

Again, I hear it.

The bells.

As if the cold, silver blanket of snow is being broken by a sleigh, far away. But no sleigh comes. It never does. Every night, I hear those bells. Every night, I hope someone comes. Every night, I stay lost, in this city of trees which is the exact opposite of my home on the snowy plains of Ronde. And every morning, I wake up hoping that this forest is all a bad dream. But it's worse than a dream, because it's real. I must be far from Ronde now, somewhere in the Sperran Forests. But this night, I'm going to look for those bells, and maybe someone will come, and break this silence. I've been in this forest for a week now, and I want to get out. I gather up all the belongings I have, and I start walking towards the sound of those bells. Every step I take seems to send a loud rustle, heard by all the creatures of the forest. The bells get louder. "Hello?" I call, but the only answer is the bells, ringing louder than ever. *Come, find us..... Come, find us.....* The leaves seem to whisper, as if the bells are speaking within them. Suddenly, everything stops and is silent, even the wind. And then I see it. Right in front of me the forest stops, and I am standing on the edge of a wide, snowy plain. I look at the vast, white distance and there is a city a long run away. I run towards it, and 10 minutes later, I have got there, and somehow feel no pain at all. I open my eyes, and the first thing I see are the silver bells, coating almost every roof. A breeze floats through the town and the sky turns rose colored. The little bells shiver and make a little tinkling sound, then get stronger, turning into the familiar ring that has now become part of the forest itself. Slowly, they stop, only occasionally tinkling in the breeze. The sun lifts up from the horizon, turning the sky golden. I hear a final ring of the bells, and I smile. I'm almost home.

Ronde is a beautiful country, with the vast, white plains stretching miles and miles around my city, Selve. It is bordered by the Alias Mountains, and beyond that is Sperr. Sperr is forest. Just forest. The only livable place there is Carnn, a tiny village somewhere in the center of the Ivory Forest. After Sperr lies the Burning Sea, which is called so because its waters are so cold they burn. There is a small island in the warmer parts(which are not warm at all) called Sprill. I have been to Sprill once, during the Months of Sun, so it was way warmer than it usually was. In the months of Endless Night, though, all lands north of the Ivory Forest are dark, and there is barely any food except for the little that comes from Phoenix, my namesake land, by ships. Right now, I would do anything to get back to Selve, dark or not. By now, I've figured out where I am. This stone city is Ast, and it lies far south of Selve. I'm in the Lower Plains, south of the mountains. It's 3 days to Phoenix by horse, and since Selve will be dark for a couple more months, I'll go to Phoenix. It must be wonderful. The last meal I had in Selve was of a sweet, red fruit with a green shell, and I know that somewhere with wonderful food might just be as beautiful. I got a horse here in Ast, pure white with black mane and tail. Her name is Shadow, and she runs with the swiftness of the wind. I'll ride her to Phoenix.

Quickly, I mount Shadow and help my new friend Esila climb onto her horse, Wind. Esila is coming with me, because she knows the way to Phoenix and I do not. At first, riding through the

plains is wonderful. Then we begin to slow down. Then we are pushing our horses at a slow trot. Then, we stop. And eat. And unsaddle our horses. And sleep.

The next day, it's all the same. Same snow, same horses, same sound of hooves of sod. And the next day. But on the fourth morning, Esila's cries of joy wake me up. "Phoenix!" She shouts. "Look!!" I do, and what I see makes me jump up and swing into Shadow's saddle. I can see Phoenix Valley! Far away, but still there! For the next hour, Shadow and Wind gallop enthusiastically for the valley. Slowly, the white land around us turns spearmint colored, and finally, green. Tall plants with fire colored fruit loom over the fresh green grass. I eat one. It tastes good, so I eat more. Esila eats some too. When she finishes one, she whispers "Firefruit". And she eats more. Shadow neighs reproachfully, and I give her some too. We continue through the valley, and at the very end I gasp. A beautiful city is laid out right in front of me, with tall steel towers crowned with firefruit vines.

A girl, my age, runs up to me and says "Are you from Selve?"

I nod.

"Come with me."

I grab her hand, and she steers me through the crowd.

"My name is Serale." She says.

"I am Phoenix." I reply.

Serale says "You are not going to believe what you see."

I nod again.

Serale has led me out of the city. I see plains now, mint green fields stretching far and wide.

She tells me to mount Shadow and she mounts her own horse, a black one. We ride a little.

Serale then tells me to dismount, and leaves me at the top of a hill. I go down the hill. Leading Shadow, I almost fall over her when I identify the city before me.

I see Selve.