

TALES OF MHEROUN: RISE OF THE RAVEN CLUB  
[CHAPTER ONE] LAST DAY AT MURDOCK

By Hazim Haemoglobin

Cheyla Tilkich squinted her hazel brown eyes at the almost amber sun peeking out shyly from between two massive gray brick buildings. It was always something to look forward to. The afternoon Mherounian skies always bustled with energy and action. She was slumped against the back alleys of the downtown Krandells restaurants watching the hundreds of different species of birds swarming through the sky with their trainers on their backs, the exhaustion from a day's tiring shift at work evident in their slouched postures and from the ones Cheyla could make out from below, moody faces.

She gazed longingly at several Krandells peacekeeping officers hunched over their ospreys. Mherounians needed to come of age at 16 before they could even think about applying for the license to fly a bird. Cheyla had to wait two more years...The ones who didn't have a license were stuck using ancient looking 1940s automobiles to get around the city's crowded streets. They weren't crowded because of cars, but of the throngs of different creatures bustling about, each with a destination to head to. Well, most of them. Krandells was the most apparent proof that Mheroun's effort to move forward into more modern times even with magic, would always be held back by the public's preferences for more traditional ways of living. Cheyla always thought that some of them just didn't have a place to be or they just had a place to run escape from.

One of these places surely must be Murdock School. Cheyla hated attending their classes of 'magic' and she let her actions speak for themselves by not attending a single one of her schooldays after the first week. Her hawk eyed mother, Veavanne, was usually too busy to notice. She was always away with work being heaped on by higher ranking officers of the Krandells mayoral office. Besides, even if she found out, what would she say? Murdock School was pointless. The teachers walked in and slept their way through their subjects while the 'students' threw black market jinxes and charms at each other with predictably messy outcomes. Most of the pupils who attended Murdock were lame. The girls were shallow and liked pink and boys. The boys were mostly busy with beating each other up and playing pranks on whoever was clueless enough to attend the dumb classes.

Cheyla always opted to spend her schooldays patrolling the streets of Krandells with Gatsby, a fellow classmate who was also clever to avoid the mundane events called classes. In fact, during the first week at Murdock, it was he who had taught Cheyla and encouraged her to ditch the classes. She had him to thank for all the street smarts and Krandells knowledge her head was filled with now that the school year was almost nearing an end. She now knew where to get the best tasting cream puffs (Juniper's shop on Icarus Street) and where the best places to view the city were (the top floor balcony of Mahathem's headquarters, an architecture firm).

Once a week, they would stop by Curie House of Comics on Spoonbill Street to read the latest issue of The Blind Warlock without actually buying it. The owner, Fatma, a crooked nosed fey, would frown as soon they walked in her store. She called them 'trouble'. Cheyla almost always spent her allowance on the Blind Warlock issues, but since she had spent most of her Doits, Mherounian currency, on some Elvin sweets the day before, she didn't have enough for this week's issue.

Today though, the usually empty pocketed Gatsby had managed to acquire enough money to purchase two issues of The Blind Warlock to the surprise of Fatma who eyed Gatsby suspiciously when he produced five individual Doit bills. Fatma stared as if he had just conjured it out of thin air, but Cheyla could tell even Fatma knew skipping school meant that such a complex magic trick was not very possible for somebody like Gatsby or Cheyla. Later, when they had reached the alleys, when asked about how he had managed to obtain 5 Doits, his only reply was "do you want to me to share

this comic with you or not?" which resulted in Cheyla nodding her head eagerly.

"Then let's not make things complicated by asking unnecessary questions."

So Cheyla waited patiently for Gatsby to finish reading the comic book, holding in her intended reactions every time Gatsby let out a sigh or a groan or a "Blind Warlock's using the same spells against Abel!". In time, she'd be able to read it herself. At least that's what Gatsby promised.

They were in the back alleys because it was always better to be behind the buildings if you wanted to avoid the crowd. Sure enough, there were gangsters and malicious looking creatures lurking about, but by following Gatsby's lead, Cheyla knew how to stay out of that kind of trouble here in downtown Krandells.

It was getting dark. The sun was dipping lower and lower every time Cheyla swung her head upwards to search for it, and Gatsby's eyes were still peeled on page 23 of The Blind Warlock issue #212. Cheyla doubted she'd actually get to read it today, so she stood up, stretched her arms and faked a yawn.

"I think I want to go back now, Gatsby," she said to her distracted friend, resting her hands on her knees and swinging them around idly, "It's getting quite late."

It wasn't really late. Cheyla and Gatsby usually stayed around and lingered much later after the sun had fully set, but Cheyla was feeling slightly irritated that today Gatsby was more interested in his comic book than spending time with her stealing Gaia berries from the fruit market or watching the trainers go about their work at the falconry.

Without looking up, Gatsby replied "Don't be ridiculous. It's not even dark yet."

"Yes, but it's going to be soon," Cheyla insisted. She stared at his mane of messy black curls and dirt smudged cheeks. Gatsby looked up and let out a startled "oh!". Cheyla never knew why people reacted that way to her eyes. Sure, they were unique (one was a watery blue and the left eye, a mystifying looking emerald), but she didn't think it warranted such a fuss. If both of them were green, then she might have enjoyed the attention, but that blue eye irked her whenever she looked at her own reflection, which wasn't often, but still....

"If you want to go back, then go back by yourself," Gatsby finally stated, "I'm staying a little while longer."

Cheyla frowned, but she shrugged it off, then turned and started walking down the alley, her school shoes clapping against the pavements, echoing off the alley walls.

"See you in school!" Gatsby called out, to which Cheyla grinned, permitting herself to chuckle slightly. She waved her hand in the air without pausing to turn around. She made a left turn at the fork in the alley and arrived at Fort Avin Street, which was still crowded with citizens coming back from work, all dragging their feet or driving their vehicles in impatient manners.

The sky was a flush of yellow and everybody on the street seemed to be glowing because of it. A family of dwarves pattered by her, the father muttering something about his wife's inability to cook. A witch was busy closing up her flower shop, waving her hands and muttering protective spells, though Cheyla didn't know who'd want to rob a flower shop in the first place. She continued walking, basking in the glow of the last few moments of sunlight before Mheroun was dipped into another round of darkness.

A slew of sparks flew right by her head, missing her ear by what might have been centimeters. Cheyla

saw the source—a group of little kids crowded around a rusty toaster on the street. It must have been enchanted, because it was burping out colorful sparks to which the kids let out waves of “ooohs” and “ahhhhs”.

“Be careful with that thing! Dumb kids!” Cheyla yelled, annoyed, “That could have hit me!”

She really hoped it was cursed instead. One of the kids, a pig-tailed little witch in a light blue cloak stuck out her tongue. Cheyla scowled back and continued walking. Another reason magic was annoying, but something was starting to creep up on her, instilling a sense of restlessness.

The honking of the vehicles on the road and the shrieking of the hoards of banshees returning from work pushing past her to get to Garga Bar didn't bother her. Neither did the horrible stench of the harpies chattering away on the best way to cook sewer rats (one of them suggested roasting with black pepper sauce) or the fact that her gray Murdock school skirt was slightly torn trying to get past two massive hedgehogs engaged in an argument about Mherounian politics. What did bother Cheyla was that she really had to use the bathroom.

She wondered why she didn't feel the urge during the whole day spent with Gatsby and she was now walking as fast as possible to get back to Aran Heights, the apartments, where Grandpa Earl would be waiting with another uneventful dinner and where Veavanne would most likely not be present again.

“If I could just learn the spell to make the urge to pee go away,” she muttered to herself as she picked up the pace, pushing and shoving past Krandells citizens loafing about, her shoes having a rapid conversation with the sidewalk.

“Then maybe I might be more interested in all this magic nonsense,” she finished, turning another corner. Finally, in front of her, two massive cerulean buildings stood on the other side of the street, a halo of yellow-orange light swathing it. The pointed rooves were white, with six slender protruding chimneys and countless white framed windows dotting Aran Heights, a serene modern looking counterpart to the mess of dark and dreary centurial looking buildings around them. Cheyla had paused slightly to bemuse this fact as she looked from the beautiful buildings, a sense of pride throbbing in her, to the older grayer ominous looking constructions of bricks around her home.

The admiration was short lived as several plump warlocks bumped into her, catching her off guard, her mouth once again spewing swear words. One of the warlocks overheard and shook his head, muttering something about “young witches nowadays.” Cheyla rolled her eyes and proceeded to weave her way between the crawling traffic, a bizarre scene of chaos involving clunky Plymouths, Continentals, herds of cattle, flightless ostriches with moody riders, and a massive emerald Komodo dragon, its hissing and long tongue eliciting nervous looks and reactions from other creatures on the road to the delight of its driver, a thin bearded farmer with a horrible high pitched cackle that could be heard even above the ruckus on the road.

When she finally reached the other side, Cheyla noted how filthy her clothes were from the automobile gas emissions. She frowned, her face resembling a crumpled piece of paper. Grandpa Earl would have a fit about this for sure. Cheyla was busy bending over to examine the hem of her uniform when a throaty voice called out her name.

“Cheyla Tillich.”

She looked up, brown hair strewn across her face. She pushed several strands behind her ears and realized that standing in front of her was a barrier, she concluded, between her and the apartment lobby revolving doors. It was the headmistress of Murdock, somebody whom she rarely saw. It was

because of the simple fact Cheyla failed to recall the elderly witch's name. The witch, dressed in an oversized neon pink overcoat which clashed horrifically with her horrendous brown hat, her tangled dirty blond curls peeking out from under.

The woman repeated Cheyla's name again and Cheyla, startled once more, responded with a hesitant "yes?"

"I doubt you would actually remember my name. A rare occasion it is when Madame Cuttler chances upon one of the two most elusive students in Murdock School."

The tone was dry, and Cheyla was unsure of what to say, but Madame Cuttler continued.

"Your mother came and saw me today."

Then, a pause. Both stood there in front of Aran Heights' entrance, calling out to Cheyla who was rooted to the spot.

"My mother?" she finally said, raising an eyebrow, "She's more elusive than me, Madame Cuttling. I rarely see her. You can't lie to me."

Madame Cuttler frowned, her eyes narrowing into snake like slits, obviously annoyed by Cheyla getting her name wrong.

"And what reason would I have for lying? Your mother invited me for a meal, which was rather scrumptious if I may add," Cheyla's headmistress said, "And your poor attendance has really disappointed her. I know Murdock is not the best school in the world, Cheyla, but a school is a school and a student is a student. You follow the rules and attend the classes."

Cheyla scoffed at this.

"Follow the rules? What? Like the other students?"

"Murdock," Madame Cuttler began, "is not the best school, I repeat. Funding is limited. We do not have access to the best resources, I know, but we do try, Cheyla, to equip you with what you need to know, so that by the time you have completed your Silver Falcon exams, you have more options with your life than those people."

Her head nodded towards a group of beggars haranguing a family in their car. Cheyla stared at one of the beggars rapping on the car to the irritation of the driver. She wasn't really entranced. She still remembered that she needed to use the bathroom and she tapped her foot impatiently.

"You do not want to end up like that, Cheyla," the headmistress went on, slightly pleased, misunderstanding in her mind that she might actually be getting through to Cheyla, "And your mother understands that as well. She is taking you out of Murdock."

The last bit caught Cheyla's attention, and she turned to Madame Cuttler.

"What? Why would she do that? I thought you just insisted on me attending classes? And now you're informing me my mother pulled me out of your sorry excuse for a school? And what kind of-

"Your mother, Veavanne, is taking you out of Murdock," Madame Cuttler interrupted, unnerved by Cheyla's insult, "And she has enrolled you in Krandells Institute For Tertiary Education, a prestigious center for education and skills development, which I may add, year after year, rejects my request for transfer. Nevertheless, you should be honored they let you in."

Cheyla was slightly taken aback by this revelation, unsure of which piece of news was more stunning—the fact that Veavanne, her mother who she rarely saw was probably in the house cleaning up after the meal which she had just shared with her headmistress, or the fact that wasn't going to Murdock anymore. True, technically, Cheyla never attending the classes and patrolling the streets with Gatsby meant she never really 'went' to Murdock, but still...

And from what Cheyla had heard from Gatsby mostly, K.I.T.E was a big marble building full of pompous students in silly uniforms and professors who actually believed in what they taught. That would clash with Cheyla's mantra of skipping classes as horrifically as Madame Cuttler's overcoat and her hat.

"And so," the headmistress said, "Since you will no longer be enrolled with Murdock, I would like to request that you at least attend your classes tomorrow....for the first time, I guess. I have something I would like to give you."

Cheyla reached into her mind for something to say as a reply, but she couldn't find the words. For a moment, thoughts of her angry bladder were fading slightly. She just nodded silently after failing to come up with a retort. Madame Cuttler patted Cheyla on the shoulder with her gloved hand.

"I am sure you will be making new friends, better friends who are better influences than that Gatsby boy. And I am hopeful, you'll finally be able to conjure spells and recount enchantments. Your first year of schooling in Murdock has not amounted to much due to your poor attendance, but do not make the same mistake with your second year in K.I.T.E."

"And with that, Cheyla Tillich," she continued, "I have to say that I must be heading back to my own home. The sun has almost fully set. I will see you tomorrow on your last day. Please remind your mother that I thought her salamander lentils were delicious. Have a good evening, young lady."

The elderly witch adjusted her hideous hat, gave Cheyla one final pat on the shoulder, and crossed the road which seemed to have cleared a bit. Cheyla soaked in the things Madame Cuttler had just told her, frowned, then suddenly remembered her mission at hand—to use the toilet and quickly made her way past the revolving doors of Aran Heights. The lobby was empty save for two dwarves in cerulean uniforms using spells to sweep the floor and wipe the marble reception counter.

She made her way to the right of the reception counter and stepped inside the elevator as two teenage wizards stepped out in midnight blue cloaks apparently off to have a fun night out in downtown Krاندells. Cheyla punched in the button marked 43 and waited as the lift made its way up 43 floors. If she was able to do magic, she could just mutter some spell without having to press the button and she'd arrive a lot faster. Bah. Who needed magic in the first place? There was no point in going to Murdock classes. There was no point in going to K.I.T.E. Cheyla couldn't possibly be less interested in transforming newts into dumbbells or summoning a merman from the sewers.

As the lift doors opened to a sparkingly lit hallway, Cheyla, suddenly fussing about her dirty school uniform, rushed towards the door emblazoned with a shiny silver 355 and knocked on the door loudly. She could hear some Estrella Hutchinson singing "Witching Hour" on the transistor radio Veavanne had bought Grandpa Earl but no other sound. She knocked again, this time louder.

"Gramps! Open the door! I need to use the toilet, Gramps!"

There was the sound of shuffling about and something scraping against the floor. Cheyla guessed it to be the sound of Gramps dragging his ebony walking stick towards the front door. There was a grunt, several clicks, and the door opened to a stout little man, hunchbacked and bushy with a thick well groomed gray beard that always reminded Cheyla of one the walruses she had seen in the

picture books Gramps used to read to her.

“Young lady, you are late as usual. I do not know whether it is even worth reminding you to come earlier next time,” the old man peered at Cheyla with his small beady eyes, before letting Cheyla pass, “And your clothes are filthy! Where have you been? Certainly not in school attending your classes.”

Cheyla bowed her head and walked into the private hall lined with bog oak boards. The hall opened to the spacious kitchen, which Cheyla could smell the salamander lentil Madame Cuttler was so enthusiastic about, though Cheyla could hardly place her finger on what was so enticing about it judging from the smell.

“Your headmistress stopped by today, you know!” Gramps called out, “I have to say, I am quite disappointed. Get yourself showered for dinner. Your mother has made some salamander lentils especially for you. She has some news to share with you. Something I quite approve of. You must cut your nails before dinner as well, Cheyla. They look more like claws”

Cheyla rolled her eyes. Veavanne made that salamander lentil for Madame Cuttler. Surely, her mother wouldn't deem her worthy enough to cook for. Brushing that thought off, Cheyla bounded down the hallway to her bedroom at the end of the hallway and rushed straight for the bathroom, slamming the door in the process, to which Grandpa Earl let out a disapproving “Oi!”. After flushing, she proceeded to wash up and prepare for whatever mess the dinner with her disappointed Grandpa Earl and no nonsense mother, Veavanne, was going to end up as. And she had no intention of cutting her nails.

The black oak floor shimmered under the elaborate iron chandelier, a family heirloom according to

Grandpa Earl. The sky blue Turkish rug which covered the area under the elegant dining table seemed comfortable enough for Columbus to nap on. The three shelves stuffed with rarely opened books and scrolls stood against the bog oak walls on one side, while a large mirror had been fastened to the other side reflecting Grandpa Earl's collection of books. All this became the setting for the awkward dinner taking place in which a rehash of Madame Cuttler's raved salamander lentils along with French bread and some queen cakes were served on fairly plain China in contrast to the dining room's elegance. Veavanne had poured her salary into a room which she rarely spent time in, thought Cheyla as she looked around, chewing on her bread. The bread was a bit dry even with the lentil.

"Where's the barnacle sauce?"

Veavanne frowned shifting slightly on her brown leather seat; all the creases and folds in her pale face became more apparent in the dim light. She set down her spoon and turned to the left of the round dining room table, handsomely carved out of mahogany inlaid with ebony and ivory. Cheyla was wolfing down her French bread with her bare hands, crumbs scattered around her plate as if there had been a miniature explosion where her bread had been.

"You do not speak with your mouth full. And you say please," Veavanne scolded her daughter, black eyes attempting to bore into Cheyla, who avoided it by reaching for a third refill of the salamander lentil. Grandpa Earl was on her right shaking his head, but keeping quiet. He, too avoided Veavanne's hawk like gaze.

"I have something to announce," she finally stated. Cheyla pretended not to hear and took another bite of her bread after dipping it into the lentil. Grandpa Earl sat a little more upright in his chair to show his daughter he was paying attention.

Veavanne tapped her fork on the half-empty wine glass irritably and cleared her throat in the direction of her daughter. Cheyla shrugged but leaned back in her chair and met her mother's gaze for the first time since the awkward dinner began. She always wondered what could possibly convince a stranger that she was Veavanne's daughter aside from the birth certificate Grandpa Earl had framed and set in the hallway to her bedroom. Veavanne was a pale thin woman with pinched lips, a long slightly hooked nose, jet black hair pulled into a tight bun, and pitch black wells as eyes. Cheyla, in comparison, was slightly tanner skinned, with free falling auburn hair, a button nose, and of course, her peculiar half-gray, half-green eyes. Even if they did look alike, Cheyla thought, one would still find it hard to associate the two with the sharply contrasting personalities backed by differentiating moral values and priorities.

"I have been promoted to Road Safety Advisor for the Krandells city council," Veavanne pressed on, her face beaming ignoring Cheyla's groans. Grandpa Earl seemed to be mildly pleased at least, stretching out a hand to congratulate his daughter. Cheyla imagined the throngs of automobiles and noisy creatures on the road every afternoon and morning and omitted a laugh dripping with genuine sarcasm. Grandpa Earl sighed in despair and shook his head upon realizing Cheyla had not bothered to trim her nails.

"And this promotion has allowed me," Veavanne added, oblivious to her daughter's reaction, looking directly at Cheyla, "to enroll you in Krandells Institute for Tertiary Education. You will no longer be schooling at Murdock School."

Cheyla tried to continue chewing, suddenly finding her bread hard to swallow. Her cheeks bulging, she looked down at her plate. So, Madame Cuttler was right. Cheyla didn't think the salamander lentil was anything special but now it tasted like inedible mush.

"Are you not excited Cheyla? Your last day at Murdock will be tomorrow, which I can only hope you do not miss as your headmistress has informed me she has something special she would like to give you. Maybe it is a nice parting gift?"

Cheyla's head was focused on trying to conjure up what she could actually remember of Murdock since after the first week earlier that year, she never really stepped foot inside the old gray building with its mansard roofs and bathroom wall scrawling and overexcited school kids which contrasted with the underwhelming teachers and....

"Cheyla!"

She looked up, startled. Green and gray eyes meeting pitch black pupils.

"I want you to attend the last day and I want you to treat this as a chance at a fresh start to mend your bad habits," Veavanne Tilkich said, her eyes narrowing slightly, "I was and still am very disheartened when your headmistress informed me of your poor showing in classes...but I will not raise my voice this time, Cheyla, because K.I.T.E is providing an opportunity for you to shape up and maybe be something."

Cheyla wished at that moment she could read her mother's mind. Veavanne was always busy with office work and normally spent nights at Aunt Josephine's on the other side of town, rarely coming home. Often, it would be weeks before Cheyla would see her again, and once they did have dinner together again, it was always another round of disappointment in which Veavanne never failed to find something unladylike in Cheyla's physical appearance, manners, and attitude to be vocal about. They got along as well as a mongoose and a snake would and Grandpa Earl never bothered to interfere like the old days. He seemed to be exasperated by the animosity between mother and daughter.

So, to Cheyla, it was amusing to see Veavanne expending some effort into being a part of Cheyla's life. Surely, there must be another motive for enrolling her in such a prestigious school. She would bet anything the other workers at City Hall had their children attending K.I.T.E and this would serve as the real reason Veavanne wanted her to be in the school. It must be quite embarrassing to admit to your peers that your daughter schooled at the shack known as Murdock School. If it wasn't the reason, then something else must be, thought Cheyla.

"How did you manage to get me into K.I.T.E? Isn't it supposed to take forever to get into...for somebody like me?"

It was an obvious question, and Cheyla really wasn't expecting a direct or even honest answer from her own mother.

Veavanne calmly responded, "Madame Chinuai's husband is the headmaster of K.I.T.E. She is my new coworker since I have been promoted to a new department. We had several discussions about your future over lunch, and she thought that Murdock was no place for a young lady to be brought up. I agreed since, frankly speaking, I have not really seen any advancement in your magical abilities."

She pressed on, voice unwavering, "So she was kind enough to persuade her husband. Normally, they do not take any new students this late in the year, with only 2 months of schooling left in your first year, but Monsieur Ferdinand is a delightful headmaster who has accepted your enrolment. After work, I flew over to Murdock and invited your headmistress over for some lentils. She informed me about your absenteeism and well, even she admitted to Murdock being unfit to be educated



seriously in the art of magic. I really am trying, Cheyla. I hope you put in some effort as well.”

Cheyla was slightly startled to hear her mother speak to her in such a gentle manner. She started grasping at straws for a reason to rebel.

“It was decided? By whom? I wasn't informed.”

“It's in your best interests and you know that,” her mother said, “And I do not know whether skipping all of your classes leaves any room for a sense of attachment to Murdock.”

“I'm going to bed,” Cheyla stated finally, after a short moment of silence to let Veavanne's reply sink in. She pushed herself away from the table, stood up, and walked over to Grandpa Earl to give him a kiss on the cheek. Grandpa Earl had been sitting silently all the while chewing slowly on his bread.

“Cheyla, please attend your last day of—

“I will,” Cheyla cut in, then turned to head to her bedroom.

“Your new uniform and schoolbooks will be given tomorrow. I am stopping by K.I.T.E to take them for you.”

“How peachy,” Cheyla remarked sarcastically and walked off down the hallway, past the library and the parlor, running her hands along the daisy print wallpaper idly. Her head was busy ringing up thoughts of what would be different now, and Cheyla tried to reassure herself that there shouldn't be a change if she just continued skipping classes and ran off with Gatsby every chance she had. She was sure Gatsby would be insisting the same idea because who else would accompany him to buy his comic books and munch on chocolate bars at Cerulean Park?

The hallway reached its end, and Cheyla turned to the chamber on the right—her bedroom, wallpapered with a print of different species of birds. Cheyla wasn't one for a lot of color in her life, but she longed badly to be the rider of an osprey or a hawk. She had boarded up the windows to exclude the light from streaming in the mornings, but Grandpa Earl had taken them down with a flick of his hand and a muttering of spells. Her bed was made by Grandpa Earl, who had nothing better to do, being confined to the apartment all day. Cheyla shuffled her feet to her bed and sat on the edge, the exhaustion accumulated from another day running around with Gatsby suddenly knocking its presence. But Cheyla felt more tired than usual, her head weighed down with K.I.T.E and Murdock and her mother and Madame Cuttler's “gift” and the last day and the first day and how much she would love to ride a bird and how nice it would be to know some useful magic or maybe not she didn't know and.....

It was misty. Cheyla Tilkich could barely make out her own hands in front of her as she attempted to

shoo away the mist idly to no avail. She was trying to make out where she might possibly be, but there was no sighting of anything familiar-a landmark, maybe one of the places Gatsby and her would kill time at-but frustratingly, Cheyla couldn't. There was no indication that anything she'd recognized would present itself. She was in the middle of a great expanse of mist and nothing else. It was obscuring as it was irritating.

"Hello?"

She called out, her senses on the edge of a cliff she would have liked to call 'Please, Wherever I Am, Please Let It Not BE Filled With Dangerous Things Cliff'. The vastness was swallowing up her vision, and Cheyla nervously walked several steps, legs slightly trembling, partially from suppressed fear, and the other contributor, the sheer cold. Cheyla wracked her brain for a possible explanation as to why she was in a place like this. Her brain must have been taking a day off, and yet, all her other senses were highly alert. She could smell the sea after allowing herself a whiff of her strange environment. She could taste the salty air on her tongue. She could feel the cold licking every inch of her exposed skin. She could not, however, hear a single sound.

At that moment, there was a slight ruffling to her left, and Cheyla instinctively jerked in the same direction, both green and gray eyes wide and bulging.

ffffFuussss...ffffuuuuSSsss...

"Who's there?"

She directed the question into the nothingness, her voice echoing. Echoing off what, she had no idea, as she couldn't make out anything in the mist. Then, the rustling began again, this time, a little louder. Her heart leapt to her throat but Cheyla gritted her teeth. She saw nothing but she felt...like she was being observed.

Then Cheyla saw it. The mist was swirling slightly faster which allowed for her to notice a massive black figure only several feet in front of her. It towered over her as Cheyla let her eyes run along the figure's height.

"Oh!"

Cheyla was startled to find the large head of a bird facing her. It was sleek, black, and intimidating instilling in Cheyla a mixture of awe and fear. She didn't know what kind of bird it was as she had never seen anything so simple yet elegant in design. The sharp black beak protruding seemed to spell something menacing and the eyes-the pitch black eyes seemed to pierce the mist straight into Cheyla's own uniquely colored eyes. She shivered in nervousness and yet, Cheyla was unable to pull away from the bird's gaze. What was this massive creature?

She began to wonder whether it was wiser to slowly back away than to stay rooted to the spot when suddenly the bird opened its beak and let out a shrill high pitched caw...

"CHEYLA TILKICH!!!!!"

Cheyla bolted up from her bed, lungs almost bursting and eyes bulging, to find Grandpa Earl standing by the door, arms crossed, tapping his feet.

"You are going to be late for your last day at Murdock," he stated, before adding "and good morning."

Taking a moment to realize that it was a dream, Cheyla finally found the right reaction-she snarled at

her grandfather.

“You could have given me a seizure! Why can't you just knock, Gramps?”

Grandpa Earl scratched his shiny bald head and shrugged. He walked towards the two windows perched on both sides of the bed headboard to tug at them with his walking stick, letting the morning sun rush in to Cheyla's discomfort.

“With you, Cheyla Tilkich,” he said, “Knocking. Just knocking, will not do.”

With that, he rapped his walking stick against the open bedroom door, “Now, get yourself dressed and ready for school!”

Cheyla watched her grandfather drag his feet and walking stick slowly out of the room. Immersing her head back into the pillow and the folds of her blanket, she attempted to return to her dream state when...

“CHEYLA TILKICH!”

“Alright, alright...I'm up!”

“THEN GET DRESSED!”

Throwing her blanket off, Cheyla let out one more lion-like yawn before padding off to the bathroom to shower. There should be a spell to shut Grandpa Earl up...

The streets of Krandells in the morning, though not as bustling and hyperactive as they would be in

the afternoons and evenings, were akin to an unsystematic beehive of activity. Civilians off to work, either in their drab looking clunky excuses for vehicles or on their birds streaking and flapping across the city skies. Cheyla was pacing herself to be purposely late for her 'first' day at Murdock. Grandpa Earl had gone as far as to chaperone her all the way to the Aran heights lobby to ensure she wouldn't try and run off somewhere she wasn't supposed to be.

"Make something of yourself, Cheyla," he had advised her, "before it's too late."

She didn't despise Grandpa Earl the way she felt anger boiling over in her stomach every single time she looked at Veavanne, her own mother. The air in Krandells was always slightly chilly in the morning, which only served to make Cheyla miss her warm blanket even more. Her dirty school shoes clapped rhythmically as she jostled through the throngs of jaywalkers and morning shifters, ducking every once in a while as swallows whizzed overhead.

The witch from the flower shop was busy undoing the protective spells she had cast and Cheyla rolled past, smirking, her almost empty book bag slapping against her ribs. Cheyla looked ahead at the row of shops and knew there was still a little way to go before she reached Murdock. The shops attached themselves to the base of massive stone towers which mainly served as offices and roosts for birds. The buildings were interwoven with harsh looking stone pillars and columns, pointed arches locked into their entrances and gargoyles perched themselves by the high windows leering over the crowds bustling about on the city streets below.

Even amidst the swollen ruckus that took place in Krandells every day, Cheyla could still make out the susurrus of elegant falcons riding the air currents overhead, the hustling of pigeons scrounging for food, and the flapping of a stork's wings as it searches for a suitable spot to rest and preen itself. Sounds of Krandells were the sounds of the avians and Cheyla reveled in them every moment she had the chance. If only she could mount an eagle, or maybe an great owl, and fly off and away...

"Cheyla! Let's go to Cerulean Park today!"

Gatsby's raspy voice hissed in her ear, and Cheyla snapped out of her morning daydream. Several feet ahead of where she was standing lay the brick steps spanning itself before her in an uneventful manner, as herds of schoolchildren rushed past her to be greeted by the rusty bronze entrance doors, under a miniature arch. Cheyla Tilkich was at Murdock School.

"Let's go, Cheyla, before the teachers come out and start tugging on our ears. The bell hasn't rung yet," Gatsby tugged at Cheyla's bag. She tilted her head towards him and spoke, voice dripping in remorse.

"I'm sorry, Gatsby," she said, "but not today. I have to see Madame Cuttler today."

Gatsby and Cheyla faced each other now, each studying the other's face in an attempt to understand what was taking place.

Gatsby, with his smudged pudgy face and clumps of black curls peeking out under his deceased father's frayed gray peak cap. He had on the Murdock boys uniform, gray shorts, wrinkled white shirt, and black buckled shoes (topped with holey gray socks). His rucksack seemed empty.

Cheyla, with her messy brown hair cascading down on her shoulders as she bore into her best friend with her blue and green eyes. Her dreary school uniform almost a twin of Gatsby's, with a gray pleated skirt in place of the shorts.

"Isn't that our headmistress?" Gatsby finally asked, scratching his nose. Cheyla nodded, dreading

letting go of what she had to tell him next.

“My mother has enrolled me at K.I.T.E, Gatsby,” she said, hushedly.

Gatsby threw up his arms and flailed them in protest. He took off his cap and poked Cheyla's left shoulder with it.

“Krandells Institute for Tertiary Education? THAT pompous place? They're not even tertiary, Cheyla! They just slap on that word to make themselves feel special! They're on the same level as Murdock and you know it! Maybe lower! Those obnoxious students there...how'd you get in? People like us never stand a chance of getting in. You're telling me you ant to join those fantail freaks? If one was in front of me right now, I'd let them kiss my fists! Are you bluf-

Cheyla pressed her finger to Gatsby's lips.

“My mother was promoted. I know they're not a university or anything, but most of the students there have been learning for years before they enroll, I guess. I promised Madame Cuttler I'd see her today.”

Cheyla's interruption sank into Gatsby's consciousness and for a moment, Cheyla thought she saw the glint of a tear when he bit his lip, but Gatsby slapped Cheyla's shoulders and let out a hearty laugh.

“Hahaha! Sure you will, Cheyla!”

Despite a thrilling year of being each other's only friends, Cheyla did not know whether Gatsby was being sarcastic or not. She frowned. And Gatsby noticed.

“See her first, then we're free, Cheyla,” he assured her and Cheyla relaxed slightly.

“I know, under normal circumstances, I'd probably chuck whatever my mother told me to do out the window, but Madame Cuttler made it sound important.”

Gatsby wiped his smudged face with his dirty sleeve and grinned at Cheyla as the school bell rang, beckoning the rest of the dillydallying schoolchildren around the two friends to stampede inside the small building.

“Let's go, Cheyla,” Gatsby held out his hand and Cheyla Tilkich grabbed it, returning his grin, “It's our first day of school!”

And with that, they bounded up the steps to find Madame Cuttler's office.

The halls of Murdoc's interiors were narrow and smelled of all sorts of unpleasant things. Cheyla crinkled her nose as she and Gatsby finally reached a lonely door at the end of a long hallway, a torn piece of parchment hung on it with the words

**MADAME CUTTLER: HEADMISTRESS**

in faded black quill.

Cheyla knocked lightly as Gatsby tried to peek under the door. There was no reply, so Cheyla rapped a little louder with her knuckles. Silence ensued again and Cheyla turned to Gatsby, shrugging.

“Maybe she's not in?”

Gatsby clenched his fists and began pounding on the door, rattling it as if it was a big rectangular drum. Cheyla grabbed his sleeves as the pounding echoed down the hallway.

“Gatsby! Not too loud!”

Gatsby shirked her hands and continued pounding. Cheyla cringed with each pound. She was sure the echo producing pounding would summon a hoard of teachers out to scold them. She lunged at Gatsby once again when the door suddenly opened to reveal a cross looking Madame Cuttler, blond curls tied up in a semi-neat bun, her bulbous nose flaring and her thick arms folded.

“Cheyla Tilkich, please come in. Gatsby Gaiji, please wait outside and don't try to escape. If I have to, I'll set up enchantments to prevent you from doing so. I need to speak with Cheyla first. Alone.”

She stressed the last word with a raised eyebrow and a finger point aimed at Cheyla.

“I'm not leaving. I'm not leaving my best friend.”

Cheyla felt a tinge of sadness and pride swell in her throat and she patted him on the back and stepped inside the dimly lit office. She looked back to wave to Gatsby but Madame Cuttler had already shut the door with a simple snap of her fingers. She sighed.

The office was square, not just in shape but in the way it was decorated. A massive portrait of the Mherounian king and queen hung above a heavy looking wooden desk, intricate looking flowers craved into the thick robust legs. The Krandells city crest—a peregrine falcon gripping a sword with its talons—was etched into almost every nook and cranny of the room's furniture; the shelves, the two oak chairs placed in front of the desk where Cheyla knew Madame Cuttler had seated herself. She gestured for her to sit.

As Cheyla adjusted her skirt and behind on the hard and uncomfortable chair, Madame Cuttler studied the soon to be ex-pupil of Murdock's.

“I gather you are not prepared for K.I.T.E?”

Cheyla shrugged. If Gatsby had accepted it, then she had accepted her fate as well. She was still going to attempt to skip classes just as before.

As if reading her mind, Madame Cuttler spoke “I would suggest you attending the classes. The repercussions for failing to do so are many degrees harsher than the punishment we try to implement here at Murdock, Cheyla. I have discussed with your mother-

Cheyla snorted and rolled her eyes, but the headmistress continued.

"I have discussed with your mother and we know your magical abilities are abysmal. It is disrespectful to Krandells, to Mheroun's heritage, and to your mother's efforts, not to mention your charming Grandpa Earl as well. You have failed to gain anything from your time at Murdock and my advice is that you follow every single rule K.I.T.E has etched in marble in their Hall of Wisdom."

Cheyla rested her elbows on the armrest and slumped in her seat, pouting.

"You said you had something to give me," she gurgled.

Madame Cuttler looked unfazed by the display of rudeness and opened her desk drawer to pull out a massive stocky looking book. She heaved it onto the desk, a cloud of dust rising into the air. Cheyla coughed slightly and gaped at the bulky ancient book her headmistress had just presented.

"What's that? A textbook?"

For the first time, Cheyla saw her smile, baring her teeth which were pointy and repulsive.

"Of course not. I want you to read this," she nudged the book across the desk to Cheyla.

Cheyla peered at it closely. The binding and cover were wooden and carved into the grains, in the center, was some sort of bird. Something about it was eerily familiar as Cheyla traced the outline of the bird, carved into a roosting position. She tried to pry the cover open, but apparently, it seemed as though the wooden shell had melted and stuck to the tattered interior.

"What do you want me to read? Why? Is this what you're giving me?"

Madame Cuttler leaned over the desk locking eyes with Cheyla, her pitch black eyes with Cheyla's colorful ones.

"Speak to it, Cheyla Tillich," she hissed suddenly, catching Cheyla off guard with the abrupt shift in tone. Repulsed, Cheyla pushed the book away.

"You're crazy."

The headmistress pushed the book back to Cheyla and shook her head.

"This is yours."

Cheyla broke out into a row of sarcastic laughter.

"This is what you're giving me? This is silly. If I had known, I'd have just gone to Cerulean Park or something. A book I'm supposed to speak to? An ancient book at that. It looks older than you."

Madame Cuttler brushed the rudeness aside and stood up, adjusting her wrinkled sleeves.

"*Barii bhagis!*" she bellowed, lilac sparks bursting from her fingers. A gray book bag with Murdock crest imprinted on it appeared out of thin air. She grabbed the bag and held it out to Cheyla, who was still slumped in her chair, frowning.

"Place the book in the bag and guard it. I suspect you will not be needing it soon. Regardless, as long as I have done my part..."

Cheyla shook her head in disbelief. There was a tone of importance in her voice yesterday when Madame Cuttler insisted she see her and today, she was giving her a book which couldn't be opened. She was also telling her to speak to it and lug it around. There was no way in the world she was going

to heave that heavy thing around anywhere, not even out of the headmistress' office.

“Take it!” Madame Cuttler's voice rubbed Cheyla like sandpaper, so she stood up and took the bag. She lifted one end of the book and to her surprise, discovered that it was actually quite light, despite its immense appearance. Madame Cuttler seemed to be pleased with her reaction as Cheyla lifted it into the bag.

“Mademoiselle Normah is teaching the history of Flamingo Island in your class right now. I will allow for you to wait for Gatsby, but once I am done with Gatsby, please make your way to her class.”

Cheyla turned to leave, but paused midway.

“Is that all?”

Madame Cuttler sighed and an expression of gloom crept into her, lines and creases in her face enhanced.

“There are a lot of things I would like to say, Cheyla Tilkich. It is partly my fault, you may have wasted your year at Murdock. I hope, “she said, making her way to the office door, “that you extol your best efforts to make up for the lost year when you are at K.I.T.E. It really is a brilliant school. You are privileged. Very privileged indeed. There, I am certain the teachers can equip you for...the future.”

“If you see your mother, Veavanne, please say hi to her and send my best wishes to Grandpa Earl. We are Mherounians, Cheyla. Open your eyes. Speaking to a book will not even come close to the most bizarre things you will be encountering, believe me. Just guard it, at the very least.”

Cheyla waited for Madame Cuttler to drone on, but she swung the door open.

“That is all, Cheyla Tilkich. It's quite unfortunate we could not get to know each other better. I wish you the best of luck at K.I.T.E.”

Cheyla found Gatsby slumped against the wall outside. His face lit up when he saw Cheyla, who gave him a small smile, and scowled when Madame Cuttler called out his name.

“Gatsby, please come inside.”

Gatsby stomped into the office, and with one last wary smile, Madame Cuttler left Cheyla alone in the barren hallway to contemplate in solitude. As light as the book had turned out to be, Cheyla felt burdened with the rectangular object in the bag she held her arms. She took it out of the bag and poured her eyes over it, tracing the bird once more. Cheyla marveled at the craftsmanship it must have involved. She could make out individual feathers on the wings. The carving almost seemed sacred. Madame Cuttler had wanted her to speak to it? What was she supposed to say? Was there some sort of password or keyword that, when uttered, would cause the book to reveal its pages?

“Hello?” she finally said, mouth mere centimeters away from the dusty pages.

“Helloooooooooo...” she repeated. She felt even more ridiculous as her voice bounded down the hallway in echoes.

Madame Cuttler had loose nuts and bolts for brains, she decided. What did bother her was the fact she was friends with Veavanne. Since when were they friends? It only served as proof to Cheyla how much Veavanne didn't really care about her if she had been friends with her headmistress all this while and never bothered to find out whether she was attending classes or not. Grandpa Earl, she could forgive. He rarely left the apartment, partly due to Veavanne's strict order that he stay in. She



figured it was only fitting a horrible woman would befriend another horrible woman.

All she sense from Madame Cuttler today was tiredness though. She wasn't really horrible. Just... tired.

The door swung open and Gatsby bounded out of the office swearing and cursing, fingers pointed accusingly at the headmistress standing in the doorway, arms folded. Cheyla quickly tucked the book back into the bag.

"You have no right! NO right, vile woman!"

Cheyla looked from a flustered red cheeked Gatsby who was fuming, cap askew on his bed of curly hair, to Madame Cuttler, calm but wary still, shaking her head at the doorway.

"Please attend Mademoiselle Normah's history lesson. Good luck Cheyla. Gatsby-

"I will not listen to you!" he interjected, spitting at the woman's feet, "let's go, Cheyla."

He stormed down the hallway and Cheyla struggled to keep up. She looked back to see Madame Cuttler's sad frame become smaller and smaller until the woman finally closed her office door. Cheyla wasn't sure where Gatsby was headed but she knew it wasn't class.

"Where are you going, Gatsby?"

"You mean, where are we going, right? Don't tell me you've gone all soft. Mademoiselle Normah is a joke, and so is that wretched Cuttler."

A little out of breath, Cheyla stood in front of Gatsby, blocking him from walking out into the streets and out of the school.

"What did she say, Gatsby? Why are you so angry?"

Gatsby shook his head.

"It's not important," he said, voice raspier than usual, "can we please just go to the park?"

Hesitating, Cheyla tried to weigh the pros and cons of going to the history lesson. At a loss for a decision, she threw up her hands and replied with an exasperated "sure"

Gatsby whispered his thanks and made his way past the entrance doors, basking in the sunlight. Cheyla followed him, one book bag in her arms and another swinging from her shoulder. The streets of Krandells seemed to welcome them with the familiar noises Cheyla had grown accustomed to in the past year. A flock of ducks flew overhead, casting a shadow on Krandells' two notorious school skippers elbowed and jostled their way through the crowds to Cerulean Park.

