

**WHAT I
REMEMBER
MOST**

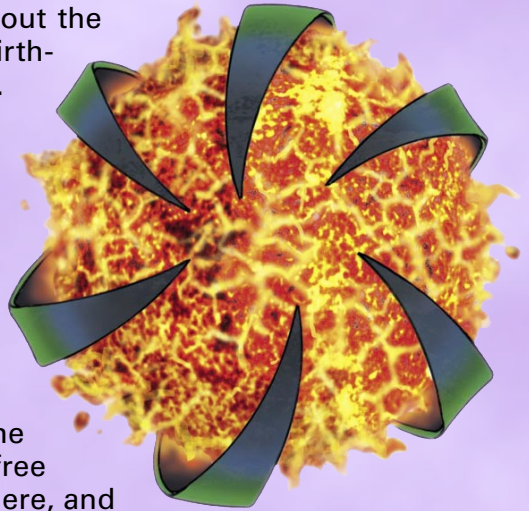
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Outworlds Alliance
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What I remember most about the day before my thirteenth birthday is the colors of the snow.

Before you tell me that snow has no color, I challenge you to look at it. Really look at it. Not on a cloudy, dreary day when it is falling, but on a day after, a day of bright sunshine.

See the colors? There, playing across the surface, the sunlight sparkles, startling free tiny rainbows of gem fire. There, and gone again, appearing and disappearing with every step. Or there in the shadows of evergreens, subtle shades of blue and grey and lavender. Blending in a cool and restful palate.



My mother always said I had the eyes of an artist, seeing color and form and beauty everywhere. In places no one else thought to look.

All of my life all I have ever wanted to do was paint. Not in harsh acrylics or heavy oils, but in the feather soft lightness of watercolors. You can not blend or mix watercolors, each shade must be perfect as you apply it. The image must flow from your heart through your brush to your paper. Because that's what makes a painting different from a photograph.

A photograph is a scene, reality as it is, captured in a moment. It has a form, a composition, a balance; the photographer brings craftsmanship to this image captured by the camera. But it is an image of what is physically there.

The artist, the painter, captures the spirit of the world.

I was a blessed girl, my mother always said. Blessed with an artist's eye and soul and blessed to live on Santiago, where the heart and soul of the artist is valued.

"From each, as they are able. To each, as they have need." The founding law of our people. And as I gave the people a glimpse of the soul of beauty around us, they would give me the food and shelter and comfort to let me seek out that beauty. That was what my mother said, and—until the strangers came—what my mother said was true.

The strangers. Santiago has no reptiles, but even so there was no mistaking the evil of the serpentine dragon with which the strangers marked all that was theirs. And all that was not theirs, but which they claimed as none would oppose them.

They came, these strangers, and claimed our world.

Claimed Santiago though it held nothing they desired and though our position—numbers meaningless now as they were then—meant we were near nothing they desired. The founders had known this, had chosen this haven for that very reason. But the strangers said there was danger, war and rumors of war, and they had come that we might have peace.

Peace was what we had had before the strangers came.

But that morning, the day before my thirteenth birthday, almost three months ago, now, I was not thinking of the strangers. Not thinking of the empty storefronts along the street, or the cold, damp scent of old smoke that lingered there; lingered everywhere.

Our school was on the other side of the park, and the park was a wild place. Not neatly trimmed and controlled, it was what the city planners called a wilderness zone; a place of trails wandering through trees and brush where you could hear *wearies* nesting songs on summer nights and find strawberries growing wild in the spring.

A creek ran through the park. The day before, on the way to the school, I had seen the ice along the rim of the waterfall above the swimming hole. The minerals in the water, baleful stainer of blonde girl's hair, were captured in the ice and—as the morning light shone through them—vibrant in greens and oranges and blues.

I imagined that painting through most of the day, feeling each brush stroke as I chose my colors. Mrs. Eckhart commented on how cheerful I looked.

On the way home, of course, the sun had moved and the icy citadels along the edge of the rushing water were subdued in the greys and blues of twilight.

The next morning was a free day. I headed out, my paint box and folding easel over my shoulder, the flask of water for mixing paints warm inside my coat, to capture the morning glory of the waterfall.

Moving slowly along the street, pausing every so often to regard a burned out building like a scavenger sniffing at bones, was one of the strangers' machines. Even with soul and eye of an artist, I could find no beauty in that hulking insect shape, taller than a tree. Some of the younger children were calling out to it, calling it names and throwing snowballs. The machine, or the man in the machine if there was one, paid them no mind.

Neither did I. Ducking my head deep into my collar, I hurried by, crossing the street into the safety of the park.

My first warning was the footprints. Huge, they churned up the ground. Black earth and red clay and the crushed greens and browns of plants were mixed through the whiteness, killing its joy and its color. Still, I had hope.

Hope that died at the waterfall, now a twisting rapid where a giant heel had slid down the embankment. The painting, the beauty in my heart that had kept me so happy, was gone.

I don't remember running back toward the street. I remember the shape of the trees, bending and wavering through my tears. And I remember the snow, away from the footprints, radiant in the clear morning light.

I didn't think when I saw the monster. I screamed. I threw fistfuls of snow, not caring enough to make snowballs. I threw my paint box.



Above me, high on the monster, there was a sound. A scraping, a sighing sound that cut through my own screams.

I looked up.

They tell me the fluid the war machine dumped on me was not a weapon. It's called coolant. A stupid name; it burned.

They tell me that my hair should grow back, which would have made my mother happy. She always loved my hair. The doctors tell me the skin grafts have taken perfectly. By the time I'm fourteen there will be no sign of scarring at all, they say.

But they can't save my eyes.

I have already seen the last thing I will ever see. That scalding flood of coolant.