

THE DREAMER

by Rebekah Blackmon¹

CHAPTER ONE

The beast's large claw looming over her was the first thing Kyria saw when she entered the dream world.

She rolled out of the way, and the beast followed with a swing of its other claw. Kyria jumped to her feet and leaped to an unnatural height, lunging forward and grabbing hold of a tuft of thick, coarse hair on the monster's chest. She was half the size of its head, and she dangled with ease as the lumbering beast continued to swing. It noticed the tugging when Kyria pulled herself up and over its shoulder, as if she were scaling a mountain. She jumped and landed in a crouch between its shoulder blades. The putrid stench from the dark hide filled her nostrils.

The beast let out a deep, rumbling growl and tried to grab her, but she was in the one place it couldn't reach. Kyria removed her sword from the sheath on her hip and drove it into its spine.

The beast's scream reverberated through her body, the vibrations traveling through the hilt of the sword into her core. As the monster fell, Kyria pulled her sword free and jumped to the grass. The beast hit the ground with a loud *thud*, quaking it under Kyria's feet. Roaring, Kyria sprinted to its head and thrust the sword through one of its bulbous eyes and into its brain. The screaming stopped.

She removed her sword and made a face at the gore.

"Well done," said Maryn, who had been watching the fight from afar. "But you seemed a little reckless."

Kyria shrugged and tried to wipe off the blood on the grass. "I don't see much reason to be cautious."

Her trainer sighed and shook his head. "I shouldn't have to keep reminding you that even though you probably feel immortal, we still don't know what happens if you die here. You shouldn't take risks."

"Oh, I know," Kyria said. "If I didn't think that claw would give me a nasty bruise, I would've had a little more fun with the thing."

"I just want you to be more careful."

Kyria bent to give the old man a small kiss on his wrinkled forehead. "And I appreciate that. I really do." She placed her sword back into its sheath and picked up the pack she'd tossed aside. "Now, what was that beast, and where did it come from?"

"A polchak. They're found solely in the far Northwest."

"The Northwest? How did one get down here?"

“I think that has something to do with why we’re here. Follow me.”

He led her across the empty field toward the side of a small mountain range whose snow-capped peaks trimmed the purple sky. The soft carpet of grass became peppered with rocks, crunching softly under their feet. The summer sun enveloped them in its comfortable warmth.

Kyria breathed in the scent of the grass as it traveled along the gentle wind brushing against the skin of her face and arms. The weather, the landscape, and the love of exploration invigorated her, giving energy to her movements.

“My colleagues and I have been getting some readings of a strange energy from this general location,” Maryn explained as they approached a small opening in the side of a mountain, “and we’ve pinpointed them to this cave.”

A faint blue glow came from the mouth of the cave. Kyria’s curiosity grew with each step.

“Is it safe to go in?” she asked.

Maryn shrugged. “I thought it was, but now I’m not so sure.”

With Maryn close behind, Kyria tiptoed into the cave, watching for shadows and listening for sounds of something else alive. She noticed a vibration in the stone under her feet growing stronger as she moved deeper into the cave. The glow became brighter, and it seemed to come from just around the corner.

The hair on the back of Kyria’s neck rose, and a shiver went down her spine. She drew in a shaky breath and let it out with slow control.

She and Maryn turned the corner to face a great expanse. In the middle of the open area was a large circle of blue light. The center of the light was opaque, but the edge was translucent. The entire circle rippled with energy. It reached toward the ceiling at a height at least three times Kyria’s.

“What is it?” she asked, eyes wide.

“A portal.”

“To where?”

“*From* where,” Maryn corrected. “I don’t know, but after seeing that polchak, I’m assuming the other end is in the Northwest. I’m not sure who put this here or why, but my guess is there are others.”

“Do you think Malgharus has anything to do with this?”

“Possibly. He’s been quiet.”

“And it’s only a one-way portal?”

“Yes,” Maryn said. “It could be nothing. It could just be someone’s harmless method of easy transportation.”

“I think we should look for more.”

“I was thinking the same thing. Let’s go back and pack for a longer journey.”

“Sounds great,” Kyria said with a bounce in her step as she turned to leave with her mentor.

For years, Kyria had found the dream world much more interesting and fun than the waking world. It made her want to figure out a way to stay in the dream forever.

* * *

It began one autumn day seven years ago. Nine-year-old Kyria sat at her desk by the window of her fourth-grade classroom. The teacher, Mrs. Smith, droned on and on about some sort of math problem. Kyria disliked math not because it was too hard, but because it was too easy. She didn't understand why the other kids took so long to figure things out.

She was fortunate to have a desk by the window. When she became bored, she could stare outside and imagine scenes much more interesting than what was going on in the classroom. Sometimes, when a vivid image outside pleased her, she would open her notebook and draw it.

That day, she was drawing a mother dragon and her baby. She was fond of the love she saw in the mother's eyes as it taught the baby how to breathe fire. She tried to capture both that and the look of frustration on the baby's face when all it could muster was a thin wisp of smoke, but fourth-grade art had its limitations. Nevertheless, she concentrated on each stroke of her pencil and erased imperfect lines.

She didn't notice the entire class looking at her.

"Kyria!" The teacher's yell startled her so much she jumped in her seat. The sudden return to the drab reality of the classroom was jarring and depressing.

"Yes?" she said in a timid voice. She closed her notebook.

"Please reopen your notebook, turn it to a blank page, and use it to answer the problem on the board," Mrs. Smith said, her gray eyes mirroring her stern tone.

Kyria glanced at the board. The problem was $\frac{3}{5} \times 10$. To her, the solution was simple. She bypassed the traditional method of multiplying fractions. She knew all one had to do was take ten, divide it into five equal parts of two, and add three of those parts together.

"Six," she said, leaving her notebook closed.

Mrs. Smith said nothing. She stood still for a moment, trying to decide what to do. Then she turned and wrote a new problem on the board. Kyria watched as she wrote $\frac{1}{4} \times 29$.

"Seven and one fourth," she said as Mrs. Smith had just finished turning around.

For some reason, her teacher looked even more irate. "Please tell the class the correct way to arrive at that conclusion," she said, her eyes daring.

Kyria began to explain her own reasoning, but Mrs. Smith stopped her.

"Have you not been paying attention to this entire lesson?" the teacher screeched. "You're confusing everyone. You can't just make up a way to get to the answer. You need to do it the way *I* am teaching you. Maybe if you paid attention instead of drawing, you'd know the correct way to solve the problem. Billy, please go to the board and show Kyria and the rest of the class how it is meant to be solved. Kyria, once again I will be discussing your behavior with your parents."

She frowned. Why was she in trouble if she had given the correct answer?

With a small sigh, she glanced out the window at the mother and baby dragon. As soon as she did, the mother looked away from her baby for one split moment to wink at Kyria. She smiled.

She returned her attention to the board before Mrs. Smith could say anything and watched Billy struggle with the math problem.

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Mrs. Smith sat at her desk with her hands clasped on top. Kyria stared, noting the woman's wrinkled veins looked like rivers. She imagined a map of a world on those hands.

"Thank you for coming at such short notice, Mrs. Taylor," Mrs. Smith said.

"Of course," said Mrs. Taylor, who sat in one of the two chairs Mrs. Smith had pulled up to her desk.

"I'd like to discuss with you the matter of Kyria's... attention span." The woman gave Kyria a pointed look. Kyria glanced up with a guilty expression. Mrs. Smith turned back to Mrs. Taylor. "Today, during Mathematics, Kyria was drawing and looking out the window instead of paying attention to the methods we use. I called on her to solve a problem on the board."

Mrs. Taylor wore a small smile. "That's a shame. So she got the wrong answer?"

"Well, no," said Mrs. Smith. Kyria chuckled, knowing what her mother was doing. "She had the correct answer, but she confused the class by explaining it in a completely different way than I had just a few minutes prior. It's distracting."

"So Kyria is in trouble for knowing the material you are trying to teach?"

"Mrs. Taylor. I know you are a smart woman. I know you understand it's not about having the answer. Life is about having the right approach as well. And her refusal to be a part of the class is unacceptable. Kyria, please show your mother the drawing."

Kyria reached into her backpack and pulled out her notebook. She turned to the drawing and handed it to her mother.

"This is very good," Mrs. Taylor said.

"Yes, but there is a time and a place for everything," said Mrs. Smith.

"Kyria, there is a time and a place for everything," said Mrs. Taylor as she handed the notebook back.

"Mrs. Taylor."

"Mrs. Smith."

Kyria smiled. She knew she didn't have any reason to worry about this exchange. Her mother was reasonable. She looked again at the drawing before she closed the notebook to put it away.

Something in the corner of her eye caught her attention. She turned. A boy her age stood in the back of the classroom. She had never seen him before, and she hadn't seen anyone come in. She stared in wonder.

We need you.

Had she just heard him speak? She noted his clothing was not like others. He wore simple, brown, cotton pants and a matching tunic. His light brown hair was disheveled, and his feet were bare.

Then she realized she could see through him. He wasn't really there.

She brightened, hoping he was a new friend. Kyria took pride in her imagination being so strong she could actually see the people and creatures who weren't there, like the dragons outside the classroom window, as if they were real. She'd had many such friends throughout her life.

He faded away without saying anything more. Kyria wanted him to come back so she could ask him questions and talk about what sort of animals lived by the rivers on Mrs. Smith's hands. She looked out the window to see if her dragons were there, but the field was empty right now.

She sighed and wished she could have gone with him back to his world.

“This is what I’m talking about,” Mrs. Smith was saying when Kyria returned to reality. “She zones out.”

“I know this,” said Mrs. Taylor. “I’m her mother. I’m sorry, Mrs. Smith, but I don’t agree with your complaints. She’s a very bright child. I don’t want to stifle her.”

“Mrs. Taylor, I am Kyria’s teacher. During school hours, I know what’s best for her. Your daughter needs to start paying attention in class so that she stops being such a distraction to the other students.”

Mrs. Taylor sighed. “All right,” she said, standing. “Come on, Kyria, let’s go. Try to be more accommodating to Mrs. Smith, okay? She’s just doing her job.”

Mrs. Smith settled back in her chair. “Thank you,” she said, her lips tight.

Kyria said nothing as she and her mother walked out of the classroom. She looked back to see if the boy was there, but he was not. She hoped she would see him again soon.

* * *

“Maybe we can put her in a school for the gifted,” Mrs. Taylor said at the dinner table.

Mr. Taylor shook his head. “We can’t afford it, and you know that. I don’t know what to do. We could just homeschool her.”

“We don’t know the first thing about homeschooling. I don’t think that would help her at all.”

“Well, being so far ahead of the other students isn’t helping her, either,” said Mr. Taylor.

“It’s not like she isn’t learning anything. She just learns faster than the others, so she spends the rest of her time daydreaming.”

“You have to admit, her drawings are pretty good.”

“What do you think, Kyr?” Mrs. Taylor asked. “Do you have any suggestions? I know you’re bored in school. Can you think of a way to solve this?”

Kyria shook her dark curls. “I like having time to draw.”

“Mrs. Smith said the reason she’s so hard on Kyria is because she’s a distraction to the other students,” said Mrs. Taylor with a sigh. “The others wonder why they have to pay attention. I don’t know why they can’t realize she’s earned it. She still gets straight A’s.”

“These are fourth graders, Jenny. They don’t think that way. I just worry we’re wasting her abilities instead of nurturing them.”

“She just said she likes drawing. She doesn’t want to be challenged. She wants to do what’s expected of her as quickly as possible so she can do what she loves. Right, Kyr?”

Kyria nodded with a smile, pleased her parents understood her.

“Even so,” said Mr. Taylor, “Mrs. Smith has a point. She has to set an example for the other children. Mrs. Smith has to make it look like Kyria’s working hard so they will work hard.”

“Oh, come on, Danny. Listen to how you sound.”

“Well, it’s true! She already gets bullied sometimes because the other kids don’t understand why she’s so smart and they’re not.”

“She doesn’t get bullied that much. She mostly keeps to herself.”

“It’s okay, Dad,” Kyria said. “They leave me alone, ‘cause they think I’m weird. I like it like

that. I don't want them to talk to me."

Mr. Taylor sighed with a smile. "You're a special child," he said. "All right, well, just try to make it less obvious that you're not paying attention in class. Maybe raise your hand to answer a question now and then."

"Okay, Dad."

"Anyway," said Mrs. Taylor, "I like your dragons. Can you tell me about them?"

"Sure!" she said, jumping out of her chair. She brought the notebook to the dinner table and opened it to the most recent page.

"It's a mother and her baby," Mrs. Taylor said, smiling and showing her husband. "What are their names?"

Kyria hadn't thought of their names. She looked at her drawing, and in her mind asked the mother dragon what she could call them.

I am Lysandra, came the reply in her thoughts. And this is my baby girl, Freidra. A pleasure to meet you.

Kyria told her parents.

"Pretty names," said Mrs. Taylor. "What are they doing in the picture?"

"It's not done, so I know it's hard to tell," said Kyria. "Lysandra is trying to teach Freidra how to breathe fire. She's being very patient with her, but Freidra is having trouble."

"Tell her to ask your mother how to breathe out hot air," Daniel said with a smirk.

"Oh, my gosh, Danny," Mrs. Taylor laughed. "I'm going to throw this fork at you."

Kyria giggled. She liked her parents. At twenty-nine, they were still youthful. She was grateful her parents understood life didn't have to be stuffy and boring.

"You should finish it," Mrs. Taylor said once the laughter had died down. "I don't think any drawing should remain incomplete. You need to bring their story to life."

"Okay," said Kyria.

"Finish your dinner, then after you do your homework, I command you to finish drawing your dragons." Mrs. Taylor winked.

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Kyria lay under her covers with a flashlight reading a book. She had already turned off her bedroom light an hour ago, and she should have been sleeping. She hated deceiving her parents, but she loved reading more. She decided there were worse ways to disobey than to read behind her parents' backs.

Kyria.

She paused mid-sentence, frightened at the whisper of her name. It must have been her imagination. She decided she'd heard nothing and continued to read.

We need you.

She jerked her head up, but all she could see was the comforter draped over her. She pulled it away and turned off the flashlight, her heart pounding.

Standing at the foot her bed, illuminated by the moonlight filtering through her window, was the boy from earlier. Kyria sat up straight.

“Who are you?” she asked in a whisper lest her parents hear.

“*Come to us,*” he said, ignoring her question. She could see through him, and he was fading away.

“How?”

“*Sleep. Dream of us.*”

And he disappeared.

Kyria stared at the now empty space for a few moments, then set her book aside. Her excitement delayed her sleep, but eventually, her thoughts of his world became a dream.

CHAPTER TWO

“See, I told you! I told you the prophecy was true!”

“You crazy old woman. She’s probably just another orphan who lost her way. What is this, the third one you’ve identified? Fourth?”

“No, no, it’s the prophecy! Look at her! Look at her clothes! Tell me she didn’t come from another world. Go ahead. Say it.”

“Her clothes are strange, yes, but that doesn’t mean anything.”

“You think an orphan would have such odd clothes? I’m telling you, this one is her.”

“Is she even alive?”

“I don’t know. Poke her.”

Kyria yelped and opened her eyes at the feeling of a bare toe digging into her side. She looked up at the plump man and woman standing over her, peering down at her.

“She’s alive,” the woman said. “What’s your name, girl?”

Kyria said nothing at first. She sat up and looked around, wondering where she was and how long she had been there, trying to take it all in. The night sky loomed above her, and she was in the middle of a long, dusty road with empty fields on both sides. Farther down the road sat an old, dilapidated house.

“A mute,” the man said with a knowing nod. “Poor orphan girl.”

“She’s not an orphan. I’m telling you, it’s her. The Dreamer.”

“That prophecy is nothing but a story they tell us to give us false hope, Carel. Don’t be so daft. You can’t just declare every poor child you find on the road our savior.”

“I’m not a mute,” Kyria said. “My name is Kyria. Where am I?”

“You’re in West Serton,” the woman answered. “Give me your hand.”

Kyria hesitated, then took the woman’s hand and let her help her stand.

“What state is that in?” Kyria asked.

“What? I don’t know. We’re in a state of near famine these days.”

“Are you hungry, orphan girl?” asked the man.

“I just had chicken and rice,” Kyria answered.

“Where in Qa’s land did you find chicken? Maybe you’re not an orphan. Maybe you’re some castaway from some royal family.”

“I told you, she’s the Dreamer!” the woman said. “This is wonderful news.”

“Well, in any case, let’s get her inside and cleaned up. Maybe we can put some real clothes

on her.”

“The boy told me to come here,” Kyria said as she walked with them to the house.

“What boy?” asked Carel.

“I don’t know his name. He was my age, I think.”

“Well, that narrows it down,” said the man.

“Really,” said Carel to the man, “with all the strange things going on these days, it only makes sense that the Dreamer would come now. I can’t believe the evidence is right in front of your face and you’re still skeptical, Thomas.”

“Excuse me for refusing to believe our savior is a little girl from some alternate reality or whatever.”

“From the world beyond our world,” Carel recited.

“Yeah. Forgive me for not subscribing immediately to that notion.”

“According to the prophecy, she would be ‘strangely clad’ and ‘dark of hair’ with ‘eyes of blue.’”

“And you think just because someone fits that description, she is what some silly religious nonsense talks about. Every time you see someone who even remotely fits, you get all crazy telling all your friends you found her.”

“Well, I’ll let her prove it. Being outside our world gives her powers we could never have. Go on, girl, show him. Do something otherworldly. Fly or something.”

“Fly?” Kyria repeated. “I can’t fly.”

“Sure, you can. Try it.”

She jumped, but gravity pulled her back down.

“Your Dreamer seems a little grounded,” said Thomas.

Carel looked disappointed. “Maybe she’s just shy, I guess,” she said. “I’m sure she’ll show us her powers in time. We should still tell the King and Queen we found her, don’t you think?”

“Dear me, Carel, are you mad? I’m not going to bother the royal family with this nonsense. We can’t even get an audience with them for food, and you want us to tell them about some little orphan girl we found on the side of the road?”

“But if the prophecy—”

“Curse your prophecy. If it’s true, I’m sure it’ll all work itself out. I’m not going to risk being laughed at or punished for wasting the King and Queen’s time every time some little girl is lost and hungry.”

“She’s thin, but she doesn’t look hungry at all,” said Carel. They had now reached the house, and she pulled the wooden door open to let them inside. “And you know the King and Queen wouldn’t laugh at us. They’re kind.”

“Kind enough to feed us, eh?”

“They can’t feed everyone. These are bad times. Hence the need for the fulfillment of the prophecy!”

“Hence the need for your false hope creating something out of nothing. This poor girl needs us and all you can do is yap about some prophecy she doesn’t even know about. Are you the Dreamer, girl?”

Kyria hadn’t realized the question was for her until she noticed the silence and saw they were

both looking at her with expectant expressions.

“I fell asleep,” she said in slow contemplation. “I remember falling asleep. The boy...”

“Poor girl was cast away and fell asleep in the road,” said Thomas. “Some boy must have pointed her in the direction of our house, knowing we would take her in.”

“And the clothes?”

“She’s clearly from far enough away that the style in her land is different.”

“Far, yes! Very, very far. She’s from another world!”

“Carel, I’m done arguing about this. It’s late. Let’s just be glad we found her and can give her a warm place to rest. We’ll sort this out in the morning, yes?”

“Thomas, I wish you’d have just a little hope.” Carel stopped talking long enough to take better notice of Kyria. She smiled and smoothed one of the dark ringlets out of Kyria’s face. “Pretty girl. You’ll be safe with us. We’ll fix you up a bed and get you in some clean clothes so you can rest tonight. Sound good?”

“Sure,” said Kyria. “Thank you.”

Confusion swirled in Kyria’s mind. She had a vague remembrance of falling asleep in her bedroom, but she couldn’t determine how she’d come to be here in this strange land. Was she really dreaming? She had never been able to tell when she was in a dream before, only gaining the realization after waking up. But she’d heard of the possibility of a lucid dream, though she’d also heard one could fly in those dreams, and she had just demonstrated she could not.

If this was real, however, then where were her parents? Her house? Her school? If this was real, she was in the middle of nowhere with no prior knowledge of how she’d arrived. She began to grow scared realizing she might never see anything or anyone familiar again.

But Kyria had always been one to adapt, and never one to jump to conclusions, particularly worrisome ones. So she decided she would have to wait to see what happened. Maybe she could talk to the woman, Carel, to find out more about the prophecy. Or maybe she could sneak away and look for the boy, though the thought of venturing alone into an unfamiliar land terrified her. A vast expanse of emptiness surrounded the house as far as she could tell, and she didn’t want to find herself lost and wandering, succumbing to eventual dehydration.

She supposed Thomas was right. It would work itself out.

The next morning, she awoke in a strange bed. The feeling of having slept was not the same as usual; she could not tell any time had passed during her rest.

She sat upright. She was in a small, plain room, the only piece of furniture besides the bed being a dresser, on top of which was a small lamp. The soft light of dawn coming through the window rendered the light of the lamp unnecessary. A small potted plant sat in the corner on the other side of the room.

The smell of bacon wafted under the door. Kyria didn’t know if the scent or the sunlight had awakened her, but her stomach told her it didn’t matter. Her topmost priority, above learning more about where she was and why, was finding the source of the bacon.

She stepped out of bed, noticing she was wearing a nightgown that didn’t belong to her. She opened the door, turning the knob before pulling so it wouldn’t make a sound. The smell of bacon became much stronger. The sound of dishes rang from the kitchen on the first floor. She made her way down the stairs and stood at the doorway of the kitchen, where her hosts were

busy preparing breakfast.

Had it not been a dream after all? She supposed going to sleep in a dream was possible but uncommon. Maybe this was real, and she had somehow found her way far from home. She shivered at the thought.

“Oh! Morning.” The woman, whose name Kyria recalled to be Carel, turned from the stove and flashed a toothy smile. The man sat at the kitchen table, his soft face frowning at some sort of hard, rectangular object.

“Says here some food sent out to the western provinces was hijacked,” Thomas said, ignoring Kyria’s presence. “See, this is what I mean. Even when they try to help, it’s hopeless. We’re doomed.”

“But we might have found the Dreamer,” said Carel with a lilting tone.

“Woman, I’m getting real tired of hearing that. This isn’t some fairy tale. This is real life. We need to figure out how we’re going to survive if things keep getting worse. We can’t be cooking up our precious little meat every time some orphan girl comes to town.”

“She needs her nourishment, Thomas.”

“Thank you,” Kyria said. “It smells really good.” She sat in an empty seat at the table and waited, her hands folded neatly in her lap.

“Best cook in the West, my wife is,” Thomas said. “It reminds me why I married her.”

“I would *hope* that’s not the only reason you married me, Thomas Myr.”

“In all seriousness, if you weren’t so good at what you do in the kitchen, we would have starved long ago. You know how to make food last.”

“Well, thank you kindly.” She placed a plate of food each in front of Kyria and Thomas. Kyria looked down at the bacon, rice, and fresh bread with hunger in her eyes.

Just as she was about to take her first bite, she heard a loud knock on the front door.

“At this hour?” said Carel. She washed and dried her hands and went to answer the door.

“Maryn! What brings you here?” Carel said from the main room. “Put those bags down, and come join us for breakfast.”

“I was traveling west for a couple days now,” the man was saying as he followed Carel into the kitchen. “I just left Garten City, and now I’m heading back east. I didn’t think you’d mind if I took a quick break and saw how you were. I haven’t seen you both in such a long time.” He released a heavy sigh. “But let me tell you, Carel, I’m absolutely exhausted.”

“Well, now, sit!” Carel commanded. “There is enough food left for you to eat with us. We want to hear all about your travels.”

“You’re too kind. Is that bacon I smell?” The guest pulled out a chair and sat at the table. He then paused and looked at Kyria. “Pardon me. I didn’t see you there. My name is Maryn.” He held out a wrinkled hand which felt hard and leathery as Kyria shook it.

“I’m Kyria,” she said. “Nice to meet you.”

Carel could not contain her excitement. “We think Kyria might be the Dreamer!” she blurted.

“Carel, please,” Thomas said. He gave Maryn an apologetic look. “Ignore her. She’s the only one who thinks that, and she thinks it about any and everyone.”

Nevertheless, Maryn raised an eyebrow, continuing to study Kyria. She blushed and looked away from him, tucking a curl behind her ear.

“Well,” said Maryn in contemplation. “If it’s true, it was meant for me to have come here.”

“What do you mean?” asked Carel as she set a plate in front of him.

Maryn thanked her and continued. “Take this as you will, but I have been told many times by seers and prophets that I would find and train the Dreamer when she came.”

“We’re still not sure this little girl is the one they speak of in the prophecy, if the prophecy is even real,” said Thomas. He explained how they found her. Maryn listened, nodding in affirmation to the clues and quotes Carel recited. He then leaned back in his chair and looked at his hands folded in his lap, his expression pensive.

“I don’t want to be hasty,” he said. “I’ve been waiting for a long time for her to come. But for the sake of our land, I do hope you are right, Carel.”

“If you’re to train her, does this mean you will take her with you?” asked Carel, frowning. “I had hoped I would have a daughter again, just for a little while. I didn’t know she would be taken away so soon.” Kyria looked at the woman. She felt a touch of empathy, but she wanted to explain that she was not an orphan. She had a loving mother and father waiting for her back home, who would worry about her if she did not return.

“I understand the pain of your loss,” said Maryn. “Your daughter’s time in this world was far too short. But if Kyria really is the Dreamer, she must accompany me. I am to teach her who she is and what she can do.”

“Oh! You’ll be teaching her to fly.” Carel smiled, and Thomas rolled his eyes.

“That is one of the lessons, yes.”

Kyria’s head continued to swim. She needed everything to pause, just for a moment. She wanted to know who this man was, why she might have to go with him, and why they kept calling her the Dreamer and referring to a prophecy. She remembered countless instructions from her parents never to trust strangers, never to go off with men she didn’t know. But she supposed sleeping in the bedroom of a strange house was already breaking the rules. At this point, how could she know what was safe and what was not?

“It’s bad out there,” Maryn was saying. “People are being terrorized more and more. I’ve been worrying that I won’t be able to protect the Dreamer as I get along in years. But I hope that soon, she will be equipped to protect me.”

Kyria frowned. She was just a little girl. She felt there was no way she could ever protect a grown man. Sure, he was old compared to her, but he couldn’t be more than fifty or sixty. He seemed to still have enough strength in his body to surpass a child with ease.

“I’d like to test her right away, just in case,” Maryn continued. “Here, if you don’t mind. After breakfast. I’m willing to trust your intuition.”

Thomas shrugged. “Fine with me. I’d like to see this. I’m not saying I don’t believe any of it, but I frankly don’t believe any of it. I’m willing to be proven wrong. I’m jealous of my wife’s hope.”

Kyria wanted to shout and tell everyone to slow down and tell her what was going on and where her parents were. She had so many questions. She was sure today was a school day, and she began to worry if she would get in trouble. She was also concerned about what sort of tests Maryn was planning to give her. Would he really be able to teach her to fly? The inquiries swirled in her young mind, making her dizzy with confusion.

“Don’t worry, child,” said Maryn, seeming to notice the apprehension displayed on Kyria’s features. “I’ll explain everything to you after we fill our stomachs.”

* * *

Maryn handed her a smooth, black stone. It shone, and Kyria could almost see her reflection in its surface. The stone had a flattened oval shape, and on one side was a strange word she could not read.

She ran her fingers over the word, feeling the letters etched into the surface of the stone. To her surprise, they began to glow a faint gold.

Maryn spoke. “The word is *volaris*. This is a power stone. One of many. Each one gives a Dreamer the power to have certain abilities only accessible to those who are in this world as a dream. This particular one gives the power of flight.”

“So if I’m the Dreamer, does that mean I’m really in a dream?” Kyria asked with wide eyes.

They sat with crossed legs in the hard, yellowed grass behind the house of Carel and Thomas Myr. The day was clear and pleasant, the sun bright in a sky devoid of clouds. As she spoke, Kyria looked up and noticed the color of the sky was not the blue it should have been, but was instead closer to purple, which happened to be her favorite color. She stared, finding this odd. If she were not dreaming, the sky would not be such a color. She looked around, and she found many small differences between this world and what she knew to be real. She had answered her own question by observation. She was in a dream after all.

Something landed on her nose before Maryn could respond. She shrieked. Maryn laughed and shooed it away.

Kyria turned and regarded the tiny creature flying away from her in lazy loops.

“Is that a fairy?” she asked in wonderment, noting the human features.

“I’m not sure what a fairy is. That was a flitterby. Harmless, really. Annoying, but harmless.”

Kyria watched the flitterby until it had flown too far away, then she remembered the task at hand. She looked down at the stone before looking up at Maryn again.

“So can you tell me what is happening?”

“Certainly,” said Maryn. “Carel, bless her faithful heart, believes you are a Dreamer. You come to our world by going to sleep in yours. All your experiences here are like a lucid dream. You know you’re dreaming, so you’re able to do anything you want. Of course, that’s easier said than done. Your brain still believes it can and cannot do certain things. The purpose of the power stones is to give you the ability to push beyond the limitations of your mind and do what’s written on the stone.”

“Why am I here?” Kyria asked, running her finger back and forth along the word. She watched the golden glow fade in and out with her touch.

“We need your help. If you are the Dreamer, you are able to become more powerful than any of us ever could. We are hoping you will be able to identify and stop the madness happening in the world right now.”

“Did you call me here?”

“I didn’t personally. Someone had to figure out a way to get you to start dreaming about us.

The way dreams work is that you often will dream about something you think about, or something that happened during your day.”

“I used to think about ice cream so I would have some in my dream,” piped Kyria. “But it didn’t happen all the time.”

“The fact that this is a world and not just a random dream makes it different. The Dreamer can dream of us every night she wants.”

“So, if I am asleep, when do I wake up?”

“It varies. Time is not the same between our worlds. You could be here for minutes or years. But we will rarely notice. To us, it will appear as if you’re always here, though sometimes we may find your expression or emotions have changed in an instant.”

“How do you know all this?”

“I’ve studied the prophecies and histories in great depth,” said Maryn. “Once I was told I was to train the Dreamer, I knew I needed to know as much as I could about her.”

“I want to try to fly,” Kyria said with a sudden impatience.

“Then try! Speak the word. The stone will give you power.”

Kyria closed her eyes and touched the word on the stone. “*Volaris*,” she whispered.

She felt a slight tingling sensation in her body. She opened her eyes, expecting to see herself floating above the ground. To her elation, she was. Still in a cross-legged position, the ground was three feet below her.

“It worked!” she shrieked. She uncrossed her legs and held out her arms. She leaned back as if she were in a pool doing a backstroke, then she turned over so she was facing the ground. She stretched her arms straight in front of her like a superhero. “I’m flying! I’m really flying!”

The stone was still in her hand. She tossed it to Maryn, then she proceeded to do loops in the air as she had seen the flutterby do. She went higher and higher, giggling. She couldn’t believe how wonderful the sensation of flying was, and how weightless and free she felt. The experience to her was better than any amusement park ride. She could go anywhere now. She could make friends with the birds and follow them to see what secrets of the sky they knew.

She looked down and froze with a sudden panic. She had flown so high she was far above the roof of the house, and Maryn looked like an ant. She began to falter as the reality of gravity filled her thoughts.

She waved her arms in a frantic motion, now feeling as if she were drowning. She knew she should just relax, but this wasn’t her swim class. This was air, there was nothing supporting her, and she was much too high for safety. Her parents would have never approved. They didn’t even like for her to climb trees.

Kyria began to fall. Her body spun as she tried to keep herself in the air. She heard a scream and recognized it as her own. She had the same feeling in her stomach she knew from roller coasters, except this time she was terrified. This time, she wasn’t strapped to a car set to curve away from the ground at the last minute. This time, she was unrestrained and unguarded, tumbling faster and faster to an imminent death.

“Kyria!” Maryn’s voice was faint but audible. “*Volaris!*”

She was terrified. She felt she could do nothing but scream, nothing but watch the ground approach.

Maryn was shouting, the urgency in his voice increasing as much as the volume.

“*Volaris!*” Kyria yelled.

And she stopped falling.

She was level with the rooftop. She floated down until she was on the ground beside Maryn.

Kyria burst into tears.

“Oh,” said Maryn. He put a tentative arm around her. “Don’t cry, child. You’re safe.”

She buried her face in his chest. She felt like a little kid, but she didn’t care. She wanted her parents and her bedroom. She wanted to hide under her covers. She wanted—

* * *

“Time to wake up for school, Kyr.”

Kyria opened her eyes with a start, realizing she’d heard her father’s voice. She sat up and ran her hand along the sheets of her own bed. She smiled. Her dad was crossing her room to the window to open the curtains and let in the warm morning sunshine.

“Mom’s making breakfast today, so I woke you up a little earlier,” her dad was saying. “We didn’t think you’d mind. How’d you sleep?”

“I slept okay,” she answered.

A dream. It was a dream. Of course, she’d known that, but to have the confirmation of awakening was a huge relief. Maybe she didn’t have to be so afraid while in that world, given the assumption that dreams couldn’t hurt people. She was always trying to escape reality using her imagination, and now she could have a more tangible way of doing so.

She thought with a smile about how she had flown. It had been frightening to her, but as long as she remembered the word on the stone, she could control her flight. She wondered what other power stones there were. She grew giddy with anticipation. Now that she knew she was safe, she just wanted the day to end so she could go to sleep again.

But first, she needed to face school. She climbed out of bed and went to her closet to find clothes. Her father ruffled her bedhead curls and left the room so she could get ready.

CHAPTER THREE

Kyria was lost in her task of coloring her dragons when the boy came up to her at recess, and his voice almost made her fall off the log on which she was sitting.

“Hi,” the boy repeated, having received a blank stare instead of a response to his first greeting.

“Um, hello,” said Kyria.

“What are you coloring?”

“They’re dragons. Lysandra and Freidra.” She showed him the paper, careful to keep a hold of it so he wouldn’t smudge it.

“That’s real cool,” the boy said. “I’m Matt. I’m new.”

“I’m Kyria.”

“I like your name.”

“Thank you.”

Unsure of how to proceed, she turned back to her drawing and resumed coloring as if Matt were no longer there. Matt didn’t seem offended. He sat beside her on the log and watched her.

“I like to write stories,” Matt said after a few minutes of silence. Kyria was once again startled by the distraction, though not as much as before. “Maybe you can draw for my books. I wrote one about dragons once, but it wasn’t very good, so I didn’t finish it.”

Kyria looked at him with genuine interest. “I wouldn’t mind reading one,” she said.

Matt’s face lit up. “Yeah? I can bring the one I’m working on to school tomorrow. Maybe you can do the cover for me. You’re pretty good.”

Kyria shrugged. “I just draw what I see.”

The statement didn’t seem to phase Matt. He nodded as if it made perfect sense. “Sometimes Chris Stetson comes and snatches my stories away and makes me chase him,” he said, looking down.

“Don’t let them bully you. Don’t chase them. If you don’t react, they get bored.”

“Is that what you do?”

“Yeah,” said Kyria. “They don’t bother me anymore. I’m no fun to them.”

“I’ll try, but I just get so frustrated, and it makes me want to cry.”

Kyria said nothing, resuming her coloring. Matt fiddled with a piece of bark on the log.

“I’m sorry you got in trouble yesterday,” he said after a few moments.

“You were there?”

“My first day was a week ago.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. I didn’t notice you.”

“I noticed you,” said Matt. “You seem cool.”

“I guess. The girls don’t want to talk to me. They just want to giggle and talk about boys, and I don’t think that’s fun at all.”

“I think your drawings are fun. I want to see more of them.”

“Okay,” said Kyria.

Kyria liked Matt, but she couldn’t keep her mind on the task of speaking to him. As she colored her dragons, giving them even more life, she thought of the dream world. She wondered if Lysandra and Freidra were there, or the little boy. She felt as if she must search for him. The more she thought of the world, the more she didn’t want to be there with all the boring children on the playground, waiting for recess to end so they could go study things having nothing to do with dragons and flying. She sighed.

Recess was over. The chaperon blew her whistle, and everyone stopped playing their games to gather in a line in front of her. Kyria put her drawing away, and she and Matt stood and walked together.

She found paying attention in class harder than usual. Everywhere she looked, she could see shimmers of the dream world. In her peripheral vision, a flitterby flew towards her, even coming close enough to buzz by her ear and whisper unintelligible words. When Kyria turned her head, nothing was there.

She looked out the window, hoping to see Lysandra and her baby. To Kyria’s delight, the dragons were outside in the grass under the warm sun. Freidra was hopping around, playing some sort of solitary game with something Kyria couldn’t see. Lysandra was watching her, the love for her child evident in her large, shining green and black eyes. She looked at Kyria, as if they’d always been there and knew Kyria had just now noticed them. Lysandra appeared to smile. Kyria couldn’t tell if the corners of her mouth were turned up or if it was her imagination, like when a puppy seemed to smile.

She smiled back and lifted a hand to give a small wave with the tips of her fingers.

The sharp *crack* of a ruler hitting her desk startled her so much she had to hold back tears. She glowered at Mrs. Smith, who was standing beside Kyria’s desk and returning the angry look.

“Pay. Attention.” The ruler slapping the desk punctuated each word. Each slap made Kyria jump, despite her trying not to do so.

Kyria glanced out the window. Freidra had stopped playing. Lysandra was no longer smiling. Smoke curled out of her large nostrils. Freidra tried to breathe fire, directed at Mrs. Smith, but she failed. Her mom reached out with her scaly claw and pulled her daughter back.

Kyria looked back at Mrs. Smith. She hated her, and she had no patience today.

“I already know all of this,” she said in a defiant yet quivering voice. “I don’t want to be here.”

“Well, you *are* here, and you need to act like you’re a part of this classroom. I would talk to your parents again, but they’re just as useless as you are.”

Kyria’s face turned red. Mrs. Smith wasn’t supposed to say bad things about her parents. No

one was.

“I don’t like you,” said Kyria in a quiet voice. “You’re mean, and I hate you.”

The rest of the class snickered.

Mrs. Smith fumed. “You don’t speak to your elders that way. Go face the corner. Now.”

Kyria feigned unhappiness, but she was glad for the punishment. Now she could let her mind wander as much as she wanted without anyone saying anything. She didn’t care about standing in one spot for an extended period of time. She had her mind, which was all she needed.

She stood at the corner in the front of the room and closed her eyes, setting the canvas for images much more interesting than a schoolroom. She imagined herself flying through the dream world, seeing Lysandra and Freidra, the boy who had come to her room, and other creatures and people she had yet to meet. She saw Carel and Thomas peeking out one of the back windows of their house. She followed their gaze to where Maryn was talking to her in the field.

* * *

“So it’s true. You are the Dreamer. Nothing else can explain why you were able to fly, or why you suddenly stopped crying for no reason.”

Kyria was standing in front of Maryn in the large backyard of the Myrs, the soft wind rustling the dry grass. There was a wet spot on Maryn’s shirt.

“I’m back!” she said, looking around, gazing up at the purple sky.

“Yes, I know,” said Maryn. “Your emotions aren’t exactly seamless when hours have passed in your world. I’m going to have to get used to that, but I guess it’s good to know when you’ve checked out for a bit. I’m pleased the old stories have well prepared me to recognize these signs.”

She knew she must have fallen asleep in the corner of the classroom. She found it amusing to be asleep while standing, and that her punishment allowed her to visit the dream world during school.

“Well,” said Maryn with a smile. “This is excellent news. There’s much to be done. Do you want to practice more with the power stones?”

Kyria paused. “I’m not sure I can fly again just yet.”

“That will come.” He was reaching into a brown leather sack. “Try this one instead.” He handed her another of the smooth, black stones.

She accepted it with both hands and looked at the word on the surface.

“*K-ki... kin...*”

“*Kineris*,” Maryn offered. “It allows you to make things move without touching them. Go ahead and try it with the stone. See if you can send it to me without moving your hands.”

Kyria nodded and concentrated. “*Kineris*,” she said, willing the stone to obey.

It did. The stone began to hover above her open palms. She smiled and used her mind to push the stone through the air toward Maryn. She could feel the small weight of the object pushing back at her.

She loved the idea of moving things using telekinesis. However, her sudden excitement

caused her to use more force than she had intended.

The stone, which at that point during its slow journey had been just a foot away from Maryn's hands, shot toward Maryn and hit him in the chest. He clutched it before it fell to the ground, but his gasp made it clear it had hurt him.

"I'm so sorry!" Kyria cried.

Maryn nodded. "It's all right. It's my fault for not mentioning just how powerful this ability can be. You can control how much force you use, and you just saw what happens if you use a lot of force on a small object or something that doesn't weigh much. It's not that different from using your muscles to throw something. And, like your muscles, you can exercise this ability so you can be more powerful. Just be careful. It's all too easy to hurt someone. Use it for harm only against creatures meaning to harm you."

"Okay. I'm really sorry."

"It wasn't too bad," Maryn said with a weak smile. "At least it wasn't aimed at my head."

"So, where did you get the stones?" Kyria asked, realizing she had just been accepting his possession of them.

"I've been searching for them for the past twenty years. Basically, as soon as I knew about you. I've kept them with me at all times just in case."

"Wait, twenty years? But I'm only nine. I'll be ten in November." She lifted her chin as she said the last statement.

"That is twenty of *our* years," Maryn corrected. "Time often flows more rapidly here. Imagine our frustration waiting so long for you to come of age, then for you to be mentally ready to be summoned to us. Meanwhile, evil has continued to saturate the land, and we don't know where it comes from."

"I see," said Kyria. She was proud to have adults need her for once. She knew she should feel unworthy, but instead she felt honored to have an entire world rely on her and wait for her—the quiet little girl in the corner who always kept to herself.

"The old scrolls mentioned the power stones. They spoke of the necessity of using the stones to grant the Dreamer's abilities. I knew instead of sitting around doing nothing while waiting for you, I should keep busy. So I set out to search for as many as I could. It was difficult at first. I had to talk to many of my colleagues, asking if they knew anything about the stones and their whereabouts. Finally, I found a wise man in one of the northern provinces who gave me a small clue. I took the journey, not knowing if I would come back alive. The clue led to writing on a wall in a cave, which led to the location of the first power stone. *Volaris*. From there, it became easier. The stones want to be together. They gravitate toward each other. You only have to hold one to feel led to another."

"How many did you find?"

"A fair number," Maryn said, reaching inside his bag and jiggling the stones. Kyria could hear them clanking against each other. "There are many more to find, but I don't know how many there are. It's possible we won't find them all, but the important thing is to give you an arsenal of powers to use against the evil in our land."

"What is the evil?" She recalled stories of witches and monsters and other bad creatures. She shivered at the thought of possible encounters with those things.

“We don’t know where it comes from yet. Right now, we’re plagued by dark beings we’ve called the Shadows. They appear in the form of tall, slender men, except they are completely devoid of light and color. It is as if a shadow had taken form. We don’t know who created them or what their purpose is, other than to spread death and fear.”

Kyria’s eyes widened. “Can they hurt me?” she asked.

“So far, the Shadows themselves have not hurt anyone, but terrible things tend to happen when they are around.”

She shivered, realizing a dream could easily become a nightmare. “I’m scared,” she said to Maryn.

“Don’t be, child. I’m here to train you so that you can fight the evil and save us. If I can help it, I won’t let anything happen to you.” He gave her a comforting smile.

She nodded, though she wasn’t fully convinced. “Okay. Can I try another stone?”

“Sure,” said Maryn, reaching inside his bag. “We’ll do one more for today.” He pulled out a power stone and handed it to Kyria. “The word is *fortiris*.”

“What does it do?” Kyria asked, running her finger across the word, entranced by the golden glow of the letters.

“It gives you strength. Go ahead and try it. And then try to lift me.”

Kyria giggled. “I can’t lift you. You’re taller and heavier than I am.”

“The stone gives you the power,” said Maryn. “You believe that, right?”

The stones had not failed before. “Yes, I do,” Kyria said, her face turned solemn. She closed her eyes, which she knew was unnecessary, but she liked to concentrate and feel the tingling sensation as the stone’s power filled her. “*Fortiris*.”

She opened her eyes. Maryn nodded, and she went to him and put her arms around his waist. Before, she didn’t think she could ever lift him, but now, knowing the power she had absorbed from the stone, she didn’t expect it to be a challenge.

Sure enough, she lifted him with ease, as if he were just one of her dolls. She laughed and spun him in a circle.

“Okay, okay,” said Maryn with a weak chuckle, the look on his face betraying his discomfort. “Very good, but I’m too old to be tossed about.”

“I could throw you up and catch you! You could see how it is to fly!”

“Please, please don’t. Please put me down, dear child.”

Kyria smiled and set the man on the ground. “I was just teasing,” she said. “But I could have done it.”

“I believe it. I think we’ll stick with you doing the flying.”

At that moment, the back door of the house opened, and Thomas and Carel came running outside, which was a humorous sight due to their girth. Thomas was struggling to keep up with Carel, who wore a large grin. They approached Maryn and Kyria.

“We saw it all!” Carel said. “So it’s true!”

Thomas shrugged. His breathing was heavy. “I can’t deny what I saw with my own eyes. I’m happy to be proven wrong finally.”

Kyria smiled. “I’m the Dreamer,” she said. Saying it out loud made it feel real.

“She’s taken to her new powers well,” Maryn told the couple. “Well, except that we have to

work on the flying.”

Carel nodded. “I had to look away when I saw her falling. I didn’t want to see another little girl’s death.”

“What do you do now?” Thomas asked.

“We should look for more power stones,” Maryn said. “Those stones are what enables her to do all the things a Dreamer can do. I will take her with me on my travels.”

“We’re sad to see you go,” said Carel. Her plump face showed a caring smile and soft eyes. She displayed a mother’s kindness, and Kyria realized at that moment she would miss her new friends whom she had known for such a short while.

“Will I see them again?” she asked Maryn. “Can we communicate with them from where we are?”

“When we go to town, we can use a farspeak to talk to them. We can keep them up to date on what we’re doing.”

“Good.” Kyria smiled.

Suddenly, Carel’s soft features changed. Her eyes turned black, as if they were pits that defied space and extended to indefinite depths. Her face turned stark white, and her lips lost all color. Her mouth was tight without the hint of any sort of smile. Her posture was stiff.

“*Leave us.*” The words came out of Carel’s mouth, but they were not her voice. The voice was deep and raspy, with an echo as if the words had been spoken inside a vast cave. The three others stared in petrified terror. “*You are not welcome here.*”

“Who are you?” Maryn managed to say in a quivering voice.

“*The Dreamer will die.*”

“I won’t die,” Kyria said. “I’m going to save everyone.”

“*You are nothing. Leave us! Wake up.*”

“I won’t!”

“*Wake up NOW.*”

* * *

She was being shaken.

She awoke with a start to find herself crumpled on the floor in the corner of the classroom. Mrs. Smith had a firm grasp on her shoulders.

“How dare you fall asleep while being punished!” Mrs. Smith said, grabbing Kyria by the arm and jerking her upright. “The principal will hear about this. You will go to his office immediately.”

Kyria was angry with Mrs. Smith for pulling her away from the dream world. As frightening as the evil that had possessed Carel was, she knew she must be brave and face it. Such a task was difficult if she had to live in reality, facing the evil disguised as her fourth-grade teacher.

Mrs. Smith’s fingers were digging into Kyria’s arm as she led her to the door. She shoved Kyria into the hallway. Kyria stumbled but remained on her feet.

“Principal’s office. And so help you if I find you didn’t go.”

Mrs. Smith slammed the door in Kyria’s face.

Kyria shuffled down the hallway, noting with displeasure and boredom how the drab lime color scheme was such a stark contrast to the vibrant colors of the dream world. Even in West Section, where the Myrs lived and where the landscape was dry and the grass was losing its green, the overall view was much more pleasing to the eye. The purple sky was her favorite. There was no purple anywhere in her school.

After much meandering, she came to a door on which was a metal plate with the engraving, “Miles Richmond, Principal.” Underneath, a small, cardboard sign read, “The principal is your pal!”

The door was open, which was Mr. Richmond’s way of saying he was always accessible. Kyria stood in the doorway, unsure if she should knock or just enter.

Mr. Richmond looked up from his desk.

“Ah, come in,” he said, removing his reading glasses. “Kyria, is it? Kyria...”

“Kyria Taylor, Sir,” she offered.

“Sit! Close the door.” He leaned back in his chair. “What brings you here? More trouble paying attention in class?”

Kyria sat in one of the cushioned chairs across from him. Everything here was too familiar to her—the soft colors, the potted plants, the framed inspirational quotes, the large window behind the desk looking out at the parking lot.

“I fell asleep while being punished in the corner,” she told him.

“I see. Why were you being punished?”

“I told Mrs. Smith I hated her.”

“Now, Kyria,” said Mr. Richmond. “You know Mrs. Smith is just trying to help you, right? She just wants the best for you and the other students. It’s not fair to her when you are obstinate.”

“She said bad things about my parents.”

“I’ll have a talk with your teacher to find out what happened, but you must understand you need to at least pretend to be interested in your studies.”

“It’s hard. They’re so boring.”

“It’s distracting to the other children when you are constantly singled out.”

“Then why can’t she leave me alone?” Kyria asked. “Why does she have to disrupt class to punish me?”

“If you weren’t punished, the others would think they could fool around in class and not pay attention, too. And they can’t afford to do that like you can. If she only punished them, that wouldn’t be very fair, would it be?”

“I guess.” She looked down at her lap.

Mr. Richmond grew quiet and contemplative. He folded his hands and regarded Kyria for a moment. She shifted in her seat.

“Perhaps,” he said, then paused again to think more before continuing. “Perhaps we can have one of the older students come tutor you during one of their free hours. Would you like to learn more advanced studies?”

Kyria considered this. All she wanted to do was dream, but maybe not being stuck in a classroom for an hour wouldn’t be such a bad thing.

“It’d be mutually beneficial,” Mr. Richmond continued. “Hopefully it would help curb your boredom so you’re not disrupting the other children. I think it could be a good experiment that we could use with other bright students if successful.”

“Okay,” she agreed.

“Excellent! Now go back to class and please, for me, tell Mrs. Smith you’re sorry.”

“I don’t know if I can do that. I hate Mrs. Smith so much.”

Mr. Richmond winked. “You don’t have to mean it. You’d do well to learn there are some things in life you have to fake.”

Kyria nodded. “Okay.” She stood. “Thank you.”

“You should probably also walk in with your head dropped as if I’d just given you a good talking to.”

This made Kyria smile. “I will,” she said.

* * *

“The school called,” Mrs. Taylor said during the drive home. The two of them were alone in the car. Kyria had been staring out the passenger seat window, daydreaming, not knowing or caring if the images she saw were from her imagination or were real people and creatures from her dream world.

“Honey, I’m losing my patience. I love you, but your dad and I don’t need this. Is there any way you can be more cooperating?”

Kyria giggled at a scene in someone’s front yard. A bear-like creature was trying and failing to climb a tree and taste its plump fruit. It gave Kyria a look of sad frustration as the car passed by.

Mrs. Taylor pounded the steering wheel with her fist, startling Kyria back to reality. Kyria turned to look.

“I’m sorry,” said Mrs. Taylor, beginning to cry. “I didn’t mean to react that way. It’s just really hard, Kyr. I want to be a good mom. I want you to be happy. But the school is just putting so much pressure on us. I just don’t know what to do. I don’t want to punish you.”

“I’m sorry,” said Kyria.

“I know you tend to go off in your own little world, and there’s nothing wrong with that. I just wish you’d have more of a grasp on reality. I wish you’d know when people are talking to you and actually respond.”

“Okay.” She didn’t want to make things hard for her parents, but she wanted them to understand how boring the real world was. She wished they could see the unimportance of the things adults thought were important. The imagination made it possible to experience so much more, but everybody wanted her stuck in their dull world with them. She wanted more than anything for people to leave her alone.

Mrs. Taylor glanced at her daughter with a warm smile. “Hey, don’t be sad. I’m sure you’ll figure out how to make everyone happy and still have time to do your own thing.” She paused, then changed the subject. “Did you ever finish your drawing?”

“I finished it last night, and I started coloring it today.”

“I’d love to see it when we get home.”

“Okay.” Kyria brightened. “Baby Freidra tried to fry Mrs. Smith today.”

Mrs. Taylor giggled. “Sounds like Mrs. Smith had it coming to her.”

“Oh, she did! She said you and Dad were useless.”

Mrs. Taylor’s smile faded. “I see,” she said.

“I didn’t like that. But Freidra doesn’t know how to breathe fire yet, so it didn’t work.”

“That’s too bad,” Kyria’s mother said, her voice soft.

They had arrived home. Kyria bounced to the door and waited for her mother to open it so she could go inside and finish bringing her dragons to life.

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