you allowed?”

Emma glared at Daniel. She immediately called out for her bow and arrows.

“And you, coming without any weapon, was that really necessary?” She handed Daniel her crossbow and darts.

“Not everybody has a purple stone, Emma.”

Emma felt stung. The Angel shot a dart that hit the forehead of his aggressor. Hunched over, Daniel moved forward targeting the men that were hidden behind a tree just a few feet away from them. Daniel stood up and shot three more darts. Three bodies fell to the ground.

“Wow, the Angels don’t kid around.”

She heard the whinny of a horse and turned around. She saw a Gong Gong on his mount coming towards her. A lifeless tight-lipped man lifted his lasso aiming for Emma’s leg. With her eyes squinted and like a flash of lightning she grabbed the rope before it hit her flesh. Enraged, she stared into the whites of the man’s eyes as she ripped the weapon from his hands and struck out at him in fits of anger. Taken by surprise, the man lost his balance and Emma had just the time to see the fear in his eyes before he tumbled to the ground. With the lasso in her hands she found herself near a horse that had lost its rider.

Immediately she ran towards the animal. It had slowed down to a walk. She straddled the horse and attached the rope to her belt, proud of the trophy that she’d won from the Gong Gong. She scoured the plain in search of Daniel and found him on a horse as well.

“Great. So where do we go now?”

“Emma if you’re able to stop to ask me the question then I’m afraid I can’t answer you.”

“Why? It’s a question just like any other...”

“Oh, I see. And here’s the answer, just like any other.” Daniel pointed in the direction where there were fifty or so men. “We’re heading over there!”

As he pointed to the Horsemen who were awaiting them, Daniel spotted their leader, Demone.

“Of course, you have to be there too.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Emma looked at Daniel. He stood there motionless, staring at something. She turned around to find a man that stood out from the others. He was exceptionally tall and full of muscles. He had long hair that swayed in the breeze. He had thick black eyebrows, an angled face and a prominent jaw. She shivered as she continued to stare at him.

“Who’s that?” she asked, as the two men kept their eyes locked on one another.

Daniel didn't answer. Emma saw that the men were preparing their arrows. Her heart skipped a beat and Emma just couldn't stand there waiting. She took her bow and arrow. Distracted by her movement, Daniel looked away and shouted when he saw Emma take aim at the Black Master's heir. Demone didn't have any time to react and found himself with an arrow planted in his shoulder blade. The blood squirted out. The arrow had narrowly missed his throat but the impact was enough that he immediately lost all his strength and collapsed onto the ground. His troops rushed to help him as did Daniel who was horrified.

"Run! Back off!" he screamed. "We're getting out of here!"

He hit the rump of Emma's horse and headed away from Demone's men before changing direction and heading off to cross the plain. They galloped for miles before Emma, completely worn out, asked to slow down.

"They're far away now Daniel, can't we slow down a bit now, please?"

"Please! Please!" He grabbed the horse's yoke and they stopped. "What were you thinking Emma? Do you have any idea what you've done?"

"I shot at a man who was about to kill us... an enemy," she answered timidly when she saw how angry Daniel was.

"You shot Demone, you stupid idiot! Nobody shoots at Demone."

Emma's heart skipped a beat. Demone, the Black Master's son, the one who led the Gong Gong, the Horsemen, the Demons, the Black Warriors...the most feared man in the Emerged Lands.

"So, I hope I killed him, then."

"Killed him! You're kidding, I hope."

"And why not? You hate him. All the Angels hate him, all men want to see him dead."

"You've forgotten that he manages the Superior people, he rules over the Northern Territories and the Angels try to maintain peace with him for the sake of the Emerged Lands. Do you want the red moon to come back?"

Emma was stung by his words. She defended herself body and soul, but never had she thought that Demone would be there in person, on the plain just like that waiting for her.

"How could I have known, Daniel? How could I have known that the biggest monster on the Planet would be here?"

Daniel scowled. He'd never thought for a second that Emma hadn't seen Demone. He thought about the irony of the situation for a moment.

"My candidate, the one who could quite possibly be the "Chosen One" shot at my worst enemy," he declared to the empty plain. He smiled bitterly at Emma. "Well, somebody finally did it! Shooting at Demone... you're going to become a legend Emma."

"I don't want to be a legend, I want to live... and I want to be an Angel, like you!"

“Live? Who can afford that luxury today?” He couldn’t stop shaking his head back and forth. Daniel didn’t realize the seriousness of the situation that he had gotten himself into and he didn’t want to even think about the diplomatic consequences for the Angelrie and Aurora. “You are really not like everyone else Emma... How is that...? Now can you tell me the name of the family that dared to defy Demone right before my eyes?”

“Blue. Emma Blue,” answered Emma defiantly.

Daniel opened his mouth and burst out laughing. The situation was decidedly caustic.

“Emma Blue,” repeated Daniel. “The former colour of water. And so, I repeat Emma Blue, you are definitely not like everybody else.”

## Chapter 19: The Promise

Emma thought about Demone's face, how he had looked at Daniel with so much hatred. How could Daniel come to his defense? Why didn't he want to see him dead? Emma understood the compromise that reigned between Men but an enemy was still an enemy and if she had been able to send Bacillus to the depths of hell she would have done it.

"But to kill him was a bit too much, perhaps not..." she thought as she turned to watch Daniel silently moving forward along the path.

They reached the village where they were going to spend the night. Night had fallen nearly two hours before and Emma waited impatiently to reach the inn where she could finally take a real shower and have a real meal. A light fog fell over them and she wasn't able to figure out if they were far away from the buildings and the inn or not. Daniel slowed to a walk and Emma noticed a bright light at the top of a building.

"But it's a mast!" exclaimed the young woman as she spotted the outline of a ship.

"Yes, it's a mast," said Daniel, smiling as he got off his horse. "It's an old boat that the owner refurbished. Recycling Emma, you know what it means?"

"Vaguely," added Emma pretending to be angry with Daniel's teasing. He laughed. Now that the shock was over, he relaxed and seemed to be calmly handling the situation. He decided to put the event into perspective. The act would eventually end up clarifying a rotten situation that had existed for far too long anyway.

"Go on, you earned your dinner, you're the one who took down the greatest demon of all Humanity." Emma nodded her head.

"You're forgetting the Black Master..."

"Oh yeah, him. It'd be great to shoot at him when you see him. Demone, no!"

"I don't understand anything about your sense of DIPLOMACY!"

Daniel gave her a dirty look and sighed. The expression on his face said "but what am I going to do with you, you poor thing?" He passed in front of Emma Blue on the quay and knocked on the door of the boat.

"Password?" shouted a husky voice.

"Daniel, your friend."

"Daniel! You mean my beloved?"

"Yes Ursula, your BELOVED," answered Daniel.

Emma remained cautious. The door opened and released an odor of vanilla rose into the air. The interior was enormous. Candles, leather chairs, a fountain full of rose petals and furniture made of rosewood and angelica seemed to float in a subdued and cozy atmosphere. In front of them sat was an empty luggage locker with a vase overflowing with peacock and pink colored feathers. on it.

“You’re kidding me, right?”

“Shhh!” hushed Daniel.

“Daniel, you’ve forgotten that I’m a young woman from a good family...” murmured Emma as she eyed the suggestive bust of a corseted woman resting on a table. “We’re certainly not going to sleep here!”

“Calm down. You shouldn’t stop at appearances when it’s just Ursula’s eccentricity,” whispered Daniel. “And not another word or Ursula won’t allow us to stay here.”

“What, and we also have to get her permission to enter?” huffed Emma. Suddenly Daniel grabbed her and hid her behind him.

He heard steps and spotted two women dressed in black, their heads covered by headscarves with embroidered mesh openings which enabled them to see. They stared at him for several seconds before turning away and heading down the hallway which led to the restaurant. Daniel understood that something unusual was afoot.

“Ursula, divine Ursula, are you still with us? Will you give me the honor of accompanying me tonight? In your warm and cozy dwelling and at your delicious dinner table? Ursula?” Silence reigned until the fountain released a musky odor. Stars and smoke spurt out with streams of water.

“Daniel!” boomed the throaty woman. She appeared out of nowhere dressed in a pink canopied dress. She was tactlessly made up with white thick powder with shiny glitter. She had a beauty spot larger than a grape seed drawn on her face and she was wearing a large wig. “Maeva at Ursula’s. It’s been too long since I’ve seen you, my sweetheart.” She leaned over waiting for a kiss.

“Ursula, my friend. What a pleasure to see you again.” Daniel left Emma standing there, dumbfounded. He wanted to give her a kiss but the manager of the “Drift ship” resisted.

“As far as I can see you’re not alone.” She turned around and sat behind the luggage locker. She opened her notebook to count the boxes. “Full, full, full... Everything is full.” She shut the book with such force that the crystals of the chandelier clinked against one another.

“Come on Ursula, she’s a friend...”

“A friend, I know lots of “friends””.

“She’s not my girlfriend. I’m escorting her to Stad, that’s all.”

“Escorting me,” huffed Emma.

“Emma this isn’t the time.”

“Escort? Couldn’t you say “accompanying” instead?”

“O.K. fine. Escort wasn’t the right word,” apologized Daniel blushing. Ursula gave the two young adults the once over.

"I see, two flirts that don't admit their feelings for one another... It's worse than I thought." She let out a sigh as she opened her notebook. "Let's see. Let's see. The problem Daniel, is that there are a lot of people on the road these days, and with the situation up there... it's HOT."

"Even for two small rooms?" Daniel gave her his biggest smile.

"Oh my love, I do hope that you're married because all that I have left is... THE HONEYMOON SUITE." She slammed the book shut again and held out her hand. That'll be 10,000 pounds sterling, 5,000 more without a marriage certificate."

"You're tough when it comes to business Ursula," said Daniel. He took Ursula's hand to give her a kiss. "You know who to send the bill to, after all this time..."

"What? You're going to make your employer pay for your shenanigans with this young woman? Well done." She put the keys on the counter. "Number 404, at the stern, obviously."

Emma rolled her eyes and walked up to them. She put her hand on Daniel's shoulder.

"Daniel, since we're married, you have to let me take my shower first." She took the keys and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you Ursula, you're an exemplary hostess."

She curtsied and walked away laughing. When Daniel's eyes met Ursula's, he finally managed to shut his mouth.

"She's a feisty one, that one."

"To whom are you talking?" asked Daniel. "Prepare us a hearty meal and two tunics."

"Travelers?"

"Smugglers, if you please."

"Oh, so you saw the new one?"

"No, I didn't see the new one, I saw your two female clients."

"Hmmm." She raised her eyebrows. "You need to look at the red newthread. They're not happy over there."

Daniel nodded and thanked Ursula. She opened the closet door behind her and looked at the tunics. She pressed a switch and looked over the available choices as they spun past her. She chose a men's outfit.

"Here, this one's for you. You left it at... well, you know how it goes."

Ursula briefed him on the loaning system for passing travelers. In exchange for a clean outfit, each client had to leave behind a dirty tunic. Often clients found their old clothes which had been of use several times before being returned to them. The woman sighed as she examined her inventory.

"It's just that few woman pass by here. You see what these idiots are wearing these days? No more skirts, just pants! And now, they're all going to wear this "burkseemi?" She pulled out a navy-blue outfit with turquoise stitching. "Look, I forgot about this one..."

"It belonged to a woman who came here, when was it? Oh my, about 20 years ago. It had a permanent stain on it so my mother never wanted to offer it to anyone." Ursula pointed to the stain on the arm. "I don't think your "escort" will have any problem with it in any case because I have nothing in her size. She's too thin!"

Ursula slammed the closet doors shut while Daniel grabbed the tunic and thanked the owner. He hurried to his room, worried and impatient to read the latest news, him who never took the time to look looked at the red newsthread. He knocked on the door and heard a box fall.

"Rats!"

"Emma? Can I come in?"

"You scared me, you idiot! Do you have a tunic for me?"

"I have something that will make you presentable, yes."

She opened the door. She was wrapped in a linen towel. She let Daniel enter before looking down at her hands. The Well Destined One was speechless and embarrassed. She grabbed the tunic.

I suppose that you don't wear a dress. Emma disappeared behind a wooden screen that separated the space between the bathroom and the bedroom. "I made up a bed for you near the chimney."

Daniel looked at the cushions and the sheepskin spread out on the ground.

"Why is it that men always sleep on the floor and women get the bed?" he exclaimed as he readjusted the cushions.

"It's called chivalry," retorted Emma.

"I thought men and women were equals now."

"That was before." Emma came out wearing the outfit. "And even so, I'm not sure that it ever really existed. It was just an illusion like so many other things."

Daniel was flooded with admiration and felt his heart thumping in his chest. She was dazzling. The colors, the shape, the size fit her perfectly.

"We could say the bath awaits you." He stood up.

"It's your turn. You stink." She glided past him and showed him to the door.

"And there, that's where the magic ends," he murmured to himself.

"I'll be waiting for you downstairs. Hurry up because I'm hungry."

"Yes sir. I'm starting to believe that I'm no longer the Angel that I thought I was."

Daniel got undressed and took in the pleasures of the lukewarm bath that Emma had prepared for him. As the laws of Nature dictated, they were limited to 25 liters of water per day for washing and bathing and these 20 liters seemed to Daniel to be the most precious thing on earth. He finished getting ready and looked at his reflection in the mirror.

“Like it was made especially for you,” he congratulated himself, seeing that the outfit fit him like a glove.

He went downstairs and joined Emma in the restaurant. Seated at the tables he found women clad in “burkseemis” and men wearing “rumitopis”, little black embroidered skullcaps. All eyes turned to stare at him. He found Emma occupied with her red newsthead.

“Bad news?” Emma was white.

“I created a war!”

“Come on, it can’t be that bad.” He took her hand to read her red thread and scrolled his finger down to see the news.

“Demone’s alive. I hit him in the clavicle.” Emma was alert and she was whispering so that the neighboring tables couldn’t overhear their conversation. “They say I barely missed his jugular.”

“They don’t say anything about Aurora?”

“Yes, they pronounced her upcoming wedding engagement to the next Mickael. It’s too cute, look.” She took her hand away and with a few clicks, showed him a blonde woman next to a brown haired man whose eyes sparkled. “He’s handsome, isn’t he? He has beautiful eyes,” marveled Emma.

“What? It’s him that’s going to marry her?”

“Of course not, stupid! It’s an Angel, I’m sure of it. I would say that it’s the Kamel.” Emma backed up. “But it’s not him that she’s going to marry. They can’t show who it is. Nobody’s supposed to know who will be the next Mickael. It’s bad luck.”

“I see. So, I take it you’ve read a lot in the news about people.”

“What? So, do you know who the next Mickael is?” Emma didn’t leave him any time to answer. “No of course you don’t because nobody knows! And how do you know, by the way, that there’s been an announcement?”

“Ursula!” Daniel lied. “And the “burkseemi”?”

“Oh... State of emergency. Demone...” Emma made a face. “I think I really created a war Daniel.”

“No,” answered Daniel, as he continued reading the news about the state of emergency. “You know, the terrorists, the demons, the bad people, they all existed before you took a shot at their chief. Even so what you did didn’t help anything.”

Emma looked apologetic when a waiter arrived at their table. He handed them menus and bent over to give Daniel a “burkseemi” and a “rumitopi”.

“Common courtesy, sir. The state of emergency demands it...” Daniel thanked him and the man walked away.

“I refuse to wear that!” warned Emma. “Centuries of feminism to return to the Stone Age, you’re kidding I hope!”

“That’s how it is, otherwise we don’t eat.”

“What? There’s no room service? After all, we’re young newlyweds who are deeply in love, aren’t we?”

She stood up and walked over to the waiter. She gave him back the two menus.

“Two orders of stew, red wine and some fruit... served in our room. I thank you.”

She left the room and not a single soul had missed what had transpired. The diners were dumbfounded. Daniel got up and said farewell to the people in the room.

“Hormones, you know how women are...” He pointed to his stomach as if to say that Emma was pregnant. He tapped on the waiter’s shoulder. “Thanks mate, thanks a lot for your help. I’m going now, okay?” The waiter gave him a sympathetic look.

“Don’t worry, it will be ready in ten minutes, sir.”

Daniel thanked him and hurried to catch up with Emma.

“Emma you can’t act however you wish! You said it yourself, we’re at war!”

“State of emergency,” corrected the young woman.

“Emma, I don’t know where you come from, but here there are rules.” Emma’s face reddened.

“I know that there are rules, but is that any reason to make fools out of women?”

“I’m not the enemy Emma!” said Daniel softly as he made a sign of peace. The young woman calmed herself. They stood in front of the door to their room. She opened the door ~~to their room~~ muttering to herself. She felt guilty for having shot at Demone. “You’re not the one who’s responsible for this situation, Emma.”

“I shot at the most devilish man on the Planet and now women have to cover themselves up? The world is upside down.”

“You see, it’s just a way of controlling people, Emma. He wants to shroud the masses. He knows full well that the Angels, the Believers, the Alterbats... people like you will refuse to dress that way.”

“This guy is really a piece of trash!”

Daniel laughed out loud.

“I’ve never heard of a more fitting insult for Demone, so simple yet so true.”

“Be careful Emma, trash once saved man from their... crap.” He laughed even louder under the young woman’s alarmed gaze. “Oh, don’t look at me like that! It’s been such a long time since I laughed like that.”

She threw a pillow and aimed it at Daniel’s head. She was right on target and he stopped laughing. He grabbed the pillow and wouldn’t let go.

“Hey! It’s mine! Give it back!”

“You lose! That’ll teach you! It’s about time you learned something!” Daniel added the pillow to his collection.

“Daniel?” asked Emma tenderly after a moment

“Yes, Emma.”

“When you say learn... you mean learn like a candidate, right?” Daniel sighed observing firsthand the young woman’s lack of self confidence. He had found her weakness.

“You’ve had a long day Emma,” comforted Daniel. “Go to sleep. You’ll have all kinds of time tomorrow to learn...” Emma frowned. “Yes Emma, that means you’re going to learn. Like a candidate.”

Emma smiled with sheer happiness. Daniel felt his resentment disappear. “How could he be angry with her for having shot at Demone, for having caused the state of emergency, for having thrown a pillow at his head....” Satisfied with the understanding look on Daniel’s face, Emma went to bed with her senses alert and her nerves on edge. Soon she would be at the Angelrie and she would learn. She would learn the skills and the manner of protecting the Planet.

## Chapter 20: The master of the Azrak

A light fog had settled outside when Emma and Daniel set out in the early morning, leaving the sleeping “Drift Boat” behind. Daniel had opted to leave at daybreak using a parallel path similar to the one the Nymph Tetis had used in order to avoid having a run in with the Gong Gong, the Horsemen or any other potential troublemakers. That’s where Ursula herself became indispensable to them, eccentric as she was. She had organized their trip so that they’d be with other travelers in a car headed for Stad. Daniel and Emma would then disappear at the first stop, going off to the forest to join the river of the Joyful.

They made it to the woods without incident and found themselves walking through the Great Outdoors which was still asleep. The sun came up by the time they reached the river. Emma found the water streams magnificently tinted with the rose-colored shades of morning. She marveled at the generous beauty that Nature offered to mankind. They got into a canoe that Daniel had found in a nearby creek and they paddled downstream until they reached a waterfall more than 500 feet high.

“There we are,” said Daniel as he helped Emma out of the canoe.

She leaned over and looked down into the void. She was head over heels with delight at the thought of meeting another water guardian. She turned to look at Daniel.

“Cool. Which nymph did we come to see?”

“It’s not really a nymph,” chuckled Daniel.

He pointed in the direction of the waterfall and the succession of granite formations and rapids which seemed as though they were making the water dance. That was nothing compared to the wave approaching them against the current. All of a sudden, a water lily gushed out of the water and she had the impression that the river was sucking air. A huge mass of water appeared splashing Emma in the face hindering her from making out the silhouette of a man.

“Ahoy, Hapi, how are you?” asked Daniel.

“Daniel, what a pleasure to see you,” answered a husky voice.

“What? A man can be a nymph?”

Hapi detached himself from the water mass and shaped himself into an imposing muscular creature. He had a square jaw, a goatee and a headdress made of bamboo. Emma immediately noticed his large prominent chest and plump belly. He had a tattoo of a hippopotamus on his torso drawn from dark liquid veins.

“Emma Blue, I suppose?” He held out his hand. “Tetis told me about you. It’s an honor to meet you.”

“I see that news passes fast,” Emma replied as she timidly shook Hapi’s cold hand.

“Yes, really fast. Almost as fast as the Black Horsemen even. You don’t have any time to lose, Daniel. Just leave that it, I’ll take care of it later,” said Hapi when he saw Daniel putting away the canoe. “Hurry up, it’s a long way. The faster I bring you to the door, the better it’ll be.”

Hapi was still holding onto Emma's hand when he took hold of Daniel's and transformed his torso into a magnificent felucca to which he added two wings. Emma raised her eyebrows in bewilderment. Just then Hapi's two legs ran toward the void.

"Be careful, it's going to get bumpy."

The makeshift boat took off into the air and flew over the majestic gorges. Emma was speechless, stupefied as she watched the waterfall. Daniel seemed worried and was glued hanging on to his red thread. They flew for several miles over the river and they watched as the landscape changed right before their eyes. After first passing the glorious gorges they flew over irrigated and fertile lands which became more and more ochre in color. The more the river zigzagged, the more Nature seemed to turn itself from rich green lands into arid desert-like areas.

"Where are we?" whispered Emma curiously.

"You're over the Azrak," answered Hapi.

"Me who thought that we were limited to ten minutes a day, I would have to say that it isn't the case at all," said Emma as she watched Daniel with his nose stuck to whatever he was still reading.

"Daniel isn't everybody, Emma. You must have noticed that already."

Emma nodded her head in agreement as she watched the stern of the boat which continued to change changing directions the further they progressed. She leaned over to check out the ripples which took the form of the hull, giving the impression as if they were sucking in air.

"How does that work? What I mean is, why does this boat seem to change shape? You're not comfortable?" Hapi gave her a warm smile.

"I'm not really a boat... What I mean is, I'm not used to providing this kind of service but as I said to you earlier, Daniel isn't like everybody else."

Emma frowned. She would have liked to believe him.

"I use water Emma. Normally I am of service to the water, not to the air. If we're able to fly today, it's because of the water particles present in their gaseous state. The water from the river evaporates and I use these molecules to strengthen the hull of our boat," he explained. "Satisfied?"

"I have the impression that I'm taking a class on the chemistry of water... That's something I never understood."

"Oh. The chemistry of water! In fact, it's essential to know its characteristics, its states, and its physical properties. Water is, after all, the most essential resource in our world... especially for you."

"Because I want to become an Angel?"

"One day... Yes, one day." Hapi pointed to a dam made of wood and stone. That over there is a natural barrier. There are a lot of them in this region for when the river water levels rise."

"Oh," muttered Emma as if she was only mildly interested.

“That’s my work, Emma. It’s what I do in order to avoid the river flooding and destroying everything around it.”

Emma nodded her head, paying particular attention to a series of dams which snaked around them. She noticed that the ground was more and more arid and seemed very dry. The boat didn’t seem to suffer from the change to desert-like conditions.

She studied Hapi who was calmly focused on what he was doing. She leaned over to look at Daniel. He had stopped staring at his hand and seemed to be gazing at the scenery. She went over to him.

“Where are we going?” she whispered. Daniel looked at her mockingly.

“Emma, the Well Inspected One, haven’t I already told you that we’re going to the Angelrie?”

“You’re making fun of me.”

“We’re going to Nyami’s door.” Emma didn’t move a muscle as she processed the information. “Are you happy now?”

Emma crossed her arms, while Hapi coughed to himself, amused.

“Nyami’s door is located in front of a tropical rainforest which leads to the Untunkat, a community of rather non-respectable people,” said Emma with disdain.

“Good job!” congratulated Daniel, surprised by Emma’s knowledge of the Center region. He gave her a questioning look as if asking for more.

“My former nanny came from that region.”

“Oh. So then she knows that they aren’t as mean as the rumors make them out to be.”

“She said that they weren’t all bad in fact. She said that their pride led them to betray, to fight each other, to die... My nanny fought all her life against this miscomprehension.”

Emma let her mind drift to memories of Cheroki. She felt a sense of guilt rise within ~~overcome~~ her. She had barely given Cheroki a second thought since she saw her being burned to death right before her very eyes.

“You miss your nanny, don’t you?” asked Daniel, reading the expression on her face.

“She’s dead,” confided Emma, trying to hide her feelings. “In a fire.”

“A long time ago?”

“No, four days ago or was it five? I lost all track of time.” Daniel straightened himself as if he understood what she was going through.

“Your house burned down and you had to leave your village...”

“Bourbeau,” blurted Emma.

“Bourbeau... Bacillus obviously.” Everything was now clear in Daniel’s mind. He knew how much this man who governed this village in neutral territory between the Center and the Northern Regions was in cohorts with Demone. “That explains everything then.”

“Everything? Really?”

“You don’t realize it Emma... They’ve begun to prohibit travel and have reestablished certain checkpoints between towns and regions.”

“Border controls? Restrictions on travel without a license? We’re back to the age of being ruled by the Black Master?” exclaimed Emma.

“And that’s not all.”

Daniel opened up his red stone and switched on a special function that only Angels could use. It enabled them to read all the available information, notably classified Security information that wasn’t accessible to the public.

“No access to the Angelrie? The Turquoise Flag flying over the wise men’s institution... What does that mean Daniel?”

That means that Demone has taken control over the State of Emergency and that it’s going to make our lives VERY DIFFICULT.”

Emma was visibly affected. All this was her fault. It was because of her ignorance and her stupidity.

“And before you say anything else, this isn’t your fault.”

“Yes, it is, at least a little bit...”

“The situation was already bad before you were involved Emma. Stop looking too much into things.”

“Indeed. I’m not looking too much into things, I’m reading.”

“They’re looking for you, that I can guarantee... But evidently they’ve been looking for you longer than you know.”

“Since that night, under the palaver tree...” Emma turned to face Daniel. “The Gong Gong were there. I think Bacillus wanted to hand me over to them.”

“Why Emma? They were looking for you way before you wrecked his shoulder... Way before he sent the Gong Gong to your village to capture you. All in all, shooting him was well deserved even if he’ll have a huge scar because of you... BUT WHY? That’s the real question.”

Emma considered the events which kept playing over in her mind since she had left Bourbeau. There were so many things she didn’t know about her past, about her family and all the little bits and pieces of information that she had managed to collect here and there, and it was still incomplete. She would have preferred to figure everything out by herself and despite the admiration and growing confidence that she had in Daniel, she wasn’t yet ready to share the pieces of a puzzle that she wanted to figure out alone.

“Bacillus doesn’t like me... I never really had any respect for him.”

“What? You wrote things against him? You went places where you weren’t supposed to go?”

Emma had a guilty look on her face which confirmed everything. Daniel burst out laughing. She pursed her lips as she considered the Well Destined One's reaction. She turned away from him and looked around her. She was in the middle of the desert. The golden sand surrounded them, but the river miraculously continued to flow through the arid region. She made out some pointed shapes in the distance.

"What are they Hapi?"

"Nubian pyramids," answered the liquid man. "I rebuilt them as homage to the Ancient Era. Today they're used as storage spaces for local farmers."

"Storage? In this desert? What can be cultivated here?"

"Cactus, Emma."

"Yes, of course." Emma remembered that the water from a cactus was very nutritive and that certain varieties were used in potions for their healing properties. She recalled that Cheroki had often used them. Emma remembered how she had often complained about the prices of cactus or cactus byproducts.

"Emma? Still lost in thought?" said Daniel. "Any progress with your investigation as to why Bacillus gave you to Demone?"

Emma decided to think about something else as she continued to look at the path Hapi was following.

"Tell me Hapi, is it you that watches over the Azrak?"

"What a question, Emma! Hapi is the Master of the Azrak," said Daniel as he adjusted himself on his liquid seat. "Don't upset him or otherwise he'll throw you overboard."

"Oh, how I'd love to do that, my dear Well Destined One, but now isn't the time for joking."

The two friends laughed but Emma didn't get what was so funny.

"Hapi's already thrown me overboard on more than one occasion," explained Daniel.

"I see... Tell me Hapi, you see a lot of people if you travel all over the Center Region."

"Yes, Emma, I see lots of people. I know a lot about what's going on in the world of Mankind, but as far as they're concerned, they know nothing about me."

"Do you know about the future like Tetis?"

"No Emma. I only know about the past." A thought came to Emma and she stopped talking, embarrassed. "Yes, Emma, I saw. I see you're hesitating about asking me the question so I'll just tell you. Like Tetis, I knew her too."

"Who?" asked Daniel who was trying to follow the conversation.

"My mother," answered Emma.

"Your mother, Cheroki, your adoptive father... I knew them all."

"Your adoptive father?"

“And my father?” interjected Emma without answering Daniel.

“Hapi remained silent. Emma had the impression that it was the same compassionate expression as Tetis had had when she had bombarded her with questions.

“I didn’t know him,” Hapi said simply. “Now, please excuse me because I must concentrate. We are getting near the area where the humidity will quickly rise. If I’m not careful, you’ll risk being sunk by the molecules.”

Hapi’s silhouette disappeared and Emma understood that he didn’t want to divulge what he knew about her past or her origins.

“Do you think that I’m his daughter?” screeched Emma Blue, terrified by the idea.

“Whose? Demone’s?” Daniel continued laughing. “Of course not! Demone’s my age. There’s only two years difference between us so you couldn’t possibly be his daughter.” Emma heaved a sigh of relief. The question still intrigued him though... “Why does he absolutely want to find you?”

Emma’s heart began to race. She thought about Shuilu and Cheroki’s confessions the night they disappeared. Could she confide in Daniel and show him the three jade colored marks on her shoulder?

“My father is... I mean my adoptive father... I don’t know anything about him except that everybody else seems to know him,” began Emma. “Mama Pape told me that Cheroki, my nanny had been an Angel before... Perhaps there’s a link somewhere?”

“No, it’s not that Emma and you know it,” said Daniel knowing she was hiding something.

Emma stiffened. Daniel knew that she was fighting her inner demons. She didn’t trust him. She seemed to be struggling within herself to find a truth that she feared to discover. He knew so little about her and knowledge was vital. She was the key to this crisis that came about right before their eyes. It wasn’t long before war would be declared. The Angelrie disposed of little means with which to stop it. Daniel shuddered as he thought about Aurora and the relations that he would have to maintain with this young woman because it would be one of the only ways to avoid degradation and violence. He absent-mindedly grinded his teeth, a reflex he had when he was anxious.

“There, I’ve done my duty,” announced Hapi.

Emma looked up. A colossus stood before a stone door almost 300 feet high. Emma recognized the fish head with the snake’s body.

“Nyami,” whispered Daniel. The spirit that hovers over the river and watches over its’ streams and in particular... its’ dams. That’s why Hapi told you all about it. Nyami destroys every dam that he doesn’t like.”

Emma cocked her head, smiling when she saw the expression on Daniel’s face. Hapi was busy putting away the felucca’s sail which dissolved into thin air. She realized that they were no longer on a boat but on a slab of water which was coming closer to the bank. A few inches from the riverbank, Daniel jumped off and then helped Emma to get off as well.

“Angel Emma,” called the Master of the Azrak.

“Hey, she’s not an Angel yet!” protested Daniel.

“Yes, she is Daniel, and you know it as well as I do.”

Hapi left no room for discussion and Daniel was surprised by the seriousness with which he had responded. Daniel remembered that water and nature dwellers knew much more than men did.

“Don’t ask yourself the “why” about your past but rather how your past can guide you. Hapi bowed his head in a sign of respect and Emma did the same. Hapi went further out into the water.

“Thanks, my friend,” said Daniel as he turned toward a narrow passage hidden between two rocks.

“What? That’s all?” exclaimed Emma.

“Yes Emma, that’s all. We must get going now.”

“Oh, O.K. then.” She turned around. “Thanks Hapi. See you again soon, I hope.”

“Hapi had already disappeared. She looked at the rippling water. She had more allies than she could ever have imagined. Protecting water was her destiny and with it she was going to discover how being exceptional was going to be the key to unlocking her well-being. Emma caught up to Daniel who was rushing on ahead.

“What? That’s it? The guy, the master of the river, the “Master of the Azrak”, a deity capable of drowning you with his power, takes us hundreds of miles... He leaves us near a secret passage and all you have to say is “thanks, my friend, see you next time?””

“Emma this isn’t the time to get into details. I remind you that we’re in a hurry.”

He showed her the way to an opening about three feet in diameter dug into the rock. Emma put her legs through first and went through to the other side. There she discovered a new landscape, a dense and impenetrable jungle. She stood still for a moment. She could never have imagined Nature being so wild and so dense. She had the impression she was entering the unknown, a place where anything could happen. She shivered. Daniel stepped over the stones that served as the threshold and held out his hand to Emma.

“Welcome to the land of the Untunkat, Emma.”

## Chapter 21: In the land of the Untunkats

They continued at a fast pace led by Daniel who was in a hurry to reach their destination. The tropical forest was silent and peaceful. The path through the thicket was well marked. Daniel explained to Emma that it was often used and maintained by the Untunkat. It was mostly unknown to outsiders so there was little chance of running into Demone's men.

"Four or five hours more and we'll reach the Lakota camp. We'll spend the night there. You, who's so concerned with every last detail, is that O.K. with you?"

"Sure Daniel, that's O.K. By any chance, will we be passing by any banana plantations? It'd be nice to stock up on some for Mama Pape."

"No," Daniel laughed. "We won't be going past any banana plantations... But don't worry the Untunkat have everything we need to restock Mama Pape's food reserves."

Night began to fall and Emma started to get nervous. She didn't like the idea of walking in a forest full of all kinds of creatures. She took out her rosary and opened her flask to consult Mama Pape.

"What are you doing?" asked Daniel

"I'm going to ask for a torch, some candles... anything!"

"Please don't call on Mama Pape. Light won't be a problem. You'll see."

"Oh," said Emma disappointed. As temperamental as her Tahitian mama was, she missed her.

"Don't be sad, Emma. We need to limit all means Demone could use to find you."

"Even a hologram?"

"Yes."

Emma digested his words while Daniel mixed together some type of plant that Emma didn't recognize. She noticed that the leaves were a particularly shiny green color, almost fake. As night fell, she saw fluorescent reflections spotted throughout the forest floor. She was amazed at how Nature was able to transform itself.

"Those are avatars. The Untunkat didn't really respect all the Wastikis rules including the ones which prohibited using manmade technology... They managed to retrieve a "natural" formula which consisted in injecting an enzyme into plants..."

"The same one as lightning bugs, of course!"

"You amaze me with your knowledge, Emma."

Daniel's eyes shined with admiration and Emma blushed. She motioned for him to follow her and they continued along the path following nature's fluorescent light show. Little by little the light diminished. She noticed that Daniel had sped up when he realized that night had fallen. She realized that they had entered into one of the most hostile areas of the jungle. She made

sure that she had her weapons handy when she spotted bright lights up ahead. They came out of the dense forest and found themselves on a sandstone plateau dominated by cliffs.

“Here we are... the Bandi-Koné cliff and the Lakota encampment.”

Daniel pointed to the lights. The closer they got to them the more Emma could make out the details of the flora strewn with trees and stones. She could see the shapes of the stone dwellings, some of them were even built into the rocks. What she failed to see however, were the silent exchanges in code that Daniel was having with a man who was hidden inside one of the cliff dwellings. The man was sending him signals using a torch and reading Daniel’s replies with a telescope.

They arrived in front a fortress which protected the village. Daniel knocked three times on the door and then waited. For a second, Emma asked herself whether or not they were going to open the door when she heard keys jingling. She sighed with relief as she heard the mechanism which unlocked the door. Daniel gave a broad smile.

“Daniel, you rascal! There you are!” thundered a giant of a man. He had a trimmed goatee and long silky hair.

“Antonio my friend!”

The two men greeted each other warmly until Emma caught the giant’s attention.

“What is this? You came with your fiancée? And me who thought it was just all a farce for Demone’s sake...”

“Well, that’s not it, exactly,” answered Daniel, embarrassed. Emma blinked as she tried to understand.

“I see, Miss. Antonia de la Vega at your service.”

“Emma Blue,” answered the young woman as she extended her hand.

He came forward to kiss her hand. Emma couldn’t stop herself from blushing, drawn to the contagious charm of this electrifying man. He gave off a certain scent and had an air and a presence about him that no woman would be capable of ignoring.

“Has this ill-mannered screwball explained to you where you are and who we are?”

“At the Lakota encampment and you are the Untunkat,” stuttered Emma.

“I see.”

He closed the door and led them past the mud houses. The village was lit by all different types of torches giving it a mysterious atmosphere.

“You’re in our village, my village,” said Antonio welcomingly. I’m the chief of this area and these villagers. We live like gypsies or at least with the same kind of spirit! Our houses are our palaces and we wouldn’t leave them for anything in the world.”

“You know Daniel really well?” asked Emma, taking advantage as Daniel walked on ahead of them and was busy greeting one of the women from the village.

“Daniel? I’ve known him since we were just little kids!” Seeing her expression, Antonio realized that Emma didn’t know anything about Daniel. “Oh, so he likes to keep himself a mystery, is that right?”

“We all do, Antonio. Daniel doesn’t know much about me either... but he knows more about me than I do about him.”

“You do know that he’s an Angel at least?”

“Yeah, I know that.”

They laughed and they continued to walk arm in arm.

“Daniel’s like my brother. He stayed with me and my family for nearly ten years. I was twelve years old when my parents took him in. He was only four. He had quite a personality. He only did things his way...” Emma found it amusing and she didn’t doubt any of it. “I quickly noticed that he wasn’t just an average guy...”

“Why does everyone keep saying that?” asked Emma with a hint of jealousy.

“Because that’s what he is for heaven’s sake! He has the best sense of combat that I have ever seen. He has been mastering the force of visions and transmutations since he was little! Even before he entered the Angelrie, he was able to transport himself using only the power of thought.”

“Transmutation? So it’s not just a myth?”

“Oh, well. It’s a myth for everybody except for a few... which includes Daniel. To do that, let’s just say that he has always known how to use his own “water”.”

“His own water?”

“Yes, his own water. You know that it’s thanks to water that we’re able to transmute ourselves.”

“Water... Water is present everywhere, in all states... liquid, solid and gas. Of course, water from the air helps to transport human molecules is what Hapi was trying to explain... But how does it work?”

“I dunno.” Antonio shrugged his shoulders. “I’m not an Angel... But when you become one you promise to tell me?”

Emma agreed with a chuckle. She realized that she was entering into a world of possibilities that she had never before imagined. She saw how forceful water was... water allowed them to be transported, enabled them to master their visions, to change things around them.

“Tetis was wrong. I can’t be the water’s protector,” she whispered.

She took out her rosary to toy with her purple stone. She did it unconsciously. Knowing that Mama Pape was never far away reassured her, even though the presence of the crowd prevented her from switching it on.

“You said that Daniel stayed with you for nearly ten years... At what age did he leave for the Angelrie?”

“He was twelve. He had been picked out by the Gabriel in such a way that he had been able to live there before becoming a candidate... Gabriel wanted Daniel to learn as fast as possible. Daniel went on to become a candidate and a member in less than one year. It never happened before!” Antonio’s expression was filled with emotion. “I’ve never seen a man so straightforward, so confident... so loyal as Daniel.”

“The Gabriel,” repeated Emma, impressed by the word itself. She had a profound respect for the Chief of the Angels and for her the Chief of the Strategists was the one who had the most noble and most complex tasks to perform. Then she reconsidered. ~~changed her mind~~. “I thought that he was a member of the Warriors?”

“Yes, he is,” nodded Antonio. “It’s not because Gabriel introduced him as a candidate that he had to become a Strategist when his time came... It’s not because Daniel introduces you to the Angelrie that you must first become Warrior and then Kamel.”

He bent down until he was eye to eye with Emma and gave her a knowing wink. He understood that Daniel wanted to bring the young woman to introduce her to the institution for the protection of the Emerged Lands. Emma blushed, much to Antonio’s amusement.

Emma studied her surroundings. Everything seemed to be empty and asleep and yet she felt like something was going on. The villagers weren’t in their homes. Emma heard the sounds of drums and percussion and string instruments in the night air. The louder the laughing, the music and the conversations became the brighter the light was. They reached the town center where a crowd was applauding a troop of graceful dancers.

“Maeva to Lakota, Emma.”

Emma looked on wide-eyed as she discovered the smiles, the humor and the faces of the villagers. Everyone was joyful and lively, a strict contrast to the meetings in Bourbeau. The men were dressed in colorful shirts and all were either playing instruments or clapping their hands. Women had crowns in their hair and wore floral print dresses, all of them were radiating. Emma envied them as if these women held the key to happiness and to men.

Antonio found Emma a place to sit down near the musicians who greeted her as they continued ~~while~~ singing. He left her with his friends ~~while~~ and then he motioned for Daniel to go with him to get something to drink.

“So, she’s your fiancée without being your fiancé?”

“Knock it off. You read too much into the news...” said Daniel, starting to get annoyed.

“What, you think I stick my nose into that red thread? No time for that. The town rumor is enough for me.”

“I’m nobody’s fiancé.”

“But the future Mickael is.”

“Who said I was the next Mickael?”

Antonio shot Daniel a dirty look. The two men had known each other since childhood. Antonio had always considered Daniel as a brother and he always knew everything he was up to, whether or not it was official or if he was meant to know it or not.

"It's her, isn't it?"

Daniel's smile didn't leave any doubt.

"The one I was looking for, yes."

"That's just what I said, wasn't it?"

"No. You were thinking otherwise..."

Antonio looked amused but his face darkened when he saw Emma in stitches, laughing as she struggled to play the guitar. Women surrounded her and they were all swaying their hips to the beat. The music stopped to the crowd's applause. An old man seated opposite Emma's group got up and started a nostalgic song. The audience settled down. Two women sang the melancholy refrain. Antonio turned his attention from the audience to focus on Emma. She was talking with the women around her.

"You know they're talking about you," he discretely pointed out to Daniel. Daniel made a face. "You told her?"

"She doesn't know anything about my nomination... which isn't official, I remind you." Daniel's eyes rested on Emma who was glowing as she spoke with the inhabitants of Lakota. "If it's her I wouldn't have to become the Mickael."

"And then what? You're going to let this angel marry Demone?" Antonio glared at Daniel.

"It's not me to make the choice for her... And we're not there yet."

Daniel downed his drink in one gulp. Antonio considered the possibility. If Daniel didn't become the Mickael, and if he was free to marry whomever he wanted, the chief of the Untunkat's village wasn't sure that he'd be capable of keeping his feelings under wraps. Sometimes, Daniel had the tendency to put his responsibilities and what society asked of him first before thinking about himself or his own destiny.

"It's her that shot at Demone?" guessed Antonio. Daniel nodded. "So she's a heroine then."

"If you say so... Others are going to see her as the worst thing that's ever happened to the Angelrie... What can you say about the State of Emergency?"

"She's a heroine Daniel. She dared to confront Demone... God, how I would've loved to be there and seen that."

"She didn't know who he was... It was an accident really."

"Never mind that Daniel. She shot Demone," exclaimed Antonio. "She looked right at him and her courage spoke to her! She aimed her arrow and injured the most dangerous, pettiest, biggest... the absolute largest vermin that the Emerged Lands has ever encountered. She deserves respect... Accident or no accident."

"I'm afraid that we've only just begun to hear about her "heroic" acts."

"Afraid? So the rumor is true?"

"What rumor?"

“Aurora’s visit.”

Daniel face clouded over as he thought about the Compromise.

“Demone is keeping an eye on all the roads. I don’t see how we can avoid him before we get to the Angelrie...”

“You can’t avoid him but in any case, he’ll come to you. I wouldn’t be surprised if the Horsemen were here tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? Antonio, are you joking with me?” The look in his friend’s eyes told him otherwise. “The party, of course!”

Daniel remembered. The Untunkat always celebrated the night before a battle. He looked at the villagers singing, Emma among them.

“And me? Do I have the right to drink something?” she asked Antonio. He served her a glass. “Cheers! To blood and to life.”

“To blood and to life.” They clinked glasses.

“You know?” stammered Daniel.

“I know what? That Demone’s army is at the outskirts of the village or that you’re the next Mickael and Aurora’s fiancé?”

## Chapter 22: The battle of the Plateau

Calm floated over the sleeping village when the sound of a bagpipe called everyone to order. Antonio had climbed up to the highest dwelling dug into the cliffs to call his colleagues from their beds. Demone's army had taken position during the night. The village had sung and danced and drank until the early morning hours despite the threat of attack. Emma, who had had a difficult time falling asleep, welcomed the call to battle with relief.

All night long, the images of her face to face with Demone with an arrow dug into his shoulder and the fear on Daniel's face kept playing over and over again in her mind. She tried to stop thinking about Aurora and Daniel, about the tension which overwhelmed her senses each time she thought about the Angelrie, and even worse, the flames surrounding Cheroki which constantly haunted her. The young woman was at the point where she started to regret her vision but she knew that the visions wouldn't return. She knew she was now living her vision; she was starting to live what she had been called upon to do.

Emma lingered over her rosary that she had set down on the table. Calling upon Mama Pape wouldn't do anyone any harm. Demone's army was at the gates of Lakota. They knew where she was and they were waiting for a confrontation. She swallowed hard and closed her eyes. Her pulse was beating wildly and she had the impression as if she was preparing for the end, the end of a completely crazy adventure. Emma was close to tears, petrified and much to her chagrin, she wet her stone.

"I see, depression is starting to set in," observed Mama Pape, folding her arms.

"I should have never left Bourbeau Mama Pape, my father was right. And now to think that maybe he's dead all because of me... and Cheroki too!"

Emma burst into tears. The exhaustion, the solitude, the secrets... Everything was just too heavy. She wasn't ready to confront Demone's army. Mama Pape started humming while she discretely scratched Emma's pink stone. Through her tears, Emma heard her students laughing. Her attention turned to the screen that Mama Pape was looking at attentively, smiling like an idiot. Emma calmed down and sniffled noisily. Mama Pape handed her a handkerchief.

"You left for them," explained the Tahitian mama. She was referring to the children. "What kind of world would they grow up in? Bacillus's world? Demone's world, a world run by the man who inherited his father's scheme to govern through his sister? And you don't know his brother Vodyano, he's another number. Don't you understand Emma? Your destiny is to offer Bourbeau's children, the inhabitants of Lakota and women covered in "Burkseemis" a vision. You are their hope for a better world."

Emma nodded as she wiped away her tears. She felt better.

"I missed you Mama Pape. Never before would I have believed that I'd be able to say that to you, given how much you get on my nerves sometimes!"

"I take that as a compliment," smiled Mama Pape.

She handed Emma some dried bananas and some figs. Emma licked her lips as she eyed the figs... they were so rare and she loved the taste.

“Where did you get them?”

“Where do you think? Hapi is very resourceful.”

“One day you’ll have to explain to me exactly how it is that you operate because between being both a snitch and being capable of getting figs from the desert, I’m afraid I’m having trouble following.”

Mama Pape looked at her, her eyes full of compassion.

“Enough with all this, we have a mission to accomplish.”

She snapped her fingers and a brown tunic with white embroidery appeared on the bed where Emma was sitting.

“It was Cherokee’s. I was holding onto it until your arrival at the Angelrie... I think it’s time for you to try it on.”

Mama Papa shot a glance at the hole that was dug into the mud wall.

“I don’t know what is awaiting you outside but they won’t recognize you. In any case, you’ll have more chance of confusing them by wearing the colors of the Repairmen than a nondescript tunic.”

Emma nodded shook her head in agreement and lifted up her shirt while grabbing the tunic.

“I added some material to make it your size... otherwise, it would’ve been too short for you.”

Someone knocked on the door and Emma shot a worried glance at Mama Pape, who motioned for her to relax.

“Good luck Emma.”

Mama Pape blew her a kiss and disappeared as Daniel continued knocking on the door.

“Emma, are you ready? It’s time.”

Emma hurried into her tunic while asking him to hold on for a minute while she got ready. She hastily made the bed, then opened the door and flashed him a smile.

“I’m ready.”

Daniel was speechless. He wasn’t prepared to see her clothed as a member of the Angelrie, but was immediately enamored with the idea. Emma was fastening the lasso to her waist when he noticed that she was trembling. He went up to her.

“Let me help you.” Emma let go of the rope and nodded. “Don’t be afraid Emma, you are ten times stronger and more intelligent than any of the men outside.”

“Really? And me who thought that I was just a nobody who can’t even be a candidate.”

“You’re angry with me.”

“When exactly did you plan on telling me that you were going to become the next Mickael?”

"There, that's better." Daniel stood up and stared deep into Emma's eyes. "I'm not going to become the Mickael, Emma. It's a decision that was taken six months ago, and which will be confirmed... if it's to be so, in the next six months."

"Don't tell me that it's not your dream to become the Mickael."

"Emma, at the Angelrie, it's not a question of dreams... it's a question of destiny, of inspiration, of path. I'm not so sure that mine is that of the Mickael."

He opened the door. Emma remained speechless. They walked down to the foot of the fortress with the other inhabitants of Lakota. Everyone was dressed in battle uniform and carrying ~~carried~~ spears, bows and clubs. Emma was impressed by the discipline and courage that was written on their faces. Now she understood better the dignity and excessive pride that Cherokee sometimes complained about. Today they were going to save their lives.

They reached the fortress where several catapults had been put in position. On top of the fortress walls, lines of women were heating oil and collecting rocks and other ballistic weapons. She noticed that children helped by placing buckets near slits in the walls or otherwise collected wood, stones or sand. The men were sharpening their arrows.

Daniel had them veer off to the far end of the fortress and they entered a house that was larger than all the others. Antonio was giving orders while other men talked strategy while looking down at a map. In the corner, near the skylight an old man dressed in white was heating a cauldron and singing. Emma couldn't take her eyes off him.

"Ah, here's our secret weapon," said Antonio as he gave Daniel a warm tap on the back. He leaned over to give Emma a kiss but she stepped back in surprise. "What? You're not going to kiss a man about to die?"

"You're not going to die Antonio, you're too big for that!" Antonio and the others burst out laughing.

"Do you hear that? Our angel confirms that I'm not going to die today..." Antonio bowed before Emma. "Whatever happens Emma, I won't die today because I refuse to die without having first gotten a kiss from you." He laughed and turned to join Daniel who was studying by the map.

"There. Twenty or so of our men are already in position. Go with them and as soon as you get the chance, head to the West. You remember where the fault line is."

"Yes." Daniel used his finger to trace the passage between the rocks. "The only problem..."

"Don't worry, my men are excellent archers... they'll cover you."

"They aren't going to die today either, are they?" Antonio grinned.

"Hey! Nobody wants to die without having a last kiss from your sweetheart."

Antonio winked at the young woman. She remained stone-faced while as she thought about Antonio and his men's strategy. They were going to take an underground passageway which would lead them to the plain in order start fighting on the western part of the plateau. The goal of the maneuver was to allow Daniel and Emma the possibility of reaching the mountain and to pass through a fault which would allow them to leave the plain and join up with a path leading to Stad.

“Your men are serving as bait to save us, Antonio. Don’t you think they have other things to think about besides kissing me?”

“Oh, Emma...What do you think? These men only think about kissing their own wives in a time of battle. How do you think they keep up the hope to survive otherwise?”

“Indeed. You put them in danger in order to save my life and Daniel’s. It’s a bit suicidal, don’t you think?”

“But what a life worth saving!” Antonio caressed Emma’s cheek. “Do you actually think that Antonio, the rebel before God, would allow the one who shot Demone to pour oil and shoot arrows like all the other women? I don’t think so.”

“Don’t worry, Emma. Antonio’s men are the best warriors I know.”

“After the Angels, of course!” contested Antonio, as he righted himself. He took a stone and pressed it firmly into Daniel’s hand before giving him a warm handshake. “Enough said, it’s time.”

The two friends gave each other one last hug and Antonio whispered something in Daniel’s ear. Emma would’ve paid dearly to know what the two had said to one another but without further ado, she followed a man who had gestured to her to get a move on. She entered a dark hallway and taking ~~with~~ the man’s advice, grabbed a lit torch. She followed the path for several feet before she heard Daniel’s steps behind her. She didn’t slow down but continued onward pushed by the fear and the desire to see what was cooking on the plateau. They reached the light filled opening which signaled the end of the passageway. The man leading the way adjusted his bow and arrows before taking off at a run shouting something unintelligible. Emma was taken a bit by surprise but she understood when she looked out on the plain... At the foot of the plain Antonio’s men were fighting with swords against the Gong Gong who were dressed in black. In order to join them, they had to run several yards down a sandy slope while the Gong Gong awaited them, ready to shoot at anyone coming out of the opening.

Emma decided to imitate the man. She turned around and made out Daniel who was still following at a short distance behind her. She took a deep breath and set her jaw. It was time. She turned to face the plateau. After taking one last deep breath she sprinted outside. The Gong Gong shot their arrows and the young woman zigzagged as best she could until she spotted a man with a sword who was waiting for her. She grabbed her lasso and with one swift movement she threw it over the arm of her attacker. Surprised, he lowered his weapon and Emma let out a shout. She dug her dagger into the man’s shoulder and he dropped his sword. Emma undid the lasso and pushed the man to the ground with her foot. The man collapsed. Emma leaned over to retrieve her dagger and take the sword.

Emma got up and looked back towards the passageway to see if Daniel had come out ~~yet~~ but she didn’t see any movement. She heard a scream and turned around to see one of the black Horsemen just steps away from her, ready to dig HIS sword into her body. Emma had just enough ~~the~~ time to rearm herself when the man suddenly collapsed on top of her. He was incapable of inflicting her any harm. Emma managed to get out from under him when she spotted another man on horseback. She immediately recognized the Angel with his scarlet colored outfit with white embroidery. She froze. It was the man who had accompanied Princess Aurora on the red thread... It was the Kamel.

Darbihar took a step toward her and she looked as if she'd seen a ghost. He smiled as he leaned over to shake her hand. For an instant, Emma thought she was going to faint, overwhelmed by his charm and his presence, but the circumstances left no time for emotions. Without hesitation, she grabbed his hand and got up on the horse.

"Darbihar, Angel Kamel. I didn't know that the Razel had sent out a team. Are there many of you? Where's your horse?"

"I don't know..." mumbled Emma. Darbihar immediately understood and turned to look at her.

"You are?" She quickly nodded her head. "Where is Daniel?"

"I don't know... He came out after me."

Darbihar's eyes swept the battlefield. He didn't see the Well Destined One. Emma did the same except that she was trying to spot Demone. She saw one of Antonio's men who was about to get hit by a Horseman so she grabbed her bow. With precision, she targeted the man's heart and he collapsed much to Antonio's friend's astonishment. He turned to Emma wide eyed and she gave him a big smile.

"So," said Darbihar. "Now I understand better."

"I'm doing what I came to do."

"And why did you come?"

"For a better world."

Emma wanted to get off the horse but Darbihar stopped her.

"Where are you going?"

"To fight."

"Out of the question! I'm here to escort you to the Angelrie with Daniel. You do remember that that's the point of this battle, don't you?"

Emma started to get upset. She nervously scoured the plateau.

"Do you see him anywhere?"

"No, but we have to get out of here as fast as possible." He whistled and another Angel on horseback appeared by his side. Darbihar motioned for him to head to the West. "My team will get a message to him."

When they arrived at the mountain slope, Darbihar guided his horse around the different ground battles taking place. Suddenly, a black Horseman appeared directly in front of them and without taking any time to second guess herself, Emma took her bow and shot an arrow hitting the man directly in the forehead. She continued to attack while Darbihar pressed forward. Shortly afterward, another Angel caught up with them.

"Find Daniel," said Darbihar. "We're heading to the mountain."

Darbihar got off his horse and helped Emma do the same. As she lowered herself down, she studied the mountain. They had distanced themselves somewhat from the battle and she found it strange that nobody was trying looking to prevent them from escaping.

“Demone’s not there,” she deduced.

Darbihar returned after retrieving a bag from his horse. He handed it over to the Angel that was on his way going back to look for Daniel.

“I see that nothing gets past you.”

“Where is he?”

Darbihar raised an eyebrow and looked amused as he considered her question. He took the lead when as they reached the base of a steep and craggy path leading to the fault line.

“We’re not going to wait for Daniel?”

“No!” shouted Darbihar angrily. “I guess you still haven’t figured out that we’re in the middle of a battle and my mission is to get you to the Angelrie safe and sound.”

He continued to climb. Emma couldn’t help but feel that she had done something very wrong, that she had offended this Angel that she had found so charming in the photo. She’d discovered that ~~in real life~~, severity and cold heartedness were part of their character in real life.

“You need to learn to control your emotions Emma, you’re like an open book...”

“Excuse me?”

Darbihar turned to face her.

“You wonder why I’m angry, don’t you?” Emma remained expressionless. “Where is Demone? How on Earth do you have the nerve to even ask me where Demone is?”

“What? I have the right to know where he is...” Emma was fuming. “So that I can fight him fair and square!”

“Fight him fair and square...” jeered Darbihar. “You wanna know where Demone is, huh? He’s nice and warm at home,” explained the young man. “I remind you that he was injured just a few days ago by a young woman who was reckless and oblivious as to the consequences of her actions.”

Emma felt stung by his words. Now she knew what he thought of her. And if he thought that she was irresponsible, then of course the rest of the Angelrie would too. She clammed up and watched as Darbihar walked along mumbling to himself.

“I wasn’t looking for trouble...” said Emma hesitantly.

“What? To create a war? Gee thanks, I hope not.”

“I forbid you to talk to me like that,” retorted Emma brusksly. “You don’t know the hell I went through because of him! You’re all the same, aren’t you? You get on your high horses saying that you’re the protectors of the Earth, but when it comes to confrontation with evil, you retreat!”

“Let me just tell you that declaring war with Demone ISN’T the best idea in the world!”

“So make love to him then?” retorted Emma so rudely that it shocked Darbihar. “A boring man who ignores any move toward peace, a man so despicable certainly cannot be dealt with by diplomacy! You call yourself Kamel, but what do you do to overcome Evil?”

“I fight the battles that I can win. It’s about time that I put you in your place, Emma Blue! Who are you to shoot at this man? A warrior? Did you get your revenge by shooting at him to save face/~~your honor~~? No Emma, you didn’t even know who he was.”

“I didn’t need to know who he was to feel the EVIL that he personified.”

“You’re nothing but an IGNORAMUS, Emma Blue! A naïve and dangerous simpleton!”

Just then, they heard stones falling and immediately they crouched down and took out their bows when suddenly Daniel appeared out of the blue.

“I see that you’ve met our Kamel, Emma.”

He was out of breath. He had run as fast as he could to catch up with them.

“And I have met your candidate,” said Darbihar roughly, infuriated.

The two men silently glared at one another and Emma immediately knew that they didn’t like one another.

“Good. There you are,” smiled Emma embarrassed. “I hope it wasn’t too hard to say goodbye to Antonio.”

“It was just a farewell Emma,” said Daniel harshly, his eyes still set on Darbihar’s.

Emma let out a breath, trying to keep herself calm and Darbihar did likewise. He knew that he shouldn’t be angry with Emma, that she had merely been a spark in a situation which was already about to explode before she had ever entered into the picture. He took his eyes off Daniel and turned to face Emma with a forgiving smile.

“I was quite impressed, I must say,” declared Darbihar. Emma masters archery to perfection and has shown a tremendous amount of courage...”

“I’m glad to hear that my friend,” said Daniel. He went over to Darbihar and gave him a pat on the shoulder. “Because she wants to be a Warrior.”

Darbihar looked up and understood what Daniel was trying to say. He turned to face Emma, his face somehow transformed. In one fell swoop, Emma was now in his camp, she had become his apprentice, his ally, and his support. Darbihar immediately knew that she would become one of his most precious assets.

“I see.” He took off his glove and extended his hand to her. “I think we got off on the wrong foot. I’m Darbihar, I’m the new Kamel and the Chief of the Warrior Angels. I would be honored, when the time comes, to study your application as a candidate to enter our order for the service and protection of the Angelrie and the Emerged Lands.

Emma barely had the time to figure out if Darbihar was merely being polite or was actually being sincere, given the fact that he had been less than courteous with her from the start, when a man suddenly appeared at the summit of the fault line. Daniel and Darbihar followed her gaze and their eyes settled upon a massive figure clad in armor and a pointed metal helmet. Without

thinking Darbihar stepped in front of Emma to protect her and took out his bow while Daniel approached the man, enraged. Darbihar motioned for Emma to stay put. Although Daniel moved forward, the man didn't move.

"It's a Phorcys," Darbihar whispered to Emma. "He works for Demone. He's only there to distract us..."

"To do what?"

Just then, a man stepped out from behind the rocks, trying to escape by taking a path which led down to the plateau. Emma understood that the Phorcys was there to enable the messenger to escape. She shivered when she recognized who it was. It was the masked man, the one who had been knocked unconscious and gotten burned in her house. Daniel and Darbihar immediately understood. The Phorcys shouted with rage trying to block their path and prevent them from following the messenger. He armed himself with two swords and went after Daniel. Emma turned around and without hesitating, she took out her bow and shot at the man. An arrow hit his hand and he cried out in pain.

"Wow, you shoot fast!" said Darbihar enthusiastically before following Daniel to attack the Phorcys.

The Phorcys fell to the ground. He had been hit in the chest by Daniel and in the leg by Darbihar. The two men leaned over him.

"Who is the ~~this~~ messenger? Where's he going?" hammered Darbihar violently.

"We know very well where he's going Darbihar. The question is, is he alone?"

The Phorcys spit up blood instead of replying when Emma joined up with them. The injured man turned to face her.

"Miss, you have my utmost respect."

"The Phorcys gasped for breath as his eyes closed. Blood trickled from his mouth and his breathing became shallow. Darbihar wanted to shake him, but Emma stopped him.

"Leave him... it's too late." She kneeled down to look at the man. She opened her flask and wet her hands to wipe the blood away from around the man's mouth. "Go. Go in peace. You did your duty."

The man fluttered his eyes to thank her. He started to fade away, grateful. Emma got up. Daniel and Darbihar were speechless.

"Well then. I suppose we need to get going if we're to arrive at the Angelrie before the messenger gets to Demone and permanently blocks us from getting there..." Emma stopped and smiled. "Home, you mean..."

Darbihar looked questioningly at Daniel. He was utterly dumbfounded by this surprising young woman.

"Hey, don't look at me like that... I warned you. She's quite a feisty character and damned tough, not to mention a handful to have on the team!"

“Daniel I kindly ask you to keep your opinions to yourself,” rebuked Emma as she headed down the opposite slope of the mountain.

“Come on Emma, you have to admit that you are rather unpredictable...”

Darbihar watched them bicker as they went down the slope. He took a breath while as he thought about the situation and this encounter. He already had a lot of faith in her and found himself intrigued by her as well. Like Daniel, he too was convinced that she would help them in their quest.

“Good then, Emma Blue, the Rainbow will be ours.”

## Chapter 23: At the gates of the Angelrie

Darbihar led them to an Angels training camp about 10 miles from Stad. It was deserted because there were no training sessions going on. They arrived at day's end and Emma had the impression that the journey to the Angelrie would never end. Darbihar heightened that impression by announcing that he had "a secret plan" to sneak into the institution without attracting attention. This would enable her to avoid encounters with the Gong Gong, Warriors and Horsemen or any other men that Demone had sent as well the State of Emergency border checks where she would surely be stopped.

After each of them had installed their tent for the night, they gathered at a large set table that was used for meetings located under the Flamboyant. The leaves of the tree kept them hidden from outside detection. Emma sat down next to the two men who were already busy pouring over a paper map. Emma was surprised. Why hadn't they used a screen or more detailed virtual maps? True, they weren't in class where they needed teaching aids, but all the same she liked to see the reliefs and the landscapes which were displayed along the entire length of the chosen route.

"There, by Baray's Temple."

"Impossible, she can't get into Stad."

"There's no choice. She only has a few yards to cover. It should be possible by Om Touk's gate, just next to..."

"The Azrak River," interjected Emma. "Our friend Hapi, is he going to save our hides again?" Daniel looked at Emma then shifted his gaze to Darbihar.

"It's too dangerous," said Daniel, not leaving any room for argument.

"It's not you that decides, it's me. May I?"

Emma sat up straight and pulled her chair closer to them. Daniel nodded. She took her eyes off Daniel and focused on Darbihar, gesturing for him to explain his "plan."

"O.K." Darbihar cleared his throat. "It's not easy but it's not mission impossible either."

"It's the part about Stad that worries me," added Daniel.

"Daniel, be quiet. It's not up to you to decide."

Daniel rolled his eyes, reluctantly accepting Emma's command. Darbihar paused for a second giving the Well Destined One a knowing look. They were on the same wavelength when it came to Emma's authoritative manner.

"Emma, you'll have to get into the Angelrie the old-fashioned way."

"The old-fashioned way?"

"Yes," replied Darbihar. His enthusiasm was evident. "You have to understand that today we subject the candidates to a certain number of tests because we have developed our own selection process. So... how can I say it? The old-fashioned way is more difficult."

“More difficult?”

“You’ll understand later.”

Darbihar showed her the map. The city of Stad was drawn to one side it. A river snaked around its fortifications leading to the plain, the famous plain that was just before the entry to the Angelrie at the foot of the famous entrance stairs. But it was neither the Angelrie nor the capital city of the Emerged Lands that was at the center of the map. It was an area designated “Baptism” that was the main focal point. She spotted two corridors, passageways that she now easily recognized having recently walked through so many of them. These two passageways represented the entry and exit to and from the zone. As had been the case with the parallel valley that Tetis had opened enabling her to access the hilly range chain, the Baptism seemed to spread out underground, under Stad’s neighboring forest.

“Is it another dimension?”

“It’s Azrak’s basin, his delta to be more precise. He lives with those who believe what they see... meaning the forest,” explained Darbihar. “You must remember Emma... For ages, Man ignored all of which existed right before their eyes. Entire ecosystems lived underground, under rivers and under certain parts of the oceans. As if everything was visible and linear while in reality...”

“World order is invisible,” added Emma, finishing his sentence without hesitation.

Her father had repeated this sentence to her time and again and Emma had the impression as if he was speaking to her. Daniel was dumbstruck. Emma had answered word for word what he was going to say. He eyed her cautiously. Emma was tracing the route, calm and determined as always. She stopped at the moat which was located right before a secret passageway which led to the Angelrie.

The challenge of the ten waters. Of course,” murmured Emma as she contemplated the drawing.

“I see.” Darbihar’s eyes met Daniel’s. He couldn’t cease to admire this young woman.

“I told you,” said Daniel, the satisfaction evident on his face.

“What?” Emma looked up from the map.

“The most difficult part will be to reach the temple,” replied Daniel.

“Killjoy,” said Emma.

Daniel pointed to Baray Temple which was located inside Stad’s fortress.

“You need to pass by there.”

“What? You just need to step through the gate...” Emma pointed out the Om Touk gate. “Do you have the key?” Emma chuckled, but Daniel wasn’t laughing. “Oh, come on, Daniel, you take everything so seriously. This entryway isn’t used anymore, right? We can see that it was sealed off.”

“It’s still guarded, I’m sure of that.”

“But there aren’t any checkpoints, right?”

“No,” answered Darbihar. “Nevertheless, we have to deactivate the locking mechanism, open the door, shut the door, pass several streets full of shops, get to the temple and past the locked door which leads to the passageway.”

“Oh, so there’s no problem then?” Emma shrugged her shoulders, trying to act more confident than she actually was. “After the Gong Gong, the Warriors, the bloodsuckers, the symbolic inscriptions and Ursula, I’m not afraid of anything. So then, after the passageway, what are the challenges? We start with still water, don’t we?”

Darbihar sighed as he grabbed his notes. He handed Emma a notebook and a pen which she reluctantly accepted.

“Test Number 1, still water.”

“The one with the supernatural powers.”

“Yeah, except that there’s nothing supernatural about it... except for the shining light.”

“The shining light?”

“How about we give you an overall presentation,” interrupted Daniel, “and that way you’ll understand the details better later.”

“Oh! So we can’t use a screen or a virtual map,” asked Emma enthusiastically.

“Intelligent yet so naïve,” Daniel said with regret. Emma frowned.

“Emma,” continued Darbihar. “The rosary was given to Man to grant them access to certain technologies... Today it allows us to control Man, you see? Once you use one of the five stones of your rosary, the system stores information about you... And this information is easy to access.”

“So you’re trying to tell me that Demone has access to my rosary.”

“Exactly,” said Daniel coldly.

“O.K., so no rosary then?”

“No,” said Darbihar shaking his head from side to side.

“That complicates things.”

“We’ve already lost enough time,” declared Daniel. “Still water.”

He pointed out the first of the instructions and explained the mirror game which consisted in making a chalice/cup. By using the light’s properties, the candidate has to transform water vapor into its solid state in order make a type of bowl which would enable access to the second test, that of the Nourishers. They’re the Angels that look after the survival of the human race and they present several waters, so the candidate must find the one which provides the most nourishment.”

“How many choices are there?”

“Thirty, and only one is the right one. The others will make you throw up, give you diarrhea and even worse... kill you.”

“Slowly,” added Daniel. “They’ll make you sweat, lose blood or secrete some kind of pus. Just good things.”

“Hmm, and finding the secret to that one if I can’t use my turquoise stone?”

“Instinct,” said Daniel nonchalantly.

“Are you joking?” Daniel laughed when he saw the expression on Emma’s face.

“You should like Test Number 3 then, Emma. You can get crushed by the Repairmen’s windmill’s wheels.”

Daniel pointed to a system of wheels which looked like a windmill. Emma listened to the description of the machine wherein the candidate had to identify the use of the mechanism’s forces to make the dirty water crystal clear in order to find the entry into an underwater tube.

“After diving into the water, the tube will enable you to access a succession of pools that would be absolutely enchanting if it weren’t for the hellish noise that’ll drive you deaf.”

“Oh, so it drives you nuts, does it?”

“Yes,” said Daniel. “Of course, finding the code will prevent you from going deaf, and after this little jaunt, you’ll find yourself at the highlight of this magnificent challenge.”

“Let me guess. The Warriors.” Darbihar laughed although Daniel was full of pride, being a former Warrior himself.

“If I may,” interrupted Darbihar. “After all, I’m the Kamel.”

He shot a look at the Well Destined One and Emma frowned as she witnessed their cock fight. These two had shared a complicated past, there was no doubt about it. Darbihar got hold of her attention and explained that the order of Kamel was known for its ability to fight and above all, to extract energy from fire which came from the groundwater. The challenge consisted in confronting quicksand before facing the Alchemists.

“Who didn’t find anything better than dipping you into the cold... A penetrating, glacial and absolutely horrible cold,” announced Daniel, who couldn’t resist cutting Darbihar off. “You’ll be in the ice. It’ll drop your body temperature, put your senses to sleep, block your circulation and eventually you’ll die of the cold.”

“Oh, what great news, and me who’s known for being hot blooded, that’ll be a change.”

“You’ll do just fine,” Darbihar reassured her.

He pointed out to her a last circle on the map which preceded a long line which represented several hundred yards if the scale on the map was correct. It was a long slide known to be bad for the back since it was so bumpy. It led to a sort of triangular cave. There, it was up to the Strategists to launch their challenges.

“This is where things get serious, Emma,” warned Daniel.

“Huh? I thought that the Warriors test was the most challenging!” Daniel chuckled.

"It's just that our Gabriel does everything to perfection... I'm sure that Shuilu updated the questions. He must be the only one who believes in this entrance," said Darbihar.

"Shuilu?" repeated Emma. She turned pale the second she heard her father's name.

"Yes," answered Darbihar. "Our Gabriel. He's the one who presented Daniel to the Angelrie, by the way."

"An incredible man," said Daniel with emotion. He had an obvious affection for this man. Emma nodded slightly, slowly regaining her composure. "Emma, are you okay?" Daniel saw that the young woman was uneasy. "The questions are difficult, but we're going to help you with them, and as far as I've seen over the past few days, you know a lot."

"I know..." Emma began as she tried to fight her emotions. "What's the next test?"

Emma made a fist with her hands and clenched her teeth as she tried to concentrate on Daniel's instructions... Shuilu was the Gabriel, that was a fact and she'd have to deal with it later on. She focused on the waves that Daniel was describing. It was the last challenge, that of the Mickael whose order symbolized the laws of the Universe, and in particular, that of the ocean which had covered the Earth. Once the candidate passed the test of the waves, the challenge was finished. Next, the candidate had to walk along the beach which led to a natural arch and needle.

"You need to swim until you reach the needle. You're going to find a door situated to the West of the cliff. It's easy to recognize because the symbols of the ten orders are carved into it."

"Then," continued Darbihar, "all you have to do is push open the door."

"Push open the door? It's going to open just like that?"

"Yup," answered Daniel. "It's going to analyse your water in a matter of seconds and it'll know... It'll know whether or not you're qualified to enter the Angelrie."

"And after that?" asked Emma, without giving any thought to what he had just said, all of which surpassed human comprehension.

"Water will bring you to the gate," said Darbihar pointing to the end of a long underground passageway.

"I'll be there to open it for you," said Daniel.

"What, you're not coming with me?"

"No Emma, I'm not going with you. In order to be accepted, you must get there by yourself."

"Because then I'll have arrived..."

"Yes. You will have made it to the Angelrie."

The young woman jerked upright. Daniel smiled. Emma remained speechless. She felt all her senses heighten at the sound of the word "Angelrie". She placed her hand on her forehead and rubbed her eyelids with her fingers. She took a breath before grabbing the little notebook and pen that Darbihar had given her. Now she better understood their usefulness.

“Well then. Let’s start with the Baptism. So, what are the secrets and suggestions that you can give me that will keep me alive throughout these tests?”

Daniel and Darbihar exchanged looks and then smiled at the young woman. The time had come for the challenge that so many candidates feared, but which opened the gate to the noble and desired Angelrie. The two young men were going to unveil certain secrets in order to help her do it.

## Chapter 24: The heir

A horse dashed along a dirt path. As the landscapes unfolded the horse slowed only to pass the checkpoints. Iku spotted the last checkpoint located just before his final destination. He exhaled as he slowed the horse to a walk. He took out his mission documents as he did at every check and the guards turned a blind eye as they opened the gates without asking any questions. It was one of the small luxuries given the pace he had had to maintain to complete his mission.

He looked up at grand arch facing him, the “Arc de Triomphe”. It merited its title. The stone monument was 164 ft tall, 148 feet wide and 72 feet deep. It was said that Demone had it built in memory of one of the emperors of the Ancient Era for whom he had a profound admiration. The structure itself was imposing but what impressed Iku the most each time he saw it were the sculptured reliefs representing the four dragons which reigned over the waters. The statues were so life-like that Iku trembled each time he saw them, as if they could wake up and devour anyone in their path.

Iku handed over the letter, politely greeting the man at the gate who nodded to his colleague without even batting an eye. He quickly glanced at the document, handed it back to Iku and gestured for him to pass. Iku turned to face the golden gate whose locking mechanism took several seconds to activate before lifting. He passed through quickly and entered the gardens of Demone’s palace. He rushed to the stables and had barely set foot on the property when he was met by a thin and nervous man named Terri.

“He’s waiting for you.”

“I know.”

“He’s in a really bad mood.”

“I can imagine.”

“His Highness Vodyano is there.” Iku stopped in his tracks. “He arrived this morning.”

“I see.”

“The news is that bad?” asked Terri in an effort to break Iku’s silence.

“He’s waiting for me.”

Iku led the way, climbing the stairs of the majestic staircase with lush red carpeting four at a time. The palace was full of ornate gold objects, paintings and chandeliers much in the same style as the lush French palaces of yesteryear that the Black Master had always considered as lost jewels. He had had his estate built without so much as a second thought for the consequences that it would have for Nature. He remained indifferent to the failures Man had made during the Ancient Era and his egoism and his personal pleasure had always prevailed before Humanity. Today, his children benefitted from their heritage.

Iku entered into one of the antechambers where the tension was running high. They were all awaiting his arrival and his news.

“Where are they?”

"In the dining room," answered the butler of the house. "In case you haven't noticed, it's noontime."

Carter offered Iku a platter with a hot towel and a glass of water. He took the towel and some water and wiped his face with visible delight.

"No, I didn't have the time to notice, Carter."

"Well then, maybe you'd like to get yourself cleaned up and put on something fresh, before we bring you to his Grace," he said, revolted by Iku's appearance.

"Carter, where's Tullius?"

Just then, the door slammed and a small nervous man with a green pallor to his skin and a yellow toothed smile entered the room. He wore the stress on his wrinkled face.

"Iku!" he shouted.

"Yes, Tullius." Iku looked at Carter. "Do you really believe with Tullius among us that I have the time to take a shower?"

"Mr. Tullius has a certain sense of urgency which only applies to him..."

"That's true Carter. And that dominates over whatever happens in this home," said Iku, putting down his towel.

He grabbed a glass of water and followed Tullius.

"They're eating. Aurora is there. I advise you to be discrete."

"Haven't I always?"

Tullius stopped and looked him over. The tattoos surrounding his eyes were so covered in dust that the traditional glitter impregnated in the skin of the Black Horseman couldn't even be seen. His clothes were ripped and dirty and the scars from his burns that had badly healed were visible. Carter cleared his throat when he saw Tullius staring at an area that had stones and dusty threads stuck to blood covered flesh.

"My friend, Carter's right..." Tullius motioned to the butler who hurried to take Iku off for a shower and a change of clothes."

Once presentable, Tullius led Iku through a series of richly decorated rooms. They arrived in front of a door and after knocking, Tullius motioned for Iku to enter the dining room. The interior was full of lavish tapestries and a magnificent chimney surrounded with marble sculptures which dominated the room. Iku bowed his head and approached the family who were in the middle of their lunch.

"Why, you think that we can trust him?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Trusting an angel, you're nothing but a hopeless romantic," said Vodyano.

"Vodyano, leave Aurora and her sense of romance alone please," warned Demone.

Iku waited silently as the three heirs finished their dessert.

“Iku,” interrupted Demone, “my loyal and trusted friend. Come join us.”

Demone got up. His arm, which was still in a sling, was hidden in his long dark coat. He had his hair tied back and was in a good mood despite all the warnings that his employees had given him when they’d seen that Iku had arrived. Demone shook Iku’s hand and invited him to sit. Iku inquired about his injury. Aurora was tense. She didn’t like Iku and she didn’t feel like sitting there listening to her brothers talking about the Angelrie and the State of Emergency that Demone had declared in order to “capture” the dissidents who had injured him.

One of the servants brought Iku a bowl of fresh strawberries and a glass of wine. The messenger served himself under the watchful eyes of the three silent heirs. Aurora looked from one brother to the other. Demone was calmly taking a bite of a piece of meringue while Vodyano mumbled to himself as usual. As much as he she detested them at times, she greatly admired them.

Vodyano and Demone were like night and day. Demone was large and imposing while Vodyano was skinny and dried out. The chief of the Northern Territories had dark hair and dark eyes while Vodyano’s eyes were green and he had red hair. As for Aurora, she had blonde hair and large blue eyes. There was such contrast among them that she often asked herself how the three of them could be related to one another...

“So then messenger, what have you come to tell us?” asked Vodyano impatiently.

“The roads are under strict control, your Highness,” replied Iku as he took a piece of meringue. “I must admit that I never saw so many guards doing their job so well.”

Aurora pursed her lips. Just the mention of the State of Emergency annoyed her. She took her napkin from her knees and set it on the table.

“I’m leaving. You don’t need me and it’ll save Iku from telling you a bunch of lies.” She glared at the messenger. “We all know that you won’t say anything with me around and in any case, I don’t care about your LITTLE SCHEMES against the Angelrie, I have my own plots to PREPARE.”

“Aurora, you know that that’s not true, you have the right to know anything that you want to know,” protested Demone.

“Really? Who shot at you my dear brother? Was it a dissident or was it Daniel?” Aurora let her anger show, frustrated by her brothers’ behavior.

“A dissident Aurora, I already told you that.”

Demone squashed a meringue biscuit with a harsh look. The crumbs scattered all over the fruit while he Demone cursed under his breath.

“And that merited a State of Emergency?”

“Your brother is the king of the Northern Territories Aurora! He’s been attacked by an enemy! By a terrorist that must be captured for the safety of all of us.”

“Don’t waste my time with all your useless chatter, Vodyano! Save that for the public, not for me! I’m your sister!”

“And as such it’s about time you start acting like it,” added Demone angrily.

Aurora got up, her pride wounded. She was torn between the respect that she held for her brothers, their heritage and the duty they had to their father for the future that he had so meticulously planned for with the Compromise with the Angelrie or the idea of throwing it all away to live her life as she pleased.

“I’m your sister Demone and I behave as such. I’m ready to marry a man that I don’t even know for the sake of my Kingdom.”

“A man that you don’t know but you seem to like very well,” replied Vodyano without pity.

“Yes, I like him. IS it a crime? What would you have done if the Mickael had been a woman? You would’ve killed her the second you were married, right? Well no luck! The Mickael is a MAN! One of the Angel’s manipulations! To have nominated a woman would have meant her being condemned to marrying one of you two!”

“Aurora, don’t go there,” warned Demone. Aurora thought the better of it; she couldn’t prevent herself from fearing her oldest brother.

“What would you have done if you were me? Wouldn’t you respect Daniel for his beliefs?”

“Oh, his beliefs... I thought you liked Daniel for the color of his beautiful eyes, not his beliefs,” chided Vodyano.

“Vodyano, you’re nothing but a Prince who has absolutely no class,” retorted Aurora, who had not the slightest fear of her second brother.

“Calm down you two. There’s no need to rehash old childhood quarrels,” said Demone with authority. “Vodyano, I’ll tell you one more time that Aurora has the right to love the person she feels would suit her and the fact that she likes Daniel is a good thing.” Aurora took a gloating stance. Don’t get ahead of yourself Aurora, I remind you that being attracted to Daniel doesn’t mean that you get to forget where you come from or the duty you have to respect your father’s wishes.” Aurora slumped.

“How could I ever forget it? You remind me every single day!” She left the table and stopped in front of the black horseman. “Iku, enjoy your strawberries, for they very well may be your last, because with our King duty always comes first, even in affairs of the heart.”

“Aurora stop that,” roared Demone, slamming his fist on the table.

“Enjoy your dessert brother, don’t worry about anything, I know very well who I’m the daughter of just as much Daniel knows who he serves and what his duty is.”

She glared at her brother then left the room full of rage, slamming the door behind her.

“Well,” declared Demone. “At least that’s clear.” He raised his eyebrows as a gesture for Iku to continue with his report.

“They passed through the fault at Dakota Village.”

"I know all that, Iku... I sent my army there, if you remember. My question is how did they get away... again?"

"The Kamel came to get them."

"The Kamel ? That charming young man who escorted Aurrora? I thought that he and Daniel despised one another."

"He came to get her, your Grace."

"Where was he taking them?"

"To Stad."

"Stad. This is getting weirder and weirder. What a strange idea... Right in the middle of a State of Emergency! It's a mistake that's almost too obvious. What do you think Tullius?"

Demone addressed his advisor who had been discretely sitting in the corner of the room minding his own business.

"I think that they're going to enter through the forest. People say that there's a secret passageway which leads to the Angelrie."

"The old gate," murmured Demone pensively.

"What are our positions like over there?" asked the younger brother.

"Good. They're good all over Stad, the entire city grid is covered by our men..."

"My foot," retorted Vodyano vehemently.

"Vodyano, have you got a better idea?" Tullius raised his voice and Vodyano backtracked as if he feared Demone's advisor. He regained his composure after taking a sip of wine. He smiled at the man he considered an enemy.

"A better idea? Like the one I gave to you the very minute Bacillus spoke to us about that young woman... That Emma Herevai or whatever her name is."

Demone thought about his brother's words. Tullius and Iku remained silent, waiting with baited breath for their chief's reaction.

"Iku, did you see this young woman?"

"Yes, your Grace... I saw her."

"So then, she's just as the rumors say she is?"

"Which ones your Grace?"

"Those that say she had more courage and strength than the Heir to the Black Master who was... shot upon without him even having the chance to defend himself. Shot by someone so disrespectful."

Iku had been taken by surprise at the unexpected question. Demone's face remained expressionless. Distracted, he played with the crumbs on the table.

"I don't know your Grace... I barely saw her fighting, but from the little I saw..." He paused for an instant feeling a bead of sweat forming on his forehead. "..."

"I'm listening Iku."

"Master, I think you should watch out for her," he answered point blank. "I don't know if she took a shot without thinking, but I think that's the case so just as I think that she has very sharp instincts, extremely sharp. I don't know if she has the three marks as Bacillus claims she does, but she's good your Highness, very good."

"Thank you, Iku. You can go."

The messenger bowed his head and left the room. A silence fell while Demone started playing with the reste of his meringue biscuit.

"Tullius, what do you think?"

"For God's sake!" interjected Vodyano. "You're not capable of making your own decisions without asking the entire world first."

"Tullius isn't the whole world," Demone icily replied. "And I don't give a damn that you are getting impatient. Your friend Bacillus is a rat. Perhaps even a good rat but I wouldn't trust him for anything."

"Bacillus has served you with honor and devotion for decades! This Tullius is nothing but a social climber!"

Vodyano wanted to get up but Demone slammed his fist on the table, paralyzing him with fear.

"We haven't finished this conversation and you know it as well as I do."

"So then, it's up to you! It's up to you to MAKE YOUR DECISION!"

"Demone stepped back and started gnawing on his thumb before motioning to Tullius. Tullius stepped forward and stood between the two men.

"So then Tullius, what do you think of our latest failure at Lakota?"

"The Untunkat are known for their skills as warriors and strategists."

"And us? Since when are we known for our ability to lose our battles?" thundered Demone. Tullius stood still. He was used to Demone's explosive behavior.

"Your Grace, if you'll allow me... Our goal wasn't to capture them at Lakota... Lakota's layout is too difficult."

"And in Stad, what's our goal my dear Tullius?"

"To capture her Master."

"Will you succeed?"

"It'll be a lot more difficult for them to get from Stad to the Angelrie."

“Tullius, my friend, your explanations distress me. I believed you to be a better strategist than THAT!” He slammed his fists on the table again and all the dishes clinked one another. Tullius inhaled deeply.

“Yes, your Grace.”

“They MUST NOT reach the Angelrie, is that clear?” Tullius trembled with fear while nodding weakly. “Listen to me carefully if you value your life, Tullius... You will stop Emma at the old entrance.”

“At the old entrance?” The glacial look in Demone’s eyes left no room for misinterpretation. “Yes, your Grace,” he replied as he backed away.

“Tullius...” The man stopped dead in his tracks. “Under no circumstances shall Emma get in the Angelrie, is that CLEAR?”

Tullius jumped, terrified by his commander.

“Yes, your Grace!”

“Summon your best men Tullius, I won’t tolerate another failure, UNDERSTOOD?”

“Yes, your Grace.”

Demone dismissed him with a wave of his hand and the political advisor hastened to exit the room.

“Well then, what do you suggest?”

“I see that you don’t trust your political advisor.”

“Father never trusted them.”

“Then why did you let him organize the attack at Lakota?”

“I needed to buy time Vodyano... I don’t know if you’ve noticed but I was injured.” Demone tilted his chair backwards, balancing it on its two back legs. “This girl, this Emma, what do you know about her?”

“Not a lot. She’s Shuilu’s illegitimate daughter... Well, it looks as though he adopted her and that she was raised by the Razel, the one that resigned.”

“Cheroki?” Vodyano nodded. “But tell me, isn’t she the one that Bacillus avoided like the Plague?” Vodyano gave a consenting smile then reconsidered.

“That’s not the point... Bacillus says she’s a madwoman.”

“Who? Cheroki or Emma?”

“This isn’t the time for jokes Demone... It’s TIME.” Demone stopped swaying on his chair when he realized that his brother was serious. He very well knew what he wanted... Vodyano wanted him to go to the edge of the Dark Side. He wanted Demone to call upon their ancestor for aid.

“On one condition,” he said. Vodyano was listening carefully. “I want you to follow her. Otherwise...”

“Going to the Dark Side would be useless,”said Vodyano finishing the sentence. “What do you think? That it’s not already planned?”

Demone flashed a satisfied grin. He didn’t have any further doubts. As of tomorrow, he would leave to meet the one he had prepared to meet his whole entire life... He would go and meet the Black Master.”

## Chapter 25: The candidate

It was night and the city was asleep. Emma still had a hard time realizing that she was going to enter Stad but that she wasn't going to be able to stay there. She who had always associated this capital with that of absolute freedom, the freedom she had always searched for in Bourbeau, she found it profoundly ironic to be obligated to go there without any other option than to follow the rules necessary for her survival. She observed the lights of the city from her hiding spot behind a rock at the foot of which the Azrak flowed while Hapi listened for any movements in the vicinity of Om Touk gate. There wasn't a single guard in sight, which heightened her anxiety level. The absence of a guard near the entrance gate didn't make any sense.

"Did you get it all down?" Daniel was by her side, waiting for a sign from the river master.

"Yes Daniel. What a mother hen you can be sometimes."

"Mother hen...Really?" Daniel was offended.

"Tell me something. It's a simple question... You and Darbihar, you aren't really friends are you?"

"Emma, do you really think that now is the time to talk about that?" Daniel looked Emma straight in the eyes.

"What?" she replied without losing her cool. "You'd rather we spoke about your feelings for Aurora?"

Daniel choked with surprise. He clenched his teeth, irritated by her sudden remark.

"You've been paying too much attention to your red thread again Emma."

"Reading my red thread too much, eh? I may die one hundred times before I see you again and you tell me I'm reading my red thread too much? What a joke. You sound like Bacillus."

"At least he was able to get you to shut your mouth. From time to time that is."

They remained silent and tense. Emma would've liked to know, to speak, to explain... Leaving Daniel now after having spent the last few days together so that she could pass her first test bothered her. She could only rely on herself. Daniel had taken her rosary away from her since it was forbidden to have it in the Baptismal area. She had to brave the challenge without the help of Mama Pape or the Well Destined One. It seemed for her seemed to be an insurmountable task.

"Everything will be all right Emma, stop dwelling on it."

"Can the Angels read your thoughts?" she asked after a few moments.

"No. They learn to read facial expressions, body language, energies... That enables them to know a lot about what's going on in a person's mind... But not everything."

"Not everything? For instance, how about feelings of love, then?"

"You're bound and determined to ask me questions about Aurora," replied Daniel irritably. "Do I ask you questions about Darbihar or... I don't know, say Antonio?"

"Antonio is married Daniel," replied Emma without allowing any of her feelings to show. She was actually quite amused by Daniel's reaction. "No, I'm not looking to ask you questions about Aurora Daniel. I'm just trying to understand."

Daniel frowned as he thought things over. He scratched his head as he continued to stare at the Om Touk door. It wouldn't be long before Darbihar gave them a signal.

"Emma."

"Yes Daniel," answered Emma as she stared at the water looking for any signs from Hapi.

"Be careful in the Baptismal area."

Emma turned to look at him, surprised by his concern and the emotion in his voice. Daniel looked at her with sincerity, his heart beating wildly. They remained silent, staring into one another's eyes. Emma felt feelings within her start to stir while Daniel continued gazing at her with unusual intensity. She would've loved if the time were to stop, to dive into his gaze and nestle in his arms. And much to her surprise she understood what it was to read someone's face... Daniel felt exactly as she did.

Just then, the river became agitated and ripples started to form on the surface. The emotion of the moment had broken and Emma focused on the water. Daniel withdrew his bow and the young woman understood that that had been their signal. She came out of hiding and laid herself flat on the ground. She rolled a few feet until she reached the riverbank. She used a shell to plug her nose and then she waited. Within a few seconds the water began to rise and Emma was swept away in the swell. Emma was thrust to the bottom of the riverbed and she began swimming. She followed the movements of the luminescent algae that Hapi used in order to create a path for her.

Emma made progress through the turbulent water. The fauna and her surroundings seemed peaceful but her visibility wasn't good. She followed the luminescent path for several minutes and was breathing under water thanks to Hapi's breathing apparatus made out of a shell. She was swept along until she suddenly felt the force of the swell of water brutally slow down. The algae ceased to sway and Emma remained still, deliberately breathing slowly as Darbihar had taught her to do. She was impatient as she waited for Hapi's signal.

She looked around and noticed the riverbed which she recalled could reach depths of a few hundred feet, something she thought impossible to imagine. Fish were swimming around her and she had the impression for an instant that she herself was part of their ecosystem. She heard a muffled sound and the algae began emitting luminous rays of different intensities although it didn't move. Emma understood that she needed to get ready.

The water started to stir and looked as though it was going to boil, tiny bubbles slowly started to form which were rapidly replaced by a whirlwind of larger and larger bubbles. Emma felt herself being pushed to the surface by the impressive force of the river. A huge bubble pushed her from behind and Emma felt herself seated on a makeshift stool which was lifting her at top speed. She looked up and realized that she was near the surface. She was thrown out of the water and a wave slammed her onto the wall of the fortress. She barely had had the time to catch her

breath when Darbihar caught hold of her arms. He lifted her up and placed her into a lock full of stones.

Darbihar left Emma on the ground, stunned, and rushed to quickly shut the door. He stayed still for several seconds listening for any movement outside. Nobody had seen them nor figured out their strategy. They had succeeded.

“Hurry up, let’s go.” He shook Emma who was still dazed and in shock.

“Just a second,” she contested, “I’m not feeling my best.”

Darbihar studied the young woman who hadn’t seemed to recover from the challenge. Her eyes were all red and she had bits of algae all over her body. She shook her head back and forth as if she were seasick. Emma suddenly smelled an odor of peppered mint which shook her senses. The dizziness, the feeling of having been crushed by the water, the swollen eyes... all disappeared in a matter of seconds to such a point that she got up to pull the tube out of her nose.

“Geez, what is that stuff?”

“It’s a homemade recipe that you should know about. Daniel is always talking about your qualities as an Alchemist.”

“It’s not authorized, that one, that’s all I can tell you.”

Darbihar shook his head in agreement, laughing at the sight of Emma weak and vulnerable, stumbling around like a puppet. She rolled her head as if she was under some heavy drug and exhaled. She remained still for several seconds and little by little her vision began to clear until she abruptly felt a flash, a boost which brought her completely back to her senses. She was refreshed and full of energy.

“Good, that’s much better.” She turned to Darbihar. “Are we going or what?”

Darbihar raised an eyebrow in exasperation and started off ahead of her. They walked along several feet inside the fortress before arriving at a forged iron gate. Darbihar activated the locking mechanism to open the gate with his blue grey stone under the envious eyes of Emma. They left the fortress and took refuge in a house where a woman was waiting for them.

“Hi Mother.”

Darbihar went up to his mother who was seated near a table reading. She placed her book down and immediately gave her son a kiss.

“Here Miss, take these and you can get changed upstairs.”

Emma obediently accepted the clothes that the woman had given her and left to get changed in this shelter full of promise. With a certain frenzy, she quickly put on the tunic worn by candidates. Anybody hoping to become a member of the Angelrie was required to wear one it for the duration of training. Though eggplant in color, she particularly liked the three designs embroidered on the chest which represented the three waters protecting the Angelrie. She adjusted her shirt and her pants, tied her hair back and looked at herself in the mirror. She was ready.

"I'm proud of you Emma," she told herself as she looked at her reflection. "Don't disappoint me."

She went back downstairs into the main room. Darbihar and his mother were laughing.

"Oh! How pretty you look!" exclaimed Flower. "It's just perfect on you. You never told me how pretty she was," reproached Flower.

"What? You talked to your mother about me?"

"Of course, it's not every day that my son comes to see me with a young woman to protect for the service of the Angelrie." Flower smiled warmly at Emma. "Here, take this."

Flower handed her a glass of water and a few hazelnuts which Emma hurried to swallow. She felt completely in control of herself now.

"Ready."

"Good," replied Darbihar. "Mother, thanks for everything."

"Darbihar gave his mother a kiss and took a lantern. Flower handed Emma a burkseemi which she reluctantly accepted.

"If one day, someone told me that this thing was going to save my hide, I would tell them that they're full of it."

"Never say never."

"I should've put my fist in his face," said Emma.

"Violence breeds violence."

"My God, and a philosopher as well! Daniel could've at least warned me. Can we go?"

Darbihar offered her his arm which she readily accepted and they left under the protective eyes of Flower.

"Remember, if we come across a guard..."

"I shut my big mouth and pretend to be your obedient and devoted wife."

"You let me do the talking, is that understood, Emma?"

They walked along in silence through the streets which separated them from the temple. They hadn't encountered a single person.

"To think that Demone forgot about me," said Emma, through the veil which completely shrouded her head.

"Hush. Keep moving instead of talking nonsense."

Darbihar entrusted Emma with his blue stone and she headed over to the archway of the gate that gave access to Baray Temple. She tried to hide herself as best she could while she heard the locking mechanism react to the light of the stone. She went through the gate and closed it immediately behind her. She took a deep breath. This was it. She took off her burkseemi and set it on the ground with the magic stone which was the shape of a teardrop. For a second she

hesitated over whether or not to give it back but Darbihar's presence persuaded her. She let go of the stone and closed her eyes.

"Believe in your destiny."

Darbihar gave her a knowing look when he was suddenly stopped by a guard.

"Hey you, what are you doing there?"

"I'm walking," he answered calmly. "I came to pray."

"At this hour?"

"I just found out that my wife is pregnant and I was so happy that I wanted to hug the temple gates."

Darbihar backed away from the gate. Emma had vanished. He had such an enthusiastic smile on his face that the guard allowed him to approach the gate again. He reached over and discretely picked up his blue stone and the burkseemi.

"Good luck Emma."

The young woman walked among the temple's majestic ruins. The night transformed their appearance into mysterious specters, as if each of the stones were whispering forbidden words. She followed Darbihar's instructions and came upon a large rectangular reflecting pool situated at the center of the temple. She found the edges of the hatch located in between the stones sunken into the ground. She took her dagger and cut through the grass which was preventing her from opening it. Using strength and patience she managed to open the lid and discovered a kind of vertical column underneath. Wooden planks were arranged into a makeshift stairwell and Emma stepped inside without hesitating. She shut the lid and sighed.

"Finally, I made it... I'm going to enter the Baptismal zone! Phew... No pressure Emma, no pressure AT ALL!"

She continued walking down until she reached the end of the tunnel where she found herself in a hallway. She noticed that she didn't need any light which she found to be very strange but she was thankful not to have to carry a torch or to worry about lighting. She continued until she reached a gallery that was dug into the ground. Her trek seemed endless. She realized that she needed to be about 6 miles from Stad in order to complete the Baptism test so she resigned herself to silently continue following the hallway for more than an hour.

Emma started to get bored when she spotted a carved gate. Her face suddenly lit up. She had reached her goal. She joyfully passed through the archway when a sudden flash of light momentarily blinded her. She jerked away from the rays. She suddenly understood why the corridor was full of light. She knew that she had reached a light station. She stood still with her eyes closed, obliging them to get used to all the surrounding energy. She regained her composure and blindly stepped forward holding her arms out in front of her to guide her. She advanced for several steps until she was able to touch the wall on the other side of the room. She slid her hand along the wall until she touched the first mirror. Using her instinct, she scanned the smooth surface with her fingers making sure it was the one that she was looking for and then she pushed with all her might. The mirror resisted and Emma winced as she kept insisting until finally it gave in and Emma felt the light begin to diminish.

Emma repeated the exercise along the length of the wall until she reached the tenth mirror. The light had become tolerable for the human eye and she blinked several times until the flashes disappeared and she was able to open her eyes again normally. She glanced around the room triumphantly and focused on the middle of the wall. There she found a tiny cavity into which she pressed her finger. The light began to dance around the room.

“And now, the chalice.”

The rays of light swept the room as harmoniously and graciously as ballerinas dancing in *Swan Lake*. She watched as the sparks transformed themselves into droplets that froze in the air. Little by little the shape of a chalice appeared and much to the young woman’s amazement transformed itself into the real thing.

“Nature certainly has a way of doing things.”

Emma stepped forward and just as the lights stopped flashing the chalice dropped into her hands. Emma thought for a second about all the candidates that had thought of the solution but had allowed the chalice to crash on the ground. She turned the chalice upside down and set it on the place in the wall around the edge of the cavity where she had originally pressed her finger and waited. Wheels turned and activated chains with a swaying motion which opened the door. Emma entered the second room, that of the Nourishers.

She gazed upon the room which was decorated with shiny ice sculptures. A big block took center stage and another smaller block was placed in front of it. She felt as if she was being invited to sit down for a drink in a bar. She sat down on what appeared to be a makeshift barstool and studied the counter. On the other side of the “bar” were 30 taps, each having a tag with a number on it corresponding to the different waters to be tasted. She eyed the chalice.

“O.K. so here we go! And the winning number is 27.”

A water hose materialized in the air as if it were ice heading in her direction. She looked on wide-eyed as she saw the water reach her and fill her chalice with transparent water. She observed the water as she thought about Darbihar’s advice to keep an eye out for any changes in the shades of the water color. Little by little, the liquid changed color and turned greenish.

“Nope, it’s not that one.”

She poured the water onto the ground without drinking any of it. She breathed in slowly.

“Come on, concentrate. You made a bet with Daniel that you’d win in three tries... The 5! The correct number is 5, I’m sure of it.”

Barely had she said the number when the water started to come to life. In just a few seconds her chalice was full again. She waited and noticed that it started to get turquoise spots on it which started to get bigger the more that she looked at it.

“Yuck! She threw away the water. And yet, I’m sure that there’s a 5 but it can’t be the... Oh! I know! The 25!”

Sure of herself, she held out the chalice and watched as the water flowed from the tap. After a few seconds, the water lit up a clear and gleaming pink color.

“I win! The Nourisher’s color!”

She drank the water in one victorious gulp and set the cup on the bar. She raised an arm and waited. Nothing stirred and Emma saw herself as if she was at death's door, yet she was sure that she had drunk the right water. She looked around the room desperately. She noticed that one of the partitions seemed to have an irregular shine to it but that it was also beginning to melt away into tiny drops. As she got closer she noticed that the block of ice slowly began to disappear and after several minutes the ice opened up to a passageway leading to a lock. Across from the lock, Emma saw the wheels of a water mill.

"Study the wheels, understand the fluid's mechanics and forces, decipher the mechanism, all with the risk of being crushed," she repeated to herself. She recalled all the explanations that Daniel had insisted that she repeat over and over so that she would understand how to activate the system. "Physics is Chinese to me," she sighed although she wasn't about to lose her concentration.

Emma stepped forward. She noticed the wheel and the duct that normally brought forth the clean water. Underneath, she saw the stagnant water which she was to purify in order to be able to dive into the tube. She leaned over making a face as she spotted the crank handles which activated the system.

"Oh, I would've preferred a good old fashioned switch... Sometimes simply living with Nature is exhausting."

She picked out what she thought was the correct crank handle and started to turn it with all her might. She knew that if she had chosen the wrong one, the mechanism could crush her to pieces in a matter of seconds. After a few minutes the system continued running, the water started flowing and the wheel turned. Little by little the water mixed. Emma continued turning the handle without letting go. A hatch opened and several panels of microscopic threads were driven into the water starting the cleaning process. Emma's face had turned bright red as a result of all her effort but she didn't stop, thinking about the nice bath that she would soon be taking. Emma exhaled as she studied the water which now seemed sufficiently clear so she stopped her efforts.

"Gee... and me who saw the work of the Repairmen as a simple mom and pop operation! Boy, was I wrong!"

She stood above the reflecting pool trying to figure out where she could find the famous "tube". She smiled when she spotted some piping dug into the wall. The young woman dove into the water toward the set up. She was immediately sucked up by the pipe. She closed her eyes and prayed for salvation when she felt fresh air and droplets falling on her face. She found herself surrounded by magnificent greenery. She got up. The water had carried her to a beautiful natural pool. She barely had had the time to realize her good fortune when an ear-splitting noise pierced her eardrums.

Emma had the reflex to cover her ears with her hands when she recalled Daniel's advice. She lowered her head into the water and the noise immediately disappeared. Overjoyed, Emma fell into the pool. She naturally went to the surface to get out and the noise started again. Rather than get out she lay in a prone position and allowed herself to be taken by the natural movement of the river.

As she allowed herself to be swept along she thought about how well the Angels did things. After the physical challenge came the challenge which obliged one to relax, to allow one's body

to be massaged by the water's healing qualities. Emma reached the last pool which formed a type of cul-de-sac where the water appeared to stagnate. She took a breath and closed her eyes in order to concentrate. She listened to the water's music which seemed to be whispering to her.

"Don't throw the baby out with the bath water," whispered the voice.

"Baby? What baby?" Emma sat up and immediately the deafening noise pounded her eardrums. "Crap!" Emma lay back down. "What a nightmare! This test is impossible; I'm going to destroy my ears."

She stayed lying down as the water level started to rise. She knew that she had to solve the puzzle as soon as possible because the water was rising dangerously close to the ceiling and her with it.

"The baby, the bath water... Tell the good from the bad... Get back to basics... to what is vital!" Emma got up and was overcome by the noise. "Vital!" she repeated. "Communicating with water is vital, for Goodness' sake!"

The noise suddenly stopped and Emma sighed with relief. All of a sudden, she felt the water gurgle and start to recede. She quickly found herself again on the ground, all the water had gone through a tiny hole as if it were a bathtub.

Emma tried to get up pushing her hand on the ground when she suddenly felt it sinking into the quicksand that Darbihar had described. The ground was rough and Emma felt water rising and adding onto it a solid layer. The mass shaped itself over the entire surface and the water had risen up to Emma's waist without her even realizing it.

"Well played! You are SURROUNDED by QUICKSAND. God! So, this is the highlight! Bloody quicksand!"

A door opened on the other side of the bathtub and Emma spotted the room which led to that of the Alchemists. She only had a couple hundred feet or so to go but when she looked at the distance which separated her from her objective, she knew that she was going to suffer. Emma slowly moved her arms and legs while they continued float about in the quicksand.

"I've never seen so many so-called challenges where you have to stay lying down in order to survive..."

Emma advanced ever so slowly toward the door paying attention to keep herself surrounded by water so that she wouldn't get trapped by the clay and other solid particles which seemed to want to imprison her. When she reached the door, she realized that the opening was 3 feet above her head.

"Of course, otherwise it would've been too easy if the water was at the same level as the door! And I get up there, how? Channel your energy like they said to do," cursed Emma as she thought about Daniel and Darbihar's rhetoric.

She eyed the wall where she noticed several imperfections that could be used to help her hoist herself up... Now she had to find a way to get herself out of the sand without getting stuck in it like a prisoner. She thought about the energy that she needed to channel and that she must have a maximum amount of water surrounding her in order to avoid the sand becoming sticky.

“Water, always water, really... it’s an obsession with the Angels.”

Emma moved around to make sure the water was circulating around her. She pressed herself against the wall and placed her hands on a spot where she could hoist herself. She took a deep breath pulling herself up as she lifted her right foot and stuck her shoe into a hole. Immediately after, she shifted her weight and lifted her other leg while attempting to grab at a bump in the wall with her right hand. She thanked the heavens above that she had succeeded because had she missed it by even half an inch she would’ve fallen. She would’ve been swallowed by the quicksand. Emma had the impression that she had turned into some kind of spider. She used all her remaining strength to escape the muddy bog where she’d found herself. She easily climbed the wall which separated her from the next step of her challenge.

She succeeded in reaching the threshold of the next room by pushing herself using both hands. Never had she imagined that she would be capable of controlling her body’s movements and generate such force in order to reach paradise. She panted noisily as she sat down on the ground in the Alchemists room.

“Good, I hope I can find a place to take a shower somewhere.”

She got up and tried to brush off the mud and greenish grime that she was covered in. She was soaking wet and she suddenly realized that it was freezing cold.

“Oh... and to die of the cold because of wet clothing. Check!”

She took a few steps and folded her arms over her chest. The room was full of frozen stalactites and stalagmites that seemed to be taunting her. She entered the room where a gigantic flake seemingly frozen in place by the cold was the main centerpiece. She noticed the form of a lock hidden by the snow, which was the key to the test. Emma found herself in front of the door which opened out onto the slide which she was to take until she reached the Strategist’s test; the one Emma was so impatient to pass. But, before anything else, she had to get out of this intergalactic freezing cold.

She went over to a stalactite and broke off a piece of ice. She winced as she felt it stick to her skin and felt her senses numbing. She exhaled hot air in order to transform the ice into liquid while her breath made cloudy gaseous vapor appear. A gust of wind kicked up and Emma shivered. She waited for the liquid water to penetrate the interior of the lock before placing her lips flush with the ground. She breathed hot air into the hole in the lock hoping that the three states of water would join together to liberate her from this inclement area. She couldn’t feel her feet anymore; the clay had hardened on her clothing and she felt as if she was going to fall down. She tried to keep breathing as much as she could but the temperature was just too cold. She laid down on the ground and curled herself into a ball, overcome with feverish tremors. Emma lost consciousness.

She was brutally awakened just seconds afterwards, thrown head first onto the Baptismal slide. Emma jumped back to life after a stone hit her dead on in the cheek. Water sprayed into her eyes and she realized that she was tumbling several hundred yards down a long slope. She tried to readjust her body while drawing her hand up to the side of her face. She was bleeding beneath her ear and around her jaw line. She pressed her fingers on her injury as she continued to plummet. Her limbs still hurt and Emma felt just how weak she was. The tests had drained her of all her strength. The water pushed her until she reached the famous triangular

room. She took advantage of it to wash her face, arms and legs. Reaching the end, she landed into a basin filled with warm and scented bathwater.

Emma appreciated the water's warmth which soothed her aching muscles. She got out of the water and noticed that her pants were in shreds. She ripped the fabric and made the garment into a makeshift pair of shorts. She washed her legs that were full of cuts. She ripped off what was left of the sleeves of her blouse and immediately she felt ready to conquer the next rite of passage. She stepped to the middle of the room where she found a digital tablet and a piece of chalk set upon a stool.

"Good. Father, it's our turn!"

Emma sat down and checked out her surroundings. Across from her a glass window pane enabled her to watch the depths of the oceans and Emma asked herself how she was going to find the strength to pass this test. Her thoughts got interrupted by the tablet which lit up right before her eyes. The black screen suddenly came to life.

"Maeva with respect to Gabriel's test. You must answer a series of questions. No mistakes allowed."

"Good. The show must go on," said Emma determinedly.

"What is the first nutritional rule for an Angel?"

"Easy. Eat dried bananas, seeds and grains, dried fruits at any time and certainly after having a vision... I'll add Baptism too," muttered Emma who was dying of hunger.

"Good. You will find some fruit in the hatch in your stool."

Emma did a double take. She leaned over to discover a small handle which opened up the stool. She devoured the bananas, the almonds and all the dried fruits that she found inside.

"Father! My goodness, thank you! You keep updating this area!" She chewed with delight as she pressed on the tablet to go on to the next question.

"Who founded the Angelrie?"

"You've got to be kidding me! Namaka, OBVIOUSLY."

"An easy question can hide a more difficult one... Who obliged the Angelrie to sign the Compromise?"

"Sheitan, the heir to the Black Master," grumbled Emma, thinking about the treaty that was going to join Daniel and Aurora. Father, you better move us along to the next level."

"What does a purple stone do?"

"What? The storeroom, seriously?"

"Who's the guardian of the springs?"

"Tetis. Say, when are you going to ask me some real questions?"

"What is copra used for?"

“To transform the useful properties found in seeds or oils.”

The questions continue to bombard Emma but she wasn't the slightest bit overwhelmed by them. She realized that between what she'd learned during her trip to reach the Angelrie and Cheroki's and Shuilu's teachings she knew all the answers right off the top of her head.

“Last question. When will Julien, the actual Mickael of the Angelrie, be replaced?”

Emma was out of breath. She felt her heart start to race. She lost all the joy she had in answering the questions.

“January 25th, six months from now.”

She swallowed hard as she thought about Daniel and Aurora. If he wanted to honor the terms of the Compromise, Daniel had to marry Demone's sister before that date and the thought alone angered Emma. She didn't pay attention to the door which opened onto the raging water and she simply lost the will to fight. The screen went blank and she put the tablet down on the ground. She only had one minute to throw herself into the water or the gate would shut leaving her stuck in the room. With a twinge of sorrow, Emma resolved herself to get up and go over to the door. To the left, against the wall were hung a surfboard, a life buoy, a canoe, fishing nets, and a mask and a snorkel. Without hesitating she took the surfboard when the mechanism triggered. She entered some sort of lock which served as a makeshift elevator going toward the surface. She gave a last look around the room.

“Goodbye, father.”

The elevator traveled through the water and Emma looked on with fascination at the peaceful life underwater. As she approached the surface, Emma took a deep breath and mustered all that remained of her courage and her strength as the door opened. Emma attached the leash of her surfboard to her foot and launched herself onto the surface of the water. The door shut behind her and morbid thoughts entered Emma's consciousness that she couldn't get rid of. She didn't have any time to think about it when a wave suddenly swept her away leaving her breathless. Emma managed to reach the surface but her board was tossed around in every direction by the powerful movement of the water. The current dragged her and pulled her away from the beach where she was supposed to go. She started to swim towards the beach and succeeded in avoiding another wave by diving beneath it.

“Good God... and I always said surfing was overrated.”

Emma finally got back on her board despite the turbulent water. She paddled with all her might to reach the waves that would bring her to the beach.

“Oh my... When you spoke about the laws of the Universe Daniel, you weren't kidding around.”

Emma continued to fight her way through water that nearly dragged her into a whirlpool, tossing her about this way and that. Several times she scraped herself against coral or rocks. Gallons and gallons of water poured over her but without giving up she succeeded in reaching the swells and watched out for the wave that would bring her to the sandy beach. She spotted three waves in formation and seized the opportunity. With the first breaker she stood up on her board and surfed confidently as she was pushed along by the swell. She was getting nearer to the edge when she lost her balance and fell off the board and got swept up into the wave's whirlpool. Her surfboard kept pulling her and Emma had a hard time getting to the surface. She

detached the leash and scrambled toward the surface. She had just the time to take a breath when a new wave came crashing down on her head. The current continued to try to pull her back into the open sea but Emma struggled. She swam with all her energy toward the water's edge and cried out with rage as she neared shallow water. When her feet could finally touch the ground, she bent forward and dragged herself from the water. Exhausted, she collapsed onto the sand, out of breath. She had made it. Her body was covered in blood, her limbs were achy and her head was pounding... She had the impression as if her body was broken into thousands of tiny pieces, but she was smiling. She had succeeded in living her dream, she was about to present herself as a candidate at the Angelrie.

She leaned down and placed her forehead on the sand and started whispering her thanks when she felt the edge of a sword poking her in the shoulder.

"Emma, what a nice surprise!"

Emma looked up, breathless. Bacillus was hovering over her.

"What must I do now? Kill you immediately or thrust my sword into your shoulder like you dared to do to his Grace?"

Emma remained motionless for an instant while Bacillus continued sneering at her, overjoyed to have Shuilu's daughter brought to her knees. While in the midst of declaring victory, Emma took advantage of the situation by grabbing his leg. She easily made him fall down and she then quickly took the opportunity to quickly get back on her feet. She took two steps back and brandished her dagger.

"Bacillus, how did you get here?" The man winced in pain as he put his hand on his back.

"What? You don't think that the Angelrie is going to subject you to a final challenge?"

He stood up to face her.

"You sold me to Demone."

"Correction: I suggested you to Demone but for the time being I haven't gotten anything because you haven't allowed yourself to be captured!"

Bacillus charged at Emma with his sword, narrowly missing her. She looked around for a longer weapon, a club, anything longer that could help her to fight the Cheir of Bourbeau. Her haggard gaze was evidence enough, the beach was deserted and Emma was left to her own devices to fight this man that she so detested.

"I'll repeat the question Bacillus... How did you get here? Nobody can enter..."

"Apart from a candidate?"

"You're not a candidate Bacillus! You could never be a candidate!"

"Who says that I've never been, Emma? Who's going to tell you that one day I also believed in the dream of the Angelrie?"

Emma opened her eyes wide with fright. Never had she thought that Bacillus could have been accepted by the members of the Angelrie seeing as how he was the living breathing proof of immorality and corruption.

“Can’t believe it, can you, huh? And then again, I’m here... Facing you thanks to the transmutation whose first rule teaches us as follows: one cannot find oneself in an area where it’s inopportune or where one hasn’t already been. Which option do you prefer Emma? The one where I’m welcome or that I’ve already been there?”

Emma knew the answer and she found the revelation nauseating. Bacillus had been a candidate at the Angelrie... Emma just couldn’t bring herself to believe it.

“How is that possible? You’re not worthy of becoming a candidate!”

“There was a time Emma... A time when the Angels were so desperate that they even accepted volunteers!”

“Volunteers? You’re lying! Never has the Angelrie accepted volunteers!” Emma jabbed her dagger which Bacillus avoided by taking a few steps backward.

“You don’t believe me then? And why then do you think I tolerated Cheroki?” Emma understood.

“She screwed up your plans, right? That’s why you’re afraid of her.”

“I’m not afraid of her!” he shouted with rage as he charged toward her with his sword. Emma turned away.

“And now what? Your Demone’s servant?”

“Let’s just say that I adhere to his values if that pleases you.”

“What are you doing here? You came to kill me?”

“What do you think Emma? You’re the enemy now. And Demone’s enemies are my enemies.”

Bacillus shouted and hurled himself toward Emma and his sword brushed her thigh which spurted with blood. The young woman swung around enraged. She drove her dagger into Bacillus’ upper back and then jabbed him in the kidneys with her elbow. Bacillus cried out in pain and dropped his sword. He fell to the ground dragging Emma with him. He forced with all his weight on her clavicle, and she went mad. She moved away from him, then got up and took hold of his sword. Bacillus was on the ground, exhausted but with a smile on his face. A black liquid started seeping from his pores. Emma pointed the sword directly against his nose.

“Go ahead, Emma, kill me. I’ve never been a good fighter in any case.”

“I want to know! I want to know the story Bacillus!”

“Really? And then what, you let me live?” Emma considered the proposition of this demon like man and agreed. “How ironic Emma! You, allowing me to live!”

“Speak Bacillus.” Emma gained even more control over him by slicing into the upper part of his shoulder.

Bacillus howled in pain, panting. He looked at his sticky wound and Emma noticed that it wasn’t blood flowing from his body. She raised her eyebrows in horror as she recalled the black water that Cheroki had spoken about.

"You, you're one of those men, aren't you? It's for him that you entered the Angelrie, in order to betray them!" Bacillus snickered with an evil inflection in his voice.

"Do you really think that I'm going to tell you the day that he called for me? That he told me that I was to be his servant? That very same day Cheroki found me polluting the water of the Azrak... And yes, your precious Hapi kept it from you. He was on death's doorstep!"

"And Cheroki saved him, right?"

"She decontaminated everything, that idiot! Never have I seen someone so gifted. She embarrassed me in front of my Master," explained Bacillus bitterly. "She gave me the anthracite that changed my skin! I became nothing more than pimples and pus. She would've killed me, your dear Cheroki, if the Black Master hadn't come to get me!"

Cheroki couldn't kill ANYBODY!" retorted Emma, losing her temper. "You're lying!"

"I survived," whispered Bacillus, his strength gone but a faint smile showing on his lips. "Watch yourself, there's nothing you can do to him, he's too powerful."

"The Black Master is dead!" Bacillus burst out laughing, an evil and threatening laugh.

"You don't understand, Emma." He looked at her with contempt. "The Black Master doesn't die! Go ahead, kill me! Kill me Emma Herevai-Batala or must I say, Emma Blue!"

Emma looked at this man, this louse that she detested. She would have loved to kill him, she would have loved to chop him into pieces, but she found herself incapable of doing so. She felt a force within her, a force that she couldn't overcome. All of a sudden, she felt a sharp pain under her clavicle.

"You see Emma. You too, you feel his presence. You too, you can serve Evil."

Emma fell to the ground, much to Bacillus' satisfaction. She tried taking several breaths as she felt her breath becoming constricted. She lifted her eyes to look at Bacillus who was on his knees citing incantations with his eyes closed and his hands full of sand. Emma closed her eyes and instinctively headed for the water. She was rinsing herself with difficulty when she discovered a green powder which had been spread over her shoulder.

"What is this, Bacillus?" She got out of the water in a fury and hurried over to the man who looked like a ghost.

All of a sudden, Bacillus was overtaken by some type of seizure and his expression became frozen. He grabbed Emma's calves and smeared sand on her. His eyes filled with a greenish color and black blood spurted from his mouth.

"You wear his marks Emma Blue. Never will you be a candidate." He sneered as Emma blinked, not understanding what he meant. "YOUR MARKS EMMA! Your marks, where do they come from? Don't you know at least?" Emma didn't answer, she felt as if her heart was about to explode in her chest. "They told you that you came from the spring, right? Your marks are green, Emma, HIS COLOR! You are one of his heirs! And now, you are his servant!" He broke out into a fit of evil laughter that echoed across the beach. Overtaken by the panic of the announcement, a tear escaped from Emma's eyes. "I can die in peace Emma because now you are one of US."

“So you think you poisoned me, huh? You’re nothing but a liar!”

She gave Bacillus a kick and his body began to decompose right before her eyes transforming into ashes. She made a face of disgust when she felt a sudden pain shoot through her legs. She rushed down to the water to bathe herself again and the pain went away. When she got out of the water she noticed that her calves were tattooed with some sort of white design. She didn’t even bother to try to understand what it was and walked to the other end of the beach. She admired the arch and the magnificent needle that gave the impression that it was piercing through the sky. Emma had tears in her eyes. She had succeeded, and just as quickly, she had failed. She was going to victoriously reach the Angelrie only to be condemned. Her ears were ringing, and she felt a strange liquid settling into her shoulder and she couldn’t do anything to get rid of it. As she neared the needle, she returned back to the water. This time, the sea was calm. She swam in the crystal-clear water. The sea water calmed the pain from her cuts and began to heal the different injuries that Emma had collected over the course of her adventure. The water soothed the young woman’s fear, persuaded that Bacillus had condemned her to die with his greenish liquid and devilish sand.

She neared the cliffs and swam until she reached the door. She immediately recognized the entry door; it seemed to pop up out of nowhere and didn’t look right on such a magnificent piece of rock that Nature had made. For a second she asked herself if the door was going to open, now that she wore the marks of Bacillus. She sighed and attempted to calm herself. She placed her hand on the door and waited. Bubbles began to form, followed by whirlpools and little ripples of water when a hatch opened just at sea level. Emma smiled, dumbfounded by all these ingenious inventions. She went into the opening feet first. She entered another dimension, a dimension where the present mixed with another era that she didn’t know.

Emma allowed herself to start sliding as Daniel had advised her to do and she watched as the rocks began changing their appearance. From structures composed of black basalt she passed rocky formations of clay and sediment until the soil became brownish and stony. She walked through the flooded area of a cave where she made out the remains of the machinery that had been used to dig the tunnel. She guessed that she was walking under the Azrak River and that she’d soon be at the Angelrie.

The current began to slow and Emma arrived in some type of pool which was the closing act of her adventure. She looked around the cave and saw that some lights were shining among the sculpted rocks, projecting floating images onto the walls of the cavern. The sculptures pointed to a corridor.

“Another passageway,” groaned Emma. “I should’ve counted how many of them I’ve been through.”

She got out of the water and wiped the edges of her shorts. She felt the weight of her exhaustion in her painful muscles. This time, water alone didn’t relax her and she felt the tension rise in her body, hardening her limbs and giving her crippling cramps. Emma winced in pain as she rubbed her hands on her calves. The surface of her skin was grainy and Emma felt small pebbly cysts forming under her tattooed skin. She exhaled and placed her hand on her shoulder where a pocket of fluid was forming under her clavicle. This time she exhaled in anger. She didn’t want to die, she would reach the Angelrie... She MUST reach the Angelrie.

“You made it, Emma. You made it,” she kept repeating to herself over and over trying to stay motivated. “I’m proud of you.”

She took the dark path and slowly made her way to the exit. She caught a glimpse of light ahead and smiled. She REALLY had made it. She was blinded by the sun and she raised her arm to shield herself from it. For a second, she looked away from the door. When she looked again, she made out Daniel's silhouette. Emma was overtaken with relief. Emma sped up as the young man opened the door with his blue stone. He'd barely had the time to open the door when Emma jumped into his arms.

First overcome by surprise then blown away by the young woman's embrace, Daniel was overwhelmed ~~taken~~ with emotion. He held her tight while Emma closed her eyes, finding peace in his arms ~~and~~ after all she had lived through. Time, the world and the goings on around them no longer had any importance. Daniel let go of her when he heard steps hurrying in their direction.

"Emma, you made it!" He was moved and proud.

"I had a few surprises along the way but everything's okay."

She lowered her arms and tried to hide the burning pain near her shoulder.

"You're injured Emma?" asked the young man, realizing that Emma must be in some kind of pain.

"It's O.K. I could do with a visit to the infirmary, if one exists."

"Of course, Emma." Daniel was leading her to the path when Darbihar showed up.

"Emma! You made it!"

He gave her a quick hug, embarrassed and clumsy but Emma didn't have the strength to care about ~~the feelings of others~~. Her vision was blurred and she felt her limbs stiffen, making it more and more difficult for her to walk. She leaned on Daniel who raised his eyebrows quizzically.

"Emma, are you all right?"

Emma collapsed on him and Daniel grabbed her to keep her from falling down. Emma passed out. Without hesitating he took her into his arms.

"Call Boris! I'll bring her to the recovery room."

Daniel rushed through the Angelrie's hallways as fast as he could. Everyone watched on alarmed. Everyone knew that Daniel's first candidate had arrived, but nobody expected her to arrive unconscious. Daniel entered the room and placed her down on the table. Emma started shivering, breaking out into a feverish sweat which alternated from freezing cold to searing hot. He gave her a glass of water as he tried to figure out where the pain was coming from when a woman entered the room.

"Daniel, get out, if you please."

Daniel nodded. He left Emma who had sunk into some kind of crazy dementia. Daniel opened the door just as Shuilu arrived.

"They're taking care of her. It's O.K. Gabriel."

"I know, Daniel. Let me in."

“Excuse me Shuilu, but you know as well as I do that it’s forbidden.”

“What? You’re going to stop me from taking care of my daughter? I don’t think so.”

Daniel was taken aback with surprise and let Shuilu pass into the recovery room.

The Gabriel went directly to the table. Emma was having convulsions and seemed to be struggling against some unknown forces.

“So? What’s going on?”

Cheroki turned to face her longtime friend.

“I don’t know Shuilu... But our friend Bacillus wasn’t kidding around.”

“What are you trying to say?” Cheroki wiped Emma’s forehead with a cloth.

“What I mean is... he very well planned his revenge. Shuilu, I have to be honest, I’m not sure that I can save her.”

“Come on, Cheroki, that can’t be true! Not you!” Cheroki opened Emma’s tunic and found the three wounds full of pus. Shuilu turned pale.

“If I save her, she’ll be marked... forever. You understand?”

“Do your best, Cheroki. Do your best.”

Shuilu lost his commanding presence and sat down desperately on a chair. Across from him, Emma was lifeless, her face white and her veins greenish in color... A color that Shuilu knew all too well and feared more than anything.

## Epilogue

A blue light was hovering about. It pierced through the room. The light was strong and powerful yet surprisingly soothing. It fell upon a golden mane dotted with reddish highlights. A young woman was lying on a table although her body seemed to be floating in mid-air. She was sleeping, one hand gently resting on her stomach. She was wearing an emerald green tunic which covered her golden skin. She lay motionless, breathing peacefully. She looked so beautiful and so serene. Daniel sighed, relieved.

“You’re alive.”

Daniel slid his hand on the table and caressed the three green marks that were carved into the wood, although this type of wood was known to be unalterable. For the first time, his wish was to see this vision come to life. He waited. Daniel waited for Emma to wake up.

He took a breath and timidly took a step toward her. Her beauty was simple and pure, yet alluring and captivating at the same time. Daniel breathed slowly, as if trying to keep hold of himself.

“Emma, wake up.”

He pronounced the words as if reciting a prayer, a profound prayer addressed to the entire world and its protectors.

“It’s you, you understand,” he continued.

He took another step forward until he was within a few inches of her. The closer he got to her, the more his heart raced. She was laying there, in front of him, motionless and asleep, her tender lips seemingly waiting in expectation. Daniel shook his head to get a hold of himself.

“You have a mission to accomplish, Emma! Your duty! Remember your duty, for the love of God! I can’t do it Emma; it’s for you to do!”

The young woman didn’t stir and Daniel was exasperated. He desperately hoped that this vision would help Emma come out of the trance that she had fallen into upon her arrival at the Angelrie. He studied his surroundings, everything was similar to the visions that he’d had before meeting Emma.

“I don’t understand why nothing is changing! You don’t move!” He stopped and stared at her chain. “Why are you still wearing the Rainbow? Tell me! Tell me why! Why is nothing happening?”

Daniel was infuriated when he felt the breeze. He noticed that it had started just a few seconds before he had fallen under the charm of Emma’s image. He knew all too well what was going to happen as of this moment. His face would be caught up in the aura that the young woman exuded. As like always, he wouldn’t have any more control over his movements, nor his hand which would cause him to fall into the trap. Daniel would be trapped in the giant sticky spider web which silently awaited him. He bent his head down and felt the air caress his cheek. He closed his eyes, clenching his hands together to delay the moment that he’s shift towards her. He waited a few more seconds when he suddenly heard a scream. He opened his eyes wide with surprise.

Daniel was no longer in the room; he was just across from the headstone. Emma had disappeared and the plain was on fire. He heard the parrot squawk and he turned towards it. Daniel didn't understand what this tropical bird was doing there; it was so rare to see one of them in his visions. He was pulled from his thoughts by the silhouette of a woman walking. She smiled at him and pointed toward the horizon. He looked at the black sky. He turned back to face her but she was gone. In her place two bodies lay lifeless on the ground. They were both bleeding and burning at the same time. Daniel had difficulty breathing as he felt the air being compressed in his lungs and a searing pain that enveloped his body. Never before had he felt such pain. He slumped to the ground when a violent gust of wind overtook the scene.

He got up with difficulty and realized that everything had vanished. A bolt of lightning flashed overhead and the rain began to fall. He found Emma lying down on the fiery sand. It was as if they had found themselves in the clutches of hell. A deafening sound rang in his ears and he cried out in pain. The ground shook and Daniel felt the fire begin to engulf his body, his tunic was burning hot and he felt the flames start to nip at his skin. He looked up and saw a ghostly figure hovering above him. The black mass stood before him, threatening, ready to take him prisoner. Daniel looked at him with a rebellious and aggressive look in his eyes. He grabbed some of the flaming soil and threw it in his direction. He ran to get Emma. He took her into his arms and turned toward the thundering ocean. When they reached the water's edge the rain stopped and Daniel felt Emma begin to stir. She opened her eyes.

"Daniel, what are you doing here?" Cherokee entered the recovery room in order to change the candles and the incense.

Daniel usually sat in the chair that she customarily sat in to watch over Emma but this time he found himself laying over Emma's body. Daniel opened his eyes, totally confused by the fury of the former nanny's voice. Just then, Emma moved and lifted her head.

"Oh, my head..."

"Emma!" exclaimed Cherokee surprised to see that she had awoken. The old nanny looked first at Daniel then at Emma and then she understood. "Daniel! You saved Emma!"

The two young people turned toward the woman, stunned and distraught. Cherokee rushed to the cabinet. She served them two glasses of tea and handed them some bananas.

"I'll be right back," she said hurriedly.

She went away, allowing Emma and Daniel to come back to their senses. Daniel felt pain in his limbs. He looked at his tunic which was in shreds. Parts of his skin were all red and he realized that he had been burned.

"I don't understand. I was in a vision. I couldn't have gotten burned."

He hoisted himself up with difficulty trying to understand what had happened. Emma was leaning on her elbows, thinking. She was trying to recall the last thing she remembered. All of a sudden, she brought her hand up to her shoulder. There was no more pocket of fluid and she didn't feel any more pain. She had left the beach and Bacillus behind.

"Where am I?"

"At the Angelrie. In the recovery room... You came back, marked by..."

“Bacillus,” she answered. Emma remembered. “Bacillus is dead.”

“For sure, and it’s no great loss.”

“How long have I...” She looked around the room realizing that she was completely naked, covered only by a thin linen blanket. “My God! Daniel! What are you doing here? This is a room for women only!”

“Come on, Emma! You’re not going to start that, are you? I don’t know if you’ve noticed but I rescued you from your vision for God’s sakes!”

Emma looked at him as she studied the situation. Daniel realized that the young woman was embarrassed to be facing him with nothing other than a simple piece of cloth covering her. He took a sigh, grabbed a red blanket and threw it over to her. She quickly covered herself and hid her marks, embarrassed.

“I know that you have those marks, Emma, don’t...” Daniel walked towards her, intrigued.

“Hey, not so close!”

“Emma, your marks!”

“What! Hands off! Get away...” She wanted to block Daniel’s finger from trying to touch her when she noticed that her marks had changed color. “They’re blue! Daniel, my marks turned blue!”

“I can see that Emma... Your crescent is blue,” he answered, perplexed.

“But what is that supposed to mean?”

Just then Shuilu opened the door and Emma turned to her adoptive father. He smiled at her with great relief. He rushed to take her in his arms. Daniel and Cherokee watched in silence as Darbihar entered the room.

“What! Don’t tell me that the whole Angelrie is going to come in here now,” huffed Daniel.

“I’m not the whole Angelrie,” retorted Darbihar dryly. “I am as much responsible for Emma’s situation as you are.”

“Stop it you two,” scolded Cherokee. “This really isn’t the time.”

“Daniel seems to have forgotten that I’m the one that sent Emma into the secret passageway.”

“How could I forget Darbihar, given that she was caught in a trap set by Bacillus.”

“I forbid you to imply...”

“That’s enough,” shouted Shuilu. “If you don’t know how to behave properly I suggest that you get yourselves out of here immediately! Emma has been through a tremendous ordeal and she needs her rest.”

“She’s my candidate Shuilu! And I just rescued her from her vision! Don’t you think I’m entitled to stay with her?”

“Shuilu, I don’t think that it should be up to him to watch over her...” continued Darbihar.

“That’s ENOUGH!” This time it was Emma’s turn to shout. They all turned to look at her. “I don’t know if you’ve all noticed, but first of all, I AM HERE and I decide by myself who stays and who goes. Secondly, I don’t know if you’ve taken note or not, but we have things that are a lot more serious to take care of around here than your little cockfight!”

She got up and went over to Cheroki to show her that her marks had turned blue. Cheroki gently pressed her hand on them as she thought about the hues of Emma’s skin. She and Shuilu exchanged looks as he leaned over to examine Emma.

“It’s Bacillus. He said that he marked me. He said that I never came from the Spring Community. He said that I was one of his heirs.”

Emma’s hasty and frightening words weighed heavily on the silence of the room.

“It makes no sense,” said Daniel to break the silence.

“On the contrary, it makes perfect sense,” corrected Cheroki.

“Excuse me?” added Darbihar. “Since when do the marks of the Fontanelle change color?”

“It’s crystal clear,” continued the nanny without bothering to answer. She turned to Shuilu. “Isn’t that right Shuilu?” He nodded as he let out a sigh and looked at Emma with a heavy heart. Everyone was waiting for his reaction.

“What does it mean, Father?” stammered Emma, full of worry. “I can’t become a candidate, is that it?” Shuilu smiled as he placed his hand reassuringly on his daughter’s shoulder.

“No, Emma. You can be a candidate but...”

“But?” repeated Emma Blue as she hung on her father’s every word.

“You will be a Strategist Angel my daughter. Your marks speak for you. Dark blue, Emma... You must follow the path of your good old father.”

Emma accepted the news with both great surprise and relief. Shuilu took her in his arms. He was ecstatic. As for Emma, she was delighted to find that she was no longer branded...The change in colors left her perplexed but at least she wasn’t condemned to serve the Black Master. Nothing else had any importance at this very moment. She looked up to see the faces of Darbihar and Daniel. Both of them displayed the same disappointment, they were both shamefaced and clumsy, their eyes staring down at the floor. Just then, Noah entered the room with a platter full of fruit and cakes. All eyes turned to him.

“And here we are, everything to pep up our two ghosts!” declared Noah enthusiastically. He noticed the silence and the fact that all eyes were on him. “What? What happened?” Emma immediately deciphered his clothing, he was a Strategist Angel. And from his badge he looked to be the next Angel Gabriel soon. Emma looked at her father. She immediately understood that he would soon be stepping down. He met her gaze and replied with a nod of his head, full of hope and tenderness. She looked away from Shuilu and took a few steps toward Noah.

“Ia orana, my name is Emma Blue...” Noah acknowledged her although somewhat taken aback. “Well then, would you take me as your candidate?”

Coming next.

Volume 2: Gabriel's choice.