

## The Gleaming Emerald

by Chan Tsz Hei Hedy

“Life is like a game of cards. The hand you are dealt is determinism; the way you play it is free will.”  
Jawaharlal Nehru

*A land of secrets, flame and smoke  
A gem of truth, a ray of hope  
Two righteous forces locked in war  
A fate not sealed, of that be sure*

I had heard this chant before. Grandmother used to sing me the lullaby while tucking me in. I never really understood what it meant, but I somehow knew there was great power and truth in the words. They served as an antidote to my anxious nature. I knew that my grandmother had been someone important although I never knew what she really did. I had resigned myself to a life of servitude, but something in those words told me it needn't always be like this.

On the strangest occasion, the chant echoed in the underground vault of the castle. The ring became louder as I approached an intricately crafted chest, as if whatever inside was luring me. I unlocked the chest with the key given to me by King Janryc and gently lifted the lid. An emerald sat on red velvet, its magnificent green gleam lighting up the whole room, reflecting every tiny detail that had not been noticed before. It was a shame that its grandeur was to be smudged by the hands of a lady in waiting, who was ordered by his grace to bring him the emerald ring for the ball. Ashamed, but honoured, I carefully took the gem from its bed.

Touching it for the first time, I felt an almighty power surging through me. All my senses were drowned in the chanting and the green glare, in a state where I could feel everything but myself. Before I could sense if the bizarre experience was real or just a hallucination, I collapsed on the ground and blacked out.

It was the throbbing of my limbs that drew me into consciousness. Despite my blurred vision, I realized that I was tied to a chair. I lifted my chin and observed the surroundings, where only the empty chest lay with no sign of the emerald. Suddenly, I caught a glimpse of a distorted figure hiding behind the shadows. I gathered my courage and demanded in a shaky voice, “Who are you? How did you get inside the vault? Show yourself!”

Unexpectedly, a small creature with a hooked nose and bat-like ears presented himself with a mischievous grin. His bony fingers tapped together in a conniving gesture. His hideous physique reminded me of the villains in Grandmother's tales, but never in my wildest imagination had such grotesque creatures ever existed. “Well, my dear. You're quite a feisty girl to confront an abductor, Evangeline Wyvernwoods,” he said in a piercing, high-pitched voice.

Blood rushed to my face and my pulse throbbed in my ears, while questions flooded my head. What was he? How did he know my name? Was it magic? Sorcery? I opened my mouth but no scream came. How much I hoped it was merely my imagination, but everything was too realistic for a dream. As petrified as I was, a tiny part of me was inquisitive about the magical creature. I had a feeling that magic existed ever since I was a child.

“How forgetful I am to not introduce myself. I'm Zhrion, a goblin, though I don't expect you to have encountered any of my kind. Well, I guess I owe you for freeing me from the emerald, in which I've been trapped for several years, but goblins are too malicious to return favours. It'd be more interesting to hold you captive. Oh, don't feel sorry for yourself, my dear, I've no intention to harm you if you do what I say,” Zhrion continued.

“Wh-where’s the emerald?” I choked.

“It’s hidden away somewhere you can’t find. It would be logical to accuse a handmaid like yourself of stealing the precious gem. Traitors are executed for treason. However, it is merciful of me to offer you a deal. If you accept it, my dear, you will have the emerald back.” he spat, while circling me like his prey.

“What do you want?”

“My dear, I know you’re a clever girl! You see, my kind vanished in Timbruglia years ago. How about I take you there? You will read an ancient spell to resurrect them. Then I’ll return the emerald. I get my family back, and you get your emerald. An appealing offer, isn’t it?”

Timbruglia?! People of Amaryllis were forbidden to venture into Timbruglia, otherwise, they would spend their remaining days in the dungeon. It was considered a mysterious place, with mythical creatures like fairies and centaurs. As a child, I had pictured it as a utopia where my favourite mythological characters from Grandmother’s tales came alive and lived harmoniously. Nonetheless, my older self was convinced that it was all made up by the Amaryllisians, who never knew why the forest was forbidden. It would be absurd to trust a devil. However, rejecting his offer would lead me to the blind alley of death, and this might be the one chance to take a glance at the magical world. It seemed like I had no choice but to follow the goblin.

“Deal,” I replied reluctantly.

Zhrion muttered a few words and a portal suddenly opened. Mists of every colour rushed towards me like water pouring out of a vase. A refreshing breeze brushed through my hair, bewitching me to take a step towards the entrance.

“After you, my dear,” he flashed a devious smile at me.

I took a deep breath and was absorbed into the mystical mist, without knowing I had passed the point of no return.

The spiritless scene around me was not what I had expected. It was impossible to see the surroundings in the dark gloom. I had imagined an animated Timbruglia, yet an uneasy silence greeted us. I narrowed my eyes to examine the black thorns twisting around in the forest, like teeth ready to tear every creature apart. Withered trees blotted out the last streaks of light. The smell of decay hung in the still air, swallowing every soul in the no man’s land. I suffocated in the musty air.

“Shall we get going, my dear?” Zhrion’s voice echoed in the ominous land, making my hair stand on its end.

I followed the goblin on a path paved with fallen leaves. Zhrion was leaping in leaf piles and humming a cheerful tone. His off-key singing was somehow relieving my tension. Then, all of a sudden, Zhrion disappeared, and I was left alone in the ghoulish woods. My veins started freezing over.

“Boo!” He jumped out of the bushes.

I shrieked hysterically, and the impish trickster cackled with his head thrown back.

“My dear, I thought you were a brave girl. Guess I’m not good at reading humans.”

“You gruesome creature! I won’t help you if you pull a prank on me again!”

“Dear Evangeline, shall I remind you that you are held captive? Remember your precious emerald?”

“Urgh!” I placed my hand on my forehead and wondered how I ended up in this miserable situation. The journey was as dreadful as the coldest day in winter. The tree knots glared at me like baleful eyes. When we had nearly reached the end of the lane, a pack of bats suddenly flew out of a large fracture in a large rock, making me squeal. “I present to you the most magnificent cave in Timbruglia, Crystal Cavern,” Zhrion heralded proudly. He explained that magic would be restored there as soon as he performed a little trick. I heaved a sigh of relief.

I sensed something grabbing my leg and assumed it was Zhrion’s doing. “Stop it. It isn’t funny.” I was getting tired of this.

“What? I am standing in front of you, as innocent as ever. How can you be so cruel to accuse a wretched goblin of a crime he didn’t commit, my dear?” he whined, faking a hurt expression.

Frustrated, I groaned, “Then who is pulling my le...”

Oh no.

Ashes and black smoke circled my leg, turning my lower limbs into stone, and travelling up my body aggressively. My body became stiff. My breathing laboured. I had never imagined myself dying at such a young age. I could have accomplished so much if I had not agreed to help Zhrion, who would probably watch me die and laugh maniacally, but what choice did I have except to seek help from the imp at this moment? With tear-filled eyes, I pleaded, “please - do something...”

Out of my expectation, colour drained from Zhrion’s face as if he encountered a ghost. His eyes grew wide as he instinctively pulled out his dagger, which instantly turned into stone. Undeterred, he swung the dagger with gusto, like a knight battling a monster. I noticed a familiar green gleam penetrating through his pocket, and in a flash, the black smoke was gone. We looked on, amazed, as my legs and his dagger returned to their normal states.

My brain was struggling to process what had just happened. Where did this black mist come from? And why did he help me? Weren’t goblins selfish beings? Perhaps, goblins were not as terrible as I presumed.

“Thank you,” I breathed.

“I do this for my family, not for you,” he avoided my eyes, hiding a blush on his wrinkled cheeks and the hint of embarrassment in his bulged eyes.

“Alright, let’s bring back your family, so I can return as soon as possible. Lead the way.” We entered the cavern.

Neither crystals nor anything glittery could be seen in the Crystal Cavern. The despair in the hollow cavity made it more like a refuge than a villain’s lair. Melancholy reflected in the weathered stones did not go unnoticed. Their screams for help became a soundless echo in the cavern.

Zhrion pulled some items from his pocket and gestured for me to stand near a cauldron at the cavern’s centre. Swiftly, he snipped off a strand of my hair and dropped it into the vessel. The pot started bubbling furiously. Upon stirring, the mixture gave off a green vapour, the shade of which resembled that of the emerald.

“Now, my dear, you are to cast the spell. Listen carefully, or you’ll get it wrong.

*Pure souls once drained from their bodies  
Summoned back to where they shall be  
May what once was lost be found  
And then someday be homeward bound”*

I repeated after him carefully. The ecstatic goblin whooped as alchemical symbols formed within the cauldron and spread to the walls of the cave. My eyes widened with wonder as the stones cracked open to reveal the polished crystals inside. The warm glow of the glistening gems lit up the cavern, banishing the shadows. Screams turned into heavenly harmonies as if the crystals were rejoicing in the enchanting moment.

I marvelled at the miraculous view as Grandmother’s chant again rang in my ears. Peculiar visions flashed through my mind. I saw an enormous egg covered with ashes, and the emerald dimming as the eggshell cracked. A headache pounded at my temples. I winced, brows furrowed tightly with pain, but failed to fight off vertigo. I saw the blinding green gleam and Zhrion approaching before fainting into darkness.

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“Mama, when will the girl wake up? Duzz wanna play with her!”

“Shhhhh sweetie, she is sleeping. Remember what your papa said?”

“But Duzz can’t wait to show her new friend everything!”

The nagging of the child woke me. I opened my eyes to find a pair of purple eyes staring at me inquisitively.

“Mama, look! The girl has woken up! Can Duzz go out with her, now?” the child pleaded.

I then caught sight of a goblette standing across the room. Physically, she was like Zhrion, but the elegant way she walked toward me reminded me of Grandmother.

“I’m Criotnalme, Zhrion’s wife, and this is our daughter Duzz. Poor girl, what have you been through? How are you feeling now?” the goblette asked with sincerity.

“Much better, thanks. How long have I been unconscious?”

“A couple of hours, but it’s still daytime. If you’re not in a rush, you can stick around for a while. There is so much to see in Timbruglia.”

As a believer in magic, I had always dreamt of exploring the fantasy world. It would be wonderful to stay in Timbruglia, but I could not bear the consequences of “stealing” the emerald.

“I’m sorry I must return to the castle as soon as possible. I would stay if I could, but before I leave, I must meet Zhrion. Could you bring me to him?” I smiled weakly.

“Papa is in Crystal Cavern. Duzz will bring you to papa!” the adorable goblin child raised her hand.

After bidding farewell to Criotnalme, Duzz and I left Zhrion’s hut. I opened the wooden door to discover Timbruglia was a lush Garden of Eden as illustrated in Grandmother’s tale. The forlorn woodland had transformed into a haven for magical creatures. Its alluring pulpy smell mixed with the sweet scent of berries and flowers beckoned me. The divine glow from heaven had shone upon the

blissful land. The chatting of elves animated the teak-brown forest. Duzz drew me back to the moment by holding my hand, and we walked along the leaf-carpeted path.

“Evangeline, what is the human world like? Does everyone live in a big castle? Do you eat nuts and berries too?” I did not expect a young goblin would be interested in the human world.

“Well, some people like the king and the queen live in the castle, and others live in the village. I *do* live in the castle—”

“So, you are a princess?” Duzz gasped, clasping her hand over her mouth.

“No, I just serve the king. I am no princess,” I chuckled at her cute reaction.

“Duzz really, really wanna go there try the fantabulous food someday! Papa always visits the king in the castle, but we never talk about him. Can you tell me about him, Evangeline?” she babbled.

“King Janryc is ancient but not weary. Shrewd, but never boastful. Powerful, but never a tyrant. He puts the citizens before himself. At midnight, he is always up for his duties as the light from his study illuminates the pitch-black gallery. He greets the staff in the castle with grace and answers every call from the Amaryllisians. His sapphire gaze is assertive but amiable, reassuring every restless soul in our kingdom through dark times. He is an honourable king.” I said with admiration.

“Duzz hopes papa will bring her to meet the king. Duzz has never seen a king before.”

“Wait, is there no king or queen here?” I was baffled how the place managed to function without the rule of a monarch.

“Everybody gets along and lives in the woods peacefully, but sometimes when they get into trouble, they will find papa for help. They say papa is the cleverest here. They even asked him to see the king when the forest was attacked by a mysterious black mist. Duzz is so proud of her papa!”

At the mention of the black mist, I was taken back to the moment when it spiralled up along my legs like snakes slithering on vines. The despair and dread it gave me kept lingering in my mind. Deep in my thoughts, I was unaware of the ashes now suspending in the air and lifting poor Duzz off the ground.

“Help!” Duzz wailed.

“Let her go!” I exclaimed. The evil ashes faded all at once as I held the little goblin in my arms.

“Shhhhh. It’s okay now. You’re safe with me.” I wiped the tears from her chubby cheeks.

“Du...Duzz remembers the mist. They make us disappear.”

*Make us disappear?* Had someone plotted to kill these magical creatures? I finally understood the terror in Zhrion’s eyes during our previous experience with the intimidating smoke. If the mist was a part of a conspiracy, the one who produced the mist and induced the massacre should never be pardoned. No word could describe how apologetic I was for the mythical creatures to suffer the tragedy, but at least they had returned from death and got their lives back, thanks to Zhrion.

“Papa is here, inside the Crystal Cavern. Goodbye, Evangeline! Come visit someday!” She gave me a quick hug.

“Run home quickly! Watch out for that black smoke.” *I hope I see you again someday too, Duzz.*

Entering the Crystal Cavern again, the same warm glow welcomed me. The once tranquil cave now bustled with laughter. Giants, ogres, and other unknown magical creatures came into sight as I ventured deeper into the cave. I hid behind a rock to avoid being jostled and took a peek at the lively scene. It seemed to be a celebration of their revival.

*More like a tavern.* I smiled despite myself.

Then I spotted the tiny figure standing on the stage.

“Greetings, my fellow warriors.”

Zhrion’s voice was deeper than usual and almost unrecognizable. The mischief in his tone dissolved into solemnity.

“It’s been a long time since our last meeting. I bet you are curious why we vanished, or more specifically, who made us vanish. You might think it is a wicked sorcerer. But no, it is King Janryc’s doing.”

Gasps rose from the audience as I shook my head incredulously. Was Zhrion was referring to another King Janryc? It couldn’t be him.

“Don’t be fooled by his benevolent exterior! He’s a monster who plotted this evil scheme to kill us all! I witnessed him casting a spell with a woman on the night of the genocide, and I was trapped in the emerald for countless years, tortured by the happiness humans get to experience. Humans are sinful, so it’s time to make them pay the price. Tonight, we will take down Amaryllis, and make the king watch his beloved citizens die in front of him! Who is with me?”

“Huzzah!” The crowd raised their axes and torches. The colour drained from my face as horror overtook my system. I jumped unconsciously from my hideout and screamed, “No!”

*Stupid me! The giants can easily finish me in a second!*

I squeezed my eyes shut, afraid to face the end of my life.

*Wait. I should have been dead by now. Why can I still move?*

I squinted and was taken aback to see the army of creatures frozen in place. Their eyes were filled with horror, just like mine when I was made immobile by the black mist. Zhrion stared at me in disbelief and consternation as his plan for revenge had been disrupted by a mere human girl. Instinctively, I grabbed the emerald ring from his pocket and fled from their lair. I hoped they would not regain their mobility any time soon.

I ran at full speed towards the castle as the streets of Amaryllis faded into the background. Zhrion’s speech echoed in my head. It would be absurd to believe the words of a goblin, but the hatred in Zhrion’s voice was genuine. What if Zhrion was telling the truth? What if the king’s hands were stained with blood? I decided not to think about it and focused on running instead. I finally reached the castle gate at midnight. The Amaryllis flag on the side of the gate was flying as usual. I prayed that it would keep on flying.

“Excuse me, sir, I—I need to see the king now. It is urgent,” I panted, covered with sweat.

“Milady, I believe your issue can wait until sunrise. His grace must be well-rested for tomorrow’s ball,” the guard said.

“No, you don’t understand! An army from Timbruglia is coming for Amaryllis. Our kingdom must be prepared for their attack.”

“Have you entered the forbidden forest?” he enquired, eyes stretched wide like saucers.

*Oh no.*

“To the dungeon,” he roared.

The guard dragged me through the castle and down some stairs. The reek of garbage assaulted my nose as he opened the door to a shady room covered in dirt and rat droppings. Thick cobwebs filled the corner of the chamber. A crack in the ceiling allowed a trickle of water to flow down to the floor and pool near the base of the wall. I sat alone in the room, counting the drops of water dripping into the puddle to distract myself from the looming catastrophe. I blamed myself for my idiocy, for helping a goblin to attack my homeland, for failing Amaryllis. Having witnessed the magic in Timbruglia, I was convinced that there was no way for our soldiers to prevail. Because of me, Amaryllis would be erased from the world.

“Now we are all doomed,” I whimpered, hugging my knees.

“Is it you who ventured into Timbruglia, child?”

Heedless of the moment and too immersed in remorse, I looked up to the source of the baritone voice and met a pair of sapphire eyes.

It was King Janryc himself.

“Your Grace,” I bowed immediately, ashamed of my discomposure.

“I see, child, you are the lady in waiting I asked to fetch the emerald ring. Tell me your name.”

“Evangeline Wyvernwoods, your grace. Here is the emerald ring your grace requested.” I handed him the precious ring which had somehow lost its glamour. Instead of accepting it, he stared at me like an exotic creature. His once serene eyes were filled with consternation.

“Have you by any chance encountered a maiden by the name of Eilonwy Wyvernwoods, child?”

I was perplexed by his question. *How did the king know Grandmother?*

“Eilonwy Wyvernwoods is my late grandmother, your grace.”

“Bless my soul! You are Eilonwy’s grandchild!” He held my hand with delight as if he had discovered lost treasure.

“With all due respect, your grace, I am to alert you of an attack from Timbruglia. I understand that I have violated the law and shall be punished, but with the Amaryllis’ fate at stake, I beg your grace to be prepared for the battle.”

“The day of reckoning has finally come,” he stiffened, groaning underneath his breath.

“Destiny brought you here, child, and you deserve to know the truth about our world. There was a time when Amaryllisians and the magical creatures coexisted in harmony. Eilonwy was the royal sorceress as the Wyvernwoods family had been the only magic users in Amaryllis. One day, she foresaw a future where Amaryllis was destroyed by a powerful dragon that breathed flames and smoke.

I was afraid my army would be fighting a losing battle. Not that I lacked confidence in my soldiers, I just feared the things lingering in the unknown. It is in people's nature, child. Thus, I requested Eilonwy to cast a spell to wipe out magic and erase its existence in everyone's mind except mine.

She warned me of the consequences of the spell. Innocent magical creatures were to be sacrificed. But Amaryllis meant everything to me and I dared not watch it fall. So, I made the irreversible decision and asked Eilonwy to perform the spell against her will.

However, I regret the decision made by my immature self. I dreamt of unfortunate elves and goblins as they were consumed by the ashes. Their souls haunted me every restless night. If I could turn back time, I would have handled the crisis differently."

As I listened in shock, I despised his act of immorality. No matter how much he cared for his people, he had no right to decide who lived and who died. Although the creatures were resurrected, they would forever live with the trauma. However, his sincere and penitent words made me endure his unrelenting crime. Did my adoration for him cause me to believe he was worthy of redemption? Did he deserve to be forgiven?

*I did not know what was right or wrong anymore.*

"After the spell was cast, Eilonwy experienced another vision, in which she saw a girl with an emerald shining brilliantly. I presume that is you, child. You shall have the emerald ring and fight for our kingdom. You shall protect our homeland against our invaders."

"Your Grace, I do not possess magic."

I recalled the incident in the Crystal Cavern and instantly realized who had frozen the army of magical beasts. I focused all my strength on the doorknob. I could feel the magic flowing and ebbing in my veins, like a river that never ran dry. "Click." The locked door abruptly opened.

Perhaps *I* was magical.

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There I was, wearing the emerald ring beside a fully-armed King Janryc in front of the troops. The moon in the brooding sky shone on the silvery armour of the troops of Amaryllisian soldiers behind us. We marched together towards Timbruglia. Nobody spoke a word. The calm before the storm was intolerable. Little did the courageous men behind me know what they were facing. Despite possessing magic, I lacked the knowledge of how it worked and the courage to combat the giants. I doubted my ability to serve my kingdom, but I could not let Amaryllis down. I could not let Grandmother down.

At the margin of Amaryllis and Timbruglia, an army of gigantic size emerged from the shadows. A familiar goblin leading a crew caught my eyes. Zhrion looked so tiny but enormous at the same time. He declared with disdain from afar, "So you have taken the evil side, dear Evangeline. I hate to confront you, but you've left me no choice. Fire!"

At his command, a horde of giants bashed at our lines. Ogres swung clunking axes and crashing hammers against our shields. The clanking of metal pierced the night-time tranquillity. It was not long before a nauseating waft of blood engulfed me. I attempted to converge my energy to freeze our enemy as I had done before, but I could not bring myself to hurt the victims of the purge.



A distant rumbling shifted my attention from the battlefield. Black mist subsequently blocked the eerie moon and overtook the sky. Some men were shivering with fear while pointing at the enormous serpent-like monster hovering above them.

Blazing ebony eyes sat deep in the sockets of the monster's horned head, giving it a menacing appearance. Several large tendrils sat above the fan-like ears on its head. Its thick neck merged into a body covered by massive scales. Its scythe-shaped wings were made from ashes and smoke, and its spiky tail ended in a mace-like growth.

It was the dragon in Grandmother's prophecy.

A crowd of elves, trolls and the inhabitants of Timbruglia flooded onto the battlefield right after the dramatic entrance of the dragon.

"Evangeline!" I recognized the feminine yell.

"Criotnalme, what happened?". She ran to me.

"Shortly after you left, a dragon attacked Timbruglia, setting our home ablaze. Everyone evacuated from our home, but Duzz is lost. Can you help me find her, please?" A worried expression was written all over her face.

*Clank! Thud!* The knifelike tail of the dragon sent an oak tree crashing down. Criotnalme and I quickly dashed to the fallen tree. We found Duzz, alive and whimpering, in the arms of a man who was crushed by the tree trunk. Balefire-red blood splattered from his gaping wounds. Despite his distorted face, I managed to identify him by his sapphire eyes.

"King Janryc! Please don't die! Our kingdom needs you!"

I tried to heal him with my magic, but it was useless. Tears kept rolling down my cheeks as I refused to accept the fact that King Janryc was dead. Our king was dead.

"The man saved Duzz when the tree fell. He is a hero," Duzz said softly. "Heroes always get happy endings. He can't be dead. Duzz won't accept it." Duzz hugged me closely we both cried.

He truly was an honourable king, who deserved redemption.

"You will always be my king, your grace. Rest in peace," I said between my sobs while closing his eyelids.

Suddenly, a familiar green gleam radiated in the dark, dispelling the ashes and smoke in its surroundings. The almighty dragon let out an agonizing roar. As I held onto Duzz more tightly, the emerald shone even more brilliantly. The mental imagery I saw back in the Crystal Cavern flashed in my mind. I recalled my experience with the black smoke. Every time it was the radiation of the emerald that chased it away, and it shone when Zhrion came to my rescue, and I protected the scared Duzz -

*Wait! Did it mean that I had been holding the key the whole time? Was it powerful enough to end our enmity and the catastrophe?*

I guessed there was only one way to find out.

I pulled out the emerald from my pocket and Grandmother's chant rang in my ears again, as loudly as ever. The beast seemed to hear it too. It lost its balance for a second and almost fell from above.

“Isn’t it the ancient incantation? Legend has it that it brings epiphany during the apocalypse.” Criotnalmeex exclaimed.

I recited the chant repeatedly and heard Grandmother’s voice as if she was communicating with me through the emerald, “Evangeline, do the right thing. Don’t make the same mistake as I did. The prophecy is just one of the many possibilities. Make good use of your power to change the future. I believe in you.”

“Grandmother, I will not fail you.”

I searched for Zhrion through the horror of the carnage. A blizzard of arrows zipped and hissed towards the giant troops while Amaryllisian soldiers evaded the explosive charms thrown by the orcs. Both parties were unaware of how the battleground had been baptised by the blood of their comrades, how their friends were burnt alive by the dragon, or how the monster enlarged as their companions stepped into the grave. The very thought of victory had flooded their senses and their sanity diminished into nothingness.

“Zhrion! Stop!”

“Don’t you see, my dear? Your kind must pay the price. Your sins shall not be tolerated!”

“I understand why you are vengeful. What King Janryc did was unacceptable, but revenge will never be the answer. Look around you. Look at your fallen comrades. They are innocent souls who are dragged into battle. You can still save them. I see the good in you. Before another line gets crossed, please stop,” I begged.

“Anyone standing in my way shall not be pardoned, even you, my dear,” Zhrion raised his dagger, aiming at my heart.

“No, papa!” Duzz shouted. Zhrion froze in his place.

“The king already died from rescuing Duzz. Duzz doesn’t wanna see anyone getting hurt again! Duzz doesn’t wanna lose papa!” the little goblin clung to her father’s leg tightly, his pants dampened by her scalding tears.

Zhrion inspected the bloodshed where the wounded and the deceased were scattered across and the gargantuan dragon above. He paused and turned to his beloved daughter with a rueful but reassuring smile.

“Do it.”

I nodded.

Everyone rooted to the spot as Zhrion stepped onto a stone, ready to deliver his speech.

“Human soldiers, for so long, you’ve been unaware of our existence, and our first encounter is on this bloody battleground. I was blinded by vindictiveness, always wanting to make your kind suffer. My inconsiderate act accounts for the casualties of both of our armies. I apologize for what I’ve done.

Now darkness is cast upon us. Look at the dragon above. It is feeding on our hatred, growing by the minute. If we continue the war, sooner or later, all of us will be killed by the monster. It is time to put aside our conflict and unite against our common enemy.”

As soon as Zhrion stopped, the chanting reverberated in the arena. A circle appeared on the ground around Zhrion, Duzz and me where the lyrics of the chanting were inscribed. The dragon's wings, which were composed of ashes and smoke, gradually dissipated into thin air.

When the chanting was at its maximum volume, the emerald floated into the air, ejecting a blinding gleam that pierced through the monster's abdomen like a spear. A deafening roar resonated from the sky as the omnipotent emerald gave the crippled dragon one final blow. Both humans and monsters covered their ears. My head shot up and I discovered that the once fiery dragon had been slain. The black dome above us vanished and the rose-tinted sky could finally be seen.

Regaining their mobility, Amaryllisian soldiers cheered and danced with ogres and goblins, as if the battle had been a mere nightmare. I mouthed a thank you to Zhrion, who returned a contented smile before reuniting with his family.

The toll on both nature and humanity was disastrous. It would likely take generations before Timbruglia and Amaryllis would recover. Suddenly, I heard Grandmother's chant ringing in my ears again.

*A land of secrets, flame and smoke  
A gem of truth, a ray of hope  
Two righteous forces locked in war  
A tale not sealed, of that be sure*

Tears welled in my eyes as the true meaning of the words became clear. I had never felt more confident and powerful in my life.

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