

Trip, Ferdinand and The Porcelain Princess
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Chapter 1

Greenish-blue or Bluish-green

The bell rung for the first recess, and no one seemed in a rush to leave their desks.

First days were different. No one knew anyone, and everyone was terrified to be the first one to make an introduction; so, they quietly went about packing their bags or arranging their books. Except for those two boys who grew up as neighbors.

Rest all were trying to get past this membrane of awkwardness, riffling through all the social skills they had learnt to come up with ice breakers and confidence, to approach some would be friends. Except for those two neighbor boys who were chatty from the first minute of school. The others eyed them. A little annoyed by their laughter. A little jealous, because they already had a friend in a sea of strangers.

Trip was one of those boys and his friend was Ferdinand.

They grew up together on Trip's farm where Ferdinand's family worked for Trip's. But that didn't define the dynamics of their friendship.

Ironically among them Ferdinand was the one who ordered Trip around. He was smarter, taller, more mature, funnier and better looking than Trip. And Trip accepted that gracefully. He never did anything without Ferdinand's advice who was always patronizing but kind towards his shy friend.

‘What do you want to eat?’ Trip asked brushing hair out of his eyes. They walked out of their classroom straight into the large sitting area.

‘I don't know, maybe some bread?’ Ferdinand scratched his beak with the tip of his wing. ‘Did you see any cuties you liked?’

‘What?’ Trip looked at his friend then immediately looked away. ‘No...’ He quietly moaned.

‘I liked that red-head,’ Ferdinand said, ‘Becca, I think the teacher called her. She has this really nice pair of...’ Trip shot him a look. ‘Eyes.’

But the way Ferdinand was holding his wings in front of his chest, Trip knew he wasn’t talking about her eyes.

‘What about that swan we saw on our way to class?’ Trip asked.

‘Oh just because I’m a duck, I must love swans?’ Ferdinand rebuked. ‘That’s really ignorant, man. Ignorant and speciesist.’

Trip looked down in clear shame. ‘You know I didn’t mean it like that,’ he mumbled.

‘Oh I know how you mean it,’ Ferdinand said anger dripping from his voice, ‘you are a duck. Date your aviary kind. Leave us people alone.’

‘T-that is absolutely not what I meant.’ Trip glared at his friend with a scrunched up face, eyes on the verge of tears.

Ferdinand let out a loud laugh and clapped him on the back. ‘Why do you always make it so easy, you sweet-sweet Trip.’ Confusion faded from Trip’s face quickly as he realized what had happened. ‘You have to learn to start telling people off,’ Ferdinand waved the tip of his wing like a finger, ‘or at least make it a little difficult for me to mess with you.’ He laughed again.

This time Trip laughed too. ‘You know that’s a sensitive subject for me,’ he rubbed the back of his head, ‘so bread right?’

Ferdinand nodded his head vigorously as they approached the café counter at the far end of the sitting area.

‘One noodles and half-loaf bread,’ Trip called to the fat lady in the apron.

‘Fifteen.’ The lady declared before stepping to the back of the café. She appeared in the next moment holding a transparent box of spicy noodles and a plate with a puffy half-loaf of bread. ‘Ferdy,’ Trip turned to Ferdinand who reached in his shirt pocket and brought out four 5-coins. He handed three to Trip who forwarded them to the fat lady and received the noodles and bread one in each hand.

Ferdinand spotted an empty two person table by the east wall and motioned Trip to follow him. They weaved through the crowd and the tables to the other side of hall, careful not to bump into anyone causing them to spill their food.

Trip set the plate and the box on the round table and scanned the progressively crowding sitting area as he settled into his chair.

Boys slurped their noodles while mice nibbled their cheese rolls. Girls laughed over their pies and the geese pecked at their rice bowls.

Despite the crowd the sounds of students shuffling about were much louder than the sounds of the short hushed conversations that went around the tables. Introductions were being made, hobbies being inquired, smiles and chuckles being exchanged. Everyone was trying to appear their best.

And that’s when Trip saw her.

Across the hall on the other side sat this girl on the table alone. Her porcelain white skin lustered like smooth ceramic. Her diamond hair were straight and long. They framed her face in glittering colors of the rainbow when light hit them. Her irises were like greenish-blue crystals that glittered with the colors of the sea. Gemstone butterflies made of emeralds and jades and rubies fluttered around her, circling her playfully. The girl stared at her pie and didn’t look up. Until she did.

And that's when she saw him.

Pale skin and a wiry frame, the boy seemed shy but kind. His black hair shiny and thin, kept falling into his brown eyes. Trip pushed back his hair, and for the first time he didn't look away. For the first time he held a gaze and dove into the girl's glittering eyes.

Trip held his breath when he plunged into the cool water.

His eyes went wide as he clasped his hands over his mouth and looked around. The water was clear and blue but Trip couldn't see anything. Far below him he saw the water grow dark with no bottom in sight. Above him the surface rippled against the sunlight.

'how did you find this place?' A loud other worldly voice boomed in Trip's head.

'I don't know what this place is,' Trip thought. He scanned his surrounding frantically turning from side to side searching for the voice.

'you appear weak.' The voice boomed again. *'you cannot protect. You cannot serve. the girl is making a mistake.'*

'Protect who,' Trip noticed he was somehow not running out of breath, 'what mistake?'

Trip screamed when the giant head appeared before him but only air bubbles escaped his mouth. The water dragon's long whiskers swayed with the underwater current. In his multi-faceted quartz eyes Trip saw a hundred reflections of his terrified face.

'you have not been chosen yet,' the dragon spoke in Trip's head, *'leave.'*

'... have a thing for redheads. I find all of them so attractive,' Ferdinand went on, 'Erin was a redhead. Stacy was a redhead. Chloe was a redhead head.' He swallowed a big chunk of bread, 'I think I might have a... You okay man?' Ferdinand shook Trip by his shoulder, 'you look pale as hell and you haven't touched your noodles yet.'

‘Huh?’ Trip looked around the cafeteria, confused how he got there; his searching eyes found the pie on the table across the hall with no porcelain girl behind it.

Was it a dream? He thought throughout the day. How did he fall asleep, just like that?

The girl’s small sad face didn’t go away from his mind. Will he see her again? He thought. He had to. He knew.

The teacher was monologuing about the importance of numerals in history. The small bells hanging from his handlebar mustache that jingled with his pronounced gestures, was all the entire class could focus on. Except Trip who was lost in his head, by his choice this time. And Ferdinand, who was peeping at Becca from the corner of his eye.

The day went on which felt twice as long to the boy and half as long to the duck. Trip couldn’t wait for the final bell to ring so he could rush out of the school and wait at the exit to catch a glimpse of the porcelain girl.

Ferdinand had spent the day coming up with clever quips and jabs about their new teachers and classmates, about the things they did, about how they looked. After every punchline he would raise his feathered eyebrows at Trip who would exhale slightly, which was his usual reaction but towards the end of the day Ferdinand sensed that his exhales were fake and joyless. And that worried him. Nothing good had ever happened when Trip had gotten tensed.

Once on their way back from their friend’s house Trip they had spotted a cat stuck in a tree, meowing for help. They walked passed it at that time but later in the night Trip couldn’t sleep his head full of the cat’s meows. So he woke up Ferdinand and made him sneak out with him during shivering cold back to the tree only to find it empty. The cat was long gone either rescued by

someone or was never stuck in the first place. Ferdinand would have placed his money on the latter.

He sensed a tension thickening around Trip and he knew he had to be ready for whatever his little friend was about to drag them into. And Ferdinand was ready. Never had he had a friend like Trip and never will he ever. His words from when they were young came to his mind and a smile colored his beak. 'If I am with Trip I don't need anyone else.'

The final bell rang signaling the end of the first school day. Trip who already had his books packed for the first five minutes pulled on Ferdinand's wing forcing his to a quick exit.

Ferdinand shuffled with his stationary and bag as he let Trip drag his out of the class, down the corridor, around the corner, down the stairs across the lobby and out of the school.

They crossed the road and turned around watching the kids pour out of the school building. The influx of students exiting the school increased for the next couple minutes before staying at a constant ten children per second. Trip's focused eyes searched the crowd from across the street for the face he remembered as clearly as his own.

'What is up with you?' Ferdinand asked, 'you have been weird since lunch. Was it the noodles? Is it a bad stomach situation?' He waited for an answer but when kept staring at the kids across the street as if trying to move them with his mind, he added. 'Who are we looking for? Maybe I can help too.'

Trip hesitated for a moment his gaze at the exit relaxing if only for a moment, because he knew what Ferdinand's reaction would be when he told him about the girl. But he decided to share nonetheless. 'There was a girl I saw at the cafeteria,' Trip said.

And just as he had expected Ferdinand went, 'ooooo. A girl? Tell me how she looked, what she was wearing. I will search for her too.'

Trip sighed but then described her. ‘She was slim with white porcelain skin, and long diamond hair. She wore a blue frock with a big bow on the waist. And yeah,’ he said, ‘she also had like a dozen crystal butterflies circling her.’

Trip nodded with hand on his chin and a serious face throughout the description. ‘Alright, alright,’ he nodded, ‘porcelain shin, diamond hair, frock big bow, crystal butterflies,’ he repeated. ‘I think I got it.’

‘Good,’ Trip smiled, turning his attention back to the crowd not that he ever took his eyes off it. ‘Don’t good me,’ Ferdinand snapped, ‘what the hell are you talking about? Crystal butterflies, what are crystal butterflies? If this your idea of a joke, I’ll admit it’s elaborate but not funny. Jokes are supposed to be funny.’

Trip expected this reaction so he wasn’t surprised. ‘Not a joke,’ he said calmly. ‘I saw her at the cafeteria during lunch and there was something about her. I would like to see her again before we go to our rooms.’

Ferdinand felt himself calm at his friends tone. ‘She really had porcelain skin?’ He asked and Trip nodded. ‘Wow,’ Ferdinand laughed then turned his focus towards the now progressively thinning crowd streaming out of the school building. A passing bird squawked in the sky pulling his attention for a second before he returned to searching the crowd for the girl his friend described.

Trip and Ferdinand stood at that sidewalk for over an hour, ten minutes after the apparently last kid left the building. Soon the teachers began to walk out. Trip readied himself to be berated by Ferdinand who instead said, ‘maybe she left before us?’

Trip looked up at his friend’s beaked face and his heart felt the joy that only great friendships bring. ‘I am pretty sure we were the first on out,’ he said, ‘maybe she left from some other exit?’

‘This is the only exit or entrance other than the fire exit behind the building,’ Ferdinand said as they started to walk away, ‘but why would she leave not leave from the main exit.’

Not knowing the answer Trip shrugged.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ Ferdinand slapped his back with his feathery hand, ‘we’ll find her tomorrow for sure.’

Trip agreed with a nod and they started down the street towards their dormitories. The campus of Bright Planes Academy were immense. They housed a school, a college, football fields, tennis, basketball courts, an Olympic size swimming pool, houses for the faculty, dormitories for the students, restaurants, coffee shops, clothing stores, movie rental stores, video game stores and everything thing else any kid or adult would need. It was fair to say the Bright Planes Academy was a small town unto itself.

Trip found his mind occupied with the thoughts of the girl something that had never happened to him before. Finding this anxiety and confusion pleasant he leaned into it. He thought about her bluish-green eyes. And the water he found himself in after meeting them. Or was that just his vivid imagination. Now that he thought about it, the entire experience felt extraordinary.

Did he really see gemstone butterflies, trailing gemstone dust behind them? Did he really plunge into icy water when he met the girl’s eyes? He couldn’t recall it well but it felt like he spoke with someone. Someone of authority. Or was it just in his head? One thing though, that Trip knew with certainty, was that her bluish-green eyes were the most beautiful eyes he had ever seen; real or not. Or were they greenish-blue? Trip then found himself down a tangent of debating the difference between the two colors or if there even was one when he heard Ferdinand’s voice.

‘Hey.’

Trip turned towards the voice to see he had passed his dormitory and walked a dozen steps ahead. Ferdinand pointed at the building he stood in front of, and made a pillow with his wings before resting his head on it. Trip slapped his head surprised by his absentmindedness and started up the stairs to the building's entrance.

‘Wow, you’re really out of it huh?’ Ferdinand was playing some zombie shooter game on his phone, which kept on announcing his kills and combos.

‘Yeah,’ Trip rubbed his head, ‘I don’t know what it is man,’ he was certain he was breathing underwater at one point, ‘I can’t get that girl out of my head.’

‘Ah,’ Ferdinand sighed, putting his hand on his chest he leaned back. ‘It is love,’ he spread his wings in an exaggerated gesture, ‘is what it is.’

‘Tomorrow we will skip class if we have to,’ he promised, ‘but we will find that girl. I want to see this beauty whose mere sight had my innocent Trip fall for her.’

Trip cringed at that phrase. ‘I have not *fallen for* anyone,’ he insisted. ‘There is just *something* about her,’ he clarified, ‘and I just wasn’t to find out what that is.’

‘Oh I bet there is,’ Ferdinand laughed, ‘and I bet you do.’

It was five on the large clock that hung under the first floor balcony by the time Trip and Ferdinand arrived at dormitory. The lady behind the lobby desk looked up from her magazine for a split second before returning to her reading. The fresh smell of disinfectant hung in the air as the boys started up the spiraling wooden stairs. They walked past the first then the second then the third floor before they arrived on their floor with crying feet and sweating face.

‘Would it kill them to put an elevator,’ a panting Ferdinand spoke.

‘You know how old this building is?’ Trip asked. ‘It will probably fell apart if they tried that.’

And Trip was right the building would have fallen apart that was tried. The boy's dormitory like other main buildings of the Bright Planes Academy were erected over three hundred years prior to Trip's birth. The last five generations of his family had done their studies here, like many of the other students. Ferdinand was not one of them.

Despite being built centuries before their time, Trip and Ferdinand were surprised to find the buildings and their amenities as modern as they could be. When they had arrived three days ago they had expected to walk in an old wooden house waiting to fall apart but they were greeted by a massive six storey building, appearing to a solid block of glass and concrete. The school building was a similar surprise. Though he knew it was true he didn't believe these buildings were three hundred years old. He had seen pictures of what construction looked like back then and it was nowhere near this modern.

The boys walked across the common area and open kitchen to their rooms on the other side of the floor. Ferdinand fetched the key from his backpack and the naked lady keychain swung when he turned it in the lock.

'It's art, you won't get it,' he had told Trip when he had disapproved of the keychain.

Their two beds separated by two beside tables and a long rug between them were neatly made and inviting. The clothes and comics they had strewn around were neatly folded and stacked on appropriate shelves and tables.

'The housekeeping package was the best thing,' Ferdinand sighed before free falling in the bed and getting nearly swallowed by the plush mattress. 'Thank your da once again for me.'

'You can do it yourself,' Trip said shutting the door behind him. He took off his bag and placed it on the chair in front of his table.

‘No way in hell man,’ Ferdinand said, ‘I mean he is great, but he still scares the tongue out of my mouth.’

‘You exaggerate,’ Trip shooed him before going through the stack of comics on the wall shelf looking for the one he was reading last night.

‘Are you kidding,’ Ferdinand was so serious he had propped himself up on his elbow, ‘not once have I had a conversation with him where I haven’t stammered for at least ten seconds.’

Trip laughed. ‘Alright you win,’ he pulled out the comic. The vampire heroine was brandishing a silver gun on the cover.

‘I know,’ Ferdinand let himself fall back into the mattress and moaned loudly from comfort.

‘What do you want to have for dinner?’ Trip asked as he pulled his curtains letting the evening light on his bed before settling on it.

‘I don’t know,’ Ferdinand spoke to the ceiling, ‘we’ll go to the cafeteria and see. Or do you want to go to the pizza place? I overheard two nerds say it was good.’

‘Hmm,’ Trip flipped through the comic to where he had left off last night, ‘I don’t really feel like walking that much. We’ll just go to the first floor cafeteria.’

‘Alright,’ Ferdinand wriggled out of his backpack and flung it across the room. It hit his chair, then slumped to the floor. ‘I’ll take a nap,’ he said rolling over, ‘wake me up when you get hungry.’

‘Will do,’ Trip said before leaning back into the pillows laid against the bed’s headrest.

He flipped through twenty pages and over a hundred panels of the adventures of the vampire heroine in latex tight before he realized he had no idea what was going on in the story. When couldn’t even recall the last dialogue he had read Trip knew he wouldn’t be able to enjoy his

comic, so he decided to give a chance to something little more stimulating and watch some funny edits of his favorite phycology professor's lectures on the internet.

He jumped out of his bed and glided to the chair firing up his laptop he put the url of his favorite video sharing website and started scrolling. It wasn't even two seconds before he found a video titled *Dr. Peter Jordanson debates shrimp equality*. Trip put on his headphones and sat back. He really enjoyed these out-of-context edit videos where the creator stitched the words said by a person in sentences so ridiculous you couldn't help but laugh.

‘You have said shrimps have been playing a victim for too long and they need to grow the hell up,’ the lady reporter asked the professor.

‘I didn’t say they have been playing the victim but that they have been victimizing themselves. And it’s not like these shrimp don’t know what they are doing,’ Dr. Peter explained. ‘These shrimps are aware of the weight their voices hold in the society and sometimes, not always let me make that clear, sometimes there would be shrimps saying their tanks are purposely smaller than the lobster’s. And though that is true that is not right.’

‘But wouldn’t you say-’

‘Let me finish,’ Dr. Jordanson sounded annoyed so he raced through his point, ‘lobsters require a larger tank because of their size. Shrimps do not. Its basic science. So saying both shrimps and lobsters need equal sized tanks and amount of water for the time they spend in the restaurant is not only factually incorrect but an immoral and misguided effort towards attaining shrimp equality.’

For the next hour and a half Trip watched five edit videos, a couple stand up clips of his favorite artist Hurr Durr and a lets paly of Felix the Cat playing Urge of Obligation 4, one of the most famous first-person-shooter games.

By the time he checked the clock on his laptop it was quarter to eight. He glanced at the window and outside the night had fallen. The last traces of sunlight were disappearing from the sky. Trip turned in chair to watch Ferdinand snoring away. He did feel a rumble in his stomach but didn't have the heart to wake up his sleeping friend.

So in an effort to distract himself from the hunger he went back to binging videos till he couldn't take it anymore. It was eight fifteen now and Trip knew they'd have to go for dinner either way, so he got off his chair and walked up to a dreaming Ferdinand.

Trip shook the duck by his shoulder, first gently then when he refused to wake up aggressively. He punctuated the shaking with his name. 'Ferdinand. Ferdinand.' He called over and over. 'Yup, yup, I'm up, I'm up,' Ferdinand repeated yawning wide and pushing himself upright on the bed.

When he opened his eyes he saw Trip standing beside him. 'So dinner?' He asked the boy yawning, still clearly sleepy.

'Yeah,' Trip said, 'or if you are sleepy we can order it in the room.' He pointed at the black phone on the table between their beds.

'No, no,' Ferdinand waved his wing and swung his webbed feet off the bed, 'let's go to the first floor. I want to have it hot and don't want dirty dishes in my room till tomorrow.'

Trip shrugged. 'Alright whatever you say,' he stepped towards the room, 'are you going to change?'

'No this is fine,' Ferdinand said, 'not like there's going to be any cuties so I don't really care.'

He thought for a moment and then held up his wing like a pointed finger, 'only for a cutie will I dress up my booty.' He gave Trip a side look and when he didn't say anything asked, 'how was that?'

‘Not worse than the other ones,’ Trip open the door, ‘but you are getting better.’ He walked out of the room before calling over his shoulder, ‘take the keys.’

‘Got them right here,’ Ferdinand jingled the keys in his hand, the figure of the small pin up girl swinging with the keys.

They locked the door behind them and headed crossed the common area and open kitchen to the wooden gallery leading to the spiraling staircase. They hopped down the staircase joining others headed towards the same goal. The stairs were wide enough that five people could have comfortably stood side by side on a single step. So even when the kids from the lower floors joined the already descending group the staircase never got *too* crowded.

Groups and groups of boys stepped onto the first floor eating area. Walking off the staircase and past the support columns, Trip could see a sea of lunch benches spread in a perfect grid. At the far wall a long counter with almost two dozen cooks manning it displayed a variety of food through clear glass.

Trip and Ferdinand paced to join the queue at the corner of the food counter and when their turn came showed their Ids to get their meal coupons. Since his father had gotten both Trip and Ferdinand the Gold Experience which was the second best package you could get, they were allowed any food they wished.

Trip and Ferdinand walked along the counter checking out over fifty dishes and preparing a mental menu of their dinner. They then strode to the table and got their plates, bowls, cutlery and napkins.

They prepared their plates and sat on the closest empty bench of which there were many. Unlike lunch at school more than half the cafeteria was empty. Trip had prepared himself a plate of

pasta in red sauce, some chicken nuggets and lightly salted fries with a box of pomegranate juice.

Ferdinand had chicken tikka masala with two pieces of naan, a bowl of pho and a can of cola.

Finding the food amazing, they both chowed it down in record time. They placed their plates and trays in the dirty plate bin and the used tray stand respectively before waddling to the staircase.

Ferdinand rubbed his bloated belly and groaned as they climbed the spiral stairwell. He held onto the wooden rails finding walking without support risky. Trip too was full beyond necessary but found himself able to walk without needing support or groaning about how much he ate.

By the time they made it to their rooms it was almost nine thirty. The boys changed into their night pajamas and after emptying their tanks, they slipped into their respective. Trip flipped the switch next to his head darkening the room the only light being the faint moon light coming from his open window. They said good night to each other and rolled over. Ferdinand added that they would find Trip's girl tomorrow before telling him to have sweet dreams. And sweet dreams he had.

Trip dreamed about the diamond haired porcelain girl. With her glittering greenish-blue eyes. Or was that color bluish-green. Was there even a difference.

Chapter 2

The Princess and The Frog

Trip was dreaming about setting the dinner table with some expensive china when a series of light tapping sounds made the scene fade away. He woke up to a dark room and lay still in bed as he waited for the sound. When he didn't hear it, he closed his eyes ready to continue his sleep adventure.

Tap. Tap. Trip threw his eyes open and sat up in his bed with a start. *Tap. Tap.* He perked up his ears and, turning his head like a wild animal, tried to figure out where the sound was coming from until his eyes landed on the window beside his bed.

Tap. Tap. A butterfly, its wings made of green emerald, trailed sparkling green dust beside it every time it slammed into the window pane. The butterfly stopped and hovered in place a few inches from the glass when Trip stepped in front of the window.

Trip watched the butterfly for a moment, mesmerized or sleepy, before the porcelain girl's face came to his mind. He immediately lifted the glass and, with the cool night air, the gemstone butterfly flew into the room dusting emerald sparkles in its wake.

The butterfly flew in circles around Trip before heading to the door where it hovered in front of the knob. When he looked at it he couldn't help but feel it was looking back at it. So Trip walked to the door and watched the butterfly who now circled the knob.

‘You want me to open it?’ Trip asked it in a low voice.

When it continued to fly around the doorknob he placed it hand on it and turned. Trip opened the door and the butterfly flew out into the sitting area. The trailing green dust behind it lit the dark with a faint glow. The butterfly flapped impatiently, waiting for Trip to follow which he did.

He walked through the open kitchen and the dark and empty sitting room, down the wide spiral staircase to the main lobby. The butterfly fluttered over the sleeping man behind the desk as if to make sure that he was not waking up anytime soon before crossing the lobby to the tall glass doors.

Trip wasn't sure how he would get through them as he stepped forward with a puzzled look on his face. To his surprise the doors slid open upon his approach. The gemstone butterfly sparkled into the warm night with Trip stepping out behind it.

He walked down the paved path for a while, before turning around the lawns. The butterfly led a sparkling trail of fine emerald dust along the yellow lit roads of the student housing block of the academy. Trip followed close behind as they moved away from the dormitories. He walked for about a mile before he realized they had exited the student housing area and were approaching the block that housed the teacher's quarters. But the butterfly turned away at the next intersection flying over a high grass hedge disappearing from his view.

Trip followed the twinkling green tail and pushed through the hedge. He scraped his arms with some thorns and twisted branches poked at his ribs but after a couple of steps Trip stepped out and found himself on a narrower brick path. There were trees, flowerbeds, benches, grassy mounds, pruned bushes of various designs and tall ornate street lights as far as he could see. It didn't take him long to deduce this was the garden area he was yet to visit.

A large area of the Bright Planes Academy was dedicated to parks, and play grounds which included the baseball, cricket and football fields, tennis, basketball and badminton courts, swimming pools, lakes, ponds and dancing fountains which were lit with bright flashing lights in the night, though no students younger than fifteen were allowed here at the time.

But that wasn't what Trip was thinking about. He wasn't wondering why this gemstone butterfly came to his room or why he was following it in the middle of this starless night. All he could see in his mind was the beautiful image of the porcelain girl sitting over barely eaten pie and the vision warmed his heart and quickened his pace.

Rising and falling lawns appeared on both sides of the path. In the distance Trip could make out several shadowed figures strolling in the grass. This time his pace quickened to not be found out of his dormitory wandering the gardens in the middle of the night. The butterfly crossed a wooden bridge that arced over a small clear stream and Trip scurried after it.

He soon found himself in the Green Animals Park, an area of the academy he had read about in the brochure. The bricked path became cobblestones embedded in the grassy lawn, now sprouting multiple narrow pathways. On his far left Trip saw a towering giraffe having tea across a marble table with a massive rhino. Both the animals were sculpted entirely from bushes and shrubs, with details like the giraffe's skin pattern or the animals' beady eyes achieved by using various sorts of flowers and vines. The remaining chairs around the marble table were left empty for park goers, Trip noticed.

Keeping one eye on the green sparkle trails floating ahead him, Trip scanned the park as he paced the cobblestone paths. A group of life sized alligators wearing snorkeling gear were climbing out of the small pond, storks dressed in monocles and top hats were suspended in midflight around a grove of trees, from time to time massive pythons appeared next to the path waving at Trip with their tails. He had just spotted a family of lions when the butterfly flew off the path. It flew across the lawn to the nearest hedge and over it. Trip sighed to himself and followed. Once more he got scratches on his arms and jabbed at his chest as he emerged from the

other side. Muffled sounds that reached his ears made him duck immediately and crawl, taking cover behind the bushes shaped as herd of belled Billy goats.

Trip looked around for the butterfly and its emerald dust trail but noticed that both were gone. As he searched for the gemstone insect his eyes found two shapes lit by the yellow street lamps not far from him. The muffled cries were coming from the smaller shape that cowered on the ground. Trip's heart leaped at the sight of the girl who was quietly and continuously sniffing. The moonlight gleamed of her porcelain skin, refracting into numerous soft colors when it met her glowing diamond hair.

Trip's heart sank as quickly when it examined the large shape looming over her. What he initially thought was another one of the bush sculptures was instead a giant bullfrog standing upright on his hind legs, nearly thrice taller than Trip. His slimy spotted skin shone with a disgusting gloss as he drooled thick globs of spit from his wide mouth when he spoke.

‘Thome bith phe Printheesss,’ the beast said in a barely comprehensible boom, ‘I donth haph do hurth youuu.’ He wiped the slimy stuff around his mouth with the back of his hand, and after a disgusting sounding smack continued. ‘Anthorrr moozth bee death by nou, so you betherr thome kpviethlyyy.’ He watched the girl who huddled up tighter, now tucking her face against her knees.

‘No,’ she squeaked, ‘he wouldn’t lose to idiots like you,’ and curled up on the ground even tighter, shaking from fear. Trip saw the gemstone butterflies were flying in a cluster of blue, red and green a small distance from the girl, apparently too spooked of the frog beast to go any nearer.

The frog made a noise resembling a sigh and reached forward grabbing onto the girl’s wrist, which in comparison to his webbed hand looked wiry thin. The girl whimpered when the beast

began to effortlessly drag her across the ground. She frantically tried to claw away but only managed to plough the grassy lawn.

Trip's mind knew he should be frozen with fear and unable to move at the sight of the monster, but seeing the porcelain girl's despair birthed something in him. It first took form of desperation which soon morphed into anger, which sooner inflamed into rage. Trip's blood boiled in his veins, his muscles twitched ready to leap at the frog. Which he was about to do right before he heard a soft thump right next to him.

Normally, in a situation like this, the sudden sound would have made Trip jump with surprise, but right now he just calmly turned towards the sound. Beside him, gleaming in the soft moonlight, sat a glorious sword. Its blade was silver, sleek and long, nearly as long as Trip was tall. Its hilt and guard were golden, decorated with Asscher cut sapphires big and small. And above it sprinkling a green dust trail was an emerald butterfly.

Then he didn't think much. Trip reached out and grabbed the sword. He expected it to be heavy and hard to lift for his non-existent muscles but the blade came off the ground with almost no effort on Trip's part. He gave the blade a couple sideways slashes, nipping at the legs of the goat shaped bushes around him before turning his eyes to the princess and the frog.

The girl's sniffling had turned into sobbing and loud crying as the amphibian monster dragged her away. She tried her hardest to struggle out of his grasp but the punching and clawing she did at his hand didn't seem to bother him in the least.

Trip leaned forward, rested his weight on his now taut calves and held the long sword his outstretched hand behind him. *Run.* The voice sounded in his head and with no hesitation the boy leaped into action. Trip broke out of the bushes sprinting towards the bipedal frog like a bullet

from the gun's barrel. By the time the humanoid amphibian turned his heavy head around to look in the direction of sound Trip was already next to him.

Jump. The voice sounded in his head again and he jumped. Trip surprised himself because the next second he had managed to launch himself over twelve feet in air. He was never even close to what one might call athletic. So either he really liked this girl or it was something to do with the sword, Trip thought. He knew it was probably the latter but it didn't make the former untrue. The frog startled by the scrawny sword wielding boy that had appeared before his face out of nowhere let go of the girl's wrist as he backed up in confusion. Trip leaned forward in air letting the momentum carry him forward. *So this is tachypsychia*, he thought.

Trip had read about this neurological condition not long back. Tachypsychia or time dilation, a condition that altered a person's perception of time, was generally induced by excessive adrenaline being pumped into ones blood, he remembered. Just as the article had said, time had seemingly slowed down for him. He saw the every movement of the frog's big ball-like eyes and noticed every muscle twitch under his slimy skin as he soared closer to his head.

Swing. This time Trip had acted almost at the same time as the voice sounded. He swung the sword as easily as one might move their limb and brought it down in a blinding slash against the monster's massive body. Before the frog could move a finger the cold, humming blade had cleaved across his eyes all the way to his hip.

The frog's massive body, with a loud thump, met the ground at the same time as the boy's feet. Trip stood up, the sword's slim blade dripping with thick green blood, and looked at the giant dissected frog next him. His entrails stared at the starless sky as the blood pooled around his unmoving body.

Trip, as if snapping awake from a hyper realistic dream, had just begun to realize what he had done and freak out when his eyes found the girl's scared face gaping at him and all his anxiety melted into a warm feeling of comfort and satisfaction. He expected her to back off when the strange boy with a sword dripping with blood approached, but instead she pushed herself to her feet and, with a bowed head, waited.

'You came,' the porcelain girl said in a voice that to Trip sounded like the melodic chime of million tiny bells. She kept her head slightly bowed, which meant she couldn't see the dumb smile that had involuntarily colored Trip's face. The moonlight refracting from her diamond hair cast a spectrum across his face, thinking about which he realized he was smiling like a madman and gentled his expression.

'I wasn't sure if you would come,' she finally looked up and Trip's heart stopped beating. 'I wasn't sure you would come,' she repeated before taking Trip's hand in hers. A jolt of electricity ran up his hand, shivering his body, his faltering threatening to give out, but Trip held his ground. The girl's hands were smooth like marble but had the warmth of flesh. Trip felt his brain numb at her touch as his vision's corners started to blacken. 'Thank you,' the girl said in a grateful whisper and the words stayed Trip.

'Who are you?' was the question his tongue had apparently decided to ask when he found his voice. It wasn't the first question he would have asked, Trip thought, but it was still in the top three. So he let it go. Suddenly aware of something the girl pulled away and Trip's hand dropped sadly to his side.

'Uncle Anthor,' the girl gasped under her breath. 'Please come,' she said, before turning around swiftly and starting away. When she noticed Trip hadn't moved she raced back to him.

‘My name is Masil Bluestine,’ she croaked, ‘my uncle might be in trouble.’ Her bluish-green eyes stared into Trip’s dark brown ones. ‘Please come,’ tears began to well at the corners of her eyes.

Trip gave a determined nod, ‘alright.’ He gestured for her to go ahead and she thanked him before racing away. Trip ran after her. They raced across the lawns past the bush sculptures of a deer licking her fawns, an elephant sitting in an armchair, reading a newspaper and smoking a pipe, and of a panda juggling koalas. Masil slowed down and so did Trip, she ducked behind a low hedge and so did Trip.

She crept along the hedge for a while before coming to a stop. Masil slowly peeked from behind the hedge, then after letting out a relieved sigh pushed herself to her feet. Trip too stood up and followed the girl’s eyes.

In the middle of the lawn heaving over a pile of blood and guts was a tall, middle aged man. His rich purple tunic, with wide golden borders, was covered in splatters of blood, likely from the thing on the ground. In his hand he held a platinum scepter with an agate crescent moon on its top end.

A woman nearly the same height as him rubbed his face clean, complaining about how the blood was not coming off. The slender woman was dressed in a body hugging robe similar in design to the man’s tunic. Her fiery red hair were tied in a thick braid unlike the man’s long black hair, which stuck to his face. Apart from the man’s thick mustache and forked beard, Trip thought, the woman looked pretty similar to him.

‘Uncle, Aunt,’ Masil spoke under her breath but the couple still turned to her.

‘Masil,’ the man grunted in relief, while the woman showed much more excitement and happiness. ‘Masil,’ she cried before pacing towards her. Masil also leaped over the hedge and hurried to the woman who locked her in a hug.

‘I’m so glad you are alright,’ the woman rocked the girl in her embrace.

‘I’m glad you guys are safe too,’ Masil said. ‘This is...,’ she gestured towards Trip when the woman ended the hug, ‘umm... I’m sorry I never asked your name,’ she said appearing extremely guilty. ‘E-E-Everything happened so fast a-and I was worried about uncle a-and...’ Trip held up his hand cutting the girl off since it looked like she was about to start crying.

‘My name is Trip,’ he said, ‘Trip Talwyn, nice to meet you.’ He flashed her a smile hoping it would stop her freak out which it did. Masil pulled a deep breath and smiled black, her greenish-blue pupils sparkling like freshly picked diamonds.

‘Trip this is my uncle Anthor Stormkin,’ she gestured at the grimacing man, ‘and my aunt Elanor Stormkin.’ The woman gave him a warm smile and Trip smiled back.

‘Who is this boy?’ Anthor stepped forward scratching his pointed beard, his expressions unamused and harsh. ‘Who is this boy and why does he have the Sword of the Chosen?’

‘He saved me Uncle,’ Masil stepped between Anthor and Trip, ‘he killed the frog *rintara* that came after me. ’

‘He did?’ Anthor’s expression softened if only for a second. His eyes moved from the Trip’s face to the sword and the blood dripping from it. ‘Well at least put it away,’ he shooed at Trip with irritation.

‘I-I’m sorry?’ Trip hesitated at the request.

‘He means the sword,’ Masil’s voice was sweet and melodic, Trip thought.

‘I don’t know how,’ Trip murmured only loud enough for Masil to hear but Anthor raised an eyebrow nonetheless.

‘Just think about putting it away,’ Masil turned around and whispered to him, ‘the Sword of Chosen reacts to your will and emotions.’ Trip stared at her with uncertain eyes. ‘Try it,’ she insisted.

And he tried. Trip visualized the sword disappearing as it had appeared and though he expected it to work he was still surprised. The long sword glowed a bright azure before turning into a beam of light that streaked towards Trip, encircling his neck. When the light died down in its place, around his neck, sat a gold necklace, with a pendant an exact replica of the sword.

Trip thought Anthor was impressed for a second from the glimmer he saw in his eyes. The bearded man threw up his scepter, which disappeared into a cloud of twinkling white sparkles. He then bent in front of Trip and spoke. ‘Tell me why you are special boy?’ He measured Trip’s wrists clasping it with his index finger and thumb, like something a doctor might do. Then he lifted Trip’s arms and jabbed lightly at his ribs underneath. He held his jaw and moved his face from side to side. When Trip’s hair fell into his eyes he pushed them back and stared into the brown pupils. Trip knew he was being examined.

‘Hmm?’ Anthor hummed loudly apparently still waiting for an answer as he put one hand on Trip’s back for support and palpated his stomach.

‘I-I don’t know,’ the boy managed to stammer. ‘I’m not?’ Trip suspected that was the answer that Anthor expected and he was right for when he said that the bearded man smiled, in that his frown went away.

Anthor nodded to himself and stood back up. 'I don't know why the sword will come to someone like you,' his expression had transformed from contempt to mild irritation, which Trip counted as a win, 'but it's the sword and Princess' decision.' Anthor declared.

Trip couldn't believe he had forgotten and his head did a sharp turn towards Masil who shuffled nervously in place, her diamond hair sparkling brilliantly. 'You are a princess?' He asked. But before Masil could answer Anthor exclaimed. 'You didn't know that?' He slapped his forehead and a short laugh, of a man unbelieving, escaped his lips. 'Gosh boy. Where did you find him Masil?'

The girl looked up with nervous eyes. 'I saw him at the school cafeteria in the morning.'

Anthor watched Masil expectantly believing there was obviously more to the story but when she had been quiet for a considerable time he spoke up. 'That's it?' He turned to Trip who shrugged then to Masil who stared at her feet then back to Trip before finally casting a concerned gaze to his wife.

'I'm sure it's alright,' the woman chimed in, 'he clearly appears to be a kind boy, who came to the princess' rescue not even knowing she was one.' She gave Trip a smile so warm he feared his heart might melt. 'I am sure he was chosen there has to be a reason behind it,' she said, 'that we can wait and see.'

Anthor nodded his wife's words clearly having a calming effect on his agitated mind. 'Alright,' he said, 'let's go sit somewhere. I think we all need to rest a bit.' Trip was almost about to speak up when he thought better of it and just silently agreed.

Anthor and Elanor led the way while Trip and Masil followed. Trip felt like a dog with two tails as he walked beside Masil who periodically kept glancing at him with her bluish-green eyes. He was dying to speak to her so he said the first thing that came to his head.

‘I waited for you after school,’ as soon as the words had escaped his mouth Trip turned furious with himself. His time slowed again during which Trip cursed himself with every curse he knew. He swore to take a vow of silence and never speak again. He consoled himself by thinking that just being able to see Masil once again was enough and he was content and he could live with it and...

‘Oh I’m sorry,’ Masil’s voice was sweet, ‘w-we had flown away so that’s why you might have missed me.’ She, what Trip thought he saw, blushed a little and went back to staring at her feet. Trip’s heart let go like a rapidly deflating balloon and a flood of relief washed over him, his every cell sighing happily.

‘A-ah alright.’ This time he didn’t bludgeon himself for his poor social skills. He just kept casting periodic glances at the porcelain skinned girl, who sometimes glanced back with a hint of smile. Trip couldn’t tell because he couldn’t see but in his chest he felt his heart smiling. He felt so happy that the tiny hair on his neck stood on their ends with joy.

They walked through the Green Animal Park for a while. Trip was surprised that they didn’t run into one other person, neither teacher nor student. But then again the park was nowhere near small and it was probably pretty late in the night, he thought. Anthor led them to a private sitting area meant for not more than a dozen people enclosed by a grove of short thick trunked trees. They sat on a set of benches facing each other. Trip wanted to sit with Masil but Anthor as if reading his mind plopped to the bench pulling Trip down with him while his wife sat with the princess.

Anthor, Elanor and Masil exchanged looks before Anthor sighed and began. ‘So we have been found out.’

‘And in only three days,’ Elanor shook her head.

‘Did they ride here?’ Masil asked her uncle, ‘I mean there is no way right.’

‘Yes. There is no way, they can make it from Sky Capitol to here in three days.’

Both Masil and Elanor nodded.

‘It is clear that Ciben’s demented master has magic we don’t know about.’

The silence that fell around the group stayed till Masil broke it.

‘So we can’t stay here anymore.’

‘No,’ Anthor replied immediately, ‘soon they will send more *rintara*, and if we defeat them they will send stronger *rintara*. If they fail too then who knows maybe Ciben and his master may come down themselves. You know me,’ he glanced at his wife and niece with apologetic eyes, ‘I am not a fighter. I am a scholar.’

Masil and Elanor nodded.

‘Where do we go now then?’ Elanor asked her husband.

‘We have two options,’ Anthor held up his fingers, ‘either we head further south, maybe to the ports, take a ship to somewhere. Or we sneak back into Moonfall and reinstate you on the throne.’ He focused on Masil, whose face dripped with dread.

‘B-but how are we going to do that?’ Her voice shook with fear. ‘Can we use the Door to Anywhere?’

‘No, that wouldn’t work,’ Anthor pulled out a smooth spherical black stone from his tunic, ‘only the owner can order a Door, and that wouldn’t be possible anymore. We were lucky that the King had ordered a Door to Bright Planes before he...’ Anthor fell silent and watched Masil, who was being comforted by Elanor, with concern.

He cleared his throat and continued. ‘Of course the decision is of the Princess entirely, if she wants to go back or away but let me just say we have already found a Chosen,’ he smiled and

patted Trip on the back, ‘and he looks more than promising.’ Somehow Trip knew he didn’t mean those last words.

Elanor squinted at her husband. ‘Why are we not considering running south?’ She asked. ‘Just as you said we could take a ship to somewhere, somewhere far away.’

‘We could do that,’ Anthor’s face was grim again, ‘but it will only be a matter of time before they find us. And we can run away again but they will find us again. It will be a game of cat and mouse until the day we die, most likely at the cat’s paw.’

‘We will return,’ Masil declared with confidence, ‘that is the only way.’

The answer seemed to have been the one Anthor wanted to hear because his chest puffed out upon hearing it. ‘Oh yes, princess,’ he smiled, ‘I have great hopes for our Chosen here and I expect he will be putting on great displays of valor on our journey.’ He put his arm around Trip. Trip had realized since they sat down on the benches that he was not to take part in the conversation and sit there like a silent observer but now he felt he had to speak up. ‘Umm, I have classes, so...’

Trip knew saying that was a mistake when Anthor’s smile dropped into a deep frown, his eyes squinted and face twisted with red hot rage. ‘YOU LISTEN HERE BOY-’

‘Uncle,’ Masil cut him off with a strong look and the man immediately fell silent and sorry.

‘Could you guys give us a moment,’ she asked, ‘I would like to speak with Trip, alone.’

‘Of course Princess,’ Elanor stood up with haste and pull her husband away by his arm, leaving Trip and Masil by themselves.

Masil slid on her bench so that she was facing Trip, she leaned forward and put her hands over his.

‘Trip,’ she spoke softly, ‘I will not ask you to accompany me. It’s not my place to request something of someone I just met.’ She fell silent and looked at his face for a while, which Trip feared might have started to blush profusely.

‘Three days back, my younger brother barged into our castle with his master and an army of humanoid animals. They killed most of the royal guards b-before-’ Masil pulled in a sharp breath, ‘b-before they killed my parents. It was the dead of the night so I was fast asleep in my room. Uncle Anthor and Aunt Elanor reached me before they could and they ushered me away to, well here.

‘Today morning when I saw you in the cafeteria I found something; something valuable that I knew I needed. I found a set of kind brown eyes, eyes like my mother’s, staring in my direction. Eyes kinder than any I had ever seen and for a moment- for a moment just a glimpse of the person behind those eyes was enough to make me feel safe.’ Tears had begun to form around Masil’s eyes while Trip’s were already rolling down his cheeks. He pulled his hand and wiped his face dry sniffling only slightly.

Masil also straightened up and stared deep into Trip’s eyes, ‘We will leave by nightfall tomorrow from the academy’s eastern main gate,’ she gave him a smile, ‘whatever you decide to do,’ leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek, ‘it was nice knowing you anyway.’ Before Trip smiled back at the girl with twinkling bluish green eyes, he had already decided what he was going to do.

Chapter 3

A Best Friend meets Girl Friend Sort of Thing

By the time Trip reached his room it was thirty past three. He pulled up his window and peered out watching the emerald butterfly trailing green dust in its path as it returned to Masil. Though he said he wouldn't get lost Masil had insisted Thirteen, which was apparently the butterfly's name, showed him back to his dorm. Trip closed the window and plopped on his cushiony bed. He felt like there was no way he could fall asleep after the kind of night he had and the kind of days he will have. He fiddled with the miniature sword pendant for a while observing the minuscule sapphires on its hilt that twinkled lightly in the dark room. He got comfortable and laid on his back, confident that he would be awake by the time the sun came up.

But as soon as Trip's head hit the pillow he fell fast asleep. He wasn't wrong though. His mind was excited, that was true, but it was also exhausted. Trip didn't dream this time or even if he did he didn't remember anything because the next thing his eyes opened to, after conking out, was a room bright with early morning sun and Ferdinand's face over his.

'Trip,' he shook him by the shoulder, 'wake up man. Damn we are late already as it is.'

Once Trip opened his eyes Ferdinand rushed into the bathroom, leaving the door open behind him. Trip got up to the sound of gushing water from the bathroom groggily rubbing his eyes and wondering if he had an extremely vivid, surrealistic dream but then he felt the cold of the miniature sword against his chest.

'Ferdi,' Trip called, 'Ferdi come out here I've got to tell you something.'

The next moment Ferdinand walked into the room wearing a beard of shaving foam around his beak white as his feathers, holding a razor in one wing. 'What?' He demanded.

Trip watched his friend, towel wrapped around his waist, face covered in foam. ‘Finish what you are doing,’ he said, ‘be quick though, this is important.’

‘You got it partner,’ Ferdinand gestured at him with the razor, ‘give me five minutes,’ and he rushed back into the bathroom. The sound of gushing water came again.

‘Since when do you shave,’ Trip called out as he crossed the room to get a glass of water.

‘Since I go to high school,’ Ferdinand’s voice came from the bathroom.

‘Do you even get beard?’ Trip poured himself another glass.

‘More than you will in the next two years,’ Ferdinand quipped.

Trip wouldn’t admit but that stung him a little. His hand reflexively went to his face, smooth as a newborn, and Trip sighed. He went back to his bed, plopped on the mattress and waited for Ferdinand who as promised walked in the room in five minutes smelling strongly of aftershave. It was seven fifteen on the clock, forty minutes to first bell, Trip noticed.

‘What did you want to tell me?’ The duck said as he crossed the room to his closet, slid it open and began riffling through his shirts.

‘No,’ Trip called causing Ferdinand to turn around with a raised eyebrow, ‘come sit here,’ he patted his mattress.

Ferdinand sighed loudly and threw his head back, then walked over to Trip’s bed and sat facing him. And then Trip told his friend about the events of last night. He tried to keep his telling short, keeping in only the events and not how they made him feel etc. Ferdinand’s face changed many expressions and his beak uttered numerous sounds throughout the story. When Trip was done he sat quietly waiting for his friend’s response.

‘So,’ Ferdinand drawled, ‘you followed a gemstone butterfly, killed a frog-man, found a magic sword and saved the princess whose uncle doesn’t like you but aunt is pretty nice, and now they want you to accompany them on their journey.’

Trip nodded excitedly overjoyed by how understanding and believing his friend was.

‘Is that the plot of a book you are writing or a dream you had or-’

‘No,’ Trip shook his head and jumped off the bed in irritation. He walked a few paces away from the bed and pulled out the miniature sword pendant from under his t-shirt. ‘Watch this.’

Trip thought hard about the pendant turning back into a sword in the hand he held out, but apparently he didn’t have to. As soon as he willed to think about the sword materializing in it hand he was already holding on to it. Trip figured that the sword didn’t act according to his thoughts but his feelings instead.

He watched Ferdinand who sat on the bed, his beak ajar with shock. He had just watch a necklace around Trip’s neck turn into blue light and then materialize into a heavy looking, long sword in his hand.

‘How are you even holding that,’ Ferdinand walked towards him his eyes glued to the magnificent sword, ‘I mean it looks super heavy.’

‘I don’t know,’ Trip shrugged, ‘seems really light to me somehow.’

‘Can I try?’ Ferdinand held out his wing.

‘I don’t see why not,’ Trip extended the sword towards Ferdinand, handing him the grip. As soon as the sword left trip’s hand it zoomed to the floor like a meteor and crashed with a loud clank of metal against wood.

‘Get it off me,’ Ferdinand squealed with his wing crushed under the sword’s weight. Trip lunged to the floor and lifted the sword, light as ever.

‘So that’s what they meant by the Chosen,’ Ferdinand croaked rubbing his wing where the sword’s hilt had landed.

‘Oh yeah,’ Trip peered at the sword upon this realization, ‘I guess you are right.’

Ferdinand sighed and shook his head at his friend’s naivety. ‘So you have decided to go with your *princess*?’ He pouted while furiously batting his eyebrows.

Trip chose not to take the bait and just nodded. ‘Yes.’

‘Well then,’ Ferdinand shook his head, ‘I’ve gotta come with.’

‘No you don’t,’ Trip said and continued to persuade his friend, to not come, who packed his *best* shirts for the princess’ cousins but Ferdinand was adamant. In the end Trip gave up on convincing him but instead started formulating scenarios and dialogues as to how he was going to convince Anthor to let his friend accompany them.

Their adventure started later that noon when Trip and Ferdinand went to the admission office. Trip spoke to the lady behind the desk that read *Student Information* and while talking to her slipped and slammed his face on her desk with a sickening thwack. He curled up on the floor, whimpering, and when the lady left her seat to check on the hurt student, Ferdinand sneaked behind her desk pulled up his and Trip’s student records and changed the *Parent’s Phone Number* field in the forms to Trip’s mobile number.

It was one in the afternoon when the boys were walking out of the admission office building with a smile of victory coloring their beaming faces. They walk backed to the dorm and, when the dorm keeper asked them why they weren’t in school, made up a lame lie about a stomach ache

from eating ice cream right after chicken soup. The good thing was the dorm keeper didn't really care and she waved the boys away.

Once in the room Trip recounted the night's events multiple times to Ferdinand each time adding a couple more details or a little commentary of what could have happened and what he was thinking. The duck listened to his friend with fascination in his gleaming eyes.

They had late lunch on the first floor cafeteria. Ferdinand had a large piece of cheese pepperoni pizza, half a dozen wontons and a bowl of popcorn shrimp with a large vanilla coke to wash it all down.

'Gotta be ready for the road,' was Ferdinand's reasoning when Trip made eyes at his overloaded tray. Trip had the same thing in mind so he took a large bowl of salad, several pieces of grilled chicken breast seasoned with lemon and thyme with a glass of beetroot juice.

They ate their food leisurely and it was three by the time they reached their room. The boys decided to take a nap before they left, their bags packed, ready and waiting by the door. Trip had set an alarm which woke him up at six. He watched the reddening sky outside his window and shook Ferdinand awake.

'Ferdi, its six,' he spoke to the groaning duck, 'I am going to freshen up, we'll leave in thirty forty minutes.' Ferdinand groaned some more which Trip took as agreement and headed to the bathroom.

It was almost quarter to seven on the big clock above the dorm keeper's desk when they descended into the lobby with overstuffed bag packs. The woman behind the desk looked up from her magazine with and cast a suspicious gaze at them.

'Where are you boys off to?' She asked with a raised eyebrow.

‘We are having an evening picnic in the Green Animals Park with some friends,’ Ferdinand shot like a loaded crossbow. ‘Don’t worry,’ he smiled at the lady sweetly, ‘we’ll be before curfew time.’

The lady twisted her neck to check the time on the clock above her head and then grunted an *alright* before diving back into her Cosmo. Ferdinand and Trip scurried out the dormitory and headed down the road to the bus stop at the intersection. They had been waiting for no more than five minutes when Trip spotted the red-white striped bus approaching.

‘Eastern main gate,’ Trip asked when the bus’s door opened.

The driver jerked his head gesturing them to get on which they did. Ferdinand swiped his card at the front and both of them found a seat to sit. The bus soon exited the student resident district and through the market district approached the towering boundary wall of the academy. It drove up a road parallel to the pink wall which, Trip told Ferdinand, was once deep maroon but had faded with time. After a while the display board above the driver’s head read *East Main Gate* and the boys got off at the bus stop.

Trip searched the curb side and across the road not far from the massive wrought iron gates saw three figure, two tall and one small, standing beside an ancient looking olive green car. Trip pointed Ferdinand in their direction and led the way, in his head rehearsing how he would introduce Ferdinand and convince Anthor to let him come.

As he got closer he saw that Anthor and Elanor were dressed like mafias in the fifties. Anthor wore a three-piece brown striped suit with his hair slicked back and Elanor wore a similar but tight fitting pantsuit with a matching wide brimmed hat, which Trip found weird since it was already night time. His eyes, though, were only for Masil who wore a frilled flowery frock that

swooped down her body giving her an elegant appearance. She smiled at Trip, brought her clasped hands in front of her chest and mouthed, 'you came.'

Trip nodded with a beaming face as he approached the group but his smile drained as soon as Ferdinand stepped beside him and Anthor gave him a questioning glare.

'Uh-um,' Trip struggled to recite his practiced speech, 'this is, Ferdinand, my friend, he insisted to come and please let me explain why-'

Anthor held up his hand cutting Trip off. 'We have to take as much help as we can get,' he said, 'and this young man looks more than capable.' He stretched his hand out and Ferdinand shook it. 'Anthor Stormkin,' he said, 'I am the royal advisor, to the throne of Blue Valley. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance'

'Ferdinand Pekin. And the pleasure in all mine sir.' Ferdinand smiled at Anthor who returned his smile and gave him a hearty pat on his shoulder. Trip watched this exchange with his mouth open nearly resting on the pavement.

'And this beautiful lady must be your wife sir,' Ferdinand bowed at Elanor and held out his wing. Elanor looked a little bashful as she put her hand in his wing and Ferdinand gave it a peck. 'Ferdinand Pekin ma'am. It's a pleasure to meet you.'

'Oh aren't you a charming one,' Trip suspected he saw Elanor blush under her hat, 'I am Elanor, nice to meet you too.'

Ferdinand smiled and gave another bow, deeper this time.

'Um,' Trip was glad he hadn't gone mute, 'a-and this is Masil.'

Ferdinand turned to the girl and smiled. 'So this a best friend meets girl friend kind of thing,' he said sending both Trip and Masil in a fit of stammering and blushing.

'W-what girlfriend-'

‘-g-girlfriend?’

‘I just met her-’

‘-only met him yesterday.’

‘Don’t even k-know-’

‘-w-what you are saying-’

‘Alright, alright,’ Anthor spoke up and the red cheeked boy and girl fell silent, not daring to meet each other’s eyes. ‘Let’s get going.’

Ferdinand winked at Trip when he looked at him and stepped towards Masil when they were walking to the car and whispered. ‘I was only joking, it is great to meet you.’

Masil still staring at her feet made a tiny squeak which sounded quite like, ‘*you too.*’

‘Boys,’ Anthor called out as he opened the driver door of this shiny ancient looking car, ‘you sit with me in the front, girls you take the back. Here boy,’ he tossed the key to Ferdinand, ‘put your luggage in the trunk.’ Ferdinand caught the key and with Trip headed to the back of the car.

As they got into the car he asked Anthor. ‘Why didn’t you get like a Honda or something?’

Anthor let out a little chuckle. ‘This is a ’53 Hudson Super Wasp boy,’ he turned the key in the ignition and car rumbled to life, ‘no Honda can compare to this beast,’ he then cast Ferdinand a sideways look, ‘you’ll see.’

Ferdinand nodded at the man and the car pulled away towards the looming wrought iron gates.