

The man's oily smile crept under Jana's skin as he grinned sickeningly at her. He had a large forehead, high hairline and angular face that combined to give him a rather fish-like appearance. "Please, if you would make your way into the Welcome Hall you'll be given your instructions. Don't worry about your belongings, Ladies... Cherren Ranisa and Jana, the Ragara girls, I presume? We have been expecting you. They will be taken to your lodgings; you will find them waiting for you when you arrive. If you'll excuse me..." He turned and strode purposefully away, his plaited hair swishing, aiming towards one of the tugboats pulling up in the harbour.

"You're on your own now, ladies," Balea's voice made the girls jump as it rang clear next to them, "it'd save me a trip if you didn't come back."

"Lady Balea," Ranisa began, "what are we supposed to do?"

"I would suggest you take the man's advice, girl; from here, you're not my problem. Farewell!"

With this, Balea leapt back into the chariot's driver's seat and cracked the whips. At the cry of "Guin!" the horses pawed at the roadway, pulling the carriage behind them as they turned and ran back across the paving, picking up speed before leaving the ground and swiftly vanishing back along the inlet's course.

As Jana watched the sorceress and her chariot disappear Ranisa looked around the crowd before them, taking stock of the situation. "I believe there are at most two dozen other students here today, cousin. This is a very small intake for a school, but it does not go against the numbers I have already seen. Everyone will be under close watch; we must put our best foot forward at all times."

"Ranisa, seriously, where are we?"

"The Whispering Rock, cousin, just as Cherren said."

The view of the beach and valley swam around Jana, the groups standing wrapped in their own interpersonal dramas being dwarfed by the size of the mountain and steep valleys before her.

She paced up and down the beach, trying to get a better view of the surrounding area but found she was mostly thwarted by the thick treeline that bordered on the bay. Ranisa followed behind her, but rather than looking at their surroundings she concentrated on observing the other students around them, quietly watching who seemed to be coping with their situation and who was on the verge of a breakdown with whichever family and retainers still surrounded them. As time slipped by more and more of the adults on the beach returned to the boats and shipped back out to sea; a short while later a retainer emerged from the building and began ushering the stragglers towards the pier as well. Eventually no one remained except for the new students.

Jana, Ranisa and their companions milled aimlessly around the mouth of the valley until a small hoard of retainers began to direct them along the river path, then into a covered courtyard with a small stage erected within. The heat was immediately oppressive, the relief of the shade offset by the lack of breeze. The fish-faced man who had spoken to the girls when they first arrived, stepped on to the stage in front of them.

"Welcome, all!" he proclaimed, his voice maintaining the smooth tone that they had heard earlier but carrying well over the small murmurings of the Dynasts as they moved forwards to gather before him. "Welcome to Whispering Rock! I am Master Bur. I hope you all know why it is you've been sent here; if not,

you are in for a treat. I will not lie to you; you are here because you are failures! You have failed to take your Second Breath and thus you represent quite a serious waste of time and resources to your various families. Luckily for you, they are able to afford this one last chance to salvage you! The Rock is a secondary school unlike any other in the Scarlet Empire, it is a school designed to bring the Breath on you. Your family have given you this one last chance to excel, I'd recommend you do not disappoint. You each have a schedule set out for you that you will receive when you reach your dormitories which will let you know exactly which classes you are to attend and when. Much of your time here will run similarly to a normal school; the curriculum will cover arts, humanities, thaumaturgy, physical and religious education." He folded his arms behind his back and began to pace up and down the stage, his eyes meeting those of student after student as he went. "You will, in line with your purpose here, also be expected to attend a number of extra events and classes! Again, these will be detailed to you when you reach your dormitories and extra assignments will be given to you as and when we feel it is appropriate! Now, before I continue the first thing we must do is separate you into your teams. Consider, if you will, your teammates to be your best friends in your time at the Rock;" he chuckled quietly, "whilst we would not like to say that your rival teams will be your enemies we would certainly advise you not to act as allies. You will be judged against the opposing teams and there are a number of head-to-head activities that we would advise you not to lose focus on..." His speech died away and he looked out over the assembled crowd. "Before I go on perhaps we should designate your teams, so as you can see exactly what you are up against."

The students shifted uneasily as he gestured to an aide standing at the side of the stage, who hurried up to him and passed him a small sheet of parchment before quickly stepping back to his position. Jana and Ranisa glanced at each other uneasily.

"What's he talking about, cousin?" Jana hissed.

"Just be quiet, watch and listen," came the hushed response.

The man gestured to a large, green, tiled area that was placed to the left of the stage he stood on. "The Emerald team will consist of Cathak Cailin, Ledaal Ara, Ledaal Catala Caris, Mnemon Mexa and Peleps Jalasus. Please step forward." Five slightly confused looking teens stepped out of the crowd and on to the green-tiled area.

"Next, the Ruby team," he gestured to a red tiled area adjacent to the Emerald team's area. "Would Cynis Mako, Sesus Kajak Ako, Sesus Kajak Imon..." the man stopped a moment, re-reading his paper before continuing with a note of suspicion creeping into his voice, "Sesus Kajak Sesedo... and Tepet Imilis please step forwards." Two individuals detached themselves from the crowd and stepped into the coloured area, closely followed by three people who were standing clustered together, sharing a mischievous grin with each other as they did so.

"Next, the Diamond team," again, he gestured to a white coloured area adjacent to the first two groups of students. "Would the following please step forwards: Cathak Kenar Padu, Cynis Wisel Minabo, Ragara Cherren Jana, Ragara Cherren Ranisa and Tepet Orrun." Jana jumped as her name was mentioned, surprise shivering through her even though she knew she must be called up eventually. When her name was followed by Ranisa's she was even more

surprised to find a bit of relief seeping into her; whilst she still wouldn't have considered her cousin a friend she was pleased to know she would be on her team.

"Finally, those of you who are left, you will form the Sapphire team. Ledaal Catala V'deko, Ledaal Seniston, Mnemon Caras Taidemol, Nellens Rala and V'neef Ya." The remaining few students shuffled forwards to occupy a blue tiled area.

"I'm afraid we did not have enough interest in our unique curriculum this year to fill out the teams quite perfectly," he continued, waving a hand lazily at an empty black tiled square at the far end of the stage, "but no matter. Take a look around you, children. Your team are your friends, allies, companions and best chance of success. Working as a team may well be your best chance of graduation! Those not on your team? Well, I'm sure you'll see how we work here soon enough."

Jana and Ranisa stood shoulder to shoulder, the other three individuals falling into a loose circle with them so they could examine one another. Cathak Kenar Padu stood next to Jana, a well-built boy with heavily tanned skin and thick sandy hair that he wore in a neat topknot. He was dressed in a simple outfit of trousers and shirt matching the colour of his hair with the only splash of colour being provided by a long olive green waistcoat he wore over the top. He stood with his arms crossed regarding Jana and his other companions coolly, his face unmoving but his eyes darting from face to face, soaking up their appearance. Next to him stood a small, ornate, doll of a girl, Cynis Wisel Minabo. She was clad in a silken green kimono decorated with embroidered golden grasses rising from its base, appearing to wave in a breeze as she shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. Her face was heavily made up, her skin almost white and her eyes heavily shaded to a dark cherry red, her black hair raising into an elaborate bun on top of her head. As she fidgeted she kept her eyes from meeting Jana and Ranisa's, shrinking away behind the large boy next to her. Finally, between Minabo and Ranisa stood Tepet Orrun. Compared to the other two individuals he looked... rather normal; he stood at about average height with fair skin, sparkling blue eyes and slick black hair that rolled in a wave across his head. He wore a smart but understated blue and white silken shirt over a pair of white trousers and stood with an easy grace, his hands in his pockets as he swung his gaze between his companions. Catching Ranisa staring at him, he favoured her with a wink. She rolled her eyes playfully, grinning as she turned away from him.

Jana felt a pang of jealousy as she watched this exchange take place, the old wounds inflicted by Ranisa reopening a little as she watched her coy cousin draw in attention. Turning away she looked instead over the other teams as they took each other in. A girl standing in the red area, one of the Sesus group, caught her looking and whispered to her companions, pointing towards Jana. The other two Sesus students turned to look at her, malicious grins splitting their faces as the first girl continued to whisper then breaking into mocking laughter as she finished. Jana's lingering feelings of jealousy burned away as anger flushed through her, a scowl crossing her face as she stared back at them. The girl swooned melodramatically under Jana's glare, falling into one of her companions' arms, and then all three burst into renewed cackles. Fighting the urge to leap at the girl Jana swallowed and turned back to her group.

"Orrun."

She flinched away from the hand that grasped towards her, catching herself a moment later and looking up at the boy who the hand belonged to.

"Come on, we can't spend the next year in silence, can we? You're... Ragara Cherren Jana, right? Tepet Orrun, nice to meet you." he watched Jana quizzically as she regained her composure, his hand still extended.

Jana took his hand and shook it, "Jana."

Orrun blinked, a bit put out by the blunt response, but he was quickly distracted as Ranisa stepped between them and brushed Jana's hand aside.

"Ragara Cherren Ranisa, it's a pleasure." She offered her hand to the boy, who swept it up to his lips and kissed it gently.

"I'm glad to hear it," he purred, smiling at her for a moment before releasing her hand and turning to the other two students. "Cathak Kenar Padu, pleased to make your acquaintance," he proffered his hand that, after a moment's deliberation, Padu accepted and shook silently, "and Cynis Wisel Minabo, a pleasure."

The girl jumped back further behind Padu as Orrun extended his hand, "H... hello," she squeaked. Padu turned slowly towards her as she cowered in his shadow, making her jump away from him as he bought his gaze to bear.

"Are... are you alright, my dear?" Orrun questioned, his hand dropping back into his pocket as he regarded the porcelain figure.

"Fu... fuh... fine, thank you." she whispered, shying away from the four of them as they stared at her.

"Ookay," Orrun took a step back, raising his hands in supplication before turning back to Ranisa, "I'm glad at least one of you is capable of stringing a sentence together."

Padu stirred slightly, shifting his attention back away from Minabo to the rest of the group, his arms still crossed, "She's just scared, leave her alone."

"Ah!" Orrun exclaimed, "The giant speaks! Glad you decided to join the conversation, my friend."

"I'm not your friend, Tepet," he rumbled, "not yet."

Sensing the beginnings of an argument in the air Jana stepped between the two boys, holding a hand out to Padu. "Ragara Cherren Jana, pleased to make your acquaintance." Padu grunted and shook her hand. "I understand that you don't know any of us and don't have any real reason to trust or like us yet," she said, raising her voice over Orrun's protest of "Hey, speak for yourself!", "but we're stuck in this together now, so let's all," she paused for a moment to look around at the other three, "make an effort to get on."

Ranisa and Orrun nodded to her; she turned back to Padu and watched again as his active eyes flicked over the rest of the group for a moment before he grunted, "Sure." Finally, she looked at Minabo. With Padu's attention back on the group the small girl had again retreated into his shadow. She looked up at Jana with large, trembling eyes.

"Oh, love of the Dragons!" Jana exclaimed, suddenly stepping between the two and shoving Minabo away from the large boy. "Stand on your own two feet, show a bit of backbone."

She felt a weight fall on her shoulder, and twisted her head to find Padu's large hand resting there. His eyes glittered dangerously from below his lowered brow. "Don't touch her."

"You've got to be kidding me!" she brushed the hand off her shoulder angrily, "I don't know if you've heard, but I gather this place is pretty dangerous. We're supposed to be working as a team to get by and I don't want to have to be looking out for some dead weight," she gestured fiercely towards Minabo, "dragging us down the whole time." She turned on the smaller girl, "You'd better suck it up, you hear?"

"She will," said Padu, stepping up next to Jana to look at their companion, "won't you? You just need a little time, right?"

Minabo seemed trapped, locked looking at Padu. "...yes," she whispered, finally.

Jana maintained her position between the two of them, forcing them to stand apart still. Orrun extended his hand to Minabo again, who brushed it lightly with her fingertips before pulling her hand back into her robe.

Ranisa smiled at Padu and performed a small bow, receiving a nod back in response.

Their brief greetings were conducted just in time; with a polite but pointed cough the man on the stage bought the assembled students' attention back to the front. "I'm very happy to see everyone getting on so well," he drawled, "As I was saying, your team will be your family for the duration of your stay at the Rock; you will be judged against the progress of your competing teams and in a number of our... special... activities will be working in direct competition with them. Ah!" he clapped his hands, his face brightening, "that reminds me! To lead you through your time at the Rock each team will be given a supervisor! Think of these people as your go-to guys if you have any questions about the facility or your studies. They will be going with you to your rooms, distributing to you your materials once you arrive and checking up on you all regularly to make sure you're keeping up with your work." He looked to each side of the stage and made a summoning gesture with his hands, "If you'd please?"

As the congregation glanced at each other warily four individuals emerged from the sides of the stage and walked along its base, positioning themselves in front of the four teams. Before the Emerald circle stood a hunched, elderly man. He leaned heavily on a cane, his back bent almost to a right angle that sent his face lurching forward ahead of the rest of his body; his white hair sticking in tufts out from under the square hat he wore and launching itself in a barely controlled goatee from his face. His grey and white robes gave him a somewhat monochromatic appearance. Next to him stood a younger man dressed in red and black silks and dripping with golden jewellery, a cruel grin flickering across his face as he looked over the students with steely eyes. A dark skinned woman stopped before Jana's group, crossing muscular arms and looking sternly down at them. Her hair was pulled back from her face into a tight braid and, Jana thought, she seemed dressed for action in a close-fitting white vest top and tan trousers covered with myriad pockets. Finally, a portly woman wearing a brightly coloured and flowery kimono stopped at the edge of the sapphire blue tiles, her rosy cheeks a flush of colour compared to her pale face and greying hair. She waved fancifully at her team.

"Well," Jana whispered to Ranisa out of the corner of her mouth, "she doesn't look so bad."

"Are you serious?" her cousin hissed back, clutching at Jana's arm, "she looks like she's gonna break us in half!"

Orrun's head appeared between the two girls, "Look at the others though, at least she's not going to die on us, murder us, or eat any time soon." He slipped his arms lightly around the girl's waists. "I'd say she's alright-OOF!"

Jana pulled her elbow out of his stomach.

"Alright, ok, no touching, I get it..." he wheezed, backing off.

"Be nice!" Ranisa scolded her, "'we're stuck in this together now', remember?"

"I can be civil from arm's length."

Ranisa feigned despair, turning back to the stage.

Bur glanced at the four teachers standing in front of him, waving his arm dismissively at the students, "Javel, Ladare, Wisbe, Tagusu, your teams. Now, I think it is time we showed you to your rooms; you will have time today to get to know your new friends, acclimatise yourself to the island and ask any questions you have of your team leaders. It has been a pleasure meeting you."

He bowed sharply before turning on his heel and striding swiftly down the back of the stage and away. In his wake an awkward silence fell across the assembled crowd, the students looking to their team leaders for guidance and the leaders, for their part, looking a little surprised to be suddenly dropped in control of twenty lost children.

The dark skinned woman standing before Jana's group suddenly stepped forward, pushing between the startled youngsters and heading back out towards the river.

"Diamond, with me," was all she said as she passed through them, moving Jana to the side with a firm hand. A musky scent washed over the group as she passed.

Jana exchanged a look with Ranisa before starting after the woman, jogging slightly to catch up where the woman's quick stride had already taken her a way ahead. From the patter of footsteps behind her she guessed the others in the group had done the same.

"Hey, wait a moment," Jana called, grabbing the woman's arm to slow her down. She was shaken off angrily.

"Not here. Follow me."

Not wishing to antagonise her mentor further Jana shrugged, checked the others were still following her and accompanied the woman out of the courtyard and back on to the path. The woman turned and began moving further inland, taking the group away from the port they'd arrived at. As they moved along the valley floor the students passed a number of similarly designed buildings, with green sloping roofs and decoratively engraved walls made from red wood. Streets branched at intervals from the grey paved path, snaking off to the right and away from the river up the sides of the valley before eventually giving up the climb and letting the forest take over again. People walked swiftly along the streets and between the buildings, avoiding looking at the students as they passed and instead staring at their feet, clad as they were in slightly out of date Realm fashions. Glancing behind them the cousins saw another group, the one led by the old man, turn and start up the path after them before crossing the river at a nearby bridge and vanishing into the buildings on the other side. Some

men and woman tending to nets aboard a boat on the river turned to watch them pass once they thought they were no longer in danger of being observed

Jana's attention snapped back as she felt a small tug on her sleeve, turning to find Ranisa on the end of it with Orrun's hand on her shoulder. The woman, Padu and Minabo were already moving away up one of the winding side streets. She turned back for a few moments to watch the fishers exchange smiles and waves with a store owner as they floated past on their way towards the ocean then turned and followed the others.

Shadows began to flit across the path as they threaded between the buildings and started climbing the side of the valley, the sweaty and dusty smell of the town swiftly being replaced with the smell of fresh growth as they left the narrow strip of buildings behind and moved into the trees.

Jana sidled up to Ranisa and Orrun, who were talking quietly to each other as they walked. "Where do you think she's taking us", Jana hissed as she drew level.

Orrun leaned forward to look at her from the other side of her cousin, his hair falling forwards away from his face as he did so. "To our rooms, according to Bur. Our best guess is that they house each of the teams separately." He glanced ahead to check that the woman wasn't listening to them then, happy that she, Padu and Minabo weren't paying any attention, leaned back towards Jana. "That was a bit of a strange introduction, wasn't it?"

Ranisa glanced at the two to either side of her from the corners of her eyes, keeping her face pointing forwards. "He certainly seemed on edge about something. I wonder if there are problems? Perhaps they're struggling for funding if they were unable to fill the entire intake..."

"On edge? More like he didn't care, if you ask me," Orrun sniffed.

Jana harrumphed. "Does it matter? He gave me the creeps; the less I see of him the better. I..."

She was cut short as Ranisa elbowed her in the ribs, subtly gesturing ahead at where the other three had stopped a short distance away. A set of heavy set of tall stone gates stood before them, and the woman was looking back expectantly at the trio as they caught up. When they were within a few metres she pulled a small scroll of parchment from the satchel she carried, unfurled it and placed it against an indented square in the gate before her. Pausing for the briefest moment she then placed a finger from her free hand in the centre of the parchment and traced a pattern on the blank sheet. For a moment nothing happened and then, suddenly, a rumble burst from the door as it began to open inward of its own accord, the ground shaking slightly under the weight of the moving stone. The woman pulled the paper from the wall and slipped it back into her bag before standing back and gesturing for the group to enter.

Jana eyed the woman suspiciously before skipping past Padu to be the first to enter. As she passed through the gate she took stock of the building before and stopped in her tracks, electing a small grunt from the larger boy as he came through behind her and bumped into her back. A tall, circular building stood before them made of a combination of the grey stone from the path coupled with the red and green motif they had seen in the village. A high stone wall ran in a larger circle around the outside of the building from where the gate sat, forming an inner courtyard in the shape of a ring, covered mostly in mud and various bits of unusual looking equipment, with a path leading from the gate to

an entrance in to the building on the ground floor. As Jana's eyes travelled upwards she guessed the building to be three stories tall; just above the door the structure became angled rather than circular as it was at the base, then further up than that the exterior walls dropped away entirely to reveal a number of large, open rooms covered by the gently steeped roof atop it all.

"Fexis Sen Aviary," the woman said, stepping through the gate behind them as it began to rumble shut. "or, as you'll know them, your rooms."