

FIGMENTASIA
The Quest for Truth

Russell Scott Emery

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DEDICATION

For my amazing nieces and nephews, Zach, Willjo, Kane, Alannah, Giselle
and Koko

Prologue

Snow whipped furiously against the woman's face as she determinedly made her way up the mountain pass. The white deluge stinging her cheeks limited her visibility. Freshly settled snow crunched beneath her feet, and the wind buffered her from walking with any speed. The amulet in her left hand glowed to show her that she was walking in the right direction. The moon's light fought its way through the overhead clouds and glistened where its light-shafts landed on the ice blanket covering the pine trees that lined the steep curved road that had led her out of the city. With her right hand, she held a shawl tightly, trying to stave off as much of the biting chill as she could.

"Merilan has hidden a child up there," Chinyere had told her, "He gave me this to guide you," and had placed the pink amulet in her hand. Chinyere had her four-year-old son Zach with her and said she would stay in the orphanage and look after the children while Miranda retrieved the infant. Chinyere did not know who the abandoned child was, or indeed how long the infant had been left alone up in the freezing pass. Neither of them expected for Miranda to find the child alive. Even so, Miranda had thrown on her coat and shawl and gone out into the night, leaving her childhood friend in charge of her wards. She had made her life protecting children, and she was damned if she was going to let a

blizzard take a young life. Miranda hadn't spoken to Merilan the wizard in years, but her old mentor still held emotional power over her to do his bidding. Chinyere had said something about Merilan being arrested, and that disturbed her. Merilan was the most honest and forward-thinking man she knew. Whatever he was supposed to have done, she felt that he would more than likely be absolved of soon.

The amulet in her hand glowed brighter and she knew she must be close. She heard herself gasp as she rounded a corner. At the side of the road by a steep slope leading down into the lower forest was a horse-drawn carriage on its side. The horses had disappeared. The snow rained down on pools of blood scattered all over the roadside. Miranda fought the instinct to turn back and flee to the safety of the city. Were the aggressors still here? She stopped to listen for any sounds of movement. Moments passed, and Miranda berated herself for letting fear try to get a stranglehold on her objective. The amulet beckoned her forward, its light now pulsing, urging her to ignore the death in the place and find the life nearby. It summoned her to the edge of the road and down a slope that she could see led to a clearing. Slowly, she made her way down, taking care to get a firm foothold with each step. She felt tears rolling down her neck, which seemed to scratch as they tumbled down her frozen cheeks. Someone had butchered these people. She did not know who had killed who or why.

Once at the bottom of the clearing, the amulet seemed to tug her slightly to the right into some bracken bushes. She let the light lead her. An invisible spongy substance pushed gently against her entire body and Miranda knew she had arrived. The flexible opaque barrier was a concealment spell, creating a shell around something. She stepped purposefully forward through the enchanted membrane, and emerging into the protected space saw a small blue fire. Next to the fire was a baby wrapped in purple velvet blankets. The baby saw her and cooed and looked at her with doe-

eyed innocence, and then seeing the glowing amulet, it reached out to for the trinket. Rushing to the child, Miranda gave the baby the necklace and scooped it up in her arms,

“Let’s get you somewhere safe,” she muttered into the infant’s ear as she held the child tight to her.

With that, Miranda pushed out of the protective shell, and into the ongoing blizzard. The twenty-year wait of winter had come to the plane. It was a time ripe for coups, and without knowing it, Miranda was pushing herself not only through a blizzard but into events that would have dramatic repercussions for the land of Figmentasia.

1 Pixaries & Punishment

“TEBAN!”

Screamed Miranda from inside the orphanage. It was a shrill piercing scream that cut through the children’s squeals of bedlam. Teban had just thrown another pixary into the three younglings, Sophie, Kealan and Koko. Pixaries are the small three-inch high humanoid insects, bit non-magical people when they felt threatened. They used their four arms and legs to latch onto a person and then would plunge their heads into the skin giving a tiny nip. Teban knew it didn’t hurt, but within minutes his victims would have an itchy red blister that would need butter on it to counteract the venom of the bite. If left alone to do their pollen collecting, pixaries didn’t usually bite.

Teban and his usual compatriot in crime Suki were always the bad guys. Suki was a fairy, so she was immune to the pixary bites, and for some reason, Teban never seemed to get bitten. Some humans were lucky that way. For the rest of the orphans though, it meant that a game of Tag Venom was a genuine thrill. From the youngest to the oldest in the house, the game was one they all joined in. It was a game that their guardian Miranda firmly disapproved of, feeling it was unfair to the tiny creatures wanting to do natures

work.

The game was simple. Teban and Suki would close their eyes in front of a giant lavender bush and count to ten. The other children and teenagers would all run off and hide somewhere in the hundred and fifty-foot garden. When Suki and Teban finished the count, they would try to grab a pixary which they would find flitting about the lavender and rose bushes. Grabbing one they would go hunting for sibling victims. As soon as a brother or sister prey was in sight, Teban and Suki would lob a pixary as hard as they could at their target. They needed to use force in the throw so that the pixaries wings couldn't course correct themselves and fly off. The aim for the children hiding or running away was not to get hit and in turn, bitten by a pixary, usually hurled at their arms or legs. Teban revelled in the gameplay using it as a means of forgetting his troubles at school and the bullying in the playground at break times. Here in the orphanage garden he could be himself and shout with raucous fun as he allowed his hidden inner confidence to break free.

Sophie and Koko the two youngest girls always giggled and squealed, and would often charge Teban if he came close to their hiding spot. Their thinking was to confuse Teban, so he didn't know which child to should be the pixaries target. Kealan was usually in the same hiding spot, and being a bit slower, didn't run out. Teban and Sophie over time had learnt his habit, and would pounce and lob a pixary at him, and then run off laughing to find the next poor insect-humanoid, leaving Sophie and Koko there to laugh at Kealan's poor misfortune. Their mean joys of entertainment wouldn't last long though. Once bitten, they had to sit that round of the game out and watch the other children get hunted down and as Teban would say with wicked smugness, "Slaughtered."

Suki would often find Sophie and Koko fighting over a hiding spot, pushing each other around trying to get behind the

gap between the garden shack and the phorus fruit tree. It made for easy pickings. With the young ones out of the way, the real excitement of the game was on. The eight to fifteen-year-olds were a challenge. They were faster, more adept at climbing and hiding. The older ones like Tymon and Zephan would use weapons of lentil filled socks and kitchen utensils to knock the pixary bombs away, which would bring the wrath of Miranda down on them if she caught them as the swats frequently broke the pixary wings. If she saw anyone maiming pixaries, then the punishment was usually a cane to the backside, with her screaming,

“I’ll teach you to murder pixaries.”

Of course, they hadn’t murdered the pixaries. Although if the pixaries had crippled wings, they could not fly. The small creatures were adept climbers so could still collect pollen from the shrubs and bedding plants while they waited for their new wings to grow again. Pixary homes were small wooden hives under the fruit trees. That area was off limits to the children if not supervised. Pixary honey was made in those hives. Both bee and pixary hives sat next to each other, and Miranda would sell the pixary and bee-honey to the local apothecary. The children knew not to go near that part of the garden, as Miranda’s retribution for that sin was vengeful. Any culprit caught spent a night in the larder.

A pixary landed on Sophie’s arm, and bit down hard and then flew off. Koko and Kealan fell to the floor laughing, as Sophie moping went to sit in the middle of the lawn, out of the game. Suki took advantage of the infants on the floor laughing, and despite the loud shout to Teban from Miranda, threw a panic shot of her pixary at the two laughing minions. It landed squarely on Koko’s ankle. Kealan got up wobbly with hysterical laughter, and proudly shouted,

“I’m not the first to die. I’m not the first to die.”

Not looking where he was going the boy ran clean into Miranda’s legs. His laughing abruptly stopped as he looked up into her disapproving face. She was not looking at him though. She was

glaring past him into the garden.

“Teban! Come here. NOW!” the tall woman demanded. He knew what he had done wrong and was chiding himself for doing it. No matter how many times the matron or his teachers told him off, it was never half as hard as he told himself off. He wished he was a better less greedy teenager. He would like to have been more attentive like his siblings. Every time he erred, he swore he had learnt from his mistake. Inevitably he would succumb to temptation and forget.

Miranda was in her forties, and although her skin was still quite youthful, her clothes and hair were practical, which gave her an austere and older appearance. As Matron she ran a tight ship when the children were in the house. For an hour each day though, she would let them run wild and free in her large garden, and although she didn't approve of Tag Venom and as long as no pixary wings were broken she tolerated it. Her only caveat was that no one was to go in the hive area, as it was the source of the orphanage's income.

Zephan had been caught opening a pixary hive the year before. Not to do any damage or cause harm to the creatures inside, but out of curiosity. The matron had caught him and had punished him for a week with chores in the cellar and cleaning the toilets. No one dared go into that area unless they were helping Miranda collect the honey. Bee stings and pixary bites were usually a good enough deterrent though.

Everyone stopped laughing and started to come out of their hiding places. Wondering what Teban had done now?

Miranda was on the warpath. She came storming down the steps into the garden from the kitchen, and across the garden path and with her extensive hand swatted Teban on the shoulder.

“Where's the birthday cake I made for Mrs Colby?”

The slap didn't hurt, but it did trigger his inner demon of a disciplinarian to go into overdrive. Why couldn't matron be a mind reader he briefly found himself wishing. She slapped him again. Being told off and beaten by the Matron was something of a regular occurrence for Teban. The other children stifled laughter, knowing it was not good for Matron to catch them otherwise they were likely to get a short, sharp clip around the ears.

"I know it was you. You're the only greedy piglet who would do such a thing."

Teban looked down at his shoes. Of all his weaknesses, a cake was his most significant downfall. His tooth was sweet, and he whenever he saw a delicious bun, or a fruit loaf, or in this case an iced chocolate birthday cake, he couldn't resist the temptation. He had seen and tried to resist the urge, but the chocolate smell had been too intoxicating. He had eaten nearly all of Mrs Colby's birthday cake like a glutton while Miranda had been cleaning upstairs. He knew he shouldn't, he was overweight and the punishments were always harsh for such a crime in the orphanage. Teban knew it was another source of income for the makeshift family and yet his taste buds yearned for it. He had intended to sneak the rest of the cake up to the loft later, but he knew no such guilty reward for his glutton would happen now. Of course, Matron could use a wand to transfigure some fruit into a rich cake, but magic cakes never tasted quite the same as a traditionally baked and iced cake.

Miranda was almost in tears, and her voice was elevated and high pitched where she was so angry. She could make another cake, but that would mean her staying up all night baking and decorating. How was she going to get Teban to stop stealing sweet treats from her kitchen? It was an on-going battle that she felt she was always losing.

Zephan started to giggle finding the expression on Matron's

face funny and that Teban had been the cause of the woman's comedic anger once again. Miranda shot him a nasty glance and Zephan fearfully ceased his giggle.

Miranda then grabbed Teban by the ear and dragged him towards the house.

"I have tried and tried to get through to you. You really are the greediest, most ungrateful child."

She was speaking to him like a ten-year-old and not a fifteen-year-old. Teban felt like a piece of turd the horses left on the streets, and his ear felt like it was going to be ripped clean off his head. As she dragged him up the steps to the kitchen, he had to grab hold of her apron string to stop himself from tripping up and surely losing his ear altogether. The woman hated him; he knew that. She was more strict with him than with any of the other children. She always had been. The other children would fight, and swear and get less severe punishments like being sent to the naughty step, or being made to wash dishes after dinner. Teban knew he was in for a beating of some kind. Her voice had that shrill blood-curdling tone that filled him with dread. He wished for someone other than matron to be reprimanding him. Why did his parents have to leave him with this woman as a baby? He knew if he had living birth parents then he would be better behaved and probably less greedy.

They entered the kitchen, a sizeable timber-framed room, with a stone arch taking over the far end of the room with a large metal oven stove in it. In the middle of the room was a large oak table with ten chairs. The counter was used for both preparations of food, and for the orphanage family to eat dinners. Miranda instructed Teban to put his head and hands on the table, and his blood went cold. He knew what it meant. Miranda then took a long birch cane, down from above the window which had rarely been used until recently and was supposed to be a deterrent for the children to try and curb insolence. In her mind Miranda had

never thought as matron she would need to use it. Her nerves and tolerance of Teban's repeated food thievery had recently reached a boiling point though, and for the third time that month, Miranda flexed the cane in her hands.

The first blow hit Teban's posterior and even with his trousers on, the strike stung him. The second blow caught his thigh. He felt himself yelping in pain each time she did it and was cross with himself that he had made a sound at all. He didn't like Miranda to know how her punishments affected him. With each strike, he would berate himself. Even so, as each blow found its mark, his mouth let out a small scream.

"You never learn."

Strike.

"You're too greedy."

Strike

"Why Teban? Why?"

Out of guilty humiliation, he didn't reply. He felt tears stinging his cheeks. He felt hot. A tingling sensation was filling his body and he wondered if he was about to faint. His back was starting to itch and burn, but Matron had not been striking him there. He felt he was going to pass out with each further strike. He heard the whistle of the next blow coming down, closed his eyes and...

...The blow didn't land.

Miranda let out a gasp and then with a forlorn whimper let out cried,

"Oh no!"

Teban opened his eyes. Miranda was now pacing around the dining table with one hand on her head and the other on her hip and shaking her head.

"No, no, no. Not now. This can't be happening now."

She was muttering to herself.

Teban was confused.

“What did I do now?”

He asked somewhat dejectedly.

Miranda turned to him and pointed at his body,

“Look.”

He looked down. His blue waistcoat and grey trousers that he usually wore were gone, and over his round body, there was now a dusky pink dress with a pale satin blue belt tied around his round belly. Was someone concealing an illegal wand and playing a practical joke he naively thought. If they were, he didn't like the thought of the other kids seeing him dressed as a girl. Someone was tugging on his back, so he turned round to see who it was, but no one was there. He felt someone yank on his shoulder blades of the, again. And again. Every time he turned around though he couldn't find anyone. Not used to wearing girl clothes, it occurred to him that he may have caught part of the skirt on one of the chairs, so reached behind himself to loosen whatever was snagging. He froze. Nothing was snagged. Teban became convinced there was some paper attached to his back that kept moving. He craned his neck around to try to see what was there and felt his stomach drop as he realised what was causing the friction.

He had wings.

Teban looked at Miranda confused and wanted an explanation. A look of pity now replaced what had moments ago been a rage-fuelled face. She reached out a hand,

“Come with me. Quickly.”

Teban thought for a moment that he must have been dreaming, but his legs still stung from the cane swipe. He felt tears began to well up and flow down his cheeks and yet he made no sound, too frightened that it may cause Matron shout at him ‘grow up’. He didn't feel like a fifteen-year-old. The confusion made him feel even more lost and odd. He went around the table like an infant, he took her hand and let himself be led up the old

creaky stairs to the Matrons bedroom. The room was small but comfortable. Lilac old paper hung from the walls, peeling slightly at the corners where it had seen better days. Her four post bed had no canopy on it, and the light summer blankets, which were also lilac, although clean, looked like they needed replacing with new ones. There were large oak wardrobes and a small vanity desk to the right of the door, and on the far wall by the window was a tall free standing mirror and an easy-chair. Miranda walked Teban over to the mirror and stood behind him as he gazed at his reflection.

Teban looked bewildered into the mirror. What the mirror showed him was not logical. Miranda was in the reflection, but where he should have been standing was a girl fairy staring back at him. He cocked his head, and the girl did too. His mouth opened to say words that did not come out, and the girl also did. He leaned forward, and the girl reflection leaned towards him. She looked a bit like him. She had the same height, same plump curves and the eyes were the same ice blue of his. The girl wore a full work dress of dusk pink. The dress was sleeveless, with a short-sleeved, pale blue, work blouse underneath. On her feet were ballet style shoes. Her hair was longer than his and tied up at the back loosely, and golden locks fell down the girls back a short way, with a considerable quif of a fringe framing her face. On her back were large translucent wings that were opalescent blue pink and yellow, and seemed to ripple the colours as the wings fluttered. They were not the dragonfly-shaped wings that fairies like his friend Suki had. These wings were butterfly shaped, but unlike a butterfly's opaque wings, Teban could see straight through the opal sheen. He groaned. These were the wings of only one type of creature, which meant only one thing. The reflection was him. He wasn't human like he had always thought. He was a mix-blood. A human fairy mixblood. He shuddered and felt his blood run cold with fear.

Teban revolted by his new form, felt himself slump to the floor, and the door burst open with Sophie, Kealan and Koko falling through in energetic excitement.

“Matron? Can Tymon help us climb the small tree please?”

Koko was asking enthusiastically but then saw Teban. She started to giggle, and Kealan and Sophie spied Teban too started to laugh.

“Teban. Why are you dressed like a girl?”

Koko said laughing.

Teban panicking looked to Miranda for help. Prejudice of mixbloods was rife throughout the city under Queen Denmilate’s reign. ‘Please don’t let Koko make fun of me for being mixblood’ he found himself wishing. Instead, the girl stated the next most obvious thing,

“Teban wants to be a girl!”

Kealan blurted out in between his guffaws of laughter.

“I think she looks pretty,”

Sophie said almost seriously but still giggling.

Miranda disapprovingly ushered the infants out of the room, telling them that as long as they did what Tymon and Suki said, they could go and climb the small tree. She then shut her bedroom door and went and sat on the edge of her bed and motioned for Teban to join her. Confused and feeling very awkward he sat next to her.

“I don’t understand.”

“I know. I should have told you earlier, but there never seemed to be a right moment,” Miranda said taking one of Teban’s hands in hers.

“You knew?”

The matron nodded, guilt faintly exposing itself through the lines around her eyes and forehead.

“It was one of the few things I did know about you when I found you. As a baby, you were like this, but by the time you were eighteen months you had become a boy.”

“Will I become a boy again?”

Miranda nodded.

“Probably in a couple of hours.”

“Why am I like this now though?”

Teban picked up the material of the dress he was wearing in disgust. He felt uncomfortable. The skirt was light and airy round his legs. He wanted the comfort of trousers. Miranda stood up and started to pace slowly around her room. She was used to the usual teenage talk. She had done it many times with her previous charges, but she had never had to deal with an adolescent mix-blood before. She was in unknown territory. She had heard of horrendous stories of mix-blood teens committing suicide, running away from home, visiting Wizards for potions to “Cure” themselves, only to end up in the hospital with a severe case of food poisoning. She huffed and decided that blunt matter of a fact tone was probably going to be best here. She would tell Teban the truth, and then find a way of supporting him, and now her too.

“You know what a mix-blood is?”

“Yes, a child whose parents are human and fairy.”

“Do you know how being a mix-blood affects a teenager?”

“The kids at school say horrid stories about not being able to control the changes, and that they go mad and die. They say that they are evil. The bullies call the weaker ones mix-bloods when they are fighting.” Teban knew nothing good about mixbloods and had only ever witnessed cruelty to the few mixbloods that went to his school. Teban felt his blood rising in his head and his voice becoming higher pitched. He...

She was growing stressed.

“You need to breathe Teban. Only a few mix-blood children have ever died, and that was because they had no support. You do have support. I may get angry at your gluttony, but as Matron, all I have ever wanted for you, or any of the children here, is for you to be safe, and grow up to be upstanding adults when you finally leave my care,” Miranda said trying to reassure the girl. Still, with agitation in her voice, Teban asked,

“I will become like this again though yes?”

“I’m afraid so. Up until you are eighteen or nineteen, as your body continues to grow towards being an adult, you will

change from boy to girl frequently. Eventually, though your body will settle into one identity, and you will be either a fairy or a human until you die of old age.”

“What’s going to cause me to change? Is there a way I can force myself into being a boy more?”

It was a question the matron didn’t know the answer too. She was going to have to ask for advice next time she went to the apothecary. There seemed to be a logical answer for now though,

“I am not sure, but I think it might be to do with your emotions. I think when you get heightened feelings of anger, upset or even too happy, that is going to make you change.”

“What happens if I change when I am at school or in the town square?”

“I can speak to your teachers. I can try to make them see that you are not bullied and aware of the situation.” This was only a partial truth Teban thought. The teachers weren’t always around. The bullies picked on him for being fat at break times. Turning into a girl when the boys bullied him was going to give those gits at school more ammunition to find new ways to torture him. Miranda continued, tried to reassure him further, but the more she spoke, the less she realised the matron knew about school hierarchy and how low Teban had now sunk on the social scale. Teban felt like detritus. Nothing that Miranda was saying was helping, but she continued.

“As for the town square. Here in Aphos, we are multicultural. I think the worse you are going to get a few stares. Maybe occasionally a human bigot will call you a racist name, but other than that, you’re not going to get lynched or anything like that.”

Teban felt his world was collapsing. He was changing into something alien. Something disorientating.

“You said you found me as a girl. Did I have a girl’s name?”

“Yes. You were called Thelba.”

“Oh no!” she groaned, “ You’ve got to be kraken kidding me. Thelba? That’s a posh girl’s name. I’m not posh.”

“You could be.”

Why on earth would Matron think she could be posh? She had lived in the orphanage all her life. She went to a public school. Never once had she been to an art gallery or a fancy restaurant. Thelba raised an eyebrow.

“Seriously?”

Miranda grinned. Teban making Matron smile was not what he was used to; he was more used to making her face scowl at him.

“I try to make you behave correctly, but you can be so infuriating at times.”

“I’m sorry,” Thelba said bashfully.

That took Miranda by surprise, and she felt a small breakthrough of pride fill her stony heart towards the confused teenager. Teban had never voluntarily said sorry before. He had always needed to be prompted. Here as Thelba though came an apology that had sounded genuine.

“So that’s why the pixaries don’t bite me!” Thelba exclaimed out of nowhere.

Miranda startled by the comment laughed.

“Yes. But I still don’t like how mean you and Suki are when you play that game. Poor pixaries. How I ever get enough honey from them never ceases to amaze me. Especially after the torment, you put on them.”

Crying started to waft up the stairs to the room. Miranda looked towards the noise. She knew what that meant. One of the infants had either fallen or gotten a splinter. She got up to leave.

“Are you coming down?” she asked encouragingly, but Thelba shook her head.

“I think I’ll go up to my room.”

Miranda nodded,

“OK. I will send Suki up. You’re going to have questions to ask her. Fairy questions. Things I can’t answer but she can. OK?”

“Yes.” And then as an afterthought, “thank you.”

Teban's bedroom was in the attic and Thelba entered in a state of bewilderment. The room was about twelve feet wide and was the full thirty-foot length of the orphanage. Rafters supporting the old terracotta roof sloped down to the floor and from them hung mobiles and paper decorations Teban, Suki and Tymon had made while they were growing up. Although only three of them shared the room, there were six beds in all. All were made of old oak and were solid pieces of furniture. They had been built to take lots of rough play from the children the orphanage had brought into its fold over the years. Three large wardrobes with clumsy carvings on the doors were in between every two beds, with tall boys at the foot of each bed. With all the oak furniture and the beams above also being made of the same wood, the attic could have been a very dull place. Over the years, however, the children and now the teens had decorated the wood with pictures, toys and other colourful objects from the market square outside and turned what could have been a morose space, into a sanctuary of rainbow fun. When the light shone in from either end of the room through the moderately sized windows, the room seemed to sparkle and shimmer with vibrancy.

It was evening and clouds had formed. The room felt like it was swallowing Thelba as she entered and went to sit on her tallboy. The decorations that usually comforted her and brightened her mood were of little comfort to her. She went to lean back on the bedpost behind her, but her wings got in the way.

"Arrggghhhhh", she muttered in disgust.

She had been born like this, but everything about her current body felt alien. Her skin felt soft, her long hair tickled the back of her neck and the quif at the front kept falling in her eye. The wings kept tugging on her spine and seeming to have a life of their own. Someone had hijacked her identity.

Banging footsteps came charging up the stairs and Suki came into view. The fairy for all her daintiness was extremely heavy footed on stairs. Her frail frame belied a strength that had

the power to slam down hard on any bully who tried to intimidate her. Suki never abused the responsibility that came with her fairy strength and as a result, had a great deal of respect from not only the children and teenagers in the local market square where they lived but at school and with the Aphos street children.

She saw Thelba and with awe in her voice exclaimed,
“Oh, Kraken!”

The fairy slowed down, walked directly over to the tallboy where Thelba sat next to her friend.

“So I’m not the only fairy here now.” She said in an unconvincing jovial voice. Thelba bumped her friend with her shoulder half-heartedly and groaned,

“Oh, Suki! Why me?”

“I can’t answer that,” she placed her hand on Thelba’s knee, “It’s not a bad thing though.”

“But what about the other kids? The infants just laughed at me. Imagine what Cadstekcer and the other bullies at school will be like when they find out this. They already make my life hell for being fat.”

“You could eat less.”

“I like my food though,” Thelba muttered petulantly.

“I know.”

“When we’re at school you’ll have to stick near Tymon and me at break times from now on then so we can keep an eye out for Cadstekcer.”

“He’s going to find out sooner or later. We’ll find a way to deal with the diplo.”

They went into a stilted silence. Suki nudged Thelba with her shoulder.

“How does it feel?”

“I feel stupid.”

“You shouldn’t.”

Thelba raised an eyebrow sarcastically at her friend who was like a sister to her. Suki giggled a little,

“Oh come on. Think about it. Imagine the fun you can have with tree climbing and Venom Tag now you got wings. We’ll be unstoppable.”

“Thelba started to smile. She wanted to lie down but those wings would make it impossible to lie down.

“How do you sleep with those on your back?”

“Oh Teban,” then correcting herself, because of what Matron had told her downstairs about Teban’s fairy name, “Thelba! Seriously? Have you never seen what I do at bedtime?”

“You’re my friend. I never paid it much attention. You were always there. When it comes to bedtime, I go out so quickly.”

“Typical boy.”

“Well that’s changed now hasn’t it?”

“It sure has,” Suki cheekily chirped, then assuming a slightly arrogant poise took on the newly bestowed honour of teaching Thelba how to be a fairy.

“OK, so when it’s time to sleep my wings naturally goes into their pouches.”

“You have pouches on your back?” Thelba asked shocked.

Suki nodded,

“So do you, I would imagine. Your wings are different shapes because you’re only half a fairy, but you should have something like my pouches. Want me to have a look?”

Thelba said yes and stood up and turned, so her back was facing Suki. She felt Suki unbutton the back of her dress and felt the small hands explore the area around her shoulder blades. The fingers seemed to find what they were looking for and Thelba felt the dainty fingers creeping gently into her skin. It tickled. Thelba jumped so hard and felt the wings flapping with urgency. Suki fell backwards on the floor and proceeded to howl with laughter. Thelba looked down at her friend who was laughing so hard that she had gone a deep shade of red.

She was looking down.

She was looking down further that she should have been for a short fat girl.

"I'm flying," she thought, "I'm actually flying."

It was a disorientating feeling. Her legs were not sure what to do with themselves. There was nothing to balance herself in the air which made her panic a little. She reached up to one of the beams to steady herself. Mentally, Thelba wanted to get down. But the wings were flapping and keeping her aloft.

"How do I get down?" she shouted out starting to panic.

"Push your shoulder blades down and squeeze them together," Suki replied still laughing.

Thelba pushed her arms down to her sides and then squeezed her shoulders back hard. Her body fell to the floor instantly and with her bulk, she hit the floor with a great big thud. It made Suki laugh even harder.

"Don't squeeze them that hard. That just stops them altogether."

Thelba felt herself glowering at Suki.

"Now you tell me."

Suki started to regain control of herself and apologised.

"Your face was a picture though."

Tingling was starting to surge through her back, and Suki's face became serious as she witnessed the fairy in front of her start to glow, and then with a flash of bright light reveal the boy she called her brother. Thelba had become Teban again.

"Wow." Suki exhaled, "That's quite something."

Teban was checking himself all over. Making sure he was indeed a boy. He also found himself feeling a little frustrated. He had wanted to try flying again. Suki seemed to read his mind.

"Matron says you're going to be changing a lot. So I guess we're going to have to practice fairy stuff when we get the chance." Suki then seemed to have a mischievous thought. She positively beamed.

2 Fairy Practice & Wand Mischief

Breakfast in the orphanage was always a time of great fun because of the wands. Miranda religiously made her children eat a bowl of cereal and a piece of fruit each morning. Once they had completed their breakfast, each teen and infant was allowed to take some fruit from the fruit bowl in the middle of the dining table, and transform it into a sweet treat of their choosing. The only stipulations were that whatever treat they materialised, had to be the same size fruit as the one they had eaten for breakfast. Many years before, Miranda had one infant in her charge that would always turn his orange into a birthday cake and repeatedly made himself sick, so the precautions were her way of safeguarding herself from having to clean up vomit.

Magical wand use in Figmentasia was a licensed affair. Queen Denmilate had outlawed unlicensed wand use shortly after she had come to reign fifteen years before. She had voiced her concern over the amount of crime involving thefts, brutality and fraud. The queen had got the bill passed through parliament on the concessions that children should still be allowed their 'Toy-wands'. Toy wands could do no harm it was widely acknowledged and as it was a huge source of revenue for the local traders, but a small

tax was added each wand sale, thus ensuring that the royal coffers profited. The toy-wands magic had limits to what they could do. They could turn food into other kinds of food. They could help a child dress or undress themselves to change into their nightclothes or vice versa. Dolls and stuffed toys could be made to dance. Fairy children were able to do small levitation tricks. The Magical Ministry disabled all other magic. Children didn't seem to mind the limited capabilities and would find ways of keeping themselves or their friends amused. Schools noticed that in many instances the toys seemed to enhance a child's creative development.

Teban sat in his usual place at the centre of the table next to Suki, with Tymon sat opposite them and the two youngest infants. Sophie and Koko sat on either side of Tymon so that they the two infants would not squabble with each other. The Zephan and Kealan children always seemed to sit in different places with Tatiana, Miranda's daughter sat at one end of the table while Miranda sat at the head of the table by the stove. Teban liked sitting in the middle as he could get to more of the breakfast offerings which always included bacon and croissants. It was usually his favourite time of day but on this morning his usual confidence had been reduced to a hunched up, quiet and scared demeanour. He was trying not to look anyone in the eye. Awkward questions were coming and as much as he wished they wouldn't, he knew he couldn't change his circumstances.

Miranda had spoken to all the children the previous evening and told them if she found anyone teasing Teban or Thelba that her punishments would be severe. Teban chanced a glance around the table and felt sick at the looks he saw on his make-shift family's faces. Tatiana the oldest girl at eighteen, and Zephan the second oldest boy after Tymon looked at Teban as if he had an illness that would induce death. The three infants though looked at Teban with curious eyes. Teban could see the dozens of questions they were obviously itching to ask him. With her usual unfiltered aplomb,

Koko was the first one to broach the taboo subject,

“When you’re a girl will you have to sit on the toilet like Sophie and me?”

Teban felt his cheeks turn burning hot red and wished for the ground to open up and swallow him. He saw Miranda turn around quickly so as not to let the other children see her smirk which humiliated him. Teban liked the open directness of infants and their questions and groaned to himself that Koko would come up with an inappropriate but innocent question. He saw Miranda recompose herself and turned around to look at him apologetically. Tymon, Suki and Tatiana were all staring at Koko with their mouths wide open, stunned at her outburst. Teban felt himself blush and knew he had gone bright red. He looked down at his cereal, while the younger children giggled. Rather than let the embarrassment consume him, he decided to play down Koko’s faux pas,

“I guess I will have to,” he replied to Koko, frustrated that she had been the first to embarrass him.

Miranda gave him a nod to say he had said the right thing. “No point in dodging a direct question when asked by this lot,” she said to him through her gaze.

Teban let out a big sigh, looked around the table and saw that everyone seemed to be more embarrassed than he was. The statement helped him relieve some of the tension. He took a banana from the overloaded fruit bowl and from somewhere deep inside him he found a tiny bit of courage. If he showed he was upset or scared the older ones would tease him. If he got angry, the little ones would start to cry and Miranda would tell him off. So he looked up from his breakfast and addressed his makeshift family,

“You better ask your questions so I can get this over and done with,” he told them.

The questions flew from all around the table.

“Why did it happen?”

“What causes it?”

“Have you got magic powers?”

“Is that why the pixaries don’t bite you?”

“Will you date boys or girls?”

On and on the questions went. Some Teban could answer, some Suki helped out with and for those that they couldn't answer Miranda would deflect by saying,

“We'll have to learn that one along the way” or “Let's find a book at the library.”

As the discussion went on Teban realised that at least inside his home walls he would be safe. Thelba had become a symbol of curiosity and exploration for all of them, not, as he had feared, something to be mocked. At the back of his mind though was the fear of what beheld him at school. He was glad he was almost at the end of his schooling years, as it meant no more having to put up with bigots and bullies on a daily basis. He had decided to become a baker's apprentice when he graduated. His love of cake meant that if he became a baker, he could make and eat cake as much as he wanted.

With the breakfast over, it was then time for Teban's favourite time of the morning, wand-time. One the children had triumphantly consumed the morning meal they all took a piece of fruit from the bowl in the middle of the table and started to turn their chosen healthy treat into cakes and biscuits or candy. Teban always smiled to himself that Suki was the only one who never opted for candy or pastries. She turned her fruit into other fruit, usually fruit out of season. She said that too much sugar made her skin and wings itch. Tymon by contrast, never seemed to have the same thing twice, always amazing the other makeshift family by thinking of something different he wanted to try. Teban was predictable. He chose to turn an apple or a pear into a slice of Lardy Cake. The sticky, sugary stodgy cake always settled on his breakfast stomach in a satisfying feeling of comfort and fullness. At least until break time. Once they had finished breakfast, Tymon and Teban tidied up the kitchen while Suki and Tatiana helped Miranda get the younger ones ready for school. It was routine but for Teban and the rest of the orphanage, it was comforting.

History was a subject Teban didn't really like, but Suki never seemed phased by it. Frustratingly for Teban, Tymon loved history. He was dumbfounded when Tymon took up an additional history and mythology class at the start of the year but marvelled at Tymon becoming a little encyclopedia of knowledge. Their history teacher Mr Rice was old and had what appeared to be a skeleton-like body. To Teban's ear, Mr Rice spoke in a long, droll monotonous drone that seemed to trick his head into feeling sleepy which made him drearily drowsy as the teacher droned on,

“Queen Cephelia was the first woman to reign supreme over the Figmen Empire, thus making her the first Empress. She was stubborn and selfish and was known to have had many of Poston's and Encafe's population killed because they opposed her empirical view. Most of the civil war was over whom should have the sovereign rule, the indigenous monarchy, or the Empress...”

Teban's eyes were feeling exceedingly tired and more than once Suki had to nudge him to make him open his eyes. He tried to focus but he had not slept well the night before worrying about Thelba surfacing herself at school. He was going to have to find a way to incorporate her into his life for at least the next six years. “Just please don't show yourself at school,” Teban found himself thinking. If Jacob Cadstekcer and his cronies saw what was becoming of him, there would be hell to pay. Life at school would just become unbearable. He struggled to get through the school day at the best of times. Break-times were always the worst because Jacob would find him and either belittle him or worse find some excuse to inflict pain. He realised that his usual gloomy self in student hours would find no solace or happiness for the remainder of his last few months of school.

Mr Rices voice barked and jolted Teban to attention, “Teban Osiris, perhaps you could join the rest of us and tell us why the Empress would feel the need to attempt an invasion of The

Deadly Isles?”

Teban without realising had fallen asleep. He felt his cheeks go hot as everyone in the classroom turned to look at him. He heard Suki and Tymon mutter something disapproving, and desperately looked around for some emotional support. No one dared look at him. When Mr Rice snapped, it was every boy and girl for themselves. Slapped with disappointment, Teban saw that every pupil in the classroom had their gaze set on their desktops.

“Well?” Mr Rice shouted almost in a woman’s tone of agitation.

“I don’t know sir,” Teban feebly said.

“Do you want me to send you to Nurse for some rape-snake cordial?”

Teban involuntarily gagged at the thought. Rape-snake cordial was made from the blood of an indigenous reptile and had avlen herb added to it, along with vinegar and honey. The concoction was supposed to be an energy drink which was rumoured to be taken by the royal guards when they were on long watch shifts. The children all knew that it was just a foul taste designed to linger so long in their mouths. Every time Teban had been given the foul liquid he had spent days vowing never to misbehave again. A bit like adults with alcohol he had noted. It was a vow that, try as he might, Teban could never keep.

“I’d rather not see Nurse, sir,” Teban felt himself saying pathetically.

“You’d rather not? Get over here.” the teacher screamed with a wobbly red face and a mop of hair that seemed to flail everywhere. If it weren’t for fear of the man’s wrath, the children would have freely laughed at him. None did.

Teban felt the blood drain from his face. He was about to get a caning, for the second time within twenty-four hours. Wanting the ground to swallow him up knew he had no control over his morphing into Thelba yet, and if it happened now, it would

be in front of everyone, including Miles and Jacob the two thugs who made his school life hell. He rose slowly from his seat and saw the two bullies sadistically grinning at him. Teban hated that Miles and Jacob always seemed to be around at the most inopportune moments. He felt his eyes pleading with Mr Rice to change his mind, but the cold, angry stare that stared back at him was giving Teban no reprieve.

“Now, Mr Osiris. Come here! If I come over there, you will rue the day you were born.”

Reluctantly and trembling, Teban made himself place one foot in front of the other and walked towards the tyrannical adult. Nausea and dread coursed through his whole body. As he passed other pupils desks, stifled snigger’s wafted up to his ear, taunting him, taking pleasure in his humiliation. His shoulders were starting to have a tickling feeling. “Two more steps and this will be over,” he thought to himself and tried to ignore the sensation on his spine. As he had done the day before in the orphanage kitchen, Teban placed his hands on the teacher’s table and bent over presenting his behind for the slaughter. With his nose so close to the wood, he noticed that it smelled musky and almost peppery, “Just like Mr Rice,” he thought to himself. With his resolve rapidly deflating Teban’s tingling sensation seemed to be consuming him more than it had the day before. Teban’s felt his eyes become wide with panic and he looked to Suki for help. Suki was still looking at her desk which meant he could find no solace in a friend’s sympathetic gaze. Teban gritted his teeth and tried to make himself fight through the sensation taking over his body. His shoulder blades felt like they were burning. The cane came down and Teban winced. There was burning friction on his back which became too much of a distraction now for him to feel if the cane strike hurt him. The next blow landed on his backside and all hell broke loose.

There was a bright flash.

Teban became Theiba.

With horror, Teban saw Mr Rice fall backwards, where his eyes had been stunned by the bright light caused by transforming.

He saw Suki and Tymon stand up suddenly knocking their chairs over.

Wishing to be any place but there in the classroom, Teban saw Miles and Jacob let out a walloping cheer. They looked at her with a smugness that screamed, "Wait till we get hold of you now!"

All hope of an easier last few months of school were gone. Why would the fates be so cruel to him he wondered. Had he been that wicked?

The rest of the class jaws seemed to have hit their desks.

Thelba felt shamed as Suki and Tymon looked on at her with helpless pity strewn across their faces.

She looked behind her cautiously. Mr Rice was looking at her with confusion. He was flustered. No, not flustered, he was embarrassed Thelba realised. He started waving a finger and his arms, shooing her away from him.

"Go back to your desk," he said, his skeletal face now red with embarrassment.

Keeping her eyes on the ground, Thelba made her way back to where she had just been sitting as Teban. Her last few weeks of school were going to become her biggest nightmare.

The rest of the day went not how Thelba expected. Word had gone around the school like wildfire. There was a new mix-blood in the school.

"Teban Osiris is a mix-blood!"

The braver or more curious natured children would approach Teban on breaks and ask him questions. The less sure of themselves either whispered in small groups or sought out Suki and Tymon to ask them when Thelba was out of earshot. Miles and Jacob came nowhere near her though. Rather than make her feel comforted, the lack of attention from the two boys only instilled more fear in Thelba. They would be an ambush one of her identities at some point. It was inevitable.

Inevitable came as Thelba made her way home with Suki, Tymon had stayed behind to attend science club. As they approached the market alley, the shortcut that would bring them out onto the piazza almost opposite where they lived, Thelba's last glimmer of hope that her day would end positively dissipated completely. As they entered the narrow pathway, Jacob and Miles came at them via the far end in front of them. Thelba fearfully grasped Suki's hand and turned to retreat but two other boys appeared behind them, blocking their route of retreat.

"So you're a wannabe fairy now?" Jacob snarled as he stealthily walked towards Thelba.

Thelba knowing she was the prey remained silent. Past experiences as Teban, had taught her replying, pleading or retaliating made Jacob more spiteful. Thelba knew Suki was not intimidated though, but it didn't give her any peace of mind.

"Let us through Jacob," she heard Suki haughtily tell him.

Jacob looked at Suki with a mock-friendly smile,

"Oh, you can go on through Suki. It's your fairy sister we want."

The way he had sneered the word 'sister' revolted Thelba. Jacob had managed to make the word 'Sister' sound offensive. Her innards recoiled as she acknowledged that this encounter was going to be far worse and unlike anything she had received off of the brute when she had been Teban.

"Then I will stay," Suki said back indignantly but the reassuring support did nothing to allay Thelba's fear.

"Fair enough," came Jacob's tentative reply. A pureblood fairy was known to be strong. He called Miles to his side and whispered in his friend's ear. Miles pulled out a small bag and pulled something out of it and then let a fine blue powder fall from his hand into Jacob's outstretched palm. He sadistically grinned at Suki and Suki glared at him. The low life piece of scum had bought rape-snake powder to a fight. Suki knew if she tried to intervene in any way, the boys would throw the concoction at her wings. The

substance had a fierce burning sensation if thrown on fairy wings. Thelba understood the threat made to her friend. Suki may be there for moral support but that was all her friend could do. Jacob paid Suki no more attention; his sadistic glare shifted focus to her, Thelba the mixblood.

Thelba felt herself starting to shake.

“Even as a fairy, she’s fat!” Miles jeered, and the other boys started to laugh.

Jacob took a few steps towards Thelba. Jacob was close enough that he could head-but Thelba if he wanted. Jacob stared with arrogant, cocky menace into Thelba’s terrified eyes.

“Boo!”

Thelba startled took a step backwards but one of the boys behind her pushed her forward. Jacob turned around and then with startling speed, about-footed and pushed her back. One of the boys behind her had gotten on his hand and knees making an obstacle that made her round body not only fall backwards, but sent her legs up into the air, and her head smacked the ground with a thud. Her wings felt crushed and the pain this shot into her torso was unlike any pain she had ever known. Thelba was in agony.

She heard Suki screaming, “Stop it. You’re hurting her!”

Miles mimicked back tauntingly, “Stop it. You’re hurting her!” followed by a cackle and snorting laughter.

Jacob paid little attention to Suki and continued stalking around Thelba. His smirk seemed to stretch from one side of his face to the other. He kicked Thelba in her ribs and she heard herself yelp. He went to boot her again, but Thelba out of instinct tried to grab his foot with her hands. She caught it and stopped the foot moving.

“That was a mistake” he reprimanded her, but Thelba was still holding his foot. She remembered something and started to smile. She pushed the foot away with surprising ease and quickly stood up to face Jacob. Jacob seemed confused. Thelba knew the boy was used to Teban just curling into a ball and taking his

punishment. He threw a fist in towards her stomach, and deftly Thelba caught his hand. Surprising herself, she started to squeeze Jacob's fist and saw the boys' face go from an aggressor to one that was startled. The mixblood felt confidence surfacing in her that she had never experienced before, and defiantly said,

"It seems that as a fairy I am a bit stronger than as a boy."

Jacob lashed out with his other arm, aiming for her head, but Thelba found she was strong enough to not only hold the hand she already held but let her left one was able to grab Jacobs second striking arm with ease. She decided to give him a little taste of his own medicine. She started to twist his arms inward and upwards, against the natural flow of the elbow joint. Jacob was now scared and looked at his friends for help. Thelba looked over her shoulder at the other boys and they seemed unsure as to what to do next. She felt her confidence begin to gain momentum as she knew that everyone had known about fairies being tenacious, which was why the louts had never picked on Suki. Thelba and the rest of her circle had always assumed that mix-bloods would be weak due to having human blood in them. The young mixblood saw that none of the gang was prepared to help Jacob take on a fight with her, a half fairy.

Suki strutted towards the boys.

"Run along boys. Shows over."

Thelba then copied Jacob earlier menace and brought her face close to his.

"I suggest you run along too," and then as an afterthought, she spat out the word, "mate!"

She let go of her vice hold on his arms and Jacob took off after his small gang of would-be thugs.

Thelba sighed.

Her adrenaline was making her shake, but relief starting to take hold, a bewildered Thelba hears Suki declare "You're amazing!"

Thelba blushed. The adrenaline in her system started to wane and she allowed herself a little smile. Not only had she stood up to her aggressor, but she had scared him. She felt empowered.

The girls resumed their walk through the alley, and left the confined space for the market square where they lived, Thelba saw the apothecary next to the orphanage and found she had a yearning to speak to Kolowski the Wizard.

“Would you come with me to talk to Kolowski?” she tried to say nonchalantly.

Thelba saw that Suki could hear from her voice that there was a motive behind her request.

“And we would be going in to speak to Kolowski because?” Suki sceptically asked her.

“I want to see if he has anything that would cure me of changing into this,” Thelba motioned to her body.

Suki groaned, “Thelba, you know wizards are unreliable when it comes to magical stuff. Colds and flu’s they are amazing at curing. Magical stuff, they’re pretty unreliable, and I don’t know if Kolowski has ever dealt in any magical healing.”

“I’d still like to ask him.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“You go home if you want. I can ask him myself.”

“No-way. I’m not letting you go in there alone. I’m coming with you.”

The fairies crossed the square to the apothecary, a small wooden beamed fronted building with just two floors. Because it was next door to the orphanage, both girls were alarmed they would be seen by Miranda, who they knew would disapprove of the enquiry. Thelba had to stifle a nervous laugh though when Suki spoke in a theatrical whisper.

“What if Matron catches us?”

“We’ll tell her we were asking him if his stock of pixary honey needed replenishing.”

Suki sceptically raised an eyebrow at Thelba as if to say, ‘Matron won’t buy that excuse.’

Thelba knew she needed answers and was already opening the door to the shop and going inside.

The inside of the shop was dark and cold and flooded the senses with smells of spice and fragrance, almost to the point of being intoxicating. Shelves from the floor to the low beamed ceilings seemed to bow with all the potions and medicines piled onto them. In the middle of the small shop was a u-shaped counter made of old storage crates, with posies of different herbs hanging from the ceiling beam above it. In front of the service area stood some old pine chairs for consultations, or for people waiting for remedies. From the small space between the herbs and the countertop was around reddish-faced man, wearing a drab light brown tunic shirt, and dirty brown velvet trousers.

Before Queen Denmilate's reign, Apos had been the western centre for excellence in magic training. Students from the entire western hemisphere would flock to the island of Figmentasia in the hopes of becoming a great wizard. Most never fully achieved their goals and would graduate with the status known as wizard. A wizard was someone who could prove at test level that they had an understanding of all the history and procedures of a wizard would use, and had a solid knowledge of the rudiments of an apothecary, but lacked the necessary aptitude for applying and utilising powerful spells with their wands. When Denmilate came to the throne, she closed all the colleges and universities in the island had. The parliament had cited that they did not want to nurture terrorists like the ones who had assassinated the current queen's older sister and family who had been on the throne before her. The Queen had been inconsolable, and due to the love for the royal family, only a few had protested. With places of learning such skills abolished, there was no central record of who had trained and who had gained what ability. In turn, this gave rise to charlatans claiming to be wizards who would then open a fortune telling shop or apothecary with fake medicines. So ingrained in the Apos culture was the use of these services, that great profits could be made by the charlatans.

Albus Micklemore face beamed a professional smile at them, and with a high pitched voice he welcomed them,

“What brings you here Suki?” he incorrectly assumed that Thelba was a school friend.

“We wondered how your stocks of honey were Mr Micklemore, and...” Suki stammered and paused over dramatically.

Thelba groaned at her friend’s clumsiness. With a disapproving glare, she took over the conversation,

“And I need to ask you for some help.”

Mr Micklemore cocked his head to one side. Thelba knew the man knew his stocks were fine. She saw a knowing look of recognition dawn on his face, but he cordially played along,

“I’m fine for honey until the weekend, so if you could tell Miranda I will take thirty more jars off her then,” he said to Suki coming out from behind the hiding place of the counter.

“What question do you have for me?” he asked Thelba as he sat on one of the waiting chairs, and beckoned to the girls to join him.

“Do you have a cure for mix-bloods?” Thelba tried to ask nonchalantly but realised she had failed in the tone as soon as she had spoken. She reprimanded herself for being as socially clumsy as Suki. The question seemed to take Albus Micklemore by surprise. He looked at Thelba and his face went from a questioning look to realisation.

“Teban?” he asked staring from the wings to the Thelba’s face and back again. ‘He looks shocked’ Thelba thought, but she nodded at the obviously bemused man.

“It’s me, but I would rather just be Teban.”

Mr Micklemore was scratching his head and seemed to be pondering what he could do for her.

“Does Miranda know you are here?” he asked concerned.

She felt herself look at the floor ashamed.

Mr Micklemore patted her shoulder sympathetically saying, “Don’t worry, I’m used to teenage girls coming in here for help. It’s

just it's not usually this kind of help I get asked. I won't say anything to your guardian if you don't want me to."

Thelba looked into the man's kind eyes and thanked him.

"So have you got anything?" Thelba asked almost with a plead.

Mr Micklemore's mouth went up at the sides and he chuckled reassuringly, "I have."

"How much?" Thelba asked cautiously.

"One gold piece."

That would be all of her month's allowance gone. She would need to hide that she had spent all her money from Miranda as she would not be pleased that Thelba had not been frugal with her money. Thelba turned to Suki,

"Will you cover for me if Miranda asks me to go shopping?"

It was deceitful to ask the question. What Thelba was saying was would Suki lend her money till the next allowance day in ten days' time. Thelba knew that Suki understood the implication immediately and reluctantly said she would help. Thelba pulled out her last gold coin from her pouch and gave it to Mr Micklemore.

It took Mr Micklemore about ten minutes to make the potion. He masterfully ground up some spices and herbs neither one of the girls had ever seen before. When he was satisfied he had crushed them, he added the contents of the pestle to a small amount of green liquid in a vial shaped glass flask and held a match underneath it for a few seconds. Throwing the match to the floor, Mr Micklemore shook the bottle and then repeated the process, with a final three slow but deliberate three shakes. Lastly, he pulled out his licensed wand and muttered something unrecognisable, tapped the bottle with the wand five times. The concoction seemed to come alive for a few seconds, with the herbs that were left in the liquid glowing and sparkling for a few seconds and then dimmed. Thelba grinned with anticipation. The wizard was satisfied with his work, smiled and then came back to the girls and placed a small vial in Thelba's hand.

“One gulp, and if your heart is true, you’ll be Teban all the time.”

Suki grabbed the bottle out of Thelba’s hand,

“What do you mean if her heart is true?”

The man scowled at the impetuous fairy and Thelba thought for a fearful moment that the concoction would withhold the medicine. Mr Micklemore seemed unperturbed by Suki though, and assertively said,

“Just that. If Teban wants to be Teban, the potion will work. If he or she is unsure in the slightest, the potion won’t work.”

“That sounds like a gamble.” Suki fired back and Thelba resisted the urge to punch her friend and instead firmly grasped Suki’s arm to warn her to shut up.

Mr Micklemore seemed to be getting rattled by being questioned and Thelba could hear he was trying to hide his irritation when he spoke directly to her “It’s only a gamble if you have questions about your identity.”

Suki let out a puff of frustration and folded her arms in disgust. Thelba knew her friend was uncomfortable with the situation and that nothing felt right to her. Thelba reached into Suki’s arms and retrieved the potion from her friend’s hand.

“It’s OK. I know what I am doing” Thelba told Suki calmly. Suki continued to frown at her. Thelba ignored the expression on Suki’s face, and swiftly removed the cork from the bottle and put it to her lips and swallowed the green concoction in one gulp. She looked at Suki defiantly saying, “There, it’s done.” Suki shook her head and stormed out of the shop. Thelba thanked Mr Micklemore and exited the shop just as Miranda was opening the door of the orphanage to let Suki in. Miranda looked at Thelba, questioning why she had been in Mr Micklemore’s, and Thelba fed her the line about honey stocks and offered up Mr Micklemore’s request for the weekend order. With relief, the matron seemed to accept this as a valid reason and said nothing more. Suki was stamping up the stairs, and Thelba looked at Miranda embarrassed.

“Have you two had a row?” the woman asked.

“Sort of. I better do my homework down here and let her calm down.” Thelba proffered.

Miranda agreed. It took a lot for Suki to lose her temper, but when she did, everyone in the orphanage, including the matron knew it was best to let the fairy calm herself down. The whole house knew that when the black fairy was agitated, external voices talking to her seemed to combat the voices in her head and made her more irritable. Thelba went into the kitchen and set her school bag down and started to do her homework. After half an hour she turned back into Teban.

At dinner time, Suki resurfaced and seemed to be calmer, but she kept glancing over at Teban with a concerned look. Teban tried to smile at her, trying to let her know everything was alright. Koko kept speaking to everyone with her mouthful which made everyone giggle, but Miranda scolded her and said that “Ladies shouldn’t speak with their mouths full or eat with their mouths open.” Koko made a big show of shutting her out and chewing her food. When she swallowed her mouthful, she opened her mouth wide, showing matron that her mouth was indeed empty. Once sure she was not going to be told off by the woman, Koko turned to Teban and said,

“When you’re a fairy, are you strong like Suki?”

Teban smiled and laughed. Once again the infant had kept him on his toes.

“Actually yes,” Teban said with pride, “And today I managed to stop Jacob Cadstekcer from bullying me. Actually, me and Suki stopped his whole gang.”

“Wow!” the three infants gasped in awe of Teban’s alter identity.

“I hope you girls weren’t fighting?” Miranda disapprovingly asked her.

“I didn’t hit anyone, and Thelba only stopped a hand from hitting her and held Jacob firmly. Neither of us hit the boys.”

Miranda looked to Teban, “Is that true?” she asked a little

sceptically.

“Yes, Matron.”

The matron seemed pleased with her answer and smiled to herself, muttering,

“Sometimes girls handle these things better than boys.”

Bedtime came, and Teban and Suki had buried the hatchet and were back to their usual gossipy selves, and asking Tymon for help with questions they were stuck on with their science homework. Teban’s dinner was repeating on him quite a bit, and he kept burping, which the other two found repulsive and funny at the same time. Miranda’s head came up from the staircase and peered through the railings, “Come on you three, it’s late, time for bed,” she said gently chastising them. Teban burped again.

“Have you been eating cakes from the larder again this evening Teban?”

“No Matron.”

Miranda looked at him unconvinced, shrugged to herself and went back down the stairs and the three teens climbed into bed and blew out their candles. Teban burped again, and this time he felt the taste of bile in his mouth. Tymon sounding concerned for his makeshift brother asked,

“Are you OK?”

“I’m not sure,” was Teban’s reply.

“You’re not having second thoughts are you?” Suki asked him in a slightly concerned voice.

“Second thoughts about what?” Tymon asked innocently enough. Neither Teban or Suki had told him about going to see Mr Micklemore. Thelba ignored Tymon’s question and answered Suki’s,

“No, I want to be Teban.”

Tymon’s brain was quick on the uptake,

“What did you do Teban?” he asked, and Teban groaned that Tymon always seemed to rumble any secrets he tried to keep. Teban belched even louder, and a stronger taste of bile and a hint of

the foul tasting green potion lingered rose to the back of his throat. He was sure he wanted to be Teban. Why was he getting ill? He felt a rumbling in his stomach, and without thinking, he hurled himself out of bed over to the sideboard with the washbowl on it and hurled the contents of his stomach into it. He could hear Tymon shouting, "What did he do? What did he do?"

He was aware that Suki was rummaging around for something and with a panicky whiny voice kept saying,

"No, no no, this isn't happening."

Teban couldn't concentrate on them though. His insides felt like they wanted to turn themselves inside out in need to expel the potion from his body. His head was swimming and his legs were turning to jelly. He wasn't sure how she had gotten there but he then felt Matron's hand holding his forehead and stroking his back as he continued to vomit, and heard her asking Suki what Teban had taken. His consciousness was flitting from delirious to pain and he wasn't sure what Suki had told Matron but heard her whining,

"It wasn't my fault; it wasn't my fault."

He felt hot, and sweat was pouring over him, and when he was sure he had gotten every last drop of the dinner and potion from his body, he let himself collapse. Miranda held firmly close to her and although Teban was not used to the Matron showing him that much care, felt himself feel protected in her parental style embrace. After a while, Matron and his two roommates helped him walk over to his bed, and just as he was about to climb into it, he heard Suki say,

"Hold him still and I can sort that bit out."

A cold tickling sensation flooded his back, which he was too drained to react to, but with great disappointment, he knew that Suki was putting wings into the back pouches and that he had inadvertently morphed into Thelba at some point. The potion had failed. The wizard had conned her, or Teban had not been true to himself. His mind thought of Koko at dinner and how proud he had been about overcoming a bully. At that moment he realised he had been pleased to be Thelba, thus ensuring that whether the

potion was real or not, it would never have had any other effect than to make him sick.

For Miranda, it meant that she not only was going to have to find some way to support Teban Thelba more than she had suspected emotionally but that one of her primary sources of income, the apothecary next door, had undermined all her respect for the selfish man that ran it. She was trapped though. The orphanage needed that income for them to survive. From that day forward, however, Miranda never spoke anything other than business or common courtesies with Mr Micklemore. Neither Mr Micklemore nor she brought up the reason for the change of the relationship, and none of the residents in Aphos was ever any the wiser to a fully grown man giving a potion to a minor, with the consent of their guardian. Within a week, Miranda's abated her financial worries when she sourced another apothecary down by the docks.

3 The Queen

Her fat pet magpie Andrea was perched on her shoulder greedily scouring the room with beady eyes. She wasn't the first magpie that The Queen had owned over the years, but she did share the name Andrea with every predecessor, and no doubt the moniker would be passed on to future successors of the royal magpie. Andrea was old and fat now due to her greed and loved her queen. She had grown to know her mistress's peevish and irritations and as such would seek them out before most people were aware, and with a squawk, which would alert The Queen to it.

Queen Denmilate was proud and knew that parliament did not share the same ideals as her. Over the fifteen years of her reign she had slowly and methodically encouraged dissent towards interspecies breeding, and although Aphos was diverse in its population's diversity, she was proud that there were so few mixbloods being born to families. Occasionally some small uprising or protester made their way to the Reckoning hall, but with the aid of her pet magpie, with as little commotion as possible, they were formally expelled from the royal court. Andrea's unique gift was knowing how Denmilate thought and would do anything to bring attention to anyone who did not fall in line with her mistress's

narrow-minded form of thinking. As such, sycophants and lackeys formed the royal court, who did their best to ensure that everything presented to the queen according to her tastes and antiquated beliefs. If Andrea spotted something untoward, a squawk at them and a glare from the Queen was usually all it took to kill a courtier's petite argument or a servant's potential theft. As such the only person in the royal court who liked Andrea was The Queen herself.

Queen Denmilate dismissed the court secretary and turned to her guest Senator Khalid. He was a short fat man with a head that was greater than it was tall, with cheeks that seemed redder than they ought to. He wore the traditional formal dress code of his homeland Hatzig comprising of pantaloons trousers, a long square neck button-less shirt and a floor length sleeveless coat made of silk. He was thankfully not a wizeward which made Denmilate slightly more comfortable. She hated doing affairs of state with the mainland who usually sent diplomats who claimed to be wizards but appreciated that it was good to be seen discussing trade routes and how to improve them. Parliament always dealt with the details and the Queen dealt with the charm offensive of state visits. Hatzig had the last trading ports before ships ventured the dangerous waters to the Far East and were, therefore, a vital ally for the islands of the Figmen Straits that stretched from Cake Island to the north-west coast of Encafe.

The Queen was tall, and still quite youthful in her features. Despite her being in the prime of her middle age years and her clothes were always styled in the Encafe fashion, long, sleek and slender shapes where the fabric was cut on the bias so that as she walked, her robes seemed to flow. Compared to the round shape of the Hatzigian, Queen Denmilate looked every inch a high-class, sleek, sophisticated monarch.

It was getting near the time for the weekly reckoning ritual to begin. Up until recently, the weekly ceremony had been

somewhat mundane, and Queen Denmilate had found herself resenting having to go before the benign creator and go through the formality of updating the deity of her view of the previous week's events. Occasionally the Reckoning offered up some futile prophecy that was more pertinent to her Parliament than it was to the queen directly. More recently, strange foreboding predictions had started to emerge about a boy who may usurp her. The prophecies were unclear in the reckoning's thoughts, and it was clear that the fates were still weaving their tapestry. She hoped that the ritual that day would be more enlightening. She just had to get rid of the current slimy visiting dignitary in front of her.

Visiting dignitaries were entitled to watch the interchange before the monarch and the deity, so out of deference Denmilate said,

“Will you be joining us for The Reckoning today Senator?” she asked in a very relaxed and welcoming tone.

The short fat olive skinned senator looked pensive for a moment, and then in a voice with genuine disappointment replied,

“Alas, I cannot. I have to set sail for Cake Island to try and find and get advice from the Wizard Sakis on behalf of the Sultan.”

Denmilate raised an eyebrow.

“Is there a problem?”

Dismissively but with a smile, the senator shrugged and said,

“Oh you know the Sultan, if one prophecy doesn't say what he wants, he will seek the answers elsewhere.”

Denmilate took the hint and didn't push the matter. That the Sultan of Hatzig was a superstitious man was well known, but he was equally a man of little tolerance to not non-sycophants. She gently took the senator by the arm patting his hand and led him towards the door of the library.

“As always it has been a pleasure to see you, Senator.”

The Senator grunted and nodded as they reached his entourage, he kissed the queen on both cheeks and uttered the

Figmentasian farewell,

“Spring’s life be upon you.”

He kissed her three times on alternate cheeks as was his Hatzigian custom and turned and left with his small group of officials in tow.

Time was against her to get to the stateroom on the other side of the castle. The Reckoning would be starting.

Denmilate had found with relief that reckoning audiences had diminished over the last ten years, and now it was usual for only a couple of the maids and servants, the court secretary and Krasten the General who were regularly present. Occasionally someone from the town below would venture up to witness the event, but the days of shocking and intriguing prophecies were so far and few between, that the draw for entertainment’s sake was not as appealing as it had once been. In these times, the only people curious were visitors from overseas. Fortunately for her, many of the nation’s subjects found her boring, and this suited one’s agenda quite nicely. No need for subterfuge or deception to the public if they paid her no attention. As long as they had money, food on their table, good trade routes and most importantly peace between the nations, the citizens of Figmentasia were happy and content. When Denmilate had ascended to the throne, she had never revealed the true nature of her sister, brother-in-law and nephews death publicly. The throne was hers by default, but a smooth transition had always been preferable to a dictatorial takeover.

The Great Hall room was somewhat of an oddity. It was a vast atrium in the oldest part of the castle, with dark wooden balconies all around it going up ten flights. Tightly wound spiral staircases were in opposing, corners were. There was no grand staircase in this part of the castle. The statement being made by the architects at the time of its inception needed the focus to be on the light that pooled in from above in the daylight hours, and the full circular well in the centre of the room. The only furniture in

the room was an impressive ornate throne on a circular dais which was facing the well. There were not many in attendance. As usual, the secretary stood next to the throne, a few ladies in waiting held position to the other side of the throne, with Krasten and the rest of the court guards by the State-Door.

The Queen hurriedly entered and took her place on the throne. Andrea remained perched on her shoulder. As soon as she had sat down, a dim lilac glow started to emanate from the well. The light mist grew brighter as it rose seductively filling the room above the well. The haze became more intense and continued to rise until it reached the height of the third balcony, and then it stopped growing and started to form a translucent mass. The mass evolved hypnotically into the shape of a round old woman's head. She had no teeth and round close-set eyes with a large flat nose. Her hair was scraped back on her head into a chignon. Although her face was transparent in the vapour, one could still see through her. The apparition took stock of the room around her, smiled and then looked down on Queen Denmilate. The Reckoning was ready to talk.

“Greetings my queen, what would you have me talk to you about today?”

It was a stilted customary greeting, and every Reckoning started this way. Only the reigning monarch was entitled to speak to their Reckoning. If anyone else needed to ask a question of the old mist god, tradition dictated they should do so through The Queen. If they asked a question themselves (Which often happened, albeit quietly), it was as if The Reckoning had never heard them. She only ever responded to and acknowledged the Queen.

“I wish to know more about the boy that you spoke of last week. Is he still a threat to me?”

“For now no.”

“In the future?”

“Maybe. The future is like my form, the further in time it is, the less opaque it becomes. There are too many strings that the fates have not woven or yet cut for me to see clearly.”

“Is the child here in the castle?”

“Not yet.”

“Is the boy still here in Aphos?”

“Sometimes yes, and sometimes no.”

“Can you see where he is?”

“No, I can only feel him.”

“Even when you are at rest?”

“Sometimes.”

“When the boy disappears from your view can you tell if he is still in Figmentasia if he is not in Aphos?”

“The boy is not in Figmentasia in those moments.”

“Is the boy using magic?”

“Only child wand magic.”

The Queen pondered on this.

She realised she was only focusing on one subject and knew it was her duty to ask if there were other subjects to be discussed. She looked up at The Reckoning and with some reluctance asked what additional insights she had for that week.

The Reckoning smiled.

“Do you have anything else for me?”

The old lady was already starting to lose her volume, whispered,

“I am done. May Spring’s life be upon you.”

Frustrated by the deities continuing vagueness, Queen Denmilate reluctantly conceded the end of the short meeting as the reckoning gently dissipated back into the water of the pool, the light waning until the only light left in the room was that of the candlelight.