

LORENZUS

Well hello there Darlings, my name is Raspberry Rose and if you've spent more than five minutes in Arhan-Zoul, you've probably heard it a time or two. What very few have heard, though, is the daring tale of how I became the Diamond of Areezah, Drag Super Star and fashion icon that I am. That's what I'm here today to discuss with you; in all the dark and colorful details it holds! Today, Spring 5th, 7552, marks my 38th Light Night, and Rhyonis has seen much change in the last few years. It's been a rich and full nearly four decades, but before all those story-filled chapters, there was a beginning. A beginning in the shape of a boy named Lorenzus. We both called Rhyonis home, Lorenzus, however, lived in a completely different world than the vibrant fairy tale I call my own. He was born at the same moment as I, and beyond the shared arrival into this world, we both inhabited the same body. Or rather, it is I who inhabits *his* body.

Locked far to the north of my home sweet paradise Areezah, is my hometown of Jerrym, the 'Diamond in the Rough', as it is known worldwide. The sleepy city is a secluded cloister of miners and traders that are all descendants of the founders of the mine upon which the city is built. It was discovered during the first century of Arhan-Zoul's founding in roughly the year 5025, before it was quickly snatched and locked away by the group of explorers that discovered exorbitant stores of diamonds within the caves below.

Since this discovery, Jerryym has become an illustrious and exclusive community as they are extremely suspicious of anyone who comes to the town. Their vanity will only allow them to sell their earthly fortune to those of some high-standing repute and have extremely rigorous screening processes. These processes are in place for those seeing to procure the gems, as well as those with the desire to work the mines; these being owned by the descendants of the original founders of Jerryym, Lorenzus and myself included.

It was in this city that my, and Lorenzus', parents- father and mother, or Rhyonis and Rhyonisa in Rhyonian Common- made their livings pursuing passions of their own. My mother, Vermalde, was a striking, dark woman and painter from a village outside of the Fey Forest. With pallet-dappled dreams, lashes like feather dusters, and eyes as bright as a spotlight, she came to paint landscapes of the iconic Skeletal Wood that loomed over Jerryym, like icy wrought iron fencing. The Wood is a legendary spectacle that ends up bringing a great deal of tourism which is just as quickly iced out by Jerryym hospitality. These tourists are often pushed away to the gated outskirts of the city, patrolled by Shaded Coalition operatives, there by duty, but prohibited from entering the city proper. Witnessing this denial, tall, strong, and stoic, the petrified trees, completely encased in ice, stand as the soldiers of the Skeletal Wood. Closely together like gargantuan skeletal warriors, they guard the precious 'Diamond in the Rough'.

It was, indeed, those ominous warriors that drew my Rhyonisa to my Rhyonis', Leoravich's, home. Leoravich Coal- may Alaxendaria see his Path remain light, was a plain man with rugged features and blinding rose-red hair and beard which framed his face like a crimson wreath, or blood-soaked mane, depending on your perspective. The

Coal's had owned a mine within Jerryym, tending to it with the hands of loyal workers they paid handsomely with their findings. We had garnished a name for ourselves amongst the stuffy Jerryym hierarchy as the most generous and, in their eyes, foolish of the founding families to pay so kindly. However, as our workers outpaced the forces that stood over them nearly ten-fold, we proved that if you pay quality people a quality wage, you get the best quality results! Where most of the other families spend their wealth on ostentatious displays, entertainment, poor employee wages, or parties, the Coals had a taste for the finer things in life: art, music, education, *appropriate* worker compensation, exotic foods and wines and, to my personal pleasure, decadent sweets!

Fast forward several years, after Leoravich was originally struck by my mother's grace and skill with a brush, they fall madly in love and marry. Shortly thereafter, they began to build their own home for their family, and I came along, as did Lorenzus. Though I could tell he was a part of me, I knew he wasn't me, nor I him. It was *his* body that I inhabited, but from the moment of our debut into this world, as clear as the heartbeat-like words of Angehlah's magic giving me conscious understanding, I knew myself to be Raspberry Rose; someone other than the little Rhyon that my parents fawned over.

Lorenzus. They would coo this name to me, as if it were a soothing sound, but it was grating, an insult to my senses. I longed for the voices of these people- people I knew to be my home- to call my name and what I knew it to be; *Raspberry*. But it was always *Lorenzus*.

Phases mixed and painted Time's passage in years as I struggled with learning to speak and express myself as Raspberry; my name inevitably became my first word. My Rhyonisa would tell me

stories in later years of how full of life and vibrance I was as an infant. Somethings never change I suppose as I was always screaming for attention, to the point of tears, which were always gold and overflowing with Life Essence, as she would say. I had made myself cry many times in the vanity within my bedroom, but I never saw the gold tears so I thought it was just her poking fun at the dramatics I painted our home in.

Looking back on it now, I didn't give them enough credit for how rowdy I was. This circumstance was made all that much worse by my clumsiness at that age- a trait I've more than mastered at this point thanks to my many performances. I would run and move away unpredictably, like the wind; I could feel air guide my steps every time my parents would try to get me to sit still. With those movements, I'd knock into precious antiques, paintings in progress, or worse: my mother's side project of dyes that had become a fervent passion of hers since coming to the otherwise grey scale of Jerrym.

It was at that time, at about the age of five, that I truly began to feel a rift between my parents and I. They longed for this Lorenzus boy and called me him constantly, and the more I insisted I was Raspberry, I could see their anger deepen.

After a particularly long day dealing with his workers and their excavations, my father Leoravich looked to me from across the dinner table in our manor's dining room. I had just taken a second rose-jelly cake onto my plate when he scowled at the scarlet tutu I had worn to supper.

“Lorenzus, please go remove that skirt and put pants on for dinner.”

“No, *Leoravich*, I don't believe I will. I'm Raspberry and I wear skirts!”

Now, I'm not sure what struck me first, my father's hand against my cheek, the tabletop against my ankle, or the hard stone floor beneath my shoulder. As I recoiled in fear at the blur of scarlet that was my father, I felt the screaming smarts in all three places. My voice would have joined them were my lips not sealed by Leoravich's palm. I struggled against his restraint in terror as I watched his eyes turn as red as the skirt around my waist and nearly pop out of his head.

“I will suffer this insolence and disrespect no further! You are MY Rhyon and you will wear what I tell you, and do what I tell you! You are *Lorenzus*! Do you hear me?!”

Leoravich, as I would resign myself to call him from that moment forward, ranted and raved even as my Nisa, pulled him off of me. I scurried to my room, slamming the door, and hid beneath the bed, screaming my throat raw and ears deaf beneath its frame. Clutching the fabric of my long-flowing skirt up to my head, I tried to block and muffle the distant howls of anger from both my parents.

The phrase *Rhyonin* was something I hadn't heard before that night, yet it struck a core within me and felt familiar. A few more hours of muffled shouts rang out through the rooms of our home and I wondered about the word *Rhyonin*. Were there other children hiding under their beds in the same city pondering words they didn't understand or parents that didn't understand them? Soft footsteps, echoed by a series of taps at the wooden door of my bedroom, woke me from my deepened thoughts about what any of it could mean and why Leoravich hated me so.

“Raspberry,” I heard his voice meekly call, barely audible over the creaking hinges as they yawned and groaned to a halt ajar. His shadow, extended by the sconce light in the hall beyond, crept across mine beneath the bed. I felt a momentary dread wash over me as he sighed and walked to the still made quilt cover. There, he sat for an impossibly long time, sighed countless sighs, and just waited on my name. *Raspberry. Raspberry the Rhyonin*. “Can we talk please?”

“You seem to be talking fine,” I called, scuttling a bit deeper beneath the bed frame, which sunk under the weight of yet another heavy sigh. Making myself as small as possible, hiding within my nest of crimson skirt fabric, I loosened my breath on a question. “What’s a Rhyonin?”

My heartbeat in my ears made the moments of silence seem like an eternity, I was almost relieved to hear his voice once more. It was low and gravelly, clearly hoarse from shouting and tired with stress.

“Your Nisa and I believe you are, Lorenzus.” I recoiled at the name, scoffing at it as he spoke. “Raspberry,” he corrected. “I apologize. Rhyonins are different people than *ordinary* ones, and I had hoped you weren’t one of them.” I knew he’d be looking at the ceiling at that. The way he said hoped was the same he had always said it when he was about to blabber about his favorite thing in the whole realm; religion. “Despite my prayers to the Light Father, St. Nihaan seems to be a bit busy to guide me in this, and it’s becoming more obvious that you are, indeed, one of these Rhyonins.” And so it began, the beginning of my understanding of who I was.

“What do you mean different?” I huffed, proudly swiping the swathe of red tulle down past my face to get a better view of his ankles.

“Do you recall the bedtime stories your Nisa tells you about?” He picked up his feet and moved them, presumably over the bed. This frustrated me because I knew how bad his feet smelled atop my quilt, and because they were no longer in kicking distance. “About the fabled creation Deity, Malirica, and the Sentience Shockwaves our realm experiences from time to time? Rhyonins are a result of that.”

I could feel the bed shift beneath the weight of yet *another* worldly sigh, bracing himself for his lengthy, inadvertent, diatribe. “But they are more serious and tragic than fantasy tales of distant realms and different realities with untold wonders. The Rhyonins are victims of circumstance. Even as an adult, a Rhyonis myself, I don’t even fully understand . . . you are far from ordinary and it’s time I do my best to try, *Raspberry*.”

“Bodies are like vessels for preserves. From what is understood about the Shockwaves, it is believed that they have the ability to move these contents from the vessel haphazardly and without warning.” There was a poignant pause and as a child, I was confused out of my already rattled mind, but as the woman I am today, I applaud the man’s efforts.

“I’ve been fighting accepting that this is what happened to you, my Rhyon, my Lorenzus, and I wanted to spare you from the uncertainty and confusion of what that truth may mean.” He uncrossed his legs, chancing them on the floor once more, assured in his safety by my enthralled silence.

“We had our first suspicions on your first Light Night. We had sent a single lantern to light up your first year alive, and as it soared to join the rest of the Zardons in the night sky, the flame burned ruby red and lodged itself in the sky just the same as a red star.”

That was all he had to say to get me to reveal myself. I almost took him off the bed as I slammed into his calves while making my way to the large windowpane across from my bed.

“Where is it? Where's my red star?” I scoured the night sky, looking for a red blip of light amidst the countless white-specked Zardons. Before he could stand to point it out, I giggled in glee as I saw it. As red as my hair and my skirt and my cheeks, sure as he had said, there was a single tiny red dot clinging to the masses just above the Skeletal Wood. “Oh, it's so pretty!”

“I sent a letter to the Church of St. Nihaan in the Divine Province for what it might mean,” he continued, not paying much mind to my emergence. “Explaining that my Rhyon's first Light Night created a Zardon that was red like blood. They told me that the Light Father had blessed me with a Rhyo that would be a star to rival others as red travels farther than any other color of light.”

I'd like to believe that my ego started with that single greatest line of confidence boost, but I was a narcissist from birth, Darling.

“Your mother also sent word to the citadel,” he grumbled, pulling my attention back, as I could feel the severity in that. Nisa was never a fan of religion and claimed that the gods caused more trouble than they fixed. Leoravich wasn't a huge fan of that as he wasn't a devout follower of any faith per se. Though, he still paid mind and observance to the Creation Gods and their significance in the Realm's existence. Despite that, he still loved my mother and tolerated her personal interest in what he called ‘*Magicky Foolery*’.

“That tower of Magicky Foolery teleported an outsider to our doorstep a moment later, and half of Jerry the next!” I stifled a laugh

as I could see the rough-skinned cheeks redden beneath his unkempt greying beard. Although his face was so rosy in the moment, he was still a bulbous and off-putting man, especially with the depth of flustered color the Citadel brought out of him. To my relief, he sighed again, calm and cooler than I was accustomed. He was clearly in defeat and admitting something to himself at that moment.

“They talked of the shockwaves and Rhyonins, as they were one themselves. It was an awkward talk as I didn't understand a lick of it, but I digested as much as I could and have sat with it the last four years. I can't deny it anymore and I should be supporting you and love you for who you are and that- as clear as the Light Father's love in Balasar- is Raspberry.”

Barely able to support my weight at that moment, I let go of the window to meekly walk over to him, adjusting my skirt once more and quickly crumbled into his arms. I tried to look up and speak through my sobs and I could- I could see the tears in his eyes. He grabbed the white handkerchief in his shirt pocket and began to wipe the mine dirt from my face where he had clasped. I had forgotten the chaotic scene that had led us to this more idyllic one, and as jarring as the transition may have been, taking his peace offering was a new beginning.

“I'm sorry Raspberry.”

“I'm sorry too, Yonny. I don't want to be trouble. I just want to be me.”

“Life in Rhyonis can be difficult enough, and while being a Rhyonin will only make it harder for you, doing it alone would be impossible. I'm sorry for not providing support sooner. The world

outside might not understand and you'll find a lot of cruelty, but your mother and I will work with you to help you discover yourself. Won't we Vermalde, Darling?"

I hadn't even noticed her standing there, my Nisa, quiet in the doorway. She was always quiet and observant, that's why she was so wise. I ultimately knew this turn of events was thanks to her scolding, but she let him fix his mistake and I appreciated her that much more for it.

"Of course, Raspberry, my love." My Nisa sung in the soothing tone mother's seem to possess as some innate sorcery. She glided across the room in two quick strides to delicately place herself on her knees like a perched bird, elegantly draping her fingers across mine.

And that was that. What choice did I have if not to go along with their plans? I was a child after all. So began the charade of half acceptance and partial freedom. In our home, we had grown really close, my parents and I. Despite the support and encouragement I received as Raspberry indoors, every family outing was made all that much worse when I followed suit with our arrangement and became Lorenzus every time I stepped out the door.

Life became a constant back and forth in my formative years. Inside, I was free to wear red skirts and dresses and scarves in all sorts of styles. I would dance and sing and my parents always smiled. It was a wonderful time indoors, but I had begun to fear stepping out past our threshold. For that's when the fun stopped, and all the pretty red things were put away.

Outside in the streets of Jerrym, I needed to be Lorenzus, a son of the Coal family, a future head of house himself, when all I wanted to

be was Raspberry the Star. It wasn't long before I would sneak skirts in my undergarments and learn new ways to hide my red Raspberry clothes beneath my drab Lorenzus attire. My shirts and pants looked comically stuffed at first and I could hardly get a belt past my Nisa's keen eye, but I mastered the skill of a second or even third outfit- and the reveal- by the time I was 10!

I did it discerningly though. Jerrym's streets were usually pretty barren, the almost perpetual snowy air made the street traffic light and if I ever saw a chance to let a piece of Raspberry see the outside, I took it!

One day, a crisp summer morning in the year 7528, when I was about 14, I was making a run to the general store for some thread for my mother when I chanced a full Raspberry outfit. Ducking into an alley between two tightly constructed homes just beyond the border of our manor's grounds, the drab trousers and overcoat meant for Lorenzus melted away, becoming one with the scenery as I emerged like an upturned rose with layers of red silk petals. I even pulled my belt up beneath my ribs and cinched it tight to give the dress more of a bell silhouette. Feeling confident in my transformation, I let the lengthy crimson red curls down from beneath my hat and boldly stepped into the street lit by sunlight, filtered through a frost-laden sky.

"Oh, who is she!" I heard someone call almost immediately as I stepped out from the alley. Panicked at the sudden notice, I found my outer to be a young half-elf boy about my age amongst an entire herd of his peers; school children. Some of the family's of Jerrym had their children all taught together in an establishment near the mines to educate them on their wondrous futures as glorified spelunkers.

My gem of a Rhyonisa spared me from such a fate and insisted on teaching me herself, so neither Lorenzus nor Raspberry had dealt with the unwashed masses that reeked of mine dust from even this distance. “She's beautiful!” All right, maybe he didn't smell too bad.

“I actually don't know who that is . . . Miss!” His escort- an elderly woman with a thick fur coat of what looked to be treated moose, or maybe that was just her posture- called, and began to feebly hobble after me as I made a quick turn towards the store. I could hear what sounded like a peg leg chunking through the icy ground before a clambering thud. Opening the door of the store, I only looked back for a moment to see the woman being helped to her feet by two of the boys in her group before the door shut between us.

“Can I help ya sweetie?” It was the familiar voice of the sweet elvan woman who ran the general store, Veera, but I was so anxious and with my heart beating out of my chest, the surprise was enough to force a voice cracking yelp out of my mouth.

Elegantly, I turned and said “No, thank you,” voice breaking on every syllable. My cheeks were redder than my attire and I didn't need a full-length mirror next to the sales counter to tell me that. I composed myself and remembered that when I was Raspberry, I was happy. I smiled and spoke clearly again. “I mean, yes please, I need Vermalde's order, will that be a problem Darling?”

She chuckled at that, looked me over, and retrieved a parcel from beneath the counter and delivered it into my outstretched hand. I was expecting some yarn, but it seemed to be several items stacked and wrapped atop a book of some sort.

“Anything else, Rosy Cheeks?”

I took the parcel, surveyed it and didn't even look up, but shook my head as I turned to leave out the door, intrigued by whatever this unexpected package could be. The door hadn't even closed behind me and I had already begun to unwrap the book. A black leather cover peaking into view from under the beige parchment, but the next thing I saw was flashing lights as a boy's fist grabbed my collar, and struck my nose in its descent. He sneered at me, spitting across my cheeks as I locked eyes with those in a face painted red by rage.

“How are you gonna make an old lady run after ya! You may be pretty but you're no lady! Oh, wait . . .” I could see the recognition in his eyes, anger bleeding into confusion; funny how easily those two go hand in hand. He was the same boy that had called me beautiful, but at this closeness, he could see Lorenzus' face beneath my willow curls. Blood was sliding into my mouth through my lips agape in shock. The taste began to make me sick, commingling with the nerves in my stomach like tidal waves. I could feel the eyes of the gathering crowd, hear the ringing of fear in my ears, see the blood dripping into a puddle darkening the snow at my feet.

“Let me go, please, I need to get home.” I was beginning to cry and tried to speak as much like Raspberry as possible, but at this moment I lost all composure and felt as weak and powerless as Lorenzus. The piteous voice made me sound even more frail than I appeared. Thank whatever god you pay tribute to, but he did release me into the snow. Unfortunately, afterward, he added a swift kick into my chest, knocking the wind out of my small body and leaving me breathless, gasping and on my knees and uncovered hands in the snow.

Through the tears and bleary vision, I noticed my spattered blood had been joined by flecks of gold; a darkening puddle of slush

accented by glowing tears illuminated with aurum radiance. I was terrified but amazed by the dancing fluids that seeped into the ground and in an instant produced a luminous, golden rose, inches from my face. Instinctively, I used my free hand to grab it, maintaining my grip on the package meant for my mother and sprinted home.

It all happened so fast, maybe a matter of ten minutes from the time I left as Lorenzus and slammed the door behind me as Raspberry, much to the surprise and iration of my parents. I didn't even risk words, simply dropped the package at our doorstep and ran past them, slamming another door, and flinging myself onto the bed. I kicked off snow and blood-covered garment after garment until all that remained was soil-free underclothes and a tear-smeared face painted with dirt and drying scarlet. It wasn't until that moment that I felt the pricking sensation in my palm and noticed how tightly the rose stem was gripped between my alabaster fingers, now sticky and streaked pink, lit aglow by the now brightly vibrant petals.

All the strength I had remaining in my legs was spent with the three steps it took from my kneeled position over my bed to the velvet bench before my vanity. I looked in the mirror and watched for a long time. When my eyes would drift and cross I swear specks of gold were in the tears on my lashes. When I would focus, for the first time in my life, I didn't see the cute little girl Raspberry I knew myself as. In a horrible recognition, I could see the dirt-worn golden tears rolling down the ruddy face of a freckled and rose-red haired boy.

I knew him to be Lorenzus, and I *hated* him. We looked at each other, unblinking, non-speaking, for I didn't know how long. At once, his face mutated into the angry sneer of Leoravich as I screamed,

throwing trouser after vest after every garment tainted with Lorenzus' name and our blood over that hideous reflection.

There were knocks at the manor's door, or maybe it was my door, followed by muffled speaking and raised voices that all seemed distant, distorted, otherworldly. The noise could have been in the same room, in the entrance of our home, or in the storefront of the general store of the pretty elvan woman, but it may as well have been in the Abyssal Trench- the rantings of Kyah locked away by His father too- because none of it reached me.

Lorenzus and I were just there. Forever alone, together; him on the outside, no matter how much I cried and clawed to be seen from beneath the surface.

I hadn't moved from the covered mirror and, by time I shook the stalemate, the rose had lost its shimmer on the vanity table, withered to a sad brackish brown, and pale moonlight filtered into the window like gossamer on a breeze. I looked through the glass, searching for my peace of mind amidst the stars; my red Zardon.

Before I could spot it, a silhouette almost indiscernible from the remainder of the trees that made the Skeletal Wood caught my notice. Evident only by the two glowing yellow eyes perched atop the icy canopy, staring directly at me, shifting slightly against the mass of their possessor. A pair of pale orbs, huge and intelligent, they slid beneath the level of the trees, but still I could feel their light, their gaze, permeating my window pane and washing over me.

Without my volition, the window slowly creaked open and the sound of music was on the wind. Faint and echoey, the song was ethereal and haunting. It was calling me, whispering to me as the

breeze filled the room and caressed the back of my neck as it passed back over; like something had entered, explored the room, and was pushing me towards the window. It didn't feel malicious, but friendly, light, and encouraging. Familiar in some way, and then it spoke.

“Come play with me!” There wasn't anything in the room with me, except Lorenzus looking out from the vanity mirror. Like me, he was standing at an open window, but in his face, I could see fear and uncertainty; an apprehension to go with the wind into the Wood with whatever it was that was out there. He shook his head at me in the mirror telling me not to go, and I felt my head shaking too. The curled hair tickling my neck and shoulders reminded me of who I was, and I realized I was shaking it out of defiance, not for the voice, but to Lorenzus.

“No, I won't stay with you. You're afraid and boring, bye!” With that, I gathered my reddest and fluffiest coat, tucked my hair under a thick furred hat, and clambered over the wall of my bedroom to leave through the window.

“Hurry! Let's play,” the voice on the breeze called to me, playfully impatient, and I felt it rush past me in a start toward the Skeletal Wood. It made even the stiff tips of the trees shudder with its speed, and with the cold air of night surrounding me, sent a shiver through my entire body.

“I'm coming, wait up!” For as loud as I yelled in my mad dash through the night, it did little good as screaming at the wind tended to. With every step, frigid stinging air whistled in my ears like breath through a flute.

It was about three-quarters of a mile between my home and destination. As I got closer, the looming towers of ice and bark grew oppressively large, but so grew the music that sounded so familiar and inviting, like a long-retired lullaby. In minutes I had cleared the field and stood before the wall of icy warriors, defending Jerry from whatever hid within. Based on my experience that morning, I began to think maybe they protected the inhabitants from Jerry.

A hard swallow rocked my esophagus, pushing down what felt like bile as I faked my bravest smile and joined the unknown beyond. What was once an ethereal melody on the wind was now clearly song; harmonious words from an ephemeral source joined and matched by the breeze slipping through crystal branches like a natural-made organ. It was as alluring as it was haunting, a joyous dirge that filled me with an equal sense of excitement and thrill as it made me feel slightly ill at ease. Whatever I had seen and was calling to me was old and powerful.

Though I couldn't see what it was, I could feel it; an omnipresent feeling of company. I wandered for a moment, allowing the music to guide me; taking my body in its palpable touch, moving me deeper within the wood until everywhere I looked was just encased trunk and howling notes.

"Rhyo of Roses," called a voice, matching the singing but overlaying it in a transcendent and all-encompassing way. "You're a wonder and a gift, but you have cried such beautiful tears. Why?" The way the voice spoke to me was curious but dry, wise but unknowing. It felt ancient and tremendous but childlike in its ignorance. I felt a kinship to it as I asked my Rhyonin what a Rhyonin was.

I did my best to address it as confidently as possible, but as the shadow of a monstrous form shifted in the distance between two trees, I felt my voice falter and nothing came out but gasps. The sudden fright sent me tumbling onto my back and looking up directly into the face of what I would have called a monster. Standing at about 15 feet tall, the speaker craned over me even as it arched its back. Seemingly made of fir tree-like bristles- deep forest green tipped with emerald-green icicles- it clattered with a whimsical chiming as it shifted to look upon my fear-stricken silence. Its eyes, each the size of my head, washed over me, scanning and searching with ancient wisdom that made me feel all that much smaller.

The rest of its body remained perfectly still while the mouthless face continued to loom and study me, waiting for an answer that wouldn't come to my lips. Though it made no moves against me, I felt pinned in a paralyzing fear watching what I counted to be six arms glide through the area. They would cut grooves into the mist-laden air, stretching, to grasp on the iced-over limbs of nearby trees to support its massive shifting weight into a sitting position.

Slowly, it moved its head back and sat crossed-legged across from me in the small clearing we occupied. I sat up, beginning to find breath in my lungs to speak, and watched in amusement as the creature stood, bipedal, with its six arms out like human limbs. It sat like a dog, using its legs to scratch away a massive chunk of ice from behind its head supporting its weight in front of it with its arms.

“What are you?”

“I am Odezz't.” It spoke alongside me, answering my question as it was asked with its voice coming from all directions, its eyes motionless. “I have come to this Wood from a distant forest and bore

witness to you beneath the red star. You exude such Life Essence to produce it with your tears. I ask again; why do you cry, Rhyo of Roses?”

“I don't know what that means, *Rhyo of Roses*. My name is Raspberry, but this body isn't mine and I'm trapped inside of it and I hate it.” I could feel the anger welling inside of me and the tears coming to the surface to run down my lashes and drip to the warm outer coats shielding me from the frigid space.

One of the hands came to rest atop the snow before me and the tears stopped at once. I placed my palm on a massive fingertip and could feel a calmness wash over my mind; a warmth exuding from both of us in that moment of contact. In mere seconds the snow began to melt in the clearing, even the ice cracked against nearby trees sending streams of water sliding down to freshly freed green earth beneath. Odezz't blinked and I did the same, sending a couple more rogue tears into the wet blades of grass. As they dotted it with flecks of gold that shimmered with a sparkling light, they would bloom and twist to expand in a massive burst of unfurling red petals.

I stifled what was a laugh of amazement and heard a light giggle on the wind that belonged to Odezz't.

“You're not a monster, are you?”

“I am Odezz't. I have lived as long as the realm, I am part of the realm, I am Life Essence, as are you, as are they.” They gestured a hand down their body, pointed at me, and then in a direction I assumed to be towards Jerry. “You and I are just *more*. I am Essence given form; free to walk and observe and defend the realm where it needs. You are blessed with a natural gift of overflowing Life Essence from

Lady Siesmet. I have sensed your distress and came here to aide you but do not understand what troubles you so.”

“I just want to be me, but everyone sees me as someone else.” Ignoring the fact that my mother had been right all along about my golden tears, I couldn't help but feel anger in that moment. If this ancient being could see the beauty in me, why couldn't my own parents? Those roses began to spread and we now stood surrounded, a nature spirit and a girl trapped in a body not her own. “What do you know about Rhyonins?”

“I do not know this word, *Rhyonin*. I know Rhyonis to be the First Son of Siesmet, and we are all His Rhyos. He is the source of Life Essence and from Him, all living things come, we are His children. What can you tell me about Rhyonins?”

They began to sit a little closer to me, their six hands moving to collect roses and gather them in bouquets that they then stacked around us in a neat circle. It was a strange but beautiful scene where I felt more at home and free than I ever had in the actual house of my family.

“So, my Yonny and Nisa told me that a Sentience Shockwave took my preserves from one body in a different world and put it in this one. They think I am a boy called Lorenzus, and that's what this body is, but I know myself to be a girl named Raspberry.”

For a moment, Odezz't looked as confused as a pair of sagacious yellow eyes could on a faceless body. They watched without blinking as I spoke and gathered their bouquets- a flurry of alien limbs like an eldritch windmill- and began to speak from everywhere once more.

“Most of the concepts you just spoke of make little sense to me. We are living entities, composed of, and overflowing with, Life Essence. A body is nothing more than a vessel to contain this Essence. It matters not what vessel you have. Your Life Essence is unique, so pure and powerful, it creates such wonders as *these*.”

Each hand, larger than my body, held out a bundle of bouquets that would have filled the entirety of my bedroom and I couldn't help but laugh and smile at how pretty they were.

“I am unable to completely change your body, but there are magics that are able to change your form by manipulating Life Essence, but they aren't permanent. Your Life Essence effortlessly produces such beautiful roses, Rhyo of Roses, and as you both have your thorns, so too have you beauty. Let this beauty shine, and you will have magic at your fingertips, Raspberry Rose.”

* * * * *

“Raspberry, wake up darling!” With a start, I lurched forward and collided with something unflinching as stone! My Yonny had been knelt over my form in bed but now staggered back as he nursed a growing lump in the center of his forehead. I reached to tend my own and felt it already cooled by freezing sweat across my brow. His hands were on my shoulders but quickly leaped to his face with his recoil. “Ah, damn it, child, you sleep nearly a full week without stir or sound then suddenly try for my life!” Already we both sported matching bumps beneath our naturally deep widow's peaks and rubbed them in much the same way.

“I've been asleep for a week?”

“Yes, Darling.” He took out his signature handkerchief, muddled with greasy mine residue per usual, and dotted the sweat from my forehead before kissing it gently. “You came home a wreck and locked yourself in here.” I looked past him for the first time, the pain subsiding and my vision clearing past the welling tears. The windows had been closed, the thick satin beige curtains drawn to block my view from the outside so there was no indication of what time it was, or if Odezz’t was still there, watching from atop the Skeletal Wood. With a sigh, I despondently fell back into my pillows. My head rolled to the left to avoid looking at my boring ugly father, in this boring ugly room, in this boring ugly body.

Of course. I heard the crackly voice of Lorenzus mumble in my head. I shut my eyes tight, believing the harder I tried not to hear it, the less he would speak. Of course, it was all a dream. The tears broke at that and before I would let them fall I muttered through gritted teeth.

“Please leave me be for a moment, Yonny. I’ll come speak with you after I compose myself.”

There was a quick grunt of resistance, but then I heard the familiar *tsk* of my mother’s tongue that both Leoravich and I knew not to speak after.

“We’ll both be waiting for when you’re ready, Raspberry.”

The door shut softly as if they didn’t want me to hear them leave. As soon as it did, my eyes fluttered open, allowing the water to roll off into the pillow. I audibly gasped in the still silent room, absorbing the breathtaking vision of the luminous bouquet of immaculate roses. They were all bound with a pink and gold ribbon

and fastened with greying green quills, staring me dead in the face from the vanity desk.

I was about to remove the massive quilts from my form, but almost at the mere thought of wanting to be in front of the mirror, the world spun around me and I could feel the sensation of sunlight brushing my cheeks, despite the curtains still being shut. A swirling school of giggling butterflies filled my belly and as they vanished, so too did I from my position in the bed; jolting and unbalanced on my feet in front of the velvet bench before the vanity mirror.

Raspberry Rose. Odezz't's voice echoed in my head, eerie yet comforting. *Let this beauty shine, and you will have magic at your fingertips, Raspberry Rose.*

“Magic.” The roses, as beautiful as they were, couldn't compare to the vision in my mirror. As they were clutched against my chest in the reflection, I beamed, a glowing radiant smile across my face. From the laugh that escaped my lips, a ripple of energy changed the image, distorted it like a pebble disturbing the stillness of a pond. A moment passed and, smiling directly back at me, was a perfect vision of who I pictured myself to be.

The early signs of my body's change to a growing young man vanished; blistering pimples erased into clean white porcelain, stray hairs fell out, my widow's peak receded, and the plain rounded features that made me Leoravich's Rhyon, Lorenzus, stretched, elongated, and slimmed until I only saw Raspberry.

Ammora. Life is yours for the taking. Daria. Like an ancient echo from the deepest diamond mine of Jerryym, the magical phrase

Angehlah used to grant sentence to the First People spoke in my head just as Lorenzus' had moments ago.

Daria. A Dream. I couldn't take my eyes from my image in the mirror, and there I stood smiling brighter than I had my entire life. My parents waited for our conversation for I didn't know how long.

It was all a dream finally realized. No matter what anyone told me, this life was mine and I was Raspberry. Life was mine for the taking and I was going to make it beautiful. No longer would I hide behind Lorenzus or lock myself away or let anyone tell me not to shine.

Adjusting my hair with a quick flip, winking to myself in the vanity, and pulling away with all the might I could muster, I turned to leave Lorenzus in my memories within that mirror. I said nothing, walked to my door, forbade myself from looking back, and ventured out, proudly wearing my skirts for the first day that I would address the world as myself; Raspberry Rose.