



STORY WHISPERERS

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CHAPTER 1: DREAMS

In his dreams there were voices. In his dreams these voices were talking about him. Not that it's uncommon to have voices in dreams talking about you—it's your dream anyway and anything can happen. It's just that the voices in his dreams were talking about his fate. And he knew, that in his dreams, he was greatly and deeply involved.

Usually, one forgets about his dreams but he doesn't and it sticks to his mind. These dreams he envisions almost feel real as if he was truly part of something.

Usually, one dreams of a different story as soon as he slumbers, but he doesn't, rather his dreams continue from where it finished—like a new start of the same story, like a new chapter of the same book.

In his dream, he was climbing down a spiral staircase going down from the infinite space above. A vast plane of mist and clouds were found at the bottom of the staircase. The staircase was made of gold. There were translucent railings supported by golden strips of wire. In the railing, there continuously flowed a torrent of pure light, like a water pipe constantly being pumped with water. The steps never seem to end yet he doesn't feel tired, because in his dream, he had already counted exactly nine thousand, two hundred and thirty-seven.

Even though in reality, he could feel his feet ache because of the fatigue, in his dream, he kept climbing down, foot after foot, left and right and left and right. Time in dreams seem to move too fast that sometimes, we could dream of our entire lifetime yet when we wake up, we would realize we only slept for fifteen minutes.

In his dream, time too seemed to move fast, in which a minute ago he was only midway down the staircase but now he's already reached the bottom. As he climbed down the final step of the stairs, the clouds and the mist sifted away from him, revealing a trapdoor. The trapdoor was made of a white wood-like material, just like the rest of the vast plane. The trapdoor's handle was made of silver glittering metal, melted to cast to a smiling crescent moon. The hinges of the trapdoor seemed to be made of the same silver glittering metal.

He pulled, with great effort, the crescent moon handle to reveal another set of stairs leading downwards. Carefully, he treaded the second set of stairs downwards. This time, the stairs was made of dragon ivory. Sliding his fingers on the pure white railing, he felt the warmth the dragon ivory was giving off. The ivory stairs led to a room just underneath the trapdoor. He climbed down and stopped just as soon as he reached the floor. Still, the stairway seemed to continue downwards from there. Two children playing bricks in the room caught his attention. They were stacking up blocks with letters and symbols embossed on it.

These children looked alike. They were twins, he assumed. One of which wore garments sewn in silver and light while the other wore clothes sewn in ragged shadows and night. The two children were younger than him. *Far younger*, he thought. They were somewhere between four and seven—almost a third of his age.

The one who wore ragged clothes, torn into fashion, of the colors of shadow and of black, whose hair was the color of the night, with glittering dust in it like stars in the night sky, was a girl. The other, who was a boy, wore cloud-like clothing, comfortable and soothing to touch, white as light and pleasant to sight. He had golden curls for his hair. Both their faces looked innocent.

Curiously, he walked towards them, thinking what could two children be possibly be doing out here all alone. As he did, he noticed that the room they were in had no walls, in other words, the ceiling had nothing to support it. What's more is that beyond the room was a toy model of a world, laid out into the horizon—boundless, infinite.

“Hello there, little children,” he said as he, for one last time, looked around the little world beyond before leaning over to the boy child wearing white.

The little boy seemed to ignore him and continued to stack up his blocks. As soon as he had finished piling it up, he stood up beside the stacked blocks and smiled. The blocks revealed...

“A name!” he exclaimed. He examined what was spelled out in the blocks. “O-N-E-I-R-O... Oney-ro?”

“Onay-ro,” corrected the little boy when suddenly, the little girl threw pieces of blocks towards the stacked up pile. The stacked up tower of blocks stumbled down the floor in a mess. He faced the little girl to tell her that that wasn't such a nice thing to do when he noticed that the twins were both smiling: baby teeth revealing, eyes widening. He looked down again on the mess the blocks made and realized there was another name spelled.

“M-A-R-I-A-N-E... Mariane?”

Hearing the spelled-out name, the girl kicked the excess blocks to reveal her true name. “Mara,” she read.

As soon as they had properly introduced themselves, they stood beside each other with their arms in each other's shoulders. He sat down in delight to see the twins doing something oddly funny. They looked at him straight in his eyes and said in unison, “I am Oneiro and I am Mara, we are the Elders and we have summoned you.”

Their words were so fluent and complex for little children that he was partly amazed and partly spooked of what he was hearing.

They stretched out their free arms towards the little world beyond. Side by side, they pointed in opposite directions. They then turned clockwise, pointing towards the little world beyond and said, “You have been chosen by us to become one of the guardians of Imagine Nation.”

The thought of having twins speaking in unison about something weird was creepy and bizarre that he jerked up—back to reality.

“You have been chosen, JP...” His name rang over and over inside his head until he woke up.

CHAPTER 2: THE REAL WORLD

P, get up!” He woke up to his mother’s wake up call. It was Monday again and Monday means it’s time to wake up early and get ready for work. He was already working but unlike other people who lived independently, he still resided in his parent’s house, with the rest of his siblings.

His head was buried underneath a heap of pillows. Evidently, he didn’t want to wake up. Not yet.

“Don’t make me mad. Today’s Monday; it’s not good to start your Monday this way,” his mother’s voice grew louder and it was obvious that she was pretty much annoyed by the way his son was acting.

“Sorry, it’s just that... I think I didn’t get a good night’s sleep,” he explained as he sat upright on his bed, “it felt as if I was awake all the time.”

“I told you before, you shouldn’t be thinking of and bringing your work when you get home,” his mother’s voice sounded calmer, “you’re still not excused from work though. Now, get up or your siblings will be late.”

As soon as he got up, he fixed his bed: folded the blanket and laid it on his pillow. With little light to guide him, he felt his way around the room towards the study desk beside his brother’s bed. He picked up his eyeglasses on the desk and put it on. His brother was still sleeping as he got up.

He had four siblings all in all. One of them was already in college that she didn’t need to get up early because of the schedule of her classes. He was the eldest and she was next to him. His other siblings were still in high school. Their father worked abroad while their mother stayed at home. Besides his mother and his siblings, they had two house-helps and a pet dog.

There were only four bathrooms in their house and only two of them were used, that was why, each of them had different timeframes of waking up. His two younger sisters were the first to get up since both of them takes up at least 30 minutes to shower. By 5:30 in the morning, his mother would wake his youngest sister and him up, whom by then, would go down the dining room and eat their breakfast. That was just enough time until the other two finishes shower. Once they finished eating breakfast and until his sisters finish shower, it was their turn to do so.

Later after, he prepared himself for work. He slipped on a short-sleeved polo, which was vertically striped in blue, and brown slacks. He tied several bracelets on his wrist and fixed his hair upwards with gel. He took his bag and hung it over his shoulder then went down the stairs.

His two youngest sisters were already in the living room when he got down the stairs. The younger of the two was watching Animax on TV while the other played Canon in D in the electronic organ. He took a pair of black socks in the cupboard under the stairs to match with his brown, steel-toed shoes, which his father gave him.

A couple of minutes later, his brother had just finished taking a bath and was now on his way down the stairs. The rest of them were putting on their socks while he was trying to continue his sleep on the sofa.

As soon as it was already 6 AM, their mother started the car's engine. He knows how to drive but he didn't have enough practice to earn his mother's trust though. He could choose to commute all the way to his office but he still chooses to go along with the students as their mother brought them to school. He thinks it's cheaper that way.

Their mother would send his only brother first to school, the two sisters next and him last. She would drop him off where the train starts to journey and from there he would ride, most probably seated and sleeping soundly, until Guadalupe. Sometimes he would go beyond Guadalupe when he couldn't wake in time, then just take a ride back to Guadalupe. Whereas, from there, he would ride one jeep and walk a short distance until he reaches his office.

He works as a programmer—that was his main function—and as a junior consultant, but he didn't know exactly what he's supposed to be doing. No matter how hard he tried to understand it, he couldn't. Maybe that was why he didn't really enjoy his work. There are times when he could comprehend a day's work but most of the times, it's all a blur. Sometimes, he would feel that that was not the right place for him to be.

It wasn't easy for him; to do something he didn't enjoy doing. He may try hard oftentimes to overcome this difficulty but it would always end up that way. His work wasn't so hard to do, it was just that he didn't enjoy it then ending up not liking it. If only he had a choice then. That was his dilemma. He had always wanted to be an artist but he ended up choosing math in college. He had always wanted to shift but he ended up not shifting because, as he says, it's not that hard. Now, he had always wanted to change careers but his parents would always push him to try giving it a chance.

Time in his office would pass by, time that seemed almost infinity. As the minutes before each day's end come, he would constantly look at the time, waiting for the day to conclude. As soon as the longer hand of the clock reaches 12 while the shorter hand is on 5, he would pack his things and hurry home.

This would happen almost everyday before... and especially when he doesn't need to rush anything.

As soon as he reaches home, he would, for a while, spend his time on his computer, pretending to be in a different place—somewhere make believe, somewhere imaginary. Of course, he'd be eating his supper first, but that need not be elaborated anymore anyway. Watching TV and spending time on his computer doing freehand art were the things that relaxed him. This was his sanctuary. This was what he enjoyed.

By 9 or 10 or even 11 in the evening, he'd be off to sleep, depending on how early he finishes something. And that's when the real story starts again.

CHAPTER 3: THE WATCH

In his dream, the twins—the Elders—were at the edge of the room, looking out into the little world beyond. They were leaning on railings that stood as walls before the little world beyond; like a crib protecting the children from harm or preventing them from getting out of sight. The room was surrounded with railings that had curved linings and intricate designs, which were distinct from each other. The Elders were bending over the fence, stretching out their arms and somewhat picking the stars and puff of clouds from the sky.

He woke up—he woke up into his dream and realized he was in the same room before he woke into reality. He looked around again in awe of the place. The room’s floor was made of marble, smooth and cold. Its ceiling looked infinite as it was painted with the view of the sky or it was the sky itself, he couldn’t tell. Light came from the ceiling lamps from opposite ends of the room—one of which was glowing in silver and white, the other in gold and yellow. There were childish designs on both of the ceiling lights. The silver ceiling light had a drawing of half a face: with its pointed forehead, an eye, a nose, half a smile and its pointed chin. Its other half was dim and it gave out no glow. *This must be the Moon Light*, he thought. The golden light that glowed of warmth had scribbles of jutting triangles all around the circle, two joyous eyes, a nose and a rather big smile, from ear to ear—if the drawing indeed has ears. *And this, the Sun Light*, he thought as he inspected the ceiling.

He looked to his back to see the set of stairs leading both up and down. There were, he noticed not until now, a large trunk and a spiral bookshelf at the center of the room: all painted in dreamy white and gray, which looked almost opaque if viewed from a different angle. Maybe that’s how he didn’t notice it the first time he was here, or maybe, it was that this is all really just a dream and anything can happen. The Elders’ toys were nowhere on the floor so he assumed they were kept in the trunk beside the translucent shelf. He knelt down beside the trunk and examined it. It was locked.

“We thought you would never come back,” Oneiro said. JP stood up and walked over to Oneiro, curiously, as he checked to see what Oneiro was doing with the star. Oneiro seemed to pluck the star from the night sky with his fingers and put it into his mouth, as if he was eating it.

“You did?” JP asked Oneiro. Mara was beside her brother and it seemed as if she was catching puffs of cloud with a net as it flew in front of them. She would put them in her mouth and the puffs would melt in her tongue like cotton candy would. Mara giggled.

“Do I even have a choice?” JP asked them as he tried to pluck a star from the sky. Or catch a passing cloud.

“Of course you do, dum-dum!” Mara said then she burped then giggled again. Her face went from white to red in embarrassment.

He leaned further, stretching out his arm as he desperately reached for a star. He lost his balance and slipped his grip. It felt as if an invisible force suddenly pushed him forward. With that, his weight shifted from feet to head, leaning closer to what he thought was a little toy world spread out infinitely in the room. Instantly, he felt his stomach churn as the little toy world in front of him began to shrink and zoom out. Only then he realized, that this was not a toy world set out on the boundless floor, but rather *the* real world in front—or far below. Gravity seemed to pull him closer to the world—to the ground. It struck him only then that the railings signified the edge of the room, and beyond meant definitely falling. The room was located in a tower—specifically at the topmost of the tower, where the Elders could watch over the world down below. The Elders grabbed hold of each of his legs before he met his unexpected doom and pulled him back into the room.

“Silly,” Mara and Oneiro said in unison. They chuckled afterwards.

“You need to choose a star that’s ripe,” exclaimed Oneiro, “stars that aren’t ripe cannot be harvested yet! Besides, unripe stars don’t taste good.”

“See that?” Mara pointed at a wobbling star, “this one’s ripe. It’s ready to fall down.”

A falling star, he thought, *why didn’t I think of that?* It was brilliant after all. Once again, he leaned over the edge railing and reached for the wobbling star. Dust was already showering from the star. It was definitely ready to fall. As he plucked the star from the sky, stardust trailed from where it had once been and into his mouth. It tasted sweet like cinnamon mixed with honey.

“You have just granted a wish,” Oneiro beamed, “that’s how wishing stars work.”

His eyes widened. He nodded in amazement as he was being fed by them, such delicious information. As soon as the honey-flavored star’s juice flowed down his throat, he helped himself to another question from the other questions floating inside his head, “What of my choice coming back here?”

Oneiro, being the more lively and sociable one, he laid out the explanation to him, “It seems you wished to escape reality that’s why you’re back here. I’m still surprised myself though—that you chose to come back.”

As he sat down against the railing, he looked up at Oneiro, who was standing beside Mara and in front of him. JP gazed in his eye and tried to understand every word his mouth spoke. *That made sense*, he thought, *wanting to escape reality and only slip in the world of fantasy.*

“They have wished for you,” Mara continued, “Oneiro and I chose you to be *their* Messenger. We only granted their wish.”

It seemed to JP that for every question they answer, another question comes up. Unable to control himself, to resist the urge to ask, he grew impatient and asked them, “Messenger? What Messenger? Who is this ‘They’ you speak of? What wish? What of my fate? What of the world beyond this fence? What of this tower?”

“You ask too many questions,” Mara teased, “just like a kid.”

Feeling ashamed being compared to a kid—who the Elders didn’t regard themselves as—he bowed his head down and looked at his toes. Indeed they too were children, but in this place, they were regarded as Elders.

“You will meet *them* soon. There is no need to hurry,” Oneiro, being calmer and gentler than Mara, patiently explained to JP detail by detail.

CHAPTER 4: THE HOUSE OF LIGHT

“You are in the Light House—a tower constructed at the very center of our world. A tower built to steer the People’s lives into what’s right. We are the Keepers, the Guardians, the Elders and many other names in which the People call us. We are responsible for keeping everything in order, in balance,” Oneiro started.

Indeed, the Light House was built to watch over each and every one of the People, from border to border and edge to edge. It was even believed that no alley below had ever escaped the watchful eyes of the Keepers high above at the topmost floor of the tower—known as The Watch. The Light House stood tall and majestically at the center of Imagine Nation (the world below), reaching and piercing through the layer of clouds above. The Watch was where the Elders spend most—or rather, all—of their time, continuously guiding the People below. Beyond the layer of clouds above The Watch is the Astral Path. This was where JP initially started his journey. Beneath The Watch were schools, libraries and studies of the Scholars of Imagine Nation. The Light House was, hence, fully equipped with knowledge beyond anyone could ever envision.

Mara danced around in circles in the open space of The Watch. Still she listened to her brother’s words, ready to butt-in, especially if he missed out something important. Shady fluid mist followed her as she swayed and moved. Voices—disturbing eerie voices—seemed to whisper in the wind as she did. JP trembled and felt the hair at the back of his neck rise up.

“This,” Oneiro pointed down the little world below, sweeping his arms to an arc, stretching out to the boundless world beyond over the horizon, “is Imagine Nation—our world. A floating land mass located in the center of yours and your people’s minds. Your imagination builds up our Imagine Nation, and vice versa.” Oneiro’s voice sounded enchanting and lulling. JP felt he was in a trance as the little boy explained.

Imagine Nation was located on a floating land mass, as big as the world laid out flat like a map. Beings and creatures one has yet encountered can be found throughout the cities, the forests and the islands of Imagine Nation.

“The Dream World,” added Mara.

“Thank you, sister,” Oneiro nodded at Mara, who curtsied in return, “Imagine Nation is *our* world and the Dream World of your people.”

“This is where our dreams come from...” JP unwarily uttered.

“Wrong! Imagine Nation is where your dreams are born. This is where the stories of your dreams come from,” Mara corrected him.

“You mean,” JP turned to Mara, “all this—all this is not just but a dream? All of this is real?” Mara ignored him and continued to turn. Her dress flowed through the wind like haunting shadows.

“You can say that,” Oneiro answered for Mara. His voice relaxed JP as he shivered by the sight of Mara’s haunting dress. It reminded him of ghouls and ghosts lurking deep within the shadows. It reminded him of the *Aswangs* and the lost haunting souls. “Dreamers, just like you and the people you belong to, those who fall asleep and wake up in a different world. A different world and yet sometimes it’ll still look familiar. Your world and ours—they build each other.”

“The People—,” Mara sang to the tune of the howling echoes as she swayed her hands up and down, crookedly, “they come to you in your slumber and whisper sometimes what you want to see and sometimes what they want you to see.” For every passing minute, JP noticed the Elders suddenly aging—before, they were only two children but currently, they looked the same age as him. Mara suddenly looked frighteningly beautiful with her eyes lined with shades of black. Overall, she looked like a gothic chick from a punk rock band. Oneiro on the other hand looked angelic: his hair seemed to flow with the wind as he spoke and was now clothed in a baggy garment.

“Learning that you have your way of reaching us and ours of reaching you,” JP fumbled to ask, “Is there a way the lot can communicate?”

“Like you and us.” Oneiro clarified then JP nodded in agreement.

Finishing her dance, she curtseyed at the two gentlemen. She then strode towards JP, waving her tattered scarf about. “Yes, there is,” she confirmed. “Messengers build a bridge between your people and ours.”

“Like many, *you* are one of the Messengers,” Oneiro added.

Finally, having brought the thought back, he held onto Oneiro’s shoulders, shook him, and asked, “What then of my fate, as your Messenger?” Suddenly, the teenager’s face crumpled, the hair on his head turned white and gray and his back crooked. Oneiro’s eyes narrowed since JP’s face was now a mere blur in front of him. Shocked at the sudden change, JP let go of the old man Oneiro. Beside Oneiro crept Mara, her back also crooked, supported her brother as he lost balance. Her eyes were sunken, her hair dangling on her head with streaks of white, her fingers looked like branches of dead trees.

“That, you will learn later on,” Mara smiled revealing the crooked teeth. It was a pretty horrid sight that JP’s heart missed a beat.

* * *

“AAAAAAH!” JP woke up, shaken. Beads of sweat ran down his face. The clock says it’s still 2 AM.

CHAPTER 5: THE DELIVERERS



nce again, he woke up *into* his dream. He looked around the room, known as The Watch. The Elders weren't there nor were signs they stayed there. It was all too weird. It was just the other day when he met the Elders and yesterday when he learned more of the secrets of dreaming but now it felt like a different dream. The translucent shelf, the trunk, the ceiling lights and the staircase were nowhere to be found as well. *Maybe it's not real, maybe I'm just imagining things*, he thought, *maybe they don't really exist after all.*

He walked over to the edge of The Watch where the railings stood. The view of the horizon and the little world below looked still—the clouds were not moving, the morning stars were not twinkling, there doesn't seem to have any activity below. He reached out his hand towards a star and tried plucking it from the sky like he was taught to do. As he did, he realized that the horizon, the world below, the stars—everything was just a painting on the wall. *It looks almost real*, he said to himself, *wait, this must be a different room. I must be dreaming.*

"You *are* dreaming," a voice sounded from behind him. It echoed through the walls of The Watch like a bee buzzing in his ear.

JP turned around to discover to whom the voice belonged. At the center of The Watch stood a figure silhouetted by the single lamp that lit the room. Its head was pointed and it appeared to have pointed limbs as well. Its torso appeared to be larger than its limbs, which seemed to be jutting out from the body like conical spikes.

"The Elders sent me," the stranger spoke. It moved closer to where the light shone revealing more of the character. The what-seemed-to-be-a-pointed-head was more like a golden pointed hood. It wore a mask, which looked like a gas mask, to cover its face. The resonated buzzing voice seemed to be produced by the mask it was wearing. It wore a baggy golden costume that is tightly fit around its arms and feet. It wore gauntlets on its arms and high boots on his legs that it looks like a star when it's standing.

I knew it! I knew I'm not dreaming! JP cheerfully thought, *Hey! How did he... Did he just...?*

Without finishing his sentence, the stranger interrupted him and said, "Yes, I can read your thoughts."

"Come with me," beckoned the stranger, "I will tell you what you want to know—I will tell you of your fate in Imagine Nation."

Carefully, JP moved closer and submitted himself to the stranger. As soon as he was close enough, the stranger laid his gloved hand on JP's shoulder. At the flick of a switch—a switch on the stranger's body

suit—light projected from the ceiling and on them. The particles of light can be felt like drops of rain pouring on the skin as it continued to flow downwards, little by little covering them both. The beam seemed to absorb the photons emitted by the single lamp in the room. A hole appeared on the floor in which they were standing on, slowly opened, letting air circulate in the room. It was only then when JP realized that the stranger wore a red scarf around its neck as the wind coming from below blew on it. As soon as the floor completely opened, JP and the stranger floated in mid-air. Seconds later, the light particles moved along the beam and it was only a little soon, they were then traveling downwards along the beam of light just like an elevator. JP pressed his hands on the wall of light in which they were surrounded and peered out of it.

“Don’t stray from my grip,” the stranger said, “traveling at light speed is far too dangerous for humans. Your soul could either end up scattered in the dream world or worse, your existence... erased!”

JP shuddered at the thought and stood still beside the stranger. It was a lengthy travel—the tower was obviously far above the ground. Breaking the silence, JP asked him, “Who are you, anyway?”

“Do you sometimes have dreams when you feel like you’re not dreaming at all?” it asked as they traveled along the light. It turned his head to JP, its goggled mask gleaming in the light, waiting for his answer.

JP thought about it for a second then nodded.

“That’s Astral Projection—the transferring of your soul into an Astral Body, which moves in tandem with your physical body in a parallel world known as Imagine Nation. That’s why sometimes you feel tired as soon as you wake up.

We, Astrals, are the Deliverers. We make sure you, one, reach your destination in Imagine Nation and two, make sure your souls return to your bodies when you wake up,” the Astral explained.

“In the real world, right now,” JP fumbled, “Is my body there? Is it being occupied by a different soul?” They were still traveling downwards the path of light. Outside the walls were huge rooms leaning against the walls of the Light House. At the center of Light House, along the beam of light, was a giant spiral staircase. The particles in the beam carried them at the speed of light. Everything beyond the beam was a blur.

“Yes and no,” answered the Astral, “your body is there in the real world—sleeping. However, it is not occupied by a *different* soul. Your body is being occupied, rather by a copy of your own soul. This soul has your memories and thoughts and is dependent on the life of your Astral Body. As I’ve said before, if you stray away from my grip, you might never return. In turn, your physical body might never wake up.”

“What about the golden staircase above the Watch? What of it?”

“Ah... That’s the Astral Path,” said the Astral. “As you know, we, Astrals, are the Deliverers of Dreamers. We deliver you to the world of Imagine Nation. Through the Astrals, you come to us.

The Astral Path is a bit different. Once the Elders have summoned you, while you are in slumber, in your dream you will descend a supposed-to-be never-ending flight of stairs. If even though it doesn’t end, you decide to continue—“

“A test!” JP smacked his right fist to his left palm. He looked up at the Astral, who looked back at him through the goggle-covered mask, nodding.

“Exactly. If you decide to discontinue, you can never be a Messenger. Not anymore.” The Astral patted JP on his shoulder and said, “You should be honored that the Elders trust you with this responsibility.” JP’s heart burned with pride, he clenched his fists in the desire to fulfill his responsibility. But—

“—what *is* my responsibility?” puzzled, JP asked.

CHAPTER 6: THE STORY TELLER

The Astral swayed his arms in a circular motion gathering idle particles of light. Photons moved along the motion path and formed a window to the outside of the tower. The Portal of Visions. A display of a variety of faces of creatures, of beings, of things and of places flashed at the Portal's opening. There were human-like life forms and beings, which looked like humans and had certain features of a different creature. Some had pointed ears. Some had tails. Some had scaly skin. Some had wings. There were also creatures from the different fantasy worlds. There were dragons. There were unicorns. There were spaceships. There were robots.

"These are the People and this is Imagine Nation," the Astral started. "They live through your people's dreams and your dreams live through the People. Imagine Nation continue to exist as long as your people dream, imagine and tell tales of the People."

"When your people slumber, the gate to Imagine Nation opens—a Dreamer is born." JP pictured himself lying on the bed slowly falling asleep. He then pictures his soul sitting upright on his physical body, standing up, and greeting a Copy. A door in front of him appears. He opens it and discovers a place unlike any other place in reality. "A Dreamer sets foot in Imagine Nation—sometimes in the city, sometimes in the forests, or sometimes it could be anywhere—and meets one of the People. They could go and have fun together or the opposite. They can be sad, or happy, or scared, or lonely depending on what the People whisper at the wind. The wind carries them to the Dreamer and allows it to happen."

"As soon as the Dreamer wakes up, he will forget everything that happened to Imagine Nation and the acquaintance of the People but a recreation of the events that had happened in the dream world will build up inside his head. This recreation feeds Imagine Nation. Hence, without the mere faux memory of the dream, Imagine Nation will slowly die."

"But why don't I forget my dreams?" JP asked recalling the previous encounters he had with the Elders.

"Because you are a Messenger," the Astral answered. "A Messenger is different from a Dreamer. You, Messengers, are delivered to Imagine Nation to hear stories told by the People—also known as the Story Whisperers—and in your end, tell them to your people. Rendering your own concept of the Story Whisperer's tales builds up your people's thinking box, which in turn, returns the cycle, building up Imagine Nation."

Heart beating faster, JP breathed air in, filling his lungs. Pride burned in his heart and overwhelmed him. Flames flickered in his eyes. He felt he was flying. He felt he was soaring. With a smile creasing in his face, he asked, "Who are my Story Whisperers then?"

Abruptly, just as soon as he asked, their descent stopped. *Are we at the end?* His heart was pounding faster; he was nervous and excited. The beam of light dissipated unveiling a dimly lit room. The Astral let go of JP's shoulder. It lowered its head and bent his body towards him, giving him a bow. There was a large arc in front of them—a door with encryptions written along the frame. Several other arc-framed doors were positioned at the rest of the corners of the room.

“Farewell, Story Teller,” the voice of the Astral resounded in the room.

CHAPTER 7: THE EXCHANGE HALL

P turned around but the Astral was already gone. In its place, perched on the floor, was a Glowbug—a bee-like insect with a bulb, literally, for its lower abdomen. Its bulb abdomen is filled with a substance that produces tiny flame when it combines to the bodily fluids of the Glowbug. Its body however is resistant to the flame created by the chemical reaction in its body. The color of the flame it produces depends on the Glowbug's gender—turquoise blue for males and yellowish whites for females.

The perched Glowbug fluttered its wings, white dust particles scattering through the air, and glided an inch away from JP's face. The trail was lit by yellowish white powder its wings release. It circled all around, gradually lighting the room as it did. Little by little, the room has been illuminated, filling it with life and activity. Little by little, People faded in the picture, unmoving. As seconds pass by, the statuette-like People gradually bustled with energy, moving from here and there.

Since Astrals travel at light speed, everything beyond the Astral's Projection moved sluggishly. In fact, in reality, JP and the Astral only traveled a fraction of a second from the Watch to their current destination.

People of all shapes and sizes moved from every direction, criss-crossing each of their paths *like an ordinary day in a business district in the real world*, JP thought. He turned around carefully appraising the room as huge as a baseball field. There was the foot of a giant staircase, which seemed to extend back up to the Watch. The floor, which was as broad as a baseball field, was covered in stained glass tiles. Light refracted from beneath the tower—through the tiles—and enveloped the whole room. JP looked at the stained glass picture on the floor and examined the intricate yet perfect design made. Although it looked like an eye in one angle or a tower in another, he couldn't get the real picture in it. His eyes followed the path of the staircase, which led to an opening in the ceiling. The colorful refractions of light danced around the dome-shaped ceiling as child-like beings with wings flew about. It reminded him of The Last Judgement and of the Scenes from Genesis in Michelangelo's design on the altar and ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, respectively.

"Ah. You noticed it too," a voice came in from behind. JP followed where the voice came. Behind him was a man with curly, grey hair and bearded face. His nose was plump and although he was chubby, his cheekbones were revealing. He had an Italian accent and he wore loosely fit garments and sandals. "The moment I saw the ceiling, I did my own rendition in the chapel. That," explained Michelangelo di Lodovico

Buonarroti Simoni as he pointed to the dome-shaped ceiling, “is my inspiration for the designs I did.”

“Sir Michelangelo?” JP asked wide-eyed and surprised, “but... you... you’re...”

“Dead?” Michelangelo replied.

“I was going to use the term ‘deceased’,” JP muttered.

“I get that often,” he said as he tapped JP on the shoulder.

“But... What happened to Heaven? Or Hell?” JP asked as he charaded heaven and hell. “If you’re here, then that would mean...”

“Of course Heaven and Hell exists!” barked Michelangelo. “If you’re curious why I’m here and not in Heaven nor Hell, I was just here for a visit, as a former Messenger and present Story Whisperer, I still need to fulfill my duties.

“Anyway, I need to go ahead. It was nice meeting you, boy,” smiled Michelangelo as he walked away towards another arc-framed door, opposite the other he had previously seen. The door opened by itself as Michelangelo stepped in front of it. Inside—or rather outside—the door was the pure whiteness of light. As Michelangelo exited the room and stepped into the light, JP could picture his silhouette waving back at him.

There were two more doors aside from the first two arc-framed doors—four doors in total that seemed to be placed at the North, the East, the South and the West corners of the room. Each door had been designed distinctively with rune-like writings along the arc frame. They were—as it seemed—made from red wood varnished in the golden honey rays of the sun.

Like a busy railway station, the People and the Messengers, enter in one door and exit in another of the four doors, exchanging glances and short chats. This, JP decided, was some kind of an exchange corner or a central station where People from different places meet and probably decide when they’re next of to.

JP turned around to face the East Door—the door in which the Astral placed him before—and started to walk towards it. He dodged the traffic of People and Messengers in and out of the room until he reached the front of the East Door. It opened before him revealing a sea of light. People and Messengers would step into the room through the East Door as he stood there: mouth agape. He reached out his hands into the light and felt a warm sensation. Carefully and slowly, he stepped into the door—light swallowing him, temporarily blinding him. The body of light beyond the door burned his body, giving him warmth and a sense of safety.

However, as he regained his sight little by little, the colors of the surroundings sunk in his eyes, revealing that he was deep in a dark forest. There was a path in front of him and behind there was none—only more trees. Not even the tower or the East Door. He couldn’t quite get a hint where the Light House was since the trees were all as tall as how JP

imagined giants were and were blocking his line of sight. Despite the fact that the beyond the door he entered was overwhelmed with light and warmth, the place he was now at was quite the opposite—dark, gloomy and cold as death.

JP heard voices and whispers within the depths of the dark forest, making his hairs at the back of his neck and arms prickle. The trees looked as if they were watching him with hollow squirrel holes like eyes and following and mocking him with their crooked roots and branches like feet and arms. Looking up at the sky was the only way his only sanctuary since the stars above, even though there was only a few, twinkled and lit his path.

As he looked up past the shades of leaves, he noticed a faint trail of smoke rising to the skies. Upon further assessment on the scene, he realized there really was a smoke—or to be exact, fire or maybe even a bonfire—since he could make up the smell of burning wood and probably food somewhere not far.

Ignoring the fear building up inside him the further he went into the dark woods, he scurried off towards the probable bonfire hoping to meet several others who were lost, or most preferably, someone who knows the way. Branches and thorny vines seemed to lash his arms around; roots seemed to move tripping him over the cold mud; trees seemed to change positions so as to lose him deeper in the depths as he hurried towards his destination. But no matter how hard the forest tried to lose him, he still came through. JP could almost see the source of smoke. There was, as he imagined, really a bonfire at the end of his trek. The woods were thinning. He could almost see the open field where the bonfire burned.

At last.

CHAPTER 8: THE WHISPERERS

Three figures were sitting on logs around the bonfire, roasting marshmallows on pointed sticks. A handful of cinders were in the bonfire and only a few branches left for reserve were beside one of the figure. An almost empty bag was leaning on the log seat of the other, unzipped, revealing only one bag of marshmallows left.

“Where is he?” asked a voice, “or she—whatever.” The voice sounded aggressive. Clearly from the voice, it sounded just like a girl’s. There was impatience in her childlike voice.

Just as the girl-voice spoke, the chilly wind blew, making the trees sway and the leaves rustle. Behind her, she heard footsteps and, with an eerie sensation, she could feel someone near—someone else besides her two other companions.

“I’m not sure if we’ll even have a Messenger,” answered another voice. The voice sounded heavenly as if a choir of angels were singing melodiously as the words were spoken. There was no certainty if this second voice was a he or a she. Besides, it could be an angel since angels didn’t have genders anyway.

Whoop! Splash! echoed the woods. For a moment, the heavenly voice seemed to notice someone else was somewhere around them. He was sure he heard something splashing or slipping on something wet. He was sure it wasn’t the sound of rain since even though the sky was dark, there were no rain clouds approaching.

“If the Elders tell us someone’ll be here,” said another voice: a voice as silent as the dark woods itself. The voice sounded serious and powerful. It sounded like that of someone full of experience.

Pant. Pant. Pant. A great shadow appeared before them. It stood lurked behind the girl: who was in the middle of the great shadow and the powerful voice. It was a monster. *No doubt about it*, the powerful voice whispered to himself. It had hideous features: a melted face and tendrils sticking out of its body. The powerful voice narrowed its eyes at the monster while he readied himself for any sudden threat or attack. The heavenly voice, who was not as brave as the powerful one, trembled at the sight of it. The girl-voice, who had her back against the monster, had no idea what was happening. She continued to chew on her roasted mallow until...

The muck monster took a step forward and reached out its hand, tendrils swaying as it did. It took another step and another until it grabbed the girl’s shoulder.

Teeth locked, she swallowed her marshmallow hard. Terror was painted all over her face as her pale skin became even paler. Her natural narrow eyes widened and whitened in fright as she forcibly swallowed the lump on her throat.

GRAARR! The monster growled or so it did, for the sound it made was more like a stomach's growl when hungry. The heavenly being shivered even more: teeth chattering as if they were in a very cold place and whole body trembling and weakening. It crawled backwards away from the bonfire—away from the monster. Even the serious one—who the others regarded as the bravest and experienced of them all—couldn't move a single muscle in fright.

Seeing their faces, the girl-voice, conquering her fear, slowly turned around. Every second was unbearable. One by one, strands of her hair twitched as the slimy grime of the monster's body oozed on her. *Drip, drip*, it went. As soon as she turned to confront the monster face to filthy face, all hell went loose.

“AAAH!!!” she shrieked, revealing her set of sharp canines, witch-like hair, whitened eyes and deathly pale skin.

“GRAH...” the sound of a muffled voice came from the monster in reply. It sounded more like a scream rather than a scare. It raised its mucky arms and stomped its feet, shaking off its thorny tendrils.

“AAGH!!!” The heavenly voice let out a disoriented cry. Its choir-like voice of angels now sounded more like howls of lost souls finding their way out of purgatory.

“HAAA—” the dark-voice embodiment gasped as he gagged his own mouth as he tumbled backwards away from the bonfire. The two screams and two muffled cries echoed through the dark woods. A flock of ravens, startled by the distant noise, flew from their perch and into the starlit sky.

CHAPTER 9: THE RITUAL

“B oofffufufufu”, came the muffled voice of the serious one. He gagged his mouth as he rolled over the grass beside the bonfire. A while later, when he couldn’t take any longer, he uncovered his mouth and released his silenced guffaws, “Bwahahaha!!!”

The monster, the girl and the heavenly one looked at him confusingly. Their lengthy shrieks of fear were soon fading into whispers of puzzlement as the serious one breathlessly continued to laugh hysterically.

“You should’ve seen the look on your faces!” he said as he wiped off his grin. The girl looked at the heavenly one, who looked back at her, who, then, both looked at the monster—or so what they thought was a monster. It was a human—surely he wasn’t from Imagine Nation because People feel other People amongst them—covered only in muck and vines. From the looks of him, he looked like someone who just got off his college school days.

“HEY! What did you do that for?!” yelled the pale-faced girl as she wiped off the mud from her leather jacket.

“I—I didn’t mean to...” JP apologized as he got rid of the last tendril-like vines wrapped around him. He wiped off the mud on his face and hair and looked sincerely at the girl. The girl had, as he observed against the bonfire’s light, fiery-red hair, pale white skin and blue eyes. She wore a leather jacket, a skirt, some armbands and bracelets and high-cut boots like a goth-punk chick. A young girl she was, still in her teens yet he could see life, death and eternal suffering in her eyes. “I—Uhh—the forest—I mean,” JP fumbled as he tried to explain..

“It’s a dark forest after all,” said the powerful voice, which was serious once more. JP looked at him as he talked. Even as the flame of the bonfire lit them, shadows still seemed to conquer this figure. JP could only notice his spiked black and blue hair, which looked alive against the bonfire as it danced like flickering flame itself. He had tattoos of swirling blues and blacks all over his skin.

“You knew it all along!” JP could hear the girl saying at the shady figure. “Why didn’t you tell us?!”

Out of the blue, like a mouse crawling out of a hole, JP heard a voice so soft and peaceful—and stammering. It was the most beautiful of the voices he had ever heard today: soothing and relaxing as if angels were singing in his ears. “Are you our Messenger?” the voice asked. JP looked to where the voice came from, which revealed light against light. The figure glowed intensely with the light from the bonfire. As JP observed, he noticed a faint ring of light above its head like a halo. With that, he was now a little bit surer that this being in front of him was an angel.

“I am,” JP said, “and I suppose you are my Story Whisperers?”

“I don’t like you,” the pale girl asked. Her straightforward answer struck JP through his heart like an arrow or a stake. “I always wanted someone who is extreme, unlike you who’s boring.”

“Even though, let’s say, you’ve been assigned to us by the Elders,” said the angelic figure, “I don’t think—no offense, kid—that you could handle me—a superior being.” His glow flashed before JP’s eyes.

JP didn’t know what to say. *Maybe I am unworthy. Maybe I am useless.* Hopeless, he looked down, mud dripping from his hair onto the ground.

“Give him a chance, won’t we?” asked the shady figure as he stepped into the light. It was only then that JP noticed the features of the character. His brushed-up spiked hair was really flickering flame dancing about. Upon careful observation, the pale-faced girl and the angelic figure noticed the similarities of their shady friend and this Messenger assigned to them. Though they did not exactly look alike, their spirits had the same auras. JP also realized something familiar about this shady figure but he could not make out what it was but he knew in him that they have met before.

“Why not?” harmoniously sang the angelic figure. There was a smile in his lyrics as if it was giving him sympathy and chance. JP’s heart continued to pound as if he had just escaped from a time-stop. Hope was sinking in his heart little by little.

“Unity?” the flame-headed figure asked. There was no answer. There was only silence. The pale-faced girl mumbled words incomprehensible as she gritted her teeth. (Without the gritting of teeth and mumbling, her exact words would be ‘fine, fine, fine!’) Silence most likely meant agreement for the pale-faced girl, named Unity.

“How come you don’t argue, Tellus?” Unity asked the angelic figure, which JP only noticed that it was a he. His face was as beautiful and flawless as a girl’s and his aura was so enlightening.

“Because, Unity, that’s the angels’ nature,” Tellus smiled at Unity, whose pale-face blushed as he did.

The flame-headed figure walked towards JP—who was staring nothingness—and reached out his tattoo-covered right arm. “I am Sifr,” he said. Sifr was wearing some kind of a sleeveless fitted black latex suit that covered him from neck to torso and baggy pants.

“John Paul,” JP said as he reached out his right hand to Sifr, “but you can just call me JP.”

“Ooooh... John Paul...,” Unity wiggled her fingers mockingly as she sarcastically justified that the name John Paul sounded scary. She was enjoying herself when all of a sudden JP’s stomach grumbled again. “EEEEK!!!” Unity screamed. Sifr and Tellus rolled over in laughter.

“By chance, would you have anything for me to eat?” JP asked as he rubbed his tummy. Tellus took out the plastic bag of marshmallows as Sifr and he snickered.

Unity pursed her red lips in embarrassment and said, “It wouldn’t be in your nature to laugh, now, would it? I mean, you know, it’s just mean to laugh at somebody, especially that you’re an angel.”

Tellus cleared his throat, washing the snicker away from his face. “You’re funny, you know that?” he said. JP helped himself with the rest of the marshmallows. He sat down between Unity and Tellus, and in front of Sifr. The moon was already up in the night sky among the twinkling stars. It was more or less midnight by then. The firewood the three have gathered were already exhausted. The bonfire was not burning low. They were in an open area deep in the dark forest. Around them were tall trees that greeted JP the moment he entered the arc-framed door. “Now, now, we’re wasting time here,” Tellus politely asked, “Can we go ahead and start?”

Confused, JP asked as he finished off the last piece of marshmallow, “Start what?”

“The Ritual,” Sifr said. “Before you completely become our Messenger, and us as your Story Whisperers, there are two final steps we must yet follow.”

“The Introduction,” Unity started.

“And The Waking,” Tellus followed. They nodded at each other. JP was chewing the last bits of marshmallow in his mouth. His stomach still grumbled but not as loud as before.

“Why don’t you go ahead with The Introduction, Tellus?” suggested Unity. “Besides, I wouldn’t want Sifr to start his boring stories nor would I want to tell mine yet. I’ll just start after you.”

“Sifr?” Tellus turned to Sifr in approval. Angelic voices still echoed in his voice.

“Fine by me,” Sifr said as he laid down the blades of grass behind the log he sat on. Unity snuggled close to JP, who had suddenly become confused why she did—given the fact that she hated him.

Tellus started.

CHAPTER 10: THE INTRODUCTION

“I am Tellus, son of the children of the children of the Almighty. I was carried down from the Heavens—down to the Earth. I am an immortal, an eternal and an endless being blinded from the truth hidden from me by my half-brother, Hellos: son of the Earth, brought up to the Heavens.

There I lived my days in Earth while Hellos lived in Heaven. As a Fallen, I was fostered by kind-hearted mortals as their own. They taught me the goodness in Earth: how things work and how things don’t, until I had completely forgotten who I really was. (It wasn’t their fault though, it just happened, like everything in Earth just happens for a reason. Whereas in Heaven, things happen because you desired them to be.)

Hellos, my half-brother, lived his days in Heaven, delighting in the things I have left behind.”

“What did God do about it?” JP asked.

“Like I have said, on Earth, everything happens for a reason and in Heaven, everything depends on your decision. In my place, I thought maybe God wanted *that* to happen; that he has a reason why I had to live there. In Hellos’ place, his decisions—his will—be done.”

“Soon, Hellos and I came face to face. We had settled the things between us. God gave me what was rightfully mine and condemned him to eternal suffering beside Lucifer.”

JP, who took much interest and listened all the way to Tellus’ story, didn’t notice Sifr already fast asleep on the ground. Tellus on the other hand gave no sign of fatigue in his eyes.

“That’s it,” Tellus said, “my part of The Ritual, that is.”

JP looked at the sky above them. The countless stars were now fading into the orange morning light. The moon, which had been directly above them before was now out of sight for the sun’s golden rays were starting to peep through the walls of trees. The once dark forest was now filled with life and colors as the first rays beamed on the vast depths.

It was only then when JP realized the weight on his back was gone. If we were to go back in time during the middle of the night, you will learn why JP had some ‘weight’ on his back. During the middle of Tellus’ tale, Unity who was snuggling close to JP, decided to lean on his back instead. She did. JP slouched his back against hers, while both of them listened to Tellus tale under the calming serenity of the night sky. Sifr had still been attentive then even though his eyes were shut tight

“Where is she?” JP asked as he stretched his muscles from the stress and numbness the ‘weight’ had given him.

“Hmm...” Tellus wondered, “I’m not... sure. Come to think of it, I didn’t notice her taking off.”

“She’s just somewhere. She’ll come back,” Sifr mumbled as he was sleeping. Tellus and JP, looking at each other with one eyebrow raised, didn’t know what to believe. If either Sifr was really talking to them or Sifr has just been sleep-talking nonsense.

“We have to find her!” Tellus stood up, golden rays of the sun radiating on him ever so proudly.

“But how?” JP asked as he thought of the size of the place: of the deep dark forest, which was now colorful and peaceful, and the whole of Imagine Nation, which even in the horizon seemed to never end. “Where will we start? I mean—she could be anywhere!” He looked at Tellus who was brushing the blades of grass on his earthly clothes for one second, then revealing a pair of heavenly wings another second. The wings were apparently hidden beneath his skin before until he called for its use. Like a stem growing out from the ground, the tip of his wings grew from his back just as quick as a second.

“We’ll fly,” Tellus smiled.

“I’ll wait here,” Sifr mumbled again before he got back to sleep—or so it looked to them that he was sleeping. His eyelids were closed; his eyeballs were motionless—meaning, there was peace in himself; he laid still and he didn’t give out another word afterwards. His flaming hair flickered about but did not spread and burn the grass he was lying on. The ashes of the burnt firewood were blown away as a Tellus stretched and flapped his pearl-white, cotton-soft wings. Up and down, up and down.

“Err.. What about me?” JP who had just realized that only Tellus can fly. He was actually waiting for a celestial gift of some sort from Tellus, which will somehow enable him to fly. But as he waited and waited, he realized Tellus wouldn’t be giving him anything.

“I’ll carry you. You’ll just have to trust me.” Even the thought of trusting an angel slipped JP’s mind as he considered what might happen if suddenly the angel accidentally slips or lets go. Tellus steadily flapped his wings until he got lift from the ground. He hovered towards JP and took him by his shoulders. “Ready?”

JP nodded. He wasn’t sure if he was indeed ready or not. His voice couldn’t come out of his mouth. JP looked at the ground then it suddenly zoomed out. The open field where the logs lay and trees stood dropped down. The tall trees looked as if they were shrinking, even Sifr was just a speck of blue flame. JP gripped Tellus’ wrists as they soared up to the sky. His stomach was in his mouth and it felt like he was going to throw up and out. JP could see the vast sea of trees laid down on the ground. Tellus, against the golden rays of the sun, shone brighter than ever that JP could not look up at him—at his blinding light. JP released his right hand grip and raised it to shield it from the bright light. With that, he looked up at Tellus’ face. JP noticed Tellus was grinning—an evil, or rather, a cunning grin—while looking down back at him with sincere (but doubtful) eyes. “Are you ready to fly?” Tellus asked.

What do you mean by fly? Fly with you or by myself? he wanted to ask Tellus but he was too afraid of, which he felt was, the answer. He was worried about his grin or his doubtful cunning eyes. What was he planning? “Wha—what do you mean by that? You know I can’t fly!” JP yelled.

“C’mon! Don’t be such a sissy!” Tellus grinned even more, baring his shiny, white, sparkling, Colgate smile. Little by little, he loosened his grasp on JP’s shoulder, letting him slide down at the pull of gravity. JP grabbed Tellus’ arms and held on to dear life. Still, he was slipping. “Let go, let go of all your problems, trust me.”

“Are you nuts?!” JP shouted but his grip was gone. It was over. And down, down, down he fell. His heart pounded so fast it felt like it was boring a hole in his chest. He closed his eyes waiting for his doom but instead of feeling the rushing pull of gravity, he felt relaxed. He opened his eyes and saw Tellus in front of him. He realized he was not falling but instead he was more like ‘descending’.

“Well? What are you waiting for?” Tellus asked him as he soared freely in front of him. “This is *your* dream. You can do whatever *you* want. You’ll just have to let everything go—every single thing you’re thinking—things that bugger you. Besides, even if you *do* reach the ground, you won’t feel a thing. You’ll just be back in your world—on *your* bed.”

Finally, he did. He let go of those matrices in his head, of those syntaxes and commands, of those unsolved equations and problems. He let them all go. He spread his arms at a length and felt the cool kiss of the wind on his face as he descended. It was not later that he too was soaring in the sky. Tellus flew at his side, flapping his wings about while JP glided.

“This is fun!” JP shouted while the sound of the wind blocked his voice. Without his burden, JP felt lighter and faster. “So, where do we start looking?” he asked as they soared on top of the forest.

“I told you to trust me, didn’t I?” Tellus smiled as he looked on towards the horizon.

“I—I’m sorry—I’m sorry, Tellus,” JP said gloomily, “If I ever doubted you.”

“No worries, my friend,” Tellus answered as they raced through the sky. “It doesn’t matter.” They soared as high as the clouds and low just above the trees. They followed the trail of rivers and brooks until they reached ponds and lakes and seas and oceans. They raced through valleys and mountains and Alps.

“Unity doesn’t exactly love light,” remembering the fact, Tellus told JP as they flew. *She must be some kind of an undead creature*, JP thought as he studied her sudden disappearance when morning came, her pale-white skin, her sharp canines, her bloody-red lips and her gothic fashion. “Hmm... Why don’t we try looking for her in places she loves to go? I could even give you a tour, if you like.” JP agreed.

Back at the camp, Sifr had just finished stacking more wood for their bonfire for the night when he heard rustling in the bushes behind him. Predatory eyes glistened in the shades of the forest where Sifr heard the leaves rustle. It seemed to be watching Sifr’s move, waiting for its chance to strike. Its bloodthirsty fangs dripped with spittle as it readied to pounce.

Sifr sighed and rested on the log. He looked up the morning sky when suddenly a shady creature jumped out from behind him.

“Where’ve you been?” Sifr asked as he turned around to see a pale-faced girl. Unity looked exhausted, panting air in huge gulps, making her saliva drip down. She seemed to be carrying a package—more like a shopping or grocery bag.

“I—I—I brought—food...” panting, she answered, putting down the grocery bag filled with goods. Not only did it contain packs of marshmallows but there were also chips and cakes and packed juices

and sodas. She took one gulp of air and confessed that she also got lost in the woods.

“They’ve gone looking for you,” Sifr told her as he opened a bag of chips.

“What?!” exclaimed Unity. “How long will it be before they get back?”

Sifr shrugged. He had no idea. “We’ll just have to wait to find out.”

Meanwhile, somewhere in the skies of Imagine Nation, JP and Tellus were at their descent. JP was tired from their journey. However, Tellus was still not. They have already been looking for Unity in the neighboring countries of Imagine Nation for almost half a day. They’ve soared above trees of different places and landed on different towns and villages. One of the places they’ve been to was called The City Square. The City Square is the center for trade in Imagine Nation. According to Tellus, The City Square is the only district in Imagine Nation where all the buildings are in the shape of cubes or squares. Even the windows, the doors, as well as the fruits harvested in the place were said to be cubes or squares. In the City Square, the Light House is visible yet it continued to tower through the first layer of clouds. JP described his experience in the Watch to Tellus who took much interest in listening. JP and Tellus, whose wings have been once again hidden under his skin, walked in the City Square side by side.

Tellus described Imagine Nation as JP’s own world AND fantastical worlds laid out together as a bigger map. “It wouldn’t be simple, traveling Imagine Nation from edge to edge in one day. But it’s still possible,” Tellus guaranteed. Like a map, Imagine Nation was laid down, whereas the edges of the map were edges of the world. Beyond the edge of Imagine Nation was an infinite sea of stars. In fact, Imagine Nation was a floating landmass in the middle of space, ‘just below Heaven,’ as told by Tellus.

Tellus also described some secrets of the Light House. He told JP that the Light House has a school designed especially for the People and the Messengers. That’s when JP remembered the exchange of people in the bottommost level of the Light House. Tellus told him that that was where the Messengers and the People congregate. He also told him that the Light House held a gigantic library full of stories of the People. Hearing this, JP jokingly gagged in disgust. He never really liked reading. If only Tellus saw JP’s reaction he would’ve scolded him because it also was a responsibility of a Messenger to read, or watch, or learn from another Messenger. This way, the Story Whisperers tales keep revolving.

In the City Square, morning had only just begun due to the fact that JP and Tellus traveled along with the sun. By that time, at the camp, the sun had already set and the moon had just ascended. By then, Sifr and Unity started lighting their bonfire. Who knows the two had been doing back at the camp.

Realizing this, Tellus called JP, who was busying himself while looking through square glass windows of square shops of The City Square, and told him that they had best be heading back.

JP was partly disappointed for he wanted to explore more of Imagine Nation and partly concerned about Unity, who suddenly vanished at daylight, he asked Tellus what of her and “what about her part of the Ritual?”

Tellus didn't look down. JP never saw him looking down on situations like these. He always looked up to the skies. Instead, he patted JP on the shoulder and said, “She'll be alright. Trust me. And the Ritual, it could wait.”

And so JP did. But before they took off, JP asked Tellus if he could spare him some change. “There's something I like to buy,” he said as he pointed the silver crucifix necklace in one of the square store's square window.

“Ah... a souvenir? I see...” Tellus took out a few coins from his pocket and gave it to JP, who hurriedly entered the shop and bought the silver crucifix with a square inlaid stone. As soon as JP got what he wanted, they took off and flew towards East.

Night approached them quicker than morning stayed. Soon, the sky was filled only with the light from the stars and the moon, and their reflection in the rivers, the seas and the oceans.

At their journey back, to help JP feel less tired and less bored, Tellus started telling him how Imagine Nation started. (Of course, all worlds, like ours, started as nothing.)

“In the Beginning,” Tellus said, “there was only darkness. God felt alone so He created light—including us. Still He felt alone, so He created the world—your world. Not only did He create your world, but He also created this.” Tellus motioned his arms to show the land below.

“God reached part of your world's soil and put it somewhere between Heaven and your planet, which was later called Earth. In this piece of earth (the piece of your Earth, I mean), he planted a seed—the Seed of Light. As Earth grew, so did the Seed. And when Earth is finally at its age, the Seed started to bloom.”

“The Seed of Light bloomed into a beautiful flower—a flower that sheds light in its surroundings. The Flower of Light then, from God's infinite care and love, produced two seeds. These seeds (and forever seeds, they are) are the Elders: Master Oneiro and Mistress Mara. They were the first Story Whisperers. And they worked for God. It was they who gave Joseph the dreams.”

“They were the first and only inhabitants of the piece of earth between Heaven and Earth. But as soon your people dreamed and told stories in any form, the sooner the Light House grew; the sooner the piece of earth grew. Later, when new seeds—new People—sprouted from

that very piece of earth, the land grew larger as did the Light House and was then called Imagine Nation.”

“There’s much to learn in The Library,” Tellus concluded. But by that time, JP wasn’t all ears since his stomach had begun grumbling again. The moon was already directly above them once again and somewhere at a distance, they could almost see an orange glow in the middle of the dark forest. It was their camp, all right.

“Are you smelling what I’m smelling?” JP asked Tellus.

“Come to think of it, I *am* feeling a little bit hungry,” Tellus nodded. Something was cooking and it smelled really good even from afar. And so, with their remaining (not really—I’m only exaggerating) energy, they sped to the open campsite.

As soon as they landed they saw Unity and Sifr delighting in the canned sodas and food they’ve cooked—well, that is, what’s left of them.

“Unity! You’re here!” JP exclaimed somewhat excitedly though he doesn’t really know what reason for.

“Of course! I was here all day! We’ve been waiting forever!” grunted Unity.

“And you’ve prepared f—“ JP said as he looked down the plastic bag. “Where’s the food?!”

“We ate it,” Sifr said as he picked his teeth with a pointed stick, later throwing it into the open fire. “What took you guys so long?”

Tellus approached Sifr and jokingly said, “You gluttonous beasts!” He kicked Sifr—softly and not seriously—at his side as he chuckled. This manner only proves that even angels joke around.

GRARRARRUUMMARR, said JP’s stomach. It sounded hungrier than the first time it did. “It’s okay, we’ll get food somehow,” JP said as he rubbed his tummy, which seemingly replied GURRRMM.

Unity then walked toward him, hands behind her back. She sat down beside him and leaned forward to his ear and whispered, “I have something for you.” (Which actually sounded something like “I haff sometthing ferr you” in JP’s ear) Alarmed, disoriented and paranoid, JP shuffled at his pants and took out the silver souvenir in his pocket. JP, who was actually reflecting on Unity’s sudden morning disappearance, figured that she was a vampire.

“Don’t come near me!” he shouted as he raised the crucifix in front of Unity’s face. Tellus and Sifr stared in surprise.

“Hmm? For me?” She stared at the silver crucifix and blinked once, twice, then thrice and said, “Why, thank you!”

“But—wait, aren’t you...” JP hesitated. He opened his mouth once more only to realize there was nothing else he could say.

“A vampire?” Unity smiled, showing her fangs beneath her red red lips. “Indeed I am...” She paused. “Heeeyyy... What was that for? Are you trying to kill me?”

“No and yes,” JP answered. “Well, I didn’t mean to. It was just—I was just a little angry—you ate all the foo—“

“You mean this?” Unity held out the bag in her hand, which when JP looked inside saw a deliciously prepared cake. This made his mouth water and his stomach happy. JP looked at Tellus, who he forgot all the while. Tellus was already eating his share by then that he ignored the commotion.

“Sorry about that,” JP said. Though he forgot to actually thank both Sifr and Unity, he let Unity keep the necklace instead.

“I hate to spoil the party but I think we need to continue on with the Ritual,” Sifr interrupted.

While the camp’s fire danced in the evening light, Sifr, Tellus (who had just finished eating), Unity and JP (who was feasting on the cake) gathered around the bonfire and readied themselves for the night. Besides the sound of the crackling fire, they too heard the sounds of crickets, hoots of owls, squawks of ravens, and whisper of winds. The dark forest was alive once again. The moon and the stars that night weren’t visible because dark clouds were forming overhead. Only the bonfire, Tellus’ glow and Sifr’s burning head lit the site.

Unity, who was looking at where the moon was supposed to be (if it weren’t for the clouds covering it), seemed to reflect and meditate. It was only after a few minutes until she started her Introduction.

“I am Unity, daughter of the darkness and the light; daughter of the moon and the night. I have been killed and then saved. I was given a chance to live.

I fell in love with a man and we were bound together forever: that if anything happens to me, it shall happen also to him and if any for the matter, happened to him, also happens to me.

Like Tellus, I am also an infinite. The only difference is that he is eternally saved while I was eternally damned. I always had to see the people that I love age, suffer and die. Happiness was only a temporary thing for me.”

As soon as Unity finished her part of the Ritual, thunder began to roar high above the heavens. Flashes of light lined the clouds. Everybody else kept silent and sincere. That was the only time JP felt Unity’s loneliness behind the mask she usually wears. That struck him, deep down, real hard. Even the creatures in the deep woods fell silent as if they had also felt Unity’s sadness.

The wind gently blew on Unity’s face as she raised her head up the chaotically peaceful skies. Tellus knew what needed to be done to make Unity feel less unhappy but it seemed he was waiting for something. Sifr looked at JP, turned to Unity and looked back at JP like he was signaling him. JP didn’t notice that but he felt he needed to say something.

“You got Tellus... and Sifr,” JP said as he looked at the two. Tellus smiled. Sifr nodded at him. “...and me,” JP continued. There was silence again except for the thunder booms. Tellus, for the first time, he looked a

little bit sorry. Sifr, who usually doesn't seem to care about things, his eyes showed sympathy. Unity looked at each of them, tear trickling down her cheek, smiling. Then at last, she stood and walked over to Tellus and Sifr. She gave each of them a hug—a thanks. She then walked to JP while holding the silver crucifix fixed around her neck, reached for his hand, said thanks and hugged him as well.

Soon after, the first droplets of rain fell from the sky. Tellus closely held Unity and JP at each of his sides and beckoned Sifr to get close too. He later spread out his wings and sheltered the two beside him. Sifr stayed on his spot as it rained harder. Little by little, the bonfire was being put out by the downpour. Sifr's (literally) burning head however, wasn't easily put out by the rain even though how hard it fell. In fact, it wasn't actually affected at all. Sifr put his hands together, stretched them forward and cracked them as if he was readying himself to a brawl. He leaned forward as he sat down on the wet log and slouched over to the dying bonfire.

"I am Sifr. I am no one. I've been everywhere. I've been dead and reborn," Sifr said. There was a long pause afterwards. They weren't sure if Sifr had just started or if he had already finished. Until he continued, "I was once a human. I loved and I got hurt. I've been through heaven and hell. And hell was partly a mistake and a chance." Sifr stood up and about the same time, JP stood up as well in front of the bonfire. JP, wide-eyed, stared into the dying bonfire as the heavy rain poured. Thunder boomed and lightning pierced the sky. The trees' branches swayed as strong gusts of wind blew on them. It was as if nature was waiting for this exact moment. Tellus shifted his right wing—the one which initially covered JP—above his head and held Unity tighter. They both looked at Sifr and JP in bewilderment.

"I had loved and experienced heaven," Sifr said as if he was reciting a lost memory. "I thought I would live eternal happiness until I had been hurt. That's when I felt..."

"Hell," JP continued as he stared into oblivion.

"I tried to end my life," Sifr and JP said in unison. Unity and Tellus looked at each other with mouths wide open. This was all so weird. JP paused then said, "I thought it was the end" at the same time Sifr said "and succeeded. Now I'm not human." JP was still in a trance.

"Searching," again they said in unison, "we are, for answers." Everything blurry before was becoming clearer to JP. At the moment he was introduced to Sifr, he felt a certain familiarity. There was something in Sifr that was calling him out. In reality (fantastical reality, that is), as JP realized, Sifr was part of him and Sifr knew this from the day they met.

Their bonfire was dead and the ground was wet. The leaves of the pines rustled as the rain drops fell. Tellus was soaked even though his

wings protected him from the rain. Unity kept him warm all the while. Sifr and JP were like mirror images as they stood opposite each other. Droplets of rain hissed as it fell on Sifr's head. His latex suit looked glossier when washed out. JP's faux hawk looked emoish when wetted as the bangs covered his eyes. Everything was still except for the rain and the trees and the clouds. Each of them fell silent.

Soon, all of them understood why the Elders teamed them up. They were one. They had their similarities even though it wasn't obvious at first.

CHAPTER 11: THE WAKING

It has been a while before Sifr moved. Even though he was still in a trance, JP had already sat down on the wet log. The campsite was starting to flood.

“The Introduction is concluded,” at last Sifr said. His voice sounded weary and breathy. Unity wanted to do something for the two but she couldn’t think of anything. She looked at Tellus, expecting he knew what has to be done but instead, he shook his head. “Tellus,” he said, “would you be so kind to start The Waking?”

Even though Tellus was still in a deep state, he nodded to Sifr’s request. “I’ll help,” volunteered Unity as she gave Tellus a pat on the back in between the roots of his wings. She walked under the rain and crossed the bonfire remains opposite Tellus. “By this final ceremony, may I ask each of us, Story Whisperers, an item for JP to bond us to him,” she said.

Tellus relaxed and his wings folded. He reaced out and plucked a white feather. “I give you this feather,” he said, “that you may be able to fly into the sky without your problems.” He laid the feather inside the ring of stones where the bonfire used to burn.

Unity bit her hand and squeezed it, letting her crimson blood ooze out from it. She stretched her hand above the circle of stones and said, “I give you my blood so that you will learn that there are always hardships and challenges along the way.” It fell down onto the white feather that was floating on the puddle of water. The blood didn’t seem to be washed off of the feather even though the rain continued to pour.

A ball of fire appeared when Sifr snapped his fingers. It’s color was of blue and not the usual crimson blaze. The blue flame danced like a candle’s light, floating above his palm. “And I give you this Spirit Fyre to bestow upon you light after difficulties,” Sifr said, “no matter how hard life is, there is no point in giving in.” The Spirit Fyre formed into a burning rock and dropped from his hands into the circle of stones. This, too, combined with the blood-soaked feather. Without burning the feather itself, the Spirit Fyre engulfed the crimson feather.

All at the same time, the three recited an old enchantment in an old language. The enchantment, when translated to our tongue, said something like this (though it sounded better in the unknown language):

*Part by part by part
We give you ours,
We give you ourselves*

At that point, JP’s chest opened up. His muscles, his skin, his ribs and his lungs moved apart as it made way for the entry of the Spirit Fyre. The Spirit Fyre burned blue beside JP’s heart and slowly, the hole closed.

There was no trace that his skin had been divided; there was no scar. But JP could feel the fire burning inside him.

*This pact we make today
Will make us one;
Our bonds unbreakable*

They held each other's hands and looked at each other's eyes one more time.

*Wake up,
Wake up,
Oh, Story Teller.*

At once, a great bolt of lightning pierced from the clouds and into the howling sounds of the trees.

* * *

JP jerked upright as he heard the lightning crackle and realized he was back in his room and on his bed. He looked outside his window, since his bed was located beside the window, and saw rain pouring hard while great winds sang along. There was a feeling of loneliness as he woke up from his dream. It is that feeling you get when sometimes you don't finish a dream you enjoyed. Upon his awakening, he stretched out his hand to find his cellular phone where he usually hides it under his pillow.

3:14 AM, he thought to himself, That dream...it felt real but it's impossible to have dreamt all of that in just a few hours. Or was it really just a normal dream?

The air conditioner or the electric fan, which was usually turned on during these times, was turned off. In fact, there was no power. It seemed that the storm caused the nationwide blackout. He breathed air deep into his lungs and collapsed himself on his bed, face up. He stared at the room's ceiling and tried to sleep. Although, the minutes passed by rather quickly and soon it was 5:24 AM, he couldn't force himself to fall asleep.

A few more minutes later, he got out of bed and came across his mother who was surprised he got up on his own. "Is anything the matter?" she asked.

"I—I woke up 2 hours ago," replied he as he climbed down the stairs and into the dining room, "then I couldn't sleep."

All the while, during his daily routine, he kept on thinking about his weird dreams lately. *Are they true? Or am I only dreaming things?* He asked himself. It seemed to him that part of him was left inside the

dream—Imagine Nation, whether there really was a place with that name.

He couldn't get them out of his mind even though days and days passed by. He hadn't had that dream since then and he was beginning to think that everything that had happened was really just a fiction of his imagination that names of People he remembered like Oneiro, Mara, Tellus, Unity and Sifr were just names of people inside his imagination.

Although he wanted to tell himself this, part of him didn't want to believe the idea. One day in his office, he focused really hard on remembering the details of his dream. Little by little, they were all coming back to him: from the day he entered the dream world to the day he left it suddenly. The tales of his dream folk friends were beginning to come back in his mind and heart that he need not try hard to dig it up in his memory. He felt there was a part of that dream world inside him.

Later afterwards, as he was thinking of a Visual Basic syntax, he noticed a door of light opening up on one wall of the far side of his office. He saw himself walking from the door towards him. He walked over to himself and shook his hand.

A Soul Copy, he thought as he looked back at the soul, which was entering his body. His physical body looked back at him and winked. He looked around to see that time had stopped for his workmates. Larry, a college classmate and now his seatmate at work, was drinking from his mug. The water was in the process of falling down as time stopped. He looked back at the door of light and noticed three more figures walking into his office. There was a little girl who wore black clothes, a guy with halo and wings and another guy with a spiked blue hair. They were motioning him to come to them. With arms wide open, he sprinted towards the three saying names, "Tellus! Unity! Sifr!" when no one would hear him.

"Either I thought you weren't really real," he said, "or I was mad."

"You are mad," Sifr said as the three of them chuckled.

"Funny, Sifr," said JP as he stuck out his tongue. "Anyway, I had this wonderful idea! C'mon," said he as he gestured them to the Light House Exchange Hall.

CHAPTER 12: HEAVEN AND EERHT

The door closed behind them as they entered the Exchange Hall. This was where the Astral once brought JP before he met his Story Whisperers. JP was overjoyed to learn that all his dreams before weren't *just* dreams. *Fantasy is reality*, as he said to himself.

"And where might we be going?" asked Unity as she hopped ahead of them.

"Well, I was thinking of telling you the story of how I thought Tellus' tale would be," replied JP as he winked at Tellus, "so, I think it would be best if Tellus decides."

"Hmm... Unity, have you ever tried flying before?" Tellus asked as he readied his wings for flight. Sifr was not too excited at the thought of flying because he didn't really do well at heights. Unity, whose face looked like a child, smiled so wide her teeth bared from ear to ear. Together, they raced towards the North Door.

Now, before we move on to what JP was thinking about Tellus' story, you might just be wondering whatever happened in the office as his true soul left it. As soon as JP's soul entered the door to Imagine Nation, time continued to tick in its regular pace. JP's soul copy did exactly what JP was doing when he left it. After all, Soul Copies have their True Copy's thoughts and memories. The only problem with Soul Copies is that they are easily distracted. Anyway, let us go back to Imagine Nation. Besides, the real story here is in Imagine Nation itself, not the real world because as a very very old saying in Imagine Nation goes, "Sometimes, when one lives in his own fantasy world, his dreams tell the greater part of his reality."

JP was soaring in the clouds with his arms spread apart. Sifr, who wasn't fond of flying *and* heights, really did well for his first try. But instead of spreading his arms, he placed them on his side as if he was just standing horizontally. Unity, on the other hand, instead of flying, had requested Tellus to carry her, in which he did.

"So, I was thinking..." JP yelled so that everyone could hear against the wind, "since, Tellus, you are an angel and your voice sounds like choirs of singing angels, in your story, I will write you as a young boy who is a lead vocalist in a band!"

"Expound," said Tellus.

"In my rendition of your story, you will be a young boy who grows up and spends almost half his life—your life—in a poor family: your mum and your friends (who are also your bandmates). Your mum, truthful as she is, tells you that she's not your real mother and that your real parents have died in a terrible tragedy. She names you Eerht."

As JP tells the story, Tellus imagined how it would be portrayed.

“Later on in the story, you will meet a group of ladies the same age as you are in a very unexpected fate. This group of girls, who is also in a band, is among the *Maharlikans* (the rich families of the country). They, especially a girl named Heaven, will change your life.

A certain character by the name of Nathaniel however, will make your life a living nightmare as he tries to get you out of the way. Actually, he thinks you’re interfering his plans because in the story, you will, little by little, learn to love Heaven (who is his bride to be).

The plot thickens as it is later revealed to you that you are the true heir of the Third Maharlikan Family, not Nathaniel (your half-brother), and that you have the right to wed any one of the lower maharlikan family’s daughters, that is, including even the Seventh Maharlikan (the family of Heaven),” narrated JP. In his rendition, Eerht will be a kind-hearted mortal, which is regarded by his friends and family as “heaven sent” because of his pure deeds. He will be written as a vocalist and leader of a band called 3 Crows; a simple boy with a great impact on his appearance. Heaven, the rich bratty girl who will later fall for Eerht, will also be a leader and vocalist of a band called Heaven & the Guardian Angels.

“And they’ll all live happily ever after,” Sifr added.

“I love it,” Tellus said as he smiled. His halo glowed even brighter.

“What will you call it?” Unity asked as she was suspended in air by Tellus.. “Have you thought of it yet?”

“Heaven and Eerht,” replied JP then all at once, as if on a signal, they all raced through the clear, blue sky. Smoke trailed their paths as they faded into the horizon.

CHAPTER 13: IN THE DARK



ays passed by and JP, as he exaggerated, was beginning to rot in his seat doing repetitive trial runs of the program he is making. His computer desktop was inverted whereas the background, the Windows menus and the work area are all in black while the text in white. He was that kind of person, liking to be different from the others and all. He even prefers being called weird.

During those times, he wasn't able to go back to Imagine Nation and he was very disappointed. All the while, he had already been cooking up Unity's story in his mind when suddenly the lights went out. He heard groans of his workmates who weren't lucky to save their progresses. He even heard murmurs of delight. The small office was swallowed in darkness. Some of his workmates went out to the pantry to take a break while there's no power; some continued working on their laptops as if every second is precious to them. He stayed at his seat and just imagined things when suddenly the people around him froze in place.

"How are you?" a cold voice of a girl asked JP.

"Unity!" he exclaimed then hushed himself thinking how his workmates would react if they heard him.

"They wouldn't hear you, silly," she said, "so, anyway, have you thought of mine yet?"

"Ha! Can't wait, huh?" asked he.

"Well, I was going to ask you to make it something weird and extreme," she answered.

"I have it all covered," beamed JP. "By the way, where are Tellus and Sifr?"

"Tellus has been summoned by you-know-Who," she said. "While Sifr had some of his secret errands."

"Okay, so anyway, in your story, you are not yet as you are now," he said, "and I suppose you were not born as you are, now, would you?" Unity nodded. After all, vampires are not born to the world—they are awakened. "I will start first by telling a tale of a vampire, just like you, named Vladmir Everdark. He lives all alone in Helfort Mansion, a haven for night dwellers, and is master of the dark woods called Everdark Forest. Even though his heart is as pure as yours, he was feared by the people living amongst him." Unity could almost imagine the place—Everdark Forest—and its neighboring villages and countries. "He will fall in love with a mortal that will be bound to him eternally by a curse of the moon."

"By fate, they will stumble upon a child, which they will love as their own. They will call her Eno as a symbol of their Unity. That's you, Unity," he looked at her and smiled.

“Your parents, Vladmir and Estella, will hide from you the fact that they are night dwellers when you are not because they do not wish you to live in eternal damnation. However, as soon as you fall for a boy, who will also be bound to you by the same curse that bound your parents together forever, you shall be fatally wounded. Only by awakening you, could you be saved,” he paused then sighed. He was lost deep in his thoughts as if he was looking for something.

“What is it?” asked Unity. “Why did you stop?”

He breathed in and filled his lungs. “I still don’t know how to end your story,” he answered. “I—I have something but it doesn’t look good yet. Here, I’ll show you.” He took out a piece of paper where he usually writes his draft ideas and showed it to Unity. “You said you wanted something extreme, so...”

Unity fell silent and her pale-white skin reddened as she read what was written on the paper. “This is...This is madness! I love it! The boys’ noses will bleed when they read this!” she exclaimed. “I could almost imagine Tellus growing two horns and a tail as he reads this. And Sifr, I’ve never seen his blue fireball head burn red. I can’t wait for this to be finished.” She said excitedly.

“I’m not sure if I can finish this, alone,” he said.

“Don’t push yourself too hard. I’ll help you out every now and then,” said she as she walked back through the door to Imagine Nation. As soon as she had entered the door to Imagine Nation, she waved his hand back at JP. Time resumed in the real world and it took almost an hour before they got power.

CHAPTER 14: ZERO



ifr's side of the story was the easiest to write for JP, even if at times he would not go to Imagine Nation or would Sifr visit him in the real world. Since Sifr was the oldest and most experienced among the three, his stories had more depth and that *gave* JP broader plots. With that, JP told Sifr's tales in many unending ways and adaptations. And he, himself, continued his own adventures in Sifr's stories.

JP began Sifr's story when once upon a time they were still one person. He was in his room that day, remembering the days while he was holding his guitar. When suddenly the walls of his room slowly crumbled and revealed an arc-framed door. Everything else except him and the door blurred into a dream, like pastels of colors stroked by a little child. He walked over to the door, bringing along his guitar (actually, it was his sister's guitar). He walked through the light unknowing what'll meet him at the other end. He knew it was the door to Imagine Nation but the doors don't always lead to an exact place.

As he stepped into the light, he finds himself in an empty, infinite and boundless void. There wasn't a floor to step on but the ground seemed solid. Monochromatic figures of people appeared randomly in places one by one until it filled the infinite void. In front of him, one of the statuettes appears to become painted in colors of black and blue. Sifr.

"Once upon a time," said JP as he remembers those days, "there was a boy named JP. He loved being different. He loved being somebody at the same time being just a nobody. He loved art and music and collected comic books."

"He met this girl who changed his life. He thought it would last forever when it didn't. He thought it was over. He thought life was over and then he couldn't move on," he continued while Sifr listened.

"This is where your part starts," he told Sifr. "You killed yourself in despair and lived to see it happen again." One by one, the statuettes collapsed as JP told Sifr their story.

"I have ended my life because I thought I could never be happier again," Sifr looked down as he picked up the guitar JP brought. "But God gave me another chance to right what was wrong." JP nodded. The guitar changed its make from acoustic to electric and its color from varnished brown to black with blue flames.

"You will be reborn to see, to watch, and to go back, literally, on your life," JP said. "You will stop it from happening again. You will save yourself. You will save me."

"And we will live our own lives," Sifr said.

The dusts of the crumbled statues were blown by the wind except for two: a girl and a boy. Scribbles of crayons and splashes of paint covered these two statues and became alive.

“Together,” said the pale-colored girl and the golden-haired boy. Unity and Tellus stepped beside Sifr and smiled at JP. The walls of the infinite void (which weren’t there before) fell down like tiles of puzzle pieces and revealed the colorful world of Imagine Nation.

CHAPTER 15: ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

Imagine Nation continued to exist because of the collaboration of the Story Whisperers and the Story Tellers. Together, JP, Sifr, Unity and Tellus, became a great team and the best of friends. They helped each other out from telling old tales and new chapters to living their lives. Together they were unstoppable.

Until one day (or night), in JP's slumber, he was awakened by a figure clothed in a pointed hood and baggy torso. The Astral, who was assigned to JP the day he became a Messenger, came to him.

"Story Teller," it said, "The Elders summon you."

It had been so long since he had seen The Elders. He was beginning to get curious as to what they would look like by now. "Wow, I've been looking forward to see this day!" he exclaimed excitedly. The Astral didn't reply a word and placed his hand on JP's shoulder grimly. JP's soul copy also looked gloomy as it plunged to his physical body.

Instantly, they were in The Watch. The Watch wasn't how JP remembered it to be. The marble was soaked in the shadows and the room was lit only by the glimmering silver stars. At the end of the hall, there were two chairs carved in translucent stones. In front of these chairs laid the familiar locked chest.

"JP," a voice said. He wasn't sure if it was a he or a she but he was sure that he heard it behind the shadows. "You are in violation of rule number three of The Code of The Messengers."

What code, he thought, was there such a code?

"You have neglected your responsibility," the voice stood from the chair and stepped forward into the light. JP noticed the small girl. It was Mara, one of the Elders, "over and over again."

"This isn't true, right?" a voice asked. It was a girl's and it was coming beside the chair of Mara. JP recognized the voice, it was Unity and she was beginning to cry when JP didn't answer. It wasn't because it was true that he violated a certain code but it was because he didn't know what code he did violate.

"You have neglected your responsibility to read and interpret other Messenger's stories," Mara said. There was another figure beside Unity who JP didn't notice before. It was Sifr though his fireball head blazed in the color of death. He couldn't look JP straight to the eye.

"I told you before!" another voice said. This voice sounded like a choir of angels singing a eulogy. *Tellus*, thought JP.

"Certain non-actions lead to certain punishments," said Mara as she wiggled her fingers above the locked chest. JP was pulled closer to the chest that he knelt down involuntarily. It was as if he was chained to the chest and the chest pulled him little by little as it opened.

Mara walked over to him and, in a second, stabbed JP's chest with his opened fist. JP squirmed in pain. He could feel Mara's hand under his skin, piercing through his muscles and ribs and beside his beating heart. She pulled out a gem—in a form of a blue flame with a crimson feather inside. “You have no right to become a Messenger. Oneiro perceived this even before but he gave you a chance and that was his mistake.”

“Once the Spirit Fyre is taken away from him, he will never dream again,” Sifr whispered as he clenched his fists tightly. Unity was crying. Tellus too. Inside the chest were other Spirit gems from other Story Tellers who had abandoned their codes.

“AAAAAAGHH!!! NOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!” JP cried as he struggled.

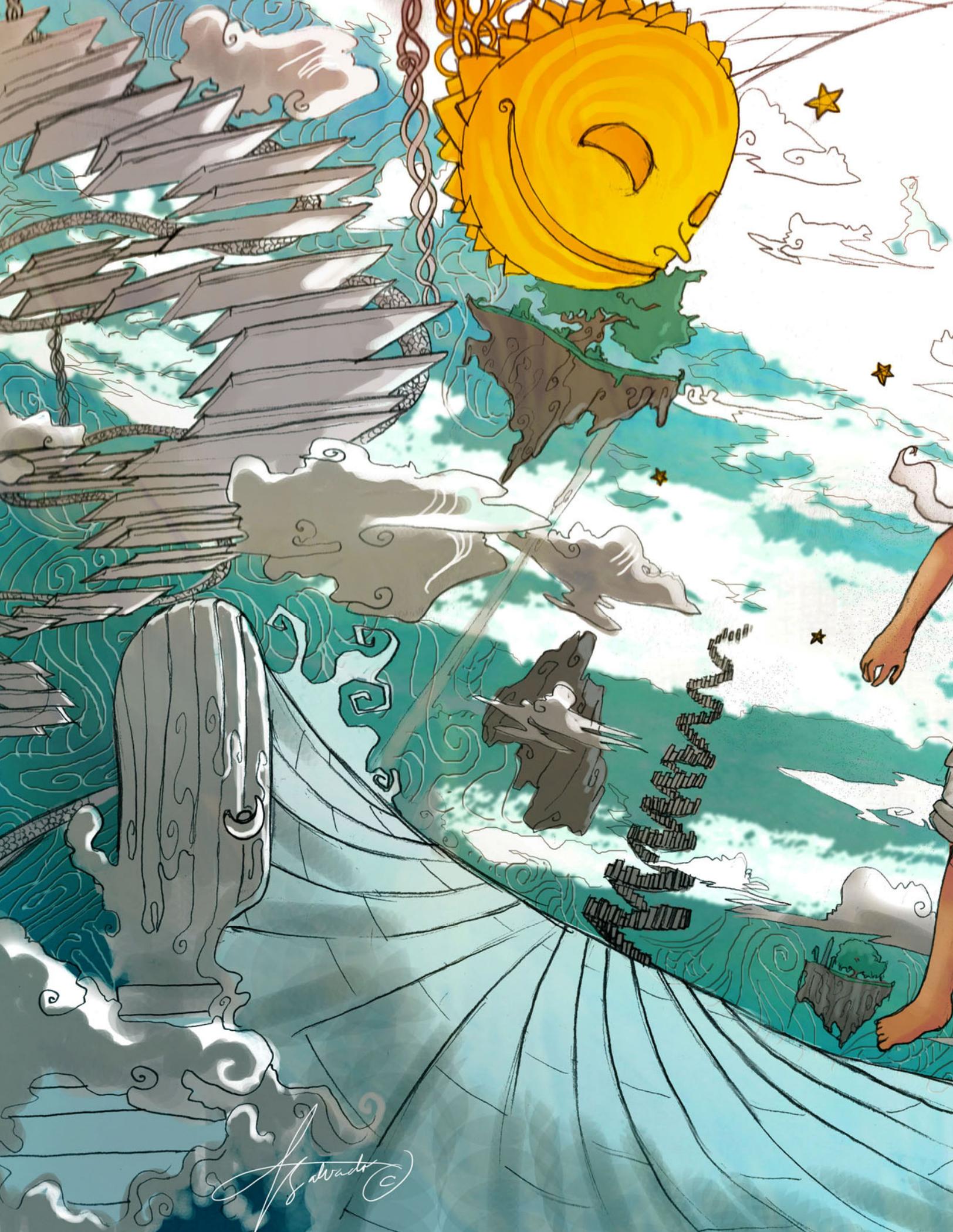
Flashes of memories and voices appeared in his mind. He remembered the kick-off (or team-building just recently). He remembered how he and his boss (the big boss) talked about dreams and goals. JP said he wanted to become a novelist, but he also said he didn't like reading. That's when his boss recommended him to read, as a fellow Story Teller. “You have to decide. You have to find your own way,” she said.

Then he woke up. He was crying when he did. But he couldn't remember any of the dreams he had or what the reason he was crying about. Only the thought of “finding your own way” and “deciding” came back to him.

As soon as he got up that day, he scanned the book shelf for an interesting title and found a book called “Neverwhere by Neil Gaiman”. He read it and he liked it and he read more of him again. Sooner than later, he dreams again. Oneiro, one of the Elders, gave him back the Spirit Fyre—the blue flaming rock with the crimson feather inside—and another chance.

Aside from Unity, Tellus and Sifr, new characters whisper in his ear about their stories. They wanted to see how JP would tell it to his people. As for JP, he still writes; he still reads; and he still continues to tell stories—just like this one. I do hope that if you read this story, you will remember that man cannot live alone, we need Them and They need us.

Signed, J.P. Bantigue, a Story Teller and a Story Whisperer.



Salvador