“I suppose you are wondering who I am” she whispered softly. I looked at her, noting her long black hair, Asian features, and deep blue eyes that reflected the glow of the candlelight. I nodded, temporarily unable to speak. “I have a story too” she told me, and for perhaps the first time, I didn’t know if I could believe her. Manderin had always been here, helping us with anything and everything. She had always told us where to go and what to do. Not in a direct or demanding way, of course – she was always very subtle, and spoke when she needed to – but she had always been a guiding force, and she had always been the same. I pondered this for a while before finding my voice.

“And what *is* your story?” I asked. “What forces could possibly combine to create *you*?”

She laughed, and the sound was at once both the most beautiful and terrible sound I had ever heard. “If you really want to know, I will tell you. It is not some dark secret that needs to be kept hidden, but merely a story that has never been told until now.”

I nodded. “Please tell me”

She smiled, and I realized that she’d known what my response would be all along. “Then let’s start at the beginning, before I was born” She leaned back, and closed her eyes for a moment as if reminiscing. “This story begins a long time ago, in another world parallel to ours.” She opened her eyes and began to tell me her story.

Before I relate to you the story that she told me, let me give you some background information. My name is Symphony, and to me Manderin is a sister. She was adopted by my surrogate mother when I was seven. At first, she appeared to me to be normal, but this perception quickly changed. Manderin soon proved herself to be a mystery to everyone. She was the guiding force behind our actions, and looking back on it, I think she influenced us more than anyone will ever know. She was the one who would speak up quietly when the path split, telling us which road to take. She knew everything, and not a person who met her could escape the feeling that all of their secrets were laid bare in her deep blue eyes. I cared for Manderin as a sister, and yet I had never really understood her, or how she could exist.

It may be surprising to learn, but in all of the time we had known her, no one had asked Manderin for her story. Perhaps we were afraid that she wouldn’t tell us. Perhaps we were afraid that she would. I think maybe no one wanted to reveal that mystery within her, because if they did, then she would cease to be a symbol of all that was unknown, and would become a real person to us. Because, even though we all loved and respected Manderin, I don’t think any of us actually thought of her as a person, as one of us. I had finally worked up the courage to ask for those secrets that no one really wanted to know, and although I was starting to regret it, I had the feeling that I was going to learn more than I could have imagined about this mysterious and compelling girl.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

“This world was very similar to ours,” she told me. “The dominant species was almost exactly like modern-day humans, and civilization had developed in a very similar manner. There was however, one main difference between the two peoples. In this world, humans generate electricity mainly through coal, petroleum, and nuclear power, although solar, hydroelectric, and other renewable energies are becoming more common. In this other world, though, energy was not gathered from these sources, but instead was tapped from a giant crystal, known as simply ‘The Source’.

The Source was massive – probably at least as tall as the empire state building in this world – and, as all crystals do, it generated an energy field. Most crystals are too small for the energy field to be very useful, and so in this world they have never been cultivated. The Source, on the other hand, was large enough to house a massive energy store. Humans had been tapping the energy of The Source for decades and there was still no sign of the energy diminishing. Some said that the energy was self-renewing, and that the crystal was connected directly to life itself.

This other world continued to use the energy of the crystal to develop their civilization, and they may have taken a very different path had not a war broken out. War eventually affects every human population, and this one was no exception. The cause of the war is unimportant; like most wars, the root cause was ignorance and greed. The Source – and surrounding land - had long ago been declared a neutral territory that could not be claimed by anyone for fear that if such a war broke out, the side with the crystal would be unstoppable. This was a wise decision, and for the first several years the rule was followed, but after a while the war dragged on, and both sides were becoming desperate.

There were tales of people who had been taken into the crystal, and then emerged with supernatural abilities and gifts, and it was to these stories that the leader of one country turned. He had no way of knowing how to cause the crystal to take someone into itself however, so he settled on the next best thing. He would send something into the crystal.

For his plan to work, the subject had to be young enough that the energy of The Source could be readily absorbed. Furthermore, the plot had to go unnoticed. Fortunately, The Source extended several miles underground, and emerged into some large caverns. It was in these caverns that he set up his laboratory. He spent several months searching for the right child to use- he or she needed to be healthy, on the right side, easily manipulated, and easy to take. This combination was harder to find in a child than one would think, and alternate measures had to be used. Instead of inserting a child into the crystal, he inserted a human embryo.

The unborn fetus was inserted directly into the heart of The Source, where it would, hopefully, continue to develop and absorb the crystal’s energy. This was not, however, what actually happened. After several months’ time, the embryo still had not grown, and he began to fear that the child was dead, and the energy too powerful. Tests were done, and a hypothesis was formed. The crystal’s energy, rather than speeding the growth of the fetus, was slowing it. Because there was an endless bounty of energy for the embryo to use, there was no real need for the fetus to grow. After several weeks of brainstorming, the researchers still had not been able to produce a solution, and the plan was abandoned.

The researchers, who thought that they had failed, did not bother to remove the embryo from the crystal. Over time, the fetus grew, unwatched. The surplus of energy from the crystal, despite slowing growth, could not stop it completely, and the embryo slowly developed into a child. Over the course of six hundred years, the child grew to be the physical age of approximately six years old. This child was me.

Inside the crystal, my sense of time was not the same as it is now. To me, it didn’t feel like six hundred years had passed at all. I did, however, have awareness of what was going on, and it certainly wasn’t as though I was in a coma. I knew, in fact, more than many on that planet about what was going on. The energy of the crystal, which tapped into an interconnected network of crystal that flowed throughout the planet, was infusing into me. As a result, I at least had a general idea of the happenings on the planet.

I also had a more intimate relationship with the crystal than anyone on that planet did, due to the fact that I was suspended in it. The crystal gave me energy, and in return, I gave it a sense of life. Through me, the crystal’s energy had a chance to be a part of form, rather than the quartz crystal (which is, really, closer to energy than physical matter). I grew to understand the personality, so to speak, of The Source, and we developed something as close to friendship as a human child and a crystal can form.

Due to my unique relationship with the crystal, and my knowledge of the events of that world, I was perhaps the only one who could have guessed what was about to happen. The planet was currently submerged in yet another war, but this one was their most desperate yet. In an attempt to completely destroy their enemy, they launched a scheme to drill into the heart of the crystal and use the energy within it to devastate their opponents.

As you may have guessed, this idea did not exactly go as planned. By drilling into the crystal, they provided a pathway through which the massive amount of energy contained within the crystal could leave. The crystal was possessed of a certain intelligence, and part of this was an intense curiosity. This energy had not been outside the crystal in billions, perhaps trillions, of years, and it had a desperate need to know what the outer world was like beyond the vague impressions the network gave to it. To fulfill this desire, the energy left the crystal through the drill-hole in a violent explosion.

To completely understand the enormity of this expulsion, you must realize that the energy within this crystal had been building for at least as many years as there has been life on Earth. This energy was all leaving at one time, through one tiny hole, and the result was catastrophic. The explosion formed was powerful enough that not only was the enemy completely destroyed, but so was everything else on the planet. In fact, the very fabric of the space-time continuum was broken for a split second, releasing the contents of the (now empty) dimension into other worlds. For the most part, these contents included the basic elements; carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, and others. But for one exception: me.

When the crystal blew up, I was nearly killed. The only thing that saved me was my closeness to the crystal. I was in the center of The Source, and as such all of the energy was leaving the area, not going to it. I was in the ‘eye of the storm’, and this is quite possibly the only reason I am still alive. All of the energy left the area I was in, and this outward force protected me from the worst of the onslaught.

The ‘storm’ continued on for some time, but eventually it had to end. The energy, once released from the crystal, destroyed the world. All matter – trees, humans, birds, lizards, fish, water, clouds, stars, and everything else – was gone. I was alone (freed from the crystal when it shattered from the energy release) with the energy in a broken world. But not for long. The energy, now bored and restless, desperately searched for the crystal to return to. Unable to find The Source, it settled on the only thing left in the world, and the most familiar thing it could find – Me.

Had I not grown up inside the crystal, I would probably have died immediately. As it was, however, my body had developed in close proximity to this energy, and was as used to it as anything could be. Still, the energy – once trapped inside a massive crystal – was far too strong for my tiny human body. As the energy rushed in, I felt a peculiar sensation throughout my body. It is difficult to describe, but there was a tingling sensation, coupled with an almost jittery feeling and a very strong pressure. At first, it was manageable, but as more energy rushed in, the pressure continued to build.

I began to see spots, and felt physical pain. I cannot tell you how strong this pain actually was, however, as this was the first time I had ever encountered physical sensation and everything felt extremely strong. My head was pounding, my eyes felt as though they would erupt, and still the energy kept on coming! Would it never end? Finally, I could take it no longer, and fainted.

When I awoke once more, I noticed two things: First, I was no longer in the empty world I had left. Second, I was filled with the entire energy of The Source. I reached a cautious thought towards the energy, questioning it. *How did you get inside me without killing me?*

The answer was immediate. I learned that, in an attempt to fit inside such a small vessel, the energy had been forced to concentrate itself until it was much stronger than before, but also much smaller. This alone allowed it to fit inside my body. The process of concentration had been the final straw for the already overtaxed boundaries of time and space, and a tiny hole appeared. It was through this hole that we had fallen, and emerged into a new world.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

I was free. For the first time in my life, I could do anything I wanted. No longer trapped inside a crystal, lost underground and forgotten! Endless opportunities awaited me. I was excited, but at the same time I felt the sharp tinge of fear. I was six hundred years old, and yet I had no experience in the world. Especially not *this* world, which I had never even set food in before! But I knew I wouldn’t just let this opportunity pass me by. I was filled with the energy of an entire world, and I was able, for the first time in a long life, to live.

I decided to set off in the direction of the nearest town. It was only once I was already walking, however, that I realized how unusual it was for me to know what direction the nearest town was in. I paused for a moment, closing my eyes. Instantly the answer to my unasked question came to me. The Source energy within me was giving me the knowledge my experience couldn’t. I searched my mind, finding facts that meant nothing to me, and images of things I had never seen. There were vast expanses of water, vast areas of sand, and tall pillars of stone. I saw Flowers in a thousand colours, and tiny animals with wings that sparkled like jewels. This was a far cry from my dark little cavern, and I was enthralled with it.

Finally, I arrived at town. I knew beforehand that I was there, because I was immediately assaulted by a wave of energy so strong that I crumpled to the ground. Eyes screwed shut; I could see a million different scenes – women nursing children, cars parking, men arguing. I felt the emotions of *every single person* in the town, and it was overwhelming. Unable to move, and barely able to think, I desperately reached out to the energy within me. In a rush it came to me; pouring into a glowing shield that protected me from the worst of the onslaught. I could still feel the emotions of the crowd, and sensations still whipped around my mind, but now I was able to function. Relieved, I slowly opened my eyes and got to my feet.

After that lovely experience, I was more careful around humans. I had learned my lesson – other animals had quiet minds, but with humans I needed protection. My little shield put a slight drain on my energy, and didn’t completely block out anything, but it was enough. As I walked through the streets, I mentally compared them to my home world. The electronic devices were much the same, but the power lines were different – ours were underground, so they could tap the Source energy. People wore similar clothing, but I found it odd that in this society, long hair seemed restricted only to women. After much wandering, it grew dark and I realized that I had nowhere to sleep.

Suddenly I felt a presence approaching me. I turned just in time to see a man walk up to me, smiling. “Hello, miss. Are you lost? Where are your parents?”

Let me just interject now that, although I am telling you this in English, these conversations occurred in Manderin Chinese. I had never spoken the language before (indeed, I had never before spoken *any* language), but I knew it nonetheless due to the Source energy that coursed within me. I looked up at the man, scanning his energy. Once I had learned that he had no intentions of harming me (I was a bit vulnerable, but not stupid) I replied. “No, I don’t know where I am. I don’t have any parents” I tilted my head at him “Can you help me?”

The man nodded. “Of course I can help you. Why don’t you come with me and I’ll get you a place to sleep?”

I followed him through the streets to a two-story building with a sign that proclaimed it to be the ‘Spring Mornings Orphanage’. He led me inside, and we entered a waiting room, where he told me to sit down, while he himself entered another room. While this was going on, I was receiving information (whether I wanted to or not) about the man, whose name was Enlai. Enlai did not work at the orphanage, but having been an orphan himself, he always tried to be nice to those he met. He honestly wanted to help me, but found me rather confusing because I apparently didn’t match any of the ethnicities he had heard of, and I had an unrecognizable accent. There was more, but I would bore you with all the details.

After about a minute of waiting, I began to notice that the material the seats were made of (Plastic, according to the Source) was very uncomfortable, and was starting to bother me. I fidgeted a little bit, trying to get the itching to go away, but to no avail. Come to think of it, this entire room made me feel *wrong*. The air was too heavy, and energies stuck to every surface. I could feel the pain and sadness of a thousand other children who had sat here a thousand times before. Apparently more things could get through my shield than I had thought.

Just when I didn’t know how much more I could stand it, Enlai re-entered the room with a woman I learned was named Lanfen. Lanfen was tired, but her smile was welcoming. “Hello, child. You’re an orphan?”

I nodded. *Orphan* seemed to mean parentless, which was certainly true for me. Granted, my parents hadn’t died, but that seemed trivial. “Yes ma’am, I’m an orphan”

Lanfen considered for a moment. “Well, we still have room here, so why don’t you stay? I’ll need to talk to you in the morning, but for now, I’ll just show you to the dining hall and the bedrooms.”

I nodded again, grateful. “That would be wonderful,” I turned to Enlai. “Thank you for helping me”

Enlai smiled at me. “Don’t worry about it. I’m just glad I could help” He started toward the door. “Bye, miss”

I smiled. “Bye!”

After he left, Lanfen showed me to the dining hall. I didn’t really need directions, but I humoured her. Once we arrived at the dining hall – a large room with a table of food on one end and many other tables filling the rest of the space – she turned to me. “You get something to eat, and then I’ll show you to the girl’s rooms. Usually, there are other children here, but you arrived just after they’d left.”

“Okay, thank you.” I would have said more to her, but by this time I was very hungry. I had never needed to eat before, in the crystal, so this was a new experience for me. I walked down to the end of the room with the food and took a plate. Looking over my options, I could immediately tell that each item had a different energy signature. The most pleasant belonged to the bowl of fruit, so I took a large helping of that, as well as some of the rice, which was also pleasant. The meats I avoided completely, as my mind was bombarded with images of dead and dying animals whenever I went near the food. Taking my plate, as well as a large glass of water, I went to a table and started eating.

Once I was finished, I went back to the lady. “Thank you ma’am. I’m done eating now, so could you show me where I can sleep?”

Lanfen nodded. “Yes, of course. Follow me.” She started off, and I followed after her as she led me to another large room, this time lined with beds. “You can sleep in bed number 9”.

“Okay” I yawned – another new experience, as I’d never needed to sleep before. “I’m going to go to sleep now.”

She smiled at me. “Okay. I’ll see you in the morning to get everything straightened out. The other children will be coming in soon to go to bed themselves” Lanfen left the room, leaving me to myself.

I immediately went to my bed and stretched out. Closing my eyes, I was asleep in a second, and I was so completely out that I didn’t even wake when the other children entered the room.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

The next morning dawned bright and sunny, and I woke up feeling much more awake than I had the night before. Interesting. I needed sleep, even though the Source energy prevented me from aging. I made a mental inquiry as to why this happened, and, as usual, an answer slipped quickly and silently into my mind. Apparently, although the Source energy would slow the speed at which I aged, sleep rejuvenated my mind as well as my body, and helped to vent the events of the day. For these reasons, my body still needed sleep.

The first thing I noticed when I woke up was the energy of the other children. My shield had gone down while I slept, and the energies once again overwhelmed me. I put my shield up again as quickly as possible, and got out of bed. Some of the other children were also waking up, and it wasn’t long before one girl approached me.

“Hello. Are you new? What’s your name?” She had short black hair and was seven years old. Her name was Biyu, and she had been here for exactly six months and two days. Her parents had died in a car crash and---

I tried to ignore the stream of information and focused on her question. My name. I had a name? I tried desperately to remember if the scientists had called me anything in particular, but there was nothing. I guess that meant that I got to choose a name for myself, and started to think. Remembering what I was told to be the name of the fruit I’d had the night before, I answered her. “My name is Manderin”

She smiled at me. “Hi Manderin. I’m Biyu. Do you want to come with me to breakfast?”

I nodded, realizing that I was hungry again. Living outside the crystal took a lot more work... I followed Biyu out of the room and down the hall to the breakfast area while she chattered at me and asked questions. “Why are you here? Did you arrive last night? Where are you from? You don’t look Chinese. Why are you wearing that funny clothing?”

Head still spinning from all the questions, I started to answer them one by one. “I’m here because I’m an orphan. Yes, I arrived last night. I’m from another place. No, I’m not Chinese. As for the clothing...” I looked down at myself. Earlier, when I’d realized that clothing was a required part of society, some of the Source energy had materialized around me as a formless white robe. “It’s all I have.”

When we arrived at the breakfast room, she stopped talking, and I breathed a sigh of relief. We headed to the food tables to get breakfast, and I was pleased to see that there was more fruit and less meat available today. We got our food and headed to a table. For a moment, I was afraid that she would start talking again, but thankfully she stayed quiet and I could focus on eating and ignoring the information and energy that was still rushing at me.

When we finished eating, I put my plate away and told Biyu that I had to go. “I’m sorry, but I told Lanfen that I’d talk to her today. I’ll probably see you later, though”

Biyu smiled. “Okay! I’ll see you at lunch!” She made a queer rocking motion with her hand that the Source energy informed me was a social gesture known as waving. I waved back at her and left the room.

I scanned the building for Lanfen’s energy signature, and followed it to her office. When I entered the room, she looked up at me, surprised. “Oh, hello! I didn’t expect to see you here. You must have asked one of the other students for directions, I suppose.”

I started to tell her that I hadn’t needed to ask anyone for directions, but was interrupted. “Well, we may as well start our conversation. Why don’t you sit down?” I moved to one of the chairs (this one was made of cloth, not that awful plastic) and waited.

“What is your name, child? I’m afraid I didn’t catch it last night.”

“Manderin” I told her.

“Welcome to Spring Mornings, Manderin. We just need to get you registered here in our files” She pulled out a sheet of paper with writing on it, and plucked a pencil out of a cup on her desk. “Where are you from?”

“I’m from somewhere far away – another dimension, similar to this one. I didn’t really know it very well, though. I spent my life there trapped inside a crystal. That world is dead now, because the crystal exploded and destroyed everything. A hole appeared in the space-time continuum that dropped me here.”

Lanfen blinked. “Well, I can see that you have quite the imagination, Manderin, but we really do need to know where you’re from.”

I stared at her, confused. It was obvious that she didn’t believe me, and didn’t know what to make of my story. A quick scan of her mind told me what my mistake had been. Apparently people like me and the world I had come from weren’t known about yet here. Obviously, she couldn’t take the truth, and yet I was reluctant to lie to her. “I’m sorry Lanfen. I don’t exactly know what to say. All I know is that I’m from somewhere really far away and that my home doesn’t exist anymore”

Lanfen’s expression softened. “Well, that’s okay, Manderin. You can have a home here for as long as you need one”.