

THE SPIRITS OF ZENET

by

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CHAPTER 1

The Eepees

Without opening his eyes, the boy remained still, sifting through his mind for any fragments of memory. Who was he? His past was like a vast city concealed behind a hill. He knew it was there and could hear the noise and feel the rumbling, but he could not see it.

Gradually, he realized that he was not on his back. He was standing on his feet, his chin pointed upwards. Cracking his eyelids, he saw a magenta sky, with two fiery suns overhead, their glow blotting out everything else. So strange--so beautiful. Tilting his head, he could make out a tangle of slender trees, which corkscrewed towards the heavens. A breeze stirred the branches, and white leaves sprinkled down.

His body was numb, and a blankness filled his mind. A muddy sack, that's all he could recall. But what else? And what was that pattering sound? His gaze followed the leaves as they came to rest on a bed of orange moss and thorny, blue shrubs, the tips of which curled inward like hooks. How ingenious, he mused, as he spied an airfish

caught wriggling on a shrub. Its orange gills flapped and its white-scaled belly inflated then collapsed, like a balloon being blown up then popped.

The sight sparked vague memories of spheres bursting and flaming as they hurtled past him, like meteors, only these fiery balls had arms that flailed and legs that kicked and faces that writhed in pain. A chill inched up his back, and he coughed, the hacking sound echoing through the empty forest. Distracted, he lost track of his thoughts, his eyes drifting to the shadows made by the wiry branches. What fascinating patterns they created: a violin, a chest of drawers, an insect-like figure swooping down--no, that was in his mind--

Was he dead? Was this what it was like to be extinguished? Had he entered the Spiritless Place? What-- He felt a pressure on his palm. Glancing down, he saw willowy fingers laced through his own rough hand. It was a girl, standing beside him. Although he did not recognize her, something told him that he knew her. Her skin was translucent like mist, and her hair was cyan, cascading down her shoulders in long, flickering curls. Her tunic was torn in several places and her pants were scorched, but she seemed untouched.

"Who are you?" the boy whispered, and as the words left his lips, a pang rippled through his body. He twitched and stumbled backwards, releasing her hand. It hurt inside. Deep inside. "What was--" He tried to speak, but the silence of the woods swallowed his words. The ache was excruciating, and he wondered how his afterlife could be so painful.

The girl looked ahead as if nothing had happened. Something about her appeared weightless, as if a gust of wind could blow her away. Was she dead too?

The boy couldn't help noticing how fair her skin was. It seemed luminous, while his was a dark brown, as if he'd sprouted from the soil. Shaking off the fear that had lodged itself in his throat, he barked, "Look at me. Can you hear me?"

Her gray eyes stirred. Despite her mature expression, she looked young, maybe fifteen, like himself. She wavered, then gasped. The boy could tell that she felt the pain too. He tried to reach out and take her hand again, but his arm was numb. His fingers had bent into a claw--crooked and throbbing.

"Where are we?" Her voice broke.

"Er--" Another wave of pain seized his back, but he held himself upright. He was certain that he was not dead or dreaming--everything was too intense. Seeing her body tremble, he leaned towards her. "Did you feel that?"

"It hurts," she choked.

"Something's very wrong. C'mon, we shouldn't be standing here." He lurched forward.

"No, wait--" she blurted out. "What's that you're holding?" Her eyes fixed on his left hand, which was pressed against his chest.

The boy felt it. His fingers clasped something round and hard, and from his fist protruded two strings which wound about his neck. "Don't know." He tried to pry open his hand. His knuckles made a popping sound, and his arm throbbed. "Can't open my--" he grunted, refusing to allow his body to disobey. With great effort, his fingers separated and revealed a perfectly round orb, containing streaks of brown and white and blue, like a marble with liquid churning inside.

"Look, how beautiful--the way it shines." She too had an orb and held it up, an

emerald glow washing over her. "So lovely. And it's moving." She shuddered, her voice rising with excitement. "It's so fluid--" She faltered, her eyes focusing on the orb, then burst out, "It's cracked! Oh, no--" Her body jerked, as if the sight of the fracture drove a spear through her.

That's when he saw it--a fissure ran through the middle. "Urrrgh, mine's broken too." A heaviness came over him. "I must've held it too tight." A half-formed image of orbs, hundreds of them linked by strands of blue light, floated in the back of his head. Something terrible had happened to-- "Zenet," he blurted out, his voice vibrating in the air.

"Yes, Zenet," the girl repeated, as if she was trying to remember.

Shaking off the feeling, he kicked at the blanket of orange moss with his foot. "C'mon, let's go--let's get out of here. We should figure out where we are."

"Wait," she said, as white lumps emerged from the ground a few feet away. "Don't move--" Breaking through the mossy surface, the bulges grew in size, pushing their crowns from the soil and forcing her to step back. With a hiss, the pod-like structures burst open and released a fine mist into the air. The shimmering clouds drifted up and settled on the trees.

There was a peacefulness in the way they popped, and the boy wanted to touch one, but no sooner did he reach down than the thing shrunk, disappearing into the moss. "Huh, it's gone!" He stretched for another, but it also withdrew. Across the mossy patch, branches shifted, as one of the trees leaned inward. A moment later, the trunk shook, shedding leaves covered in the shimmering dust.

"Did you see that?" she said.

"Humph," he replied. "Smells funny." The leaves looked like they were coated with diamonds, and he detected a candy-like odor. "Let me check it out." Cautiously, he stepped closer, until he had a good view of the leaves. They expanded, crinkled and warped, then puffed into balls, forming glistening bodies. Dozens of them hung from the branches like ornaments. "They're alive! I see heads and arms--"

Tiny creatures, no bigger than a thumb, yawned and stretched and mumbled to themselves, then glanced up. They had opaque wings, sharp, jewel-like faces and crystalline arms, which captured the light.

"Garth!" one exclaimed. A moment later, dozens swarmed into the air. "Garth and Hue!" they cried out. "We heard you call," said a thing buzzing about the boy's ear. "We did, we did!" squeaked the others. "And we made it!" More swooped overhead.

"Garth--Hue?" The girl looked about. "What?"

"That's you, Hue," giggled one of the creatures, inches from her nose.

"Did you say we called you?" asked the boy.

"Yes, yes, Garth, you summoned eepees, and here we are!"

Another bunch buzzed about the girl like flying trinkets. "Hue, Hue, no time to lose. Let's go!"

"That's right, let's go, Garth, let's go." A group somersaulted in front of them. "You know we have to wake up the one in the deep sleep and let her know we're here on Zenet!"

The hyperactive eepees shot ahead before Garth could say that they were in no condition to travel. First they should find somewhere to rest, get something to drink and recover. He tried to communicate this, but his words came out garbled. "Water, we

need to, stop--eepees--wait!"

Without listening, the eepees flew forward, out of earshot. Garth and Hue dragged their bodies after the creatures, struggling to keep up. They stumbled across the bed of moss, trying not to trip over the roots and rocks which poked through, while more freshly hatched eepees sped past.

A streak of pain pierced Garth's neck, and he cried, "Wait--stop--we need a rest!" He felt as if his head would burst open, then fell to his knees. Had a tree fallen on him? No, it was inside. "I can't--it's--" The twinge curled down his back, while an overwhelming pressure squeezed at his bones.

Hue bent down and lifted his arm over her shoulders. "I'll help you." Looking up, she shouted, "Wait for us!" But the eepees were too excited to hear much of anything. Released from the confines of the pods, they whirled about in a dizzying display of acrobatics, as if they hadn't stretched their wings in years.

"Thanks." Garth gritted his teeth. "But we should rest. This is no good." They walked together for a few feet, wavering. "This is no good," he repeated.

Hue smiled weakly, and as if accepting defeat, said, "You're right. We should rest. There's no point. They aren't listening."

Together they sank to the ground. "What if they leave us here?" muttered Garth, curling up on a bed of white leaves.

Hue lay next to him. "I'm worn out."

"Stupid, useless eepees! Don't know why we summoned them," Garth grumbled. The leaves were fuzzy and thick and seemed like they contained pockets of air. "This feels much better though..."

"Yeah." She shut her eyes. "I'm so tired, need to sleep, have to sleep."

"Come on, come on!" An eepee whooshed past. "Get up. No time to waste!"

Garth squinted through one eye. The eepee circled back. "Are you ill? Are you ill?" Several more joined, and soon dozens teemed above, their bodies sparkling in the light.

"Go away," he said.

"No, no, no," piped an eepee. "You get up."

"No, I won't," he mumbled. "You tell me why I should, and while you're at it, how 'bout explaining why I feel like I'm being crushed?"

"Don't know, don't know," squealed the eepees. "Not really, not truly. But, let us tell you, we have what you need. Come and we'll show you!"

Garth couldn't keep track of who he was talking to. Each time it seemed like a different one spoke. Were they communicating with one another? It was annoying that they refused to speak plainly. "Forget it. I'm not moving unless you tell me."

"You're Garth," squealed one eepee.

"Garth and Hue, Garth and Hue," cried others.

It was hopeless. Garth shut his eyes. He could hear Hue breathing. She was asleep, and he wanted to join her. The tiredness. He needed to sleep.

"You must get up, your life depends upon it," cried the little voices. "If you don't, you'll never wake up!"

He shook his head, as if to say that was impossible. The eepees protestations grew faint, and the blackness embraced him. Were the eepees telling the truth? He was so tired, and the fuzzy leaves felt good on his cheek and neck and hands. What

was his name? Garth? That's funny, he thought, his mind drifting to a domed city, with buildings that spiraled upwards, higher than he could see.

Somewhere far away, he heard shrieks, and then felt thuds against his skin. The eepees, were they slamming their tiny bodies into him? Couldn't they just leave him alone? But he felt them, everywhere, crawling through his hair, tugging on his ears, plugging his nose, until his head pounded--couldn't breath--

"Okay, okay, I'm up!" He bolted upright, gagging and swatting them away like flies. "Stop it!"

"Wake her! Wake her!" shrieked the eepees. "Now! Now!"

"Okay, I said!" He spat out an eepee lodged in his throat, then placed his hand on Hue's. Her skin was whitish and cold, as if her blood had drained away. The eepees must be telling the truth. Death was taking her. "Wake up." He shook her. "We have to get up."

"Let me sleep," she murmured, her eyes sealed tight.

He yanked on her arm. "We have to get up, the eepees, c'mon, get up."

He lifted her and she rose. She was only half conscious, but with her arm locked in his, they pressed on, stumbling forward, pushing through the thorny, blue foliage. Although each step was torturous, the short rest seemed to have helped. She looked better than before, as if life had seeped back into her skin.

Within a short time, she no longer needed his help. But he was thirsty--so thirsty. If only he could wet his mouth. And the bushes were awful. He couldn't seem to avoid them. Several times the hooked twigs caught on his pants and tore nasty holes.

"Oouuuch!" cried Hue, nursing her arm. "Look, I'm bleeding."

"Me too," he replied, watching a school of puffy, white-scaled airfish glide past, avoiding the barbed shrubs. "They're smarter than we are."

"Yeah," she said. "I wish we could do that."

As the slender trees gave way to thick ones, ancient and knobby, the eepees dispersed landing on branches and trunks. Garth could no longer tell which way to head. "Hold on, they're going back into the trees."

"Oh, well." Hue sank onto the spongy groundcover, as the eepees shrunk, becoming balls of light which melted into the bark, only to reappear a moment later--a gurgling noise coming from the trees. Before he could stop her, she had closed her eyes and was falling asleep.

"Hue?" He slumped next to her, while the wild spectacle played out before his eyes. Something was leaking from the holes--a red, gelatinous substance. It oozed out and wound down the gnarled trunks, pooling at the base. Inside the blobs of sap squirmed maggot-like creatures. He would have been concerned except that the eepees appeared satisfied, buzzing around with increasing delight. A number of eepees came back, carrying handfuls of blood-red goo with itsy-bitsy bugs wiggling inside.

"Eat! Eat! Eat!" chimed the eepees. "Good grubs!"

"Hmmmgh." Garth nudged Hue, amused. "Up, up, they've brought us food, if you can call it that." He forced her to sit up. "Look at this, can you believe it?"

She rubbed her eyes. "Oooh, yuck! What's that?"

"They want us to eat it."

"But, it's--it's horrible." She recoiled. "And disgusting and probably poisonous!"

"Good grub. Good grub. Eat! Eat!" The eepees tried to shove the wiggling worms into Garth's mouth. They smelled like vinegar.

"Stop it! I won't--never!" He swatted them away.

Hue made the mistake of yawning and a dozen eepees darted inside, stuffing her mouth with larvae.

"Arrrgh!" She spat them out. "No--don't do that--"

"It's not funny! Get us some water," demanded Garth. "Water!"

"No, no, no," wailed the eepees. "Eat these! Eat these!"

"You can't be serious?"

"Yes, yes, yes, good grubs!"

"Okay," he grunted, if only to get the eepees to stop. "Whatever."

The eepees continued trying to shove the worms into his mouth. "Okay, okay, I'll try one, just one." With his fingers, he picked a squirming maggot off the ground. Shutting his eyes, he opened his mouth and shoved it in, then swallowed.

"That's crazy. I'm sure it's poisonous," said Hue.

"Well... Hmm. Not bad, if you don't think about it. But--er, I don't really--" He stopped in the mid sentence. "Hmm. I actually feel something." He cocked his head and smacked his lips. "I'll try another." He opened his mouth wide and the eepees darted inside, stuffing it full.

"That's sick!" said Hue.

He chewed and chewed, blood-red juice spurting from his lips.

"Look at you. Filthy! Revolting!"

"Try it," he said, between mouthfuls. "It's not terrible. Kind'a tart like

pomegranates, if you can overlook the smell."

"Go, go, go to that tree," prodded the eepees.

His arms and legs tingled, as if an electric current ran through them. Invigorated, he stood, but he still felt the pain. It was deep in his bones.

"To the tree, to the tree," urged the eepees.

As he approached the tree, the syrupy gook continued to dribble down, and at the base flopped a giant worm, over three feet long and growing larger by the second. The worm's skin was slick and looked like red honey.

"Drink, drink, drink the sap," the eepees chanted.

Garth held his hand against the tree and intercepted a trickle. A pool of goo formed in his palm. It was warm, and inside he saw a grotesque-looking worm. Without waiting, he shoved the thing into his mouth. It jiggled furiously, beating against his tongue and pushing on his cheek. He thought it might slip out, but he kept his hand over his mouth and forced it down. It was so fat, it made his throat hurt, and his mouth tasted like wax. But it went down, all the way to his belly, and there he could feel it jiggling.

"You okay?" He glanced over at Hue, who sat crossed legged, looking paler than ever.

In a weak voice, she asked, "It's not poisonous, is it?"

"Nah, might be the eepees' idea of a practical joke, but I think it's working. Feels strange. Ow, yeah, you should try it. I feel--" He hesitated. "It just moved in my stomach, a big one. It jumped, no, it's growing--getting bigger." He pressed his palms to his belly and felt it bulge outward, then ripple, the ridges of worm forming lines across

his skin. "Wow, look at this!"

Hue scrunched up her nose. "You're not helping."

"Good? Good?" An eepee zoomed past Garth's ear.

"Yeah?" He squeezed his gut, trying to push it back into shape.

"Has to dissolve," said another.

"That's right--bigger is better," said a third, or was it the same one? He couldn't tell.

"Be patient, be patient!"

As the crowd of eepees swarmed, something popped within him. It was as if someone had punched him from the inside out, and he doubled over, bits of red goo spraying from his lips. "Aaaargh!"

"It's bursting!" cried the eepees.

"Oooh," he gasped. "That hurts." A fizzing sensation leapt through his gut and into his veins. It was like he was on fire. He tried to straighten up, but couldn't. Then, as if by magic, every cell of his body stopped aching.

"Garth--" Hue was on her feet, staggering towards him, a concerned look on her face. "What'd they do to you?"

He straightened his back, strands of crimson mucus hanging from his chin. "Don't worry, I'm fine. In fact, I feel good." The muscles in his legs tightened, and he had the urge to jump up and down and fling his arms in the air. "Wuhoo! I'll tell you, I've never felt this good--yow!" he shouted, hopping about like a rabbit. "Feels unbelievable." He flapped his arms while springing into the air.

"You're nuts," she giggled, then sank back to the ground, exhausted, while he

continued hopping, unable to stop.

"I feel so--so incredible. Hue, you've gotta try some. You've got to!"

"Do it, do it!" chimed in the eepees.

"Okay, okay," she groaned, biting her lip.

"Here." Garth grabbed a maggot from the ground. "Start with this, let me help you." Trying to calm his body, he leaned over, practically mashing the bug in her face.

"I got it." She grabbed his hand and took it. "Yuck!" She dropped it on the ground as it wriggled violently. "Oh, it's gross."

"Just open your mouth and shut your eyes." He picked up the bug, and when she opened, he plopped it inside. "Now, chew and swallow. Don't think about it!"

She swallowed hard. "Not bad, huh?" he asked, shaking one leg, then the other. She refused to do more than nod, and he grinned. "You'll be amazed at what the big piece can do. C'mon, to the tree, before you change your mind!" With his help, she made it to the tree and held out her hand, capturing a gob.

"Down it!"

"I'm trying." She shoved it in her mouth and swallowed. "Brrrrrgh, it's twisting." She clasped her stomach. "Yurrrr--ck."

He laughed. "Just wait. It gets better!"

After a moment, she looked up, wide-eyed. "I feel it. It's-- Ouch!" She doubled over.

"It's bursting!" He couldn't help grinning as he watched her experience what he'd gone through. Soon they were both engaged in a wild dance, leaping about and waving their arms--trying to release their pent-up energy.

"This is nice, but really," she cried. "I'd rather be a little less energetic."

"Don't worry, it's wearing off." Out of breath, he leaned up against a tree. "Yeah, less than before."

"Look, they're getting even bigger," she pointed out. Dozens of worms wriggled about on the ground. Some had become half the size of Garth and were still growing. The largest ones inched into the shrubs, disappearing below a wall of hooked thorns, while red goo continued to dribble from the holes, and more worms replaced the ones that had wandered off.

"Let's see where they're headed," he said. "No use sitting around here anyway."

"Don't, no, no, no," squealed an eepee, bumping into his cheek. "Don't do it!" The eepees became hysterical, jabbering all at once. "It's the claw's job--not ours. Certainly not yours. Not yet. Come on, come on, let's go this way!"

"But why?" He watched another worm slip into the thicket.

"Because, because, we must spend time in the forest, wait until she's ready."

"Who's ready?" said Hue.

"Yeah," seconded Garth. "Who?"

But the eepees kept going, streaming back into the woods, their glimmering bodies forming threads which wound between the trees and down the slope.

"They're not telling us much, are they?" Garth huffed, going after them. "Wait up!" His foot caught on a gnarled root, and he nearly fell. "I said wait!"

The eepees pooled in mossy clearing at the base of the incline. There they began to circle. Overhead, the purple clouds had begun to mass. It was late in the day, and the two suns had receded behind the trees.

Garth snatched one of the eepees from the air. "Okay, I got you." The creature felt soft, like a ripe berry stuffed with juice.

"Let me go!" cried the eepee, its wings beating against his palm. Carefully, he took the tiny creature between his thumb and forefinger and stared into its beadlike eyes. "Tell me, where the worms went or else I'll squeeze."

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes." He grinned, knowing that he would do no such thing.

"I can't."

"Yes you can. I know you can." He applied a slight pressure to the eepee's delicate body and felt it squish inwards.

"Ooooooh! To the Water Elemental, that's where. But you can't disturb her before she's ready--not until she's woken up and had her meal. You know, you have to avoid her wrath. Of course, you should know. You don't want her to be upset. Takes a day or two, maybe a week. Don't fret, she'll summon us."

"A week?"

"Yes, yes, or months, or years, or just minutes--no one can be sure. Right?"

"That's ridiculous."

"Let me go, please, that's all I know, please--" squealed the pitiful creature.

"No, not yet. First, tell me who sent you?"

"Why you did! We told you that, now, pleeeeeeease," whined the eepee. "Let me go. I must join the others. Pleeeeeeease--" Garth released it, and the eepee fluttered up, disappearing into the group.

Hue leaned against a rock protruding from the moss, fascinated. "They're pretty,

aren't they?" Overhead, near the tops of the trees, the eepees had coiled into balls and were bobbing up and down.

"Oh, c'mon," Garth said, disgusted. "Are we really going to sit here and watch them bounce around for days or years or whatever?"

"Or minutes." She grinned. "Why don't you just relax? Let's see what happens in the next day or two."

"But-- We can't just wait around twiddling our thumbs. Like you said, we're here for a reason, remember? Something happened, something terrible, and we've got to act--now. I mean--I don't know what we need to do, but it's not just standing around. That's for sure. I say we follow those worms."

"Wow, you're so impatient," she said teasingly, as he turned, heading back toward the ancient grove. "Hey, where're you going? I really don't feel it's right--" She scrambled after him. "Let's give them a day. Just one day!"

"No way." He trudged up the slope, his open-toed sandals sinking into the moss. It tickled.

"How about a night!" she shouted. "One night!"

He ignored her, cresting the slope, he came to the patch of knobby trees. The sap had dried up, and the worms were nowhere in sight. Even the maggots were gone. "They tricked us! Those eepees tricked us!"

She came panting up behind him. "This isn't good. We should listen--"

"There, there's one!" He leapt over a half-decayed stump. "It's going into the thicket, see--" The tail of a worm disappeared under a reef of shrubs as he ran in after it.

"Arrrrggh!" The hooks tore into his legs. "Ouch!" He yanked himself out. "Not this way, there--there's an opening!"

"You're crazy!" She was right behind him. "Let's spend the night with the eepees--"

He nimbly cut a path between two clumps of bushes. "Hurry or we'll lose it. And watch out for that!" He sprung over a jutting branch. "Darn, those things move fast." He caught sight of the worm slithering rapidly down the slope, just under the thorn line.

"See, that sticky stuff, he went in there!" The worm was no where in sight, just a gooey, red trail. He ran around the thicket and stopped. His tunic was shredded, and drops of perspiration speckled down his brow.

"Under that log!" shouted Hue, excited. Despite herself, she didn't seem to mind helping him with the chase. "That's him!" The red tail of the worm disappeared into a hole in the ground. She slid to a stop on a patch of gray mud, while Garth lunged at the hole, his chest plowing into the muck.

"I got it!" Sticking his arm in the hole, he touched something wet and slimy, like surface of an overripe mushroom. He squeezed, trying to hold onto it, but it slid right through his fingers. Unable to accept defeat, he pushed further, jamming his arm deep inside, all the way up to his shoulder.

"Oh, Garth, you'll never fit." She laughed, circling around him.

Roots and pieces of rock tore at his hand as he fished about for the worm's tail. "It's gone. I can't believe I let it go!"

"There's no other way out that I can see." She came back. "It's probably way underground by now. Hey, get up, will yah? You're making a mess."

Furious, Garth laid there, his heart thudding against his ribs, his clothes coated in mud. This wasn't good. He'd lost the last worm.

"You look silly like that." She giggled. "Don't you ever give up?"

"No," he said, refusing to remove his arm now that she'd poked fun at him.

"Okay, stay there all night. See if I care," she said, walking away. "I'm going back to the eepees."

"No, wait!" He withdrew his aching arm and scrambled after her. "I'm sorry, but I had to try. I couldn't just sit around. You understand, don't you?" He followed her through the densely packed trees, their corkscrew tops swaying overhead. It was cooler now, and the sky had become a dark purple.

"We're losing our light. I can hardly see." She was on her hands and knees staring at the spongy groundcover. "See, no footprints," she said, her voice drenched in frustration. "Once we hit the moss--nothing. They end right here."

"Oh, boy." He waited, his head still spinning.

"I think it's this way." She got up. "But I can't be sure. What do you think?"

"Sounds good to me." He had no idea. "I'll follow your lead."