

Morning broke and Jana awoke as usual to the sound of sprightly song being played on a small flute by her girl, kneeling on a pillow next to an opened window with the daylight just beginning to spill in. She lay listening to the light melody until the tune ended, then softly clicked her fingers and groaned to let the girl know she was awake. Placing the flute back in its case the girl rose and padded softly across the room, kneeling next to Jana's bed.

Jana swallowed the lump building in her throat. "So..." she grumbled, "what do I have to do?"

"If it pleases you My Lady," the girl intoned, "rise as normal. I have had your belongings transported to where they need to be and you have a few hours yet before you depart. Please, take your time. I will make you comfortable for your journey."

Jana allowed the girl to tug her from her bed and escort her through her apartments to the washroom, where she knelt in silence as the girl washed her hair and scrubbed her down. Refusing the girl permission to dress her in a formal gown she donned first a light gi and ran through a series of martial exercises to loosen her muscles and keep her in shape then changed into her usual attire, but did relent to letting her style and scent her hair into something more presentable than the bird's nest she normally wore.

"You're not coming with me, are you?"

"No, Lady," the girl replied, "You will be travelling by Azure Chariot with Lady Ranisa only. I am told the school to which you are being sent does not allow a personal staff to attend to the students once they arrive."

"Well then," Jana said, rising, "you shall breakfast with me this morning."

"My Lady!" the girl dropped into a bow, "I cannot, it wouldn't be right. It would reflect poorly on you if word got out."

"Let them say what they like, go and tell the chef. Tell him I will eat in the garden today."

"My Lady..." the girl whispered from the floor.

Jana gestured at the door, "Go, do not disobey me!"

Standing the girl backed out of the room, her face a mix of fear and confusion. Jana paced alone around her rooms, running through a mental inventory of what she was taking with her and what was being left behind. Stepping up to the mannequin in her entrance room she examined her golden sword belt, drawing first one then the other of the blades from their sheaths to check their condition and reassure her of their presence. The swords, given to her as a gift by her parents upon hearing of her martial prowess at Juen Ko, had not yet seen real combat, but her instructors relented to allowing her to practise with them at the school rather than using the weapons they provided. They were not just a source of pride for Jana; they served as a reminder to her of her own abilities and she found, though they were not in any way magical, she drew strength from their presence. Sighing, she returned them to their sheaths and, slipping the belt around her waist, placed her feet into her sandals and drew back the door. Stepping briskly into the corridor she made for the courtyard containing

the family's garden. An elderly maid who had been waiting outside her apartments fell into step beside her.

"My Lady, all the preparations for your journey are complete. You are required in an hour on the western bank of Cherren's Gate to meet with Lady Ranisa and Lady Balea and head off."

Jana grimaced at Balea's name; the sorceress gave her the creeps.

"Balea had better not have any of her critters along for the journey," she snapped.

"I will pass your wishes along, my Lady," the older woman bobbed in a bow and turned back along the corridor, heading towards the main entrance to the complex and Cherren's Gate.

Jana walked the rest of the distance to the garden at a sedate pace, savouring the surroundings that she was about to be removed from. As she approached the courtyard the sound of running water and tok-tok-tok of the bamboo ornaments grew in volume. Emerging into the sunlight she saw servants scurrying around the stone seating area that extended over the small pool in the centre of the courtyard, placing extra tables and cushions down as more servants streamed from another door carrying platters of food. She stood and observed as they finished, her maid emerging after them and stepping quietly round the terrace of the courtyard to join her.

Jana glanced at the girl as she approached. "There are too many places being laid, what's happened?"

"My Lady, Lady Ranisa caught wind of your desire to breakfast outside and has chosen to join you."

"Great," Jana sighed, "that's perfect." She walked slowly through the garden, savouring the relaxing sounds of the water and sweet smell of the flowers, allowing the servants to finish setting the places and bringing out the food. Once they had left, she followed the path out onto the stone island and seated herself on one of the cushions surrounding the low table. Her girl knelt behind her.

Jana gestured for the young servant to move up to the table. "You don't have to speak, just eat."

The girl bowed, shuffled forwards onto one of the cushions next to Jana and, after glancing to her mistress for permission, began to pick delicately at the repast before her. Once she had made sure the girl eating something Jana helped herself to a generous portion and began her own meal. Quiet reigned as both were absorbed in their thoughts, Jana pondering the journey ahead and the girl fearing for her life should she choke or spill anything on her mistress. The peaceful atmosphere was soon broken as another door leading into the courtyard slid open and Ranisa stepped out and paced up to the table, sitting opposite her cousin. She was dressed in a less accented ensemble than the previous day but it was clear that whilst a nod had been made to the practicality of travel she still aimed to impress upon arrival. She stared through her loose flowing hair and smiled cynically at Jana's maid sat with her as her own girl settled on her knees

behind her.

"Good morning, cousin," she chimed brightly, "what a pleasure it is to breakfast in such esteemed company!"

Jana's maid shrank back a little and looked sheepish.

"You are welcome to eat elsewhere if you do not approve of the company I keep." Jana answered around a mouthful of rice.

Ranisa's smile sweetened as she turned it on Jana. "I wouldn't dare criticise your choice of table guests, dear cousin!" Her smile stayed as she began helping herself to her own food but, as she sat examining the contents of her plate, it suddenly dropped. "Look Jana, can we not play these games? We are not best of friends I know but we're stuck in this together now. Can't we try and put everything behind us and approach this Whispering Rock as allies rather than enemies?"

Jana took her time chewing on her mouthful, watching Ranisa. "'Not best of friends'? I hate you, cousin; you made me look like a fool in front of a lot of people and took from me one of the few things I actually cared about."

"Yes, yes, but that was in the past! Like Cherren said, we're going to have to stop thinking like children if we're going to get through this and *I* think that starting things over with a clean slate will do us both good! I... I twisted some information on this place from my father last night, things Cherren had told them but not us; did you know that only about sixty percent of the students sent to this place actually come back as Exalts? Of the other forty percent apparently half come back unchanged the other half, well they don't come back at all. I certainly plan on being in first sixty percent, cousin, but I have thought about it and on my own my chances of survival, let alone success, drop quite dramatically."

Jana watched Ranisa as she spoke. Whilst she span her chopsticks in her hand as she spoke in an apparently carefree manner Jana could see there was a new intensity behind the words; Ranisa's perfectly sculpted image was fraying at the edges, her posture to intense, her gaze too fixed on Jana's... Jana grinned.

"You're not... scared... are you, cousin?" she asked, her eyes flashing with glee.

"Yes, Dragon's damn it!" Ranisa thumped her fist on the table, her words soft but fierce, "You would be too if you knew what we're in for! They push you at this place, really push you! I'm talking mortal danger: traps, beasts, beatings, everything they can think of to call the Dragons to us. Did you know Cherren has agreed to a waiver that states Ragara will take no action against the Rock if we return in boxes? Yes, cousin, I am scared."

Jana had stopped chewing during the other girl's tirade, shocked by the intensity of the answer. She swallowed now, still watching her cousin for signs of duplicity but finding none. She placed her chopsticks beside her plate.

"You're serious, aren't you?"

Ranisa glanced off to the side, glaring at the waiting servants who were doing their best not to listen and pushing some trailing hair behind her ear before turning back to Jana and nodding succinctly.

"I will not forget what you have done to me," Jana warned, "but... whilst we are trapped in this together, a truce." She extended her hand across the table to Ranisa who, after a second's thought, took it and shook it gently.

Ranisa was quiet a moment, then visibly brightened back to her old self, her veneer restored. "Very well, dear cousin! If we are to be allies, I have a request to make."

Jana rolled her eyes, shovelling another mouthful of rice into her mouth before speaking, "Why am I not surprised? What do you want?"

"I had travelled here from <town> under the impression that this was a family visit whilst our parents and the other family elders held discussions. I have brought with me only formal clothes, only trinkets and accessories, nothing of any practical use in a difficult situation." She gestured to Jana's swords, "I see you have your daishō with you, and I suspect you have a number of other useful tools stored in your trunk, yes? I have nothing. Help me, cousin, equip me to better watch out for us."

Jana scooped some more vegetables onto her plate. "Exactly what equipment do you want?"

"A bow, and some needles."

She raised an eyebrow across the table at Ranisa. "Needles? I didn't picture you for the type."

Ranisa grinned mischievously, "A girl has to have some surprises, wouldn't you say? Fancy hair isn't just for show, though," she glanced at Jana's shorter tufts, "I can see why you may not be aware of that."

Jana resisted the urge to retort. "We have half an hour before we're needed. Finish quickly and I'll see what I can find. I would also like to find us some protection, a leather vest or some such to wear under our clothes; your colourful description of this place has made me feel more exposed than before." She scooped a final few mouthfuls of food then laid her chopsticks back on the table, waiting for Ranisa to do the same. When Ranisa finished her meal Jana turned to her girl. "Thank you for your company. Run to Aninis, tell him to meet me outside my rooms in five minutes."

The girl, who had barely touched anything since Ranisa's arrival, shuffled back from the table, bowed, and then fled on her errand.

"Must we involve him, cousin?" Ranisa whined, "Everything will take so much longer with him trying every bow and every piece of armour until he finds 'the right one'."

"That's exactly why we want him out of his workshop when we get there." Jana sipped at the last of her tea. "Come on, I know another way there."

The two girls stood and, followed silently by Ranisa's maid, slipped from the courtyard. Servants emerged from the shadows of the terrace like vultures to clean away any evidence of their presence.

Without the armourer's overbearing presence Jana and Ranisa spent an expedient few minutes poking around the House's supply of arms and armour,

selecting a bow for Ranisa that Jana deemed suitable, a quiver of arrows, some needles that Jana initially passed off as tools but Ranisa managed to rescue from being thrown back and, on a whim, a small knife for each girl to conceal about their person. They wrapped the equipment in a piece of fabric so as not to arouse suspicion as they left the manse then, so equipped, they made their way finally to Cherren's Gate together. As they passed through the exit of the complex and out into the daylight a sandy field stretched out in front of them with a single main road leading from the manse's entrance straight across it, sloping down suddenly between two walled barricades. From the outside, these large stone walls looked like the outside of a fortress, but with the road sloping up as it entered they were in fact only keeping the manse stationed above the level of the surrounding lands. On the western protuberance a lone woman stood, clad in a silken blue dress the colour of morning sky that fell from her shoulders and around her hips, the shade falling to the darkness of night where it gathered on the floor around her, imperiously looking out over the surrounding landscape. A short distance away from her was Jana and Ranisa's trunks and, trying to keep the belongings between the woman and herself, Jana's girl. As the girls approached the woman a stunning vista of the Blessed Isle fell into view behind her. They stopped a few paces from the woman and waited for her to notice them; Jana's nose wrinkled as the smell of rusty copper flushed the air around her.

Without turning her crystalline voice rang out to them. "I have always approved of Cherren's choice of location for his home. Standing between man," she swung an arm out towards the landscape falling away below her, "and god," she turned, swinging her other arm out past the girls to encompass Mount Meru as it rose behind the manse complex, "Fitting, don't you think?" She smiled sweetly at the girls, but Jana felt a chill crawl down her spine as the woman met her gaze and something... alien... crawled behind them.

Ranisa folded her arms in front of her and bowed deeply, "Ragara Cherren Balea, I had heard that you had a penchant for the melodramatic!" She rose again and smiled at the woman. "I am Cherren Ranisa, and this is my cousin Cherren Jana."

"Really," the woman's tone lost its grandiose overtone and suddenly dripped with ice, "I had been told you were the polite one."

Ranisa blanched. "I- I'm sorry, Lady, I did not mean to offend. Your observation is, of course, accurate and I daresay the same thought must have crossed Cherren's mind when he decided on this location."

The woman stared at Ranisa for a second longer before turning away. "I do not like to be called out here to carry a couple of mortals the length of the Isle; I am busy. I have directions of how to reach this 'Whispering Rock' of yours, and would like to be on my way as soon as possible. You had better be ready to leave."

"We have a few last belongings to stow in our trunks before we go, sorceress. Where is Cherren?"

Balea turned to Jana with an eyebrow arched. "Watch your tongue," she

said flatly. "Your cases are over there, be quick. Cherren is not coming; apparently the fewer people know where are being taken the better."

Again the hair of Jana's neck rose and the smell of rust filled her nostrils. Glancing to Ranisa she nodded to her cousin and they set off in silence to place their stolen stash in the trunks. With their maids help they eventually managed to seal them with the extra items inside and turned again to face Balea.

"You two," she gestured to the maids, "go."

Jana's girl, avoiding the woman's gaze, glanced up at her. Jana nodded to her, "You'd better do as she says."

Ranisa also nodded to her maid and, bowing, the two of them swiftly retreated to the safety of the manse.

"If you two are quite ready?" Balea inquired, "We may yet make the coast by sunset."

Jana and Ranisa shared a look between them before Jana turned to the sorceress and nodded briefly. Ranisa tucked herself slightly behind Jana, away from the woman.

"Good, then let us be on our way."

Balea turned from them to face out over the Blessed Isle. She stilled for a moment, then in a piercing whisper began to chant under her breath. Making a number of improbably dexterous hand symbols in the air before her with her left hand she drew a circle in the air before her with her right, a trace of blue essence being left by her fingertips that, on completion, fled inwards to form an intricate pattern hanging before her as her left hand continued to gyrate. Behind her a thick fog began to coalesce on the dust field, sending the two young Dynasts scurrying backwards to avoid it. As her voice rose, speaking ancient sounding words, the circle glowed brighter and brighter until, with a crash, she smashed her left hand through the emblem of essence she had created and released a cry.

"Conjure the Azure Chariot!"

In time with this a clash a bright light rent the fog and, which a snorting and stamping of hooves, four cerulean horses emerged, lightening coursing from their bodies into the fog around them as it dissipated. The girls took another few steps back as the horses approached, snorting steam yet bringing with them an unnatural coldness that froze the earth where they stepped. As the fog continued to clear it revealed behind them a large chariot the same shade of blue as the sky above, pulled easily as if it were made of cloud by the beasts.

Jana had heard of the spell before, and had occasionally seen such magical transports pass above her ferrying important Dynasts around the Isle, but never had she seen it cast or been so close to the beasts. The otherworldliness and strange intelligence they radiated unnerved her.

"Get your things on board."

The girls jumped, returning their attention to the woman they had, in their surprise and fright, temporarily forgotten. Balea glared at them and gestured impatiently, her dress blowing in a light wind that teased a few vestiges of fog

around her legs. A sharp arc of lightning jumped from her hand to the closes horse as she gestured. Without their maids Jana and Ranisa were forced to work together to heft the sizeable boxes of belongings into the carriage, clambering in after them under Balea's impatient stare. Once everything was secure she approached the side of the carriage and peered inside.

"I'd advise you not to open the door," she said, winking at them then slamming it shut. They felt a slight rocking then a soft thud as Balea mounted the carriage and settled into the drivers seat then, with a cry of "Guin!" from outside, a lurch as the horses began to move.

With astonishing acceleration the horses raced towards the edge of the earthen barricade surrounding The Fallen Crucible. Though she had seen the magic at work before Jana's heart still tightened as the horses leapt up and over the edge, dragging the carriage behind them and up away from the ground and into the sky. She moved for a better view out of the chariot's window as the Blessed Isle fell quickly away below them, the few miles surrounding the manse quickly falling behind them as the horses continued to accelerate onwards and upwards across the morning sky.

"This is incredible!" she breathed, gesturing without looking for Ranisa to join her. "Come and see!"

"It's weird." came the tight, measured reply.

Jana turned and found Ranisa sat straight backed and perfectly poised in the rocking chariot, her hands folded in her lap, eyes closed and with a faint white pallor spreading across her face. She grinned then turned back to the window, straining to see Mount Meru as it fell away behind them.

"You don't know what you're missing."

The journey proceeded without incident. Jana was happily glued to the window for hours watching the Realm race by beneath her and, after her initial queasiness had worn off, Ranisa rummaged in her trunk, pulled out a battered sanxian and began to play, humming along with the melody. When questioned by Jana she explained it helped to calm her nerves and think more clearly, not missing the opportunity to barb her cousin for her boyish enthusiasm and recommending she put more thought into where they were going and less into where they'd just been. Once bored of the window Jana tried a number of unsuccessful attempts to discuss what she'd been looking at with Ranisa, but the other girl shut her eyes and continued to hum and play, increasing in volume to override Jana's persistent chatter. Finally giving up on the enterprise Jana proceeded to contort herself into a number of unusual positions on her side of the carriage before finally giving up on entertaining herself and falling into a doze. She awoke with a bump as the carriage touched down in the port town of Guin, the sun just vanishing over the horizon.

"Too close, girls," Balea snapped as the horses and chariot vanished with the sun, dumping Jana unceremoniously on the floor just as Ranisa managed to hop out. The cases thumped to the floor around her as servants of the house

they were staying at swept forwards to collect their belongings. "Here at dawn tomorrow."

She turned on her heel and marched into the lodgings, heading off the family as they emerged to greet their guests. Jana took the opportunity to stretch her cramped muscles whilst Ranisa waited patiently beside her until more servants emerged to lead them inside, chaperoning them first to a bath, then dinner, then bed.

The next morning Jana woke early; having slept half of the previous day she wasn't tired enough to stay in bed any longer than necessary let alone taunt Balea by sleeping in late. As she rose, bathed and dressed for her morning exercises she was surprised to find that Ranisa rose to join her.

"You weren't the only person who took the classes at Juen Ko." was the only explanation Jana was given.

The two girls mirrored each other through the series of katas they had been taught. Jana was surprised at how well Ranisa kept pace with her; she had always assumed her cousin to be something of a layabout who avoided physical activity whenever possible but she proved she was more than capable of following Jana through the routine. Trying to assert her position a little Jana began to increase the speed at which she ran through the exercises, leaving less time to rest and moving through her forms with more speed as the tempo built. Annoyingly, Ranisa maintained pace and finished the routine alongside Jana, slightly out of breath and a little dishevelled, but without having broken too much of a sweat.

"Maybe you're tougher than I give you credit for," Jana joked as she shrugged off her gi and slipped back into the baths to wash the exercise from her.

Ranisa turned away from her, letting her gi drop to her shoulders, then looked back over her shoulder to Jana, replying in a mock-sultry voice "Physicality isn't all about toughness." She winked then, dropping the rest of the robe, slid in beside Jana.

Balea was stood waiting for the girls when they emerged into the breaking daylight. Whilst she didn't give them a warm welcome she was at least pleased that they had both managed to be ready on time and were eager to get going. Waiting for the sun to break properly over the Isle behind them, she then cast her spell again and summoned forth the Azure Chariot that they had travelled in the previous day. The servants from the house, once they had got over their initial shock if not their misgivings about such a sorcerous apparition, helped the girls load their trunks onto the chariot and soon they were on their way, quickly leaving Guin and the Blessed Isle behind them and sailing out over the western ocean.

Jana quickly bored with nothing to look at and, after searching fruitlessly through her trunk for something to entertain her in such a small place, eventually overcame her pride and asked Ranisa if she had anything she could do. Whilst initially unimpressed with the small pile of excerpts from the Immaculate Texts

that Ranisa gave her she did, with some guidance from her cousin, eventually find some passages dedicated to how to tell an Anathema, which she sat and quietly digested.

Luckily for her, the flight that day was not as long as the previous day's journey and, shortly after noon, Balea thumped on the roof of the carriage for their attention. As both girls peered out of the windows to see what the commotion was about the chariot swerved off to one side, suddenly bringing into view a huge black cliff rising from the ocean. Standing hundreds of meters high the cliffs made for a very imposing sight; their tops were out of view no matter how much they strained to see but the walls fell away down an almost sheer slope to a jagged bottom, the waves crashing angrily against it. In a few places as they sped along the cliff the girls saw magma bubbling from within and sliding down the cliffs into the sea below, steam hissing upwards where the two met. Balea pitched the chariot downwards, skimming a dozen metres above the waves. Jana and Ranisa both jumped backwards as, suddenly, a ship shot past the window. In its wake the cliffs seemed to vanish, Balea pulling away from the shore to reveal a verdant green crack opening up between them with an inlet spreading between lazily along the bottom of the valley. More ships joined the first, moored away from the inlet and with a small fleet of tugs and other lighter vessels moving to and fro from the valley's mouth. Picking her spot, Balea again swung the chariot around and blasted straight up the inlet, the speed of its passing causing waves on the water even from their height. The girls frantically tried to keep up with what they were seeing as the carriage sped along the river's course, overtaking the small boats and shooting through an overgrown, tropical forest before emerging into a large sandy clearing, an inland beach with a small dock on which the boats seemed to be mooring.

Aiming for something ahead of them that the girls couldn't yet see Balea began to slow the chariot, dropping down to ground level and kicking up clouds of sand as the horses' hooves finally made contact with the earth beneath them. Rolling eventually to a stop, they were presented with a view of a small single story building with a large paved area in front of it, the sloping green tiled roof of the building extending some way over the slabs and supported by ornately carved red wooden pillars. Standing outside the building were a number of groups of people, all clustered apart from each other and all, seemingly, centred around a younger member in varying states of emotion. Most were now staring in their direction, blinking and coughing slightly as the sand cloud rolled over the area but still interested in seeing the magical construct drop from the heavens before them. Balea leapt nimbly down from her perch on the front of the chariot and swung the door open on Jana and Ranisa.

"Out." she snapped, jerking a thumb in case they hadn't got the message.

Jana tumbled from the carriage first with Ranisa slipping out softly behind her. They both stood for a moment simply staring around the strange location they found themselves in as the crowd quickly lost interest and returned to fussing over their charges. Two retainers swept forth from the building and,

before the girls had thought to stop them, pulled their trunks from the vehicle and scurried away with them.

"Hey, wait a moment!" Jana cried after them. She was on the verge of giving chase when a smooth voice sounded close behind her.

"Ladies, welcome to Whispering Rock."