

ANJA AND THE GOLDEN
ARROW

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To Mikey

“...May God hold you in the palm of his hand.”

IN THE BEGINNING

Our skies existed before time; a magical space inhabited by Starbeings. Some beings were a cluster of stars, some beings were larger stars that shone brightly on their own in the deep purple, violet and indigo universe. A particularly larger star, named Binluna, was a most beautiful being, full of peace and harmony. One day Chiron, a constellation from another galaxy, saw her light. He sent a winged horse to profess his love to her. However, because of their distance, they could not be together, so Chiron gifted Binluna a planet called Ja as a token of his unending love. Chiron sent seven archers each to shoot an arrow into Ja to create life. The seven arrows generated wheels of energy that formed the seas and the land. A multitude of mystical beings sprang forth from the newly alive planet, from dragons, to unicorns, mythical beasts and dominant beings called uprights. Together they governed the seven provinces of Ja and worshiped Binluna as their moon.

The sea province was overseen by the Great Dragon. She gave birth to twin sons. As they grew, they became troublesome causing chaos in the seas and causing fear for the

beings of the land. Many creatures went into hiding. Others, including the uprights, decided to wage war against the Great Dragon and her province. After years of battle, the Great Dragon had no choice but to put a spell over her sons to achieve peace. With the help of Binluna the dragons were put into a deep sleep. The only way to awaken them was to change the energy of the planet by throwing it off balance, and thus putting all living beings and the entire planet in jeopardy.

Over time, the sense of wonder and magic that once encompassed Ja had faded as the mystical creatures became those of myth and legend, leaving only the uprights and dragon species. Eventually, the uprights became the sole monarchs of the planet though living in harmony with the dragons thanks to Binluna and the festival that honored her every twelve months. Arrows of prayers, praise, and gratitude launch to Binluna's starbeing guardians at the end of every festival. The Starbeings in turn deliver them to Binluna, giving her energy she needs to oversee the balance of the planet. Legend says that if the moon does not receive the arrows of honoring, she will begin to fade and become weak, thus bringing about an ancient prophecy that could destroy Ja.

For hundreds of years the planet lived without disruption. But there was an unsettling in the sea. And the uprights were beginning to fear an imbalance.

“Beware!” shouted a crouched old woman in the market. “The prophecy is coming.”

She was up ahead in our path. I didn’t want to walk by her, but eventually, we had no choice.

“It is coming soon. Soon!”

Mother and I were at the Harvest Market dropping off preserves and baked goods from our estate’s pear orchard before we headed to our meeting with the king. He wanted to see the new bow designs our family’s factory made for the annual Moon Festival games of Ja. One of the designs was my own. Mother thought it only fair I accompany her to this meeting.

This was also the first year she brought me with her to the market. I was twelve going on thirteen, old enough to stay near her and not wander off. I was a curious child, and still am. But I am maturing. This coming school year, I entered the Angels Archer Academy. I’d been waiting for this my whole life. Angel Archers got to shoot the prayer and blessing arrows to the moon in the festival games. We got to ride dragons with the boys who attend the Flying

Tigers School. Kam, my twin, would be riding a dragon this coming year. If we were chosen to ride together to represent our province we would bring honor to our family. However, only the best archer and best dragon rider had this wonderful one-time opportunity, though others still were able to compete in the games. It was my dream to compete and ride with my brother. Father would be so proud of us.

“Anja? Anja?” Mother called. I was lost in my thoughts and drifted away from her. We were getting closer to the old woman. She seemed to be finished with her rant. Then, just as we walked past, she grabbed my arm.

“Ehh!” I gasped. My eyes widened and I met her gaze.

“Heed the warning.” She looked me up and down. Her eyes were a light blue, stark against her dark aging skin. I was too in shock to pull away. It was noisy in the market and Mother hadn’t realized I was grabbed. I managed to loosen from her grip. She kept her eyes on me and said no more but pointed at me. I turned, ran and bumped into a man with a cart of apples.

“Watch it, clumsy,” he yelled. I looked through the crowd to find Mother.

“Anja?” I heard her call again. I spotted her thick dark brown hair tied up ornately with ribbons and her flowing green garment. “Please stay near me.” She sounded annoyed.

“The old lady...” I panted.

“Pay no attention. She’s been saying that for years. Where are the bows?”

“I...I dropped them.” I quickly became upset. “Damn all, Ja!” I shouted. Mother’s hazel eyes widened, glaring disapproval at me. She had lovely soft features, a small perfect nose and rose-bud lips. She never frowned—frowning caused wrinkles. But I could tell she was a little less pleased with me. I could feel my face getting hot. I wanted to stomp the

ground. But Mother now gave me a threatening look. I felt the knot in my throat and my breath starting to quicken.

“Don’t,” Mother said. “I thought you had outgrown this,” she whispered under her breath as she looked around. She was worried I would make a scene. She quickly grabbed a piece of jerky from a butcher’s stand and told me to bite on it as hard as I could.

As I bit, a man called out, “Miss? Are these yours?” He had my bag that held the bows. I let out a sigh of relief.

“Yes. Yes, thank you, sir,” Mother said to the man as she took the bag from him. She then looked at me. “Well, we got lucky,” she said and let out a huge sigh.

AFTER THE MARKET WE TOOK A CARRIAGE TO THE palace of our province, Jenlun. It was carved into the mountains. Our province had the tallest mountains of the planet, jagged points of red rock extending high into the skies with snow-white peaks, often hidden by the clouds. Our source of clean water came from these mountains. Jenlun provided the largest supply of freshwater for the entire planet. It rushed down the mountains into the rivers and streams that flowed into the sea.

In front of the palace was the grand bear statue. It was modeled after Ursula, our provincial mascot. There was a star formation in the sky named after her. She was the original queen, when the beasts and mythical beings ruled the planet along with us. Since the beginning a royal bear has lived in the palace. The bear, always named Ursula, accompanies King Capros to all functions. “*Would I get to see her today? If not, I would definitely see her at the games.*”

When we arrived at the palace, we were escorted to a simple stone room on the main level. It reminded me of a family den in a regular home, very welcoming and not how I

imagined a palace room. A fire was lit in a hearth and there was a long table to which we were guided. As I sat with my mother waiting for the king, my thoughts drifted back to the market. *“Why did the old lady grab me? And what happens in the prophecy?”*

“King Capros,” a loud voice announced. We stood. I clumsily bumped my chair as I stood. Mother gave me a pleading glance.

“Ava,” said the king as he walked to my mother and took her by the hands, lifted one and kissed it.

“Ava? This was a bit personal from the king”

“Wonderful to see you. Thank you for bringing me your new designs.” He looked at me. “And this must be your designer?” He chuckled.

I didn’t like that he laughed. I tried to hide a frown. *Was this our king?* He reminded me of a bear, perfect for our province I guess. He was tall, barrel-chested with a reddish-brown full beard and wavy hair. He was not dressed at all like a king, but rather as someone who was about to work in the forest, a lumberjack of some kind. He even smelled woody.

He studied the bows I had laid out on the table. Picking one up, he smelled it. “Ah, orange osage, a superb wood.”

I looked at Mother and tried to hold in a laugh. He knew his bow woods and he held the bow the proper way, pulling back the string as if he was about to shoot an arrow. He invited his diplomats, who had been standing behind him to test the bows as well.

“These are...” He paused and looked at me. “You are an exceptionally talented designer. You uphold the reputation of the Kiara Bow Factory.”

I smiled. “Thank you kindly. She does have a talent in this area,” replied Mother.

“Of course she does. And the boy? Your son?”

“He is preparing to train as a dragon rider this year. In fact, that is where he is right now, meeting the dragons.”

“Wonderful. I assume I will see you both competing at the games this year?” King Capros directed his attention to me once again. I simply nodded. I was too focused on settling my nerves. He was, after all, the king, and his gaze a bit intimidating.

“Your father would be very proud. I knew him when we were young. My deepest sympathies,” he said as he looked at mother.

She placed her hands together in gratitude. “Appreciated, your majesty.”

“I will have the royal carriage take you back,” said King Capros.

“No, that won’t be necessary,” Mother declined graciously.

I wouldn’t have minded taking a carriage. I was anxious to get back and tell Kam about the king and the palace and to find out what the dragons were like. But Mother was a woman who did not like to be catered to. She was independent and she had to be even more so since Father died.

The skies were a deep indigo with streaks of purple tonight. Kam and I walked up Jasper Hill near our family's estate and laid down our blankets. This was our favorite thing to do. Sometimes twins needed time together, without anyone else. Watching the stars was our time. Tonight the sky was exceptionally clear. Shooting stars were abundant. As we sat on our blankets, I told Kam about the meeting with the king. He told me about his day with the dragons.

"Are they scary?" I asked.

"You might think so. They are much larger than the usual dragons we see everyday."

We were used to watching the dragons fly the skies. They transported people faster than a carriage or a boat. They were keepers of the portals, magical openings that allow instant arrival to any of the seven provinces. Only a transport dragon could bring you through the portals by flying over the Red Mist Gardens. Once there, they exhale their fiery breath, creating an opening in the air. I don't know what happens after that. We never took a portal to a province. Father said

we wouldn't be able to see the landscapes and wonders of Ja if we simply skipped through a portal.

"Larger than our neighbor's dragon?"

"Much," he said, with arms out.

Some families had their own dragons. However, we did not. Another thing our father did not prefer. Though he approved of training them for the participation in the annual games, considering them equal competitors along with those who rode them. But he felt they should not be owned. It had only been in the last hundred years that dragons were sold to uprights. I didn't understand the reason. They once held governing positions, such as the Great Dragon. Now the planet was ruled solely by uprights.

"Do you get your own dragon, Kam?"

"No. There are about five of us who train on one dragon. But whomever bonds the most with the dragon is most likely to ride him during the games. I think my dragon likes me so far. His name is Vedo." Kam had a sparkle in his eyes when he spoke of his day and his dragon.

"Did you ride him yet?"

He frowned. "No. I have to get to know him and build a trust before I can just hop on."

We both lay down and began to speak to each other with our minds.

"Kam? Are you afraid that the prophecy will come true in our lifetime?"

"No. I hope it does."

"How does it happen again?"

"If you are so afraid, why do you want to know?"

Again, he was right. But I was so curious about everything. This is what got me into trouble most of the time.

"Ok. It goes like this. When the balance of the planet is disturbed, and the moon is weak, twin dragons will rise from the sea."

I inched closer to him.

“The dragons will fly around the moon, loosening it from the sky. The moon will begin to fall toward Ja, toward us.” He reached his hands up as if he were pulling down the moon. *“Everything will go crazy.”* He waved his hands around quickly. *“The sea will become violent.”*

“What will happen to those who live in sea province of Dalun?” I asked.

He ignored my question.

“Animals will hide high up in the mountains.”

“But!” He jumped up, speaking out loud. *“Two tigers will save the planet. They will capture the dragons and force them to return the moon to the sky.”*

“Two tigers?” I gave him a confused look.

He looked down at me and smirked, then said out loud, *“Who better to defeat the dragons than dragon riders from the Flying Tigers School?”*

It made sense. As dragon rider, Kam will learn to communicate, settle and train dragons. And most likely learn about a dragon’s weakness. I looked at Kam as he lay back down and smiled contently at the skies, his arms behind his head. I knew what he was thinking. He wanted to be one of the two who defeated the dragons.

“Why are you so brave?” I asked him

“So you don’t have to be.”

“Besides, Anja, you are following in father’s footsteps as a talented bow maker and mostly likely the best archer ever. I need something to make him proud as well.”

We had a little less than a year to train. This year's annual games had finished last month. The Province Shalun had come away with the most awards but only by one more than Dalun. Dalun's King Zayl was not happy, as reported by the daily scrolls. Since he became king three years ago, his province had won the games. But not this last time.

"He is a vain king. I wouldn't be surprised if he cheats this year."

I overheard a conversation among the workers of our bow factory as I grabbed my supplies for the first day of training. Stephan and Barbo had worked for my father since they were young men. I considered them my uncles. They liked to tease Kam and me but also watched over us when we are in the factory. Both were mentors to me in bow making. Although they were known as Master Bowyers, they were terribly humble. Never call either of them a master.

Stephan glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. He was a tall thin man, thinning gray hair and practical in all senses.

“It is ill fate to talk negatively of our royal magistrates,” he said, winking at Barbo. “If he does cheat, he will receive his Moirai.”

“What’s Moirai?” I asked them

“Oh, Anja, you are a quiet mouse. Just like your father, sneaking up on us.”

Barbo must not have seen me. I think his vision was failing. Stephan gave him a discerning look.

He was shorter and rounder than Stephan. His eyes became like crescent moons when he smiled his gap-tooth grin. He always made me laugh.

“It’s ok. I don’t mind talking about my father.” I missed him and talking about him made me feel he was still here.

“Moirai,” said Stephan, moving the conversation away from the subject of my father, “is fate, destiny. What goes around...comes around.”

“Ah. I see”

“You better hurry now,” he said.

He was right. I gathered my training supplies and headed out.

“Good luck, Anja,” they called after me.

I was eager to start the first day of training. I didn’t notice anything around me as I approached the door of the academy, a building smaller than our regular school, yet more pristine and intimidating. Its walls were made of stone mined from the base of our mountains designed to resemble a small castle. As I began to climb the steps, my foot hit something and I tripped forward, almost slamming my face on the edges of the stone.

I heard girls laughing, and then I heard *her* voice. Ranita Shan. The thorniest of thorns in my side since school began at age five. We were close friends once. When I wasn’t with Kam, I was with Ranita. We played in the pear-orchard and

we hid in the bow factory and stole arrows when the workers weren't looking. But Ranita always found a way to make me feel inferior. She liked to tease and make jokes. Her father acted the same. He frequently made fun of Ranita, her hair, her lanky body. If she cried about it he scoffed at her and told her to get some thick skin. We didn't know what that meant.

One day, in our third year of primary school, I had enough of her teasing.

"Why do you have all those dots on your face?" Asked Ranita. She poked her finger at my nose. "Dot, dot, dot and more dots," she laughed.

"Stop," I said, swatting away her hand.

She recruited some other girls to join in. "Anja has a spotty face," she called out.

My heart sank into my stomach and I felt singled-out. "Stop," I repeated. "They are called freckles and other people have them."

"Yes but they are all over your face. She brought her face closer to mine." Eh! I think they are moving." She jumped back. "Bugs! They have legs and are crawling on her," she screamed.

The girls that had gathered around us squealed.

"Gross," said one of the girls.

I put my hands to my face as if I believed her.

"She must not wash her face." Ranita said to our audience.

"Yes I do!"

"Yes I do," Ranita mocked in a whiny voice.

As the other girls laughed, a tense ball of frustration grew in my chest. My freckled face was hot. I looked down eyeing a harvest net that we laid under a tree to catch the ripe pears. With instinct mixed with anger, I pulled on it and whipped at Ranita. I had hoped the net would blanket over her but

instead it stuck together and hit her in the temple. A twig was caught in one of the net holes and scratched her skin.

“Ow!” She cried and held her head. She wailed and dropped to her knees.

I just stood and stared at her. When I looked at the others, they stood there with eyes wide and mouths open. Some of the girls ran after a few moments. Ranita continued to cry. One of our gardeners ran toward us. It was then I decided to make my exit. I rushed off into the orchard before he reached us.

When I arrived home, I hurried to my room and stayed there until dinner. Conversation was normal as we ate. The gardener must not have told my parents anything, yet. But our peaceful dinner was interrupted by a loud banging on our front door.

Soon after, our maid appeared in the dining room doorway. “Mr. Kiara? She said, her voice shaking. “There is an irate man at the door demanding to see you.”

I stopped in mid chew. Father slowly rose and let out a huff. “What can this be now?” He questioned under his breath.

Mother tried to ease the worry she saw in our faces. “It’s probably a matter from the factory,”

We could hear father argue with the man, but could not make out words.

“Kam, Anja, eat,” said Mother. She could tell we were trying to listen as we had not taken a bite or lifted our forks.

However, we managed to hear the last shouts of our visitor. “You think you are better than everyone else,” he yelled at my father. “Keep you daughter away from mine.”

Father returned to the table, raised an eyebrow at me, then sat down and continued to eat.

That night before bed I sat on my window seat, staring off into the night. I turned to see Father at my door, arms folded.

“Care to enlighten me on what happened today?”

“Yes sir,” I said and I continued to explain my confrontation with Ranita.

Father walked over to my bed and sat down. He rested his forearms on his knees and looked at me with deep blue eyes that were accentuated by his olive toned skin and dark wavy hair.

“Sometimes, Anja, hurt people, hurt people.”

I frowned.

“You were hurt by the things she said?”

“Yes.”

“So, you hurt her back.”

I lowered my head. “I just....”

“It’s a normal reaction, though I would not have resorted to violence.”

“I’m sorry Father.”

“You should apologize to her.”

“Do I have to stay away from her? I heard Mr. Shan.”

“Perhaps a break from each other would help,” he suggested.

He stood and opened his arms to me. I threw my arms around his waist and he gave me a warm squeeze. He had an athletic build but as he grew older, he looked more like a teddy bear.

“Father? What did Mr. Shan mean that you think you are better than everyone?”

“Ah, people say things like that when they are jealous. It’s not anything to waste your thoughts on.”

I thought about what he said. I thought about our home, a large stone villa with high ceilings, beautiful gardens, our pear orchard. And then I thought about the Shan’s home, far from an estate but one could see Mr. Shan provided well for his family. They dressed in fine clothing, had an expensive carriage which they frequently rode through town.

“What was he jealous about? And could Ranita really be jealous of me?”

I apologized to Ranita and we didn't play for a few weeks. But we picked up where we left off soon after and so did her teasing. I learned to bottle up my frustration with her. Eventually we spent less time with each other.

But today, once again, I found myself a target of Ranita's taunting. “Better watch where you are going, bow maker,” she said.

My face became hot as I rose to my feet. I gave her a stabbing glare. I was not about to start my first day in an angry fit. I cleared my throat, which I could feel tightening. I straightened my bow and quiver.

“I hope you get your Moirai,” I said.

She flipped back her long wavy blonde hair and looked down her nose at me. Even through her condescending look, I knew she was questioning what I meant. Her groupies all stood there like puppets waiting for her to respond, but all she did was roll her eyes. The school bell ended our encounter, allowing me to have the last word, for now.

“Why. Why did she have to be here?”

Training school was not like regular school. We did not have much desk time, and were expected to know the basics of archery. We started the first day in the field. I did have an advantage over many of the girls. I knew how to design a bow and understood how the parts were put together. Another girl, Samal Jash, whose father worked in our factory, also knew the workings of the bow and arrow. Samal was tiny for our age. She had dark hair that she wore in a very short style. Other girls teased her and said she look like a little boy. She didn't have many friends. But I didn't mind her company. And her tiny stature was perfect for traveling with a dragon rider. She just may surprise everyone and be one of the best at the games.

“Hi, Anja,” said a raspy voice behind me.

I turned around. “Hey, Samal,” I replied, smiling at her.

“Everyone will be watching you today.”

“Why?”

“You know why. You are already a great bow designer. And I think Ranita is totally jealous.”

My mouth couldn’t help but curl upward, though now I was nervous. I took a deep breath.

“This is your destiny,” she said. “I’ll be asking you for help for sure.”

“Ladies, would you like to join the training or just keep in your conversation?”

That was Master Lu. I had heard about her. She was strict, but she knew archery as if she invented it.

“Today we will practice at targets to gauge your talents and assign you into groups,” she announced.

“They don’t waste any time,” I whispered to Samal.

“Miss Kiara?” Master Lu called to me.

“*Jeez, this one is like a hawk.*” She looked like one too. Small round eyes that peered into the soul focused in on me. She had a prominent nose that curved downward like a beak. She wore her hair pulled back into a long braid, pieces of gray intermixed with her dark hair. I imagined her spreading her wings and screeching as she lifted off for flight.

“I will particularly be watching you.”

I could feel my chest tighten. I heard girls whispering, but not exactly what they were saying. My face became hot. I tried desperately to smile at her as I nodded. She turned from me and continued addressing everyone. I let out a huff. I must have been holding my breath.

“*Why am I so nervous?*” I had practiced my whole life. I first picked up a bow and arrow at three-years old. This should be second nature to me. The targets, however, were farther away

than I was used to. And besides, today there would be much more to consider than simple aim at one stationary spot.

Ten of us lined up in front of the targets. We measured our paces and set our marks. I raised my bow and took an arrow from my quiver.

"You have three shots. Make them your best," called out Master Lu.

"That is quite the bow," a strong voice said behind me.

"Thanks," I said, as I turned to see Master Janof. He was a young master, new to the academy and one of very few males who taught archery. He stood out more for his looks than simply being a man. He was tall, with blond wavy hair. His eyes were sometimes blue, other times green. We had all been told of him by the class ahead of us, but instantly noticed his dreaminess ourselves.

"My father helped me make this one." I admired it closely, as I had many times. Besides I couldn't look at him; he was too handsome and could throw off my concentration.

"Archers, take your arrows."

Master Janof stepped back, bowing and gestured for me to continue.

This time, my smile was genuine but quickly turned to a frown as I caught the eye of Ranita, who was one of the ten girls in the first round with me. I shook my head trying to get her out of my mind.

"Prepare!" shouted Master Lu.

Silence blanketed the field. Only the pull of the bow strings could be heard. I concentrated my vision and held my bow steady.

"Release."

Foom, fffffoom. Arrows launched, slicing through the air. Some together, some seconds off from another, each hitting their target.

"Prepare..."

Our second round. My first shot was mediocre. I came close to the center but not a bullseye.

“Release.”

Again the arrows whizzed toward the targets. One girl missed the target completely. I felt bad for a second, but quickly focused back on my own performance. A little closer this time.

“Prepare...”

I closed my eyes to reset myself and took in a deep breath.

“Release.”

I knew before the arrow completely left contact from the string, this was not my best attempt. I could hear the wobble of the arrow. I could even feel it in my core. Outside and low on the target. I sunk into myself a bit before I was startled by a squeal of delight. Ranita. She hit the bullseye.

“Great.”

Her friends gathered around her, joining in the squealing.

“All right, ladies.” Master Lu broke up the celebration with a few claps of her hands. I imagined her long fingers curling around like talons.

“Well done, Ranita,” she commented, but quickly returned to her serious tone. “Retrieve your arrows. Next group.”

“Good shoots, Anja,” said Samal. She was heading to her target in the next round.

I responded with a grim, “Thanks,” and kept my head low. I know she was just being supportive, but I did not agree with her. Those were mediocre performances.

The whole day my performance was lackluster. We practiced shooting at targets in trees, shooting at targets from trees. We worked on form, and we practiced how quickly we could draw our arrows from our quiver. This was definitely not my strength. The masters were expecting more from me.

This was confirmed at the end of the day when I was pulled aside by Master Lu.

We entered her chamber. Sunlight sliced through the tall windows providing some light in the dark room. The walls were lined with wooden shelves that held everything from books to boxes, statues, and awards, yet not a speck of dust. There was also a hearth, but no fire burned at this time.

“Was today an off day for you, Anja?” she asked, as she sat down at her rather grand oak desk fit for a queen.

“I guess so,” I said.

“I’m surprised at the caliber of your archery. I thought you would have been one of the top archers.” She folded her hands and waited for a response. “Considering your father’s occupation and reputation in archery,” she continued.

“So basically I am a disappointment.” I stood with no emotion or expression, though a volcano was bubbling inside of me. *“Not now, not now.”*

“I’m sorry to say that I have to place you in the second-string group.”

“What?” The word left my mouth faster than I could decide to let it out. “I mean...”

Master Lu interrupted. “Do you challenge my decision?” She peered at me with her beady black eyes, head cocked to the side.

“No ma’am...Master.” My voice was shaky now. I needed to leave. I needed to go somewhere to scream. Second-string archers were never considered for the position of moon archer. Restless energy rose through me.

I could hear laughter in the hall grow louder as people approached Master Lu’s chamber.

“...and did you see how well Ranita performed today?” said Master Janof to Master Kaya, as they walked into the room.

“Oh, I apologize,” said Master Janof.

He looked at me, then at Master Lu. And that's all I saw because I bolted past both him and Master Kaya. I could not contain my frustration any longer and did not want to have an episode in front of my masters. Especially not in front of Master Janof.

I ran fast and hard, as if I were fighting the ground with my steps until I ran out of breath. I stopped by a stream and grunted with hands clenched before I fell to my knees. I leaned in for a drink, washed my face and stared at the stream. I could see my wavy reflection in the water. I gazed at it until the water stilled. When my image became clear, I felt I was looking at a stranger. “*Who are you?*” I stared at myself: a girl with shoulder length dark brown hair and forest-green eyes, turned-up nose and pouty bottom lip.

“What happened to you today?” I shouted then punched the water and fell back onto my legs, defeated.

Shouts woke me out of my self-pity. Sounding like what could be a fight, I listened intently. This time the shouts were in unison, as if on purpose. I followed the voices, walking up a hill to a line of trees. One tree stood out among the rest. He was mighty, like a king of trees. Standing tall, perfectly full branches, leaves larger than my head, I recognized it as an oak. We had used oak, specifically red oak, to make some of our bows. My attention, at the moment, was on the tree, but was quickly diverted by more shouting. It was coming from

the other side of the trees. I hurried over and realized there was a steep drop. Then I saw it.

The School of the Iron Fist. From where I stood, I could partially see into their courtyard where young men were training in physical drills. They all had on uniforms, light gray tunics with loose fitting pants that were tapered at the ankles. Even their hair was the same: shaved short but not quite bald. The two masters, however, looked opposite like night and day. One was stout, bald headed, dressed in more warrior attire. The other, slender with long, straight, black hair, tied in the back. He was wearing a loose-fitting garment, a longer tunic with flowing pants. He stood to the side, allowing the other to shout commands and move about vigorously. I could not hear what he was saying; it all sounded like random yelling. The young men lined up and began another drill of exercises.

I had heard these moves were secret, only taught to those who were students and those who were serious about becoming defenders of the provinces. I wondered why it was necessary. Other than the ancient battle with the Great Dragon, our planet has never been at war. Our provinces have always lived in harmony. I heard my grandmother say once, "Just in case. It's good to be prepared." I leaned against the oak and continued to watch the young men gesture in unison. Same movements, same shouts, perfectly timed, fighting the air.

The words of my grandmother echoed in my head again: "It's good to be prepared." I thought of the prophecy. Is it for that which they are training? I thought of Kam and how he wanted to be one of the two to defeat the dragons. Then I thought of the upcoming games—the games in which I probably would not participate.

The students below began another drill. I studied their positions. This time they stood wide and bent their knees

into a squat. They tucked their fist near their sides and while staying low in position, jabbed one fist and then the other in front of them, straightening the arm and retrieving it back in quick sharp movements. I stood up with knees bent and mimicked the students below, punching at nothing but my thoughts. Surprisingly, I felt a little better.

After that, the drills were over and the students went back inside. I gazed up at the tree once more. His branches were ideal for climbing and there were enough grooves in his bark to get to the lowest limb. "Next time I'll watch from higher up," I said to him. *I was talking to a tree.*

I could have stayed and talked to him for hours. I dreaded going home. What seemed more appealing: conversation with wood or facing everyone at home?

I knew I would have many people asking me how I did today, the workers from the factory as I passed by on my way home and then the grounds people, housemaids, and servants. And, of course, my mother and Kam. I know they all cared and were curious. They all had expectations. I just couldn't face anyone right now. I decided to take a different way and sneak in through my window. The stone walls on the south, where my room was located, were ivy covered. I had climbed the walls before when I wanted to leave or come back unnoticed, albeit only a few times. Today, it was necessary.

The next day was one of two classroom days of the week. I had to admit I was relieved to not have to be in the field. Maybe I just needed a day to clear my thoughts. Besides, I liked history, and along with archery mechanics, it was included in our studies these next few months.

“Good morning, angel archers,” said a loud but kind voice as we processed into the giant hall. The rows of seats curved around the center stage, where Master Fey stood. Each row of seats was higher than the one in front of it, allowing us to see Master Fey. The design also allowed her voice to travel throughout the room. There was no excuse of not hearing what was being taught.

Master Fey was beautiful for a teacher. Not that our teachers were ugly. It’s just, you would think she would be a queen or royalty at least. Her golden hair flowed in waves down to the middle of her back. She wore a black robe that was pulled with a silver belt around her tiny waist. A white blouse peeked out at the top, with a crisp rounded collar on each side. She paced the stage in high heeled black leather

boots, arms behind her back, a smile on her angelic face, waiting for us to be seated.

“Welcome to the history of Ja,” she said proudly once we had settled.

“Ughh. Why do we have to learn this again and why now?” asked Ranita as she leaned over to one of her groupies. She didn’t realize that anywhere she sat her voice traveled through the room.

Master Fey had a look of shock on her face. She picked up her own text and held it forward.

“This, young ladies, is how we came to be. It’s the law of our existence. And much more in-depth than your simple lower-school courses. If you don’t learn it now,” she paused and stared at Ranita, “you will be lost when and *if* you finish your training here.”

“Pretty and kind yet tough. I like her.”

I had been staring at Ranita. She must have felt my eyes on her because she glared directly at me after Master Fey finished speaking. I quickly turned forward. I couldn’t help but smirk. Finally, someone was putting Ranita in her place.

Master Fey continued. “To review your already savvy knowledge.... The moon is our connection to the great sky and the great sky is our doorway to the heavens. The sea was the original kingdom overseeing all the provinces.”

As she continued, memories of my father filled my head.. He enjoyed history and it was another subject in which we bonded. Although, it was not by choice on my part but rather the result of a suspension. I was sent home for a week for some silly outburst I had in class in lower school. One of many to come. My assignment, or rather punishment, was to read my texts out loud at home. It was a blessing, giving me fond memories of my father, who passed away two months ago, just before the last games.

I fondly remember sitting with him outside under an

arbor that looked over our pear orchard. Father had planted the orchard as a wedding gift to my mother. It sat on the west side of our estate. Father enjoyed sitting out there to watch the sunset before we ate our last meal of the day. This was when I read my texts to him.

“On the planet Ja, there are seven provinces. They are Jenlun, Jilun, Dalun, Aylun, Tonlun, Shalun, and Julun.” I had paused and looked up at him. I remember him nodding for me to continue.

“The eighth and most important province rests in the skies. Her name is Binluna. Binluna is the moon for our planet. It has no inhabitants or governors. Binluna is a sacred province that oversees balance and harmony on Ja.”

Father would test me after each chapter.

“What are the seven banners?” he’d ask.

I’d think for a moment. “Well, ours is red with a bear.”

“Good. And the rest?”

“Jilun is orange with a tiger.” I paused again.

He looked at me with approval.

“Aylun has a green flag with a dove. Tonlun is blue with a wolf. Shalun is indigo with a hawk, and Julun is violet with an owl.

He waited patiently as I remembered the last one.

“Binluna is white... flying horse.” I smiled proudly.

“You forgot just one.”

When I realized, my eyes widened and then I remembered. “Dalun. The sea. I can’t believe I forgot that.”

“And?”

My eyes moved around as if I were searching for what I was supposed to say next. It took me a moment. “Oh. Gold with a dragon.”

“The Great Dragon,” he added. “The Great Dragon is well respected. She governed the sea and could have easily

succumbed to the power that water provides. With control of water, Dalun could rule the planet.”

“But we are all equal, are we not?”

“Yes, that is what keeps the balance of the planet. We must not be taken by greed or jealousy, or lust for power. We must all live in harmony.”

I admired my father for his beliefs. He was fair but did not look kindly on those who were not. He is someone you wanted on your side especially in an argument. Though he was a larger man, he was gentle; kind-hearted, unless provoked.

I recall that our evening history lessons were not always pleasant. One day, I had broken a bow I worked very hard on creating with the help of Stephan and Barbo. I was frustrated with myself. They reassured me. But I couldn't get over it.

That same night I began to read. A few sentences in, I had to clear my throat. I felt a knot building in my chest. The frustration from breaking the bow was returning. I tried to continue. “Each province has a king or queen...” This time the knot was up into my neck. I tried to squeeze out the words but aggravation brewed. When I tried to clear my throat again, I let out an angry grunt. The next few words were said through tears.

“Anja? What is the matter?” my mother asked.

I stood up. “I'm just so...” I clenched my fists. “I'm just so...argh!”

Father slammed his large hand down on the table causing all of us to jump. “To your room at once.” He spoke in a stern tone with us, but he never yelled and only used his bear-like paws to hit something inanimate to get our attention.

I stomped to my room and tried to slam my wooden door shut, but it was too heavy. I hurt my arm instead. I sat on my bed and let out another hefty grunt, flung myself backward and cried.

That was the night. I now remember. It was my first dream of the Great Dragon. It wasn't a scary dream. I actually felt brave and confident when she was near me. I saw her and she flew directly at me, taking my breath away, but it was amazing. She landed in front of me and released smoke out of her nose. She didn't say anything. Just stared at me, and I at her. Was she trying to communicate with me like Kam and I communicate? With no words, just in our heads? I tried to listen but did not hear anything except for the waves of the sea which eventually coincided with the movement of her wings. She then launched upward and flew away.

I became fascinated. I wanted to read everything I could about the sea. We lived more inland and had many rivers but were far from a coast line, so I had never been there. I wanted to figure out what this all meant. Was I supposed to go to Dalun? I had never travelled anywhere far before. Then I realized, once I reached the age to compete, Dalun is where the Moon Festival and honor games would be held, sparking my determination to participate.

I was jolted from my memories with the sound of the class bell. I completely missed Master Fey's lesson. I was there but my mind wasn't, a frequent habit of mine. Maybe I could review over lunch.

Outside the temperature was warm. A few clouds decorated the sky, puffs of white against a vibrant blue. Every few minutes a cloud eclipsed the sun and provided some shade upon us. I sat on a tree stump and ate a pear that I grabbed from our orchard on the walk to school. It wasn't quite ripe, but soft enough to bite into. Just when I had a mouthful of pear, I felt a jolt on my back, thrusting me forward and off the stump. Once on the ground, I turned to see what or who pushed me.

It was Ranita and her group of followers. "Do you have a staring problem?"

I frowned at her.

"See? I told you, she is staring at me again," she said to her friends.

She was right. I was. But I was in shock. And I couldn't speak because my mouth was full.

“Next time I catch you staring, you’ll regret it.”

Her friends laughed. She kicked some dirt at me and walked away.

The dirt ended up getting into my mouth as I tried to chew. I ended up spitting out my pear. Suddenly, I felt a heat wave come over me. I jumped to my feet, but quickly felt shaken. An anger began to brew deep in my core. “*Why was she such a bully? And why did I let her get to me?*” I knew Kam could feel it, because it was a strong emotion. But he didn’t communicate with me like usual.

“*Kam, where are you?*” Still, no answer. He must have been taking a test or on a ride with a dragon. I felt alone.

Instead of staying around the rest of the girls, I ran to my new favorite place, the oak tree. I sat down and leaned my back against it and let the tears fall. I laid down and gazed up through the branches of my tree. Thick arms full of green reached outward, providing a blanket of shade over me. I knew I should get back to school. But I couldn’t move. Well, I could. I just didn’t want to. I wanted to stay there, for the rest of the day.

And I did. I woke to shouts — familiar voices, calling my name. The sun had set. I could hear the insects singing their night song. I sat up quickly, almost forgetting where I was. I heard my name again. It was my mother. *Ugh, I’m in trouble again.*

Surprisingly, I wasn’t, at least not from her.

“I’m sorry, Mother,” I said as I ran down the hill.

“Anja! You had me worried. The Academy said you didn’t return after lunch.” Her voice was more shaken than stern.

Kam met us as we walked home. “You found her,” he said through deep breaths.

“*Are you in trouble?*” He asked.

“*No. Not this time.*” I replied.

Though the Academy decided a punishment was neces-

sary. I couldn't eat lunch outside for the rest of the week. Fine. I would be away from Ranita.

She acted like she was better than me. Now she could definitely say she was better at archery, adding to her portfolio of queen of everything. Just the thought of her put a bad taste in my mouth. Sometimes I could not stomach to look at her.

As the weeks went on, my frustration with Ranita was building and really disrupting my lessons at the academy.

"Next week, we'll talk about Starbeings. Read chapters thirteen and fourteen," said Master Fey.

"I've seen a Starbeing up close," boasted Ranita.

Master Fey gave her a skeptical look, but before she could say anything the class bell rang.

As I took my time gathering my books, Ranita's groupies gathered around her.

"Did you really see one?" one girl asked

"Of course. She was so bright and sparkled like crystals."

"Didn't your eyes burn? My mother says you can't look straight at them or your eyes will burn," said another girl.

"What does a Starbeing do?" Samal asked with her typical soft and innocent tone. I was surprised she said anything at all.

I walked closer to the group and dropped off a paper on Master Fey's desk.

Ranita scoffed, "You don't know?"

Samal lowered her head.

"They bring messages from the moon," I chimed in.

"What was your message, Ranita?" I may have had a bit of attitude with my question.

In her typical high and mighty tone, "That's none of your business," she replied.

"She's full of it," I whispered to Samal.

"You are just so jealous of me. Admit it."

That's it. I'd had enough of her. Adrenaline built inside my body and before I could think straight, I grabbed the nearest item, an apple, off Master Fey's desk. I threw it at Ranita. Everyone gasped. It barely hit her but that didn't matter. She dramatically fell to the ground and began to wail. I looked around to see if any masters saw. Again, didn't matter, one of her groupies went running and told on me. Ranita stood and laughed when her friend returned and said Master Lu wanted to see me.

This time both Master Lu and Master Kaya were waiting for me in the chambers.

"But she..."

"You do not talk back to your Masters," said Master Kaya.

I had to hold my thoughts from my mouth. It was so hard. I felt a tightness in my chest, a lump in my throat and tears began to well in my eyes. I pushed myself against the back of the chair, causing its front legs to lift off the floor. Luckily, I didn't fall back, but the chair slammed back down into place.

"This is a check against your record. Two more checks and you will be suspended," said Master Lu. Master Kaya opened the door and motioned that I leave.

I tried not to stomp out. "*It should be Ranita who is expelled.*"

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG FOR THE INEVITABLE. THE day we practiced drawing our arrows out of our quivers sealed my fate. Every time I grabbed for one arrow, I pulled the rest of them out with it. I was so frustrated. Ranita and a few other girls laughed at me. I could feel the pressure build then rise up from my belly into my head. I flung the quiver off my body in a rage and then took an arrow and broke it in half over my knee. "*Maybe archery is not for me.*"

Master Lu walked over to me and just stood, staring down

with her hawk eyes. The look on her face was stone cold. She reached out her hand. I gave her the pieces of the arrow while I kept my head down. "Come," she said. I followed her to the Grand Master's chambers then waited in the hallway as a group of them spoke.

"This one is a nuisance," said one of the head masters. They didn't know I could hear them. Or they did and didn't care.

"I haven't seen this kind of anger or disobedience in a child in a very long time." That was old Master Bell. She was the eldest of the masters and had been teaching at the academy since my grandmother was here. She was ancient.

"Do we suspend her?" asked Master Kaya

Master Lu made the final call. "For now that is the decision. The next time will be more drastic measures."

I was sent home the rest of the week and suspended the next. My classmates continued their lessons and improved their skills.

Not being able to train at the academy was hard to swallow. My days were kept occupied, however, by watching the young men at the School of the Iron Fist. I knew it was wrong, but excitement filled my body when I climbed the mighty oak and spied on their drills. I was slowly learning the moves. I practiced what I could remember in the privacy of my room. I did not want to get caught. For one, I was not a student of the Iron Fist, and two, girls were not allowed to participate in combat exercises. There was sure to be a punishment.

One night I could not sleep. Restlessness built inside me and my thoughts flew around my head repeatedly like an annoying fly. I even called upon the Great Dragon. *"Maybe she could help me go to sleep. That was silly."* I quickly shook the thought from my head. I stood and paced. Binluna shone brightly tonight. I sat at my window and stared at her. While gazing, my mind began to quiet. I felt the urge to take a walk. It was the perfect night to watch the skies. Though, I didn't want to wake Kam to go to our hill. No. I decided to visit my tree.

Sneaking around was becoming my forte. I descended down the ivy outside my window. I didn't need to carry a lantern tonight. "Thank you, moon," I whispered. It was still a little spooky, walking alone in the dark through the pear orchard. I usually felt protected among the trees, sheltering and hiding me but tonight was different. I paused, my shoulders hunched toward my ears. I saw a flash from the corner of my eye.

"Hello?" I barely spoke aloud. I didn't want to draw attention if there was anything out there. I continued through the orchard at a slower pace.

When I made it to the end, I carefully scanned my surroundings before I made my way over the stream. I realized I was holding my breath and tensely shrugging my shoulders. I tried to relax and breathe. Another flash appeared in my side vision. It was like a white spark. I crouched down. "*Could it be a Starbeing?*" I wouldn't know, I had never encountered one. I knew they visited the planet and watched over us. Could one be watching me right now? I crawled up the hill, keeping low, as if that would make me invisible. I heard that Starbeings wore dark cloaks to hide their brightness when on the planet. It would be blinding to view them in their natural state.

Finally I reached the top of the hill and there he was, my trusted friend. I felt a little safer as I got close to his dark trunk and moonlit branches. I ran up and embraced him. I sat at his base, my back leaning against him. I sighed. I rested a few moments then decided to show my oak friend all that I had learned and put together. After all, it was just me and the trees right now. I assured myself that no one would see.

Trying not to make too much noise, I began a slow dance through the moves. I preferred doing them slowly—it helped me to remember them and really focus on the positions. But I was startled from my concentration by a snap of a twig. I

gasped. "Who is there?" I ran over to my tree and hid behind him.

"Don't be afraid," said a deep voice. "I was just enjoying an evening stroll under the stars." A figure stepped forward. He was dressed in a dark cloak.

"Oh, my moon it is a Starbeing."

He stepped closer and began to remove his hood. I quickly sheltered my eyes.

He gave a chuckle. "Is Binluna too bright?"

I slowly looked up and saw his features. He looked familiar but I couldn't place how I knew him. *Ok, not a Starbeing...I don't think.*

"Well done, miss," he said.

"You saw me?" I became worried. "Oh please don't tell."

"I did. And I shall not. You are the girl who has been spying in the trees, yes?"

I stupidly confirmed with a nod of my head. *Wait, how did he know?*

He sat at the base of another tree. I came from around my tree and sat down as well.

"I teach at the School of the Iron Fist. I am Master Kao." He paused. "And I'd like the students to practice the moves slowly, just as you were. But the other masters disagree with me."

"That's it. He's the taller and calmer teacher I saw in the courtyard."

I moved closer to him. "I am Anja." I held out my hand. He stood, much taller up close. I noticed my hand shook and I questioned my decision to introduce myself. He put his palm to mine in the usual greeting gesture.

"Pleased to meet you," he said.

"Am I in trouble now?" I stepped back.

"Only if you allow yourself to be."

I didn't know what that meant. But I decided to not allow myself to be in trouble at that moment.

Normally, I would be more on edge with an adult stranger in the middle of the night. But for someone with obvious authority, he had a peaceful presence. He seemed comforting, non-judgmental. And perhaps he reminded me a little of my father. Not in looks, but in how he made me feel—safe.

He sat down again and closed his eyes. I decided to do the same at my tree.

“Would you like to learn more?” he asked.

I opened my eyes. “Oh. Me?”

“Is there anyone else here?”

I gave a nervous laugh. “Yes. Can I? Aren't the moves secret?”

“That hasn't stopped you before.” He continued to talk with his eyes closed.

“Right.” Perhaps this was something I could be good at other than bow making. I had a bitter taste in my mouth about that since I'm failing at the skill that goes along with it.

“Meet me here after school.”

“I, um, I'm suspended as of now.” I was embarrassed to admit it. But I felt I could tell him anything. Or that he would find out anyway.

“Perfect.” He looked at me. I could not hide my confusion. “Meet me here when school usually ends for you.” He stood directly in front of the moon, creating a glowing silhouette. “We'll refine your movements.”

As he walked away, I was distracted by a shooting star. I looked at him again but he seemed to disappear into thin air before I could agree.

“Ok,” I said quietly. I rubbed my eyes. I definitely need to get some sleep now.

“I’ll be back later,” I called out as I ran out the door. If last night wasn’t a dream, I was about to have a personal lesson with a teacher from the School of the Iron Fist. I couldn’t believe it.

Kam followed after me. “Anja. Wait.”

I cringed. I didn’t want to tell him where I was going or what I was going to do. Not yet anyway.

“Have you been practicing your archery?”

I walked slowly as he caught up to me.

“Um, kinda.”

“Anja remember, we are supposed to be in the games together.”

“Kam...”

“If you don’t practice, you won’t get moved up and the chances for us to partner up will be nothing.”

I stopped and looked him in the eye. “Kam, I’m trying, but there is not much I can do while I am suspended.”

“Practice, please.” He stared at me for a moment. “I have to go,” he said, then turned and headed toward a group of dragon riders on their way to train.

“What if I don’t want to?” I made sure that thought was to myself. *“Besides, I have something else to work on today.”* Too excited to dwell on the conversation, I continued on my way to the oak grove.

Once I got there, I sat and waited for Master Kao. Thoughts of the games began to dance around in my head.

“You think too much about future times,” said Master Kao as he appeared from behind a tree. “You must live in the present. Be mindful of right now.”

I jumped up. *“How does he know what I am thinking?”*

“Lesson one.” He motioned for me to sit back down. He sat next to me. “Take a deep breath.”

I inhaled and lifted my shoulders toward my ears.

“No. No. Your lungs are not up here.” He held his hand above his chest. “They are below.” He placed his other hand lower toward the bottom of the rib cage.

“Pretend that you are filling your belly with the air. Bring it down low to the base of your spine.” He noticed my confusion. “It’s not really filling your belly, you are tricking your mind to help fully expand your lungs.”

I started to inhale.

“Slowly,” he said. “And now exhale completely.”

I blew out the air in a blast.

“No. Slowly. As if the air is leaking through a small opening.”

I continued to try as he spoke.

“Think of the sea, the waves flowing in, the waves flowing out.”

My breathing began to slow. I think I was getting the hang of it. It seemed like the sun set and rose again before he spoke. Finally Master Kao told me to open my eyes.

“Very well. I’ll see you again tomorrow.” He stood.

“But...”

“Slowly,” he said as he walked away. But then he turned back. “Practice.”

Before I was to meet with Master Kao, I had to read some chapters of my history book. We were studying the terrains of the provinces. Our province was known for its mountains of red rock. We also had many hills and valleys and a few lakes, but on the other side of the mountain range was Province Aylun's Lake Eros, the deepest lake on Ja. I drifted into more memories of history discussions with my father.

"Have you been to other provinces father?" I had asked him one day.

"Some, but not all." I remembered an endearing smile appearing on his face. "I took your mother to Lake Eros after we were married." He paused and stared into the orchard, eyes gleaming.

I interrupted his gaze. "And...?"

"Ah. Well, I've been to Dalun many times."

"Is it under the sea? Did you have to swim down there?"

"Ha. No. In ancient times, there was a palace under the sea. The palace of the Great Dragon. But when we, the

uprights, came into power, the first king designated Oro Island as the center of living for Dalun.”

“Just an island?”

“Not just an island, but a grand mass of land in the middle of the waters. That’s where you will go for the annual Moon Festival games when you reach the age of thirteen.”

I was brought back to reality by the thought of the festival games. “*Sorry, Father. I don’t think I will be participating.*”

I continued to read. “Julun is the land of ascended trees...”

I had seen the drawings but never have been there. I was imagining the trees, how magical it would be to see them floating upward, yet with roots still attached.

AFTER I STUDIED, I WALKED TO MEET MASTER KAO, not with my usually upbeat step but rather a slow shuffle.

“You are sad today.”

“Are we breathing again?” I asked him, ignoring his observation of my mood.

“Yes. Keep standing this time.”

We closed our eyes and started breathing deeply in a slow rhythm. Ebb and flow, I thought.

Master Kao began to speak. “Now focus your thoughts. Where are your feet?”

I started to answer but he interrupted. “Don’t tell me, just think. Now, where are your knees?”

He continued asking, moving up the body until he got to the head. “Breathe,” he reminded me. “Body awareness, mind and body connection.”

I focused on my breath, remembering to pull the air deep into my belly.

“Think about the body as you breathe. Move deliberately and intently.”

I frowned.

“With purpose,” he added. “Now, use your chi.”

“What is chi?”

“Chi is energy, within and around. It is our life force.”

“Like breath?”

“Yes, but more than that.” He brought both hands toward his heart, palms facing each other. He then rotated his hands as if around a small ball, right hand on top, left hand on bottom and then moved them to the sides again and placed left hand on top and right hand on bottom. I recognized this from the warm ups I saw the young men practicing in the courtyard.

“Embracing the moon,” he said as he continued to rotate his hands. He motioned for me to join him. We moved our hands around our imaginary moons.

“Do not forget to breathe.”

I laughed, “How can one forget to breathe?”

He looked at me seriously. “When one concentrates, one holds one’s breath.”

I didn’t realize I was doing just that when I was trying to follow his moves.

“Can you feel the chi between your palms?”

“Um, kinda,” I said as I looked at my hands. There was nothing in between them, but I did feel a slight buzzing in my fingers.

“Good, now sink the chi.” He motioned both palms downward to the ground as he bent his knees. “Sink your energy into your hips and intend the chi to go into the earth.”

He was silent for a moment. “Where are your feet?”

I looked down. “Right here.”

“Do you feel them on the earth?”

I was aware of them. “Yes.”

“All the moves you have practiced from watching the boys

are going to feel more powerful once you have mastered your chi.”

“*Powerful chi*,” I thought in wonder. A wave of excitement filled my being and my stomach fluttered as I imagined perfecting the new skill I was learning.

“See these oak trees? They have roots. The taller the tree, the deeper the roots.”

My oak tree was quite tall; his roots must run very deep.

“The wider the tree trunk, the stronger the base and the roots.” He stepped out wide, his feet a little past shoulder width. I did the same.

“Now sink your chi.” We raised our arms upward. “Inhale,” he said. We motioned down to the earth with our palms. “Exhale and sink your chi.” We bent our knees. We continued the movements, starting with the inhale and finishing with the exhale.

“Now imagine as you press downward, roots growing from the bottoms of your feet and traveling deep down into the earth.”

We practiced this for some time. After Master Kao left, I stayed by the oak trees and practiced on my own. My mood was lifted and I was eager to start working on the moves the young men practiced. Master Kao did teach slowly—maybe too slow for the Iron Fist.

The next day, I decided to go early to the oak grove. I wanted to watch the young men so I could remember the moves. Since I hadn't worked on refining them with Master Kao yet, I was afraid I would forget them. I climbed my mighty oak. Once on my favorite branch, the one that let me see the best, I adjusted my position. I wasn't even seated before a bird flew toward my head. Swaying side to side with my arms out, trying to balance myself, I eventually lost control and fell to the ground, landing flat on my back. I squeezed my eyes shut and groaned.

When I opened them, Master Kao stood over me. He laughed. "Even monkeys fall out of trees." He held his hand out, helping me to my feet. "Are you hurt?"

I nodded and pointed to my back.

Master Kao took a deep breath, reached down as if he were scooping up an imaginary ball. He then pushed his hands upward and opened his arms down to his sides, then reached up to the sky and pushed his hands downward before holding the imaginary ball near his heart. He then placed his right hand on my back. He held it there for awhile.

I could feel heat from his hand and slowly, the pain dissipated.

“How did you do that?” I asked after he removed his hand.

“It’s the magic of chi.”

“Can I learn how to do that?”

“That happens to be our lesson for today.”

“Magic?”

“Chi. Cultivating positive chi.”

In our usual start, Master Kao began with his posture commands. Speaking of monkeys, I felt like one being trained. With each command I adjusted my body accordingly.

“Touch ten toes to the ground to connect your energy.”

“Distribute weight evenly on the balls and heels of the feet.”

“Drop tailbone down.”

“Raise front of pelvis.”

“Stretch lowest ribs forward.”

“Lift collarbone.”

“Sink shoulders and drop the elbows.”

“Let arms and hands fall naturally at sides.”

“Touch tongue to roof of mouth.”

“Thread suspends head from above; quiet the mind, breathe smoothly and naturally through the nose.”

After I was in position, he began a guided meditation.

“I will tell you what to visualize.”

“Ok,” I said.

“Let us begin.” He double checked my feet. “Weight is sunk into hips, knees soft?”

I anchored my feet to the ground. Feeling every part of my foot on the grass, just like he taught me.

“Yes.”

“Close your eyes. Are you breathing?”

“Yes,” I said, with a smirk.

“We are being serious.”

“Yes, master.”

“Think of the sea, the ebb and the flow of the waves. Align your breathing to that rhythm.”

I followed his cues. I could feel the calm settling in.

He spoke slowly. “Continue to breathe. Imagine a warm shower flowing over you. Cascading down over your face, ears, back of the head. Down over your neck and shoulders, flowing over your arms, front, back, and sides, washing away all negative thoughts and energies.”

I breathed in deeply and released the air.

He continued, “Over your hips and traveling down your legs to your ankles and over the tops of your feet. This shower will continue to wash over you until the water at your feet runs clear.”

He paused for a few moments as I continued to visualize and breathe.

“Now imagine yourself surrounded in white light. You are barefoot, walking on Ja. Feel the ground—is it grass, dirt, sand?”

He gave me a moment. “You are surrounded by trees arching over you, creating a tunnel. Ahead you see an opening—walk toward it. Once there you see a place where you feel safe, secure, and happy.”

A smile came to my face. I immediately imagined being near my mighty oak.

“Allow yourself to slightly sink down into the ground. Roots begin to grow from the bottoms of your feet, traveling through the dirt, through the layers of Ja down to Ja’s core. And there sits a beautiful clear crystal, emanating warm light. Wrap your roots around the crystal and begin to absorb the healing energy from it. It is yours to take freely.”

I could see it clearly in my mind. I could see a massive

rough-edged crystal in the center. A formation of red and orange and yellow halos surrounded it. I felt its warmth.

He continued. "Begin to pull up that energy through your roots, up through the layers into the dirt." His voice became louder. "Feel it enter the soles of your feet, traveling up your entire body, and finally bursting out of your crown." His voice crescendoed then began to get softer again. "Opening the lotus flower at the top of your head and allowing yourself to raise your vibration, lift your spirit, connect with your higher self. Guides, guardians, Starbeings all surround you now, encircling you in a violet light, bubbling you, protecting you."

I saw the vibrant color of violet all around me. I saw myself in the bubble, floating above my body, the stars bright against the deep blue sky.

"It is now time to reach to the moon, to the great skies and allow your branches to grow high to the heavens."

Was I floating? I felt I was. But I did not want to open my eyes to check for fear I would lose the feeling.

"A magnificent waterfall rushes down." His voice grew louder again. "The energy from it enters your crown and travels straight down through the center of your body."

I felt a power run through me.

"It flows down into the ground nourishing your roots, then bounces back up through your body and repeats the cycle, down and in, up and out. You are now a clear channel to cultivate chi. You are weightless and floating, yet strong and grounded. When you are ready, you may open your eyes."

I slowly lifted my eyelids and inhaled deeply, awakening all of my senses. I saw a more vivid view of my surroundings. I noticed that my arms were opened out to my sides with my palms facing upward as if I were holding a large ball of energy. I stood and without Master Kao instructing me, I

began to shift my weight side to side slowly, forming a ball with my arms rotating my palms around it, expanding it and contracting it. I could feel the buzzing energy between my hands. I moved the energy around my body as I continued shifting.

He turned his back toward me and began to do a series of moves, which I followed. They came so naturally to me. I'd seen them before, I'd practiced them, but now I felt they were a part of my being, like I'd always known them and forgot but now remembered. Archery never felt like this.

The Great Dragon came to me again that night. I sat near the water's edge and I saw her in a pink sky where both our sun and Binluna were visible. She flew toward me, and I noticed for the first time that the underpart of her wings were a brilliant blue color. Her skin sparkled. As she came closer I noticed a bright light upon her back. It was almost blinding. I could not see what it was exactly. When the Great Dragon landed in the shallow waters, a dark cloak appeared in place of the bright light—a Starbeing. *“Did she have a message?”*

When I woke I could not remember all of my dream. I sat on my bed and stared at the floor, desperately trying to recall every little part, but the memories stopped at the Starbeing.

“She said something. I know it,” I said aloud.

I looked out the window. It was a gray day. I would be returning to school the next day, which dampened my mood even more than the weather.

I had a few chores to do, but before I started, I wanted to practice what I had learned this week. I was excited to continue the movements of the Iron Fist drills. I finally

remembered most of them and felt like they were part of my being.

I practiced the moves slowly so I would not throw off my balance and fall. I did not want to fall. I did not want to fail. And I did not want to give up. *“Did I give up too easily on other things, like archery?”* This time I was going to learn something thoroughly, correctly. Not like in archery school, where everything was a race to be the best.

I tried to think of the sea again like Master Kao taught me, but my thoughts turned to Ranita. I thought of her laughing at the fact that I got kicked out of school. I wondered who she was tormenting now, and would she just go through all of the girls one by one, until they were all gone, and she stood the queen of the school? Ugh.

I shook my head as if that would get the thought of her out of my mind.

“She’s not worth your thoughts or mine.”

That was Kam in my head now.

He appeared in my doorway. “I haven’t seen you in awhile,” he said.

“You’ve been very busy with your dragon. I assume.”

“Let’s go to the hill tonight.”

“Sure, that would be nice.”

I was glad we could meet. I could finally tell Kam about Master Kao.

I waited for Kam on the hill. The stars were not as visible tonight and a breeze brought a chill in the air. I put the blanket I had brought for us to sit on around my shoulders. I felt my shoes sink into the damp ground as I began to pace. After some time, I could see a worn path in the long grass. *“Is he ever going to get here?”*

“Sorry, Anja. I was practicing some extra flights with my dragon, Vedo.”

“You are doing well?”

There was a sparkle in his eyes. “Yes, and Master Trey says I have a great chance of being chosen for the games.” His face changed to a concerned look. “And you?”

“Well, I wanted to tell you something.”

“What is it?” He maneuvered around as if he was practicing riding Vedo.

I cleared my throat. “It’s exciting actually. But you can’t tell anyone.”

He stopped and started to sit down. “Are you cold?” He pointed to the blanket.

I laid the blanket down for both of us.

"I've been learning moves from a teacher."

He stared at me, waiting for more.

"He's a master at the School of the Iron Fist."

Kam's eyes widened. "How? What? That's the school for warriors, Anja. It's a private school and only for boys!"

"I know. But, I've been watching them while I was suspended, and he saw me one day."

"Is that what you are doing in your room? You are going to get into so much trouble. Those movements are used in battle and you could compromise their secrecy. I can't imagine what punishment would be given to you.

"But it's not the same. Here let me show you."

"No, Anja." He stood and looked down at me. "You should be focusing on archery."

"I...I don't want to." I looked down. I couldn't believe I said that. I guess I never wanted to admit it. Something that was inside of me for so long. I let it out. Maybe I never really wanted to be an archer. I enjoyed designing and creating bows, but there was something else for me. I knew it.

Kam spun himself around, placed his hand on his temples and looked at me with disbelief. "You are just frustrated. You know how you get. Tomorrow you can start over and catch up and show them all you are the best."

"I'm not, Kam." The familiar feeling of anger rumbled inside me. I stood, took the blanket, and put it around my shoulders again.

"You have to."

His voice had a sense of urgency and his fists were clenched. This was so unlike him. He was the calm one. In that aspect we were like night and day. Twins but different.

"Try for me, Anja, please. Father would want us to work together. You need to put some effort into things." His voice was stern and his brow was furrowed. This was not my brother.

I stood. “You don’t think I am putting in effort?”

“No, you’re preoccupied with this silly secret training you are doing— forbidden training What would Mother say? What would Father think? You bringing disgrace to the family?”

“No one is going to find out. Right?” I demanded. “Why did I even tell you?”

“I would have found out anyway. You can’t keep secrets from your twin.”

“Ughhhhh.” I exaggerated my groan.

A thicker layer of low-lying clouds started to make their way into the night’s sky. A gust of wind blew, rustling through the trees, voicing their disapproval for our argument. “I’m going back to the academy tomorrow. We’ll see what happens.” We walked down the hill and headed home together. No more words spoken, no thoughts shared.

I dreaded but also looked forward to returning to the academy. I was afraid to fail and to face humiliation, but maybe deep down I wanted a chance to prove something. Maybe I didn't want to let Kam down. Though what was the point now? I missed a week and a half of training. I was in the second-string archery group. The chances of us being partnered up were slim. Only the top three archers and three dragon riders would have an opportunity to be chosen for the honor shooting.

The first day back was uneventful, which was a good thing. I kept to myself mostly. The groups were on a different schedule so I did not see Ranita, only in passing. The next day we worked with partners. I was partnered up with Samal, and I was happy about that. She was a good friend and we encouraged each other. She was improving, but I noticed she still struggled with her bow. As I watched her, I realized her bow seemed rather large for her stature. It was standard size, but Samal was tiny for our age.

"Is it too heavy?" I asked her.

“Oh. No. It’s fine.” She immediately stood taller and tightened her grip.

I could tell she was not being truthful.

“Samal? What if you used a smaller bow?” She didn’t answer me at first.

She lowered the bow and her eyes. “This was my father’s bow.”

I understood. It had sentimental value and I knew he could not make her another one because he had taken a leave from work to care for her mother.

I let the conversation drop. But I had an idea.... Master Janof called us over to work on the next exercise. He was waiting by a line of horse-drawn wagons.

“Today you will shoot your arrows from a moving station. Archers will stand on the wagons and will practice shooting targets while in motion.”

He paused, assessing our non-response. “This should be fun and challenging. Come on, ladies.” He tried to pull some excitement from us. I was eager to try and was the first to hop on a wagon. This was the first step in preparing us to shoot while riding. Eventually we would move to horses and then dragons. Though, only the chosen contenders for the honor shooting would make it to the dragon phase.

I used my new skills from Master Kao to help me. I adjusted my position and grabbed an arrow from my quiver.

“Ready?” Master Janof asked.

I nodded.

He mounted the horse and we began to travel. “Watch for the targets along the path. There will be four. Two on each side,” he called back to me.

I saw a target ahead and adjusted to a wide stance, readied my bow and arrow, and then launched it at the target as we passed. Too late. It flew about two feet to the side.

I tried again on the next target. Stance wide, weight sunk,

I relaxed my breathing and shot the arrow seconds before passing it. It hit. "Ha!"

The smile on my face changed quickly as we hit a few bumps. I wobbled but did not fall. The next target was low, so I knelt on one knee. Drew my bow and again hit the target. The wagon turned, so I decided to stay low until the ground was steady. I slowly stood, gaining my balance and aimed at the last target which was up in the trees. Right as I released, we hit another bump. I jumped with the wagon and landed on both feet. I turned back and saw that I did hit the last target, more on the lower edge, but I still hit it.

"Excellent balance, Anja," said Master Lu as we pulled up to the beginning of the course.

Relieved it was over, a wave of pride went through me. "Thank you, Master Lu," I said with a smile.

I couldn't wait to tell Master Kao. I continued my lessons with him after archery school. We practiced clearing out bad chi and cultivating good chi. Bad chi was anything negative: thoughts, pain, sadness, and anger, clouded and stagnant. Good chi was happiness, health, compassion, and love, clarity and flowing. I started to understand what it meant to feel balanced, what it meant to be in harmony. This was somehow helping in my archery, as today had proven.

The time was getting near for pairs to be assigned and to decide who would have the privilege of shooting the prayer and honor arrows to the Starbeings.

Everyone was getting anxious, even the townspeople of the province. Even the planet itself. Storms were frequent and word spread about the violent waves in the sea. I overheard talk at the factory. A few other men sat with Stephan and Barbo for a lunch break. I was inside the factory and could hear the conversation through an open window.

"The games will have to move to another province," said one of the men.

"Not if Zayl can help it," said Barbo.

"Dalun is already preparing," replied Stephan.

"I heard that the island has not been affected."

"The weather should improve by then. How many months?"

"Five."

"See? Plenty of time."

"*Plenty of time for me to prove myself.*" I laughed at the thought. It seemed that my lessons with Master Kao had a

positive affect on my archery. I was more centered and my concentration improved, allowing me to hone in on my skill. The Masters had noticed a difference as well. One day Master Janof even pulled me aside and told me they were thinking of moving me up to the first string. So maybe, just maybe, I could compete. I was starting to enjoy archery again.

I wanted to tell Kam but he seemed distant. He walked around like, like...Ranita. I scowled at the thought. He thought he was better than everyone. I could feel it. His accomplishments in training were going to his head. *"Not you too, Kam."*

My thoughts were interrupted when I heard someone say, "Prophecy." I edged closer to the window without being seen.

"Do you think that will ever happen? It's been thousands of years. It will never come true," said Stephan.

"I don't know. These storms and the sea, I have never seen anything like this in my life," said Barbo. "My neighbors are stocking up on supplies, food, water."

"Simple precautions," replied Stephan.

"I've seen more arguments among people," another man added. He sounded anxious.

"What people?" asked Stephan.

"Everyone in town: vendors and buyers, neighbors, family members. If we don't control ourselves..."

Stephan interjected again. "We don't have the power to wake the dragons."

"It would take much disruption among the people," agreed another man.

"What about Binluna? Do we have the power to weaken her, setting the motions into place?"

I peeked out the window. I hadn't heard Barbo say anything for awhile. When I looked at him, he seemed to be off in another world, staring into space. I wondered if he was scared or worried too.

Then, as if he were awakened by something, he looked up at the rest of the men with a serious look that I had never seen on his face. He then said, in a monotoned voice, “Don’t feed the fears.” There was a flash in his eyes and then he looked away.

“Good advice, my friend,” said Stephan as he gave Barbo a pat on the back. The men arose from their seats, ending their break. Barbo sat for a moment.

“You coming?” asked Stephan.

“Huh?” Barbo awoke from whatever trance he was in.

I needed to leave too. I was going to be late for school. I tried to push any worries of the conversation out of my mind, as “*Don’t feed the fears*” repeated in my head.

Just as I had hoped, I was moved up to first string the next month. I felt bad leaving Samal behind, but she was happy for me. Master Janof was waiting for me in the archery fields.

“Anja.” He smiled.

“Where is everyone?”

“I am going to be your personal trainer for some time before you join the group.”

“Why?” I caught myself—I didn’t want to show any disrespect. “Sorry, sir. I meant, why are you doing this for me?”

He put his arm around me as we walked toward the targets. “Let’s just say, I believe in you.”

I felt a tingling through my body and then all my nerves and muscles went limp. I felt my legs were going to give out. I tried to focus. I couldn’t speak. Shaking off any other feelings that were arising, I finally managed some strength and let out a formal, seriously toned, “Thank you.”

“Still...why me? Maybe he liked me in a way a teacher shouldn’t? Maybe that was just a fantasy in my head. Silly. Stop being a foolish

girl.” Now I was nervous to shoot in front of him. I felt pressure to not disappoint. He must have sensed it.

“Just relax, and put yourself in a place where you feel strong. Whatever you had been doing while you were gone, go there.”

I thought of Master Kao, his words, my tree. I grounded myself to the earth, and I began breathing slowly and deeply. I felt energy in my hands, and it flow into my arms as I pulled back then released the arrow. I felt the energy leave my arms as if the arrow took it on its flight. I shot three in a row, all hitting close to center of the target.

“Ha! I knew you had it in you,” Master Janof praised.

“I think I just got lucky,” I said not wanting to seem over confident but I couldn’t help but smile.

“Let’s continue.”

We walked into the practice forest. I aimed and shot at targets high and low within the trees.

After my lesson, we walked back to the school grounds for lunch. Ranita was headed toward us. She stopped and stared at me, then at Master Janof, then back at me, giving me a dirty look before moving on.

“Don’t worry about her,” he reassured me. “I know she is your opposite, your um, nemesis, if you will. Just focus on you.”

“I wish she would just go away.” I couldn’t believe I said that out loud.

“Ha ha. Yes.” He leaned toward me and whispered, “Many do.”

I smiled at that.

“But one day you will have to confront your fears.”

He was called over by another master before I could ask him what he meant.

I didn’t worry about it though. I had an important ally at

the school. A handsome ally. *“Stop it, Anja. Don’t ruin this opportunity.”*

After school ended for the day, I headed home to get a snack before meeting Master Kao. I floated along in a dream world as I walked. I thought of my newly developed chi and all the things that could be. I could be better than Ranita. I could be chosen to shoot the honor arrows. I could live up to everyone’s expectations of me. But I was quickly woken from my bliss when I saw the official provincial carriage at our gates.

“What is King Capros doing at our home?” The last time he was here, he had delivered us the worst news. I ran inside through the front entrance. First, I stopped in the receiving room. No one was there. I went to the formal dining area—no one. I looked in all the rooms that were off the grand hallway until I reached the back where I saw, out on our terrace, the king and my mother. He faced her, his hands holding hers. I stopped dead in my tracks. I felt betrayed. *“Why are they holding hands. What about father?”* Mother, looking solemn, turned her gaze toward me and quickly dropped her hands from the king’s. She folded her arms and said something to him, shaking her head, then walked toward me.

“Mother what is it? Is everything ok? Is it Kam?”

She looked a bit shaken, but was not crying. She embraced me. *“No, dear. Nothing is wrong.”*

The king strutted inside. He looked more regal than when I saw him at the palace.

“Anja,” King Capros said in a loud boisterous voice. *“How goes the archery?”*

“Fine, sir,” I said politely.

“His royal highness was just telling me about a new addition to his palace,” Mother said. Her voice was formal.

“He had to hold your hands to tell you?”

King Capros cleared his throat. “Ah, yes. Would you like to live in a palace one day?”

I looked at Mother, who stared at the king with wide eyes. I didn’t get a chance to answer.

“Very well. I must attend to some business in the next town.”

Mother walked him to the front door. I stayed close behind but far enough so she wouldn’t notice me. I stepped back into the doorway of a room as he turned to look at her.

In a kind, low spoken voice he said, “I’ll await your answer.”

I stepped back farther. “*What did that mean?*”

It was bad manners to inquire in adult business, so I dared not ask. But something was going on that Kam and I didn’t know about. “*Or does he?*”

Once Kam found out that I was living up to my expectations at the academy, he became less distant. We returned to spending time on our hill again. I got the confidence to ask him about the king.

“Maybe you are overreacting.”

“About what? I saw him hold her hands and then he asked if I wanted to live in a castle.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing. Besides, Mother would never betray Father.”

“But he has been gone for almost a year. Don’t you think she is lonely?”

“You want her to find another husband?”

“No,” I blurted. “No. But it does happen.”

We stayed silent for a few moments.

“Anja?”

“Yes?”

“Do you believe Father died in a hunting accident?”

“That’s what Mother told us. Why wouldn’t I believe it?”

He took a deep breath, sat up and faced me. “I heard something.”

I stared at him. “*What?*”

“Something about selling bows to the the different provinces but Dalun wanted an exclusive deal and offered to relocate the factory to Dalun.” He paused. “Father was going to settle on an agreement but he was killed on purpose to prevent the deal.”

“That’s terrible. Who do they think killed him?” “*No this can’t be true. It was an accident. I don’t want to believe otherwise.*” I started to cry. Kam put his arm around me.

“It’s probably a silly rumor.”

I wasn’t convinced.

“I’m sorry I upset you.”

I COULDN’T SLEEP THAT NIGHT. I SAT IN MY window wishing I could see the moon, but clouds lay thick and heavy in the sky. The night storms had moved on a while ago but the clouds lingered.

I stared into them, hoping for a pocket I could see through to a star. Just a peek of a glimmer would give me a sign that what Kam said was gossip.

I gazed so long I started to see things in the mass of cloud. Shapes formed into faces then transitioned into animals. First a bird, then a tiger, and now a dragon. The dragon grew larger and closer. I noticed the mist of the cloud descended around and past me as if I were moving through it. “*Was I inside the dragon cloud?*” The skies became clearer and I felt I was flying.

A whooshing noise was to my sides. As the cloudy mist completely dissipated, I noticed I was sitting on golden scales, wings to either side of me, a long neck in front of me. A large beastly head turning back and staring with a vibrant green eye, and then I heard a voice in my head say, “*Hold on.*”

We dipped downward as I howled, “Whoaaa.” Wind gust

through my hair. I leaned forward and embraced the dragon as tight as I could, leaving one eye open. Everything was passing by so fast, I could not make out where we were. We flew over the tops of trees and a lake. “*Lake Eros?*” I held on tight, because I feared the water. I couldn’t swim. We then ascended higher through a layer of clouds into the night sky. Time seemed to slow. I sat up, with both eyes open, and I saw them. Starbeings were everywhere, so bright, so beautiful. They parted, creating an opening in the sky to reveal an even brighter light. An orb, iridescent with flashes of pastel colors. Binluna. She looked pure white from the planet; I had never noticed all the colors she held within her. She transformed her orb shape into a flying horse and headed toward then past us, descending toward Ja. Time sped up again and we followed her down. I leaned forward again and held the dragon and my breath. With a swoosh we landed in a forest where a man stood waiting for us. I stayed on the dragon as he walked toward us. Then his features were revealed in the moonlight.

“Father?”

I couldn’t believe my eyes. I wanted to get down but I couldn’t. So many emotions flooded me: joy, sadness, anger, confusion. He looked up at me with pleading eyes.

“Anja. You must keep the balance.”

Before I could ask what he meant, he was gone. We were gone. The dragon took me back up and we traveled at high speed through mists and clouds. My eyes teared from the wind. The air was cooler and I could hear waves crashing. The dragon aimed us down. She was going to crash us into the sea.

“What are you doing?” I cried.

We were about to smack the surface of the violent waters when I screamed.

I was in a solemn mood the next morning. The dream of my father made me miss him even more, and even though I had Kam and Mother, I felt very alone and confused. *“What did he mean when he said, ‘Keep the balance’?”*

Kam ran into the dinning room as I tried to eat my breakfast.

“Did you hear?” He didn’t wait for me to answer. “They are choosing partners today.” He was full of excitement; his eyes seemed to dance.

“But they are not supposed to partner people until they have chosen the candidates from each school, which is not for another week.” He must be wrong.

“I guess they did that already too. There was a meeting last night.”

This was an early decision. Three archers and three dragon riders needed to be chosen and then they could partner them. Why were they rushing things?

I was so eager to get to school, I ran the entire way without stopping. Thoughts rushed through my head: *“What are the chances I am chosen?” What if I am chosen? I’m not ready.”*

Everyone was gathered at the front steps of the school. The doors hadn't been open yet. It looked as if every student arrived early to find out what was happening.

Master Lu opened the doors and a silence fell upon us. She stood calm, dressed in all black, hands clasped behind her back. She looked like a crow today. *"Isn't a crow a bad omen?"*

"Good morning, students." She smiled. "I see you are ready to start your studies early today."

A few girls groaned.

"I'm sure you have heard the news, that we have chosen and partnered our three archers who will be eligible to shoot the honor arrows at the ceremony. We have also chosen our team to compete in the games. We will announce at the first bell. Please gather in the archery fields."

Everyone was clucking around about who they thought were chosen. It sounded like a hen house. I couldn't make sense of any of it. Just noise I didn't want to decipher.

"Anja," Samal shouted. "Are you excited? I bet your name will be called."

My nerves were getting to me. "Oh, thanks Samal. But I really can't get my hopes up."

Ranita strutted by with her groupies. I ignored them.

Once gathered in the archery fields, we waited for what seemed forever. I never thought I would wish the first bell to ring so badly. The masters gathered on a platform overlooking the crowd. Samal and I stood quietly while others expressed their angst.

"I think they delayed the bell just to agitate us," one girl said.

"Come on already," said another.

And then it rang. Everyone screamed. I wanted to throw up. Master Lu hushed the crowd. "Ok, ladies. The moment of anticipation had arrived." She had a smirk on her face that

added to my unease. “Master Janof, would you do the honors?”

Master Janof stepped forward, looking more handsome than ever today. He wore a new dark green tunic accented with leather. He was growing out a beard that complemented his features. Thirteen-year-old girls usually don’t like beards. He made it like-able.

“Good morning. First we will announce the overall Jenlun Team that will perform in individual and group competitions.” He looked down at the list. “You will get your specific events later today. Ok. The twelve chosen for the team are... oh, please hold any applause until I’ve gone through the entire list.”

Just get on with it. Please.

“Mayla Grandol. Vanda Bree. Rory Clayder. Jemma Toll. Brilla Zel. Tam Eyer. Anja Kiara.”

“Wait, what?”

Samal grabbed my arm and pulled on it. She was smiling and her eyes teared. I turned toward her and she jumped up and hugged me. She was such a kind-hearted friend. I still couldn’t believe my name was called. I was in bit of a shock and I didn’t hear the rest of the names until the last one.

“And last but not least, Ranita Shan.”

And now the screaming began. I was too happy for myself to even have a thought about Ranita. I knew she would make the team. I wasn’t going to let her take away my moment of joy.

“Ladies.” Master Lu commanded our attention once again. “Those of you who have been chosen, please join us on the platform.”

I looked at Samal, and she motioned for me to go. I didn’t want to stand in front of everyone. I felt bad for the girls who didn’t make it. And I had a little bit of guilt for being chosen after coming up from second string. I

wondered if they made the announcement yet to the dragon riders.

On the platform I stood on the opposite side of Ranita. I didn't even look at her. I tried to practice my breathing and chi work, internally at least.

"Congratulations team Jenlun," said Master Fey. "We will now announce which three of you are candidates for the honor shooting and your designated dragon rider partners."

Everyone hushed.

"Tam Eyer and Madix Vale."

Tam jumped up and down with her hands over her mouth.

"Mayla Grandol and Austin Macry."

Oh, that was perfect. They've been in puppy love since third grade. A few girls in the crowd oohed at the pairing. Mayla contained her excitement. That left one more pair. I knew Kam had to make it. He'd worked so hard. Could we possibly be paired? I had a glimmer of hope. I glanced over at Ranita, which I shouldn't have. She was growing a scowl on her face. If she looked my way, I'd be dead in one glare.

"Last one..." said Master Fey. She held up the small piece of paper and waved it excitedly in the air.

"Ranita Shan and..."

Cheers and screams erupted from the crowd. Her groupies were now her cheerleading squad. They were so loud I barely heard the dragon rider's name. A sickness brewed in my stomach.

Master Fey repeated the name. "Dragon rider partner is Kam Kiara."

I really can't explain what happened next. I felt like I went inside myself. A wave of heat started from my head and moved down to my feet. The air became thick and heavy. I tried to plant myself, like Master Kao taught me, but my head was spinning. After that everything was black.

I woke to a cold cloth on my head. It took me a moment to realize what had happened. I sat up, heart pounding. Mother tried to calm me.

“Anja, dear, please lie back down. You’ve had a shock.”

“It’s not fair,” I wailed.

“Shh, I know. I know. Kam is upset as well.”

“Is he?” My tone was harsh.

“Anja, you know he wanted the two of you to be paired.” She seemed surprised at my doubt.

“Ooooooh.” I pounded my fists on my bed and kick my legs underneath my blankets. “Of all the people. Why her? I would have been fine with Mayla or Tam. Not *her*.” My breath quickened.

Mother hugged me and held me tight. “I know. Honey, I know,” she said in her soothing voice. I buried my head in her chest and cried.

I would have to endure the day at school not knowing what to expect. I feared Ranita would approach me, rubbing in the fact that she was his partner and telling me how much time they will spend together, or worse treating me like a messenger.

And even worse, finding something else to tease me about. I would have to control my emotions and I was too tired to do so.

I trudged through some mud on my walk to the academy, my mind and heart heavy. I didn't care if my boots got dirty. At school I saw there was only nine of us that met in the archery fields.

"If you are wondering where the rest of your team is, they are meeting their partners today."

Perfect. I was glad not to see Ranita, but sour about her being with Kam.

Since my event was the equestrian challenge, I continued to work on shooting from horseback. I had proven myself in this area and was feeling confident in my skills. I had Master Kao to thank. I hadn't met with him yesterday. I'm sure he understood. But I felt awful about skipping our lesson without word. I desperately needed his guidance and hoped that he would excuse my absence. I was also excited to tell him about my events.

When I got to the oak grove, I found a note on my tree.

"Dear Anja, I was hoping to tell you yesterday, but when you get this, I will have left on a special assignment from the School of the Iron Fist. I heard you made the archery team. I am very proud of you. Practice your breathing, shifting, and moving deliberately with purpose. Keep the balance."

Keep the balance. Those words echoed in my head. Those same words my father said in my dream.

Since I wasn't having a lesson with Master Kao, I used my free time to do some work in the factory. I wanted to make Samal a bow from bamboo—it was a lighter wood, and in a size more appropriate for her. This would also help keep my mind from dwelling on Ranita and Kam.

"What are you doing?" I turned to see Kam in the doorway of the workshop.

“Hey. Making Samal a new bow.” I continued to draw out the shape on a wood plank.

“Did you find out your event?” He moved from the doorway into my view.

I looked at him impatiently.

“Why are you giving me an attitude? You know I didn’t choose her as my partner. I had nothing to do with it.”

“It’s complicated, you wouldn’t understand.” I kept my head down, pretending to be focused on Samal’s bow.

“She’s not that bad, Anja,” Kam said, trying to correct my view of my nemesis as if I were wrong.

“She’s awful. And she better not be awful to you.”

“She’s actually very sweet. We worked together today.”

“What was this? Sweet? Does he have a crush on her? Oh no no no.”

“She’s a demon who has you under a spell.” I sent my thought to him.

“Anja, come on.”

“I’m busy. What do you want?”

Kam took me by the shoulders and turned me around. He looked me in the eyes. “Anja. If you could put aside your hate for Ranita.” He seemed a bit nervous as he cleared his throat. “Would you, the best bowyer that I know, would you make Ranita a bow for the games?”

“Did he seriously just ask me to make that nasty girl a bow?” I felt some rage building. At the same time I was flattered. *“Did she want me to make her a bow? Does the high mighty Ranita need my assistance?”*

“She asked if I would ask you.”

“Ha!” I didn’t know how I felt, appalled maybe, flattered, appeased?

“I don’t know.” I shook my head and returned my focus on Samal’s bow.

“Please,” he begged. “For me. If we are chosen for the honor shooting, it will be like I have a part of you there.”

“*Oh that was a good one.*” I thought to myself. “Let me think about it.”

“I’ll take that,” he said, and gave me a hug. “Great, I’ll leave you to what you do best, sister.”

He was out the door and I hadn’t moved. I stared into space trying to figure out what I was going to do. Kam and Ranita were becoming close. “*How dare she. He was my twin.*” I knew what I felt was jealousy. But what Kam said about having a part of me at the honor shooting, well that had me thinking. I could make two bows. A grand bow for the honor shooting. And then a mediocre bow for her individual game competition. I let the thoughts stir around in my head. *This could be my opportunity to settle the score...balance. Hmm.*

I'm not sure what came over me in the weeks following Kam's request. I was busy training for my event, and practicing cultivating chi, but I still managed to find time to design two bows for Ranita. I had been wanting to test out different wood and new materials. Ranita was the perfect guinea pig. Though I convinced myself that my decision was due to other reason. One was because Kam had asked and the other was my father. I felt close to him when I worked in the factory.

Kam never showed much interest in bow making, which had given me my own time with Father and a bond I would forever treasure. The smell of fresh-cut wood, the rhythmic sounds of carving and sanding it smooth brought his memory to the forefront of my mind. He passed down his appreciation of trees and taught me the different types of wood and the distinct characteristics of all used in bow making.

As for Ranita's bows, only an expert would know that one bow was made out of an orange osage wood and the other was made from birch, still a good wood, but its string was made from an inferior material and it wasn't my best

creation. I didn't feel bad about making her a less-than-perfect bow for her competitions. She was lucky I decided to make her anything.

IT WAS ANNOUNCED THE WEEK BEFORE THAT THE games would go on as planned in Dalun. Even though the storms had cleared for some time now, the waters were still restless. More people opted to travel through portal by dragon. The Red Mist Gardens would be a busy place. Those of us who were competing were to arrive two days before the opening ceremony so we could get settled in our camps.

I had just finished making Samal's and Ranita's bows the day before we had to leave. Even though Samal did not need hers for the games, I wanted to give it to her before I left.

I asked Kam to meet me in the factory when he was finished with breakfast. When he came, I was polishing Samal's bow.

"Is that Ranita's?"

"No, this is Samal's. Ranita's are over there." I pointed to the table opposite of him.

"Which one?"

"Both." I placed Samal's bow in a leather wrapping and walked over to him.

"Really? You made two? She will be so happy."

I made a disgusted smirk, but smiled when Kam looked up at me.

"Ok, listen," I said. "This red bow..." I held it up. "This one is for the honor games. See?" I pointed to two bear carvings, one on the upper limb of the bow and one on the bottom.

"Whoa, did you make those bears?"

"Stephan did most of the work on the carvings."

"It's us." He smiled.

“Yes.” I paused. “Me and you.” I just wanted to make sure he knew that. “You said it would be like I was with you if I made the bow. Now, this one...” I picked up a purple-stained bow. “This is her competition bow. It’s in her favorite color.”

“Anja, you are the best.” He lunged at me and hugged me. I sighed. “You are going to do great, Kam.”

He grabbed the bows and ran out the door like a boy waiting to give flowers to his girlfriend.

“Ugh,” I moaned out loud.

I grabbed Samal’s bow and headed to school. When I got there, I couldn’t find her. I carried the bow around all day, but never saw Samal. We were leaving the next morning, so I would have to wait to give it to her. I couldn’t concentrate on much at school. I don’t think any of us who were competing were fully present. Even the masters seemed out of focus. There was a lot of whispering and secretive behavior on their part. It was an odd day that dragged on.

Even when I arrived home, the sense of normalcy didn’t return. Mother wanted to leave that night, so we had to quickly pack our things.

“Why are we going now? I asked.

“It’s just better this way. There will be less congestion at the Red Mist Gardens. We can have better choices of dragon carriers, and....”

One of our maids interrupted Mother. “Shall I tell the king you will not be leaving with him in the morning, ma’am?”

“Um.” She looked at me and then at the maid. “No. No, that won’t be necessary. Have a messenger send him a note first thing tomorrow.” Mother hastily finished packing her belongings.

“All right. Do you have everything?” she asked.

“Almost.” I just stared at her.

“Ok, well, let’s get a move on.”

I shook whatever I was about to say out of my head and did as she said.

Within the next half hour we were off to get our dragon. I was very excited about this and so was Kam even though he was an expert at riding dragons now.

We arrived at the Red Mist Dragon Stalls and met our dragon rider. He took us to our dragon, and we loaded our belongings on the carriage that sat upon his back, and then we strapped ourselves into the carriage seats. Because the weather was calm and warm, we chose not to have the protective canopy up.

Our dragon began to strut and raise and lower his wings. He did this a few steps and then began to run. I held on to Mother and Kam. "Is this how you take off?"

"Similar, yes," said Kam. Of course, he was relaxed and adjusted to this. I, on the other hand, was nervous.

I started to ask other questions. "How do we know when to go through the portal? I don't see any. Are they all closed? What if we can't get through?"

She reassured me. "In order for a portal to be open, the dragon must exhale its fiery breath while flying over one of the mist gardens. That is what actually caused the mists, the smoke from the dragon's breath."

Before she could say anymore our dragon leapt upward. My stomach did flips as he waved his wings up and down, gathering air underneath him. Whoosh, whoosh was the sound they made, slowly bringing us higher. I held on tight to Kam. We were above the tallest trees now and glided through the air, the wind kissing our faces. Ahead I could see the Red Mist Gardens. It was much faster by dragon. As we neared the gardens, our dragon lowered his head, stretching his neck outward. I felt him inhale the mists as we flew once over. Then we circled around and headed toward the mists again. As we reached the beginning edge, our dragon opened

his mouth and exhaled flames that shot about fifty feet in front of us. A large circular opening appeared bordered by his flames. Kam and I watched in wonder. We had never seen a portal before. Through the opening was a dark blue sky, nothing else. Before we knew it, we were through the portal and in the province of Dalun flying over a yellow mist. The time was different here than on Jenlun. We arrived during afternoon hours, even though we left the night before from our home.

Our dragon brought us to a clearing on the island where the visitor's camps were located. I could see Dalun's palace peeking above the trees that surrounded us. It seemed far. We unloaded our belongings from the large cart that sat on the dragon. Mother paid our rider and we headed toward the crowd of people near the huts that provided us shelter. The atmosphere was very similar to the market.

Once settled in our hut, I couldn't concentrate. Every noise outside and in bothered me. People talking, a group of elders drumming, little children playing. Even the sound of Mother cutting fruit irritated me. I couldn't go to my tree. The frustration was building inside of me and I felt another episode coming on. When I felt like this, I couldn't accomplish anything. It took over like rushing water, drowning any common sense. The only way I knew to relieve the feelings was to scream, grunt or cry and thrash around as if I were trying to rid my body of a demon.

"Are you sure this is where the competitors stay?" I asked Mother.

"Breathe, Anja," she said without looking up.

"They put us here on purpose," said Kam. "It's a strategy."

"It's not fair," I pouted.

"I'm going to see if anyone else is here yet. Do you want to come with me to the dragon stalls?" asked Kam.

At first, I welcomed the invitation. But then I thought of the possibility of running into Ranita. “No, you go ahead. I am going to try and find a quiet place.”

“Be back before dark please,” said Mother as we both left the hut.

Kam and I separated once the dragon stalls were in view. I headed into the trees. I wanted to find a quiet place to practice my chi exercises. I didn’t realize how far or how long I had walked until I came upon a cliff. It was much higher than the drop near my oak tree and it looked out onto the sea. I could hear the waves crashing below. I inched closer to edge but not too close. The height made me nervous. This was a good enough spot. The sun was starting its descent into the horizon, creating orange and pink layers in the sky. I planted my feet.

I closed my eyes and shifted my weight, took a deep breath and repeated Master Kao’s meditation in my mind. When I opened my eyes to start my exercises, I noticed a blue butterfly, wings dotted with gold flecks, flitting close to my face. She flew a zig-zag path toward the edge of the cliff. I followed her. I was dangerously close to the edge when she descended toward the waters and flew into an opening in the rocks below. It looked like a cave entrance. I was intrigued, but saw no way of getting there besides stepping off the cliff.

The sun had lowered now, dipping its bottom into the surface of the sea. “*I better get back to the camp.*”

The festival itself ran only three days. The first day was designated as practice for the competitors while the the guests enjoyed the festival market with it's carnival atmosphere. Artisans from each province displayed their crafts along with food vendors and games for young and old alike. The second day would feature the opening ceremonies followed by the competition games. The final day included more games followed by the award ceremonies and the much anticipated honoring of Binluna.

On the morning of practice, we met with our team at our station near the main field of the games. We had the whole day to practice for our events. I steered clear of Ranita as much as possible. Part of me wanted to approach her and ask her about her new bows. But I didn't think that would turn out well. I was actually surprised she hadn't come to me. I mean, a small thank you shouldn't hurt her pride. But maybe it did. *Moirai*. The thought of it gave me some satisfaction.

Each province had a specific time to use the fields. While one team practiced the rest of the teams watched. This gave us an opportunity to assess our competition. Dalun's team,

however, had their own private field on the other side of the castle. I guess they didn't want us to watch them, though you could see them watching us from one of the castle balconies.

"They are arrogant," said Mayla, pointing up at them.

"Just like their king," said Austin, who put his arm around Mayla.

"And they are on a mission for revenge this year," she replied.

I studied the two of them for a second. A ping of jealousy passed through me. I wondered what it was like to have a boyfriend to share adventures with. They were lucky to have this opportunity to compete together.

My daydreams went up in a poof when a voice from the other side of the field shouted, "Attention."

It was Master Janof. Everyone headed toward him for his announcement.

"Everyone, please follow me over to the site of the opening ceremonies. We will review our procession protocol."

Groans could be heard throughout our small team. I, however, was looking forward to the opening ceremonies. I also wanted to know where to be, what to do, and when to do it.

"Hey it's Team Jenlun," shouted a boy from Dalun's team as we walked by their practice field.

"Keep walking," instructed Master Janof.

"Which one of you is Anja Kiara?"

"*How would they know of me?*" I waved at the team, not sure of why they wanted to know.

Then same boy who asked for me continued with more questions. "I thought you were the best archer, why aren't you shooting the honor arrows?"

Kam came to my side.

A few of the Dalun team members walked closer to us including the inquisitive boy.

“You must be her twin. What’s your name, Kat?” He flipped his sandy blond, straight hair out of his face, revealing hazel eyes and a freckled complexion.

Kam rolled his eyes. “Come on Anja they are not worth our time.”

“Looks like your bow factory isn’t going to be the only one on the planet anymore. We are getting our own factory and it will be far superior,” the boy said nudging a teammate.

“What does he mean Kam?”

“I don’t know but I don’t like his attitude.”

Another Dalun teammate walked over. He seemed less intimidating, strong features, yet smooth skin and kind eyes. “Let go back to practice,” he urged.

I thought of what Kam had told me before about father’s death and I my stomach turned.

“Team Jenlun, you need to catch up,” called Master Janof.

Kam, myself and a few others that had hung back hurried to meet up with the rest of the team.

“Best to steer clear of team Dalun. They are overconfident and not afraid to taunt you about it,” Master Janof said.

“I heard their king threatened to punish them if they did not come in 1st place,” replied Austin.

My stomach continued to flip flop the rest of the day. As practice continued my nerves settled. I used my chi to help sharpen my technique and clear my head. With my focus on my events the afternoon passed and the deep indigo of the night sky descended upon us. That night, Kam and I gazed at the stars but no communication passed between us.

The morning of the games, Kam and I left to meet our team. We entered the open arena directly behind Dalun’s palace. The king’s balcony was straight ahead of the main

entrance which was flanked by hillsides. It seemed eons before everyone was situated in their assigned places.

The teams were stationed on a hill at the back of the audience, where we waited our turn to walk through the main aisle, but not until all the kings and queens processed in first. Together we looked like a rainbow in our designated province colored uniforms. We had a decent view of everything and I was mesmerized by the overwhelming display of sites and sounds; it took my breath away. There must have been at least 20,000 people gathered. I felt very small among the vast spectacle before me, yet I had great pride to finally be here representing my province.

Tribal trumpets blared in a staccato fashion, large karen drums along with buffalo horns and handpans combined to make a harmonious tune. The music came to a halt once King Zayl walked out onto a balcony of the palace. The crowd roared, applauding his appearance. He was a robust man, tall in stature, white hair mixed in with brown. A longer mustache and beard adorned his reddish-toned face. He wore a helmet with sculpted flames and seashells decorated with jewels of red, gold and green. His stance was determined but he had an endearing smile.

“Good people of Ja. We thank you for being here for the annual Moon Festival Games in Dalun.”

The crowd cheered some more.

“Please welcome your royal monarchs,” announced King Zayl.

More trumpets blared and the procession began. I jumped as cannons shot small colored papers out onto the procession.

King Capros, representing our Province, Jenlun, rode in on Ursula, the grand bear. I never realized her size before today. She was massive, more than twice the size of the King,

yet moved with grace. King Capros sat tall on a red velvet cloth and waved to the spectators.

Queen Ventana of Jilun was seated in a chariot painted in swirling flames of different orange hues. The turban she wore matched the flames and complimented her dark skin tone. The chariot was pulled by the provincial tiger, Gren, another creature larger than I imagined. He carried her four young children riding on his back.

Next in line was the Province of Aylun. Queen Leilani wore a long green robe that trailed a few feet behind her tall and slender frame. She walked so gracefully, it seemed she was floating. Ayeleh, a white dove, sat on her left forearm, positioned slightly away from her body. Queen Leilani held a staff with a diamond encrusted outline of a heart in her right hand, mirroring her heart-shaped face and translucent complexion.

I would not have wanted her place in line. Behind her followed the giant wolf named Rain, carrying King Donris of Tonlun. He appeared to be the youngest of the monarchs with shoulder length dark hair. But what I noticed most about him were his ice-blue colored eyes, same as the sash he wore and the harness that held Rain.

Queen Zira of Province Shalun proceeded behind. She sat in an open carriage draped in a deep indigo colored cloth pulled by three diplomats. What I thought was a statue placed on the front rail of the carriage turned out to be a live hawk. It was Robere, the province's mascot. He spread out his wings, as if to lift off, but then tucked them back under. Queen Zira wore a few of his feathers in her thick light brown hair. She smiled and held her palms facing one another in prayer pose.

Finally, King Sebast concluded the monarch procession, representing the province of Julun, He was the oldest and wisest of the monarchs. His long white beard stood out

against his violet robe. Over his shoulders sat a wooden bar that swirled around to his right. It looked like carved oak. On top of the bar sat a large white owl. Her name was Kira. King Sebast greeted the spectators that lined the procession route as he walked.

After the kings and queens processed through the main aisle, King Zayl announced, "And now please welcome our competitors." He initiated the applause.

Dalun's team lead the way. They marched in unison in their golden robes, heads held proudly, postures perfect. Even the dragons, with their necks extended high looked proud. They looked down at the crowd, strutting in behind their team of uprights. It seemed over the top, but I guess this was typical for the province of Dalun.

Our team headed down the hill as it was now our turn to process. I never experienced this kind of attention. It seemed all eyes were on me. Once into the aisle, I felt like I was being swallowed up by a sea of people. Their cheers and smiles were appreciated, but were deafening. I couldn't help but feel smothered. A wave of heat washed over me. My black tights and red tunic felt stifling. The quiver slung across my back weighed heavy. My grip on my bow was slipping. "*Oh no please don't pass out now.*"

I felt an arm around my waist. I thought I was having a nightmare when I heard the voice whisper in my ear. "You must stay strong."

It was Ranita. She was helping me stay up. "*What in the world is happening?*" The shock of that was enough to give me a jolt of energy. I stared at her in disbelief.

"Just consider it a thank you for helping Kam with the bows," she said.

When she saw I was fine she quickly stepped away and looked into the crowd, waving as if they were all her fans. "*Wait, did she say helping Kam?*"

Once all the teams walked through the aisle and to the designated seats, the crowd focused its attention on King Zayl again.

“It so good to see all our provinces represented, to have you all here. We will begin the games in two hours. But first, some entertainment for all of us.” He motioned to a stage below his balcony.

A giant gong sounded, giving a loud crash to the start of the show. Drumming followed in a quick rhythm as dancers dressed as colorful dragons ran onto the stage. There were about four dancers per costume, representing six dragons total: red, orange, green, blue, indigo, and violet. They performed at first in unison but once the music changed, adding bells, flutes, and stringed instruments, the dragons ran chaotically and then off the stage.

More dancers, dressed in the same rainbow of colors, entered the stage with swords and performed a warrior type of dance, reminding me of the Iron Fist drills. They acted out a fight scene with each other. The gong crashed again and the warrior dancers fell to the ground. An expansive cloud of smoke encompassed the stage. Once the smoke had thinned, a large gold mechanical dragon appeared. I didn’t see any dancers underneath; it looked to be controlled by pulleys and strings. Nevertheless, it was spectacular. The dragon marched forward and spread its wings. Its mouth opened and simulated fire shot toward the audience. The crowd gasped and appeared to jump back in unison.

As the music crescendoed, the colored warriors scurried off stage and the smoke completely cleared. The dragon lowered its wings. A peaceful song of harps and handpans played while a variety of golden dancers slowly came about from all sides of the stage. They represented creatures of all kinds, including mermaids, centaurs; half upright, half horse, unicorns, flying beasts, along with other familiar animals and

uprights. They gathered around the dragon and bowed towards it as the music ended.

The entire arena erupted in applause. I had never seen a show like that. The colors were beautiful and the dancing was amazing. But a small knot inside of me nagged at my mind. *“What did it mean?”*

King Zayl stood, silencing the audience. He smiled with pride. “The Great Dragon,” he shouted, gesturing to the stage. The audience applauded and cheered again. After a few moments, King Zayl motioned for silence. “Once again, thank you for being part of the Dalun Games. Let the competitions begin. Best of luck to all provinces.”

Kam and I were lucky to have our competitions near each other. We both rode animals, so we were near the dragon and horse stalls.

Although we didn't get to see each other compete, Mother was able to watch each of our separate events. Kam and I took second place in our competitions. We were satisfied with our accomplishments as was Mother. Kam, mother and I met at the stalls before heading back to camp.

We waited for the daily scrolls to arrive to find out how our team-mates performed since their competitions were spread out on the island.

Dalun, of course was leading in overall scores. Ranita's competition was on the last day and I would not find out how she did until the night of the honor ceremony.

That next morning, Kam begged Mother to go watch her, but Mother wanted to visit the festival market and would not let him go alone. I also thought she was trying to avoid King Capros. All the monarchs would be present at Ranita's competition. It was one of the most watched in all the games. The points were doubled because it was considered a game of

high-skill, a relay of sorts, different targets along an obstacle course. It would be fun to watch, and part of me wanted to see how she did with the special bow I made her. Instead, mother took us to buy souvenirs and to try the different foods from the provinces. It was more sophisticated than the atmosphere near our camp. There were vendors of all sorts selling jewelry, clothing, and game props. Colorful tents aligned wide isles filled with people from all provinces. A variety of aromas infused the warm summer air such as savory spices, floral perfumes, and the unmistakable sweet fragrance of pears and other fresh fruits.

We stopped to get food from the Tonlun Province. I was getting impatient as we waited in line. "Can I look at the dream catchers by the Jilun vendors?" I asked Mother. It wasn't that far.

"Fine. Kam, go with your sister."

Kam and I walked down the main aisle. Smaller aisles branched out with more vendors selling vibrant crystals, silk parmas in an array of patterns, and leather goods among many others. As I looked down one of them, I saw Samal.

"Hey Samal," I shouted.

"Anja, where are you going?" asked Kam

I turned to Kam. "I see Samal. I'm going to say hi."

I ran and he slowly followed, poking around at each vendor tent.

"Samal?" I called out, looking about for her. She was just here at this tent. I looked around. I noticed the vendor was selling bows and arrows. It wasn't our factory's tent. Jenlun sellers were located on the other side of the square and none of these bows looked familiar.

A man walked out from behind a curtain. He was surprised to see me, and I him. "Mr. Jash?" I was a bit confused. I thought he had been taking care of his wife. I saw Samal peek from behind the curtain.

“Samal,” I said, waving to her.

“Samal isn’t feeling well, Anja. What can I do for you?”

I couldn’t think of anything to say except, “What are you doing here?”

He gave out a laugh. “No need to worry about adult dealings, Anja.” He paused. “Is your mother here?”

My gaze kept bouncing from him to the curtain. “Yes,” I said slowly.

“I’m sorry we are going to have to close for a break.” He said in a strict tone. “I’ll tell Samal you said hello. You should get back to your mother.”

Confused, I walked back to find Kam. But I must have walked in the opposite direction because now I was lost. Lost in the sea of vendors and lost in my head. “*Why did Samal hide from me? Why was her father selling bows in another province?*” I didn’t look to see which province he was representing. We were near Tonlun, but Shalun was next to it and Dalun’s vendors were everywhere.

My head was spinning. I spotted a fountain at the end of one of the aisles. I walked over to it, leaned over its short wall and took a drink. “*I better find Kam, or else I’ll be in trouble again.*”

I began to head back in the direction I came. “*Just retrace your...*”

My thoughts were scared out of my mind as a horse whinnied in my ear. It almost ran me over, or at least the man riding it did. “What in the love of Binluna are you doing, girl?” he shouted. The two men riding on the cart behind him had fallen off, and the cargo it was carrying rolled off the back end.

My heart pounded in my chest and I struggled to catch my breath but managed to say through breaths, “I’m so sorry.”

He jumped off his horse and checked on the cargo.

I felt I should help, so I followed the other men to the

back of the cart. There, I saw the prayer arrows for the honor ceremony. The amount looked to be all the arrows from the provinces. Small tubes tied to the arrow shafts carried the prayers to be sent to Binluna.

The men hurried to put the arrows back and cover them up when they saw me.

“Watch where you are going next time,” one man said.

They secured the cart. The man on the horse shouted and they left me in a cloud of dust. When it cleared, I noticed one of the tubes had fallen off an arrow. “*I should return this. I should give it to Mother first.*” Before I did either, I opened it. There was nothing inside, no rolled up paper with a prayer or praise. “*That’s odd.*” It was probably an extra tube. I put it in my pocket anyway and rushed back to find Kam.

I found my way to the main aisle finally.

“Where on Ja were you?”

I cringed. Mother did not sound happy; at least Kam was there. I could tell her I almost got ran over by a horse. Maybe she would feel bad. Or maybe that would make her even more upset.

“I’m sorry. I made a wrong turn down a smaller aisle.”

Kam looked defeated.

“It’s not Kam’s fault.”

“Was that Samal?” he asked.

“Huh? Oh, no. Just someone who looked like her.”

“Here, Anja, take your food. It’s probably cold now.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“I’m not holding your food. At least take it.”

I took it and we continued through the square, Kam and I, blindly following Mother. After some time Kam tugged at Mother’s robe.

“I should get back to the stalls.”

“We have plenty of time,” Mother said.

I could tell Kam had nervous energy. “*You’ll be fine.*” I told him.

About twenty minutes later, and after Kam had enough of pacing around, he insisted again that we leave.

“All right,” Mother sighed. “I wanted you to get some cultural experience from the other provinces but I see you are too anxious about this evening.”

We found a carriage to take us back to our huts.

My thoughts switched over to Ranita. She should be finishing her event soon. “*I wonder how the bow held up?*”

When we returned, Kam changed into his honor ceremony uniform and left for the stalls. The sun was setting and we soon would be all gathered to watch the arrows launched to the Starbeings to take to the moon. We all were excited with anticipation. I waited for Mother outside the hut, playing with the prayer tube that dropped off the wagon. I was met by a girl in hysterics.

“What is it?” I thought she was upset but she was actually ecstatic about something.

“She won first place in the event,” she squealed.

“Who? What event?”

“Ranita!”

A crowd gathered, and Mother came out of the hut.

“How did she...” I stopped myself from speaking. *“How did she win with that inferior bow I made her? It should have broke.”*

Everyone was out of their huts now. Some were cheering, some were crying with happiness, some were laughing and jeering at Dalun. I just stood there. First jealousy enveloped me, then worry as I heard what the girl continued to say.

“Ranita had this beautiful bow. It was a crimson color. I

thought I saw sparks fly from it when she drew the arrows. She's my idol.

"No. That was the bow for the honor ceremony." A few people looked at me. "*Did I say that out loud?*"

I looked at them and then ran back inside. I paced as I thought. *I need to get to Kam.*

Mother appeared in the doorway. "Be happy for her, Anja. Are you ready to go?"

"Yes. Yes. Can we see Kam before we get there?"

"He's probably already there. And I'm sure he doesn't need us adding to his anxiety."

"*Oh. What was I thinking? I wasn't thinking. I mean I should be thinking and sending my thought to him.*"

I tried to connect. "Kam? Are you there?" No answer. "Kam?" I waited for what seemed to be forever.

"Anja, not now."

"Kam, it's about Ranita."

"*I heard. She won. Please don't fill my head with your anger.*"

"I'm not angry." Ok maybe I was. "Kam?"

He didn't answer. I tried a few more times but he still didn't answer. "*Breathe, Anja.*" I told myself. "*Plant, breath, ocean, good chi.*" I started to calm down a bit. Maybe she will use the red bow anyway. At least I tried to convince myself that was the case.

We continued to the honor ceremony on carriage. I continued to play with the prayer tube, which I found was helping my nervous energy. "*Why was this one empty?*"

"Anja." Mother nudged me. "We are here."

I hadn't realized the carriage had stopped and Mother got off. My head was far, far away. Perhaps I wanted to stay there, for fear of what was about to happen.

The sun was deep into the horizon. Palace torches were lit and children held flying lanterns, anticipating the moment they could release them into the skies. These represented

prayers as well, even though they would not reach to the Starbeings. They stood as a symbol and a way for the children to participate in the ceremony. I remember doing this as a child when the games were held in Jenlun. It was quite a magical site, the orbs of light floating upward, freely, eventually turning into small glowing specs. We sat with the rest of the Jenlun team and their families.

King Zayl strutted onto his balcony as the crowd applauded. He wore a lavish robe of white decorated with pieces of gold. His matching crown sat high on his head, similar to his opening ceremonial crown, though this one had a sculpted dragon at the top, flames shooting outward. *“How does he keep that on his head?”*

He motioned for the crowd to silence. “Good people of Ja.” He stood with chest and arms raised at his sides. “The scores have been tallied.” He smiled proudly. “I am pleased to announce the third place overall team, Shalun.

Queen Zira walked out onto the balcony and waved to her provincial team as they cheered.

“Second place, in a very close competition.” He laughed. “Jenlun.”

Our team jumped up and down with excitement, though some had questionable looks for this placement. I saw a few masters whisper to each other, shaking their heads in disbelief. I remembered the conversation Stephan and Barbo had about Dalun cheating at the last games. *“Did they cheat again?”* King Capros appeared at the front of the balcony, waved over at us and gave a wink. I looked at my mother, who wore a small blushing smile.

“And now, the champions of the annual Moon Festival Games in Dalun” King Zayl’s voice boomed as he read the small scroll handed to him. “Dalun! Dalun has won the competitions yet again!” A sea of gold rushed forward toward the palace. Team Dalun ran up the two sets of steps that lead

to the balcony, hooting and hollering, facing the crowd, waving as everyone applauded.

“Of course,” I heard one of the Masters from Jilun say loudly. Not everyone was pleased with this outcome.

“I heard they cheated,” said one of my teammates.

“In what?” I asked.

She couldn’t answer, because King Zayl spoke again.

His voice boomed again, “So now, let us send prayers, honors, and praise to Binluna.”

Drumming began and the crowd gasped as the provincial dragons flew overhead.

“There’s Kam,” Mother said, pointing to his dragon.

I squinted to see if I could tell which bow Ranita held. I couldn’t see; they were too far up. A sick feeling sat in my stomach. I didn’t even notice the Starbeings descending into our atmosphere, preparing to receive the arrows.

“Mommy, look” said a little girl holding a sky lantern. “Now?” she asked.

“Not yet. We have to wait our turn. After the arrows are launched.”

Trumpets blared along with the drumming and then faded as the beats slowed to a monotone rhythm. The dragons carrying the riders and the archers circled above and flew higher into the skies. Once finding their appropriate positions, they hovered and waited for the signal.

The drumming ceased and the ancient ceremonial horn blew loud and deep. The anticipation was enough to make me ill. I hunched my shoulders and held my stomach while still peering into the night sky. “*Please have the right bow, Ranita. Please have the right bow,*” repeated in my head.

The archers released a series of launchings; twenty-four arrows for each archer. Around the eighth launch, I heard a horrible cry. I looked around. The crowd began a wave of whispers, questioning each other: what was happening? And

then we all saw them...arrows falling from the sky, hurling downward toward the sea.

“Oh no,” someone shouted.

I looked at Kam’s dragon, Vedo. He swayed side to side, as if he was trying to keep steady. I looked at the other dragons. They seemed fine; however, I thought I saw a few arrows from the other provinces fall toward the sea also. I couldn’t be sure, until I heard someone say, “All the arrows are dropping.”

The crowd began to panic. I looked at Mother.

“They are not all dropping,” she said calmly, though the look on her face contradicted her tone. She kept her eyes on Kam’s dragon.

The Starbeings began to ascend and the dragons headed toward the palace. As Vedo brought Kam and Ranita closer, I could see she held the purple bow. My heart sunk into my stomach. A wave of heat overcame me and I began to shake. I had to get out of here.

And then when I thought the situation couldn’t get worse, Vedo turned toward the crowd and flew extremely close. Women and children screamed, others ran. I caught a glimpse of Ranita’s face, It was red and she was crying, trying to hold on to Kam as he struggled with Vedo. They landed in a field near the ceremony grounds.

Mother ran in their direction. “*I should follow her.*” Instead, I ran the opposite way. I didn’t know where I was going. I just ran, even though it felt as if there was a brick in my stomach, even though I couldn’t see through my tears.

I found myself at the cliff that I practiced near when I first arrived. I could see the sky lanterns floating high in the sky. I would now associate a happy childhood memory with a terrible mistake. I looked up at Binluna. *“Did she receive the honors and prayers from all the provinces except for one? Or did others fail because of Jenlun, because of me.”* I could not believe what I had done. The feeling of remorse was not enough. There was pain in my heart and stomach and it radiated down into my hips and legs. Tears were not enough to release the massive amount of guilt I had. I stood at the edge, staring into the crashing waves. They were hypnotizing. Then everything disappeared from my mind. Time and space became non-existent. I could only focus on the waters below. I remembered what both Father and Master Kao said about the water holding power. I closed my eyes, inhaled deeply and raised my arms, hoping the mist from the waves would somehow give me healing. As I began to exhale, a gust of wind blew toward my back. I became airborne, adrenaline pumped in my veins and I could not catch my breath. I couldn’t even scream.

Out of nowhere something large flew below me and I landed upon it with a painful thud. Whatever it was carried me into the opening in the cliff, the one the butterfly flew into. It slid to a halt once inside and I rolled off of it, ending face-down in the dirt.

When I looked up, I saw her. The Great Dragon. *“Was this another dream?”*

“You weren’t planted,” she said aloud. “And no, it’s not a dream this time.”

Her voice was soothing—stern, but soothing.

“You can hear my thoughts?”

“Yes. I hear the thoughts of everyone who is in my province. It is an advantage, but also a curse.”

I gazed at her. She was smaller than she appeared in my dreams. Her scales glimmered in moonlight that shone through the cave opening. They were golden, but flashes of other colors appeared and she slowly walked around me. I was sitting up now and we faced each other. I noticed her eyes, emerald with facets like a crystal. She was beautiful.

She began to walk deeper into the cave and I followed her with blind trust. The cave was damp and cool, but as we approached a large archway, I could feel a wave of warmth emanating ahead.

Before entering, she stopped. “Stand behind me,” she said, and then exhaled a fiery breath into the room beyond the archway, lighting torches along the walls. The light exposed a grand hall, neglected and forgotten in time, but seemed to have once been part of a royal palace. A large statue of the Great Dragon sat in the center, though rather dull and with patches of algae, it was beautifully carved.

We approached the statue and the Great Dragon sat herself down. I followed her gaze to the base of the statue where there was an etching of two small dragons.

“Your sons?”

She simply nodded. "Place your hand over them."

As I did, a glowing light grew from inside the base of the statue causing the cold rough etchings to become hot. A rumbling ensued and the panel with the etchings cracked open.

"What did I just do?"

"Reach in."

I followed her directions and felt a sack made of leather and pulled it out.

"I want you to take this gift."

A feeling of guilt washed over me. After what I just did, I shouldn't be rewarded. "I don't deserve a gift." I said lowering my head.

"Do not think of it as your gift."

Now I felt humbled and embarrassed.

"But I need you to keep it safe for me."

"You trust me to keep this safe?"

She laughed. "Ah, you should not be so hard on yourself. The only way is up now."

"But I ruined the honor shootings..."

"You cannot undo what is done, but you can show what is to become."

I opened the satchel and pulled out an oblong box and studied it. I was not familiar with the type of wood used to make it, although it was light in weight, maybe a type of bamboo.

"It is not from this planet."

I grew curious. The carvings were foreign, circular symbols I had never seen. I tried to open it.

She laughed again. "You cannot open it here. I made sure of that. Open it when you get home to your province. Then you can study it closely. You must keep it with you at all times."

I had so many questions.

“We can speak another day, dear Anja. But I think it is time to get you back to your camp.”

She lowered her wing. “Climb up, I will make sure you do not fall off.” She winked.

Her thick scales were surprisingly soft and warm to the touch. Once I was settled on her back, a rein appeared for me to hold. I made sure the satchel was secured around my shoulders.

The Great Dragon raised and lowered her wings, circling around her statue with a running start, lifted off the ground and flew low through to the cave entrance. She launched upward once out in the open and flew me back to camp. The Starbeings had returned to their positions in the sky, and I could see fireworks set off from the honor ceremony grounds. I knew I had to face reality shortly. But I tried to make this moment with the Great Dragon last by appreciating it.

It was over too soon and she landed us in a clearing near a forest of trees close to camp. I climbed down her wing and looked at her.

“Remember, keep it safe.”

I nodded. “Thank you, Great Dragon.” I began to walk toward the huts.

“Anja?”

I turned to face her again.

“Everything happens for a reason,” she said, launched upward with ease, and disappeared over the trees.

I ran back to my hut. To my luck, no one had returned yet. I quickly packed the satchel with my belongings in just enough time.

“Anja, you are here? Oh, thank Binluna!” Mother rushed in and held me.

“I’m sorry, Mother. I didn’t mean to leave you. I felt sick.”

“It was so chaotic. I needed to rush to your brother. He’s very upset.”

“Where is he?”

“He’s helping Ranita to her hut. Her family left the ceremony right after it happened.”

“Can we go back home when he gets here?”

“Oh, Anja, I think we all need a night’s rest.”

I didn’t plead. Though I wanted to get home and open the box.

Kam didn't speak to me from the time I returned to camp until we got home. I also stayed quiet, partially due to guilt, and partially due to curiosity of what was in the box.

Once we were settled at home, I confined myself to my room. I took the satchel out of my bag and began to pull out the wooden box. I was interrupted by a loud knock on my door. I quickly shoved the satchel, under my bed.

I unlocked and opened my door. Kam stood in front of me with a stone look on his face.

"Did you have something to do with that?" he asked, as he pushed passed me into my room.

I lowered my head and closed the door.

"Anja, tell me the truth," he yelled.

My frustration took over and I yelled back in defense, "Ranita was supposed to use the crimson arrow for the honor shooting. I told you that."

"I did tell her. So you *did* rig the purple bow so it would break."

I had nothing to say. I just stared at him.

“Wow, Anja, I thought you had put your issues with her aside. I can’t believe you. You made me look like a fool. You are not my sister right now.” He left and slammed my door.

I slumped down on my bed. I was too numb to cry and too exhausted to discover what was in the box I’d hidden under my bed.

It wasn’t until the middle of the night that I woke. I went to my window to look at Binluna. She wasn’t as bright tonight as she was at the ceremony. But she was still there and that brought some comfort to me. I decided to finally open the box the Great Dragon gave me. I pulled the satchel from under my bed and quickly removed the box. Excitement took over and I took a deep breath.

I unhooked the latch and found a brilliant gold arrow. I ran my fingers over it. As I grabbed to pick it up, a jolt of energy shot through my entire body. It almost knocked me over. Still holding onto it, I raised it upward. It was much lighter than it looked. Through the window a beam of light hit the arrow, making it glow. My arm was glowing as well. In fact, my whole body emanated light. The arrow and I were one.

A hint of fear traveled through my body and I quickly placed it back in the box, closed the latch and put the box back in the satchel. I then hid the satchel under my bed once again. I wondered if I should tell Master Kao about it. I had a lot to tell him, if he didn’t already know.

There was only a few days left of the school year. I decided to play sick for the first day back. I didn’t want to face anyone, not even Samal to ask her why she avoided me at the games. Besides, we were mostly wrapping up our history lessons and learning about what the next year would entail. Some girls would go on to join the palace archers and

work with mentors, others would continue to study and decide whether to work in the bow and arrow factories, and other would choose to move on to another area of study. As for me, I had no idea what I wanted to do. After the tragedy I caused, I wanted to run away and not think about it.

I met Master Kao. He was waiting for me at the oak tree, sitting cross-legged with eyes closed, peaceful. As I approached, he opened his eyes and smiled. "Welcome back."

I sat next to him and crossed my legs. Before I could speak, he said, "I know what happened."

"You do? *Of course he did.* Everything?"

"Enough."

I sighed. "I feel awful. I didn't mean..."

"Actions are louder than words." There were a few moments of silence. "I failed you."

I adjusted my position and faced him. "No. No, Master Kao. I failed." I put my head in my hands.

He stood. "Self-pity will only lower your vibration."

I looked up and he held his hand out, helping me to my feet. "Follow me."

I followed him for some time, down the hill, and away from the direction of my home. We walked so far my feet started to hurt, and the satchel I forgot I carried now felt heavy. After we passed through a forest of pines we came upon a meadow of grasses dotted with wildflowers. Across an open stretch of green was a small shimmering lake at the base of the mountains. Finally we stopped at a pier on the lake's edge. We proceeded across the wooden planks until we reached the end. The once crystal blue water now looked dark and ominous.

"Jump in the water."

"Now? But I can't swim," I cried.

"It's time to learn."

He seemed very calm, completely the opposite of what I felt. But I trusted him. I removed my satchel and shoes and sat at the edge of the dock and dipped in my toes, gauging the temperature. I wasn't moving fast enough, however, and he gave me a nudge, causing me to fall in. I waved my hands around, trying to keep my head above while swallowing water.

"Do not fight the water. Become one with the water."

I managed to grab a part of the dock and climb up, choking. Once I caught my breath and stood, he looked at me, holding my shoulders. "Become the water." He then pushed me in again.

I calmed myself as I sunk toward the bottom. "*Become the water. Become the water.*" I thought over and over. I leaned my head back allowing my hips to float toward the surface, followed by my feet. It was as if I was lying on an imaginary bed while my body slowly rose to the top.

"Trust," I heard Master Kao say. "The water is power and can carry even you." He laughed.

I floated for a time with my eyes closed. Then I open them and lifted my head. I lost control again and started to wave my hands and feet violently.

"Do not fight the water! Move with it. Find its rhythm"

I began to slow my motions and move more fluidly.

"Well done. You are now treading water." He started to walk away.

"Where are you going?" I called

"I'll be back. Keep treading."

As I moved through the water I wondered, "*Was this some sort of test or punishment for what I did?*"

He returned within moments. "Now take this brick." He held up a red stone block.

I tried to make my way over to the dock.

“No stay there.”

“But my arms need to....”

He tossed me the brick. Amazingly, I caught it.

“Hold it with both hands.”

I tried to stay afloat using only my legs. I began to sink and finally went under fully. I panicked after a few seconds under, dropped the brick and propelled myself upward, trying to tread quickly.

“Where is the brick?”

“Probably at the bottom,” I said through breaths.

“Why?”

I treaded over to the dock, hanging on to it, exhausted. I leaned my head against a post and closed my eyes while managing to speak. “It was too heavy and prevented me from treading.”

“Good.”

I looked up at him, confused.

“The brick is your anger. If you hold onto it, you will sink. If you let go of it you can float and breathe. The brick is negative thoughts, the brick is self-pity, jealousy.” He held out his hand and pulled me out of the water. “Let go of the bricks.”

I sat on the dock. He put the cape that he wore over my shoulders.

“*Keep the balance, Anja.*” My father’s voice echoed in my head.

“Master Kao?”

“Yes?”

“Does everyone know...that I or someone sabotaged Ranita’s bow?”

“Admitting it is the first step.”

“*Did he know or did I just confess?*”

“It doesn’t matter now. But it is your job to regain the balance. What you choose to do next can make a difference.”

I thought for a moment. I think I was starting to understand.

“Come, you should get back home, at least to put some dry clothes on.”

I picked up my satchel. “Oh, Master Kao...”

“You can show me what you brought next time.”

I nodded. I was too tired and we had a long walk ahead.

I took a nap when I returned home, woke and ate a quiet dinner with mother and Kam and quickly returned to my room. I wanted to try something.

I locked the door to my room and took out the golden arrow. Holding it in my right hand, I practiced cultivating my chi with the arrow. Again I felt and saw a glow emanating from it and myself. I swirled it around and pretended it was a sword, just like I saw the young men practicing with in their drills. I continued to dance slowly around, using the moves I learned from the school and Master Kao. I then did a move where I lifted my right leg and right arm, balancing on my left. When I raised my arm the arrow released itself from my grip and floated upward and stuck into the high ceiling.

I stood dumbfounded. *“What in the moon?”* I squatted down with my arms out to my sides. *“How in the planet of Ja am I going to get that down? How did it even get up there?”*

I had an idea of how. It must have been the chi along with the magic of the arrow. But that still didn’t answer my other question of how to get it down. I sat on my bed and thought.

Then I paced. *“Should I get Kam? No. No I don’t want to involve him.”* I sat again. I paced again. Then I lay down staring at the arrow above. I hadn’t noticed the crack it made in the ceiling. I didn’t even care about that. I wanted to laugh. It was funny in a way. “Only you, Anja,” I could hear my father say. But this was serious. I shook my head. I reached my arm up toward it, pretending I could grab it, pretending it was right there for me to pluck right out. I kept my arm up and squinted at the arrow as I exhaled. *“Was my arm glowing again? Or was I just delirious? It wasn’t really stuck. I’m still napping and dreaming.”*

I lowered my arm and then raised it again, switching focus between it and the arrow. I saw the glowing again. Then I swore I saw the arrow shake. I decided to send my chi to it through my arm, focusing on it. Then it happened. Our energies connected, making a continuous beam of light and the arrow shook itself loose from the ceiling and fell directly into my hand.

I MUST HAVE PASSED OUT BECAUSE I WOKE THE next morning holding the arrow close to me. I’m positive I had a dream, but for the first time in a long while, I could not remember it.

I quickly put the arrow back in its box and put the box into the satchel. Once I was dressed I flung the satchel on my back and left for school. One more day. I’m surprised the school had not contacted mother that I missed school again.

“Don’t you want breakfast?” called mother.

“I have a pear,” I yelled back as I walked out the door.

I walked past the factory and contemplated grabbing Samal’s bow. I had put it back in the shop when I returned from the games. As I was looking for it, I heard Stephan,

Barbo, and their group of friends talking in the shop next door.

“So, if one province’s arrows fail to reach Binluna, all the others fail as well?” asked an unfamiliar voice.

“That’s not how it works,” said Stephan.

“Then why did the Starbeings say that no honors were brought to Binluna?” asked Garbo.

“I saw the other provinces shoot their arrows. It doesn’t make sense.”

That sounded like Barbo’s brother Von, who lived in Dalun. He must have been visiting.

The men continued to argue as the weight of guilt sat on me. I couldn’t stand to listen anymore. I began to walk away until I heard the unfamiliar voice say something else.

“Well regardless, the daily scroll says that the Golden arrow, hidden during ancient times, must be found and launched to one of Binluna’s Starbeings.”

My feet became like concrete; I couldn’t move.

“It’s as easy as that?” asked Stephan.

“That’s what it says,” confirmed the voice.

Von continued the conversation. “And who knows where this Golden arrow is located? It could take days, months...”

I found strength in my legs and ran. I needed to see Master Kao right away. I needed his advice.

It was the beginning of the school day, so he would be at the School of the Iron Fist. I knew I shouldn’t go there. Only students and occasionally their family were allowed near the school. I didn’t care. I needed to talk to him. I could say I was his niece and there was an emergency in the family.

When I arrived at the school I was met by a tall black iron gate. Of course it was locked and there was no one attending.

“Hello?” I looked around and found a large copper bell. I grabbed the rope that hung from its center and rang it vigorously.

A man who looked to be in his twenties or thirties with the same haircut and uniform as the rest of the students came to the gate, rubbing his eyes and muttering. He squinted at me.

“I’m here to see Master Kao.”

“Huh? Master Kao?” His expression made me think he’d never seen a girl before. “Just a minute.” He ran into the front entrance of the stone building.

He came back out with two other men. They spoke a different language, but I could tell they were agitated.

The tall older man with long white hair pulled into a bun, looked at me. “You are asking for Master Kao?”

“Yes, sir. I am his niece.”

All three burst into laughter.

“His niece,” said the second man. He was dressed in the same flowing garments as the older man but had darker hair and a rounder face. He continued to laugh.

“Then you should know that he does not teach here. Not for a while anyway,” said the old man.

“Go home, niece. This is not a place for you,” the round-faced man added.

I decided to be persistent regardless of the questions floating in my head. “*He didn’t teach here? Why is it funny that I would be his niece?*”

“Where can I find him then?”

“You can try the castle. That’s were uncles like him frequently visit,” said round face. They continued to laugh.

“Or the sky,” squealed the one who answered the gate. He snorted and cackled. The older man hit the gatekeeper’s chest with this arm and he stopped laughing.

I turned and left without saying thank you. I know that was bad manners, but I didn’t like their laughing. I had a serious matter. “*What did they mean by uncles ‘like that?’*” I

headed to the village square near the market. I could get a carriage to the palace there.

I had done more walking the past two days than I have ever done in my life. My legs were sore and my mind bounced between concern about arrow and confusion about Master Kao. At least there was overcast on this hot early summer day. I made it to the market. Just a little bit more to the carriages at the square.

I pushed through the people shopping and selling. Everyone's energy seemed off. It was almost like I could feel what they were feeling and this wasn't a good feeling at all in this place.

The market turned into an endless spiral of worry, fear, and negative actions.

"The moon is fading—did you see?" I heard a woman cry to a vendor selling fruit.

Another woman in line at the spice counter screeched as she fell to the ground when a man pushed her out of line.

"The prophecy is nigh." I turned and saw the old woman who grabbed my arm when I was here with Mother.

Men argued about the Moon Festival. "We are being blamed for the mishap at the honor ceremonies."

"We should blame the bow makers at the factory. Who is that one bowyer? Barbo? I heard he is losing his mind. It was probably him."

"There is going to be war among the provinces," announced the daily scroll delivery boy.

I kept spinning as I heard the different conversations. I felt like the market was getting more crowded by the minute, closing in on me. My chest became tight. The delivery boy dropped his bundle of scrolls in front of me causing me to stop short. A woman with a cart carrying three children ran into me from behind. A donkey bellowed and kicked a table that held glassware which shattered everywhere. Suddenly, a

calmness blew over me like a breeze. *Bricks*. These were all bricks. I needed to drop them, drop the fears and negativity so I wouldn't drown.

I decided to go back to my mighty oak to meditate and wait for Master Kao.

With my tree in view, I ran to it and hugged it. The students of the Iron Fist were in the courtyard one last time before their training ended. I noticed there was a type of ceremony taking place. *“Why wouldn’t Master Kao be there?”*

I climbed my tree to get a better view, still no sign of Master Kao. I continued to watch. School was still in session, so I had plenty of time before Master Kao would be here. I needed to keep my mind entertained or my anxious thoughts about what to do with the arrow would get the best of me.

The young men walked up to a makeshift stage. A gong sounded and they swiftly took position. After a moment, they began a routine in unison. I recognized their moves. I had finally memorized them, though I performed a slower version as Master Kao taught me. I watched knowing exactly what came next in each move they made.

When they were finished, they proceeded off the stage but not before receiving a scroll from the Master I had seen instructing them the first day I watched. After the last student received his scroll, I climbed down the tree. I took

the golden arrow out of the box and held it in my right hand.

The glowing appeared once again, from the arrow and from myself. I performed the beginning meditation to cultivate chi and continued into the choreographed moves performed by the young men at the School of the Iron Fist. I felt a release of energy. All the negative chi was vacuumed out of me and in return I was filled with such joy. It was a rebirth and I hadn't been this happy since before my father died. Move after move, step after step, I became lighter. I noticed the light emanating from the arrow and myself grew larger, almost encompassing my surroundings. As I finished, I tapped the arrow to the ground. I had learned not to raise my arm up with the arrow in hand, for fear it would shoot up to the sky.

I heard someone clapping their hands behind me. I jumped up and saw Master Kao.

"You skipped school again."

"Master Kao!" I shouted as I jumped up and down.

He laughed. "You have raised your vibration, I see. And with help." He looked at the arrow.

"Master Kao, I have to tell you something," I panted. I wasn't out of breath because I was anxious, but because I was so excited at the way I felt. I couldn't explain fast enough.

"Let us sit and breathe."

I followed his lead and took a few deep breaths.

"Now tell me," he said.

I told him how I met the Great Dragon and how I became in possession of the arrow. I noticed I was no longer worried about what to do, but rather had a feeling of empowerment. I felt in control and confident. And Master Kao wasn't shocked or disappointed, as I had thought he might be.

"You know, the arrow chooses its archer," Master Kao

said. "Not just anyone can find the arrow. It must be fate. Written in the stars, as they say."

"So whoever finds the arrow must be the one to shoot it?"

"That's what the ancient texts say. Or in your case... whomever is given the arrow by the Great Dragon."

"I have to shoot it?"

"Yes."

I stood and paced. Normally, I would be in a fit of worry. I would feel a wave of heat pass through me, my chest would tighten. None of that happened.

"You've broken through the threshold," he said.

I raised an eyebrow in question as I looked at him.

"You've graduated. Like the young men you were watching below." He paused. "Are you ready for your destiny, Anja?"

His words empowered me, yet I wondered how I would accomplish this next feat.

"What do I do now?"

Master Kao came home with me and explained to my mother and Kam what had happened. Well, not exactly what happened, but the fact that I found the arrow in Dalun and what must happen from here. He instructed us to take the arrow to King Capros immediately and the King would make arrangements for me to carry out my mission. Mother stayed calm. I could not gather what she was thinking. Kam, on the other hand, would not stop communicating thoughts to me.

“What? No way. You found it? When? Why didn’t you tell me? This is crazy.”

“Shhh,” I finally said out loud.

Mother and Master Kao stopped and stared at me.

“Sorry.” I glared at Kam. But we were both smiling. Even mother began to smile. I hadn’t seen her beautiful face this happy for a long time.

WE ARRIVED AT THE CASTLE WITHOUT WORD.

“Is the king expecting you?” asked one of the guards.

“No. But if you tell him Ava Kiara and her children are here to see him, I’m sure he’ll allow us counsel right away.”

Soon enough, we were led to the same room in which I met the king at the beginning of the school year. I had thought then that it seemed warm and informal. I had since learned that this was for casual guests, relatives and close friends. I began to understand that we shared a more personal relationship with the king. It just dawned on me that when father talked about his friend Cap, he was referring to the King Capros.

Mother insisted that we wait outside the room. She wanted to talk to him first. Kam and I reluctantly did what we were told.

“Can I see it?” Kam asked.

“Just wait.” I hushed him. “I’m trying to hear what they are saying.

Just then the door opened and King Capros stepped out beaming with pride. “Anja Kiara. I understand you have something of importance.”

Kam and I entered the room. We all sat and I began to explain how and when I found the arrow. He listened intently as did Mother and Kam. I gave him the box and he studied it with awe. He opened it up, but did not touch it.

“Not that I don’t believe you, Anja, but I want to see if legend is true. Please pick up the arrow.”

“Yes, sir.” I stood and placed my hand on the arrow. Before I fully grasped it, it began to glow. I lifted it and held it outward toward the king.

“No way!” exclaimed Kam, jumping out of his seat.

Mother’s jaw dropped open. This was the first time I had seen her do anything un-lady like, and in front of the king of all company.

The king stared in amazement, then began to laugh. He hopped out of his chair. “Ha! It is true.”

What they all didn't realize was that each time I held the arrow, each time I bonded with it, my chi felt stronger and I became more at ease with myself.

The king thanked me, and we all sat again after I put the arrow away.

"I am going to call a meeting with the other monarchs."

A diplomat wearing Jenlun's official brown uniform and red sash appeared in the doorway. "Is everything all right, sire? I heard shouting."

"Yes. Yes indeed. Please send an urgent message to the star sector. We request an attendance tomorrow night."

"*Are we going to get to see a Starbeing face to face?*" Kam asked me.

"*I'm not sure,*" I replied

The king turned to us. "Tomorrow night you will launch the arrow to the head Starbeing. Your brother will take you up on his dragon." He nodded at Kam. "In the meantime, please take advantage of my hospitality and stay the night." He looked at Mother for approval. She bowed her head.

"Wonderful!" He clapped his large hands together which made such a loud sound Kam and I both jumped.

"*TOMORROW NIGHT.*" I HAD A HARD TIME SLEEPING DUE to the overwhelming anticipation. Since this was such a special mission, I would have liked to have made myself a new bow but there was no time. I thought about sending for Ranita's crimson bow, but I doubted she would let me use it now. I rose from the bed in the guest chamber I was given. A grand tapestry depicting a mature oak tree in full foliage with exposed roots growing deep into the ground, adorned the wall across from the bed. "*My mighty oak.*" It was a comforting sight. The red rock walls kept the room cool on this warm evening. I walked over to a large arched open window. The

terrace below, lit by a line of torches led into the palace gardens before reaching a forest of pines. I heard a rushing river in the distance as I gazed into the night. Binluna couldn't be seen from this side of the palace. Nevertheless, I held her image in my mind and began to shift my weight side to side, as I tried to clear the my head.

I took a deep breath, allowing my belly to expand while I opened my arms out to the sides. I exhaled slowly, contracted my stomach muscles, and pushed the air out through my mouth and brought my arms back in. I held a ball of energy between my palms. "*Embracing the moon.*" I moved my hands around the ball, feeling its power.

After that moment, I felt myself fall backward into a river. I felt completely calm and floated along, watching the sky. "*So beautiful.*" Hundreds of shades of purples and blues dotted by tiny white stars held my gaze until I saw her once again. The Great Dragon flew above me, circled around and landed on the bank of the river. I swam over to her.

She stood majestic, more so than I had seen her before. She smiled and handed me a flaming bow. I hesitated to grab it. But I trusted her, so I reached for it. When I made contact with the flames, the bow disappeared. I looked around as if maybe I dropped it.

The Great Dragon laughed. "You are the bow, Anja."

A flash of light blinded me for a moment. When my vision returned the Great Dragon was gone, but now Master Kao stood in front of me.

"Anja. You have something I need."

"I do?"

"In your pocket."

I pushed my hand into the pocket of my tunic and felt the empty tube I had picked up at the games. I had forgotten about it. I handed it over to him without a word.

"Thank you."

I stared into his eyes and said, "I am the bow," in a monotone voice.

"Your chi is all you need."

And with another flash of light, he was gone. I was filled with an overwhelming sense of peace and empowerment.

The next day felt like a time warp. I don't remember much between waking up to eating a light supper with the king in his den. I do remember that we were treated like royalty, as if we were his family.

The time had come and it was not a moment too soon. The moon seemed so dim tonight. Binluna must be losing energy. I wished we could just fly up right now.

Kam looked out one of the palace windows. "Anja, there are people. Lots of people."

I ran to look for myself. I didn't have a thought on it. My old self would become anxious. But my new self was focused on my mission. I hadn't told anyone that I wasn't using a bow. I did not want them to question my plan. The Great Dragon had confidence in me, and that is all I needed.

We were called to the grand meeting room where King Capros met with the other monarchs. This room was more formal. Everything seemed to be made of oak. Above us were tall ceilings held up by thick oak beams from which an iron chandelier lit with at least two dozen candles hung. A round table, also made of oak, probably weighing a ton, sat in the

middle of the room. The monarchs sat in red velvet lined chairs, framed by ornately carved backs. We walked in quietly and sat off to the side, almost hidden in an area where the candlelight did not reach. A diplomat stood in each corner of the room.

The King stood and spoke.

“Thank you all for joining me tonight. I have a very important announcement to share.”

“What’s this all about, Capros? Did you decide to have a party for ruining the honor games? Why is there a crowd outside?”

“Zayl, save us your sarcastic remarks,” said Queen Zira. “We are honored to be here, your highness.”

“Ah, the honor games.” King Capros cleared his throat. “That is not where I wanted to start this meeting.”

Zayl huffed.

“But since you mentioned it, I have heard rumors of a plan to keep all prayers and honors from reaching Binluna. It is said that all the arrows, whether shot or not, contained no prayer honors,” continued King Capros.

“We all saw that there were tubes attached,” commented Queen Ventana.

“Yes, but one of my men...” he paused, “...found this tube with the arrows that were being delivered to the palace.”

“*Master Kao?*”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” said King Donris.

“You are correct. But when we retrieved our arrows from the seas after the ceremony, all of tubes attached were empty.”

Zayl stood up and slammed his hand on the table. “That’s proof enough for me that your province is single-handedly responsible for the ailment of our dear Binluna.”

“I don’t believe this,” replied Queen Leilani. “The Starbe-

ings that visited each of our palaces said no honors were given. Were everyone's prayer tubes empty? I had ours double checked. I don't understand." Her eyes welled with tears. I had heard she was the most compassionate and loving of the monarchs.

Queen Zira stood and said in her determined voice, "Regardless of who or how, the issue at hand is the golden arrow and the health of Binluna."

Queen Ventana nodded slowly. "Yes, I agree. My concern is for our future generations. I'm afraid the arrow will never be found."

"Why do you say this?" asked King Capros. "And please, everyone be seated."

Queen Ventana waited for all to sit. "In the ancient text of the Four Wisdoms, the ones we no longer teach in schools..." she looked at Zayl with a raised eyebrow, "...it says the Golden arrow was hidden in the palace beneath the sea. Don't you all remember?"

"I thought that was a fairy tale. It could be anywhere," replied Queen Leilani.

"We have looked." King Zayl leaned back in the chair with his arms folded. "I've sent my very best men with the best archers to search, including the sea palace. It is nowhere."

A moment passed and he continued as he leaned forward. "And please, tell your people..." he looked at all his fellow monarchs, "...to stay in their own province. I don't need my island crowded with scavenger hunters."

Queen Zira rolled her eyes then glared at him. "Oh, but you would love for them to spend money on your island though, wouldn't you?"

King Zayl leaned over to Queen Ventana once again. "Someone is jealous they lost the games this year."

"Let's not throw off the order of business," pleaded King Capros.

“Not to mention the balance,” roared King Sebast as he clasped his hands together

“And speaking of balance of our planet, I’d like to introduce you to someone,” continued King Capros. He stood and motioned for me to come to the table. Mother and Kam walked with me.

“Oh, you are getting remarried with a family. How lovely,” cried Queen Leilani.

Mother’s eyes widened and she paused for a moment. But she was quickly brought out of whatever made her hesitate.

“Ah, the boy who could not control his dragon,” laughed King Zayl, leaning over to Queen Ventana.

Kam immediately scowled and his face reddened. I thought he was going to rush at the arrogant king. I placed my hand on his shoulder. *“It’s not worth it.”*

“Anja, would you like to do the honors?”

I nodded. My hands shook as I removed the satchel from my back and took out the box. I then gave it to King Capros. The monarchs gazed at the ancient box made of wood from another planet with the foreign symbols carved into it. He unhooked the latch and revealed the beautiful gold item inside. Queen Leilani gasped with delight and held her delicate fingers over her mouth. King Zayl’s face was one of shock. He looked like a seal with its mouth open. I felt a nervous laugh bubbling up from inside. I looked at Kam and we both tried to remain composed. A series of questions came forth: “Where was it? How did you find it? Who found it?”

And then King Zayl spoke. “You must return that to our province right away.”

“Why?” asked Queen Zira

“It must be shot from Dalun, of course. We are the gold province and it was at my games that the mishap happened. Dalun should be responsible for sending it forth.”

“Now he wants to claim responsibility,” Queen Zira snapped.

“And I suppose you will shoot it?” Mother became outspoken. King Capros looked at her with pleasing surprise. I think she surprised herself as well.

King Sebast responded. “No, it must be shot right away, and by whomever found it.” His old voice sounded so wise, one would seem a fool to disagree with him.

King Capros gestured to me. I became slightly embarrassed, then proud, then nervous. “Anja and her twin brother, Kam, will fly the dragon, Vedo.”

“With all respect,” said King Donis “I’ve seen her shoot at the games. She is not your best. He then raised his brow turned his palms upward and shrugged his shoulders, “And you are going to trust this boy to take her up?”

King Sebast focused his eyes on me. “You found this arrow, young lady?”

“Yes, sir.” Master Kao told me not to mention the Great Dragon.

“Then it is written. We must not go against the law of the stars.” King Sebast stood. “She shoots tonight.”

Everyone applauded except for King Zayl. “Doesn’t anyone want to know how and where she found the golden arrow?”

I suddenly had a knot in my stomach. I didn’t think about what to say if this was asked. Before I could speak, King Donris added, “It doesn’t matter. We know what needs to be done.” He then gave Kam and me a wink.

“His mind changed fast,” Kam said to me.

Everyone stood now as King Capros spoke once again. “I will make the announcement to the people. They have been patiently waiting to find out why I called them here.”

. . .

KAM AND I WENT IMMEDIATELY TO GET VEDO FROM the palace stalls. He was treated with much reverence, given a bath and a meal. His purple scales shone and his fiery orange eyes danced. He knew he had a very important job to do with us. With the golden arrow in my quiver and a bow on my back I mounted Vedo with Kam. Of course the bow was just for show.

We could hear the crowd of people cheering as they must have heard the announcement from King Capros.

“Are you ready?” asked Kam.

I smiled. “Are you?”

“Let’s do this. To the sky,” he shouted.

Vedo let out a puff of smoke from his nose and grunted as he ran out the stall way. Flapping his wings, he jumped upward, carrying us up into the night.

People called out to us. “Save Binluna.”

“Kam, I need you to land on the mount toward the side of the balcony.” I almost forgot to prepare my chi.

“Why, what’s wrong? What’s chi?”

“Just trust me.”

He let out a sigh and steered Vedo to the plateau on the small mount. Once there, I climbed off Vedo. The crowd became quiet. I took the arrow in hand and held it outward. My energy connected to it and the glowing began. I could hear gasps from the crowd below.

With the golden arrow now a part of me and I of it, I cultivated the chi from the earth and the heavens and moved it around slowly, deliberately. I could feel the power move within and out from my body. I kept my breath slow and deliberate. When I was finished I placed the arrow secure in my quiver, and walked up Vedo’s wing. I whispered to Kam, “Let’s go.”

As we ascended I noticed the Starbeing. She or he seemed

to wear a cloak of light. Many colors shimmered within and small beams of white pierced into the night sky. We flew closer and Kam turned to me. "This is it, Anja."

I stood and balanced on Vedo a little different than sitting on a horse or standing on a moving carriage. "*Don't look down, Anja,*" I said to myself. I didn't need to know how high Vedo brought us. Instead, I imagined myself connected to the earth. I put trust in Kam and myself as well as Vedo. The flapping of his wings gave a soothing rhythm. I thought of the ocean waves.

Grabbing the arrow for the last time, I lifted it upward and rotated both arms over my head to build a power vortex. I then lowered my right arm in a circular motion backward and aimed it straight up while lifting my right knee. The arrow shot straight to the Starbeing, whirring as it ascended.

The Starbeing then removed the hood of his cloak and I saw him. "*Master Kao?*" I remained standing on Vedo, dumbfounded.

The arrow entered the light surrounding him and it flew along with Master Kao upward to the moon. He did not touch the arrow; it simply attached itself to his energy. Together they ascended higher and higher, until they blended into the dim light of Binluna.

Kam and I stayed in position until we were pushed back by an unseen force. I slid down Vedo's tail.

"Anja!" Kam called out.

"I'm here. Just head back."

Underneath us the planet shook. I heard people screaming as they lost their balance. I closed my eyes and held tight to Vedo. Kam brought us down as Vedo released a ball of fire from his mouth, cautioning the crowd to make way. We landed safely.

A little boy shouted, "Look at Binluna." The screams were

by now cheers as we all saw our moon turn golden in color, shining brighter than ever.

A group of young girls ran up to me. "Teach us how to do your dance," one said.

"You were glowing," said another.

Kam jumped off Vedo and ran over to me. "You did it, Anja," he said, giving me a hug.

"We did it," I whispered in his ear.

Mother found her way to us and embraced us both. "Your father would be very proud of you both, as am I."

The people surrounded us and two large men lifted Kam and me up on their shoulders. I searched the crowd. "*Master Kao, are you out there somewhere? Was that really you?*"

A figure in a hooded cloak caught my attention. I told the man holding me to take me over toward that direction. He let me down once he made it through the crowd. The cloaked figure waited for me to approach him.

"Master Kao?"

He removed his hood and smiled at me. It was him.

"How did...was that you?"

He laughed. "The time for questions will be later. There's still one more thing you need to do."

I couldn't possibly imagine what he meant.

Facing me, he put his hands on my shoulders. "Put things in balance." And he pointed behind me. I turned and saw Ranita off in the distance near the crowd.

"*Hurt people, hurt people.*" The words of my father echoed in my head. And it dawned on me that perhaps Ranita had hurt me all this time because deep down she was hurting. I needed to stop this cycle of hurt. I needed to apologize to her and release my last brick.

"Be patient. Forgiveness is not easy," Master Kao said. "It will be up to her to release her own bricks."

I turned toward him, but he was gone. Then a flash of light in the sky caught my attention.

Looking up I saw the Great Dragon flying overhead. *“Thank you, Anja. You have restored the balance, for now.”*

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Xie Xie

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K.P. Zwick has been creating stories since age five. Now, as a married mother of 2 boys and 1 fur-baby girl, K.P. teaches Yang-Style Tai Chi, practices Reiki and continues to write in the world of fantasy.

