

# IN THE LAND OF MAREITHIA

by

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## Chapter One: On the Great Rainbow Ship

*Today is the day!* Trembling with excitement, fourteen-year-old Thea stood at the prow of the great rainbow ship which quietly sat in the sky, like a frog on a lily pad. The sun rose graciously over the magnificent meadowlands, marshlands and mountains of Mareithia. Its light yellow fingers inched up to tap on the great multi-coloured vessel. “Just look at all this, Thea! This is spectacular!” she said to herself. “Remember this moment!”

The morning light began to tickle the misted patterns of spider webs in the grasses. A few tiny, red insects crawled, half awake, over a scattering of wet leaves. Life slowly stirred, refreshed after a fragrant sleep.

*Here I am on this extraordinary rainbow ship in Mareithia picking up members from everywhere for the council meeting! Me, Thea, a part of the great Astriel Lumena council! I just can't wait to start travelling...hmmm...so...besides picking up members on the surface, we're actually going inside Mareithia to pick up someone who lives there...what was the term? Oh yes, an 'in-dweller.' And then we're flying up into space to pick up star people! I've waited so long for this! I can't believe it!* Her thoughts spiralled around and around like whirlpools in the marshlands. She started to get nervous. *No, Thea. Don't get nervous. You can do this and everything will be fine. Oh, I hope everything will be all right! Well, anyway, I'm not alone. I have my marmotasha friends with their little monkey fingers and the wonderful ribbonoters who are excellent pilots and hopefully I'll see Platona soon, my dear lempier friend with her soft, long rabbit ears.*

Exhilarated, Thea called out to the others onboard as the ship slowly descended towards the surface of Mareithia. “Ribbonoters, marmotashas, come over here and see what's

happening!” She turned around impatiently, her long, green, iridescent hair—still damp from the morning air—floating like sea grass in the shallows. Her small, pale face tensed with excitement. “Come and watch everyone and everything wake up.” Thea swirled back and happily continued to view the scene below, her turquoise garment billowing cheerfully, and pointed with a feverish finger: “Look, there are the bee balancers nudging the orchada flowers to open for a breakfast of pollen. Oh! And look over here! I see some long-eared lempers already nibbling the grasses in the meadowlands. They really do look like rabbits! There they are together with those lovely white deer-like soonshows. The villagers are missing all of this! They must still be sleeping after a long night in the fields...mmm.” She pulled in a deep breath of pleasure and murmured, “You can just smell Mareithia warming up!” Her violet eyes closed and her delicate nose inhaled the scent of the freshly moistened earth.

Although Thea was human, it was thought that she also held another origin. No one was certain: apparently, she was born *in* the Sea of Sevenaaz, her parents had suddenly disappeared when she was very young and that before they vanished they made sure that Thea would always be well taken care of. But by whom? And how did she come to live in the forest? Her history was very puzzling.

Thea delighted in the warm, salty waters of the aquamarine Sea of Sevenaaz. She quickly made friends with the affectionate and wise chelonians, the great sea turtles, who travelled the oh! tunnels throughout Mareithia. With the chelonians as guides, Thea learned a great deal about these water tunnels, swimming them with curiosity and wonder. When she eventually surfaced at the golden lake in the middle of the sacred forest of Mareithia, her heart plucked joyfully, like carefree fingers on a harp. This place smelled like home! The shimmering water and the exquisite songs of the raymerry birds echoing in the oak and pine, formed a peaceful place

within her. *I want to live here!* she thought with fervour. Her pearly legs, strong from long, watery travels, glowed as she silently emerged from the water. *This is where I belong!*

Gradually, Thea made friends with kind and unusual visitors who frequented the forest and she forged a special bond with Platona. Platona was a female lempur with the soft body of a rabbit, who often looked to Thea with large, expressive eyes wanting her very long, velvety ears patted. Thea tensed up when too many people surrounded her and so she enjoyed spending time alone with Platona, who, for the most part, was quiet and comforting. However, Thea knew that she was becoming more social; it was only a matter of practice and time.

"We're coming! We're coming!" The muffled singing of the ribbonoters floated and pirouetted through the air from the back of the rainbow.

Usually, several ribbonoters piloted the great rainbow ship when it wished to travel long distances. With their rounded heads slightly flattened and colourful ribbons flowing from their short sticklike bodies, the ribbonoters resembled notes on a scale, dancing and fervently singing together with wide and shiny mouths. They spoke very well and very loudly when necessary, but what they really enjoyed was changing the colours of their bodies and ribbons by singing. Sometimes they slid their voices from high to low and watched each other shift from the purple to the blue and then travel down through the greens and the yellows and the oranges to finally nestle in the bright red. At other times they played "singing hide and seek," trying to match the changing colours of their forms with the bands of colour in the rainbow's wall.

Their ribbons were decorative but also practical: some were short and convenient which the ribbonoters used as hands and feet and others were longer and kept them warm and cozy. The ribbons were also excellent for the ship's navigation. The pilots braided them with the sturdiest

part of the rainbow—the prow—to create reins so that they could easily guide the vessel to wherever it wanted to travel.

Like the soonshows, who were keepers of the land of Mareithia, the ribbonoters, too, had a special friendship with nature—the sky. They kept a constant check on the weather. Regularly, a group would leave the ship, using their ribbons as propellers, to observe unusual cloud formations and possibly dangerous precipitation.

In general, the ribbonoters were cheery and patient beings but their patience was often tried by the marmotashas—yellow and white striped minute and mischievous monkeys with long, strong tails and very busy fingers which they used for playing and speaking. These creatures, the size of a child's forearm, were captivating but also irritating.

"We're coming, we are coming!" The muffled sound of the ribbonoters grew a little louder.

The marmotashas had also heard Thea's call and started to scramble towards her voice. Confusion set in. The ribbonoters near the back of the rainbow, continued floating and dancing through the warm, woolly inside of the ship while the marmotashas, who were in the middle section, tumbled and toppled and tripped over each other. They swung up and slid down the ship's fleecy hills and jumped on fuzzy cloud-like pillows which lay scattered about.

"We are coming through! Be careful of our ribbons!" shouted out a cluster as they tried to dance over the monkeys. It was too late. Two very quick and able marmotashas grabbed hold of some passing ribbons with their powerful tails and held on for dear life as they were wildly swung forward. The remaining monkeys continued onward muddling and tumbling.

Finally, everyone was at the front edge of the rainbow with Thea, who was kneeling and carefully pulling up and holding on to a large, sturdy section of red and orange. Everyone looked down below to Mareithia.

“Oh! This is beautiful!” said the ribbonoters in awe as they watched the orchada flowers squirt out golden pollen in the morning air exciting the bee balmers even more. “Look, do you see the white deer? The soonshows? Over there near one of the streams? They look so elegant especially when they move their wings and their tails!”

Thea nodded her head in agreement. She knew a great deal about history and nature. “The soonshows are ancient, just like the star people and the great turtles called the chelonians. I think they were all created at the same time as Mareithia itself. Apparently, soonshows are guardians of the land; they can swim and walk and fly to ensure that all nature and all beings remain well—”

“Please stop it. Stop it!” Some ribbonoters, irritated, turned around to see an especially mischievous marmotasha fiddling with their various coloured ribbons, tying them together and attaching them to some of the colours inside the rainbow. The monkey, with its tiny fingers moving rapidly in front of his yellow-striped face, tried to explain how much fun it all was.

“That may be true for you, but we cannot move if you continue to tie our ribbons together. If you go back to the centre of the rainbow you can play with as many furry bits of colour as you like.”

All eight marmotashas sprinted off in clumps, fingering each other's fur. They tumbled around and over to finally reach the centre. There they eagerly started pulling off small, fluffy pieces of blue and orange light and scrambled to the rainbow's edge to toss them overboard. Laughing with their fingers, they watched the small coloured pieces leisurely float to the ground.

Every now and then a raymerry, the song-sparrow bird of the sacred forest, flew by with a coloured fragment of rainbow drifting on its kind head.

At the prow of the rainbow, the cluster of ribbonoters, shaking their broad heads and looking up at Thea—they came to her knees—said, “We’re sorry for interrupting you. Those tiny marmotashas—”

“Are fascinating but annoying,” Thea completed as she looked up with a shrug and a smile. “I suppose they take advantage knowing that they are visitors. Just like me.” Thea looked down again to the land below. “I live there.” She pointed to the sacred forest with its ancient oaks—the quercusans—and scented pines. In its very centre lay the mysterious and magnificent golden lake, crowned by flowers and grasses, glistening like a holy jewel.

“The sacred forest of Mareithia,” murmured the ribbonoters as they intertwined their bands of colour, pulling themselves closer to each other and remained quiet for a moment. “We’d heard that you lived there, Thea. We always thought that the forest was a strange place but now that we have met you maybe it isn’t after all.”

“Well...actually...” Thea twisted her pale body a little and became somewhat uncomfortable with the discussion. “There *are* some interesting things going on in the forest. It’s more fascinating than eerie. It’s more about love and less about fear.”

Suddenly, there was a jerk and for an instant the rainbow burst into thousands of tiny glittering particles of light. Then, whole again, it began to move.

“Time to prepare for a major ride,” the ribbonoters called out loudly in unison so that the marmotashas could hear their voices from further inside the ship. “We’re going to pick up the members of the great council, the Astriel Lumena, for an important meeting above the sacred forest of Mareithia.”

Thea nodded her head knowingly; she had been chosen to greet the various participants as they came aboard. Sitting down where she was at the prow of the ship, Thea closed her eyes and enjoyed the wind streaming across her face as the rainbow accelerated. *It is going to be wonderful to meet all the members from everywhere*, she thought. *I wonder if I know any of them? I wonder if...Rom-Fine...* Thea cast off the thought and opened her eyes. Snuggling down just enough to ensure that she was safe, Thea was ready to observe everything that was about to happen. Her heart beat quickly.

The marmotashas had also heard the announcement, had felt the pull of the ship and became increasingly agitated. The voices of the ribbonoters continued to echo throughout the rainbow: “Hold on to the fluffy hills; pretend that you are riding a horse because we will zigzag across the land, travel down into the inner parts of Mareithia, zip up again past the clouds and journey up into the sky towards the stars and beyond. This is going to be a roller coaster ride!”

The monkeys lay down, anchored their tails in the thickest part of the fleecy mounds, placed downy pillows under their heads and played finger games while they waited. The ribbonoters, now true pilots at the prow, held on firmly to the reins and enjoyed the pulsating guidance of the rainbow. They sent a warm smile to Thea who was now comfortably secured close by, and the journey began in earnest.

The rainbow quickly skimmed over the meadowlands. It scooped up some orchada plants, flowers and pollen, which all tumbled aboard along with some confused but happy bee balmers. Before everything could get settled in properly, the rainbow moved towards a trio of soonshows and a few lempers who were all enjoying their breakfast not far from the streams. The soonshows began to fret. The tops of their hooves had turned red and the surrounding grass had become red and purple! Soonshow-Leef, the eldest of the three, had seen many rainbows in

his lifetime; yet, he was just as anxious as his brother and sister. It was true that the soonshows were keepers of the land and knew many of its secrets but none of them had ever seen such brilliant colours falling so close on their bodies and around their feet. Where did these colours come from? They stamped nervously and began to rustle their wings and their tails. The lempers, on the other hand, looked up nonchalantly and then went back to nibbling the fresh grass. One lempers, however, wanting to feel important as lempers always do, stood up on her hind legs and began to clear her throat. “Ahem, ahem, I believe we have a unique and chivalrous visitation from a foreign location and—”

“*Please* stop speaking in such complicated language and eat your food,” interrupted another lempers, grouchy because he had slept poorly. “If you continue, we will just have to tie our ears around our chins because the morning is a time for food and *quiet*.”

The first lempers was just about to crouch back down to continue nibbling when she looked up to see Thea in the rainbow. “Thea, Thea, it is I, Platona! Thea, it is I, Platona!” Using all four paws she began to race to Thea as quickly as she could without losing her dignity.

It was difficult for Thea to hear and to see who was calling her from below. Although they resembled bronze-coloured rabbits, lempers could change their colour and the texture of their bodies to match their surroundings. As Platona started to run towards the ship, she was striped green and grey imitating the tall grasses and their shadows where she had been munching. Now as she frantically zigzagged into the open field she turned the colour of the morning sun.

*Ahh! Platona! There she is, a fluffy piece of moving sunlight!* Thea grinned and called out in happy surprise, “Platona, my dear friend! What are you doing here? Why are you not in the forest?”

“That is a long narrative, too extensive to describe now. I observe that some of the soonshows and the lempers are travelling with you in the rainbow. Could I come as well?”

“Of course. We were going to look for you in the forest. Finding you here in the meadowlands is even better. Now, please go back to where you were eating with the other lempers. The rainbow will pick you all up and transport you to the Grand Hall so that you can enjoy the trip to the council. I’m at the front of the ship and the Hall is close by, Platona, so you won't be too far from me.”

Platona happily bounded back to where she had been nibbling alongside Soonshow-Leef, who continued to be anxious. The white bodies of the soonshows were now splattered with so many bright colours that they didn't know what to do. They began to jostle each other, quivering their wings and tails, ready to take flight. Soonshow-Leef nervously moved his antlered head, and began to project rapid images between them. Platona, her mouth full of fresh grass tops, looked up to see pictures of questions and concern moving between the soonshows. She gently rubbed her soft, long ears against the trembling legs of Soonshow-Leef to comfort him. A moment later, a part of the rainbow graciously lay itself down as a moving carpet for the soonshows and the lempers and transported them up and into the Grand Hall. There the happy bee balmers were already rustling the air close to the white trumpeted orchada blossoms hoping for more golden pollen. Its fragrance was sweet and summery like warm apples sitting in clover.

“Is everyone properly settled?” asked one ribbonoter to a colleague who had just returned from inspecting the Grand Hall.

“Yes, everyone is comfortable and secured. We are ready to go!”

“And away!” the pilot ribbonoters shouted, their voices filled with adventure and their ribbon hands firmly holding on to the braided reins of the rainbow.

“And away!” echoed the members of the council in their various languages.

## Chapter Two: Inside and Up!

The rainbow jerked briefly, exploded into thousands of fragments of diamond light and then melted back into its glorious, colourful form, ascending, a glittering garland gliding in the delicate sky of morning.

“We are sweeping upwards to position the ship properly and then we travel down *into* Mareithia! Watch carefully not to miss the earth tunnels and the oh! tunnels. Sharp curve coming up; be prepared.” The ribbonoters masterfully negotiated the turn and prepared for the descent into the earth.

Members became thrilled and turned around to see the excitement in the others. The friendship between them felt like velvet.

Down flew the ship. The moment it touched the ground, it flattened out like a hand sliding into a glove and slowly began to pass through the soil. The rainbow walls became a very thin membrane through which everyone could see inside Mareithia.

“Ooh! This is incredible! Are we really seeing *inside* the earth?” Awe and surprise gleamed from everyone’s faces and bodies in the Grand Hall, including the ribbonoters who were no longer on pilot duty—only a few of them had ever travelled inner Mareithia. “Oh! Do you see those earth tunnels? They’re so long and twisted and so *clean*! And look at these small moles with their beautiful coloured flower noses and look, over there, some tiny mole-babies sleeping on the ledges!” Everyone was completely enthralled.

Pulling her turquoise garment a little further down past her opalescent knees, Thea stood up, timid yet determined, in the front of the council members. She had been asked to guide this part of the journey. As she began to speak about her beloved Mareithia, her shyness dropped away, like a hand from a table. *No need to hold on to being shy when you speak about what you love*, she gently reminded herself. Looking directly at everyone she explained, “These earth tunnels are kept wonderfully clean, dry, and airy by our lura friends and their offspring, the lurrettas, when they get older. Luras are very hard workers and sleep in shifts so that pathways are always kept open, day and night, in dry weather and in wet. They feel earthquakes with their flowered noses and warn the villagers in the meadowlands when the land becomes unstable. When rumblings and underground movement become dangerous, they communicate with the great turtles, the chelonians, who are responsible for the tremendous underground waterways called the oh! tunnels. These remarkable chelonians help out whenever they can. We’ll see them in a moment.”

The rainbow sank further down into the earth and the magnificent water tunnels became visible. Great turtle families were swimming back and forth playing tag, blowing bubbles and licking at some of the long leaves, curtains of light and shadow, floating and eddying in the currents. Every now and then, an adult chelonian would nudge a few plants in place to ensure that the waterways stayed open for emergencies and for easy swimming.

“The chelonians in these oh! tunnels take their work very seriously,” remarked Thea. “Once, a few years ago Mareithia was paralyzed because a thick, sticky, smelly fog had slithered down from the skies and had blocked the oh! tunnels *and* the earth tunnels. The chelonians and the luras did their very best to clean everything up but it wasn't enough. Some of Mareithia’s inhabitants vanished. It was a very sad time...” Thea’s voice sounded hollow.

There was a moment of silence; no one knew what to say. The soonshows shifted uncomfortably and the lempers closed their large eyes and frowned. *Could this calamity happen again?*

The stretched rainbow continued down, down into the earth leaving behind the tunnels and approached a wide-open country. *Ah, this is better! I have more space! I can breathe again in any colour I wish,* the rainbow thought to itself in blue and began to spiral into the creamy-orange sky. It looped around the tender, inner sun to create a circle of fellowship. Here was the glorious inner earth of Mareithia! Everyone aboard called out in joy and wonder at this world with its shimmering lakes, its green hills and its delicate, delightful star. Below them, people of all shapes, sizes and colours were sitting outside their roundhouses telling stories, laughing and eating what seemed to be fruit and nuts.

“Look there. Look at the different coloured bodies of these people! Do you think they are related to our rainbow?” the ribbonoters asked. “And over there, black-skinned people with white stripes on their arms and their backs! They are *so* beautiful!”

“This is my marvellous, inner Mareithia. Soon I will meet Rom-Fine once again. I just know it,” Thea whispered to herself. Then with a wide smile, she moved as close to the outer edge of the rainbow as possible.

The rainbow picked up Thea’s thoughts in pink because her thoughts were kind and smelled of warm sand. It slowly unravelled itself from the delicate sun like a sleepy caterpillar from around a stem and moved towards the roundhouses and the laughing inhabitants—the in-dwellers. It stopped just over their heads and sent out an emerald ray of invitation to a jovial, corpulent and very tall blue-skinned man. It was Rom-Fine, a much-loved leader of inner Mareithia. He brushed away his shoulder-length straight blonde hair from his face as he looked

up to see the green light shining down on the him. It was time for the meeting of the Astriel Lumena. Earlier that day Rom-Fine had received a message from the hallowed voice of Mareithia itself which still echoed in his head: *Come immediately to the Astriel Lumena. We have good news to share but we also have concerns.*

The in-dwellers of the roundhouses stood up and with a friendly gesture pulled and pushed and tickled Rom-Fine until he was standing up under the green beam. “Your vacation is over, Rom-Fine. Back to work you go!” Everyone laughed: the short, the long, the stripped, the coloured, the old and the young.

Rom-Fine laughed back at them and nodded his head in agreement. “All right! But while I’m gone, I trust you’ll keep the lakes full and don’t forget to hide the sun!”

There was more explosive laughter because everyone knew that the lakes filled themselves and that the sun was very capable of shielding itself so that the in-dwellers could sleep comfortably every “night.”

Standing tall inside the emerald ray of light and waving back to his wonderful inner earth community, Rom-Fine felt great affection for them and for the land. Then, in a flash, he was gone. As the in-dwellers had seen this type of transportation many times before they were not surprised. Every time Rom-Fine vanished, they would come and touch the spot of his disappearance; it always felt warm and soapy and made their hands tingle.

“Rom-Fine!” Thea spoke softly but with intense inner excitement as he materialized before her in the Grand Hall. Within seconds she was joyfully smothered inside his strong, gentle and blue arms. “How wonderful to be with you again!”

Rom-Fine laughed, and like a father to his daughter, he stroked her glistening green hair. “I see you are in charge here to make sure we get to the sacred forest. You must be looking forward to going back. Is Platona with you?”

Platona, having very acute hearing, was already dashing up as elegantly as possible and stood on her hind legs. “Ahem, ahem” she said as she cleared her throat, “if eyesight serves me correctly, I discern a tall and friendly ultramarine gentleman with whom I am already acquainted.”

Rom-Fine crouched down and looked into Platona’s big eyes. “Yes, we have met before and I’m happy to see that you are taking good care of Thea.”

Platona started to clear her throat again to reply, but the rainbow ship was already preparing for the next stage of its voyage. There was the familiar jerk with thousands of particles of light appearing and disappearing instantaneously and then the vessel moved back up and towards the small sun in the creamy-orange sky.

There were several ribbonoter pilots back at its helm now to negotiate a complicated travel pattern that was coming up. “Everyone find a secure place again please, we are going to pass through the sun and enter greater space. We are off to the stars and the galaxies to gather up members from the Star Nations Assembly and the Intergalactic Partnership.”

During all these events, the marmotashas were getting quite bored playing inside the rainbow by themselves; they wanted to be with the others. Ignoring the caution to remain secure, they released their tails from the fluffy hills and tumbled and scrambled towards and into the Grand Hall which lay close to the front of the ship. It seemed as if everything was happening there! When they realized that the bee balmers and the lempers were aboard they stopped immediately and turned their attention on them. With happy and busy fingers, the marmotashas

frantically pulled off pieces of coloured rainbow and began to stuff them in the ears of the unsuspecting lempers. Bee balmers buzzed around the lempers warning them of the coming danger but it was useless. The monkeys were already busy. Many annoying ‘ahems’ filled the air as the lempers attempted to stand up on their hind legs and recuperate a sense of dignity. Finally, frustration took over.

“Please depart!” cried a few lempers as they tried to swat the monkeys with their blocked ears as best as they could. “This is very irritating. Kindly leave us in peace!” A few lempers managed to clean their ears by gently using their hind paws and then immediately tied their ears under their chins for safety. This did not increase their hearing but it certainly kept their ear canals clean.

The bee balmers, who also liked to tease the lempers, were merciful and droned the marmotashas away towards the three soonshows who were quietly standing together flashing images of adventure and curiosity. Everyone in the Grand Hall could see these pictures but not everyone understood them.

“Please do something about those eight monkeys,” the ribbonoter pilots, concerned, called out from behind their navigational system. “We have a dangerous manoeuvre to make when we fly into the sun and everyone needs to be buckled in as soon as possible.”

*Let's see if we can help the marmotashas,* flashed Soonshow-Leef to his siblings and all three quietly shifted over to where the monkeys, now cornered by the buzzing bee balmers, were trying to cover their faces with their tails. *They are so small in size but so big for making trouble,* flashed Soonshow-Leef tolerantly shaking his antlered head. *Do you see that section in the other corner of the Hall filled with mirrors and bells and climbing ropes that change into slides? Let's see if we can invite them to play there.*

The soonshows began to flash images of playgrounds and shiny things to the marmotashas who had removed their tails from their faces. As they followed the pictures, the monkeys started a discussion between themselves using their fingers quickly and precisely. The more they fingered the greater their excitement. *Yes! Yes!! Yes!!!* They bobbed with their heads and their hands. *Yes! We go there now! Now! Now!! Now!!!*

The marmotashas were just settled in when the last warning was sent out by the ribbonoters: “Is everyone fastened in their seats?”

A quick tour of the Grand Hall showed that the orchada plants had nicely rooted themselves in a very comfortable cloud chair and were toning a lullaby, the bee balms held fast to the inside of the flowers to keep themselves powdered with their beloved pollen and the soonshows lay down in a fluffy section on the floor in the middle of the room. Rom-Fine and Thea were sitting together on a huge, fleecy sofa—Platona between them—and the other lempers huddled close by their feet, adding extra warmth.

Suddenly, everything in the Grand Hall began to ripple.

“Rom-Fine, I can’t seem to see anything but waves and small particles moving in and out of the room,” exclaimed Thea opening and shutting her eyes rapidly. “Now I see another ‘me’ in front of me! No! I see two, no three ‘me’s’ in front of me and they’re becoming swirling waves just like the waves on the golden lake in the sacred forest!”

Rom-Fine nodded his smiling head, enjoying Thea’s discoveries. “That is only the beginning, the best is yet to come. You are among friends, Thea. Let your self go and enjoy this experience because it is very rare.”

As soon as Rom-Fine finished speaking, the rippling stopped and there was only one Thea in the hall. But quickly something else began to happen—everything and everyone started

to fold up! The walls of the room closed in gently like the wings of a huge butterfly and all that remained of the Grand Hall was a ball of white light. For an instant nothing else existed not even the great rainbow. Everything had become an enormous sphere of light. There was no time and no sound. The entire universe seemed to hold its breath; all life was suspended. Only a pulsating ball of brilliant light filled the place and that light was made of love.

This lasted for only a moment and then everything and everyone unfolded again into the Grand Hall.

“We are through!” the ribbonoter pilots called out cheerfully to everyone. “We have gone through the inner earth sun and Mareithia’s skies! Now we are travelling higher up and passing through the last region of Mareithia’s atmosphere—the exosphere. From there we enter the space of other planets. We shall reach the Star Nations Assembly shortly to pick up Seemer and Tannaël.”

Seemer, a young, tallish man with wavy brown hair and tawny skin, lived inside the planet Cera which was surrounded by twelve small stars. He came from ancient lineage and was hundreds of years old or even thousands of years old if the villagers were to be believed. It was rumoured that Seemer, Soonshow-Leef and the great turtles, the chelonians, were present when Mareithia was created. According to legend, the name Seemer meant ‘the undefined one’ in the ancient tongue. This was understandable because Seemer could materialize from light form to human form when necessary. Not only could he change his body but he could also change the thoughts of others if they were willing to exchange lower thoughts for higher ones. Seemer had travelled to many worlds in his lifetime and had seen many wonders. Yet, a large part of his heart rested with Mareithia. Perhaps it was his great fondness for all its inhabitants. After all he had

helped many of them pass through the calamity called The Rawl—the thick and relentless glutinous fog which had suffocated much life in inner and outer Mareithia.

Tannaël, too, was a citizen of Cera. With her thick, red, rolling hair, her slanted green eyes and light skin, she was lovely and kind. She continually wanted everyone and everything to be whole and healthy and so, wherever possible, she healed those who asked for help. Tannaël was also full of mischief. She frequently blew kisses to the lempers; they felt embarrassed but secretly they *loved* Tannaël and her kisses.

Tannaël had met Seemer at a special school in Cera where they both learned about other worlds and other people. They shared the responsibility of leading the Star Nations Assembly. As a result, Tannaël and Seemer were not only close associates but also very good friends. Tannaël, too, had visited Mareithia frequently and, like Seemer, a large part her heart lay there. She knew about the difficult times in the land with the devastating Rawl and still flinched whenever her thoughts turned to the villagers' memories of destruction.

In the Grand Hall everyone became more and more excited as the great rainbow ship sailed up and through the exosphere.

“Soon you’ll see your friend Seemer again,” Thea said to Rom-Fine with a smile. “It looks like a very happy reunion for us all.”

Rom-Fine shifted somewhat uncomfortably. Although the cloud sofa was too small to truly accommodate the tall blue in-dweller, that was not the real reason why he moved. He had an uneasy feeling—perhaps the reunion at the Astriel Lumena would not be as happy as Thea thought. But he said nothing and instead squeezed her hand in friendship.

“We have just entered interplanetary space and now see the planet Cera in the distance,” announced the ribbonoter pilots. “If you would like to see Cera simply touch the wall of the rainbow and it will become completely transparent.”

Immediately all eight monkeys in their play area had their fingers tapped furiously on the wall: *Now you see the planet, now you don't, now you see the planet now you don't...* The tapping was continuous. Luckily, in another area further away from the marmotashas, the wall had also become transparent. There, to the relief of many, an unbroken and magnificent view shone forth from pure black space—the Planet Cera with its twelve, miniature, encircling stars.

As Cera grew closer and closer and larger and larger, an oval shaped bubble left the underside of the planet and began to float gently towards the rainbow. In it were two figures: Tannaël and Seemer. Delight filled the room as the members watched the silver bubble, surrounded by darkest space, move slowly and surely towards the multi-coloured ship. They held their breath, as they watched the occupants gradually float closer to the outside wall of the Grand Hall. At the moment of contact with the rainbow ship, the transport bubble melted and, in so doing, created an opening for the two Cerans to walk through.

### **Chapter Three: From Space to the Astriel Lumena**

“Welcome aboard the council rainbow ship!” Thea exclaimed, clapping her hands, as Tannaël and Seemer stepped into the room with heartfelt smiles. “I’m truly sorry that there is no time now for proper handshakes and hugs. The rainbow needs to get everyone to the Astriel Lumena quickly.” Thea indicated two fluffy cloud chairs close to where Rom-Fine and Platona were

sitting. “You should be very comfortable and secured there as we continue our trip into intergalactic space.”

As both Cerans made themselves at home, Rom-Fine sent them a big grin because he knew them well. “If we are going into intergalactic space that means we’ll have Gäl-iard with us. Is this so, Thea?” Rom-Fine turned to Thea as she took her seat once again.

She nodded quickly and then with luminous eyes, filled with hope and responsibility, she answered, “I have been asked by the voice of Mareithia that all members attend this council meeting. This includes Gäl-iard from the Intergalactic Partnership.” Thea’s pearly face and light violet eyes remained alert to any ensuing comments.

“Hmm, I wonder what is happening in Mareithia?” Tannaël sent a quizzical look to Rom-Fine and Seemer which they both returned.

“We would ask you for your attention for the next and last section of our travels in space,” called out the ribbonoter pilots. “As we will be jumping through folded space to shorten our journey, it is important to remain still, and to close your eyes. Let go of every thought and image you might have in your mind.”

Most of the members in the Grand Hall settled down and followed the instructions that were given: the bee balancers droned deeper inside the white trumpeted flowers as they bent over and closed up; Soonshow-Leef and his siblings placed their heads together and blanked out images and the lempers, including Platona, covered their mouths with their ears in case they had the impulse to clear their throats and speak. The marmotashas, however, were having difficulty remaining still. Scrambling back and forth and jumping around trying to close each other’s eyes, they made a racket in the play area. Eventually, they found a way. They made a circle by lying

on their backs, their fingers joined, their heads close together and their long, strong tails launched straight up in the air and anchored to the fleecy ceiling. Now their bodies and fingers were still.

“You will begin to feel a little strange,” continued the pilots, “but for only a moment. Before you know it, we will be back over Mareithia.”

There were a few murmurs in the Grand Hall and then suddenly everybody and everything simply disappeared. There was no rippling or light. Nothing existed anymore. If the inhabitants of the nearby planets had seen the rainbow shifting through the folds of their universe, they would have seen the great ship disappear instantly... and reappear somewhere else.

“We have completed our journey so please open your eyes and have a look outside. What do you see?” The teasing and enthusiastic voices of the ribbonoter pilots reverberated throughout the Grand Hall.

“Mareithia!” exclaimed the members in various languages as they opened their eyes and glanced outside. “Mareithia!” they all shouted in their own way.

“And what do you see inside this magnificent room?”

A gloriously deep voice resonated throughout the Grand Hall and a humming began. Sweet fragrances from the sea and the mountains and the meadowlands of Mareithia swirled to the tones. Then slowly an exquisite form materialized in the very center of the Grand Hall. Everyone’s eyes became fixed on that one spot. A long, egg shaped, white sparkling crystal, made up of millions of pieces of brilliant light, stood upright in the middle of the room!

Thea was astounded! She attempted to look a little closer, her eyes squinting in the bright light. *This is not possible*, she thought to herself as her astonishment grew. But it was possible and more was to happen. To Thea’s amazement and delight, each particle of light became

thicker! Softly all the pieces of the crystalline light changed into molecules and then into cells. Gradually, in front of all the council a straight and tall and slightly misty form emerged—Gäl-iard from the Intergalactic Partnership—radiating joy and fellowship!

*Gäl-iard?* Thea's pale violet eyes widened. She had never met a person who could change into anyone or anything at any time. "Form-shifter," Rom-Fine had told her once, "Gäl-iard is a true form-shifter. He can even shift into a symbol."

Thea had asked him what that meant and Rom-Fine had explained: "Gäl-iard can shift into a brilliant sword of light to defend against approaching shadow or change into a heart to express love or shift into a sun to represent birth or regrowth. You know, Thea, in the ancient tongue, 'Gäl-iard' means 'nothing and all.'"

"'Nothing and all?' Is this a riddle?" she had asked and remembered that Rom-Fine had laughed a little.

"Well, perhaps, Thea. Ancient knowledge tells us that the world exists and doesn't exist at the same time. So perhaps nothing is everything and everything is nothing."

Thea had been very confused but also very intrigued by Rom-Fine's explanation. She had always hoped to meet a form-shifter and here he was: Gäl-iard,—"nothing and all!"

Gäl-iard, complete now in human form, had long sandy-coloured hair which lay as a long, thick braid on his back and which was held together by a round, gold clasp encrusted with white diamonds. His skin was smooth and pink; his grey eyes—the colour of Mareithia's Northern Expanse—were kind yet penetrating. He smiled and continued to radiate light to all, his white garment rustling as he walked towards Seemer and Tannaël. They stood up to greet him. *It is such a great blessing to see you both again here in Mareithia. This truly is the land of our hearts.* Gäl-iard spoke to them with his mind.

*Yes, this land lies deep within us all. I feel that Mareithia is like a seed of happiness inside of me which sprouts whenever I visit,* thought Tannaël smilingly back to Gäl-iard.

Seemer nodded his head in agreement. *Yes, we have helped many villagers and have made many friends here. When I am in Cera I often think of Mareithia and send the land and its inhabitants love and encouragement. They are a brave and good people.*

All three star friends stood for a moment in happy thought and then went over to the transparent walls of the rainbow.

By now the ship had slowed down to enter the lower skies of Mareithia and offered once again a splendid view of the entire land. As it slowly curved around in a big circle from east to west, everyone could see the vast, turquoise water and white banks of the Sea of Sevanaaz. Its waters were linked to those of the golden lake in the forest as both had been born from the same star a very long time ago. The members admired the Mountains of Mauve with the unexplored Northern Expanse holding it in place and the Great Boulder Divide which bordered the Westerly Unknown. These were the mountain ranges of Mareithia. From this point the land curved down into the gentle meadowlands with its villagers and their grass and willow dwellings, and then it turned south, a direction mostly untravelled. One main road, the Cheminaad connected all of Mareithia. It began as a small path at the Sea of Sevanaaz, gradually enlarged as it bypassed the sacred forest and then changed back into a small footpath in the south. The marshlands in the Easterly Lay could be seen crowning the back part of forest and offered several hidden entrances. It was from this easterly direction that the rainbow now travelled to move over the forest. Masterfully transforming itself into a large and comfortable circle, the great coloured ship settled down above the golden, mystical lake which sparkled in the very centre of the forest of Mareithia. Like the great Sea of Sevanaaz, this forest lake was responsible for fascinating

transformations. Long ago, a glistening being of liquid light had emerged from its waters to walk the land, sprinkling golden drops everywhere he went. Perhaps one day that story would be told.

It was a heady ride for the council members because they so admired and loved Mareithia. However, they were also looking forward to the meeting. The rainbow sensed their polite impatience. It came to a full stop and relaxed more deeply into an inviting circle. The voyage was completed and the meeting of the Astriel Lumena was soon to begin! A cheerful raymerry bird, the unassuming sparrow-like resident of the woods, warbled a shining song of welcome.

Quercus, the great and wise oak whose vast roots extended far into the forest, slanted his enormous trunk and branches and then smoothly extended them upwards to enter the rainbow from below. As soon as he penetrated the various colours of the ship, everyone returned to him in the delight. “Quercus!” He happily flashed snippets of light from between the cracks of his sturdy bark.

Now that the rainbow was steady and immobile, it was time to properly greet each other. Everyone hustled about and swirled around with great joy presenting hands for shaking, ears and tails for rubbing, throwing out hugs and smiles, wishing each other friendship and good health. The minute marmotashas jumped and rolled in the coloured cloud pillows tearing off little bits and opening their tiny mouths to taste the difference between red and purple. The lempers were so excited that they forgot to tie their ears when the bee balmers came to greet them! Luckily, their greetings were buzzed from a respectful distance. Quercus swayed his branches; green leaves embroidered with delicate silver markings fluttered down to everyone like kind dreams. Soonshow-Leef quivered with inner excitement and invited his brother and sister to move closer to Seemer, Tannaël and Gäl-iard. Images of introduction flashed between the soonshows and the

star people and soon Tannaël was gently stroking the elegant white wings of Soonshow-Leef's sister. Rom-Fine's grin covered his entire blue face as Thea, with Platona close by, gave him a huge heart hug. To the utter delight of the bee balmers, the air was filled with the magnificent fragrance of orchada flowers waving their golden pollen.

This was the first meeting of the Astriel Lumena in the land of Mareithia for some time. The reason why the council had been summoned back was that there had been a Great Awakening in the land. Villagers were beginning to wonder what life was all about. They wanted to learn more and become better in what they thought and what they did. The Astriel Lumena was thrilled with all the villagers and wanted to encourage them forward. There was also another reason: the council was concerned that the dreadful Rawl might still be lurking in the land. It was essential that everyone remained vigilant; land and life could still be in danger.

Seemer, having known Rom-Fine for a long time because of the kinship between the inner earth and the star alliances, approached him. After an enthusiastic handshake he said, "Thea seems overjoyed to see you again, Rom-Fine. She has certainly grown since the last time I saw her. I think she was only a baby when the Rawl..." Seemer coughed and felt rather awkward. He didn't want to continue.

"When the Rawl pulled itself over Mareithia like a grey foul-smelling blanket and started to spit suffocating clots of sticky fog everywhere. When it touched everybody and everything horribly," completed Rom-Fine firmly. "Yes, it was a hard time and much of the land and, indeed, all living things were terribly affected by this disaster. Even in the inner earth, we are still recuperating. After all it was only fifteen years ago. I hear that there is still oozing somewhere in the land. Just hope it has left the people alone. Makes me uneasy."

Seemer nodded sympathetically. He leaned forward and half whispered to Rom-Fine, “I understand that Thea’s parents helped save Mareithia from the Rawl and they lost their lives doing so.”

Rom-Fine sighed. “Well, that was never proven. But it is true that Thea grew up in the Sea of Sevenaaz without her parents. She *did* find friends there and I, of course, also looked over her. She’s a fascinating girl and can breathe underwater! In fact, just before Thea’s parents disappeared in the greyness, her mother came to see me because she knew they were in trouble. She put her thumb behind my ear and imprinted this.”

Rom-Fine, bending over, pushed his blonde shoulder-length hair away from his right ear and showed Seemer a very small, beautiful design. It was a drawing in silvery dust of two intertwining circles, both the same size. In the very middle where the two circles intersected—the vesica piscis—there was a small perfectly formed heart filled with sparkling rose-coloured dust.

“She asked me to give this drawing to Thea. All I needed to do was to allow the love of her parents for their daughter to flow through me, take my thumb and imprint this same design behind Thea’s right ear. Just like her mother did to me.”

“And did, you, Rom-Fine?” Seemer asked with great interest.

“Ah, in a moment you will see what happened,” Rom-Fine said with a wink. Seemer wanted to ask more but noticed that everyone was settled down comfortably on the many fluffy multi-coloured pillows, waiting for the meeting to begin. Rom-Fine and Seemer went to join them.

A great voice echoed from above and from all around. “Thank you all for coming to this magnificent gathering of the Astriel Lumena council. Thank you, ribbonoter pilots, for your

marvellous navigational skills in bringing everyone here from the inner and the outer regions of Mareithia.”

The ribbonoters blushed with pleasure and fingered their ribbons a little awkwardly.

“We meet again after many years under much happier circumstances. Before we start let us take a silent moment to thank all of Creation for seeing old friends again and to seal this wonderful bond of fellowship between us all.”

There was a quiet moment and then all voices said together in reverence, joy and friendship: “Our hearts are open wide to Creator and Creation. May the Light keep us all!” The bee balmers buzzed the words, the orchada flowers toned them, the lempers said the words standing up with their enormous ears pointed to the sky, the marmotashas fingered the meaning, the great oak, Quercus, flashed its light and the soonshows sent forth images. Thea, the ribbonoters, the star beings and in-dweller Rom-Fine spoke respectfully with eyes closed and a smile on their lips. The chant echoed throughout the land—through all the tunnels, the inner earth and even out into the vast regions of space.

When they were finished, the great voice again called forth to address the council: “As you know, the land of Mareithia is changing. It is unfolding and moving upwards to more light and more harmony. That is why today we begin the journey together to help all the inhabitants of the land to advance in love and fellowship. They have come a long way and we are going to help them even more by showing them how to open their hearts and minds as wide as the universe. The changes in the land are marvellous because they are lighting up everybody and everything. These transformations offer greater possibilities to all the citizens of Mareithia. Not only will they learn more about themselves and others, but they will enjoy friendship with those living inside Mareithia and those living in the skies above. These changes are happening everywhere,

not only in and under this land but also in the Star Nations Assembly and the Intergalactic Partnership. Some call this time the “Great Spiritual Awakening” and here in Mareithia it includes all life: the stones, the birds, the insects and animals and plants and trees and the villagers and everything in between. However, please remember a very important law: no living thing is to be forced into changing. We must let the villagers choose. We can help to direct, but we must allow others their freedom to want to change or not. Is this clear to all?”

Everyone nodded in agreement as the importance of these words sunk in.

The great voice continued, “Let us now all observe what has been happening the land. Below, close to the surface of the golden lake, you will see projections of events which took place not too long ago. As you know, everything in Mareithia is recorded not because we want to spy on the land but because we wish to have a better understanding so that we can help as best we can. Make yourself comfortable in the rainbow and make sure you can see well. We will start in a moment.”

A few bee balms flew around unsettling the lempers and some ribbonoters lifted up their coloured bands for comfort. As soon as they did so, the marmotashas let go of the small pieces of coloured pillow and snuggled close to them trying to finger their ribbons. The soonshows and the star people smiled with their eyes at each other in recognition of the importance of this meeting. Quercus, who was standing close by, acknowledged their smiles with a subtle sparkle of light and Platona, Thea’s dear lempers, made herself comfortable by lying down and putting one long ear on Thea’s lap.

The powerful voice of Mareithia continued, “The Rawl...”

Everyone on the council cringed and moved about uncomfortably, remembering a time of sorrow when the foul-smelling fog had spewed down from skies.

“...Most of Mareithia has been cleansed. Some Rawl still remains, now thinner, but just as threatening. We must remain alert to its slightest movement.”

Council members nodded in agreement and began to relax again.

“As you know, the present changes in the land are increasingly powerful. Today, we celebrate these wonderful new ways of life by viewing several exciting events which have taken place since we last met. One account even includes Thea and Rom-Fine.”

Thea blushed a little, but was pleased and held onto Rom-Fine’s hand.

“Now,” said the great voice of Mareithia, “spread out your minds and hearts to all of Creation as we view the recent happenings in this marvellous land of Mareithia.”

Everyone, nicely settled down in the coloured ship, looked down through the transparent walls to the lake to view the recordings. It started with Thea.

## **Chapter Four: Thea’s Voyage and Rumbings**

In her dwelling at the edge of the forest, Thea’s light violet eyes opened earlier than usual. She was getting warmer now that the day was heating up in the pink and yellow sky. It was the sense of adventure nestled within her sleepy mind that pushed itself upwards to awaken her. Slipping out of her bed as quietly as the brush of a butterfly wing against a leaf, she felt the need to visit the lake again.

*“Why do I want to visit the lake again and again?”* she thought. *“Is this becoming a habit? Why?”* She had no answer. Yet, somehow today felt different.

With her green iridescent hair swinging slightly, Thea tiptoed down the dew-filled path not wanting to disturb the myriad of creatures living there. She sat down at the flower-filled edge

of the water. Platona, her lempier friend, padded over to sit with her. Pulling her great ears down, she took Thea's hand and put it on her head inviting Thea to pet her. Thea happily obliged and greeted her: "Good morning, Platona," and then opened her heart to praise the glory of Creation. "Thank you for this wonderful morning. May the Light keep us all."

As she reverently spoke these words, her gaze fell on something in the golden shallows of the lake in front of her. There it was: a perfectly shaped pearl the size of her fingernail, out of place yet feeling much at home in this tranquil place. It was waiting to be chosen.

With inner excitement, Thea dipped her opal hand into the gracious, cool water and felt the pearl immediately warm up between her fingers. The adventure had begun.

As the pearl sat in her hand drying in a slow sun, violet and blue light began to shine from it. One very powerful violet ray moved upwards towards the heavens and a second ray, blue, moved downwards through her fingers into the earth. The tingling in her hand made her realize that a great power far beyond her understanding had opened itself up to her.

"Oh!" Thea was surprised. "This feeling is lovely and reminds me of another place where I used to live. I think it was also near water. I just can't remember where. But I know that I have travelled light rays before and I remember it was easy. I just closed my eyes, opened my mind and I went!"

Looking at the vibrant rays Thea wondered which one to select.

"Hmm, what do you think, Platona? Which ray should I choose? Do I go up or down? I often see the stars at night, so perhaps I can take the blue ray that is shining down into the ground. I've never been *inside* Mareithia! Platona, would you like to come with me?"

The idea of travelling so close to the water did not appeal to Platona at all. She shook her head energetically in refusal, sat up, cleared her throat and stated with dignity, "Ahem, ahem, my

destiny is to journey the land; yours is to travers the worlds.” Platona returned to nibble the grasses and Thea prepared for her voyage. She stood in the blue light, closed her eyes and took a deep breath. The pearl fell from her hand back into the lake.

Within moments she felt herself travelling with great ease and delight through an earth tunnel. A few luras, slumbering on their bed-shelves in the tunnels, vaguely raised their flowery snouts to sniff about and fell back asleep.

Thea heard the groaning crust of the earth with its hot liquids and then landed in a beautiful region of tropical flowers, plants and shrubs which were drinking in the light of a glorious central sun. She was astounded to discover that a perfect land existed under her very feet, *under* Mareithia!

Thea looked around her. The land seemed to shimmer. In the distance lay large, quiet lakes; the sky was pink and orange with clouds waiting in the background to cover up the sun when it was time to sleep. The entire place felt and smelled like paradise. Beings of all types, sizes and colours came to greet her with generous smiles. These were the fascinating in-dwellers of Mareithia. Some were boisterous, others quiet; some had several eyes, others have only one or two; some were changing forms, others rippled beautiful striped skins like zebras. Some languages were sung while others were spoken with fingers, or by changing eye shapes. Although they had different physical features, all in-dwellers resembled the human form. Like those who had visited this inner land previously—Thea was not first traveller—she felt she was being enveloped in a comfortable cloak of blessings.

But Thea was also a little taken aback by it all. Luckily, she could understand the different languages because they were automatically translated inside her head. However, the many different species and the unusual, yet beautiful, surroundings were too much for her.

Although Thea felt friendship, she was confused and overwhelmed. She couldn't breathe properly and started to panic.

"What am I doing here? It's very beautiful, but what am I doing here? How do I get back home?" she panted.

The inner earth "greeting committee" sensed her uneasiness and began to move back to give her some room. Then, through the crowd a tall, corpulent and smiling blue-skinned man with straight, blonde hair down to his shoulders came towards her and took her hand. The moment their fingers meet, Thea began to feel better. He seemed familiar to her.

"Thank you for saving me," she said to the man. "I didn't know what to do. So many lovely people, but there are just so *many* of them!"

The jovial being smiled and the crowd separated to allow them to pass. As they did, the inhabitants threw thoughts of goodwill into the air. These thoughts of kindness fell around them both like rose petals.

The blue-skinned man and the pearly white-skinned young girl walked together hand in hand into a quieter place. Thea noticed that all the buildings in the area were round and surrounded by enchanting gardens and small lakes. She asked her new-found friend, "Why are all the houses here shaped like circles?"

"Because they are built on the knowledge that life is circular. Everything goes around and then spirals upwards."

Thea was puzzled but said nothing, contemplating all of this.

"Would you like to meet a few people who dwell in these places, Thea?"

Thea was very startled. He knew her name. How did he know her name? "How do you know my name?" she asked.

The gentle, tall being smiled and gave her hand a squeeze. “I knew you when you were very small, Thea. Perhaps you don’t remember, but I found you in the turquoise waters of Sevanaaz and we became friends. You called me ‘Rom-Fine’ because I am so tall. Do you remember the ancient tongue, Thea? In the ancient tongue *Rom-Fine* means ‘up high.’”

Thea remained puzzled, but accepted what he said. After all, it *did* seem familiar. Vague memories of Sevaanaz began to surface in her mind like mist lifting off a field.

Rom-Fine repeated the question, “Thea, would you like to meet a few people who live here?” and pointed to an elegant, circular dwelling.

Thea hesitated because she wasn’t particularly fond of some of the beings. They were friendly, but they *looked* so different. She hesitated. “Ummm...well I don’t know.” She squirmed.

“Ah,” replied Rom-Fine. “You don’t like them.”

“No, it’s just...well, it’s just that I find some of them, frightening...and some of them are not very...”

“What you are saying, Thea, is that you find some of these beings, these in-dwellers, different?” Rom-Fine said very gently.

“Umm...Yes...” Thea felt uncomfortable, but relieved that she had told him.

“Thea, when you are in the sacred forest of Mareithia, you see different types of beings, don’t you? Some that seem silly and others that seem severe and others that are big or small with different colours.”

“Yes.”

“Then tell me, how do you feel about them? Are they unattractive to you? Are they frightening to you?”

Thea gushed forth, “They are beautiful! They are my friends. It doesn’t matter what they look like or how they behave because they are my friends. “

“How do you know that they are your friends?”

“Because I feel love and kindness and friendship coming from them. I feel happy when I am with them.”

Rom-Fine continued, “And here in the inner earth, do you feel love and kindness and friendship?”

“Yes...” answered Thea hesitantly.

“Well, why don’t you come to meet these beings? Just for a short visit. Feel if they are your friends,” suggested Rom-Fine.

Thea bit her lip and then nodded. “All right, just for a short while.”

They approached a circular house and met with various inhabitants who happily offered them unusual but very tasty cakes and drinks. Thea began to feel at home with these generous in-dwellers, Rom-Fine’s neighbours and friends.

*They’re really wonderful,* Thea thought to herself.

From that day on, a deep friendship was formed between the tall, portly, blue-skinned being and Thea. She began to call him Rom-Fine and giggled the first time she pronounced it, but got used to the name very quickly.

On the last day of her sojourn in the inner earth, Rom-Fine found Thea, a little nostalgic, sitting at the edge of a large lake which reflected the pink and orange sky. The water was surrounded by shimmering flowers unknown to her, although they reminded Thea of the orchada plants back in Mareithia’s forest. The fluffy clouds were slowly making their way over to cover up the sun, preparing the in-dwellers’ sleep. Thea knew that the forest of Mareithia was calling

her back home. She heard a great rumbling coming from above her head and became anxious. She turned to Rom-Fine. “What’s happening?”

“Mareithia is shifting positions to prepare for an unsettling visit, Thea. It’s going to happen soon above ground at the periphery of the forest. But don’t be anxious. It does not concern you, Thea. You will be quite safe when you go back.”

Thea relaxed and turned back to look at the lake and the colours, thinking about everything she had experienced here. Rom-Fine sat down beside her, whispered in her ear and as they both stood up, he bent down to give her a final hug. The love that Thea’s parents had for her flowed powerfully through Rom-Fine. As he embraced her, he gently placed his thumb behind her right ear. There he imprinted a beautiful design of violet-coloured sparkling intersecting circles. In the middle where the two circles met was a perfectly formed heart of shimmering rose-coloured dust. Thea did not realize what was happening. *Is Rom-Fine tickling me?* She smiled and gave her friend one last heart hug of gratitude. She then closed her eyes and in instant found herself once again at the edge of the lake in the sacred forest.

The had no idea how long she had been away, but both the pearl and Platona were gone. For a long moment she sat with distant, violet eyes contemplating what Rom-Fine had whispered to her: *Always remember, Thea, that beings upon the earth wish to be free. And to be free means to understand that in all worlds there is only one power, one light, one thought and one expression. It is called ‘Oneness,’ and that ‘Oneness’ is Love. It doesn’t matter what beings look like. What you see as different is only on the outside. Inside it is all the same. It is all Love. Like the resin in the pinecone, Love glues life together. Without It you are as lost as the raymerry without its nest. But when you feel Love you are connected to everything; sunshine ripples through you like the warm touch of the sea in your hair. Your heart blossoms and your mind*

*smiles.*

Thea looked down at the golden and calm lake in Mareithia's forest savouring Rom-Fine's words. Remembering his tickling near her right ear, she lifted up her shining green hair, put up her hand and fingered the spot. Because the design was slightly raised, she could easily feel it. "*What's this?*" Puzzled, she leaned forward towards the surface of the lake and saw the drawing reflected in the water. "Oh, this is beautiful," she said with awe and then with excitement: "This is so beautiful!"

Suddenly Thea remembered that while she was in inner Mareithia, a short wind had blown Rom-Fine's hair away from the right side of his face and for an instant Thea had seen the same design, but in silvery dust. *We are related*, she thought to herself and grinned. She took a closer look and saw that although the colours of the design between Rom-Fine and herself were different, the hearts in the middle of the intersecting circles were exactly the same size and the same colour!

"Yes, we're definitely related," Thea exclaimed loudly. "I think that very important things are going to happen and I want to be a part of them!"

She jumped up, took one last fond look at the place where she had travelled down and then skipped back to her dwelling in the forest. The rumbling at the other end of the forest was very faint under her agile feet. Thea's hands glowed with the blue memory of the pearl and she touched the exquisite design behind her right ear once more. *All is one*, she thought to herself as she danced back home, *all is one*. It seemed to Thea that the universe was a treasury of millions of diverse life forms all held together by the one perfect hand of Creation.

But the rumbling continued to increase in the western part of forest close to the Cheminaad and the meadowlands. The earth tunnels, kept clean and tidy by the luras, began to

tremble. Some luras stirred a little as they continued to snore heavily. Night duty had been long and exhausting. The earth continued to shake.

“Oh, what is happening? What is happening?” squeaked a baby luretta as he tumbled from the wall shelf, “are we having an earthquake?”

“I don’t think so. My nose flower is picking up a strange trembling noise coming from the ground of Mareithia’s forest,” answered his mother who was sniffing around intensely.

“From the *forest*?” squeaked half a dozen lurettas now completely awake and glueing themselves together for security and warmth. “That means Mareithia is getting very upset!”

Just at that moment, the great forest lifted its shoulders up skywards and a tremendous cracking shook the entire place. More lurettas awoke and scuffled around in circles, moaning and groaning, thinking it was the end of the world.

“No,” said their mother, guessing the reason for the panic. “No, it’s not the end of the world. The sacred forest is getting ready for a serious conversation with someone. I’m quite sure. You know it happened before, a long, long time ago...” She shuddered at the horrible time of The Rawl. However, none of the lurettas was interested in hearing about the “long, long ago” story as they were too busy scrambling around.

Meanwhile, the chelonians in the oh! tunnels were also struggling. They were swimming up and down and swirling around in utter confusion. The oh! tunnels were not very far from the earth tunnels and sometimes when they met, chaos resulted. Both the luras and the chelonians were aware of this and certainly didn’t want more confusion.

“Let’s swim away as quickly as possible,” bubbled a small chelonian. But no one could read her bubbles: they were hidden by hundreds of overlapping bubbles created by other frantic chelonians.

“Save our tunnels, they bubbled. “Save our tunnels, save our tunnels!”

It was then they realized that it was time for the Great Evacuation. The chelonians, like the soonshows, were as ancient as the land and remembered another Great Evacuation which occurred some years ago when the waters were thickened and life choked. They understood what this meant: they had to get to the great Sea of Sevenaaz where they would be safe.

“Swim, swim, to the great Sea. Now! Swim to Sevenaaz!” they bubbled to each other.

Suddenly, a great and venerable voice thundered out, making the bubbles in the water wobble: “We need to help the forest and the earth tunnels as best we can. We cannot leave!”

The Great Chelonii was right. They couldn’t leave the others. Help was needed. The turtles nodded their heads and agreed although they were still distressed. “Yes,” bubbled everyone, “let’s do our best to help out.” They began to swim towards the closest earth tunnel to see what assistance they could offer.

As the chelonians drew closer to the earth tunnel, they saw odd-shaped bubbles rolling towards them. *Where are these coming from and what is this strange whistling in the water?*

On the surface of the land, strangely coded whistlings were travelling through the air, penetrating the earth and voyaging through the oh! tunnels. Lempers, soonhows and even the bee balmers stopped where they were in the meadowlands and straightened up with surprise. *What is that sound?*

“Oh, it’s a lura,” quickly droned a bee balmer to the others. “I can see her very clearly from up here. She’s whistling to us. I think she is saying not to panic because it is not the end of the world. The earth is rumbling because there is an argument going on over at the next village with two young boys.”

Once all understood that there was no danger of an earthquake, everyone returned to

nibbling and buzzing.

The message that all was fine quickly spread throughout the tunnels.

“Oh,” some of the luras answered slowly when they heard the news. Excitement had fallen away. “Oh...” Slowly they snuffled back down into the familiar areas of their tunnels, some back to dozing and others back to repairing minor damage.

The chelonians slowly bubbled *thank you for staying* to each other politely and swam back in an orderly fashion into the larger oh! tunnels, gently nosing a few plants back into place. “Just as well,” said the Great Chelonii in an ancient voice. “Not sure if I was up to all that travelling to Sevenaaz. It’s a very long way and we would have had to change tunnels at least three times.”

Although some young chelonians were disappointed in not making the adventurous trip to Sevenaaz, most simply bubbled in agreement and went on their way.

## **Chapter Five: The Twin’s Unusual Encounters**

Meanwhile, above ground close to where the lura had noticed a disturbance and had whistled to the others, thirteen-year-old twins, Lithan and Sian, were arguing again. They were not identical as Lithan, the leader, had a longish nose and Sian, younger by fifteen minutes, a smaller upturned one. Both were taller than the average villager, brown skinned and black haired, sparkling with enthusiasm and adventure. These days, however, the boys seldom got along. A permanent scowl seemed imprinted on Lithan’s face. Sian, too, had begun to practice his own thin frown.

It was early morning and the meadowlands felt cool to the touch. The rumbling in the ground continued but grew fainter.

“Give me that grass. That’s mine. I braided it,” snapped Lithan to Sian.

“No, it’s mine. I found it. I keep it,” retorted Sian who was often upset because Lithan was always the boss. Both boys tumbled and fought and finally Lithan grabbed the braided grass from Sian’s hands with a tight fist. Sian moved away angrily and Lithan grinned with victory, swirling the braid in the air like a lasso. “I’ll finish this roof before you do, I’ll finish this roof before you do,” he taunted as he went back to constructing the grass building beside their home which would store the food for later months.

“Lithan, Sian, come and help with the zazow fields. Some zazow need to be pulled up and stored,” called out their father.

The zazow was a very sturdy, fat and long vegetable, half carrot and half potato easily grown in the meadowlands because of the long days of sunshine. The zazow was ready when the top leaves were tall, dark green and bunchy. The first delicate green leaves grew close to the ground and remained there even as the vegetable grew. Children and youth loved eating the zazow raw because they could hear laughter coming from the vegetable every time they took a crunchy bite. As adults didn't hear this laughter, they preferred to eat the zazow cooked.

The moment the lempers heard the word ‘zazow’ they hopped in quickly from the nearby the willow trees where they were nibbling the short grasses which were close, but not too close to the streams; lempers disliked even the possibility of becoming wet.

“Oh, how simply lovely,” murmured one especially handsome lempere to another as she approached the zazow patch. She stood up and cleared her throat to address the others. “Ahmen, ahmen...zazow plants! I am reminded of my luxurious time in Ziemenia, ingesting those *fruits glacés* and sipping a delectable beverage contemplating the sunset cascading over the desert sands—”

“You were never in Ziemenia that I can recall,” interrupted another lempers impatiently.

It was true that she had never been there, but she loved to daydream. Just the same, she felt a little hurt, scrunched back down to the ground and drifted further into the zazow patch. There she found some especially delicious zazow leaves—those close to the ground, of course—and smiled to herself: *I may not have been to Ziemenia, but these leaves are delicious!*

Some soonshows, fond of the higher zazow tops, came elegantly into the fields, all the while checking to make sure that everything in the meadowlands was running smoothly. *Yes, everything is in its place; everything seems happy,* imaged the soonshows to each other. *Except, of course for the two boys who are always arguing. I hope that also will change for the better.*

The soonshows and the lempers ate together quite amiably, each respecting the other’s territory. However, every now and then the lempers tried to cheat the soonshows.

“Come and admire the magnificent morning sky,” said one lempers to the other. Both stood up to admire the colours of the sky and while they were standing, they took a swipe at the higher leaves of an especially delicious-looking zazow. The soonshows nibbling in that area shook their head, rolled their eyes upwards and with a leg pushed the lempers gently but firmly back down to the ground.

After hearing their father calling them, Lithan and Sian slowly dropped the grasses they were braiding and dragged themselves up to the field behind their willow cottage to help lift the ripe zazow.

“More work,” mumbled Lithan and Sian imitated him. “Always work, never play,” they both muttered.

Of course, that was not true. Both boys played more often than they worked. As they walked up to the garden, Lithan took out his small, sharp and slightly curved knife perfectly

suited to remove the vegetables.

“Here, Sian, you can use my knife.”

Sian was very pleased until he realized that it was a ruse. As they only had one knife between them, it meant that Lithan could not work. Sian began to protest and a quarrel ensued. Finally, their impatient father handed over his own knife. “Stop this,” he says tiredly. “Here, Sian, take mine. I need to rest.”

The two boys worked, rumbling and grumbling, getting the zazow out of the ground. From time to time Lithan unkindly pushed a lempers out of the way, swatting at its ear. Sian tried to copy Lithan’s behaviour but felt a little uncomfortable doing so. A few wary bee balms buzzed around the field to taste the meadowland flowers but stayed away from the boys. The soonshows moved away nobly and quietly when the boys approached them. *These boys are really upsetting nature around here*, imaged one soonshow to another. *I am not at all surprised that the earth is trembling. I think the forest is very upset.* The other soonshows widened their eyes with understanding and left the fields, all to the utter delight of the lempers who enthusiastically continued to nip and nibble. But the soonshows, guardians of all of Mareithia, did not go too far away. They kept a watchful eye on the situation.

“When I am done with this ridiculous zazow field I’m going to the forest,” shouted Lithan, “and I’m going straight to the lake and jump in. I’m hot and I’m hungry and I’m tired and I’m...”

Sian remained silent but he was in full agreement. However, he did *try* to correct Lithan, “Well, actually the zazow field is not ridiculous, Lithan. We all *love* zazow!”

Lithan gave him a withered look, bent down to push away a few lempers and with his knife cut out another zazow, pulling it up from the ground roughly.

Finally, the time came to stop: The sun was high and the heat was intensifying. The boys left the vegetables scattered in the fields for their father to gather up, never thinking that they could have done so themselves.

“To Mareithia’s forest! *To the forest!!*” Both boys screamed at the top of their lungs.

It is at that moment that the rumbling in the ground grew louder and louder.

“Lithan, maybe we shouldn’t go to the forest. There is a lot of shaking here and it might get louder.”

“Keep quiet, let’s just get there.”

Trampling recklessly on the wildflowers which were just nodding off for a quick siesta, they ignored the intricate design of cobwebs and swatted away the fragile flutterings of the white and orange butterflies. The boys trudged on and the rumblings increased.

“When I get there, I’m going straight to the lake and jump in,” retorted Lithan. “I’m hot, and I’m hungry, and I’m tired and ...” Sian sighed a little, irritated at Lithan’s tiring repetitions.

After a period of trampling and complaining, they crossed the Cheminaad—Mareithia’s great road—and closed in on their goal. In their mind’s eye they saw the forest, twinkling and shimmering, echoing the sweet calls of the raymerries and the fragrant murmurings of pine and oak. Another few minutes and they would be inside!

The closer they came to the forest, the louder the rumblings became.

They shouted out, “*To the forest of Mareithia!...Maaareeithia!!...Mareeeeeithia!!!!*” and immediately everything stood still. The rumblings stopped short. Not a bird sang the sweet song of welcome; not a tree swayed in greeting. Not even the white, puffy clouds overhead moved. The forest had become dark, silent and closed. A tremendous invisible force had moved up from within the earth and had swung itself around from left to right to encompass the entire

perimeter of the forest. This holy abode had become untouchable.

The boys, infuriated, threw themselves upon the invisible protective shield and stumbled backwards with biting frustration.

“I have my knife” spewed out Lithan. Pointing to Quercus, the elegant and venerable oak who stood before them, the boy muttered with a hard mouth, “I’ll throw it at this tree and we’ll break the shield that way.”

Although the zazow knife was poorly thrown, the forest allowed a small part of its shield to dissolve. The knife skittered over the bark of the great oak, bounced back and landed at Lithan’s feet. He was surprised and frustrated. Picking up the knife and examining it carefully he muttered to Sian, “I don’t think it’s damaged. I’m going to try to hit the tree again.”

Just as Lithan got ready to throw the knife once more, a grey tongue of thick, smelly fog began to ooze through the handle almost touching Lithan’s fingers. He felt his hand burning. Lithan dropped the knife and screamed. “I’m burning! My hand is burning up! Sian, help me! I’m dying! I’m dying!!”

Sian saw nothing burning. “Calm down, Lithan, your hand is not burning. But there is something drooling out of the knife and it smells awful!”

They both looked down at the knife lying on the earth, as it slowly disappeared in the terrible clutches of something thick and dirty.

“What’s happening?” Lithan said in a small, frightened voice to Sian who was also shaking with fear.

“I don’t know, Lithan. I told you we shouldn’t have come here.”

As they both looked back up into the forest, the great oak tree suddenly changed into a gigantic column of blazing light from which a spiral of light slowly and kindly twisted itself

around the boys. They became sleepy. It gently lifted them up and laid them tenderly on the ground. There they were comfortably nestled among the fragrant leaves and the pine needles at edge of the forest. Lithan and Sian fell asleep and began to dream.

In their dream, both boys found themselves walking from the meadowlands with three other friends towards the mountains of the Westerly Unknown. Lithan was leading the eager group. He had heard that somewhere in that direction lay an enormous flat rock, a natural platform, for star vehicles to land and he certainly wanted to see that for himself. Sian was a little concerned because the Westerly Unknown seemed so far away and it was full of deep crevices and strange noises. But he followed his brother and the others.

Everyone was walking and skipping and running, happily singing towards a new adventure, even Sian. After a certain time, Lithan became more and more unsure about his direction. He had heard that the sparse trails leading to the murky Unknown were very poorly marked and found this to be true. Nevertheless, he pushed on and entered the first steep part of the Unknown. Sensing that Lithan was hesitating more and more about which way to turn, everyone became anxious, especially Sian.

“I don’t think we’re going the right way,” said Sian. “We should be going this way,” and pointed to a small trail to the right.

“No, no, it’s this way,” argued Lithan. The three others agreed with him. But the day was getting very long and so were the shadows which were forming in the crevices of the outcroppings. After a while, the group began to doubt Lithan’s leadership and started to lag behind.

“Is everyone following me?” Lithan called out after a long moment of silence. There was no answer. He turned around and realized he was alone. Alone! A sharp wind came up and

frightened him; he knew that he was lost. *Why didn't the others follow me? Why didn't they listen to me? ... Where am I??*

He sat down in disappointment and in fear on a rock near the cliff, his shoulders hunched over and his face tight to hold back the tears. Suddenly, a warm, peaceful breath moved through him. It held the fragrance of leaves. Could it be the oak from the sacred forest?

*Why do you think others don't want to follow you, Lithan?* breathed the calm breath inside him.

"I don't know," replied Lithan out loud to the darkening air. "I try not to push them."

*Are you sure?*

"Well..maybe just a little." Lithan shrugged, embarrassed.

*Oh, there is no need to feel embarrassment, Lithan. You have many good ideas and a warm heart. I know you will be a fine leader.*

"It's just that...well...I'm still angry at what happened when my friends made me walk through those muddy marshes and I was getting stuck and sinking and nobody wanted to get me out. The more I panicked, the more they kept making fun of me...and now I just want to bully others." Lithan squeezed his eyes closed, like a door banging shut against the sun. "I was so afraid," he whispered.

*Lithan, open your eyes and look at your hand. What do you see?*

"I don't see anything, just my hand."

*The palm opens up to show fingers and a thumb. You create a bond of respect is between them if you show your appreciation for your hand. Sometimes other people force you to do things which you know are disrespectful. You've had that experience. Then the fingers and the thumb of your hand don't work well together anymore. They become confused just as you do, living*

*differently in your head than in your heart.*

“So, what should I do?” Lithan opened and closed both his hands.

*Find out why. Why did these “friends” intimidate you and why did you let them? As you begin to understand others you begin to understand yourself. The fingers and thumb work well together when they are nicely anchored in a palm pulsating with love,* breathed the breath as it began to evaporate.

With a sudden realization, Lithan shouted out, “Wait, wait, does that mean that I was glued to...to... the Rawl when I was in the wetlands? Is that why I couldn’t move?? *I was touched by the Rawl???*” He stood up screaming in horror.

*Not the wetlands, Lithan. The Rawl did not touch you in the wetlands. But do you remember the faces of your “friends” as they taunted you?*

The voice relaxed him somewhat. He slumped back down and answered a little more quietly, “Well, they looked angry and slippery. They looked *slippery*, Lithan repeated in a hushed voice. “Their faces were grey and sticky. Oh no! *The Rawl came out on their faces???*” Lithan’s voice shook and grew louder once again.

*Beware and remain alert, Lithan. Remain true to all that is good and just and we shall meet again.*

With these words whispering through his body, Lithan remained seated for a few minutes longer, calming down and inhaling what he had learned. Soon he felt a great weight falling away. He stood up determined to find the others and to help where he could. *Remain true to all that is good and just*, Lithan thought. *That might not be easy, but I’ll do my best.*

Meanwhile Sian was also having his difficulties in the Westerly Unknown. When he and Lithan had started the journey with the others, Sian could not contain his excitement. *Imagine*

*seeing a real star ship on the rock, he had thought to himself. That would be so exciting!*

Now he wasn't so sure. Several times he and the others had suggested a different direction but Lithan had ignored them. "I don't want to continue," Sian stubbornly said to himself and began to take an interest in the smaller rocks and the tiny, shiny red insects that crept in and out of the boulders. High above, the wild and white tarra birds, normally seen only in the Great Boulder Divide, called out stridently making Sian's ears ring. But Sian's attention was elsewhere. He was so intrigued by what he was seeing on the ground, that he started to fall behind the others. Completely absorbed, Sian lingered more and more and suddenly realized that part of the Unknown was being swallowed up by early evening shadow. He looked up and there was no one around. He was alone. What frightened Sian the most was that for the first time in his life he was in a vast and unfamiliar place without his brother.

"Lithan, Lithan," Sian called out with a small trembling voice. "Where are you? Lithan?"

No one answered. *I know that Lithan can be a bully sometimes, he thought to himself, but I'm used to him that way. I know he is always taking advantage of me, but I'm used to that as well. I don't mind.*

But deep in his heart Sian *did* mind. He minded very much how his brother had been treating him recently. He had followed Lithan, watching him trample on the cobwebs and swat at the wings of butterflies and lempers' ears and couldn't understand why he had changed. Lithan never used to be like that.

"Every time he mistreats me I get so sad. But I don't know how to live on my own and I don't know how to live with Lithan. And here I am alone in a unknown part of Mareithia and the sun is going down," moaned Sian. He sat down on a cold bit of stone and began to shake as a red, sparkling insect travelled across his hand. It sat for a moment to sniff his fingers, received a

tear from Sian's eye and then inched on, shaking the water off its tiny back.

“Sian, Sian!”

Sian heard his name being called and jumped up. But it was not his brother's voice. It was his *father's* voice! What was his father doing here so far from the meadowlands? Father?

“Over here, over here,” Sian shouted with relief. As he peered through the cracks of the stubby branches into the cooling twilight, he saw a yellow line of lanterns threading its way towards him. *Is the whole village here looking for us?* Sian wondered.

From the cliff top Lithan also saw the same thread of lights waving and villagers calling out.

“Leeethaaan! Leeeeeethaaaaaaan!!”

Their voices carried far and bounced in between the slices of the rocks. Shouts of delight wove in and out from both boys and the three friends who were now also coming down to join the others.

“We are here!”

It was not long before everyone was back at the bottom of the Westerly Unknown, bathed in lantern light and hugs. Never have Lithan and Sian been so happy to see their father and the villagers!

The next morning Lithan was awakened by the sun teasing his face from an open window. A few bee balms droned outside peering through, unsure if Lian would swat at them, should they enter. Lithan looked around puzzled, and saw Sian sleeping soundly in his bed on the other side of the room.

“Sian, wake up! Wake up!”

Sian muttered something about red insects, slowly opened his eyes and then sat up

quickly and looked around him. “What are we doing here in bed?” he exclaimed. “Did we have a dream? Weren’t we in the forest?” He looked at his brother who was staring rigidly at the table between the two beds.

“What is it, Lithan?”

“What do you see on the table?” asked his brother urgently.

“Your knife. Your zazow knife!”

“Yes, but *look* at the knife!”

Both boys got out of bed and cautiously approached the table to have a closer look. The knife was clean and polished. It looked brand new. Gingerly, Lithan picked it up. It felt warm and friendly; it felt just like the breath that spoke to him in the Westerly Unknown. He cupped it for a moment in his hand and then held it out to his brother.

“Here, Sian, take my zazow knife. I can always make another one,” Lithan said kindly. Sian was very touched by the gesture and gratefully took the knife, muttering a shy “thank you.”

“And Sian, I am sorry to push you around and make fun of you because you love nature so much.”

Sian was overcome with joy; he brought on a big grin which Lithan copied and both boys slapped each other on the back. Droning robustly, the bee balancers flew around the bedroom gleefully sprinkling orchada pollen from their baskets under their wings and then zipped around catching this golden dust with their tiny tongues, eyes closed in pure delight.

“There’s something important I have to do now,” Lithan said to his brother. “I have to go back to the forest. I need to find the big oak tree where I...hmm... where I...well...I can go alone.”

“—No, I want to come with you, Lithan.”

Lithan nodded quickly and smiled with new friendship in his eyes. “But before we go,” he continued, “I need to go into the garden for a moment. Please stay here.”

Sian agreed, secretly thrilled that his brother used the word “please,” and sat down on his bed to closely examine his new knife.

Lithan went to the fields. There were still quite a few zazow lying where he had thrown carelessly yesterday before trampling to the forest. *I’ll just gather these up to make things easier for father*, he thought to himself, quite pleased. He put the vegetables in a large bin near the new storage area being built with a braided roof and returned to the bedroom.

“Are we having something to eat first?” asked Sian.

With a grin, Lithan pulled out a few beautiful zazow from his pockets. “We can eat these while we walk. Remember how they laugh when we eat them raw?”

Both brothers smiled broadly and went on their way.

The travel to the forest was silent; both boys were reflecting upon their strange adventures. On the way they met a lempier who, upon seeing Lithan at the very last minute, froze and closed his eyes waiting to have his ears swatted. But to his great surprise and delight, Lithan stopped, crouched down and patted the long ears. The astonished lempier hopped elegantly to a peer group close by, stood up, cleared his throat and stated, “Ahem, ahem...have you observed how behaviour can be transformed? Now, if you recall the great psychologist who studied individual conduct...” and stopped when he realized that no one was listening. Everyone was happily nibbling with their ears tied under their chins.

The boys continued on their way.

“Lithan, were we really in the Westerly Unknown?”

“It seemed very real to me,” answered Lithan slowly. “I don’t know. Maybe it was a

dream. But what I *do* know is that we were in the forest and that I threw a knife and then the knife was dripping with that horrible grey thick ooze... and ....” His voice shook and trailed off. Sian was wise enough to remain silent.

“I wonder if we will be able to get close to the tree?” Lithan asked quietly, as they crossed the Cheminaad. Sian shrugged a little nervously.

It was very easy to find the place again because the great oak, Quercus, towered majestically over all the other trees in the woods. Hesitantly, the two boys approached the edge of the forest. The magnificent tree was in front of them but they were unable to touch its bark. The force field was still in place and the entire forest remained dark and silent. Lithan was very disappointed. He stood humbly in front of the great oak: “I am very sorry for having thrown my knife at you. Thank you for telling me that I can become a good leader. Maybe one day you will allow me to touch your bark to thank you properly.”

For a fleeting moment a few sparkles of light shone through Quercus’ bark in response. Both boys caught the glimmer and smiled in gratitude. At that very moment, the forest began to shimmer; the clouds swam elegantly through the blue sky and the raymerries burst forth in song.

“I think we can go home now, Sian. Maybe someday I’ll be allowed to give the oak a genuine handshake.”

As they started their way back to the meadowlands, Sian, curious, and asked his brother, “How did you know the tree spoke to you about being a leader?”

“Oh, just something I dreamt,” answered Lithan vaguely with the smallest of smiles.

## Chapter Six: The Morassa Family's Adventure

Lithan and Sian, with courage and warm hearts, reverently left the forest, careful not to step on the nodding flowers. Soon they found themselves once again on the Cheminaad. While crossing the great road, they perceived three figures in the distance moving slowly and sorrowfully towards them from the direction of the Sea of Sevenaaz.

“Who are they?” Sian wondered.

“I don't know,” answered Lithan. “Let's go and meet them. Perhaps they need help.”

As the twins approached the group, they saw a slightly stooped middle-aged man with soft eyes, walking with his right arm over a young boy's shoulders, pulling him close every now and then. The woman, of similar age was leading the way with a courageous but sad step, seeing only the ground.

“Hello,” said Lithan as they meet. “Are you lost?”

“No,” answered the man shaking his head a little and heaving a sigh. “We've come from up that way,” and waved his slender hand vaguely in the direction of the Sea of Sevenaaz. “We need to find some rest later on today.” He looked around, exhausted, and realized he hadn't introduced himself or his family. “Kye. My name is Kye Morassa and this is my wife, Pela and my son, Berma. He's almost thirteen.”

When the introductions were made, Sian kindly volunteered: “We have a few slices of zazow for you if you are hungry. We can sit here at the edge of the Cheminaad and have a small picnic.” He pointed to a comfortable spot in the grasses between the flowers and the white and orange butterflies. All three members of the Morassa family acknowledged the gesture gratefully and within moments everyone was sitting down and enjoying the zazow.

The twins were curious about these people; this time of year, there weren't many

foreigners walking the Cheminaad because of the heat. They wanted to question the Morassa family. Why were they so far away from the north? Where were they going? But both boys were a little uneasy to interfere. The sorrow in the air seemed private.

Finally, Pela spoke up. “You must be wondering why we are walking here,” she says softly, gazing at the butterflies and then up. The twins looked silently at Pela and at Berma and gave an encouraging nod.

“It is true that we come from the region of the Sea of Sevenaaz and that we have been walking a long time.”

At the words ‘Sea of Sevenaaz’ both Lithan and Sian gasped and looked at each other, amazed. “Sevenaaz!” they exclaimed together.

Lithan continued, excited, “We have never met people from there. We hear that the sea doesn’t really exist. But then we also hear that the sea with its white ground and turquoise water is so vast and deep that no one has ever been able to measure it. We’ve heard that the great Sea of Sevenaaz even has *star vehicles!*” Both boys leaned forward, thrilled. Young Berma smiled.

Pela heaved a sigh and slowly her eyes travelled from the butterflies to the boys’ faces. “Star vehicles. Perhaps.” After a brief moment of silence she continued: “The Sea of Sevenaaz does exist, an infinite ocean of turquoise. During unsettling times, the sea will overflow and flood the white banks which always try to protect it. But we didn’t much visit the sea.”

The silence continued another awkward moment. The twins were so thrilled hearing about Sevenaaz that they couldn’t understand why the family didn’t visit the sea and why they were so sad.

Pela sensed their excitement and continued speaking in a thin voice, “When we lived in the region of Sevenaaz, we were a larger family. We had a lovely daughter, Norra, a few years

older than Berma. Last year Norra got very ill and died..." Pela's eyes grew moist as she bit into a small slice of zazow and tried to swallow it. But her throat had tightened. Silence fell once again like a snowflake on silk.

Berma continued for his mother. "You see, we cannot carry on living in a place which reminds us of Norra. It is too painful. For a few months afterwards, we lived further down from Sevenaaz, closer to the foothills of the Mountains of Mauve. The villagers there were very kind, even though we were considered foreigners. But it was still too difficult for us. Everything there reminded us of Norra. So now we are simply wandering on the Cheminaad hoping to find somewhere to live. Where we will feel more peace. Where we will feel home and at home."

Kye put his arm around Pela to give comfort and Berma looked at his parents with tenderness and a growing sense of responsibility.

The Morassa family wanted to continue their journey while there were still a few hours of sunlight left. Everyone stood up and startled the butterflies and smaller insects which groped through the grasses towards a few tiny zazow pieces that Berma had left for them.

"If you continue down the Cheminaad, just before it gets smaller, you'll see that it curves around the sacred forest of Mareithia. Perhaps there you will find a place to rest," Lithan explained. "I can't promise that the forest will open itself up to you, but there is a good chance."

"Why do you call the forest 'sacred'?" Berma was intrigued. He had witnessed mysterious events at the Sea of Sevenaaz which he had never told anyone and was curious to know if there was a connection between that sea and Mareithia's forest.

Lithan gave a short smile, but his eyes gleamed with interest. "You'll see," was all that he said.

The Morassa family thanked the twins for the food and the advice. As they proceeded

down the Cheminaad, Lithan and Sian waved their hands in friendship and continued on their way back to their willow-and-grass home in the meadowlands.

The great sacred forest of Mareithia was not only opening itself up to the Morassa family, it had been awaiting their arrival for several months. A special celebration had been planned throughout the entire land that very night. The villagers were unaware of these celebrations for they occurred in a more subtle world which—except for Thea—most of the people of Mareithia could not slip into.

Light started to dart and flicker between the branches of the forest. Thea, standing close to the lakeshore, swirled around to admire a myriad of fireflies painting gold and silver dots above the water. “Ah,” she whispered to Platona, who lay snuggled close to Thea’s feet, “Mareithia is preparing for the full moon’s *Remembrance of Reverence* celebration.” She bent down to pat the lempet and as she did so, Platona’s long ears softly curled around Thea’s hand as if to pat her back.

Quiet voices drifted by. Thea and Platona silently moved away from the lake and slid between the grasses towards the sound of the speaking. Peeping from behind the trees they saw three figures slowly walking down the Cheminaad.

“I think Mareithia is calling them in for an evening of adventure,” she murmured with a knowing grin. Platona agreed. Standing upright with her great ears stretched towards the sky, she cleared her throat, “Ahem, ahem...it shall be a delectable evening of great charisma.” Thea laughed softly and they both returned to the lake and to Thea’s dwelling.

Berma, who was walking ahead of his parents, observed odd sprinkles of light flashing in among the trees and the bushes of the forest.

“Look at that!” he exclaimed to his parents just as an especially strong burst of sparkles

fell in between the branches of the pine and oak trees. They all stopped to watch, but nothing more happened.

“Perhaps it’s lightning; a storm may be coming in,” replied Kye quietly as he continued walking alongside Pela. Her eyes remained downcast; his eyes researched the sky.

They were now approaching the curve in the road and, as Lithan had mentioned, they saw in the distance that the Cheminaad indeed was narrowing. Dusk had already begun to scatter evening dew and pink light into the grasses and the flowers. Night would flow in soon.

“We need to find shelter,” Kye said. “Let’s see if we can find a way into the forest.”

Pela nodded in agreement and they began to scout out an entrance between the darkening trees.

“Come and look here!” Berma called out excitedly. “I think we’ve found a way in.” Both parents joined Berma who was pointing to a rather small, undefined path leading into the woods. To everyone’s amazement, they noticed bits of multi-coloured light falling down on the path. Astonished, they looked up to see a small piece of a rainbow in the sky just over the trail. Minuscule rainbow bits drifted lazily to the ground like young feathers from a high nest.

“Oh, this is beautiful,” remarked the three in unison. They continued to look up, and in the rainbow they saw someone tearing off tiny pieces of coloured light and throwing them out.

“This must mean that we are invited into the forest,” Berma said happily and both his parents inclined their heads in agreement.

As the Morassa family followed the fragments of coloured rainbow on the trail, they came to a clearing. Perfect for a good night’s sleep! Close by, several raymerry birds, feathers trembling in song, trilled with joy that they had come to visit.

“Ah,” sighed Pela. “This is a good place to rest. I feel it my bones.”

They each made a comfortable bed of end-of-day-warmed pine needles, lay down and looked up into the deepening blue sky. A white, floating moon hung graciously like a water droplet on a marshland reed.

“Just listen to the sway of the trees and the humming of the full moon,” Pela said sleepily. “We are very fortunate to be able to rest here.”

They smiled at each other and then closed their eyes. Among the scented boughs of the woods, the raymerries placed their lovely heads under their wings and rested.

While the family slept deeply, the forest and all of magical Mareithia awakened fully.

Small, perfectly formed fairies the size of pine cones began to dance on the breath of the trees. With a great and loving whisper, an exceptionally majestic force swelled up from underneath the ground. Inner Mareithia, its central sun shimmering in exaltation, intensified its natural beauty and its in-dwellers of all colours, shapes and sizes raised their arms upwards in reverence. Its lakes began to billow and follow upward streams. Water in the oh! tunnels became molten, silvery light; the diving chelonians, with their glistening turquoise bodies, puffed out delicate bubbles of exquisite geometric forms. These shapes travelled quickly through the waters and burst forth in the Sea of Sevenaaz and in the sacred forest lake.

Earth tunnels became transparent as the soil changed to a dwelling of light. Luras and lurrettas sat quietly in circles with their eyes closed, their flower noses touching the shimmering floor, and inhaled the earth’s strong life force. “We are a part of a great creation. For this we thank the Creator and pledge to always revere life in all its forms and expressions,” they fervently declared.

As they spoke, the magnificent geometric forms in the sacred lake and in the Sea Sevenaaz rose upwards to meld with the many rainbows, great and small, which curved

majestically over them. Together they created a kaleidoscope of exquisite shapes of light which illuminated the entire land. Colour and music burst forth everywhere, painting Mareithia in golds and purples. The full moon, filled with rays of gratitude, showered the heavens with celestial spirals. Starlight sharpened. Then the entire universe fell into a moment of stillness and reverence. Insects, animals, star beings, Thea, Rom-Fine—even a few sleeping villagers who were experiencing something greater, although they did not yet realize it—all felt reverence, love and gratitude.

The great voice of Mareithia resonating throughout the land and the skies echoed the luras' words: "We are a part of a great creation. For this we thank the Creator and pledge to forever revere life in all its forms and expressions." The powerful voice continued, "Tonight, in this full moon, we celebrate the festival of the *Remembrance of Reverence*. Even when morning comes we will continue, as always, to hold life in highest esteem."

Everyone and everything nodded and smiled at each other. The land held the fragrance of a thousand white roses.

The Morassa family slept on.

Something, perhaps a flash of light, pulled Berma out from a deep, deep sleep. He rolled over, brushed away a pine needle from underneath his nose, opened his eyes and saw in the gleaming distance a human form in pink and gold radiance. It is beautiful. It is also quite familiar.

Excitedly, Berma sat up and shook his parents who, too, were far away in sleep. "Wake up," he whispered urgently, "wake up. We have a visitor." Startled, his parents awoke, sat up and looked to where Berma was pointing.

There she was, a magnificent light in human form. Norra. Their daughter.

“Shsst,” said Norra oh so softly, her sparkling index finger touching her lips. “Do not be frightened. I am really here.” She delicately approached her surprised family who were unable to move.

Norra continued to speak in that fine way. “When you think of death, you think I am lost to you. This is not so; I am simply in another place. And that place is given sustenance by your thoughts and your love. The whole universe is only a beat of the heart and each beat is a thought of love. If you keep your thoughts on this love, you will see me and you will be with me because there is where I am.”

She came up, oh so very closely, to everyone. In her hands were three objects. She first kissed her brother and softly said, “With this special stone I give you courage to help our mother and our father. Put it in your pocket, Berma, it is precious.” Her brother, astounded, did as she asked and as curious as it may seem, promptly fell back asleep.

It was a very strange event which was happening much too quickly for Kye and Pela. It was overwhelming. Is this really Norra? Is she still alive? Where did she come from? They saw that Berma was sleeping! How could he sleep? It was so confusing! Norra realized this and came even nearer to ease their bewilderment.

Gently she kissed her father and whispered, “With this oak leaf I give you vision to care for our family and the many others who will come to you for help.” Kye, with tears of joy in seeing his daughter again, took the leaf with trembling fingers. He turned to Pela whose face shone with love and astonishment.

Norra, now moved closer to Pela and murmured in her ear: “With this flower I give you love to become the leader of a community you will all build together,” and she kissed her mother goodbye.

Norra's parents tried to stand up to embrace their beloved daughter, but as they reached out, she slipped like water through their fingers. Instead, they touched a pinkish gold flickering light which sent forth the fresh scent of a sea. The perfume filled the air like a lullaby and made them drowsy. Peacefully, Kye and Pela slipped once more into a heavy sleep.

It was late morning before the Morassa family awakened in the sun-flooded forest. Each member thought, *I had the strangest dream about Norra. I saw her clearly. She spoke to me, kissed me and gave me an object.* But not wanting to create possible heartache to the other, no one spoke about the event. As they got up and stretched, Berma secretly fingered the stone in his pocket; Kye placed his leaf carefully in his bag and Pela put the orchada flower in her hair where everyone could see it. A bit of pollen tumbled down and tickled her face.

"Well, I had such a wonderful sleep." Pela beamed and looked up into the sky.

Kye and Berma watched her in surprise. Quietly Kye said to his son, "Your mother is smiling and she is looking up at the sky! I haven't seen her do that for so long. She *must* have had a good sleep!"

Berma remained silent and gingerly touched the stone in his pocket. Pela put up a finger to her face and tasted the pollen on her cheek: "Hmm, this is delicious," she remarked and invited her husband and her son to try it.

"Mmm, it is," Berma and Kye answered, licking their yellowed fingers. And so the orchada pollen became their breakfast as they sat in the woods listening to the raymerries practicing for their afternoon concert.

They left the sacred forest with gratefulness in their hearts and continued down the Cheminaad, Berma leading the way. Fidgeting with the stone in his pocket, he slowed his step, turned around and cautiously approached his parents. He was uncertain and uncomfortable, but

he had to speak. He blurted out, “I miss Norra. I know we all miss her. But I believe that the universe is a beat of the heart and that each beat is a thought of love. Death is only an idea. Every time we think of Norra with love in our hearts, she is with us.” Berma remained uncomfortable yet shyly added, “Well, that’s what I feel and that’s what Norra told me...last night...” His voice was close to breaking.

Both Pela and Kye stopped abruptly and Berma waited for their outburst. But no outburst came. Instead, Berma found himself inside the warm embrace of both his parents. As their kind arms finally loosened and then fell away, he grinned and pulled out the stone that his sister had given him. “Look, this is what she gave me.” In presenting the small, flat, white pebble to his parents, he look closer at it and saw some peculiar blue markings scratched on its surface.

Pela looked puzzled at seeing the stone and then, looking up at her son, she said thoughtfully, “Norra also came to visit me last night,” and tenderly touched the flower in her hair.

“Yes, and she visited me.” Kye's voice held deep emotion and with a mild, shaking hand he pulled out the stately oak leaf with its intricate veining and tiny silver drawings, barely visible.

Nothing was explained and no more was said. That would come later. For now, the Morassa family proceeded down the Cheminaad with a lighter step.

## Chapter Seven: The *Amireel* - The Feast of Friendship

When Pela, Kye and Berma reached the narrowest part of the Cheminaad, they suddenly saw a profusion of minute, silver flakes falling down on them. As each shining sliver twirled down, it touched and invigorated the ground, intensifying its colours, and then melted away. The Morassa family squinted up to see what was happening.

“Look at that!” exclaimed Berma. He pointed to somewhere beyond the silvery flakes. “Do you see a rainbow? I’m sure that’s a rainbow. Perhaps it is the same one we saw in the forest!”

His parents continue to squint.

“Yes, the flakes seem to be coming from somewhere up there,” Pela replied. “I think you’re right, Berma. I can faintly see the same red of the rainbow that we saw when we were welcomed into the forest yesterday. Kye, what do you see?”

Kye noticed that the silvery fragments were being sprinkled from a specific area in the sky; it could easily be a rainbow. He nodded cheerfully to Pela and Berma, “Perhaps it’s a present from Norra who is happily sending us on our way.”

The family, enthralled, continued down the dwindling road as the slivers of light continued to embellish the surrounding land.

A bee balmer, droning by sometime earlier, had found the orchada flower in Pela’s hair and since then, was feasting blissfully on its the pollen as the Morassa family continued their journey. When the silvery flakes began to fall to the ground, the bee balmer became very curious and looked up. *What was this? Where are they coming from?* As the shiny bits travelled downwards the bee balmer started to travel upwards. It was arduous work but with an extra lick of Pela’s orchada pollen that she had stored under her wings as a pick-me-up, the bee balmer

flew a little more easily. Higher and higher she went then stopped abruptly. *A rainbow! An enormous and brilliant rainbow ship! How is this possible?* She droned closer and saw slivery flakes being tossed out by somebody or something inside...marmotashas! Without warning, a thunderous chorus of hearty welcomes burst out from everywhere. She had made it to the great rainbow council ship and everyone was cheering! As she flew into the rainbow, families of bee balms buzzed and hummed and bumped around her with joy.

Mareithia spoke, its strong and noble voice fluttering the air with gladness, "Welcome to the council of the Astriel Lumena! Congratulations! You have managed to fly through the projections of the events we have been watching above the golden lake. It takes a courageous heart to explore something different and we wish to thank you for your adventurous spirit and your perseverance. Therefore, from now on you will be called 'Bee Balm,' the true leader of all the bees in Mareithia. Yes, the bees have used the words 'bee balmer,' for a very long time, but there has never been a leader. You are the first one. And, Bee Balm, as of this very moment you are an important member of the Astriel Lumena. "

A tremendous applause rose up from the rainbow which echoed throughout the forest, and made the golden surface of the lake ripple.

Bee Balm was overcome with emotion; a part of her wide, dark brown stripe on her lower body unravelled nervously and became entangled in the ribbons of the ribbonoters. With an apologetic air, she scrolled the brown stripe back in by swivelling her body, and flew to her bee balm community to find out what was happening.

Members settled back down again as the great voice continued, "Today we have observed remarkable events which bring the land of Mareithia into a larger place in the universe and we will certainly celebrate these accomplishments. However, beforehand, there is a surprise waiting

for you all...we have an unexpected guest.”

*Who? Who is it?* Members exchanged glances. Abruptly, the rainbow disappeared from underneath them. Everyone became alarmed.

“Stay where you are,” commanded the imposing voice, “and no harm will come to you.”

Everyone froze where they were and suddenly found themselves in exactly the same positions but supported by dark blue space which was dotted by hundreds of tiny suns. A dazzling star nearby quickly advanced towards them, expanded and changed into a human form. It stepped forward in the dark blue space to greet them. Nobody moved. Mouths were agape and eyes were enormous. Everyone recognized the form. It was Norra. Norra Morassa!

“Norra,” a few lempers whispered.

“I have always perceived life as infinite.” Platona, on her hind legs, spoke as loudly as she dared.

“Yes, Platona,” Norra said kindly as she turned to her, “you are right.”

Platona looked rather smugly at the other lempers.

Norra took everyone in with her affectionate eyes, “I was able to appear to my family in the forest because of your help. Here, where we are now in this starry space, all life exists in all time. But to be able to communicate with my family, I needed the celebration of the *Remembrance of Reverence* to help me. It was when Mareithia changed into a thinner and finer place during the celebration that I had an opportunity to kiss and to speak to my family. Thank you.”

There was a moment of warm quiet as everyone shone beams of affection towards her. With a last smile, Norra reshaped into a star, grew fainter and fainter and finally vanished, taking the dark blue space with her. Members, quiet and thoughtful, found themselves once again

snuggled in the rainbow ship. It took a moment for them to absorb Norra's words but soon they began moving again, eager for the feast.

Seemer, Tannaël and Gäl-iard, all standing close to Quercus, began a short conversation.

"Well, Quercus," said the red-haired Tannaël with a mischievous smile, "I see you had quite the experience with the twins." Quercus flashed his light through the crevices of his bark.

"Tell me, how did you know that the boys were not ready yet to cross into the forest to thank you?" asked Seemer intrigued.

An oak leaf fluttered down for Seemer to catch. He looked at it carefully as Gäl-iard came closer. Delicately sketched into the shiny, green leaf, were minute silhouettes of Lithan and Sian who were surrounded by magnificent silver filigree drawings of plants, animals, spirals and stars.

"Hmm," remarked Gäl-iard as Seemer handed him the leaf to read. Gäl-iard knew this language very well; in fact, Gäl-iard knew many unusual types of languages. "Apparently Lithan and Sian need a little more time to get used to their new selves. They are very interested in life, Sian with the natural world and both Sian and Lithan with the star world. They are learning how to respect themselves, everyone else and everything around them. This is good news! They are moving forward quickly."

A new leaf fell into Gäl-iard's hands.

"And," continued Gäl-iard, "it seems that they are doing so well, that when they next visit Mareithia's forest they will receive a special handshake from Quercus."

Tannaël grinned. "I wonder what kind of handshake that will be?" and laughed as Quercus blinked his bark.

The fallen leaves had disappeared and the star friends looked around to see a crowd

eagerly forming, ready to celebrate.

“Dear friends of Mareithia!” the hallowed voice resonated in the sky. “Welcome to the Feast of Friendship—The *Amireel!*”

The moment the word *Amireel* was pronounced an invisible choir of hundreds of voices sang out from the sky. In no time at all, the ribbonoters braided themselves together in song and joined the celestial voices, letting tones and colours spread out and lift up like bright blankets in the wind.

The great rainbow expanded its circle and in middle appeared an enormous, glass-like table holding fruits and small, savoury loaves, scented and inviting, mouthwatering sweet cakes shaped like stars, Quercus’ amber coloured acorns, whistling sparkling juices and crisp, fresh, zazow. The white-trumpeted orchada flowers sat in the middle of the shiny table, dusting up a little pollen in the air for food and fragrance. Bee Balm sat in a place of honour—on the top of orchada flower display itself—while her bee balmer companions fed her fresh pollen from the air and stronger tasting pollen from their baskets under their wings.

The lempers, not wishing excited bee balmers to accidentally fly into their ears or marmotashas to stuff them with rainbow bits, tied their ears around their chins loosely, so that they could still nibble and swallow. They surrounded Platona who felt highly prized because Norra had spoken to her and had *agreed* with her. Seemer, Tannaël and Gäl-iard, star beings from so far away, sat around the table with all three soonshows—Soonshow-Leef and his sister and brother—standing peacefully beside them. Quercus majestically spread his great, shiny oak branches with their silver leaves of language and held everyone and everything in beauty.

Marmotashas hopped back and forth and slid on the glassy surface picking up bits of food and feeding the ribbonoters; Rom-Fine and Thea sat eating and smiling at each other, comparing

the designs behind their ears.

With their faces filled with friendship and their bodies filled with nourishment, everyone in the great circular rainbow let a grateful chant rise up towards the heavens, “Our hearts are open wide to Creator and Creation. May the Light keep us all!”

The *Amireel* continued deep into the night; music and happy sounds echoed throughout forest.

This, however, was not the case in the northern foothills. A muffled rumbling had been heard recently. Apprehensive meadow-landers and rock-landers said that their sky felt perturbed. During the festivities, Gäl-iard, too, had begun to feel the same uneasiness. *The land is shifting*, he thought to himself. *Danger is drawing closer. We must be watchful and very careful.*

## **Chapter Eight: Waxxar and the Strange Sky**

Gäl-iard was right. Several weeks later, the morning sky above Mareithia started to turn white. Gone was the mild and the yellow awakening light and in its place slid a chalky, thick, white covering. For a while the villagers in the meadowlands, always up early working the fields or re-braiding grass roofs, paid little attention to the change. Then, suddenly, a giant white ball appeared the sky, hanging heavily like a last moldy apple on an autumn branch. A small shiver ran down the bent backs of the villagers as they stopped what they were doing. Glancing up, they realized that Mareithia’s sky had grown pale and that a huge white sphere was suspended, immobile and silent, in the bleached sky. It was unnerving.

“I feel I am being watched,” whispered one older villager to her neighbour. “Do you feel that too?”

Her neighbour nodded nervously, “I’ve lived a long time in Mareithia, but I have never experienced this. I wonder if the soonshows know what’s happening. They’re so good at detecting danger in the land. ”

There was other strangeness: no one villager could see the white ball but when two or more inhabitants looked up into the sky together the sphere was easily visible. Its movement was also peculiar. Sometimes the ball disappeared—it simply blinked out— and then appear again. No one knew where it went, when it was coming back and *if* it was coming back, where it would be in the sky.

“What is this ball and why is it here? How long will it be here? And what are we going to do?” The villagers’ many questions made the air tremble.

An observant young girl who was being crushed by the gathering crowd, stepped away a little to have a better look at the sky and thought, *why can I see this white ball when I look at it with my family and when I try to look at it I don't see anything? It's so strange, the sky is white and the ball is white, so why can I see the ball?*

Then she saw a small shadow just behind the sphere, a small muddy-grey shadow, that seemed to leak out, creep around and make itself visible to the world below—if enough people were viewing it.

*Does it mean that in order to see something there needs to be a shadow?* The girl continued to think: *And why is the sky so white? I have never seen a chalky sky. Has this happened before?*

As everyone continued to watch, the shadow around the sphere shifted and the ball changed into the shape of a teardrop. The villagers felt sadness move down into their hearts. Perhaps the shadow was *making* the ball change form, but that was not possible. It was well

known that no one was forced to change. Everyone was guided and cherished by the many wonderful teachers that came from the land and the stars. No one was ever pressured to change—people changed because they wanted to.

It was the oddness of the shadow in the sky that upset the meadow-landers. Normally, the villagers delighted in the comfortable and warm shapes of the meadowland shadows that the sun created throughout its waking hours. Shadows reflected the hues around them. There was a family bonding between the plants, animals and the shadows; they knew each other well. When lempers lifted their great bronze-coloured ears upwards in the early morning or at twilight, the shadows they cast took on the colour of their ears. The noble, white deer-like soonshows cast shadows of wisdom and light. Even the bee balmers flittered bits of golden pollen shadow here and there on the ground as they buzzed by. But the gloomy shadow lurking around the strange ball in the colourless sky felt cold. It felt unfriendly.

The inhabitants in the rocky parts of Mareithia were also puzzled by this sky sphere. The only large objects they had seen lately in the heavens were Fhieno and Syra, Mareithia's two beautiful moons. Seven days earlier, the rock-landers had been thrilled to experience the *binaria*—a rare moment when both exquisite moons were full at the same time. It had been a glorious: Fhieno, the larger of the two, radiating a brilliant violet light downwards while gentle Syra's glimmering pink glow warmed the sky and the few stars that were still visible.

Inhabitants had been awestruck to see these two magnificent orbs shimmering in the dark blue velvet sky like iridescent orbs floating on a sapphire sea. Sweet music drifted down. Some villagers had held their hands out to receive the coloured light from the sky, placed it to their ears and heard the heartbeat of the universe.

But what the rock-landers now saw in the sky was not the exquisite *binaria*; it was a gloomy shadow sneaking around a white tear drop making the sky sick.

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Fraza, an older, heavy-set, strong woman, tired of sweeping the dust from her rock and moss dwelling, bent down to admire a togreta, the glass-winged butterfly well known and loved throughout Mareithia. The togreta rested delicately on the very edge of a spider web, which was pearled with mist, and reflected the white of the dawn. *White of the dawn? The white light of the dawn?? Where was the yellow light of the dawn?* Fraza wondered as she pushed away a grey bit of hair that played in her face. Her eyes swept down from the Mountains of Mauve to her home in the foothills. She knew she was fortunate to live at the very edge of the foothills close to the meadowlands where she enjoyed the lovely surroundings and its delightful creatures.

There were no early morning yellow tips of sunlight on the tops of the rock. In fact there was no sun at all. She looked back at the togreta still quivering on the dainty web and realized that its wings did not mirror the various colours and shapes of its surroundings as it normally did. Its wings only reflected white. *White? Why??* Fraza grew concerned. She stood up and took a closer look at what was above her head. *Ooh! The sky! ...Better alert the others.*

“Sano, sano, sano! Has anyone seen the sky this morning? Sano, sano, sano! Look up! What’s the strange shape with the shadow?”

Her voice echoed through the spaces of the rock beds. Fraza lived alone and further away from her family grouping so that she could better listen to what the land was saying. An answer would take a little time to echo back.

The population in the foothills of the Mountains of Mauve was quite sparse for life was not easy—even in the summer months the days were short. As a result, the rock-landers paid very close attention to each other to make sure that everyone and everything was safe. Evenings around the fire, they shared “star”stories: silvery space vehicles in the skies, friendly people made of glimmering light and other unusual events which occurred especially during the *binaria*.

Where did the rock-landers come from? Some spoke of the great Sea of Sevenaaz and others of the vast Northern Expanse, a region of enormous, enamelled and eternal ice which lay beyond the Mountains of Mauve. Some said that the rock-landers travelled here and there and eventually settled down as small family clusters in the foothills close to the meadowlands and the Cheminaad.

“Sano, sano, sano!” The alert call was coming back to Fraza. “We don’t know what’s happening. Please come and join us, Fraza. Come now. Something else is happening. We need to stay close.”

In a flash, Fraza threw down her broom-brush, scaring off the togreta and scrambled as best she could over a thick line of rocks and down into a hollow where there were several moss and stone dwellings, similar to her own.

“What’s happening now?” she gasped, catching her breath and pushing back her hair. “Is something happening to Mareithia?”

“Look up,” said a short, long-bearded man with red hair and white, thin lips which were pressed together with worry.

Everyone gasped. The shadow in the sky had leaked into the tear drop and was pulling it lower and lower to the other side of the foothills. In the sky behind, the sun began to shine once

again as Mareithia's joyous yellow, morning light brought with it clear weather. A marvellous day was in the making.

"What is all this about?" asked Fraza as everyone watched the changing sky with confusion and relief.

"I don't know," answered the red-bearded man beside her, "but I can feel a strange electricity in the air and my back is shivering."

Fraza and everyone else nodded in agreement.

While the rock-landers and the meadow-landers—for they too, had seen the chalky sky change to a shimmering morning light—were thinking about what had happened, the tear drop shape, now completely filled with grey shadow, was jerked down into a gloomy hollow of damp rock. Within the hollow, five young men sat on horseback in a circle speaking quietly. Suddenly, the tear-drop shape plummeted down and burst into the very middle of the group. Down splatted the jelly-like, murky substance, wetting the ground and oozing close to the horses' hooves! Nervously, the horses backed away and began to whinny.

Stanior, a strong, friendly and competent rider, grimaced down at the sticky spattering of the grey, gluey globs.

"What is that??"

The other four riders looked up into the sky and then back down to the ground.

"It smells awful!"

The horses, shiny and sleek, fretted and continued to move further away from the centre of the foul-smelling circle.

"I know exactly what it is," an angry voice spit out. "But I don't want to tell you. I want to tell you something else."

The voice belonged to the leader, the eldest of the group, Waxxar, who was sometimes bold, sometimes careless and sometimes friendly. Today, however, he was angry.

“Do you all remember my loving companion, Loupcanus?”

Stanior and the three others nodded with quiet heads.

“Yes, we remember him very well, Waxxar. Brave and intelligent as a wolf. Such thick and glossy grey-white fur and intelligent, golden eyes. He never left your side, Waxxar,” Stanior replied respectfully.

“Come here and look in my hand,” Waxxar commanded his group.

Silently the young men got off their horses, and walked over to Waxxar, careful to avoid the centre of the circle.

“I have kept this a secret for too many days now,” Waxxar said, happy and annoyed at the same time. “Look!” He opened his left hand.

All four heads bent over and saw a beautiful drawing of Loupcanus in full colour etched in Waxxar’s hand. As Waxxar breathed on it, the picture became alive; his wolf-like companion was running enthusiastically on the spot in his hand. “This appeared in my hand when Loupcanus vanished.”

Turning his hand into a hard fist of frustration, Waxxar shouted out tearfully, “I don’t understand why Loupcanus left or where he is, but I am going to find him. I don’t care what happens to me; I am going to find out what happened to him.”

The others began to feel a little uneasy. Waxxar was a brilliant horseman and knew more of the land of Mareithia than the others. Although he was just sixteen, he had already explored the Cheminaad, and had met meadow-landers and rock-landers. He had even explored some of

the Mountains of Mauve. But Stanior and the three others, Emvir, Roddon and Walcer, also knew another Waxxar—a young man who could create problems.

There was another reason why the group was uneasy. Rumour circulated that Loupcanus had vanished somewhere in the sacred forest Mareithia. Although the impressive and beautiful lupine had only been gone a week, it was thought that he had gone too deep into the golden lake of the forest. No one in the group believed the rumour to be true, but if Waxxar heard about it, there was going to be trouble...

“I’ve been told that Loupcanus might be in the forest and the lake is there and you know how Loupcanus loves water...and the lake is very deep and...” Waxxar stopped with a ragged throat. He didn’t want to shed tears in front of his friends.

“That is only a rumour,” Stanior said quietly as he placed a calming hand on Waxxar’s shoulder. “No one knows where or why Loupcanus has gone.”

But Waxxar was not to be consoled. “I’m going to the forest,” he muttered between tight teeth. “I’m going to see if the forest has done something to Loupcanus. Will you come with me? If so, we leave at dawn.” He looked around to the others bravely, but his eyes were filled with sorry.

No one was excited to go, but Stanior knew that Waxxar was very upset and needed care. Stanior also knew that when his friend was thirteen years old, he had accidentally been touched by the Rawl—this same sticky and horrible shadow that had just splattered down into the circle. Although he never spoke of it to the others, Stanior knew that it was Waxxar’s unpleasant encounter with the Rawl that made it follow him. Waxxar was becoming more and more unreliable and soon he would be a prisoner of this horrendous and unpredictable force. Watching his friend closely, Stanior noticed that at times Waxxar changed abruptly: he was gentle and then

for no reason, he became angry. Although Stanior cherished their friendship, it was not always easy to keep.

*So here we are, in a circle of dangerous foul-smelling matter,* thought Stanior as he looked at the others quickly. *We've got to help Waxxar, otherwise his anger will take over.*

There was little enthusiasm in the group to go to the forest, but the horsemen were loyal to Waxxar. No one spoke.

Waxxar grunted: "We are in agreement then," and turned back to mount his horse. "We'll be gone a few days. Don't forget to pack the torches."

The silence continued but the thought of torches raced through everyone's mind. Why bring torches? Did he want to burn something? Stanior and the others slowly walked back to their horses and prepared for the journey. From within the sticky circle, a dribble of grey fog secretly slid out and stuck itself under the hooves of Waxxar's horse. At that very moment, a strange rumbling echoed throughout the land; the foothills and the meadowlands trembled.

## **Chapter Nine: Star Friends**

On the sparkling white banks of the turquoise Sea of Sevenaaz, the great star being, Gäl-iard, stood tall. His thick sandy-coloured braid of hair, held together by a golden clasp of diamonds, fell heavily down his pink back. His acute, grey eyes took in everything around him. They moved from the shoreline to the sea and upwards to the heavens. Then he smiled warmly as a small, silvery star craft fluttered down gently inside a stratunnel. *Ah, here they come!*

There were three types of tunnels in Mareithia: earth tunnels which were maintained by the luras, oh! tunnels, the underground waterways which were home to the great sea turtles, the

chelonians, and the stratunnels, tube-like energy fields, which connected Mareithia to space. Stratunnels were useful for space visitors as their craft remained invisible. Sometimes star visitors flew into Mareithia's skies without using a stratunnel and risked being seen. But that was a rare event.

“Good, they are using a stratunnel,” Gäl-iard said to himself, moving towards the descending craft as it approached the sand banks. “It hasn't been long since our last visit, but I still look forward to meeting my friends again.”

The star vehicle softly touched the ground. As the stratunnel released the craft from its grasp, out stepped Seemer and Tannaël who had come in from their home planet, Cera. With a wide grin of friendship Gäl-iard came forward and embraced them both.

“Seemer and Tannaël! My friends from the Star Nations Assembly! I knew you were coming back to Mareithia at some point after the *Amireel*, but why here at the sea?”

“And you, Gäl-iard, from your Intergalactic Fellowship! Why are you here?” exclaimed Seemer and Tannaël together.

Everyone laughed for instead of thinking their words, which they normally did, they spoke them out loud—all three at the same time.

“Well,” said red-haired Tannaël with green, slanted, mischievous eyes, “I think we have been called here by the Astriel Lumena.”

“The great council calling for our help?” responded Gäl-iard with a mocking air of surprise. “Are you sure?”

The three friends laughed once again and then become serious.

“I wonder why the council would have us meet here at the Sea of Sevenaaz,” said a puzzled Seemer as he turned around to view the area. “It certainly is beautiful here. I remember

hearing that Thea, the young girl who now lives in the sacred forest, was born here in the sea. Her parents had done their best to stop the Rawl from reaching the water. Then they disappeared. Just like that.” Seemer snapped his fingers.

“Yes,” said Gäl-iard. “We saw the entire event from our homes in the stars. It was mysterious and tragic. Even the white banks were speckled with oozing blobs of that sticky, grey fog. I think Thea’s parents were able to clean that up before they vanished.”

Tannaël walked around the pristine shoreline while Gäl-iard and Seemer continued speaking together. She looked down, carefully picked up a tiny grain of white sand and brought it back to them.

“Look at this.”

Inside the grain was a small yellow oval and underneath a tiny globule of dark grey matter.

“Ah,” Seemer said. “That is an en-iar, Tannaël. Look at the tiny dark spots on its yellow back. When it breathes in, it holds down these spots and then it breathes out, the spots pop up and the en-iar jumps back into the sea.”

By focussing a ray of light from her green eyes into the entire grain of sand, Tannaël squinted and looked closer.

“No.” She shook her head as curly, red hair flew around her face. “No,” she repeated with rising excitement. “Look, Seemer, look *underneath* the en-iar.”

Both Gäl-iard and Seemer readjusted their eyes to see through the yellow, dotted insect. Suddenly, the en-iar popped up and jumped back into the sea. But a tiny blob of thick, glutinous grey fog remained on the grain of sand. All three saw it.

“Oh!” they exclaimed.

They looked at each other and then back to the blob. A bit of foul smell began to permeate the air around them.

“Oh...”

“Now we know why the council has asked us back,” said Gäl-iard quietly.

Tannaël cupped the grain of sand in her hand, brought it up to her heart and closed her eyes. Her lips moved softly and her hands glowed golden. When she opened her eyes and her hands again, a perfectly white grain of sand was revealed. She walked back to the turquoise water and gently laid the spotless granule near the edge.

“Yes,” replied Seemer as he watched Tannaël. “I think there is still work to do in Mareithia. There is still help to be offered and love to be given.”

The earth under their feet began to shake violently. The tremor was strong enough to make the surface of the Sea of Sevenaaz quiver; then the waters paralyzed. Silence followed. Everything stood stock-still.

“Is this an earthquake?” asked Tannaël in a concerned voice as she and Seemer look at Gäl-iard.

“No,” replied Gäl-iard, shaking his head slowly. “There *are* earthquakes on Mareithia, as you know and the luras in the earth tunnels do a very good job in letting us know. But this is not an earthquake. This is something else. This rumbling means danger. I must go.”

“Where?” asked Seemer.

“To the sacred forest. Danger is approaching. I’ll take the direction of the Easterly Lay. That route is shorter and I can get into Mareithia’s forest from the other side which is less known.”

Gäl-iard pointed to the water. “You are very welcome to stay and meet up with friends there in the bubbled dome under the sea...but I don’t think anyone there is visiting from Cera at the moment. Hope you aren’t homesick already?”

Seemer and Tannaël smiled at him fondly and shook their heads.

Gäl-iard clasped both his friends’ hands and added, “I’m very happy you are here again. Mareithia seems unsettled. If you are not staying here, could you both go to the crystal cave and see if all is in order there?”

Tannaël frowned, a little puzzled. “The crystal cave? Which one, Gäl-iard? The one near the Northern Expanse or the one near the Southern Heading?”

“Near the Southern Heading,” Gäl-iard responded and let go of their hands. “We will meet again soon, I hope, perhaps on the Astriel Lumena rainbow ship?” He smiled as he waved goodbye, quickly shifted his pink body into a ball of sky-blue light and flew up and towards the forest of Mareithia.

“May the Light keep you...”Gäl-iard’s voice trailed off and echoed in their minds and hearts as the ball quickly sped away.

Gäl-iard zoomed towards the Easterly Lay over the grasslands and upset a few bee balms who were leisurely droning in the air, enjoying the rich, floating pollen of the orchada flowers.

“Sorry,” said the ball of blue light to the tumbling bee balms who buzzed quite loudly at the intrusion.

As Gäl-iard approached the edge of forest, he shifted back into human form and met a few soonshows—white deer-like animals capable of galloping, swimming and flying. As loyal stewards of the land, they were discussing Mareithia’s environment by flashing pictures to each

other. These images were projected into the space between them so that everyone could see and be included in the conversation. Every now and then, the soonshows flickered their wings in agreement with a dialogue image.

“Well met, Soonshow-Leef,” flashed Gäl-iard as he bowed his head to a particularly noble soonshow with magnificent antlers of brown velvet. “How is the forest?”

“All is well,” Soonshow-Leef flashed back with a slight flicker of his wings, “but the forest seems somewhat different. We don’t understand why.”

Concerned, Gäl-iard continued onwards and moved quietly into the back entrance through dense trees and shrubs. In the distance he heard a chorus of raymerry birds singing their hymn of joy to the sunny day. The fragrance of the pines and the flowers swirled up in rhythm to the music. All was beautiful and fine.

*Perhaps I am wrong*, thought Gäl-iard. *Perhaps it is an earthquake after all*. The rumblings began again under his feet. “No, this is not an earthquake, this is darkness coming. I must get ready. I must warn the forest,” he said out loud and moved quickly towards the lake. But the forest of Mareithia already knew of the coming danger and had pushed up and around itself. The sacred place waited.

Just as Gäl-iard approached the lake, he glimpsed fourteen-year-old Thea and her lempers friend, Platona, crouched at the water’s edge but they did not see him. Both Thea and Platona were frightened; the rumbling had disturbed the normally quiet air.

“Come away, Platona,” Thea whispered urgently to the lempers as she stood up and prepared to move into the forest. “I think we should leave *now!*”

Platona started to stand up on her hind legs wanting to speak in that sophisticated voice of the lempers.

“Ahem,” she said as she cleared her voice. “I am speculating if present circumstances warrant closer assessment prior to the evacuation of —eee!—” and was pulled back down and away by Thea. They scrambled into the woods, just far enough to remain hidden and yet close enough to see the lake.

“Something very important is about to happen, Platona. Let’s stay here and watch. I think we’ll be safe.”

“Important?” Platona squealed. “Did you say important, Thea?” She excitedly started to clear her throat and tried to stand up to speak.

“Shhht,” replied Thea as she gently pushed Platona down. “We must remain quiet. Perhaps afterwards you can tell everyone what occurred. For now let’s just see what’s going to happen.”

Both waited. Suddenly they saw Gäl-iard coming to the very edge of the lake. He slowly changed into a blade of grass. Thea and Platona’s eyes opened wide in astonishment.

“Oh! I know that Gäl-iard can shift into any shape, but I have never seen him actually do it,” exclaimed Thea in a whispered voice. “Look, Platona. Can you find Gäl-iard in the grass?”

Amazed, Platona shook “no” with her head and then managed to squeak out, “At this time, it is best I not nibble the grass near the lake!”

As Gäl-iard shifted form, he smiled knowing full well that he was being observed. *This should be a fine adventure for Thea and Platona*, he thought as he prepared to receive those who responsible for the fierce noise booming down from the foothills.

## Chapter Ten: Waxxar Rides Forth

“Eeeeeeeee! Ooooooh,” squealed a few lurettas. They tumbled from their bed shelves into the tunnel below, as the meadowlands near the foothills quaked. These tiny, baby mole-like animals, soft and rosy, trembled with fear. They tried desperately to twitch their minuscule newly sprouted flower-shaped snouts.

“Eeeeeeeee! Ooooooh...ooohhh.”

A chorus of lurettas joined in and soon there was havoc: lurettas falling out of the beds, parent luras anxiously coming in between them and with their flower noses promptly shoving them back into bed. Some parent luras brought their multi-coloured flower noses close to the ground to sense the integrity of the soil and then they began to softly hum a lullaby. The earth around the bed shelves swayed ever so slightly but most of the lurettas calmed down. There was, however, one lurette who was particularly anxious about the rumbling ground.

“Wh-wh-what is it? Do you sme-sme-smell an earthquake? Do-do-do you? Do-do-do you?” she stuttered in apprehension and nervously scratched her tiny flower-shaped snout.

The parent lura answered quietly. “No, it certainly isn’t an earthquake, because earthquakes have a very special odour. It’s just Fraza who is beating on some stone and calling out to other rock-landers. She is a strong woman and can really make a great deal of noise banging rocks together. You know how the people in the foothills love to move rock around to build houses and fire areas...and please stop scratching your snout. It is just beginning to take that lovely flower shape. Just look at those beautiful colours and forms. They are small but already very pretty.”

The lurette smiled and relaxed back into her bed. She snuggled up to her lurette sister and whispered to her, “Don’t you ju-ju-just *love* our parents!”

Without showing any outward sign of distress, one of the parent luras quietly left the tunnel, shuffled down a deeper passageway and entered a large communal room where other luras were snuffling around, smelling change and possible danger.

In the group, a particularly substantial lura with a remarkably large multi-coloured flower snout turned around and addressed the other luras in a snuffled voice.

“I think it is time we spoke to the chelonians.”

“The chelonians? The great turtles in the oh! tunnels? But we haven’t seen them for a very long time,” mumbled some of the luras,

“Yes, I know, but they’ll know what is going on. I have heard that Gäl-iard is now in the sacred forest and that the soonshows are concerned about Mareithia.”

There is a moment of complete silence and then everyone spoke at once but quite slowly, “Gäl-iard? Gäl-iard from the Intergalactic Fellowship? Soonshows? Unrest?”

“Let us settle down, let us settle down,” repeated the great lura several times. “We shall call on the chelonians. Please let us all sit in a circle and look down into the floor.”

All the luras present, male and female, snuffled and meandered and slowly settled into a circle, sometimes sitting in one place and then, for no apparent reason, moving to another place. This took time as no one seemed rushed, although they were curious to know what was happening.

The leader lura in the circle struck the earthen floor several times with his great paw saying in a resounding voice, “Companion chelonians, come and meet us here. We ask for your friendship and for news of the surface world. We sense danger. We wish to be of help.”

For a moment there was silence and then a whooshing vibration entered the bodies of the seated luras. The great turtles had arrived! The earthen floor became transparent. Bubbles of all

sizes created by several chelonians rose up from the waters of the oh! tunnel to bounce against the clear, thin film which separated the earth room from the water tunnel. Using their flower noses, the luras smelled the odour of the bubbles as they broke near the film. This way they understood what the chelonians were saying.

“There’s nothing you can do,” they bubbled. “Gäl-iard is aware of the situation. As the sound of the rumblings increases, stay home to clear your tunnels and calm your children. Eventually all will be fine again.”

The bubbles grew smaller as the turtles swim away. The thin film separating the water and the ground tunnels was once again replaced by the thick earth floor. Thoughtfully and steadily, the luras snuffled back to their homes, their flower noses tickling the ground.

“We know that Gäl-iard will do well,” muttered one lura to another, loud enough for the entire group to hear. All the luras nodded in agreement as they shuffled homewards.

#

Thunder shattered the air. Flustered, Fraza looked up to the sky. She had slept soundly last night with her rock-land friends and had savoured their company and security. Now, she was back home early enough to enjoy a quiet morning walk in the meadowlands. Mareithia’s sky was beautiful and brilliant as always. But this noise! She covered her ears as the rumbling sounds from the foothills—the cracking of rock, the clattering of stones and the breaking of shrubs—came closer and closer. In the meadowlands, she saw that the fresh dew on the flowers had evaporated. The bee balms, usually basking in golden pollen, had disappeared. Gone, too, were the glass-winged togreta butterflies.

Down from the rocky parts, drove a group of five young riders tightly squatted on shiny, dark brown horses. Clots of earth and pebbles hurdled wildly up into the air.

“We’re riding into the forest!” bellowed Waxxar. “I *will* find Loupcanus! I’ll do anything to find him! Get out of the way! We have torches! We will not stop!”

“Sano, Sano!” Faza frantically called out the alarm to her friends in the foothills, hoping they would hear her from where she was. Turning around on herself again and again she shouted, “What is this noise? Who is screaming? Why are the stones crashing down? Is this an avalanche?”

Suddenly she spotted a blurry and dusty group of wild riders and heard the smashing of hooves on rock. “What’s the matter?” Fraza turned around trying to back to her home. The riders were closing in on her. “Who are these people charging down into our land with such rage? Are they going to destroy everything here?”

As the pounding of the hooves increased, the earth shook. Fraza froze. The riders raced straight towards her.

“Get out of the way, or we’ll run you down. Get out of the way! We will not stop!” Waxxar yelled again.

But Fraza couldn't move; she was rooted to the spot with her eyes tightly closed. “Please do not come and destroy our lands,” she whispered. “Please leave us alone.”

The riders burst forth—just missed Fraza—and continued charging, pouring into the meadowlands like wet mud through a hole. Young men and horses crashed through the streams and trampled the orchada flowers, whose damp, yellow pollen fell to the ground like small balls of clammy gold.

Shaken, Fraza started walking back to her dwelling on wobbly legs, looking at the path of destruction left by the angry riders.

“Oh no,” she cried out. “The flowers are shredded and the streams are sullied.” She bent down to touch one of the tattered leaves of an orchada plant. A thin, foggy slime leaked out from the underside of the leaf and seeped into the soil.

“The Rawl! The Rawl has come back,” Fraza whispered as she quickly pulled her hand back. “Mareithia is in trouble.” She looked up towards the distant Cheminaad with its entrances into the sacred forest. All she could see was damage and all she could feel was sorrow. Yet, deep, deep inside, Fraza knew that help would come and they would all do their very best to save Mareithia.

#

While the riders battered their way from the foothills to the meadowlands, the shimmering forest of Mareithia lifted its fine shoulders and pulled in a breath of peace and expectation. The moment was at hand.

*So, they are finally coming here. Let us then make new friends,* thought Gäl-iard-as-a-blade-of-grass. He took a moment to admire the beautiful reflections of a togreta butterfly as it fluttered down on a branch close by. *And you, dear togreta, can fly back to your home in the meadowlands and give Fraza a flutter for me. Thank you for your company and concern; I will be fine here.*

As the togreta gave an extra flutter of goodbye, Gäl-iard, with a twist and a stretch, rose up from the grasses near the lake, and appeared once again as the tall, pink-skinned and powerful

being from the stars. With eagerness and fellowship in his heart, he waited for the arrival of the riders and their torches. *Here, in Mareithia's gentle forest there are no weapons*, he thought. *No arms are necessary, for the mind is greater than any weapon and can create wondrous things through love and intention.*

Although Gäl-iard was not native to Mareithia—his home lay in deepest space—he often spent time there. He held a deep affection for its inhabitants and today looked forward to making new friends.

Sliding like dark and devious shadows, the riders and their horses raced on, crossed the Cheminaad and furiously entered the great forest of oak and pine.

“I just know that Loupcanus has been hurt in this forest. Maybe he has been taken. I’ll destroy this place now and forever,” spat Wexxar, eyes solid with destructive intent.

The forest had wrapped itself in a layer of light so strong that nothing could penetrate it. Yet, a small tunnel which joined the sacred forest to the outside world appeared, like a wide golden wedding band. Wexxar grabbed onto this opportunity with a violent hand and, blinded by revenge, crashed through the tunnel, his riders following tightly behind. They thundered down into the middle of this gracious forest and stopped abruptly at the edge of a shimmering, quiet and modest golden lake.

“Men, prepare the fire,” ordered Wexxar and great flames soon began to blaze from the hand-held torches. Then, just as the first flaming torches were inverted to touch the grasses, it began to rain—a sweet, gentle and forgiving rain. All fire was extinguished. Wexxar cried out in frustration as he looked up into the heavens. The more his anger flooded him, the heavier the rain poured down. On the other side of the water stood Gäl-iard, tall, powerful and very dry and beside him golden-eyed Loupcanus, silent and smooth, and also very dry.

*Wexxar!*

Wexxar twirled around only to discover that the voice came from inside his head. Looking across the water, he saw the man who had spoken his name within his mind so exquisitely that Waxxar began to have a new feeling—a feeling of kindness and generosity. Then he saw Loupcanus.

*Loupcanus!!*

“Loupcanus! You are alive! Why are you here?” Waxxar burst out with tears of joy.

Loupcanus remained motionless beside Gäl-iard.

Gäl-iard transported himself instantaneously to the riders’ sides as his voice continued to speak to them in their minds: *Waxxar, Stanior, Walcer, Emvir, Roddon, why are you here? Why do you want to destroy this beautiful place?*

The young men were startled to hear Gäl-iard in their heads and to see him suddenly appear beside them. They looked uncomfortably at each other and then at Waxxar who stared down at the ground. He couldn’t bear to look at Gäl-iard and especially not to gaze into the golden eyes of his beloved Loupcanus, who remained like a statue at other end of the lake.

Stanior began to speak, “We just wanted to help Waxxar find Loupcanus. We didn’t mean any harm.”

“Why did you think that Loupcanus was in danger?” asked Gäl-iard out loud.

Waxxar mumbled, “Because he left me and I got worried that maybe he had—”

“Had been captured by others and taken away?” asked Gäl-iard.

“Ummm, or worse.” Waxxar cringed as he spoke.

“I can understand your worry and it is good to know that you are concerned for others, Waxxar. But why do you think Loupcanus left you?”

“Because he doesn’t love me anymore?”

“Oh, I don’t think that is so, Waxxar, I think there is another answer. Look carefully into his eyes. What is he telling you?”

Across the small lake, Loupcanus’ gleaming golden eyes of friendship shone into Waxxar’s heart. “I think he is saying that he needs to go to different places, but that he will always be my friend, even if I don’t see him every day.”

“Yes, that is true. And there is something else, Waxxar. Did you know that Loupcanus has a family?”

“A family?” everyone said, surprised.

“Yes,” nodded Gäl-iard, “and he needs to be with them also.”

Waxxar breathed in a sigh of understanding and his heart lifted. Loupcanus had not been stolen and he had not broken his friendship with Waxxar! He had left to help out with family responsibilities! Waxxar, filled with joy, sent his fine companion an enormous smile. Loupcanus, no longer able to stay still, crashed through the lake waters and bounded up to Waxxar with beaming eyes and a very excited body. Waxxar quickly got off his horse and crouched down to embrace his cherished lupine friend. “I am very sorry, Loupcanus. I didn’t realize you had another family.”

Waxxar stood up and bowed his head to Gäl-iard. “I really never meant to burn down the forest.”

Gäl-iard smiled and answered, “It would never have been possible, Waxxar. This is a sacred place, meant for friendship—a place for building, not for tearing down.”

The great star being gently patted Waxxar's shiny dark brown horse. "He's a beautiful animal, Waxxar. Take good care of him. Now go back to your foothills and see that all is well there."

"Thank you," said Wexxar a little shamefaced and murmured to the others, "let's move away from here." As all five riders slowly left Mariethia's forest they realized there was no longer a tunnel to follow—the sacred forest had let go of its light shield. Instead, Stanior, Emvir, Rodden and Walcer rode peacefully behind the contented Waxxar on a new path freshly made by the gentle Gäl-iard. Loupcanus stopped, took one last deep look at Gäl-iard and then leapt ahead to follow Waxxar.

Waxxar never truly understood why his splendid horse become more lively after the short visit in the forest. But Gäl-iard knew very well; while petting the animal, the star being had graciously clean its hooves with his mind.

*We will need to look after Waxxar a little more, Gäl-iard thought. The Rawl is still with him. But he's learning and soon he will be free.*

As he walked back around the lovely lake, he saw Thea and Platona staring out from under the bushes, eyes still wide. He smiled at them and vanished. Emerging at the eastern entrance of the woods, he saw Soonshow-Leef waiting there patiently, his brown velvet antlers reflecting the dappled light.

"Are things better now in the forest?" Gäl-iard flashed in images.

Soonshow-Leef flashed back, "For now, Gäl-iard, but I still feel a little uneasy about the marshlands. Perhaps I worry too much." Soonshow-Leef flickered his white wings.

Gäl-iard flashed an image of agreement and another one of gratitude. "It is comforting to know that you and all the other soonshows are here to take care of this marvellous land,

Soonshow-Leef. Thank you.” Looking around him and absorbing everything with his grey eyes Gäl-iard continued: “The forest is at ease for now and I think that Thea and Platona will enjoy the surprise visit that is coming. But I’ll stay here with you, Soonshow-Leef, just the same, to make sure that there is no trouble in the marshlands.

## **Chapter Eleven: Crescenda’s Visit**

“What a stupendous occurrence! Never have I attested to such enlightenment!” exclaimed Platona, her ears pointing straight up to the heavens and her hind legs trembling with excitement as she saw Gäl-iard leave the woods.

Thea burst out laughing, her green iridescence hair flying wide, and hugged Platona as they walked out of the forest and towards the lake.

“Platona, look!” Thea pointed with a tensed finger to the water. “The lake has changed!”

A small piece of red and yellow fluff had drifted down and now floated on the multi-coloured reflections of the water. As both looked up, they saw a small hand with quick fingers pulling back into a barely visible rainbow.

“Those fingers belong to a marmotasha! This means that the great council rainbow ship is just above us, Platona! It’s almost invisible but you can just make it out the form!” Thea’s pale violet eyes shone with excitement.

“You mean, we are being hailed by a tiny yellow-striped monkey on the magnificent Astriel Lumena craft?” Platona’s ears and hind legs seemed to grow taller as she continued to stand in awe.

The quick fingers did belong to an excited yellow-striped monkey inside the rainbow. When the eight marmotashas realized that they were once again over the sacred forest, they became extremely agitated. Using their fast and flexible fingers, they motioned to each other: *Do you remember the ride with Thea and the other council members when we flew down into Mareithia? Do you? Do you?? Do you???* *Do you remember when we sailed up into that black space and to the Planet Cera? And playing in the Grand Hall jumping on fleecy pillows? And tying the ribbonoters coloured bands to the ship? And putting pieces of rainbow in the lempers' ears? Do you? Do you?? Do you???* The marmotashas, minute and merry, bounced and tumbled around the front of the ship near a small group of ribbonoters, bobbing their heads and swishing their long and very strong tails. The ribbonoter pilots, who were discussing a possible voyage, became impatient. The monkeys were delightful, but at times...

“We’re not going anywhere for a while,” explained Crescenda, a well-known and excellent ribbonoter pilot, to the bouncing monkeys as patiently as she could. “I understand your enthusiasm, but please go back to the play area of the Grand Hall and enjoy yourselves there. If another journey is in the offing, we’ll let you know.”

Away tumbled the eight yellow-striped, mini monkeys in clusters, tails tangling and fingers fiddling.

Crescenda stood up and picked off the rainbow fluff that a marmotasha had pulled from the vessel and had left in her lap as a present. She stuck it back onto the ship. “I need to get to Mareithia’s road, the Cheminaad, and help someone there. I understand that Waxxar and Gäl-iard have met?”

The other ribbonoters in the group nodded their heads happily. “Yes, their time together was very helpful.”

Crescenda smiled and readied herself, making sure that her green and blue ribbons were working properly as propellers, and gently hopped over the prow of the rainbow ship. Slowly she descended to the forest.

Thea squinted her eyes as she continued to look up. “Hmmm...here comes a ribbonoter circling down. It might be Crescenda, one of the pilots I met on the ship on my last voyage...aha! Yes, it is.”

Both Platona and Thea waited impatiently as Crescenda, wide-headed and stick-like, warmly wrapped in red, orange and yellow ribbons, came down carefully, her green and blue ribbons propelling and directing her. As elegantly as a damselfly, she touched down on a dancing branch of a fragrant pine and then fluttered to the ground. Her wide-mouthed smile, known and loved by everyone, shone forth.

“Crescenda!” Thea ran up to her as Platona, back on four feet, scrambled to keep up. “What are you doing here?” She bent down to receive the ribbonoter’s embrace—completely buried in colour and soft music.

Ribbonoters were fairly short people, half as tall as Thea, and lived inside the Astriel Lumena, the great council rainbow ship. Skillfully, they piloted this great vessel when it wished to travel. Ribbonoters were musical and changed the colour of their ribbons by singing into them. Sometimes the ribbons would even sing on their own. The well-known ‘ribbonoter embrace’ was given freely to anyone who wanted to hear different musical notes coming from different coloured ribbons.

“I also, please; I also, please!” Platona squirmed in with Thea to receive the warm embrace.

“It’s wonderful to see you again, Crescenda, and I hope you can stay with us for a while. You must have so many stories to tell us of your rainbow travels since we last journeyed together to bring the council members to the meeting. Do you remember that?” Thea asked enthusiastically as she stood back up. “It was a very exciting time...when we travelled down *through* Mareithia and up into the high, high skies and into space! And I was responsible to get everyone on time to the Astriel Lumena meeting over the sacred lake. And you were such a marvellous pilot! Are you here to ask us to join you in another rainbow adventure?” Thea’s words bubbled over in excitement. Her heart raced and her eyes radiated anticipation. Beside her Platona, standing tall once again, also eagerly awaited her answer: if Thea was going on another council trip, so was she!

Crescenda pulled herself up by her ribbons and stood equal to Thea.

“Ummm...well..actually...”

There was an awkward silence. Then Platona cleared her throat and turned to Crescenda: “I perceive a different undertaking is presenting itself to you. You have an act of kindness to perform in Mareithia, do you not, Crescenda?”

“Yes...you’re right, Platona. Crescenda nodded, her multi-coloured ribbons waving up and down with her. “There is someone I want to help, Platona. He’s an elderly man, not far from here. The council has been watching over him, but lately he has been unwell. I am worried about him.”

Thea bit her lip trying to hide the disappointment that she felt. “Of course, Crescenda, you must help him. Maybe we’ll travel with Platona on the great rainbow ship at another time...”

“Tis well spoken, Thea. Tis well spoken,” murmured Platona and, with her warm, soft and very long ears, touched Thea’s legs in friendship.

“But I promise you that someday we will see each other again on the great Astriel Lumena rainbow ship,” Crescenda said solemnly. “Until then, I shelter you both warmly in colour and music.” She lifted into the air, the blues and greens propelling her quickly upwards while the other brilliantly coloured ribbons billowed around her. “Until next time, Thea and Platona. May the Light keep you.”

“May the Light keep you...” Her friends’ words rang in the air as Crescenda spun off towards the end of the Cheminaad where it became a small path rubbing into the Southern Heading.

## **Chapter Twelve: Vynen the M-marsher**

Vynen, born in the saltwater marshlands, was five years old when the magnificent Sea of Sevenaaz flowed over its white sand banks. Down gushed the turquoise waters, flooding parts of the foothills and drowning the eastern marshlands! Down surged the blue waves into the deepest parts of the salty wetlands, uprooting floating islands of cordon grass and carrying clams and crabs away! Tumbling head over heels were the green frogs, croaking and sputtering, their black spots quivering on their backs and stomachs. The perries, small, marsh periwinkle snails with twirly grey-white backs resembling wasp nests, held fast to their beloved cordon grasses. Down crashed the water and away floated the perries with their grass islands—small sailing boats in the turquoise waves—towards the sweetwater marshlands near Mareithia’s forest.

Clinging desperately to their grass stems as they voyaged downstream, the perries messaged each other using their long and wildly waving tentacles: *Where are we going? Will we be together again, once things become quiet? Let’s just stick to these grasses and wait. Maybe*

*we can help each other once we have found a new home. Well, I am getting a little tired clinging on. Just relax and soon things will be quiet again. I have never been in such a storm. Well, it will stop soon. Let's be patient.*

Luckily, before the waters came, several families of perries had been dining together on the rough yellow-green grasses that made up the floating island and luckily, during the downward ride they had remained together.

*We are still together*, they signalled to each other with their longer tentacles swinging swiftly and their lower tentacles quiet. *We have food and shelter and each other. Soon things will settle down. Well, what about the other perries? Where are they? I think they remained upstream in the salty parts. Well, will we see them again? Oh yes, I'm sure. Once we get settled down, we can start exploring our new home and go back to visit them. Maybe they'll come and visit us. Wouldn't that nice? Well...yes...I suppose so. But won't that take a lot of time? Shhh. Go to sleep now. Keep your strength for tomorrow.*

Slowly, the families of perries crawled into their hard-shelled twirled homes and hung upside down on the wiry stems to receive the moisture from the floating island below.

*Ah, this feels sooo comfortable*, signalled one baby perry and promptly fell asleep. The ride down to the sweetwater marshlands had quite exhausted everyone.

The inhabitants of Mareithia called the event The Great Spill and spoke about it for many years. It was caused by the *binaria* which happened twice a year when Mareithia's two moons, Fheino and Syra, were full at the same time. But that was not all. During this particular *binaria* another very curious event took place which filled the people with wonder—the two moons, glowing pink and violet—began to swirl, one around the other. The mixture of colours and light was astounding. Suddenly, from within the swirling of colour appeared a large and beautiful

white five-pointed star. Everyone gasped! The light of this dazzling star shone down and sent special silver rays to the surface of the Sea of Sevenaaz. No one understood what was happening, but everyone knew that the Sea of Sevenaaz was a mysterious place: star craft was seen there and wonderful beings filled with light came out from their sky vehicles to help the land and its people.

A few rock-landers who lived near the sea said that as the white star shone its silver light upon the water, the water began to bubble. The bubbling started in the very centre of the sea and then expanded outwards to cover the entire surface. The Sea of Sevenaaz was boiling over! The rock-landers, with their cry of danger, ‘sano, sano, sano!’ alerted their families and quickly moved away to safety. Although The Great Spill was upsetting, it brought no harm to anyone, only change.

When The Great Spill occurred, Vynen and his parents were living in a cosy, orange reed dwelling on one of the larger floating islands that graced the saltwater marshlands. There, in the channels the waters were calm; they reflected the beautiful skies of Mareithia and gave life to many different types of creatures—insects, birds, frogs, crabs, perries, and Vynen’s favourite animal companion—Lontrann. Flashing in between the floating islands, hiding in root strands, slipping and sliding from land to water, auburn, sleek, elegant and long whiskered, otter-like Lontrann played. Sometimes she popped out of the water to stare at young Vynen with big, gentle, dark eyes. Then she would clap her hands and flatten her ears, grunt a “arghmmm” and waited for Vynen to act. She knew that young Vynen spoke a different language. Although he could laugh out loud, generally Vynen preferred using sounds: “Mmmm” for something delicious or exciting, “hmmm” when he was thinking, “ummm” when he was deciding on

something, “oomph” (with a smile) when Lontrann playfully jumped up and “mm-hmm” when he agreed on something.

Vynen’s closest friend was a boy named Kayver. They grew up together and were inseparable. They played and later worked in the wetlands. They dried salt and wrapped it into small packets with marsh grasses for the inhabitants and learned how to build sturdy, reed boats. Sometimes, Kayver spoke Vynen’s “mmm” language. Often, he lovingly teased his friend and called him “Vynen the M-marsher.” Vynen laughed warmly at the nickname—later shortened to “M-marsher”—continued to speak his own language and continued to discover his beloved marshlands with his best friend. Vynen kept his nickname even after he decided to speak the language of the inhabitants of Mareithia. The name “M-marsher” made him feel a part of the wetlands and its wonderful creatures. It also reminded him of Kayver and their deep friendship.

“A big spill is coming! We have just heard that the waters are rising! exclaimed M-marsher’s parents. “We must make for the boat!” All three scrambled into a vessel made out of cattails, nut grasses and the strong, triangular leaves of the sedges. The boat was small but comfortable. Most importantly, it was easy to navigate. “We’ll head for the larger inner channels. There the water will also rise, but it will rise slowly; the inside islands will protect us.”

Quickly they moved out, using long poles to push and manoeuvre around the smaller clumps of mud and brush. His parents were right. The waters in the inner channels rose slowly and quietly. The boat rocked gently back and forth like a cradle but everything was very silent. Not a peep nor a squeak nor a bird’s call. M-marsher closed his eyes, took a deep breath and smelled the sweet fragrance of the bushes and cattails and the water and soil. They were safe!

Although the flooding occurred a long time ago, M-marsher still remembered The Great Spill and how valiant his parents had been. How hard they had worked to help the inhabitants,

extracting salt from the marshlands and building boats. How patient they had been with him while he spoke his “mmm” language. How well they had taught him how to live in the wetlands that he so cherished.

Now, standing confused in the middle of the Cheminaad, Vynen the M-marsher was lost. *Where am I?* He pushed his small, brown feathered cap further back from his sticky forehead with his right hand and then looked down at his fingers. They were rough and lumpy and aged. *What’s happened to me? A short while ago I was young and full of life and now I am old.*

Vynen trudged on wearily, sometimes stomping in the marshes, sometimes shuffling on the road. He stopped and looked further down. This was the end, only a thin, straggly path continued on towards the Southern Heading. *Where am I?* he repeated. *How did I get here? Why am I walking and not taking my boat?*

Vynen’s thoughts were tired and dusty. Exhausted from uninterrupted and dull travelling down places he neither saw nor cared about, Vynen felt lifeless. He was dried up, inside and out, like a crumpled up old oak leaf.

It was becoming warm. Swallowing a little water from a half-broken container he carried in a bag slung over his left shoulder, Vynen found a small hollow away from the path, and flopped down heavily. He refused to lie back; sleep had become a foreign land he no longer wished to visit. But he managed to admire the many coloured grasses and drowsy, fragrant wildflowers. A few bee balms happily buzzed close by. It was all so quiet and calming. Slowly, Vynen’s body relaxed and slid back; his eyes drooped, he was almost in the land of dreams. *No, I don’t want to dream. Never again. I must stay awake.* He struggled to sit back up.

“May the Light keep you!”

The voice came from behind him. Vynen spun around. His eyes opened wide and fell upon a small being standing daintily in the middle of the path, cloaked in rainbow-coloured ribbons.

“May the Light keep you,” she repeated with a wide smile, ribbons humming sweetly around her. Her voice was high and clear like the call of the northern tarra bird. Vynen, despite his fatigue, was immediately fascinated. How could this beautiful miniature know his language? For that matter, how could this wonderful being *live*, let alone speak?

“Where do you come from?” asked the astounded Vynen.

She pointed up to the sky. Vynen saw nothing.

“From a great rainbow which is visiting this part of the land,” she answered mysteriously. “You *do* remember the rainbows, don’t you, Vynen M-marsher? Remember how you would gaze at the golds and reds and greens in the sky when you were lying in your boat, drifting on the quiet waters in between the marsh islands with Kayver? How you wanted to visit these rainbows? Do you remember, Vynen M-marsher?”

“Do I know you? Have we met before...? I am very confused,” Vynen said hoarsely and honestly to the fine visitor.

“My name is Crescenda and I am a ribbonoter.” Pointing skyward she added, “And I live up there.”

“Up the in the rainbow?” Vynen was astounded. “The rainbows are *inhabited*? How you you know me? What is a ribbonoter?” Vynen’s voice, tired as it was, began to trill from excitement.

“Vynen,” said Crescenda softly, “the great rainbow is a ship which looks after the inhabitants of Mareithia to make sure that everyone and everything is well. That is why I know

all about you. Recently you have not been yourself, so I have come down to help you—”

“But I don’t understand. I am well, just a little lost. I can’t remember certain things, that’s all. And what is a ribbonoter?” Vynen asked again.

“Ribbonoters are rainbow pilots; our ribbons are very strong and can be used as propellers to travel in the air. You see, we like to check on weather patterns and so from time to time we go into rainclouds to make sure the water that falls upon Mareithia is clear and pure. We help out whenever we can...Vynen...would you like to come up and visit the ship? I think you’ll make a very interesting discovery.”

“Ohhh, ohhh yes, but I don’t know if my body can travel. It’s old and tired. But, ohhh! I would dearly like to visit a rainbow ship!” Vynen began to feel a strength rising inside of him.

“Good! Hold on to my red ribbons and close your eyes. I will look after the rest. Enjoy the music as we travel upwards.”

Vynen stood up a little shaken, but with a heart full of excitement and exploration. Up they went, Crescenda’s green and blue ribboned propellers twirling swiftly and Vynen holding on tightly to the billowing reds with one hand and his feathered cap with the other. He squeezed his face shut, trying to keep his eyes closed. *It would be wonderful to see the land from so high up!* he thought. But Vynen was also wise enough to follow Crescenda’s counsel. She knew the sky better than he did.

## Chapter Thirteen: What Vynen Learned

“Here we are!” Crescenda said as they landed softly on the prow of the great ship. “Let’s go to the Grand Hall.”

Just as Crescenda disengaged her ribbon propellers, a cluster of marmotashas skittered in, tumbling, tails over fingers, bouncing up, jostling Vynen who stood stock-still with unbelieving eyes trying to absorb his surroundings.

*We want to play! We want to play!! We want to play!!! Come and play!!!* The minute yellow-striped monkeys signalled to Vynen with their fingers. One of the marmotashas jumped on his head, fingered his feathered cap and tried to pull it off. Vynen held on to it frantically.

“Not now,” Crescenda said firmly as she brushed the monkey to the ground. “Please, all of you, go back to your playing area.”

As the monkeys fumbled off, Crescenda turned to Vynen who was still standing motionless, enthralled by his surroundings. *I am on a rainbow ship! Oooh, this is wonderful!* He realized then that he, too, felt wonderful.

Gently Crescenda took Vynen’s arm, led him into the Grand Hall and arranged a few fleecy pillows on a large cloud-like sofa which faced the wall.

“Please sit here, Vynen, and I’ll sit beside you. Are you comfortable?”

Vynen could only nod ‘yes.’ There were so many questions to ask, but he couldn’t find his voice. It was all so marvellous!

Crescenda explained: “You are sitting in the great rainbow ship where members gather for the Astriel Lumena council meeting and discuss how they can help the people of Mareithia. This great ship also records all the important events in the land so that we better understand what is happening and assist as best we can. Now, a few days ago, something happened that greatly

upset you, Vynen, and caused you to feel lost in your head and your heart. You might think you have even lost your youth. But what you really experienced was something quite different. It was much better. Let's see what really happened."

Vynen gave a small smile—he was getting somewhat used to his surroundings—and shifted around on the fleecy sofa until he was comfortable.

"Please watch the rainbow wall in front of you."

Gradually the ship's wall became white and moving pictures appeared. They showed the last time when Vynen was with Kayver in the saltwater marshlands.

"How is this possible?" wondered Vynen out loud from his comfortable sofa seat, "I feel as if I am inside the pictures."

"Yes, it can be quite a surprise when you haven't seen these projections before. But if you relax and watch, you'll be fine, Vynen," Crescenda said kindly.

Vynen sunk back into the very comfortable, fluffy pillows...

There they were, Vynen and Kayver happily racing their home-made reed boats in-between the marsh islands. It was a day of rest: no salt packing, no boat building. They had an entire day to themselves to explore the wetlands. Oh the thrill of pushing their boats with the long and sturdy poles in and out of shady roots and shallow islands!

Early evening fell. The shadows grew long and dark and there was Kayver, ahead of Vynen, poling his boat as fast as he could.

"See that long, floating island?" Kayver called out to Vynen who was far behind him, losing the race. "I'm going there!"

"No! Don't!" Vynen's loud voice ran over the waters to his friend. "There are deep holes

there, Kayver, and whirlpools which are very difficult to control with a reed boat. Don't go there!"

Vynen's voice got lost in the dusky shade of the on-coming evening. By the time he got to the floating island, Kayver had disappeared. All that remained was his little, orange reed boat, with a hole in its side. It was growing darker.

Vynen called out until his voice became hoarse. He scrambled around the island with his boat, poling frantically and calling over and over again, "Kayer, Kaaaavyer!" But the only sound he heard was the fat sucking of the whirlpool and all that he saw around him was blackness.

"I should have made the boat sturdier. It was all my fault. Kayver has gone because of me. I should never had started the race." Vynen burst out in tears.

All the night long, Vynen combed the marshlands, calling out, desperate to hear Kayver's voice. Desperate to know if his good friend was alive...

"Vynen," Crescenda said as she glanced down, reading the changing colours of her ribbons. She looked over to see Vynen who sat hunched up in a ball with his eyes closed, tears flowing down his cheeks. He seemed so very old. "Vynen, I have just received news that Kayver is alive and well. He is resting now and you will see him soon."

Vynen looked up at Crescenda with a damp face taking a moment to understand what she was saying. Then his face lit up and he sung out in joy: "You say Kayver is alive? He is well? Kayver??" As Crescenda nodded to him, Vynen broke into a large, sunny smile. "Kayver is alive and well! Where is he? What happened? When can I see him?"

"Vynen, please understand that you did not abandon Kayver. You did your very best. Someone else who knows every possible nook and cranny of the marshlands saved him."

“Who was it? I must thank the person who saved my friend!”

Crescenda gestured to the rainbow wall with her ribbons. “Please look at what really happened to your friend. Then your questions will be answered.”

Vynen looked back up to the rainbow wall. The ship was very sensitive to Vynen’s emotions and had halted the pictures the moment he had closed his eyes. Now that Vynen was ready to resume watching, the images sprung back to life...

The moment Kayver felt his reed boat touching the outer waves of the whirlpool, he knew he was lost. The pull to the centre was too strong. Trying to balance the boat by standing up, Kayver wobbled, let go of his marsh pole with a cry and fell deep into the threatening core of the whirling waves. Forcing his eyes open, he frantically tried to clutch the wiry roots of the water plants as he tumbled by, but they slipped through his fingers. Down he went! Damps strips of weed smeared through his hair and pieces of floating stalks pushed themselves up into his face.

*I’m lost, Kayver thought panic-stricken. I’m going down.*

He was now in a deep hole at the very bottom of the marshlands. The waters were silent, dark, and slimy. Kayver grew tired and closed his eyes. Slowly, he let go of the air in his lungs. He drifted. *I am gone now from Mareithia. I am sleepy, gliding away in the water. I am letting go. This is so calm.*

Suddenly, a warm wind stroked his cold and clammy face. A balmy current of air flowed to him. With his eyes still closed, Kayver feebly put out a hand in front of his face. There was air! Immediately he opened his mouth and a tunnel of sweet, warm wind rushed into his lungs. He sputtered and gulped and finally managed to breathe properly in this tunnel of mild air. Kayver followed the stream of wind as it pulled him upwards. Every now and then, he felt a

friendly nudge which directed him in between the massive root system of the floating islands. Then he remembered nothing.

Near the sacred forest, Kayver's wet body lay kindly draped over a mound of scented pine needles on a small grassy inlet in the Easterly Lay. Beside him lay Lontrann, Vynen's sleek and otter-like friend, her body heaving from the long rescue she had made. It had taken all night. Every now and then Lontrann sat up, clapped her hands, flattened her ears and grunted a "arghmmm." But there was no response. Kayver lay motionless. Lontrann slid closer to him and sniffed his hair. It was sticky and had a foul smell. She snuffled down to his face and felt his breath blowing into her great eyes. It was steady. Tenderly, Lontrann nudged Kayver into a soft roll and he landed, face up, in the sacred forest under the gracious and wide branches of the ancient, venerable oak, *Quercus*. Giving one last "arghmmm," Lontrann slipped back into the shallow waters of the inlet and slid away...

"Lontrann! It was Lontrann who saved Kayver!" Vynen cried out astounded, his heart filled with happiness. "Lontrann knows all the wetlands in Mareithia. She's perfect!"

Crescenda laughed at Vynen's reactions. "You know the marshlands very well, too, Vynen M-marsher. But you're right about Lontrann. She is a water animal, easily sees through whirlpools and twirls in them very skillfully. Because she's so flexible, it was easy for her to slip into small, deep and dark places between roots and mud hills. That's how she discovered Kayver buried inside the hole. But remember this, Vynen M-marsher, you certainly did your very best."

Vynen looked at Crescenda with a sheepish grin but agreed with her; he had done his very best.

He started to rub his hands. They were itchy. Then his arms and legs grew itchy and then

his face. Vynen squirmed and scratched.

“Are you itchy, Vynen M-marsher?” Crescenda had a funny smile on her face.

“Mmmm,” answered Vynen, squirming and twitching. “Mmm! Mmm!!”

“That is very normal. Look at your hands.”

Vynen looked down. His hands were young again! Startled, he looked back up at Crescenda, startled.

“Look at the rainbow wall and tell me what you see?”

The wall had become a mirror and in it Vynen saw a seventeen-year-old handsome man staring back at him.

“Is that *me*?” Vynen asked, as his mind became young, sharp and clear again. He stopped scratching.

Crescenda nodded, “Yes. You were extremely frightened and upset, but now you have become yourself once again, Vynen M-marsher.”

Vynen looked at Crescenda, then back to the mirror, then back to Crescenda, trying very hard to absorb everything. “Ummm...ummm... this is so astounding, Crescenda. But I am *so* happy. Thank you.” Vynen M-marsher’s broad smile filled the Hall.

Crescenda sparkled with delight. “Let’s go and visit Kayver. Shall we take the same mode of transportation as before?”

“Of course,” he said, his grin becoming almost as broad as Crescenda’s face. “And as quickly as possible, please!” he added as he bowed to her with his feather cap in his young, firm hand.

The great oak tree, Quercus, anxiously blinked the light inside his bark. There was a sleeping stranger under his branches! What was to be done? Where was Gäl-liard? He would know what to do.

It was a little raymerry bird sweetly trilling in the forest that came to his aid. Attracted by Quercus' light shining through the crevices of his bark, she landed lightly on one of his branches. She bowed her thoughtful head, listened to the sap running up and down in the tree and quickly understood what Quercus was asking. The venerable oak let drop a broad, green leaf embroidered with silver markings. As deftly as a bee balmer catching pollen on its tongue, the little bird swooped up the falling leaf and flew away to find Gäl-iard.

He was easy to find at the edge of the forest, enjoying Soonshow-Leef's company. The raymerry landed on Gäl-iard's wide, pink shoulders and dropped the oak leaf into his waiting hand. Off she flew back to the forest, trilling the melody of the day.

After reading the silver markings on the leaf, Gäl-iard flashed to Soonshow-Leef, "You were right. There has been trouble in the marshlands. But I think it is almost over. I need to see Quercus."

Soonshow-Leef bobbed his brown velvet antlers and elegantly moved away.

A moment later, Gäl-iard stood under the magnificent branches of the oak tree and looked down at Kayver, who continued to breathe thinly. His face was like old wax—stiff and grey. Gäl-iard touched Kayver's hair—sticky and foul-smelling

*There is still much Rawl in Mareithia, thought Gäl-iard. It must be attracted to the goodness of this land, trying to destroy it.*

Gäl-iard felt inside Kayver's mind and found wonderful qualities there—how Kayver had so often helped his family and friends, how he had shown kindness and patience and generosity

of heart.

“Hmmm, these will do just fine,” Gäl-iard said to himself as he pulled out the memories from Kayver’s mind and turned them into threads of golden light. Delicately, he wove the filaments together to create a magnificent web of light which encircled Kayver’s body. “This should only take a few moments.”

Gäl-iard stepped away and watched the exquisite network of light dance into Kayver’s body. “May the Light keep you,” he murmured and lifted his closed eyes up to the heavens. Slowly, his body shifted into a diamond shape form as each cell began to twinkle. Breathing in thankfulness, Gäl-iard vanished.

Kayver’s face and body gradually took on a healthy glow. When he opened his eyes, Vynen was kneeling beside him with one concerned hand on Kayver’s shoulder.

“Wha-what...where... how...?” Kayver struggled to sit up. “Vynen? M-marsher?”

“Yes, Kayver. I’m right beside you. You’re fine now. You were brought into the sacred forest from the marshlands for care, and now you are fine—”

“But what happened? How did I get from my boat—oh, the whirlpool, M-marsher, the whirlpool! And then I don’t remember much—oh, yes the warm air that rushed into me...!” Kayver became agitated. Sitting up quickly, he panicked: “M-marsher, I almost drowned! I almost drowned! His voice trembled as he put his hands to his mouth. “You were right. The whirlpool was much stronger than I thought. I should have listened to you.”

“It’s all over, now Kayver. Everything is fine now.” Vynen continued softly, “We are marsh-landers and it’s in our nature to explore. Sometimes we get *so* enthusiastic that we lose our way. But now we’ve found our way again, Kayver.”

Vynen waited until Kayver had calmed down a little and then helped him to stand up.

“You’ve had many surprises and so have I...let me tell you about the great rainbow ship—”

“The rainbow ship?” Kayver raised his eyebrows in surprise. “You mean the Astriel Lumena council ship? Did you see it?”

“Not only did I see it, I was *on* it!”

“You were *on* it??”

The two friends stared at each other dumbfounded. Then they began to laugh quietly together.

“I think we have a lot to talk about, M-marsher.”

Vynen agreed. “Do you think that you are strong enough to go back now?”

Kayver looked at the forest around him, a little puzzled. Everything seemed normal, but he wasn’t sure. He hesitated. *Was my body touched by some bright light while I slept?* Shrugging off the thought with his shoulders, Kayver answered, “Yes, I want to go home now. I want to see everyone again, especially Lontrann.”

“Lontrann? Why?”

“I don’t know why, but I think I need to thank her for something.”

Vynen hid a smile as he put an affectionate arm around Kayver’s shoulders: “Then let’s go back to the wetlands.”

Hearts laughing, the two young men left the forest by the Easterly Lay and with a quick step, made their way back to their beloved marshlands.

## Chapter Fourteen: The Sea of Sevenaaz

Sevenaaz was a large, turquoise, inland sea, protected by white sand which held together firmly when the winds blew and the rains fell. Further to the south were the marshlands and northwards lay wild mountain ranges which rose up and away into the Great Northern Expanse. It was said that the majestic and mysterious Sea of Sevenaaz poured out into an immense ocean to nowhere. The rock-landers called this “nowhere” the *messern*, which in the ancient tongue meant “where the world-ends meet.”

The Sea of Sevenaaz had several unusual traits: it was both shallow and deep, presenting fairy-like underwater meadowlands and dark, gaping caverns moulded from old, extinct volcanos. To the delight of the various creatures that visited Sevenaaz—no one and no thing had a permanent home in its waters—the sea offered fresh and salty water currents and, therefore, a delicious underwater menu. In all of Mareithia, the most powerful place was the Sea of Sevenaaz. It was a refuge for the ancient chelonians, the enormous sea turtles which guarded the oh! tunnels and it was a place of friendship for visiting star beings who had created elegant, domed underwater dwellings. Most importantly, the Sea of Sevenaaz had a powerful grip on the dreadful Rawl which continued to pollute Mareithia whenever it could.

That grip, however, weakened when one year the sea began to boil and poured its waters over the frightened white sands, alarming the inhabitants and flooding the surrounding marshlands. This was *The Big Spill*.

It was the Rawl that had sneaked up the night of the two full moons, its foul-smelling tongue of greasy, dirty sludge sliding into the sea, choking grasses and water creatures. As soon as the sea realized the intrusion, Mareithia’s two moons, Fheino and Syra began to swirl furiously in the sky, shedding violet and pink light, calling for help. A blazing five-pointed star

came to the rescue, travelling swiftly down from the heavens, its light cutting through the waters. A great battle raged in the middle of the sea. The waters seethed. Down plunged the star's light and up shot long, slimy streams of shrieking Rawl, suffocating the brightness. Water flew in all directions. Underneath, the sea was in turmoil, grasses strangely bent and broken and immense clumps of soil and stone thrown against each other. Frogs, crabs, even perries—tiny periwinkle snails—sailed away, tumbling and choking in the churning currents.

In the end, the Rawl withdrew from the waters, but it never really left—it went into hiding.

*There will be a time, Sevenaaz, when I shall take you and all living creatures. I can wait, the Rawl spat out. I can wait a very long time.*

#

“Seemer, I think we should make plans to go to the southern crystal cave as soon as possible. You know, I find it disquieting that we found a particle of sand turning grey and giving off such a bad smell.” Tannaël looked at Seemer who stared out at the aqua sea. Underneath a lock of red hair, her pale, smooth forehead wrinkled up with worry. “It was easy enough to change the sand back into its pure state, but that might not always be the case. What do you think, Seemer?”

Seemer turned his gaze on her, his brown eyes showing affection and concern. “Yes, we must remain alert. The soonshows are being very watchful for any strange movement in the land. And of course, the ribbonoters. When they're not piloting the rainbow ship, they can propel themselves skywards to see if anything unusual is getting ready to fall from Mareithia's sky.”

“Hmmm...ribbonoters?” asked Tannäel, puzzled. “But the Rawl has never fallen from the skies—”

“Oh, but it did once, Tannäel, some years ago not long after Thea was born here in Sevenaaz. You were far away teaching in Cera when it happened. Gäl-iard, too, was away. But I was here in Sevenaaz with in-dweller Rom-Fine. We saw the thick, jelly fog coming down from the sky in torrents just behind the sea. It slithered down into the northern mountains and gushed towards the water. Its stench was everywhere.” As much as he tried, Seemer could not still his agitation as he recounted what had taken place. His body grew tight.

Tannäel had heard of the dreadful event, of course, but she hadn't realized that the Rawl had poured down from the skies; she thought it had oozed up from the earth. She breathed in deeply, her shoulders and thick red curls lifting up trying to reach the clear sky. “I am truly sorry to hear this, Seemer. I didn't know all the details.”

Seemer relaxed a little and slowly shook his head as he looked up at the beautifully clear heavens of Mareithia. “I know you are devoted to making all things whole, Tannaël, but there was nothing you could have done. You were elsewhere, helping others. And we were here and did our best.”

They walked together silently on the white sands, shoulder to shoulder, in easy friendship, admiring the loveliness of the turquoise water, which twinkled at them. Seemer relaxed a little more. Suddenly, he stopped walking and turned to Tannäel with a playful grin. “All is quiet here, now, Tannaël. I think you and Gäl-iard are right. We should go down to the crystal cave now...in fact... I am wondering...hmmm...would you like to go to the great Celebration of Thankfulness, the *Takalin*?”

“The *Takalin*? Isn’t that the early harvest feast with the southern meadow-landers? Oh! Of course! We would visit the crystal cave on the way!” Tannaël’s green eyes shone with anticipation.

Seemer slightly shrugged his shoulders. “Well, only if you are interested,” he teased, seeing she was *very* eager to go.

Tannaël’s face began to soften as she thought of the cave. “Do you remember the glorious meeting we once held in that crystal cave, Seemer, with the council members of the Astriel Lumena? How we all melted into the brilliant rays of the giant crystals and sent the rays everywhere, not only on and in Mareithia, but far out into space? We were all swaying together in these exquisite crystal waves as they flowed through us.”

Seemer closed his eyes and his body slightly moved in memory of the crystal waves. “It was exceptional and certainly stopped the Rawl from spreading, Tannaël. Unfortunately, in revenge, the Rawl became so furious it tried to suffocate the Sea of Sevenaaz.”

“But it didn’t succeed. And will never succeed,” Tannaël said firmly. “We will make sure of that!” She looked up at Seemer for confirmation.

Seemer did not reply.

After an awkward moment of silence, Tannaël continued, “It would be marvellous to go to the *Takalin*, but does it still exist? I thought that the villagers only celebrated in small groups now or in their homes secretly, since the upheaval of the smelly—”

“No,” said Seemer quietly. “Not anymore. The meadow-landers decided it was time again to celebrate out in the open with everyone, including the bee balms, the lempers, and the soonshows. You might even see Nillay again!”

“Nillay,” Tannaël said in a far-away voice, “Nillay, the little girl I once visited who used to listen to the music that seeds and stones made. Sometimes, when we were walking together in the meadowlands she would say to me, ‘Tannaël, smell the sweet perfume that is coming the rocks as they sing.’ I would close my eyes, listen to the music and smell the fragrance. Then I would reply, ‘Can you see the lovely colour coming from the perfume, Nillay?’ She would giggle and then ask me, ‘What colour is the wind?’ and ‘What perfume do your thoughts wear?’ Then we would both burst out laughing. Nillay had a delightful way about her and a wonderful understanding of things invisible. I also remember that she was particularly fond of the crystal cave. Each time her parents took her there she didn’t want to leave.”

“And Nillay, who’s fifteen now, has become an accomplished musician and composer,” Seemer added. “She plays her sansarra—a beautiful Mareithian harp made of wood from the sacred forest—to the delight of villagers. I’ve been told that she will have a place of honour at the *Takalin*.”

“Then let’s visit the crystal cave and later join the villagers in the celebration, Seemer. Imagine seeing Nillay again! Do we use our small craft or do we fly there without it?” Tannaël chuckled, her playful green eyes sparkling. She nudged Seemer who, too, started to chuckle.

## **Chapter Fifteen: The Meadowlands and the Crystal Cave**

Since the first of the pink dawn, the bee balms had been busy rubbing the morning light into the damp clover, waiting impatiently for the orchada flowers to open and send out their delicious, golden pollen. The head of all the bees in Mareithia was Bee Balm, who, one day had courageously flown all the way up to the rainbow ship from the Cheminaad where she had been

accompanying the Morassa family. Bee Balm was greatly respected for her bravery and kind leadership. Now she was droning along with a drift of her friends, and deftly caught the first floating pollen on the hairs of her tiny tongue.

*Mmm, she droned. Delicious! She buzzed to the other bees, Come closer! The pollen has just arrived!*

While the bee balmers were enjoying their fresh breakfast, the graceful, white soonshows, stewards of the land, nibbled on succulent plants and seeds and smoothed out the grass with their elegant hooves. The leader, Soonshow-Leef, and his brother and sister, were also there, looked up every now to make sure that everything was fine. The lempers were happily sampling the fresh grasses close by, their soft, long ears, tickling the leaves.

The lempers were gentle animals who could change their colour and the texture of their bodies to blend with their surroundings. They enjoyed the company of the soonshows and would snuggle down near their hooves to eat. The soonshows sometimes tripped over the them and became impatient. Because lempers thought themselves very important, they often used complicated language.

“Ahem, ahem, ahem.” A young lempers cleared his voice, got up on his hind legs and spoke out eagerly and loudly: “What an auspicious daybreak we are experiencing. It is unreservedly the most gratifying period, consuming with playfellows. I ponder—oomph—”

“I beg your pardon,” murmured another lempers close by as he gently pulled the young one back down. “Most of us slept poorly last night as the bee balmers wanted to play around us. We had to doze off with our ears tied underneath our chins and it was most uncomfortable. So, you see, we would rather nibble in quiet...*if* you don’t mind.”

The young lempers moved away thinking that his voice *was* important just the same, but soon forgot about it all. He found an especially delicious clump of fresh plants, began to nibble at them and promptly became very excited. These were not just ordinary meadowland grasses! These were zazow tops! Zazow tops!! The young lempers had only tasted zazow tops once in his short life but he had never forgotten the experience.

Zazow was a crunchy vegetable, a mixture of potatoes and carrot, and looked like long, fat toes. It grew deep in the ground. The shiny green and delicate tops of the zazow, especially the young leaves close to the earth, were tender and very tasty for any lempers, hungry or not. Zazow was normally found only in the villagers' gardens, but from time to time its seeds were pulled away by the wind and they sprouted in the meadowlands. Young children enjoyed eating the zazow raw because it laughed from inside their mouths.

The young lempers became so excited eating the vegetable tops that he rapidly attracted the attention of his entire family and neighbours. Soon a small colony of lempers were joyfully munching away—there was enough for everyone—and *that* attracted the bee balms.

“Tie down your ears! Tie down your ears!” A frantic mature lempers cried out, her mouth half-full with zazow tops. “The bee balms are coming!”

Indeed, the bee balms, always wanting to play with the lempers, came buzzing down to tease them.

Soonhow-Leaf moved his brown antlered head quickly from side to side and flashed images to his siblings. *Humph, I wonder if we could get the bee balms' attention so that the lempers are left alone?*

*Well, there are a good many orchada flowers not far from where I am,* flashed his sister. *Shall I go and rustle up some pollen?* Without waiting for an answer, she quietly walked over to

a patch of orchada plants and gently shook their white trumpeted flowers with her hooves. The pollen, golden and enticing, flew out and up into the air.

Bee Balm, the first to see the large cloud of food dancing above the ground, raced over, wet tongue sticking out to merrily receive whatever fell down on it. Instantly, the other bee balmers were beside her, swooping and scooping up.

“Ah, the soonshows are clever,” murmured one lemp to another as he tucked into some fresh zazow leaves and shook his ears free. “Glorious to be alive with loose ears again! Simply glorious!”

A shiny, glass butterfly—a togreta—landed on the long lemp’s ear and fluttered there affectionately for a moment.

#

There were two major crystals caves in Mareithia—one in the Northern Expanse, the place of vast, frozen whiteness, and the other near the Southern Heading, where the Cheminaad disappeared into the unknown. Rumour circulated that another massive crystal cave lay further down past the Heading, guarded by very large and tall people called *granders*, which in the ancient tongue meant “towering weight.”

The crystals in the caves, both north and south, were spectacular and sent forth powerful waves of harmony and peace to all of Mareithia. These ripples voyaged through the air and down into the earth. Here, with the help of the flower-nosed luras, they healed fissures in the earth tunnels. With the great sea turtles—the chelonians—these crystalline waves helped clear the waters in the oh! tunnels.

Most important of all, the crystal caves in Mareithia kept the land steady. Their energies flowed from the north like angel hair and mingled with those streaming in from the south. The land was continually enveloped in rivers of harmony and peace; yet, even then there could be disturbances.

From the Sea of Sevenaaz, a small, shiny craft slowly fluttered down like a falling oak leaf near the Southern Heading. It nestled in a delicate dip close to three ancient willow trees and near a clear, gurgling stream. From the generous opening of the star vehicle, Tannaël and Seemer stepped out and reverently placed their feet upon the earth. A small hill rose up before them.

Tannaël looked around. “There doesn’t seem to have been much change since I was here many years ago,” she remarked as they approached the small mound which preciously held the cave, like a mother embracing her child.

“Oh, Seemer, look!” Tannaël stopped suddenly and bent down to touch a tiny, deformed frog which gazed up adoringly into her green, slanted eyes.

“It is waiting for you, Tannaël, just like the small grain of sand on the shores of Sevanaaz.” Seemer grinned.

She cupped the poor creature in her hands and closed her eyes. Her lips moved and suddenly the frog squawked with joy. Newly formed legs! She opened her glowing hands and gently put the frog back on the ground. Quickly, it bounded away to find its reflection in the stream. Tannaël laughed with delight as she turned back to Seemer. “Let’s go and explore the cave,” she said as she gave Seemer an enthusiastic pat on the back. “If I remember correctly, the opening is on the other side of the hill.”

They walked around the mound and discovered at its base the discrete entrance to the cave. The opening was hidden by a few stately birch trees and reddish, prickly brush. Seemer

and Tannaël carefully pushed the brush aside and ducked their heads to enter the glittering crystal cave.

“Oh!” They both gasped at the sheer beauty of the place. In the very centre of the cave were massive families of crystals which rose up to the ceiling like arms reaching for the heavens. Violets, blues, greens, whites, yellows and oranges glimmered in exquisite triangles, spheres and rectangles, hugging each other. Blinding silver light moved up from the ground into the magnificent geometric structures.

“I had forgotten how spectacular this place is,” Tannaël whispered as her eyes swept over the centre and into the intricate alcoves which carefully kept baby crystals in place. Delicately, they both stepped onto the golden crystal walkway which started at the very entrance and wound itself round the entire underground chamber.

“Seemer, look at these nooks, I think they’re beds for the birth of new crystals.”

Seemer nodded. “Yes. They seem to be places for crystal seedlings.” He pointed to the right as they continued walking the shimmering path. “Look, a nook filled with emeralds, and the one beside it is full of amethyst. Let’s continue down.”

“Oh, this is so beautiful,” Tannaël said admiringly as she paused in front of an alcove filled with small diamonds veined in gold. “Have you ever seen anything so splendid?”

They both stopped to take in the beauty of thousands of sparkling, baby jewels.

“This is magnificent,” Seemer answered with reverence. “Look at the gold lines in the tiny diamonds. They remind me of the silver markings in the oak leaves that Quercus sometimes lets fall.”

They continued their exploration, enjoying the shimmering light and feeling the powerful crystalline waves that moved in and out of everything. Tannaël looked up, squinted and saw

something dancing on a seemingly invisible string. “Look Seemer!” she exclaimed as she pointed up towards the glimmering ceiling.

To their astonishment, they saw hundreds of exquisite glass-winged butterflies, fluttering together and winging around the bluish crystal ceiling. From time to time they rested on thin, golden filaments of light.

“Togretas!” Seemer whispered. “I never knew that the glass-winged butterflies had a home here in this magnificent cave. I thought they lived only in the meadowlands.”

“And look around, Seemer. The golden threads seem to link all the crystals together in the cave! I wonder what will happen if I pluck one,” said Tannaël. She reached up and touched an especially beautiful strand of light which connected a pure-white diamond to a deep purple amethyst.

Immediately, all the other filaments in the cave began to vibrate together and sent out a great hum. Every crystal in the splendid cave echoed the musical droning. Tannaël and Seemer looked at each other. Their bodies, swaying to the sound, gradually started to disappear.

“I can't see you, Seemer!” Tannaël exclaimed. “All I can make out is an outline of your body in light. Can you see me?”

“You, too, are only an outline, Tannaël. This reminds me of our time in school. Do you remember when we used to play with the light in our bodies? We would practice how to become invisible.”

“Oh, you're right! This is just like our school in Cera. Let's see what happens when I pluck another filament of light...if I can!”

The humming stopped immediately and they became visible once again.

Both friends stood still for a moment getting their bearings. They laughed at the experience and then continued on their way down the golden path of crystals. There was one last nook to explore. It was very small and very peculiar. The alcove darkened slightly as Seemer and Tannaël approached it.

“What do we have here?” murmured Seemer.

In front of them was a small, dull statue crouched on a black pedestal. The head and body were split; its crystals were thin, grey and partially melted. In its hands were pieces of a shattered clear, crystal ball, sharp and menacing. Fragments of lightning bolts flickered in between shards. On the pedestal was a crushed togreta butterfly wing lying like a fractured mirror.

“What is this, I wonder?” Seemer gazed intently at the broken statue and then at the splintered ball. “Tannaël, did you see this the last time you were here?”

Tannaël moved closer. “No, and it certainly wasn’t here when we had the Astriel Lumena council meeting...it looks as though there has been an explosion. What is a shattered togreta wing doing here? I don’t like this, Seemer. It all feels very peculiar.” She shivered nervously.

“Hmmm...I agree,” he responded as he moved closer to the pedestal. The statue remained split and silent. But every now and then, a shadow moved inside the partially melted crystals of its body. Seemer was so close to the figure now that he could almost touch it with his nose. “Hmmm...”

“What is it, Seemer? What do you see?”

Waving his hand, he signalled for Tannaël to come closer. “Isn’t this you?”

“What?” Tannaël peered into the crouched, broken crystal form in front of her and then slowly nodded. “That’s an image of me, when I was young school girl in Cera! How is this possible? What’s this all about?”

Seemer, puzzled, shook his head, “I don’t know.”

Tannaël continued looking and pointed with a determined finger. “Look here,” she said gravely. “Just look here, Seemer, where the shadow is moving a little more quickly. Something is not right.”

They both peered into the same bit of melted crystal. There was Seemer, also a young child, also in Cera, also at school! And with him was Gäl-iard!

“Gäl-iard!” they both exclaimed.

“Why is Gäl-iard there? Why are *we* there? What is this all about?” Tannaël began to worry in earnest.

Abruptly, the shadows stopped moving and the images disappeared. An ice-cold stream of air pierced the alcove and the crushed butterfly wing sadly drifted to the ground.

Tannaël and Seemer backed away from the statue slowly and looked down on the floor. All the crystals lying close to the pedestal had melted into a heap, their beautiful geometric forms now one big blob of hard, grey, stone. Gone were the humming threads of light and the warm crystal waves. Beside the puddle of lifeless stone, frantic footprints smeared the cold, damp earth.

“Whose footprints are these?” Tannaël asked as she bent down to examine them.

“I don’t know,” Seemer answered with concern. “They seem very fresh. I just hope they don’t belong to Nillay.”

## Chapter Sixteen: Nillay

There were two major harvest in the land of Mareithia—one in the middle of the summer and the other later on, when Mareithia’s two moons, Fheino and Syra, drew closer in the sky.

Today, the villagers were preparing for the afternoon feast to celebrate the first harvest. Great gleaming tables sprinkled with the golden dust of the handsome orchada flowers were being set outside in the shady areas. Sweet and savoury smells of baking honey-bread and cooking herbs swirled between the faltering notes of instruments being tuned. This was a solemn yet joyful time when the villagers thanked Mareithia for its generosity and remembered the goodness of all their companions who no longer lived in the land. The feast was called the *Takalin*—the Celebration of Thankfulness.

Away from the bustle of the kitchens, sat Nillay huddled in a stone corner of the village wall, her head down and heavy tears dripping down her long face. Her fingers, strangely bent and nicked with tiny cuts, were clenched in her lap and partially hidden by a thick, beige shawl. Frustrated at not being able to play her sansarra—a small harp known in the region for its particularly clear sound—Nillay’s heart and head grew tighter and tighter. Jealousy gnawed inside her as she saw the other musicians enthusiastically tuning their instruments, readying for the festivities.

“I hate music,” whispered Nillay with a thick and terrible tongue and pushed her back further into the cold, cracked stone of the damp wall. “I hate music. I hate the *Takalin*. I hate the crystal cave.” She tried unsuccessfully to jerk her shawl closer to her thin, shaking body. “I hate everything and everyone.”

“Are you sure Nillay?” It was a lady’s voice.

Lifting her head ever so slightly, Nillay noticed through her wet lashes, red hair, green eyes and, further away, a tawny-skinned gentleman who was moving away towards the kitchen area. How did this woman know her? Intrigue slowly pushed through her petulance.

“Why are you so unhappy?” inquired the fairy woman—at least that is what Nillay thought she was.

Nillay remained silent, her lips firmly set in a white line.

“Nillay, don’t you remember me?”

Nillay quickly turned away and hid her face under her woven shawl. “No,” she muttered.

“We used to play games together when you were younger,” Tannaël said softly. “We would smell the sweet perfume that came from the rocks as they sang and I would ask if you could see colours in the fragrance.”

Nillay slowly moved her head from under her shawl and turned to Tannaël. “...And I would ask you, ‘what colour is the wind?’... You are Tannaël!... Oh! *Tannaël!*” she cried out in astonishment and then burst into tears. “A horrible thing happened to me. Look at my fingers. They are cut and crooked. Crooked! How can I play my sansarra with crooked fingers!... I hate music.” Nillay continued to sob as she pulled her fingers from underneath the shawl and plucked at them, desperately trying to straighten them.

“Nillay, tell me what happened. Did you go to the crystal cave?”

“How do you know about the crystal cave? ...Oh, it’s all so awful.” Nillay cried even harder.

Tannaël sat down quietly beside her and took both her hands. They warmed up quickly.

“Nillay,” she said again a little more firmly. “Tell me what happened.”

Nillay took in a few deep breaths, hiccupped and started to speak a little more calmly.

“Well...it all started early this morning. You know how I love the crystal cave and the golden threads and the humming and the—”

“And the beautiful glass wings of the togretas,” Tannaël added.

Nillay nodded. “I went there very early this morning so that I could breathe in the waves of the beautiful crystals before the *Takalin*. That way, you know, I could keep a part of the crystal wave inside me when I played my sansarra. Well, when I got there everything was fine. I walked around, breathing in the beauty. I plucked at a few golden filaments and listened to the humming. Then I heard a terrible shrieking. It seemed to be coming from a small alcove near the back of the cave. The humming stopped; all I could hear was a sharp screeching. It made my ears hurt.”

Nillay stopped speaking, grimaced and put her hands to her ears.

“And then?” Tannaël gently prompted.

“And then,” Nillay shook her head, letting her hands drop back into her lap. “And then I ran over to see what was happening and what I could do to help. It was very dark at the back of the cave, but I saw a small, grey form crouched on a black pedestal. It held a clear crystal ball with togretas in it and lightning. The butterflies wanted desperately to get out and kept knocking at the sides of the ball. But the lightning inside kept shrieking at them and pushing them back. It was awful. I wanted so much to help them. I thought that if I could pull the ball away from the statue’s hands, I could run outside and throw it at some rocks and it would break and the togretas would be free.”

“That was a very good idea, Nillay.”

“Yes...but it didn’t work. I pushed and pulled, trying to pry the crystal ball from the statue, but the harder I tried, the stronger the stone hands held on to the ball. Then, there was a

roaring crash! I closed my eyes, thinking the entire cave was going to come down on me. But I held on! When I opened my eyes again, the ball had shattered and the statue had split in two! I don't know what happened to the butterflies...the crystal all around had melted...turned into globs of grey stone and...and...then I looked at my fingers...my fingers...oh, Tannaël!" Nillay broke out again in painful sobs and leaned towards her friend.

Tannaël closed her eyes as she gently continued to stroke Nillay's hands. "Perhaps I can help you, Nillay. Breathe quietly, and hear the humming of the golden threads in your head. All will be well."

A comfortable warmth like a sleeping baby kitten on a lap, slowly crept into Nillay's body. She let herself go into memory of the golden threads and the magnificent crystal waves. *Ah, this is so comfortable...oh! I feel my fingers pulsing!* She opened her eyes slightly to look through the crack of Tannaël's glowing hands. The cuts on her fingers were vanishing and her fingers were almost straight again! Almost!...but not quite.

The happiness that had begun its journey through Nillay's mind and heart quickly stopped and slid into a hole of disappointment. No, her hands were not well enough to play her sansarra. She pulled them away from Tannaël's lap and hid them once again under her light brown, woollen shawl.

"That is true." Tannaël had answered her thought out loud. "Your fingers are not quite healed enough for you to play your harp, Nillay, but they will get better soon... Tell me, can you sing?"

"Sing?" Nillay bit into the word hard as if it were wood. "I never learned how to sing." She pushed herself once again into the cold, stone wall.

“Why don’t you try? You are far from the crowd and I am the only one who will hear you,” Tannaël lifted up a smile.

Nillay shifted around a little uncomfortably and then in a small, thin shaky voice, she tried to sing.

“Feel the humming of the golden threads and the crystal waves flowing through you, as you sing, Nillay. Pretend that you are playing your voice as you would play your sansarra.”

Nillay closed her eyes and felt a humming ripple inside her. She began to sing. A new world of music opened its arms to her, like the piercing of the first bloom through the last snow. Her clear, joyous voice made the festive air tingle.

“I can sing! I can sing!” Nillay cried out to the world around her as she stood up and pushed her head skywards.

“Yes,” answered Tannaël with sparkling green eyes. “And soon you will be singing *and* playing!”

Nillay immediately broke off singing and swirled around to face Tannaël with a look of bitterness. “I will *never* play the sansarra again. Even if I am able to play later on, I will *never* play it as well as I used to. It was that horrible creature...that...horrible *thing* in the cave that was responsible. I will never forgive it and I will never forget what happened. I will *burn* my sansarra!” She moved away from Tannaël, distancing herself from the preparation of the meals and the decorating of the tables.

Tannaël followed her at a distance and called out, “Nillay, look up. Look up into the sky!”

Nillay flickered her eyes upwards and saw a silver cloud of magnificent, glistening light. It was alive, twinkling and dancing down towards her! As the blazing cloud turned itself inside

out, hundreds of tiny diamonds burst forth and floated down like shimmering crystal dust. Nillay stood in wonderment, covered in sparkling particles of light.

“Oh, Tannaël, this is so beautiful! I don’t want to move!”

“Look *inside* the small diamonds,” Tannaël said softly as she approached Nillay.

Nillay moved her body very carefully and scooped up a handful of diamonds from her shoulder. “I see tiny, tiny wings,” Nillay whispered. “I think...yes...I think they are baby *togretas*! Does that mean that the glass-winged butterflies are born inside diamond crystals? Like the crystals I saw in the cave?” Her eyes opened wide in surprise.

“Yes, and that is why it was so important for you to save the ball of light that the statue refused to give up. The *togretas* were held prisoners and were weakening. You were very brave, Nillay, to risk hurting your fingers to rescue them.”

“But I didn’t rescue them,” Nillay said sadly, as she shook her head, the shimmering diamonds and the crystal dust falling down around her like fine grains of sand.

“You did, Nillay. What do you think happened to the butterflies when you held onto the crystal ball as it broke?”

Nillay shook her head. “I don’t know,” she said quietly.

“The *togretas* flew out. They were saved. Those beautiful, glass-winged butterflies, born in diamond crystals in your beloved cave were saved because you held on to the ball as it broke. You held on, Nillay. It was *you* who broke the ball. You saved the *togretas* because you were stronger than the statue.”

Nillay looked up with a timid smile, “Really? I saved the *togretas*?”

Tannaël nodded and her arm went around Nillay’s thin shoulders and pulled up her warm shawl around her. “You will find a very pleasant discovery when you go back to the cave again,

Nillay. You will find that the dark alcove with its broken and melted crystal has disappeared. So has the horrible odour.”

“You smelled that too? How do you know all this Tannaël?”

Tannaël laughed, her green eyes sparkling mischievously. “A little fairy told me.” As she started to walk back to the gleaming tables, she beckoned to Nillay. A delicious aroma of freshly baked bread filled the meadowland air. “Shall we go back and celebrate the *Takalin*?”

Nillay began to sing out sweetly. “*Thank you, takalin, thank you, takalin.*” Several cooks, surprised by such a beautiful and unexpected voice, bumped into each other with hot plates, while others encircled Nillay expressing their admiration.

“Where did you learn to sing like that?” asked one of the meadow-landers, his hands full with jars of rich honey and fresh zazow tops.

“It was my wonderful friend, Tannaël who helped me,” Nillay said proudly. She looked around, wanting to introduce her new friend, but Tannaël had vanished.

Back at the stream and the willows, Seemer smiled at Tannaël. “Nillay’s fingers will heal soon?”

“Oh yes,” she grinned back, “once she truly realizes that she’s stronger than that darkness in the cave and that she really did save the togretas.”

“So, she will be playing her instrument, not burning it?” Seemer grinned.

Tannaël nodded and noticed that he had turned away from her. He was looking towards the Sea of Sevenaaz with a sight frown. “What is it, Seemer?”

“When you were speaking to Nillay, I went out further into the meadowlands and studied an unusual light flare that was coming from the northern part of Mareithia.”

“Near the Sea of Sevenaaz?”

“No, further up, towards the Northern Expanse.”

“The Northern Expanse? But there is nothing there, is there Seemer?”

“Hmmm. I have never seen flares there. It’s just a little odd.”

“Perhaps Nillay’s singing is lighting up the North!” Tannaël said with sparkling eyes.

“Shall we go and spend some time in the sacred forest before leaving for Cera?”

“A splendid idea, Tannaël. If we’re lucky, we’ll hear the raymerries in concert.”

They both chuckled quietly, took a last tender look at the flower-and-bee meadowlands, and quietly entered the small, shiny star craft.

## **Chapter Seventeen: The *Takalin* - The Celebration of Thankfulness**

“Oh, what is happening? What is happening?” squeaked a baby lurette as he tumbled from his wall shelf in the earth tunnel. “Why is everything shaking?”

“Well,” answered the mother lura who was sniffing around, “my nose flower is picking up a wonderful scent. There seems to be an exciting noise coming from above the ground. I think something is being prepared. Go back up to your bed-shelf please.”

“Something? A feast? Four other lurettas were now wide awake and excitedly spilled down from their nests to join their brother. “Are we going to a feast?”

The mother lura sighed. “I had wanted to surprise you all, but the noise gave it away. She then brightened up. “Yes! We are all invited to the *Takalin*.”

“To the *Takalin*! With the bee balancers and the chelonians?” All five lurettas spoke at once.

“With the bee balancers,” their mother answered patiently. “But I’m not sure of the sea

turtles. I know they wanted to come, but they are busy at the Sea of Sevenaaz.”

“The Sea of Sevenaaz.” The lurettas echoed the words with wonderment in their tiny voices. They had never been to the sea; it was so far away and so very mysterious.

“Now, please go back into your bed-shelves and rest. I will let you know when the feast begins.”

Sniffing and snuffling, the five lurettas climbed over each other and then popped up and into the warm recesses of the earth tunnel. Squeaking with excitement as they settled in, the baby luras closed their eyes and then opened them again and then closed them again, trying to sleep. It was difficult; the anticipation was very great.

When the lurettas finally dozed off, the mother lura tunnelled up to the surface quietly and snuffled around. Surrounding her were hurried feet, large and small, trampling from the kitchens to the great tables magnificently decorated with fragrant orchada flowers. A cluster of exuberant bee balmers dove into the white trumpet-like blossoms, kicked the tasty golden pollen up into the air and flew through the golden blanket catching the pollen with enthusiastic tongues. They closed their eyes in pure delight as both pollen and perfume danced through the air like graceful strands of fine smoke.

Suddenly Bee Balmer herself appeared. “Look! Look what is falling from the sky!” she buzzed excitedly to the gathering crowd. The cooks, the meadow-landers, a few visiting rock-landers—including Fraza—and everyone else looked up.

Slowly drifting down from the clear sky of Mareithia, were delicate bits of multi-coloured, shining fleece. The pieces glided down lazily like thin flakes of marshland grass, changing the colour of the earth from oranges to blues and purples. Every now and then, yellow and white striped fingers quickly flitted in and out of the colours above. Soon a part of the sky

also became multi-coloured.

“It’s the Astriel Lumena council ship! The great rainbow ship!” Bee Balm buzzed, swooping up and down, exhilarated. “And the marmotashas are dropping down pieces of the rainbow. Oh! And here comes Crescenda, the ribbonoter pilot. I am going to fly up and meet her.” With a wide lick of pollen wrapped around her face, Bee Balmer flew upwards and away.

“This is really too much excitement for me,” the mother lura said to herself as she shuffled back into the earth tunnel, keeping her flower-nose close to the ground. “I think I need more sleep!”

“Ahem, ahem.” A young lempier stood up on his hind legs in front of her, blocking her path. “It is a superlative pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Sohcrat. Are you partaking in the illustrious jollification that is about to occur?”

The mother lura looked up puzzled, not understanding a word the lempier was saying. However, she didn’t wish to appear impolite, after all, he *did* have beautiful long ears. She nodded her head slightly and gave a half-smile. Then, with her flower-nose snuffed back down to the earth, she slowly bypassed him and shuffled homewards.

Sohcrat looked around him. Where was everyone? He saw a thick grouping not far from the great circle of celebration tables. Curious, he walked over as elegantly as possible on his hind legs. On his way, he spotted another lempier eating zazow tops. Zazow tops!

Forgetting his elegance and following his stomach, Sohcrat dashed over on all fours to investigate. As he approached, he realized that the lempier had stopped eating. She stood quite still, her mouth wide open and *empty* and her big eyes staring up into the sky.

“Ahem, pardon me, ahem,” Sohcrat said rather loudly to the lempier, hoping to get her attention. “Ahem...ahem...may I partake in your repast...pardon me...”

The lempers remained frozen to the spot.

“What are you observing?” Sohrat looked skywards and squinted his large eyes. “What is that...?” A small figure was navigating down from the sky with multicoloured ribbons billowing out on all its sides. Clinging on to its red ribbons was a young girl and tightly clinging on to the young girl was a very tense lempers. The small figure was expertly handling a propeller made of green and blue ribbons. Droning beside them was Bee Balmer, exceedingly happy.

“It is Crescenda coming down from the rainbow council ship!” buzzed Bee Balm to everyone below. “And you will never guess who is with her! Thea and Platona! They’ve come to celebrate the *Takalin!*”

“Platona?” Sohrat said, surprised. “Platona from the forest?” He watched in amazement as Crescenda, the ribbonoter pilot, slowed down her propellers and neatly landed in the middle of a small patch of wildflowers. Orange and white butterflies, startled out of their late afternoon nap, hiccuped and fluttered. Releasing the red ribbons, fourteen-year-old traveller, Thea, touched the ground with Platona securely in her arms.

“Welcome, Thea,” said a gloriously deep voice which sounded familiar. “It is wonderful to see you again.”

Thea spun around, her iridescent green hair flying about. “Who is speaking?” she asked.

“Look down to the ground. What do you see?”

“A lovely pink stone, and your voice is coming from it!” Thea was intrigued.

“Bend down closer. Now tell me, what do you see?”

Thea stooped down very close to the pink stone and realized it had strange lines sketched into it. “What are these unusual lines?” she asked the voice.

“Watch them closely, Thea.”

The lines began to flow back and forth like the grasses in the Sea of Sevenaaz. The stone became larger and taller and finally changed into a magnificent, sparkling human form.

“Gäl-iard!” Thea clapped her hands with delight. “Gäl-iard! Platona and I saw you changing into a blade of grass in the forest! It was remarkable...oh, how wonderful to see you again!”

Gäl-ard smiled and made a short bow, his thick braid of sandy-coloured hair quietly resting on his pink back and its the diamond hair clasp shimmering. He looked deeply into Thea’s eyes and then glanced around, his grey eyes absorbing everything all at once.

“I have come to share in the Celebration of Thankfulness with you, Thea.”

Thea gave him a big, friendly grin and then remembered that she still had Platona in her arms. She gently put her on the ground—on her hind legs. Standing elegantly, Platona addressed Gäl-iard a little shyly, for he had impressed her.

“Ahem... ahem...it is a monumental pleasure to encounter you once again, master Gäl-iard. Your shifting form greatly amuses me but, I confess, also confuses me.”

Gäl-iard laughed heartily and bent down to greet Platona. “Changing form seems to confuse many, sometimes even myself!” He then proceeded to the great tables with Thea. Platona hunched down and followed them.

“Platona? Is it you, Platona from the precious woods of Mareithia?” A charming voice whispered into her right ear.

Platona twitched and turned around. “Sohcrat!”

“At your esteemed service,” he replied. “I have been far away and have experienced formidable happenings. Would you grant me the privilege to sit with you at the *Takalin* for interesting conversation?”

Platona nodded happily, her long, velvety ears high and wide with pleasure. “Oh yes! Let me lead you to the celebration!”

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It was late afternoon when the *Takalin* finally began. Enormous tables, set out in a large circle, boasted huge bouquets of flowers, glistening fruit, hot breads, sweet grasses and fresh zazow tops. In the middle of the circle was a large clear crystal table which reflected the sky above.

“Ohhh!” the meadow-landers and the visitors exclaimed, as they gazed into the table’s reflection to see the sky—it was easier to look down than to look up. “Look at the brilliant colours of the great Astriel Lumena council ship! Do you see the marmostashas fiddling with their fingers and waving their tails, throwing down bits of colour and silver flakes...? I don’t know how the rainbow ship remains the same size when there are so many monkeys throwing down bits of the ship to the ground!...Oh that’s easy to answer. The ship just creates more of itself, so it always stays the same size!”

Thea, with Crescenda on one side of her and Gäl-iard on the other, looked around the great tables at such a fine gathering of friends. Her heart grew larger and larger. There was Nillay, lightly stroking her beloved sansarra and above her, Bee Balm and her companions flying in squares and in loops, skillfully catching pollen. Further down, Thea saw Platona, in deep discussion with a new companion. Beside them were other lempers munching happily on zazow tops with their ears tied under their chins—discouraging over-enthusiastic bees to enter. As she looked down at her feet, Thea saw a mother lura with five lurettas, snuffled by, smelling joy.

Seated in clumps around the tables were villagers—meadow-landers talking excitedly to

each other and to a few visiting rock-landers. "...And you know, the horse-rider who almost ran over me, well, he came back much later looking sorry and apologized," Fraza said to her neighbour. "Umm...I think the leader's name was Waxxar. He had really given me a fright, but I hear he found his companion and has settled down, at least for now..."

"...Well, I heard that there was an accident in the marshlands and that Kayver almost drown. You know, Kayver, the young man who helps with the salt packages and builds those really sturdy boats?"

"Yes, but apparently he's fine now. Someone found him in the sacred forest..."

Slowly, a revered hush moved through the gathering like a soft wind. A magnificent family of glass-winged butterflies appeared from nowhere and began to flutter over the tables.

"Togretas!" everyone whispered in awe. "The beautiful togretas!"

"Are these the butterflies I freed from the ball in the crystal cave?" Nillay wondered out loud.

"Yes!" fluttered the togretas. "Yes! You freed us. Thank you. We are all together again!" They were joined by hundreds of other togretas flying around Nillay's head, many landing on her hands. The sparkling waves of glass-winged butterflies reflected the multi-coloured rainbow ship in the sky.

"Play," fluttered the togreta family as they flitted in between Nillay's fingers. "Play and sing," they fluttered as they swirled in the spaces between the strings of her precious harp.

Nillay began to sing, her voice high and sweet, her fingers strong enough now to gently stroke her harp,

In the great circle of the *Takalin*, Nillay played and sang: "We thank the Creator and all Creation for this land of Mareithia. We thank all beings living on, under, and over Mareithia.

“We celebrate the *Takalin* with warm hearts and open hands! May the Light keep all living things. May the Light keep us all!”

“May the Light keep us all!” Everyone echoed and smiled at each other. “May the Light keep us all!”

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Gäl-iard looked around to everyone with a great, open heart. *Yes, Mareithia is a wonderful land!* For a moment, his grey eyes caught a brief, bright ribbon of light far away, out towards the Northern Expanse. *Hmmm*, he reflected. *I wonder what it's signalling?* He shrugged a little, smiled to himself and took another piece of honey-bread.

THE END