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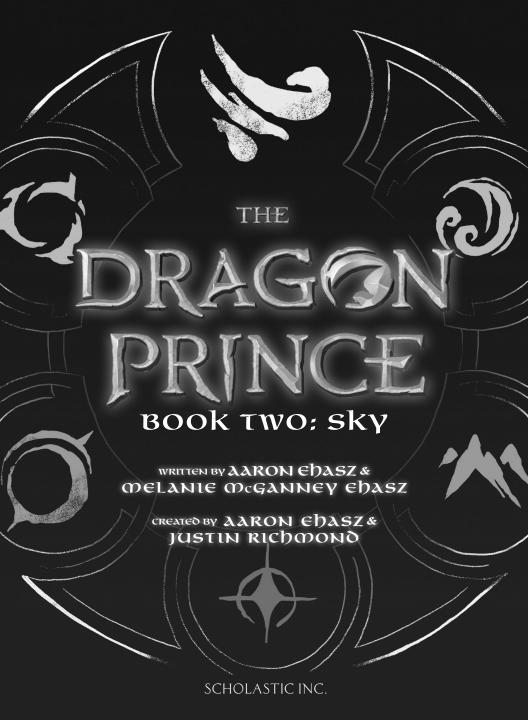
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It was a big world, and sometimes it felt daunting.

The girl was the granddaughter of the famous inventor who had built wings out of wax. And so, she knew the Warning Story better than anyone. It was the story of how her uncle had died because he didn't listen to Grandfather's warnings not to fly too high, and so his wings melted when he flew too close to the sun.

The girl told her mother that she wanted to fly more than anything. But her mother and all the other adults told the girl it was too dangerous. They told her over and over: Remember the Warning Story.

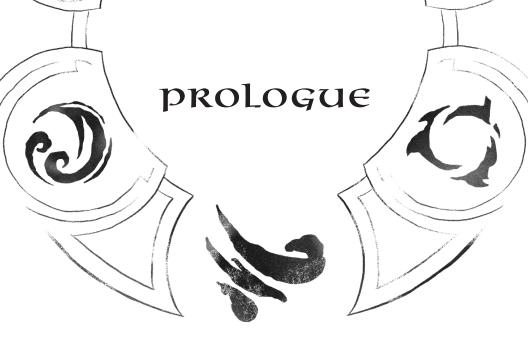
Nevertheless, she persisted.

The girl found the old wax wings, which had been hidden away. The wax was strong enough to hold the feathers, but the hot sun would melt the wax. So the girl strengthened the wax by adding her strongest glue, which she knew would stay solid even in the heat.

When the others saw her wearing the new-and-improved wings, they yelled at her to stop. "You'll fly too high!" they said.

Were they afraid she would fail, or were they afraid she would succeed?

With some luck and a strong breeze, the girl flapped her wings. Soon she was airborne. Soaring through the sky, she felt so free! And from high up there, the world looked ... smaller. Not *small*, but just the right size. And the girl knew she could do anything, even change it.



Dear King Harrow,

I hope you're not too worried about me and Ezran. It feels like a lifetime since we left home, but it's only been a week. We had to leave because we found something the world thought was destroyed—the egg of the Dragon Prince! I tried to tell you, but Lord Viren stopped me from entering your chambers. So, Ezran and I decided to take a journey across the world, carrying this precious egg home to its mother in Xadia. Bait tagged along, in case you were looking for him. We hope that when the Dragon Queen receives her egg from humans we will be able to stop the war.

It's been an amazing adventure. I'm even learning how to do magic! And I'm weirdly sort of good at it. It feels good to finally be good at something! Weirdly good.

There have been a ton of surprises on our journey. Things never went as we planned. In the past week, we've slept in the woods, been chased out of the Banther Lodge, and taken a rowboat down high rapids, where we were attacked by a sea monster that thought Bait would make a perfect snack! Bait made it out totally fine, though he was so terrified I think I saw him turn a few colors I've never seen before.

During a huge snowstorm, the egg plunged into a frozen lake for a few minutes and we thought all was lost ... but something incredible happened. We managed to haul the egg up the Cursed Caldera, where we got some good advice and, well, to make a long story a little shorter, the egg hatched and now we're taking care of someone new! The Dragon Prince is here! He's the most powerful creature in the world, and he's just about the cutest thing I've ever seen.

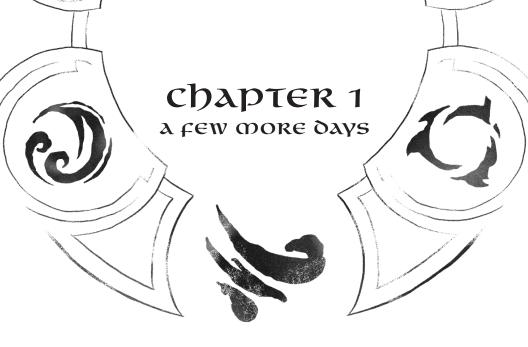
This journey hasn't always been easy—in fact, it's probably the hardest thing I've ever done. But we haven't done it alone. We've been traveling with a new friend, Rayla—a Moonshadow elf. Nothing I believed about elves is true. Rayla is kind and good. She's fearless, fast, and strong...

But I'll stop talking about her because there's something I have to say to you. Ezran keeps telling me that you would want me to call you "Dad." I know you're not my first dad, my daddad...he's gone. But maybe Ezran is right, and you would be okay with this? Let me start this letter again.

Dear Dad,

I love you and I miss you. Ezran and I will take good care of each other until we see you again.

Love, Callum



ome and get it, everyone!"

Callum's ears perked up. There was a gnawing hole in his stomach where food should have been. It seemed like Lujanne had been preparing breakfast for ages. Wasn't she a mage? Couldn't she just conjure something up?

Callum hurried over to the long wooden table nestled in the clearing. He took a seat and looked around the caldera for Rayla. It still felt strange to be friends with a Moonshadow elf, especially an assassin sent to kill his little brother. But he and Ezran—the two princes of Katolis—were still alive and Rayla was now one of the best friends Callum had ever had. He didn't see her, though. Maybe she was sleeping in for once.

"'Morning, Callum!" Ezran said, coming up behind his brother. "Boy, am I hungry! But I think Bait is even hungrier."

Ezran motioned to the pet glow toad at his feet.

Callum glanced at Bait, marveling at his little brother's ability to perceive what animals were feeling. Callum himself could usually tell Bait's mood by the hue of his color-changing skin, but Bait's teal-spotted yellow skin hadn't changed—he was just as grumpy as ever. (Of course, those who knew Bait well knew that underneath the façade of "grump" there was great loyalty, courage, and even grumpy love.)

"Oh, his skin didn't give him away," Ezran said. "And he didn't tell me in glow toad either. He communicated with the universal language—tummy growling!" Ezran chuckled. "But I think Zym is the hungriest of all."

Azymondias, the Dragon Prince whom they all called "Zym," romped over to Ezran and Callum. Only a week ago, this adorable, puppy-like dragon with long eyelashes and a tender heart was inside an egg. And now he was out—hatched and healthy! It was a little hard to believe that Zym was destined to become a massive, epic archdragon. Callum patted the dragon on the head, and Zym immediately nipped at his fingers.

"Hang on, buddy," Callum said. "Breakfast is coming."

"Whoa! Ava! Come back here, girl!"

A huge wolf burst into the clearing, followed by Ellis. Ellis was the brave girl who'd led them up the Cursed Caldera in search of the Moon mage Lujanne. Years ago, Lujanne had healed Ellis's wolf pet, Ava. Ava was massive, but despite her size, she was as tame (and as fluffy) as a kitten. She was missing a leg due to an old injury, but she didn't seem to notice or care. Ava gave Zym a big lick on the cheek.

Callum sighed, feeling lucky they'd met all these new people and creatures on their journey. After all, Zym might not ever have hatched if Callum and Ezran hadn't met Ellis and Ava and Lujanne.

He also felt lucky he was about to consume the most tantalizing dishes he had ever seen.

"Elves and humans over here," Lujanne said, pointing to the garland-covered table. "And those with three or more legs can sit there, with Phoe-Phoe." Lujanne gestured to a nearby clearing where her pet, the immense moon phoenix Phoe-Phoe, was standing. Phoe-Phoe guarded four large bowls with her spread feathers, but Callum could see that the dishes were heaped with squiggling worm-things. Ava, Zym, and Bait hopped over to Phoe-Phoe and immediately began chowing down.

"You named your pet 'Phoe-Phoe'?" Ellis asked Lujanne in her squeaky voice.

"She's a moon phoenix," Lujanne said. "Her name is short for Phoenix-Phoenix."

Phoe-Phoe squawked and flapped her brilliant blue wings when she heard her own name.

"Can we try whatever we want?" Callum asked, greedily eyeing an iced chocolate cake. Ezran had already helped himself to a plate of cookies, but Callum didn't want to be rude.

"Of course, dear," Lujanne said sweetly. "The choice is all yours."

"You have the best food up here," Ezran garbled. His mouth was full and he clutched pastries in both hands. "What's your secret?"

"Well..." Lujanne started. She tapped a long, shapely fingernail on her tan cheek. Her lip twitched. "My secret is... that it's all fake." She smiled.

"What do you mean, fake?" Callum asked as he sank his teeth into a crispy layered pastry. Nothing had ever tasted more flaky, more buttery, more delectable than this delicate tower of delight.

"You know, fake," she said. "They're delicious illusions."

Callum nodded while he chewed, although he had no idea what Lujanne was talking about.

"You're actually eating grubs," Lujanne said, still smiling sweetly.

Callum froze midbite, and then placed the exquisite treat he was holding back on the table. He tried to stay focused on the melt-in-your-mouth flaky goodness, but now that he knew it was a spell, he was starting to detect the writhing larvae that were apparently being disguised by the illusion.

"Oh, you must mean 'grub'?" Ezran asked. He brushed a few long dark curls out of his eyes. "Like as in, 'Wow, this is some good grub!"

Callum looked over at Ezran. His kid brother was still eating with gusto. He wanted to explain to Ezran that there was no cultural misunderstanding over the word *grubs*, but he was too nauseated.

"Um...no," Lujanne said. "Do you see what Phoe-Phoe is eating?"

Callum looked over at the pet area, where the four animals had their heads buried in squirming worms. All Callum could hope was that Ezran would swallow his last bite before he realized the unpleasant truth.

"That bowl of worms?" Ezran asked tentatively.

"Those are grubs," Lujanne said. "Technically not worms, but insect larvae. Extremely nutritious!"

Ezran clutched his stomach. Nearby, Ellis continued to chew what appeared to be a slice of blueberry chocolate pie.

"I don't care," Ellis said. "Worms. Flies. Yesterday's garbage. This illusion pie is the best I've ever had." She cut herself another slice as Ezran quietly vomited onto the grass.

"Hey, everybody!" Rayla called out, jumping down from a hilltop and waving both hands.

*Rayla!* Callum stood up, desperate to move on from the whole grubs situation.

"Well, you're in a good mood," Ellis said to Rayla.

"It does feel good to have two working hands again," Rayla said. Her pointy ears wiggled with excitement. When she caught sight of Ava with only three legs, she looked a little sheepish. "Uh, no offense, Ava." But Ava just panted happily and returned to her grubs.

"Guess what, folks—I can slish and slash with both swords again," Rayla said. She hurled herself up a craggy rock, swung both blades around in an exuberant whirl, and then quickly folded them away. "I can also clap, do handstands, and do that thing when you finish a nice song and dance." Rayla clapped, tumbled into a handstand, and finished off with perfect form, waving both hands in the air.

"That's so great, Rayla!" Ezran exclaimed.

Callum was relieved Rayla's hand had fully healed. Just a few days ago, it had turned a deep and disturbing shade of purple, constricted by a tight binding on her wrist. Rayla had magically bound herself to killing the human prince, Ezran. But of course, that was before they had gotten to know each other. When Rayla decided she would not follow through on her assassin's duty, the unbreakable binding became tighter and tighter until it seemed her hand might fall off. But the little dragon Zym had solved the problem by nibbling off the binding with his baby teeth! Easy for Zym, but a true miracle for anyone who wasn't a legendary dragon.

"And how's everybody else feeling?" Rayla asked, cupping her now healthy hand to her ear.

She received a chorus of enthusiastic responses.

"Glad to hear everyone is feeling good!" Rayla went on. She looked around mischievously. Then her voice turned from playful to deadly serious. "Cause it's time to go."

"What? Why?" Callum asked. "We barely just got to the Moon Nexus."

Everyone else groaned in agreement. If nothing else, Callum thought saving and hatching a dragon egg might buy him three or four days of rest and relaxation.

But Rayla ignored the griping. "Danger is coming for us, I know it. The longer we stay here, the higher the risk," she told them. "I'm not trying to scare you all, I'm just being realistic."

"She's right," Lujanne said. "The night the Dragon Prince was born, I sensed something amiss." She shook her head. "Those strange purple wisps that were drawn to the newborn

dragon that night—pretty as they were, there were dark forces behind them that are now probably pursuing you."

"Nobody likes dark forces! Which is why—" Rayla signaled it was time to go by swinging both hands toward the foot of the mountain.

"Making good use of those two hands, huh?" Ezran said.

Callum smiled. His little brother had inherited their mother's sense of humor. Her jokes had often been accompanied by an encouraging smile, as Ezran's was now.

"You bet I am," Rayla said. "Besides, we've got precious cargo to deliver. War is coming, like the world's never seen, unless we get the wee dragon home to his mom."

"But Zym—he's so widdle. He still needs to learn how to fly," Ezran said.

"Ez is right," Callum said. He was also reluctant to leave the relative safety of the Moon Nexus while Zym was still so fragile. Plus, he was hoping to learn some Moon magic while they were here.

"Ezran seems to have a special connection to the dragonling," Lujanne said thoughtfully. She turned to Ezran. "Perhaps you could teach him to fly?"

"Me?" Ezran asked. "But I don't know how to fly."

Callum nodded encouragingly at his little brother. He was sure Ezran was the right person for the job, despite his lack of wings.

"I could try," Ezran finally said.

"Good. We'll be stronger as a group if Zym can fly," Callum said. "And even stronger if I knew more magic. Maybe you could teach me some Moon magic, Lujanne?"

"I could show you some things," she said.

"Ummm, Lujanne, I thought you were on my side?" Rayla said. "Remember, dark forces, purple wisps?"

Lujanne shrugged noncommittally.

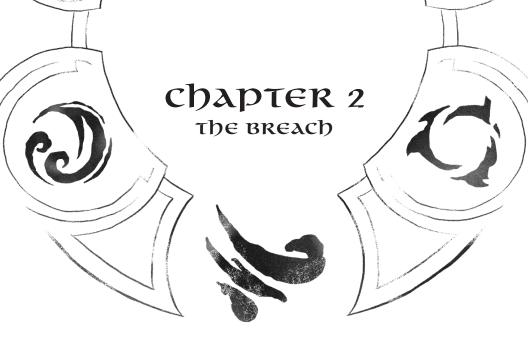
"A few more days, Rayla—that's all we're asking," Callum pleaded. "I wrote a letter to my stepfather to catch him up on everything. I think there's a real chance that he'll send us help if he can. We should hang out for that."

"A letter to your stepfather? The ... king?" Rayla asked.

"Yes. That's what I said," Callum replied. He noticed Rayla's face turn even paler than usual. She could clearly use some rest too.

"Fine," Rayla relented. "We'll stay one extra day—one! But I'm serious about the danger. I'll keep patrolling. Everyone else, stay on your toes." She looked intently at each member of the group, her eyes landing on Zym. "Except you. You work on getting off those toes!" She flapped her hands like wings, and the baby dragon seemed to smile in reply.

Callum was glad Rayla was going to continue patrolling to keep them safe—but he was even gladder that he now might have enough time to learn some Moon magic.



This was the single thought running through General Amaya's head as she rushed away from Katolis toward the Breach. She'd had to leave the princes' safety in the hands of her trusted interpreter, Commander Gren, for without her leadership at the Breach, the humans' secret passageway into the magical land of Xadia would become vulnerable.

Amaya dug her heels into her horse until the rhythm of its hooves hitting the ground was almost as fast as her heartbeat. Protecting the Breach was a huge responsibility. Centuries ago, after all humans were driven out of Xadia, the continent had literally been divided in two as the great dragons scorched a deep scar into the earth and filled it with a river of molten lava. But humans had discovered a hidden feature: Beneath an

epic lavafall, a slight ridge protruded from the cliff's face, forming a treacherous path across the molten river—a singular, secret link to Xadia! The Breach was a closely guarded secret of the kingdom of Katolis, and humans controlled outposts on both sides of the passage. It was critical that elves and dragons never learned of the secret passage bridging the continent's divide.

Amaya slowed her horse as she approached the Breach. She needed to cross the path to reach the outpost on the Xadia side, which was hidden within the walls of the cliff itself.

As she started down the path, the sky was so dark, it was hard to believe it was morning. She trod carefully, scanning the scene for anything amiss.

Amaya had been born deaf, but she'd learned to hear with her eyes in situations like this. She took in every detail and every movement, no matter how small. Her mind constructed a perfectly detailed map of everything in front of and behind her—and in every direction, for that matter—so that she could detect any change or variation instantly.

Amaya turned her horse in a circle, looking for anything of importance, being careful to avoid the blasts of steam that rose from natural vents in the ground. Had her horse's ears just flitted to the left?

Amaya whipped her own head in that direction and trotted slowly toward a large vent. There wasn't much steam coming out, considering the size of the hole. She dismounted and leaned in to examine it. *This was curious*—

She suddenly felt vibrations on the pathway floor behind her.

They were decidedly *not* her horse's footsteps. In an instant, she leaped off her horse and whirled to face the three figures who had followed her down the path. All three wore fire-red armor that set off their mahogany skin tone. Amaya recognized them in an instant.

Sunfire elves.

The warriors raised their swords and rushed the general.

They were fierce, determined elves, and it was three on one, but Amaya's strength, experience, and mighty shield outmatched all three. One by one, she fought each elf to the edge of the path until each one fell screaming into the fire pit below.

Out of breath but alert, Amaya looked up. Apparently, she wasn't done.

A female warrior wearing a golden headdress stood a few feet away, her armor glinting in the firelight. Her yellow-gold face paint highlighted her dark brown eyes and fierce expression. She had a hand on her sword, but she stood still—calm and confident. Amaya was sure she was facing a Sunfire knight, one of the most elite fighters in all of Xadia. She felt a twinge of intimidation, but steeled herself for battle.

They locked eyes. Then, with a slow, steady hand, the knight reached for her sword in its runed sheath. Amaya gritted her teeth; she recognized the weapon as a glowing Sunforge blade. One of the rarest weapons in the world, the blade's heat alone could kill.

It suddenly seemed to Amaya that she and the knight had been sizing each other up for hours—it was time to break the standoff. "AHHHHHHHH!" she cried. She lowered her head and charged the knight.

The two warriors clashed. The Sunforge blade sliced through Amaya's sword like a hot knife through butter, breaking it in two. Amaya would have to rely on her shield now.

The knight came at Amaya multiple times, swinging the heavy blade with ease. The general dodged each of the elf's dangerous swings, but the hot orange glow of the blade was so bright, it was nearly blinding. At one point, her shield took a hit from the blade that left it with a smoldering gash in its surface.

Amaya noticed that the Sunfire knight's confidence seemed to grow with each swing of her blade. The general knew that those who feel invulnerable sometimes neglect their other senses—a mistake Amaya herself would never make.

Your blade may be invincible, Amaya silently said to the knight as she dodged swings of the blade. But you are not. Watch and learn.

Amaya bided her time till there was some space between her and the knight. Then Amaya stood tall and beckoned the knight to approach her.

Sure enough, the knight took the bait. When she charged forward, Amaya was ready: She slammed the knight in the torso with a side kick that sent her flying backward. The knight landed on her back, skidding to a halt just inches from the lava.

It was a small victory, and Amaya knew her weapons would not hold up against a Sunforge blade forever. She took this opportunity to mount her horse and race back the way she came.



"Dragons! The Xadian threat grows every day," Viren said as he slammed his fists down on the battle table. "Wake up!"

It was early in the morning, but he had been up for hours, strategizing about the kingdom's future, *caring* about the kingdom's future. Some of the other council members were still rubbing sleep from their eyes.

Viren, the high mage, had called this meeting of the council in the throne room to discuss the next steps for the kingdom of Katolis. The princes had both disappeared; there was an empty throne and no clear successor. The council would listen to him. He would make them understand that King Harrow's assassination was only the first incident in what was surely a full-scale war.

"There have been sightings of terrifying shadows in the clouds, flying high above the towns and cities of Katolis—war dragons!" he yelled.

A skeptical council member waved his hand in Viren's face. "Whoa, whoa, whoa—war dragons? How can you tell they're 'war' dragons and not just...you know, regular dragons?"

Viren laughed derisively. Such a question could only come from an ignoramus. He looked at the other council members and shook his head, trying to bring them into his confidence.

"Gigantic destructive beasts are circling at the edge of our kingdom," he said. "They're not our friends. It's naive to ignore this. They're waiting to strike! We must take action."

Viren frowned at the soft murmuring around the table.

Finally, High Cleric Opeli spoke. "No, we should wait. Xadia sent assassins, and they took the king's life," she said.

"Yes," cried Viren. This was exactly his point. Did Opeli want to sit around waiting to be attacked again? "And we must answer Xadia with force."

"But there hasn't been even the slightest skirmish since then," Opeli said. "Maybe the assassination was it. They've had their revenge, and everything will just... settle down now. Perhaps anything we do would escalate a situation that is actually waning."

"Settle down?!" Viren scoffed. "Can't you see the danger we're in? General Amaya reported that elven forces are gathering on the Xadian side of the Breach. We must be prepared to fight, and we won't be able to fight them alone." He ran his hand through his hair. "I can only hope I am not alone in thinking we must call for a summit of the Pentarchy." Viren knew that as this conflict escalated, it was critical that all five of the human kingdoms combined their strength. He looked around at the council members, trying to get a read on their inclinations.

Opeli, as usual, stood strong against Viren.

"You're out of order, Lord Viren," Opeli said. "Only a king or queen can call for a summit. Frankly, I doubt the other rulers will even look at a message that doesn't bear the king's seal." She crossed her arms.

"But this is a crisis of historic proportions!" Viren yelled. How could Opeli not understand the calamity? "Humanity could face extinction if we don't work with the other four kingdoms to do something!" "None of that matters while we have no king," Opeli said. She leaned in and stared Viren down. "Therefore, our top—and only—priority must be finding the princes. Until we do, our hands are tied."

Another skeptical council member grinned, agreeing with Opeli. Another one yawned.

"It seems the council is still divided," Viren said, "and perhaps not alert enough to make this decision." He shot an accusing glare at the yawner. "The council shall convene again when everyone is properly prepared for this discussion."

Viren left the room before anyone could protest. He did not agree with Opeli when it came to the princes. His hands weren't tied in their absence—quite the opposite, in fact. However, Opeli did make one good point: The only way to get the attention of the other four kingdoms would be with letters bearing the king's seal.

Viren strode across the courtyard and ascended the stairs to King Harrow's chambers. When he reached the top, he shuddered involuntarily at the scene before him. Arrows, elven and king's guard alike, stuck out of the king's chamber doors. Dried, crusted blood splattered the walls. For a moment, Viren found himself reliving the night of the final battle; screams and chaos roiled in his ears. He shook his head to clear the visions, and then entered the king's bedroom.

Although someone had attempted to clean up around the tower, the king's bedroom had been left untouched. The bed was unmade. Harrow's belongings were broken and scattered about. An arrow stuck out of the cracked face of a large pendulum

clock, freezing it at the time of the attack. The balcony door was partially open, and the curtains fluttered softly in the breeze. In the corner, the king's songbird, Pip, stood silently in its cage. Viren walked over.

"Good for you, surviving the attack," Viren told the bird. Pip did not respond.

Viren held one hand over his face to stifle a sob—and sank onto the unmade bed. *I miss you so much already, dear friend*—

He ran his hand over the soft bedclothes, trying to soothe himself, but his hand stopped on a hard object—a small painting in a frame. He picked it up and came face-to-face with a royal family portrait of Harrow, Queen Sarai, young Callum, and baby Ezran. This was certainly one of the very last things the king saw before the assassins came.

Viren felt a pain budding in his chest, a mix of sadness, regret, guilt, and loss. He willed the emotions back down inside before they could grow out of control though. He hadn't come here for sentimental reasons.

He placed the portrait back on the bed, then walked over to Harrow's desk and tugged on the wooden drawer in the middle, the one he'd seen the king pull paper and quills from a million times.

"Locked," Viren muttered to himself. He shook off a final pang of guilt, and then uttered a basic spell. The drawer shot open, revealing the king's seal on a stack of paper next to a ball of red wax. Viren pocketed what he needed and left the chamber.