For Aaron, Sara and Kayla.
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NOTES ON TIME

The arrow of time runs from past to present to future, never wavering from its track save in memory or speculation. But this is only half the story. Time has a deeper symmetry, and as our experience of time flows one way, somewhere else, in a counter universe, time is going in the opposite direction.

Consider three aspects of time:

**Forward Time** is what we call *normal* running time. We experience the directional flow of events from past to present to future. We plant a seed, it sprouts, flowers bloom. We remember the past.

**Backward Time** is a retrograde motion, not like memory where our thoughts trace events that have already happened, but a timeline that runs anew from future to past. Flowers bloom, the seed sprouts, we plant the seed. We remember the future.

**Circular Time** repeats itself around and around in a *strange loop* where repetition—planting or sprouting or blooming—is the only constant. Usually, we are unaware of the cycle. Memory is in the form of déjà vu.

These opposing directions of time are not sensed because we don’t see them side by side. They remain separate, incomparable. The corridors handle that. They keep the timelines running straight, in either direction. If there were a glitch, a sudden juxtaposition of directions so that the full scope of time became observable, words such as past and future would become meaningless, as would life and death.
EARTH & GAELA—TIME: FORWARD
CHAPTER 1

‘Did you hear that?’ Kreshkali turned around in the saddle and squinted at the sun. She flipped the compass closed and tucked it into her pocket. There it was again—a bone-jarring rumble.

‘What is it?’ An’ Lawrence asked.

Kreshkali halted her horse. ‘Sounds like drums,’ she said, pushing damp hair off her forehead. ‘Large ones.’ The horse sidestepped, its neck arched, nostrils flaring. Kreshkali looked at the striated canyon walls. The massive sandstone monuments towered overhead, shaped by erosion and held together with the roots of gnarled scrub oaks and twisted Manzanita. ‘Can you see anything?’ she asked.

An’ Lawrence stood in his stirrups, searching the cliffs. Red rocks and shale were trickling down, gaining momentum as they rushed to the basin floor. ‘Landslide?’ he asked as he sat back into the saddle. He pushed up his sleeves, working to keep his mount under control. Scylla, his temple cat, crouched nearby, bobtail twitching. ‘Or is it more…what did you call it? Seismic activity?’

‘Earthquake!’ Kreshkali’s horse crow-hopped as the ground shook beneath them. ‘Ride!’ she shouted. She cracked the tail of her split reins behind her, snapping them like a whip. Both horses pinned their ears back and sprang, churning up dust and stones as they scrambled out of the box canyon. Shoulder to shoulder, the animals vied for the lead, charging towards the summit. Under them, the earth groaned and cracked and rolled.

‘Head for open ground!’ An’ Lawrence yelled as he crested the gorge, Scylla leaping in front of him. He pointed at the wide expanse, a barren landscape that looked like an endless field of red, sunbaked bricks.

‘Gee-up!’ Kreshkali shouted over the roar.

They took off at a dead run. Kreshkali leaned forward, reins in both hands, her arms gliding smoothly over the mare’s neck in time with the rocking motion. The horse’s mane blew over her arms—whitecaps cresting in a dark sea. Her robe was streaming behind her. Looking down the mare’s shoulder, she watched the horse’s hooves compress the dry earth to powder. ‘Mind the holes,’ she yelled to An’ Lawrence. ‘There’re deep ones.’

_I can watch for them, Kali, but at this speed there’s little to be done but observe the fall._

She tightened her jaw, hearing his thought directly in her mind. He was right. When she reached the centre of the plateau, she straightened, easing the mare down. ‘Whoa, now, girl. This is as safe as it gets, right here in the middle.’

She brought the mare down to a jog, taking some time to stop. An’ Lawrence and his temple cat shot past, skidding to a halt further ahead. Both horses were blowing, steam rising from their backs, their flanks slick with sweat. The ground beneath them rattled like a frying pan on high heat.

‘You call this safe?’ An’ Lawrence shouted at her over the sound of tumbling boulders and cracking ground.

‘As can be…’ she shouted back. ‘Give it time. It’ll pass.’

Rents in the ground opened up, creating arm-length fissures around them. The tearing of the earth was like bones breaking. Scylla braced against the gyrations, all four paws at wide angles to her body, her ears pinned back and bobtail pointing skyward as she hissed, the sound swallowed up by the roar of the earth. Sweat dripped from the horses’ bellies, making dark spatters on the ground like drops of rain.

Kreshkali checked the surrounding hills and ravines, watching the horizon. She imagined a feeling of stillness returning to the land. Ignoring her fear, she focused on calmness, peace and quietude. ‘It’s okay. It’s backing off,’ she whispered to her horse. ‘It’s all over now.’

The earth continued to rumble, then an eerie stillness fell. Suddenly, the loudest sounds were the horses’ blowing and the squeak of leather as Kreshkali twisted in the saddle. A trio of caws filled the air, and three ravens appeared, scolding as they circled overhead.

‘It’s all right,’ she said. ‘All’s safe.’

An’ Lawrence grimaced. ‘When are these wretched shakers going to stop?’ He glared at the hills in front of them, as if they were responsible. ‘There’s nothing remotely like this on Gaela.’

‘The known lands of Gaela sit on a single tectonic plate. Of course it’s stable,’ Kreshkali said. ‘This is California—what’s left of it.’

‘And that means?’

‘It’s sitting on broken glass.’

‘More like dynamite.’
Kreshkali turned her mare around in a circle, her eyes on the horizon. A smile lit up her face. ‘Don’t be so sour, old man. That shaker got us going in the right direction.’ She pointed towards a dark fence line that undulated into the distance. ‘There it is, and the gate still stands!’

‘It’d be about the only thing that does.’

She laughed, stroking her mare’s dappled grey neck and urging her into a jog. ‘Come on. We’ve found it. This is good news. The estate can’t be far off.’

‘It wouldn’t want to be. We’ve almost no water left, certainly not enough to get back to Half Moon Bay.’

‘There’ll be fountains full of it on the estate.’

‘Are you sure about that? The place might be rubble, destroyed by the quakes.’

Kreshkali remained bright. ‘As I think it, so it is. There’s water, Rowan. I promise.’

An’ Lawrence jogged alongside Kreshkali, his mouth turned down at the corners. How she could remain so cheery in this sun-stroked, dead-beaten, fly-ridden land was beyond him. They’d spent days looking for signs of her ancestor’s home grounds. Futile venture. It would be dust and ruin after all that had happened here. He swatted his neck and picked the dead insect from between his fingers. ‘Old man?’ he asked without looking at her.

She laughed. ‘It’s a figure of speech.’

‘It hardly applies,’ he said. He urged his horse around a newly opened crack in the ground. Scylla sprang neatly over it. ‘If you’re counting years, Kreshkali, I’d be…’

She stopped him with a look. ‘I’m not counting years.’

‘I’ll bet you’re not.’

She slowed her horse to a walk, loosening her reins. The mare lowered her head, nostrils fluttering. ‘Old man was a reference to your optimism,’ she said.

‘I’m not optimistic.’

‘Exactly.’ She leaned over and gripped his forearm. ‘Can you choose your words more carefully? Things are only as grim as you think them.’

‘This again?’

‘Of course this again. It will be “this again” until you get it.’ She smiled. ‘It’s not like the laws of the universe are going to change to suit your grumpy belief system.’

‘But isn’t that just a limiting belief as well?’

‘Not as limiting as your pessimism.’

‘Are you saying I created the earthquake?’

‘I’m saying, think calm and serene and you’ll experience calm and serene.’

‘I promise I’ll be as happy as summer solstice the moment you stop thinking of me as an old man.’ He hoped that would keep her quiet for a moment. It didn’t.

‘More of your circular arguments! An’ Lawrence, I’m not the cause or the effect of your moods.’

‘Oh, but you are,’ he laughed, and she tossed him a look that sent fire up his spine.

_I hate to interrupt the philosophical discourse, Rowan, but you do realise they’re following, don’t you?_’

The voice of his temple cat swept into his mind, a familiar touch. He spotted her running ahead, her buff-coloured coat vivid against the stark red landscape. Her ears were pointed forward, like radar scoping the distance.

‘Who’s that, my lovely?’

_The demon dogs._

‘Who’s what?’ Kreshkali asked, not hearing Scylla’s part of their dialogue.

‘Lupins. Apparently not far off.’ _How close, Scylla?_ he asked.

_Very._

_Can you be more specific?_  

_How far can you throw a stone?_  

He straightened his spine and studied the landscape. Ravines and fissures cut their way through the barren hillside, scars on an ancient face. Giant red boulders jutted out from the land at strange angles. They reminded him of the half-buried statues of the old gods, abandoned or forgotten on Gaela’s distant islands of Rahana Iti. The rotting husks of dead oak trees lay scattered like so many broken limbs. Only two healthy trees stood in the distance, shading the fence line ahead. He had no idea how they survived but it was a refreshing view. _I can’t see the Lupins anywhere_, he said to Scylla.

_That doesn’t mean they aren’t nearby._  

_In front or behind, my lovely?_  

_We’re surrounded._
When they reached the gate, An’ Lawrence dismounted, mopping his brow. The sun shone relentlessly now
that they’d disabled the solar shields. It had taken less than a year for the continuous rain to stop. The Earth was
drying out. Kali said balance would return, eventually. He hoped it would be in his lifetime, and the sooner the
better. He’d known nothing like this heat, even in the desert plains of Corsanon. It wilted almost everything it
touched.

‘Look at the apple trees,’ Kreshkali said. ‘They’re as sound and fresh as any stock from Gaela.’

He examined them, rubbing a green leaf between his fingers and thumb. These specimens didn’t appear to be
affected by the acid rain, heat or seismic activity. ‘Strange. There’s been no replanting this far out. How’d they get
here?’ The land rejuvenation corps hadn’t ventured past the outskirts of Half Moon Bay. Finding this growth, miles
from the settlement, didn’t make sense.

‘Strange indeed,’ she said, leading her mare closer to see for herself. ‘Look at the blooms. It’s not even spring.’

The smoke-grey branches sprouted small leaves clustered around tiny pink and white blossoms. Kreshkali
leaned in to inhale the buds as her mare nipped a lower twig. ‘Oh, no you don’t.’ She backed the mare up, pulling
the twig from the horse’s mouth. She studied it. ‘Rowan. This tree doesn’t just look like Gaela stock. It is Gaela
stock.’ She eyed it closely.

‘Let me see.’ He pushed his horse’s nose away as he examined it. ‘Demons. It is.’

‘A new piece to the puzzle?’

‘It seems that way.’

What’s the fuss with the fruit tree, Rowan? Scylla approached, her shoulder blades rising and dipping with each
stride. She rubbed her cheeks against his leg. The Lupins seem a more important consideration at the moment, don’t
you think? And water. I’m thirsty.

A howl echoed in the distance and her hackles rose. An’ Lawrence stroked them down, feeling the vibration as
she growled. The horses sidestepped, swivelling their ears to listen behind.

‘Scylla, are they inside the gate?’ he asked aloud.

No, but I suspect they will be soon.

An’ Lawrence ran his stirrups up and loosened the girth a notch. ‘Can you talk to your puppies, Kali? Tell them
to back off? They’re making me nervous.’

‘They make everyone nervous.’

She smiled. ‘Not me.’ Her head tilted towards the gate. ‘You think you can bust us in?’

He passed his reins over as his horse minced forward and back. Kali was having similar trouble.

‘Perhaps a calming spell first?’ he said.

‘Good idea.’ She sent a waft of energy towards the mounts, light and soothing. He felt it from where he stood;
it was like a warm breeze after a storm. Immediately the horses stilled, their heads lowering, ears relaxed. One
cocked a hind leg and swished his tail.

‘And the Lupins?’ An’ Lawrence asked.

The howling sounded closer. Kreshkali looked over her shoulder and shrugged. ‘They aren’t listening to me
much these days.’

‘Would they jump the gate?’ He pointed at the spiked entrance and the miles of head-high fencing on either
side.

‘I don’t see why not.’

‘Best keep moving, then.’

Kali reached into her saddlebag and handed him an axe. The horses startled as a black shape darted behind
them and disappeared into a ravine. ‘Steady, now. We’re going to hack our way through those locks,’ she said to the
horses. ‘And find the estate on the other side. There’ll be water there, and shade, and splendid stables and a manor
house, if the old photographs are any indication.’

‘You really think it still stands? It’s been centuries, Kali, and not kind ones,’ An’ Lawrence said.

‘Optimism, Rowan?’

He answered by raising his axe and letting loose a swing. He aimed to send the blade deep into the first
padlock, but it bounced back, nearly flying from his hands. The sound reverberated through the wrought iron and
into the ground. The green-broke mounts braced their front legs, eyes wide and nostrils flaring in spite of the
calming spell. ‘Demons, Kali,’ he said after several more swings. ‘What’s this stuff made of?’

‘Titanium alloy.’

‘What?’

She smiled. ‘Throw a little magic into it, Sword Master. It’s just metal.’
He glared at her. ‘Are you mocking me?’

‘If you want to see it that way, be my guest.’

He shook his head and took a few more swings, boosting his strength with a blast of energy that lit up the axe like blue lightning. On the third swing, the axe flew clean out of his hands, sailing past Kreshkali and the horses to land in the serpentine rock behind them. The axe head was buried to the hilt.

‘Stop,’ she said, holding up her hand. ‘This isn’t working.’

‘You’re kidding. I thought I was getting somewhere.’

She led the horses down the fence line and tied them. ‘There must be a spell on it.’

‘Now you tell me?’

‘Now I know.’

Don’t all locks have a key? Scylla asked, staring at An’ Lawrence. She sat gingerly on the hot red earth, her tufted ears languid in the heat.

Yes, Scylla, they do. But this key is lost.

Are you sure?

He hesitated. Not when you say it like that.

‘There wouldn’t be a key, would there?’ he asked Kreshkali. ‘Or a way around?’

She shook her head. The fence stretched out for as far as the eye could see in both directions. ‘Not today. Not for us. We could climb over, but that would mean leaving the horses behind. Not an option.’

More howls wafted on the wind.

‘Don’t tell me they have the key?’

‘It’s a possibility,’ she answered. ‘He had to entrust it to someone.’

Another shadow darted behind a boulder, or was it the same one? It moved too quickly to tell. Scylla leapt up, growling. Her hackles spiked, making her appear double in size. Kreshkali brushed dust from her hands before stroking the feline’s head. ‘It’s all right, Scylla. The Lupins don’t want to hurt you.’

The feline hissed. Really? Is that why my fine white belly fur still bears a scar from a Lupin blade? What kind of wonderland does she live in, Rowan?

She turned away.

Let me see what I can do,’ Kali said, stroking the temple cat again before turning towards the gate. She pushed up her sleeves and lifted the thick twists of chain that looped the central post. She touched the locks gently, as if they were small creatures. ‘What’s your secret, my little ones?’ she asked. ‘Why so tight? Don’t you recognise me? A child from the one who made you? Come now. Won’t you let us pass?’

An’ Lawrence screwed up his face as he retrieved the axe and brushed bits of rock from the blade. The edge looked like jagged teeth. ‘It’s a lock, Kali. Not a stray cat. You can’t coax it into…’

‘Shush.’

Her eyes softened. All her focus went into the padlocks. As she held them, she released a warm wave of energy that surrounded the metal. Particles of light hovered like fireflies around her hands. Thunder rumbled on the horizon.

In the stillness that followed, the locks clicked, letting go their hold. She unwound the chain and gave the gate a shove, swinging it as wide as her smile.

An’ Lawrence crossed his arms. ‘Done, and well done,’ he said. ‘Can I ask why we didn’t do that in the first place?’

‘I like watching you sweat.’ She winked as she strode through the ancient iron gate. ‘Let’s hurry along, Rowan. We need to water the horses, and the Lupins are following, you know.’

‘Of course,’ he said, biting the words. ‘And while I get our mounts, might you be so kind as to tune in and see if there’s a banishing spell on the estate? I wouldn’t want to be turned to stone on such a lovely afternoon simply because I don’t have the right sort of look about me.’

‘More like the right sort of DNA, I imagine.’

‘That too, then.’

She sighed. ‘I already did.’

‘And?’
‘Luka Paree must have laid down a ripper.’
He slowed in his tracks. ‘Can you dispel it?’
‘It’s a little more complex than that. I don’t know what we’re up against, really. It’s very old magic.’
‘Great.’ He untied the horses. ‘Can you at least lock the gate behind us?’
Kreshkali stared into the distance, not answering. An’ Lawrence led the horses through the gateway, his eyes on the woman.
‘The Lupins?’ he prompted. ‘What’s your call? Shall we lock them out?’
‘They have a right to be here too. You know that.’
He had more than one argument ready, but as he looked behind him, he nodded and mounted up. ‘Lead the way, Kreshkali. We, and the dark demons of the underworld, shall follow.’
She offered neither smile nor frown but turned her mare towards the west and trotted on.

Kreshkali jogged beside the Sword Master, her mind tuning in to him. He was adjusting rather well considering recent events. He’d met his grown daughter—one he’d never known—for the first time, been swept from his world to a place both foreign and hostile, battled the technologies of ASSIST and taken up the challenge of expanding the tattered coven in what was left of this harsh, post-technological world. Now she was asking him to accept the Lupins—the strange shape-shifting creatures of her ancestor’s creation—as eagerly as one might take on a litter of hunting dogs. And they were far from that. Not bad for a man with his moon in the fixed sign of the Scorpion. Change didn’t come easy for such a placement, nor did letting go of grudges, but he’d handled it with near effortlessness—if you didn’t count the grumbles, scowls and derogatory comments.

She pulled out her compass again and then redirected them slightly more to the southwest. They travelled in companionable silence. The subtle breeze was lifting the heat of the day and erasing the tensions from the recent earthquake.
‘Here come your minions,’ An’ Lawrence said, pointing skyward. ‘Looks like they’ve got news.’
The Three Sisters, blue-black ravens from Gaela who had taken quite happily to this other world, swooped and darted overhead. Unlike most visitors, they found delight in the strange, decimated and unpredictable environment. They whooshed past her, cawing out like mad pipers, flapping and blustering. She laughed. They were definitely excited about something. She hoped it was more than a rotting carcass on the other side of the hill. ‘What have you found, my beauties?’
‘Probably a chunk of obsidian shaped like a wing,’ An’ Lawrence said. ‘Or an old cow skull.’
‘I think it’s more than that this time.’
They cawed their news, diving by the riders a few more times before shooting off.
We follow, my lovelies!
‘I take it they spotted something significant?’ An’ Lawrence asked.
‘Indeed.’
‘The manor?’
‘Seems so.’
‘It still stands?’
‘It does, at least from their point of view.’
‘They’d be excited by a rubbish heap.’
She raised her eyebrows at him and he chuckled.
‘I meant, that’s great news. I can’t wait to see for myself!’
‘Thank you, but it would be more convincing without the sarcasm.’ She smiled in spite of his expression.
After looking for remnants of a road and finding nothing but endless packed clay and rocks, she wondered how easy it would be to find Paree’s mansion in the thousands of rolling acres. Wherever the road had been, it was now buried under rock or lost to erosion. Cracks cut through the land and there was no sign of the trees that used to line the old driveway. Of course, there were very few trees left in this region, so it wasn’t much of a surprise. Still, she believed that on her ancestor’s estate both flora and fauna would be preserved. There was enough energy in this land to preserve the whole world—and from the sound of the Three Sisters, it had protected the estate at least. Of more immediate interest, there was water—and that meant survival. They really were running low.
‘It does feel like something substantial ahead,’ An Lawrence said. This time the positivity in his voice was genuine.
‘I agree!’ She’d not known how she would ever locate the mansion until she found the picture in her mother’s diary—a treasure and a boon—though the image itself was of little help. The world had seen much change since the photo was taken. Nothing was recognisable. The lush trees that led the way, exploding in purple blossoms and feathery green leaves, weren’t even a memory for her generation. Yet the image had been passed down their family line for more than reasons of nostalgia.

She still recalled the thrill she’d experienced when she’d turned the photograph over and read the back. The message was cryptic, it had to be, but it contained all the information needed to locate the estate—for one who knew how to interpret it.

Luka Michelle Paree
January 30, 2054
05:55:23
151 W 13:23
33 N 52:11

She had guessed immediately it was not her ancestor’s birth data she was looking at. Although of interest, that information wouldn’t lead to the estate. The latitude and longitude would be of no help either, as all such coordinates had altered with the first plate-shift. But the data was there to find the Paree mansion. She was sure of it. Her ancestor wouldn’t have left a set of coordinates just by chance. It had to be the data for a horary chart, an effective horoscope map that would lead right to the front door, no matter how much the terrain had changed—providing whoever had written the coordinates had asked the right question.

She’d drawn up the chart using the Draconic zodiac—a system based not on the vernal equinox as in Western astrology, but on the lunar nodes—studying the rulerships and aspects before plotting a path that led, eventually, to the gates surrounding the estate of Dr Luka Paree. Because magnetic north had shifted by twenty degrees since the data was written, she had to keep recalibrating her alignment, but that fortuitous earthquake had shot them out of the canyons in the right direction. The fence line led to the gate and beyond the gate would be the manor estate. What condition was it in? By the sound of the Three Sisters’ cackling, it would be everything she hoped for.

As they wound their way down a steep grade and trotted up the next hill, the manor house came into view and her face lit up like a sunrise. ‘Rowan!’ She reached out to grip his arm.

There, in a shallow valley, was the Paree estate, a white sandstone manor in a red sea desert, an oasis frozen in time, immune to the beating suffered by the surrounding land. The two-storey mansion had a domed stained-glass roof over one wing and turrets rising above the balcony windows. Flowerboxes overflowed with trailing red roses, and smooth-branched gum trees swayed like guardians at the inner gates. The front entrance was paved with terracotta tiles. Wide steps led down from the front doors to a courtyard fountain which spouted crystal-clear water over a prancing black onyx stallion.

Kreshkali squeezed the Sword Master’s hand tighter. ‘It’s so like Diablai,’ she whispered.

‘Uncanny.’

A stone wall surrounded the grounds, graced with flowering shrubs and broad, shady oaks. On the opposite side of the courtyard were the stables, built for warm weather with open box stalls and breezeways. Stone-paved driveways led to and from other buildings. It was a storybook setting, a valley sleeping under a spell, waiting patiently to be awakened—vibrant in the afternoon light. And there were so many trees! Kreshkali’s eyes welled. Live trees on Earth! Oaks with dark green leaves and pale jacarandas bare of leaf but covered in purple blossoms, weeping willows and figs, paperbark eucalypts and yellow blooming acacias, all offered a welcome reprieve from the sun. Everywhere, flowers displayed their colours like strutting roosters—a view she’d never seen this side of Gaela.

‘It’s beautiful,’ An’ Lawrence said, bringing his horse to a halt. ‘Your Earth really is beautiful.’

‘I never thought I’d hear you say that.’

‘Me neither, but this is extraordinary. It reminds me of Timbali Temple in the spring.’

Kreshkali let the tears spill down her face. ‘There must be an underground water source,’ she said, wiping her eyes. ‘Look at the colour of the grass.’ She pointed to the rolling paddocks behind the stables and orchard.

‘Grass alone would be a marvel in this desert, but that’s as green as the Southern Cusca Plains, and there are acres of it.’

The horses tugged at the reins, tossing their heads. Scylla bounded down the lane, scampering in spite of the heat. Water! Mice! Joy!

‘It might be the last oasis on Earth,’ An’ Lawrence said, allowing his horse to follow Scylla.

The fountain water looked pure, and a trough next to the hitching posts ran clean and clean, the water flowing through like a stream, its source as yet undetected. Garden sculptures stood straight and regal as if the earth hadn’t rocked and belched beneath them.
‘It’s been protected,’ Kreshkali said. They followed Scylla, jogging down the lane that led to the inner gates. They were wide open and welcoming.

‘Clearly a spell,’ An’ Lawrence agreed as he dismounted, leading his horse towards the manor entrance.

‘I’d like to know what it is,’ Kreshkali murmured. She felt the air with her fingertips.

‘Can you work it out?’

‘Maybe.’

They stopped at the hitching posts, the horses plunging their muzzles into the water, sipping at a frantic rate. An’ Lawrence lifted their heads after every few swallows to slow them down. ‘We’ve got to watch they don’t get colic in that pasture,’ he said, pointing towards the fields. ‘I’ve never seen clover so green.’

Kreshkali helped unsaddle the horses and rub them down, checking their hooves for stones. ‘That paddock looks like the best bet.’ She indicated a small corral, knee-deep in pale green rye grass with a few tassels of oats.

‘That will keep their minds off the Lupins, at least,’ she said, leading the horses towards the enclosure and releasing them. The animals didn’t take more than one step forward before setting into the grass. She had to give them a shove, slapping their rumps, in order to close the gates behind them.

‘But will it keep the Lupins’ mind off our horses?’

‘I don’t think they’re here for food, Rowan.’

‘I hope you’re right.’

Kali turned towards the manor house. ‘Shall we investigate?’

‘We’d better bring provisions.’ He looked the place up and down. ‘It could take hours to explore. There’s room for a whole village here.’

‘It’s perfect.’ She smiled, grabbing two green packets from the saddlebags. ‘Just what I’ve been hoping for.’

‘Tell me you’ve something other than those vile nutries?’ he said, wrinkling his nose.

‘You’re as fussy as Rosette.’ She laughed. ‘This is all we have left, unless you would care to hunt.’

As if in answer, a not-too-distant howl sounded on the wind.

‘I think I’ll explore the manor first,’ he said.

The massive doors were locked, but she coaxed them as she had the main gate, with a bit of charm and love. The handle seemed to awaken with her touch. ‘Thank you, darlings,’ she said, pushing the door open.

The outer door frames had faded to grey, bleached and weathered by the passing centuries, but once over the threshold the rich tones and hues jumped out to meet them. The walls were white marble veined with lapis, a sky blue shot with gold. The archway and door were made of dark polished teak, and the brass latches shone with a golden glow. Finely woven rugs covered the Spanish tiles, a layer of dust muting the colours beneath. She crossed the entranceway, leaving boot prints in the fine film. An’ Lawrence and Scylla followed more slowly—Scylla sniffing her way in.

‘We need to find the library,’ Kreshkali said, gazing at the ceiling. ‘It’s probably upstairs.’

‘Where do you think the kitchen is?’ An’ Lawrence asked as he examined the pictures lining the hall.

Kreshkali joined him. They were engaging images that drew the eye towards the centre of each lively scene—picnics in lush woodlands, a pool full of waterlilies and nymphs. And there was one of charging warhorses, their riders carrying off two voluptuous nude women, much to their apparent delight.

‘You’re that hungry?’ she asked, pulling her eyes away from the paintings.

‘Starving.’

She tossed him a nutri and he caught it without looking. ‘Eat up.’

Scylla sniffed the nutri and sneezed.

‘I might explore in this direction,’ he said, waving towards the other side of the hall. ‘There has to be something better here than this green glue.’

‘I imagine there’s a sizable pantry, Rowan, but I doubt it will still be stocked, at least not with anything edible.’

‘I’m not so sure. There’s a palpable spell on the whole estate—the trees, water sources, ground untouched by quakes. How else could it have survived? I’m guessing everything has been preserved—books, equipment, medicaments, weapons and food.’

‘Perhaps,’ Kreshkali said. She’d spotted a letter on a table near the stairwell. She picked up the envelope and blew off the dust, frowning at the address before opening it. ‘Worth a look,’ she said, not taking her eyes from the letter.

‘You’re not hungry?’

‘Maybe. Just something I need to check.’ Her head came up when he chuckled. ‘What?’

‘You’ve come home, haven’t you?’

She glanced down the hallway and back to him. ‘As close as I’ve ever been.’

‘What spell are you brewing, Kali? You’ve got that look…’
She returned to examining the letter. ‘Pardon?’

‘Never mind,’ he said. ‘I’m checking out this side.’ His heels clicked across the tiles as he headed towards the left wing. Scylla sneezed again and followed him, her soft pads not making a sound though they left prints on the dusty rugs.

Kreshkali slipped the letter into her pocket. Isn’t that just interesting! They thought of everything. She strode down the hall, looking into the rooms that branched out on either side of the long corridor. There was a massive dining hall that seated over one hundred, the long tables and high-backed chairs buried under a heavy covering of dust but otherwise sound. She wiped the dusty table with her finger to reveal the gleam underneath, a rich oak finish. The grain swirled like a waterway, creating beautiful patterns in the wood. Exquisite. She’d never seen a wooden table on Earth before, let alone one so large. The last had been made—and destroyed—before she’d been born.

The room was lined with buffets and hutches holding china, wineglasses and silverware. Kreshkali let her fingers glide over the patterned dishes, her tattooed hands delicately counting cups and saucers.

She checked the other rooms. There was a parlour with decadent sofas and cushions, a huge stone fireplace, and a refreshment room with basins and toilet.

‘Plumbing!’ she shouted over the sound of the flush. ‘We have plumbing, Rowan.’

I don’t know what your obsession is with such conveniences, but I’m glad you’re happy. He sent the message directly to her mind.

I’m not happy, Rowan. I’m ecstatic!

She found an open room with a raised stage fitted with chairs and music stands and sound equipment, and a room with tiered seating—a lecture hall, perhaps. She breezed in and out of them all, her heart quickening.

She arrived at the end of the hall to find the double doors ajar. She inhaled deeply, her fingers twitching. She heard the faint rise and fall of breath not her own, and the displacement of energy created by a familiar presence. She knew this scent—Lupin through and through. Her shoulders relaxed, and a spontaneous smile lifted her face. She pushed the doors wide and entered, searching him out. The Lupin greeted her with a smile of his own, arms stretched wide, gesturing for her to take in the expanse.

‘The library!’ she said, turning full circle.

‘Did you guess it would be this grand?’ he asked, his voice like silk over bare skin.

She resisted the urge to lock eyes immediately, turning her attention to the room instead. She took her time, absorbing the features as she might a work of art. The place was enormous, lined with bookshelves two storeys high, packed tight with tomes. Stairs led up to the second level and a railed walkway ran around its circumference, little tables and chairs set up in each corner for study. Light filtered through the stained-glass ceiling, casting a rose, blue and emerald tint over the carpet. Broad wooden tables and chairs filled the centre of the room, some with quiescent computer monitors and consoles, and others with books, notes and calculation devices.

‘It’s impressive, Hotha,’ she answered, finally allowing her eyes to rest on the Lupin. ‘More than I dreamed of.’

‘Indeed.’

He sat at the far end of the table, filling a high-backed chair. She had recognised him immediately by his posture more than anything, though his stunning looks and rich forest scent were unmistakable identifiers as well. Hotha had a regal quality that set him apart. Man or wolf, he was exquisite in either form—superb physique, dark eyes, sculptured jaw, jet black hair, dazzling smile.

He returned her gaze unblinking. ‘I’ve been waiting for you,’ he said.

‘You didn’t come in the front door.’

‘Your horses aren’t accustomed to us. I thought I would spare them the fright.’

‘And I thought it was An’ Lawrence you avoided.’ She chuckled.

‘The man holds a grudge.’

‘Not without reason. I think it best you two keep your distance, for now.’

Kreshkali crossed the room and he stood, bending to kiss her—one cheek, the other, and then her lips. He pulled out a chair and motioned for her to sit. ‘Straight to business?’

‘Hotha, we need to discuss the future.’

‘Which future?’ he asked, his eyes dancing.

Heat rose up her spine. ‘That’s an interesting question.’

‘Isn’t it?’

‘Are you saying you’ve glimpsed more than one?’

‘I have.’

‘Please tell me you aren’t playing with time.’

‘It’s anybody’s game, my queen.’
‘True, if you know the rules.’
‘That’s just it. I don’t think there are any.’
She crossed her arms, her fingers tapping her biceps. ‘I’m listening.’
‘It happened quite by accident.’
She laughed.
‘You’re right, not by accident. Let me start again. The portal made an odd turn. For a moment, it was visible, clear as a summer’s day.’
‘What was visible, Hotha?’
‘The symmetry of time. I saw it flowing both ways.’
Kreshkali stood. Her mouth opened, but no sound came out. Hotha’s smile deepened.
‘Time symmetry?’ she whispered. ‘You actually perceived it?’
He nodded.
‘Tell me more.’
‘I’ll do my best. Thinking about time moving in both directions is disturbing. I can’t quite grasp it myself.’
‘That’s because everything we observe in nature reinforces an asymmetrical motion to our universe. Things happen in a first, then, finally order, all moving from low entropy states to ever increasingly disordered ones, all moving forward.’
‘Am I telling this, or are you?’ Hotha asked.
‘You are. Please continue.’
‘You’d think it was like that, Kali—time moving only forward, only one way.’ He lifted his finger. ‘But it’s not. The twentieth-century physicists were right. Time flows in both directions, and it is observable outside of closed systems.’
‘You mean, outside our universe?’
He nodded. ‘You can see it from the corridors if two opposing universes are lined up next to each other.’
Kreshkali sat down.
‘I know. It’s unnerving,’ he went on. ‘And what looks like reverse order to us is an ordinary, natural flow to them. It’s a counter unfolding of time—finally, then, first, and nobody seems to notice. I suspect that’s what creates symmetry within the whole.’
‘I suspect so too.’ She rubbed her hands together. ‘Who’s them, Hotha?’
‘Parallel worlds maybe? I don’t know. I couldn’t tell.’
‘So time is symmetrical,’ she said again. ‘It flows both ways…’
‘It does, but we are only in one stream, so we see only our half, an asymmetrical aspect. It’s the same with them, I’ll wager, but when the universes are viewed side by side, when they become comparable, the distinction is made.’
‘Distinction between what?’
‘Asymmetrical and symmetrical time—forward-moving and backward-moving time.’ His face lit up. ‘It was incredible. Our past is their future, their future our past.’
‘But any comparison is meant to be hypothetical. There is no way to bridge the counter universes. The portals between them, between the symmetries, are closed.’
‘Not completely.’ He patted her hand. ‘Don’t look so scared. It was only a peek, a one-off experience. I doubt there can be actual travel between the time symmetries.’ He rubbed his jaw. ‘It would likely drive someone mad if they tried. There’s no preparing for such a journey.’
‘Did anyone else notice this glimpse of yours?’
‘Only me.’ He laced her fingers in his. ‘Kali…’
‘How many Lupins came with you?’ she interrupted.
‘Two more clans, though some will return to Gaela.’
‘I can understand why. Earth is hardly a holiday destination.’
He raised her hand to his lips, brushing her knuckles as he whispered, ‘I need to see you, Kreshkali.’
She retrieved her hand. ‘We don’t want to make matters worse.’
He leaned closer. ‘You and I are the only ones that can bring this temple to life. We have to work together.’ He waited for a moment, and when she didn’t speak he sat back, relaxing into the chair. ‘So how is he?’
‘An’ Lawrence?’ She laughed. ‘As you say, he holds a grudge.’
‘As does his minx.’
‘Scylla does hate you.’
Hotha cringed. ‘Perhaps an emissary will be best for now. I don’t know if I can see you like this without… seeing more of you.’
She looked away, letting her eyes scan the books above her. ‘What do you have in mind?’ she asked, turning back to him, her face expressionless.

‘A young lad. Nose in the books and no great love of battle, though fierce when need be.’
‘Quick mind?’
‘Spring-loaded—obsessed with word puzzles.’
‘Crosswords?’
‘That’s the one.’
‘Sounds like a Virgo moon.’
‘The sign of Ceres? Good guess.’
‘I never guess my astrology, Hotha. Sun sign?’
‘The Sea-goat.’
‘Capricorn? Perfect—practical, sensual, steady and ambitious. Hardworking. What’s his name?’
‘Teg.’
‘Teg? Meaning sheep?’
‘It describes his quiet disposition, not any lack of initiative.’
‘Send him. He can start training with the Sword Master’s students when we get things under way here, and if he can handle it, and I like him, I’ll take him on.’ She spun around at the sound of footsteps. An’ Lawrence stood in the doorway, his eyes flashing. ‘Rowan!’ She shot a look back to Hotha, but he’d gone. The chair was empty, only the sweet scent of forest loam left behind.

‘Talking to yourself, Kali? Or weaving a spell?’

She got up, her chair scooting over the floor. ‘Did you find the kitchen?’ she asked, smoothing her dress over her hips. She made a show of flipping through the pages of a book on the table.

‘I did, and it’s quite marvellous! Stocked full—dried fruits, pastas, rice, honey, tins of beans and tomatoes and relish and boxes of seeds for planting. A crazy amount of herbs. Not a moth or worm or broken seal in the lot. I’ve got pasta simmering, if you’re interested.’ He smiled as he moved towards her. ‘And I see you have found the library. Is that what has you on edge?’

She closed the book. ‘It does. Now the real search begins.’ Kreshkali waved towards the shelves as if to begin immediately, but her mind was on Hotha and his discovery. Access to symmetrical time? The seemingly backward unfolding of events from death to life to birth? How can it be? The portals are meant to keep such paradoxes apart…’ ‘To the kitchen,’ she said, taking his hand. ‘I can smell the garlic from here.’
EARTH—TIME: BACKWARD
CHAPTER 2

Everett stared at the walls. They were old, but not as old as he was. The plaster, like the skin over his bones, had been scraped smooth, reapplied and smoothed again so many times there was little trace of the original. The finished look never reclaimed his youthful vigour, nor the wall’s, but it covered the cracks with a thick, rough texture. Behind the skin was Everett. What stood behind the walls, he didn’t know.

Until recently his longevity had seemed like an attribute, a medal of achievement, but not any more. Things had changed. New cracks had appeared. He followed one now as it meandered through the pale green plaster. It stopped just short of the clock. He took a moment, letting his eyes adjust, waiting for the second hand to catch up. He cleared his throat.

‘Time of death, 1.05 p.m.’

The room was silent save for the drone of the heart monitor, a flat blue line running across the black screen. Someone took the paddles out of his hands and flipped off the switch. Stunned faces edged his peripheral vision, mouths open, brows creased. A dam of questions would burst and he was the only one with answers. They’d need his direction and he had to give it to them, but his mind felt frozen, his body numb. How could she be dead?

He took off his glasses and pinched the furrow between his eyes. It made no sense. He polished the lenses with the corner of his scrub shirt and replaced them, bringing the room back into focus. There was no way to explain a death. What would he say?

The edge of the metal table captured his attention, making it impossible to look elsewhere. He studied it, pulling off his gloves and letting them fall to the floor. Like robots, his staff started to animate, moving in slow motion, turning off monitors, clamping drip sets, folding up instrument packs, but no one turned away. Like him, they were transfixed by this dead woman. As he perspired under the lights, the subtle activity around him blurred. It felt like time was slowing down. If only it would reverse so he could make sense of this disaster, change it even. He clenched his fists until his knuckles were white, and opened them. His hands became flaccid, his jaw slack.

‘Dr Kelly?’

He heard the question but didn’t answer. He couldn’t answer. His eyes shifted from the edge of the table to the wrist that lay upon it. Her hand was like a lotus flower, white fingers curled, red-painted nails pointing towards him. He closed his eyes.

‘Dr Kelly?’

His student was next to him, shoulder to shoulder. He flinched at the touch, pulling away.

‘What do we do, Dr Kelly?’

Sound poured into the room as the doors swung open. Outside, in the halls of the emergency ward, the clatter, shouts and demands of the other rooms rushed in. The press couldn’t be here already, could they? How would he handle that? He couldn’t think.

‘I don’t know the procedure,’ his student said, blinking as if trying to awake from a dream.

The student was too close. ‘No one knows the procedure.’ Everett drew further away from the table, away from his student and staff, away from the dead woman. He had to get out. He had to think. He strode to the double doors and pushed through, ignoring the curious faces and questions that followed him. He hunched his shoulders and kept moving.

‘Dr Kelly?’ The student dogged him. ‘Dr Kelly, the procedure? We can’t just leave her like that.’

Everett spun around. ‘Use your initiative,’ he said. He stared at the younger man, disregarding the orderlies who were leading a manacled woman past, one on either side so that her feet barely touched the ground. He paid no attention to the shouts for help as gurneys followed, swerving to avoid him. There must have been an event in the secure unit. He could slip away in the confusion. The press were here for that catastrophe, not his own—not the death. They didn’t know yet. Good. He still had time. ‘The procedure’s in the manual,’ Everett said, releasing his student’s eyes.

‘But where…’

He walked away, throwing his hands in the air. ‘Look it up.’

Was running the procedure so far beyond their comprehension? He understood how that could be, but a nurse would eventually search the manual, find the correct protocols and perform them. They wouldn’t have any death kits in the storerooms—they hadn’t been stocked in decades—but they were an industrious crew, his team. They’d improvise. While they did, he could get away and think this through.
What Labs would make of a death he couldn’t imagine. They’d be calling him soon, requesting an explanation, demanding his presence too, no doubt. That would be a breeze compared to the debacle awaiting him when Admin got word of it. And then there was the press. He looked over his shoulder. A few of them had paused by the open doors, their hungry eyes staring in at his patient’s hand, those fine, curled fingers pointing towards the ceiling. They may not know death when they saw it, but they could read faces. It would be obvious something had gone very wrong in that trauma room. How was he to explain it?

He heard his name called again, but he blocked the voice out. He’d had years of practice creating that wall in his mind, a barricade against all thoughts and questions arrowed towards him. He shoved his hands in his pockets and ploughed on, quickening his pace. It wasn’t far to his office, just a few more turns. He’d be in his sanctuary soon. He’d sort this out.

He didn’t blame his staff for their questions or their helplessness. Naturally they would feel disoriented and confused. He certainly did. None of these people had seen a death before—they were too young. It would take them some time to assimilate the strange event, categorising the symptoms, treatment, prognosis and outcome. Doing the procedure without him would help them adjust. It would help them reconcile their minds to the experience. He needed to leave them to it. He had his own adjustments to make. Or was that just an excuse? Maybe he was running scared. So many thoughts were struggling to surface; he felt like something important was being drowned out.

What was he forgetting? It was a vital bit of information—but he couldn’t find it anywhere in his mind. Like when looking for lost keys, the more he searched, the more frantic he became. He couldn’t fit these pieces together. He rubbed the back of his neck. His thoughts continued to swirl, like butterflies, unable to alight anywhere, not for long, not for more than a fraction of a second. The most persistent queries jolted him like needles: sharp, searing, relentless. What have I done? Could I have stopped it? Should I have stopped it? What is it I can’t remember?

Those were only on the surface. Underneath was the question that had been pushing against his waking life and his dreamscapes ever since the patient was brought in. The question that was there waiting for him every morning when his alarm went off. It ate at his thoughts as he gulped down his coffee and raced off to work. It persisted through the day, lurking behind every task he performed, every lecture he gave, every patient he treated, every transplant he supervised. It haunted his words, infiltrating his voice whether he spoke truth or lies. It followed him to his bed at night and stood vigil over his sleep. The all-prevailing question that teased him, obsessed him, filled him with confusion, longing and desire—who was she? He didn’t even know her name. Or was that what he had forgotten? Had he known it once?

He raked his hands through his hair, grabbing his stethoscope as it slipped from around his neck. The question had irrevocably changed now that she was dead, the answer beyond reach. The knowledge of whoever she had been vanished with her—a library burned to the ground. The strange thing was that this unique event, unprecedented in his life, felt familiar, as if it had happened before. It was like a dream he was certain he’d had but couldn’t remember. What was the word for that? Déjà vu? He laughed. Ridiculous. There must be a plausible explanation and he had to find it soon. Or make one up. Admin would need an explanation. A credible one.

As he rounded the last corner, an officer stepped into his path, blocking his way. Tall, armed and frowning, she filled his vision, prohibiting escape. ‘I need to speak with her, Dr Kelly. I’ve waited long enough.’

He looked up into the woman’s eyes, keeping his face a mask, forcing his mind to be still. ‘Whom do you need to speak with?’

‘The Jane Doe we brought in last week. I’ve left several messages. You didn’t answer them.’

He brushed her aside. ‘You can’t see her now.’

She stopped him again. ‘I must insist.’

‘It’s not possible.’

‘Make it possible. We need information and she’s been unconscious too long.’

‘What do you want me to do?’

‘Wake her up.’

‘I can’t.’

‘Of course you can. We need a head shot for ID as well, and DNA samples. I have a requisition form, signed by…’

‘You’ll have to wait for Labs,’ Everett said, starting to push past her again. ‘They’ve first claim now.’

She grasped his arm, her long fingers circling his wrist like a vice. ‘I need to see your patient, Dr Kelly. I’m not waiting any longer.’

‘It’s too late,’ he said, avoiding the intensity of her eyes.

‘What do you mean, it’s too late?’

He focused on her badge, memorising the ten-digit number while he thought of what to say next. He wanted to avoid the word ‘death’ for as long as he could. It would give him time to handle the situation. He’d tell the press just
enough to leverage his meeting with the ASSIST coordinators. He’d tell this officer less if he could get away with it. His plan was half formed but growing by the second. He didn’t want to speak too soon, if he could help it. ‘Your hunt has failed,’ he said. That would throw her off track.

‘What do you mean? The hunt is only beginning. She has to be from the Borderlands. It’s the most likely explanation.’

‘I suspect it is, though you’ve reached a dead end.’

She stepped closer, the rise and fall of her chest inches from his. ‘Explain yourself, Dr Kelly, or I’ll find someone who can.’

The smell of her—a mix of starched fabric, hair dye and gun oil—made his nostrils flare. He shifted his weight, considering his options. There was no walking away from this. Maybe the news would shock her long enough to give him the extra time he needed.

‘Jane Doe is dead.’ Everett let the words roll off his tongue like marbles down a drain. The officer slackened her grip, her hand falling to her side. ‘What do you mean?’

‘She died.’ He looked at the hall clock. ‘Seven and a half minutes ago.’

‘Precisely. At 1.05 p.m.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Nor do I. Not yet. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I must get on with my own investigations. Admin has not been informed.’

She stopped him. ‘How could it happen?’ she asked.

‘I’ve no idea, but I’m going to find out.’

Her fingers pinched. ‘You’ll need to do better than that, Dr Kelly.’

Everett hesitated. What he really needed was more time. ‘Give me your card,’ he said, looking again at the clock. He pulled a pen from his scrub shirt pocket.

The officer handed him a small white contact card with her badge number embedded on one side. He scribbled on the other and handed it back. ‘I’ll know more when the lab reports are in and I’ve had a chance to review my notes.’ He let his eyes roll towards the ceiling. ‘They’ll need to see me first, before there is an official press release. You understand. I’ll contact you immediately after my meeting with Admin.’

She nodded. Hierarchy was one thing she would acknowledge.

‘Call me on that number in twelve hours. We’ll discuss it then,’ he said. He felt her relax.

‘It’s a private line?’

‘Of course.’

She released her grip and took the card in both hands, studying the numbers as if she would know by examining them whether they were forged or not. Everett took advantage of her distraction and stepped away, continuing down the hall.

‘But how could she die?’ the officer shouted out after him.

‘Dr Kelly! Tell me how this happened!’

The words were soon absorbed into the chaos of the ward. Everett manoeuvred down the last stretch of hallway, dodging past gurneys and nurses as they rushed by. Some carried packs of swabs, tubing and emeses bowls. Others held stacks of digital charts and trays of medicaments. He avoided eye contact, though none seemed to notice him, intent on their own tasks. They all would be noticing him soon enough, once the word was out.

The officer didn’t follow. Good.

He spotted a group of med students clustered around their attending resident. He kept his eyes unfocused, evasive and aloof. Nearly there. He thought he heard the officer call out to him again, but Everett pushed on, impervious to the turmoil, the congestion and the building pressure in his head. Or was that his heart? He couldn’t tell the difference. When he reached his office, he swiped the lock with his ID card and slipped inside. The door closed silently behind him.

He stood for a moment, his back pressed against the door frame. The room was in darkness. He caught his breath and automatically checked his pulse. His donor heart hadn’t beat this hard for some time. He had to get his stress levels down. Inhaling deeply, he brought up the lights to a low level, willing his pulse to settle.

At his desk, he switched off his internal com and cell phone. That would shock them. He was always available to everyone, anywhere and any time—but not now. After such a trauma, he needed solitude. If he could disconnect from his reeling emotions and disjointed thoughts, he’d be able to formulate his plan. He needed to focus. There would be many more questions other than the obvious ones the officer had just asked.

_How had this happened, indeed?_
He had to be prepared. He had to have an answer. Admin would come looking for him any minute. He wanted to pre-empt that event. He sat at his desk, carefully took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. It came to him like fog clearing. He had seen death before, once. There had been another case like this—a woman with no external ID, no microchip, no file on record, nothing to check, nothing to cross-reference, nothing to refer to. That woman had died within minutes of admission.

He frowned. Had she? His memory seemed to be slipping again. He knew the other woman had died in the same way as his current Jane Doe had finally gone—like dominoes, tipping one event over to the next, rushing through a sluice, following its prescribed course to the inevitable end: tachycardia, ventricular fibrillation, asystole, arrest. No response to de-fib. No response to cardiac stimulants. No response to his plethora of measures and techniques. No response to anything at all. Her heart stopped beating—no known cause. And that was something that didn’t happen—not any more. No one had died of anything, least of all cardiac failure, for over two hundred years.

Past advances in medicine had achieved what everyone had been desperate for—eternal life. Unfortunately, it hadn’t improved anyone’s disposition in the long run. No one was any more or less content. The fountain of youth, it turned out, was not a fountain of joy. It did not equate with feelings of happiness, exhilaration or inner peace. It certainly didn’t bring about the idyllic life that was anticipated. And now this—a rent in the fabric of their plastic immortality.

He stiffened. It would hit the news in moments and it was him they would want to interview, again and again, until it made sense. It was him they would turn to for clarification. And if that clarification was not given, it would be him that they would want to hang.

How much can I tell of your extraordinary tale, my mystery woman? He realised he was hoping for a response. How peculiar. The room remained dim and silent. Not a word in his mind from her lilting voice. Her voice? Had he ever heard it?

Can’t talk to me any more? Or is it that you won’t? He shook his head. What was he saying? He brought up her chart on the computer screen and began to write. I’ll tell your story myself, without you, if that’s your plan. But don’t be cross if it doesn’t come out quite the way you wanted.

He chuckled, patronising his inner voice. Had he thought he could goad her into connecting with him from a place beyond life? It was as if a part of him believed she was there, in the room. He could taste it, just as he could taste a dinner before it was served. But the emptiness prevailed, leaving him chilled, uncertain. She’d been unique.

His mystery woman had unusual qualities in her physicality, and he was not even sure she was human. Humanoid, of course, but Homo sapiens born and raised on a twenty-fifth century Earth? He didn’t think so. That bit of information would not be on the record though, not without a great deal more research into the plausible alternatives and a deeper study of her DNA. Nor would he mention her extraordinary body art, though how that would remain undisclosed if she went to the donor ward, he wasn’t sure. Could she even go to the donor ward if she were dead? He’d have to look that one up. Perhaps the body art would somehow provide an answer and stand as a warning. He dismissed the thought.

The tattoos had intrigued him deeply, and it felt like a betrayal to use them as an explanation for her death. Still, he’d have to find a way to account for them as well. It would raise a stir. For one thing, she couldn’t have put that art on herself. There had to be others involved, at least one other, and that would make everyone nervous. It reeked of the Borderlands, as the officer suggested, and no one, not even ASSIST, was comfortable with anything that didn’t happen—not any more. No one had died of anything, least of all cardiac failure, for over two hundred years.

Who could those others be and where were they hiding? He wasn’t the only one who would be asking that question. The last thing he wanted was to support a global search for her kinfolk. He planned to find them himself. He had to. The eggs depended on it. Whatever happened, he had to protect them from inquiry or discovery. There could be no connection, not between the two women and not between them and the eggs. He would see to that. He brought up another screen and keyed in the access codes, allowing the scan to sweep his eyes and fingertips.

She’d given him some clues and he intended to follow them, without the full-arsenal SWAT approach of the authorities. In this instance, he would find them on his own. He had to. Where did you come from, my mystery woman? What can your DNA tell me about the children? He ground his teeth. What children? The eggs had been in Cryo for decades.

He rubbed his temples, pressing his fingers hard against them, before jotting down a few encrypted notes. He looked up the DNA scans and checked for cross-matched blood types in the transplant wards. His search of ten million only came up with a handful. But that was enough. It would be feasible to swap samples with one of them. A superficial decoy at best, but it would buy time. His mind flipped through the screens. What next?

He toggled to the flight schedules. He had to make it look natural. He frowned. There was already a booking—two fares to the island of Tibet. He checked the encrypted transaction. He’d made it this morning. Chills washed...
down his spine. He didn’t remember doing that.

No matter. It was done. As he checked that the booking was untraceable and confirmed, a clear plan began to formulate. Admin would grant him leave, surely. He had the credits and then some. No one would question his need for a break. He would holiday in Tibet and bribe a chopper to fly him to the outskirts of the Borderlands. He’d make contact with the inhabitants and get to the bottom of this. He straightened his shoulders. This would work.

He’d have to change the samples in the lab tonight, hold a press conference in the morning and assign blame to the one thing they couldn’t challenge—chaos theory. ASSIST would have to give him permission to reintroduce the notion of death. He’d say it had finally caught up but not to worry, it was just a stopover on a long, eternal journey. They were safe. All was well. They would be freed from their cold and fruitless immortality—unlike the deathless gods they had aspired to become.

*My beautiful mystery woman, was this your plan all along?* The silence left him numb. *Not going to respond? No matter. I’ll find answers, and I’ll find a way for the children to live, with or without your help.*

For a moment it felt like his memory would fill his mind like a giant wave before sucking back out of sight. What was that thought he kept glimpsing? He stared at the display screen. Why had he brought up that page? Tickets? Tibet? Okay. Get away. Good idea. But why two tickets? Who was he travelling with? *I always travel alone.* He changed the booking to one.

What was this note about the Borderlands? There was a cryo-bank number and a requisitions form. What was he getting out of embryonic suspension? He closed his eyes and when he opened them again, the screen was blank. He shook his head, frowning at the bouncing screensaver. *Why did I turn off my com unit?*

He switched it on and buzzed the front desk. ‘Jass? Get me Admin, will you. I need to speak with them, stat.’

‘Stat?’

‘Immediately!’

‘They’re online now,’ Jass replied. ‘There’s a backlog of waiting calls too. What do I do?’

‘Shoot them through. One at a time.’

Everett slipped on his headset, scrolled down Jane Doe’s case history and pushed line one.

He was counting on the pathology lab being dark. One good thing about that department was the hours they kept—ten ‘til four. Nobody worked overtime there. That was for emergencies, bottom floor, his floor. The path lab always ran a thirty-hour week, or less. That is, until tonight.

Everett cursed when he saw the lights. This was going to be tricky. He had to get that body out of there before they ran deep-level DNA tests. He no longer remembered the reason for the urgency that drove him, but he was driven just the same. Feeling for the samples in his coat pocket, he took a breath and pushed through the doors. With any luck, Lucy J would be the one working late. The head pathologist was not an easy woman to deal with, but she didn’t support the Eternal Life Protocol and she didn’t mind breaking rules. At least, not the ones she opposed.

‘Everett,’ Lucy J said, calling out as the doors swung shut behind him. ‘I’ve been waiting for you. Come take a look at this.’

He weaved in and out of the vats, threading his way across the floor. At one point he glimpsed a familiar set of numbers and looked away before he could see the activation date. He didn’t want to know how recently she’d been used. He rubbed his ring finger and carried on.

‘You’re working late, Lucy J.’

‘With good reason.’

She stood over the cadaver, her dark curly hair escaping the blue cap. She pulled the sheet back and turned to him. ‘I couldn’t find a mention of this in your report,’ she said, pointing a slender brown finger at the body art. ‘How’d you miss it?’

He didn’t answer immediately.

‘Obviously you couldn’t have missed it,’ she said when he didn’t respond. ‘So, why’d you omit it in the work-up?’

Everett stared at Jane Doe’s chest. The tattoo was vivid, considering there was no vascular supply. Perhaps the dead woman’s skin, pale now in the absence of blood, provided a better contrast than the tawny hue it had in life. He stared at the contours. No. Not better, he decided. When she was alive, the image rose and fell with each breath, a part of her life force. Now the artwork was immobile, as unresponsive as she, frozen like some painting left to collect dust.

‘I’ve had more pressing notes to make,’ he said, avoiding the pathologist’s eyes. ‘It was a baffling case.’ He shrugged. Surely that was an acceptable response, under the circumstances. She knew what kind of pressure he was under just to keep Jane Doe on his ward. Admin wanted her shunted straight to donor status. They had strict rules:
no ID, no bed.

‘It’s still baffling,’ she said. ‘I’ve run bioassays over and over—all negative. Can I show you?’

He groaned internally and nodded. No choice.

She led him back to her lab bench, indicating the chair opposite hers. She switched off her com speaker and wheeled her chair closer until her knees touched his. He swallowed, forcing himself not to back away.

He scanned her results, shaking his head. ‘What do you make of it?’

Lucy J lowered her voice. ‘If I didn’t know better, Everett, I’d say your patient willed her heart to stop beating.’

His spine prickled. ‘You’re not putting that in your report, are you?’

She laughed, but it sounded forced. ‘You think I want to be shipped off to Psych?’

‘What, then?’

She pulled out a paper notebook and scribbled on it before tearing off the top sheet and handing it to him. He wondered at her stealth. They were the only ones in the room.

‘Follow those chains,’ she said, tapping the image she’d just drawn.

There were no chains to follow. She’d drawn him a map that led to the basement incineration unit. It was a massive furnace used for disposing of excess donor materials, limbs, old organs and pathological samples. His eyebrows shot up. ‘Shall I run your next load for you?’ he asked, keeping his voice level.

‘If you wouldn’t mind. I’ve so much to do and the transporters aren’t here until morning. Quite a pile-up.’

She must have thought they were being watched, so he played along, making certain he didn’t cause the slightest alarm. He was curious to know how Lucy J planned to pull this off. As if reading his mind, she smiled.

‘The toxins in her blood are highly contagious. As you suspected, she’s from the Borderlands. We have enough samples now.’ She nodded towards his pockets. ‘So the sooner the body is disposed of, the better.’

How had she known? He had no idea why she had anticipated his actions, his plan to switch samples, or the need to do so. He passed her the labelled vials and slide case, keeping his expression blank. ‘Shall I take care of it now?’

‘Thank you. I’ll have a report to you first thing tomorrow.’ She returned to the corpse, replaced the sheet and zipped closed the body bag. ‘I’ll send the data to your reception file?’

‘Perfect,’ he said as he wheeled the gurney out the door. ‘I’ll be there.’

It was a lie. He wasn’t sure where he’d be in the morning, but he was certain he would not be here, not tomorrow, nor ever again. His hands shook. He tightened his grip on the edge of the gurney, colour draining from his fingertips, and took Jane Doe for her final ride.
Kreshkali leaned against the brick wall, watching the sky turn red. Streaks of gold dazzled the clouds until the
vanishing sun left everything a wash of pale green. Indigo shadows followed and the vault above her darkened. 
Sunsets from the estate’s rooftop observatory were spectacular at this time of year—clear, epic displays, as if the
gods were blessing the world. She took a deep breath. Any view of the sky was a wonder on Earth, in contrast to the
brown sludge that had previously passed for the heavens, though tonight’s sunset was glorious by any mark. She
stretched her arms wide over her head. ‘Isn’t it magnificent?’

An’ Lawrence looked up from his work, blowing dust from the blade resting on his knees. He’d been slumped
in the corner, reconditioning swords from the armoury, tinkering with various materials he’d found, filing tangs and
oiling fittings. He rebound the hilt of one particularly promising weapon, wrapping it tight, testing the grip. ‘You say
that every night, Kali.’

‘And so would you, if you’d been reared in my world. Here they come!’ She exhaled softly. The first evening
stars appeared, escorting the sun below the horizon. She waited until only the lip of the corona was visible and
adjusted the angle on the sextant. ‘This is magic,’ she said, aligning the sight.

She had plotted over fifty-seven navigational stars, five planets, the sun and moon and dozens of asteroids,
using horizon astronomy to rewrite coordinates for the planetary positions. It hadn’t been done accurately since the
tectonic plate-shift—no one could see objects in the night sky, even if they’d had the skills to identify and chart
them—and ASSIST certainly hadn’t supported the investigations. They’d exterminated astronomers and astrologers
like, not stopping to discern a difference.

She checked her notes. ‘That’s Regulus about to set. Spica will follow in four hours.’
‘I’m sure you’ll tell me when it does,’ he said, not looking up from his task.

Kreshkali made a few more notations. A light breeze fluttered the pages and she rested her fingertips on them
while searching for a paperweight. An’ Lawrence remained hunched over his work. She dropped a smooth stone on
the charts and faced him. ‘What’s the problem, Rowan?’

He didn’t answer until he had finished binding another blade, testing the balance with his index finger. Perfect.
‘I don’t like it here,’ he said without looking up.

She clicked her tongue. ‘Demons with you, then, Sword Master. Go back the way you came.’ She turned to
walk away.
‘Kali, wait! You didn’t let me finish.’ He kissed the hilt of the sword before sheathing it.
‘You have more to say?’

‘I do.’ He cleared his throat. ‘I don’t like it here without my students. You brought me to teach, and I’m restless
to get on with it.’

‘You are?’

‘I am, and I’m thinking this would be the perfect place to establish a new temple school. There are enough
stragglers at Half Moon Bay to keep Zero busy, and since meeting that young woman Merriam he’s showing no
desire to return to Treeon any time soon. I can work with the apprentices that are coming over from there, as well as
the Bay. The gods know they’ll need training and there are enough of them.’

She tilted her head. ‘So you do want to stay.’
‘If this is to be a temple ground, I do.’
‘But not Half Moon Bay?’

‘I don’t know what your attraction is to that place. It’s a rubbish heap.’
‘It’s my home, my birthplace.’

‘Yours and the sewer rats, and whatever those grotesque knobbly things are that grow to be the size of small
cats.’

‘Cane toads?’

‘Come on, Kali. This place is vast, productive, and more important, it’s been protected. You can’t tell me you
don’t want to make a temple of it. It’ll breathe new life into Earth.’

‘I have no argument, save for the Lupins.’

He grizzled.

‘Rowan, you know that’s why I’ve considered asking Zero to master here. He’s not opposed to the Lupins. He
welcomes them in his ranks, open to their ways.’
‘I’m open.’
‘Since when?’
‘Since I decided I was.’
She laughed. ‘Rowan, the Lupins belong here. They were bred here, after all, and…’
‘Save your speech, Kali. I know it by heart, and yes, the Lupins have a right to be here. Of course. You’ll get no argument from me.’
‘Really? I thought that was all I got.’ She stared at him for a moment and went back to her notes, then scanned the night sky for Jupiter. It was in the sign of Virgo now, halfway between Regulus and Spica, a little north. She spotted the bright planet and checked it with the sextant. Wonderful. Just where he should be. Her calculations were accurate. ‘You’re like a child, Rowan,’ she said.

He didn’t respond for some time. Finally he came out with, ‘Don’t you want me to stay now?’
Was he trying to antagonise her? ‘It’s not about what I want, Rowan. It’s about what needs to happen for people to survive on this planet. It’s not about us. Not a personal thing. Never has been.’

‘I see.’
She lowered the sextant. ‘I didn’t mean it that way,’ she said.
‘How then, if not personal?’
She smoothed her dress. ‘It’s not completely impersonal.’
‘That must be refreshing for you,’ he whispered, though she heard him loud and clear. He was looking towards the stables rooftop. His long legs were stretched out in front of him, a stack of swords polished and oiled by his side.

‘Rowan,’ she said, unsure how to finish.

He got up, brushing dust from his leggings. ‘I’m going to check the horses,’ he said, shaking his head to forestall anything she might say. He scooped up the swords and carried them to the stairwell.

‘Rowan, wait.’
She stopped him with her voice, closing the distance between them. He kept his back to her, though he waited. She stepped near, rising up on tiptoe to speak softly in his ear. ‘Stay.’
He turned, brushing his lips across her cheek. ‘Are you certain?’
‘I think it’s a great idea.’
‘And my students?’
‘Bring your core group from the Bay, and any apprentices from Treeon that want the experience. They’d be invaluable with the horsemanship.’

‘They’d want to be.’
‘Rowan, most on Earth had never seen a picture of an equestrian team, let alone a live horse, until we brought these over. You can’t expect them to have any horse sense yet.’

‘We’d need to introduce school horses to start with—smaller and thinner-skinned to cope with the heat.’
‘I’ve struck a deal with some Gaelean breeders from Corsanon. It’s nearly the same climate in their deserts and those animals are superb.’

‘Desertwinds? They’re a little light for my taste but brilliant on endurance. Elegant too.’ He shifted his grip on the swords. ‘Good choice, as long as we begin with placid ones.’

‘It’s done. I’ll have more horses for you as soon as the paddocks are ready and the water system’s set up.’
His eyebrows creased. ‘How’d you manage those negotiations? Corsanons don’t part easily with their steeds.’

‘You know me, Rowan.’ She laughed. ‘I dance life’s dance. I get what I want.’
He nodded. ‘I’ve noticed.’
She pressed her body closer. He didn’t resist. ‘I want you to stay,’ she said.

‘Because?’
‘You’re the master who can unite everyone, the most skilled swordsman and equestrian. Your teaching abilities are genius and…’

‘Anything else?’
She gave his neck a kiss. ‘If you’re willing to work with the Lupins, it’ll…’
He cut her off. ‘I said I was. Not that they needed much tuition last time I checked.’
He turned his back and left.

‘Rowan?’

Her only answer was the sound of his boots clipping down the stairs. She returned to her work. He wasn’t embracing the Lupins with much enthusiasm yet, but it was progress, and that was exactly what she wanted—progress in the right direction.
La Makee stood outside the portal, checking her pack. The sun was setting, turning the redwoods to gold. A ground fog rolled in. It hovered knee-deep around her boots like a carpet of cloud. Jays and magpies scattered as her familiar, a Lemur raven, landed in the sacred oak beside her. He cawed, shuffling and reshuffling his dark wings before letting them settle against his back. His head cocked sideways, waiting.

‘Nearly ready, Woca. Are you?’

He answered with a burst of short raspy caws. Her golden warhorse breathed softly at her side, warm puffs of air coming from his nostrils. The animal sighed and rubbed his head on her shoulder, nearly knocking her over. Golden hairs clung to her black cloak.

‘Hold still, Amarillo. I’m thinking.’ As she checked the saddlebags, the raven cawed again.

_Think fast, Mistress. Your apprentice comes._

‘Demons.’ She raised her hand and around them fell an invisible blanket, a glamour that hid the witch, her horse and the raven. It rippled for a moment like a fine net made of dew, before vanishing and taking all traces of their presence with it. _Quiet, my lovelies. Until the girl passes._

Her apprentice sang, a sweet lilting voice that rose to the canopy, sound waves seeking the sky above the treetops. She walked right by Makee and her companions, wandering deeper into the forest, gathering herbs and mushrooms, unaware and unconcerned.

_And she calls herself a witch?_  
_Please, Mistress. The point of the glamour, Mistress, was to make us undetectable._  
_She didn’t so much as twitch!_  
_A testimony to your expertise in glamour weaving?_  
_Possibly._

Makee didn’t know whether she felt relief or annoyance. The girl should have been more aware. But then, she hadn’t actually met her yet—it was before her time. She wasn’t completely to blame for her lack of attentiveness. Makee laughed to herself.

_Relief, Mistress. It’s best we are not found by anyone from Treeon Temple, past, present or future, if this plan of yours is to work._

_You’re right, my gorgeous one. Relief it is._ Makee let the glamour down and disappeared into the portal, the warhorse and raven in tow. ‘Now it begins,’ she said, stroking Amarillo’s crest. ‘Kreshkali isn’t the only witch who can run between the worlds, and now we know hers is not the only time.’

The raven cawed, flapping his wings.

‘Take us back,’ she whispered, her hand brushing over the plasma. ‘Take us to old Corsanon. There’s a woman called Jaynan I have to find!’ She chanted a spell, twisting it and folding it in on itself until it covered the glowing rock. ‘Who shall pass, pass not with guile. Who shall try, shall only fail…’ Purple strands of energy jumped out, hitting her palm and zapping like a lightning strike. She jerked her hand back and rubbed her fingers. The smell of burnt flesh filled the corridor. Amarillo reared; his iron-shod hooves clipped the edge of the rock wall and sparks flew. ‘Easy, lad.’ She soothed the stallion. ‘You don’t want to bring the roof down on us.’

The portal swirled, streams of light dancing in spiral patterns.

_Will the corridors run true, Mistress? Without one of the blood?_ The Lemur raven settled on the back of Amarillo’s saddle.

‘One of the blood!’ She spat the words.  
_Will they?_ he persisted.  
‘We’re about to find out, Woca. We’ll either land where I intend, or…’  
_Or?_  
‘We’re lost in the corridors forever.’
Rosette inched her way forward, peering into the dark. She kept her breath soft, her steps guarded, unsure of the footing. Her fingers groped along the wall, chunks of rock breaking loose, crumbling in her hands. She coughed in the dust. This place was new—she felt certain she’d never been here before, but still she had a strange feeling of déjå vu.

‘Drayco? Can you see anything?’ she whispered, resting her hand on the temple cat’s back.

I see everything. Drayco’s voice reverberated in her mind, warm and deep, a soothing balm in the dry atmosphere of the cave.

She patted his head. ‘Like what, for instance? Can you describe it to me?’ She couldn’t see her fingertips when she held them in front of her face.

It’s a wide tunnel, Maudi. A cave. Wider than the sewers under Half Moon Bay, and the smells are broader here too. There are not as many metallic tones, though there is at least as much decomposition. There’s daylight ahead, bats behind. Watchfulness ahead, sleepiness behind.


More than here. See?

‘Can’t see. That’s the point. Where’s Jarrod?’

Drayco pressed his shoulder against her side. I don’t know.

‘I thought you could see and smell everything! He was just in front of us.’

He was just in front of us in the portal, true. But this is not the portal and he’s not anywhere in front of us now.

Dust wafted across her face, the feel of it gritty on her lips. ‘He has to be.’

Really, Maudi? Is that true? He has to be?

‘Doesn’t he?’

Rosette cupped her hands to her mouth and called out. ‘J-a-r-r-o-d!’ Her voice echoed through the cave, waves rippling in all directions. Before the sound died away, pebbles started trickling down the walls. Jarrod didn’t answer, but the mountain rumbled and groaned. Rosette clamped her hand over her mouth, holding her breath. ‘Oh no.’ She sank her fingers into Drayco’s fur, clutching him tight.

I wouldn’t be yelling at this point, Maudi. Drayco’s tail brushed past her as he snapped it back and forth.

The mountain’s edgy.

‘What do you mean, edgy?’

I mean unstable, volatile…edgy. Like a keg of dynamite near a campfire.

‘Got it,’ she whispered. ‘But Jarrod was here only a second ago.’ She continued forward, taking baby steps.

‘Where could he be?’

Drayco didn’t answer. He gave her hand a nip and quickened his pace. I want to get out of here.

‘Me too.’ She stumbled after him towards the light.

The call to this world had been urgent. Rosette had felt it instantly. They’d been at Timbali Temple, searching the library for ancient records, looking for a map or a list that identified all the portals to the many-worlds. They knew of a few—those of the Richter line being intrinsically drawn to them—but Jarrod thought there were more scattered throughout Gaela. They needed to be identified. Rosette had suggested they search the archives of the oldest libraries, but so far they’d found no clues.

The portals were aligned to intention. If the traveller had a strong enough focus—a clear and fearless picture of their destination—they could enter. They might even end up where they wanted to go, but the real ticket was in the blood. The safest travel pass was encoded in the DNA. The Richter line, as could Jarrod. For anyone else, though, the journey would be a gamble. With the portals between the worlds open to so many—the traffic between Gaela and Earth ever increasing—Kreshkali had concerns, the risk of trackers being one of them.

‘ASSIST is down, but maybe not all the way out,’ she’d said when she and Rosette had discussed it.

‘Is there anything we can do about it?’ Rosette had asked.

‘I’m weaving a selective spell at each portal. Travellers with the wrong intentions will be stopped, or at least diverted.’

‘Wrong intentions?’ Rosette had said.

‘Wrong to us.’
‘And it will work?’
‘It will, if we can find all the portals.’

Rosette had nodded, and begun the search. She and Jarrod had found cryptic text in Timbali referring to the portals, though their exact locations were not disclosed. Rosette wondered if they might have been so well known at one time that they didn’t need a map to identify them. Jarrod wasn’t sure.

‘The ancients knew of them, that’s clear,’ he’d said. ‘And they used them, on occasion. But they were meticulous record keepers. Look at these lists.’ He had held up a scroll the length of his body. ‘You can see how many nails were in each horseshoe and an all-too-graphic description of what their dogs were fed. It makes sense that there would be a set of coordinates for the portals as well.’

‘Then there is,’ Rosette had said. ‘We just haven’t looked in the right place yet.’

She’d been up a ladder reaching for the top shelf when she’d heard the call—a deafening sound that had stopped her cold. Jarrod’s eyes told her he’d heard it too, but when she looked past the long tables and shelves of the library and out into the courtyard, she realised no one else had. Students were reading quietly, sparrows and yellow-eyed figbirds were dipping in and out of the courtyard, initiates were meditating under the flowering cherry trees. A messenger rode past, waving at a friend near the well.

Before it sounded again, she’d closed the book in her hand. As the cover dropped down on the thick pages, a letter fell out. She’d caught it in her fingers, holding it tight as she’d turned it over. The envelope was the colour of cornsilk with a blood-red seal on one side and dark blue writing on the other—a flowery script spelling out the name Nellion Paree in flamboyant loops and jags. She had dropped it into her bag while backing down the ladder, no time to give it more thought. They’d been called to another world, loud and clear, and the need was urgent.

After packing some basic supplies and sending a quick message to Kreshkali, they’d sailed south to the Gulf of Tasisia. Even though the distance to the mainland was shorter to the north, a current ripped through the strait, making it impossible to cross. The only way to and from the Isle of Lemur was the Port of Tuscaro at the south end of the Gulf. It took a little coaxing to get Drayco back on board, but the Azul Sea was smooth and calm, the breeze filling the sails. The next morning they’d made their way to Flureon by coach—two days’ travel with a good team.

‘This is another reason why we need those maps,’ Jarrod had said. ‘There would be a portal on Lemur, surely.’

‘If there is, it’s hiding,’ Rosette had said.

They’d slipped into the portal above Bastis Point, trusting the Entity to take them where they were needed. Now Gaela was far behind, and what lay ahead, Rosette had no idea. Jarrod had been right in front of her. It didn’t make sense that he wasn’t there now.

She kept one hand on the rock wall, the other on her sword hilt, and squinted into the distance. ‘Is that the light up ahead that you’re talking about, Dray?’

You can see it?
‘I can. It must be the way out.’
I certainly hope so, Maudi.

A pinprick of light showed in the distance. The ground rumbled beneath her and she tripped over the uneven rocks. Drayco waited for her to scramble up again before breaking into a jog.

‘Jarrod must be waiting for us at the entrance.’
If he is, he’s not answering me.

The mouth of the cave widened as they approached.
Something’s not right, Maudi.

She slowed, dropping her hand from the wall and drawing her sword. It sang as it cut through the air, glinting in the increasing light. Holding it in a guard position, she rested her other hand on Drayco, feeling the tension in his neck.

I don’t think the sword’s going to be of much use, though.
‘Why not?’
You can’t fight a mountain with it, and right now, the mountain is the problem.

A tremor shook, the ground rolling like a wave.
‘What was that?’ she whispered, gripping the hilt with both hands.
Feels like an earthquake to me. A big one.

Rocks tumbled around them.
‘Run!’ she screamed.

The ground churned as she bolted towards the opening. Pebbles and dirt rushed down the walls, turning into torrents that piled in mounds of debris. Dust billowed and she choked, the taste of chalk in her mouth. The ground opened up behind them, and they raced to stay ahead of the rifts. The acrid smell of sulphur filled the air.

The entrance was only a breath away. It framed a landscape of twisted trees and swamp. Tangles of branches
were draped with sea-green moss, hanging like tattered kelp at low tide. A murder of crows took flight from bare limbs as they approached, their squawks and caws drowning out all but the tearing ground.

‘Keep going!’ Rosette yelled as the roar of the cracking mountain hammered her ears.

They burst through the entrance onto a narrow track and skirted the cliff face. There was no sign of Jarrod, and no time to investigate. She sheathed her sword, then raced down the trail to the edge of the marsh. They hit the swamp running, muck sucking at Rosette’s boots and caking her bare legs. The hem of her skirt and cloak were heavy with ooze, forcing her to a slow-motion trudge. Drayco moved in a series of leaps, mud up to his belly fur. He kept his chin high, his long black whiskers brushing the surface as he sank deeper into the mire. He grumbled obscenities in her mind. The stench was nauseating.

‘What do you think died here, Maudi?’

The hoary trees quivered and shook, branches crumbling as they fell.

‘Everything,’ she answered, shouting to be heard.

‘We’re going to add to it if it gets any deeper. We can’t swim in this sludge.

‘There’s higher ground this way.’ She motioned for him to follow, touching his neck as she veered out of the depths. Not far ahead stood a large oak, branches spread wide over a knoll—an oasis in an endless black mire.

The ground firmed as they reached the roots of the tree. It was still alive, judging by its olive-coloured leaves and the odd acorn among the twist of branches. Rosette turned, her sides heaving, mud dripping down her legs. A deafening sound boomed from the cave, the mouth now obscured by boulders, rock and rubble. Dust clouds shot towards the summit, slowly settling like a mist on the newly reshaped rock face.

‘Jarrod?’ she whispered.

The entrance to the cave, and to the portal, was gone. Save for their breathing and the squelch of mud, everything was silent.

Drayco narrowed his orange eyes, staring back the way they’d come. That portal’s lost, I imagine.

Rosette grimaced. The mire was seeping in between the laces of her boots, saturating her socks like noisome glue. She wiped her hands on an edge of her cloak before brushing back wisps of hair that had escaped her long braids. ‘If the portal is lost, Drayco, so are we.’

‘What, Dray? What do you see?’

A low growl emanated from his throat.

Jarrod sat cross-legged by the mouth of the cave, his back against the rock wall. He closed his eyes, wishing he could do the same to his nose. The smell of decay made him sick to his stomach, a feeling he was not accustomed to. There were definite disadvantages to being in a human body, tulpa or no. This was another to add to his list. The benefits outweigh the drawbacks, though. He smiled at the thought.

A picnic scene came immediately to mind—particularly the blooming cherry trees in the courtyard of Timbali Temple’s main library. Rosette’s long black hair was covered with pink flower petals, filled with the scent of early spring. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Not long after the picnic had been packed away and they were back in the library, they’d heard the call. Looking into each other’s eyes, they’d closed their books and were out the door in moments, heading for the Gulf of Tasisia and the portal on Bastis Point. But the picnic had been lovely, he mused.

There would be other picnics, surely, but never exactly like that one, with the cherry blossoms in her hair and the figbirds chattering overhead. He’d been going to broach a topic—one that had been on his mind for some time—but never quite got to it. Now it would have to wait. He wrinkled his nose. What’s taking her so long? They were right behind me.

He’d been on the edge of the mountain for three days—their longest separation yet—and still there was no sign of Rosette and Drayco. This wasn’t the first time they’d travelled to an unknown world, responding to the call of the Entities—guardians of the portals. So far, he and Rosette, and her enigmatic familiar, had come through together, seconds apart. Time had been on their side. But not any more. He flicked dust from his leggings and stared at the swamp.

He understood the physics of it, the slowing down of dimensional space perception. It was an illusion, though an extremely convincing one. It had happened to him and Janis Richter all those hundreds of years ago when they stumbled onto Gaela and hid his CPU in the gorge above Corsanon. His eyebrows narrowed at the memory. Just like then, he had no idea where he was now. As far as he could tell, this world was his own, thousands of years ago. Or perhaps it was really another world altogether, thousands of light years away. There was no knowing. Not yet. Not until he had a look around, and that wasn’t going to happen until Rosette arrived.
A snapping twig cut short his thoughts. He didn’t move, didn’t shift his eyes, but heightened his awareness, stretching it out in all directions like an invisible web. He kept his hands resting together in his lap, his shoulders relaxed, eyes soft behind closed lids. Soon he could hear branches giving way to bipedal travellers, two of them by the sound of it. Their boots slogget through the mud, the low buzz of their voices mellifluous in his head. The language was unrecognisable. He guessed they were about a mile off and would take some time to arrive, if they were coming this way at all. Jarrod suspected they were.

He waited, unmoving, sinking deeper into meditation, letting the sounds and smells of his immediate environment fade away. When he opened his eyes, a man and a woman stood before him, fixing him with dark stares and drawn swords. He assessed them both and turned to the female. ‘Greetings,’ Jarrod said, his lips lifting into a smile. The tone of his voice was like sunshine.

‘Who are you and what are you doing here?’ the woman asked. Her sword remained directed at him, like an extension of her arm. The dull light that filtered through the clouds bounced off the edge of her blade and hit his eyes, making him squint.

Clever.

The woman spoke with confidence and assertion. There was a sternness to her that suggested she would not hesitate to maim—or kill. Jarrod suspected she was not much older than Rosette, perhaps in her late twenties. Her body was wiry with long limbs, clad in leather pants and vest. Her hair was a short, spiky brown, her eyes green like Gaela’s North Sea—quite a contrast to the drab background of this world. She wore a black cloak flung back from her shoulders and clasped at the neck with a silver image of the moon. Her long fingers wrapped around the hilt of her sword like vines around a branch. What a focused soul, he thought. She’ll have to meet Rosette.

‘Answer me,’ the woman said. Her voice became more challenging as she raised her sword slightly, moving the refracted light back into his eyes. The hem of her sleeve fell back as her arm lifted, revealing the edges of a dark tattoo. It looked like the head of a serpent or a reptile, its mouth open, hissing.

Jarrod processed the words she spoke, considering her syntax and inflections, creating a new database for the language. It had vaguely familiar components. Ancient Babylonian Earth? He would have to research that. ‘I’m a traveller, waiting for my companion,’ he answered back in her own tongue. ‘Who are you?’

She lowered her sword enough to drop the glare from his eyes. ‘I am Selene, first marshal of the border scouts.’

Jarrod nodded his head, about to speak.

‘State your name and placement,’ the man cut in, holding the tip of his sword an arm’s length from Jarrod’s throat. He was taller than Selene—just—with a lithe, muscular build. His arms were bare from the shoulders down, and both were etched in tattoos of flames that licked up towards his face. His sandy hair was cropped short except for a long thin braid that fell from the nape of his neck to his waist.

Drayco! Are you through the portal?

There was no reply.

‘Name and placement?’ the man repeated, stepping a fraction closer.

‘My name’s Jarrod Cossica. I’m not from around here, so the “placement” query is unanswerable.’ He watched as the two of them seemed to confer without sound or gesture, wondering if they were telepathic. He tuned in, but couldn’t hear their thoughts. Interesting…

‘Where are you from, Jarrod Cossica, and how did you learn our language if you are, as you say, “not from around here”?’ Selene asked, her voice more curious now than challenging. He could imagine it being quite lilting, if she wanted it to be. She shifted her stance.

‘If you speak our dialect, you have a placement,’ the man said, interrupting her again. ‘Answer.’

There was no hint of a lilt in his voice. The man’s irritation was transparent, though Jarrod couldn’t work out if it was towards him or Selene. He seemed to be scowling at them both. Jarrod’s eyes went soft, focused on nothing and everything at once. As he took a deep breath, he turned to the man, expanding his energy field towards him. He held him immobile until the other finally lowered his sword, a quizzical expression on his face.

‘My name is Shane,’ he said.

‘Thank you.’ Jarrod turned back to Selene. ‘I’m recently from Gaela, a long way away. I came here to…’

‘Did you come from there?’ she asked, nodding towards the mouth of the cave.

A race of interrupters, it seems.

‘Yes, I came to…’

‘Then I know why you’re here,’ she said, looking past him into the depths of the mountain. She sheathed her sword and nodded for Shane to do the same. ‘It’s him.’

‘How can you be sure?’

‘Who else could he be? Besides, you felt it, didn’t you?’

The man grimaced at her for some time before finally nodding.
‘We called you,’ she said, bringing her attention back to Jarrod. He kept his face expressionless. Something wasn’t right. She couldn’t have been the one that called them. She wasn’t telepathic.

‘You need to come with me,’ Selene said. The words were not an invitation.

‘As I mentioned earlier,’ Jarrod replied, slowly standing up as he spoke. He brushed the dust from his hands while looking her in the eye. ‘I’m waiting for my friends. I don’t want to abandon them.’

‘You said you had one companion.’

‘Yes, I did, but it’s actually one, plus one other.’ Jarrod shot another mental thought to Drayco. Where are you two? Again there was no reply. They’d either not arrived yet, or had arrived elsewhere. Accept it, Cossica, and move on. It’s not going to solve itself in this moment.

‘He’ll wait for them,’ Selene said, tilting her head towards Shane. The other man stiffened, his face contorting as he stared back at her. It was obvious he didn’t like the idea at all, but the look in Selene’s eyes didn’t change. ‘I’m sure it won’t be long,’ she added.

‘What if it is?’ Shane asked.

‘You can practise one of those instruments you always have with you.’ Her tone was dismissive.

‘How long have you been waiting?’ he asked Jarrod.

‘A few days.’

‘So it couldn’t be much longer,’ she said. ‘Good news.’

Shane stood firm for a moment before sheathing his sword. The scowl on his face didn’t lift. He was not Jarrod’s first pick for Rosette’s welcoming party.

‘We need you now,’ Selene said to Jarrod. ‘Follow me.’

Jarrod had no desire to leave this man waiting for Rosette. She’d probably carve him to shreds before they’d exchanged two words—not that she would understand his language, or he hers. Still, he did look like he could handle himself, and Selene had a sense of urgency. He made a decision instantly from an infinite array of possibilities. ‘I’d like to leave a token for my companion, unless either of you have a notepad and pen?’

Neither did.

‘Her name is Rosette and she’ll be coming out of that cave some time soon. Her, and her familiar.’

Shane looked quizzical. ‘Familiar?’ He said the word as if it prickled his mouth. ‘What’s that?’

‘A temple cat…a large one.’

Shane shook his head.

‘I think he means tabby cat,’ Selene replied, her voice softening with the last word.

Jarrod smiled. ‘Yes, a tabby, more or less. More, really. He has no stripes, though. All black,’ Jarrod said. He held his hand hip-high. ‘And larger.’

‘Larger?’

‘A big beast.’

Shane wrinkled his nose.

‘Not a cat lover?’ Jarrod rubbed the back of his neck. Good luck. ‘Take this. It’ll help,’ Jarrod said, untying his pendant. He looked at it briefly. It was a silver falcon, wings outstretched and inlaid with turquoise. The wingtips curved upward, forming a semicircle topped by a brilliant ruby sun.

Handing it to Shane, he said, ‘It will persuade her to come with you, assuring her that you’ll know where I am. I don’t think you’ll be able to communicate, unless she can hit your frequency.’

‘Frequency?’ Shane said, looking at the small falcon and rubbing his thumb over the face of the sun.

‘Your mind speech.’

Shane shrugged before slipping the charm into his breast pocket. ‘I don’t have a mind speech.’

‘Then the pendant will help, as long as she doesn’t think you took it from me by force.’

Shane spun around to Selene, about to speak.

‘Let’s go,’ she said, avoiding eye contact with either of them. She adjusted her belt and headed out into the swamp, not looking to see if Jarrod followed.

Shane stared after them as they waded into the fog. It hovered knee-deep above the swamp, rising in wisps that dissipated before touching the misshapen branches and clouds of gnats and flies. If he could bore holes into them with his eyes, he would. He didn’t look away until they’d disappeared.

Perfect. Now I’m to be doorman to some foreigner who’s most likely going to attack before I speak my name. And what did he mean, ‘larger’ tabby? He brushed the flies away from his face—a futile exercise. This day was not going as planned. Nothing close.
Early that morning, he’d volunteered to walk the borders with Selene. He regularly jumped at any chance for her company, love having that insatiable urge towards proximity that cannot otherwise be explained. It certainly wasn’t a pleasant experience, being with the woman. She was sharp, like fine-cut glass, and she used her wit as a barrier against his desires, his suggestions, his lust. There was no way in. Not for him. Every day he awoke hoping she might open up, and every night he fell asleep disappointed, miserable. He hated it and loved it in equal measure—a demon forever swallowing its tail.

Today Selene had proved aloof, as always, her proficient, detached manner impossible to penetrate with any kind of warmth or meaningful exchange. The more she deflected his efforts, the more sullen he’d become, until he’d finally given up on his overtures reduced to glares and grumbles. Inevitably he found himself wishing he was far from the stinking border marshes, far from his ice-cold Selene, in a warm pub, drinking beer and playing tunes with other bards. Now that she was gone, it seemed he had been granted half his wish. He was far from her, but it didn’t help. Nothing did.

He turned his back to the cave and slid down the granite face until he sat on the ground, his head resting against the wall. There was no warmth in the rock, and no comfort in the view. A flock of crows circled above. They alighted in several of the trees, their squawks and caws filling the foul air with earsplitting noise.

He rummaged in his pack and brought out his flute. The creases in his forehead softened as he began to play, the music wafting sweet and brisk over the bog, drowning out the incessant hum of insects and competing with the crows. As he played, the pinch in his heart began to lessen and his spirits lightened, just a little.

He played for hours, though his lips went dry and his fingers ached. He played until all thought and turmoil vanished from his mind and he became the notes that rose from the flute, drifting over the land and into the distant haze. As he finished a lengthy tune, drawing breath to begin another, he paused. The crows took off, a mass exodus. Everything went still. Even the insects had stopped buzzing. An eerie silence rang in his ears. He started a new tune when suddenly the mountain answered back with a deep bass rumble of its own.

‘Demon’s brother,’ he whispered. ‘Not a shaker.’ He pulled the flute away from his lips and jumped up, bracing against the cliff face. He thrust his instrument into his backpack, his knees flexing with each rising tremor. The ground rocked. He shouldered his pack, tightened the straps and raised a fist to the mountain. ‘What did I do to deserve this?’

There was no direct answer, but the ground rolled in waves underfoot. He ran into the marsh, coursing for the highest ground he could find. At the base of a wide-girthed oak he stopped to catch his breath. The mud rose around his legs; a swell of black sludge was heading towards him. He scrambled up the tree, sticking to the centre branches, outer limbs snapping and breaking at the slightest touch.

High up the tree, he levelled his eyes at the mountain in time to see the cave tumble in on itself, shooting a geyser of dust out of its mouth as it collapsed in a heap of rubble. When the dust settled, he saw that the tree wasn’t the only thing that had escaped the landslide. A dark figure charged out into the swamp, and at her side was an enormous tabby—bigger than he could imagine. Shane steadied himself on his perch, the oak shuddering beneath his weight. They were headed straight for him.

‘What, Dray. What do you see up there?’ Rosette felt his hackles rise, his neck tightening. Her hand went to the hilt of her sword. She slowed her breath and tuned her thoughts and awareness to the immediate surroundings. If there was anyone nearby, they were masking their energy effectively. She couldn’t spot them.

_There’s someone perched in the tree…like a stooping vulture._
_A bird?_
_No, but they’re pretending to be one._
_Where?_
_Above and to the left. See?_

Rosette looked up through the oak branches, squinting. When she spotted him, she drew her sword. ‘Hey! You up there. Why don’t you come down?’

There was a reply, though Rosette had no idea what it meant. The language was strange, full of consonants and clicks, though the man’s voice sounded deep and inquiring. Nice timbre.

‘Drayco, did you catch any of that?’

_Not a word._

‘Great. Where the heck is Jarrod when we need him the most? He’d have the entire dialect catalogued by now.’ She craned her neck. ‘We mean you no harm.’ This time she spoke more slowly, hoping the tone of her voice would transmit a sense of safety and welcome.

The man answered. Though unintelligible, his words sounded a little more quizzical, not menacing. He kept
talking.
‘Sheesh. Once you get this guy started, there’s no end.’
Her familiar flicked his tail. *The same may be said of you, Maudi.*
‘Do you think so?’
*I do.*

She listened to the man in the tree. He carried on, sentence after sentence until, amid the garble, she thought she recognised a word. It sounded like *Rosette.*

*How could he know my name?*
*Maybe if you can get him down here, we’ll find out. I don’t know his words, but I can read his body language.*

She turned back to the tree. ‘That’s me. I’m Rosette.’ She said the name very slowly. ‘R-o-s-e-t-t-e. Come down, please.’

After more dialogue, his questioning sounds and her coaxing, there was movement in the tree. He was climbing down. Rosette got a good look at him as he descended. He was armed with a long sword, broader than hers, like a Corsanon blade, though he was dressed more like a hunter than a warrior. Clearly camouflage was a priority, though his eyes stood out. There was no camouflaging them. They were a most vivid blue, like a cloudless autumn sky. He’d be considered handsome if he stopped screwing up his face.

She stepped back from the trunk, giving him room, and hoped it would look like a sign of friendship. He’d stopped his descent about head-high and nodded towards Drayco. His hackles were still up and he sniffed the air around the man’s boots.

‘Oh, don’t worry. He’s okay…as long as you are,’ Rosette said. ‘This is Drayco, a temple cat from the Dumarkian Woods.’

*Probably meaningless to him, Maudi, given the foreign language.*

*I’m reassuring him. It’s the sound that counts.*

*He’s not a stray dog, you know.*

She ignored Drayco’s last observation and gestured to the man. ‘Keep your sword sheathed and we’ll all get along fine,’ she called out.

*That doesn’t seem to be encouraging him, Maudi.* Drayco’s voice rippled with humour as he licked his chops. ‘Neither does that,’ she said, stroking down the hackles. ‘Can you close your mouth, at least?’

*I will, if you put away your sword.*

*Good point.* She sheathed her blade and smiled up at those spectacular blue eyes, her palms open.

Finally, he swung both legs out and pushed off the limb to land splat in the mud next to Rosette. He stared at her, then the feline, his hand never leaving his sword hilt.

‘I didn’t know a tabby could get that big,’ he said, pulling his gaze from Drayco to focus on Rosette.

‘I’ve no idea what you just said, but I can assure you there’s no threat here, unless it resides in you.’

*I don’t think he got that, Maudi.* Drayco gingerly sat down on the firmest ground he could find and began to purr.

‘Now that he might understand,’ Rosette said, smiling. She looked at the man and watched his face lighten briefly as the rumbling sound of Drayco’s purr filled the air.

*I prefer dogs,*’ he said. ‘But your beast is impressive, in size anyway. He seems almost intelligent.’

*I don’t like the look of him, Maudi.*

*Let’s give him a chance.* She smiled. ‘I’ve no idea what you mean.’ She said the words slowly. ‘But I take that tone as an alliance.’

‘I’m called Shane, second marshal of the border scouts. I’m guessing you two are the friends that Jarrod was waiting for. You got out of that cave just in time.’

Rosette had been concentrating on the words, unable to grasp any of them, until she heard him say *Jarrod.*

‘Jarrod! Have you seen Jarrod?’

‘Jarrod.’ He nodded. ‘He asked me to wait for you.’ He fished the pendant out of his pocket and handed it to her.

She snatched it from his grip. ‘Jarrod gave you this?’ she said. ‘To pass to me?’

She scrutinised the charm before tucking it between her breasts. ‘Where is he? Where did he go? Is he all right? Did he give you any message for me?’

The man looked perplexed.

*Too much, Maudi. Too much. He’s clearly met Jarrod. He’s probably going to take us to him. Remember, you said to give him a chance.*

*You’re right.* Rosette took a deep breath and reached out her hand. ‘I’m Rosette,’ she said, placing her free hand over her heart and repeating her name. ‘Rosette. And this is Drayco.’
‘Shane,’ he said, giving a trickster’s smile, like a man who knew more than he was telling. She liked that. He took her hand and held it for a moment. ‘Rosette.’ He said her name with that strange accent of his. ‘Drayco?’ He nodded to the temple cat.

‘Yes, that’s it. And you’re Shawn?’

‘Shane.’ He articulated more slowly, a genuine smile now transforming his face. ‘Shane, is it? Well, Shane, can you take us to Jarrod?’

He nodded at her and Drayco. ‘You best come with me if you want to find Jarrod.’

*What do you think, Dray?*

*He feels okay. But…*

*But what?*

*Something’s weird.*

Rosette looked around at the putrid landscape. The mysterious man adjusted his pack and motioned her to follow.

‘No kidding,’ she said, before stepping out after him. ‘Let’s go.’
Startled by the nurse, Everett looked up from his digital display. Didn’t anyone knock any more? ‘What now?’

‘The Jane Doe, Dr Kelly. She’s cyanotic.’ The nurse turned her hand-held monitor towards him.
He checked the figures on the way to the ward. ‘How long has she had trouble breathing?’

‘The last hour. We were going to buzz you but…’
He silenced her with a look and quickened his pace.
The Jane Doe was still unconscious, her breath shallow, her skin grey. ‘Bag her, oxygen wide open. What’s that scent?’

‘Doctor?’
‘Can’t you smell it? Fragrant, like…’
The nurse took a deep breath. ‘Roses?’

Everett frowned. ‘Yes, like roses,’ he said. ‘How did you know?’

‘I remember it from the bio-museum. Been there more than once. Amazing how you can remember a smell…’

Everett tapped the top of another display screen. ‘What’s wrong with the heart monitor?’
The nurse flipped a switch and rapid beeps filled the room. ‘We were turning her…’

‘Keep it on all the time, Hally,’ he said, shooting a glance towards the open door. ‘No exceptions.’

‘She’s tacky at 190, Dr Kelly,’ she said.

Everett studied the screen, blue lines on a black background that traced the outline of mountain peaks and irregular valleys. It was going too fast.

‘The P waves are doubling up. We might be overdosing her,’ he said.
‘She’s had the recommended rate.’

‘Not recommended for her, it seems.’ He listened to his patient’s lungs, his stethoscope sliding over the wings of a lion embedded in her skin. The detailed image covered her upper thorax, the wings extending towards her clavicles. The lion’s heart was directly over her own. Sweat beaded on his forehead. She was a strange woman with no ID. He couldn’t keep her hidden from Admin forever. ‘She’s got wet rales,’ he said. ‘On both sides. Damn.’

‘Doctor?’

‘Look it up in your Historical Pathology manual. Rales are bubbly lung noises heard on inspiration. Come listen. The pulmonary alveoli are filling with fluid.’

Hally listened with her stethoscope. ‘Pneumonia again?’ she asked. ‘From aspiration?’

‘It doesn’t make sense.’ He shook his head. ‘Sit her up and turn off the fluids. She’s drowning.’

‘It can’t be an infection,’ Hally said, clamping the intravenous drip. ‘She’s been irradiated.’ Her eyes went wide. ‘Unless it’s a new outbreak.’

‘What’s her temp?’
She switched the screen to an alternate diagnostic display. ‘Elevated again,’ she said. ‘Forty degrees Celsius.’

‘Cold packs, stat, and get some help. I want the temp down immediately. No convulsions this time.’

‘She’s like a teaching hospital’s dream, isn’t she, doctor? Everything that can go wrong…’

‘Just cool her down,’ Everett said, scribbling notes into the digital chart. He felt a prickle down his spine as he wrote.

‘Dr Kelly.’ A woman stuck her head in the room. ‘Do you have a minute?’

Everett cursed under his breath. Bad timing. He covered his patient’s chest and forced a smile as he waved the chief resident in. She was a small woman with a chiselled, porcelain face like an antique china doll, but her energy boomed out from her diminutive frame—loud, officious and intimidating.

‘Dr Snead,’ he said. ‘It’s a pleasure to see you.’

‘Don’t start by lying, Everett. I came to find out what you’re doing in here. I’ve heard rumours.’

‘I’m treating my patient,’ he said as he turned to watch the heart monitor. He felt his own pulse pounding along with the accelerated beats of his patient. He slipped the stethoscope under the sheet.

Hally and two other nurses lined the patient’s bare arms and legs with cold packs. The chief resident crossed the room with a clipped stride, stopping to read the digital displays.

‘What do you mean, rumours?’ he asked.

‘There was talk,’ she said, turning to the patient. She pulled back the sheet and sucked in her breath. ‘And I see it’s true.’ She pointed at the winged lion. ‘Explain that, will you, Dr Kelly?’
He cleared his throat. ‘They call them tattoos.’
‘Tattoos?’ She said the word as if it had a bad taste. ‘Who are they?’
‘Various ancient cultures. The original reference to this kind of body art is “tatuung”.’
‘Meaning?’
‘To make a mark.’
She raised her brows. ‘They certainly made their mark on her. Why was it done?’
‘No one knows for certain.’
‘Best guess?’
‘Perhaps it was a sign of membership or rank, connection to the clan.’
‘Clan?’
‘A cohesive group.’
She huffed.
‘Tattooing was most likely a sacred ritual, the body art symbolic of initiation of some kind. The artist possessed the skill to weave the spirit of the image into the body.’ He watched her face. ‘According to ancient traditions.’
‘Which ancient traditions?’
‘Pacific Islands, Egyptian.’
‘When?’
‘Five thousand BCE, or more.’
‘You’re not suggesting that’s where she got this work, are you, Dr Kelly?’
‘I’m not suggesting anything. I don’t know who did this, or where she comes from.’
Dr Snead flipped the sheet back and turned to Everett. ‘I didn’t come here to talk about ancient history.’
‘What, then?’
‘Admin’s been alerted. You’re working on a Jane Doe, Everett.’
‘Her identity is…’
‘Not on the chart.’ She crossed her arms. ‘Why not?’
Everett stalled, making notations on his digital file. ‘Hally, start her on gentacore-50, 500mg IV, t.i.d. and monitor her temp Q every fifteen minutes. I’ll be right back.’ He nodded to his nurse and ushered the chief resident out of the room. ‘She has no ID,’ he said, leaning in close.
‘Exactly. You know the rules, Dr Kelly. No ID, no treatment.’ When he didn’t respond, she went on. ‘This is an Allied States hospital that follows the procedures. If you can’t justify treating her to me, I can’t justify it to Admin.’
‘She needs treatment.’
‘No ID, Everett. Move her on.’
‘What are you saying?’
‘I’m saying ship her off to the Donor ward, stat. She can live there indefinitely.’
He rubbed the back of his neck. ‘You have a limited concept of the word “live”, Dr Snead. She’ll never communicate again if she goes to Donor.’
‘You don’t know that.’
‘It’s a safe bet.’
She narrowed her eyes. ‘And?’
‘Aren’t you the least bit curious where she comes from? This case presents so many questions. How could she have survived to maturity without ID, and why can’t we wake her up for more than a few moments at a time? Why aren’t any of our treatments that work one hundred percent of the time on one hundred percent of the world population working on her? What does that tell you, Francis?’
‘Are you suggesting she’s not from this world?’
‘Of course not. I’m saying that if we don’t keep treating her, we’ll never know. This is a teaching hospital, and we’ve got a great case. Do you really want to let it go?’
Dr Snead tightened her jaw. ‘You aren’t getting it. No ID means one of two things: itinerant or Borderlands. She’s too clean to have been brought up on the streets, and ASSIST has strict policies in either case. It’s not an option, Everett. Shift her. If you don’t, I will. She’s delegated to donor status as of now.’ She flipped open her digital notepad and made an entry. ‘That’s it. Done.’
‘She’ll die there.’
‘Don’t be ridiculous, Everett. No one dies there. No one dies anywhere. They rest until we find a cure.’
‘You mean they rest while we slowly relieve them of all their vital organs.’
‘This isn’t a philosophical debate; it’s a medical decision. Get her off my ward, now.’
He clasped his hands together. ‘You’ll need an order from Admin for that. I’m going to fight you on this one. I’ll keep trying to revive her until I see the paperwork.’
‘You’re pushing it too far.’
He exhaled. ‘I’m aware of that.’
‘So move her!’ She held his eyes for a moment before heading down the hall.
_Not until I have to._ He straightened his shoulders and returned to his patient. ‘Hally, we need another complete set of diagnostics, and get me Lucy J in Labs.’
‘Are we running out of time, Dr Kelly?’
He listened again to Jane Doe’s heart. ‘It would seem so.’
An’ Lawrence didn’t move. His eyes were unfocused, and though he was aware of each sword pointed at him, front, back and side, his shoulders were relaxed, his body fluid. Stripped to the waist, his weapon in a guard position, he felt the serpent tattoos on his arms come alive, as if they too were watching, waiting. The thunder eagle protecting his back was all but screaming defiance. He kept his eyes hooded and drew in a breath. Sweat poured down his chest, mingling with the red dust, streaking his skin.

‘Again,’ he said, bellowing the command.

Four students rushed in at once, their war cries filling the air. He took a small step to the side and allowed three of them to pass. Their practice swords swung wide of the mark as they struggled to avoid colliding with each other. The fourth, a Lupin named Teg, had more cunning. Waiting a fraction of a second, he had attacked with a right-handed strike, his blade aiming to slice from above the left clavicle to the right hip. An’ Lawrence dropped to one knee. He thrust his sword arm up, his blade becoming a horizontal block. The Lupin’s strike hit near the hilt, sliding down the length of his sword to the ground. As it glanced off, An’ Lawrence stepped forward, swinging his arm in an arc and striking downward. He stopped as the wooden practice blade cracked the top of his student’s shoulder. Teg dropped to both knees, his sword arm out of control, the blade digging into the ground.

‘That was your block, lad?’ An’ Lawrence asked. He sheathed his sword and signalled his students to do the same. The Lupin picked himself up and stepped back into line. He didn’t wince, though An’ Lawrence knew that his shoulder would sting like demons after that blow. ‘Is anyone still confused as to why we are using practice swords today?’

The class was silent, their collective gaze fixed ahead. Although none of them made eye contact, they were completely attentive.

‘You did well, all of you. Maluka, your work is exemplary, though you need to think further ahead.’

A Lupin girl squared her shoulders and gave a slight nod.

‘Teg, your initial move was smart. Where was the follow-through?’ He didn’t wait for an answer. ‘I’d like all of you,’ he said, raising his voice, ‘to practise moving from block to cut to block this afternoon. Focus on each action completely, and when it is executed shift fluidly to the next. There is always a next move, even when your opponent is lying at your feet. Questions?’

Maluka stepped forward, her eyes resting on his. They were a deep teal blue and lined with black lashes. Her hair, held back in a short ponytail, was red as sunset—strange colourings for a Lupin. But the potency in her gaze alone gave her away—it was beyond human. ‘Sword Master,’ she said, her voice melodic, sweet, ‘when will we be working more with energy forces?’

There was a murmur of approval from the other students. He smiled. This one will have to meet Rosette.

‘You mean magic?’ he asked.

The entire class nodded, eyes bright.

‘When you can protect yourself without it,’ he answered.

Some of the faces fell, but Maluka dipped her head, her eyes never breaking contact with his. It was a challenge. He felt a fire rise up his spine, and he gathered it, blazing it back to her. She didn’t look away. The breeze fluttered loose strands of hair across her face and she relaxed, brushing them aside. ‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘I look forward to it.’

He exhaled. In the distance a bell tolled, indicating the noon break.

‘Done, and well done,’ he said to the class. ‘And, Teg, get some cold packs on that shoulder.’

The other Lupin met him with much the same look as Maluka before turning away. As his students cleared the practice arena, forming small groups as they headed towards the manor house, he smiled. They’ve got talent, he said to his familiar.

Some more than others.

He turned to find Scylla sitting under a willow tree, her eyes glowing like amber jewels in the shade. She was framed in the weeping branches, a curtain of green tendrils wafting in the breeze.

You think so, Scylla?

I know so. Watch out for the male.

Are you warming to the Lupins, Rowan?

He hid his surprise at Kreshkali stepping out from behind the tree. Thanks for the warning, he said to Scylla.
She gave what felt like a mental shrug. *I thought you’d have sensed her.*

*I didn’t.* He took the towel Kreshkali tossed him and wiped the sweat and dust from his body. ‘They’ve got potential. They all do.’

‘And they fit in?’

‘Maluka, definitely. Vivacious girl, much like Rosette.’ An’ Lawrence searched for Teg, but he’d vanished.

‘And Teg?’

‘Talented.’

‘In the group?’

‘He’s a loner, though the others respect him.’

‘Good enough.’

An’ Lawrence ducked under the rail, then took a long drink from his waterskin. ‘What’s up, Kali? I know you didn’t come out here to chat about my students.’

*She’s got news, Rowan.*

*Good news?*

*Not really. She’s worried.*

He didn’t react to his familiar’s insights, his face remaining smooth and placid.

‘I’ve not heard a word from Rosette since they left the Isle of Lemur. I thought perhaps Scylla or you…’ Her voice trailed off. ‘But no, I can see you’ve not heard from her either.’

‘Scylla can’t reach Drayco mind to mind. The distance is too far, wherever he is.’ He watched his familiar preening herself for a moment before she returned to her statue-still pose. ‘She’s not perturbed.’

‘Well, I am. They’ve been gone three months now.’

‘Three months our time. No knowing how long it’s been for them.’ He headed for the manor.

She fell into step with his long stride. ‘I can’t shake this sense of concern, Rowan. I’m crossing over to Treeon to see if there is any word there.’

‘Makee may know something?’

‘I’m hoping she will.’

‘She wasn’t there last time you checked.’

‘Sabbatical. She’d be back now. She’s never far from the Dragon Bone Chair.’

‘Even with the new High Priestess, La Teeka, there?’

‘Makee remains principal adviser, though she’s free to come and go, as she desires.’ Kreshkali frowned. ‘I wonder just how far she’s exercising that freedom.’

‘The coming or the going?’

‘Both.’

An’ Lawrence draped his arm over her shoulder. ‘When are you off?’

‘As soon as you agree on the name.’

He tightened his grip for an instant before letting his hand slide away. ‘You’re dead set on Los Loma?’

‘Temple Los Loma,’ she said. ‘It suits.’

He looked at the landscape. Beyond the surrounding oasis were endless barren plains, rent with cracks and tumbled red rocks, a desert without visible signs of life, though much dwelled there.

‘Doesn’t Loma mean “hill”?’ He opened his arms wide. ‘You may have noticed that there are no hills, dales or mountains of any kind here. It’s mostly as flat as my blade outside of this valley, and there certainly aren’t any snowcapped peaks, save leagues to the north. I don’t see the connection to Los Loma, Gaela.’

‘The name honours the Lupins, for one.’

He ground his teeth. ‘Anything else?’

‘The numerology fits.’

‘How so?’

‘Fives and nines,’ she said.

‘Please refresh me on the relevance, witch.’

‘Freedom, unconventionality and the gift to adapt and change as need be. Also, the skill to stand alone.’

He looked into the distance again. ‘We’ll certainly need that. There’re no other temples on Earth, are there?’

‘Not any more. None that I can detect, anyway.’

He exhaled a long breath, tapping his lips. ‘The lack of boundaries?’ he asked. ‘How will that relate?’

She glanced at him sideways. ‘So you do know your numbers, after all.’

‘I’ve had need to understand the nines,’ he said, a smile curling his lip. ‘It’s given me great comfort to study that one in particular.’

She cleared her throat. ‘Have you? It’s not necessary to walk you through it, then.’
‘Would you mind, though? I’m curious how it applies to a place as opposed to a person.’
‘Person, place or thing, all have an identity, an energy. You know this.’
‘And the number nine in Temple Los Loma?’
‘I see it as the link to the portals more than a loss of centering. We are in a fixed position here, but we travel to
and fro via the corridors.’ She swept her arm towards the courtyard, empty now as everyone else sought shelter from
the blistering midday sun. ‘We are a mix here, unlike any other. We come from different lines, different worlds. Our
boundaries are truly blurred, mingling to create something new, something unique.’

He put his arm back around her shoulder and drew her close. ‘Let’s hope you’re right,’ he whispered in her ear.
‘So you agree?’
‘When you put it that way, Temple Los Loma it is,’ he said.
‘Thank you.’ She beamed, looking up at the sky. ‘I won’t be long.’ She stepped back, energy swirling towards
her like a dust storm.

He felt a rebound wave hit his chest and when he blinked she was gone—a black falcon shooting up above the
tree line and heading for the gates. Three ravens, squawking a reprimand, flapped after her.
‘You best not be,’ he said, though she disappeared as he spoke.
Scylla pushed her head under his hand, the purr in her throat vibrating his fingers. *She manipulated you well.*

*What do you mean? It was my choice. She wouldn’t use the name if I didn’t agree.*

*That, Rowan, is true.*

He roughed her neck. ‘Come, lovely, let’s find some food. I’m famished.’

*And a cool spot? I can’t feel my full appetite in this heat.* She panted as they walked out of the sun.
‘I know just the place. You’ll love it.’ He headed towards the shaded pool, his temple cat by his side.
Rosette reached out into the darkness, taking small, cautious steps. The ground was uneven, the rock wall crumbling at her touch.

‘I can’t see a thing, Drayco,’ she whispered, keeping one hand on the hilt of her sword. ‘How about you?’

There’s a light ahead.

The voice of her familiar felt like a soft blanket that comforted her in this dry atmosphere, but the words made her shiver, chills prickling her spine. ‘Whoa. Hang on.’

What is it, Maudi?

‘I just had a massive déjà vu.’

He leaned against her. I don’t get those.

‘I know, but I do, and it was a big one. Can you sense Jarrod ahead?’

There was a pause as her familiar considered. He’s not here.

‘What do you mean? He has to be.’

She cupped her hands to her mouth, tipped back her head and started to call out, ‘Jar—’ She stopped herself short. ‘This is really weird. I feel like…’

It’s okay, Maudi. You know how time can play tricks. He may have come through well before us.

‘That’s not what I meant…’ She strained into the distance, cupping her ear. ‘Do you hear that?’

Those birds?

‘It sounds like a flute to me.’

A bard?

‘Maybe.’

Bards, birds. Not much difference really.

She laughed before calling again. ‘J-a-r-r-o-d!’ Her voice echoed through the cave. Before it completely died away, pebbles trickled down the walls. The mountain answered with a deep rumble of its own. Rosette held her breath.

I wouldn’t be yelling until we are out of this hole. Besides, it’s not Jarrod. He doesn’t make the bard music.

Why is that? Drayco rubbed his ear on her thigh as he sent the thoughts.

‘I don’t know.’

It’s someone else, Maudi. He’s strangely familiar.

‘I thought you didn’t get déjà vu.’

I don’t. Drayco’s hackles went up and she gripped her sword.

‘Whoever’s out there may know where Jarrod is.’

Of course, we will ask.

‘They might…’ She stopped short and drew her sword. It sang as she released it from the scabbard, the edge glinting in the dull light. ‘What’s that?’ A tremor ran up her legs; the ground beneath her rolled like the sea.

Earthquake?

‘Run!’ she screamed above the sound of tumbling rock. She sprinted towards the opening of the cave, Drayco loping by her side, the ground churning. Torrents of pebbles and dirt flowed down the walls, turning into rock slides. Dust swirled, grating her eyes and stinging the back of her throat. She couldn’t breathe. The ground cracked, splitting open. She ran hard to stay ahead of the rifts. The light increased, and beyond the mouth of the cave a landscape of dead trees and mire appeared. ‘Keep going!’ she said as they rushed out.

She sheathed her sword and hit the swamp, muck saturating her boots and caking her bare legs. Deeper into the mire they ran until the ground firmed up at the base of a huge oak tree. She turned in time to catch the thunderous clap from the mouth of the cave, which was suddenly obscured by boulders, rock and rubble. Dust rolled upward, plumbing above the newly reshaped rock face. Within seconds, the landscape went deathly still.

‘Drayco, this seems uncomfortably familiar to me.’

The temple cat didn’t answer. He bristled, staring up into the tree.

Rosette followed his gaze. ‘What, Dray? What’s up there?’

A man with a sword.

‘Shane?’

‘Rosette?’
What’s happening? She and Drayco said the words at the same time, looking at each other, then back up the tree as Shane dropped down to the ground in front of them. ‘This is more than déjà vu,’ Rosette said, looking from her familiar to Shane. ‘I think we’re going in circles.’
‘Did you hear that?’ Jarrod asked. Selene stopped for a moment, cocking her head. A gust of wind rustled in the bare branches, shaking the twigs like nervous fingers. A raven cawed in the distance. ‘Hear what?’

‘Sounded like an explosion.’

‘You’ve got good ears,’ she said, moving on again. ‘It’s probably a shaker. We get them a lot this time of year.’

‘You mean an earthquake?’

Selene frowned. ‘I don’t know. Do I?’

‘The ground rolls like the ocean.’ Jarrod waved his hand through the air in undulations. ‘Teacups fall off the shelves, mountains slide, trees uproot, bridges fall.’

‘That’s a shaker. What do you call it again?’

‘Earthquake.’

‘Did you hear one?’

‘I think so, from back the way we came.’

Tremors rolled underfoot.

‘That’d be one, for sure,’ she said. ‘Worried about your friends?’

He pushed his hair off his forehead. ‘I’m…concerned.’

‘Semantics,’ she said. ‘I can see the worry on your face.’ She stared at him. ‘We can’t go back.’

‘What about Shane? Don’t you worry about him?’

Her face smoothed. Whatever she felt about the man was suddenly pushed away. ‘What about him?’ she asked, her tone void of inflection.

Jarrod shrugged. ‘It’s possible he was caught in the earthquake. That doesn’t concern you?’

‘It certainly doesn’t concern you.’

‘Right.’ Jarrod wondered at her response. ‘I just thought he might be…’

‘He’s fine.’ She cut him off with a wave.

‘Definitely some tension there. Jarrod decided to change the subject. ‘Can I ask where we’re headed?’

‘T’locity.’

‘Person, place or thing?’ he queried, looking at the bleak surroundings. It was hard to imagine a township in this terrain. The landscape was one huge quagmire.

‘Place.’

‘Village?’

‘City. It’s quite grand. You’ll see.’ Selene adjusted her sword belt and led him on. ‘This way.’

Eventually the mire gave way to a firm dirt road, the dead oaks and rotten stench replaced by fragrant groves of pines with sticky-sweet resin dripping down the trunks and dark green needles poking skyward. The trees were interspersed with the red branches and peeling bark of Manzanita in full bloom. The white velvet bell blossoms were rimmed in blood-red and they dangled on the twisted branches—puppets bobbing in the breeze. Sunlight filtered through the canopy, turning Selene’s face golden. The landscape had radically altered from decayed to fecund, reminding him of her abrupt change of mood. She was definitely of this land, both dark and light.

There were still plenty of Corvids about, though once out of the stark background, they looked more like curious friends following the travellers’ progress than ominous scavengers waiting for mishap. There were other birds as well, all contributing their songs, verse and chorus, to the atmosphere. Tiny blue fairy wrens and red spotted finches chattered in the undergrowth, teetering on brambles and vines, searching for grasshoppers and grubs. A raptor whistled above. Jarrod didn’t recognise the call, though it sounded similar to that of a black falcon. A large family of magpies chortled back and forth, flapping and swooping about them. It made him feel quite at home.

‘We’ll stop for a wash.’ Selene’s voice jarred him out of his musings. She was pointing towards a line of trees at the side of the road.

‘Where?’ he asked, seeing only a deeper forest.

‘There’re hot pools at the bottom of that ravine.’

‘I wouldn’t mind a drink and a wash.’

‘It’s not about what you would mind or not mind,’ she said. ‘It’s about presenting well to the Caller. You probably don’t realise how you smell.’

‘That bad?’ Jarrod rolled up his sleeves as he followed her along a winding path towards the water. ‘The
swamp was noisome…’

She spun her head around and smiled so briefly that he wasn’t sure if he’d imagined it. ‘Exceedingly,’ she said.
‘I’m sure I don’t smell any better.’

A short way into the woods they came to a gorge, nestled between the trees like a temple garden. A path wound
down to the bottom where head-high boulders stood sentry around the river basin. Some rocks had miniature pine
trees and tiny oaks growing from cracks in their sides, reminding him of the bonsai grown on the Isle of Lemur.
Steam rose from the water where it pooled in deep green eddies. The mist hung about, as it did over the swamp, but
the smells here were fresh and aromatic—thyme, pine needles and eucalyptus blossoms—a welcome change.

Jarrod knelt in the white sand, cupping his hands to sip the sparkling water. ‘It’s icy!’ he said, turning to her,
his lips tingling from the touch.

‘Not in the depths,’ she answered.

‘Subterranean thermals?’

Selene raised one eyebrow. ‘You speak our language, but there are some words I don’t recognise.’
‘I mean underground fissures that vent…’

‘Underground, yes. I’ve got to wash properly,’ Selene said, cutting into his sentence as if the rest of what he
had to say held no interest. She unbuttoned her cloak and sword belt.

Jarrod didn’t bother explaining more but watched her strip naked and wade out into the water. It lapped around
her waist, sending goosebumps over her back. She submerged her body, coming up with a gasp, water running off
her face and glistening over the serpents tattooed on her forearms. Across her heart, between her breasts, was a wide
red scar. It didn’t look new.

‘It’s warm here, in the depths,’ she said, swimming out into the middle of a large eddy. ‘Come on.’

He didn’t move but simply watched.

‘I’m not bringing you to the Caller stinking of the Black Swamp.’ She spoke before diving under the surface
again.

Jarrod started unlacing his boots as she came up for air.

‘Who’s the Caller, exactly?’ he asked.

‘She’s the one who sent for you, the one we’re going to T’locity to meet.’

Jarrod had a fleeting intuition that Selene might have it all wrong, that he may not be the one the Caller wanted
to see at all. He sent a silent plea to Drayco and Rosette while stepping out of his clothes, but there was no reply. If
Rosette didn’t show soon, he’d have to think up a new set of possibilities.

Selene scrutinised him as he entered the stream. ‘You have no scars,’ she said, a frown crossing her face. ‘And
no tattoos?’

‘The first is right,’ he smiled. ‘No scars on this body, but…’ He turned his back to her, revealing a solar disk
between his shoulder blades, held up by wings that spanned his broad shoulders, the tips extending down the backs
of his arms. Two cobra’s draped the length of his spine, rearing up at the small of his back.

‘Oh.’ Selene’s mouth formed the shape of a circle. ‘What creatures are those?’

‘The cobras? They are similar to yours,’ he said, indicating her forearms as he waded deeper into the river. ‘Ah,
here’s the warmth.’ He gave a brief smile before diving. When he came up for air, she was right in front of him,
ready with another query.

‘What do they mean?’

Jarrod hesitated. He didn’t want to reveal too much to this woman. The more time he spent with her, the more
he felt curiously uncomfortable. Something didn’t seem right. ‘Cobras are guardians.’

‘Guardians?’ She said the word slowly.

‘Protectors.’

She nodded, dipping her chin under the water as she did, treading to stay afloat. ‘And what is it they guard? Is
someone after you?’

He winked. ‘Not at all, now that I have my cobras.’

Selene didn’t look impressed. They trod water in silence, staring at each other before swimming back to shore.
She asked no more about it. He got the feeling she was making up her mind about him. He hoped her conclusion
would be beneficial.

The sun came out fully as they emerged from the pool, warm against bare skin. They busied themselves with
tasks—drying hair, shaking out their clothes and washing away the worst of the caked mud from cuffs and hems.

‘Hungry?’ Selene asked, reaching into her cloak pocket. She pulled out a pouch filled with slices of dark bread
laced with fruit and nuts.

‘Not right now.’ Jarrod shook his head. ‘Thanks anyway.’

She looked at him sideways. ‘What kind of man are you?’
‘A different kind,’ he said. He could eat, and happily, but he didn’t want to. He certainly didn’t need to. His body was a tulpa, made and held together by thought, and as long as his thoughts were healthy, so his body would be, regardless of whether he fed it or not. *Energy follows thought,* he mused.

Right now most of his thoughts and energy were focused on locating Rosette, and he didn’t want any distraction. He knew if Drayco had come through the portal, and Rosette had emerged from the cave, the temple cat would hear his mental messages. At least, he would if he were alive. Jarrod looked at Selene, smiling to hide his uncertainties. *Dwelling on this ‘what if’ certainly isn’t going to help,* he reminded himself.

Once she’d eaten, they dressed in damp but clean clothes and returned to the road. Eventually it merged into a paved thoroughfare that became increasingly trafficked, the congestion quite a contrast to the earlier part of their journey. Carts drawn by dappled horses passed them by, as did larger wagons pulled by teams of shaggy brown oxen with gold rings in their noses. They lifted their cloven hooves slowly, like great weights were attached. From time to time, one would bellow, stopping suddenly to swing its head back to its flank, licking away swarms of flies. Long-haired alpacas, or creatures that looked much like them according to Jarrod’s databanks, were led placidly behind their owners, their backs strapped with mountains of colourful cloth and assorted boxes.

Selene was given a wide berth, and Jarrod wondered at the woman’s rank. She didn’t look to have anything that distinguished her, save the brooch at her throat. She made no eye contact, nor did she acknowledge the other people at all. And they were careful of her. There were no greetings, shouts or waves. There was only wary silence.

‘Popular in these parts?’ he asked, after a group of children skirted around them, the adults pulling them away.

She said nothing. He tried again.

‘How are you related to the Caller?’

‘I’m not.’

‘Then you are…?’

‘As I said, I’m the first marshal of the border scouts.’ She looked at him as if he were a slow learner.

‘I’ve no idea what that means,’ he said loudly, projecting his voice over the street noise.

‘I patrol the borders.’

‘The borders of what?’

‘Tensar.’

‘And that is?’

She frowned at him but didn’t answer. Perhaps she didn’t take it as a serious question.

‘And the Caller? What does she do?’ Jarrod persisted.

Selene turned to him, her hands on her hips. ‘It’s like this, Jarrod. The Caller keeps everything in sequence. The border scouts keep out the inflections. Get it?’

Jarrod checked his database to see if he had the word meanings correct. ‘What sequence?’

‘The sequence of time.’

‘Of course,’ he agreed as they continued walking. What was this woman on about? It startled him how he could understand the words but not the meaning of her sentences. ‘And the inflections?’ he asked.

‘Inflections are,’ she said, laughing at his quizzical look, ‘those like you.’
Shane looked out over the swamp, scratching his head. If he thought he had problems with his love-life, this current situation made them insignificant. He sat down, his back to the granite wall, and pulled out his flute. His fingers shook. He knew what would happen next. What he didn’t know was how long it would take before it started or how long it would keep happening.

He suspected that the woman, Rosette, and her big black temple tabby had caused this strange and repeating sequence of events. She clearly wasn’t from T’locity and perhaps not even of Tensar itself. If so, it may have been a glitch in her travel methods—whatever those may be—that had snagged Time. He thought for a moment about killing her to see if it would break the cycle, but he didn’t like the idea. He’d never get past the feline, for starters, and he didn’t have the heart for it, or the stomach. She was lovely. Whatever the solution to their time-entrapment problem was, they would have to work it out together. He needed to remember to discuss it with her again, as soon as she appeared. It wouldn’t be long now.

The mystery schools of T’locity had taught about these occurrences—rare snicks in the fabric of time where a sequence of events would play out in an infinite number of versions of itself. He felt nauseous just thinking about it. What bad luck to stumble into this mess. He had to figure out how to pull himself out. Rosette too, if he could.

He might be better equipped to manage such an anomaly had he not flunked out of the Darkwood Mystery School in his third term. That had been years ago and, as it was, he could only remember a listing of the proclivity of time, and not much about its management. If he’d stayed on, he might have some idea of how to deal with this.

As it was, he’d failed, not from a lack of intelligence or focus exactly, but from a lack of desire. His aptitudes, and his heart, lay elsewhere, in the lilting sounds of the flute and the driving rhythms of his guitar. Music to him was a mystery teaching of its own, and he’d followed it, away from the learned halls of Darkwood and into T’locity’s market festivals and pubs where he would play from early morning to late night and on into the morning again. It was his true calling, that he knew, but the price he’d had to pay for it was grave—Selene broke her bond with him. She said he was wasting himself on thin air. She shunned him like a trinket that had lost its shine.

He raised his hands, bringing the flute to his lips. The tune he played was a complex one, though he could render it perfectly now. How long have I been practising under the shadow of this mountain?

He received no answer as he started another tune. This one spoke of loss and surrender, the giving up of one thing for another. Every other lass in Tensar worshipped the bards and their creative offerings, but he had fallen for the one who wanted something else. As his arms began to ache and his mouth went dry, he spotted Rosette and her tabby rounding the corner of the cave entrance. She appreciated his music. Fortunate, since it seemed they might be trapped together forever.

‘That sounds amazing,’ she said. ‘Soul-captivating.’
‘It’d want to, all the work I’ve been putting in.’
She smiled that incredible smile of hers. ‘No tremors yet?’ she asked.
‘None.’
‘It seems to be getting longer, the time between. Do you think?’
He nodded his head.
‘What is it, Shane? What’s happening to us?’
He rose and looked her straight in the eye. ‘We’re trapped.’ He spoke softly, as if he didn’t believe his own words.
‘Where exactly?’ She searched his face, the scrutiny making him swallow.
‘In Time.’
‘Time,’ she whispered. ‘And how do we get out?’
‘I don’t know that we can.’ He watched as her hand sank into the fur of her temple cat’s neck. She only did that when she was deep in thought, or frightened.
‘We can, Shane.’ She shook her head. ‘We’ll find a way.’
‘I’m glad you think so.’
‘I don’t think. I know.’

Rosette closed her eyes as she leaned against the granite wall, sliding down next to Shane. She pulled out her water bag, took a swig and offered him the last. ‘Let’s go through it again,’ she said. ‘We’re caught in a time loop, and we
don’t know why or, more importantly, how to get out?’

He nodded.

‘Going round and round through the same sequence of events?’

‘More or less.’

Less, Maudi.

What do you mean, Drayco?

We used to meet Shane in the swamp, racing out of the cavern as the ground shook. Now we have these long philosophical discussions and music and language lessons before everything rips apart. We never go out into the swamp any more.

Do you miss it?

Hardly. I would like to hunt, though…

Hungry?

Not really. Just an urge.

I know what you mean. She caressed Drayco’s back. And Shane’s teaching me to play music?

Don’t you remember, Maudi?

Sort of. Her face lit up as Shane handed her a penny whistle. I do now!

The events are changing a little bit, Maudi, every time round.

I think so too, but I’ve no idea what to do about it.

Me neither.

She smiled. ‘Thank you.’ She put the whistle to her lips, tapped her foot and launched into a slip jig. Shane accompanied her on the flute and when they reached the end, she burst out laughing. ‘This is wonderful fun!’

‘You always say that.’

She studied Shane’s profile, noticing the frown lines. She put her hand on his shoulder, and he forced a smile.

‘We’ll get out of it, Shane. I promise.’

‘You always say that too.’ He turned away.

‘Hey.’ She nudged him. ‘We need more of this, or we’ll die of thirst.’ She shook the empty water bag. ‘And don’t tell me I always say that.’

‘You do, and it doesn’t matter. It’ll be half full again next time round. Besides, there’s no way out, with or without quenched thirst.’

‘There has to be.’

Shane lowered his head, rubbing his temples.

I think he’s going to cry, Maudi.

Goddess of the woods, I hope not!

‘Come on, Shane. It’s not that bad.’

‘Really? How long do you think this has been going on?’

She shrugged.

‘Let me put it this way, Rosette. How much time do you think it would take to master my language, if you studied every day?’ he asked.

‘Fluently? A year, at least. Probably more. Your language is tricky. All those deep…’

‘And how well do you speak it?’ he interrupted.

Rosette looked into his ocean-blue eyes. At that moment, they seemed like the only drop of colour in the world.

‘I guess I’m pretty fluent now.’

‘And how many tunes do you know on the penny whistle?’

She knew it was more than she could count on both hands.

‘That’s how long we’ve been looping,’ he said.

She couldn’t dispute it. They must have been here, going round and round, for a very long time. Rosette covered her face with her hands.

‘A year of this or more?’ she whispered. ‘That could be decades in my world.’

Or minutes, Maudi. We don’t know. Her familiar got up and strode back into the cave. I’m going to find a rat.

Hungry after all?

No, but if it’s been a year, I ought to be.

Yeah, me too.

She’d tried to get a message through the portal to Kreshkali. She’d even thought of taking them all back to Gaela, but they never got that far. They couldn’t cross the threshold before the tremors started. Within seconds she would find herself charging through the swamp towards the oak tree, Drayco and Shane at her side, or some other version of that now familiar scenario. She sighed. ‘It feels impossible.’

Shane leaned his head towards her. ‘I don’t know that word. What’s it mean?’
'It means something can’t be done.' She smiled and gave him another nudge. ‘I’m not supposed to know the word either.’ She paused. ‘Shane, what if it’s always like this?’

‘Pardon?’

‘What if this is how life is, a continuous repetition of events, only we don’t realise it?’

‘You mean, what if we aren’t trapped but simply aware?’

She nodded. ‘What if…’

‘Stop! I don’t want to think about it!’

She shook her head, the ends of her long black hair lifting in the breeze.

_Maudi? I’ve found something._

‘What is it, my lovely?’

_In the cave. Come look._

Rosette got up, Shane at her heels. She led the way back into the cave, following the sound of her familiar’s thoughts. At first she worried about them getting separated if he wandered off, but not any more. It didn’t seem to matter what she did, or said, or where she went. It didn’t make any difference if she was crushed under the falling rocks, sucked into the mire of the swamp or stranded up the gnarly old oak tree. Whatever choice she or Drayco made, they continued to experience a replay of variations of the shaker, meeting Shane, and their bafflement. Shane was right. Judging by how far both their musical playing had advanced and their grasp of each other’s native tongue, it had definitely been going on for quite some time, though it felt like less than a day to her. She smiled suddenly.

_This is relativity! I really get it now._

_Stop pondering, Maudi, and come. I’ve found something new._

_On my way._

Rosette never knew how long they had between intervals, before the sequence would start to replay again. She wearied at times with the thought of it, although her familiar remained light-hearted. The time loop didn’t seem to be affecting him at all, and she took that as a good sign. If it wasn’t damaging their health, if it was only a puzzle for the mind, she could figure it out.

‘What’s the big discovery, Dray?’ she asked aloud as she approached her familiar.

He sat by the edge of a pool nestled deep in the recesses of the cave. Sunlight fell onto the top of his head, streaming down from a fissure in the vault above. The temple cat turned gold in the light, like a statue above the shimmering surface of the water. He licked his chops.

‘You found a big pool? That’s something new, I suppose. Good work, though I don’t imagine us having time to swim.’ She sniffed her armpit. ‘Why don’t I smell worse than this, if it’s really been a year?’

_A year, or more, Maudi. But water’s not the big deal. I found cave fish!_

‘Cave fish?’

_Many of them. Come look._

‘You brought me back into this hole, another earthquake about to crush us, to look at a bunch of fish?’

_I believe it’s called a ‘school’, Maudi._

‘What’s he got?’ Shane asked as he reached the edge of the pool. His face brightened as he studied the surface. ‘Cave fish!’ He whistled a long, descending note. ‘This is a stroke of luck.’

Rosette put her hands on her hips. ‘Do you guys want to tell me what’s so great about a pool of…’ She glanced at the water. ‘Pink, blind, and I must say, hideous fish?’

_Simple, Maudi. The pool is fed by a stream. It might lead somewhere different. It might lead us out of this time trap._

‘It’s just a pond.’ She frowned. ‘How’s it a way out?’

‘It’s not just a pond,’ Shane said. ‘It’s a pond with an underground inlet.’ He started stripping off his clothes.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Going on a hunt.’

She wrinkled her nose. ‘What for?’

_Shane’s onto it, Maudi. He’s going to swim up the inlet and see if it offers a way out. These time traps are usually very circumscribed. I’m optimistic._

‘You’re always optimistic.’ Rosette smiled as she cupped her hands in the water and tasted it. She immersed the waterskin, filling it to the brim.

_That’s because I know some things you don’t._

_Like time traps are circumscribed?_

_Yes. Like that._

‘Actually, no,’ Shane replied, thinking she’d spoken to him. ‘I’ve become increasingly more and more pessimistic. Depressed, even.’
‘Really? I hadn’t noticed.’ She tried not to smile.
‘I have. It’s a habit now. I look at the worst possible outcome to everything. It’s probably a dead end.’
‘Charming, Shane, but I was talking to Drayco. He thinks we have a good chance.’
‘I have doubts about that. Worth a try, though.’
She shook her head. ‘When were you born?’
‘What?’
‘I don’t know your constellations here on Tensar, but I sense something a little on the dark side of the moon.
Like a Saturn transit or a Saturn return. You’d be the right age?’
‘I’m twenty-nine.’
‘Figures.’
‘Are you saying Saturn makes me depressed?’
‘Not at all.’
‘Don’t tell me it makes me happy. I won’t believe you.’
‘It doesn’t make you depressed. It doesn’t make you happy either. Saturn doesn’t make you anything. It just coincides with a time of intense evaluation of your life so far…relationships, love affairs, professional achievement. Things like that. Have you been pondering a lot lately?’
He gave her a quick look and turned away.
‘What is the symbol associated with your birthday? Do you know it?’
He nodded, and started undoing his pants.
‘Are you going to tell me?’
‘It’s called the water dragon.’
She closed her eyes. ‘Does it have a stinger? Poison? Does it transform?’
‘It has three forms—the sea snake, the water dragon and the eagle. The snake is venomous.’
‘Sounds like Scorpion to me.’
‘And what’s that supposed to mean?’
‘Transformation, please,’ she murmured.
‘I didn’t hear that.’
‘It means your world is as dark as you like to make it.’
He glared at her, naked now, his clothes in a pile next to him. ‘That’s cryptic,’ he said.
‘It’s meant to be.’ She brightened, taking in his shape and the reptilian images tattooed on the sides of his torso.
They came up from the sea, through a band of fire and into the clouds. The colours were striking—sunny sky blue, greens like gemstones and vermilion red. It was so vivid, maybe from lack of exposure, or perhaps they were new.
‘What’s the problem now?’
‘I’m definitely feeling more optimistic,’ Rosette said, gazing at his body.
‘How’s that?’ he asked, ignoring the scrutiny and lowering himself into the pool.
‘You’ve got quite a physique, Shane.’
‘What do you mean?’
She squatted down by the edge of the pool. ‘I’m saying, you’re fit—very fit. And I know from your flute playing that you have good lungs. These things bode well.’
‘How so?’
She shook her head. The guy did not know how to receive a compliment. ‘Just take a deep breath and find us a way out of here.’
He winked at her before gulping in the air and disappearing under the surface.
*Hold your breath, Drayco, while I count.*
She’d got to fifty-nine when he resurfaced. He braced his hands on the edge of the pool and levered himself out in one smooth motion. Water ran off his glistening body as he wiped his face with his shirt. ‘That’s warm in there. It must be fed by hot springs.’
‘And is there a way out?’
He grinned. ‘Aye.’
‘Where does it lead?’
‘That’s the strange part. I didn’t recognise it. But the good thing is, the pool’s fed by a short inlet; just a few strong kicks and it opens into a canopy of rock over a stream. Plenty of air, though I don’t know how he’s going to go.’ Shane tilted his head towards her temple cat.
‘How far up did you swim?’
‘Far enough to see daylight. It’s not a dead end.’
‘Can we walk once…’
‘No.’ He interrupted her with a wave of his hand. ‘It’s a swim, the whole way.’
Rosette started unbuttoning her leather vest. ‘Let’s do it before another shaker comes and we have to discover it all over again.’
‘What makes you think this is the first time?’
She pulled her top off over her head. He glanced away. ‘You think it isn’t?’
He let his exhale turn to a whistle. ‘I think I’d remember if it was.’
‘Now you’re being cryptic.’
He bundled his clothes together and stuffed them into his pack. He slipped it on, his sword in his left hand. ‘Are you ready?’ he asked.
‘Almost. Dray? Do you understand what we have to do?’
Swim under?
‘Have you ever done that before?’
There was the shipwreck, of course. We were under for a long time. I hated that. I don’t like the salt water.
‘This is fresh water, warm and clean. It’s a short swim under. Can you picture it?’
Her temple cat stood at the edge of the pool, staring into the dark water.
Swimming like a platypus.
‘That’s right. You don’t breathe while you’re under. You hold your breath in.’
I got it, Maudi.
Rosette bundled her clothes and boots and tied them to her pack. She slid her sword out of its sheath a short distance, checking for rust. It was perfect, though what this underwater journey would do to the metal she knew too well. She hoped there would be time to treat it properly on the other side. As she lowered herself into the water, Drayco splashed in beside her, dog paddling in circles. The cave fish disappeared into the rocky crags. Rosette wondered what else lurked in the nooks and cracks. ‘Lead the way,’ she said to Shane. ‘Before…’ A tremor rolled through the water and the walls of the cavern began to shake. ‘Go!’ she shouted.
Gulping in a deep breath, she followed Shane, her familiar swimming beside her.
Everett lowered the window and stuck his head out, checking the sky. He knew he wouldn’t see any stars. Those could only be viewed in planetariums or computer simulations, but he stared up through the glaring streetlight anyway, the muddy vault impenetrable. *This must be where the saying ‘clear as mud’ comes from*. At least the rain had stopped.

The air burned his lungs, the smell of wet asphalt and insecticide filling the car. Rubbish compactors were working this time of night, the drone of a jet descend towards the east. The red and green lights blinked, candy drops in a brown bowl. He closed his eyes and shuddered, Jane Doe’s comatose face appearing in his mind. *Why does she want to die?*

He forced himself to dismiss the vision before he could ponder it, but even as he did she came seeping back into his awareness, like water oozing through footprints in the mud. It was inappropriate, of course, to feel this—to feel anything at all save clinical interest—for a patient, especially a Jane Doe. Yet she was an enigma, and he found it hard not to speculate. What was her origin? She was marked so bizarrely—a tattooed woman. She was not of the Allied States, perhaps not even of this world.

That’s ridiculous. What other world could there be?

He pressed his temples. He could imagine her awake, the few moments of consciousness he’d observed extrapolating into vivid scenes in his mind. He could hear her talking in that strange accent, angry as she pushed her long red hair back, flashing those hazel-green eyes, gesticulating, fervent, exciting, erotic. She looked to him like a dancer or an artist, a siren out of myth with her slender body and graceful fingers, the nails painted the colour of blood. But she carried the scars and images of another culture—perhaps an ancient tribe not unaccustomed to the hunt, battle, or ritual journeys.

What are you thinking? There are no such things any more.

He’d studied it, though, knew they had existed once. He’d found texts and sacred documents that suggested a people long ago who might have looked like her, been like her. Images of those tattoos were found on cave walls and stone slabs thousands of years old. Could she have been kept in cryo? Perhaps discovered in some frozen archaeological site and reanimated? That might explain the peculiar physiological response—or lack of response—to his treatments. It would explain a lot of things. But if someone had found her, it posed a more difficult question. It would mean there were scientists either outside of ASSIST’s auspices, acting on their own, which was dangerous enough, or they were ASSIST-sanctioned and he didn’t know about it—worse still. What secrets are they keeping?

He sensed in his Jane Doe something familiar, something compelling. He had to investigate. He had to find out. Could she have been born outside the State? When? How had she survived? Where was her family?

*If she doesn’t recover, we’ll never know.*

He sighed. Maybe he was wrong about her. Maybe she was a rebel who had spent time in the underground. He shook his head. The fleeting glimpse of her when she awoke carried a sense of power. It reached up towards him, without words. It grabbed him, throttled him. *Just like before*. It was so much like before, it was uncanny, though that was many years ago.Wasn’t it? His memory could play tricks at this age. He rubbed his brow, the old ache returning.

There had been a case like this some time ago, but the strange thing was, when he went to look up her records, they were gone. He couldn’t cross-reference, and he couldn’t be sure of his recollection. Was it accurate? He knew how selective ‘memory’ could be. Besides, you could buy a memory these days for less than a week’s wage. Could he have been tampered with? Was that other woman, that other case, real at all? He could recall only fragments.

Before he’d become head of his department, when he was a young intern, the medtechs had brought her in. At
least, that was how he saw it in his mind. The similarities were so striking he’d have thought them almost the same person if it hadn’t been so many years earlier. Both women were unconscious. Both had very long hair, wide-set eyes, unusual costumes, and skin tattooed with strange, compelling images. Though the artwork was different, they looked to have been done by the same artist, or the same type of artist.

The first Jane Doe had a profoundly beautiful image of an extinct species on her upper arm, a large feline with tall ears and glinting eyes. Its tail wrapped around her bicep, an embrace. The current Jane Doe had different body art. Her images looked more mythical than real, but both of these women had heart conditions that did not respond to treatment. The first woman had died almost immediately, leaving him no wiser as to her origin. Everett scratched his head, a flash of memory returning.

He’d put her straight into cryo, and when he tried to sign her up for donor dispersal it was as if she’d vanished. The staff at Medical Records couldn’t find her file. No one, even those attending at the time, could recall her. Was this how ASSIST dealt with death? They erased memories?

He didn’t press the matter. Why bring it to attention? If the staff’s memories had been tampered with, so had his, though not thoroughly enough. He could glimpse her, as if out of the corner of his eye, in the wings of recollection. Not wanting to draw attention to himself, he’d kept quiet. He’d held onto the disjointed thoughts and images and acted as if he also knew nothing of his first Jane Doe. His plan was to save his investigation for a time when he had the power and resources to conduct it himself. It occurred to him now that the time was well past due. There has to be a record somewhere. There would have been samples from the autopsy. Unless he was going mad, and she never existed after all. He mopped the sweat off his forehead with his sleeve.

Sitting under the orange haze of the parking lights, he fidgeted. He turned his ring around his finger, trying to pull it off. It got close to his second knuckle and wouldn’t budge. There was only one way to get it off. Of course, if he did that, he wouldn’t have the ring any more. It mattered little, really, but he still couldn’t quite let it go. He chuckled. I hang onto what’s not there and search for what may never have existed. Some life this is I’m leading. The irony was knowing his ‘life’ was going to last forever.

He gripped the steering wheel, leaving imprints in the spongy plastic. Who was he kidding? He wasn’t going anywhere while his Jane Doe still breathed. She might wake again. She might speak. His strange patient had disturbed him, shaken him up like he hadn’t been shaken in decades. It took all his strength to repress the demons swirling around in his mind. He had to remain professional, natural—act like nothing was amiss, or Admin would get onto it and shut him down, or worse, re-erase his memories.

Now that would be death, wouldn’t it? He laughed, a humourless sound. Just be regular, Everett. He schooled himself. Give them nothing to notice, nothing to take exception to. For him, being regular meant being considerate, empathic and kind—smart, hardworking and non-confrontational. But tonight he felt nothing like that. Tonight he felt like going for throats. Just let Admin try and shut her down. I’ll tie them up in so much red tape they’ll never find a way out.

He thought about that for a while, smiling. But what his mind wouldn’t ponder, couldn’t give credence to, was his Jane Doe’s only request. She had asked for something. He’d heard it loud and clear, no denying it, but he couldn’t bring himself to honour it.

‘Let me go…’ She had whispered the words after beckoning him closer.
‘Let you go where?’
‘You know.’
‘I assure you, young woman, I don’t.’
‘Let me go…Let me die.’
‘I don’t understand.’
‘You do.’

He jumped at the tap on the glass. Heart pounding, he lowered the window, making room for the bulbous nose and ruddy cheeks of the emergency charge nurse.

‘Thought you’d still be sitting here,’ she said, pressing her face closer. Her breath smelled of coffee and stress. He nodded, keeping his manner calm. Be regular, he reminded himself. ‘What’s happening? I didn’t get a page.’

‘Not for lack of trying. You must have it switched off.’

He flipped his wrist over and looked at the subcutaneous implant. He didn’t have to pretend to be surprised.
‘My mistake.’

‘No matter. I found you anyway.’ She leaned against the door. ‘I figured you’d want to know, Dr Kelly. Your Jane Doe woke up again.’

‘And?’ He pulled off his glasses and polished them, holding his breath.

‘She looked around and slipped back under like a stone.’
‘Did she say anything?’
‘Not that I heard.’
‘Vitals?’
‘Stable for now, save the arrhythmia and a slight fever.’
‘I’ll just be a moment.’ He nodded at the nurse and triggered the window. She had to pull her head out to keep from getting pinched. Everett rubbed his face. *Those eyes!* He couldn’t imagine how he’d respond if they were awake, conscious, and focused on him again. He certainly didn’t handle it well the first time.

He grabbed his keys. There were still some hours before dawn, the start of his next shift. He might as well spend them here at the hospital. He’d need to check her anyway. If she woke up once, she might do it again, and he wanted to be in the building if that happened. He scooped up the tubes of freshly drawn blood sitting on the passenger’s seat and dropped them into his pocket before opening his door. ‘Are you sure she didn’t speak?’
‘Not to me, Dr Kelly, but maybe to someone else. Your student might know more. He was there.’
‘Thanks.’ He strode back into the hospital, feeling the nurse’s eyes on him.
‘Have you eaten today?’ she asked.
He frowned. ‘I don’t remember.’
‘Get a bite.’ She waved him towards the cafeteria block. ‘That’s where the med students will be this time of night anyway.’
‘Good idea. Thanks.’ He thrust his hands deep into his pockets and headed down the hall.
‘Where are we?’ Shane whispered. He stood naked, gazing into the distance.

‘Gaela,’ Rosette answered. ‘Above the Dumar Gorge.’

He whistled long and slow. ‘It’s magnificent.’

The water glinted like gems spread across a glass surface. Walls of white granite, rippled with veins of rose quartz and gold, led down to the lake. The distance held rolling green hills backed by snowcapped mountains. A warm breeze brushed her face, bringing with it the scent of daffodils and lilacs.

‘Is this heaven?’ he asked.

Rosette smiled, dropping her bundle and kneeling in the soft grass. She touched her brow to the bright orange poppies growing among the clover, pressing her forehead to the ground. ‘It is heaven to me,’ she said.

Drayco inhaled the air, keeping his mouth slightly open to taste every nuance of scent before shaking the water from his fur.

‘Hey! Not so close, Dray.’

The temple cat ignored her and shook again. *Who would have thought, Maudi? The cave fish river has led us home.*

‘It’s wonderfully strange,’ she answered aloud. She lifted her face to the sun.

‘So we’re dead?’ Shane asked. ‘Figures.’

‘Not at all.’ She wrung out her skirt and spread her clothes over the carpet of grass to dry. The sun felt delightfully warm on her shoulders. She sat untangling her hair, her legs folded beneath her.

‘Where, then?’

‘Gaela is my home.’ She smiled at the northern mountain peaks, thanking every god, goddess and demon she knew, and any she didn’t, for her safe return. Drayco bow-stretched next to her, flopping onto his side. He rolled over and over in the grass, purring like a kitten.

‘What’s Gaela again?’ Shane asked, staring at the two as he wrung his clothes, the water splashing onto his bare feet.

‘It’s my home world.’

‘I thought you said you were from a place called Earth.’

‘I’m from there too. It’s not like this.’ Her smile faded. He didn’t seem to notice, but followed her gaze to the distant peaks.

‘I don’t recognise the mountains. How far from T’locity are we?’

Rosette straightened her back. ‘How far?’

_Good luck, Maudi. I don’t think he’s going to grasp dimension shifting and the many-worlds theory right off the mark. Do you?_

*He studied at the Darkwood Mystery School. I think he went to third term._

*Before he flunked out, Maudi?*_

*Is that a joke?*

*Not really.*

Shane repeated his query. ‘How far from T’locity? Do you know?’

‘Further than you can imagine, I’ll wager, but at the same time, not far at all.’

He scowled. ‘Witches’ riddles.’

‘Come on,’ she said. ‘There’s going to be afternoon sun against those rocks.’ She pointed to a tumble of boulders clustered near a small oak tree. ‘We need to dry our clothes and gather firewood before dark.’ She emptied her pack, frowning when she came across the letter to Nell. It was soaked, but the seal was still intact. She put it with her other things to dry, tempted to open it.

*Will you, Maudi? Could be important._

‘I think not.’ She looked at Shane. ‘We have to hurry.’

‘What’s the rush?’ He spread his arms wide, basking in the sun. ‘It’s mild enough.’ He kept his arms out and spun, taking in the panorama, his body glistening.

‘You won’t say that in a few hours.’

‘What happens then?’

‘It gets dark.’
He laughed.
She cleared her throat, pointing at the westering sun. ‘It’ll be close to freezing by sunset, and besides, this is Lupin territory. They often come to this place to feed.’
‘And that’s bad?’ He kept smiling, waving his arms like a child.
She hated to break his rare moment of joy, but he needed to know. Their lives depended on it. She reached out to stop him, like a stick in a cartwheel. ‘Listen to me, Shane. It’s not bad. It’s not good. It’s just the Lupins. They…’
‘They what?’
‘Lupins can eat all sorts of things, including people and temple cats. Do you understand that concept?’
His smile fell. ‘Tell me what to do.’
‘Can you manage a fire? My matches are soaked from the swim.’
He nodded. ‘I can manage it easily, if I can find a piece of flint.’
*Good thing he’s resourceful.* Drayco licked his belly fur, turning over on his back.
‘I could get a flame going, if I had to, Dray.’
Sure you could. I’m just glad you don’t have to. The last time…
*I know what happened last time. The fire got a little out of control.*
A little? Maudi, you incinerated an entire valley.
*Can I help it if the elementals were overenthused? Besides, I put it out!*
She snorted. ‘If we’re speaking of capable, how about you rustle us up something to cook?’ she said aloud.
Drayco leapt to his feet, shaking off the grass and dandelion fluff. When she looked again, he’d vanished.
Rosette gathered dead wood, surprised at how quickly Shane made a fire. His prevailing melancholy seemed to have dissipated somewhat under the mountains of Gaela. He clearly had no sense of any immediate danger and simply appeared rapt in the beauty of their surroundings. Coming from that awful swamp, she could understand why. Perhaps all of Tensar was as dreary. She shuddered at the thought and turned her face back to the sun.

‘Tell me about the Lupins,’ Shane asked as they sat in front of the crackling fire chewing on crispy pieces of roasted goose.

Drayco had nabbed the bird just before sunset. The temple cat had finished his share and was sitting statue-still next to Rosette, facing away from the fire. He stared out into the night, his eyes unblinking. *Tell him they are demon dogs capable of flaying victims with a single thought.*

She looked at Drayco, watching the tip of his tail twitch.
*Let’s not push him back into depression just yet. He’s almost cheerful right now.*

*There’s nothing cheerful about the Lupins.*
She turned to Shane. ‘The main thing you need to know is that they’re dangerous, especially now,’ she said.
‘Why especially now?’
‘No one controls them any more.’
‘What do you mean, controls them?’
‘No one keeps them in line.’
‘And who had that job?’
She hooded her eyes. ‘A powerful witch.’
Shane stopped chewing and waited for her to continue. Finally he asked, ‘That’s all you’re going to say?’
She offered a bone to Drayco who politely took it from her fingers.
Tell him, Maudi. If you don’t, I will.
‘I’d like to see that.’
‘See what?’ Shane asked.
She shook her head. ‘The Lupins are an ancient race of wolves—not wolves exactly, but shape-shifters. They used to be under the constraints of a High Priestess named Kreshkali. She isn’t here any more, and that means they are under no constraints at all.’
‘Interesting. Do you know this Kreshkali?’
‘I do.’ Rosette tucked her hair behind her ear. ‘She’s my mother.’
Shane whistled, his eyes widening.
‘Play us a tune?’ she asked.
‘I want to hear more about these Lupins.’
‘Not now.’
‘Why not?’
‘Because talking about them is like shouting out an invitation. I don’t feel like their company tonight. Do you?’

He frowned, shaking his head.

‘A tune, then?’ she asked again.

‘My pleasure,’ he said, and rummaged in his pack for his instrument.

The sound of his flute wafted into the night as he played a slow, sensual tune, hauntingly beautiful in a minor key. It was answered only by an owl hooting in the cottonwoods. She joined him on the penny whistle for a while before setting her instrument aside and closing her eyes. She let the music drift into the back of her mind and turned her thoughts to her familiar.

*Drayco? Can you hear anyone? Have you tried to reach Scylla? An’ Lawrence might still be at Treeon. We’re too insulated here. We need to get away from these mountains—closer to the coast—if we’re going to reach anyone.*

*We’ll head to Treeon in the morning.*

*That’s a fairly long walk.*

*I know the portal here. We’ll be gazing down the cliffs into Treeon Valley before morning tea.*

*Excellent.*

She tilted her head back, opening her eyes to the sparkling vault above. Towards the western horizon a bright star appeared from behind the clouds.

‘That’s strange.’

‘What?’ Shane asked, taking the flute from his lips as he finished a reel.

*Maudi?*

Both Shane and Drayco were staring at her.

‘Maybe nothing, but if I have my bearings right, that’s Jupiter shining bright on the western horizon.’

‘Jupiter?’


‘I don’t understand any of that, but its placement there is strange to you because…?’

‘Because when I left, Jupiter was rising in the sky at dusk.’

‘Still not with you, Rosette.’

*Give him the facts, Maudi. He’s good with them.*

*I thought that’s what I was doing.*

*Maybe in a different order? Like, from beginning to end instead of all middle?*

She smiled, took a sip of water and smacked her lips. ‘Jupiter has a twelve-year cycle—it takes twelve years for it to travel one complete orbit around the sun. If the planet’s setting now, and we’re in the same season, it’s been six years since I was last on Gaela.’

*Six, Maudi, or eighteen.* Drayco sent the thought with little concern, like counting daisies.

She stared at him. *What?*

*Or thirty…or forty-two…or fifty-four…or…*

‘Drayco, stop.’

He blinked his orange eyes at her before twisting around to lick a spot between his shoulder blades. *I’m just saying, Maudi, we don’t know how long it’s been or even if we’ve come forward.*

*You think we might be backward?*

‘I wish you two would converse aloud. These long silences with your eyes glazed over is unnerving.’ Shane poked the fire with a stick and threw on another log. Sparks danced up inside a curtain of smoke.

‘Drayco’s suggesting that it may be many more than six years in the future or perhaps even the past.’

*If it is six years ago, or more, Nell would be here. I’ll see if I can contact her.*

‘That’s right! Six years ago you and I were living with Nell in the Dumarkian Woods. It was before we left for Treeon. Are you saying you’re going to try to contact yourself?’

*Interesting, don’t you think?*

‘But, Dray, you can’t, or, you didn’t. If you had, we’d remember.’

The temple cat lifted his left paw, licking it before washing behind his ear. *You’re right. But maybe I reached Nell.*

‘She would have told us.’

*Perhaps not. Nell keeps secrets.*

Rosette nodded. ‘See if you can.’

‘See if you can what? Who’s Nell?’ Shane stared at her, his eyes dark in the firelight. ‘On second thought, maybe it is worse when you converse aloud. I have no idea what you’re talking about, either way.’

‘If it’s the past, then we might be able to reach Nell. Drayco is going to try to get a message through to her.’
'And Nell is?'
'Nell’s my mother.’
'I thought you said the High Priestess Kreshkali was your mother.’
'I did. They’re one and the same.’
Shane scratched his head. ‘Isn’t she here now?’
‘No, she’s on Earth, I think.’
‘Hang on. Earth? Gaela? What are you talking about?’
‘They’re different worlds. Different places in time and space.’
‘I don’t understand?’
Maudi, I can’t raise Nell…and if the grumpy birdsong man would stop asking so many questions and listen, it would make more sense to him.

Grumpy? I thought he was almost cheerful tonight.
Oh, come on, Maudi. He’s got wider mood swings than the other one had.
What other one?
Clay.
Her smile faded. Maybe it goes with being a bard.
Drayco stared at Shane and lashed his tail. Obviously, in this case it does.
‘You two are talking about me, I know it! What’re you saying?’
‘Drayco suggested you might like to hear the whole story, that’s all.’
He frowned at her for a moment. ‘I might regret this, but yes, I would.’
‘It’s a long one.’
‘I’ve got no other plans for this evening. Do you?’
Rosette laughed. ‘You’d best get comfortable.’

For hours they sat by the fire, adding log after log until her story was told. Shane focused on the embers, shaking his head.

‘That’s it?’ he asked.
‘The highlights anyway.’
‘Many-worlds with corridors between them?’
‘Yep.’
‘I had no idea.’
‘Realities are immersive, Shane. Like a good story. The knowledge of separate dimensions doesn’t exactly blink like a neon sign. I don’t think it’s meant to.’
‘What kind of sign?’ Shane turned his head to her, brow furrowed.
‘Just think of starlight in a tube going on-off, on-off.’ She brightened. ‘At least it’s warm; usually these mountains are freezing all year round.’ She sat bolt upright. ‘Dray! Does it smell like spring or summer?’

Early summer. Time of the Twins.
‘Can you be sure?’

Yes.
‘How?’

The geese were nesting.
‘What is it?’ Shane asked.
‘If it is early summer, time of the Twins, then it can’t be six years ago, or any immediate future.’
‘Why?’
‘Because Saturn was in the sign of the Twins then, and he’s not there now.’ She pointed directly above them.
‘There’s Saturn, in the sign of the Fishes by the look of it. Oh, great mother goddess.’

‘What?’
‘It means we definitely aren’t anywhere near my “now”. We must be way further than six years.’
‘Forward or back?’
‘Either.’
‘How many?’
‘Twelve years back or eighteen years forward…or more, of course. It could be much more. Either way.’
‘You’re kidding.’
‘I wish I was.’

We might be more lost than we were back in the smelly world’s cave, running from those earth shakes.
‘Don’t worry, Dray. We’ll head for Treeon in the morning.’ She turned to Shane. ‘We can’t let the fire go out.’
‘Lupins?’
'Yes.' She slid under her cloak. ‘And bears.’

*And mountain cats,* Drayco added.

‘And mountain cats…’

Hotha ran hard, puffs of red dust flying out behind him. He jumped the chasms and rents in the ground, skirting cacti and fallen tree trunks, never slackening his pace. In the body of a wolf, he was his most powerful and most free. He revelled in it, leaping higher than necessary to clear each obstacle. In this form he was unencumbered by oppressive thoughts, the things that worried him as a man. The sudden lifting of responsibility felt like bliss—a delightful relief. After a few more miles, his tongue lolling, sides heaving, he couldn’t even remember what he felt so much relief from. The sun was shining, vultures circling—what more could he want?

He ran on, catching the scent he was after. It touched him lightly as he veered around a broad ravine and shot north. He hadn’t forgotten his purpose; he’d just forgotten why it had concerned him so much. What would be, would be. Who was he to judge?

He spotted the cliffs opposite the black gates, noting the three ravens perched in the deadwood above the crevice. Of course she would send her familiars. He didn’t mind. On the contrary, she could watch all she wanted. Before he reached the cliff face, he dropped to a trot and sniffed the air again. Where was Teg?

On closer inspection he spotted the young Lupin in human form, hunched over a book, tapping a pen against the side of his head. Hotha growled—a deep vibration in his throat. The youth was obsessed with word puzzles.

He skidded to a halt and sat on his haunches, waiting. When Teg didn’t respond, he focused his mind and morphed into bipedal form. Instantly the worry and urgency flooded back. He shook his head, pushing stray hair off his face. Teg was still absorbed in the book. He hadn’t looked up but clasped it with both hands to keep the shockwave of Hotha’s transformation from ruffling the pages. Hotha cleared his throat.

Teg glanced up. ‘What’s a nine-letter word, starting with *p*, that means abundant or lush?’

Hotha’s face darkened. ‘I’ve a better question. What’s a lad doing playing with word puzzles when he’s meant to be watching for arrivals?’

Teg smiled. ‘I can do two things at once.’

‘The wind is too strong. It’s masking scents from the west. You could miss someone, or something.’

Teg looked out over the barren valley; a few brown tumbleweeds were rolling by with drifts of red dust trailing behind. ‘The Santa Ana?’

Hotha nodded, black waves of hair falling into his face. He smoothed it back with both hands and tied it at the nape of his neck, biceps flexing with the movement. ‘What do you know about her?’

‘Santa Ana?’ Teg said. ‘She’s from the east, a place in ancient times known as the Valley of Saint Anne—patron goddess of books.’ He frowned. ‘I don’t know why they say her wind comes from the mouths of demons, unless they were opposed to the teachings of the sacred feminine, or occult knowledge in general.’

‘There were plenty who equated scholarship with evil.’

Teg scratched his head, his face lighting up. ‘Plenitude,’ he said, writing the word into the small squares on the page. ‘Thank you!’

‘Demon blood vipers, Teg!’ Hotha shouted. ‘Put that away!’

The younger Lupin rose, dusting off his leather pants. He folded his puzzle in half and used it as a place marker in a larger tome. Hotha caught the title before Teg slipped it into his pack. ‘*The Evolution of Consciousness in…*’ He tilted his head to read the rest. ‘*Closed System Societies?*’ Hotha snorted. ‘No secret how you’ll be voting. Where’s your sword?’

Teg clasped his side, his long fingers grasping at an empty scabbard. His face fell. He stammered an unintelligible reply.

‘That’s it.’ Hotha’s lip curled up in a snarl. ‘I don’t care if the Sword Master was willing to take you on. You’re out. An apprenticeship with him, or me, is earned by attention to detail and exactitude. You’re lacking both. I’m done.’

‘Hotha, no! Please. I just forgot. It won’t happen again. I…’

‘It’s already happened too many times. If books are your weapons, you’ve no business here, keeping watch, nor training under me. How will you protect the council chambers if the need arises?’

‘I’m aware of…’

‘You’re aware of nothing! You didn’t even sense my arrival.’

‘I did! I knew it was you—no threat—so I just kept going with my…’

‘Word puzzle?’

‘Crossword puzzle, actually,’ he mumbled, his eyes on the ground.
‘And if I had been a threat? What then? You have no sword.’
‘I have my mind,’ Teg said, ‘and these.’ He lifted his hands, and his fingers curled—ten sickle claws jutting out.
‘Then you should have stayed on all fours.’
Teg hung his head again, nodding.
‘But you can’t read on all fours, can you?’
Teg drooped lower, his shoulders hunched. ‘Not so well,’ he whispered.
The elder Lupin gazed towards the gates of Temple Los Loma. He sighed and turned back to Teg. His face relaxed.
‘Look, son, here’s what we’re going to do. If things go well in there,’ he tilted his head towards the inner cavern, ‘I’ll let Rashnan lead the fractious clans back to Los Loma, Gaela. The rest will stay here, under my watchful eyes.’
‘And me?’ Teg asked.
‘What if I send you to the High Priestess Kreshkali? Maybe she can find use for your literary interests.’
‘Kreshkali?’ he said. His face transformed. ‘Our queen?’
‘They don’t call her that so much any more. Not here on Earth. Something about a double life…But there’s much you can learn from the witch, and I think she can use you too.’
‘I’ll be able to apprentice?’
‘That would be the plan, if you suit. She has different needs, Teg, different rules, and different magic.’ He caught himself and laughed. ‘Actually, Kali has only one rule.’
‘What’s that?’
‘Ask her yourself,’ he said, brushing a fly from his face. ‘You’ll start out as an envoy to the council, a go-between. You’ll report to me too, of course.’
‘She’ll have me?’ Teg’s eyes glistened. ‘Kreshkali wants me? She knows who I am?’
‘I suspect she does now.’ Hotha lowered his eyelids. When he opened them the three ravens took flight, screaming a victory call, their wings tearing the air as they sped away. ‘You’re in.’
‘When?’
‘It’s already done.’
Teg froze for a moment, his hands braced on his thighs. As the sun came out from behind a cloud, he bent his knees, threw back his head and howled—long, deep and joyful.

Rosette stood at the edge of the cliff, the wind blowing her cloak away from her body like a dark flag. It was clasped at the throat, dark red lining whipping against the rich black wool. She could smell apple cider. It reminded her of another time when she’d stood above the temple valley. It seemed ages ago. Where had the naivety gone? She stared at the grounds, her eyes shielded against the bright sunlight, scrutinising everything.

The rows of jacarandas and acacias looked thinner than she remembered, but that could simply reflect the time of year. The redwood grove was the same—massive trunks that rose up towards the top of the valley with their rich and fragrant green branches. The courtyard statues were all familiar and in the right place, though their companion trees were gone, unless the saplings near them counted. The brightly coloured banners that topped the temple library were absent; short flags, dark purple and black, were in their place. She wrapped her cloak around herself and called to Drayco, stroking the back of his neck when he appeared. ‘It’s not what I expected,’ she whispered to him. ‘Something’s not quite as it should be, no matter when it is.’

He stood at her side, scenting the air. I agree, Maudi, this isn’t our time. But more pressing for the moment—someone is coming.
‘Where?’
Rosette leaned forward, watching the bend in the road that led out of the valley. Just ahead. It’s a rider. Coming up from Treeon. Can’t you smell her?
‘Not like you can, my lovely. Beware?’
‘Always.’

His hackles went up at the sound of hooves clipping over the cobbles. Rosette closed her eyes and reached out with her inner sight to perceive the traveller. A horse and rider were winding their way along the zigzag path that led from the valley floor. She got an image of messages; many to deliver by the look of the saddlebags filled to the brim with scrolls and booklets. It was most likely an apprentice on her mentor’s errands. She shut her eyes tighter. The horse shone in her vision like a newly pressed gold piece. Perhaps that was just the morning light in her face, though she knew there was such a colour—a golden yellow with white mane and tail. They called it palomino, a strain she’d
never seen outside paintings and tapestries. They were common before the Corsanon wars, but few, if any, remained in Gaela now. Could it be that long ago?

*It could, Maudi.*

The horse seemed young and eager, pulling against the reins, anxious to reach the top. He pranced and tossed his head as the rider, a young woman, held him to a collected trot. Rosette adjusted her assessment as they approached the crest of the grade. The one who handled the horse so expertly was probably only a girl, small, slender and topped with flames of wild red hair. She opened her eyes to find Shane staring at her.

‘What are you doing?’ he asked.

‘Checking out the approaching company,’ she answered.

‘What approaching company?’

‘A girl on a horse.’ Rosette nodded to the rider as she appeared over the top of the ridge. It was a palomino after all, and not the sunlight.

Rosette’s group hadn’t been spotted yet, and none of them moved.

‘Do you know her?’ Shane asked.

‘I don’t think so.’

Shane dug his hands into his pockets and shivered. ‘Is it me, or has it suddenly got colder?’

Rosette hooded her eyes and stared at the rider. ‘It isn’t just you,’ she whispered. ‘Be ready.’

‘For what?’

Rosette shook off the chill and shielded her mind, closing her thoughts from any who might pry. The girl may or may not be a mind-traveller, but either way, Treeon would be full of them, and Rosette suddenly felt the need for caution. Drayco? Lie low, can you? The horse might spook when he picks up your scent. They’re coming straight this way.

*Where would you like me to go?* The temple cat yawned massively before gazing into Rosette’s eyes.

*Perhaps into the trees, just in case?* ‘We should all step slowly to the side of the road,’ she said aloud, tugging on Shane’s sleeve and pulling him with her. They were dead centre in the road when she heard Drayco’s voice.

*Bad timing, Maudi.*

The rider had been looking the other way, the horse preoccupied, snorting away from the entrance flags that flapped like gangly wings. The girl moved her mount into a brisk trot and headed straight into their midst as if they had been invisible. Drayco leapt to the side to avoid a direct collision, and the horse, seeing the huge feline, suddenly skidded to a halt and reared. When his front hooves touched the ground, he dropped his head, bucked once and ran. The girl was unseated, hitting the ground hard. Dust billowed around them. The young rider scrambled to her feet and raced off after her galloping mount.

‘Gem, whoa!’ she shouted in a high-pitched voice.

The horse galloped on.

Rosette cupped her hands to her mouth. ‘Whoa up!’ she yelled over the girl’s head, one arm thrusting out towards the retreating figures.

The human stopped immediately. The horse took a few more calls, but Rosette soon had the animal trotting back to them, ears pricked, stirrups flapping and reins dragging on the ground. He was a splendid coloured animal, immaculately groomed and in perfect condition. He stopped just short of his rider, nostrils flaring with each breath, neck arched, eyes locked on Drayco.

The rider was looking much the same as her mount—shocked at the sight of the witch and her familiar. Neither noticed Shane as he leaned against a tree by the side of the road, chewing on a blade of grass. The girl stroked her horse’s neck, eyes wide and staring.

‘It’s all right, lass. I’m Rosette de Santo. I apologise for the fright.’ Rosette looked the rider up and down. She was very young, nine at the most. ‘Are you okay? That was quite a spill.’

The girl continued to stare at Rosette, her mouth open. She didn’t look particularly frightened, but she did look surprised, as if she were trying to bring something to mind. Her spine straightened and her shoulders went back.

‘I’m fine, thank you,’ she answered, her breath coming out in a rush. She picked up the reins and dusted herself off before looping them over her horse’s head. ‘We got a startle, that’s all.’ She whispered to her mount before reaching onto her tiptoes. Grabbing a shock of mane at the horse’s withers, she vaulted up, her boots quickly finding the stirrups.

‘Sorry for that.’ Rosette smiled as the girl settled into the saddle, keeping the horse under better control. She was a well-trained equestrian. Rosette found herself nodding approval. ‘Have you never seen a Dumarkian temple cat before?’ she asked.

The girl swallowed. ‘Is that what it is?’

*He.* Rosette emphasised the pronoun. ‘Let me introduce you to Drayco of the Dumarkian Woods. He’ll do
neither you nor your fine mount any harm.’

‘Is he…’ She lowered her eyes as if searching for a word. ‘Your…’
‘My familiar?’

Her head shot up. ‘Is he?’
‘We are bonded, yes.’ Rosette raised her brows at the golden horse. ‘And him?’

_Not hardly_, Drayco said, licking his forepaw and wiping dust from his eyes.

_I know. I want to see what she says._

The girl smoothed her expression as she stroked the horse’s neck. ‘He’s not my horse and certainly not a familiar. I’m exercising him for High Priestess La Kaffa. He’s her favourite palfrey. I’m the only apprentice allowed to ride him.’

Rosette created a smile and held it in place. La Kaffa? Could it be that long ago? ‘And you are?’ Rosette asked in a pleasant tone.

‘I’m called Nell, apprentice to master archer Gunton.’ Her girlish voice was sweet and lilting, like sunshine on buttercups. She was proud of her rank.

_Nell?_ Rosette stumbled backwards, Drayco swaying at her side. Shane spat out the grass stem and made to draw his sword. She held out her hand to stop him.

‘Nell,’ Rosette said aloud. As the word escaped her lips, the ground seemed to rock underneath her feet. She felt the colour drain from her face.

_Maudi, what’s going on? Is she really our Nell?_ I’m not sure. Did you sense it?

_Total surprise to me, but you better talk to her. She’s looking quite confused and sending some rapid messages back to the temple._

_What’s she saying?_ Various things.

_Such as?_ Help. Danger. Strange witches.

_Great._

Rosette returned her attention to the girl, subtly indicating to Shane that his sword would not be required at this point. ‘What is your full name, if I might ask?’

‘Nellion Sophia Paree,’ she said, her words formal. ‘Do I know you?’

Rosette shook her head and blinked.

‘You okay? What’s happening?’ Shane asked. He put his hand on her shoulder, steadying her.

‘I’m fine,’ she said to him, not taking her eyes off the girl. ‘Your hair is so red…’

The girl smiled. ‘Henna! Isn’t it fabulous?’

‘Pardon?’

‘I got a whole tub of henna powder from the markets at Morzone last week. We never get any here. It suits, don’t you think?’ She all but giggled as she twisted in the saddle to offer a better view of her long tresses. She seemed to be over her suspicions, whatever they were.

_She’s stalling. Half of Treeon’s guards are on their way now._

Rosette didn’t speak.

_Pull it together, Maudi. It’s okay. At least we know ‘when’ we are._

_But we don’t, Drayco. Nell didn’t cross over as a child…I mean, Kreshkali didn’t cross over as a child. She was never here then, before…I mean…_ Calm down, Maudi, and say something to her. She’s about to ride away.

Rosette took a deep breath. ‘It’s quite vivid. Really lovely, Nell.’ She turned to Shane. ‘This is my travel companion, Shane…’ She looked at the man, frowning as she searched for words. She had no idea how to present him.

‘Shane MacVenton, master bard and left-hand rank of the T’locity border scouts.’

Rosette nodded before turning back to the girl. ‘We just met.’

Nell winked back. ‘Sure you did.’

_What a cheeky little imp._

_Sounds like she’s our Nell then, even if she can’t be._

_Tell me, Nellion._ Rosette beamed a smile at the girl. ‘Who’s presiding High Priestess of Treeon Temple now? La Kaffa?’

The girl wrinkled her nose. ‘You mean High Priest, don’t you?’

‘High Priest?’
‘Corvey, High Priest Rosh Corvey.’
That can’t be right, Rosette said.
Nothing is. There are no familiars about at all, Maudi. I’ve tried contacting. It’s silent down there. Not a peep from feline, raptor or serpent, and we know La Kaffa had one—a temple dog from Corsanon—and there were always a few Lemur ravens about.
I’m glad you remember your history, Drayco. This is strange. I feel the silence too.
‘Mistress Rosette?’ Nell said as her mount started pawing the ground. ‘Can I ask you something?’
‘Of course.’
Nell dropped her voice to a whisper and urged her horse a little closer. ‘Where did you get the sword?’
Rosette frowned. That was definitely not the right question—not one that made sense anyway. Her sword was forged at Treeon and sported the serpent-entwined tree as a crest. It was a traditional design. Unmistakable, even half a century ago.
Especially half a century ago. ‘Why do you ask?’
‘I’ve never seen one up close. Never on a woman, of course.’
‘Never on a woman?’
Maudi, may I suggest you move the conversation to a close now? There are more riders gathering at the gates below. They’re armed. Aggressive.
You’re right. We may not be quite where we think we are, Dray. I’m starting to wonder if this is even Gaela.
Is it Nell?
So it seems, but there never was a High Priest at Treeon, Corvey or otherwise, and everyone from Morzone to Lividica would have seen swords on men and women and teens, all the time. It’s commonplace, now or then—at our Treeon Temple.
So where are we?
I have no idea.
One way to find out.
How?
Ask.
Rosette smiled, as she realised that Nell was still talking to her.
‘I’ve always been fascinated by the weapon, though it’s banned for females, of course.
Rosette kept her face a mask. ‘Tell me, Nell. What do you call this place?’
She scrunched her face. ‘Where are you from that you don’t know?’
‘Just answer the question, missy-miss,’ Shane said, his voice a strong tenor. ‘We’re a little…disoriented.’
‘This is Treeon Temple.’ Nell stroked the horse’s neck, directing her answer to Shane.
‘Yes, of course. I meant, what do you call your world?’ Rosette asked.
‘You don’t know the name of the world?’
‘There could be some confusion, yes.’
The girl shortened her reins and sucked in her breath. ‘This is Gaela,’ she said at last, presenting the entire landscape with a graceful sweep of her arm.
‘What year?’
‘212 AD.’
‘AD?’
‘After destruction,’ Nell answered.
‘ Destruction of what?’
‘All the temples, of course.’ Nell stared at their blank faces, then turned her horse around. ‘I’ve got to go,’ she said, looking back over her shoulder. ‘But you can pose your questions to the temple guards or even High Priest Corvey, if you get an interview. They are on their way to greet you.’
‘Thank you.’ Rosette was too stunned to say anything else.
Nell broke into a canter, putting distance between them as she raced down the road. Rosette watched the girl ride away, the golden horse galloping along, smooth as butter, Nell’s henna red hair streaming out behind her. She pressed her forehead with the palm of her hand and looked at Shane.
‘I take it we aren’t quite where you had anticipated.’ Shane’s voice brought her back to the present.
‘Not even close,’ she answered.
‘What now?’
I suggest we get out of here, Maudi. Those guards are armed and charging.
They can’t be. This is Treeon, not some blood-hungry Corsanon temple.
See for yourself, Maudi. They’re charging, swords drawn, and we are the target.
Rosette shut her eyes, opening her inner vision to the Treeon Temple guards. Something about them was peculiar. A dozen sentries mounted on bay and black warhorses were galloping up the hill in tight formation, following their captain. He rode a dappled grey horse, lighter in build than the others though equally fit. All were armed with swords and shields. Four at the front had crossbows slung on their backs. The faces of these men were set and grim. It didn’t look like a welcoming party, and it didn’t look right.

_Something’s strange here, Drayco._

_I agree. Why are these men charging us?_

_That’s it, Drayco. That’s what is so strange. They are all men._

_Maudi?_

_There’re no women among them. Not a one._
GAELA & EARTH—TIME: FORWARD
CHAPTER 12

Maudi! They’re nearly cresting the hill.
‘Here they come!’ she said, opening her eyes, blurting out the warning to Shane.
‘Where?’
‘Up the hill!’ She gripped her sword hilt and faced the temple. A sudden gust blew over the lip of the valley, sending leaves scuttling across the road. They whisked over her boots and around her legs. ‘Stay alert,’ she said. ‘The captain’s sword is drawn, but we don’t want to fight them.’
‘How can you tell?’ Shane said. ‘All I see is a dust cloud.’
She didn’t answer. ‘That little witch…’ she mumbled to herself. ‘What did you say to them, Nellion Paree? That we were demons from the underworld come to assassinate your High Priest?’
Nell had ridden away, acting the part of the enthused and admiring apprentice—a hoax. She’d been calling up the temple guards the whole time and whatever she’d told them, they looked ready to cut first and ask questions later. Rosette could hear the riders approaching, the sound of the horses’ hooves pounding over the road, the clatter of it shaking the ground as the animals galloped up the grade. Drayco’s muscles were taut, and a low growl rumbled from his throat. Rosette kept a grip on her sword, straining to catch an actual glimpse of the riders below her. The wind swirled, bringing with it dust and the smell of sweat, leather and aggression.
‘Maybe it’s a welcoming party,’ Shane said, looking at the cloud that preceded the riders. ‘This is your coven, after all.’ His voice trailed off as the sun disappeared behind a cloud. He shivered. ‘Isn’t it?’
‘Not here. Not today,’ Rosette said. She pulled him off the road into the cover of the trees.
He didn’t resist. He may not have her vision skills but he knew when danger was about to run him down. ‘What do you think?’ he asked, his sword half drawn. ‘Do you want to stick around?’
They were shoulder to shoulder, hearts pounding.
‘You don’t send out a score of riders, armed and ready—horses charging—to invite a witch to morning tea.’
Shane nodded. ‘My thoughts too.’
She looked into the forest. In the shadows, the woods seemed thicker, a wall of oaks and pine trees chained together with tendrils of prickly vines. Drayco was already disappearing into the dense cover of bracken and tree ferns. This would be the way, Maudi, back to the portal—unless you want to fight the guards.
Good call, Drayco. We’re right behind you. She grabbed Shane’s shoulder, turning him around. ‘Let’s get out of here.’
‘How?’
‘Run!’
Shane slammed the hilt of his sword back into the scabbard. ‘Where to?’
‘We’ll circle through the woods and reach the portal from behind.’ She pulled him along.
‘You know the way?’
‘I used to.’ She hoped the horses hooves would trample their tracks by the road, slowing the pursuit, at least momentarily. There was no time to brush them away, by hand or magic. Would the guards know of the portals? Nell certainly had to. She grumbled an oath at the child again and dashed between two cypress trees, following the path her familiar had taken. Shane was right beside her.
This way, Maudi.
She thought she knew the area intimately, having spent many hours hunting and wandering these woods with Drayco and Clay. That was only a year ago. How much could have changed? A year ago my time…my world, she reminded herself. This is different.
Much different, Maudi.
As she ran deeper into the woods, the trees became unfamiliar, as if they had grown a different way than she remembered. She kept going, running past fringing oaks and eucalypts, pushing the tall ferns out of her face. Panic rose in her chest. She took a deep breath and let it out in a rush. Drayco? Does any of this look right to you?
Not really.
Demons. Which way’s the portal?
It should be a short sprint in from the main road and another short sprint south.
Should? You never use that word. Which way from here?
He sniffed the air. Veer right?
She caught up with her familiar and kept running. They tried to take a southerly course, but the way was blocked by brambles, nettles and vines. Rosette stumbled, snapping twigs and stirring up leaves as her boots dug into the ground. They tore across a clear stretch and she looked skyward. The sun was obscured by clouds and the woods were getting darker. She quickened her pace. What do we do now?

_Maudi, you need to shift!

What?

*Turn into the black falcon. Fly out of here and spot the portal. Do it now!* 

Shift?

_The woods have changed, Maudi. We might run straight into a trap. You can guide us from the sky._

He wasn’t stressed from the run, like she was, and his mental voice was severe—a freshly whetted knife against her thoughts. His request had logic, no arguing that. They could both easily get away if she changed form. He could outrun the guards in this terrain, even though it was strange, and she, like her mother before her, could simply take to the skies, spot the portal and guide him in.

She’d perfected her shape-shifting skills in the Sierras last spring, under the tuition of Kreshkali. There she had changed into the form of a black Gaelean falcon and soared high above the snowy peaks, riding thermals for hours on end. She’d hunted with Drayco, much to the temple cat’s delight, snapping the necks of jack rabbits that he flushed from the scrub.

They could take the same approach now—her above, him below. It would mean escaping without direct confrontation, but it would also mean leaving Shane behind, straggling on two feet. He’d fallen back already, an easy mark for the temple guards.

_It won’t work._

_Why not?_

_Shae._

There was a pause before the temple cat responded. Rosette listened to the pad of his soft paws and the thud and snap of her boots in the deep loam. Her breath, and Shane’s behind her, was becoming more laboured.

_I’d forgotten about him, Maudi._

_It’s all right. We’ll find a way together. If nothing else, we can turn and face the guards. I’m not without skills._

Drayco responded by quickening his pace. Rosette grimaced, forcing her legs to work harder. The dense foliage entangled them and the loam became deeper. It slowed the pace considerably. The woods darkened further as the trees thickened. Redwoods shot up in frequent groves, their peeling bark and green leaves rising high above her. The smell of leaf mould and bramble berries filled the air—recognisable yet not quite as she recalled. She dodged a fallen log as Drayco leapt over it.

_This way,_ she said, slowing her pace until Shane was beside her. She darted left, waving for him to follow.

_Are you sure?_ he asked, his breath coming in gasps. _I’m all turned around._

_Not really. I’m all turned around too._

They ran on, the sound of shouts and barking orders receding in the distance. Drayco moved with ease, his stride still effortless and fluid. _Maudi? I have a new idea._

_Tell._

_Change with me._

She felt the warmth of his mind touch and the glow of his body as he pressed his consciousness against hers.

_Change with you now?_

_Yes._

_Are you forgetting what happened last time we tried?_

_This is different._

_How so?_

_It’s an emergency, and there are no sudden drop-offs or children involved._

_None that we know of anyway…_She considered the idea.

_A witch’s bond with her familiar wasn’t only one of companionship, nor was it simply a mind-to-mind contact. Their indivisible link allowed for an even greater merging—an exchange of bodies. As a bonded pair, they could switch forms—her slipping from human body to feline, and he to hers. They did it sometimes while she slept, but this was different. Apparently Drayco thought it would be the next best thing to her shifting to a falcon, even though they’d only done the exchange once when she was conscious—with disastrous results. It took a lot of skill and they hadn’t had time to practise. Even if we manage it smoothly, how’s it going to help?_ She panted as she sent him the mental query.

_You can find the portal much quicker than I can, if you take my form. The Entity is your homing device and you can guide us to it. If we do get tripped up by these guards, you’re free to find Kreshkali or Jarrod and bring help._
Meanwhile, I can mind the bard in your form.

Rosette considered. Shifting with Drayco did mean she could at least locate the portal much quicker. Without Rosette—in any form—neither of them were going anywhere. They needed her consciousness to link with the Entity to travel the corridors. Drayco knew the priorities and was being logical. He was also being brave.

There’s no point in all of us being cornered when you’re the one who must survive.

Dray, we’re all going to survive. Don’t worry about that.

Drayco sniffed the air. They’ve worked it out. They’ll be on us in minutes. They’re on horseback, remember?

I remember.

The exchange was a reasonable option in a pinch, and things were getting tight. The guards would catch up with them soon, despite the evasive trail they had left behind. The temple guards had to know these woods much better than she did. As they jagged around a stand of boulders Rosette didn’t recognise, she made a choice.

All right, Drayco. Let’s do it. I can lead the way to the portal, and you and Shane can follow.

Are you going to tell him? Drayco rolled his eyes towards Shane.

No time. Come, before I lose my nerve.

Think easy and it will be easy.

She felt the soft pull of Drayco coaxing her out of her body and into his. Easy it is.

Her limbs let go of her human form and found shape in the essence of the temple cat. It was like putting on a new winter coat—arms slid into forelegs, hands into paws, her upright spine lowering into a smooth arch above the ground as they ran. She felt her life energy flowing down the length of his shoulders and back to his hind legs, her pace no longer the churning pump of a biped but the graceful lope of a wild animal in the woods—tireless, majestic and formidable. For a moment they were together, the boundaries of their bodies blurred and souls intermingling, then he was gone and she alone inhabited the magnificent form.

Oh, my goddess of the underworlds. I’d forgotten…

Rosette revelled, basking in the strength of the feline’s body, her mental anxiety vanishing as she succumbed to the new sensations. She felt the smooth glide of her paws over loam the impact of each stride releasing a wealth of rich aromas. The scent brought a pungency of information that made her whiskers tremble, her tongue water. White-tailed deer had browsed here only minutes ago. A family of bush pigs hunkered nearby, disturbed from a midmorning snooze. She could hear their grunts and squeaks, visualising them lined up in a row, half covered with dirt, their pink snouts poking out of the black soil, worms in their teeth. Ripe blackberries swelled, sweet as jam, and the sun streamed in from holes in the leafy canopy. It formed shafts of gold against the dark wood, a perspective she’d never seen before.

She drew in another breath, scenting. There were feathered nests with spotted eggs deep under grey down, redwood bark peeling from the limbs of great trees, fairy ferns beneath the bracken, a babbling stream full of crawdads and minnows, a lumbering bear and two cubs on the far side. Each image was depicted through their auras and aromas, the new sensations rich with meaning. Rosette could taste them all on her tongue, and it made her head spin with delight and prickling curiosity.

Focus, Maudi! We’re fleeing danger, not sniffing out a picnic site.

She snapped to her senses, concentrating on the threat of the guards. Drayco and Shane had fallen behind. Got it.

The sound of the guards entering the woods was clear as her breath. The great bulk of the warhorses moved surprisingly fast through the trees. They were in their element and knew the way. She heard the order given for some riders to head north and south, effectively cutting them off. Seconds later, she detected a troop of riders on the road. Damn. More are coming.

Glad you can hear them.

She looked back at Drayco running hard in her body. You okay, Dray? You look a little…

A little what?

Strained?

It’d have been better if you’d warned me about the sore foot. What’s wrong with these boots?

Sorry. They’re new, remember? Bought them in Flureon before we left.

You could have mentioned it.

I don’t like to dwell on negatives.

He squared his shoulders. And what’s with the breasts? I feel like a newly calved heifer.

It’s cyclic, you know…premenstrual.

Great. You better get out of here before I change my mind.

Drayco’s words were stern but his intonation full of warmth. She felt good in her heart and her hopes lifted. She sped on, sensing for the portal. She couldn’t detect it. Problem, Drayco.

What’s that?
I still can’t locate the portal. It’s got to be due south.

Unless we’ve passed it.

I’ll race on, doubling back if I can’t find it in the next few minutes.

Be quick, Maudi. Be safe.

She let out a rumbling growl before shooting off into the woods. You too, she echoed back to him, and don’t forget Shane. He’s lost without us.

She heard a faint chuckle.

He might be just as lost with us, Maudi.

Rosette laughed in her mind, unable to replicate the sound in her throat. I think you’ll be fine, Dray...as long as they don’t have dogs. Keep following. The moment she sent the message, she heard the baying. Apparently they not only had dogs, but the beasts were yowling as if their quarry was in sight. Dray?


‘Where’s he off to?’ Shane asked.

‘Ahead.’

‘Do you hear dogs?’

‘Just keep running,’ Drayco commanded, speaking the words as if he had a hot marble in his mouth.

Shane’s face twisted. ‘Are you okay?’ he asked.

The woman beside him did not answer.

Rosette charged ahead in her temple cat’s form, leaping fallen logs and tangles of undergrowth with ease, putting distance behind her with every stride. For a few miles she coursed in a zigzag pattern, searching out the portal. Eventually she could see it in her mind’s eye. It felt as if an invisible force was drawing her closer, propelling her faster than she had ever run. Yet when she thought she would have been upon it, the vision faded, and the portal was nowhere to be found. She sped on, a black streak, scenting and searching.

As she started to climb out of the forest, she knew she’d gone too far. Her tail whipped as she turned her ears behind her. They were like radar, catching the slightest bleep of sound in a wide radius. She listened for her familiar, hearing Drayco’s thoughts more than the voice of her body. What she sensed startled her—there was worry that she hadn’t known from him, and the sound of baying dogs and pounding horses was much too close. The forward thrust of her momentum slowed.

Drayco, can you hear me?

She braced all fours and skidded to a halt. Several miles ahead already, she couldn’t be certain, but she thought she heard the sound of capture—shouting men, barking dogs and drawn swords. Shivers ran down her spine. She hadn’t found the portal, and the swap didn’t seem such a good plan any more. She couldn’t abandon Shane and Drayco—and her own body—to the Treeon guards, not this Treeon. If they weren’t caught yet, they would be soon, and she knew it wasn’t going to be a friendly inquisition. I’m doubling back!

The sound of the baying canines made her hackles go up. It felt like goosebumps, only much stronger. She launched off, heading back the way she’d come. She covered the distance in bounds, crossing the forest like a gazelle. She leapt over the fallen logs and walls of tangled briars. She dodged boulders and redwood groves, making the straightest line possible to Drayco and Shane.

When she found them, they were surrounded by mounted temple guards. The horses were mincing from side to side, steam rising from the animals’ backs and nostrils. The riders had circled around to trap them in a small clearing. She sized up the horses, spotting two dark mares that stood out. Not only exquisite in form, their calm approach to the situation suggested sense and maturity. She wondered who was training the others. They were behaving like green-broke track horses. An’ Lawrence would be appalled.

She crept closer. Shane stood in the middle of the clearing, his shoulders back, right hand on the hilt of his sword. He did not look at all intimidated, which she felt was a good sign, though his conversation with the captain wasn’t getting very far. If his goal was to enrage the man, he was succeeding wonderfully. Drayco? What’s with Shane’s diplomacy skills?

He doesn’t appear to have any, Maudi.

She chuckled, a rumble in her throat.

Maudi, where are you? Did you find the portal?

Not exactly. I’m behind the bay mare.

Which one?

The one with her ears pinned back and tail swishing like a flyswatter.

Drayco turned her body in a graceful movement, taking in the horse and the shrubs behind it.

That’s not the portal, Maudi. Do you need a map?

I had to come back. The swap isn’t working.

It would be working perfectly if you would simply get away and find the portal. I can handle this.
You can?

*Just get through the corridors and bring Kreshkali. Everything is fine here. All under control.*

Rosette lifted her head and scanned the scene again. The riders were advancing towards the captives, swords and crossbows aimed at their throats. The hounds were straining against their leads, the handlers barely able to contain them. The noise was discordant. It hurt her head. A few young pups, out for training perhaps, crouched behind the older dogs, alternately barking and darting towards the captives and running away again, tails between their legs. Their yips pierced her ears and she automatically tried to cover them with hands. She didn’t have any.

*You call this ‘fine’, Drayco?*

*If you don’t get out of here, you’ll be caught too, and then who’s going to bring Kreshkali through to sort it out? Please go.*

*I’m not leaving you. Wait for my signal.*

*Signal for what?*

*Just wait. It won’t be long.*

*Maudi!* Rosette inched forward on her belly, ears pricked, listening to the conversation. Shane was playing dumb, repeating each question the captain fired at him and returning it with one of his own. Of course the ‘playing dumb’ part wasn’t much of an act. Shane was utterly ignorant. He hadn’t a clue what was happening or why he was here or where his world was or how he would get back. He didn’t even know that it was a Dumarkian temple cat that stood mute beside him and not Rosette. She peeked between the fronds, her eyes unblinking.

‘Let me put it this way,’ the captain said, his lips hidden behind a dark beard and curling moustache. ‘What are you doing with a sword woman?’

Shane scratched his head. ‘You mean Rosette?’ He stuck his thumb out towards her as he spoke.

The captain gave a curt nod as he tried to keep his horse still. The animal was restless, shifting its weight from hoof to hoof and pawing the ground with alternate forelegs. The fuss was making it difficult for the captain to stay composed. Most of the mounts were equally unsettled. They snorted and stamped and refused to stay quiet. The behaviour was most unlike any guard team Rosette had ever encountered. At Treeon, the equestrians trained in precision drills under all kinds of distractions, or at least they had in Rosette’s time, in Rosette’s Gaela. Here the riders were sloppy and unsettled, adding to their mounts’ distress. Pathetic.

Rosette belatedly thought that her scent might be upsetting the horses, especially since Drayco had sensed no other temple cats nearby. They would picture a mountain lion, poor things, or worse. She used her tail to flick leaves over her back, hoping to mask the aroma. Too late.

One of the pups from the pack had sniffed his way from the inner circle, nose to the ground, lungs like a bellows, tail wagging in circles behind. The young dog nearly bumped straight into Rosette, face to face, before it sat back on its haunches. It let out a small yip and stood, wagging its tail faster.

*Quiet, little one. No noise.*

He barked again, a happy sound.

*No, no, pup! Quiet time.* Rosette sent him soothing words to blanket his mind. *I’m not here,* she told him. *I’m not a feline. You cannot see me.*

The pup responded, mind to mind, startling Rosette with his fresh and articulate thoughts. *Not here. Not kitty. Not see?* He stuck his nose into her side, inhaling deeply. He drew the black fur into his face, closing his eyes as he did. The contrast of the rich coat of the temple cat was striking against the hunting dog’s white and grey spattered fur. After a few more breaths, the pup shook as if emerging from a swimming hole. The action sent a flurry of dust and dog hair floating about them. He sneezed, rubbing his face with a forepaw before lunging towards her again, taking in more scent. *Not two legs?* the pup asked, as if speaking to himself. *Not four legs? Not here? Not seen?* He sneezed again. *Not right!*

He barked as the thought shot into her mind. Rosette pushed him down with her paw, resting it on his neck as she pinned him to the ground. *You’re a smart little doggy, aren’t you? Now go to sleep before I turn you into a toad.*

She infused him with a slumber spell and it worked rapidly on the little mind. The pup stayed down, his shoulders giving up the struggle, his hind legs stopping their frantic scramble to be free. Finally, his head dropped to his forepaws and his jaw snapped shut. He sighed, closing his eyes like window shades drawn against too bright a day. Rosette tucked her paws under her brisket and turned her attention back to the circle.

‘I told you before, Captain. I was set to watch for this woman at the edge of the Black Swamp.’

‘What Black Swamp? Outside Morzone?’

He shook his head. ‘Near T’locity. But before I could meet her, there was a huge shaker, repeated shakers, actually—they kept happening over and over.’
‘What are you talking about? A shaker?’ the captain shouted. His horse reared a few feet off the ground and came down hard. He ground his teeth as Shane continued.

‘I’m talking about my meeting with Rosette. You wanted to know what I was doing with the sword woman, didn’t you?’

The captain appeared too shocked to reply. Shane took his silence as a signal to continue. ‘We eventually found an underground stream and ended up here, wherever here is.’ He shrugged.

‘I don’t care about how you met,’ the captain shouted. ‘What are you doing with her?’

‘What do you mean? Your questions about women and swords don’t make any sense to me. Perhaps you can rephrase it with greater clarity?’ Shane stared at the captain, who had gone crimson. Leaning towards Rosette, he mumbled under his breath, ‘I could use a little help here…can’t you say something?’ The body of Rosette remained still, silent.

Buy us a little time and talk to the captain, will you, Dray?
You think it will help?
Can’t hurt.
Your call, Maudi. ‘Excuse me, Captain,’ Drayco said. He used Rosette’s voice more articulately than before.

‘Am I to understand that Treeon Temple no longer respects the right of the sacred feminine to partake of the ritual art of sword training or, for that matter, battle?’

The circle went suddenly still, the men’s eyes wide.

Even the dogs dropped down to their bellies at the sound of Rosette’s voice, though they probably didn’t understand the precise meaning of her words. Only the clip and snap of the shifting horse hooves and the wind through the trees overhead broke the silence—that and the snore of a young pup deep in the bracken. In the distance, a goshawk whistled. ‘You have not been asked to speak,’ the captain said as his horse reared again.

‘Yet I am speaking just the same,’ Rosette answered, smiling. ‘Clearly that is the best way for us to solve this mystery, wouldn’t you say, Captain? Direct communication?’

‘Silence her!’ the captain shouted, pointing his sword to Shane.

Shane’s brow furrowed. ‘You’re kidding, right?’ He chuckled as if humouring a child and the captain’s face turned an even darker shade of red.

Rosette, watching from the cover of grass, tried to figure out how her lovely Treeon had fallen into the lopsided patriarchal dominance this situation suggested.

‘I think you would do best to talk with her directly, as she says,’ Shane continued. ‘She knows far more about our circumstances, and her own sword mastery, than I. We’ve only just met, as I was explaining, and I’m hardly qualified to speak for her in any case.’

The captain’s face twisted. His horse was out of control—bunching his hindquarters, ears flat against his neck. The animal’s head shot up as he made another attempt to rear; the whites of his eyes were showing. The guards began pressing in towards Rosette and Shane.

‘Listen to me!’ the captain yelled above the cacophony. ‘Women do not wield weapons of that nature. You are not allowed a sword at your side. Hand it over and come with us. You have no options here. There will be no more talk.’ The captain’s voice was like gravel under wagon wheels.

Are you hearing this, Maudi?

Rosette felt her hackles rise as she took in the measure of the group. All too clearly, Dray. She sized up the situation. There were ten men present. The others must be scouting the periphery of the circle, looking for the temple cat that Nell had undoubtedly reported. She swished more loam over her back. Nell would have communicated full details of the nature of their group. Rosette reminded herself to strangle the little vixen, mother or not, when they next met, but for now she had to act. She inched forward.

I have a better idea. I count to one and you run to the portal. I can handle this until you return with Kreshkali. Get going! You’re meant to be there by now.

But I’m not, so listen carefully. I don’t know how well Shane can handle a sword, but we’ll have to risk it.

It’s about to blow…
I realise that, and we’re going to use it to our advantage.
What are you suggesting, Maudi?
If we can get those two horses, the blacks…
The sensible ones?
Yes. If we get them, and unseat these buffoons, we’ll leave them in the dust. Are you ready?
Why switch? I can handle this fight.
Really? Have you forgotten how much you hate riding?
Drayco hesitated, ignoring the captain’s final request to hand over the sword and shooing him away with a flick of the wrist. It surprised Rosette that they hadn't asked for Shane’s weapon. Their biggest fear seemed to be the presence of an armed woman. How odd.

In this body, Maudi, I can handle a horse.
And I suppose you have learned to wield my sword as well, while I wasn’t looking?
There was no hesitation this time. Actually, no. I haven’t learned that yet.
Then as soon as we switch, unseat the riders. Can you get them all on the ground at once?

One would hope so…

Good. On my count. She gave him no more room for thoughts. One, two, three!

It was unfortunate that she had no way to speak directly to Shane’s mind. She’d tried on a few occasions, but it was like tapping on a tree trunk—alive, sturdy, yet impenetrable. She couldn’t see in, let alone transmit anything. Fortunately, the man caught on quick. The moment Rosette felt her limbs fill out her human form, she drew her sword. ‘Would this be what you’re after, mi capitán?’ she asked, the sun glinting off the steel tip as she held the hilt high over her head with both hands.

She sent a boost of energy up her arms, through the lapis and silver hilt and into the sword blade. Fending off the guards, she turned slowly in a circle, staring down each rider. Their expressions were shocked, faces blanched. The horses were prancing about, barely controllable.

These guards are useless, Dray. Unseat them!

Instantly, Drayco tore around the circle, nipping at the horses’ hocks, sending them rearing and bucking like broncos. Eight of the riders were unseated, while the others were engrossed in trying to restrain their steeds. Shane drew his sword seconds after Rosette, the sing of it ringing out over the trample, snorts and shouts. Good man. The last thing Rosette wanted was for him to stand transfixed in the middle of the chaos, a sure target for the captain, who seemed reluctant now to tackle her. What was their problem with women warriors?

She didn’t bother to work it out. Instead, she lunged towards the captain, dropped to one knee and sliced the air in a short arc towards his horse’s near shoulder. It was a close cut. She severed the taut reins, nicking only a few grey hairs from the animal’s throat as she did. The captain, who had been tugging wildly on his mount, was flung backward by the sudden release. He hit the ground a second time, unable to draw breath. Rosette was not impressed. ‘Whoever taught you lot to ride is in desperate need of a review,’ she yelled out, unseating the two remaining guards with a blast of energy from her sword tip. Their horses bolted after the captain’s.

None of the men responded. They were too busy trying to avoid being trampled by the hysterical steeds or sliced by each other’s waving swords. Rosette had the reins of one black mare in tow and was reaching towards the other as it trotted past. Drayco was backing several men towards a tree, and Shane had disarmed three others. Good swordsman. She calmed her mounts with a waft of soothing energy and sent a blast of confusion to the rest, both man and beast.

‘Mount up,’ she shouted to Shane, handing him the reins of the nearest black mare.

He looked at her, his face enraptured. ‘You’re amazing.’

Rosette sheathed her sword and vaulted onto her horse, the stirrups too short to reach from the ground. ‘You can thank me when we’re through the portal. Let’s go.’

Shane struggled onto his horse, a toddler climbing steps for the first time.

‘Demons! You can’t ride?’ Rosette frowned at his awkward seat, one hand clutching the uneven reins and the other gripping the pommel of the saddle. His boots couldn’t find the stirrups, and his attempts inadvertently poked the mare, sending her in jerky circles as he bounced up and down.

‘I’ve seen others do it, since coming here…’
‘You’re a bard, for demon’s sake. Why can’t you sit a horse?’

‘It’s a long story.’

‘Goddess help us! Hold still.’ She snatched the reins and drew them over the horse’s head. ‘Get your feet in those stirrups, and be still. Sit deep. Stop kicking her sides!’ She waited a second for him to adjust himself then led his mount along like a baggage pony. ‘Relax. Let your legs be easy, Shane. You’re sending her a hundred different messages all at once.’
‘Like this?’
She shook her head. ‘Heels down, toes parallel.’
He grimaced.
‘That’s better. Now lean forward, just slightly, and hang on.’
‘That’s it?’
‘For now.’ She levelled her eyes at him. ‘Whatever you do, don’t fall off, and don’t draw your sword!’ Run, Drayco!
I’m way ahead of you, Maudi. Me and this ridiculous beast you encouraged.
What beast?
Some goofy pup. Says his name is Fynn.
She groaned. White with grey speckles? Thin tail, always wagging? Great mind speech?
I wouldn’t call it ‘great’ mind speech, though I suppose for a dog it’s above average. Mostly he’s enthusiasm and legs.
Ignore him. Run!
They left Treeon’s temple guards behind, stumbling and groping like blind men without canes.
‘It shouldn’t have been this easy,’ Rosette said, looking over her shoulder.
‘You call that easy?’ Shane asked. ‘Where have you been?’
‘If you only knew,’ she answered. She urged his mare on, clucking to both horses. They moved into an easy lope, Shane holding onto the saddle with both hands.
Just be glad it was easy, Maudi, or we’d never get out of here. Come my way, north-east.
I’m thinking we skip this portal and head to Corsanon, Dray. We need distance between us and those guards and we can’t get that by zigzagging through these woods.
My thought too. Follow me, Maudi. I remember a short cut straight to the Corsanon route.
I hope it’s still there.
It is. Run!
Jarrod approached the dais, and the woman at the top of the steps. She was sitting like a lotus flower, hands folded in her lap. Her face, though craggy, was relaxed, her eyes closed. The only discernible movement was behind the lids where her eyes darted, the rapid motion framed by folds of skin, arched by her sparse grey brows. While her body rested in meditative composure, her eyes continued to roll, threatening to escape her face. Was she dreaming? Jarrod rubbed his jaw. Calculating?

Her white hair was cropped close, her body lean and ropy, browned from the sun like dried fruit. She was clothed in colourful material, a flowing curtain wrapped and tied in ways he hadn't seen before. He checked his database and found a similar style in Earth's Hindu culture. As the gyrating beneath her lids subsided, her shoulders squared. She smiled and let out a sigh. The expression lit up her face, turning it into an image of welcome and delight. She fluttered her lashes, eyes opening. They were piercing green gems, like freshwater ponds in the springtime. He smiled back.

‘You’ve come,’ she said, her voice surprisingly deep for her size and gender.
‘We followed the thread of your call.’
‘Indeed you did.’
Selene raised her head when the Caller spoke and stepped forward to introduce Jarrod.
‘Where did you find him?’ the older woman asked, her brow lifting.
‘At the foot of Mt Pelt. He sat waiting like a beggar.’
The Caller wrinkled her nose. ‘Come by the back door, did you, Jarrod?’ She laughed. ‘Brave of you.’
He shrugged, still smiling.
‘Noisome swamps, those,’ she said. ‘I don’t know how they tolerate them.’ She tossed her head towards Selene. ‘Disgusting place, don’t you think, dear?’
‘Agreed.’
Merriment fell from her face. ‘Did you go there alone, Selene?’
‘Shane MacVenton came too. He’s the…’
‘I remember him,’ the Caller said, cutting her off. She glanced behind Selene. ‘Where is he, then? You didn’t have to leave him on the steps, you know.’
‘I didn’t. I left him at the foot of Mt Pelt.’
‘What in the world for? Punishment?’ Waving to Selene to be silent, the Caller closed her eyes again. They popped open seconds later. ‘I see. That makes sense.’
Jarrod raised his eyebrows. The Caller appeared to be using her inner vision to scan the surrounding lands as easily as one might glance about a room. Impressive.
‘Go on, now.’ The Caller motioned Selene away. ‘But not too far. I want you to collect this one after we’ve had a little chat. I’m sure he’ll need your assistance.’
If Selene was surprised at the dismissal, she didn’t show it. She left the room with only a nod, ignoring Jarrod.
The Caller’s voice brought his attention back. ‘You said we followed the thread of your call. Not alone, then?’
‘I am accompanied by two others.’
‘Really? Where are they?’ She studied him as if they might suddenly jump out of his pockets.
‘I don’t know where they are, at this point.’
‘You lost them?’
‘Temporarily.’
‘Why in the world did you let that happen?’
‘It wasn’t intentional, I assure you. We were separated somewhere along the way.’
‘And you left Shane to wait?’
Jarrod parted his lips but didn’t respond. The Caller closed her eyes again, motioning to him to be silent.
Jarrod was uncertain whether she was immersed in the inner landscapes of her mind or searching further afield. That she had gone elsewhere was obvious, the withdrawal of her energy palpable. She disappeared, leaving her body like a place marker in a book. Jarrod suspected that she was scanning far beyond her own thoughts. He waited until she returned. Her eyes opened slowly, green gems reappearing. ‘That can’t be,’ she whispered.
Jarrod gave her a quizzical look.
‘Never mind. Your companions aren’t here. I’ve checked.’
‘With respect, Caller, I do mind. Can you tell me where they are, if not here on Tensar?’
‘I cannot.’ She rubbed her forehead. ‘They are beyond my sight.’
‘But you know something about it.’
‘Yes, I do.’
‘Can you please share it with me?’
She stared until he wanted to look away, a new sensation for him. ‘I’ll make you a deal.’ She smacked her lips.
‘You attend to my concerns first and then we’ll unravel yours.’
So that’s your game, is it? Hide and seek? You best hope you’re not the one who has hidden Rosette and Drayco from me. ‘Fair enough,’ he answered aloud, his voice smooth. ‘I came to help, if I can. I’ll play your game, as long as you play fair.
She didn’t respond to his mind speech; he had kept his shield up. There was more to this woman than she let on, he was certain of that. He crossed his arms. ‘How can I assist you, Caller?’
She glanced towards the entrance, holding out her hand for silence. ‘Not here.’
There were two guards standing sentinel, silhouettes in the afternoon light. Another pair stood at a side doorway, armed with polished wood javelins and metal blades. They were so still they looked to be carved from hardwood; smooth, refined and determined. A breeze wafted through the door, causing the red tassels on the javelins to dance, but nothing else moved, not even the rise and fall of the guards’ breath.
The Caller snapped her fingers, and one of the guards broke free. His heels clicked on the tile floor, tapping out a rhythm that echoed to the ceiling.
‘Escort this traveller to the tearoom, will you, Jayk? See that he’s comfortable.’ She turned to Jarrod. ‘I won’t be long.’
The guard bowed, then gave Jarrod a brief nod. ‘This way.’
Jarrod followed him through a side entrance and across a covered breezeway. It was lined with dwarf palm trees in large clay pots and baskets of ferns hanging from the eaves, their long air roots nearly touching the ground. From this elevation he could see much of T’locity, a colourful city with clean, wide streets. They were dotted with yellow-flowering trees, branches reaching up to the red-tiled rooftops. An open-air market was buzzing with trade. The scent of leather, spices and timber floated towards him and in the distance he could see rugged, snowcapped mountains. It was a pleasant contrast to the black swamp in both landscape and aroma.
‘In here,’ the guard said, gesturing to a doorway.
The room had high windows and only the one visible door. The ceiling, like the main hall, was open-beamed, giving a spacious feel and keeping the air cool and fresh. The room was lavishly decorated with bright rugs, wall hangings and overstuffed pillows set around a low table. It felt comfortable, as if friends shared meals here—a surprise after the austere atmosphere of the receiving hall. He sat with his back to the wall and waited. The sentry waited as well.
The Caller entered from another door seamlessly embedded into the far wall. She sat opposite, motioning him closer.
‘Now we can talk,’ she whispered, though she turned abruptly away. ‘Organise us some tea and bread, will you, Jayk?’ She smiled at the guard, whose face held no expression. ‘Then back to your post. No one is to enter or leave until I return.’
‘Yes, Mistress.’ He bowed twice before closing the wooden door behind him; the sound of his steps faded as he strode away.
‘Finally. Do you ever weary of how long it takes to accomplish the simplest of tasks?’ she asked. Jarrod nodded as she kept talking, ‘Here’s the problem,’ she said, keeping her voice low as she fluffed the pillows around herself. Oddly, she didn’t recline into the nest but leaned forward again. ‘We don’t have a lot of time.’
‘We don’t?’ Jarrod looked at her, waiting for a response. If there wasn’t much time, she certainly seemed to be wasting what little they had.
‘There are listeners everywhere,’ she continued, her voice barely audible.
At least you’re aware of it. Jarrod had sensed a bevy of inquisitive minds ever since he had arrived. They were like mice trying to chew their way into a grain sack. ‘You mean spies here in your…’ He paused, lifting one shoulder. ‘Temple, is it?’
‘Palace,’ she corrected. ‘Spies, assassins, traitors, reporters. Every court has them—people seeking information that they shouldn’t have because others are paying, or forcing, them to do so. It’s all about information. Didn’t you know that?’
Jarrod repressed a chuckle. His whole existence had come about from the desire for information—more, faster, broader. His memories turned dark as he thought of the scientists at ASSIST all those centuries ago. ‘I’m familiar with the concept of information technology.’
‘Is that what you call it? You can understand, then, the need for discretion.’
‘Of course.’ He dropped his head close to her ear. ‘Can you tell me, Caller, what information it is we are discussing?’
‘I can.’ She spread her fingers out on the table. ‘These spies and reporters, they seek any word about our…’
She looked left and right before cupping her hand around the side of her mouth. ‘Dilemma.’
Was she going to talk in riddles all day? ‘Your dilemma?’ Jarrod said, matching her tone. ‘And what can you tell me about that, exactly?’ He sat back against his pillows, waiting.
The Caller clenched her jaw and motioned him closer. ‘Here on Tensar, we are experiencing a strange… problem.’
‘I gathered there was a problem, Caller. Otherwise I wouldn’t have come.’
She took a deep breath and let it spill out, her voice so low he had to amplify his auditory perceptions to catch it. ‘Here on Tensar, there are no more births,’ she whispered.
Jarrod wasn’t sure he heard her correctly. ‘No more births?’
‘Shush. Quiet.’ She looked around the room. ‘We’re denying it, of course, but the fact remains. There are no more births. None at all.’
‘Nothing is being born?’
She clicked her tongue. ‘Of course things are being born. Chickens, dogs, horses, snakes—animals are being born, hatched, whelped. Grass grows, trees bear fruit.’
‘But no children of Tensar?’
‘That’s it. No children.’
‘How long has this been going on?’
‘For over a year.’
Jarrod frowned. ‘Why?’
The Caller threw up her hands, her face going red. ‘If I knew that, I wouldn’t have troubled you!’ She shouted the words, suddenly unconcerned with discretion. He kept his eyes level with hers, but didn’t respond. She’d become preoccupied with smoothing her long scarves and he gave her a moment to compose herself. ‘That’s what you’re here for,’ she said in a natural tone. ‘To tell us why.’
He nodded and blinked his eyes, instantly computing the myriad possibilities. ‘I have some questions,’ he said.
‘Let’s hear them.’
‘Have your people been exposed to any toxins?’
‘That’s been checked. We have a self-sustaining agrarian culture, Jarrod. Everything is recycled and any toxic waste decomposed until it becomes inert.’
‘Have there been unusual meteorological events?’
‘What do you mean?’
‘Weather changes, sunspots, meteor showers?’
She shook her head, her large amber earrings swinging wildly. ‘No more than usual.’
‘Have there been disease outbreaks in food animals?’
She screwed up her face. ‘What do you mean “food animals”?’
‘Animals reared for ingestion.’
‘Ingestion? Of course not. Repulsive!’ The thought threw her against the pillows. ‘Who would eat their friends and workmates?’
‘Customs do vary, Caller. In some worlds…’
‘It’s despicable. Barbaric.’
He took a deep breath and let it out. ‘Have there been any disease outbreaks in grain or fruit crops, then? In anything you do eat.’
‘Not that we’ve identified.’
‘Has there been an epidemic? An illness with high fevers? Infections?’
She banged her fist on the table. ‘Do you think I would miss the obvious? All these questions have been considered long ago.’
‘I need to be thorough, Caller. Please bear with me.’
She nodded. ‘Continue.’
‘What about morale? Are the people stressed? Worried? Is there an asteroid about to impact, the seas rising, population explosion, climate change?’
‘Nothing like that.’
Jarrod tilted his head, raising one eyebrow. ‘Are your people having sex?’
She frowned for a moment, the question not seeming to register. She was about to comment when a tap
sounded at the door. ‘Enter,’ she said. Her face shifted like a spring breeze and she smiled at the girl entering the room.

She was dressed in a patchwork skirt and an embroidered top, her long, hair twisted high on top of her head. She carried a serving tray in both hands. The scent of mint, apple blossom and cinnamon wafted about her, and something else that reminded Jarrod of roast pumpkin pie. His mouth watered as she set the tray down between them.

‘Thank you, Lila,’ the Caller said, dismissing her when she asked if anything else was required. The girl didn’t move but eyed Jarrod with a lush smile. ‘Go, Lila. That’s all.’ The Caller snapped her fingers and the girl backed out of the room, her eyes still resting on Jarrod. ‘What were you saying?’ She glanced at the door as she served him. She poured his tea and offered bread, warm to the touch. There were dips in little porcelain pots—orange marmalade, red chutney and a deep purple jam.

‘I was asking if your people were interested in sex.’

After taking a few sips of tea, the Caller raised her eyebrows. ‘What do you think?’ She nodded towards the place where Lila had stood.

‘It would appear so,’ he said. ‘It’s just one possibility.’ He thought for a moment. ‘Are there any belief systems in place that forbid it?’

The Caller tapped her chin with a gnarly finger. ‘Sex has never been taboo on Tensar, regardless of shifting religions, cults and factions, though I’ve heard of it in other cultures.’ She wrinkled her nose. ‘What kind of god would place a hex on intimacy?’

You’d be surprised.

‘Only one against nature,’ he said aloud.

‘Well, that’s not happening here.’

‘You’re certain?’

‘Completely.’

Jarrod shook his head as she offered him more bread. He shut his eyes and calculated the probable causes of this situation from a database of infinite possibilities, cross-referenced with an immeasurable number of realities. In less than a femtosecond—a fraction equal to the difference between one second and thirty-two million years—he opened his eyes again.

‘My first thought is that souls aren’t coming through,’ he said, a little dizzy from the quantum journey. ‘That’s my best guess at this point.’

‘Explain.’

‘The most likely cause of cessation of births in this world is lack of available souls for incarnation. There is a safety measure in place, you know—otherwise there’d be billions of rudderless ships, as it were.’

‘I don’t follow.’

Do I give the long or the short version? He sighed. ‘Think of it this way, Caller. Everything is energy and all energy vibrates at a particular frequency. Energy also cannot be made or unmade. It simply is.’

‘What’s this got to do with it?’

‘Do you think the sex act creates a new person? It doesn’t. It’s merely a magnet that constellates being, brings together the molecules that form a new body, a habitat—something for a soul to dwell in.’

‘I still don’t follow.’

Long version, then... ‘We know that energy is always moving into manifest formation, through it and out again.’

‘Manifest form in this case, being a body?’

‘You can think of it that way, yes. There’s a link, like a beacon, that the soul uses to find its new placement. When that happens, the body materialises from the sex act, which is not only DNA recombination but a “vibrational” alignment. When the DNA, energy vibration and soul match, a pregnancy occurs. A child is born, and the soul jumps in. Actually, the soul jumps in before birth usually, but that’s the basic order of things. Does that make sense?’

‘It’s not quite what the mystery schools teach, but also not so different. I follow. You’re saying that there are no souls hovering about to trigger any new bodies, hence no reproduction?’

‘That’s about it, though I am not certain yet. It’s a calculated guess. There are other possibilities too.’

‘There’re plenty of animals reproducing.’

‘That would suggest plenty of animal intention souls.’

She nodded, cupping her tea with both hands.

Jarrod closed his eyes for less than a blink. ‘Tell me, Caller,’ he asked. ‘Are there deaths?’

She frowned. ‘No more than usual.’

‘But no less?’ Jarrod watched her expression as she struggled with the concept. He was perplexed by it himself.
If energy always moved into form, through form and out of form, why was it only going one way here? Why only out of form and not into it?

‘No less death,’ she answered. ‘Can you tell me why this is happening?’

‘I’ll need to investigate further.’

‘I suggest you get started immediately.’

She drained her teacup and stood, calling in the guard. She patted Jarrod’s shoulder and mouthed the words thank you before her face turned sour as if she’d tasted bitter fruit. ‘I’d hoped for more from you—solutions, cures, explanations. You’ve only given me riddles to ponder.’

Jarrod hid his surprise. She certainly was paranoid. ‘I’ll know more soon,’ he replied. He leaned towards her, extending his hand. ‘May I have your leave to explore the city and talk with your people? I may need to travel as well.’

She waved the question away. ‘Do what you must, if you think it will help. I’ll expect you back soon with a substantial result.’

He didn’t move.

‘You may go,’ she said.

‘There is still the matter of my friends.’

She gave him a quizzical look. ‘Your friends?’

‘My travelling companions. They didn’t arrive with me. You said you might know something?’

The Caller motioned the guard out, though the door remained open and he stood well within earshot. ‘Did I say that?’ She chuckled, running a hand over her close-cropped hair.

Jarrod waited for her mirth to subside.

‘They never arrived,’ she said, humour still dancing in her eyes. ‘You must have lost them before you got here.’

‘Rosette?’ Shane whispered.

She turned to him, the breeze lifting long strands of hair. Her lips curved into a smile as she gazed back over the valley. ‘What’s that, Shane?’

‘Can I thank you now?’

She laughed. ‘You may. We’re above Corsanon, safe and sound.’ She’d dismounted, holding the reins lightly as her horse’s head drooped, eyes half shut. The mare cocked a hind foot and fluttered her nostrils. Both horses had laboured hard, increasing the gap between them and their pursuers by many leagues before the first nightfall. They were days ahead now, if the temple guards had even continued the chase.

The young pup who called himself Fynn was asleep, draped over the saddlebags, tied there like a sausage link. He hadn’t protested when Rosette took him on board. He had refused to be left behind, and it had broken her heart to watch him struggle to keep up. When he’d fallen back she’d sent Drayco to retrieve him. He’d hoisted the pup by the nape of his neck and Rosette had made room for him across the saddlebags. She felt a soft spot growing for the little guy, though she didn’t know what in the many-worlds she would do with him.

‘Still no pursuit?’ Shane asked, searching the horizon.

She closed her eyes for a moment. ‘I can’t sense them at all.’

‘Not much of a guard team, really.’

Rosette frowned as she undid the ties securing Fynn. ‘I agree, and that bothers me.’

‘Maybe so, but it was lucky for us.’

She lifted the pup and nested him in the grass that carpeted the mountain ledge. He let out a huge sigh but didn’t wake up.

‘Lucky, though they didn’t have a chance in any case. These horses left them in the dust.’ She ran up the stirrup and unbuckled the girth before hauling the saddle off. ‘I would have loved to have met their High Priest, just to learn what the big “women-with-swords” taboo was all about.’

Shane leaned against his horse, letting it rub its sweat-crusted forehead on his shoulder. He’d improved his horsemanship skills considerably in the last few days, and he was proud of it, if somewhat saddle sore. ‘Probably it’s what all taboos are about,’ he said.

Rosette looked at him.

‘Generating fear to stay in control.’ He answered the unspoken question.

‘I don’t know how it could happen at Treeon, but your theory sounds right.’ She began vigorously rubbing down the mare with a thick cloth.

‘Do you know what would sound better?’

‘Show me.’ She knew what was coming next and it made her smile. He reached into his pack and pulled out a
low whistle. The tune he played was rich and sorrowful; it was like the sound of a lone raven searching for its mate—sad, yearning yet hopeful. When he finished, Rosette wiped tears from her cheeks. ‘That’s beautiful.’

‘Ta.’
‘Did you write it?’
‘Aye.’
She looked at his face and noticed a hollowness there she hadn’t spotted before.
‘Selene?’
He looked away. She took Shane’s hand and gave it a squeeze. It felt cold to the touch.
‘When’s her birthday?’
‘What?’
‘I’m a star-witch, remember.’
He nodded. ‘We call it Caprimarius, half-serpent, half-goat. You know it?’
Rosette nodded. ‘The Sea-goat? Of course.’
‘So tell me, does that mean anything to you?’
‘It says something about her ambition and maybe a leaning towards self-sufficiency.’
‘That’s playing it soft.’ He broke off a grass stem and chewed one end. His horse took it out of his mouth and finished the job. Rosette pushed the animal over a few paces to unsaddle it, rubbing down one side while Shane did the other.
‘Does that mean she’ll never want a partner?’ Shane asked, straightening his back.
‘Everyone wants a partner, Shane. Just different kinds and for different reasons.’
‘And her reasons?’
‘If I had to guess?’
‘Please do.’
‘To build an empire.’
He snapped off another tassel of oat grass. ‘That explains it.’
‘How so?’
‘I’ve no interest in empires—building up, or taking down.’
‘There are other ways to connect.’
He wrinkled his nose. ‘Would she think sex was one of them?’
‘Of course.’ Rosette laughed. ‘The Sea-goat is as sensual as she is ambitious.’
‘Not seeing much of that side.’
‘Don’t worry, Shane. We’ll get you home and you’ll sort it out.’
‘Is that a prediction?’
‘It’s an intention—one you might want to take up yourself.’
He nodded.
‘Meanwhile, she’s safe. She’s with Jarrod, after all.’ Rosette grinned widely, picking up the horse’s hooves and checking for stones.
Shane raised his eyes to the surrounding mountain peaks, staring at them for some time before putting his whistle back in his pack. ‘That’s not much comfort, actually.’
‘Are you kidding? He can protect her, if that’s what you’re worried about, though from what you say she sounds like she can protect herself. Good woman. But Jarrod’s different.’
‘In what way?’
She shrugged. ‘It’s complex.’
‘I think he’s the one that’ll need protecting. I saw the way she looked at him.’
‘Really? How?’
Shane gave her a look that made sweat prickle the small of her back.
‘Oh, I get it.’
‘She likes different,’ Shane said. ‘She likes complex as well.’ He spat out the blade of grass. ‘She likes it a lot.’
Rosette wrinkled her brow. ‘I hadn’t thought of that.’
‘I have…’
She patted him on the shoulder, not knowing how else to respond. Shane was trapped in a creation that was not to his liking, and nothing she could say or do would change it. His emotional dilemma with Selene was his business anyway, not hers. She had dilemmas of her own.

Grayson?
Are you listening in, Drayco?
Only when it’s interesting.
She sighed. *He’s been gone a long time, that’s all. Or rather, I’ve been gone from him for a long time.*

*You miss him?*

*Feels like it.*

*Maybe he’s not as far away as you think.*

*What do you mean?*

*You don’t know?*

She put her hands on her hips and stared down at her temple cat’s amber-orange eyes. *You can enlighten me?*

*No, Maudi. This is one you best work out on your own.*

She frowned and roughed his neck. *Then I will!*

She led the horses to the edge of the path that wound its way like a snake to the basin below. There, grasslands rolled in broad low hills, dotted with dusty grey cows and jet-black calves. The occasional moo bellowed up to the top of the ravine, answered by the high-pitched bawl of a young one. The wind rustled the white-barked trees. She’d never seen the valley so beautiful.

She released the horses, slipping their bridles off over their ears and stepping aside. They stood for a moment, looking back at her, until she slapped their shining black rumps and shooed them along. *‘Have a break, my gorgeous ones. You’ve earned it.’*

Swishing their long tails and nickering to each other, they shook their heads and ambled down the path, breaking into a trot until they reached the edge of the grazing land. There they stopped as one and dropped their heads to the grass. Drayco yawned massively as he watched them. Fynn slept on.

*‘Will they be all right?’* Shane asked as he leaned against the rock face.

Rosette laughed at the horses cropping the tall grass. *‘I should think so. And so will be the Corsanon herdsman when he finds two Treeon Temple steeds prancing around in his fields. There would be a reward for their return, I imagine. At least, on my Gaela there would.’*

*I smell rabbit.* Drayco stood and stretched before he lunged over a shrub and darted away.

*Don’t be long. We aren’t staying.* She reached out to Shane and pulled him forward.

*‘Come on. Let’s swim.’*

*‘And then home?’* he asked, following her down the path to the water.

*‘Which one?’* she said, stripping off her clothes when she reached the water’s edge.

*‘Mine,’* he said, doing the same.

She didn’t answer right away. She’d have loved to go home to her Gaela. But she hadn’t seen Kreshkali in… she paused. How long would it have been? The time loops they’d been experiencing made it impossible to know. It felt like ages. She wanted to see her, and she wanted to find Grayson. They’d separated too quickly. There’d been no time to talk, no time to clarify their connection. But she also needed to find Jarrod, and get Shane back to Tensar. That was a priority.

Torn between her intentions, she trod water, swishing it around her body as her arms glided in circular motions just under the surface, flutter kicking to keep her head up. Finally, she flipped over on her back and floated, letting the gentle current take her downstream.

*‘Not back to Tensar yet, Shane,’* she said as he swam beside her. *‘We don’t want to walk into that time loop again. I was thinking more of my other home world. We can get some perspective there, and consult with Kreshkali. She’ll help get this mix-up straightened out.’*

Shane rolled over like an otter. *‘Earth?’*

*‘That’s the goal.’*

*‘What’s it like?’*

She swam back to the embankment, Shane still at her side. *‘I think I’ll have to show you. It’s too hard to describe.’*

Drayco?

*Here, Maudi. I have a rabbit! Are you hungry too?*

*Not so much, lovely, but can you save some for Fynn?*

*If I must.*

*Please?* Her feet sank into the mud as she stood, walking the rest of the way out of the water. *You know what he’s like when he’s hungry…*

*Say no more. I’ll nab a whole one just for him.*

She swiped the water from her body and lay down in the grass. Within minutes the sun had dried and warmed her skin enough for her to get dressed. She and Shane climbed back up to the portal in silence.

*Can you meet us at the top, Drayco? It’s time to go.*

He answered by appearing around the other side of the ledge, his pace leisurely, a limp jack rabbit dangling
from his mouth.

‘Nice one,’ she said and stroked the top of his head. ‘Fynn will be pleased.’

And famished.

‘If he ever wakes up.’

Drayco didn’t respond, but his eyebrows twitched.

Rosette scooped up the pup and led the way to the portal. It was hidden in the crevice of the mountainside, but she knew where to find it. This may be a different Gaela, but the land was the same above Corsanon—at least it seemed to be. As she entered the portal that led to the corridors between the many-worlds, she felt the tingling of the plasma energy that always enraptured her. Bliss. Are you with me, Dray?

Naturally.

She pulled Shane in a little further and glided her hand over the plasma Entity, her mind focused on her mother, in either of the woman’s forms. She thought first of Earth, where Kreshkali would be, picturing her at the entrance to the resistance stronghold in Half Moon Bay. Next she imagined her mother Nell, standing in her gardens near the Dumarkian Woods, just in case she was there. It wasn’t likely, but she wanted to cover all bases. It was the right choice, either way. She needed guidance and reflection after her encounter with young Nell and the Treeon guards.

Jarrod would have met the Caller on Tensar by now. She felt a wave of concern at the thought, but convinced herself he could handle things there. She’d find him after she sought counsel with her mother—be she Nell on Gaela or Kreshkali on Earth. She chuckled. Her mother was one of the few witches who had the skill to be in two worlds at once, more even, judging by her recent meeting with the young Nell here on this world—this Gaela. Rosette bristled. She still wanted to have words with that girl. What was she thinking, turning them over to the temple guards?

Perhaps it was not the most fortunate thought to be holding as she crossed through the portal and into the corridors. Her intention was to reach her mother, and that was what she did, but her overriding emotion was focused on the Nell of this reality, and she got that too, more or less.
When the portal opened, Rosette put Fynn down, her hands going slack. It wasn’t the view she’d anticipated. It was neither Earth nor the Gaela she’d thought of, but the landscape took her breath away. ‘So it’s Nell, is it?’ she said. ‘I wonder what she’s doing back here.’

Drayco leapt through the portal to land beside her. Dumarka, Maudi. We’re home to Dumarka!

His voice roared in her mind. ‘Dumarka,’ she whispered, while taking a keen look at the contours of the land as it sloped away from the ledge. ‘It is Dumarka, of course. Look at the trees. Nothing like them anywhere else, but this isn’t where the portal normally is, not the one we’ve ever used, and everything is so much greener.’

_Dumarka’s always been green, Maudi._

‘Not quite these shades, even in spring. Where are the ruins?’

_I don’t know, but it’s unmistakably Dumarka._ Drayco pressed his head into her leg. _Aren’t you glad, Maudi?_

‘I am, but it’s so strange. It feels the same, but it looks…different.’

_Breathe, Maudi. This is good. This is my place, where I come from._

‘It’s my place too, but…’ She drew in a breath. Loam filled her senses, mingling with the sweetness of pine needles, wild sage and blackberry blossoms. It had to be the height of summer. The tall redwoods were tinged crimson in the sunrise, creating a shining canopy above them, and the warmth of the sunbeams made the air all the more fragrant. The shades of green ranged from the colour of sweet peas to freshly mowed grass, more vivid than she had ever remembered. A layer of white mist, remnants of a night fog, hovered above the ground like a mystical sea. The allure and slight unfamiliarity reminded her of the first time she walked into these woods with Nell, gathering herbs and mushrooms, before she and Drayco had even met. ‘This is very near where I found you!’

_As I said, Maudi, our Dumarka._

‘I still don’t see the temple ruins.’ Her eyes strained into the distance. ‘Where’s that massive slab of marble, the vine-covered columns and the crumbled steps that lead nowhere?’

Drayco didn’t reply. He’d turned around to face the other way, his tail brushing her thigh. Birds were flitting in the high branches, calling like a mad chorus—sparrows with their sweet chirps, ravens, guttural and sharp, and lilting magpies, gloriously melodic. Louder than them all, noisy miners were scolding in their high-pitched ’weet, weet, weet’, clearly annoyed by the intruders, especially Drayco. A red-tailed hawk whistled long and mournful, her single descending note lingering above the treetops. Rosette tipped her head back. The raptor’s shadow passed over them, and it wheeled once before disappearing towards the North Seas.

_Maudi!_

‘Beautiful,’ she whispered, sighing at the space between the trees where the hawk had been.

_Stop gawking at the sky and turn around. You won’t believe this!_ Drayco’s mind speech jarred her reverie.

Rosette turned, her mouth opening in slow motion—the world waiting for her awareness to catch up. Hairs prickled on the back of her neck. As the scene before her registered, she rocked back on her heels, snapping her mouth shut. She reached for Shane and turned him around also. Automatically her hand found the hilt of her sword. She sensed Shane doing the same. ‘What is that?’ she asked, her voice barely audible.

‘Looks like a temple to me,’ Shane whispered back. ‘Quite a decent one, I’d say. This Earth of yours is a spectacular place. I can see why words wouldn’t describe it.’

Rosette shook her head. ‘This isn’t Earth. Nothing close.’ She let go of her hilt, her hands falling to her sides. What was the Entity up to, sending her here, this time?

‘Where, then?’ Shane asked.

‘It’s Gaela, the woods of Dumarka, but the question isn’t “where” any more. It’s “when”.’

‘Again?’

‘Seems so.’

‘I thought you knew what you were doing.’

‘Me too.’

_Maudi! Temple cats! Dozens of them! They’re coming._

‘I see them, Dray.’

_This is thrilling!_

‘Yes, it is.’ She stroked the top of Drayco’s head, feeling him quivering beneath her hand. They had to be quite a long time ago for this to be happening.
Here they come, Maudi.

Below them, expansive temple grounds rose out of the mist. It nestled among the trees like part of the forest itself, with its tall pillars, open walkways and redwoods growing on all sides and up through the middle of the inner courtyard. The place felt alive, an island surrounded by mist and waterways. There was a series of arched wooden bridges crossing the meandering streams. The steps leading to the entrance were massive, wide enough for twenty horses abreast, and down them paced the most impressive sight Rosette had ever seen. Temple cats by the dozen were descending the stairway, their heads high, eyes bright.

Drayco dropped to the ground like a sphinx, stretching out his nose, testing the air. Rosette’s lips parted as she watched the clowder of felines. Most were black with red highlights, like Drayco, but some had rust-coloured spots on their flanks, and others had deep red tabby stripes around their eyes and forelegs. A few had white markings on their chests with dusky-grey striped limbs. All were at least as large as her familiar and more than a few were bristling. Drayco didn’t react to the threats, but she felt Fynn sandwiched between her feet, whimpering.

My ancestors! Maudi!

‘Wonderful, Dray. Are they friendly?’ She crouched down and stroked his back, unable to take her eyes off the other felines. She wondered what it would be like to face these creatures without her bonded mate. That was not something she wanted to find out. Drayco had identified them as forebears and it made sense, though just how far back in time they’d gone, she couldn’t guess. The temple had been destroyed before the Corsanon wars had got under way. She tried to remember when that would have been. Gaelan history was not her best subject.

‘They’re my family.’
‘I’m glad you’re so excited, Dray.’
You’re not?
‘I was hoping to get to Earth and find Kreshkali, or Nell.’
That’s not a problem.
‘What do you mean?’
You’ll see.
‘This isn’t a good time to be cryptic.’
‘What’s wrong?’ Shane asked, missing the mental communication from Drayco. He tore his eyes away from the approaching temple cats to look down at her.

‘I don’t know what’s going on. We aren’t where we wanted to be—again—and Drayco isn’t making much sense.’

Shane put his hand on her shoulder as the lead temple cat sat in front of them and stared at her with jewel-green eyes. ‘Maybe where we think we want to be and where we actually need to be are not the same thing,’ he said.

Rosette stood up, glancing sideways. ‘Are you sure you dropped out of the mystery teachings?’
He laughed. ‘Bards can have insights too, you know.’

She smiled. ‘I know.’ She said the last words so softly she didn’t think he heard her. Turning her attention to the temple cats, she squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. ‘You’re all so magnificent. Let me introduce myself.’

They know who you are, Maudi. I told them.
‘Thank you.’
But you better tell her.
‘Who?’
Nell.
Rosette’s eyes widened. ‘Nell? She’s here?’
‘Of course, my dear.’ A voice floated from the top of the steps, light as a breeze.

Rosette stared at the woman. She wore a long green dress that dropped down from her shoulders and plunged deeply between her breasts. Her arms were tattooed with temple cats, ravens and other symbols, black images with just a hint of shade and colour. Her hair was red with highlights of gold.

‘Nell? Is that you?’

‘Who else would I be?’ The woman opened her arms, her lips curling into a smile. ‘Welcome to Temple Dumarka,’ she said. ‘Now tell me who you are and how you come to know my name.’
Everett pulled the tome from the highest shelf, and dusted the jacket. It was quiet in the rare books library, the long reading table empty, only one lamp turned on. He stretched his neck from side to side. He’d been searching half the night, looking for answers in the artefacts of the past—books. So far, he’d found none. The old medical texts offered nothing he didn’t already have in his database. They listed the diseases now eradicated, particularly the cardiovascular disorders that plagued earlier times, but he found no clues to Jane Doe’s condition. The editions from the twenty-first century post-enlightenment period were too dated to be of any use. Dead ends. But the text in his hand might offer something the medical books could not.

Art in the Ancient World—the Collected Works.

He re-read his handwritten notes before opening the book. Jane Doe’s skeletal scan placed her at no more than thirty years old. She couldn’t have a physiology susceptible to heart conditions, unless she wasn’t human, or was much older than her bones. Or from somewhere else. Where else could there be? He was getting nowhere down that path. He folded his notes and put them in his pocket.

What she did have was body art, and that might tell him something about where she was from and who she was. The thought made him shiver. It may not be a question of pathology as much as species, or even time. He wasn’t sure which possibility frightened him the most.

He checked the table of contents. Running his finger down the chapter headings, he stopped at number eighteen, The Art of Tattooing. He flipped forward and found drawings of island cultures, people with abstract tattoos, dark curved lines covering half the face and decorating buttocks and limbs. He adjusted his glasses, chastising himself for missing his laser treatment. The print was small. He squinted, pulled the text closer and read.

The art of tattooing was traditionally practised by many cultures for hundreds of generations. Performed on both men and women and sometimes animals, but rarely children, tattooing could indicate honour, rank, collective worth and, in some cases, punishment or identification—i.e. pirates or slaves. In other cases it was reserved for those of revered standing, high achievement within the family, clan or culture, or for those involved in spiritual initiations (see Art and Shamanism pp. 689-702). Some tattoos were thought to contain magic spells and were worn only by adepts or spiritual guides. In other societies, the tattoos were believed to bring the individual closer to the divinity or their source—to higher consciousness.

He coughed. Nonsense.

What she wore certainly didn’t look like a punishment. He guessed it was more the latter—an image for an adept or spiritual guide. It was too beautiful, and too potent, to be derogatory or simply identifying. He continued reading but could find nothing in the text about ASSIST and their campaign against all forms of such practices in the twenty-second and twenty-third centuries, nor the consequences of contravening the bans.

My, how they had changed the history. He’d read a speculative theory about small resistance groups that had managed to code dermal art into the DNA, but there’d never been any proof. Those resistance groups were long gone and the ‘artists’ with them.

He scooted his chair closer to the table. So much had been omitted from these records that it made him doubt the validity of what was left in. Still he read on, scrutinising the images and colour plates. They were fascinating, and he wondered how such creativity could be feared, abolished. Whatever the reason, it had lasting effects. No such creative spirit had survived to his day—nothing close.

He turned through page after page, but none of the plates matched what he’d found embedded in the flesh over his patient’s heart. No winged lions with eagle claws, looking as if carved out of jewelled stone. He kept on, losing himself in the designs, until the last page of the chapter came into focus.

He stopped, drawing in his breath. His forehead wrinkled as he stared at the image, his hands shaking. He shoved them into his lab coat pockets, as if hiding them would help, and leaned closer to the book. There it was, right in front of him—a winged lion with a woman, a deity of some sort, riding upon its back. The image was scanned from a photo of the actual monument dated third century BCE. ‘Five thousand years ago…’ he whispered. There was an inscription, a translation, if it could be considered accurate:

If you open not the gate that I may pass,
I shall break the lock,
The door’s steps will shatter, and the pillars.
And the dead will outnumber the living.

He stared at the words for a long time before scanning the page and sending the image to his personal database. Closing the book, he replaced it on the top shelf among the other antique volumes, his palms clammy. He turned off the desk lamp and polished his glasses, careful not to glance at the security camera pointing his way, careful to hide his fear.

‘The dead will outnumber the living, will they, my dear Jane Doe?’ he whispered, his voice melodic. ‘How could you know such a thing?’ He slipped his glasses back on. ‘I think it’s time I woke you up.’

He left the library and headed towards the intensive care ward.
**EARTH & GAELA—TIME: FORWARD**

**CHAPTER 16**

‘Did you see that?’

An’ Lawrence tilted his head. ‘See what?’ he asked.

‘How could you miss it?’ Kreshkali said. ‘Someone’s coming. Look at Scylla. She knows.’

He searched the temple courtyard for his familiar. The place was like a beehive: people leading horses to and from the stables, others pushing wheelbarrows full of manure, bumping across the plaza towards the vegetable gardens and orchard. Wagons were being unloaded, aqueducts cleaned and repaired, fountains drained and scrubbed—even a few Lupins were hard at it. Some, he noticed, were training with his sword students; something he had thought he would never concede to, but so far it was working out.

In a few months, they had turned the place into a functioning temple, bright, productive and engaging, an oasis in the red desert sea. But most important, the energy was optimistic, as if the spell that had preserved the estate was working its magic on the weary occupants, perhaps even himself. He shielded his eyes, following the line of the new road as it led out of the temple grounds over the rise and towards the wrought-iron gates, a half hour’s easy ride to the northeast. Scylla sat in the middle of the courtyard, ignoring the activity around her and staring towards those distant gates. ‘Scylla, what do you see, my beauty?’

*I can’t see anything, Rowan. The hill is in the way.*

He chuckled. ‘What do you sense?’

*Someone’s coming.*

‘You mean someone new?’ he asked.

‘They’re at the gates,’ Kreshkali answered. The Three Sisters landed above her and began preening themselves and squawking. ‘I think a welcoming party is in order,’ she said.

‘I’ll get the horses.’

_Come on, Scylla. Let’s check this out._

The feline responded by leaving her vigil and heading for the shade of a weeping willow. She bow-stretched and sharpened her claws on the trunk.

*It’s just a walk, lovely, not a hunt.*

_The hunt, my dear Rowan, is everywhere, waiting to be revealed._

He laughed, shaking his head when Kreshkali queried him. ‘Whoever’s coming, she’s not worried.’

‘Nor are they.’ She tilted her head towards the ravens.

‘Then I’d say it’s a friend, not a foe.’

‘All the more reason to greet them!’

They rode to the gates at a leisurely jog, leaving the bustle of Temple Los Loma behind them.

‘Too much for you back there?’ he asked.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Now that you’re in the saddle, Kreshkali, you don’t appear as eager to get to the gates. I hope this wasn’t an excuse to get away. I’ve students to train and horses to work. If it’s claustrophobia you have, I can suggest…’

‘Certainly not.’ She scratched her nose.

‘Really?’

‘All right, sometimes maybe. I can feel a bit hemmed in, but not today. There is someone coming, An’ Lawrence. I’m not making it up.’

‘If you were making it up, Kali, it would happen anyway.’ He mumbled the words to himself and then chuckled.

‘What’s that?’

‘I said, it’s good to be out in this lovely day.’

She squinted at the sun. It was baking down on them, the heat saturating their light cotton clothing and making her face flush and skin prickle. The breeze was hot, dry and dusty. ‘Right.’ Easing her horse to a walk, she pinned him with her eyes.

‘And how are you coping?’

‘I’m fine,’ he said quickly.

‘The Lupins aren’t making you itch?’

‘It seems to be working out.’ His voice sounded rehearsed in his own mind. It was.
‘Hating it that much?’
‘Not hating per se.’ An’ Lawrence was wary of the ‘understanding’ between the Lupins and the resistance group, though he had given his word to participate openly, and that is what he would do. He rubbed the back of his neck. ‘The truth is, I don’t trust them, and I don’t see why we need them here.’
‘It’s not about need, or what we see. It’s about what is authentic. This is their home. They were born here.’
‘You mean created.’
‘Same thing.’
‘I think I liked it better when they were all underground.’
‘Give it time, Rowan. Give yourself time.’
They rode on in silence until the top of the gate was visible, its wrought-iron spikes black against the red earth, bright apple tree leaves waving against them.
‘Is it Rosette and you’re not telling me? I hate surprises,’ An’ Lawrence said.
‘I know you do. It’s not her. She doesn’t even know where this place is. She left before we found it, remember?’ Kreshkali took a swig of water from the canteen and handed it to Rowan. ‘There’s been no contact, unless you’ve heard something.’ She frowned. ‘Have you heard something?’
He shook his head. ‘I’d tell you if I had.’
‘It’s been quite some time with no word from Treeon.’
‘Rosette’s with Jarrod.’
‘I hope so.’
An’ Lawrence paused for a moment as he watched Scylla lope ahead. ‘Ally or enemy?’ he asked her. ‘Can you tell?’

Ally! A good ally. I like him!

‘Scylla says it’s a friend.’
‘Obviously not Lupin.’
‘Could only be Grayson.’
‘Is that what Scylla says?’
‘Just my best guess. Come on. Let’s greet them, whoever they are.’ He urged his horse into a lope, waving for Kreshkali to catch up.

Grayson stood at the gates, examining the wrought-iron work, as the riders approached. They were coming down the lane at an easy lope, a temple cat in the lead. He soothed his mount, running his hand along her brilliantly coloured neck. She was golden in the sun, her ivory mane rippling. She was alternately spooking at the feline heading straight for them and nickering to the other horses, a welcoming sound. Her nostrils flared as she sidestepped; her saddlebags, full to the brim, slapped her flanks and agitated her further. Grayson recognised Scylla first, then Kreshkali and An’ Lawrence. He beamed them a smile, but his eyes went wide, looking past the two riders. Where were Rosette and Drayco? There was no sign of them.

‘She’s not here,’ Kreshkali said, pulling her horse to a halt and leaping to the ground. He dismounted as she closed the distance between them. He held her tight.

‘She’s still travelling with Jarrod?’ He said the words easily, but his shoulders were taut.
‘Seems that way.’ An’ Lawrence stepped up, clapping his arm around the man’s shoulders as they gripped each other’s wrists.

‘No word at all?’ Grayson asked.
‘Not a sound.’ Kreshkali whistled, crossing her arms in front of her as she examined his mount. ‘Where did you get her and can we keep her in the broodmare paddock?’

Grayson chuckled. ‘I didn’t steal her, if that’s what you’re thinking, and yes, I thought you might like a foal from this one.’ He paused for a moment, staring at the apple trees on either side of the gate. ‘The mare comes from the same place as these,’ he said, picking a bright green fruit and polishing it on his shirt. The golden horse stepped forward and nickered, her muzzle working its way towards the treat. ‘These apples are from Treeon, right?’ He bit off a chunk and offered it to his horse.

Kreshkali nodded. ‘Is that where Rosette was going to meet you?’

‘She said she’d be a few days at the most. It’s been six months. I stayed at the temple, making inks and gathering supplies—did a fair bit of work for the initiates too—and then Makee gave me this one.’ He pressed his shoulder into the mare. ‘Her idea of payment, and not a bad one. She helped me pack and sent me on my way.’

An’ Lawrence ran his hand down the mare’s jowl, letting it rest lightly on the bit. He eased the horse’s mouth open and checked her teeth. ‘Where did Makee find her?’
‘I don’t know. Corsanon?’
‘This is an all-but-vanished breed.’ Kreshkali narrowed her eyes. ‘Makee didn’t follow you into the corridors, did she?’
Grayson shook his head. ‘She knows she can’t, not without risking her life, or the portals’ integrity. I wouldn’t have been able to go through on my own without the altered DNA. Plus, I have Rosette’s blessing.’
‘She wove you a travelling spell, did she?’
Grayson laughed. ‘She did.’
Kreshkali patted his shoulder. ‘And it worked well, it got you here.’
Grayson pushed his mare back from the apple tree. ‘How’d these grow so fast?’ he asked.
‘That’s one of the questions we’re considering right now,’ Kreshkali answered. ‘What’s even more curious is how they got here in the first place.’
‘You didn’t plant them?’
She shook her head.
‘It’s a mystery,’ An’ Lawrence said. He mounted up and motioned Grayson to follow. He watched the palomino’s gait as Grayson led her forward. ‘She’s a little light for open battle, but I bet she can cover the distance smartly.’
‘Fastest horse west of Morzone,’ Grayson said, stopping to tighten the girth.
‘We’ll have to test that claim,’ An’ Lawrence said. He noticed the packs. ‘I hope you brought plenty of ink.’
‘There’s work for me here?’
Kreshkali snorted. ‘They’ll be queuing.’
‘They were in Treeon, too.’ He mounted up, An’ Lawrence closing the gates behind him. ‘I was hoping for a bit of a break and…’
‘No chance. You’ll be amazed at the designs people are drawing. Impressive.’ Kreshkali eyed him for a moment. ‘I have a new apprentice. His name’s Teg and he’s got something very special in mind.’
Grayson shot her a glance. Her voice had softened, but she didn’t seem to notice. ‘So it’s straight to work?’ he asked.
‘Naturally.’
Grayson cleared his throat. ‘And Rosette? You really have no idea where she is?’
‘With Jarrod. That’s all I know.’
‘You’re certain?’
‘Why?’
‘I’ve had dreams. She was alone.’ Grayson looked behind at the greenery flanking the gates—the only leafy flora on the red horizon. ‘Are you sure there’s been no word?’ he asked, bending forward to offer his mount the apple core.
Kreshkali watched the seeds fall from the mare’s mouth as she chewed around the bit. An’ Lawrence grumbled. It was a practice he didn’t approve—feeding horses with bits in their mouths.
‘The trees?’ she said.
‘Rosette loves those apples, always has one in her pocket. And these are definitely from Treeon.’
Kreshkali considered. ‘It’s possible.’
‘Feels like something she would do.’
‘If so,’ said Kreshkali, narrowing her eyes, ‘she’s having quite a…time. They were here full grown when we arrived, three days after she left.’
‘Rosette loves those apples, always has one in her pocket. And these are definitely from Treeon.’
Kreshkali considered. ‘It’s possible.’
An’ Lawrence nodded. ‘Feels like something she would do.’
‘If so,’ said Kreshkali, narrowing her eyes, ‘she’s having quite a…time. They were here full grown when we arrived, three days after she left.’
Grayson watched the young man striding towards them. He didn’t look particularly Lupin, but he was very handsome—as most of that species were. He took Kreshkali’s reins when she dismounted, locking eyes with her. They had a silent exchange that left him smiling.
‘Sword Master,’ Teg said, dipping his head.
An’ Lawrence gave him a curt nod.
‘This is Grayson.’ Kreshkali opened her arms towards the man as he dismounted.
Teg’s hand went out, his wide eyes smiling. ‘I’ve been hoping to meet you. Will you be staying long?’
‘Long enough to do your work, if that’s what you mean.’
‘Oh, I didn’t…well, I did, but…thanks. That’s great news.’
Grayson unstrapped the saddlebags and hoisted them over his shoulder. ‘Where can I camp?’ he asked.
‘We’ve cleared you a space in the workshops, but don’t go there yet. Come have a meal with us first. I want
news of Treeon. News of Makee.’ Kreshkali turned him away from the row of artists’ studios in the building
opposite the main manor.
‘We’ve got some things to discuss,’ An’ Lawrence added, lowering his voice. ‘In private.’
Teg reached for the Sword Master’s reins, a question on his face.
‘I’ll see to her myself, but you might want to look after the palomino.’
Teg eyed the golden mare, who was rubbing her face on Grayson’s shoulder, covering his vest in white hairs.
‘Shall I?’ he asked.
The mare inched towards him, nostrils fluttering.
‘All yours, thanks. Just watch her near hind leg. She got a wire cut a few months back and still gets a little
skittish when you handle it. If you run your hand down from her hock, strong and sure, she’ll be fine.’
‘I appreciate the warning.’ Teg spoke to Grayson, but his eyes drifted to the Sword Master. ‘It’s good to be told
such things.’
An’ Lawrence shrugged his shoulders and led the way to the horse barn; Teg followed with the other two
mounts. Kreshkali and Grayson exchanged a look.
‘Is that what he meant by fine?’ Grayson asked.
‘He’s not warmed to them yet, Teg in particular,’ she answered.
‘And the lad’s your apprentice?’ Grayson chuckled. ‘I can see why he’s sceptical.’
‘How so?’
‘Kali, you’re a powerful witch, High Priestess on two worlds—that I know of. You have occult magic beyond
any on Earth. You can find a portal in a snowstorm, if it’s there to be found, and you’re passing all that knowledge
on to a young Lupin?’
‘Ah, but that’s where the misunderstanding is.’
‘What do you mean?’
‘The knowledge goes both ways.’
Grayson frowned, his head tilting as he looked again at Teg’s retreating figure. ‘I’m lost.’
She wrapped her arm around his shoulder and headed him towards the manor. ‘Come on. It’ll make sense in
time.’
‘I’m not so sure.’
She let her arm fall, slipping it around his waist. ‘Have a wash and a meal.’ She squeezed him. ‘You’ve got a
lot of work ahead of you.’
‘And Rosette?’
‘If we don’t hear from her soon, I’ll go traipsing after her myself.’

Rosette peered into her mug. The rich herbal infusion was gone and only the honey-saturated dregs remained, lying
in a damp mass at the bottom like a miniature landscape. It would have been good if she could read them, find the
portent hidden in the shapes. She knew some witches could, deciphering tea leaves as readily as a star chart.
Unfortunately, she didn’t have the skill. Something else for her list of to do’s.
Rosette had been invited to afternoon tea with Nell while Drayco and Fynn went hunting with Nell’s familiar,
Torgan. The massive Dumarkian temple cat had taken a fancy to both Drayco and Fynn, though Rosette had
cautioned them. She noticed there were no other canines around and was not clear on Torgan’s intentions for the pup
—friend or food.
She looked at the shape of the tea leaves, seeing a dark cave and a giant bird of prey. A cold hand brushed the
back of her neck, and she looked again, turning the mug. Suddenly, the shape changed into an image of Nellion
Paree, rising over a river like a storm. She shuddered. What would she have to fear from Nell?
_The last time you saw her, things didn’t go so well_, Drayco said, reminding her of the young redhead who had
sent temple guards after them.

*Good point, Dray. Stay close. I don’t know where any of this is leading.*
Just like the portals?
So it seems.

The tea room was comfortable, cool. The wide-open windows welcomed the fresh air, and the afternoon breeze was cooling. She heard Shane’s flute not far away and spotted him playing for a group of women. She suspected there would be no pressure from him to leave any time soon. She hadn’t seen any other men at the temple yet. If there were, they had to be outnumbered. She suspected Shane would find himself more than popular tonight, if they stayed.

Rosette smiled at the thought, then brought her attention back to the woman across the table.

‘Can you read the future, girl?’ Nell asked.

Rosette stared straight into her eyes. ‘Which one?’

Nell laughed. ‘So you still think you have a choice?’

‘There is always a choice, Nell.’

‘Preposterous. Who taught you that?’

‘You did. It’s your number one rule.’

Nell blinked, but she didn’t respond. Rosette leaned forward and clasped her hands, feeling them tense for a moment before they relaxed. She gripped them tighter. ‘I’ve got to get back to my own time, Nell, and soon.’

‘You keep saying that, but what’s the rush?’

‘I’m needed elsewhere, and I don’t know how long I’ve been skipping through the calendar—backwards, forwards, between. Has it been months? Years? I have to get back.’

‘I was hoping you might want to stay here with us…for a while.’

‘And do what?’ Rosette’s spine stiffened, and she forced herself to stay calm.

‘Teach the sword, of course.’ Nell laughed. It wasn’t a particularly joyful sound. ‘I can picture the High Priest of Treeon’s face, blanched white at the sight of a woman with a warrior’s weapon. Can you imagine his response to a whole coven of us wielding swords?’

‘Not really.’ Rosette had been keenly aware of the eyes watching her as she’d practised with Shane on the smooth tiled floor of the inner courtyard earlier in the day. They’d been teaching each other some of their forms and giving an informal demonstration to the gathered apprentices. It was customary for visiting witches to share their knowledge and, like the young Nell they had met at the top of Treeon Temple Valley, this Nell was also intensely interested in her swordsmanship.

‘You can’t see it yet?’ Nell asked. ‘Warrior weapons are taboo to women. Simple as that.’

‘It’s not the way of my Gaela, or Earth for that matter. At least, not now. Or, then…whenever I’m from.’ She coughed. Was she forward or backward? She wasn’t sure. What were the Entities doing, slipping her around like this? She lifted her chin. ‘In my world, anyone who wants to train, and has the aptitude, can.’ She squeezed Nell’s hands before releasing them. ‘What happened here? How did the sword become an exclusively male weapon?’

‘A different choice, made by one person. That’s all it takes to change a world’s paradigm.’

‘Can’t you make new choices now? Change it back?’

‘That’s my intention, and I want it to be yours as well.’

Rosette cleared her throat. ‘Why don’t you get the “me” that lives in this world to do it? She would have greater motivation and not as many previous obligations.’

Nell shrugged. ‘That’s the funny thing, Rosette. There is no you. Not here. Not this time.’

Chills. ‘Is that so?’ She rubbed her hands together and tilted her head. ‘You resisted the charms of my father? I bet he was disappointed.’

‘Resisted his charms? Child, I’ve never resisted anything decent in my life, and by the look and manner of you, he must be quite decent.’ She laughed. ‘I simply haven’t met the man yet. Who is he?’

‘He’s brilliant. You’ll love him. He’s called…’

Nell threw up her hands and jumped back from the table, tipping over her mug. ‘Stop!’ Her eyes flashed. ‘Don’t say it. I don’t want to know.’

‘Then why did you ask?’ Rosette said, righting the mug.

‘I shouldn’t have. It’s enough to know that a girl like you might come from me some day. Let’s not tamper with too much foreknowledge. I’ll know him if we meet. That’s enough.’

Rosette was surprised at Nell’s response—her mood swinging widely from calm to alarm. This woman was certainly made of a different temper than the mother she knew. Mothers…As much as she might like to stay for a time and teach the sword, it wasn’t practical. To start with, there were no weapons, and they would take time to forge—a process beyond her expertise. Even carving wooden bokkens for practice would be a lengthy task, and proper training would take months.

_Years, Maudi._
You’re right, Drayco. Years. We’re going to have to slip away. I just need to check one more thing and then we’re excusing ourselves.

Excusing?
Or making a run for it.
The walls were closing in. If Nell didn’t want her to leave, it could get tricky. ‘I’ve got to get back to my world,’ she said.
‘Again, what’s the rush?’
‘Jarrod,’ she whispered, watching Nell’s pupils. Rossette let his name hang in the air until it slowly dissolved like wisps of clouds evaporating over a dry land.
The other woman didn’t flinch. She returned to the table and refilled their mugs. She drank from hers, savouring the taste, leaving glossy droplets on her lips. ‘Who’s that, dear?’ she asked. ‘Some boy you’ve got to get back to?’
‘Jarrod,’ Rossette said again in a normal tone.
Nell raised her palms. ‘Is that name supposed to mean something to me?’
Rossette could see that it didn’t. Drayco, are you following this?
Following what, Maudi? Her temple cat seemed distracted.
Dray?
I’m hunting with Torgan.
How’s that going? Fynn all right?
He’s a champion scent dog. Glad we kept him.
That’s great, but, Drayco, Nell doesn’t know Jarrod.
It’s surprising, isn’t it?
How can she not know him?
I’d say because they’ve never met.
Rossette shook her head. Her familiar was sending her mind in circles.
‘They do that,’ Nell said in a soft voice.
Rossette snapped up her mind shield and nodded politely.
‘So, who’s this Jarrod? A beau, I take it?’
‘I wish it were that simple. He’s more than that.’
‘I find it’s never simple with men.’ Nell smiled. ‘Tell me about this “more than a beau” Jarrod.’
Rossette took a deep breath. ‘When I met him, he was the boy next door. After my family was murdered, I found out he was a quantum sentient, created by our ancestor Janis Richter, and linked to the females of our family line through the splices in our DNA.’
Nell made an impatient noise. ‘Have you been nibbling the golden-tops, girl? I understood the first half. Disgusting business with your family. Sorry to hear it. But I lost you after the word quantum. Care to try again?’
Rossette rubbed her temples. She sensed for an instant that she was revealing much more than she’d intended, but the thought vanished as quickly as it had arrived. ‘We come from another world, another time, Drayco and I. Jarrod too. Centuries ago, a woman named Janis Richter developed a quantum computer that attracted consciousness. When his existence was threatened, he projected his awareness into a tulpa body and travelled the corridors to Gaela.’
‘Missing most of it except that he’s here now. Is that right?’
‘I don’t think so. Not this Gaela. A different one.’
‘Past or future?’
‘Neither, both.’ She shook her head. ‘I don’t know. Just different.’
‘And that’s where you met him?’
Rossette nodded, a smile lifting her face. ‘We grew up together in Lividica. Before…’ Her face darkened.
‘Before things changed and I ran away to live with you—the you in my world—only there was no Dumarkian Temple then. It was an ancient ruin, destroyed in the Corsanon wars.’
‘Corsanon?’ Nell chuckled. ‘Corsanon couldn’t sponsor a flea market, let alone a full-scale war. They hardly rate a speck on the map—it’s a dust bowl that grows a few scrawny sheep. Some nice horses, though…’ She searched Rossette’s face. ‘What’s your connection to this Jarrod now?’
‘My DNA. I carry the key-codes to his operating determinants.’
Giving away the farm there, aren’t you, Maudi? What’s going on?
She has a right to know.
You didn’t think that before. Maudi, she’s spelled you! Get out!
Rossette rubbed her neck; pains were shooting through her head.
‘What are you saying, girl?’ Nell was still talking. ‘It makes no sense to me.’
Rosette wanted to run away, but couldn’t make her legs respond.
‘It’s like this,’ she said, unable to stop. ‘I hold his life in my blood. Our whole family line does. Which means you do too. And the portals…’
Nell’s eyes narrowed. ‘Tell me about them!’
Rosette drew in a breath, ready to reply, when a gong reverberated through the temple chambers. The sound waves rattled her eardrums. Just as suddenly as the echo faded, the pain in her head stopped. A spell had been lifted, and she wasn’t pleased. She kept her face a mask.
‘Demons,’ Nell said under her breath. ‘It’ll have to wait.’ Nell cleared her throat. ‘It’s afternoon meditation,’ she said. ‘Come with me.’
‘I’d like to be excused, if I may. I want to find…’
Nell gripped her shoulder and guided her out into the walkway. ‘No one misses afternoon meditation,’ she said, her voice low and even.
Rosette allowed Nell to guide her to the breezeway, feigning cooperation. The path led from the private quarters to a communal hall. The cooler air brushed her face with the scent of mountain streams, horses and fresh-cut herbs. Robed figures were flowing out of rooms and filling the walkways, many flanked by magnificent temple cats, all heading towards the main hall. If she was going to slip away, it would have to be now.
She started to lag behind as more and more apprentices filled the walkway, their shoulders brushing hers as they passed, heads nodding as they made small comments—her sword demonstration was superb, her hair a glorious length, where did she get the temple cat tattoo? Rosette smiled at each remark, answering in soft tones, double-checking that her mind shield was firmly in place. Feeling secure, she wove an imperceptibly subtle spell, diverting attention and thought away from her—a glamour that diluted her appearance. Slowly she became all but invisible, allowing the others to flow past her until she was far behind, on the edge of the walkway.
Drayco, you’re right. We have got to get out of here. Fast.
I’m with you, Maudi.
I thought I’d have to drag you away from all these kitties.
I’m ready to go.
Trouble there as well?
Torgan’s eyeing Fynn. It’s definitely time to go.
I’m coming. Rosette hesitated. I just have to work out how to get Shane. I can’t see him anywhere.
He’s here, with us.
Is he having problems too?
He is. Best hurry.
Has he got my pack, by any chance?
On his shoulder, but, Maudi, I think it’s been searched.
Rosette slowed. Demons!
Maudi?
The letter! The one from the library at Timbali.
It might be gone now. Nothing for it. Harry.
Rosette redoubled her pace. What about Fynn? He hasn’t wandered off?
I’ve got him. Meet us up here.
Where?
Edge of the woods at the top of the long steps. We’re in front of the portal.
Which one?
Ours. Can you see me?
She shielded her eyes as she scanned the cliffs above the temple grounds. I’m on my way.
Rosette slowed her pace further, allowing more apprentices to fill the gap between her and Nell. The High Priestess was in deep conversation with another woman. They talked in hushed tones, heads bent towards each other. Rosette kept her spell weaving and her mind shield up, and as the flow of people turned right around a corner, she ducked the other way down a short flight of stone steps. Hitting the bottom, she broke into a run, dashing over a wooden bridge, past a garden pond and waterfall and out the main entrance. She didn’t look back but hiked her skirt and kept running, her boots thumping softly over the close-cropped grass. As the lawn gave way to fern and moss, she bolted towards the cliff steps and started to climb.
Drayco and Shane were just ahead. She spotted them halfway up the stone steps, both watching her progress from outside the portal. Fynn raced down to greet her, holding up her progress as he tangled around her legs, yipping and jumping.
Hush, silly one. This is an escape, not a carnival. We don’t want to announce ourselves. She gave him a quick pat, taking the steps two at a time, the pup at her side. He leapt, nipping at her hand as they ran. She reached out for Shane without slowing down, nodding towards the portal entrance. ‘Come on! We can’t dawdle. Into the corridors, quick, Drayco.’

Right behind, but so is Torgan.

‘Damn. I thought you’d ditched him.’

So had I.

They tore up the last few steps, the surface almost completely obscured by vines and rubble, and stumbled into the portal just as the gong sounded again in the distance. She didn’t wait to see what that might mean, though she thought she heard shouts over the sound of rushing water. Torgan bounded towards them, only a few lengths behind. Rosette checked for all three companions before placing her hand on the plasma waves. Purple light jumped out from the edge of the Entity, linking to her with tingling bolts of lightning. The force of it slammed her back into the corridor wall. ‘Jarrod!’ she said, her breath coming in gasps. ‘Take me to Jarrod.’ With Shane’s assistance, she picked herself up off the ground.

‘What was that?’ he asked.

Rosette brushed herself off. ‘I don’t know. Something’s going haywire with the Entity.’

‘Which means?’

‘We’re travelling blind.’
Nell hung back, watching the young witch race up the steps. Perfect. She’d fallen for it, leading her straight to the occult portal. She should have known it would be right on their doorstep. ‘That wasn’t so hard, Rosette de Santo.’ She focused her thoughts on her familiar. *Torgan, can you track her? Quickly!*

She braced her hands against her lower back and watched Torgan spring up the steps. She huffed. Rosette had claimed to be her daughter in another world or another time. How interesting. And she wielded a sword as well. That was too intriguing to pass up. Nell didn’t know quite how she’d get the girl to take her through the corridors, but that was no longer a problem. She hadn’t even had to ask. Rosette had led her straight there.

Nell followed them, keeping to the shadows and slipping from tree to tree, crouching low to cross the bridge. All of Rosette’s attention was focused on where she was going, not where she’d been. A mistake. ‘Who trained this girl? Surely not me.’ Nell tailed her to the steps, ducking behind a redwood as Rosette caught up with her companions and disappeared into a cleft in the side of the rock face. *Torgan? What happened?*

*It’s easy. I see what she does.*

*Excellent. Come back now, lovely. Let them go. She crossed her arms and stepped out from the shadows.*

‘Thank you, my dear Rosette,’ she said. ‘You’ve shown me exactly what I needed to know.’

Torgan came slinking down the steps, his rust-black coat turning vermilion in the afternoon light. The dark tabby stripes on his forehead and legs stood out like a tiger’s.

*And you could see where they went? Nell asked her familiar.*

*Not exactly, but I saw what she did. The daughter-girl touched the edge of the rock and it jumped out to meet her—purple snakes of light zapping into her hand. She didn’t look alarmed, but the bite of them knocked her down.*

*Did it cause injury?*

*I don’t know. I couldn’t tell.*

*Then what happened?*

*They all disappeared.*

‘It’s our portal. Finally,’ Nell whispered.

*The exit we’ve been searching for?*

*Yes! It’s been here all along, right under our noses.* She caught up to Torgan and stroked the feline’s massive head.

*There’s nothing below my nose, Nellion, save teeth and tongue.*

Nell laughed. ‘It’s a figure of speech, my love. Let’s go.’

*Do we follow them?*

*Not yet. Tonight, when the moon changes signs. Come, we mustn’t be missed at meditation.* The witch wrapped her robe tight against the rising wind and headed back across the bridge. ‘We’ll need supplies.’ She talked more to herself than her familiar. ‘Warm furs, plenty of dried food, my dagger…’

*Long trip?*

*‘It could be that way.’*

*I don’t mind.*

She laughed, roughing Torgan’s neck. ‘Then let’s be over-prepared, just in case we decide to make it so. There’s a sword master out there that I’m dying to meet, and some kind of sentient as well.’

*Sentient?*

‘That’s all I caught, save his name is Jarrod and he has some intriguing qualities.’

*‘She told you?’*

‘She did, in more ways than one.’ Nell felt for the letter deep in her robe pocket, rubbing her thumb over the edge of the broken seal. ‘This is going to be quite a journey.’

Torgan purred, his tail held high.

Jarrod left the palace, his hands clasped behind his back. The Caller had presented him with a curious dilemma. No births—no human births anyway—yet no known cause. More confusing still, there was no sign of Rosette and Drayco. They never arrived, according to the strange woman who vacillated between flippancy and focus. She emanated a strong psychic association with the energies of this world, though, and her intuition matched that of any High Priestess on Gaela or Earth. Not surprising she was a Caller. If she said Rosette and Drayco never set foot on
Tensar, he believed her. But why had they been barred, or were they diverted? More pressing, where were they now? He shoved his hands into his pockets and descended the steps.

He felt a chill and turned back. At first he saw no one. The only movement came from the purple and black flags whipping across the entrance, straining at their poles like unschooled dogs eager for a run. He ran his hand through his hair and studied the columns on the left until Selene appeared from behind one. He waved, and she trotted down to meet him, her hand going to her sword hilt to keep it from jostling.

‘I’m glad you waited,’ Jarrod said, giving her a quick smile.

She didn’t respond immediately.

‘What’s wrong?’ he asked.

She kept close, staring past his face into the distance. ‘I need to get you out of here,’ she whispered.

She continued down the steps, Jarrod falling into place beside her.

‘Are we in danger?’ he asked.

‘Not now,’ she said, her lips barely moving. ‘Walk as if you hadn’t a care.’ She smiled at a group of men heading up the steps and quickened her pace.

Jarrod followed her lead, loosening his shoulders and lifting his face, his expression light and pleasant. She did the same. ‘Where are we going next?’ he asked, keeping his voice cheery.

‘To the market streets.’

‘Something we need to acquire?’

‘You could say that.’ She waved and called out a greeting to several women as they passed. Jarrod shot her a quick look. The smile transformed her face—she became strikingly beautiful.

‘You’re a stunning woman,’ he said, before turning his eyes forward again.

She kept her face light, but her voice was stern.

‘I meant pretend you didn’t have a care, not actually be that way.’

‘Is there a difference?’

She turned to him. ‘Between pretending and being? Of course there is.’

‘If you say so, but you become what you pretend to be.’ Jarrod shrugged. ‘Selene, can you tell me what’s going on?’ He said the words frivolously, as if discussing the best vendor for spicy fruit rolls.

‘Things aren’t what they seem,’ she said as they turned down a busy thoroughfare.

He laughed at that. ‘Things haven’t been what they seem since I stepped out of my hardware.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Only that they haven’t been what they seem for quite some time.’

He brushed against her shoulder as a cluster of pedestrians forced them together. She didn’t move away when the group passed. The contact thrilled him; the rush of energy was like fire in his veins. ‘Where to now?’ he asked, his palms sweating. They had come to an open square and it took discipline not to scan the surroundings. He suddenly felt vulnerable. It was a curious sensation.

She smiled at him, projecting her voice. ‘I need to buy some beetroots and check on the horses. Will you join me? I’d love your opinion.’

‘On beetroots?’

She chuckled, pulling his sleeve as they dodged an oncoming oxcart. ‘On the horses, silly one.’

‘We have horses?’ he whispered, his hand cupping his mouth.

She ignored the question, continuing to chat in her lightest tone. ‘Your gelding’s thrown a shoe, again, remember? I’m thinking he needs toe-clips this time.’

‘How did you know I was a blacksmith?’ He leaned in close as he spoke, brushing his lips across her ear.

‘Didn’t,’ she whispered back. ‘But I was hoping.’ She grabbed his arm and stopped to face him. The intensity of her eyes was startling. His head automatically pulled back as if blasted by a floodlight. When he relaxed, she kissed him. It was unexpected, and quick as a new lover might kiss, more a question than a statement. Her eyes searched his face for a moment after, then she hurried on across the square. He touched his lips, the sensations lingering. She was headed down the street, and he ran to catch up.

She didn’t look up when he was shoulder to shoulder again. His heart was pounding double time. He wondered if her actions were part of the act or something else. His curiosity rose further. There was nothing to do but play along, and he didn’t mind in the least. ‘The gelding will need a toe-clip, I think, if we plan on crossing rugged terrain,’ he said, continuing the conversation.

She didn’t respond.

‘Will it be rugged, Selene?’

‘Partially.’

‘In that case, a toe-clip—possibly two.’
‘I’m glad you think so,’ she said.
Jarrod made sure his face did not look as confused as he felt. She guided him through a maze of streets, passing by fruit markets, vegetable stands and colourful clothing stalls. At a stock feed vendor’s stall, she purchased a sack of grain and compressed hay, and a bag of beet pulp.
Jarrod grabbed the burlap sack and hoisted it over his shoulder. ‘This is more than a few beetroots,’ he said, shifting the weight of the sack.
She smiled at him for a moment and shrugged. It was a casual gesture, one that made her bodice strap slip off her shoulder to reveal smooth freckly skin. ‘So it is.’ She led him to other stalls, buying more supplies—flat bread, dried fruits, seeds and nuts, and several new waterskins. After leaving the market area, they turned down a narrowing side street and entered a large, two-storey horse barn.
‘We’re off on a bit of a journey?’ he asked as he followed her into the building. He took a deep breath. The scent of alfalfa greeted him along with the sweet smell of cracked corn, oats and molasses. Mingled with horse sweat, manure and leather, the aroma brought a spontaneous smile to Jarrod’s face. There were at least fifty animals stabled here and half a dozen grooms going about their tasks. He wanted to laugh aloud. So much of his existence in the last few centuries had been in the company of horses, and now, for the first time since leaving Gaela, he felt completely at home.
‘You’re right. I’m planning a little trip for us,’ she answered, her emphasis on the last word.
They walked down the rows of tie stalls, multicoloured round rumps and tails pointed towards them—black and brown and bay and white, all of varying heights and composition, from draughters to cobs to shaggy-haired mountain ponies. Some of the horses stood with their heads high, ears back, switching their tails and stomping their hooves. Others, the ones already fed, had their noses in the mangers, munching away. When they stopped in front of a red chestnut mare, the graceful creature turned her head towards Selene, nickering through a mouthful of hay.
Selene smiled, transforming to beauty again, and directed Jarrod to leave the beet pulp on a nearby bench.
‘Where are we headed, Selene?’ He dropped the sack and rubbed his shoulder.
She shushed him with a wave of her hand. ‘It’s a reasonable query,’ he said.
She stopped, pulling him into her with both hands, her green eyes turning dark as her pupils dilated. ‘Your world,’ she said in a whisper. ‘You’re going to take me there.’
He raised his eyebrows and was about to speak, but she pushed him back, placing a saddle and bridle in his arms.
‘Tack her up, and please don’t tell me you’ve never done that before.’
‘I can manage.’
‘Finally, one that can,’ she said under her breath. There was no trace of a smile any more.
‘And what about the toe-clips?’ Jarrod asked, lifting the horse’s hoof out of the deep straw.
‘Already done.’

They rode out of T’locity, away from the sun as it touched the horizon. Jarrod jogged alongside Selene; he was mounted on a well-schooled gelding, black as lava rock with four white socks and a long white blaze from his forehead to his muzzle. She rode the chestnut, a younger animal but also neatly trained. He turned to see the amber light drop below the skyline, and with one hand buttoned his jacket against the coming night. ‘We’re heading east?’
‘West,’ she said, correcting him without further comment.
He twisted around in his saddle again. ‘The sun is setting behind us?’
‘Obviously.’
Selene’s expression didn’t change. If she felt annoyed, or fearful, or any other emotion, it didn’t show.
_Mirror universe then, not parallel. Interesting. I should have noticed that before_, he thought. ‘Selene, can I ask you something?’ He took her silence as a yes. ‘That kiss back there, in the marketplace. Was that part of the act, or was it something else?’
She stared ahead. ‘Did it feel like an act?’
‘Not really.’
‘Then why do you need to ask?’ She moved her horse into a trot and he urged his forward to keep up. ‘Selene, I asked so we could talk about it,’ he said. When she didn’t respond he scratched the back of his hand. ‘You aren’t one for light conversation, are you?’
She shook her head. ‘Right...’
This woman was very different from Rosette or from any of his Richter women. Conversations with them had
always flowed like water coursing downstream. Could this be more mirrors? He cleared his throat.

‘Are we really heading for my world?’

She nodded.

‘And you know how to get there?’ He clucked to the gelding, moving into a collected canter to keep up. The horses were confident in the failing light, the road a smooth, broad strip of well-packed dirt. The percussion of hoof beats filled the air.

‘I know where the portals are hidden,’ she said above the sound.

‘How’s that?’

She turned, narrowing her eyes. ‘Is there a problem with your memory?’

This would have felt a bit like a stab if he let it. ‘Actually, no. My memory is virtually perfect.’ He drew in his breath and let his tone take on a narrative quality. ‘As the first marshal of the border scouts, you would be aware of all the nooks and crannies of your realm, including the portals that link to…other places. That is, if someone had taught you of their existence, and how and where to look for them.’

‘Someone did.’

‘Who?’

When she didn’t answer he tried another tack. ‘Do you know where the portals lead?’ He kept his voice light, hoping this wasn’t going to be another dead-end conversation.

‘I was told they are pathways to the many-worlds.’

He exhaled. ‘You were told correctly.’

‘Thought so.’ She leaned forward in the saddle, allowing the mare to gallop up a side track. ‘This way,’ she shouted as they ran. ‘It’s nearly dark.’

‘You make it sound like dark is the enemy,’ he said as they crested the rise.

‘It is.’

‘Why? What happens after the sun goes down?’

She looked at him, her eyes gleaming. ‘We get off the road.’

He was about to question further, but her expression changed his mind. They galloped on, dusk settling over them like a thick quilt, the cadent rhythm of the horses’ hooves and their measured breaths a mantra: hurry along, hurry along.

When they crested the last in a series of undulating hills, Jarrod spotted the cabin. The outline was visible in the rising moon. It nestled in a narrow valley and was made from the logs of the surrounding trees. Beyond the small barn was a pasture, knee-high in grass and fenced with wooden posts and slat rails. A creek meandered through the far corner, flowing in a rush towards a dam below. It reminded him of his adopted family’s land in Lividica, except for the massive mountain behind it. He tilted his head. It was jagged and snow-capped, the wind from its slopes icy cold.

He buttoned his collar as they walked the horses down the winding path. Not many travellers took this road, judging by the overgrowth. Certainly no wagons or carts would make it.

‘Is this your property?’ he asked Selene when they reached the barn.

‘It was my family’s.’ She opened the wide doors and led them in.

‘Was?’

She nodded. ‘Now it’s mine.’

She lit a few lamps, then tied her horse away from the water barrel until she was untacked and rubbed down. He did the same with his mount, currying the damp coat in brisk, circular motions. After letting them drink, they turned the horses out into the paddock and followed the path to the cabin.

Inside was a cozy home with a high, open-beam ceiling, many windows and central stairs leading to a loft. Selene busied herself at the hearth, making a fire while Jarrod lit more lamps. The main downstairs room had a huge fireplace, tall bookshelves and a long sturdy table surrounded by many chairs.

‘Large family, yours?’

‘Not any more.’

They shared a meal of nut and black rice porridge laced with dried fruit. Selene didn’t talk about her past, but she was very keen to know more of his. Surprisingly, she didn’t ask about his conversation with the Caller. Jarrod suspected that she was one of those spies the other woman had been so concerned about. The wind picked up outside and Jarrod scooted closer to the fire. ‘You never told me why we had to be off that road after dark.’

‘Didn’t I?’ She shrugged. ‘It gets cold at night.’

‘That’s it?’

She turned her face to the fire, warming her hands. ‘That, and the occasional band of thieves.’

‘They’d attack the first marshal of the border scouts?’
‘No, but it wasn’t me I was worried about.’ She smiled. ‘Come. We need to sleep. Tomorrow we find the portal and cross to your world.’

‘Why do I get the feeling you have an agenda of your own, Selene?’

She held out her hand, ignoring his query. ‘You do _sleep_ where you come from, don’t you?’ she asked.

He smiled. ‘And then some.’

‘That’s encouraging.’ She led him to the loft, but didn’t let go of his hand.
‘Dr Kelly, we need help!’

Everett looked up from his monitor and frowned at his med student. ‘Get an intern, I’m busy.’

‘We need you. It’s an emergency.’

He took off his glasses and cleaned the lenses, replacing them back on his face. ‘What do you mean, emergency?’

‘It’s the Jane Doe. You said to inform you immediately if…’

He leapt out of his chair. ‘What are her stats?’ he asked, pulling on his lab coat. He’d crossed the room before the words were out.

‘She crashed. No breath sounds, ECG flat line.’

‘A cardiac arrest? Why didn’t you notify me?’

‘It only just happened and then she…’

‘I should have been beeped.’

‘By the time you received the message and rang back it would be…’

Everett tore past the cluster of staff blocking his way—attending physicians, patients, nurses and students—snapping on gloves and a protective gown as he entered the treatment room. ‘What’s happening?’

‘Dr Kelly?’

The words stopped him.

‘I’ve been waiting for you.’

It was her voice, rich and melodic, as if it had been trained in elocution, each syllable and phrase full of warmth and promise. He stepped up to the bedside, glancing briefly at the chart his nurse held in front of him. He nodded, waving it aside. Everything around him faded. Only his patient came into focus. Only his Jane Doe.

‘So you’ve decided to make your first appearance,’ he said.

She smiled, and the world fell away at his feet. ‘I was getting bored listening.’ Her eyes shone under the halogen lights.

‘Were you now? And does that mean you’ve heard everything we’ve said?’

‘Everything of interest to me. And I agree with your diagnosis, doctor. Cardiomyopathy—no known cause. Though why you keep calling me Jane Doe, I can’t figure out.’

‘If you could supply us with your ID, we’d call you by your real name.’

She laughed. ‘What is “real”?’

‘Your ID, for starters.’

‘There you go again, on about identification. Where I come from, names are sacred, chosen at times of initiation in accordance with numerology and planetary alignment. There is a ritual…a ceremony. None of this ID and scanning of chips embedded in the skin.’

‘So why don’t you tell me yours?’

She closed her eyes for a moment and the light went out. ‘I can’t.’

‘Can’t or won’t?’

‘I can’t remember,’ she whispered, her face strained. ‘I can’t remember.’

‘Don’t worry.’ He patted her hand, an extraordinary action for him. ‘It’ll come to you. Just relax. Breathe.’

‘I can hardly do anything else. What kind of herbs are you giving me? I don’t recognise the names.’

‘We are giving you exactly the right things.’

‘You’ll hardly think so when I die.’

‘Die? Whatever gives you that notion? No one is going to die.’ He knew it was patronising, but he didn’t know how else to soothe her. Besides, it was true.

‘That’s an answer for a child, Dr Kelly. Is that what you think I am?’

‘Not at all.’ He waited for her face to soften. ‘Do you remember what you are? Your profession? A paramedic perhaps?’

‘I’ve had experience in the healing arts, if that’s what you mean.’

‘Arts?’

‘What do you call it?’

‘Science.’
‘I see. Is that where I’ve landed?’
‘What do you mean?’
She closed her eyes for a moment. ‘First things first, Everett. I don’t think I have a lot of time.’
‘I wouldn’t be so sure. Now that you’re awake again, I plan to keep you that way.’
‘You aren’t listening. I don’t have a lot of time.’ She motioned him closer. ‘I have to get back.’ He swallowed, heat flushing his face. As he leaned in, she grabbed his shoulder, holding him just above her face. ‘I am a temple priestess, a High Priestess and witch. I know that for certain. I also know my message.’
‘Message?’
‘The one I’ve come to deliver. Everett, you have to stop this notion of eternal life and let me die.’

His eyes shot a quick glance at his staff. They didn’t appear to have heard. ‘You don’t know what you’re saying,’ he whispered.
‘But I do.’ Her eyes bored into his.
‘Why do you want to…die?’
‘I told you before—I have to get back.’
‘Back where?’

She sighed. ‘The balance is upset, Everett, and your eternal life experiments are creating havoc on other worlds. I can’t remember exactly how I came here or who I am, but I know I am meant to straighten this out. It’s not going well. I need you to stop, and I need to get back.’
‘Why don’t we get you well before we talk about sending you anywhere?’
She pulled him closer, tightening her grip. ‘You have to let me die.’
He choked, unable to respond. Her demand echoed in his mind.

*Let me go. It’s the only way to solve this mess, and we do need to solve it quickly.* She winked before her eyes rolled back into her head and her body went rigid.

‘Seizure!’ the nurse shouted, opening up her drip. She reached for a syringe.

Everett straightened. ‘Ten units D-Zpan, IV push,’ he said.

The nurse checked the stats again. ‘Pulse-ox down to sixty.’
‘No heart rate,’ his student said.
‘Are the cardio-pads still in place?’ Everett asked.

The nurse nodded, going for the crash cart.
‘Shock her at two hundred.’
‘Clear,’ the nurse called, and the Jane Doe’s body jolted.

They turned to watch the heart monitor. It was flat line.
‘Charge to three hundred.’
‘Clear!’

The sound of electrical current ripped through the room. Her body arched and fell again.
‘We’re losing her,’ the nurse said.
‘Not if I can help it,’ Everett said. ‘Charge to three fifty.’
‘Where in blazing demons are we?’ Shane asked.

Rosette stared at the wrought-iron gates, their tall points reaching high overhead. Thunder rumbled on the horizon and rips of lightning flashed through the sky. The rain fell, a steady downpour that saturated her clothes. It clung to her skin, making her itch. ‘Oh no,’ she whispered.

‘What’s that?’

‘We’re not where we belong.’ She turned to Shane. ‘Don’t swallow the water, or let it get in your eyes.’

He screwed up his face. ‘What’s wrong with it?’

‘It’s toxic.’ She pushed her hand into the depths of Drayco’s neck fur and looked down the fence line. It seemed to go on forever, disappearing into a foggy mist. Trees had lined it once. You could tell by the broken twisted trunks, the haunt of termites whose giant red mud towers stood nearby. Ravines cracked the ground and water rushed through, staining the red earth, a sulphur foam gathering in the eddies.

Stagnant pools formed near the gates, hosting thousands of toads. They croaked incessantly above the patter of rain, camouflaged in the mud, adding syncopation to the rolls of background thunder. Fynn wiggled out of her arms and trotted over to the nearest pond, his nose working hard to identify all the new scents. The sludge stained his white paws and left ochre splatters on his flanks as he leapt about.

‘Keep out of it!’ she called to him. ‘Those toads are toxic too.’

Shane stepped forward, his boots splashing in the ooze. His hand hadn’t left the hilt of his sword since dashing into the portal above Temple Dumarka. ‘Where are we?’

‘Earth…I think,’ Rosette said. ‘But we’ve come too soon.’

‘How do you mean, too soon?’

_It smells like Earth, Maudi, when Kreshkali first brought us over. Before we made the sun shine again._ The temple cat sneezed, shaking raindrops from his coat.

‘I hope not. Can you sense Jarrod? There must be a reason the Entity brought us.’

_I don’t think anyone’s around. Not anyone we know._

‘Me neither.’ She closed her mouth, careful not to let moisture in.

‘Me neither what?’ Shane asked, wiping his face with his sleeve. ‘What is this stuff? It stings.’ He looked at the water droplet on his hand.

‘It’s called acid rain.’

‘From volcanoes?’ He scanned the terrain. ‘There’s hardly a hill nearby, and those distant mountains don’t look active.’

‘Not volcanoes.’ She shook her head. ‘It’s from pollution. Come on.’ She tugged at him, turning back towards the portal. She whistled to Fynn. ‘We need to get under shelter. There’s nothing here at the gate, certainly not Jarrod.’

‘We aren’t staying, are we?’ He spat. ‘This place is worse than the swamps of Tensar.’ His boots were half submerged in the mud and he lifted one foot as evidence. Muck dripped from his sole, rain bleaching the leather tops in light-coloured splotches. Muck filled the imprint as he stood on one leg. ‘I don’t care if this is your Earth, or the bowels of Gaela, for that matter. I think we should go.’ He hunched his shoulders as a rip of lightning scorched the sky. ‘Come on, Rosette. This is no good.’

‘Give me a moment. We can’t jump back into the corridor and get whirled out into another random place. I’ve got to get my bearings first, Shane. I have to work out when and where this is, and why we landed here. Something’s happening with the corridors…’

‘Girl, you haven’t had your bearings since I met you. Where do you think you’re going to find them now? In this?’ He looked into the distance as if the answer would appear on the horizon. A mistake. He didn’t see it coming.

Rosette slammed his shoulder with a full-palm strike. It tipped him off balance, knocking him to his knees. His hands sank into the mud to break the fall and disappeared beneath the surface of the ooze.

He glared up at her. ‘What was that for?’

‘Your compulsion to focus on the negative.’

‘Me? What about your response? I’d call that fairly negative.’

‘Like attracts like.’ She crossed her arms.

Fynn bounded to his side and jumped up to lick his face. He pushed the dog away. ‘Back off, you crazy mutt.’
He glanced at Rosette and flicked mud off his hands, a half smirk curling his lips. ‘The lot of you are crazy.’

‘Maybe.’ Rosette extended her hand to help him up. ‘But I’d like to remind you that I can and will find my bearings.’ She smiled. ‘And, just so you know, I haven’t been a girl for quite some time.’

Shane cringed. ‘It’s a figure of speech,’ he said.

‘Don’t use it around me.’

He nodded, took her hand, and allowed her to hoist him up. ‘Never again.’

They stood face to face, the thunder cracking overhead, their feet and hands covered in mud. They suddenly started laughing so hard Rosette didn’t notice the toads had gone quiet.

_Maudi, the portal!

She stiffened.

_Someone comes. Her familiar crouched as he sent the thought._

Rosette spun around, drawing her sword. The sing of it clearing the scabbard rang out just ahead of another clap of thunder. Drayco’s hackles fanned, a low growl rising from his throat. Fynn released a series of husky barks, surprisingly deep for a pup.

‘What is it?’ Shane said, drawing his sword as well. ‘I can’t see a thing.’

Rosette sidestepped and motioned to Shane to do the same, making certain they were outside of each other’s kill circle. Her eyes focused on a figure emerging from the rock crevice. Drayco sprang forward, flying through the air.

_Maudi, Maudi! We found him._

‘Wait, Dray. Who?’

_Sheath your sword, Maudi. He’s here._

Laughter came from the man walking towards them. ‘Actually, Drayco,’ Jarrod said, his voice booming over the reanimated toads, ‘it’s I who have found you.’

Rosette lowered her sword. ‘Jarrod!’ she shouted, slipping her blade into its sheath and charging. She leapt, wrapping her legs around his waist, almost knocking him over as he slid backward in the mud. Drayco ploughed the top of his head into the entwined couple, purring like an engine. Fynn barked rapid-fire—high pitched and ear-piercing now that the danger had passed—his tail wagging.

‘Here you are at last. The glorious Rosette de Santo,’ Jarrod said, his voice still projecting across the barren landscape. ‘My beautiful witch.’ He wrapped his arms around her tighter, whispering, ‘Where have you been, love?’

She hugged him back, squealing with delight. Jarrod teetered, struggling to keep his balance before releasing her to the ground. She planted a kiss on his lips that lasted long enough for Shane to turn away. When Rosette pulled back from the embrace, she laughed aloud. ‘I’ve been lost like you wouldn’t believe.’ She grabbed his face and kissed him again. ‘Where have you been?’

‘Most recently? Treeon. Looking for you.’

‘You’ve managed to keep track of him, I see.’ A woman stepped out of the crevice and nodded towards Shane. She took in the scene, her eyes squinting in the rain. Her hand was on her sword, her face stern.

‘Rosette, this is Selene,’ Jarrod said, introducing the women.

‘From Tensar?’ Rosette queried.

‘I am,’ she said. ‘And you…’ Her tone dropped as she directed her attention to Shane. ‘What have you been playing at?’

‘Odd. I have the same question for you,’ Shane answered, his eyes even with hers.

They glared at each other, speaking in their native tongue. Rosette followed the conversation, but the body language alone would have given them away—testy, belligerent, defensive. Rosette turned to Jarrod and shrugged. He shook his head, apparently no wiser than she.

‘Let’s get out of this rain,’ he said, brushing strands of damp hair from her cheeks. She fell into step beside him as they returned to the portal.

‘Do you know where we are?’ she asked when they were under the rocky overhang. ‘It looks a little early for us.’

‘My thoughts exactly, though I recognise the spot,’ he said. ‘Even in this state.’

‘You do?’

‘It was once a very beautiful place.’

‘What? An ASSIST complex?’

‘Not at all. It’s the estate of Luka Paree.’

‘The place that Kreshkali’s searching for?’

He nodded.

She looked out towards the barren land; a flash of lightning turned everything blue-white before it went back to
its bleak and murky hues. ‘But this is before Kreshkali brought us over, isn’t it?’

‘I’d say so.’

Rosette pushed her wet hair out of her eyes. ‘The portals aren’t running true for me, Jarrod. What about you?’

‘Definitely askew. I get the feeling someone’s tampering.’

‘Tampering?’

‘I think so. Trackers might be hacking into the plasma stream, or it could be a spell.’ He glanced towards Selene and Shane. They were still arguing in the rain.

‘If there are trackers about, that means ASSIST has gone underground,’ Rosette said.

‘Or trackers could have been wandering through the corridors since Kreshkali crossed over. We have to find them in either case.’

She frowned. ‘You said you’ve been to Treeon? My Treeon?’

Jarrod laughed, reaching into his pocket. ‘I have indeed, and I’ve got these to prove it.’ He pulled out several moss-green apples and handed her one, tossing the others to Shane and Selene. ‘Catch,’ he called out, getting their attention.

‘You’re divine,’ she said, polishing the fruit on the inside of her coat and biting into the crisp skin. She captured the sugary liquid that spilled over her lips with a sweep of her tongue. ‘We were just there too, but it turned out to be a different time. It was very strange. Nell was strange…Oh, this tastes good!’ She examined the apple before taking another bite.

‘The entire journey since we left Tensar has been strange,’ Selene said. She’d turned away from Shane and was staring at Rosette. ‘I imagined you differently.’

Rosette stopped chewing. ‘Did you?’

‘From the way he talks, I pictured you more…mature.’

Rosette lifted a brow and smiled. ‘Thank you.’ Turning to Jarrod, she asked, ‘Did you see the Caller? Is that world sorted out?’

‘Still working on it—long story.’ He dropped his eyes to Fynn, who was twisting around to chew at the base of his tail. ‘I can see you’ve some stories as well. Where’d you pick him up?’

‘You first,’ she said, leaning her back against the rock wall. ‘What’s happened since I saw you last?’ Her eyes drifted from his face to Selene. ‘I want all the details.’

Rosette had finished her apple by the time Jarrod explained his experience on Tensar. She held the core between her thumb and first finger, absently rotating it from side to side. ‘And why did Selene get you away?’

‘She’s got her doubts about the Caller.’ He lowered his voice. ‘Says she might be interfering with the borders and enlisted me to help her find out.’

‘I thought you might have been “enlisted”.’ She winked. ‘And have you solved that mystery?’

‘Which one?’

Rosette laughed, then turned to consider Shane and Selene. They had renewed their argument and were speaking in low, harsh voices, unaware of Rosette’s scrutiny.

‘Explain how you learned her language so fast?’ Selene fired the question at Shane.

He shrugged. ‘I told you, we had plenty of time—we were caught in a loop.’

‘For how long?’

‘For long enough to learn each other’s language.’

‘Long enough for other things as well, I see,’ Selene said, her face curled into a sneer.

‘You don’t know what you see,’ Shane said. His voice echoed through the rock shelter.

‘Don’t I? I think I see perfectly well. And I can add, too. You speak her language, and that’s not all, is it!’ Rosette touched Jarrod’s shoulder. ‘What are they arguing about?’

‘You tell me,’ Selene snapped, her green eyes zeroing in on Rosette.

Jarrod raised his hands. ‘Whoa, now. They understand each other’s language,’ he said. ‘It doesn’t mean any taboo has been broken or boundaries crossed.’

‘What taboo? What boundaries?’ Rosette asked, returning Selene’s look.

‘We have some pressing matters in front of us,’ Jarrod interrupted. ‘Let’s stay on the immediate topic.’

Selene crossed her arms and closed her mouth.

‘Rosette, what happened when you reached Tensar? You must have got out of the portal.’

‘I certainly did. Many times.’ She described their journey, the recurring loop at the entrance to Tensar, her meetings with Shane and their escape through the subterranean waterway. Jarrod questioned her frequently, especially her experiences of Nell as a girl and at the Dumarkian Temple. Rosette was about to elaborate on her own
theory when the ground beneath them rolled. A searing bolt of electricity lit the sky and the cliff face rattled. The rain stopped. Rosette blanched. ‘Shaker’s coming. A big one.’

‘This way.’ Jarrod waved them deeper into the crevice. ‘We’ve got to get out of here.’
Shane and Selene hung back.
Rosette braced against the wall. ‘Quickly, you two. We’ve got to go.’
‘I’m not going back in there,’ Selene yelled over the falling rubble. ‘It’s collapsing.’
‘That’s why we need to get through the portal before it does. The corridors are safe.’
‘I’m not so sure,’ she said.

‘I am!’ Rosette grabbed at her sleeve and made to pull her forward. Selene stood back, her hand going to her sword. Rosette automatically did the same.

‘What’s the problem?’ Jarrod asked, rushing back. ‘We’ve got to move.’ He looked at the women, squared off for battle. ‘What happened?’ he asked Shane.

‘Nothing.’
Selene planted her feet, keeping her eyes locked on Rosette. ‘Where are you taking us?’
‘I’ve got to find Nell—the Nell of my time.’ She let out her breath. ‘What’s wrong with you? We’ll be buried alive if we don’t move.’
Selene didn’t answer.

Maudi, we need to go now.

Rosette broke the connection, turned away from the other woman and stared at the wrought-iron gate. It rolled with the quaking ground as if a giant serpent was travelling beneath it. The apple core still in her hand, she raised her arm and hurled it towards the fence. It hit the post and splattered. When she turned back, her voice was strong.

‘Nell’s the missing piece to this riddle. You can come with us to find her, or you can stay here and be buried under a ton of rock. Your choice.’

‘I think there’s more than one missing piece,’ Selene said, tilting her head towards Shane. ‘I’m not moving until I see it.’
Rosette wiped her hands on her coat-tail while mouthing a silent question to Jarrod. What’s going on?
He shrugged. ‘I get the feeling she thinks you and Shane have been…’
‘Have been what?’ Her eyes widened. ‘Intimate? You’re joking, aren’t you?’

Apparently it’s a sore point, Maudi. Her temple cat stood by her side, his legs braced against the building shaker.

Rosette spun back to Selene. ‘You think I’ve been having my way with him?’ She tossed her hand towards Shane. ‘That’s what this is about?’

Selene lifted her chin, unmoved. ‘It’s obvious,’ she said.

Jarrod stepped between them. ‘Can you two continue this debate in the portal? We really need to get out of this time-space, or do you fancy entombment?’

‘No, no. Let’s clear this up right now.’ Rosette bristled as she spoke. ‘What exactly is the problem?’
‘He wouldn’t be the first bard you had an eye for…’ Selene said, her voice trailing off.
Rosette spun on Jarrod. ‘What have you been telling her?’
He started to speak, but Rosette turned back to Selene.

‘First of all, what difference does it make if we’ve been having all kinds of sex? You don’t possess him, do you? Control his capacity for love and intimacy? I don’t remember slavery being on the list of Tensar’s social customs. And, second of all, we haven’t, though I can’t see how that concerns anyone but me and Shane.’ She finished with a look for Jarrod that made him cringe.

‘I don’t believe you,’ Selene said.

‘Why not?’
‘Look at you.’

Maudi! Move it! her familiar roared in her head.

Rosette was about to fire another challenge. Instead she let her shoulders relax and exhaled. ‘Come on. This is absurd. We have to travel the corridors and it’s best done without anxiety. No telling where the Entity will send us otherwise.’

‘It doesn’t change what I know.’ Selene directed her comment to Shane.
He looked at her, eyes pleading. ‘Selene, she was like that when I met her.’ He nodded to Rosette.

‘How could she have been?’ Selene snapped the words back. ‘You said you’d been trapped in that loop long enough to learn each other’s language. That is longer than it takes.’

‘Longer than what takes?’ Rosette screwed up her face. ‘What in Passillo’s bright fire are you two talking
Another groundswell rolled underneath them, sending the cliff face down like a waterfall.

‘No more time,’ Jarrod shouted. ‘Into the portal.’

Rosette hesitated long enough to grab Selene’s hand and turn her around. ‘Enough! Peace now. Come with me.’ She led them all into the corridors, brushing past the plasma stream as it burst from the Entity, her intentions focused on finding Nell. She was panting as she leaned against the smooth wall of the corridor, a quiet darkness around her. Her mind reached towards her familiar. Drayco?

*Here, Maudi.*

*Did we get Fynn?*

*He’s here too. Sleeping again.*

*Everyone else?*

*They all came in.*

Rosette sighed, letting go of Selene’s hand. After a moment’s reflection, she spoke to Drayco. Do you know what she meant by ‘longer than it takes’?

*I’m not sure, Maudi. Some kind of task?*

*That doesn’t make sense to me at all.* She rested her hand on her familiar’s back as they whirled through the corridor streams in silence.

*Nothing’s made sense for quite some time.*

‘I know, but now that Jarrod’s here, it will.’ She scratched Drayco’s spine, her fingers disappearing into the plush fur. His tail rose and whipped back and forth. She leaned over him, reaching to pet the long silky fur of the pup.

*Maudi?*

‘Yes, my lovely?’

You’re not going to like this…Her temple cat sat next to her, wrapping his tail around his front legs like a winter scarf.

*What won’t I like?*

*I can’t see Jarrod any more, or the others.*

*What do you mean, you can’t see them?*

*There are no electrical signals running from my optic nerve to the visual cortex that indicate their presence.*

*What? They are right here. They have to be. We all ran in together. I held Selene’s hand.* Rosette stiffened, her head scanning left and right, arms reaching out to touch her friends.

*They did, and they were, Maudi, but they aren’t here now.*

*How did that happen?*

*I think we’ve taken a different turn.*

Rosette closed her eyes and sank to the ground as her legs collapsed beneath her. ‘Entity! Not again?’ She sat on her heels, rocking slightly in the dark as the stillness of the corridor floated around her.

*Seems that way, Maudi. Must be for a reason. It’ll be all right.*

Rosette didn’t move until Drayco nudged her with his nose.

*We’re somewhere now, Maudi. See? We might as well have a look around. Check it out?*

She got up, brushing off her cloak. ‘You’re right. We might as well, Drayco,’ she said aloud. ‘How much worse can it get?’

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Teg crossed the central square of the temple grounds, nodding to a few faces he recognised, keeping the eye contact brief so they wouldn’t stop and talk. He was amazed at how chatty these people were. Almost everyone took an interest in him, even though many knew he was Lupin. *Especially because I am Lupin.* What a curious bunch. Hotha had warned him there could be fear or resentment in some of the Gaeleans, but they seemed more inquisitive than biased. It was a refreshing contrast to growing up in Los Loma, Gaela, a land steeped in prejudice against his kind. Here, so far, the only two with hard feelings were the Sword Master and his lynxy feline, Scylla. No matter how hard he trained or how polite and accomplished he was, An’ Lawrence never gave him more than perfunctory sentences or curt nods, and Scylla all but hissed when he came near.

It didn’t matter to them that he had nothing to do with the incident on the Prieta Mountains. He wasn’t even under Los Loma, Gaela, at the time. The Sword Master didn’t seem to remember that Teg and his clan mates had battled their common enemy with him at the gates of ASSIST either. Teg had been wounded badly there. That should count for something. A redemption? Ingratiation? Why do I feel I owe him one?

He cringed at the assumptions. There wasn’t any place for ‘should’ in his life, not now, especially not as the
new apprentice to the High Priestess Kreshkali. Besides, the wound had been a blessing, the top of his ‘gratitude list’ that he recalled daily. It had left him crippled for months, the recovery slow and painful. The only way he could distract his mind from the agony and confinement was by reading. In the process, he’d fallen in love with the written word. Literature was his divine consort now, when before it had been the hunt, or the fight. He was happy to return to those activities as his body healed, though they didn’t hold the same fascination any more. He never strayed long from the written page, and there were so many books to explore. The library of Temple Los Loma held endless distraction for him. It was the last great collection of literature on Earth, and it was his job—one of his jobs—to help catalogue and preserve it. Bliss.

He paused in his reflections, catching the eye of a woman trotting down the manor steps. She adjusted her course straight for him.

Maluka.

She was wearing short leggings and a small leather vest. A sword belt fitted snugly around her hips and a large sack of apples balanced on her shoulder. His face brightened when she slowed her pace. She stopped square in front of him and flashed a smile back, shifting the weight of the apples to lean in and give him a kiss on the cheek. Maluka was someone he didn’t mind stopping to chat with.

‘Tell me you’re training this morning,’ she said, dropping the sack to her feet and letting it rest against her leg.

Her red hair swept across her face and she brushed it aside.

‘I wish I was, beautiful, but…’

‘Liar.’

He laughed. ‘You’re right. I’m not unhappy to be working with Kreshkali today.’

‘Any day’s more like it. What is it? The books? Charts and stars?’

‘Something like that.’

‘And I suppose your smile’s for her too?’ Maluka cocked her head to the side, raising her chin.

‘This one’s all yours,’ he answered.

‘Ha! Lying again. You’re not a Lupin, you’re a diplomat.’ She picked up the sack, her biceps flexing as she settled it on her shoulder. ‘Come to the afternoon workout, if you aren’t completely immersed. I still want to learn that one-handed uppercut you wielded yesterday.’

‘The Sword Master hasn’t shown you?’

She lowered her voice, her eyes glancing about. ‘I’m not at that level yet.’

‘But you want me to break protocol and teach you anyway? I’m not already in trouble enough with An’ Lawrence?’

‘I didn’t think that would worry you,’ she said, brushing her body alongside his as she walked past.

‘I’ll be there if I can,’ he said, but she was halfway across the courtyard by the time he spoke.

There’s an invitation I can’t misinterpret…He watched her disappear into the sword hall. He might be training later today, but if so, his sparring partner would be Kreshkali. She’d taken a keen interest in the sword since the battle at ASSIST. She used the blade as a conduit more than as a weapon and she was teaching him the technique.

‘I’m not interested in battle,’ she’d told him. ‘But magic—that’s another thing.’

Magic and divination mattered more than anything to the High Priestess—more than anything she explored with him, anyway. He wondered how An’ Lawrence felt about that. He was such a traditionalist when it came to boosting the power of the sword with magic. As far as he knew, Rosette and Zero were the only students he worked with in that way. He doubted he would get a chance to learn it from him any time soon.

The tension between him and An’ Lawrence had increased proportionally to the time he spent with Kreshkali. The more they were together, the harsher he became. Could he be jealous? The thought made him smile. In any case, Teg still trained with the sword students, and they were grim workouts when An’ Lawrence took the class. Grim but instructional. Teg sometimes wondered whose benefit the sword sessions were really for—him or the Sword Master. That man’s biases were getting in the way of progress, and he told both Kali and Hotha so.

Kreshkali had suggested it was a mirror. He had to think about that. He shook his head and carried on. Today was different. No need to brood over these details. He would be spending this entire glorious day with his mentor, if all the signs added up. She’d asked him to pack a few things and he suspected they were going on a little trip. He breezed through the temple doors, the scent of cedar, sandalwood and fresh coffee greeting him. So far his apprenticeship was the best time of his life.

Of course it was challenging, and Kreshkali was tough on him, exacting, but he loved the work. The readings she set and the discussions that followed opened his mind in ways he’d never dreamed of. It was like a whole new world. And the magic she taught was different from the Lupin mind spells he’d perfected in Los Loma, Gaela. Kali’s lessons made him feel indescribable joy, and the energy went both ways. She was equally keen to explore the
Lupin earth magic. He shivered.

There was something else he found indescribable, something that took him over when he was in her presence. It made his head spin and his heart pound. It made him want to point his nose towards the moon and yowl, *Kreshkali!* He strode down the hall, his bare feet silent on the carpet. The library was in sight. She would be waiting—his mentor, his queen. He would not be late.
EARTH & GAELA—TIME: FORWARD
CHAPTER 20

‘You’re brooding,’ Kreshkali said.
Grayson glanced at her before returning to his work. If he ignored her, she might go away. She didn’t. Instead, she leaned over his shoulder—not his favourite placement for any onlooker—studying the drawing board in his lap. His stomach grumbled. Would he come poking his nose in her grove when she was brewing a spell? Certainly not.
‘What’s that, Kali?’ he asked.
‘I said, you’re brooding.’
‘I’m not brooding, woman,’ he answered, rubbing out a section of the sketch and redrawing it. ‘I’m concentrating. This is my work. It takes focus.’
Kreshkali exhaled forcefully. ‘I know the difference between concentration and mood,’ she said.
He turned to her. ‘I imagine you would.’
She chuckled. She put her hand on his shoulder and gave it a squeeze. ‘You want to tell me what’s up?’ she asked.
He ignored the question, rubbing out the line again and redrawing it in a higher arc. The image was captivating and he wanted to get it right. The wings needed to be able to carry the beast’s weight, be capable of more than just short hops. It had to be able to fly. The woman who commissioned this tattoo was very specific.
Make it real, she had said. Make it as if you have met this being in more than your dreams.
She called it Ishtar’s Lion and spoke of it as one would a lover, or a god. He didn’t know if this creature existed anywhere in the many-worlds, but he had seen a life-size sculpture of it in the plaza of Treeon Temple. It stood guard in the eastern corner—a winged lion with a long tail and sharp claws, crouched to pounce, or perhaps take flight. They called it something else there, but he didn’t remember the name. He intended to design it as authentically as he could imagine, though, as ‘real’ as he could picture it when she described it to him. What an intriguing notion—a winged lion.
‘Grayson?’
He put down his pencil and pointed towards the waterskin. She passed it over. Kreshkali would linger until he gave her his full attention. He might as well do it now so he could actually get some work done when she left. He took a swig and wiped his mouth. The only thing she could have been there to discuss was Rosette, and there was no point pretending that topic didn’t worry his mind. ‘She’s been gone a long time,’ he said.
‘Maybe, Grayson, and maybe not. We don’t know how fast or slow time is moving for any of us.’
‘It’s not going fast for me, I promise.’ He traced his finger along the edge of the lion’s shoulder. ‘I thought she would be back by now, or at least would have sent a message. It’s been half a year, for me.’
Kreshkali gave his shoulder another squeeze and sat down. He shifted along the narrow bench, releasing tension as she leaned against him. It was a comforting gesture, and he allowed it.
‘I thought we would have heard something by now as well,’ she whispered. ‘Not much we can do but carry on, though. The bright side is, she may have only experienced a few days of absence herself not all these months.’
‘Or it might be many years for her. She might be living her whole life out in another world, away from us. I can’t…’ He let his thought trail off.
‘If that’s true, then she and Jarrod aren’t meeting with much success. Or they can’t get back. I don’t think it helps to dwell on either of those possibilities.’
He nodded, taking another drink. ‘Do you know where they were called to?’ he asked. ‘Or what the problem was?’
She shook her head. ‘I know it was urgent. They were away within hours.’
‘I remember. I didn’t even hear about it until after they’d left.’ He rubbed his forehead as if trying to shift a heavy weight. ‘Can’t Scylla communicate with Drayco? Would she have heard something?’
‘I’d have told you if she had, but there’s been no word through the corridors. Too much time and space between. The mind-links don’t often transmit that far, even with the temple cats.’
Grayson returned to his work. ‘Nothing to do but wait, then,’ he said.
‘For now.’ She stood up, again looking over his shoulder. ‘That’s a spectacular Lamussa. Where’s it going?’
‘Lamussa! That’s the name. Over the heart, between the breasts, wings extending towards the collarbones.’
Kreshkali whistled. ‘It’s amazing. Who’s it for?’
‘I don’t know. One of yours, I presume.’
‘I would have remembered that, if I’d been told. When did they commission it?’
‘That’s the strange thing. They haven’t yet, at least not in person.’
Kali tilted her head, waiting for him to continue.
‘I got the image, and the instructions, in a dream. It was as clear as clear. I actually saw the lion, alive and well
at her side, growing up out of thin air as she described it.’ He got shivers talking about it and noticed she did as well.
‘When is she coming?’ Kreshkali asked. ‘I want to meet this woman.’
‘Two days’ time, on the new moon, first light.’
‘I’ll drop in.’
‘My door is open to you, Kali.’ He smiled. ‘You’d walk through it anyway, though, wouldn’t you?’
She bent down and kissed his cheek. ‘To see this go on, I would. If I can, I’ll come, but…’
Grayson searched her eyes. ‘You won’t be here, will you?’ He didn’t wait for her to respond. ‘You’re going
after Rosette?’
‘I plan to check a few things out,’ she said, breaking eye contact. ‘I’m going to talk to an old friend. I may not
be back in time.’
Grayson studied her face a little longer. ‘Witches’ business, I see, and I’ll be none the wiser for my questions.’
He stood to embrace her. ‘It’s best kept that way, for my own sake I think, but if you catch word or glimpse of
Rosette…’
‘I’ll come straight to you, I promise.’
He kissed her lightly. ‘I’ll be here.’

Nell studied the undulating fence line that spread for leagues either side of the gate. The imposing wrought-iron
staffs with spiked tips reminded her of a thousand island spears, standing sentinel over the baked red earth.
Fortunately, the entrance was wide open and unguarded.

Strange people. Why have a barrier and then leave it unattended? Her temple cat sent her the message as he
rubbed his cheeks on the edge of the gatepost.
‘Not unattended, Torgan.’
The feline tasted the air with his mouth half open.
‘It’s being watched,’ Nell said. ‘We must be mindful too.’
Nell wasn’t fooled by the outward show of welcome. There was a spell on the entrance, clear as the faint blue
light it emitted. She caught a glimpse of it at the edge of her sight, like the rustle of a mouse. Only this was no tiny
creature with a corn kernel in its cheek. The feline’s hackles went up.
‘Not to worry.’ Nell smoothed them down. ‘These people don’t know it yet, but we’re allies.’
You mean they’ll help us get Corvey off the Dragon Bone Chair?
‘Precisely.’
And we will help them.
‘Them or us, it’s one and the same.’
One problem, Nell.
‘What’s that?’
There are no other temple cats here, save one, and it’s not Drayco.
‘Rosette’s not about?’ Nell asked.
Not without the black. We must have come to a different place, or…The temple cat sat on his haunches staring
into the distance, eyes unblinking.
‘Different place or what, Torgan?’
Time.
Nell frowned. Corridor travel was still unfamiliar to her. Others had tried it when one of the ancient portals had
been discovered near Treeon years ago, but none of those explorers ever returned. Corvey had banned it and she was
beginning to guess why. Had they spent their lives looping through time or did they find a world they couldn’t
leave? ‘You say there’s a temple cat here?’
Only one. That’s so strange.
‘Can you vision him?’
Her. Of course. She’s different.
‘How so?’
She’s smaller, very light-coloured coat with…no tail!
‘No tail?’
None to speak of. She’s linked to someone important, though.
How important? Nell sent the question silently, tilting her head to listen to three ravens flapping in an apple tree beside the gate. They fell silent when she stared at them. She pointed a long tattooed finger in their direction. ‘I’m watching you, black birds.’

One of the ravens opened its beak and let out a raucous call. It was immediately repeated by the other two. *There may not be other temple cats, but I see three familiars already, Torgan.* She faced the ravens. ‘Why don’t you tell your mistress I’m here instead of squawking about like old hens?’

The ravens screeched as they shot off towards the distance. They disappeared into the haze, leaving a single black feather floating on the breeze. It drifted towards the ground in front of Nell and she caught it, holding it at an angle until it turned an iridescent blue-green. She smiled, marking their line of flight. ‘That would be the direction we need to go,’ she said, stroking the top of Torgan’s head. ‘Can you communicate with this important familiar? Will she talk?’

That’s the problem, Nell. *She’s bombarding me with questions. Wants to know where we are from and how we got here.*

‘Aggressive?’

Not at all. Curious, though. Excited. Torgan lifted his paw, licked it and proceeded to wash his face. *We seem to be a novelty,* Nellion.

‘We can use that to our advantage.’

Yes and no. *Your identity will cause some confusion.*

‘How’s that?’

It appears you are already here.

Nell rubbed the back of her neck. Time paradoxes were not her forte either. ‘And you? Are you here too?’

Oddly, I’m not.

‘This is going to be an interesting afternoon.’

I don’t think we’ll be able to blend in.

Nell shouldered her pack and gave the feline a playful nudge. ‘We won’t have to, if I weave the magic right. You fancy being a mongoose?’


‘That’s the one. Are you ready?’

I don’t mind.

They strode through the open gates, displacing a palpable wall of energy. Nell winked at Torgan and wove the glamour, transforming the temple cat into a healthy young example of genus *Herpestes* and changing her own looks to that of an island girl from Rahana Iti.

Nice, Nell. I like it. Torgan flicked his tail and bounded ahead.

Jarrod stood at the edge of the snow-covered expanse, his breath making puffs of fog in the still air. The sky was pale turquoise, tinted by a glacier that jutted into the valley like a frozen lightning bolt half a mile high. Beneath them was a lake, ice-solid, framed with bare trees and drifts of snow. As the sun emerged from the eastern hills, it sent yellow rays over the landscape making the ground sparkle like sugar in a crystal bowl. His face lifted and he whistled out over the valley. ‘Beautiful, isn’t it?’ he said. ‘What a landscape.’

Selene gave the view a cursory glance before shoving her hands into her coat pockets. Her lips were grey, her face tight with fine lines. Ice formed in her hair and eyelashes. Her skin turned white as the blood drained from her extremities. ‘Just grand,’ she said through chattering teeth. ‘I hope I live more than a few moments to appreciate it.’

He looked her up and down. ‘You cold?’

I’d like to spit at you for asking, but it would freeze before getting past my lips. Don’t you have any feelings under that thick skin? Any sensations at all?’ She nodded to Shane. ‘He’s worse off than me.’

Shane trembled, unable to speak. He was rubbing his hands together and stamping his feet.

But this is so beautiful. Jarrod couldn’t imagine how the sheer awe would not forestall their discomfort, at least for a few moments. It had his, though a chill was starting to seep in.

‘We can’t stay,’ Selene said. ‘Not dressed like this. We’ll freeze to death.’

Shane sank to his knees.

‘You’re right. Insensitive of me. Let’s go.’

Jarrod took one last look at the valley. ‘This is amazing, Rosette, but way before our time—a prehistoric Gaela by the look of it. What were you thinking about when you touched the Entity?’ He chuckled, looked back at the portal. ‘Rosette? I know you hate the cold, but stick your head out a moment and take it in. You won’t regret it.’ He
smiled, waiting. ‘Rosette?’ His boots scrunched snow as he returned to the crevice, peering into the depths. ‘Rosette? Where are you? Drayco?’

His only answer was the slow drip of water from the stalactites framing the mouth of the portal, fangs guarding a dark gullet. He scanned the area. Nothing. Not this again.

‘I haven’t seen either of them,’ Selene said, her arm around Shane, guiding him. ‘Not since the black gates.’

She stumbled into the crevice, let go of Shane and blew into her hands. The bard slumped to the ground, his head on his chest.

‘Fey demons,’ Jarrod said. ‘Get him up.’ He hauled Shane to his feet before Selene could respond. ‘You can’t give in to it, man.’ He slapped his face. ‘Come on. That’s it. You’ll be warm soon.’

‘He’s never been able to tolerate the cold,’ Selene said, rubbing his arms, her hands vigorous against his body.

‘How would you know what I can tolerate?’ Shane said through clenched teeth.

‘It’s simple. You’re constantly spouting them off, all your likes and dislikes. Mostly the latter.’

‘Spouting off?’ Shane pulled away, shivers contorting him.

‘I can give you an example, if you like.’

‘Please do. I find your interpretations ever so fascinating, though utterly fictitious.’

‘Good!’ Jarrod said. ‘Nothing like a brisk argument to warm everyone up.’ Jarrod left them bickering. Shane’s colour had improved, and Selene was actually glowing. He turned away and closed his eyes. He had more pressing concerns. Where was Rosette?

The corridors were acting strangely, launching them off in all directions, landing in unpredictable places. He frowned. The integrity of the links between the many-worlds mustn’t fail. The corridors were like the skeletal structure of the universe. If they collapsed, everything else would follow. Everything. A big bang in reverse.

The Entities were sentient firewalls. An incursion could send them haywire. But would it make them skip through time like this? We are back in an ice age—a million years in the past. He winced. Or the future?

He wondered if it could be a rogue traveller causing the anomalies—someone without the key-codes in their DNA. A tracker from ASSIST might be the culprit, or some stray witch. Could any still be wandering the worlds, looking for him and the Richter line? He tuned into the links between the portals, but found no error of alignment. And no trace of Rosette either, nor a hint of which direction she might have gone.

He touched the plasma field, focusing his intention on Kreshkali, on Earth. Hopefully, Rosette was headed there too, but the way the portals were shifting, he couldn’t be sure of any destination now. He needed to find Rosette and they both had to sit down with Kreshkali, or Nell, and get to the source of these missteps.

‘Where was that place?’ Selene asked.

‘Corsanon,’ Shane said before Jarrod could answer. He’d stopped shivering, his face now flushed.

‘You know it?’ Jarrod asked.

Selene crossed her arms, waiting for the answer.

‘I’ve been there, with Rosette. It was warm as summer, though, and…’

‘When?’ Both Jarrod and Selene asked at the same time. One was a question, the other an accusation.

‘Just before we met up with you,’ Shane said. ‘We’d escaped the Treeon guards and galloped east for three days.’ He turned to Selene. ‘We had two of the best horses I’ve ever seen. You’d love their gait, so smooth…’ His voice trailed off. ‘What’s wrong now?’

‘What are you talking about? Their gait so smooth? You can’t even ride.’

‘I can. Rosette and I had plenty of time for…’

‘Plenty of time for what?’ she asked.

Shane threw up his hands. ‘I would have thought you’d be happy we escaped.’ He kicked the ground and turned his back to her. ‘What could it possibly matter to you about me and Rosette anyway?’ He spun to face her.

‘You ignore any efforts I make to engage you. I don’t know why I bother any more.’

‘Ignore you, do I? And what overtures have you actually made? I don’t recall any at all.’

He cleared his throat. ‘I aim plenty of attention your way.’

‘Aim would be the proper word, wouldn’t it?’ she said, her eyes rolling.

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘You don’t know? Let me explain.’ She pushed up her sleeves. ‘You detonate your energy, Shane, shooting it rapid-fire like I’m some kind of quarry you’re trying to run down. How’s that supposed to make me feel?’

‘It clearly doesn’t make you feel anything. Besides, the subtle approach doesn’t work.’

‘Subtle? Shane, there never was a subtle approach. How else can I respond but to rebuff you? I’m not a rabbit in the underbrush.’

Shane blinked his eyes. ‘I don’t think of you that way,’ he said.

‘How do you think of me, then?’ she asked. ‘I’d really like to know because you never…’
‘Excuse me.’ Jarrod interrupted them. ‘Can you two continue this later? We’re here.’ He extended his arm towards the entrance of the portal.

‘Where have you brought us this time?’ Selene asked. She hooded her eyes and strode past Jarrod, leaving Shane behind.

‘I’m not sure, but it’s definitely warmer.’ Jarrod took in the landscape as he followed her out. ‘I’d say we’re getting close now.’

‘Close to what?’ Selene snapped. ‘This doesn’t look near anything at all.’

‘Wrong spot?’ Shane asked, catching up.

‘Slightly!’ Selene pointed her finger at Jarrod. ‘I showed you an alternative portal on Tensar so we could solve a mystery on my world, and you take us gadding about on your little friend’s heels.’ She crossed her arms under her breasts, fingers gripping her biceps. ‘And here we are in another land clearly not anywhere in the vicinity of…’ She looked left and right. ‘A single thing I recognise.’

‘Selene?’ Shane edged towards her.

‘What?’ She turned on him, making him jump back. ‘I suppose you think this is fine. Can’t wait to see her again, can you?’

While their argument faded into the background, Jarrod looked the other way. The environment was lush, green and sultry, buzzing with honeybees, small birds—and something else. He closed his eyes. Something larger. There were two bleeps on his internal radar, dots in the distance, making their way towards him. Now we might be getting somewhere. He raised his hand to alert the others. They didn’t notice.

‘That’s what you say, but how do you explain the end results?’ Selene drove the query, her face inches from Shane’s.

‘I don’t have to explain anything to you, first marshal or not.’

‘Would it matter if you did?’ she asked. ‘I expect…’

‘Quiet.’ Shane suddenly hushed her. He stared into the distance. ‘Someone’s coming.’

‘So you’ve noticed?’ Jarrod asked.

A woman approached, walking towards them at a leisurely pace. She wore a long green dress, black laceup boots and a light, open robe. A temple cat strode beside her. Selene’s hand went to her sword.

‘Why didn’t you pick up on her?’ she asked Jarrod.

‘I did.’

‘You could have warned us.’

Jarrod chuckled. ‘I couldn’t get a word in.’

Nell watched from her vantage point behind the brambles, her lips stained purple from the sweet berry juice. Not far off, a man and a woman argued. The woman’s face was red, her hands gesticulating. The man backed away, keeping her at arm’s length. He looked familiar.

Torgan? Do we know him?
He was with Rosette. Played flute, remember?
Ah! Shane…That seems so long ago now.

Shane argued with the woman while the other man ignored them both. He stood with his eyes closed as one viewing the inner landscapes of the mind.

The hairs on Nell’s arms rose suddenly, and Torgan bristled. Something brushed her consciousness, like a sweep across her cheek. It was gentle, soft, but enveloping like a breeze that rushes into a house when you first open the window. She looked closer at the other man. His eyes were still closed. You felt that, Torgan?

I did.
Can he see us?
Not unless he has third vision.
Men don’t.

I know.
Nell swallowed. It feels like he’s staring right at me, touching me.
If it feels like he’s staring at you, Nellion, then he probably is.
It doesn’t make sense.

Unless he’s not what he appears to be.
She gripped the feline’s neck. Torgan, this is it.
The one in the message?
It could be no one else.
She’d been lost in the corridors for what seemed like years, and she was coming to the conclusion that no matter how much insight she gained about the past, or the future, none of it would change her situation back home. The curious note she’d found in Rosette’s pack, with its set of instructions addressed to Nellion Paree of the Dumarkian Woods, had remained a mystery. Until now. This could be the man that the message spoke of, the quantum sentient Rosette had expected her to know.

She drew in a long breath. Before finding the letter—the one written to herself by herself, the one that she didn’t remember composing—she thought it was somewhere ‘out there’ that things had to be manipulated. Now that she’d glimpsed the many-worlds first-hand, she knew it wasn’t. What she was searching for was right here where she stood, and she finally comprehended what had to be done. Nell staggered, tightening her grip on Torgan’s neck. The realisation struck hard.

Her desire to remove Corvey from his authority over Treeon Temple had not dissipated, though at times it was pushed back while a more pressing concern took hold. Travelling the corridors had a strange effect on the mind. It often rearranged things—memories as well as priorities. Her old world didn’t fully exist for her any more—a world that must be manipulated by external efforts, plans and strategies acted out with the aid of others. She was immersed in another reference now, one that transcended the ordinary boundaries of time, space, and conventional reality. She didn’t know if she would find her way back to her Dumarka, or if Corvey would even be in power any more—or yet—when she got there. And if he was, or was not, would it really matter? In the expanse of the corridors, it was a grain of sand in the Mobbie Desert. And now that she’d found Jarrod, there were other grains of sand to trace, other priorities. She felt them sting her skin.

Eyes open, Nell. He watches.

‘He’s definitely spotted us,’ she whispered to her familiar.

And he is the one?

She stepped out from behind the brambles, still holding a handful of blackberries. She popped another into her mouth, purple juice trickling down her thumb. ‘Only one way to find out.’

And how’s that?

‘Introduce ourselves.’ She laughed. ‘Come on, Torgan. Time to make new friends.’

‘Where do you think we are?’ Rosette asked, turning in a full circle.

A refuse dump? Drayco sneezed. This place reeks.

‘He doesn’t seem to mind,’ she said, pointing to Fynn. His nose was sucking in scents like a bellows.

He wouldn’t. He’s a canine, remember?

‘I do.’

And this place?

‘I don’t think it’s a dump.’

The valley below poured out of a long funnel-shaped landscape. It rushed away from her feet, tumbling down towards the city below. The sloping ground was nearly bare, spotted here and there with strange trees, their trunks dull and twisted, their hoary branches tangled like an orphan’s hair. It might have been an orchard once, but it was more a graveyard now. Dry stocks of grass jutted up in clumps. The ground was grey and cold, the smell sour.

Fynn had dashed straight out of the portal, sniffing the turf and squatting to pee before continuing on his olfactory investigations. He started to run towards the township, doubling back the instant Rosette whistled. ‘Not so fast, little lad.’ She reached down to stroke the top of his head. He sat on her feet. ‘Let’s assess the situation first.’

He doesn’t understand why we don’t run down the path. Says there’re new scents—peculiar scents. He wants to explore. Drayco’s voice was warm in her mind, a temple cat’s chuckle.

‘Peculiar scents, eh?’ She patted Fynn again. ‘All the more reason for caution.’ Rosette took in a deep breath and licked her lips. She wouldn’t classify the air as peculiar; the predominant smells were much like a tannery—decidedly chemical. They left a tingling feeling on her tongue and made her eyes water. ‘Curious,’ she said, tilting her head. ‘This reminds me of something I can’t quite recall.’

Me too, and I don’t like it.

‘Maybe it’s a medicinal plant.’

Or paint thinner?

She scanned the valley down to the rooftops, looking for the source of the thin, metallic scent that made her senses cringe. It certainly wasn’t coming from any flowers or growing vegetation. The place was as barren as the gates she’d just left behind, spattered with a similar array of dead wood.

I don’t sense any inhabitants, Maudi.

‘There must be,’ she said. ‘And plenty of them. Look how tall those buildings are. Like towers.’
High rooftops glittered in the pale sunlight, rising over dark streets. The closer buildings were pushed together in a hodgepodge fashion as if little thought had been given to their construction or overall design—elongated rectangles shooting up to scrape the skyline. She was certain they did not practise the ancient Earth art of Feng Shui here. It was much too haphazard and cluttered for that. Beyond the old buildings appeared newer structures, their organisation more streamlined. Each shape, corner and line was a carbon copy of the next, though the height and breadth varied from thin to very narrow, tall to soaring. All were tinged dull shades of grey, like a charcoal drawing left out in the rain.

Drayco was right. She detected no signs of life. Nothing moved on the streets. Nothing rustled in the dead grass. A wan yellow light touched her hands, though she could not see the sun. There were no clouds—the light obscured by haze. The place was silent. ‘Where are the birds?’ she whispered.

The trees lining the track were ghosts, leafless and brittle, though it did not feel like winter. It didn’t feel like spring or summer either. There was an absence of season around her, the air void of the rich aromas that proclaimed the time of year—the pungency of grazing cattle, wet grass and herbs, ducks on a lake, feathered nests. There was nothing like that here. No taste on the breeze, save that strange tang of an alchemist’s laboratory. The sky was empty, the ground barren and silent. It felt like an alien place. She gripped her sword hilt, taking comfort in its cool familiarity.

‘Do you recognise any of this, Drayco?’ She reached out to touch her familiar, her hand searching for his head. She couldn’t feel him. ‘Drayco? Where are you?’

I’m still inside.

‘You may not need to come out. I don’t think I want to stay.’

She whistled to Fynn, who had wandered again, nose to the ground and tail wagging. He trotted back and she scooped him up into her arms, mesmerised by the scene in front of her. It was like looking at a photograph—a picture taken and then all the life erased.

Maudi? Something’s wrong.

‘I agree. On second thoughts, maybe we do need to investigate. The portal brought us here. It could be important. Come on. Catch up.’

That’s just it. I can’t.

‘Sure you can. Walk on through the crevice. It’s not that narrow.’

Maudi, I can’t walk through. Something’s pushing me back.

‘What are you talking about?’ Rosette felt a chill wash over her. She turned around to the portal, but as she faced the gap in the rock wall, it disappeared. Where moments ago had stood an entrance to the corridors, there was now sheer cliff face, a barrier of shale and rock higher than her head. She dropped Fynn to the ground and pressed her hands against the rock, brushing dust aside, looking for a seam. She checked the path to see if she had wandered further away from the exit point.

‘Drayco?’ She became frantic as she raked her fingers across the wall. ‘Drayco, can you hear me?’ she shouted. ‘Where are you?’

Fynn jumped at the wall, barking, hackles up.

Both of you, calm down. I’m right here.

Fynn sat and whined, his tongue lolling out, panting. Rosette continued swiping dirt and shale away from where she thought the entrance should be. ‘I can’t find the opening,’ she screamed.

Maudi, can you hear me?

‘I can, but…’ She tugged at roots that got in her way, her fingernails filling with dirt as she attacked the cliff.

Easy, Maudi. It’s only a wall between us, not a universe.

‘I’m not so sure.’

Her breath came in gasps as she searched the cliff face. Sweat beaded up on her forehead.

Stop, Maudi.

‘I can’t. I can’t get back. I can’t get to you.’

Fynn sat next to her, howling.

Maudi, think about what we can do, not what we can’t.

‘Like what?’ she shouted.

We can still link minds. What else matters? Everything is going to be all right.

‘It doesn’t feel that way to me.’

Take deep breaths, Maudi. You sound like you’re choking.

‘I tried a deep breath. It didn’t help.’ She was wheezing, and sweat trickled down her temples, mixing with her tears. Her heart felt like it was caught under a stampede.

Easy. Breathe slowly and deeply.
Rosette took a long, exaggerated breath.
And again. Play with the idea that it is something different than what your mind thinks it is. Come on. You can respond to this any way you like. Is panic the best choice?
She bit her lip, letting her hands fall to her sides as dust from the cliff face settled. Fynn dropped to his belly and whimpered. She took another deep breath and let it out. ‘Not really.’
So choose a different response. Frantic only creates more frantic.
She let the tension in her shoulders ease. She drew in another breath and let it out in a long, slow whistle, like a kettle on the boil. A breeze cooled her damp skin. Her breath started to smooth out. ‘All right. I’m okay now.’

Good. Can you see me?
‘That’s my problem, I can’t even…’
With your inner vision, Maudi?
I’m checking. Rosette closed her eyes, allowing her inner sight to rise, extending her awareness out towards the rock wall. The blackness startled her. ‘It’s blank…impenetrable.’
I’m here, Maudi, and I can see you with my mind.
She wrinkled her nose.
I’ll give it another go. She closed her eyes again, pushing through the obstruction of granite. She saw it first as porous, then it thinned until it became transparent, a film of shadows. Finally it dissipated completely and Drayco came into sharp focus, standing in front of her, his tail snapping. She smiled. I’ve got you now. But you don’t seem to be taking your own advice. Are you okay, my lovely?
His tail stopped whipping about, though his ears were pinned back and his hackles up. Fynn barked a throaty challenge.
Behind, Maudi! Men approach.
Rosette turned to find three men charging up the track, headed straight for her.

I think they are. Short rifles. Like ASSIST. Watch out.
She studied the group. Their pace quickened—they were clearly not out for leisure. One was shouting, directing what sounded like a question to her, though Rosette didn’t understand the language. Their garb reminded her of the guards at ASSIST. They all wore the same clothes, dark uniforms that concealed their bodies completely. Their hands were gloved and their faces were obscured by lenses and helmets. As they approached, she readjusted her appraisal—two women, one man.

Drayco was right. They didn’t have swords at their sides but were armed with short metal hand weapons—like the laser guns used by ASSIST troops, only smaller. She weighed up the options and slowly released her grip on her sword, moving her hands away from her sides and up into the air.
What are you doing, Maudi?
There was no time to weave a spell, and her instincts told her not to fight, not yet. I’m going to see what they want first. No need to draw blood.
I’m not so sure.
Call Fynn back for me, can you?
Down, pup! Drayco’s voice was deep and booming. Stay still.
She smiled at Drayco’s clear enjoyment of the command, letting the approaching group think the expression was for them.
Fynn is still, the pup sent back, his mental voice small. Fynn is scared.
It’s all right, little one. We’ll figure this out. She kept the smile on her face. Keep it light and easy, she thought.

No threat here. The words calmed her, but her head was spinning.
They stopped several feet in front of her, weapons sheathed, but the man’s hand hovered over his. They stood like people who had spotted something wrong and knew just how to fix it. ‘What’s that?’ he asked, pointing his weapon at Fynn.
Rosette didn’t fully catch the words with their strange accent, but the question was obvious. Fynn understood it too and showed his fangs.
‘Don’t mind him. He’s just a pup,’ she said.
‘State your name and ID.’ The voice came from the woman closest to her. It wasn’t friendly, but the gestures were unmistakable.
‘I am...’ Rosette hesitated as she began to form her reply. Suddenly, she was uncertain how to answer. It felt as if an invisible hand had reached into her mind and pulled the plug, draining out all current and relevant facts. Her sense of self started to disappear. It whirled like water down a pipe, blurring into a stream of colourless recollections, all racing by too quickly to discern before they were sucked away. Her name went first and then her familiar’s, followed by any memory of why she was here or what the young dog was doing at her feet. ‘My name
is…’ She rubbed her forehead. ‘I mean, I’m called…’

A second guard stepped forward, a man with a sharp-edged aura. She could see his eyes behind the lenses as they stared at her. Like his face, they were dark and penetrating. He glared unblinkingly, and as her memories disappeared she thought she recognised him for an instant. It was like the tail end of a thought—something that vanished before it made any sense. What was it about him? He was so like someone she knew. She reached out her hands as if to keep from falling. There was a question she wanted to ask, someone to call to for help, but she didn’t know that name either, or where they might be.

Maudi? What’s happening? I can’t see you any more.

What was that voice inside her head? She loved the sound of it, longed for it in some unimaginable way. She couldn’t place why. A word started to form, then vanished before she could shape it. The guard stepped closer. She had to do something—and fast.

‘Hand over your weapon,’ he said, nodding towards her sword. ‘Unless you can produce your ID and permit right now.’

‘Weapon?’

She looked down at her side as if noticing the long black scabbard and ornate hilt for the first time. The guard reached out to grab her, pointing his gun as he did. Instinct took over—a force of nature inside her, violent as a storm.

Of its own volition her right hand drew her sword, a thin blade designed for a single cut that gave no warning. She dropped to one knee and carved the air in a semicircle over her head, taking out the man’s hand weapon and his fingertips with it. He stumbled, clearly not anticipating her response. His face blanched as he snapped back his hand, realisation slowly registering as blood pumped from the stubs.

Instantly she boosted her blade with her inner strength, a potent magic, the energy knocking him to the ground with a backhand slap, aiming to disable, not destroy. ‘If you’re smart, you’ll stay there,’ she said, ducking to ward off the short club that came out of the woman’s belt and was lowering towards her head. It struck her side as she leaned away, a winding blow. The next slice of her sword came so fast it blurred the air. She cut left, slicing the club in half just above the woman’s gloved fingers. Taking her sword in both hands, she held the blade high, boosting the tip with energy until the steel turned iridescent blue. The second woman had her weapon drawn and aimed at Rosette’s chest. She fired just as Rosette turned the blade side-on. The deflected ray shot back up the guard’s hand and the woman dropped her gun, screaming. The canine beside her let out a savage growl, lips pulled back, white fangs bared. It hurled towards the nearest guard.

A searing heat shot past Rosette and the young dog fell to the ground mid-launch. It didn’t move again. The next thing Rosette felt was cold metal against her temple.

‘Raise that weapon again and I’m going to lobotomise you. Do you understand what that means?’

Rosette froze, shifting only her eyes to look at the man who held her point-blank. Blood seeped from his fisted hand and saturated his sleeve. His jaw was locked, eyes steady.

Maudi, don’t fight them now. Just go along and we’ll figure this out. I’m with you. I can hear you. You can hear me. It’s all right.

There was that lovely voice again. It sounded worried. Well, why not? Even if it was her own schizophrenic demons talking to her, they had good cause for concern. She lowered her sword, pulling zaps of energy back into her solar plexus as she did.

She wanted to respond to the voice inside her head. It felt like someone close, someone she could trust, but she was having trouble linking words to thoughts. Like pages lit with a match, her mind was being incinerated, turned to char before she could read the words. Who are you? she asked the voice in her head.

I’m with you, Maudi. It’s okay. I’m just on the other side.

In the blackness that followed, she felt hands, hard and rough, buoy her up. Voices shouted at each other. More joined in. It meant nothing. The language was completely foreign again and the effort to listen took her last flicker of strength. She let out her breath, rolled her eyes up into her head and slipped away.
Everett didn’t know how long the com unit had been blinking. His head had been so deeply buried in his studies, the flashing red light hadn’t registered. He checked the readout code and flipped on his monitor.

‘Kelly! There you are!’ A three-centimetre-square image of the admin operator shouted into his headset.

Everett enlarged the screen. ‘What’s up?’

‘You’re the kid on call, aren’t you? We’ve an emergency coming in.’

‘What is it?’

‘You think they tell me? Just get yourself to Trauma, stat. You’re the only one around.’

‘What about Hass or Richards?’

‘Out of the building.’

‘I can’t run it without an attending.’

‘They’re buzzed, on their way. If I were you, Kelly, I’d hurry. They’re having fits on this side.’

‘Which port?’

‘Trauma One. If you jump now, you can meet them at the doors.’

Everett scrambled out of his chair, a shooting pain going through his head. It felt like someone had clobbered him. He shook it off and bolted from the reading room. He ran down the hallway and into an elevator just before the doors closed. The numbers overhead flashed in descending order before coming to a halt on the ground floor—trauma Level One. He charged down the hall, a fellow med student thrusting protective gear into his hands.

‘Are they here?’ he asked. His breath came in gasps as he donned cap and mask.

She tilted her head towards the main entrance. ‘Just coming in now. They got hung up in traffic—lucky for us. I was sound asleep.’

A med tech rolled the gurney through the double doors. Another tech was astride the patient, doing chest compression.

‘What do you have?’ Everett asked, falling into step with them. He indicated the main trauma room; a path opened before them as people jumped out of the way.

‘Female, of unknown age, name or origin.’

‘What do you mean, unknown?’ Everett interrupted. ‘Scan her.’

‘Did that already. No ID.’

‘Impossible. Scan her again.’

‘I’m telling you, we did. She’s blank.’

‘No microchip?’

‘Like I said, no ID.’

‘Could she be a feral?’

He shook his head. ‘Too tall, and too clean.’

‘Where was she found?’

‘Back lots.’

‘Be specific, please,’ Everett said.

‘The back edge of the North Sector.’

‘She was in the prohibited ring? How can that be?’

The med tech glanced at Everett’s name tag. The letters were small, as they were for all the medical students. It was one of Admin’s subtle ways of reinforcing hierarchy.

‘Mr Kelly, is it?’

Everett nodded.

‘You’re fifth-year, aren’t you? The attending is on the way?’

‘What’s your point?’

‘You’re asking the wrong questions. We aren’t here to solve a mystery. We’re here to save her life. She’s down and unresponsive. If I were you, I’d be focusing on that.’

Everett grabbed the gurney, shoving the other man aside. ‘I need a history,’ Everett said, his voice cool. ‘And her point of origin is imperative to that history. Are you going to give it to me?’

The med tech raised his brows. When they turned the next corner, Everett veered to avoid a collision with an oncoming group of nurses.
The tech caught up. ‘All I know is she was called in by a security detail,’ he said in a rush.
‘Conscious at the time?’
‘When they first spotted her, yes. Conscious and fighting in the most arcane way. Two of the wounded guards are right behind us.’

Everett looked over his shoulder. ‘Really? Wounded guards?’
‘One’s lost a few fingers; the other has cracked ribs and facial paralysis.’
‘How?’
‘She carried a weapon—a sword. Knew how to use it too. Like in the old cinematics.’
‘You’re kidding. A sword?’
‘Saw it myself. She also had a mammal with her.’
‘A what?’ Everett’s mouth hung open.
‘Yeah, shocked us all. I think it was canine, but I’d have to look that up.’

Everett turned his focus towards the patient. Her long black hair was tangled with twigs and bits of grass. Her face was pale yet clear. Not a pockmark on her. Couldn’t be feral. It didn’t add up. ‘Heart rate?’
‘She was tacky at 190 when I got her on the monitor, then flat line, decreased breath sounds bilaterally and pupils dilated, unresponsive to light—no accommodation.’

‘Treatment?’
‘We started a saline drip, and administered oxygen en route.’
‘Been doing external cardio for twenty-five minutes,’ the woman astride the gurney said between compressions of the patient’s chest.

‘That’s it?’

The emergency team came towards them from the opposite end of the hallway. Everett motioned them into the trauma room and they assembled, ready to run the procedure, looking to him for instruction. This was his final year of medical school. He had only a few months to go in the trauma ward and he’d be a doctor, fully fledged. He was confident he knew what to do, but was still meeting with resistance from the tech. How hard was it to give a quick and concise history? Just because traumas of any kind were rare didn’t mean they should be this difficult.

‘You didn’t shock her?’ he asked as they came to a halt alongside the stainless steel table in the centre of the room. ‘Didn’t give E-lites? Retropulse?’

The medic grabbed his wrist. ‘Unknown origin, Kelly. No chip. You heard me, didn’t you?’

Everett snapped his arm back. ‘I did, but…’

‘You know the rules?’
‘Of course. No ID: DNR, donor status only.’

‘That’s right, and when I last checked DNR meant do not revive. I follow the rules.’

‘I see that.’ Everett motioned to the med tech to stop compressions as they transferred her to the table. The nurses hooked his patient up to the monitors and he saw for himself—flat line, no cardiac activity. Respiration nil. Brain activity, nil. ‘Tube her.’

‘DNR?’ the med tech said.

‘DNR, unless there is a crime involved. Judging from that guard’s missing fingers,’ he said, nodding towards another gurney wheeling by, ‘there is.’ He leaned forward. ‘Positive oxygen, six litres.’

‘Your call, Kelly.’ The tech shook his head.

‘Thank you,’ Everett said. ‘They’ll want her awake for questioning. Stand back.’ He listened to her chest, eyes widening as he noticed an image embedded in the skin of her upper arm. An elegant creature, mammalian, possibly feline, with the tail circling her bicep. His hands trembled. Where was this woman from? ‘Let’s wake her up, people. Ten ccs E-lites, IV,’ he said, keeping his voice steady. ‘Get dialysis going. I want her blood cleansed and filtered in the next five minutes.’ He checked the wall clock. ‘And I want her heart back online, stat! She’s no good even to Donor like this.’

‘Like what?’ A nurse frowned at the flat line.

‘Dead.’

‘Is that possible?’

‘Apparently.’

‘Paddles?’ a fellow med student asked, charging the crash cart.

‘Do you know how to use them?’

‘I’ve seen tutorials.’

‘Then shock her!’

The nurse hooking up the intravenous drip set let out a squeal. She leaned towards the patient’s body.

‘Look at that.’
There was another image on the woman’s leg, going from the back of her knee to the top of her hip—a snake?
‘How real does that look?’ the med tech said.
‘I wouldn’t know. I’ve never seen one, and neither have you.’
‘Well, she has. She had an animal with her.’
Everett studied her arm. ‘She’s been outside the borders,’ he said, keeping his voice calm.
‘How can you be sure?’
‘No injection scars.’ He turned to the woman entering the room. ‘Lena, get a message to Isolation Unit. Level Ten precautions.’ Goosebumps covered his arms. He continued to treat her, alternating cardiac stimulants with electric shocks, but there was no response. A half-hour passed.
‘Are you going to pronounce her dead?’ the medic asked.
‘Of course not.’
‘She looks dead to me.’
Everett turned to the man. ‘How would you know what death looks like?’
Everyone around him paused for an instant, the heart monitor alarm cutting through the silence. The tech backed away, gathering his gear and signalling to his partner to follow.
‘Clear,’ Everett shouted. ‘Where’s the attending?’ He shocked her again. ‘Get her and Richards! I need help, stat!’

Rosette felt a sense of relief, warm and comforting. As the fractured images in her mind merged into coherent scenes, the confusion she had experienced earlier gave way to a clear sense of self. She had no idea where she was, but she knew her name. She was Rosette de Santo, a witch of Treeon Temple, daughter to the High Priestess Kreshkali and Sword Master Rowan An’ Lawrence. She also knew the sound of her familiar’s voice, purring in her mind. Drayco?

*Here, Maudi. I’m right here.*

Her whole body sighed. It felt light, as if she was floating—a curious sensation. She checked her senses, trying to follow the line of her arms and legs as they extended out from her torso. Nothing. Her body was like mist, and she hovered over a deep valley. She couldn’t feel anything, yet she was definitely alive. Her inner sense of self confirmed it, but, like a dreamscape, her physical self felt nonexistent, or perhaps wrapped in layers of cotton wool.

She reached out, but there was no feeling of fingers, nothing to wiggle and no sense of touch. She couldn’t stretch her back or flex her muscles. Her hair didn’t fall over her shoulders and down her arms. There was no contact of air or cloth against her skin, no tightness as she tried to clench and relax her jaw. No feeling of teeth. She tried to blink, to open her eyes wide. Her lids wouldn’t budge. There weren’t any.

*Can you still hear me, Maudi? Are you awake?* Drayco’s voice felt nervous, like a cat scampering across the kitchen table when the light’s flipped on. Something had gone wrong. She slowed her stream of thought for a moment, wanting to laugh at herself. *Wrong* was an understatement. Drayco! *I’m fine, more or less. Where are you?*  

Oh, Maudi. You didn’t know me. You didn’t answer me. I thought you couldn’t hear me.

It’s all right. I’m here now, lovely. Where are you?

Still stuck behind the wall.

What wall?

The corridor wall. Remember? I couldn’t follow you into this world.

She wanted to widen her eyes and leap. *My sword! Where is it?* She glanced around. There was nothing to see.

*I remember drawing my blade. Fighting. Then everything went dark. Where in the demon’s pit am I?*

You’re still in that world. I’ve been trying to get to you.

But I did fight, didn’t I?

You did.

How did I go?

It actually went rather well, considering the weapons they had.

What weapons?

They shot you with a lightning bolt. I think it disrupted your neuro-pathways.

My what?

You know, the pathways of electrical impulses transmitted through the central nervous system.

Drayco, where did you get such words?

I’ve been listening to the doctors and med students.

The what?

The healers. Maudi, you’re not breathing. You need to do that now.
Funny. I feel like I am breathing. I feel fine.
Your body’s not breathing. Your heart’s not beating either. I’m concerned.
My heart’s not beating? Oh, that’s no good. She focused on her lungs, trying to fill them with air, wondering
why she wasn’t desperately hungry for the stuff. It didn’t seem to matter. Breath or no, she felt fine—light and easy.
I don’t know what we can do for your body, Maudi, but I think you can get out.
I have a feeling I already am out, Drayco. She could sense the temple cat pacing.
Maudi, I’d like it if you would try breathing again for a bit and see what happens. You can always go back to
not breathing if that doesn’t work.
All right. She returned her focus to her lungs, doing everything she could to expand her ribcage and draw in a
breath. It’s not working, Dray. Nothing’s working.
Plan B then.
Which is?
Get you back into the corridors and we go for help.
How do I do that? Do you see a way? A door? A crack or crevice? I think I could squeeze through just about
anything right now.
Her familiar didn’t answer immediately. I don’t see any opening.
She tried again to breathe, to move, to shout. Kick her legs. There’s nothing here. I can’t feel my body, or see
anything in this fog. Can you tell me what’s going on?
It’s hectic. The healers are working on you.
Not doing much of a job, are they?
We need help, Maudi. I’m going for Kreshkali, he answered back.
You can’t. The corridors won’t run true without my key-codes. I have to come too.
Maudi, you may not remember this, but the corridors haven’t been running true for quite some time, with or
without your key-codes. By the way, if you’re not in your body, you don’t have the key-codes anyway. I’m going to
risk it.
I’m coming with you. She heard purring in her mind and felt something like a spontaneous smile. You can’t
pretend that thought doesn’t please you.
I don’t pretend. But someone needs to guard your body, the key-codes in your DNA. You’d be leaving them
behind. That isn’t wise. Jarrod could be lost. We need help.
Wait a moment. She tried to turn inside her skin—to move, to breathe, to speak. It felt like pushing against a
void. She gave up. I want to see for myself what’s happening, Dray. If I can only open my eyes.
Rosette turned her attention to the dense film that obscured her vision. She pushed past it, focusing her inner
sight, letting go of her notion of physical perceptions and activating something else—a different mode. The haze
began to dissipate, slowly replaced by a bustle of energy below. She was elevated, looking down on a stainless steel
table.
It was surrounded by people working on a body, though she didn’t actually see it. The perception felt more like
watching a dream while it was still happening. The treatment was violent. She wanted to stop the healers, but made
no move. Extending her energy closer, she recognised her own face looking blankly towards the ceiling—staring
through eyes that saw nothing at all. That explains a few things…
They were shocking her heart with jolts of electrical currents, firing fluids directly into her veins and blowing
air into her lungs. There were tubes coming out every which way—from her arms, her throat, her belly. Dark blood
flowed from her abdomen into a spinning vat. It whirled around in circles and went, as far as she could tell, back
through a vein in her leg. You call yourself healers? You’ve nicked my serpent tattoo!
They seem to have other priorities, Maudi.
I don’t! What are they thinking, defacing my totem?
The tube down her throat was attached to a bag, like a blacksmith’s bellows, and someone was using it to force
air in and out of her lungs. The mechanical rise and fall of her chest was the only movement, save for when they
discharged the electrical shocker through her heart. When that happened, her whole body arched, convulsing for an
instant before falling back to the table.
A man was in charge. He was young, stressed and surrounded in an aura of purple edged with muddy brown.
No wonder he was not able to help her. He needed healing himself. She moved her energy closer to him, offering a
whisper of curiosity and concern. His aura jumped, turning a brilliant violet that expelled the murky undertones. She
reached out to him, like a child to a flower. You are going about this the wrong way, she whispered.
His head turned towards her, eyes seeing past. What was that?
So you can talk to me. Good news.
He looked around; no one noticed his confusion.
What’s your name? Rosette asked.
The word Everett came to her before he formed the thought. Everett? That’s nice. She said his name slowly, as if they had all the time in the world.
I’m hearing voices now? Lack of sleep, no doubt. I’m going mad.
Not madness. I’m real, and, Everett, I don’t know where you learned your healing arts, but this is all very cart before the horse.
Cart? Horse? Who are you?
Rosette de Santo, a witch from the Dumarkian Woods.
I’m hallucinating.
If so, it’s a shared experience.
I don’t understand.
For now, just pretend you aren’t hallucinating. I’m real and you need to listen to me.
What?
You need to take a different approach. Your emergency measures are making my body uninhabitable.
He looked up at the clock, sweat trickling down his temple. He shouted ‘clear’ again and everyone stepped back from the table. Her body jolted as the paddles shocked her.
That’s not working. You’re trying to revive my body when you really need to give me more energy.
Energy?
Mine’s badly depleted. Can’t you see that?
What I see is a cardiac failure on the table and a minor schizoid episode in my head.
Great. So now I’m some kind of minor episode? Everett, jump-starting my heart and cleaning my blood won’t help. I need more energy. Don’t you know anything about healing? We are energy beings. You’re treating me like I was blood and bone.
‘Last heparin?’ Everett asked aloud.
‘Fifteen minutes ago.’
‘Give one more. Resume compressions.’
Rosette watched as one of them rammed her chest like it was a tyre pump. This isn’t the way. Look, he’s cracked my ribs. That’s going to hurt like demons when I get back in, you know.
Who are you?
I explained all that. Please. Just stop this nonsense and boost my energy field with your magic. That will fix it.
Even if I could give you energy, I wouldn’t know how.
Sure you would. You do it all the time.
Explain.
You’re flooding me with stress and anxiety right now. Everyone is. You could start with giving me a boost of something a little lighter—more nourishing. The fear in here is making me close off. Actually, I’m totally disconnected from my body now, so if you can come up with a different methodology quickly, that would be grand.
Like what?
Joy, for example. Bliss. Are you familiar with those terms?
Joy?
Can you think of something that makes you happy?
I never think like that when I’m working.
And you can see how effective it is. Zilch. Everett, give it a go. Just think of one good feeling. Otherwise, I’m dead.
He didn’t respond but shouted ‘clear’ yet again, ordering more injections—using words she didn’t know.
Bother him, Dray. He’s not listening.
She floated away, a balloon slipping out of a toddler’s hand. Rosette watched the scene from a mountain-top perspective. They were like ants below, busy with tasks, industrious but ineffectual. When they stopped, only a drone sounded. It came from a monitor displaying a single flat line.
No one moved. They were transfixed, staring at her body.
What’s the problem now, Dray?
I think they’ve given up.
Everett cleared his throat, his voice a scalpel slicing the air. ‘Time of death…’ He paused to look at the clock.
‘11.07.’
That’s it, Dray. Let’s go.
Maudi?
My body’s dead. I can’t get back in.
Come to me, Maudi.
She focused her energy on her familiar and instantly was by his side. I'm here, Drayco. Can you see me?
I can't see you, but I do feel you. He purred. Let's go get Kali. This is salvageable yet.
But my body? The DNA. What will happen to it?
They put them on ice. It'll be all right. We'll get help and come back for it.
You know an awful lot about this place, Dray.
I've had nothing to do but watch and listen. This way, Maudi. We can find Jarrod too. If nothing else, he can teach you how to make a tulpa.

Good plan.
She focused on the sound of her familiar’s voice and shot after him. They travelled some way before she stopped.
Oh, crap. Drayco, I forgot about Fynn? Where is he?
Sorry, Maudi. They shot him. He's gone.
Shot him? With an arrow?
With a bolt of lightning. Then they froze him.
Oh no. Her heart sank as she followed Drayco into the corridors.

‘How long’s she been down?’ Everett asked. The voice in his head had gone but he was having trouble shaking the sensation.
‘One hour and ten minutes. Even if you get her back, her brain activity is nil,’ a nurse said.
‘I don’t think the Donor unit will complain,’ he answered. ‘Clear again.’
After another twenty minutes of resuscitation, Everett looked at Richards. The attending looked shocked, but she gave a nod. He put down the paddles and snapped off his gloves. His team fell silent and the drone of the flat line warning sounded through the room. He cleared his throat. ‘Time of death,’ he said. His eyes went to the wall clock. ‘11.07.’ The heart monitor’s alarm was like a death knell, one that had not rung in over a century. ‘Turn that thing off,’ he said, letting his gloves fall to the floor.
A nurse flipped the switch and clamped the IVs. Another pulled a sheet over the patient’s head. ‘What do we do now?’ she asked as everyone stared at the corpse.
‘Call Cryo, stat,’ Everett said as he walked away. ‘This isn’t over yet.’
What do you make of it, Teg?’ Kreshkali touched him on the shoulder. He’d been hunched over the chart all afternoon, taking notes and checking equations, getting reference books down from the shelves and bookmarking pages. There were stacks of them around him, like towers in a desert landscape. She’d watched his progress, flickering in and out of his mind, following his tracks as she worked on charts of her own. He was receptive, a quick study. The connection exhilarated her. He was every bit as astute as her last pupil, only there was something else—a charisma that kept her enthused no matter how long the tutorials.

It wasn’t that Teg’s magnetism was any more potent than Rosette’s— that girl was sunshine in a bottle. But Teg was not her daughter. He was male, through and through, whelped in the time of the Sea-goat. His energy was earthy and sensual, appealing in such a diffident way. Capricorn, the Sea-goat! Such depths.

She smiled. It was a complex and wily deity, the god of Capricorn. He could coincide with a rise to the heights of material ambition while simultaneously plumbing the depths of inner worlds and metaphysical thought—a mystic and a pragmatist embodied in one sensual, alluring and erotic body. Right now it was the erotic nature that intrigued her, though she knew better than to confuse the boundary between teacher and student, at least during the apprenticeship stage. She sighed. What made him enticing was his utter lack of awareness of her as a woman— either that or he had incredible control, an attribute also linked to Capricorn, but not known for its abundance in Lupins. Interesting combination. She laughed to herself. She would know.

‘Something funny?’ he asked, putting down his pen and closing the text. His dark eyes lifted to meet hers.

She whisked the query away with her hand, shielding her mind. ‘What did you discover?’

‘As a horary chart,’ he said, his voice smooth and deep, ‘it’s radical and fit to read. There is an answer here but…’

‘Go on?’

‘I don’t think we’re asking the right question.’

She lifted her chin. ‘Are you suggesting the chart knows what the “right” question is?’

He nodded, a faint smile forming on his lips.

‘How can that be? Any astrological chart is a representation of a moment in time, the interpretation made through a symbol system that derives meaning from planetary motions. How can it “know” anything?’

‘I take it that’s not a rhetorical question?’

His thought entered her mind in spite of her shield. It didn’t surprise her. *You take it correctly.*

‘Not just planetary motions,’ he answered aloud. ‘Precise and prescribed planetary motions that coincide with equally precise and detailed events. As above, so below…’

‘What do you mean by events?’

‘Inner and outer experiences. Every instance of time carries with it all the possibilities of that moment, past, present and future. The thought, the question, asked at a precise moment, contains its history, its current state, and its potential outcomes. In that sense, it contains the “answer”, which is simply an understanding of its essence. The two are inseparable.’

‘Excellent,’ she said. ‘Good work, Teg. Anything else?’

‘Such as?’

‘The reference to “knowing”?’

He shifted his weight. ‘It’s not so much about sentience as we understand it, but about synchronicity.’

She slipped into the chair opposite him and leaned forward. ‘Synchronicity? And what do we know about that?’

‘The man who formulated the notion.’ He frowned for a moment, staring at her. ‘Jung. Carl Jung. He used the term to describe the paradoxical occurrence of events that are tied together without obvious cause, yet linked through intrinsic meaning.’

‘Meaning? To whom?’

‘To the person experiencing it, of course. A kind of coincidence in time of two or more otherwise unrelated events that share a similar significance.’

‘And the operant word here?’

‘Time… and acausal.’
'That’s two words.'
'I need two. In horary astrology, time is what matters, but the frame of reference is meaningless without a deeper understanding of causality.'
'How so?'
'In Earth’s past, it was believed that reality was based on causal mechanics. They called it…’ He tapped the side of his head, thinking. ‘Newtonian! The principle of cause and effect that informed their notion of reality. Things that happened caused what happened next.’
'Example?’
'The sun rises; light appears. The moon orbits the Earth; the tides ebb and flow.’ He closed his eyes. I kiss you and you smile.
Kreshkali jolted. He hadn’t sent that last thought, but she caught it anyway. Or did she imagine it? She stared at his face until he looked up.
‘What?’
A trick of my mind, then. She ran her hand across the tablecloth, smoothing it. ‘Continue, Teg.’
‘A seed is watered; the plant grows.’
‘And in the astrological model?’ she asked, keeping her voice steady. ‘In magic and quantum theory? What informs causality in these disciplines?’
‘Causality takes a different shape, more like Jung’s synchronicity, though it was never widely accepted on Earth.’
‘Why not?’
‘Stuck on Newton, I guess. Paradigm shifts don’t come easy.’
He nodded. ‘And that’s how they said it, perpetuating another limiting belief.’
‘Why was it so hard to accept?’
He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. ‘In the synchronicity model, one event does not cause another but coincides or participates in a way that is meaningful. That was so far outside the mainstream, post-enlightenment persuasion, it couldn’t be grasped.’
‘Better.’
He smiled fully, showing even white teeth. ‘The problem with this chart, though,’ he said, turning to it again, ‘is that the moment in time and its synchronistic relationship to us is pure in essence, but when we translate it into our daily language, it falls short.’
‘What do you mean? The language is limited?’ she asked.
‘I think the language we use to frame our thoughts is imperfect; they all are. And in this case, it is unable to express the quality of the moment as we experience it. There is an answer here, but we aren’t asking the question.’
‘Are you saying our language is flawed?’
He shook his head. ‘Not flawed, but incomplete. Limited.’
‘In what way? Vocabulary, context, connotation?’
‘All those, but I was thinking more of hidden limitations.’
‘Which represent?’
‘The biases.’
‘Now we’re getting there,’ she whispered. She leaned back, taking a sip from her mug. The tea had gone cold, but she didn’t get up to refresh it. The sun was slanting in from the west, rays of golden light splashing over the table and landing on his hand as it held the edge of the chart. She studied his fingers, long and smooth, gracefully curved, holding the paper as if it were a flower, or a rare bird. She coughed. ‘What would those biases be, Teg?’
He kept his eye on her until the hairs on the back of her neck rose. ‘The obvious ones are social,’ he said, returning his attention to the chart. ‘The expectations and assumptions of our various clans and circles.’
‘Examples?’
His lips curled. ‘Propriety.’ He winked. ‘Particularly when in the presence of one’s mentor.’
She raised her eyebrows. ‘Interesting thread, Teg. What else?’
‘Gender issues.’ He held her gaze.
‘Historically or currently?’
‘Historically for starters. In Earth’s past, the denigration of women has been widespread. A few centuries ago things were changing for females—for both genders really—and a non-gendered equality started to form. That was before the wars and ASSIST-mediated controls. After that, the Hammer of Witches…’ He made a disgusted sound in the back of his throat ‘Was revived, sending humanity into the Dark Ages, again.’ He kept his eyes on hers. ‘How’d you ever survive?’
She straightened. ‘You don’t want to know.’
‘I do. Really.’
She flicked crumbs from the tablecloth. ‘Later, maybe. Please continue.’
‘On Gaela, it’s different—genders are equal, at least in the temples, though race is not.’
‘Interesting, isn’t it? On Gaela I come into my own as a woman and a witch, but there as a Lupin you’re considered as other.’
‘Everywhere I’m other,’ he said, his voice a whisper.
‘Not at Temple Los Loma.’
‘Sometimes.’
‘Never here, in my sacred space.’
He brightened. ‘No, not here…not with you.’
She drained her mug and stood. ‘Done and well done. Time for a break. You’ve been cooped up for hours.’
‘I don’t mind.’ He turned to the window; the sun was a deep red, merging with the horizon. ‘It’ll be a good night for hunting. No wind.’
‘The north hills?’
‘Aye. Join me?’
She followed his gaze. ‘I’d like that.’
His head turned slowly to her, the smile barely perceptible on his face. ‘Lead the way.’

An’ Lawrence studied his familiar. She paced under the palm fronds, her coat dappled by the noonday sun. *Scylla, my beauty, what’s wrong?* She didn’t answer, but her bobtail twitched.

*Are you sensing danger?* He asked the question softly, a gentle touch to her mind. It was like brushing up against a beehive.

*Shush, Rowan. I’m trying to hear him. It’s very faint. Very far away.*

An’ Lawrence stiffened. *Who’s very far away? Scylla?*

‘I thought you were going to make us some tea?’ Kreshkali said, looking up from her books. She blinked at An’ Lawrence, letting her eyes drift past him to his familiar. ‘What’s going on?’

‘Something’s up with Scylla,’ he said.
‘Can you be more specific?’

‘She’s trying to hear someone.’ He dropped his voice to a whisper. ‘She wants us to be quiet.’

They were in Kreshkali’s apartment, on the ground floor of Temple Los Loma, the southern side of the manor. The day was hot and the breeze did little to displace the thick air, even though the doors and windows were open. Heat waves wafted up from the ground and the potted plants drooped.

‘She’s going to pace a trench in my garden,’ Kali said. She moved to the kitchen and rinsed out the teapot.

‘Can’t she tell you who’s got her upset?’

‘Give me a minute.’

Scylla continued to stride up and down the length of the patio. Like a lion, her shoulder blades dipped and rose with each step, her nails clicking on the stepping stones. She held straight to her course until forced to weave around a large terracotta herb pot brimming with basil, coriander, mint and lemon balm. She stopped inches from the gravel pathway lined with flowing lobelia, turned back on her haunches and headed for her starting point. Back and forth, back and forth she went, the shade of the young date palms dappling her coat.

‘Anything?’ Kreshkali asked as she measured herbs with a small spoon.

‘All I get is that she’s upset, and straining to hear a message.’ He didn’t need to add that anything upsetting his familiar upset him as well. She would know. She had links of her own, some with creatures he’d never seen, but he knew she had them. He exhaled slowly, easing the tension in his neck.

Scylla suddenly sat on her haunches and tilted her nose at the sky. She let out a yowl that set every hair on his body standing on end.

Kreshkali dropped the teapot and it shattered on the tile floor. ‘What in a Watcher’s underworld is that about?’ she asked, staring at the feline. She picked up the shards of porcelain. ‘I’ve never heard her do that before.’

‘I have.’
‘When?’

‘Just after we stormed ASSIST.’

‘When Rosette was hit?’

He nodded.
Kreshkali stood up, her eyes unfocused.
‘Who are you talking to?’ An’ Lawrence asked.
She opened her eyes wide. ‘I was checking the borders. We’re secure.’
‘The Three Sisters?’ he asked.
‘And Teg.’
He looked away. ‘No one at the gates? No intrusion?’
‘We’re all right. It’s not Los Loma.’
‘Someone might be coming through the portal. Can you keep a watch there?’ he asked.
‘I’ve got it covered.’ She dried her hands on a towel. ‘Can’t you follow her thoughts, Rowan?’
‘Not yet. It’s too disjointed. I’m not sure she even follows them. She’s telling me to wait.’ He crossed his arms.
‘Who are you talking to now?’
‘No one.’
He held her gaze for a moment; her eyes were like steel. ‘It looked like you were talking to someone.’
‘Looks can be deceiving.’
He squatted at his familiar’s side. ‘Easy, my lovely. I can’t understand any of this in such a rush.’ He held her face in both hands, her white whiskers tickling his wrists.
‘It’s a message?’ Kali asked. ‘Has she heard from them?’
An’ Lawrence didn’t answer. He stood up, his face drained of colour.
‘She says she can hear Drayco.’
‘Where? The portal?’ Kreshkali’s head spun towards the open door. ‘Somewhere in the corridors? How’s that possible?’
‘I don’t know, but she’s communing with him now. Something’s happened to Rosette.’
Kreshkali leaned against the table. ‘I haven’t felt anything,’ she murmured. ‘Where?’ She lifted her head.
‘Where does she say they are?’
An’ Lawrence knelt in front of his familiar. He held her thoughts, locked in concentration, until the feline pulled away from him, yowling again, nose in the air, her bobtail twitching. ‘Kali, it’s not good.’
‘I can see that.’ She crossed the space between them and took his hand. Hers was cold and trembling. ‘Come and sit down,’ she said, leading him back to the table. ‘You’ve gone as white as winter.’
He slid into the chair, and buried his head in his hands. Kreshkali waited, sitting beside him. ‘Just let it flow, one thing at a time.’
He cleared his throat. Finally, his hands fell from his face and he exhaled. ‘Scylla thinks Rosette is dead.’ His eyes welled up as he spoke, tears spilling down his cheeks in the silence that followed.
Kreshkali bit her lower lip. ‘I don’t believe it,’ she whispered. ‘It doesn’t feel right. Where’s Drayco?’
‘He’s walking the corridors.’
‘Alone?’
‘It seems.’ He turned as Scylla came to him. She clamped her jaw around his forearm, bracing her hind legs and tugging. ‘She wants us to go find him,’ he said.
‘In the corridors?’
‘He’s close, she thinks, just one or two vibrations away.’
Kreshkali shut her eyes. ‘What is the message, exactly?’ Kali asked. ‘I want it word for word.’
Scylla, tell me again. Slowly. What did he say?
He said, over and over again, ‘Rosette’s body’s dead. I can’t get us out. Come help.’
An’ Lawrence repeated Scylla’s thoughts aloud.
Kreshkali didn’t open her eyes, but he could see them in rapid motion beneath the lids. ‘I don’t understand it,’ she said.
‘Nor I, but Scylla says we have to move—and quickly.’

‘Her body’s dead…’ Kreshkali repeated the words with differing emphasis, wiping her eyes with her hand. ‘Rowan, that’s it. She isn’t dead. She can’t be.’
‘Love, Scylla says…’
‘No! Rosette isn’t dead. It’s something else.’
‘What else could it be?’
‘I don’t know. Come on. Scylla’s right. Off to the corridors.’ She went into her bedchamber and returned with three backpacks, her cloak and her sword. ‘See to your weapon, Rowan.’ She nodded towards the door where he’d left his blade.
‘What are you doing, Kali?’
‘We’re going on a little trip.’
‘Where?’
‘To find Rosette.’
‘Of course, but she could be anywhere.’
‘That’s why we’re going to follow Scylla’s advice and be quick! What’s wrong with you? You’re stuck in mud.’

She swept away her books and papers before dropping the gear on the table. She pulled supplies out of the cupboards and filled the packs. While reaching for her short knife, she noticed the chart Teg had been working on. It had stuck to a damp spot on the tablecloth. She snapped it up before it was soaked. She looked at the symbols on the ascendant. Pisces—a mystery, an intriguing set of circumstances. Nothing as it seems. She closed her eyes, aware that Rowan hadn’t budged. Teg. Where are you now?

Stables.
Are the borders still clear?
As far as I can sense. What’s going on, Mistress? I heard Scylla yowling.
Come to my rooms, quickly. Bring your blade.
Danger?
She could feel him running as he spoke. Possibly. We’ve got to take a little trip and find out.
Where to?
I’m not sure yet. Hurry. She brought her attention back to An’ Lawrence, slumped in his chair. ‘We need more supplies,’ she said.

He lifted his head, nodding slowly. ‘Scylla keeps talking about ice.’
‘We’ll need warmer clothes, then. Winter cloaks. We don’t know what we’ll meet…and we need to be fast.’

She returned to the kitchen. ‘Demons, I wish Jarrod were here. Where am I going to find him?’

‘Kali, I know this is a shock, but we can’t dash off into the corridors without a destination and Scylla doesn’t have one.’

‘Drayco can guide us. She’ll be able to communicate clearly with him once inside,’ she said, moving around him.

He reached out, catching her arm as she whisked by. ‘Kali, stop. This doesn’t make sense.’
‘It doesn’t have to,’ she said, pulling out of his grasp. ‘We need to find Drayco and Jarrod and get to Rosette. What’s the problem?’
‘In all the worlds? In all the times? How are we going to find her? Think about it…’
‘Better still, you think about what’s going to happen to the many-worlds if we don’t find her!’ she said, turning on him. ‘We can’t lose track of the key-codes. We can’t lose Rosette.’

He buried his face in his hands again. ‘We already have.’
‘Stop it! You’re falling into a Scorpion hole, Rowan, and I need you to climb out. We’ve got things to do.’

He lifted his head, his eyes streaming tears. ‘Kali, you don’t send an army to a graveyard.’
She stopped. The silence of the room was broken only by a trio of caws outside. ‘You’re right,’ she said, raising her voice. ‘But you would send one to look for a lost child.’

‘We have no idea where we need to go. No heading, no coordinates,’ he shouted back at her, his fists hitting the table hard, making the crockery jump.

Kreshkali drew in a long breath and tossed him a smile. ‘Good thinking.’ She headed for her desk. She pulled out the ephemeris and glanced at the timepiece ticking on her mantle. ‘I’ll do a horary chart now. Can you finish the packing? We’ll all meet by the stables in ten minutes.’

‘All?’
‘It’s going to take more than just us.’ She waved towards Scylla, who continued to pace. ‘Send her to Grayson, will you? He’s got to come too.’

The feline bolted down the path before her sentence was out.

‘Grayson?’
‘Yes, thanks.’
‘That wasn’t me,’ he mumbled. ‘No one’s listening to me.’ An’ Lawrence rose, gripping the back of his chair. ‘Rowan, are you going to stand there in a daze or are you going to help?’ she asked without looking his way. Her head was bent over a list of logarithms, scratching calculations in her notebook. ‘This would be faster on the computer—but by the time we got to the library and fired up the generator, I’d be done.’ She looked at the table still cluttered with supplies. ‘How’s the packing going, Rowan?’
An’ Lawrence pushed back his chair, its legs scraping over the tiles. He strapped on his sword and tucked a short knife into one of the packs. Kreshkali put down her notebook and came up behind him, reaching up to rub the back of his neck. ‘Are you breathing?’ she asked.

He exhaled. ‘A bit. Kali, tell me, what are you planning?’

‘A rescue,’ she said, looking past him to the door. Teg wasn’t far off.

‘Scylla says Rosette’s dead,’ An’ Lawrence repeated.

‘I heard what your familiar said.’ She cut him off. ‘That’s why we have to move. You are swamped with negative thoughts!’

‘Kali.’ He turned around and clasped both of her hands, running his thumb over her long tattooed fingers. ‘Denial is a natural first response.’

‘And despair is yours?’ She pulled her hands out of his grip and grabbed her notes. As she slipped on her pack, there was a knock at the door. ‘It’s Teg. Let’s go,’ she said.

‘He’s coming?’ An’ Lawrence scowled, staring at her as if she’d invited a Corsanon warlord to accompany them.

‘Behave. I need a team, not a battlefield.’

‘I get that, but why do you need him? He’s only…’

‘My apprentice! And if you’d open your eyes, you’d see how brilliant he is.’

‘My eyes are open wide enough, thanks.’

She turned away. ‘Enter, Teg,’ she said. ‘We’re almost ready.’ She grabbed her winter cloak from the rack and let the young Lupin in. He was packed, armed and alert. He caught her eye and acknowledged An’ Lawrence.

‘Where are we going, my queen?’

‘On a hunt.

‘Rosette?’

‘Indeed. She handed him both charts and spoke aloud as they left her rooms. ‘We need to find Drayco, and we’ve got to send a call to Jarrod as well. Where’s Grayson?’ She spiked her hair off her forehead and flipped up her cowl.

‘Kali, what if Scylla’s right. What if Rosette’s dead?’ An’ Lawrence asked.

‘Dead? Teg asked.

‘She’s not. And if she is, she won’t be for long.’ She strode down the hall, boots clicking on the floor. Teg, do you remember the north portal?

‘Of course, Mistress.

‘Get Grayson from the stables and meet us there. We’ll be along shortly.

‘Horses?’

‘Not where we’re going.

They trotted down the entrance steps and the Lupin darted off without a sound.

‘We can’t let any other world get hold of her DNA, Rowan.’ She spiked her hair off her forehead and flipped up her cowl. ‘If we don’t find her, we’re lost anyway, Kali.’ His voice sounded empty. ‘She’s childless. The Richter line is finished.’

Kreshkali clapped her hands together, jolting him with the sound. ‘Nothing’s finished,’ she said. ‘Not if I can help it.’

The woman emerged from a tangle of blackberry vines, a sudden gust blowing strands of amber hair across her face. She walked unhurriedly, a graceful gait. The temple cat beside her was equally composed, his black coat rust-red in the sunlight. They stopped a few feet in front of Jarrod. She released a smile that made his breath catch. Selene and Shane drew their swords.

‘Disarming,’ Jarrod said, though the words barely escaped his lips. He waved the others back without taking his eyes off her. The breeze lifted the delicate material around her neck, a gentle sea rolling against the shoreline. Another gust pushed the mantle further aside, revealing a striking tattoo. He heard Selene gasp, though he made no sound himself. The image was Ishtar’s sacred lion, done in mosaic tiles of lapis, vermilion and gold. It covered her heart and its wings spread up to her collarbones, the very tips of the feathers appearing to ruffle in the wind.

‘Impressive,’ Jarrod said, returning her smile. He leaned forward, allowing his eyes to wash over the image, taking in the more subtle tones—yellow, mocha and moss edged with crimson—a fierce and compelling landscape between her breasts.

‘Thank you. You’re one of the first to see it.’
He straightened, pushing hair off his forehead. ‘It looks like one of Grayson’s.’

‘You know his work?’

‘He has a distinct style.’ Jarrod tilted his head slightly. ‘What brings you here?’ he asked. ‘Or is this a chance meeting?’

She didn’t answer, but Jarrod felt the gathering of a spell. She was shielding her mind, hiding something that had suddenly risen to the surface of her thoughts. He couldn’t grasp it quick enough before the block was in place.

Selene and Shane stepped up, their swords now level with the woman’s throat. They obviously felt the spell too.

Jarrod turned to them, shaking his head. ‘She’s unarmed.’

‘Perhaps she has no sword, but I sense other weapons,’ Selene said.

‘And that one is definitely well equipped.’ Shane pointed to the temple cat, who stared back at him, unblinking.

‘If the feline was going to attack,’ Jarrod said, ‘you’d already be on the ground.’

‘But not you, right, Jarrod?’ the woman said.

‘You’re right, Nell. Not me.’

The others frowned, lowering their swords and slowly sheathing them. Shane kept his hand on his hilt. Selene’s were planted firmly on her hips.

‘I wondered when we would meet,’ Nell said as she stroked the top of her familiar’s head. ‘This is Torgan, a Dumarkian temple cat. I don’t think you’re familiar with him. Nell’s voice was smooth, like water from a silver tap. The feline sat down and yawned, flashing white fangs and a red tongue for an instant before they disappeared, hidden behind a quiet face.

‘Can I ask again what you’re doing here, Nell?’ Jarrod emphasised the location, letting a smile escape with the question.

‘Do you mean here or now?’ She touched her lips with her fingers for a moment before adding, ‘Either way, I’ve been waiting for you.’

‘I was also hoping you’d turn up soon.’

Selene stared at them both, following the conversation from the sidelines. ‘I don’t get it. How do you two know each other?’

‘We go way back,’ Jarrod said. ‘Isn’t that right, Nell?’

The woman winked. ‘Apparently, though I was told of you just recently. Seems we’re quite close…in some worlds.’

‘I’m lost,’ Shane said.

‘Me too.’ Selene pushed back her hair when the wind flattened it against her brow. ‘Do you know each other or not?’

‘We do now,’ Nell answered, ‘and we’ve business to attend to.’

Jarrod stepped closer. ‘And what business would that be, Nell?’

‘It’s simple, really. I have information you need—something that’s going to solve problems on many levels—and there’s a minor task you can perform for me in return. I thought we could help each other out. Make an exchange.’

‘Bargaining, Nell?’ Jarrod asked. ‘That’s not like you.’

‘Just what she said too.’ Nell clasped her hands together, squaring her shoulders. ‘Get this straight up and clear. I’m not the mother and mentor of your travel companion. Not on my world and not in this one. I’ve only just met her, by chance as it were. There’s no parallel in my time—no Jarrod or Rosette.’

‘Nor is there a Torgan in mine,’ Jarrod interrupted.

‘But you have met Rosette, and me, for that matter,’ Shane said.

Selene and Jarrod both stared at Shane.

‘Indeed I have, bard.’

‘You followed them through the portal. Into the corridors?’ Jarrod asked.

‘Bingo.’

‘How did you manage that?’

‘Easy, really. The Entity recognised me, though no one else did. It was quite pleased, I think, to have me about, so I decided to do some scouting.’

‘What sort of scouting?’

‘Here and there, back and forth,’ she said, her lips parting in a smile. ‘I’ve been to quite a few of the many-worlds now—I’ve seen things first-hand even you may not be aware of.’

Jarrod hooded his eyes, calculating the myriad possibilities that would allow for a time and place where Nell knew neither him nor Rosette. He didn’t like any of them. ‘Get to the point, Nell. What do you want?’
‘I’ve got a major twist going on in my world…’

‘A twist?’

‘It’s more than inconvenient and I think it might be contagious. It might even be linked to the demise of your Earth.’

‘Demise?’ Selene said.

Nell gave a brief nod, returning her focus to Jarrod.

‘How so?’ he asked.

‘There’s a tyrant on the Dragon Bone Chair and he’s got control of all the temples across the known lands of Gaela.’

‘He?’ Jarrod interrupted. ‘Rosette said there was a High Priest in Gaela.’

‘That’s part of the problem.’

‘How’d it happen?’

‘Long story.’

‘We’ve got time.’

Selene stepped forward. ‘Hate to contradict you, but we don’t!’ She put her hand firmly on Jarrod’s shoulder, drawing him back. ‘There’s no knowing how long we’ve been away from Tensar,’ she said. ‘And we’re no closer to a solution to the…situation there. We’ve lost track of Rosette, and her familiar, and we don’t know where we are or how to get back—to my time or yours. The corridors are running like a back-alley crap shoot, and anything could happen. I’d say it’s not really the right time for long stories, wouldn’t you agree?’

‘That’s where I come in,’ Nell said, leaning forward.

‘Really? How’s that?’ Selene’s voice rang out a challenge.

The two women faced each other.

“You’ll need to listen if you want to find out,’ Nell said. Her voice was light, as if she was talking to a small child who didn’t quite understand.

Jarrod put his hand out as Selene reached for her sword. ‘Wait,’ Jarrod said. ‘Let’s hear Nell’s story. We need to make some choices and if she has a piece to this puzzle, I’d like to see the shape of it.’

Selene let out a huff. ‘I’ve no doubt she has something to offer, but I think the puzzle she’s working on is not the same as ours.’

‘That’s where you’re wrong, border marshal. There is ultimately only one puzzle, though we like to see it as many.’

Selene scoffed. ‘Witches’ riddles.’ She kept her hand on her sword hilt.

‘Come, Nell, let’s hear it,’ Jarrod said. ‘We’re listening.’

Nell stared at Selene, continuing her story only after the other woman took a small step backward. Jarrod exhaled. It was unnerving, conversing with this exotic woman, so strange and yet so familiar. She was like his Nell in some ways—her serenity and grace, her confidence—and she was like Kreshkali in others. Her voice had an edge, a quick-trigger survival instinct that made her unpredictable, ruthless and dangerous. She also had a quality about her that was wholly foreign. He couldn’t identify it, but it was there just the same. She brewed a potent spell that put him on tenuous ground. He’d need to watch out. There was more going on than she was telling him.

‘It started, long ago in my time, with a priest named Braxton Corvey. He was consort to the High Priestess Le Saint before she fell ill and passed over.’

‘No successor named?’ Jarrod asked.

‘That was the problem. It happened unexpectedly, after a riding accident. She broke her leg and infection set in.’ Nell’s tone changed when she said the word ‘accident’. ‘Corvey took her place, a temporary measure that became permanent.’

‘It wasn’t contested?’

‘At first, no one seemed to mind—he was doing a great job and it gave everyone freedom to mourn Le Saint while he ran things. She was well loved, and honestly, I don’t think anyone wanted her replaced, at least, not immediately. Corvey worked hard and, as it turns out, deviously. He extended his influence, first at Treeon and then across the temple lands from Bangeesh to Corsanon, even Timbali. His charisma united the people in a way that had never been seen. We all got swept up in it. There was no evidence of his treachery until he’d gained the highest power.’

‘He became regent over all the temples?’

‘Exactly. By then it was too late to contain him. He’d spotted his threats early and had taken measures.’

‘Put limitations on females, did he?’

She nodded. ‘It started out slowly, almost imperceptibly. He replaced all key mentors with his own clan, loyal to his ideals.’
‘Patriarchal, I gather?’
‘Somewhat.’ Her lip curled. ‘First, certain weapons were discouraged for the female initiates, and before long they were banned altogether. He’s got quite a spell cooking. It’s blinding everyone to the truth.’
‘No one challenged him?’
‘I wouldn’t say that.’
‘What would you say, then?’ Selene asked.
Nell let her eyes rest on the other woman. ‘No one challenged him and lived.’
‘More accidents?’
She nodded.
‘But not you.’
‘He’s tried a few times…’
‘You stay one step ahead?’
‘One or two.’ She smiled fully. ‘Comes easier now with a foot in the many-worlds.’
‘But you need some help waking up your Gaela? Breaking the spell?’
‘If you’d be so kind.’
‘I think that can be arranged, though first I have to…’
‘Find Rosette?’
He looked startled. ‘You know where she is? She’s in trouble? Why didn’t you tell me straight up?’
‘And toss away my bargaining chip?’
The trees darkened as the sun went behind a cloud. The wind dropped and only a single whistle from a distant hawk could be heard. Jarrod felt goosebumps rising on his arms.
‘Tell me what you know,’ he said. This time it was his voice that carried an edge.
Nell cleared her throat. ‘In the beginning, when I first stepped through the corridors, I followed her around—it was like an uncharted maze. It took time to get used to the twists and turns. She’s trodden some strange paths, some illusive, and some she would have been better off leaving be, perhaps.’
‘She’s taken a bad turn?’
Nell didn’t reply.
Jarrod rubbed his jaw. ‘Please go on.’
‘I’m not sure we would call it a “bad” turn. If it is, it’s the kind you can do nothing about.’ Nell wrinkled her nose. ‘Fine line, really, don’t you think?’
‘Again these riddles!’ Selene said. ‘I don’t think she knows anything at all.’
‘Wait,’ Jarrod said. ‘Wasn’t a request. What do you mean, Nell? A fine line between what?’
‘Between knowing or not knowing. Is it choice or fate? Is it “bad” or is it necessary?’ She touched the tender skin around her heart. ‘It doesn’t matter either way. I know what has to be done.’
‘It matters to me,’ he said, the fire in his voice rising again.
‘Let’s just say she’s on ice for now.’
Jarrod frowned. ‘Ice?’
‘She’s not going anywhere for the moment.’
Jarrod stood still. ‘I think you best tell me what you know, straight and clear, or I’m leaving all the chips on the ground where we stand.’
Nell sighed. ‘She’s gotten herself mixed up with a medic on another world—strange place. Very dark. Bad smell…a lot of rules. Why would people want to live that way? It’s crowded, bleak, and devoid of any pleasure as far as I can tell. Terrible climate. The population seems to be in a constant state of mourning, though they claim nobody has died.’
Jarrod’s eyebrows went up. ‘No deaths?’
‘Chip number one.’
‘And Rosette?’
Nell hesitated. ‘She’s reached a bit of a stalemate.’
‘Explain.’
‘That healer has her held up somewhere and isn’t keen to let her go.’
‘What about Drayco?’ Shane asked. ‘Surely he’s with her? He’ll protect her.’
Jarrod and Selene turned to look at him. He licked his lower lip. ‘Can you see someone getting past that beast?’ he asked.
‘That’s why it doesn’t make sense,’ Jarrod replied. ‘Between the two of them, they’re more than formidable.’
Nell shook her head. ‘Last I saw her temple cat, he was wandering the corridors.’
‘Alone?’ Jarrod’s voice was barely audible.
‘I didn’t see anyone else at the time,’ Nell replied. ‘Though we blood witches aren’t the only ones travelling these paths.’ She whispered the last sentence, but he heard it loud and clear.

‘Trackers?’

‘Perhaps.’

He felt his body give way, his knees buckling beneath him. In an instant several possible ramifications flashed through his mind at once, all of them threatening his life. Drayco would never leave Rosette. Even if things became extreme, she wouldn’t send him off on his own. Unless she was trapped? Injured? Dead? He thought he would be sick.

If Rosette was lost, so was he, and with him their branch of the many-worlds. Without her, he was mortal—his CPU, the key-codes, all that he needed to self-perpetuate, would be gone. Without her, without her offspring, the spell—Passillo—would unravel along with every one of the many-worlds they’d touched. The impact would be unpredictable though certainly devastating. The integrity of the corridor Entities depended on the spell. He shook his head. What would happen to Earth? Gaela? Was it happening already?

Yet it sounded like Rosette had stumbled upon a world that was circumventing death. That could be the key to Tensar’s imbalance, though she wouldn’t realise it if she never made it onto Tensar. The paradoxes rocked him.

‘Rosette!’ He screamed her name, and his legs gave way. If it hadn’t been for Selene’s and Shane’s automatic response, he’d have hit the ground hard. They grabbed an arm each and propped him up, one on either side.

‘Come on,’ Selene said in his ear. ‘Stay with us.’

His eyes fluttered as he lifted his head to Nell, who was still standing before him. She took a few steps back. He locked onto her, boring into her with his gaze. ‘Take me to Rosette!’

She faltered, and her familiar’s hackles went up. ‘There’s no rush,’ Nell said, stroking Torgan’s head until he calmed down. ‘Rosette, like I said, is on ice. We’ve got time to take care of these problems in their proper order.’

‘And what order is that, Nell?’ Jarrod pulled out of his companions’ grip.

‘My Gaela has to come first.’

‘Why?’

She cocked her head. ‘You’ll have to trust me on that one, Jarrod. All I can say at this point is there are wrinkles in a few worlds that need smoothing out and one must follow the other. I can help you, but you’ve got to help me first. The High Priest Corvey has to go. That’s not negotiable.’

While Jarrod kept his eyes locked with Nell’s, he became aware of the cool breeze on his face and the sun coming out from behind the clouds. It brightened the leaves of a nearby strangler fig and warmed the back of his neck. He also became aware of the many possibilities as he made instant calculations.

‘It’s a fair trade, really,’ Nell said. ‘What’s the problem?’

‘No problem,’ he answered. ‘We’ll go with you.’

‘Like dead demons we will,’ Selene said.

He turned to her. ‘I know what I’m doing.’

Selene snapped her mouth shut.

‘There’s something I’d like to check first, though, Nell,’ he said, softening his eyes.

‘What’s that?’

‘I’d like a small sample of your blood. Just a prick,’ he added when her pupils dilated. ‘It won’t hurt but a sting.’ He waited while waves of emotion washed over her face. Her mind shield faltered. It was just the chink he needed. He was in.

‘A little assurance that you’ll lead us to Rosette when the time comes,’ he said. ‘It’s not much to ask, under the circumstances.’

She lifted her chin. ‘Certainly, if it makes you feel better.’

‘It does.’

‘It doesn’t for me,’ Shane said, pulling Jarrod aside. ‘We can’t go with her, fight her battles. What about Tensar? What about Rosette? This doesn’t make sense.’

‘The best path isn’t always in a straight line, Shane. Believe me, we’re headed for both at the same time.’

Shane kicked the ground. ‘The best path is away from her, I’m sure of that.’

Jarrod turned back to Nell. ‘The blood.’

‘Get on with it,’ she said, holding up her finger. ‘Though what it’s for, I surely don’t know.’

Ah, but you do, my queen. You revealed that to me, if nothing else.
**EARTH & GAELA—TIME: FORWARD**

**CHAPTER 23**

**Drayco?**

*Here, Maudi, by the entrance.
It’s pitch dark. I can’t see anything.*

*You never could see well at night.*

*True, Dray.*

*What do they call that?*

*Night blindness.*

*That’s it. You’ve always had night blindness.*

*So it’s not just because I’m dead?*  
*I don’t think so, Maudi. It really is dark. You wouldn’t perceive anything even if you had a body.*

*You mean, even if I was alive.*

*Maudi, you are alive. Your body’s dead. There’s a difference.*

Rosette wanted to sigh. She felt the sensation, like an exhalation, a wash of relief, but she had no physicality to perform the action—no way to express it. *I don’t know how I’m going to get used to this, Drayco. This non-corporeal state.*

*It’s temporary, Maudi.*

*I hope so.*

She had no body, no connection to physical reality, and the strangeness threw her. It was beyond anything she’d ever experienced or, at least, beyond anything she remembered experiencing. Meditation, of course, was similar, as was astral projection, but the totality of her current state went further, much further. It felt like there was no going back. She didn’t know how to find peace with that.

Was it merely a force of habit, her desire to shrug, to exhale, to relax her shoulders, to let her head tilt to the side, to wink, to rough Drayco’s neck? Or was it more than that, a part of being? She wanted to feel the tension melt from her face, the fine lines around her eyes soften and then spontaneously crinkle again with a smile. She wanted to wrap her arms around her familiar and squeeze him tight until his tail lashed and she risked a swipe of his massive paw. She wanted to erupt into deep belly laughter and feel her heart pound against her breastbone. She wanted to cry, letting the well of emotion overflow from her eyes. She couldn’t do any of these things and the realisation caught her head-on.

*I’m dead.*

*Maudi!* Drayco’s voice snapped into her awareness. He’d been calling to her for some time. *Maudi! Think of what you can do, not what you can’t.*

*For example?* She knew she sounded sulky.

*Think of the freedom.*

*Freedom?*  
*Finally, you can keep up with me.*

*There it was again—the desire to laugh. But she couldn’t laugh, or sigh or cough or smile, or touch or hug.*

*What can you do?* Drayco asked again. *Focus on that.*

*I’m thinking…*  
*There’s a start.*

She thought of laughter. She could feel the energy behind the action and its essence. It was like looking at a map of a strange and foreign land—a realm she had never seen before, wasn’t prepared for, but now must travel. The map didn’t make any sense.

*Find a reference, Maudi. A point of entry,* her familiar suggested.

*He was so practical. She loved that about him. An astrological reference? Like what sort of transit this might reflect?*  
*Exactly. Drayco looked in her direction. I’m guessing Neptune?*

She exclaimed, but no sound came out. *Of course! Perfect! Neptune transiting in opposition to my sun. That’s it. You’re brilliant.* She felt her energy whirling about like a dust devil stirring up leaves. *Neptune rules the sea, a place where there are no boundaries. In Neptune’s world all the sharp edges, the lines that distinguish one thing*
from another, are blurred. He’s the god of immersion, the god of dance and ecstasy, boundless love and union with the divine. The god of enchantments and also deceptions. She felt laughter welling up from some deep place of awareness. I know I’m meant to let go of attachments and identification with material ‘reality’, but this is a twist I didn’t count on.

An interesting one, don’t you think?

Very. Neptune makes sense. Everything is dissolving, melting away, so I can see who and what I am without the props. Great goddess of the woods, I never thought of my body as extraneous. This gives me a new perspective on consciousness.

Indeed, me too.

It had been hours since they had left her body in the healing centre, and though she felt neither cold nor hot, or hunger or thirst, those feelings would have been welcomed for the familiarity they offered. She had the opportunity to find out who she was without them now. She wanted to take a deep breath. A wave of reticence struck. So I’m lost.

Not really, Maudi. You’re right here. It’s your body that’s the lost one.

She wanted to nod.

You’ll get used to it, Maudi.

Do you think so?

Drayco’s confidence made her feel stronger, though what part of her needed strength, she couldn’t tell. She was all energy now—liquid light—a spark of consciousness dwelling in the corridors between the worlds. As the reality of her condition settled over her, she felt the magnitude of this event.

We need to get back to Earth, to Kreshkali…or Nell, my Nell, not that Dumarkian Temple witch. She shook her head, but nothing moved. Jarrod’s got no backup now. My DNA, the key-codes, they’re all gone.

I know. Bit of an issue.

Understatement.

I’m talking to Scylla now.

You can reach her? How?

It’s faint, but I’ve got a message through. I’ve upset her, I think. I wonder if it came out right.

How can you be transmitting from so far away?

It’s you, I think. Your energy is like an amplifier. It’s boosting my signal.

Can you hear back? What did she say?

It’s not so clear…

Drayco must have moved closer because she sensed his tail snapping. She stilled her mind, knowing he wanted to concentrate on his connection with Scylla. She was surprised he didn’t shush her outright.

Maudi?

Did you make her understand? Rosette felt a rumbling energy waft through her as Drayco began to purr. They know what’s happened to me? An’ Lawrence? Kreshkali?

I’m not sure what they know, but they’re coming. We need to get to the portal under Half Moon Bay.

That’s where they’ll be?

Drayco waved his tail again. I think so, if we can just manage the correct ‘when’.

That’s not going to be easy.

Drayco’s energy shot towards her. Not if you say it like that, it won’t be.

You’re right. She felt another dust devil pivot her around. It’ll be a snap. We get there, just where we need to be, and exactly the right ‘when’.

That sounds better. Can you focus on them both—the ‘when’ as well as the ‘where’?

I’ll do my best. She felt his energy move off and concentrated her thoughts on the Half Moon Bay portal. When are we meant to be there?

Right about now will do.

She’d discovered the knack of keeping up with Drayco. She stayed focused, kept her eyes on him and watched where he went. Her energy would follow. What am I saying? I have no eyes. She laughed again, a feeling with no sound or action. Drayco? Do you think I’m going to be able to see…I mean, perceive anything when we get out of the corridors?

I wouldn’t worry about it too much right now. Whatever happens, it’ll be all right.

Okay. She remembered the feeling of a sigh. Good call. I won’t worry. She kept her attention on him, her energy hovering over his body.

At first she could only sense his whereabouts intuitively, but then a lightening in the corridors brought more distinction. She could see, or visualise, the outline of his back and long tail conspicuous against the background.
I’d be lost without you, Dray. She sensed wafts of energy coming from him. Are you laughing at me, black cat? You’ll have to admit it’s pretty funny.

How so?
Drayco’s rumble turned to purring; a purple aura flowed from his body in all directions. I’m as lost, he said, and as found, as I ever was.
The glow increased.
Me too, Dray. Me too.
She brushed past the Entity as they entered a portal, Drayco right beside her. The jolts of purple plasma engulfed her, filling her vision with indigo light. They settled into the recesses of the portal as a wash of colour sped by. When it stopped, she moved forward, keeping her focus on a shaft of light illuminating the edges of her vision. Beyond, it looked much like the sewers of Half Moon Bay.

On track, Maudi. Good work.
She had no idea of the when, though, and there was nothing to do now but wait to see if Kreshkali showed up. She did the closest thing she could to taking a deep breath.
It was a relief to make out the subtleties of hue, saturation and colour as the light increased around her. She loved visual consciousness and it was a blessing to get it back. Everything became clear in minute detail. The main drain was dark and rusty, strapped to the corrugated wall with brackets and tattered with fine holes, moth-eaten from erosion. The moss growing on it was a pale green. It turned vivid lime where sunlight beamed in from the surface. Algae clustered where water seeped from the walls.
Everything glowed—an aura of energy. Rock, walls, feline, moss, stone, gravel, drain—all had an energy field, and it was that subtlety of light that she could understand now more than anything else. The plasma of the portal Entity leapt towards her as she moved past, a caress. She stayed close to Drayco and explored the causeway.

Can you smell anything? she asked.
Are you kidding? He sneezed.
That’s a yes, I’m guessing.
Are you saying you can’t? Count your luck. It’s putrid.
I can’t smell a thing. Are you sure you’re not imagining it? Maybe they cleaned up.
Unfortunately, ‘they’ did not clean anything down here, whoever ‘they’ are.
Most likely ‘they’ would have been you and me!
Exactly. But these tunnels are just as rank as ever. He sniffed the air. I do pick up on rat, which might be a good time-passer.
Hungry?
Very.
I’m not.
Maudi, I don’t think the five senses are going to apply quite the same to you.
Forever?
I don’t know. For now.
Sorry, my lovely. I know you don’t. I’ll deal with it, I promise.
He sneezed again. I’ve got to hunt, and find fresh water.
I’ve got water in my pack...She automatically turned to look behind her.
It’s gone, Maudi. Everett Kelly has it.
In a whirl Rosette realised what she’d left behind. Drayco, we have to go back!
Back where?
Back to that other place, where my body is.
What?
My DNA. My blood. We can’t leave it for that man to examine. We don’t know how advanced they are. We can’t let them get hold of Jarrod’s CPU, the key-codes.
Maudi, we went through all this.
We did?
We’re meeting Kreshkali first. And I wouldn’t worry too much. They weren’t advanced enough to save you and there wasn’t anything wrong.
But that’s just it, Drayco. There’s nothing wrong with me. I shouldn’t have died.
But you did. Drayco sat and curled his tail close to his body, away from the drain.
Not by natural causes, Dray.
By what, then?
I don’t know. A spell maybe? It felt like we were being followed through the corridors.
Her temple cat stood up and shook. We will go back. Straight back. But first we need to wait for the others. We need their help. I couldn’t get into that world, remember.

I can’t wait. It was a mistake to leave that way. It’s what they wanted.

Who’s ‘they’ now?

I don’t know, but I’ve got to go. Rosette felt like she was trying to climb out of her skin—skin she didn’t have.

Easy, Maudi. One thing at a time. Let me get a bite and a drink, and then, if Kali hasn’t shown up, we’ll head back. We’ll figure out a way to get your body out of there.

With me in it!

That would be preferable, yes.

She wanted to rough his neck and kiss the top of his head. She wanted to feel the deep texture of his fur as she sank her hands into it and the thrill of his sandpaper tongue as he licked her arm. The sensuality that had been her vessel, her first contact with reality, was gone, and she had panicked. The fear was passing with the reassurance of her familiar. What would she do without him? Thank you, Dray. Go hunt now. I’m fine. I’ll wait here.

Are you sure?

I am. Pan has left me—the god of panic is banished.

Good. Shan’t be long.

His aura turned a dark red as he stalked down the sewer. Her heart’s desire was to follow, but she waited by the portal. Kali might come through. Would she know what to do? Would she sense her? Hear her? Rosette needed some way to let her sadness out, but she had no eyes to fill with tears, no body to weep.

Kreshkali stepped out of the portal, her long cloak billowing behind her as she strode into the sewers, her high-laced boots splashing in the water that pooled in the uneven concrete.

‘Can you see him?’ she asked, taking in the north and south aspects of the underground causeway. Tiny shafts of sunlight beamed down from manholes, illuminating the tunnel with intermittent spots. Murky water flowed along a central channel, but it didn’t reach the higher ground on either side. She was relieved. Sometimes these sewers were flooded, though now that the rains had backed off, there was more solid ground. She led the group up to a platform directly under one of the manholes.

‘Demons, it stinks down here,’ Teg said.

No one disagreed.

‘She’s found Drayco.’ An’ Lawrence tilted his head towards Scylla. His familiar dashed down the tunnel, disappearing around a corner.

‘What’s he doing?’ Kreshkali asked.

An’ Lawrence paused for a moment, his eyes losing focus. ‘Ratting, apparently.’

‘Ratting?’

‘That’s what Scylla says.’

‘Rosette’s lost and he’s having a picnic?’

‘I suspect he had to eat, no matter what’s happened,’ Grayson replied when An’ Lawrence didn’t. He stepped out of the portal. His hands were shoved deep into the front pockets of his fur-lined coat. His head lifted slightly as he scanned the terrain. ‘It felt different last time I was here.’

‘How long ago was that?’ An’ Lawrence asked.

Grayson’s face was pale and drawn. He cleared his throat. ‘Last year. Coming back from my first visit to Gaela, my holiday with…’

An’ Lawrence looked away. ‘With Rosette,’ he whispered.

Kreshkali stared at them both.

‘Stop being so morbid, you two. We’re here to find Rosette—to bring her back, not bury her.’ She threw her hands up in the air. ‘Do you think I would need all of you otherwise?’

No one replied.

Kreshkali paced, walking the distance of the platform in several long strides. Then she turned on her heels.

Teg? Can you go see what’s keeping the temple cats?

The young Lupin pulled his sword out of his belt and bowed as he passed it to her, scabbard and all. She suspected he felt more comfortable on four legs in this unknown space than two. It made sense. She slipped the sword into her own belt as he disappeared down the tunnel. His footfalls echoed back, turning from a two-legged pace to a three-beat lope.

‘Where’s he going?’ An’ Lawrence asked. ‘Did you send him off or…?’

‘Easy, Rowan. I asked him to check on the felines. That’s all. When are you going to drop the grudge? Teg had
nothing to do with that day on the plateau.’
‘That was more your doing, wasn’t it?’
‘Finally!’ She stopped pacing. ‘I’ve been waiting for you to get to this, though your timing is awkward.’
‘My timing or your response?’
‘Here they come,’ Grayson said. He laced his hands on top of his head.
Scylla and Drayco trotted towards them. They were being careful to avoid the deeper water, leaping over pools and sidestepping puddles. A black wolf loped easily beside Drayco, his coat luminous with grey highlights when he passed under the shafts of sunlight. Scylla avoided the Lupin, keeping to the other side of the big black cat. Within a short distance of the platform, the wolf slowed his pace, morphing in seconds into the form of a young man. His face was relaxed and sunny as he stepped out of the shock wave. He nodded to his mentor and leapt onto the platform.

_Thanks, Teg_, Kreshkali said to him privately. _I love watching you do that._

_My pleasure, Mistress._

She held his gaze for a moment before turning to the temple cat. ‘Drayco!’ She lifted her chin as she took in his approach. ‘You seem quite well, under the circumstances. I’m not going to waste time telling you how anxious we all are. What’s happened?’ Her glance went to An’ Lawrence. ‘I told you things would not be as dire as they seemed,’ she said to him with a sideways look.

‘Really? Then you haven’t heard what Scylla has to report, have you?’
‘How could I? You haven’t given it to me yet.’
‘I haven’t heard it yet!’

Drayco leapt on the platform as Kreshkali squatted down in front of him, ignoring An’ Lawrence. The feline rubbed his cheeks on her shoulder, alternating his left and right, rumbling a purr.

‘I’m happy to see you too,’ she whispered, grasping his neck and giving his head a shake from side to side. He yawned deeply and bow-stretched.

‘We’d better hear your tale now,’ she said, standing up and brushing dust and cat hairs from her long cloak.

‘You’re up, Rowan,’ she said. ‘See what Scylla can glean. I want to know what happened, in detail. And ask if…’

He waved her back. ‘I know what to ask. Scylla knows what to ask. Give me some room so I can translate.’

Kreshkali turned to the gurgling stream that rushed along the causeway, her fingers alternately clenching and relaxing while An’ Lawrence engaged with his familiar.

Rosette quivered. The portal was glowing, someone was coming through. She felt her connection to the Entity, even from a distance. When the portal opened, Kreshkali stormed out like a warrior into battle, An’ Lawrence and Scylla beside her. Their auras were similar, she noticed, a mix of reds and blues and purples, though her father’s was dark around the edges—in one of his moods, no doubt. Well, why not? His daughter was missing, possibly dead. It was a mood-worthy event. Kreshkali’s aura was rimmed in a corona of white light—spectacular. Rosette wanted to shield her eyes. She laughed at the notion.

Grayson followed, slowly, as if weighted down, restrained. His head was steady, but his eyes darted about, taking in the surroundings. His aura was a brilliant violet and orange—stunning to see—but he too had a blanket of darkness hovering around the edges, like fog trying to swallow up the sun. Her heart leapt at the sight of him. She felt a spontaneous smile lift her face, even though her face wasn’t there.

Another came as well—a young man, handsome and confident and…something else. He was different. What beautiful colours shone from his heart—shades of rose and gold and a blast of white light that made her mentally blink. He must be a new apprentice, though she doubted he needed much spiritual training. She could see immediately that he looked to her mother, not An’ Lawrence.

She noticed his sword. Her urge to see it, to touch it, to question him about its making, flooded her. Neptune transit aside, she was more than ready to get her body back. Finally, they were here to help. She called out to them all, directing her energy towards the platform where they gathered. It took her a while to realise that no one noticed. They were bent on finding Drayco. They seemed anxious that he was alone, particularly the Sword Master. She tried to shout at him, attract his attention, but slowly she grasped that they couldn’t sense her at all. In a moment, Scylla shot down the tunnel after Drayco.

Rosette focused on her familiar and sent him a stream of thoughts. **Dray? They’re here! They’ve found us. We can go now but no one’s noticing me. Oh, demons, now Kali and An’ Lawrence are arguing about something. Grayson looks depressed…but it’s good to see him. I feel so…Drayco? Are you listening to me?**

He didn’t answer right away. She guessed he was communing with Scylla and his mind was full. They’d be ecstatic at their own reunion. She couldn’t stop her thoughts, though. **It looks like Kali’s picked up a new apprentice, Dray. Whoa! You will not believe this! He’s Lupin! He just shifted. Heading your way. He’s with Kreshkali, so be**
nice. Please? He’s got a fabulous aura. Different from the others...like Kali’s really, when you think about it. Drayco? Are you there?

I’m here, Maudi.

Drayco, I can’t get their attention. They don’t respond to me at all.
Which is odd because I find your shouting quite pervasive.
She drew her energy back, like sucking in her breath. Sorry, lovely. I was excited.
Me too. Everyone’s here.
Everyone meaning Scylla?

He didn’t answer, but there was a buzz of purring. She spotted the two temple cats trotting back, their auras green and earthy, overlapping each other’s as they negotiated the drains. Scylla’s had an edge of red, and the Lupin, still on four legs, radiated an aura of such brilliance she felt rapturous looking at it. Now there was a deep soul—rich and magical. What a great place to dwell, that man’s heart.

A conversation was bantering about the platform, and she watched, her sense of joy and enthusiasm slipping away. Drayco, they think I’m dead.

Technically, Maudi, you are.

His response startled her. I’m not. I’m here. Tell them I’m here.
I think the problem is that your ‘here’ isn’t quite the same as ours.
But you can hear me. You know I am alive.
We’re bonded. Our link has always been mind to mind, so of course, with or without the bodies, we are still linked. We still hear each other.

She floated over Grayson, trying to speak with him, sending him her rushing thoughts like pouring cold water over his head. Nothing. She tried the others.

It doesn’t make sense. I’ve mind-linked with all of them at one time or another, but I can’t get through.
That’s because they ‘think’ you’re dead.
What do you mean?
It’s a paradox, Maudi. Tricky. They can hear you, with effort and proximity, and you them because you have a mind-to-mind link, but their minds think you’re dead, so they can’t hear you. See? No amount of effort allows for your voice because they believe you are not here.

Can you please tell them the truth? Tell them I’m here?
Already done.
And?
They think I’m in denial.
You’re kidding!
They think I’m creating a phantom of you so I don’t have to face the fact that you’re dead.
But I heard Kali. She’s convinced I’m alive.
She’s convinced you still have viable DNA somewhere. There’s a difference.
Rosette floundered. And they think you’re hallucinating?
Seems so.
That’s ridiculous.
Not really, Maudi. It’s quite plausible.
Oh, great. Now they have you believing it?

Drayco sat on the platform in front of Kreshkali and began licking his paw and washing his face. The notion makes sense, Maudi. It’s probably exactly what I would do if you were dead. I have no way, right now, of knowing for sure if I am hearing you or if I am making you up in my mind.

But I do! This is me, and I wouldn’t feel ‘me’ if I was a figment of your imagination, so stop that line of thought right now! You have to convince them to get my body out of... wherever it’s been put, and find a way to get me back in.

I’ve got them headed in that direction.
Even though they think I’m dead? How did you manage that?
They managed it for me. There’s a lot of concern about Jarrod and his key-codes. They need to get your body so no one else has access to your DNA.

I guess that’s a start anyway. She was learning how to express a sigh without breath.
We’re moving. Come on, Maudi.
She looked down. Everyone was headed into the portal. Wait for me!
Drayco stalled by the entrance as she swept past.
And we are headed where, Dray?
Everett slid his ID card into the scanner and waited for the release tone. As soon as it chimed, he pushed the stainless steel door back and buttoned his coat.

‘Welcome to Cryology, Mr Kelly. How can we be of assistance?’

For once he was glad it was a computer-activated simulation that greeted him. The last thing he wanted to do was answer any questions right now. There would be enough of them in a moment, when he mentioned the words ‘Jane Doe’.

‘No assistance needed. I’ll find my own way, thanks.’

‘If you require anything in the future, Mr Kelly, simply…’

Everett double-clicked the F1 key on the central keypad and the simulation disappeared. ‘Nothing is simple today,’ he said as the hologram flickered out.

His heels tapped out a rhythm on the tiles. It was so cold that his breath was visible when he exhaled. He passed rows and rows of vats before he found a technician, a tall woman leaning over one of the tanks. He approached her with his data file screen extended, the digital readout showing a patient number.

‘I’m looking for this one,’ Everett said. ‘She would have come down late last night.’

The tech took the hand-held computer and wiped her thumb across the screen. ‘The new ones are further back. It’ll just take me a second to cross-match.’ She frowned. ‘That’s strange. There doesn’t seem to be an ID.’

‘Jane Doe,’ he said, keeping his tone light.

‘Really? Let me double-check the location.’ She went to the central desk and ran a search, stretching her neck towards the console as the numbers flashed. ‘Female, Jane Doe, brought in at 23.25?’

‘That’s the one.’

The tech’s eyebrows went up. ‘We didn’t get a file update yet,’ the tech said.

‘There isn’t one.’

‘Admin too clogged to tag her?’ The woman led him past dozens of cryo vats, glancing from their digital displays to the readout in her hand.

‘They’re very busy.’

She huffed. ‘We can’t use her until they do.’

Everett nodded as they passed another block of vats.

‘Here it is.’ She stopped at a tank indistinguishable from hundreds of others save for the number displayed at the foot of the vessel—103,989,001. ‘You need to get her out?’

‘How long will I have?’

Everett blew into his hands and rubbed them together. ‘That’s fine. Twenty minutes should do it.’ He looked at the small table beside the vat. ‘Sample packs?’

‘They’re at the front station. What do you need?’

‘Cytology, crypto and lap scope, and…’ He saw curiosity rising on the tech’s face. ‘Don’t worry. I’ll get them myself. No need to interrupt you further.’

‘Didn’t Labs do the scope already?’

‘Of course. I want to double-check some of their results.’ He raised his head. ‘I’m presenting the case next week. My first one.’

The tech nodded. Mention ‘case study’ and there was instant understanding. He wished he’d thought of that first. The fifth-year students generated a lot of compassion. Their routine and study load was gruelling.

‘You want samples from the animal as well?’

She stopped at a tank indistinguishable from hundreds of others save for the number displayed at the foot of the vessel—103,989,001. ‘You need to get her out?’

‘How long will I have?’

Everett scanned through his file screen. ‘I had it this morning,’ he said almost to himself. ‘It took hours to get.’

‘Never mind.’ The tech indicated the tank behind them. ‘I know where that one is. Not every day you get a canine in here.’

‘Isn’t that right.’

They both exchanged looks and shook their heads.

‘Do they know where it came from?’ she asked.

Everett shrugged. ‘As far as I can gather, they don’t know much at all about either of these two. How long will
it take to get the reviver going?’
   The tech’s eyes widened. ‘You’re going to wake that thing up?’
   ‘That’s what my requisition requires.’
   ‘I’ll need to cite it and get the order number for that.’ Her hands shook as she pulled a remote monitor from her pocket. ‘But I don’t want to be around when you do it.’
   ‘Bad dreams?’
   She turned away.

   Though no one had contact with animals, many were haunted by them in their dreams. It was wonderful luck that this tech was phobic. Everett planned to do more than wake the canine up. Now that he knew he was here, he wasn’t going to miss the chance of a lifetime.
   ‘I’ll pop in the access code for you so you can get started, but you’ll have to zip me the requisition and confirmation code before midday collection arrives.’
   ‘Thanks. Much appreciated.’
   She hesitated. ‘Is it dangerous?’
   ‘That’s what they sent me to find out.’
   The tech nodded. ‘I wish they’d change their minds. What a waste to vivisection such a rarity, don’t you think?’
   ‘Exactly.’

   Everett followed her back to the station and put together a tray of instruments. He glanced at the security screen before grabbing some culture tubes. He slipped those into his pocket, nesting them inside a small, subzero case. He whistled as he drew up a few millilitres of normal saline, injecting it into a blood agar dish. He grabbed an extra syringe and a vial of dopamine3, the heaviest sedation he could spot at a glance. The tech didn’t pay any attention—she was hunched over her work again, headphones on, back turned.

   Everett found Jane Doe by matching up the digital readout the tech gave him. He set up his tray, placing the instruments in a neat row, and popped the lid. ‘Now, my mystery girl. Let’s see if I can discover what the lab could not.’
Nell stood at the edge of the road, checking both ways. It was deserted, save for a small rabbit frozen in mid-stride, paralysed by their sudden arrival. Torgan dropped, flattening himself into the grass, his tail snapping back and forth, haunches bunching.

‘Not now, love,’ Nell said, smiling at her familiar. ‘We’ve got to get to Treeon before sunset.’
‘Straight into the enemy camp, is it?’ Jarrod asked.
‘We need to do some scouting.’
‘I thought scouting implied stealth,’ Shane said.
‘I don’t think it will be necessary yet.’
‘Yet?’ Jarrod asked.
She brushed grass seeds from the hem of her long dress. ‘Open books are not always so easy to read.’
Selene frowned at that, but Jarrod laughed. ‘So we are going as…what, may I ask?’ he asked.
‘Visiting witches from beyond the Dumar gorge. We’re here for Beltane.’
‘From the Forest of Vesper? Romanon Bay?’ He smiled. ‘You timed that rather well.’
‘I’m getting the hang of it.’
Selene crossed her arms. ‘What in demon’s fire is Beltane?’
‘One of the Sabbats, a spring fire festival,’ Nell answered, condescendingly. ‘A time to honour the vegetation gods and the great mystery.’
‘Wonderful,’ Selene said, looking out into the distance, her lips pursed.
‘Festivals usually have an element of merriment to them,’ Shane said, leaning closer to her. ‘Especially those involving fertility rites and…’
‘I know.’ She pushed him back. ‘I’d like a clear view of what I’m walking into and so far all I hear is snips and snags.’
‘You want a clear picture?’ Nell said. ‘Think of markets, feasting, bonfires and dancing. What’s the riddle in that?’
Selene looked at Jarrod, who nodded an affirmation. ‘There’ll be music and horse races, demonstrations. Sword work too.’ Jarrod stared at Selene’s weapon. ‘That’s not going to go down well, though. You best let me carry it.’
She put her hand on the hilt. ‘Not a chance. I won’t go unarmed.’
‘Then you’ll not go at all,’ Nell said. ‘We want to blend, not stand out like wolves among the chooks. Do you fancy arrest and imprisonment?’
‘Let them try. They won’t touch me.’ She gripped the hilt of her weapon.
‘Selene,’ Shane said. ‘It’ll be all right.’
He offered her a drink from his water bag. She ignored it.
‘I’ll mind it well for you,’ Jarrod said, his eyes level with hers, arms out to receive her blade. ‘We really can’t manage this if you’re carrying a sword.’
She kept her lips pressed tight while undoing her belt. ‘You best look after her.’ She kissed the scabbard and handed it to Jarrod.
He bowed to her and took the blade. ‘Thank you.’
Nell smoothed her dress over her hips and shouldered her pack. ‘Are we all ready now?’
Selene grumbled. ‘Ready enough.’
Nell opened out her arms as she stepped onto the road. ‘Can I remind you all that this is a festive time of year and we’re travellers who enjoy such things?’ She twirled around, her head back, face to the sun. Torgan bounded beside her.
‘Witches know how to have fun? Is that it?’ Selene asked, her face still frowning as she watched Jarrod strap on her sword.
‘I can’t speak for them all, but I certainly do,’ Nell said.
‘In that case,’ Shane smiled, pulling a low whistle from his pack, ‘I’d best give us a tune.’
He glanced at Selene before he started to play. ‘This one’s new—something I picked up in Gaela.’ His lips closed around the whistle and a dance of sound filled the air.
The rabbit bolted, Torgan taking off after it as Nell’s laughter rang out. Selene scowled.
‘Come now,’ Nell said, leading them down the road. ‘To Beltane!’ Nell kept smiling, but she let her mind drift
to her familiar. She couldn’t see the temple cat in the tall grass, but she could hear him cutting left and right and
doubling back through the pasture. The quarry was giving him quite a run. When they crested the first hill, Torgan
emerged from the hayfield and joined them. Did you get it, Torgan?
  No, but very close.
  Never mind. There will be roast meats at Treeon.
  I’m hungry now…
  Lucky we’ll be there soon, then!
  ‘How far is it?’ Selene asked as they stood on the crest.
  Nell surveyed the ridges and valleys that rolled out before them, squinting into the distance. She pointed a long,
tattooed finger towards a cleft between the hills. ‘There they are. Can you see?’
  ‘See what?’ Selene said. She wrinkled her nose and shaded her eyes.
  ‘I’ve got them,’ Jarrod said, his face relaxed. ‘They’re out filling baskets with wild flowers. It wouldn’t hurt for
us to do the same.’
  ‘Pick flowers?’ Selene said.
  ‘Exactly.’ Nell was sparkling. ‘We can’t arrive unadorned.’
  ‘You think I’m going to carry flowers?’
  ‘You’ll be wearing them, Selene, preferably in your hair and along your bosom if possible.’ Nell considered her
for a moment. ‘You do have bosoms somewhere under there, don’t you?’
  ‘Uh-oh…’ Shane whispered.
  Selene glared at Nell before tossing aside her pack and pulling her jersey over her head. She wadded up the
thick material and stuffed it into her bag. Underneath she wore a tight-fitting bodice of sky-blue satin laced up the
front with a black silk cord. She threw back her shoulders and planted her hands on her hips. At the top of her left
breast was a single rose tattoo, entwined with a small black serpent.
  ‘So you do,’ Nell laughed. ‘Lovely—and already adorned, I see.’ She waltzed out into the grass, searching for
patches of purple daisies. ‘Come on, then. A few flowers won’t hurt. This colour is perfect for your hair.’
  Selene didn’t respond.
  ‘It’s all right,’ Shane said. ‘This isn’t so bad. Poppies and chamomile blooms are everywhere, and look at the
red daisies and yellow morning bells. They’re beautiful, don’t you think?’
  Selene still didn’t budge. ‘When did you become a botanist?’ She stood with her feet wide apart, her hands
crossed in front of her, a snarl on her face.
  ‘You’ll be stunning,’ Jarrod said, leaning towards her. ‘And it shows you love the floral goddess, so come on!’
  He tugged at her hand and pulled her into the field, catching up with Nell.
  ‘Another tune, my bard?’ Nell said to Shane. She bent her head towards Selene. ‘We know he won’t need
encouragement.’
  Selene’s lips parted in a half smile.
  ‘None at all,’ she answered.
  Nell gave her hand a squeeze before picking an armful of sunshine poppies.

When they passed through the gates of Treeon Temple, Jarrod felt a chill, as if the breeze had fingers. He didn’t look
directly at Nell but saw from the corner of his eye that she’d felt it too. Her temple cat bristled, his hackles rising
briefly before they folded back into a smooth veneer of rust-red and black shine. Nell would have cautioned the
creature—act easy, stay loose. He took the advice himself. They must all appear to be immersed in the Beltane
reverie—eyes and ears alert, outer appearance carefree. He told himself they could pull it off.
  He walked beside Nell, Torgan between them, and Selene and Shane followed. The couple from Tensar
appeared to be over their tensions for the moment. They held hands, whistling a jig. He sensed it was an act, though
a convincing one. Others who passed nodded and winked, singing out greetings, though none called Nell by name.
Jarrod waved back. Oddly, Nell was not recognised by anyone. When he turned to her with a question on his face,
he saw why. The witch had spun a glamour, and a fine one at that.
  The shape of her body hadn’t changed. It was still strong, sensual and lithe, but her face belonged to a younger
woman, a girl in her late teens, with hair as purple as ripe forest berries, tied in ribbons of bright red. Her eyes were
no longer dark hazel but emerald gems, and her skin was white like fresh cream. She skipped along as they passed
the bards and dancers, tossing about yellow flower petals from her basket. She was definitely blending in, touching
the shoulders or arms of young men as they passed, laughing when they stopped to kiss her cheeks. She shone like
the sun, radiating joy and anticipation—a girl thrilled with the prospects of Beltane eve.
  ‘Where are the maypoles?’ she called out to a group of mentors gathered in front of a candle maker’s stall.
‘On the training grounds,’ a woman replied, smiling back. ‘The dances are sure to be starting soon.’

Nell sang out her thanks and led them all to an apple juice stand. Stacked on either side of a bench were crates of apples, both red and green. Two barefooted lads were at the press, a large wooden vat with a handle on top, twisting the lid down, round and round, continuously pressing out the sweet cider as the apples were crushed between the wooden plates. She paid them a few coins and collected four mugs from the bench, filling them with sticky juice directly from the tap. She passed them around, lifting her mug in a toast, clicking rims with the others. Hiding her lips as she spoke, she said, ‘We need to get as close to the High Priest as possible. Follow my lead.’

Selene leaned towards her. ‘I thought we were here to listen, to measure the mood,’ she said, also speaking with her mug held to her lips. ‘What are you up to?’

‘We’ll be listening, of course. I want to see how he is received, up close. I want to see their faces.’

Jarrod felt the chill again and saw Nell falter. She put down her empty mug and gripped the edge of the table. She recovered, smiling at the boys. He tossed an extra coin into their coffer and refilled her mug. She quaffed it and brightened.

Are you all right? Jarrod asked.

‘Let’s find the poles!’ she called out, not answering his mental message. Her voice rose over the crowd. ‘I want to dance.’

Are you ignoring me, Nell, or not hearing me? he forced a smile. I’m not sure which is worse.

She gave no indication of awareness. Jarrod exchanged looks with Selene and Shane as Nell skipped ahead. Selene gripped his arm, inclining her head towards a group of women who were coming their way. The light breeze had blown open their robes, revealing thin curved swords at their hips, hilts studded with lapis stones smooth against the black leather wraps.

‘Do you notice something amiss?’ Selene whispered to Jarrod. ‘Perhaps a bit of incongruence?’ She didn’t wait for a response. ‘These women are carrying swords—fine ones, too, I thought Nell said they were banned.’

‘Leave this to me,’ he said. ‘We don’t want to draw attention.’ Jarrod quickened his pace to catch up with Nell. He caught her waist, drawing her into his body, his arm around her shoulder as they danced along. He tightened his grip, smiling to passers-by as he felt her flinch. ‘I’m a little confused, Nellion.’

‘How so?’ she asked. Her face was beaming out towards the crowd, but she stiffened in his embrace.

‘There are mentors wielding swords, Nell. Women.’ He tossed his head back behind him. ‘A lot of them. Would you like to explain?’

‘I’m as surprised as you,’ she said, her glamour shifting for a second. She slipped out from under his arm and made to twirl away.

He caught her hand and pulled her back. ‘That isn’t quite enough of an explanation.’

She let out a giggle and kissed his cheek, her hand wiggling out of his like a slippery fish. ‘There they are,’ she shouted. ‘The ribbon poles! Hurry.’ She ran ahead, pushing through the crowd to join the maypole dancers. ‘There’s room for us,’ she said, waving them in.

Poles were planted in the close-cropped grass of the training grounds. They stood tall, streams of rainbow ribbons sprouting from their tops, fluttering against the bright blue sky. A raised platform stood nearby, banners snapping in the wind. There the bards assembled, ready to play. As they approached, the sound of fiddles filled the air, backed by the driving rhythm of guitars, mandolins and bouzoukis. Percussion instruments joined in with the low thump of wooden drums, pounding out a syncopated beat, accompanied by a jangle of shakers, bells and tambourines. The crowd tapped their feet and clapped their hands, contributing accents with sticks and castanets. A chorus of flutes, pipes and whistles wove in and out of the melody, raising the energy higher with their sweet, lilting tones. The ground shook beneath Jarrod’s feet as people jumped up and down, many crowding the poles, leaping to grasp the wafting ribbons.

A couple emerged from the crowd, holding hands and flashing smiles towards everyone. A wave of cheers rose, following them as they approached the other dancers. Nell pushed in, Jarrod fast behind her, until they were next to the couple at the main pole, grasping for ribbons.

What are you up to, Nell? Is this your priest?

Again she either did not hear him, or pretended not to. When the dance began he saw Selene and Shane moving in the opposite direction as they began weaving the ribbons in and out in time to the music. He skipped along, ducking under one arm and over the next, in and out, over and under, as the colourful streamers twisted round and round the pole.

‘What do you make of this?’ Shane whispered to Jarrod as he whisked past him.

Selene followed, mumbling her concerns as she slipped between Jarrod and the pole. ‘That witch is up to something more than she’s telling. I’m sure of it. I want my sword back.’

‘Keep your eyes open,’ Jarrod said at the next pass, though it wasn’t necessary. They both looked alert,
nervous. ‘Be ready for anything.’

Jarrod kept Nell in full view. She was only one step in front of him, holding a yellow ribbon, her arm extended as she danced along. She slowed with the music at the end of the tune. The pole was laced with rainbow streamers, each of the dancers tethered close to the centre. He took a deep breath, about to exhale in relief, when he caught a glint of steel. ‘Nell!’ he shouted, leaping forward. ‘Don’t’

Nell was on the man before Jarrod could do anything. When she stepped aside, she dropped her blade, red and wet in the short green grass. The band stopped and the oblivious crowd broke into cheers. Nell turned away, her glamour gone.

Screams rose around them, the shrill sound cutting through the applause. The man, who had come so lightly to the dance, his partner laughing at his side, doubled over, collapsed to his knees and fell face down. Nell let go of her basket, the bright flower petals spilling over the blood seeping from his wound. They rested for a moment on the dark pool before the yellow centres turned black and sank under the slick surface.

Before Jarrod could grab her, Nell threw back her head and sent a blast of energy from her body, repelling all who closed in. In a whirl of light, she morphed; the backlash of her transformation knocked him down. She emerged from the shock wave as a black hawk, streaking skyward. The raptor shrieked in a high-pitched whistle that sent Torgan tearing across the field. The familiar shadowed his mistress high above, climbing out of the Temple valley.

The woman was cradling the dead man in her lap, tears streaming down her face. One hand was on his cheek, the other pressed hard against the wound. Her fingers were red, blood gushing out between them. Jarrod turned around, following the hawk’s flight until it disappeared. Then he saw the guards.

Shane and Selene backed into him, half-a-dozen swords pointing at their throats. In front of him he faced a similar barrage. Suddenly, the area was empty of other dancers, save the victim and his companion. Jarrod lifted his arms over his head. ‘Tio,’ he whispered. ‘I give up.’ He was in no position to fight.

Selene hissed into his ear. ‘When we get out of this, I’m going to kill that bitch!’

‘Not if I can do it first.’ Jarrod stared at the blades, leaning into Shane and Selene, pressing back to avoid the metal tips. ‘They’d happily carve him up for fish bait if given the slightest provocation. Maybe even without it. Fortunately they were having trouble controlling the crowd—the chaos around them kept any clear order from being delivered. At his feet the dead man bled out. The crowd was wailing his name, ‘Corvey, Corvey’. The woman who held the lifeless body spoke to the guards. They referred to her as the High Priestess Le Saint.

So much for Nell’s ‘accident’ story. The woman seemed in perfect health. ‘Get them out of here,’ she screamed, her bloody finger pointing towards Jarrod.

The guards shoved Shane and Selene forward, grabbed their packs and weapons and marched them down towards the main temple. By now the crowd had become hysterical. The news was travelling fast. People were pressing in, shouting to make way for healers and more guards, but seemingly reluctant to take their own advice. They did part in front of the captives, though, some staring wide-eyed and others hissing and spitting. Corvey was well loved. His death would be avenged, Jarrod felt sure of that.

‘Keep moving,’ the guard said, pushing him forward. The prisoners walked with their hands on top of their heads, fingers laced. They were herded up the steps of the temple and along the side walkway until they came to a set of stairs leading down. The light vanished into a black pit and Jarrod smiled to himself. Perfect, he thought, wishing he could communicate their good luck to the others. He knew this labyrinth, with all its twists and turns. At least, he did on his Gaela.

They were led down the spiral stairwell. It opened into a rock-hewn chamber. Jarrod frowned. This was new. The stone walls were damp, the air musty. Jarrod kept his heart rate steady as they approached a room with no windows and only a single door. They were directed to enter and sit with their backs to the wall. One of the guards dumped their packs and weapons on the ground, tipping the contents into a pile.

‘Watch it,’ Shane said when his low whistle and flute clattered to the floor.

The guard picked up the instruments and examined them one at a time. He tossed the whistle back into the pile and pocketed the flute.

‘You’ll not be taking that!’ Shane stood up; the guard immediately knocked him down.

‘What’s the problem?’ the guard asked. ‘You think you’ll ever be playing music again?’ The others laughed.

‘You’ll be lucky if you live out the night.’

Shane collapsed, blood trickling from the side of his mouth.
'You like the protein packets, do you?' Everett laughed at the animal as it gnawed into the brown squares of amino acid compounds, ignoring the phyto-fructos balls.

It'd been tricky working out what to feed the little guy, and he still wasn’t sure if he was giving him ‘dog candy’ or the nutrients his body needed for growth. He’d established the animal was young and yet to reach maturation—the scan of his long bones revealing open growth plates—but he couldn’t find any reference to dietary requirements in the public archives. No point drawing attention by searching the historical records for the care and feeding of canis familiaris. Trial and error would have to do.

‘You want more, Canie?’ He patted the dog. ‘Last time I fed you that much, you chucked it all back up, remember?’ Everett grinned as the animal wagged his tail and yipped.

The semiotics were obvious, once you observed the behaviour long enough, though he found it astounding how much of his own words seemed to be interpreted by the creature. Was it tone of voice, body language, or was it something else? Everett stroked the soft fur on top of the dog’s head. There was so much joy there. Want more food? The tail wags. Chase the ball? Yips and barks. Have a rest? Whatever you say. It seemed to Everett that the canine’s brain was hard-wired for happiness—something humans lacked. Why hadn’t that been appreciated before the exterminations?

‘I’m going to have to buy a parkland permit now, and sneak you out of here. You’ll be needing exercise, won’t you?’

Canie yipped again and raced to the door. Everett shook his head and punched in his order, checking credits. He purchased a month’s worth of daily excursions. It wouldn’t be questioned, though he would have to explain to Cryo why he couldn’t find a requisitions order for the revival. Perhaps he could fake his return to the vat. Now that he was getting to know Canie, he’d not be keen to hand him back over to Labs. The little guy wasn’t just a clue to his Jane Doe any more. He was starting to feel familiar, like a companion. It was delightful—a new feeling for Everett—and he didn’t want to let him go. ‘Come on with you now, Canie. Into the backpack. We’re going for a little outing.’

Canie ran in circles, yipping as Everett scooped him up. He allowed himself to be smuggled out in the pack as if he knew stealth was necessary, the reward well worth it.

Grayson sat under the bare tree. The limbs were brittle, like long bony fingers reaching skyward. The air was chilly and left a metallic taste on his tongue. Nothing stirred in this place, nothing but the rise and fall of his chest—and the stranger who appeared on the path below. Grayson hooded his eyes, mindful not to move or attract attention. This was the first person he’d seen in this deadwood-rotten world, and although a thrill welled up in him at spotting another being, he chose caution over expression. The young man seemed agitated, out of place. He wasn’t dressed for a hike in this rock cemetery and he kept looking over his shoulder and glancing from side to side.

The man took off his backpack, struggling with the weight. Grayson couldn’t see what it contained until he’d straightened, lifting a wiggling animal. It jumped from his arms and hit the ground running. The creature came back the instant he was called to heel. It returned to sit in front of the man, licking his hand, brimming with gratitude. Why not? Even this desolate place had to be better than being stuffed in a backpack.

Grayson smiled, recognising the species, canis familiaris. He’d never encountered one in his years confined at ASSIST, though there were plenty on Gaela and Temple Los Loma. Rosette had introduced him to the hunting hounds of Treeon and the tracking companions on Rahana Iti. He’d taken to them immediately—wonderful animals, though rambunctious. He thought of getting one himself, someday.

When the young man waved his dog on, it shot out into the distance, nose to the ground, coursing through the tussocks of dry grass, rocks and stumpy tree trunks. It seemed to be on more than a frolic; the animal was clearly searching for something. The man appeared concerned, hurrying to keep up with it, still looking over his shoulder and glancing from side to side.

Grayson edged towards the mouth of the crevice. The others hadn’t arrived and he couldn’t imagine what was taking them so long. Drayco and Kreshkali had been next to him when they entered the portal, An’ Lawrence and Scylla right behind. Only the Lupin, Teg, had kept to himself.

When the portal had opened onto this world, he’d thought they were following as he stepped out, anxious to find Rosette. When they didn’t appear, he thought they may have come out ahead, but after a day and a night, it was
clear they hadn’t. Waiting was tedious and non-productive, but so would be wandering the infinite twists and turns of the corridors unguided. He was here for a reason, and that had to be Rosette. If she was anywhere on this strange world, he would need help to find her. Maybe the man below was just such a help—and maybe not. Time would tell.

Grayson stiffened as the dog let out a yowl and quickened his pace. *Demons! He’s onto me.*

The pup had caught his scent, no doubt from his morning’s jaunt to the lake. He was sniffing his way towards him at increasing speed, following an invisible zigzag path up the slope. The man was right on his heels. Grayson backed further into the crevice, dirt crumbling in his hands as he pushed against the walls. He crouched just in front of the portal and exhaled, stilling his energy. He could feel the Entity’s aura warm against his back, a light caress. The temptation to slip into the portal weighed against his desire to explore this world—to find if Rosette had been here or if there was some other reason the Entity had popped him out in this strange place.

He’d stretched his awareness outward, leading with his heart, but he couldn’t sense her anywhere, certainly not in a specific location. Yet he did have the strange feeling, ever since he entered the sewers under Half Moon Bay, that Rosette was close by. It might have simply been his longing for her that pervaded his senses, and not a real presence, like the image of water on the horizon to a desert wanderer. What had she called that? A mirage?

He shook his head. Damn the dog. It was nearly upon him. He had to make a decision fast—stay or go. What would it be?

‘Are you all right there, sir?’

The voice came from above. The man had followed the pup right up to the crevice and was hovering over him, a look of concern on his face. In an instant Grayson realised he’d slipped partway into the portal and had lost awareness. The pup was sniffing over his boots, the animal’s white and grey velvet ears brushing the ground, his black nose huffing. He wiggled and sat square in front of Grayson, tail sweeping the ground, making a smooth arc behind him. Grayson patted his head and stood. ‘I must have dozed off,’ Grayson said, brushing his pants.

The man in front of him was youthful, well framed, with refined hands, kind eyes and a strong jaw. His face was pale, though, his expression tense. ‘What are you doing here?’ he asked.

Grayson gave him a light smile, allowing his energy to soften. ‘I was out for an early morning walk.’

The pup jumped up, yipping. He dashed off for a few feet before running back to Grayson, sitting at his heels and looking up, the yips and yowls getting louder. Grayson frowned. ‘What is it, lad? You trying to tell me something?’

The dog dashed around him in circles, coming back to face him. Grayson calmed him down, saying a few soft words until the little dog settled.

The man leaned forward, his brow creased. ‘Is he yours?’ he whispered.

‘This dog?’ Grayson said. ‘I thought he belonged to you.’

The man straightened. He had caught sight of a tattoo on Grayson’s chest, a loop of serpent peeking out from the front of his shirt. He stared at it as if seeing a ghost. ‘Where are you from?’ he asked. He took a step back, patting his leg to attract the dog’s attention. It didn’t respond.

Grayson frowned. The man was out of his element, lost or confused. They might have much in common. He made a choice. ‘My name’s Grayson Nath,’ he said, extending his hand.

The man took it and gripped it, a familiar custom. ‘Everett Kelly,’ he replied. ‘Medical student at the ASMIU.’

‘Branch of ASSIST?’

‘Isn’t everything?’

Grayson nodded, looking around. ‘And what do you call this place?’

Everett shrugged. ‘Parklands South.’

‘Parklands, eh?’ Grayson raised his eyebrows. ‘Some place for a park. And ASMIU, where’s that?’

Everett lifted his chin, glancing from the pup to the portal entrance. ‘Sector Six.’

‘A sector of…?’

‘Allied State One, of course.’

Grayson rubbed the back of his neck. A sudden tightness wrenched him as he considered where he might be. Allied State One was only a concept before he left ASSIST. After the insurrection, it wasn’t anything at all. ‘Mr Kelly, I think we should talk.’

‘You’re not going to report the dog, are you?’

Grayson shook his head. ‘Not if you don’t report me.’

‘Let’s walk.’ Everett led the way down the slope, Grayson and the pup following behind.

Rosette thrilled at the sight of Fynn. *There you are, you crazy mutt-hound. What did they do to you, eh? You look like you shrunk!* She moved her energy forward, and Fynn dashed in circles around Grayson, stirring up dead
leaves. Drayco, look here. We’ve found Fynn!

Indeed. The big cat yawned. He hasn’t seemed to have matured much in our absence.

Fynn cocked his ears; his tail stilled for a moment before the frantic wagging resumed.

Can you talk to him, Dray? Calm him down. I’m not sure he’s hearing me.

Fynn hears! Fynn found Maudi. Fynn found Maudi! Let’s go!

Fynn seems to think he found you, Drayco said, mimicking the exuberance of the pup.

Rosette glowed, her new rendition of a smile. You certainly did find me, wiggle-worm puppy. Now sit down before you drive these guys nuts. Quiet. I want to hear what they’re saying.

Fynn settled, though his limbs quivered. Home now, Maudi?

Not yet, little Fynn. We have to find my body first, and get me back in it. Drayco, can you still sense Kreshkali and the others?

Not any more, but Scylla says they’ve found Jarrod. They’ll be along as soon as they bust him out.

Bust him out of what? Is he locked up somewhere? She shimmered—laughter without sound.

I think he might be.

I can’t imagine him letting that happen. Can you tell Scylla we’ll wait here for her, and to please hurry.

It’s done. What’s next?

I’m sticking to Grayson. Looks like he’s making friends with Everett. Just the right person. This is good luck.

I’ll keep watch on the portal.

You won’t need to hunt?

She felt him yawn again.

A long nap is all I need, for now.

How do you think you’ll be able to watch the portal while asleep?

I can do both, Maudi.

Excellent. She blew Drayco a mental kiss and followed the men, hovering over them as they headed down the path. Fynn was more relaxed now and onto the business of exploration, seemingly unconcerned that Rosette was a disembodied spirit.

If only she could be that comfortable with it. The constant state of awareness was a shock, as was the detachment from tactile sensation. Her other perceptions were finely honed, though, and she loved being able to read energy fields and auras so clearly. Grayson was emitting a soft violet and yellow glow and she brushed against him, watching the edges turn pink at her touch. He closed his eyes and gave a little shudder, a smile playing across his face. She basked in it for some time before focusing again on her developing strategy.

Drayco still couldn’t get into this world, though having him in the corridors was very useful. He could keep in contact with the others, at least while Scylla was in the corridors. She suspected Drayco would not have gone over too well anyway—a huge black temple cat, seemingly unaccompanied. There were no animals to be seen in this place, save for Fynn and a small kettle of vultures circling high in the distance. She moved closer to Grayson.

Being with him yet not being able to talk, to touch or to let him know she was there, was making it hard to concentrate. He felt more animated now; the edges of his aura were turning a subtle green, matching an emerald tint of Everett’s. That seemed to happen a lot—people’s auras taking on the hue of those around them, the dominant feeling transmitting somehow to the others. Interesting. She would remember that for future reference.

As twigs snapped under the men’s shoes, her attention returned to the present. She focused on their words. This conversation might offer some crucial hints to her body’s location.

‘Before I answer,’ Everett said, picking up a stick and tossing it off into the distance for Fynn. ‘I’ve got some questions of my own.’

The little dog dashed after the stick, stirring up dirt and gravel as he ran.

‘Fire away,’ Grayson said, his eyes on the path ahead.

‘The body art on your chest…is that permanent?’

Grayson smiled. ‘It is.’

‘And did you put it on yourself?’

‘You could say that.’

Oh, goddess of the woods, Grayson. Don’t start telling him about your genius DNA tattooing. This man’s with ASSIST. Haven’t you worked that out yet?

He doesn’t hear you, Maudi.

Her familiar’s voice sounded drowsy, as if she’d woken him.

I know, but I can talk anyway. Maybe some essence of my thoughts can get through, even if he thinks they’re his own.

I do that all the time.
Rosette stopped. *You do?*

The only response was the sound of his purr.

*We’re going to talk about that later, Drayco.* She turned her attention back to the men. They had reached the lake and were skirting its edge. Everett kept calling Fynn away from the water, but the little pup wasn’t responding to the command.

‘Canie! It’s foul. Don’t drink it.’

It looked none too pure to her either. *Fynn, little lovely? The water’s bad. Stay out of it.*

*Water’s wet. Wet is good.*

*Not this time. Look! Grayson has a stick. Go for it. Hurry.* She shimmered as he scurried away from the shore, catching the toss before it hit the ground.

‘Have you put such marks on others?’ Everett asked.

Grayson took the stick from Fynn’s mouth and tossed it again. ‘It seems like that’s all I’ve been doing lately.’

The men fell into silence. Rosette suspected that each was taking the other’s measure.

‘And what are you doing here?’ Everett asked, indicating the smoke-lined horizon.

‘I’m looking for a woman,’ Grayson said. ‘She may have come through your facility—wounded perhaps.’

‘Did she have…’ Everett hesitated, looking at Grayson’s chest.

‘Tattoos? Yes. You’ve seen her?’

Grayson’s aura jumped to orange and Everett’s matched it, though he didn’t respond immediately.

*Say YES, you idiot!* Rosette hovered over him, wishing she could scream, bombarding him with her thoughts anyway. It was like shooting an arrow at close range, straight through a cloud. The man didn’t so much as twitch. She knew he heard her before when she was first brought into the healing centre. Why couldn’t he hear her now?

_He thinks you’re dead, Maudi. On ice. His mind cannot conceive of communication with you now._

_Well, his mind is an ant-sized dust bunny._

*Kreshkali couldn’t hear you either._

_That’s…different._

Everett had his hands in his pockets, his shoulders hunched. ‘I think I know who you’re looking for,’ he said finally. ‘I can take you to her, if you like.’

‘She’s alive then, unharmed?’

‘Not now, but she will be just as soon as we work out what’s happened to her heart.’

‘Cryo-suspension?’

‘You know about it?’

‘A bit. It’s only experimental.’

Everett eyed him up and down before calling Fynn. He crouched down and opened his backpack.

‘Experimental?’

‘Isn’t it?’ Grayson asked.

‘The technique’s been fully functioning for almost two centuries.’

*Finally, some useful information! Drayco, tell Scylla we’re in the future. Jarrod needs to…*  

*Maudi, I can’t.* He interrupted her thoughts.

*Why not?*  

*She’s out of reach again.*
Jarrod watched Selene. She was plucking flowers from her neckline and throwing them towards the centre of the cell. The tiny yellow daffodils with crimson eyes formed a mound of vibrant colour at her feet, bright against the rough stone floor. She ground them with her boot.

Jarrod inhaled the scent released from the crushed petals. It brought a wash of relief, easing tight muscles and edgy nerves. He hoped the scent would act as a soothing balm to everyone. Selene’s temper was heating the room like a furnace, doors wide open.

‘What are you looking at?’ She snapped the words towards Jarrod as he studied her face.

‘This isn’t as bad as it seems,’ he said, his voice even, eyes steady.

‘Really? As bad as what, then, if not as it seems?’ she snarled. ‘Did you realise what that bitch-goddess was up to?’

‘She’s not actually a deity,’ Shane said.

‘How can you tell?’ She turned on him and folded her arms.

‘Because Rosette said…’

‘Oh, blow it.’ Selene waved her hand like a knife. ‘I don’t want to hear either of their names right now. I just want to know how we’re going to get out of this.’

Jarrod closed his eyes. ‘I’m working on it.’ His voice was a whisper and neither of them responded. Perhaps they hadn’t heard. At the moment, it didn’t matter. He needed to quickly calculate the myriad possibilities their circumstances offered—quickly as in how long it takes a bubble to pop. Humour flickered across his face as his eyes opened a fraction of a second later. He stood.

‘Well?’ Selene asked, pressing a petal between her thumb and forefinger, staining her fingertips yellow.

‘We’ll get an interview with Le Saint before long. She’s upset, but not incensed. She’ll want to know why this happened and what our part in it is.’

‘And what will you tell her?’

‘The truth.’

‘I’d like to hear that,’ Shane said. ‘I’ve no idea what’s happened.’ He dropped his face into his hands.

‘We’ve been set up, that’s what’s happened,’ Selene said. She dug a pebble from the floor and threw it at him.

‘Not set up exactly,’ Jarrod said. He held out his hand as she started to protest. ‘Used as a distraction, yes, but I think she was only looking for a buffer of time.’

‘Time for what?’

‘To get away?’ Shane asked.

‘Maybe, or perhaps to keep us all occupied here while she does some other mischief in the corridors.’

‘Like I said, a setup.’

Jarrod frowned. Selene’s assessment disturbed him. It was possible that Nell’s agenda was more complex than he had originally thought. According to his calculations, she would be heading back to her temple in Dumarka to check on the results of this little adventure. She knew he would hold her to their agreement, though. He had her blood. He could track her anywhere now. He didn’t have to worry about her getting away from him.

‘And what do you think is going to happen when we speak to Le Saint?’ Selene asked.

‘She’s going to thank us,’ Jarrod said.

Shane and Selene both stared at him.

‘Are you mad?’ Selene said. ‘She’s hardly going to give us an award. We effected her lover’s murder. She’ll want to feed us to her crows, or worse.’

‘She would have initially, but my guess is the spell is dissipating now that he’s not here to weave it.’

‘He’s had her under a spell?’ Selene asked.

‘Heavy as metal.’

‘And you think she’s going to come to her senses now that he’s dead?’

‘I do.’

‘And then what?’

‘And then new doors will open.’ He closed his eyes again. ‘They’re coming now. Let me do the talking.’

Kreshkali smiled at Teg as he ran towards the tree line. He disappeared into the woods and she caught the change of
his bipedal gait as it became the easy lope of a wolf. Her heart beat faster, and she drew in a long breath to steady it.

‘Where’d you send him?’ An’ Lawrence asked, frowning at the sound of Teg’s shift.

‘He’s checking the road behind us.’

‘We’re being followed?’

‘I hope so.’

‘You don’t mind if I send Scylla along too?’

‘That would be ideal,’ she said, unruffled by his mood. ‘I want us captured, not them.’

‘I can’t wait…’

She looked at the Sword Master; his jaw was tight, his hand on the hilt of his sword. ‘Rowan, we know they’re being held beneath the temple itself. This is the quickest way to get to them.’

‘Getting to them isn’t the problem. It’s getting out that worries me.’

‘I’m not without skills.’

‘Nor I, but this is not our Treeon and we don’t know who the High Priestess is. My guess is she’s adept, or she wouldn’t have Jarrod locked up in the first place. Have you thought about that?’

‘I have.’

‘And?’

‘I’m not worried.’

He avoided her eyes and stared at the hills around them—lush, green and covered with wild flowers. ‘Do you have any idea when we are?’ he asked.

‘Other than Beltane?’ Kreshkali shook her head. ‘Not a clue.’

‘Didn’t think so.’

They’re coming, Teg announced. Riding hard. Seems they got the message.

His voice resonated in her mind. How do you do that?

Mistress?

How do you deliver an ordinary bit of news, yet make it sound like…She faltered, giving herself a little shake.

Like what, Mistress?

Never mind. We’re ready here. Kreshkali paused for a moment, catching An’ Lawrence’s grimace. How many are there? she asked Teg.

Six.

And Scylla’s with you?

Grudgingly.

Can you stay out of sight and still track us?

What do you think?

Kreshkali laughed. We won’t be long, Teg. Stay close. She turned to An’ Lawrence and rested her hand on his shoulder. ‘There’re six riders heading this way, at the gallop,’ she said. ‘Teg’s going on to Treeon Valley under cover, with Scylla, of course.’ She tilted her head at him. ‘But you already knew that, didn’t you?’

He nodded, his lips tight. ‘I did.’

‘And are you ready to roll over, Sword Master?’

His knuckles went white as he gripped the hilt of his weapon. ‘I am.’ He said it like an oath.

‘It’s expedient, Rowan. Please play along. I don’t want any surprises.’

Before he could answer, half-a-dozen riders crested the hill behind them, creating billows of dust, dirt brown against the green fields. The one in the lead drew his sword when he spotted them and Kali moved her hands away from her sides, letting the hood fall back from her head, her cloak slipping to reveal her shoulder. An’ Lawrence stood, his legs wide apart, arms crossed. When the riders were on them, they skidded to a halt, the horses’ haunches tucking neatly beneath them. They circled, swords drawn.

Kreshkali beamed a smile. ‘Looking for someone, are you?’ she asked the captain.

‘The High Priestess Le Saint requests your immediate presence,’ he said, his horse blowing after the hard sprint.

He rode a copper-coloured palomino, tall and well proportioned. Her flaxen mane fell in rippling waves as she tossed her head. Kreshkali’s eyes drifted over the mare, thinking she would be a fine addition to their growing herd at Temple Los Loma.

‘Fabulous animal,’ she said.

The guard sheathed his sword and dismounted. He had light hair himself, and broad shoulders. He was stripped to the waist save for a leather vest and a round shield slung on his back. His blue eyes flashed.

‘You hold priestess rank,’ he said. It was a statement, not a question. He was studying the tattoos on her hands and followed the line of her arm to her shoulder which bore the symbol of Treeon Temple—the serpent-entwined
tree. As he studied An’ Lawrence, his jaw began to work. ‘I’ve been at Treeon all my life,’ he said. ‘I would not forget either of you.’

‘Thank you,’ Kreshkali said. ‘We’ve been away for some time.’

The guard levelled his sword at her throat. ‘Drop the glamour, witch. You have not deceived me.’

*Mistress?*

*It’s fine, Teg. Keep going.*

A flash of silver caught the corner of her eye. ‘Rowan, don’t!’ she screamed.

An’ Lawrence’s reaction was instant. He had his sword drawn and the clash of steel rang over the hills. His unexpected uppercut had disarmed his opponent, but before he could follow through with a downward stroke to the man’s neck, Kali threw her hands into the air and released a blast of her own.

‘Consisto statim!’ she bellowed to the sky. *Stop! Immediately!* She repeated the words again underneath her breath. ‘Consisto statim. Consisto statim…’

*Kali! What’s happened?* Teg’s voice rang in her head, but she had no time to respond. She needed to defuse the situation before An’ Lawrence flayed their fastest way into the labyrinths beneath Treeon Temple in two.

A blue haze rose around her, like the curtains of the aurora borealis, the northern lights. It expanded until it was engulfing the guards in a glowing orb. Their motions were stopped, captured like a painting, a scene frozen in time. Only Kreshkali and An’ Lawrence were free to move about them.

Four of the horses were caught rearing like statues, their riders spurring them forward. The brandished swords were dull, slate-blue in the pulsing haze. Kreshkali slowly exhaled, keeping the spell in place as she stepped away from a horse inches from running her down. The animal was immobile, locked in a charge. The rider’s face was contorted, his sword arcing down towards her shoulders. An’ Lawrence stepped to the side as well, ducking under a striking hoof poised to cleave his head in two.

‘What were you thinking?’ she shouted at him, her face hot.

‘What was I thinking? I suppose you wanted me to let him split your head open?’

‘I had it under control.’

‘You had us plummeting towards the underworld, is what you had. He was going to use that blade, Kali. I just saved your life.’

‘And now we’re in a bigger mess,’ she yelled as she retrieved the captain’s weapon from the ground.

‘Bigger than death?’ An’ Lawrence asked. ‘You’re mad!’

Kreshkali looked at the guards; an eerie silence enveloped them along with the haze. A breeze caught the nearest horse’s mane. It floated like strands of seaweed in a tidal pool. Other than that, the scene was dead still.

‘This is not my idea of “roll over and let us be captured”, Rowan. What are we going to do now?’

*Do you need me? Shall I come back?* Teg’s voice entered her thoughts again. It sounded like he was running.

*I’m not sure yet. We’ve had a little situation here. Give me a moment.*

An’ Lawrence sheathed his sword. ‘How long will this last?’ he asked, tilting his head towards the motionless scene.

‘About thirty more seconds.’

‘Can you fog their recall?’

‘You don’t ask for much, do you? There’re six of them, and the horses.’

He raised his eyebrows.

‘I can manage it.’

‘Then jump on that palomino. Quickly! I’ll calm the horses as soon as they come to. You take care of the men.’

He vaulted onto a chestnut whose rider was standing up in the stirrups, leaning forward over his mount’s neck. He gently took the sword from the guard’s grip and sheathed it before nodding to Kreshkali.

She returned the captain’s sword to his scabbard and vaulted onto the palomino. The horse had her front hooves off the ground in a low rear, making it hard to stay seated. Sweat dripped from her brow. There were only seconds left.

‘Do it.’ An’ Lawrence waved her on.

With one hand gripping the mare’s mane, she spread her fingers wide, sending out a deep hum from the back of her throat. The sound built up, then, as if struck by lightning, the entire scene reanimated, the guards and horses bursting back to life. She wove her calming spell, mingling it with a mild confusion. The other horses came down from their wild rear and stopped short, jolting the riders before they could sink into their saddles. The palomino did the same, but Kali was ready for it. She smoothed her cloak and lifted her chin, beaming a smile. The captain scratched the back of his neck, touching his sword hilt as he turned to face her.

‘We’re ready then?’ Kreshkali said. ‘Off to an audience with Le Saint?’ She sat forward on the horse, giving him room to mount up behind her.
The captain looked about him as he drew the reins over the mare’s neck. The concern on his face didn’t lift. ‘Treeon?’ she encouraged. ‘We’d like to meet with Le Saint about this ghastly business. We have news, remember?’

‘Of course I do.’ He eyed An’ Lawrence before shortening the reins. He swung up behind Kreshkali, a smooth and practised movement, his arms enclosing her waist as he turned the mare back the way they’d come. His guards followed and they headed out at an easy jog. She glanced at An’ Lawrence riding behind the guard on the chestnut mare. His face was grim.

She tuned into Teg. *We’re on our way.*

*Same plan, Mistress?*

*That’s right.*

*You had me scared.*

She exhaled. *Everything’s fine now.* She noticed An’ Lawrence’s fingers twitching and hoped very much she was right.

Le Saint stood before them, her hands clasped tight, her pearl dress saturated with blood. The hem was torn; wilted daisies clung to the edges, falling to the floor when she paced. Her feet were bare, the toenails painted a dark red, but not as dark as the dried blood around her ankles. Her hair fell in golden ringlets, and her eyes were a slate blue, like the centre of orchids. They bore into Jarrod, unblinking.

‘I am High Priestess Le Saint,’ she said, after he and his companions had given their names. ‘Tell me, where are you from?’

Jarrod shrugged one shoulder slightly. ‘A different place, High Priestess.’ He offered no other explanation and she drew in a deep breath.

‘A different place, or is it time?’

‘Both.’

‘And the witch in your company? The murderer?’ Her voice was flat, devoid of any emotion or emphasis.

‘She’s from another place again.’

Le Saint paused to survey Shane and Selene. ‘And they also, I gather.’

He nodded.

‘But you’ve all converged here, in my time, my temple…my Beltane. For what reason, other than death?’

‘We hoped to restore balance to another future.’

‘By murdering Corvey?’

‘That was not my intention.’

She blew air over her lips. ‘Yet it is the result. Couldn’t you foresee it?’

He considered, wondering for a moment why he hadn’t been aware of the probability of Nell’s actions. As quantum sentient, he could predict—in a deterministic fashion—all the myriad outcomes of any given set of events and observe them simultaneously in superposition to each other. It’s what he did. How could he have missed this? ‘It seems I was deceived,’ he said, his brow furrowing.

She looked down at the bloodstains on her hands and rubbed them. ‘It seems I was as well.’ She drew in another deep breath. ‘And now I must decide where the truth lies. Corvey may or may not have brewed a spell that was best broken. My people are not going to hail you and that indigo witch as heroes either way. You’ve cast a shadow on our Beltane, and a shadow on my sovereignty. It doesn’t bode well.’

‘We sought to protect your sovereignty.’

‘I don’t like your methods.’

‘It wasn’t my best solution, I assure you,’ Jarrod said.

‘Yet here we are.’ She turned her gaze towards the high arched windows to the west. ‘For good or ill?’ she said as if speaking to someone far away.

He shrugged both shoulders this time. ‘The results are yet to be seen.’

‘With that established, can you speak plainly, both of you?’ Selene blurted out, her voice gathering momentum as she continued. ‘I’m tired of these allusions to what’s right or wrong, best or worst. Either lock us up or set us free, but leave off with the damned mystery. Demons, is this how all you witches communicate?’ She snapped her mouth shut at a wave of Le Saint’s hand.

‘I can see this doesn’t concern you,’ the High Priestess said.

Selene gathered her breath, about to respond, but Shane pulled her back, shaking his head. An apprentice entered the chamber before anyone could say more. Her feet were bare and her footfalls silent. She closed the gap between them in seconds, her robe flowing out behind her.
‘High Priestess,’ she said, dipping her head and waiting for acknowledgment.
‘Have they found her?’ Le Saint asked.
‘Not yet, but they’ve brought someone else.’ She paused, taking in Jarrod and his companions.
‘Who else?’ Le Saint drew her attention back.
‘There was a couple heading south on the Corsanon road. Apparently they are out for a Beltane hunt.’
‘That’s not uncommon.’
‘Not in itself, but these two are…unusual.’
‘In what way?’
‘They bear the marks of Treeon.’
‘Again, not uncommon.’
‘The ancient ones,’ her apprentice said in a whisper. ‘From the old records.’
The High Priestess faltered, but recomposed herself quickly. ‘And do we know what they’re hunting for?’ Her eyes drifted to Jarrod.
‘They’re here now, if you care to see them,’ the apprentice said.
‘Show them in, thank you.’ The High Priestess pushed her hair back and tied it with a band from her wrist.
‘Let’s see if this is anyone you know, shall we?’
Grayson stood over the stainless steel table, staring at the crystals. They were like tiny diamonds covering Rosette’s bare skin. She was grey, a sunless sky; her eyes were black holes, staring at the ceiling, unblinking. The colours of her newest tattoo seemed painted on, no longer a part of the living canvas of her skin but a thing apart, foreign. A wave of nausea rose in his throat. He trembled, reaching out to touch her cheek.

Everett stopped him. ‘Mustn’t contaminate,’ he said.

Grayson could feel the man staring at him. He couldn’t bring himself to pull his eyes away from Rosette.

‘This is your missing friend?’ Everett asked, slowly closing the vat.

Grayson continued to stare while Everett snapped the lid shut. When he finally looked up, his face was streaming with tears. ‘How did it happen?’ he asked.

‘Not here,’ Everett said, handing him a small digital screen.

Everett glanced at the tech station before guiding Grayson towards the doors. Grayson read the contents of the screen and handed it back, tightening the collar of the pathology jacket Everett had given him. He lengthened his stride. The two walked out of the ward with only a brief nod to the tech.

Grayson waited for the elevator door to slide shut before speaking. ‘When can you release her?’ he asked as they began the descent to ground level.

Everett frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I want to take her home.’

‘Not a possibility. Admin’s logged her now. She’s quite a novelty. I’ve got thirty-six hours to effect a cure before she goes to donor status.’

Grayson felt another wave of nausea rise up into his throat. ‘Effect a cure?’

‘If I can find out what stopped her heart, I can ameliorate and reanimate.’

Grayson let out his breath. ‘That’s all fine for the body, but what about her spirit?’

A tone sounded. Ground floor. Everett held the elevator doors open, allowing Grayson to exit first. They walked down the hall, deserted now in the early hours of the morning, and out into the crisp metallic air.

‘I’m not sure I follow. Do you mean spirit in the sense of the pre-enlightenment notions?’ Everett asked.

‘Do your pre-enlightenment notions include a divine life force—source energy—that inhabits the body-vehicle. Energy that cannot be created or destroyed?’

‘That’s about right, if my history is correct.’

‘Then yes, that’s what I mean.’

Everett laughed, cutting it short as he registered the look on Grayson’s face. ‘Sorry. I didn’t realise you were serious. The existence of a soul or spirit prior to or after the life of the body was disproved centuries ago.’

‘If that’s the case, why are you keeping so many bodies on ice?’

‘They’re for organ donation, mostly. They’re nearing their use-by dates, though, which is a problem.’

‘Use-by dates?’

‘Most of those bodies have been in deep cryo for the last ten decades or more.’

‘What about recent deaths? What do you do with them?’

Everett put out his hand to stop him crossing the street. A high-speed motorcycle whizzed by. It didn’t make a sound. ‘There hasn’t been a death this century, except for your Rosette.’ Everett’s face lit up. ‘We’ve beaten it.’

Grayson stood at the edge of the concrete walkway, letting his eyes wander. Monoliths towered above his head. He could see no stars in the glare, only a haze-brown between the cracks of the skyscrapers. The buildings stood like sentinels, lit up to their knees by burnt orange streetlights, an unnatural colour that neither attracted bugs nor created shadows. Their barred windows obscured any activity inside, if indeed the rooms were occupied. A breath of wind pushed rubbish along the gutter, a plastic bag catching on the base of a nearby lamp pole. It struggled for a while, fluttering in panic before it was suddenly whisked away in another direction.

A peel of thunder cracked overhead, the lightning flash turning everything a blue-white, making the buildings appear double their height. Among the refuse piled in black bags under a public transport sign, a man slept, his face hidden, his hands gnarled and twisted like old tree branches. Cockroaches crawled out of his cuffs.

‘You’ve beaten death?’ Grayson asked.

‘We have,’ Everett smiled.

Grayson shook his head. ‘Amazing.’ He followed him onto the monorail, sitting in the seat behind him. ‘I need
to take Rosette home,’ he whispered. ‘You’ve got your ways here, and I am grateful you’ve kept her body in suspension, but I can’t let you keep her like that any longer. She will not be a donor, in any case. Her DNA won’t match. Hasn’t your pathology department picked up on that yet?’

‘Rosette.’ Everett said the name as if it were the only word Grayson had uttered. He sounded like a man who had been starved his whole life for it, and had only just realised.

‘I’m going to need your help,’ Grayson went on, leaning forward. ‘Are you listening to me? I have to get her out.’

‘What does it mean?’ Everett asked, his eyes soft.

‘It means I need you to…’

‘Not that. What does the word Rosette mean?’

Grayson gripped the back of the seat. ‘Rose. It means rose.’

Everett shook his head. ‘I’ve heard of it but never seen one, of course.’

Grayson relaxed his hands. ‘It’s a plant. The blooms have many petals. Deep crimson. Incredible scent.’

‘I’m no historical botanist. What are the medicinal qualities?’

Grayson looked down. ‘The rose, it’s said, alleviates pain of the heart.’

‘An anodyne?’

‘Similar.’

When the monorail stopped, Everett was already at the door. Grayson didn’t understand the rush until he saw a flood of people coming on board behind him. They swarmed inside, all wearing grey coats, collars turned up, hair slicked back. It was difficult to distinguish the sexes. No one smiled, or frowned or yawned or laughed. They simply poured in—straight backs, straight faces. He got off the train as quickly as he could.

‘Where to now?’ Grayson asked, keeping close track of Everett as they squeezed through the crowd waiting on the platform. It was like pushing upstream; his shoulders were knocked and buffeted, but not a face turned towards him, not a word was spoken. No one talked. Some coughed, or cleared their throats as if swallowing blades of grass.

Everett didn’t seem to notice the eeriness of it all. ‘I’ve got to sedate Canie again and get back to work. You can’t stay here. You’ll be seen.’

‘By whom?’ Grayson looked at the sea of people ignoring him. He felt invisible.

‘Security,’ Everett whispered.

‘Security?’ Grayson followed him into the elevator and Everett nodded his head towards a camera in the corner. When they entered the man’s apartment, Grayson spotted another camera in the main living area.

‘Audio?’ Grayson mouthed the question.

‘Not with my advanced student rank.’

Grayson’s eyebrows went up. He was careful not to step into range of the camera.

‘I have an idea,’ he said. ‘I’ll take Canie back to the park and wait for your shift to end. You can’t keep doping the dog. It’ll kill him.’

‘I can’t let him be seen.’ Everett nodded towards the camera.

‘Is that the only room wired?’

‘That, and the bedroom.’

Grayson frowned. ‘Leave it to me. I’ll look after the pup and keep him out of sight.’

‘And then?’

‘We get Rosette out of this place before she’s cannibalised.’

Everett sighed. ‘I told you. She’s been tagged. There’s no way.’

‘I’ll find one.’

‘I don’t see how.’

Grayson felt a finger tickling his spine. ‘I do.’

‘It’s not as easy as that,’ Everett said, grabbing Grayson’s arm and stopping him from pacing. ‘The security system is infallible.’

Grayson felt exhaustion creeping over him. They’d been arguing this point all evening. He looked towards the kitchen, where Canie was curled into a ball, deep in a natural sleep. At least one of them was getting some rest.

‘Nothing’s infallible,’ he said. ‘Nothing.’

‘Then neither is your plan.’

Grayson allowed himself to be guided back to his chair. Their discussion had become heated and he knew that wasn’t going to provide a solution. ‘The system’s in place to stop break-ins,’ Grayson persisted. ‘We’re going to break her out.’
'In or out, I can’t see how we can get by it.’ Everett rubbed the back of his neck before pouring another drink. Grayson picked up the hand-held computer screen and scanned the index page. ‘You have a map of the layout?’ ‘All students do, but…’ ‘Codes?’ Grayson punched in the numbers as Everett said them. They studied the screen together. ‘Are there any legitimate reasons for moving her?’ ‘Only to the donor ward, or Labs, not out the front door.’ ‘But we can get her out of Cryo and moving?’ ‘Rolling a frozen body down the street would attract some attention, even in this disconnected city.’ Grayson looked up, his lip curling in a half smile. He didn’t think Everett had a sense of humour, but his eyes were twinkling now. ‘That’s the word you used for it, isn’t it? Disconnected?’ ‘That’s one of them.’ Grayson tapped the edge of the monitor with his forefinger. ‘We need a first-class glamour.’ ‘You haven’t used that word before.’ ‘Glamour?’ ‘What’s it mean?’ ‘It’s a bewitchment,’ Grayson said. ‘A charm.’ ‘A pendant.’ He shook his head. ‘It’s not literal. A glamour is a manipulation of ambient energy. It displaces the light waves reaching the visual cortex of onlookers so that the thing being looked at appears to be something else.’ ‘An illusion?’ ‘Close.’ ‘Like a holograph?’ ‘That’s a reasonable reference, yes.’ ‘What generates it?’ ‘Consciousness.’ Everett chuckled. ‘You’re in the Dark Ages with that kind of thinking, Grayson. We know consciousness has no such properties. Outside of a concept, it doesn’t exist at all. It can’t affect matter. We disproved that hocus-pocus long ago.’ ‘I’m sure you did,’ Grayson said. ‘Nonetheless, we need a glamour. I wish Rosette was here to show you how it’s done. She’d change your mind on that subject lightning quick.’ ‘I don’t doubt she could.’ Everett averted his eyes as he spoke. ‘If I can find Kreshkali, we’ll be able to pull it off.’ ‘Kreshkali?’ ‘Her mother.’ ‘She knows who her mother is?’ Everett stood. ‘How’s that possible?’ Grayson shook his head. ‘And you think I’m in the Dark Ages…’
Kreshkali spotted Jarrod the moment she entered the temple. He was flanked by guards, as were she and An’ Lawrence. She could feel the Sword Master’s ire brushing across the back of her neck, making fine hairs stand out from her skin. She hoped he would control his temper. The man was like a powder keg. No doubt Scylla’s absence wasn’t doing anything to calm his nerves. If she could talk to his familiar, she might get her to settle him down.

Teg? She let her thoughts drift up out to the temple valley until they found the Lupin’s mind. She blinked.

You’re having a picnic?

Kreshkali? He swallowed quickly. We stumbled on a herd of fat sheep. You were tracking back to Treeon with the guards so we…well, we couldn’t resist.

Kreshkali allowed him to hear her mental chuckle.

Good to know you’re getting along. Just make sure the locals don’t see you.

We’re staying hidden, top of the valley. Do you need me?

Kreshkali hesitated. Not yet. How’s Scylla?

Impressed with my hunting skills, I’d say.

They’re sheep, Teg. Enclosed in a paddock and overfed. She’s probably more impressed with your audacity to pinch one than anything else.

Two.

What?

I said, ‘That’s true, Mistress’.

Indeed. When you’re both sated, see if you can get her to soothe the Sword Master before he carves holes in the temple walls, please?

Will do.

Kreshkali turned her attention to the woman pacing in front of the Dragon Bone Chair, ignoring for the moment Jarrod and his companions. It didn’t look good. It wasn’t clear whose blood had soaked the High Priestess of Treeon Temple—Jarrod hadn’t mentioned any violence in his brief message into the corridors—but it appeared the woman thought Jarrod had something to do with it. Kreshkali relaxed her shoulders and smoothed her expression, holding her mind shield tight in place.

‘I’m High Priestess Le Saint,’ the blood-soaked woman said. ‘I understand you and your companion have been hunting in my woods.’ She closed her eyes for a moment. ‘And pastures…’

Teg! Get out of there. ‘We’ve been celebrating Beltane,’ Kali said, extending her hand in the traditional greeting of equals—palm up. ‘Perhaps a little too enthusiastically? I do apologise.’ She allowed herself a quick smile at Jarrod and Shane. ‘I’m delighted you’ve found them. Saved me the trouble.’ She shook her head.

‘And you are?’

‘Kreshkali, High Priestess of Temple Los Loma.’

‘Temple Los Loma? I don’t know it. Are these your apprentices?’

‘They are.’ She nodded to Jarrod and Shane, making full eye contact with each. ‘The other is…’

‘Mine. I’m Sword Master Rowan An’ Lawrence.’ He took a step forward to stand next to Kali. ‘Has there been some trouble?’

‘There’s been a murder,’

Kali’s eyebrows went up.

‘My consort, Braxton Corvey, is dead.’

‘Witnesses?’

‘Hundreds.’

‘What was seen?’

Le Saint looked down at the blood on her dress, a white daisy falling from her hair as she did so. Her head came up fast and she locked eyes with Kali’s. ‘A witch—in their company.’ She pointed a finger at Jarrod. ‘Stabbed him in the liver before hawk-shifting. She escaped, leaving them behind.’

‘And?’

‘And I think you’re that witch, back here to set them free.’ She turned to the guards. ‘Lock them up.’

The men at either side stepped in and drew their swords, the ring sounding throughout the chamber. They bound her hands behind her back and did the same with the others, before leading them away.
‘Keep them separate,’ Le Saint called out.

Kreshkali’s guard forced her in a different direction, away from Rowan and the others. Teg! she called.

We’re in.

After the sun set, Teg crept down the western slope of the temple valley, past the training grounds and stables, following Scylla. They stuck to the shadows, not making a sound. The feline knew the terrain and guided them flawlessly, keeping to dark corners and thick hedges, along paths overhung with trees swaying in the wind. The success of this venture would depend on stealth, both physical and mental. There were mind-travellers about, and other familiars. He wanted to consult with Kreshkali on their plan, let her know what he was doing, but neither he nor Scylla had risked a mental communiqué. It would be like clanging bells on a still morning. The place was alive with psychics. He shifted into his other form, directing the rippling shock wave skyward.

As a quadruped his instincts sharpened, sights, sounds and smells taking on an infrared glow. He could see the texture and nature of energy in a palpable way—as if perceiving them with a different part of his mind. He was drawn towards the temple courtyard as they crossed beneath the shadow of the guardian statues. He shivered, slinking past the smooth marble shapes, keeping to the darkness that lined the empty thoroughfares. The streets were littered with the day’s revelry, abandoned when the Beltane festivities had come to an abrupt halt.

When he came to a three-way crossing, Scylla went left without hesitation. An’ Lawrence was like a homing device to her, with or without mind communication. Teg’s link to Kreshkali was even more literal. In his current form, he could smell her blood as if it were his own.

On padded feet they trotted around to the rear of the main temple and found a door, closed but unguarded from the outside. Scylla tilted her head, staring at Teg, her dark eyes unblinking. He licked his chops, white teeth flashing when the moon appeared from behind a wisp of cloud. He raised his energy, calling it into his solar plexus, and shifted soundlessly into bipedal form. Scylla braced against the wake, hooding her lids, the feathery tufts of her ears blowing back.

Teg lifted the door latch, slowly pushing it open wide enough to get his arm in. He knew what was on the other side. He could see it as clear as the moon. The guard was unaware, thinking the threat was inside, not out.

As quick as a snake, Teg clamped his hand around the neck of the guard. Her back was to him, her attention towards the row of cells down the hallway. Before air escaped her mouth, he compressed her carotid artery, sending a sleep spell straight to her heart. She crumpled, and he slipped through, easing her body to the floor and catching her sword before it clattered on the stone tiles. He tucked it into his belt and moved down the hall, his booted feet as silent as Scylla’s soft pads. She ducked down a side corridor and he continued on until he came to a door that pulsed with energy. He risked a tap. It was less likely to be heard than a mental call. ‘Mistress?’ he said, his voice barely allowing the air out of his throat.

He had his palm against the door, feeling the spell that bound it shut. The warmth of her energy on the opposite side penetrated his fingertips, sending electricity up his arm.

‘Can you help me lift the block?’ she asked.

‘I can blast this door off its hinges if you like.’

‘I can too, but I thought we’d be more subtle tonight.’

‘What do you suggest?’

‘All I need is a few inches at the bottom. If we work with equal pressure from both sides, it might go undetected.’

He drank the warmth of her humour. ‘Just say when.’

‘Now will do fine, Teg.’

With pinpoint focus he concentrated on the bottom of the door, feeling the force of her doing the same on the other side. Kali worked her spell and he matched it, imagining molecule by molecule her movements, mirroring them as he did.

‘Shield,’ she whispered. ‘It’s working.’

As Teg reinforced his mind shield, expanding it to encompass the door, he felt movement. A gliding sensation passed over his foot, soundless save for a slight rasping. It smelled earthy, like trees after rain. His heart beat faster. Emerging from underneath the door was a long snake, cobalt-blue in the dim hallway light, a splash of red behind each eye. Its black tongue flickered as it slowly wound up his leg. Teg trembled, swallowing hard as the weight of the creature dragged at his clothes. When the snake reached his right shoulder, it looped around his neck, head resting just above his collarbone. He hesitated before daring to stroke her with his fingertips. Cool scales pressed against his cheek. The serpent wound closer to his head, flickering her tongue towards his ear.
Good timing, Teg. There was excitement in her mental voice as she risked mind-to-mind contact. I was running out of ideas.

My pleasure, Mistress.

We best get out of here.

The others?

Unfortunately they can’t shape-shift. Where’s Scylla?

This way. He took in the air, scenting for the Sword Master’s temple cat. Preoccupied with the serpent around his neck and the aftermath of the door spell, he didn’t scent for anything else. He turned a corner and ran smack into another guard.

Teg drew his sword as the guard recovered from her surprise and lunged at him. She wilted to the ground before Teg could block her strike, a tiny trickle of blood oozing from her neck. The serpent snapped her mouth shut, concealing long curved fangs.

So you’re toxic?

Somewhat, Kreshkali hissed, tightening her coils.

Teg took the sword and knife from the body and stepped over it, continuing down the hall. Around the next corner they found Scylla in front of a door, her bobtail twitching. She backed up as Teg approached.

What now, Mistress? he asked.

Same thing, only higher, if Jarrod’s on the other side of the door. There was a pause as the loops tightened. He is. Move closer. Scylla, back up, sweet one. We’re getting him.

The heat of the spell flushed his face and in a moment the bottom of the door vanished. There was plenty of room for them to crawl out.

Teg held his breath, waiting for the sound of guards approaching at a run, or the clang of the temple bells. Neither could be heard. He nodded to An’ Lawrence as he led the others out.

‘What took you so long?’ the Sword Master said.

Teg didn’t know if the question was for him, Kreshkali or his temple cat. He retreated down the hall, tilting his head in the direction of the exit. ‘I suggest we hurry,’ he said, taking in the measure of Shane and Jarrod. His eyes rested on Selene. ‘There will be a pursuit.’

‘How many bodies did you leave in your wake?’ An’ Lawrence asked, stepping over a guard. The woman was face down, arms and legs at awkward angles. She hadn’t moved.

‘Enough to rescue you,’ Teg replied, his voice low. ‘Follow me.’ He didn’t turn to see if they did. He could tell they were behind, slinking down the long twisting hallway, keeping to the shadows. When they reached the alley, Teg closed the door, sealing it with a light spell of his own. Kreshkali relaxed her coils when he did. The night air touched his face, cool and fresh after the cloistered warren beneath the temple hall. He tilted his head back and gazed at the stars. When he looked at the others, they were all staring at him. ‘What’s the problem?’ he asked.

‘Who are you?’ Selene asked.

‘Kreshkali’s apprentice. Name’s Teg,’ he said, introducing himself.

An’ Lawrence stepped forward and tapped the serpent on the top of her head. It let out a hiss, mouth wide, fangs bared.

‘And this is Kreshkali,’ the Sword Master said. ‘You needn’t stay in this form forever, you know. I’d hate to see you get stuck like that.’

In a warp of energy, Kreshkali shifted, launching skyward as a night owl, the loops of the serpent disappearing as she burst out of her previous shape. Teg gasped, the sudden release throwing him backward. He watched as she rose above the treetops and disappeared.

Teg, come with me!

He blinked, dropping the weapons at his feet. He leapt after her, shifting into wolf form in mid-stride.

An’ Lawrence grimaced as the Lupin morphed and bolted.

‘This is déjà vu,’ Selene whispered, picking up the swords. She belted one on, and passed the others to the men.

An’ Lawrence held up his hand, listening. ‘Did you hear that?’ he whispered.

‘Guards!’ Jarrod said.

The Sword Master drew them into the darker shadows of the alley. Scylla crouched, bristling, and he kept his hand on her back as he pressed against the wall, motioning for the others to do the same. Boots clipped on pavement and stopped. Scylla jumped to the top of an apple barrel, tasting the air.

Guards, Rowan. Two.

He spotted them. ‘Sentinels,’ he whispered to the others. ‘Don’t move.’
The guards lingered at the end of the alleyway, their conversation clear on the evening breeze. ‘There’s no way to tell,’ the woman said. ‘They may or may not be from the southern continent.’
‘They sure as demons aren’t from around here. I’ve never seen a shift like that, and you haven’t either.’ The other voice was masculine.
‘Come on, Drake. At Temple Dumarka they shift like clouds in a storm.’
‘Gossip!’
‘Fact!’
‘How do you know?’
The woman whispered; An’ Lawrence was barely able to hear her answer. ‘It’s in their blood.’
The man didn’t have a response for that. He struck a match, and a wreath of smoke rose up around his face. ‘What do you think Le Saint will do with ‘em?’ He jerked his head towards the temple.
The woman laughed. ‘Bargaining chips, of course.’
‘For Corsanon?’
‘Where else if, as you say, they are spies.’
‘It’s more likely than your theory—there is no southern continent.’ He chuckled, then stopped suddenly. ‘Did you hear that?’
Red sparks fell to the ground and were crushed beneath his boot. Both sentinels drew their swords and jogged away.
‘That’s our signal,’ An’ Lawrence said. ‘Let’s go.’
‘She’s distracting them,’ Jarrod added, motioning Selene and Shane out of the shadows. ‘Come on. This is our chance.’
The moonlight revealed the zigzag road coursing out of the valley for nearly half a league. Selene baulked. ‘We’ll be spotted if we climb that.’
An’ Lawrence shook his head. ‘We’ll go the other way.’ He stretched out his arm towards the far end of the valley.
‘But it’s twice as steep,’ she said.
‘It’ll provide cover,’ he said. ‘Hurry. I want out of here before they discover we’re gone.’ He took off at a jog, finding the narrow back alleys and keeping to the shadows. If they didn’t run into any more guards, they would make it.
‘Some chance this is,’ Selene whispered as she caught up to him. ‘And what do we do if we manage to get to the top?’
‘Hope Kreshkali’s waiting for us.’
‘Hope?’ Selene made a spitting sound.
‘She’ll lead us to the portal.’
‘And what if the other one is there instead?’
An’ Lawrence slowed his stride for a moment. ‘She won’t be,’ he said, and ran.
Rosette was desperate to have her body back, if for no other reason than to clobber the two men over the head with the nearest blunt object. How could they be so dense? They weren’t picking up on her thoughts no matter how hard she hurled them. Of course there was a way to get her body out of that medical fortress, and she had a fairly clear picture of what it would take for her to get back into it as well. If only these blockheads would listen. Drayco, nothing’s working. They can’t hear me. I don’t know what to do.

I see that, Maudi.

She felt the big cat warm against her awareness—a divine comfort.

Have you tried to get through to Fynn? he asked.

How will that help? They don’t understand him either, and he’s acting like a drunken rat. What are they feeding the poor guy?

Sedatives. Let me see what I can do.

She brightened. And I’ll play poltergeist.

There’s an idea, Maudi. Can you?

I’ll know in a sec. Rosette hovered over the table, focusing her intention on the objects there—a bottle of amber liquid, two very small glasses, a single plate with some kind of white wafer on it and a small computer display that they were passing back and forth. Not quite the ideal ingredients for a conjuring but something to work with anyway. Dray? Do you think the four Elementals even exist in this world?

I imagine they exist everywhere, don’t you?

I love your imagination! And you’re right. Of course they do. She began to weave the Elemental summons, calling up Air, Earth, Water and Fire from the four corners of the room, the four corners of the city, the four corners of this world. The results knocked her over before the spell was half complete.

Grayson jumped out of his chair, righting the bottle as the liquid splashed out. At the same time the contents that pooled on the table ignited in flames. Everett yelled and leapt away from the fire, the hairs on his forearm singed. Fynn sprang to his feet, barking up a storm. He broke free of his restraint and Grayson caught him in his arms. He stood still, the dog squirming and yapping. His lips parted. Rosette!

‘She’s here,’ he said as the smoke billowed towards the ceiling. The table was charred black, the smell of burnt plastic thick in the room. Everett was hacking and coughing, waving the towel away from the smoke detector. Grayson let Fynn down, snapping his fingers towards the kitchen. ‘Sit, Canie. Good pup. Stay!’

‘Who’s here? What are you talking about?’ Everett’s face was beaded with sweat. He stared at the table as if it was alive. ‘Rosette can’t be here. You’re mad!’

Finally! Drayco, I’ve got their attention.

Maudi, you have the attention of most of the people in this apartment building. It might have been a little over the mark, that spell.

She rippled laughter. You know me…

Yes, but now what are you going to do?

I’m not sure, but at least Grayson knows I’m here. That might encourage him to hurry along with the body snatching. I’ve an unpleasant feeling that we’re running out of time.

Kali would argue the point, but I have the same feeling too. What’s next?

Is Fynn listening to you?

As best he can in his state.

Rosette longed to grimace.

Tell him to keep quiet and stay out of sight of the security cameras.

A little after the fact, but will do.

She hovered over Grayson and watched his aura jump. Again her thoughts wafted out towards the man and she let herself immerse in the memories of their intimacy—open, deep, passionate. It felt like years since they had touched and she allowed the backlog of desire to surface. Who knows, maybe it had been years, yet the sense of familiarity had not diminished as she mingled with the energy surrounding him. Gray? Can you hear me?

There was no answer, but the look on his face was one of reverie. ‘She’s here, in the room with us,’ he said. ‘
can feel her.’

‘I don’t know about that, but we’ll have more than her ghost in here shortly. We’ve got to move, fast.’

‘Why?’

‘Fire squad will investigate as soon as that footage is viewed,’ Everett said, indicating the surveillance camera.

‘They may send security too, if there were noise complaints. And there will be. I’d no idea how loud a dog could get.’

‘How long do we have?’

‘Fifteen minutes, tops.’

Both men were startled by a knock at the door.

‘Or less if they’re on patrol and get an instant divert.’ Everett waved Grayson aside as he swept the table clean, throwing the charred towel and burnt items into a cupboard. He scooped up Fynn, clamped his mouth shut and stuffed him into the backpack. Grayson grabbed it as Everett propelled them both into a closet. Rosette would have rolled her eyes, if she’d had any, when she slipped out into the hall to see who was there.

_They’re worried about a little boy selling papers?_  
_Not that,_ Drayco said, his voice on edge. _The boy’s a decoy. Look down the elevator. Armed troops are on the way up._

_Demons! What now?_  
_Perhaps the doctor has something clever in mind._  
_I’m brewing up another summons, just in case._  
_Try not to incinerate them this time, will you? They won’t be much help if they’re cooked._  
_Good point._  
_But you better do something quickly, Maudi. The troops are here._

Rosette drew on the energy around her as Everett opened the door. He had a short conversation with the boy, bought a paper and was about to close the door when the elevator on the opposite side of the hallway rang and opened. Men with shields and fire extinguishers poured out, pushing the youth aside and knocking Everett back. They were heading straight towards the second room where Grayson hid.

_Maudi, now would be a good time for that spell._  
_I’m on it, Dray. Eyes open. It’s going to get hot in here._

Grayson raced down the fire escape, the backpack digging into his spine. Everett was ahead of him, one hand on the metal railing, the other clutching a small computer case under his arm. The sound of his boots on the metal steps was like an alarm, clanging out a warning. There was no stealth in his movements, speed being the imperative. He hunched his shoulders every time an explosion erupted overhead, waiting for the muffled shouts and screams that would follow. They must be getting close to the ground floor.

Everett stopped suddenly, breathing hard. He leaned over the railing and looked down the shaft to the bottom of the stairwell, his face bright red and sweating. ‘We have to go back.’

‘Why?’ Grayson said, following his line of sight.

Everett’s eyes were wild. ‘We can’t get out this way.’

Grayson eased the tension of the backpack and indicated above. ‘It’s no better up there.’

Paint chips and rubble fell from the ceiling as another boom rocked the building. Grayson wiped his eyes.

‘The door we just passed,’ Everett said, retracing his steps. He raced up to the next landing. ‘It should lead to the service entrance. Come on.’

‘Should?’ Grayson asked, following on his heels.

Everett tested the door for heat before he tried his key-card in the slot. It clicked, and a small light blinked from red to yellow.

‘Damn. We need the password,’ he said as the key-card ejected.

‘Do you have it?’

Everett shook his head.

The sound of boots on the stairwell tapped double time. Grayson glanced below and spotted the troops sprinting up the steps—a moving blockade with their riot shields and batons. ‘I think I might know someone who does.’ He yelled above the explosions and shouts, ‘Rosette! A little help with the door?’

He didn’t hear an answer but felt an overwhelming impulse. He grabbed Everett and jerked him forward, dragging him up one flight of stairs. He crouched, shielding his face, waving for Everett to do the same. ‘Get down.’

‘If you think they won’t notice us here in plain sight…’

‘Everett, cover your eyes.’
‘Why?’

Grayson pulled him to the ground. A blast knocked them both back into the wall. When the sound subsided, Grayson scrambled to his feet, hoisting Everett as well. They charged down the steps to the landing. There was a hole in the wall where the door had been, exposed wires sticking out like a burnt claw, sparks zapping from the raw ends. Grayson raised his eyebrows at Everett. ‘Not the exact password, but effective, don’t you think?’

Twisted metal littered the floor, radiating heat and smelling of solder. He picked his way through the rubble. The hall was dim, lit only by flickering orange lights. They had to step over the remains of the door. It had been thrown several metres from the entrance and was folded over itself.

‘How did you do it?’ Everett asked, pulling his hand back from a smoking beam.

‘Rosette.’

Everett frowned. ‘I feel like I’m going mad. How can you know it’s Rosette?’

‘Subtlety’s not one of her strong points,’ Grayson said without further explanation. He winced as a palpable wave of energy swiped the back of his neck. ‘It’s true, and you know it.’ He turned behind him, sending his words to the general area where he felt Rosette hovering.

‘I didn’t say it wasn’t,’ Everett replied.

‘I was talking to Rosette.’

Everett shook his head. ‘This is a bad dream.’

Grayson held his finger to his lips. ‘They’re behind us,’ he whispered.

The sound of the troops on the landing rang out, like hammers on tin. Everett started to run, but Grayson stopped him, shaking his head and signalling again for silence.

‘They’ll be onto us,’ Everett whispered. His eyes were black in the orange light.

‘She’s taking care of it.’ Grayson crouched against the wall. ‘Trust me.’

‘You’re delusional,’ Everett whispered, as he hunkered down beside him. ‘I don’t know how you planted the explosives but you can’t really think a dead woman did any of this.’

The sound of the troops rushing up the steps shot past. Soon it was silent again except for the distant rumbles.

‘What just happened?’ Everett’s face twisted.

‘Not a bad glamour, don’t you think?’ Grayson smiled.

‘I don’t know what to think. You aren’t making sense. None of this is making sense.’

‘It will in time. Can you get us out of here?’

Everett rose to his feet, his hands shaking. ‘This way,’ he said, heading down the hallway. ‘The service entry is this way.’

Grayson followed him through a warren of twists and turns.

‘I hope you have a plan for when we hit the street,’ Everett said.

‘It’s forming. Can we get back to Rosette without attracting any attention? Back to the hospital?’

Everett stopped in front of another door, glancing at Grayson before swiping his key-card. This lock was not password protected. They stepped through into a small alcove with two elevators.

‘We’ve put ourselves on every security screen in the city,’ Everett said, shaking his head. ‘We couldn’t attract more attention than this if we joined a circus.’

Grayson chuckled, glad Everett had found his sense of humour. ‘Then we can’t wait. We have to get Rosette’s body out of that deepfreeze now.’

‘You’re not suggesting we blast more walls, are you?’

They both ducked at the sound of another round of explosions.

He shook his head.

‘What, then?’

‘Rosette has a plan.’

‘Are you insane?’ Everett looked desperate. ‘Rosette’s in deep cryo, subzero saline crystals…’

‘You’re right. Her body is, but she still has a plan.’ He motioned to the elevator as the door opened. ‘Get us to the hospital, fast!’
Kreshkali alighted in the oak, her back wing strokes parting the leaves, the bough swaying briefly as her claws found their grip. From this position, she could observe the progress of the others climbing out of the north end of Treeon Valley. The owl’s night vision gave her an advantage. She wouldn’t be able to see much otherwise, now that the moon was behind thick clouds. The going was steep and progress slow, but there was no sign of pursuit.

Teg stood below her near the edge of the road. He was bipedal and unmoving, his black leather vest wet with sweat, his shoulders taut. Silently she morphed, dropping to the ground behind him.

‘That was close,’ he said as she approached. He didn’t turn but kept his attention on the others climbing the rocky path. ‘Which one’s Jarrod?’

Apparently he could see them clearly. She squinted. ‘He’s running to the left of An’ Lawrence.’

Teg nodded. ‘And the other two?’

‘Don’t know. I suspect Jarrod picked them up somewhere along the way. Another world perhaps. Hopefully they aren’t from this Beltane festival.’

‘Wrong place at the wrong time?’

Kreshkali chuckled and he turned at the sound.

‘No such thing, Teg.’ She tilted her head towards him. ‘Thank you,’ she said, her words in time with her heartbeat. ‘You handled that perfectly.’

He captured her eyes, leaning so close that she could see gold and green flecks when the moon came out from behind the clouds. She was held immobile for a moment. As the cloud cover returned, the moon vanished, and his eyes were again black pools. She shivered.

‘We aren’t free of it yet,’ he said.

Her hand was next to his, their fingers a breath apart. Then he touched her. Like a butterfly, he traced her knuckles once and then drew away. She lingered for a moment in the sensation. An owl hooted in the background, a mournful sound. The crickets had stopped their chatter. Exhaling, she stepped forward and checked the road. ‘All quiet?’ she asked, looking both ways.

‘As still as death,’ he said.

‘That’s not comforting.’

‘Just a metaphor.’

‘Interesting choice.’ She smiled. ‘Teg, when we find Rosette, I want you to stay close to me, no matter what. There could be…’

She never finished the sentence as the temple bells suddenly rang out, the sound ripping through the air, clanging the alarm. It pealed across the valley, urgent and clear, jarring her bones and rattling her mind. ‘Go,’ she said, pushing him forward. ‘Guide them.’

‘To the portal?’

‘I’ll lead from above.’ She shifted into her falcon form, letting out a raptor’s shriek. She needed speed and she knew her destination. They had to reach the portal. A second rescue wouldn’t be so easy and she wanted to avoid a direct confrontation. There had already been one death at Treeon. She didn’t want to cause any more.

The terrain was clear beneath her, the finer details of the night no longer obscured by human sight. She flew high above the valley, staying just ahead of the others. They ran hard, climbing up the rock face and over the valley lip. She whistled long and shrill. Teg was racing down to meet them, urging them on. Good lad. They’d have to hurry to stay in front of the dogs that were pelting towards them. She spotted the dark shapes running up the hill. They were sight hounds and locked on, their quarry well within range. A mounted guard followed, twenty strong. They had to take the road out of the valley, the cliff face too steep for horses, but they were already a quarter of the way up.

She shot out over the dense forest, searching for the glimmer that marked the portal. It wasn’t far off, nestled between granite boulders and a grove of tall redwood trees. When she spotted it she circled, making certain Teg had seen her.

*I’ve got it, Mistress.*

*Run hard! Lead them. I’ll be waiting at the entrance.*

She dropped lower with each spiral until the treetops brushed her wings. When she alighted on a branch next to
the portal, she gasped for breath, screaming out a single cry that was instantly cut short. A weight had dropped over her, pinning her down. She tried to shriek again, talons spread wide, beak snapping.

*Mistress! Are you all right?*

*Get them out...* she called back, unable to say more. A shadow hovered, a rock the size of a man’s fist. The blow struck, and Kreshkali knew only searing pain and then darkness.

Teg morphed, running on four legs ahead of the others, making sure they could keep him in sight. He’d heard her command. He had to get them out. He led them deeper into the forest, straight towards the point where she had dropped down. The dogs were closing, but An’ Lawrence could handle them, surely. Teg’s mind was on fire.

He’d heard that last cry cut short, though no one else seemed to have noticed, not even Jarrod, the one Kreshkali said was ‘more than’ human. Well, Lupins were more than human too, just not in the same way. He was certain he’d heard distress and the sound of it stabbed repeatedly in his mind. Were they completely unaware, these others? He tuned into each of them, feeling their energy as if it was cloth in his hands. Jarrod and An’ Lawrence were confident, protective, enthused—they seemed to be enjoying themselves. The temple cat was nearly playful too, though she stuck close to the Sword Master’s side, alert. The other man was worried, at the point of exhaustion, though he ran on. The woman was angry, her strength astonishing. They would make it.

As the portal came in sight, he quickened his pace, steeling himself against an array of possibilities. What would he find? Regardless, he knew his charge: stay aware and do what he was sent for—get these people through the portal as quickly as he could. Kali would be all right. She was the High Priestess, their queen. What could touch her?

When he saw her waiting for them, waving them on, a rush of exhilaration coursed through him, and relief. She was unharmed. The concern was for nothing. He laughed at himself. Of course Jarrod and An’ Lawrence were relaxed. Nothing had threatened Kreshkali. She was a powerful witch with awareness in many-worlds, wasn’t she? He shifted to his human form with that thought resting at a strange angle in the corner of his mind.

He was panting from the run and the baying dogs were making him edgy. As the others gathered around her, he hung back. He could stop the dogs if necessary, though he’d be loath to harm them. Dogs were his favourite—simpler minds than the temple cats but so much fun on the hunt.

Kali was motioning them into the corridor, her slender arms open wide. The sound of horses was not far off. He could hear shouts and hoof beats tearing up the loam. He squeezed into the crevice after An’ Lawrence. They locked eyes briefly. Scylla didn’t hiss for once, and she made room for him as he brushed past. Her hackles remained down. They had an agreement now, centred mainly on those sheep they’d nabbed.

Kreshkali followed behind, moving past him as her hand went over the Entity’s plasma discharge. He frowned as he crossed the threshold, bowing in turn to the guardian of the corridors. Something didn’t feel right. Inside the corridors it was still, no wind and little scent, all sound subdued save for a distant echoing of water—like waves lapping a shore. All as it should be, but...

An’ Lawrence approached him, adjusting his sword belt. ’I guess I owe you my gratitude.’ He said it like his teeth ached.

’I don’t require it.’ Teg waved it aside. He didn’t want to be distracted right now. There was something at the edge of his thoughts, like a spark trying to ignite. He needed to focus.

An’ Lawrence stepped back. ’Kali, I think you need to teach your apprentice better manners.’

Teg flashed his eyes at the Sword Master. ’You’re welcome,’ he said. Teg knew it didn’t sound genuine, but he was preoccupied. It was taking all his concentration to control his emotions, and the presence of An’ Lawrence and his reprimand tipped the scales. His defences were activated. He barely acknowledged the introductions being made. He nodded his head towards Shane and Selene but didn’t speak. Being rebuked publicly by An’ Lawrence wasn’t endearing him any more to the man. He leaned his back against the wall and avoided everyone’s eyes. Kreshkali hadn’t said a word. Something wasn’t right.

He was relieved to see her safe, wondering what he could have heard. There had been fear and danger in her voice before, or was it simply his own thoughts bouncing back to him? Now he wasn’t so sure. His confused feelings around her were not easing. Had he crossed the line when he touched her? It felt as if, in that matter, he had had no choice.

*There is always a choice.*

He heard Kreshkali voice her only rule, but it was a memory, not a direct communication. He glanced her way. She seemed apprehensive somehow, which was strange. He had always known her to unwind in the corridors. This time she was on edge, though imperceptibly so. What was going on? Was he imagining it? He felt Jarrod studying him.
‘Teg, is it?’ Jarrod asked.
‘Aye.’
‘The new apprentice?’
Teg nodded.
‘How’s it going so far?’
Teg felt all eyes on him.
‘Brilliant, thank you.’

He looked directly at Kreshkali, and she grinned. It was a curious expression—detached, diffident. Had he gone too far? If so, there was no obvious way to jump back.

You can never go back.

Again the memory of her words filled his mind. He closed his eyes. He was plummeting into a dark underworld. Something was wrong, but he was falling too fast to recognise it.
'Working late tonight, Mr Kelly?'

‘When am I not, Nessa?’

Her question was directed to him, but her eyes drifted to Grayson. The other man gave her a smile, which
seemed to be what she was after. Everett wished he had cautioned Grayson against engaging with the staff or even
making eye contact. If he uttered more than a few words, his accent would be obvious and his other ‘differences’
would surface as well—the last thing they wanted in this crazy venture. They needed to be unremarkable and quick
—get in and get out. How they could pull it off was still unclear, but if they attracted attention it’d be impossible,
and if they were delayed much longer, the authorities would find them. He’d be questioned, of course, and possibly
held responsible for the fires and the disruption. He might even have his memory wiped. How he’d got into this
mess a few short months before he graduated, he couldn’t work out. He only knew he felt compelled.

‘I haven’t seen you here before,’ she said to Grayson. She ran her finger along the edge of the monitor screen.
‘Dr Slay’s from Sector Nine,’ Everett said, hoping it would satisfy her.

It didn’t.

‘Are you here for the seminars?’ she asked.

Everett shook his head.

‘Yes,’ Grayson said, smiling wider.

Everett cringed.

Nessa’s face was animated, her lips parting. ‘Will you be speaking, Dr Slay? I didn’t see you on the program,
but I’ll be there, you know. I’m a tech-supervisor.’

‘I am speaking, yes.’

Everett tightened his fists. What was this man doing?

‘Oh, you’ll be grand,’ Nessa said. ‘You have a great speaking voice. What’s the topic?’

Everett readied himself to rescue Grayson, but it wasn’t necessary.

‘Cryptocryonics and the reorganisation of ribosome constructs in post-traumatic isolation syndrome.’

‘Oh, excellent. I’ll be listening. Front row.’

‘Thank you.’

She was glowing. ‘Did you hear what happened on the north blocks? A dozen sirens went by not long ago.
Something about a fire. It’s on the news,’ she said, as if recounting a joyous event.

‘Didn’t notice,’ Everett said, starting to walk away and pulling Grayson with him.

‘But that’s your building, isn’t it, Mr Kelly? You must have heard something.’

‘There were some explosions,’ Grayson said.

Everett tightened his grip on Grayson’s sleeve and tried to guide him away.

‘Did you see them? What happened? Was it a robbery?’ Nessa asked.

Everett shook his head imperceptibly when Grayson looked at him, but the man kept talking anyway.

‘I don’t think it was a robbery. A kitchen fire, I suspect. We were leaving when it all erupted.’

Everett tugged harder. Was he trying to blow their cover? He couldn’t believe he was engaging the woman.

And where had his accent gone? Everett was forming a clear request for the tech that would take her away from the
desk when she jerked forward, cradling her neck. She closed her eyes and moaned, her brow furrowing.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked, pushing Grayson aside.

‘It felt like I got hit with a crowbar.’

‘Let me see your eyes.’ He wondered what she was playing at now, but her pupils were unequal. She actually
did look as if she had been hit with a crowbar.

‘You better get that scanned,’ he said. ‘Do you want me to call relief?’

‘It’s fine,’ she said, still rubbing her neck. ‘I should just get back to work.’

He punched in a sequence to her com link. ‘They won’t be long. Best get it checked out.’

Grayson was frowning as they headed down the hall.

‘What was that about?’ Everett asked. He lengthened his stride as they passed another central station; there was
no telling who he’d start chatting with next.

‘I thought it best to engage her.’

‘Had I not made it clear? The goal is anonymity.’

EARTH—TIME: FORWARD
CHAPTER 31
‘She was curious about me. If I hadn’t talked to her, she’d have run a search. We both know what that would have come up with.’ Grayson adjusted the pack on his back. At least the pup was quiet.

Everett turned the corner and led them into an open elevator. As the doors closed he squared off in front of Grayson.

‘What happened to Nessa? She looked like she had a concussion.’
‘Rosette, I suspect.’
‘Rosette?’
‘I think she’d had enough of the banter.’

Everett was about to question him further when the elevator door opened. Three med students entered, wheeling a gurney. On it lay a comatose patient—a woman whose skin was as grey as the walls, eyes staring at the ceiling, chest rising and falling with the forced pressure of the ventilator. The students were chatting about their case, debating the merits of putting her in deep cryo while waiting for organ synthesis, or a donation from a feral. The one nearest him looked up, indicating the control panel. Everett raised his eyebrows.

‘Cryo,’ the student answered, pointing towards the top floor.

Everett nodded, his body going rigid. He had no idea how they would get Rosette out now with a troupe of med students underfoot.

I wish he’d relax. He’s like a racehorse at the gate. Rosette sent her thoughts to Drayco, more to keep herself calm than anything else. She knew her familiar could sense what was going on from his side of the ‘wall’, as he called it. Still, she longed for the comfort of his voice in her mind. Mind? She laughed. Do I even have a mind any more?

Of course you do, Maudi.
Really? Where is it? I’d love to know.

Drayco didn’t answer but followed her earlier thought. The man’s somewhat jittery, I agree. Looks like the new arrivals aren’t helping.

Oh, but they will! Rosette flattened her energy against the top of the elevator as the med students loaded on. Their presence was just what she needed, a stroke of luck. They would provide plenty of distraction, giving her time to weave her glamour. She was getting the hang of it, affecting matter with thought. She’d had enough practice at Treeon, of course, and with Nell, but her body had acted as a conduit. She realised that now. Without physicality her energy blasted out in all directions unless she focused very clearly, like a pinpoint. The trick was staying relaxed and keeping the energy flowing. It wasn’t going to be that hard. All she had to do was conceal her corpse with a glamour long enough for Grayson to get her to the portal. She could do it. She had to do it.

Can you hear Scylla at all, Drayco?

I can’t even rouse Fynn. What did they do to him?

Everett gave him more sedatives.

Perhaps he should have taken a dose himself.
Rosette undulated in laughter. That’s an idea, but let Fynn be. We don’t need him bounding out of that pack and yipping down the halls just now.

There are no four-legged creatures here.
Not in this healing centre, you’re right.
That’s not what I meant, Maudi. There are no other four-legged creatures in this world.
Rosette felt a chill down her back. How can that be? This is Earth. A future one, but Earth just the same.
It’s a future without quadrupeds.

Rosette got lost in that thought for a moment before rushing out of the elevator to catch up. They were on the top floor, heading for Cryo, heading for her frozen body. It was going to be okay. Grayson knew she was there. She trusted that. This would work.

How long will it take, Maudi?
She detected the unease in his voice. Depends on how these two go, and my glamour.

Grayson’s confident.

Rosette felt her energy light up. He is, isn’t he? I love that about him.

She floated down the hallway, skimming the ceiling. There was neither warmth nor cold from the lights and vents as she passed them. There was not even the sensation of motion, though she knew she moved. What she sensed was an awareness of her relationship to everything else, a curious impression that was beyond empirical analysis. It wasn’t sounds that she heard, or colours and shapes that she saw, but an awareness of the energy of sound, and colour, and light, and thought. In this state she had no trouble picking up on anyone’s mental voice, if she chose to tune in, yet oddly it was only Drayco who could hear her.
The group of students chatted together; Everett and Grayson remained silent. They exchanged a few looks. Everett’s face was pale and strained, Grayson’s placid, a mask. At the tech station the attendant startled at seeing so many people entering the ward at once. Rosette could sense he was unaccustomed to that much activity here on the ‘top floor’ and viewed it as an annoyance. He deferred to Everett, though, once he introduced Grayson as a visiting pathologist, and gave them immediate attention. The other students appeared to be much like other people’s children to him—something to tolerate, at best.

The tech scanned Everett’s ID and offered to guide him towards the tank where Rosette’s body was kept. Everett declined. He had the numbers and knew the way. The students went off in different directions, data-screens in hand. One student stopped at a tank directly opposite Rosette’s. Tricky. She was hoping for a bit more privacy.

As Everett unclasped the vat and raised the lid, billows of subzero air rose around them before rapidly sinking to the floor. When it cleared she saw again the ice crystals, like tiny gems, covering her skin. She shivered, not from any cold that could be felt.

The impact of facing her corpse was curious. It was like looking in a mirror, seeing an image she knew was not real, mere reflection. She wished someone had brushed her hair before they froze her. It should have been put in braids, as if for sleep—a long sleep. She wavered, a feeling of weakness washing through her, remembering how Jarrod used to comb out her tangles long ago, when she was just a girl, just little Kalindi Rose.

Maudi?
I’m all right. It’s confronting, that’s all.
I can imagine. I’m a little disturbed myself. If I couldn’t hear your voice, I’d be…
But you can hear my voice, sweetheart. You can. Let’s stick with that thought. She moved closer, watching Grayson and Everett work. They were unrolling a thin casing, the cryo-transport that would keep her at subzero temperatures until revival.

When they had her body sealed, Everett hesitated. ‘Now what?’ he asked.
Grayson stared at the black body bag. She could tell it was getting to him as well. ‘We wheel her out of here.’
‘Just like that?’
‘I hope so. Where’s a gurney?’
Everett clicked his tongue and went to the station, returning with a narrow, stainless steel gurney. Rosette waited for them to make the transfer. When the body bag was settled evenly, she went to work. She wanted to weave a spell that concealed her without attracting too much attention from the Elementals. They were starved on this world, ravenous for any hint of conjuring, willing to blow holes through walls or warp time just to dance with her. Well, maybe later. She was grateful for their support and she told them so. Easy does it. This was to be a subtle glamour, simple, invisible, quiet. Very quiet. Hush, hush, please, my beauties.
‘I can still see her,’ Everett said as they closed the lid on the vat.
‘Just make sure the numbers read as if she’s still there. We want to avoid alarms for as long as possible.’
‘But I can see her here on the gurney. You said she’d be glamoured—invisible.’ Everett spoke softly while he recalibrated the readout parameters of the tank.
‘It’s okay. The glamour won’t work for us.’
‘Why not?’
‘Because we know she’s there and we are stuck in that knowing.’
Everett rubbed the back of his neck. ‘Then how can we tell if the others can’t see it?’
‘We can’t.’
‘What?’
‘No way to tell, but I suspect we’ll find out soon enough. They wouldn’t let us wheel her out of here, would they?’
He shook his head. ‘Not likely.’
Rosette pressed her energy against Grayson’s skin, feeling the hair rise on the back of his neck.
He smiled. ‘I think we’re good to go.’
Everett moved to one end of the gurney and pushed it into the aisle. The med student opposite them followed their progress, his hand coming up. ‘Excuse me?’
Rosette wanted to growl.
‘If you’re finished with that gurney, I could use it. We’re taking this one to transplant.’
Everett and Grayson froze.
It’s working!
Maudi, stop gloating and do something about him.
Like what? I can’t keep the glamour up and deal with him at the same time.
I think you’re going to have to. Everett’s about to pop.
He did look uneasy. Rosette turned her energy away from the glamour and focused on the med student. He was reaching for the gurney. On reflex she sent a blast of energy to stop his hand just before it touched the surface—a surface occupied by her corpse. Too much. He was knocked back, folded over at the waist, knees buckling. The instrument tray jumped out of his hand and clattered to the floor. The sound broke the icy silence of the ward, turning heads.

Fellow students came running. ‘What happened? What’s going on?’ they asked.

Everett pushed the gurney towards Grayson, indicating for him to move it aside. ‘He just collapsed,’ Everett said. ‘Ring the ER, stat.’

One student reached for their pager screen, but the supervising tech shook his head. ‘It’s faster to take him there ourselves. Quick. The gurney.’

_Maudi, do something!_

_I did._

_Do something else!_

She sent a revival spell to the collapsed student, though that also appeared to be too much. His head came up like a shot just before the tech had reached the gurney. Rosette would have screamed if she could. Her glamour slipped and she bolstered it back up. The student was on his feet, his face blank, mouth open.

‘What are you playing at?’ Grayson whispered.

She knew he was speaking to her. _I’m trying to get us out of here._ The look on his face didn’t change. He couldn’t hear her response.

Everett took the lead, making a show of guiding the gurney towards the station. No one paid attention. They were all focused on the med student, who was articulating his strange experience. Apparently it wasn’t at all unpleasant and he felt completely revived. As they chatted in the background, Grayson and Everett slipped out of the cryo ward and headed for the elevators. When the doors closed on the lift, they turned to each other, sweat dripping down their faces.

Rosette hovered, reading the intensity in their expressions. They glanced at the security camera before turning as one to read the elevator numbers lighting up in descending order.

_That was close, Maudi._

_Wasn’t it?_

_Will they set off an alarm when they see you’re gone?_

_Not until they wake up._

_Wake up? You knocked them out? When?_

_Right after the doors swung shut._

_Why?_

_Seemed like the best idea at the time._
Teg rubbed his forehead, pushing a lock of hair out of his eyes. His feelings were becoming unmanageable, and Kreshkali’s actions were doing nothing to reassure him—not that he had any expectations that she would. It was like he’d missed a chapter in their book, the pages torn clean out. The invisible line that kept apprentice and adept apart had become a river, expanding into a wide and rich wetland—no dams, no boundaries, no stops. What was going on? Whatever it is, he thought, An’ Lawrence looks savage. Teg felt like he was caught in a whirlpool, his mind dizzy with the rise and plummet of emotion. Focus. Stay clear. Think only of the task. He could do that, surely.

He’d zero in on the immediate charge of finding Rosette and then Kali would turn to him with a word or a gaze that touched him in such a way that he nearly forgot his own name. What spell was she weaving? An enchantment? He hardly needed one. He rubbed his temples harder, shaking his head.

They’d arrived in the most austere world. Its colours were insipid, the prevailing scent metallic, the sounds harsh, mechanical. Kali and Jarrod had argued whether this was the right place until Rosette’s familiar came bounding up to them, leaping over the top of Scylla and knocking Jarrod to the ground. His purr vibrated through the crevice and everyone let out a burst of laughter—relief, joy, recognition. But why was the temple cat on this side of the corridor? Where was Grayson? More importantly, where was Rosette?

‘Teg,’ Kali called his attention to her. ‘You’ll stay here and keep watch.’

He dipped his head, hiding his frown. That wasn’t right.

She led Jarrod and An’ Lawrence out of the mouth of the portal into the cool grey world that smelled like a bucket of paint thinner. Selene and Shane were talking behind him, their voices raised.

‘Who is she again?’ Selene asked.

‘Kreshkali? She’s the queen of the underworld.’ Teg caught their confused looks. ‘She’s the High Priestess of Temple Los Loma, for one. Rosette’s mother as well.’

Shane shook his head. ‘Pardon?’

‘The witch Nell. Nellion Paree. She’s got glamour like I’ve never seen before. She’s the one who murdered Corvey right in front of my eyes. She shifted into a bird—like Kreshkali. Do all your witches have such skill? It’s a wonder you can tell them apart. They look one and the same to me.’ Shane laughed at his own summation.

Teg stared at him, his spine stiffening. ‘One and the same?’

‘I didn’t mean any disrespect,’ Shane said, taking a step back.

Teg ignored the gesture. ‘You encountered Nell at different times? On Gaela?’

‘Aye,’ Shane said. ‘But Rosette didn’t know her, at least, not at first. She was confused. Something about it being another Gaela. We found Nell as a child, then in Dumarka as High Priestess, and now she’s been in these corridors a while...What’s wrong?’

Teg felt his heart pounding in his chest. He could hardly breathe. He looked out into the grey world and watched the retreating figures of Kali and the two men, suddenly aware of what wasn’t right. She wasn’t right! She wasn’t Kreshkali, not his mentor anyway.

His mind screamed at him to bolt, but which way? Out into the world to confront the woman in the glamour before she did some irretrievably harmful act, or back the way he’d come to find Kreshkali, if she could ever again be found. He looked at the temple cats grooming themselves near the entrance. They seemed unconcerned. Could she fool them too? How was that possible?

‘You’ve gone white, Teg,’ Selene said, leading him back to the wall. ‘Sit down before you faint.’

He jerked away from her grip. ‘Let go!’

‘Take it easy,’ she said. ‘I’m just trying to help.’

Shane moved forward, blocking the depths of the corridor. ‘What’s the matter with you?’

‘Get out of my way,’ Teg said. He made to push past. He didn’t know if Kreshkali was still alive, but he was keenly aware she was not the woman leading Jarrod and An’ Lawrence into the city below. How could those men, who knew her so intimately, not realise it? How could he, who did not, be so certain? ‘That witch isn’t who we think she is!’ Teg blurted out.

‘What do you mean?’

‘She’s an impostor, with some purpose of her own.’

‘You’re paranoid,’ Shane said. ‘The corridor travel has you rattled. Just wait for your head to clear.’
‘Move away,’ Teg growled.
‘Come on. Take it easy. It’s all right.’ Shane was soothing now. ‘They’ll be back soon, with Rosette.’
‘Those two know her well,’ Selene said, taking on Shane’s reassuring tone. ‘And they aren’t worried.’ She reached towards him again. He backed away.
‘You’re both wrong. It’s not her.’
Selene and Shane exchanged a look and blocked the entrance to the strange land.
‘We can’t let you go in this state.’
He feigned a move in one direction, then turned to face the corridors. Selene glanced at the portal, where the plasma Entity sparked. She drew her sword and darted past him to block that way as well.
‘I think we need to stay put until the others return,’ she said, her feet wide, sword pointing towards his chest.
Teg lowered his eyes, allowing his peripheral vision to keep each of them, and each exit, in sight. The temple cats remained indifferent. That confirmed his decision. He bunched his muscles and leapt, shifting to his wolf form in midair as he sprang over Selene’s sword and back into the portal.

Kreshkali struggled against the restraints until her ankles bled and her head throbbed. She could feel the sticky fluid cooling on her skin. It dripped to her toes, the rusty smell of blood strong in her nostrils. Her arms were pinned behind her, clamped tight to her back, the point of one shoulder digging into the ground at a distressing angle. She tried to open her eyes, but her lids wouldn’t cooperate. They barely fluttered. The pain in her body astounded her. She screamed. Easy, she cooed to herself. These thoughts aren’t helping. Slow down. It’s going to be all right. Breathe deeply. Assess.

She soothed herself into a calm, relaxed state, allowing for the sensations without judgments. It was just energy, after all. She could choose how to experience it. When she felt a little relief, she pushed her awareness out of her body, surveying the surroundings with her inner sight. A light breeze ruffled along her back, lifting the tips of her wing feathers.

Ah, wings. That’s part of the problem.
She was still in falcon form. Her first reaction was to shift, but she paused, reconsidering. Was she lying on a tiny outcropping hundreds of feet high? Was she balanced on a branch or in a tangle of thickets? She’d best wait until her senses cleared before she did anything sudden. She eased herself further, taking slow breaths.

Above her another falcon cried. She couldn’t see it, but she recognised the sound. It belonged to a Barbary, a small bird of prey, fast as lightning. It was far in the distance, though it had obviously spotted her. She sighed. He would no doubt move on. Barbary falcons were hunting birds, not scavengers. The crows were another problem. She heard them squabbling in a nearby tree. Not good. She got the sense of being on the ground and risked shifting back into human form. Nothing happened. My energy is too depleted.

She had a grim chuckle at the irony. This would be just her luck—pecked to death by her own Three Sisters. No. That wouldn’t happen. They were back on Earth and she was still in Gaela, wasn’t she? It was little comfort. What self-respecting crow wouldn’t make a meal of her in this state? Again she struggled against the restraints.

The sun was rising towards its zenith. She could sense the bright orb of light through her closed lids. The warmth gave little comfort—it increased her thirst and vulnerability. How did this happen?

She remembered swooping towards the portal, alighting on a nearby branch and then…blank. Searing pain and nothing.

Where was everyone else? Did Teg get them out?
While she pondered, a crow dropped from the tree and landed near her head. Leaves scattered as it hopped closer. Twigs snapped. She screamed and it flapped away, only to return moments later with two others. They looked like slits of black through her partially opened eye. She was in a clearing surrounded by shrubs and tall pines. There were a lot of crows in the lower branches. More above.

She tried to conjure a banishing spell on the birds but failed. She was too weak and the Elementals unresponsive. The crows dropped down. It felt like twenty of them were on the ground now, coming closer, making a ruckus with their cawing. She opened her beak and screamed louder, filling the clearing with a challenge. They flapped off, dispersing—a momentary victory. She tried again to shift, but there was no response. She couldn’t change back into human form and she couldn’t get away with bound wings. The crows returned.

I’m not food! She fumed. With so many, she’d be stretched to death in a tug-of-war before they ever shut up and listened to her. One of them stabbed its thick black beak into the blood-soaked ground by her face. Before it could stab again, a ripping sound cut through the air, followed by a loud thwack. The crow shrieked and the whole murder took flight. She forced one lid to open wide and saw two yellow-scaled legs, magnified by their proximity. They were covered with a pale ginger wash of feathers, lightly barred in smoky grey bands. Not a crow, obviously. What, though? That little Barbary she’d heard? He came back? Is that you, little Barbary?
The legs swaggered towards her.

Great. Now she’d be eaten by a cheeky little falcon. At least he’d dispatch her quickly, as was their way. He filled her vision, inches from her face. *Wait! Talk to me!* She tried to communicate, pushing her energy towards him, looking for a way inside its head.

He let out a shrill *Kak-kak-kak.*

*That’s it?* Kreshkali queried the creature. *That all you can say?* It made a softer whistling sound, an exhalation.

*I was hoping for a more articulate conversation, especially if this is to be my last.*

The legs took a step back and his head dipped down, meeting her eye to eye. As she focused she saw a brown-capped face, huge dark eyes with white rims and a rusty red-napped neck. His ivory beak was half open.

*Kak-kak-kak.* It blasted the sound at her like a tiny trumpet.

*You don’t have to be afraid,* she said. *I’m no threat like this, but I’m no lunch either.*

A call came from the distance—another whistle, this time human. She noticed the jesses when the Barbary took flight, flapping hard to gain altitude. The ground beneath her vibrated with the triplet beat of cantering horses. As a last attempt she struggled to be free, but the binding held fast. A dog’s nose poked her feathers.

‘*Zap!* Roma! Get behind. Good boys.’ She heard a man calling his dogs. The voice was strong, smooth and easy. The dogs responded immediately, backing away, but she could still hear their panting, and the occasional whine.

‘What’s this?’ A woman’s voice. Horses approached, boots hit the ground.

‘Demons!’ It was the man talking now. ‘Take Marley, will you?’

There was a pause before a black steel-capped boot came into view. A man crouched down, his grey hair tied back in a ponytail, his brown eyes enormously kind. A wash of relief went over her. She relaxed. This was a good man. She felt it in her bones. She was safe, for now.

‘What trouble have you found, my lady?’ His voice was soft. He pushed the yellow dogs back. ‘It’s a black falcon, Lil. Some demon soul’s bound her…’ The rest of his sentence was a string of profanities.

Kreshkali couldn’t muster the energy to reply. It was enough to let the warmth wash over her. His voice was an enchantment, rich and deep. His hands gentle. A knife came out and sliced the bindings that ate at her legs. Instant respite.

‘She’s lost blood. We need to get her straight back.’

‘Who would do such a thing?’ The woman’s voice was edged with aggression.

‘I don’t know, but I’ll curse them if I find out.’

There were panting tongues again.

‘Settle, Zap.’ He pushed the larger dog away, snapping his fingers towards the horses. ‘We’re taking this one home. No more hunt today.’

‘I’ll do more than curse them,’ the woman said. She whistled to the dogs. ‘Get over here. The poor queen’s had enough terror. She doesn’t need you drooling over her.’

Kreshkali shivered. The rush of blood returning to her extremities burned like liquid fire. She was scooped up and wrapped in soft gossamer swaddling. She didn’t resist. She’d have to gain strength back in safety and it looked like these angels disguised as falconers were going to provide it. The rhythm of the horse’s gallop was like a lullaby. She didn’t know where she was headed, but it felt good. She would survive.
They're here, Maudi. They've arrived!

Who's here, Dray? Rosette didn't want to take her attention off the glamour.

Jarrod! Scylla!

Oh, good news. Where are they? I can't see them.

Jarrod's coming straight towards you. Scylla remains with me. She can't get into this world either. I told her to tell the Sword Master you're here, but he still thinks I'm delusional. Drayco made a spitting sound.

Does he, my lovely? Never mind. When I get back into my body, I'll kick him for you. He will apologise, I promise.

Unnecessary, Maudi, but an entertaining image nonetheless. Thank you.

She wanted to rough his neck. My pleasure. She risked diverting her focus away from her body to scan for Jarrod. I still can't see them.

Up ahead.

There he was! She sensed Jarrod first, and his head jerked up the instant she spotted him. He was a long way off, walking between An' Lawrence and a woman. Jarrod! Here! I'm here. It's me.

Rosette? I can't see you.

That's because I'm disembodied, if you can believe it. I've run into a bit of trouble.

Drayco was right?

Of course, and he's not impressed that no one believed him.

I knew it was a possibility but... where's your body?

On the gurney. I've got a glamour cooking. We need to get out of here.

And the rush?

She wanted to laugh. I'd say that most of the armed troops in the city are looking for us right about now.

I can't leave you for a moment, can I!

It's been somewhat more than a moment, love. She revelled in his presence, soaking up the feeling of appreciation and bliss as their energies touched. He'd found her. Peace. But where was Kreshkali? They'd need her to help reanimate her corpse. She thought she'd be with Jarrod. Where's Kreshkali?

Right here. Can't you see?

Technically, I can't see anything. I don't have eyes.

Trust me, she's here. She's the one who found me, to bring to you.

Rosette shielded her thoughts. That wasn't right. She could perceive everything around her and Kreshkali wasn't in the picture. Drayco, who's the woman with Jarrod?

Nell.

Rosette felt her glamour slip. Which one?

Torgan's Nell, but the temple cat is not here. Curious.

Drayco, listen to me carefully. Who do they think Nell is?

Kreshkali. I corrected them, but they aren't listening to me. Teg knows. He's pretty upset.

Who the heck is Teg?

The apprentice Lupin. Remember? I like him.

You like a Lupin?

This one, yes. He's just headed into the portal. Off to look for Kreshkali. About time somebody did.

And I thought things would be simple once we found Jarrod...

Hurry, Maudi. Behind you. Troops!

She spun around. Grayson and Everett walked side by side, the gurney between them. They quickened their pace as Jarrod and the others came into view, Grayson assuring Everett that this was genuine help. They were by the lake now, not far from the portal. Everett looked over his shoulder and they broke into a run.

Behind them a squadron of armed troops followed at the jog. Grayson pushed the gurney to An' Lawrence and Jarrod, the three of them racing up the path to the portal. Nell hung back, standing beside Everett, and turned to face the inquisition. Rosette didn't linger. She flew into the portal ahead of her corpse.

An' Lawrence stared at the body bag, his hands shaking. He mopped his brow.
Her body is very cold, Rowan. Like the day of the blizzard on Los Loma, Scylla said.

I know. I remember.

Can you revive her again?

Not this time. Not like that.

His familiar sat close, also staring at the black body bag. Drayco says Rosette is here with us now.

An’ Lawrence touched the edge of the bag. His fingers were burnt by the frost. He nodded.

‘Kali, are we in time? Can you bring her back?’ He looked up at the faces around him. ‘Where’s Kreshkali?’

Jarrod stood next to him. ‘She’s still out there.’

An’ Lawrence reached the mouth of the crevice in two strides, pushing Jarrod aside. ‘What do you mean, out there?’

Jarrod didn’t respond. He too became absorbed with the body bag.

‘She stayed with Everett,’ Grayson said, laying his hand on the Sword Master’s shoulder.

‘Why?’

‘To deal with the troops. I think she plans on scrambling a few more memories before she leaves this world.
Something about the timeline. I didn’t wait to hear more.’

‘I’m lost,’ Shane said. He made his way over to the gurney, swallowing hard. ‘What do we do now that we have Rosette?’

‘We need to get her back in her body,’ Grayson answered. ‘Her spirit’s here with us, and we have her corpse.
It’s just a matter of putting two and two together.’

‘Her spirit’s here?’ An’ Lawrence asked. ‘How can you be sure?’

Grayson laughed. ‘If you saw the walls she blasted just to get my attention, I think you’d agree.’

Jarrod joined the laughter. ‘She’s here. Relax. You’ll feel her, hear her, if you tune in.’

Everyone went still. A breeze rushed past and pebbles washed down the side of the cliff face.

‘As I said…’ Grayson indicated the entrance. ‘She’s here.’

‘Her familiar was right all along?’ Selene said.

‘Drayco was right.’ Jarrod was still gazing at the body bag. ‘We need Kreshkali to pull this off.’

‘Or Makee.’ An’ Lawrence nodded towards the depths of the portal.

‘That would be risky,’ Jarrod said.

‘Maybe, but we need to get moving. We won’t bring her back like this.’

‘Like how?’ Grayson asked.

‘Disconnected. Our thoughts are all over the place—confusion being the dominant one.’ An’ Lawrence spun around. ‘Where’s Teg?’

‘He panicked,’ Selene said. She told him what had happened.

‘And you let him go?’

‘Excuse me, Sword Master.’ The title didn’t sound like an honour. ‘He shifted into a rather large black wolf again and flew over my head. I didn’t think you actually wanted me to gut him, so, yes, I let him go.’

She tried to stop him, Rowan. But we didn’t. He’s gone to find Kreshkali.

‘You say he went into the portal?’

‘That’s right,’ Shane said.

Scylla, why would he go that way?

Because that’s where he can find her.

An’ Lawrence stared at his familiar. What do you mean? She’s out there. He waved his hand towards the lake.

That’s a different Nell.

What?

A different glamour.

Now you tell me?

I didn’t know it was important until Rosette said so.

You hear Rosette?

I hear Drayco. He hears Rosette.

Why can’t I hear any of this?

Probably because you aren’t listening.

He clenched his fists. The black maw of the portal was almost indistinguishable from the rock face around it.

The plasma emission from the Entity was lifeless, not a spark. Teg had been brave to try the corridors alone, brave and strongly motivated. He wouldn’t have left Kreshkali, not with the fascination he had for her. He wouldn’t abandon their rescue of Rosette either, unless…

‘Jarrod.’ He tapped the man’s shoulder. ‘Rosette is communicating with you?’
He nodded.
‘And that’s not Kreshkali?’ He pointed towards the parklands.
Jarrod blinked. ‘It’s a version of her, but not the one we know. She’s not coming back. There is something she needs to do here.’
‘Are you certain?’
‘I am.’
‘Let’s go.’ An’ Lawrence rolled the gurney into the dark portal, the plasma coming to life.
‘Without Kreshkali?’ Grayson asked. He was at the Sword Master’s side.
‘Yes, without her.’ He looked behind him. ‘Jarrod! Hurry.’
‘But Kali…’ Grayson stopped.
‘She’s not who you think. Come on. I’ll explain.’
He ushered them into the depths, his thoughts locked onto Temple Los Loma and the blooming apple trees and red earth that marked the entrance.

Nell studied Everett Kelly while armed guards poured into the Sector Six Parkland. The young man had a pinched look on his face, like someone breaking all his own rules and not certain why.
‘Let me speak, Everett,’ she said, indicating the uniforms bearing down on them.
He took a step back. ‘And who are you?’
‘You can call me Nell. You won’t remember that, or much else, when the time comes.’
‘When what time comes?’
‘The time for you to forget. You’ll be older by then and this will seem like a dream.’
‘I think you’d better explain.’
She glanced at the troops. ‘I know what to do, and it’s going to get you out of this mess—get your world out of this mess.’
‘What business is this of yours?’
‘Unfinished.’ She took his arm. ‘Please step back. I’m going to set it right, and I need cooperation.’ She dropped her voice to a whisper. ‘I promise, you won’t feel a thing.’
He pulled out of her grip. ‘That’s exactly what I say to my patients before I put them into Cryo. What things do you have to set right?’
‘You named it already, Mr Kelly. Your cryo project is creating quite a few problems. I’m here to fix them.’
‘Problems where?’
‘In some of the many-worlds.’
‘Many?’
‘Some of them, yes.’ She exhaled, looking across the desiccated parklands to the entrance. The troops marched towards them. ‘What do they teach in your universities, Everett, that you don’t know about the many-worlds?’
Orders were barked, weapons aimed. ‘Never mind. Here it is, in a nutshell…’
‘A what?’
‘A concise form. Listen closely. Whenever multiple possibilities exist, the world splits—hence many-worlds—multiple realities—a different one for every new possibility. Each of these worlds starts out the same as the previous. It’s impossible to tell them apart, save for the one choice.’
‘That’s crazy. People are making different choices every day. Thousands of them.’
‘More than that, actually.’
‘Millions?’
‘Upon millions. And from that point of difference, that branching off, the new world develops in its own way without any communication back to the original world.’
He frowned. ‘Are you saying you’re from a different world, a different choice?’
She nodded.
‘But you’re communicating?’
Nellion? Her familiar’s voice flowed into her mind. What’s the point in explaining everything that was in the letter when you’re going to erase his memory in a few minutes’ time?
I suppose there isn’t any point, though if he knows it once, it might help him to learn it again. He’s got quite a task ahead.
What’s ahead are those uniforms. I think you need to do something about them.
‘And Rosette…is she from your world too?’ Everett asked.
‘No time. Here they come.’ This is it, Torgan, she said to her familiar.
You’re convinced it must be done?
I am. Are you ready?
As I can be.
I love you.
I love you too.
I’ll meet you on the other side.
Teg shifted back to two legs as he landed inside the portal. He let his hand pass over the plasma emission, bowing to the Entity as he skidded to a halt. He'd seen Kreshkali do this many times. He didn’t have the blood, but he knew the ritual. *Keep your mind on where and when you want to go*, she had said.

His thoughts honed in on Kreshkali and the forest near Treeon Temple where he last saw her. He didn’t let doubt enter his head. That was crucial. The Entity would respond to confusion in kind. He had to keep his focus tight on Kreshkali—the smell of her, the angle of the moonlight where she had last stood, the carpet of leaves beneath her feet, the sound of her voice when she said his name. It wasn’t a difficult exercise. He’d thought of little else since they parted.

The corridors were dim, the contours soft and blurry. He leaned against the back of the portal, gazing at the energy flowing past, winding its way like a river through the twists and turns. The speed and flash of it burned his eyes after a time, but he didn’t look away. How long would it take to get there? Where was ‘there’? He didn’t know. Time travelled at a different pace inside the corridors.

That was an understatement. He suspected he might be outside time altogether, above it somehow, or beside it, no longer part of the arrow, whichever way it was pointing. He finally closed his eyes, still keeping the ‘when’ in mind as much as the ‘where’. The subdued light calmed him and his breathing steadied. He opened his eyes and took a tentative step forward, ready to jump out as soon as he could visualise solid ground and a still frame in front of him. The instant the rushing stopped, he leapt.

The clearing was empty, though he wasn’t sure what he had expected to find. *Did you think she’d be standing here waiting for you, arms crossed and foot tapping? Or maybe arms open wide, overwhelmed with gratitude that you’d come back for her?* He chided himself, then chided again for the self-denigration. *Treat yourself as you would your most treasured friend.* Her words came back to him, and he let out his breath. He realised he’d been holding it for some time. *All right, good friend,* he said to himself. *Let’s find our mentor.*

He scented the air, expanding his awareness, searching for Kreshkali with both mind and heart. Chills went down his back. She’d been here, he was certain, but her scent was faint. Had too much time transpired? ‘When’ was he anyway? He looked at the sun. It could be only a few hours after they had left with the impostor.

The earth vibrated beneath his boots. Cantering hooves churned up the ground and he turned towards the sound, ducking behind a blackberry thicket before they charged past. Two riders were heading north-west. They were followed by several dogs, golden barrels with legs—Labradors, bounding along happily, oblivious to his scent. Their tongues were long and panting—a hard run. He narrowed his eyes. It was a hunting party, and both of the riders carried birds of prey on their wrists. Falconers! Nothing unusual about that, but what was the other scent he caught? Blood. From the kill? No. It was Kreshkali’s blood.

Every cell in his body screamed at him to follow. He checked for threats. The Treeon guards were nowhere about. All he heard was the sound of crows in the distance and a babble of water behind him. He bounded out from the cover, taking off at a dead run. Using four legs meant he could catch up faster and his shift was seamless. He was downwind of the charging beasts and the dogs. So far, the other animals hadn’t caught his scent.

He followed the hunting party north to the foothills of Mt Pele, a lush and rolling pastoral land crisscrossed with creeks, oaks and hay fields. The horses were walking now, cooling off from the sustained gallop. He kept a fair distance back, the terrain lacking the cover he needed to stay close and concealed. He marked where they turned down a driveway and shifted back to bipedal form. The area was dotted with small farms, no place for a Lupin to be seen prowling about, but a young man would pass more or less unnoticed.

He paused at a stream and drank deeply, bathing away the sweat and grime from his soaked vest and letting the sun dry his skin and hair. He didn’t want to burst in on them and raise suspicions. It was only an hour’s ride from Treeon. There may have already been word of the murder and the escaped suspects. He didn’t want to look the part.

The falconers had gone into a prosperous estate, judging by the finely bred horses in the surrounding fields. He’d clean up, and come a-calling. It wouldn’t take long to find out why he smelled Kreshkali’s blood. He shivered, even though the sun beat down on his bare shoulders. *Kali, where are you?*

There was no response. He gathered pungent herbs to mask his Lupin scent and headed down the road—a young journeyman herbalist from Morzone on his way to Treeon in need of directions. The driveway was long, shaded by oaks draped with pale green moss. When he reached the manor house, dogs charged out to greet him, teeth bared and hackles high. *Easy, boys. Is your master about?*
Their growls quickly changed to curious yips as they sniffed and wagged their tails. That’s surely a yes? He roughed their backs.

A woman with flaxen hair the same colour as the dogs appeared from the stables, dressed for the hunt, her right hand gloved. He recognised her as one of the riders. She smiled at him, unafraid. Good start.

‘Are you lost?’ she asked.

What a lovely voice. The dogs ran to her as she spoke, making to jump up before thinking better of it as she scolded with her finger. They contented themselves with dashing back and forth between them. ‘Not any more.’ Teg beamed a smile that made her blush. ‘I’m looking for the turn-off to Treeon Temple. I seem to have gone astray.’

‘Somewhat.’ She smiled. ‘I’m Lily. Stay for the noon meal and my husband and I will set you straight.’ She put a slight emphasis on the word husband.

It delighted him that she felt that was necessary. ‘You’re most kind,’ he said. He crossed the distance between them and followed her into the stables. Two horses were cross-tied in the breezeway, a groom hosing them down. They didn’t startle as he passed, and Teg felt even more grateful for his time at Temple Los Loma. He’d learned how to relax among a variety of species and had taken quite a liking to horses, and they responded in kind.

Kreshkali? He sought her with his mind.

‘We’ve an injured bird here; we’re just cleaning her up now.’ The woman guided him into the tack room.

‘What happened?’ Teg asked. He made it sound light, curious. He knew it was Kali, though she hadn’t answered his calls. His palms were sweating. Kali? Are you all right?

‘A trapping of some kind,’ Lily said, frowning. ‘More than that,’ the man added as they entered the tack room. He turned and extended his hand to Teg, eyeing him from head to foot. ‘I’m Jago.’ His voice was a deep baritone. ‘You’ve met Lily, my wife?’

Teg gripped his hand, finding it interesting that they both added possessive labels to each other’s name. He held Jago’s eyes for a moment, but moved his gaze when he spotted the black falcon on the table. She was hooded, perched on a bar, allowing her wounds to be dressed. Teg felt the sweat break out on his forehead and wiped it with the back of his hand. Kali? Can you hear me?

Teg? The voice was soft, distant. It’s so dark, she said.

You’re hooded, that’s all. You’re okay. I can see you, right in front of me.

I tried to shift. Nothing happened.

It’s going to be all right. I’ve come to rescue you.

A wafting sound came from the bird.

‘Have you worked with falcons?’ Jago’s question brought his attention around.

‘In Morzone, yes.’

‘Good place for it. I know most of the falconers there. Who’ve you hunted with?’

Teg couldn’t take his eyes off Kali.

Caspian... Spates, I think, she said to him.

Are you sure, Mistress?

In my Gaela, yes.

‘Spates. Do you know him?’ Teg said the words with confidence.

‘Caspian? Excellent trainer. His partner is the better of the two, though...is she still riding that wild red chestnut?’

Sara. Kali’s voice was weakening.

‘She was last time I saw her. Sara’s been working him hard and steady. He’s coming round, though I wouldn’t volunteer to have a go.’

Jago laughed. ‘That’s saying a lot, especially seeing you’re on foot. It’s a hefty trek, Morzone to Treeon.’

Water. Kali’s message was a demand.

‘She’s thirsty,’ Teg said, interrupting.

Jago eyed him. ‘Is that so?’

‘That’s what I’m getting too,’ Lily said, handing a dropper to Teg. She righted the bird as it listed slightly, steadying her balance. Black claws gripped her glove. ‘Can you get the hood off?’ she asked. ‘She does need a drink.’

Teg released her from darkness and was rewarded with a shriek. Her wings extended, hanging like a scarecrow’s. She allowed the drops of water to be trickled down her throat.

‘You’ve a way with her,’ Jago said. ‘Are you a healer?’

‘A herbalist’s apprentice, yes. I’m headed for Treeon.’

‘To apply?’ Lily’s eyes went wide.

It was as good a story as any and it seemed to impress them both. ‘Aye. I’ve got some of the blood in me.’
Careful. Kali sent the message as she dipped her head for more water.

‘I don’t doubt that,’ Lily replied. She eyed him, no attempt at subtlety.

‘We’ll let her rest now. The injuries are not extensive—she’s more exhausted and traumatised than anything.’

Jago led them to a large, open-air space where several falcons of various sizes perched. He opened a cage and helped Lily transfer her to the roost. A breeze fluttered her black feathers as he slipped the hood back on. Teg made no move to go.

‘Come, lad. We’ll share a meal and you can tell me what old Caspian’s been up to.’

I’ll be back for you, Kali. Don’t try to shift. You’re in a cage.

A cage? This is your idea of a rescue?

It will be. Gather your strength. I’m not leaving.

There was no response, but her wings lifted slightly, then folded neatly behind her back.

Teg sat at the dining table, shoulders squared, his hosts firing questions at him one after the other. They were both curious, Lily especially so. She gave him nothing but smiles and sweet laughter—maybe that explained Jago’s increasing interrogation. It seemed he was stirring up old memories, reminding them of someone else. It was just his luck to have to deal with this as well as think of a way to get Kreshkali out—a way other than violence. These were sound people and he didn’t want to hurt them. The rescue would have to wait until she recovered enough strength to fly, or shift, in any case. Would that be hours or days? He stared at his plate, wondering where his appetite had gone.

The table was laid out with a magnificent midday meal—enough for more than the three of them by triple. Bowls of salads and garden vegetables sat next to fresh apples, citrus and berries, and there was meat. The scent tantalised him, his mouth watering when a platter was brought in—a huge white porcelain dish holding a dozen golden-roasted pigeons. They were stuffed with rice and glazed with sweet orange and ginger sauce.

‘Are these from today?’ Teg asked, steering the conversation away from his personal connections in Morzone, of which he actually had none. He’d never even been to the place. His generalisations were starting to run thin on that topic and he needed a new one, quick.

‘It was a good morning’s hunt.‘ Lily smiled at him with more enthusiasm than he thought necessary. Couldn’t she sense the tension in Jago? Was that why she was doing it? He gave her the briefest of smiles in return.

‘Hungry?’ she asked.

He held his plate up and she piled it high with a choice selection. ‘It looks amazing.’ He moved his fingers aside when she brushed them.

‘So tell me, Teg.’ Jago’s voice cut through their private exchange. ‘Have you spent much time near the plateau of Los Loma?’

He choked, swallowing hard to keep from coughing. Lily handed him a glass of water, her eyebrows raised.

‘Some,’ he said, clearing his throat. ‘That ginger sauce is full of chilli, isn’t it? Delicious.’ He stuffed his mouth again so he wouldn’t have to speak.

‘The Temple guards were around early this morning,’ Jago said. ‘Seems there’s trouble at Treeon—the High Priestess’s consort’s dead. Murdered, apparently.’

The food went cold in his stomach. He drank again from his glass.

Kali, we’ve got trouble.

‘They might have been the ones who trapped the black falcon, eh, Teg?’ Jago asked. ‘Seen anyone in your travels?’

Teg swallowed again, keeping his expression bland. ‘Do they have any clues?’

‘A few. They’re looking for a covey of witches that escaped in the night.’

The food went cold in his stomach. He drank again from his glass. Kali, we’ve got trouble.

‘They might have been the ones who trapped the black falcon, eh, Teg?’ Jago asked. ‘Seen anyone in your travels?’

Teg wiped his mouth. ‘Not ‘til I found you.’

Jago poured himself a deep red wine and shook his head. ‘Of course not. You’ve come the other way, haven’t you?’ He chuckled, not a contagious laugh. ‘Witches’ business anyway. Isn’t that right, Lil?’

She frowned at her husband. ‘Witches’ business, I suppose, but tell us, Teg, do you know anyone from Los Loma?’ She leaned closer, lowering her voice. ‘Do you know a man named Hotha? He’s from Los Loma, the heart of the mountain.’ Her voice was soft but the question razor-sharp.

‘I never said I was from Los Loma.’

‘But you certainly aren’t from Morzone,’ Jago said.

Teg didn’t deny it. There was no point. It was also clear who he reminded them of. Hotha! That Lupin, on any world, was a lover of women. It didn’t surprise him that he’d been this way before and stirred everyone up, particularly Lily. They may not realise he was a Lupin too, but they were onto his connection. What now? Stick as close to the truth as possible, lie outright, or make a run for it? Running was looking like a most attractive option, but he wasn’t going anywhere unless he could take Kreshkali with him. He had to stall while she revived. Kali? Can
you hear me?
Teg tore a small loaf of bread in half. Steam rose from the centre and burned his fingers. ‘I know of Hotha,’ he said. He popped a piece of bread in his mouth as their faces brightened.
‘I thought you might!’ Lily said, reaching for the other half of the bread.
Teg didn’t offer anything else. He was making a good show of preoccupation with the food, though he was having trouble getting it down. He couldn’t work out if they knew Hotha as friend or foe. He could pose as either. Then it occurred to him that they were being extremely cordial considering there were murderers on the loose and he might be one of them. Suddenly, he felt like a pig being fattened for Beltane.
‘He’s an accomplished falconer,’ Jago was saying.
‘What’s that?’
‘Hotha. He’s a good hunter.’ Jago’s eyes were on Lily. ‘He rode with us on several occasions, but he doesn’t come this way much any more.’
‘Have you spoken to him recently?’ Lily asked, her hand reaching out to stop Teg’s next mouthful.
He put down his fork and turned his full attention to her. ‘I’ve not seen him for some time. Are you concerned?’
Her brow creased.
‘Not at all,’ Jago said. ‘A man like that can take care of himself.’
‘A little,’ Lily whispered. ‘Can you get a message to him?’
Teg groaned internally. There had to be a smooth way out of this. He was about to respond when a woman entered, distracting Lily. She was one of the grooms, plump and blonde with a smile like summer sun. Her short stature made Teg wonder how she handled the tall horses he’d seen in the stables. How did she ever saddle and bridle them?
Her eyes darted to him. ‘Milk crate,’ she said.
‘Pardon?’
‘Mind your thoughts around Jess,’ Jago said, laughing deeply. ‘She comes from a long line of witches.’
Jess joined the laughter. Teg thought he would be sick.
‘Don’t look so alarmed,’ Jess said. ‘I’ve got more important things to do than skulk around inside your mind.’
She shook her head, her golden hair bouncing. ‘I never make a habit of eavesdropping.’
‘That’s good to know,’ he replied.
She looked at him closely, letting her eyes take in his form as if she were studying a horse at the markets. ‘For you I might have made an exception, but I see your mind shield is already well in place.’
‘Sit down, Jess.’ Lily pulled out the chair next to her. ‘And let our guest eat.’
Teg was surprised at the inclusion. Other staff members entered the dining hall and filled the remaining seats.
‘Thanks, but I’ve got the broodmares to turn out still. I came in because I’m worried about the new falcon. She’s making a lot of noise.’
Jago rose from his seat, motioning the rest of them down. ‘Stay here, Jess. I’ll let the mares out and check on the bird.’
Teg was up, ready to follow.
‘Eat, lad. I won’t be long.’
Teg slid back into his chair and faced the two women, who were now asking him more questions about his origins.
What are you doing, Kali? Are you all right? Teg sent the message through his mind shield, testing to see if Jess caught it. There was no indication that she did.
I’m getting that man away from you before the word ‘Lupin’ comes up. What are you doing wining and dining with these people?
I’m trying to rescue you.
There’s that word ‘try’…
Kali, I thought we could tell them the truth, but I’m having second thoughts. They may have alerted Treeon that we’re here, or that I’m here. I’m feeling a wee bit vulnerable.
You’re feeling vulnerable? She all but screamed at him. I’m hooded, in a cage, injured and unable to shift or fly. Remember? And watch the groom. Smart witch, that one.
Jess turned to smile at him.
Shield!
‘You’re no stranger to the birds of prey, are you?’
‘I thought you didn’t eavesdrop.’
‘Normally no, but your mind is so deep and rich. I just wanted to…’
‘Jess, get out of it,’ Lily said as she thrust a plate into the other woman’s hands. ‘He’s just a journeyman herbalist on his way to Treeon. Nothing more, nothing less. Isn’t that right, Teg?’

He nodded, taking a mouthful of fruit. The sweet juice trickled down his throat. He coughed. Kali? What’s Jago doing?

‘He’s taking my hood off.

‘So tell me, Teg.’ Lily scooted her chair closer to him. ‘Are you related to Hotha? Is he a…brother perhaps? An uncle?’

‘Me? No…My family is from the outskirts of Morzone…’ His voice trailed off as he directed his thoughts to Kreshkali. Are you out of the cage?

I am.

‘Oh, come now, Teg. You don’t know enough about that city to be born and bred there. Where are you really from?’

‘You can tell us,’ Jess added. ‘We can help you, whatever you’re mixed up in.’

Kali, they know.

Get out, Teg! Now!

Teg bolted, leaping from his chair and down the stairs, shifting to all fours before his feet hit the ground.

An’ Lawrence stood at the gates of Temple Los Loma.

‘It’s the right place, Sword Master. Well done,’ Grayson said. ‘Is it the right time?’

‘I think so.’

The apple trees were vibrant, full of leaves and swelling fruit. That fitted. The temple cats were relaxed, always a good sign. Fynn had scrambled out of Grayson’s backpack, awake now and delighted to see Shane, who rewarded him with a pennywhistle tune. The sweet high-pitched jig lifted spirits, a welcome relief, and the Three Sisters greeted them all with loud caws, their shiny black wings whiffing through the air as they swooped and dived. They didn’t seem to be upset that their mistress wasn’t present, and he took that as a comfort. He searched the ground for prints, boot or paw. There was no sign of Teg.

Grayson bent over the body bag, feeling the edges, frowning deeply. ‘Everett said we only had a day or so until…’

‘Once she thaws, it’s all over, unless her heart starts up again. Is that about right?’ An’ Lawrence asked, turning away from the corpse. He looked at the sky; it was pale blue and cloudless, a sliver of moon rising in the east. The sun was already making him sweat.

‘That’s what I gather.’

Rowan, we need a High Priestess, fast, if we’re going to revive Rosette. Kreshkali isn’t here.

He reached out and stroked the top of Scylla’s head. Any ideas?

Treeon. Or Timbali?

An’ Lawrence patted her back, directing his attention to the others as they gathered around him. ‘Get her into the temple hall. Assemble everyone.’ His voice boomed as he waved them towards the gates.

‘Where are you going?’ Grayson asked.

‘To get us a High Priestess, or a Timbali witch, even La Makee if I can find her.’

‘But Kreshkali…’

‘We don’t know when she’ll arrive and we need someone who can do the ritual. We need a High Priestess. Makee is one. It’s our only chance.’

‘She’s on sabbatical,’ Jarrod said. ‘How will you find her and get her back here in time?’

‘The Entity will take me to her.’

‘You’re trusting a lot.’ Jarrod had his hand on the edge of the black body bag. ‘The Entity has been opening strange corridors lately.’

‘It’s worth the risk. Kali may get back here in time; I may find La Makee. This doubles our chances of saving Rosette.’ An’ Lawrence called Scylla to him and backed towards the portal, waving them away. ‘Set it up. Get everyone into the Temple hall, meditating. Lift the roof off the place with healing energy. Joy. You have to start with a sense of joy. That’s the first step.’ He turned to Jarrod. ‘You know what to do. I won’t be long.’ He gripped his sword and dashed through the portal, Scylla by his side.

He felt a particular thrill as his hand passed over the plasma waves sparking out from the Entity. He was clear now. Whatever Kreshkali was up to, in whatever form or world, he didn’t have time to wait. The more he thought about it, the more he knew Makee was the best bet if Kali didn’t show. In spite of their past, he trusted the woman, and because of their past, he felt confident he could find her in a flash. Would she come? Surely curiosity alone
would bring her back. He tightened his grip on his sword.

The streams of colour and light slowed and the portal opened onto a familiar scene—the flat lands east of Corsanon. What in demon’s darkness was she doing there? The sounds of clashing steel and thundering hooves, shouts and screams, came in on the breeze. He smelled smoke and turf and blood. Scylla’s hackles were up, her spine tense.

‘Curse you, Makee. What battle are you fighting now?’ He and Scylla leapt from the portal, screaming a war cry.

It appeared this campaign had been going for some time, the heat of the day wearing both sides down. It almost looked like slow motion, a sea of horses, warriors and hand to hand.

*Where is she, Scylla? Can you spot her?*

*To the west, holding that small hill.*

*Which one?* He squinted at the fray.

*On the golden horse.*

He spotted her, red hair flaming, the sun glinting off the sapphire that hung between her bare breasts. She wielded her sword in smooth arcs, tireless and exacting, her mount in perfect control, pivoting and leaping in time to her swings. No one could get near her; he watched them die trying.

*Scylla, run with me. We’ll skirt this lot and approach the hill from the south.*

*Why not straight through?*

He chuckled. *You have a taste for blood, my lovely?*

*It’s Corsanon!*

*Come. This isn’t our fight. Rosette’s our first concern.*

*Let’s hope you can make it Makee’s. She does look like she’s having fun.*

He took off towards the knoll, hoping to avoid the warriors. He’d done it all before—fought Corsanon into the ground. Why they kept re-forming was beyond him. They seemed to have no concept of peace or truce. Certainly they had none of defeat.

*She knows we’re here,* Scylla said.

*Excellent. Her mood?*

*Curious-excited.*

*That’s better still.* He followed Scylla as she led the way, clearing a path to Makee.

The witch spotted them. She didn’t take her focus from her opponents but sent him a mind message. *What brings you here, Sunshine? You finally get tired of Kali, or was it the other way around?* She charged towards him, cutting down those too slow to get out of her way. The rest retreated.

*Neither. Makee, we need you.*

*Of course you need me.* She flashed him a smile as she signalled her mounted troops. ‘See them off,’ she commanded, throwing her head towards the retreat.

*Rosette needs you.*

Makee flicked blood from her sword and sheathed it, jumping to the ground. She handed her reins to her second, giving the warhorse an affectionate slap on his sweat-soaked neck.

‘Well done, Amarillo,’ she said to him. Raising her voice, she addressed her warriors. ‘Done, and well done, all.’

They were gathering around her but let An’ Lawrence and Scylla through, stepping back and bowing their heads as they passed.

‘What trouble’s the young witch in now?’ she asked.

An’ Lawrence reached her, bending down to kiss her right cheek, her left and then her lips. ‘She’s dead.’

Makee frowned. ‘That is trouble.’

‘Can you help?’

‘She’s floating around disembodied?’

‘Back at Temple Los Loma.’

‘Where’s that?’

‘Earth.’

‘And her body?’

‘It’s been on ice. Glacier-cold. We don’t have much time.’

‘Kreshkali knows the ritual. Why are you bothering me with this?’

‘She’s gone missing.’

Makee laughed. ‘So you’ve come begging?’

He kept his eyes on her while watching the far side of the knoll with his peripheral vision. A Corsanon warrior
crept forward, only the top of his head and the tip of his bow visible.

An’ Lawrence pulled Makee aside as an arrow whizzed by, just missing her shoulder blade. The High Priestess let out a rumbling scream and spun around, blasting her energy out in a sudden flare. An’ Lawrence covered his face, shielding his eyes from the white light. The archer was thrown, landing face down on the ground, unmoving. She spat and turned back to the Sword Master. ‘You really can’t find that doppleganging witch? ’

He shook his head.

‘But you found me!’

‘Indeed, Makee. I did.’

Rosette studied the apple trees at the entrance gate. They seemed to glow with recognition, their leaves radiant in the sunlight, branches ruffled by the breeze.

_I don’t remember those, Drayco._

_Nor I, Maudi._

When she returned her focus to the others, An’ Lawrence and Scylla were back in the portal. What was he doing now? She tried to send him a mental query, but it was like throwing feathers at a bull. No impact.

_Where’s he going, Dray?_

_To find a High Priestess._

_I hope he can be quick._

She was feeling thin, drifting further and further away, losing the significance of her connection to the people below. She could barely hear their voices even as they argued. Jarrod’s cut through above them all. He rallied them, saying something that calmed everyone down. They followed him through the gates, heading towards Temple Los Loma. Part of her wanted to keep up. She was sure it was best to stay close to her corpse in any case. It seemed important, but she couldn’t quite remember why. The other part of her wanted to drift away, buoyed up by the wind, letting go of all that worry down below. If she could only float off like an Elemental. That felt good. She wanted to do that.

_Maudi!_

_It was a scream in her head. Drayco, don’t yell. I’m right here._

_You’re neither here nor right, Maudi. You’re fading. Come back!_ His voice was choked. He was running towards her, racing up to the higher plateau.

_How did you get so far away, Drayco?_

_You’re drifting! Come back!_

She’d floated up so high that Drayco’s sleek body was a speck on the red earth. Jarrod took off at a run after him. He was incredibly fast, catching up to stop the temple cat. Drayco’s hackles went up and he spun around him, rolling back on his haunches.

_We’re losing her, Jarrod._

_Rosette heard his mental message, surprised. Losing me?_

_The temple cat ran on. When he was directly beneath her, he stood, sides heaving, nose to the sky. Maudi, don’t leave me. Jarrod says we must go to the temple. Please come back._

_She loved the sound of his voice, even when he was screeching at her. It filled her with warmth and delight. Her ascension faltered and when she looked again, she was hovering within an arm’s reach. I’m here, Drayco. I am with you._

_Where did you go? For a moment I couldn’t sense you at all. He stood rigid, his tail snapping._

_I don’t know. I heard voices in the distance. At first I thought it was Grayson. It sounded familiar. But it couldn’t have been. He’s over there, with that body. It was getting difficult to concentrate._

_Maudi, stay with me!_

_Drayco was insistent. She ignored all her other thoughts and hovered over him, wrapping her energy around his body until he purred like a honeybee. His limbs were shaking, his heart racing. I’m here, Dray. I won’t leave you._

_You must stay close. Jarrod says so too._

_It was odd that she couldn’t hear Jarrod herself, though she had to concentrate to remember exactly who he was and why she needed to go with him. The effort was exhausting. I’m so tired, Dray. I want to sleep._

_No!_

_Drayco’s voice agitated her. Why couldn’t she let go and drift into a lovely peaceful sleep? It felt so soft and easy—like floating downstream, warm water lapping, frothy whitecaps buoying her up._

_Maudi! Stay with me._

_There he was again. This time his words snapped her to attention, the distress in his voice like a magnet,
drawing the final threads of her dispersing energy back together. She thought she heard a click. I’m awake.

*Stay that way! Jarrod says I am to keep you talking.* She heard him snicker. *That was never much of a challenge.*

*Ha!*

*Not your fault, Maudi. You were born under the sign of the Twins, ruled by the messenger of the gods.*

*Meaning?*

*Talk, talk, talk…*

*Excuse me. The capacity for verbal communication is not actually a fault, Drayco.*

*What would you call it?*

*An attribute!* It was easier to stay awake now, though she wasn’t completely certain why that was important. *I love to banter.*

*We can banter ‘til dawn if you follow me to the temple. We have to get your body out of the sun.*

She couldn’t remember which temple he was talking about, or why the sun was bad. Her consciousness was a lighthouse surrounded by fog. *Where are we?*

*They call it Temple Los Loma.*

*For the Lupins?*

*Apparently. Follow me.*

She took in the terrain as they travelled along—rusty red soil cut with erosion and cracked like peeling skin; darker boulders jutting out at crazed angles, a game board whose pieces had been scattered; desiccated tree trunks, petrified into hollow, twisted shapes.

*It doesn’t seem that much like the lush green woods of Dumarka to me.*

*It’s not Dumarka, Maudi. It’s Los Loma.*

*Can’t be. There are no mountains.*

*Los Loma, Earth.*

*It’s like a dried-up eggshell. Where’s the acid rain?*

*Gone. It hardly rains at all, but Jarrod says there is water at the temple and fresh green trees.*

*What temple?*

*Temple Los Loma. Do you remember it? We’ve never been there but…*

*The estate Kreshkali was searching for? She found it? She named it for the Lupins’ stronghold?*

*That’s it. Demons, Maudi, you are muddled up. Do you remember anything else?* He kept asking her questions, his streams of thought holding her attention.

*I remember tossing an apple towards that gate. Look! There are apple trees.*

*Those would be your doing.*

*How long have we been away?*

*A fair bit of time, it seems. Or none at all.*

*Both are one and the same, I think.*

*That’s right, Maudi. Come on. Keep up. Why again?*

*We’re going to the temple. Almost there.*

‘Where’s he off to?’ Shane asked as Drayco ran, red dust billowing behind him.

‘Fire demons! I’ve got to stop her,’ Jarrod cursed, racing after the temple cat.

Shane glanced at Selene, who simply shrugged, covering her mouth and nose until the dust settled. Fynn sat down, whining, apparently still too wobbly to pursue.

Grayson went pale, his eyes focused on the distance. ‘We have to keep moving,’ he said, sweat soaking his shirt. ‘We’re running out of time.’

‘Are you all right?’

Grayson kept his eyes ahead. ‘The sun’s too hot for her. She’s dissipating.’

‘Dissipating?’

He didn’t explain. Shane scooped up Fynn and carried him under his arm, breaking into a jog to stay abreast with Grayson.

‘What about them?’ Shane asked, jerking his head towards Jarrod and the temple cat. The two were halfway up the ridge behind him.

‘They’ll catch up, and hopefully Rosette will too.’

‘I guess it won’t work without her,’ Selene said. She jogged easily next to Shane, their shoulders touching.
When they crested the small hill, the temple lay before them. Fynn wiggled in Shane’s arms and he let the dog spill out onto the ground. When he straightened, he whistled. ‘Some place you’ve got here,’ he said. ‘What’s it called again?’

‘Temple Los Loma.’

‘It’s so lush,’ Selene said, catching her breath. ‘Where does the water come from?’

‘Underground.’ Grayson held the gurney back as they descended towards the plaza. It jostled over the bumpy drive.

The trees lining the entranceway were in bloom. They had white-skinned trunks and purple flowers. A gentle honey fragrance drifted on the air. Blossoms littered the ground, creating a lavender carpet releasing more sweet fragrance as they walked down the slope. A marble fountain dominated the centre courtyard. In the midst of it stood an impressive statue—a black horse prancing with one foreleg drawn up so high it looked as if the hoof was ready to strike. Water sprayed in mini-geysers, creating flecks of sparkling rainbows.

‘That’s amazing,’ Shane said.

Fynn made a beeline for the water. He didn’t stop to lap at the edge but plunged straight in. He was greeted by a trio of large red dogs with long cowlicks down the ridge of their backs. He was dwarfed by them but still pup enough to cool their aggression with submissive gestures.

People were coming towards them, calling out to Grayson, their expressions of joy changing quickly to concern as they saw the corpse. They poured out of the main manor, the temple gardens, training grounds and the stables. Some were leading horses, some had garden hoes and rakes in hand, some carried books and folders, some swords and bows. All stopped what they were doing to converge on his small party. A man thrust a waterskin into his hand and he drank deeply, handing it over to Selen.

Grayson was talking to a grey-haired woman who soon gave orders to the gathering. Before he could take another drink, they were ushered into a spacious, open-air temple with polished wood floors and walls that rose only halfway to the ceiling. It reminded him of Temple Dumarka. In the breezeways, hanging from the open beams, were baskets of flowering plants, deep crimson, violet and yellow blossoms spilling over the edges, long air roots reaching towards the ground. He didn’t know their names, but the look of them was immediately heartening, the fragrance heavenly, like sunshine after rain, and something sweeter. Honeysuckle?

They laid Rosette’s body on the stone altar, the grey-haired woman giving further instructions. She pointed towards the entrance, moving with a grace that fascinated him, her long blue robe flowing behind her as she directed people this way and that. Her hair was swirled on top of her head, wisps escaping to give her an ethereal look. Grayson had introduced her as Annadusa, and he seemed to know her well. As Shane watched, she caught his eye, waving him to her. He gave Selene’s arm a quick squeeze. ‘I’ll see what she wants.’

He had to wait when he reached her. She and Grayson were directing a group of dark-robed students that clustered around, answering their questions in low, smooth voices.

‘But she’s dead,’ one woman said, ‘What do you mean you’re going to bring her back?’ She stared at the body still in its black shroud.

‘This isn’t a funeral, Maluka,’ Grayson said. ‘Rosette is here. We just need to get her back in there.’ He indicated the corpse and the young woman frowned.

‘The energy must be lifted,’ Annadusa said, her tone commanding everyone’s attention. ‘Think strong, happy, vital, enthusiastic thoughts. Fill the temple with them!’ She pulled the group in tighter. ‘Instruct everyone, face to face, row by row, to conjure their best memories, their most cherished dreams, their greatest talents and greatest loves. These are our gifts to Rosette. Anything that brings a spontaneous smile, that’s what we all need to dwell on. That’s what it will take to bring Rosette back.’

‘And Kreshkali?’ a woman in a green robe asked.

‘She’ll come. She has to. We need the High Priestess here as well.’ She clapped her hands and they dispersed, all but Shane. ‘Grayson tells me you’re a bard?’ She looked at his backpack. ‘You’re not far from your flutes, I trust?’ Her eyes were a dark brown with flecks of gold. Mesmerising.

‘Unfortunately, they were lost in a bit of trouble. I…’ He wanted to say more, but his mouth was dry, his hands sweating. He wiped them on his pants.

‘There are plenty of instruments around.’ She waved at a young man by the door, miming a flute. He ducked out. ‘There are more on the way. Will you start some tunes? Others are setting up, but you were with her last. Your music will be more familiar.’

‘I’ve a few she liked. Would there be a low whistle?’ The man returned, handing him an instrument bag. He tested several and took the low whistle. ‘Perfect, thank you.’ Standing next to her body, he faced the temple hall, which was swelling to capacity as more and more people filed in. His stomach heaved and he looked down, the corner of the body bag in sharp focus. He swallowed. This was for Rosette. *Happy thoughts. Joyful reunion,* he
reminded himself.

He took a deep breath and lifted his whistle to his mouth. He started with a haunting tune, one that he wrote on Tensar while waiting for Rosette to appear, over and over again, as they were caught in that strange loop.

Happy thoughts! He cringed at his own reprimand. This was going to be tricky. The time loop, the strange way they met, seemed so long ago now. Maybe it was. That’s a little better. They certainly had some excitement on their journey, like when they escaped from the Treeon Temple guards and he learned how to ride. The exotic experience of Temple Dumarka and all those beautiful priestesses. That felt better too.

The tune was perfect, enchanting in its reverence, and he could feel it binding people’s hearts together as they began to meditate, pouring out thoughts of love, peace, happiness, appreciation and joy. Other bards joined him with guitars, ouds, mandolins, sitars and flutes. They surrounded the altar, some standing behind Rosette’s body, some sitting on the steps in front. A group of women with percussion instruments began an accompaniment, bringing a powerful syncopation to his piece—shakers, small drums, sticks and castanets came together, creating a dynamic rhythm that lifted him higher. It was the first time he’d performed the piece in public and he had a veritable orchestra behind him. Bliss! Are you hearing this, Rosette? We’re playing for you.

He let his mind wander as the music washed through the temple, like waves against a pebbled shore. He caught Selene’s eye and shifted into another tune, one that he knew both she and Rosette loved—a melodic slip jig. Selene brightened, beaming him a smile. He felt his chest swell as he took quick breaths between phrases. It was the first look of appreciation she had ever offered him as a musician. His eyes smiled back.
Everett stared at the woman lying on the ground. She lay face up, drained of colour, her limbs motionless. For a fraction of a second he knew who she was. It was a memory from long ago—his last year as an intern. Then the memory was gone and an impenetrable wall replaced comprehension. He knelt beside her, automatically checking her pulse and heart rate. It was weak, irregular and thready. He reached into his pocket and hit his recall pager. An ambulance would be here within minutes. He needed to get her on a monitor, fast. *Lucky I was passing by.*

As he checked her for wounds, a siren wailed in the distance, and security troops closed in, their boots circling the body as he knelt on the ground. Where did they come from?

‘You found her,’ the captain said, out of breath. ‘Medics are behind us.’

‘I only just paged.’ It didn’t make sense, but his reflexes took over. He had a patient in crisis. ‘Back up. Let them through.’

Had the troops been tracking her? Had he? Or was it coincidence that he’d stumbled upon this scene? Whenever he tried to recall how he got here, he ran into a wall—thick and impervious.

‘Is she all right, doctor?’ The captain crouched beside him, being careful not to touch her as Everett rolled her onto her side. His voice was more concerned than aggressive. Perhaps she was a missing person and not a criminal.

He hoped so, for her sake. ‘She needs oxygen, cardiac stimulants.’ He checked her stats.

The captain went to the ambulance as it arrived. Everett listened for breath sounds. There were none, and the woman’s lips were turning blue. He laid her flat, tilted her head back and pinched her nose, filling her lungs with his own air. Her chest rose and fell, the cloth of her dress wafting open in the breeze.

Chills raced over him, like tiny ants up his spine. He stifled a gasp and covered her with his jacket. He gave her more breaths and her pulse increased, though her eyes did not open, nor did they focus when he pushed back the lids. He shivered. There was no such thing as déjà vu—he refused to consider it—but the undeniable feeling was that this had all happened before. He shook his head, trying to revive the memory.

Not this, but something like this. He didn’t know the image, the winged lion over her heart, but he knew without searching the archives that it was called a tattoo. The idea worried the edges of his memory, pushing the wall barricading his recollection. He almost caught hold of it before it slipped out of reach. He’d had a patient like this once, long ago. ‘Oxygen!’ he called.

A medic approached with a small cylinder.

‘Mask her, wide open.’ Everett stepped aside as the medics took over, strapping her to a board. They loaded her onto the ambulance and signalled him, but he caught himself staring out into the parkland. He located a rocky outcropping in the distance. He wanted to look for something, but what?

‘We’re ready, doctor.’

He jumped in, and the ambulance took off, the sound of the siren ringing in his ears.

‘Straight to Trauma?’ the driver asked through the com.

‘Side entrance,’ he said, checking her pulse again, bracing as the vehicle rounded a bend.

The medic ran a hand-held scanner over her wrist and frowned. He scanned the nape of her neck. ‘Where is it?’

He leaned over her, scanning her entire body. He tapped the scanner against his palm and scanned again. Then he scanned his own wrist and his brow creased further. ‘Here’s a first,’ he said, pulling off her shoes and scanning her feet.

‘What’s that?’

‘No chip, doc.’

‘That’s impossible.’

‘Check for yourself.’ He handed Everett the device. ‘It must have been removed.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’ Everett checked her head to toe. In all his years of medical service, he’d never had a patient without ID. He swallowed. Or had he? His memory swelled and receded like the ocean. Was there someone like this when he was an intern? Before he’d taken over the trauma ward? He would have to check the records, but he was starting to feel certain of it. ‘Odd.’ Everett scanned the inside of his own wrist. ‘I don’t believe it, but you’re right. No ID.’

‘How do you want me to label the record?’

‘Jane Doe,’ he whispered.

‘Say again?’ The medic had his fingers on the small digital keyboard, poised to type in the filename.
Everett cleared his throat. ‘Call her Jane Doe.’
Teg pelted towards the stables, kicking up gravel as he crossed the driveway. He hadn’t thought about shifting. It just happened automatically. *I’m coming, Kali,* he called out to her, skidding to a stop before rounding the stables.

*I still can’t shift.* Her voice was stronger in his mind. *He’s got me.*

In a fluid motion Teg changed back into human form. He took a deep breath and turned the corner, running straight into Jago coming out of the aviary. He had Kali on his wrist. Her hood was off, her wings half open and a set of leather jesses on her legs. Jago startled. He looked past Teg for a fleeting second before focusing on him.

Kali let out an ear-piercing screech and fanned the air with her wings, dipping her head to bite at the restraints.

*He’s called up the Treeon guards. Released a pigeon. There’re a dozen riders coming this way. We’ve got to get out.*

*I hear them, Kali!*

‘What’s the trouble, lad?’ Jago asked. The words were light but his voice tense. He took a step back, lifting the arm that held Kali.

Teg stared at the jesses. ‘She’s a wild bird, not one of your own.’

‘Are you trying to tell me my business?’

‘If you’re keeping her captive, I am.’

‘She’s wounded. It’ll take her time to recover.’

*He’s stalling, Teg. He knows what I am. Quick! Treeon comes!*

Teg didn’t flinch, though his heart beat double time. He could feel the vibration of galloping hooves rising up his legs. He lifted his nose to scent their direction. They were surrounded. ‘She needs to come with me.’ Teg stepped forward. ‘She’s recovered from her shock. She can be released.’

‘Not going to happen,’ Jago said, his voice finding more volume, though he continued to retreat. ‘You’ll see in a moment that the temple guards of Treeon are coming. You’ll not take the raptor in any case.’

Teg was impressed. Whether Jago knew he faced a Lupin or not, he was brave to make such a stand. Brave and foolish. His sentiments were misplaced.

‘She’s with me,’ Teg said. ‘I apologise for deceiving you, but the falcon is mine.’ He held out his bare arm to Kali.

She extended her wings fully and fanned the air. Jago hung on tight to the jesses, keeping her back.

‘So you say. You also might say you had nothing to do with the temple murder. Neither is necessarily true.’

The dogs let out a throaty challenge as horses filled the driveway. He heard Lily and Jess shouting. Boots marched towards them. Teg levelled his eyes on Jago. ‘I’ll take her now and be going. You have no more say in this.’

Jago held his ground. Teg didn’t want to hurt him, but he was out of time.

*Get on with it, Teg, before I do!*

He defocused his eyes and drew in the energy around him, honing it to a fine point. He sent it straight to Jago’s mind like a quick zap of lightning.

Kali flapped away as Jago stumbled backward and dropped to the ground, the jesses sliding out of his hand. She landed on Teg’s wrist.

*That wasn’t so hard, was it?* She sounded pleased.

‘No, Mistress. That’s what scares me. It isn’t hard at all.’

*It’s okay, Teg. You had the right touch. He’s not dead, just disabled. Look at his aura.*

‘I can’t actually see his aura right now.’

*Something to work on.*

He turned to Jago, who was struggling to lift his head. ‘Sorry, sir. We thank you for your hospitality.’ He quickly undid the ties on Kali’s legs and dropped them to the ground. He checked the wounds. ‘And your healing skills,’ he added, ‘but we’ve got to be on our way.’

‘Who are you?’ Jago looked from him to the raptor and back.

‘A falconer, like you.’

‘And a murderer?’

‘You’re still alive, are you not?’

*Enough, Teg. Let’s go,* Kali screeched.

He ducked under the railing and headed towards the fringing woods as two temple guards came around the
corner of the stables, swords drawn.

‘Halt!’ one said, rushing forward.
Two more guards appeared at the opposite end of the breezeway, blocking that exit.

*Can you fly, Kali?*

*Can you run?*

Teg launched Kreshkali with an upward thrust of his arm and sprang over the railing, landing on all fours.

‘Lupin!’ one of the guards yelled.

‘Get the horses. He’s headed for the woods.’

Teg didn’t linger to hear the rest. The captain was barking louder than the dogs—clearly unnerved. He hoped the momentary confusion would give him a good head start. He sprinted through the paddocks and out into a field of grazing broodmares. The horses parted in front of him like a river diverting, heads high and ears back. The dogs were close behind and gaining. He called on a boost of energy and charged up the grade, keeping Kreshkali in his sights as she flew overhead. That’s when he saw the eagle. *Mistress! Above you.*

*I’ve got it. Keep running. The portal is south-west.*

He turned left.

*No, Teg! The other way.*

He cut to the right, glancing up in time to see the grey raptor above her drop into a dive. It let out a shrill cry.

*Mistress, look out.*

If it hit her at that speed, she’d be knocked to the ground, killed instantly. She couldn’t shift midair. That was certain death if she couldn’t shift back before losing too much altitude. He didn’t think shifting would help anyway. The eagle looked like it could drop a horse. Teg slowed his pace while he watched. Mistake. A tracker dog sank its teeth into his hind leg before he knew it was on him.

Teg spun around snarling, the pain like a hot knife. Temple guards were riding hard through the pastures, jumping the fences and gaining speed as they chased him up the hill. They would try to cut him off before he reached the cover of the woods. He wasn’t going to let that happen.

With his mind focused, he sent a blast of energy towards the lead dog and launched at its throat. His teeth sank into muscle and he shook the creature like a rag doll. It collapsed to the ground, unmoving. Two other dogs had caught up and both leapt to attack him.

*Back off, canines!* He screamed at them in his mind, sending a charge of power with the message. It scorched them and they dropped mid-launch. He risked a quick look skyward. Kali was above the eagle, darting east, outmanoeuvring it.

*Get out of there!* she yelled to him, her call ringing shrilly over the valley.

Riders cut him off from the west, forcing him to turn straight southward. Perfect. He boosted his legs with every bit of energy he had left, charging towards the cover of the woods. Hooves were churning behind him. He could hear the laboured breathing of both animal and rider about to overtake him. He plunged into the darkness of the pine trees as the lead rider’s blade swiped his flank. A new pain shot up his spine and hot drops of blood spattered his face.

Kali whistled overhead. He couldn’t see her any more, but her call was anger. Not a death knell. *Keep to this side of the creek, Teg. Do you see it?*

*I’ve got it.*

*Are you hurt?*

*Somewhat.*

*Keep running, Teg. You’re almost there.*

*The eagle?*

*Not a problem. Run.*

Teg winced as he scrambled over boulders and fallen trees that lined the babbling stream, sharp pains shooting through his side. He stumbled and slipped on the moss-covered rocks.

*The horses have stopped, but the dogs are still behind you.* Kali’s voice filled his mind.

The canines were indeed back on his trail, no longer cowered. He heard them gaining, and also sensed the riders on foot, charging after them. His own blood was making the way easy to follow. The portal had better be near. He didn’t feel he had much energy left.

*It’s just up the rise. Keep running.*

Teg stopped short, staring at the sheer cliff in front of him. It was taller than an ancient redwood, at a ninety-degree angle to the creek. *You call that a rise? Kali, it’s a fifty-foot high cliff. How in the demon’s dance do I get up there?*

*Climb!*
Teg leapt, forcing his legs to scramble, ignoring the shooting pain and the burning of his lungs. Somehow he found purchase, lunging from shelf to outcropping until he crested the top, shale and rocks dropping down on the dogs below. They jumped and slid and yapped but could not follow.

_Do you recognise the portal?_ Kali asked.

He loped into the clearing. _I do now._ He wanted to laugh and cry at the same time when he saw Kreshkali, her dress wafting in the breeze, her arms crossed as she stood in front of the entrance. Her hair clung to her forehead and she pushed it off her face, her smile radiant. He bounded towards her and shifted, ignoring the searing pain that redoubled in his left leg and hip. He reached her, falling into open arms. For a moment, everything stopped. The sound of the stream, the distant hooves over the forest loam, the baying of the tracker dogs, the wind through the trees—all went mute. He could no longer hear the birds, the leaves or the sway of branches overhead. The only thing he knew was the pounding of his heart, or was that hers? He couldn’t tell the difference.

Her arms were around him, the line of her hip pressed tight against his side and her hands on his neck, fingertips tangled in his hair. They took one breath together before she released him.

‘There you are,’ a woman said. ‘I was hoping to catch you.’

An avalanche of sounds returned as the world started up again. He spun round to the portal. A woman stood in front of it, blocking their way.

‘Haven’t you had enough of us, Le Saint?’ Kali’s voice was calm.

‘Not quite, and certainly not enough of him.’ She pointed a finger at Teg and an eagle feather fell from the hem of her sleeve.

_Drop her, Teg, before she sees it coming._

Kali’s words were so pervasive, he didn’t hesitate. He built a blast of energy in silence, feeling it fill his mind and rush down his arms. He held it in, to the point of bursting.

‘Where are the others?’ Le Saint asked.

She was oblivious to his summoning.

‘Why don’t you come with us and I’ll show you?’ Kali said.

For a second the other woman faltered. She hadn’t expected that.

_Now!_ Kali shouted into his mind.

Teg sent a searing bolt of energy to Le Saint so fast she could never have caught it in time. It would hit the side of her mind—splashing into her consciousness, scrambling her memory and balance, short-circuiting her thoughts. It would have, that is, if she hadn’t had a shield up. He conjured every last bit of his reserves to cut through.

_Stop, Teg. She’s down. Don’t kill her._

The last thing he remembered was Kali pulling him into the portal, the temple guards shouting behind him. In the cool darkness of the corridors, he collapsed to the ground.
Everett stared at the walls. They were old, but not as old as he was. Their plaster, like the skin over his bones, had been scraped smooth, reapplied and retextured again and again. The finished look never reclaimed his youthful vigour. There was no rosy glow, but it covered the cracks and filled the pits. Behind it stood Everett. What stood behind the walls, he didn’t know.

At one time his centuries had seemed like an attribute, but not any more. Things had changed. The cracks reappeared. He followed one now as it meandered through the pale green plaster. It stopped just short of the clock. He let his eyes adjust, waiting for the second hand to catch up. He cleared his throat.

‘Time of death, 1.05 p.m.’

The room was silent save for the drone of the heart monitor, a flat line running across the black screen. Someone took the paddles out of his hands and flipped off the switch. No one else moved. Faces edged his peripheral vision, silent, twitching. A dam of questions was about to burst and he was the only one standing in the causeway. They’d need his direction and he had to give it to them, but his mind felt frozen, his body numb.

He took off his glasses, pinching the furrow between his eyes. Now it made sense, but it didn’t lessen his disorientation. It didn’t make it any easier to do what must be done. He polished the lenses with the edge of his scrub shirt and replaced them, the room coming back into focus. No one would understand a death, but they had to learn. It was time for them all to face it.

‘It’s keeping them trapped. Can’t you see that now?’ Her voice rang in his head, though he knew it was only a memory. She said she wouldn’t hang around after. After death? He didn’t blame her. With the images of life in other worlds, vibrant worlds where he’d made other choices, filling his mind like a multi-digital display, who would? She’d shown them to him to offer encouragement and to help him understand. He did, now. He also understood the austerity and poverty of this world. Not a poverty of nutrition, but of the soul. Who would stay in a place so devoid of spirit, a place where the inhabitants were all but robotic replicas of human expression? That’s what she’d called him, and the label made him weep.

A replica of human expression. He shook his head. No one had predicted that their ‘fountain of youth’ would turn into a prison, a place where souls, over time, would fade, losing their lustre for life, love and happiness. Worse still, it happened so slowly, so insidiously, that no one noticed. No one cared. They were going to live forever in a confinement of their own making, never acknowledging they were architect as well as inmate.

She had told him, though. She had made him see. Without words or narrative she had delivered the images. She’d put them straight into his mind—pictures of trees and flowers and forests, of four-legged creatures like Canie, and some not like him at all, of fish and frogs and fleas. She’d shown him glorious weather patterns, sunsets and mountain peaks. And he had heard their sounds. Angelic music, voices, wind blowing spray from the crest of waves, birds, whales, whispers and wolves—everything missing from his world, this choice, for so long it was forgotten.

His Earth had become a cadaver, a ghost town with windows shuttered and streets abandoned, nothing but dust and debris tumbling past—and he was the dust and debris. This was no way to live a life, let alone an eternity.

She’d shown him yet another world, full of contrast, gloriously bright fields of grain and flowers, dark forests and darker swamps, rumbling mountains and rippling streams, oceans, cities and prairies. This other world was also suffering. Because of his fountain of youth, no children were born in that other place and their cycle of life-death-life failed. He laughed at the irony.

His people, who fervently wanted to preserve existence, were preventing it, trapping the life force until the energy dried up and turned to ash. Suspended animation was not a lifegiver after all. They’d got it wrong, and he was the one who had to set it right.

He had wanted to say, why me? He’d screamed it out to her, but what she’d shown him next made his mouth snap shut. Instead of a protest, he’d squared his shoulders and dipped his head. This was his chance to turn it around. He said, ‘Why, me!’

The stainless steel table reflected the halogen lights, hitting his eyes like a sunbeam. He focused on the hard edge, unable to look elsewhere, unable to turn away. He pulled off his gloves, letting them fall to the floor. In his peripheral vision he saw his team moving as if in slow motion, turning off monitors, clamping drip sets, folding up instrument packs, collecting rubbish. No one walked away, though. No one left her side. He understood why. This was their first death.
‘Dr Kelly?’
He didn’t reply. His eyes shifted from the table to the delicate wrist of the woman who lay upon it, her hand like a lotus, white fingers curled, red-painted nails pointing towards him. He closed his eyes.

‘Dr Kelly?’ The attendant was next to him, shoulder to shoulder. He appreciated the touch, the contact bringing him back to the present. ‘What happens now?’ The question was outlined on everyone’s face as he scanned the room.

‘Is it too late for Cryo?’ a med student asked.
‘She’s not going there,’ Everett said, after clearing his throat again.
‘I don’t understand. Where, then?’
‘We’ll put together a death kit. Run the procedures and get her down to the morgue.’
A nurse stared up at him. ‘Dr Kelly, we don’t have a morgue.’
‘We do now.’ He felt a wash of relief. Some of his staff had been alive for decades past their centenary, patched together with synthesised donor parts, looking lopsided and taut from repeated plastic surgeries. Their eyes were tired, glazed. Lifeless. Without death, there could be no life. She had explained it to him. Now he had to convince ASSIST, and the rest of the world.

‘What’s a death kit?’ the nurse asked.
‘Get me a lab pack,’ he directed. ‘I’ll show you how this is done.’ He snapped on a fresh pair of gloves. ‘Hally, can you call Admin for me? I want Dr Martin in on this.’
‘Chief of Staff?’
‘Please.’

The door swung wide and a large man appeared, gasping for breath. ‘Dr Kelly? The press are here. What do I do?’
‘Let them in, and cancel my appointments for the rest of the day.’

Everett squinted as the digi-cameras flashed. The press edged into the exam room, throwing questions at him from the second they crossed the threshold. He motioned them closer, covering the corpse with a sheet, calm in the midst of fervour.

‘Dr Kelly. We’ve heard you’ve just pronounced a death. Is there some mistake?’
The room went silent.
‘No mistake,’ he said. ‘She died at 1.05 p.m.’
A barrage of questions erupted and he addressed them, answering each reporter, one at a time.
TEG awoke; his head was resting easily under a bunched cloak. For a second, he didn’t feel the pain. In that instance he didn’t remember anything but warmth and a sense of peace. He groaned when the second passed.

‘You’re awake.’ Kali laughed softly. ‘I thought I’d have to carry you out of the corridors, and I wasn’t looking forward to it.’

The sense of peace vanished as his memory rushed back—the race to the portal, the wounds from fang and sword, Le Saint’s challenge, his escape with Kreshkali. He groaned again, inside and out.

‘That bad?’ she asked.

‘Worse.’ He shifted onto his side. ‘I feel like I’ve been mauled.’

‘Drink this.’

He tilted his head back, accepting the liquid with its earthy fragrance and bitter aftertaste.

‘More,’ she said, holding the vial up to his lips.

He took another gulp and pulled his head away. ‘I’ll be sick.’

She handed him a waterskin and returned to her vigil by the entrance. ‘Wash it down. Slow sips.’

The water was sweet, though the sour aftertaste remained. ‘Thanks.’

He could see her profile outlined in the dark. She was standing at the mouth of the portal, streams of light rushing by. He tried to get up and yelped.

‘Not yet,’ she said. ‘Give that draught a minute to work.’ She was back at his side now, her cool hands on his face. ‘You need to learn to protect yourself, Teg,’ she said. ‘Your defence is shocking.’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

Her hands were hovering over his wounds. Warm energy radiated from them and the shooting pains along his side and ankle eased. She tapped his spine, his head and around his eyes, chanting quietly as she did. The pain eased further.

‘That’s magical,’ he smiled, catching her hand and forcing her to look at him. She returned his gaze with a flash of fire that made him let go.

‘Drink more.’ She propped his head and held a waterskin to his lips. ‘You’re dry as bark.’

He swallowed, and choked, sitting up and coughing. ‘That’s not water.’ It was much stronger than the first potion she’d given him. His mouth stung, and his throat burned with the harsh taste.

‘I know. Take another sip.’ She held it to his lips.

He took a few more swallows. ‘Am I being punished?’ he asked, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, his face pinched. There was something rancid in the concoction. Maybe she’d decided to poison him.

‘You’re being cured, fast. You might also take it as a reminder to avoid getting wounded in the future.’ She studied his face. ‘Teg, you have a powerful magic. Why are you so reluctant to use it? These wounds were unnecessary.’

He shrugged and looked away.

‘There’s no shame in being a Lupin,’ she said when he didn’t answer. ‘Nor in using the arcane magic. It’s a gift.’ She returned to the mouth of the portal. ‘Please run true,’ she whispered to the Entity. ‘Take us straight to Rosette.’

‘What’s wrong with the portals?’ he asked, relieved to shift the focus off his failings.

‘I don’t know. Someone’s tampering, I think.’

‘Trackers?’

She shook her head. ‘I’m not certain. Maybe.’

‘What else could cause them to run erratic?’

‘I need Jarrod to calculate that.’ She rubbed her shoulder. ‘Entropy is my guess.’

‘How do you stop it?’

‘The old school answer?’ she said. ‘You don’t.’

He smiled. ‘I’m glad you’re not old school then.’ He leaned back, staring at the ceiling. ‘Kali, it’s not shame that makes me hesitate,’ he finally said, understanding it as if for the first time.

‘What, then?’

‘I don’t actually enjoy injuring others.’

‘Even to protect yourself?’
‘Even that.’
She turned and smiled. ‘Don’t let the Sword Master hear such ideas. You’ll have a philosophical debate on your hands that’ll last aeons.’
He laughed, cringing. ‘I guess I never put it to the test quite like this before.’
Perhaps not. But, Teg, the test isn’t over yet.’ She straightened her spine. The whirl of colour rushing past the portal slowed, the blur coming into focus—red plains, cracked land, treeless and desolate save for the green Gaela apples. She silently thanked the Entity. ‘We’re here, Teg. Can you walk?’
Not on two legs.’
‘Then shift. I’m not lugging you all the way to the temple.’
He sighed, focusing his thoughts on his wolf form, and rose on all fours, favouring his near hind leg. He was surprised at how much stronger he felt. Between the potion and his Lupin form, the pain was nearly halved. His emotions were steadier too. He tuned into Kreshkali, sensing their connection. That was all he needed to feel—nothing more, nothing less. He followed her out of the portal and into the intense heat of the day. The apple trees rustled in the wind.
I’m hungry.
‘Good sign, but it’ll have to wait.’ Kreshkali stood in front of the gates, her eyes closed. In a moment the call of ravens filled the air, their jet-black bodies bearing down on them at top speed. They swooped and dived, escorting them through the entrance.
‘Rosette is here.’ She smiled.
Alive? Teg asked.
‘Not yet.’ She crouched to the ground. Meet me there.
She rose in the form of a black falcon, overtaking the ravens and disappearing in the distance. The Three Sisters squawked for a moment before shooting off after her. Teg loped, his side in a stitch. He winced, slowing to a trot. He’d been an idiot to let himself be wounded, twice. This wouldn’t go down well.
Teg!
He spun his head around, turning on his haunches. Hotha?
You’re wounded?
Not badly, and I can explain.
No time. We’re called.
He looked past Hotha and saw the scattered clan of Lupins, black and grey dots on the red earth. They approached slowly, tongues lolling in the heat.
For Rosette?
Hotha dipped his head. Blood heals blood. He frowned at Teg’s wounds. What happened to you?
Long story. Do you remember a woman named Lily?
A deep rumble came from Hotha’s throat. How could I forget?

Grayson saw the Three Sisters take off, their cries muffled by the music. He put down his guitar and left it on the stage. The ravens’ sudden departure could mean only one thing and he hoped it was good news. ‘Kreshkali?’ He mouthed the words to Jarrod and slipped out of the temple.
The courtyard was abandoned save for Canie. Fynn, he corrected himself. Shane had told him the pup’s name, explaining how Rosette had picked him up in Gaela when she and her familiar had switched bodies. The dog was sitting under the weeping fig tree. His ears lifted at the sight of Grayson.
‘Come here.’ He slapped his leg and the little dog trotted over, his tail wagging in circles. ‘Are there too many people in there for you, lad?’ he said, scratching the animal’s back.
Fynn yipped and ran to the tree, jumping up the trunk and sliding down. Grayson smiled. Halfway up, on a smooth wide branch, was Drayco, his hind leg dangling, his tail lashing. The temple cat leapt down and sauntered over to Grayson, surprising him with a lunge that placed his front paws on the tall man’s shoulders. ‘Is Kali coming, big fellow?’
‘Be here any moment,’ Jarrod answered from behind.
Drayco jumped down and rubbed his cheek against Jarrod’s leg.
‘I think Rosette’s out here,’ Grayson said, looking at the tree. He couldn’t see her, but he could sense her presence. Besides, Drayco and Fynn staying so close was a sure sign.
‘She is.’ Jarrod nodded to the temple cat. ‘He’s keeping her from drifting.’
Grayson scanned the road, shielding his eyes. ‘And Kali?’
‘Here she comes.’ Jarrod pointed at the sky where a black falcon winged in. He held out his arm and Grayson
stepped back as the raptor stalled to land on the outstretched wrist. A moment later the air around her blurred and
Grayson felt the now-familiar waft of energy, like a wave hitting his face, and Kreshkali stood before him. She was
injured, her long robe tattered, but her eyes were clear and flashing. ‘Make room.’ She pushed past Jarrod and
headed towards the temple.

‘What’s happening?’ Jarrod rushed to keep up with her.

‘The Lupins are coming.’ She paused, turning to the tree. ‘Rosette! We need you inside.’
Everett gripped the podium, staring at the crowd. Their twisted mouths shouted exclamations, hands waving, faces vying for attention, bodies jostling—an ocean of need. All their energy, the frantic expressions, the yearning, the straining, the hope in their eyes, was directed towards him. He was the man with the answers, he reminded himself, though it felt like the force of their questions would bowl him over. He wanted to run, but he kept his feet planted firmly to the spot. These people needed the truth and he was going to supply it, as best he could.

He didn’t know how to explain exactly why the suspension of death had all but swallowed up their lives. He didn’t begin to understand the impact on other worlds, the other choices as she’d called them. He wasn’t going to try to elucidate that. It was more than this press conference was ready for. It would be enough to get them thinking about existence in a broader way. He’d have to do this one step at a time—let them see the body as a vehicle, and its spirit as the energising force. Keeping the spirit in the same vehicle for too long sapped the vitality of both. They’d lost their shine. Their energy had stopped moving forward. It simply hovered above the ground.

Look around, he would tell them. Such was clearly a fate worse than death. Would they see it that way?

‘We’ve feared death,’ he said to them, projecting his voice above the crowd. He paused until they all settled. ‘We have fought against it, and in our fear and aggression we thought to conquer it, beat it, repress it. But now we’re trapped in the void of its absence. More dead than alive.’

The auditorium went silent.

‘Fighting against death is not the way to free the spirit. It has let the energy, the life force, of our world turn to dust. This is no way to be. This is no way to live.’ His voice echoed over the stillness. The only movement was the flicker of digital cameras, strobes of light flashing across his face. He blinked, perspiration dripping into his eyes. He ran his arm across his forehead and continued. ‘The intention of the Allied States is to restore the life cycle. We are working on that now as we launch the new protocols. Questions?’

The crowd took a breath and everyone started talking at once. He signalled to the reporter in the front, one he was sure to hear above the uproar.

‘Dr Kelly, is it true that the first death came here from another dimension? Another world?’

Everett forced a smile. ‘Only if you call the Borderlands another dimension. From what I’ve heard, the description is probably apt.’

The crowd laughed with him and more questions followed. He wished he could be completely honest about the whole matter, and the ramifications, but ASSIST had been clear. His line of delivery could not waver. He was under their control and had to keep to the strict boundaries of disclosure. He had to. That way, they wouldn’t see it coming.

‘Just get them comfortable with the notion of a life span,’ the board of directors had told him. ‘Most are so detached from their relatives in Cryo that they won’t be missed.’

‘I’m not so certain,’ Everett had answered. He rubbed his ring finger.

‘We are. Remember, we need at least a billion death certificates in the next month. Get onto it.’

There was no misunderstanding ASSIST. They’d been looking for a reason to reverse the immortality protocol for decades and now they had it. It didn’t matter to Everett that their motives were for their own convenience. The results would be the same. A more or less natural life cycle would be reintroduced, and with finite lifetimes the population would be renewed. What ASSIST didn’t know wouldn’t hurt them. He nodded to a reporter towards the back, waving the others silent. He’d take one last question and wrap it up.

‘Dr Kelly, has there been definitive proof of life after death and has that been the reason for the shift in policy?’

‘You mean life after life?’

The crowd cheered.

He never answered this question directly, but he implied the response, as he had been instructed to do. A swarm of questions followed. He nodded to the security team on either side and they stepped forward. ‘That’s all we have time for today. Thank you for coming.’

The crowd cheered louder, pressing in, arms reaching towards the platform. He slipped out of the auditorium and headed back to his office. He had three hours to go before his last meeting, three hours before he would collect his things and get out. Then I’m done. Finished with it all. No more ASSIST, no more press, no more death certificates, no more lies, and hopefully no more bad dreams. He was escaping to the Borderlands, and he hoped to all powers that they actually did exist.
Rosette floated above the crowd. She felt as if the wind would blow right through her.

It actually does blow right through you, Maudi.

She wanted to smile, but the effort seemed too great. Can you tell me what’s going on? I’m muddled. I don’t remember why we’re here. I’m not even sure where this ‘here’ is.

Temple Los Loma, Earth. The place Kreshkali was looking for when we answered the Caller.

I’m glad it’s clear for you. I don’t remember anything.

It’ll all return in time.

That’s just it, Dray. I don’t even remember what’s not coming back. I’ve forgotten what I’m worried about forgetting. I don’t know what I’m meant to be doing. She heard him purring. At least there was no forgetting how good that sounded.

Kreshkali’s here, Maudi, and Jarrod and Grayson. They will help. Everyone is helping.

Why, again?

To get you back into your body. Come closer. Can you see?

She could. Everyone in the room was filing past the altar, pausing next to her corpse. All the people were smiling and laughing as they told stories. She hadn’t been listening before, but they were talking about themselves now and how they knew her, telling yarns and snatches of memories that clearly filled them with delight. It was bringing her delight too. It made her want to giggle and she drew closer to catch the details. The stories were funny and warm and interesting—things she hadn’t thought of since they’d happened but were a comfort and joy to her now. I can remember this!

I told you it’d come back.

Her body was no longer shrouded in the black bag. They’d arranged it on a colourful quilt, her head on a white cotton pillow. She hadn’t wanted to look at it before, in that other world, but here it entranced her. Someone had brushed the tangles out of her hair and in an instant she knew it had been Jarrod. She could almost feel where his tears had fallen on her cheek.

Jarrod?

Come back, Rosette. Please come back.

I’m right here. Drayco, tell him I’m right here.

Tell him yourself, Maudi. He can hear you if you want him to.

Jarrod! She felt like shaking him. He looked up, towards her, but past her.

Rosette! We’re here to wake your body up, love. We’re all here for you. His voice was faint. Stay close. Stay very close.

The ice crystals were melting from her face. They dripped from her fingertips and eyelashes, down her cheeks and onto the altar, forming little blue-tinged pools, like tiny glacier lakes. She stared into those pools, imagining she could see her reflection. That’s when she noticed the trembling. The water was vibrating as if the world shook beneath them.

They’re here, Maudi. This is good.

Who, Drayco? Who’s here?

Look and see.

Where?

Towards the entrance.

She pulled her attention away from the altar and saw at first only darkness. The doors of the hall were barely perceptible, an outline in the black. It seemed for a moment that the shadows would surround her, engulf her, and then something snapped. It wasn’t shadow after all, not a lack of colour, but a strong, earthy energy with an aura much like the deeper parts of the Dumarkian Woods, or perhaps even Espiro Dell Ray, the old forest of her childhood. She sighed. I see them now. So many! It does feel good. She was amazed at the thrill in her heart.

As the Lupins entered the hall, a few auras shifted, some brightening, some dimming, but most were clear and inspiring. At the altar, the bards were joined by many of them in bipedal form who added percussion and bass to the tunes. It grounded her, and she moved closer still to her corpse. I love that sound—I couldn’t really hear it before.

It is from Los Loma, Gaela.

Under the Prietas?
See. You’re remembering more already. Keep listening.

The hall was filled to capacity and then some, the close quarters enlivening the air with a palpable zing. It felt like a carpet of jonquils in a spring meadow—alive, fresh and full of promise. Everyone’s thoughts were joyful. They poured out of the hearts of those who passed by, each person sharing the things they loved most about life. She wanted to respond.

You can, Maudi.

She wanted to reach out to them and thank them, sharing her own ideas of joy and bliss as well. This is amazing, Dray.

I like it too.

She had to get closer, as close as she could.

‘It’s too late. I’ve already called them in,’ Kreshkali said. ‘They’ll be here any moment.’

She bent her head towards Annadusa, their shoulders touching as they conversed outside the hall. The last thing she wanted to do was argue with the woman, especially when she had a good point. Such a large group of Lupins could throw a few of the Gaeleans out of balance, creating discord and perturbing the spell. ‘Anna, they’re coming to help,’ Kreshkali said. ‘Not threaten.’

‘I know that, but look behind me. What do you see?’

Kali let her eyes drift across the crowd, knowing the woman’s concerns were valid. She was worried herself and doing her best not to show it or focus on it. They’d talked about the importance of keeping the energy up, not letting any negative thoughts penetrate the web they wove around Rosette. The ritual required a powerful dose of peace, appreciation, respect and, most importantly, a heartfelt zest for life. That wasn’t going to be easy to achieve if half the contingent was uncomfortable with the other half.

Annadusa leaned closer, cupping her hand to Kali’s ear, her voice cutting through the music that poured out of the hall. ‘I’m not ruffled by them, two legs or four. You know that. But you’ve enough of your people from Gaela here to cause alarm, and that’s not going to get Rosette back.’ She crossed her arms and cocked her head to the side.

‘The good outweighs any risks,’ Kreshkali replied, a slight smile on her lips.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, we need as many contributors as we can get. Besides, the child hears the call of her own.’

Annadusa shrugged. ‘Nonsense. Rosette’s no Lupin. She’s your blood.’

‘So she is.’ Kreshkali looked away for a moment. ‘Anna, why don’t you work up a calming energy to weave underneath our spell? I think that will vanquish any potential problems.’

‘Like something I’d use to soothe a child waking from a nightmare?’ Her face brightened as she spoke.

‘Precisely.’ Kali gripped her arm, holding Annadusa back before she returned to the hall. ‘This is going to work.’

‘It will, Kali. It will.’

She kissed her cheek and let her go. A ruckus in the trees by the stables caught her eye. Three ravens stared out of the greenery, their white eyes dancing.

What news, my lovelies? she asked them.

He comes!

Who?

The silent one. He brings many!

Kreshkali laughed. There were plenty of times she wished the leader of the Lupins was indeed silent. Good work! Keep watch for Rowan.

Always.

Thank you! She raised her arms to the black birds before turning to the Lupins. ‘Hotha! Teg! Here,’ she called aloud, waving them in. ‘This way. Bring them all this way.’

Kali embraced the Lupin leader. For a moment he engulfed her and tears welled up. ‘I’m glad you’re here.’ She straightened and turned to Teg. How are you faring? Hotha didn’t give you too hard a time?

I’m fine, Mistress.

She smiled. ‘Teg, I want you to go in first and instruct the others as they enter.’

Teg went straight to the hall. Hotha didn’t move. He pushed damp hair back from Kreshkali’s cheek. ‘I warned you it was too big a risk letting her…’

‘Later,’ Kali said cutting off his words, her back stiffening. ‘Nothing but good feelings past this door. That’s not negotiable. Make sure everyone understands.’ She raised her voice. ‘Bring your joy, in whatever form it takes. Leave all else behind.’
He parted his lips. ‘All business, then?’
She put her finger to his mouth and shook her head. ‘Do this my way, please, Hotha. I know it will work.’
Their eyes locked.
‘Your way, then, for now.’ He sighed, the tension melting from his face. He pulled his hair back and tied it with a band. ‘I want her alive as much as you do, Kali. Whatever it takes.’ Hotha looked over the crowd. ‘Where is he?’
Kali hesitated for a moment, studying his eyes. His features didn’t move, but she caught the subtle smile behind the mask. ‘You mean An’ Lawrence?’ She glanced around as if he would appear from the stables or down the lane. ‘I don’t know. He took off.’
‘Took off?’
‘Looking for me. He hasn’t returned.’
‘That’s unfortunate.’
Her eyebrows went up. ‘I never thought I’d hear you say that.’
‘We do need as much energy as we can muster, and his is…’
‘Considerable?’
He nodded.
‘As is yours.’ She linked her arm in his and escorted him across the threshold. He bowed to the altar and entered the hall, followed by dozens of Lupins who all did the same. They were bipedal, glowing with warmth and trust. He’d schooled them well. It lifted Kreshkali’s face into the brightest smile she’d felt in quite some time. ‘It’s working,’ she said. ‘I can feel it.’
'I don’t give a rat’s crap what you need, Rowan. You abandoned Gaela and shifted to that other world.' La Makee sat by the fire, her familiar, the black raven Woca, on her shoulder.

‘Earth,’ he said.

‘Earth, yes—and the problems there are yours, not mine.’

‘You mean I abandoned you. That’s it, isn’t it? That’s why you’re so irked.’

Makee stopped chewing. ‘Irked?’ She handed the rest of her meat to Woca and wiped her lips. The bird took off. ‘Irked?’ she said again. Her voice was like a blade. ‘I am well more than irked, Rowan An’ Lawrence.’

Her face contorted and he found himself wishing he’d chosen his words more carefully. He wanted to win her over, not alienate her.

Too late for that, Rowan, his familiar pointed out.

Are you laughing, Scylla?

It’s somewhat humorous from where I’m sitting.

The fire suddenly felt too warm. He tried rephrasing the question. ‘Let me explain, Makee.’

‘No, no.’ She pushed her hand out. ‘Let me explain.’

He closed his mouth, eyes attentive.

‘Irked is what you feel when you go out to the hen house to collect eggs and realise you forgot your little basket.’ She drew a deep breath. ‘What I felt when you left Treeon was like going for eggs and finding the barn burnt to the ground. Can you see the difference, Sword Master?’

He started to answer, but she wasn’t finished.

‘Because when you left, I didn’t have a Timbali-trained sword master any more! You took Zero as well!’ She glared at him before returning to her meal. The glow from the fire turned her eyes black.

He stared at the burning logs, wondering how he was going to get her on his side. Trying in the first place was starting to seem like a fairly bad choice.

She’s still angry at you, Rowan.

I see that, Scylla. Suggestions?

She’s remembering the past.

An’ Lawrence groaned, his shoulders sagging. ‘I didn’t abandon you, Makee,’ he said. ‘Rosette’s my daughter and going to Earth with her was a chance for me to know her better, to participate in her world.’

‘And now?’

‘I have to do what I can to bring her back.’

She turned on him. ‘Did you ever consider the impact of this meddling?’

‘Kreshkali doesn’t see it so much as meddling, but as aligning with another choice.’

Makee spat. ‘Semantics. It’s meddling and you know it. And who cares what Kreshkali thinks. I’m interested in what you think, not that underworld witch.’

‘I want Rosette back.’ He said the words quietly, in an exhalation.

She leaned towards him. ‘And what makes you so certain she wants to come back? Have you considered that Rosette may be quite pleased with her new-found freedom? A disembodied witch is a powerful force.’

Scylla hissed, her bobbed tail twitching. She’s not pleased. She’s trapped. The temple cat sat tall—like a sandstone carving facing the night.

‘Drayco didn’t seem to think she was all that happy about it,’ he said. ‘Scylla’s made it clear.’

Makee rubbed her temples. ‘I’d forgotten about her bond.’

Rowan passed her the wineskin. ‘I need your help, Makee,’ he said, uncorking it for her.

She held the spout to her lips and nodded. ‘I know you do.’ She took a long drink.

He waited. ‘And?’

‘You ask a lot.’ She waved at the blackness. ‘I’ve got business of my own.’

He screwed up his face. ‘This battle?’

‘Corsanon was never set right. I’m addressing issues in our world, Rowan, not chasing whelps through the corridors.’

‘That’s because you have no whelps to chase, Makee.’

Her face froze.
Rowan, was that the most opportune thing you could think to mention at this point in time?
I don’t know where it came from, Scylla. It just slipped out.
Some underlying resentment, no doubt. A slip of the tongue. Meanwhile, you better fix it, quickly. We’re losing her.

He cleared his throat. ‘Makee, I only meant…’
‘I know what you meant.’ She spat again, and vanished.

He didn’t see the shift, but he could feel the energy blasting out from the space where seconds ago she had sat, grinding her teeth at him. Far above, he heard the screech of two ravens and then silence.

Now what? Scylla asked.
‘I guess we wait out the night and see if she returns.’
You do remember that we are in the middle of a battleground?
‘I do, now that you mention it.’
I would consider that in all likelihood she is going to tip off our location to the enemies.
‘She’s that upset?’
She is.
‘Demons.’ He rammed his forehead into his hand.
Still want to ‘wait out the night’?
‘Not really.’
The portal isn’t far.
‘Just an enemy camp or two away?’
We’ll skirt them.

He laughed, grabbing the wineskin and hoisting his pack. ‘At least she left the warhorse. What does she call him?’

Amarillo.
‘He’s a fine one too. We’ll take him. Who knows? It might lure her back.’
Which way, Rowan? North towards the lower Prietas?
Sounds good. Just mind we don’t walk into a trap.

Scylla rubbed her head against his leg as he saddled the horse. In minutes they were wandering out into the night.
Jarrod closed his eyes and watched the myriad possibilities rush by. To anyone else his vision would look like a dark chasm, a mini-universe of galaxies hidden behind the lids. For him it was a torrent of streaming energy, waves of varying lengths, each with their own frequency and meaning, all moving at the speed of light. He smiled. Every possibility held a gift when viewed from this perspective.

_Some more desired than others, though. Don’t you think?_

_Rosette?

_Finally, you can hear me! I’ve been calling to you forever but…I’m so thin at times I can’t get through._

_He held the hand of her corpse. I've got you loud and clear now._

_Everyone gathered close, sharing their thoughts aloud, or just standing quietly, thinking to themselves. Their faces were bright, focusing on joy and passing on to Rosette their best memories—their happiest moments. He was heartened being near such a force and he added his thoughts to her as well. Drayco was on the altar, lying with his front legs stretched out like a sphinx. He purred a constant stream, his eyes closed, paws making bread against the pillow._

_Are you still feeling thin, Rosette?_

_It’s strange. One minute I feel like I could wield my sword, the next I’m a miasma drifting in all different directions at once. Is that normal?_

_Jarrod laughed aloud. I don’t think there are established norms for your situation, Rosette._

_She laughed like a chorus of finches, bright and sweet. I suppose not. What’s next?_

_We’re going to give your body a bit of a jolt._

_A lightning conjure? You’re kidding. That’s what Kelly did, and I think it killed me._

_We’re hoping for the opposite effect._

_When?_

_We’re ready now._

_Kreshkali approached. Her tattered robe had been replaced by a new one, dark green and hemmed with gold. It streamed out behind her long legs as she climbed the steps, her face lifted towards the ceiling. Teg was at her side, carrying a metal plate and fresh candles. The sun had set and the waning moon as well. Jarrod replaced the stubs of candles that had been burning since afternoon._

_How long has this been going on, Jarrod? I’ve lost track._

_Two days._

_He heard her whistle in his mind._

_We’ll need to do something soon. I can’t imagine my body going so well without me._

_The cryo process has a preserving effect, and Annadusa has done something with herbs._

_So that’s the smell?_

_Bittersweet?_

_Like me?_

_Like your journey._

_They laughed._

_Kreshkali raised her eyebrows at him and he nodded. ‘She’s as close as she can get.’_

_Kali looked down at the corpse, the lifeless eyes dark and unreflective. ‘We’ll have her closer yet. Help me with this.’_

_He and Teg rolled her body while Kreshkali slipped the metal plate under it. Annadusa brought a thick square of cotton, saturated in a fragrant tincture—Amazon lily—and handed it to Kali. She put it between the plate and Rosette’s shoulder blades and motioned Grayson. ‘Move everyone back. We don’t want to singe their eyebrows.’_

_This is it? Rosette asked._

_It is. Stay close, and keep watch for an opening._

_An opening?_

_Kali says it’ll be like shape-shifting back into your own, you know?_

_I do. She just explained it to me._

_He made room as Grayson returned. The others formed a wide circle around them._

_‘You’re communicating with her?’ Grayson asked, placing his hand on the edge of the altar. ‘She’s with us?’_
‘Strongly.’
‘This is it, then.’
Jarrod smiled. ‘Exactly what she said.’
Tell him I have the most wonderful idea for a new tattoo. He’s going to love it!
Jarrod leaned towards Grayson. ‘She’s thinking about new work. We’re definitely going to get her back now.’
Grayson beamed, his eyes glistening.
More candles were lit and the shadows retreated under benches and between people’s feet. Annadusa chanted and everyone joined in, the vibration lifting higher still. Jarrod felt like he was floating on clouds. Teg and Kali had their eyes closed and were weaving a spell so fast it sounded like gibberish, even to him. Thunder rumbled in the distance, coming closer with each boom.
There are a lot of Lupins here, Rosette said. The Sword Master must be fuming. Is that why he’s not around?
Jarrod opened his eyes to see Hotha staring at him.
The Lupins honour you, my gorgeous one. You’re their queen too.
Hotha! I still don’t quite understand the connection, she said.
There’s time for that later, Jarrod said. Just be glad they’re here.
It is strong energy, isn’t it?
The chanting amplified. Drayco’s purring grew in volume as well. Hotha stood at her head, one hand on her brow and one under her cranium. He mouthed words in yet another tongue, weaving them in and out of the droning chant. A crack of lightning turned the hall blue-white, followed immediately by a shattering boom. There was a palpable gasp before the chanting continued. Again and again, the hall lit up and the zing and crack of the thunder sounded, louder and closer each time.
‘Now, Jarrod,’ Kreshkali said, lifting her eyes to the ceiling.
Jarrod placed his hands over Rosette’s heart. The energy amplified and he drew it in. Like a whirlpool he sucked it into his solar plexus, preparing for the next blast. Kali and Teg threw their arms skyward and a hole in the ceiling opened, the roof melting like burning plastic as the lightning flashed. The hall blazed white with the deafening sear and zap. Jarrod felt the force of the bolt pass through him straight to Rosette’s heart. It hit the metal plate and bounced back, hurling him across the hall, knocking down those in his path like empty milk bottles. The shockwave blasted the temple doors and rolled under the floorboards.
Jarrod couldn’t see for some time. His vision was like static on a broadcast monitor, crackling with interference. His ears were ringing and his limbs shook. Strong hands gripped him, helping him to sit. From the corner of his eye he could just see Selene, and Shane and Teg as well. He kept trying to focus, scrunching his eyes and relaxing, but blackness masked the centre of his vision. He knew there was a world out there, but it wasn’t registering. He felt the vibration of voices around him, yet no distinct sounds, no words, formed in his mind.
The scent of sweet herbs engulfed him. Cool hands touched his face. Annadusa was looking after him now. He could tell by the aura he was able to sense. He tried to push her away.
Let me see Rosette, he said. No sound came out. Why were they focused on him when they should be helping her? Was she back in her body? A hand clasped his shoulder and he shrugged it off, gathering his strength to stand.
Rosette?
Someone was crying. It sounded far off, like a child in the distance. He felt his heart racing, erratic beats that pounded against his breastbone.
‘Deep breaths, Jarrod. Easy. There’s no rush. It’s okay. Take your time.’ Finally, he heard Annadusa and others around him.
‘But Rosette…’ His voice was like an old man’s. He cleared his throat and tried again. ‘How’s Rosette?’
It’s all right, Jarrod. Relax.
‘Drayco! Where are you? I can’t see properly.’
Stop struggling, Jarrod. Your mind’s like an ant’s nest. I’m here to help, but you have to breathe deeply.
Annadusa was tapping his body here and there, on his fingertips and head, opening blocked channels. He felt the energy flow increase, like unclogging a dam. His vision cleared and the hall came slowly into focus. The dark blotches in the centre of his vision dissipated.
The candles were burning brightly, wax dripping down the sticks. The bards were playing an ambient tune with low whistles and guitars, the music sweet and light. People were everywhere, all smiling, their auras vivid. He touched his chest and winced. The smell of burnt flesh rose to his nostrils.
‘You took quite a jolt, my lad. How’s the tulpa holding up?’
He stared at Kreshkali. ‘Rosette?’
‘Come. You’ll need to see for yourself.’
He made his way towards the altar, supported by Shane and Kreshkali. He could glimpse Drayco; he was standing over Rosette, his forepaws on either side of her head. She didn’t move. The big cat leaned closer until his
nose touched hers. Still no response, until a pale hand lifted. Everyone held their breath. When Rosette’s fingers found her temple cat’s neck, they disappeared into his ruff and didn’t let go.

‘Rosette!’ Jarrod stumbled the last few steps towards her.

Grayson caught him and propped him up. ‘She’s with us. She’s back.’ His voice was muffled as tears streamed down his face. Jarrod’s eyes welled too. The Lupins began a haunting bay, a deep resonant chorus which Drayco joined.

‘Jarrod?’ Her voice lilted towards him. ‘I found it.’

‘What’s that, love?’

‘The way back in.’

He laughed. ‘So you did.’

Kreshkali caught him as he crumpled to the floor.

‘Are you all right?’ Rosette narrowed her eyes. ‘You look like you’ve been in a demon’s den.’

Jarrod smoothed her hair. ‘You would know more about that than me.’

‘Not really.’ She tried to get up.

‘Stay still,’ Kreshkali said, easing her back with a hand on her chest. ‘You need to wake up slowly. A warm bed, a cup of tea and some herbs to start with.’

‘Slowly?’ she said, though she didn’t resist. ‘I’ve already been asleep for…how long now?’

‘Too long,’ Hotha said.

She turned towards the beautiful voice. ‘Who are you?’

‘Don’t you remember?’

She frowned. ‘Los Loma?’ She looked at his hands. ‘You guided me. You’re Lupin. You’re Hotha!’

‘Memory’s intact,’ he said.

‘You took me prisoner and nearly killed my…’

‘All of them, it seems.’

‘Let’s get her to her room. You too, Jarrod. I want to check your heart.’

He didn’t argue.

‘Grayson, can you bring her? And Teg, come with me to the kitchens.’

Jarrod winked at Rosette. ‘I’ll see you in the morning?’

She smiled back. ‘You will.’

Selene and Shane supported Jarrod, one on either side, as he made his way out of the hall. An apprentice led them to the rooms that had been prepared, turning around frequently to check their progress. At the base of the stairs, Jarrod looked up and sighed. The spiralling steps leading to the second storey appeared to go on forever.

‘We’ve got you,’ Selene whispered in his ear.

Jarrod took a deep breath and stilled his mind, tracing the neuro-pathways that fired through his tulpa. The experience of physical difficulty surprised him; he wasn’t used to it. But he couldn’t quite get his mind past the electrocution. Not yet. Half of his brain cells seemed to be firing out of sync, the other half not firing at all. He needed to meditate, to suspend his tulpa and think himself back into perfect alignment. ‘Thanks,’ he said. ‘I’m fine now.’

‘You’re really amazing, Jarrod. You brought her back.’

‘We all brought her back.’

They started up the steps, taking them one at a time. The apprentice led the way to their apartment. Candles were burning on wrought-iron stands, casting a soft light in the hallway. She lit more in the other rooms.

‘I’ll send up some food and wine,’ she said. ‘And hot water. You’ll want to bathe?’ She looked hopeful.

‘Of course,’ Shane said. ‘That sounds grand.’

The apprentice nodded and disappeared.

‘I might just lie down,’ Jarrod said. He felt neither hungry nor particularly in need of a soak in the tub.

‘This way,’ Selene said.

There were two bedrooms and a lounge area with colourful rugs, overstuffed pillows and a low table. Their packs were lined up against the wall along with their weapons. The bedroom glowed, lit by a row of short candles on the sill. They threw a warm yellow light, filling the room with the scent of honey. The curtains were drawn back and a large quilt covered the bed. On the bookshelf was an oil burner, the sweet scent of lemon balm and ginger rising from the little pot. He closed his eyes, ready to pass out where he stood.

Selene pulled back the quilt as Jarrod sat on the edge of the bed, shrugging out of his clothes.

‘Let me,’ she said.
‘Thanks.’
She knelt in front of him and unlaced his boots, undid his buckle and pulled off his pants. She peeled him out of his shirt and he flopped down with a sigh.
‘I’ll be fine,’ he mumbled.
‘Get some rest,’ Shane said. ‘We’ll see you in the morning.’
Jarrod murmured his gratitude, but kept his eyes shut. Already he was sinking into a deep state of meditation—the electromagnetic amplitude in his brain going up, the frequency going down to theta waves and lower. He was aware of the cycles—seven per second, six per second, five per second. Later he was aware of Kreshkali, her hands hovering above his heart. The added energy was appreciated, but he didn’t open his eyes. He would thank her later. She knew anyway.
He sighed again, allowing his tulpa to repair while his consciousness gathered, keen to head off in another direction. He had a thing or two he wanted to discuss with the Caller and he knew just where to find her.

‘That went well,’ Shane said. He pulled the door closed and stretched his neck from side to side. He rubbed knots out of his shoulders. When he straightened, Selene was staring at him. The lines on her brow deeply creased. Even the candlelight didn’t soften the edge of her expression. ‘Is something wrong?’ he asked.
She let out her breath in a rush. ‘I’m sorry, Shane, but your idea of “things going well” isn’t the same as mine.’ She slipped out of her long cloak and tossed it towards her pack. ‘I mean, what are we doing here? This isn’t our world and these aren’t our people, or our problems, for that matter. We’ve been gone for who knows how long and I’m not even sure how to get back.’ She drew in more air. ‘We don’t belong here!’
‘Maybe, but we are here nonetheless.’ He took her hand and led her to a nest of cushions, easing her down.
‘I’ve been here long enough, Shane. I came with Jarrod, thinking he’d solve our problems on Tensar, but as far as I can tell he hasn’t even considered it.’ She talked over him when he started to answer. ‘I can’t imagine he has, with everything that’s been going on. What about Tensar? What’s happening there?’
‘I don’t know.’
‘That’s my point. We’ve no idea.’ She bent forward to unlace her boots, leaning back with a sigh before she could get the knot undone. ‘I’ve had it. I’m finding my way back tomorrow, and I don’t care who’s disembodied or trapped in time or in need of rescuing. I’m going home.’ She held up her hand. ‘I know there is something wrong with the portals. They’re going every which way but direct, but that’s an even stronger sign that we need to get back. The many-worlds are in danger when the portals stop running true. I’m first marshal of the border scouts. I need to do my job!’
He patted his thigh and nodded towards her boots. ‘Fair enough,’ he said.
She put her feet in his lap. ‘Pardon?’
‘I said, it sounds like a fair plan to me.’ He untied the knots and slipped off her boots. When he started massaging her feet, she didn’t pull away. She closed her eyes and smiled. Music floated up the stairs, the soft stringed instruments creating a melodic ambience.
‘I’m surprised you aren’t down there, with them,’ she said through a deep yawn.
‘I’m happy here.’
‘Happy?’
He nodded.
‘You haven’t said that word in a long time.’ She sighed. ‘Shane, we know where the portal is.’ She kept her eyes closed. ‘We’ve seen how it works, how they commune with the Entity—been through often enough now. What’s to stop us from going home?’
‘What indeed?’
She opened one eye. ‘You’re awfully agreeable this evening.’
He winked at her, about to answer. There was a knock at the door.
The apprentice had returned with a platter of food: flat bread and an assortment of dips and sprouts, goat cheese, dark purple grapes and roasted macadamia nuts. She also carried a pot of hot spiced wine. ‘This will have to do on short notice. All the meats have gone to the Lupins, you understand. Nobody wants them roaming around hungry!’
‘This is perfect,’ Shane said. ‘We don’t eat meat.’
She put the tray on the table and waved in two more apprentices. They carried a steaming kettle between them.
‘Don’t spill any of it. These are Gaelean rugs, you know.’ She rolled her eyes at Shane and Selene. ‘We can’t have water splashing about.’
Shane felt certain the warning was for him as well. He inhaled deeply. The aroma of orange blossom and cloves
rose with the steam. The apprentices carried the kettle into the bathroom and poured the water into the large tub.

‘They’ll be back with one more. It’ll make a proper bath for both of you.’ She smiled at Shane, the expression transforming her face. ‘I’m Porsche, second apprentice to Annadusa’s circle. Let me know if you need anything else.’ She lifted one shoulder and pushed her dark hair back from her eyes.

‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘I will.’

Porsche let her finger play across her lips and left.

‘It’s not too hard to work out what she’s offering,’ Selene said.

‘What’s that?’

‘She was all but drooling over you.’

‘Are you sure it wasn’t for you?’ he asked, continuing to massage her feet.

Selene froze for a moment before chuckling. ‘Both of us?’ She covered her mouth. ‘There’s a thought.’

Shane leaned forward, letting her feet slide from his lap. He took her hand away from her mouth and pulled her near, kissing her before she could protest. Her eyes went wide at first, and then she responded, kissing him back.

‘Shall we get in the tub while the water’s hot?’ he asked. He stood and offered her his hand. This time it was Selene who wrapped him in an embrace, sending fire up his spine. ‘I could use a good wash,’ she whispered. ‘It’s been a while.’

Jarrod stared into the Caller’s eyes. They were like emeralds in the afternoon light, striking against the violet pillows propped about her. The look she gave him was intense, almost too much, and he let his focus wander, past the double doors behind her. They were thrown open to a lush courtyard filled with climbing vines and flowering shrubs. Noisy miner birds dotted the branches, piping an urgent *phew phew phew* almost to distraction. Two ginger tabby cats sat near a central pond, the source of the birds’ distress, though the felines were hardly on the prowl. The cats seemed more interested in the splash of water from the fountain than the zealous birds that were clinging to the overhead vines, hanging upside down, tilting their heads this way and that while shrieking impetuous warnings.

He sighed and returned his attention to the Caller. ‘You still haven’t answered me,’ he said, watching her pupils dilate.

They had been conversing for the better part of an hour and he still wasn’t convinced she was telling the truth. There was something peculiar about her thought process and her mind shield. Strange, yet familiar.

‘That’s because I don’t think much of your question, Jarrod. Who cares why Rosette couldn’t get through the portal to Tensar? It’s done, over. Let’s move on.’

‘Not quite done and over, actually. There’s significance there. I certainly don’t want her to return here if she’s still at risk.’

‘Why would she need to return? You’ve convinced me the problem’s solved.’

He leaned back, allowing one of the ginger cats to jump into his lap. He scratched under its chin. Orange cat hairs floated to the ground like autumn leaves. ‘That’s what it seems like to you,’ he said when the cat leapt down.

‘But are you taking into account the many-worlds, or your choices in them?’

She clicked her tongue. ‘I’m having plenty enough to do with one world, one set of choices.’

‘That’s a single card. I’m looking at the entire deck.’

‘Are you certain?’

Jarrod rubbed his forehead. He wasn’t getting anywhere with the woman and he needed the information now, before he saw Rosette, before she made another choice. He decided to try a new tactic. ‘If you have anything to add, I’d be grateful.’

She shrugged. ‘I can’t add anything until you tell me where my two are. Selene and the bard? Seen them lately? She’s my first marshal, you know.’ The Caller punched a pillow a few times and leaned back into it. ‘I let you two go gallivanting through the portals on the proviso that you brought her back. Remember?’

‘They’ll both be on their way here soon.’ He blinked. ‘Any moment, really.’

‘And did her little plan work?’

‘I think it was his plan all along, Caller.’

She shook her head, then leaned over to top up his teacup from a blue ceramic pot. The room filled with the scent of rosehip and mint. ‘You’re grumpy today, aren’t you?’ she said.

‘You’d be perturbed in my shoes, I promise.’

She took a sip from her cup, a smile appearing from behind it. ‘Perhaps.’ She got up and closed the doors, blocking out the chirping birds and the splash of the fountain. The ginger cat followed her, and she scooped it up like a child, cradling it in her arms. ‘I don’t know for certain why Rosette was trapped in that time loop, but I suspect…’ Her voice trailed off and her smile deepened as she sat down.
‘You suspect?’
‘Well it’s obvious, isn’t it? What’s the one thing not possible on this world?’
Jarrod felt his face flush as the answer dawned. ‘She was pregnant?’
‘Still would be, I imagine, unless she’s left a child behind somewhere. But let’s not test it by bringing her here again. It’s taken me a month to fix that anomaly. I don’t want it starting back up again.’
‘You fixed it?’
She winked.
His quantum mind raced through an infinite number of possibilities, infinite choices. He looked back at her, frowning. ‘You met with Nell?’ he asked.
‘Who?’
‘A High Priestess of the Dumarkian Woods.’
‘Ishtar’s lion?’ she asked, scratching the cat’s back.
‘So you do know her.’
‘We had a visit.’
A new game? he wondered.
‘She came to me with her little “problem”, which I didn’t see as a problem at all. “Just kill the man,” I told her, but she kept saying it was more complex than that. Muttering on about a balance of power within the temples and the furthering of knowledge for all people, men and women equally. Well, of course. That’s a given. But the man was an interference, so I suggested she remove him the old-fashioned way—with a knife.’ The Caller shook her head, tapping the cat’s nose when it nipped at her hand. ‘It’s only as complex as you want to make it, really. Matriarchy-patriarchy. Much of a muchness if you focus on the opposites.’
‘Perhaps easy to say from your position?’
The Caller laughed. ‘Don’t be fooled by gender.’
Jarrod looked at her again, his brow furrowed. ‘I’m not generally fooled by anything.’
‘Then get on with it.’ She clapped her hands. ‘I want Selene back here, and I want to see for myself that this world and her sister dimension are running in a balanced way again. I want to see births and deaths and births again, preferably in that order.’
‘People are dying now, I assure you.’ He drained his cup and stooped up.
‘Nell paid the price?’
‘In that world, yes.’
The Caller leaned back against the cushions. ‘Full of riddles as ever, Jarrod?’
‘No more than you.’
A breeze came in from the west. The chimes clattered like long-legged puppets unable to run fast enough.
‘Where are you off to next?’ she asked.
He lifted his eyes. ‘Now that would be telling.’
‘Touché—but come, you can give me a hint.’
He looked at her before moving to the door. ‘A hint? Watch for the birth closest to home. She will have something to teach you.’ Jarrod noted the look on the Caller’s face, and smiled as he disappeared into the golden afternoon.

Rosette awoke to sunlight beaming across her bed and Drayco’s soft snores by her side. At first she thought she was still floating disembodied, but as she became aware, she felt the weight. It took a moment to work out why everything was so thick and heavy. She stretched, groaning.
Maudi?
I’m in my body, Drayco, and it’s like climbing a mountain after floating downstream. Stretch again, Maudi. It’s the best way to wake up.
She took his advice and stretched like a cat, while listening to the whispers floating in from the other room. They were too soft for her to distinguish the words, but she didn’t care. She was back in her body, and though she had some creaks and cramps and very sore ribs, it felt good. Drayco stretched by her side, the warmth of his back like a full-length pillow along her spine. She sank her hand into his thick pelt and he purred.
Feeling better now, Maudi?
She rolled over and wiggled her fingers and toes. ‘Much. Where’s Jarrod?’
Drayco jumped down and yawned, arching his back. Sleeping…deeply.
‘Don’t wake him, then. We’ll talk soon enough.’
I doubt I could if I tried. It’s like he’s not there.
She reached towards the ceiling, spreading her fingers wide. ‘Well, I’m here. Gratefully.’ She let her hands drop to her sides. ‘What are they nattering about out there?’

A variety of things. Drayco licked his front paw and swiped his ears a few times.

‘Such as?’

He tilted his head. The future of Temple Los Loma seems high on the list. Jarrod and you…the Lupins. They don’t mention me.

‘Don’t they?’ She laughed. ‘Does that sting?’

He dropped his face to hers and stared, eye to eye. Suddenly, he licked her nose, making her squeak. Bees sting, Maudi. Inclusion or exclusion doesn’t have the same effect.

‘You’re such a philosopher.’

I got that from you.

She rolled onto her stomach and pulled the covers over her head. ‘Not today,’ she said, laughing into the pillow.

And why is that?

She rolled over again and looked out the window. ‘Because today I’m back in my body, the sun is shining, you are here, and I suspect there is some good hunting in these plains.’

You’re optimistic. It’s a desert.

‘Yes! And I’m hungry too!’ She threw back the covers and looked at her naked body. She ran her hand down her left arm, caressing her temple cat tattoo, and followed the line of the serpent from her hip to the back of her knee, noticing the nick. ‘Where’s Grayson?’

He comes. He’s bringing food for both of us. Good man.

The knock on the door made her smile. ‘Enter all ye who bear my breakfast.’

‘Does lunch count?’ he asked, opening the door and looking in.

She glanced out the window again and noted the sun’s height in the sky. ‘You’ll have to forgive me if I’ve overslept.’

He chuckled. ‘You’ve been asleep far too long—like a fairytale princess.’

‘What kind of princess?’

‘Rosette,’ he chided, setting the tray down on a low table and pulling her into an embrace. ‘We must expand your literary knowledge.’

She hugged him tightly before squirming away. ‘Certainly, but first I must eat. What have you brought?’

I’d say the raw lamb shank is mine. Drayco licked his chops.

Rosette pulled a sarong off the bed and wrapped it around her body, twisting the ends and tying them at the nape of her neck. She dropped her chin to let her hair fall in front of her, then gathered it and twisted it into a knot on top of her head as she straightened. Grayson handed her a chopstick and, kissing his cheek, she secured her hair with it. ‘I’m ready.’ She leaned towards the tray, inhaling. ‘Show me the goods.’

He lifted the lid. There was a tiny bowl of steaming oats, a little jug of goat milk, honey and an even tinier dollop of stewed apples and rhubarb.

‘You must think I’m an infant. I could eat three times this much.’

‘That’s what Kali feared, hence the modest meal.’

He sat next to her and circled her waist with one arm. ‘Your body’s been in cold storage, remember? You need to take it easy.’

‘How could I forget?’

He kissed her lips. ‘Drink this first,’ he said, uncovering a small bottle of dark liquid.

She wrinkled her nose and pulled back.

‘It’ll aid digestion. Otherwise…’

‘Don’t tell me any symptoms. You know what I’m like! Hear it today; have it tomorrow.’

He laughed. ‘Then drink this and all will be well.’

She took the bottle from him and drained it in one go. Her face contorted. ‘What was in that?’ She shook her head. ‘It’s vile.’

‘It’s Annadusa’s.’

‘Tastes like it.’ She took a spoonful of porridge.

‘Better?’ he asked.

‘Delicious,’ she said around another steaming mouthful.

They chatted lightly for some time. She felt reluctant to talk about anything but the most trivial. No doubt there would be deep discussions soon enough. For now, she wanted to enjoy the day without any complexities. She wanted only peace and serenity.
That won’t last, Maudi.
Why do you say that?
A trio of caws blasted through her open window. The branch outside swayed as the ravens landed, jostling for position, rustling their wings. They stared into the room, alternately squawking and preening, white down showing beneath black feathers.

Because the Three Sisters are here.
Rosette put down her spoon. ‘Kali!’ she yelled, making Grayson lean back. ‘Call off your spies.’ She laughed as the Three Sisters took flight. ‘Come in here and see for yourself if you want to know how I am.’ She smiled at the look on her mother’s face as she entered the room.

‘Nothing wrong with a little precaution,’ Kali said. She sat down on the bed next to Rosette and took her pulse. Rosette pulled her hand away and reached for the stewed fruit, tipping it onto the oats before she took another mouthful. ‘I could eat three times this amount.’ She smiled. ‘The apples are very sweet,’ she added as juice trickled down her chin.

‘Thanks to you,’ Grayson said.
‘What do you mean?’
‘Temple Los Loma has the only Gaelean apples on Earth.’
Rosette lifted her face. ‘Demons. Those apples are my trees, aren’t they? How long have I been gone?’
Jarrod awoke to dazzling sunlight. It beamed into his room, filtering through a stained-glass window above his bed. It decorated the walls and floor with half-moon shapes and stars, making cookie-cutter patterns of purple, yellow, red and green. The lower portion of the window was open, giving a clear view of the stables rooftop and the rust-red plains beyond. He stretched, his tulpa body protesting.

He tapped around the orbits of his eyes and under his nose, his chin, his chest, his fingertips stimulating energy meridians to repair the disrupted flow. Kreshkali had come to him again, late in the night, and done more work herself, leaving only minor adjustments to attend to. She’d told him to stay put for at least a day, that there was plenty of time to sort out the threads of their web, though he had already ignored that advice. ‘You know patience wasn’t written into my original program,’ he had said to her.

She’d smiled. ‘I suspect Janis Richter had Aries in mind when she designed you. I wonder who she modelled you after.’

‘A friend of her daughter’s. His name was Damien.’

‘Ruby’s?’

‘Not her. The older daughter, Loni. But can you blame Janis for using the first cardinal sign of the zodiac as reference? She knew I’d need all the initiative I could muster. And courage.’

‘And the spirit of adventure, too. No blame at all.’ She’d put her hand on his heart. ‘Jarrod, do consider that your body just took three million volts per metre of electrical current from the anvi-to-ground lightning strike. Even a tulpa would find that challenging. You might want to have a little rest.’

He’d rubbed his chest. ‘I haven’t forgotten. That was some conjuring, wasn’t it!’

Kreshkali was clearly pleased with it herself, and with all the Temple Los Loma clan. Reviving Rosette had been no small feat. Now it was time to set things in motion for a much more humble act, but miraculous just the same. He needed to ensure his continuation, and he needed Rosette’s cooperation for that. According to the Caller’s theory, he already had it, though he didn’t think Rosette knew. How would she react? The topic had never come up, though he’d tried to broach it a few times.

Jarrod yawned and stretched as he kicked back the covers. When his toes touched the floor, a feeling of warmth rose in him—a rush of wellbeing. He rubbed the stubble on his chin and laughed. At the window he gazed down to the courtyard, spotting Teg near the fountain. The Lupin looked contemplative, one hand playing in the water, slowly swishing back and forth. The young apprentice shivered and turned to Jarrod.

‘Have you seen her?’ Teg asked.

The mental message surprised Jarrod. He wasn’t expecting that. Rosette? No, not yet. You?

‘I thought I’d stay out of the way. Kreshkali’s with her now.’

‘Claustrophobic?’

‘A bit.’

Jarrod laughed. ‘If I know Rosette, she’ll be feeling the same, and aching to hunt before the day’s out. Perhaps you’ll join us?’

Perhaps. Thank you. Teg shook water from his hand and headed towards the training ground. It would be interesting to see what developed there. Rosette was so unpredictable.

Jarrod’s eyes drifted across the scene below. He marvelled at the lush greenery of the temple grounds. The contrast to the barren red plains was startling. Here the trees were in full bloom, carpeting the courtyard with purple, yellow and red blossoms and giving the atmosphere a rainbow hue. Willows and beech trees circled the manor, and a variety of fruit trees in the orchards beyond were also in bloom. How it had survived the trials of Earth’s last few centuries baffled him—a spell that lasted that long would take some heavy-duty generation. Who kept it going? Surely not the Richter-Paree line. Kali didn’t even know where this place was. It took her months to find it. Yet it had survived, and now it held a mixed population of the old Allied States, Gaeleans, Lupins and a variety of familiars and horses, goats and other livestock, birds, dogs, cats and fish. He wondered what Luka Paree would have made of it all, if he could see it now.

The grounds were active with gardeners tending the vegetable, fruit and herb plots. Horses were being exercised and riding lessons under way. A small group of archers practised at the edge of the sword grounds, several artists sketching them as they slowly drew and released their bows. It was much like Treeon, save for the surrounding lands. They were a barren moonscape compared to most of Gaela. He sighed. Would they have enough
time to establish this temple, if the portals kept running askew?

He laughed at his question. Time wasn’t a commodity to have enough or not enough of. It didn’t measure in
volume, not in grains of sand or celestial motion. It didn’t exist at all outside of an abstract, and peculiarly
individual, perception. Why he still processed information from such an artificial reference point, he didn’t know.
Because it’s so convincing? he asked himself. That might be it.

He dressed and entered the central room, spotting signs of a hasty breakfast.

‘Everyone rested?’ he called out. ‘Well fed?’ He felt immediately that the place was deserted, but he called
again anyway. ‘Shane? Selene?’

Their cloaks were missing, their packs and swords gone as well. I had hoped for a final word. He turned to the
door. ‘Enter, Kreshkali.’

She knocked at the same time he spoke. ‘Did I make that much noise coming up the stairs?’ she asked as she
opened the door wide.

‘You’re as quiet as a cat. I just happen to have exceptional hearing, as you know.’

‘Ha! I do know.’ She kissed him on the cheek and breezed into the room, a tray of fruit, hot chai and blueberry
muffins balanced in one hand.

‘What’s this?’ he asked.

‘I brought myself breakfast, though you’re welcome to join me. I know you like to eat sometimes.’

‘I wouldn’t mind a bite.’

‘That’s news,’ she said, looking him up and down. ‘Maybe the electricity did you some good.’

‘One never can get enough of that.’

‘Electricity?’

He laughed. ‘I meant good. How’s Rosette?’

Kreshkali chuckled, sweeping the empty cups and bowls aside to make room for her tray. ‘Fit and saucy as
ever. It’s as if she never died.’

‘More good news, then.’ He beamed a smile.

‘You’re in fine form today yourself.’ She poured tea and sampled the hot muffins. ‘Rested? Refreshed?’

He sat opposite her and took a tentative sip from his mug. ‘Nearly perfect. Thank you for the tapping last night.
It got me back in alignment.’

‘It helped me too. Always does.’ She looked around the room.

‘They’re on their way back to Tensar, I suspect,’ he said, answering her silent question.

‘On their own?’ She frowned. ‘That’s a risk. It’s just such travellers that are distorting the Entities’ signal. I
wish I’d kept an eye on them.’

‘You had other things on your mind.’

‘As did you.’

‘At least their intentions would be united. That may keep them on track.’

‘I’m actually more concerned about the long-term effect on the portals than their smooth travel.’ She took
another bite. ‘So they finally kissed and made up?’

He nodded. ‘Seems so.’

‘And did you solve things on Tensar as well?’ she asked.

His eyes shifted.

‘Don’t play coy with me. I know you didn’t stay put last night.’

Jarrod hedged. ‘It’s more or less unravelled. The Caller is a trickster, though. She enjoys her little games.’

Kreshkali frowned. ‘Example?’

‘Mostly she plays with words.’

‘You mean she lies?’

‘Pretty much.’

‘That’s frustrating, though you would see right through them, yes?’

‘I’d like to think so.’

‘Then do!’ She watched him as she polished an apple on her sleeve. ‘I can’t stay long.’ She lowered her voice
and looked towards the open window. ‘Teg’s waiting for me.’

‘He’s by the fountain,’ Jarrod said.

‘We have three pressing concerns as I see them. Number one—the corridors are not running true.
Do you have any idea why?’

He closed his eyes for an instant. ‘I’d say the most likely cause is what you felt—travellers going in and out of
the corridors who are not aligned to the Entity.’

‘Trackers?’
‘That’s one possibility.’
‘Letting Shane and Selene go was a mistake then.’ She frowned. ‘Secondly, we have the situation with your
CPU. It’s the one thing that won’t replace itself.’
‘Have you thought of your option to have another…?’ He let the sentence trail off.
‘Another child?’ Kali’s face contorted. ‘Not going to happen. Besides, the spell’s passed on. Rosette has the
activated DNA.’
‘But have you mentioned that component of the legacy to her yet?’
‘I was hoping Nell would do that.’
‘What are you saying, Kali? You are Nell, for great Passillo’s sake. What do you think Nell could say that you
could not?’
‘I know. I know.’ She waved the idea away. ‘I am Nell, but I’m not. It’s hard to explain. Once you begin this
whole “two places at once” scenario, things change. Nell’s got a better way with…delicate matters.’
‘It is delicate, isn’t it?’
‘Indeed.’ She tilted her head. ‘It would probably be best coming from you, now that I think about it.’
Jarrod laughed. ‘Chicken.’
‘I’ll admit it. I am.’
He took her hand and squeezed it. ‘It’s my life in her blood. Of course I’ll tell her.’
‘And the third concern is…’
‘An’ Lawrence?’
The smile on Kali’s face disappeared. ‘He’s nowhere to be found.’
Jarrod put his arm around her shoulder and held her tight. ‘Then we’ll have to look beyond nowhere.’
She leaned her head on his shoulder and murmured, ‘That we will, and soon.’

Shane looked out of the portal, taking in the scene. He scratched his head and turned to Selene. ‘Beautiful, we might
have a problem.’
She came to the edge of the crevice and linked her arm around his waist. ‘What’s the worry?’ She sniffed the
air. ‘It’s as putrid as ever. We’re home!’ She put her hand over her nose.
‘That’s the problem,’ Shane said. ‘The portal entrance to the swamp was gone when we left.’
‘It’s hardly gone, Shane. We’re standing in front of it.’
‘But the mountain caved in. The portal was destroyed.’
‘When you and Rosette were here?’ Her eyes narrowed.
‘It was a time loop—a repeating sequence of events.’
‘I know what a time loop is and I’ve heard the story before.’
He shrugged. Somehow Rosette was still a sore spot, though he couldn’t work out why. Every time he broached
the subject, she flared up. He had decided to leave it a mystery and move on. They were having a wonderful time at
the moment and he wanted to enjoy it. Getting caught in the past wasn’t going to help.
‘So what do we do, if this isn’t “supposed” to be here?’ she asked. She sounded as if she already knew the next
step and didn’t care for it at all.
‘Let’s explore. If we’re trapped in a loop, I know the way out. We’ve nothing to lose.’
‘That’s a new attitude,’ she said.
He wrapped her in his arms and kissed her, his hands resting on the small of her back. ‘I’m not so stuck in a
bog as you think, gorgeous one.’ As if to reinforce his words, he straightened and released her from his hold. With
his hand on the hilt of his sword, he led the way out of the portal, Selene at his side.
‘Don’t speak too soon about bogs,’ she said. ‘We have that one to navigate.’
He half expected an earthquake to rumble beneath his feet as he headed down the tunnel towards the light, but
nothing happened. The swamp and its noisome odours were like a still-life painting in the distance. They made their
way to the cliff face, Shane looking over his shoulder as they went.
Nothing moved. Not a bird or a breath of wind. The sun, at its zenith, was obscured by clouds. The trees were
grey with dull leaves and twisted trunks, patches of lichen growing over their thick bark. The mud was black, the
surface slick. It must have rained recently.
They stood on the ledge, the very outcropping where he and Rosette had spent so much time. His heart tugged
at the thought and his mouth turned down at the corners. Was she all right? Recovering? Perhaps they should have
seen her before they left. He’d wanted to, but hadn’t pressed the point.
‘You’re doing it again,’ Selene said.
‘Doing what?’
‘You’re thinking about her.’
‘Who?’
‘Don’t be daft. You’re obsessed with Rosette. Admit it.’
‘I’m not thinking about her. I’m certainly not obsessed. I’m just wondering about…’
‘Her.’ Selene supplied the word when he hesitated. ‘It’s obvious. The more you deny it, the weaker your case.’
‘I’m on trial. Is that it?’
Selene ignored the question. She headed out into the swamp, testing its depth. He watched her pick a path around the darker pools, skirting the edges of the black pits. He followed. There was no point in trying to explain his connection to Rosette when Selene was like this. They needed a new topic, quickly. ‘Do you think we’ve been spotted?’ he asked.

A lone raven landed on a nearby branch, calling out before it took flight again, its wings whooshing overhead.
‘Perhaps we have now,’ she answered. ‘In any case, it looks like your time loop theory was wrong.’
His boots were squelching in the mud as he hurried to catch up to her. He nodded. ‘It’ll be interesting to see what time we are, though.’
She slowed her pace and turned to him. ‘You mean, we could be in the past?’
‘That, or even a completely different now.’
She shrugged. ‘Not too different.’ Her nose wrinkled. ‘Demon’s darkness, this place is rank.’

Jarrod knocked on the door. He knew he’d already been announced. Drayco had spoken to him as he’d climbed the stairs, searching for Rosette’s room. He’d left Kreshkali and Teg in the library. They were casting horary charts and checking the planetary transits, searching for clues to where An’ Lawrence might be found, or where in all the myriad realities they could look. He’d wanted good news to take Rosette—a destination at least. She would surely ask after him. So far, there was nothing positive to relay.

When he focused his quantum thoughts on the matter, he came up with so many waves of potential, so many seemingly random places the Sword Master might have reached, it was no help at all. It was very strange. It was almost as if An’ Lawrence was nowhere and everywhere all at once. He knocked again.

You don’t need to keep banging on my door, Jarrod. I heard you coming up the steps and down the hall.
Enter?
Rosette’s voice in his mind made him smile. ‘And I’ve heard you snoring into your pillow all morning,’ he answered back.
‘You have not!’ She swung the door open, and greeted him on the threshold, wrapping her arms around him and kissing him deeply.

As he held her body, he sensed for damage, scanning her DNA.
‘Hey, Dr Cossica,’ she whispered. ‘Stop probing. I’m fine.’
As she stepped aside, his eyes caught Grayson’s. He sighed and let his hands slip from Rosette’s waist.
‘How’re you feeling?’ He turned her left and right. ‘Good to be back in the old body?’
‘Not as old as yours,’ she laughed, pinching him.

Grayson got up from the couch and grabbed his pack. ‘I’ve got work,’ he said. He thrust his hands deep in his pockets and headed for the door.
Rosette reached for him but he slipped past. ‘I’ll come down to the stables and find you,’ she said, but he was gone.

Jarrod lifted his brow.
‘It’s always been a tricky one,’ she answered his silent query. ‘Seems more so now.’
He roughed the top of Drayco’s neck and sat on the couch, patting the space next to him. The temple cat leapt up, which made them both laugh.
‘I think he meant me, Drayco.’ She squeezed between her familiar and Jarrod, putting an arm around each.
‘How is it with him?’ Jarrod asked, after a few moments of silent communion.
‘With Grayson?’ She held her smile a moment longer before letting it fade. ‘We’re close, connected. You know that. But…’
He didn’t interrupt or push her thoughts along. He leaned his head back and waited, listening.
‘It works best when we are off on our own,’ she said.

Jarrod leaned across her to scratch Drayco. ‘Just the three of you?’
She laughed. ‘That’s part of it. The trickiness. I’m not a simple witch with a simple life. I have deep connections with others, my familiar, you…’ She nuzzled his neck and gave him a nip. ‘Lately I haven’t had a body.
That’s been a real damper on my affairs.’

He grinned at her. She was so beautiful. ‘No worse for it,’ he said, tracing the curve of her cheek.

She turned to face him square on. ‘Jarrod, I seem to have spent a great deal of time in, well, other times. The results are not conducive to a solid, predictable relationship with anyone. Grayson and I haven’t had a chance to discuss it, but I sense it might be too much for him.’

Jarrod took a deep breath. ‘Rosette, first of all, there’s no such thing as a simple witch and you would be bored as a toad on dry land if you had a “predictable” and…what was the other word you used?’

‘Solid.’

‘A predictable and solid relationship. That’s never been your “feel good”.’

‘You’re right, but it’s never stopped me from loving.’

‘Of course not. No reason for it to. The question is, will it stop you from having a child?’

Rosette stiffened. ‘What?’

That was subtle, Jarrod. The temple cat seemed to be chuckling as he spoke.

I don’t actually have a plan for this, he said to Drayco.

Pity. A bit of scripting would have been wise.

Rosette was up and pacing. He ignored her familiar and patted the seat again. ‘Sit with me. Let me explain what I meant.’

‘I’m fine.’ She stood in front of him, arms crossed. ‘What are you talking about reproduction for now?’

‘I tried to bring it up in Timbali, before we were called, but then it didn’t seem so urgent.’

‘Urgent?’

‘I’m just saying that we nearly lost you. We nearly lost the spell and…there’s no backup.’

She clamped her hands on her hips. ‘That’s what this is about? You need me to brood like a mare in a paddock to make sure your key-codes pass on?’

‘Not quite like a mare in a paddock.’ He caught her look. ‘I mean, nothing at all like a mare in a paddock!’

‘Like what, then? And with whom? Have you picked him out for me too? Demons, Jarrod!’ She looked around as if the walls held the answer.

‘Rosette, I haven’t picked anything out and I have no hidden motive. I’m not telling you what to do or what must be done. I’m only saying that in the past, the Richter line has naturally passed down the quantum key-codes in their DNA—without prompting, I might add.’

Without prompting? Smart tag, Jarrod. I’ll bet you wish they’d programmed you as any other sign but Aries right now. Perhaps the diplomacy of Libra? Or maybe the compassion and poetic subtlety of Pisces? You seem to possess neither.

Drayco, can you hold off on the commentary, please? I’m having enough trouble getting this out as it is.

I see that. The temple cat yawned.

Rosette’s face was turning red. ‘I’m not going to have some random child, Jarrod, just because you think it’s time to run a backup program for your operating determinants. Why would I want to set aside my training and my chance to take on an apprentice of my own now that I’ve actually made it to Temple Los Loma? I just got my body back, for flaming demons’ sake. I’m not turning it over to some little tyke for the next few decades. Not now. I’m not ready. Forget it.’ She started to pace again. Drayco’s tail lashed as she spoke. Jarrod realised his timing was terrible.

Perhaps it would have been good to ask Kreshkali to run a chart for the most opportune moment to broach this topic. Clearly this wasn’t it, Drayco said.

Clearly.

Rosette didn’t stop talking. ‘I’d love to know who you think I’m going to have this child with!’ She sucked in her breath. ‘Is that why you asked about Grayson? You think he’s the one? Have you examined his DNA? Are we well-matched lab rats?’

‘Lab rats?’

‘I’ve read the journals. I know how this all started, back when Luka Paree was dabbling with an extinct species and Janis Richter thought she could save the world with…with you!’ She stopped pacing and pointed her finger at him. ‘Experiments! Laboratory animals! Is that all I am to you?’

Drayco growled deep in his throat, or was that laughter? I’ve heard, Jarrod, that when people have something very important to say, they get a bard to help them write it out. Do you think that would have been a good idea? Even Clay, were he still alive, could have said all this much better.

Stop it, Drayco. I get that it’s not coming out the way I’d hoped.

I’m curious to see how you’ll extricate yourself. You’re in deep, deep…

I know!
Rosette’s arms were gesticulating wildly as she ranted on, firing one protest after the other. Jarrod got up, blocking her in her tracks. He grabbed her shoulders, and forced her to look at him. ‘Do you think that Nell put her life on hold to have you?’ He cringed. It wasn’t what he’d meant to say.

*Going deeper with that line of thought, Jarrod. She’s still wrestling abandonment issues. Did you forget?*

Rosette flushed. ‘What? Nell put her life on hold for me? Hardly. She gave me up to Bethsay, remember? She didn’t even know where you were, but she passed the spell along anyway.’ Her eyes were fierce. ‘Why don’t you ask her to have another daughter? I’ll gladly hand the spell to my little sister when she comes of age. You could time the birth for a more convivial moon sign. Ceres perhaps? Maybe that’ll make her clucky.’ Rosette spun away from him. She grabbed the door and, balancing on one foot, stomped into her boots. ‘Where’s my sword?’

Jarrod looked around, speechless.

‘Never mind.’ She snapped out the words. ‘An’ Lawrence will have it. Is he on the training grounds?’

He coughed.

‘Oh, great. So he’s still not here? Demons with him. Demons with you all.’ She spun back, her face crimson, fists in the air, poised to strike.

He raised his hands. ‘Tio, Rosette. Tio. I don’t want to fight.’

‘Really? Then why’d you bring this up?’ She turned and stormed out, Drayco bounding after her.

*Rosette says to…*

*I hear what she says, Drayco. Thank you.*

He sank to the couch, rubbing his face in his hands. He thought of going after her, but changed his mind. She needed time to get used to the idea. It would work out. It always had.

There was a tap at the door. Kreshkali looked in, and gave him a soft smile. ‘Everything all right?’ she asked, one eyebrow raised. ‘I heard a commotion.’

‘It could have been worse,’ he said. ‘Her sword wasn’t here, thank the goddess.’

‘She didn’t take the news well?’

Jarrod shrugged. ‘I haven’t exactly told her yet.’

‘About An’ Lawrence or the pregnancy?’

‘Neither.’

‘The portals?’

He shook his head.

‘What did you say?’

‘All the wrong things. It’s never been an issue before. I was on unfamiliar territory.’

She patted his arm. ‘Her mind shield is up, Jarrod. Do you know where she’s headed?’

‘Out of the manor at a run.’

‘I’ll send Teg. Time they met properly anyway. It’ll be all right.’ Kreshkali closed her eyes for a moment.

‘Come.’ She extended her hand. ‘It’ll sort out. She’s not the first young witch to have a child she wasn’t expecting.’

He nodded. ‘Let’s just make sure she’s not the last.’
Everett stepped off the chopper, wind tearing at his clothes, the whirl of the blades deafening. He stooped, running hunched until clear of the landing pad, his pack bouncing against his back, his baggage nearly slipping from his grip. As he reached the abandoned building, the chopper took off and disappeared into the clouds. There was no wave of farewell. He hadn’t expected one.

Everett took in the surroundings. His eyes welled up, blurring the vista like a watercolour left in the rain. Oh such colours! He struggled between the rush of emotion and the desire for clear vision. The sun was shining a brilliant yellow, the horizon blue—something he’d only seen in computer simulations and digital imagery. Puffs of white clouds were strewn overhead and there were birds—real ones—flying in the distance.

It was beautiful beyond his wildest imagination—the sky, the clouds, the mountain peaks, the birds. There were trees too, healthy ones of different shapes and shades of green ranging from almost yellow to a teal blue. Tall varieties with smooth bark and long leaves were clustered around the building, shading it from the sun like guardians. The building itself was double-storey, the corrugated iron rust-red with age. A sign hung sideways from a large wooden beam, one of its chains snapped. It squeaked in the breeze, swinging on its single support. He tilted his head to read the words ‘Flight Centre’.

According to the archives, this had been a heavily trafficked air transport complex before the ‘conflict’. He laughed at the euphemism. ‘Holocaust’ would be a more accurate description for what had happened in his world, but ASSIST was big on prevarication. Whatever it had been, this Flight Centre now marked the edge of the Borderlands—a place with horrors of its own, supposedly. At least it existed, and was not a fabrication of ASSIST.

He took a deep breath. If this was the gnashing hell he had been led to believe, he welcomed it. It looked more like paradise to him. He turned full circle, arms outstretched, taking it in. A mountain filled his view. It was jagged and snow-capped. Majestic. His eyes welled again.

Insects of some kind chanted in the midday heat. He brushed one from his face and laughed. He couldn’t believe such luxuriance of nature existed only a few hours’ flight from the city. Why hadn’t he come here sooner? He’d had all the status and credits he needed, but, like his colleagues, he’d been led to believe the world was wretched beyond the protection of the sector walls. Not until the recent death of his Jane Doe did he start to wonder, to research for himself what was ‘out there’. Standing in the abandoned airstrip and seeing where she must have come from, he began to understand her better.

Everett had uncovered an underground contact while searching the history of the Borderlands. The contact was eager and the requirements clear. He had a way into this new world, this strange culture that had sidestepped the regimented and endless life offered by the Allied States One. He exhaled. They were to meet him here. He only had to wait.

As the heat brought perspiration to his forehead, he heard their voices. They were unmistakably human, and unmistakably happy. The conversations and laughter rode the breeze. In the distance several people were walking up the road, heading straight for him. This was it. First contact.

He waved, the other hand going to his pocket, automatically checking for the tiny cryo case. It was there, safely zipped into the lining of his jacket. He wouldn’t rush, he told himself. He’d do what he came here for—establish the in vitro fertility program for those who wanted to conceive, and somewhere along the line he’d find the perfect host for his project, none the wiser. But he would know, and eventually he would discover the secrets of the egg he’d harvested—a DNA combination that had left him awestruck. Jane Doe’s child would have answers to questions he’d not even considered. He was sure of it. ‘Hello.’ He projected his voice, searching their faces.

Everett knew he was about to make a deadly deal, and so did these people. They had been sterilised for a reason—ASSIST’s internal protection protocol—and if he were discovered reversing that process, his life would be suspended. Why he’d been compelled to turn his back on ASSIST—the safety, predictability and longevity they provided—to offer medical aid to the Borderlands shocked him at first until he acknowledged his feelings. It was simply a sense of hope. As he looked around, he knew that his hope had been answered—paradise on Earth. These people never had to know what else he would get in return.

He patted the case and put both hands in the air, waving his enthusiasm as well as his lack of weapons, just in case. ‘I’m Everett Kelly,’ he said, extending his hand to the woman who greeted him. ‘Dr Everett Kelly.’

‘Regina De Luth,’ she said and introduced the half-dozen adults accompanying her.

They were all dressed in brightly coloured fabric with much of their skin exposed. Their necks were draped
with decorations of blue and white stones, smaller versions hanging from hooks in their ears. They were a tattooed people, as he suspected, though none of the designs he saw in this group remotely resembled the images on...he scratched his head, trying to remember something. It seemed like it was important, but it slipped away before he could grasp it. They were nothing like Jane Doe’s.

‘Are you all right, doctor?’ Regina asked.

He wiped his brow.

‘The climate takes some getting used to,’ she said.

He shook his head. ‘I’m fine. Just not expecting the heat.’

She smiled. ‘You’ll learn to appreciate it.’

They picked up his bags and guided him back the way they’d come, over a rise and down a track that led into a moist, windless jungle. Every aspect of this land was like an alien world to Everett. The scents in the air alone astounded him. They tantalised him with their contrast to the accustomed odours of tarmac, smoke and chemicals. The richness that assailed his nostrils was unrecognisable, but he revelled in it anyway. He couldn’t imagine what the food would taste like in such a place. He took off his jacket, carefully folding it over his arm. ‘How far away is it?’

‘Our home?’ Regina smiled. ‘Not far.’

The village was nestled in a sheltered valley a few hours’ hike from the abandoned airstrip. By the time they arrived, he was so disoriented he couldn’t have said which direction they’d gone.

They crossed a high arched bridge, traversing a gorge with rushing water far below. After spending over a century in a single apartment building and the skyscraper hospital complex, this experience was like a rebirth. It didn’t matter that he couldn’t find his way out. He never wanted to go back.

Regina showed him to a cottage adjacent to a large open-air building she called the healing centre. It was comfortable, organic, with breezeways and a high-beamed ceiling.

‘Are you ready to get started?’ she asked. ‘Or do you need to rest?’

A line was forming outside the clinic. All women. All in their prime. How could that be?

‘Where is your...what do you call him?’

Regina laughed, the sound like sweet wind chimes. ‘Are you asking for our shaman?’

‘Shaman, yes. Where is he?’

She laughed again. ‘I am she.’

‘I didn’t know,’ he said. He made a show of gathering items from several bags to pack in his kit. He included the cryo-pac from his jacket as well.

‘No reason why you would.’

He felt his palms sweating and he rubbed them together.

‘I was hoping you would begin with me,’ she said. ‘That way I can lead the others.’

He nodded. She was perfect. Strong, tall, healthy. Her face was full of joy and enthusiasm. She even looked like Jane Doe, with high cheekbones and brown eyes. ‘I’ll need to set up.’

‘Of course.’ Her smile was genuine, like a caress. ‘We’re very grateful you’re here, Dr Kelly,’ she said, watching him sort through his packs. ‘There hasn’t been a child born in over fifty years.’

He stared at her, his eyes narrowing. ‘How old are you?’

‘How young am I? Seventy-three.’

He frowned. He would have guessed an unassisted thirty-five at the most. She would have had no access to longevity treatments, transplants or cosmetic work. It didn’t make sense, but it had to be true. The sterilisation protocol was enacted sixty-five years ago.

‘How?’

‘That’s why you’re here, isn’t it? To learn the ways of the shaman? Our exchange?’

‘You prolong life without technology?’

‘Is that so bewildering to you?’

‘It is.’ He frowned.

‘We’ll make it familiar, then. Come. This way.’ She reached for his hand and led him to the healing centre. The afternoon light warmed his face. He paused, squinting towards the sun. ‘That’s west?’ he asked, pointing towards the light.

‘East.’ She corrected him as a parent might a small child.

He twisted around behind him, his mouth slightly open. ‘East?’

‘Yes. Come this way.’

He was about to say more, but let the matter go. There would be plenty of time to solve that riddle. It had to be a problem of language anyway, and not one of cosmology. That’s the only explanation. The words have been
reversed, he thought.

If you’d like to think so, Everett.

Chills rushed through his limbs as he heard Regina’s voice in his head. He looked at her face, but she only smiled and urged him on.
Rosette stormed from the apartments, pounding down the stairs, her boots sounding like drums reverberating through the wall to clear the path for her, tea trays tipping and saucers clattering. *Shall we explore the surrounds, Maudi? Get some fresh air?* ‘Demons couldn’t get me there fast enough!’ She quickened her pace when she hit the ground floor. ‘I want to be as far away from here as possible, Drayco. Lead the way!’

He trotted ahead of her, tail lashing. *And we are running from…?* ‘Everyone! Everything!’

That’s inclusive.

‘Indeed!’ She knew her reaction was extreme even as she allowed the emotions to erupt. She was a volcano spewing lava, burning everything in her wake. She couldn’t hold back, didn’t want to try. It felt good to explode. Let them burn if they couldn’t move quickly enough.

As she passed the fountain, she broke into a run, screaming a war cry when pain shot through her ribs. What had happened there? She startled several apprentices who were sitting on the edge of the pool. The look on their faces made her chuckle, even in the midst of her aggravation.

*I'm having a tantrum, Drayco.*

*I'm glad you can see it so honestly.* She winced and screamed again. *What in the demon’s pit happened to my ribs? I think that was Everett’s doing. Cracked them trying to revive you. It’ll come good.*

She ran out into the red desert plains, her body exulting in the physical exertion in spite of the ache in her chest. She wove a healing spell and the pain eased, reminding her how much she appreciated her body—and how much it had been through. When the sprint left her panting, she settled into a steady jog, Drayco loping beside her. The fire in her mind tempered and she began to reflect. ‘I didn’t see that coming.’

*Nor I. What provoked you, Maudi?* ‘You mean, what provoked me the most?’ That’s a start.

She thought about it. What was the huge provocation? It wasn’t like Jarrod suggested she had to conceive this minute, and she’d known all this year that the secret to his existence, the assurance of his continuation, lay in the spell she carried in her DNA. She just hadn’t put together what that meant for her. At some point the spell had to be passed on, and of course he would have been upset by her brush with death.

*Brush, Maudi?* Drayco was right. She’d been clinically dead for some time, no denying it. Jarrod would have been shaken. On one level, he was deeply in love with her, and on the other, he had his own survival instincts to deal with—if ‘instinct’ was the right word. In any case, she felt the tension in her shoulders ease. It wasn’t like she’d never thought about having a child in the future—a distant future.

When she and Grayson were in the islands of Rahana Iti, she’d briefly fantasised about having one with him. He’d be a great parent, with his sun in the nurturing sign of the Cobra, or Cancer as they called it here on Earth. He’d be protective, intuitive, giving. He might be open to it, at least he’d seemed like it before she’d died. What was she so afraid of?

She slowed her pace, feeling more fire drain from her body. Maybe she should go back and find him, take him with her for the hunt. They hadn’t talked and she felt like they needed to. ‘Do you know where he is, Drayco?’

*In the workshop near the stables.* ‘Alone?’

*Students are there, chatting, watching him draw…* ‘Forget it. Let’s go.’

*You used to like being with people.* ‘I know, Dray, but I’ve been separate now for so long.’

*Kali says it will take time to adjust.* Rosette quickened her pace, fire burning in her eyes again. ‘Is everyone talking about me?’

*Pretty much. Do you want to run? Kali says it’ll be good for you.* ‘Blow what Kreshkali says. I’ll make that choice myself.’ Rosette felt much like she had on her first day at
Treeon—lost in a strange place, overwhelmed by the unfamiliarity. Only this time there was no An’ Lawrence coming to give her a lift. She didn’t even know where her father was. She ran harder.

_The Lupin comes_, Drayco warned her. _He offers to guide us._

‘Why would he?’ she said between gasps for air.

_A few reasons. Mostly he wants to get away from something too._

‘You’re talking to Lupins now?’ She slowed her pace.

_He’s talking to me. He has a nice voice._

She looked over her shoulder and spotted the young man running towards them. He was handsome, vibrant, his aura a mix of light and shade. Intriguing. ‘He’s Kali’s new apprentice, isn’t he?’

_We saw him in the sewers under Half Moon Bay._ Drayco stopped by her side and she rested one hand on his warm pelt; the other braced her ribs.

‘What’s he running from?’ she panted.

_Kreshkali._

Rosette laughed aloud. ‘Perfect! Just the company I’m after.’ She smiled as he approached. ‘You’re the new apprentice?’ She greeted the Lupin with an outstretched palm.

‘Aye. Call me Teg,’ he said, matching her gesture.

‘Can you get us out of here?’

He cocked his head to the side and winked. ‘This way.’

She set off at a jog to match his, feeling the warmth of the sun on her shoulders and the wind in her hair. _This is good, Dray._

_That it is. Let’s run!_ 

The sun was moving westward when they stopped to rest, the intense heat of the afternoon making the land feel like a cast-iron pot boiled dry. They lounged under a leafless tree, sharing Teg’s waterskin. Rosette closed her eyes and sighed. ‘I’m glad you’re here,’ she said. ‘I couldn’t face… things back there.’

‘Sometimes running away is the best choice.’

She flashed him a look, about to retort. He passed her the water; his face was soft and open. She laughed instead. ‘And it’s good to find a guide who remembered to bring refreshment.’

She’d left without a thing, not even her buck knife. She would have had to return hours ago if Teg hadn’t come along. Aside from resourcefulness, his presence comforted her. He had a calming influence. She didn’t feel like she had to talk or explain herself. With Teg, she could just be.

_And he’s a demon of a hunter. Did you see how he moved, Maudi?_  
_I did. Impressive. I can’t wait to meet him on the training ground._

They conversed more as the day wore on, mostly about the rigours of being Kreshkali’s apprentice—their common lot—and fortune. Rosette had detected the lilt in his voice when he said her name and suspected he’d fallen for her with more than a student’s admiration. She liked the idea. The dilemma it would present her mother filled her with delight. He would be hard to resist.

She stretched out her legs, leaning back on her elbows. It felt good to be in the body—an adjustment certainly, but worth the effort. The tangible world was seductive, filled with secret scents and myriad textures. She could no longer see auras as well as before, but the colours of the sky, the touch of the hot red dust beneath her hands, the feel of water in her mouth, droplets clinging to her lips, the sound of Teg’s voice, the tickle of Drayco’s whiskers on her neck—each sensation filled her with pleasure. _Not so bad, having a body, eh, Dray?_  
_Nothing bad at all, Maudi, except you have to feed it._ Drayco sent her the message from a short distance away.

He had a bone braced between his front paws and was gnawing at it like a child with a honey-pop.

_Good advice, Drayco. But unlike you, I prefer my game cooked._  
_So cook it._

She looked at Teg. ‘Shall we?’ she asked.

He hadn’t mentioned his ability to follow her and the temple cat’s mental communications, probably out of politeness, but she knew when he listened in. She could feel it the same way she knew when someone else was in a dark room—like a wisp of wind in her mind. Drayco didn’t care, so why should she? It gave her a chance to practise her mind-shielding skills, something she hadn’t done while disembodied. At that time no one but Drayco could hear her and there’d been no need to filter. Now it took effort to let some thoughts through and keep others occult. She felt a little rusty. Teg, on the other hand, was very good at it.

‘There’s plenty of deadwood about for a fire. And…’ He pointed into the distance. ‘It looks like we’ll be having company. If we offer our mentor a meal, it might improve her mood.’
Rosette cringed. ‘Did you let her know where we were?’ she asked.

Teg shook his head. ‘Did you?’

‘I’ve been shielding.’

‘Me too.’

They turned as one to watch the falcon’s approach. It winged in from the direction of Temple Los Loma, making a beeline for them. When she was overhead, the black raptor spiralled down, whistling shrilly. It didn’t sound like a cheerful welcome.

‘We best offer her landing,’ Rosette said. ‘That tree’s all but rotten.’ She made no move to get up.

‘Thanks,’ Teg said out of the side of his mouth. He was standing before she saw him move, his left arm extended, his head tilted back to watch her descent. The falcon swooped down, stalling just above his head and landing on his forearm. For a moment they stared at each other, transfixed. Rosette took a deep breath. This was going to be interesting.

A force of energy cut the air, blowing her hair back from her face. She shut her eyes against the dust and when she opened them Kreshkali stood before her. ‘Since when did I have to go scouting the countryside for my apprentices? Didn’t any of you hear my calls?’

She stared at each in turn, including Drayco, who had stopped chewing. His dark orange eyes stared back. Rosette ignored the question and embraced her mother, holding her in an envelope of peace. ‘We’ve been playing with our mind-shields,’ she said, smiling at Teg.

‘Practising,’ Teg corrected quickly.

Kreshkali tilted her head. ‘And you’ve worked through the rage?’ she asked.

‘We’ve had a successful hunt,’ Rosette said. She had no intention of discussing her emotions as if she were an errant schoolgirl. ‘Are you hungry?’

Kreshkali eyed her. ‘What’s on offer?’

‘Roast rabbit,’ Teg said. ‘We were about to make a fire.’

‘Get on with it, then.’ She looked at the lowering sun. ‘I want to be back before dark. We’ve plans to make.’ As Teg went off to gather wood, Kreshkali extended her arm, stopping Rosette from following. ‘Sit. Talk to me.’

Rosette obliged, returning to her spot in the red dust. She crossed her legs and tried to relax. ‘What?’ she asked.

‘I’m fine, if that’s what’s worrying you. I just needed to get away.’ She tilted her head towards her familiar. ‘Dray too.’

Drayco had resumed working on his carcass.

Kali murmured an agreement. ‘And how’s the body feeling?’

‘Better now.’

‘Better than…?’

‘Before. It was awkward at first,’ Rosette said. She rubbed her arms. ‘It felt stiff and heavy. My ribs are cracked too, by the way. Very painful. I’m getting used to it now, adjusting. The hunt was marvellous.’ She brightened. ‘Teg’s lovely.’

‘Off topic,’ Kali said. ‘We’re talking about your body.’

‘It’s fine.’

‘Indeed it is.’

Kali stared out at the horizon as Rosette studied her profile.

‘What’s wrong, mother?’ she asked.

‘Nothing’s wrong.’

‘Okay, then what’s right?’

‘It all depends, Rosette, on how you view it.’

She touched Kali’s shoulder, looking straight at her. ‘Is this about the spat with Jarrod?’ she said in a rush. ‘I know I reacted strongly, but I had this huge wave of emotion and it had to break somewhere. He can take it, I promise. I’ll speak with him tonight. We’ll be fine.’

‘I’m not worried about Jarrod.’

‘What, then?’

Kreshkali levelled her eyes with her daughter’s. ‘He was trying to tell you something this morning, though admittedly not very well.’

‘Oh, I know!’ Rosette interrupted. ‘He’s in a twist about losing my DNA, losing the spell. Of course he would be. As I think about it now, I don’t know why I blew up. After my apprenticeship, when I take on one of my own, I’ll give it some serious thought. That could be a good time to…’

Kreshkali gripped her shoulder, stopping her stream of thoughts. She took a deep breath, letting it out in a blast.

‘You’re pregnant.’
‘Huh?’
‘You’re already pregnant, Rosette.’
‘When?’
‘I thought you could tell me.’
*Maudi? Are you having a litter?*

She wrestled with an army of emotions before bursting out laughing. *I certainly hope not, Dray.* She continued to laugh until tears streamed down her face.

‘Not quite the response I’d anticipated,’ Kali said.
Rosette was doubled over, holding her sides, alternately cackling and wincing. ‘Is that what Jarrod was trying to say this morning?’ she asked, wiping her face with the back of her hand and gasping for breath.

‘It was.’

‘For a quantum sentient—one with access to all the words in the universe—he didn’t choose the best ones.’

Kreshkali chuckled at that. ‘Is it Grayson’s?’ she asked.
Rosette stopped laughing. ‘Grayson?’ She let her voice trail off. She got up, brushing the dust from her leggings. ‘I guess this was inevitable, and necessary. Actually,’ her smile deepened, ‘it’ll be fun.’

‘You always wanted a front row seat on humanity, Rosette, and like nothing else, having a baby is just that,’ Kreshkali said, giving her a hug.

‘I’m going to need to adjust.’

‘You’ll have time.’

‘And I’m going to need some help too, I guess.’

Kali reached for her, kissing both cheeks.

‘What?’ Rosette asked.

‘Kalindi Rose, that’s the first time I’ve ever heard you ask for help.’

‘Probably not going to be the last,’ she said, rubbing her flat belly.

Teg returned with a massive armload of wood and dropped it to the ground.

‘Did you know?’ Rosette whispered to him as she lay the fire.

‘It was hard not to, the way Kali and Jarrod were going on.’

Rosette cupped her hands around the embers, blowing on them. When the flame was bright, Kreshkali sat beside her.

‘So how far along am I?’ she asked.

Her mother shrugged. ‘I’ve no idea. Your body’s been frozen, you’ve been through a wash of time changes in the corridors and technically dead for days. It’s a wonder the little girl’s still with you. We’ll get Grayson to check on her DNA. We’ll know more then.’

‘Little girl? For certain?’

‘We only have daughters, Rosette. I thought I’d explained that.’

Rosette moved to the other side of the fire ring, avoiding a plume of smoke.

‘You didn’t.’ *Drayco, where’s Grayson?*

Her temple cat scented the air. *In the workshop. Still talking.*

She jumped up. ‘Does anyone else know?’

Kreshkali shook her head.

‘And can I shift?’

‘Of course, Rosette. You can do anything you’re accustomed to doing…but…’

*Drayco, come with me!* She turned back to Kali and Teg. ‘I’ve got to go. I need to find Grayson, and Jarrod too. I’ll see you at the temple?’

‘I thought you were hungry,’ Teg said, but Kreshkali only smiled.

‘The meat isn’t so appetising; I’m craving An’ Lawrence’s Avan-chak!’

Rosette didn’t explain further. She called on the energy of the Elementals, and felt them rush to her like a storm. Her thoughts started to take the shape of a falcon, as was her habit and training, but she altered suddenly, feeling the contours of a large black she-wolf instead. Maybe it was from spending time with the Lupins and the mind-to-mind exchange that flowed between them, but the new form came easily. It felt natural, ecstatic. She morphed into it and tore off, Drayco at her side. She ran hard, relishing the feel as the red earth turned to powder under her feet.

*This is new, Maudi.*

*Like it?*

*Very much.*
Me too. Race you to the fountain?
You’re on!
She took off like a shot. Drayco darted after her, chewing up the ground as he ran.

When she saw the rooftops of Temple Los Loma glistening like an oasis, Rosette eased her pace. Drayco slowed with her, his sides heaving from the sprint. It would seem that neither death nor new life has hampered your strength, Maudi.

She laughed. That’s because I never thought it would. She came to a halt and shifted, the exhilaration of the run coursing through her veins. Her chest rose and fell as she panted. Sweat dripped down her face. ‘I wish there were bathing pools here,’ she said. ‘I would love a swim.’

There’s one.
‘Where?’
Behind the temple. You can see it from here…to the right of the grove. Blue and shimmering.

She shaded her eyes. ‘Oh, lovely. Not as big as Treeon’s, but no bathing pools are, unless you count the ocean.’

There is ocean in Dumarka.

She turned to her familiar and stroked the top of his head. ‘I miss it too,’ she whispered. She roughed his neck. ‘Come on. Let’s get to that pool and have a quick dip. I’ve dust in my eyes and grit in my teeth.’

And then?
‘We find Grayson first, I think.’
That shouldn’t be a challenge.
‘Meaning?’
He’s coming this way.

Grayson walked towards them, his long strides quickly closing the distance. He carried a waterskin. Brilliant man. She was parched.

‘How was the hunt?’ he asked. He directed his question to both of them, but his eyes were on Rosette.

‘Grand. I’m looking for a bath, though.’
‘The pool’s beautiful—mosaic tiles the colour of the sky. You’ll love it.’

‘Your mood has lifted,’ she said, taking the waterskin and drinking deeply. She poured more into her cupped hand for Drayco. ‘Show us the way?’
‘My pleasure.’ He looped her arm in his.

She felt her heart swell. It was good to be with him when his mind-set was so light. He must have had a breakthrough. ‘Grayson, there’s something I want to talk to you about.’

He put his arm over her shoulder. ‘I’ve been wanting to talk to you too.’
She looked at his face, ready to laugh, but he wasn’t smiling. She felt a wave about to break. ‘I know,’ she said, wanting to forestall it. ‘I haven’t been too accessible, have I?’

‘Rosette, you’ve been dead.’
She chuckled, but her mirth faded when he went silent. Drayco?

I don’t think you will like his breakthrough, Maudi.

Chills went up her spine. ‘What’s up?’ she asked, trying not to stiffen underneath his touch.

His arm slipped off her shoulder, but he didn’t speak. She couldn’t stand the empty space between them, so she filled it with words. ‘I know I’ve been gone for some time. It must’ve been frustrating.’ She searched for other ways to say the same thing.

‘Frustrating?’ He took a deep breath. ‘It’s made me think deeply.’

‘About?’
‘Us.’
‘You know I’m not…’
‘Rosette,’ he interrupted. ‘You are a beautiful and amazing woman.’

That’s never a good opener, Maudi.

Hush, love. Let him explain.

‘You’re powerful, full of energy, dynamic, intelligent…Being with you was an exhilarating experience.’

Rosette bit her lower lip. ‘Was?’

He brushed the hair back from her cheek as they walked. ‘You know I love you.’

Rosette swallowed hard and kept her eyes on the path. ‘And…?’
‘You’re from the line of Janis Richter.’
‘I am. This is true.’
‘You’re linked to a quantum sentient, Rosette, you’re linked to the Lupins—it’s part of your brilliance, of course—but it’s making it too hard for me to be with you.’

‘Too hard.’ She nodded, not trusting her voice.

‘For almost a year, I haven’t even known where you were. When I finally found you…’ He paused, looking into the distance. ‘You were dead. As I tried to deal with that, you came back to life. Now here you are, as vibrant and enthused as ever.’ He pulled her to a stop. ‘Rosette, I can’t handle the unpredictability. I can’t handle the separations, the not knowing. It’s too much for me.’

‘You mean, it’s not enough.’

‘That too. When we’re together, you’ve business brewing; training, teaching, planning, organising. And…’

‘More?’ Her throat was so tight she could barely speak.

‘There’s Jarrod.’

‘Jarrod is my…’

Grayson put his fingers over her lips. ‘Let me finish, please. I know who Jarrod is to you. I know what your work is like. You’re a free spirit with interests and intentions in all four directions. I respect that. I admire it. I adore it.’ He pulled her into an embrace. ‘I just can’t live with it,’ he whispered into her ear.

The tears she had so carefully contained filled her eyes and overflowed, running down her cheeks.

Maudi?

It’s okay, Dray. I’m okay. She took a deep breath and tightened the embrace, crying into his neck. He held her for some time before she straightened and wiped her eyes. ‘You’re right, of course,’ she said. ‘My life is unpredictable and it’s not going to settle down any time soon.’

‘I would never ask you to live differently for me.’

She nodded. ‘I know. I wouldn’t anyway.’

‘Friends?’ he said, holding out his hand.

‘Of course.’ She gripped tight. ‘We’ll always be connected.’

They walked down the path, the carpet of flower petals rising with each footfall. Drayco pressed against Rosette’s thigh and she stroked him. When they reached the courtyard, she let go of Grayson’s hand. ‘I’ll find my way from here.’

‘I can take you. I’m through for the day. I can…’

‘I’d like to be alone.’

He nodded. ‘I love you.’

She leaned in and gave him a lingering kiss. ‘I love you too.’

Before her tears had a chance to rise again, she turned and headed for the pool, Drayco beside her. She followed the tiled pathway around the temple hall and up newly laid steps to an open breezeway. From there she could see the bathing pool, a deep turquoise like the lagoons of Rahana Iti. The reminder made her eyes fill again.

Maudi, you didn’t tell him about the litter.

‘It wasn’t the right time.’

Her familiar sneezed. I would say the right time has passed, then.

‘I’ll tell him. Just not now. And, Drayco of the Dumarkian Woods, it’s not going to be a litter, so please stop using that word!’

He pushed his head into her leg. Are you all right, Maudi?

‘If you call having your heart broken “all right”, then yes, I’m perfect.’

Your heart is well and healthy, Maudi. It’s your emotional body that’s churning.

She smiled. ‘You’re right. I’m fine,’ she said. ‘I’m alive, swamped with feelings and I’m going to have a baby. My heart is certainly not broken. It is rich and full and complete. Let’s swim.’

They trotted down the steps and through the curly iron gate that led to the pool. By the time she reached the edge of the water, she’d stripped off her clothes, flinging them to one side. Together with her temple cat, she dived into the deep end, swimming underwater for as long as she could before breaking the surface to take a gulp of air and then plummet down again.

Jarrod watched from the breezeway. The sun was sinking behind the hills, turning the landscape an even deeper red. Rosette floated on her back, her eyes closed, her hair surrounding her like a kelp garden. Drayco lay on the edge of the pool, one paw dangling in the water, his black coat glistening.

Feel like some company? Jarrod asked, sending the thought directly to her mind.

He didn’t want to intrude on her tranquillity. They hadn’t fought like this morning since Lividica when she lived on the Matosh Estate. Those arguments had been mostly over his brother Liam. It felt like lifetimes ago. He
hadn’t known who she was then, but he’d loved her just as deeply.

She didn’t open her eyes, but he saw her smile. *I’ve always been able to out-swim you.*

He laughed. *I wasn’t thinking of a competition.*

*Why would you, when you know I’d win?*

He entered the gate and pulled off his shirt. ‘How’s the water?’

‘Come feel for yourself.’ She rolled onto her stomach and duck-dived.

He stripped off the rest of his clothes and crouched by the edge of the pool, dipping his fingers into the water as it lapped the blue tiles. It was some time before she surfaced again. ‘And how was the hunt?’

‘Jarrod, stop being so solicitous and jump in. I won’t bite.’

He slipped into the pool and immersed, watching her swim. He could see as well under the surface as he could above and the sight of her made him laugh, releasing a lungful of bubbles. She looked like a mermaid from a fairytale, her long black hair streaming behind her as she dolphin-kicked towards him. It undulated around her waist when she broke the surface again, gasping for breath. They swam towards the steps at the shallow end of the pool.

‘Why weren’t you direct with me this morning? You could have just said, “Good news, Rosette, you’re pregnant and my future’s assured”.’

He leaned his head against the edge, closing his mouth to keep out the sloshing water. She was still a little angry. ‘I wanted to see how you felt about it conceptually first, before I disclosed anything. Test the water, as it were.’

‘Oh, such metaphors.’ She splashed him, but as he wiped his eyes, she smiled. ‘I didn’t make it easy for you, did I?’

He pulled her into an embrace. ‘You never did.’ He kissed her. ‘How are you feeling about it now?’

‘I’m thinking more than feeling, to be honest. Keeping it light.’ She buried her face in his neck.

He stroked her wet hair, then slipped her whole body into his lap and cradled her like a child. ‘Grayson?’ he asked, his voice barely audible.

‘We’re going separate ways.’

‘Are you okay with that?’

She slid from his arms and swam away, doing a lap underwater before she returned to him. ‘There was never any commitment.’

‘Doesn’t really answer the question, Rosette.’

She sighed. ‘I hadn’t seen him in a long time. And I hadn’t thought about it much. I’ve had more urgent things on my mind.’ She leaned her head back, her hair floating over her breasts, her legs stretched out in front of her.

‘Did you tell him?’ Jarrod asked.

She rolled onto her belly, tracing the turquoise-veined tiles with a fingertip. ‘I didn’t get the chance to say anything.’

‘You mean you didn’t take the chance.’

She splashed him again. ‘The thing is, Jarrod, I’m not even completely sure it’s his.’ She looked away.

‘Really?’

‘I’m missing some pieces, as it were.’

‘How so?’

‘I’ve been gone a year of his time, no idea how long of mine. Unless I’m gestating an elephant, it doesn’t add up.’

‘Shane?’

‘I don’t think so. I don’t remember anything like it, but we were in a strange time loop. I don’t remember everything that happened.’

‘Selene reacted strongly to you.’

‘Most women do.’

He chuckled.

‘Does it matter, in any case?’ she asked.

‘You mean genetically?’

She nodded, swishing her hand through the water to make small waves.

‘The Richter-Paree blood dominates. It doesn’t really matter too much who the father is in that sense, as long as there is genetic compatibility.’

‘The Richter line is from Earth, but my father’s Gaelean. That seemed to work fine for me.’ She rolled over, frowning. ‘Where is he?’

‘Who?’
‘An’ Lawrence, of course.
‘An’ Lawrence?’
‘Jarrod, stop repeating. Where is the Sword Master of Treeon Temple and Temple Los Loma? Why isn’t he here?’ She narrowed her eyes. ‘What aren’t you telling me?’
‘Nothing, really.’
‘Then tell me where he is!’
Jarrod swallowed. ‘There was some confusion in the corridors between Nell of another world and Kali.’
She sat on the steps, crossing her arms. ‘Are you purposely trying to keep me in the dark?’
‘Not at all.’ He explained An’ Lawrence’s sudden departure.
‘So he dashed back into the portal when he realised Nell was not our Nell?’
‘Apparently.’
‘But Teg found Kali. Rescued her from a very different Treeon, and some falconer who thought to add her to his bevy. He told me about it today.’ She pulled her hair back from her face, wringing it out and twisting it on top of her head. ‘Can you imagine that? Kali on some hunter’s forearm?’
Jarrod shook his head.
‘Finish the story.’ She smiled. ‘Where’s An’ Lawrence now?’ She stood, pulling him up with her. ‘Hopefully he’s in the kitchens, cooking up a feast. I’m longing for Avanchak.’
He gripped her hand and followed her out of the pool. ‘We don’t know,’ he said.
‘What?’
‘That is, we aren’t sure.’
‘You’re saying he went through the portal and hasn’t returned?’
‘He hasn’t returned yet.’
She dropped his hand, swiping water from her arms and chest. ‘We have to find him.’ She shook out her leggings and stepped into them. ‘Kali and I are going in the morning. We’re just settling things here first.’
‘I’m coming too.’ She continued to dress.
‘That’s not a good idea.’
‘Why not?’
He looked at her flat belly, about to speak.
‘I’m pregnant, Jarrod, not disabled. I can wield a blade and cast a spell as sharp as ever. Maybe even better. What’s the problem?’
‘You’ve been in such a long time-flux, there’s no way of telling what stage you’ll be in when the portal spits us out into a new world. The corridors aren’t running true—something we need to discuss as well. And…’ He took a deep breath. ‘We can’t exactly search for An’ Lawrence and coach you through labour at the same time.’
Her face slackened. ‘That could happen?’
‘It’s possible. This is new territory. You’re the first of your line to be such a world-hopper.’
‘And you saved this bit of information for last? I can’t travel the corridors?’
‘Not to new places.’ Jarrod wiped his face. ‘This hasn’t been my day for timing.’
She slipped on her boots. ‘So what are you saying? I’m out to pasture?’
‘Kali was thinking you might like to spend the summer in Dumarka.’
I would love to go home, Maudi. There is peace in Dumarka, good hunting, wild seas, and a warm fire at night.
She smacked her lips. ‘Dumarka?’
‘Drayco likes the idea,’ Jarrod said.
‘I guess I could get a lot of work done. It’s been ages since I’ve had time to draft charts, correlate research.’
‘You’d have the time and space to finish the apprentice manual and complete your training.’
‘Then I’d be able to take on an apprentice of my own.’
‘You’ll need someone there anyway.’
She shook her head. ‘I’d rather be alone.’
‘You may not think so as time passes.’ He put his hand on her belly.
‘I suppose you and Kali have someone in mind?’
‘She thought it would be Grayson.’
‘Not in the picture.’ Rosette’s voice muffled as she pulled her top on over her head.
‘Teg’s an option too. He’s been keen to study the stars with you.’
‘I don’t need baby-sitting, Jarrod. I’m fine.’
‘Let’s see what Kreshkali says about it.’
Rosette’s eyes stormed. ‘It feels like I have little choice in the matter.’
He shook his head at her protests. ‘Have you forgotten Kreshkali’s first rule—her only rule?’

Rosette suppressed a smile. ‘*There is always a choice. Good reminder.*’

‘And she’s still your mentor, Rosette. She has jurisdiction.’

Her arms fell to her sides. ‘All right,’ she said, letting out a little laugh. ‘I’m choosing to consider this option. Lead the way, but make it past the kitchens. I’m also choosing to quell my hunger.’

*I wouldn’t mind another snack myself, Maudi.*

‘We’re all hungry here,’ she said, striding between Drayco and Jarrod.

‘You’re lucky the temple grounds are so productive. The stocks are overflowing.’ He took her hand and led the way to the kitchens.

Kreshkali stood in front of the portal, tightening the strap on her backpack. She’d packed in a hurry, not knowing how much time had elapsed since An’ Lawrence had disappeared, uncertain as to her chances of ever finding him again in the shifting worlds beyond the corridors. He’d been foolish to risk it—foolish and brave. She loved him for it and hoped she could someday tell him so.

There’d been little argument from Rosette, who seemed satisfied with her assignment to Dumarka. Teg rankled at his part, though. She knew he would. He showed enthusiasm for studying the stars and Earth literature with Rosette and already was bonding with her, but he protested the exclusion from their search for the Sword Master. She suspected that he mostly protested the separation from her, though he didn’t say so. It was all the more reason to have some time apart. A mentor could become as attached to her apprentice as he to her. She sighed as she slipped on her pack. They decided to send Annadusa through to Dumarka in the autumn, if Kreshkali and Jarrod were not back by then.

‘Ready, my queen?’ Jarrod asked.

‘Reading my thoughts?’

‘Never without your permission.’

‘Then yes, I’m ready.’ She turned to take a last look at the barren landscape that swept towards Temple Los Loma, invisible behind the single hill. The wrought-iron gates stood open and the apple trees beside them were flowering, the ground scattered with a carpet of blossoms, pink and white on the baked red earth. The fragrance was delicate and sweet.

‘It’s spring,’ she said, running her hands through her spiky hair.

Jarrod followed her line of sight to the trees. ‘We’ll be back before autumn in Dumarka,’ he said. ‘In time for the birth.’

‘You sound certain.’

‘It’s the best approach, don’t you think?’

She laughed. ‘Energy follows thought. I can’t believe I need the reminder.’

At the sound of her laughter, three ravens winged in, one landing on her shoulder, the other two on the rocky outcropping above the portal.

‘The Sisters are coming?’ Jarrod asked.

‘They’re restless for change.’

‘I thought you were sending them to Dumarka with Rosette and Teg.’

‘They wouldn’t have a bar of it.’ She stroked the bird’s glossy neck. ‘I’m glad to have them with me. Besides, Mossie is at the cottage. He’ll keep an eye out.’

Clouds raced across the face of the sun, dulling its intensity. Jarrod frowned, his eyes fixed on the horizon.

‘Someone’s coming,’ he said.

‘By all the elements, Jarrod, you’ve got good eyes in that tulpa of yours. I can’t see anything but dust.’

‘They’re running towards us. Fast.’

‘A farewell party?’

‘Perhaps.’ Jarrod squinted. ‘A quadruped.’

‘Just one?’

‘Looks like it.’

Kreshkali closed her eyes, allowing her inner sight to reach out towards the one who approached them. She touched a familiar consciousness. *Hotha?* She straightened, sending the thought to him as he ran. *What’s the rush?*  

*Did you think I’d let you go without a word?*

She laughed, turning to Jarrod. ‘It’s Hotha.’

He nodded.

*You’ll be watching over Los Loma while we’re away, won’t you, Hotha?*
As agreed.
She opened her eyes. She could spot him in the distance, a small black speck trailing a cloud of dust. As he approached his form became more distinct, a magnificent wolf, running so hard his feet barely touched the ground. It was only moments before he stood before them. The shock wave blasted their faces as he morphed into a man.
‘And you can tell An’ Lawrence that I will be overseeing his sword students until he returns.’ Hotha chuckled between gasps of breath. ‘That’ll bring him back, quick as Santa Ana.’
‘I’ll be sure to pass that along.’ Kreshkali gave him a hug, the raven on her shoulder squawking as she leaned into the Lupin.
‘Settle down, black bird,’ he said, pointing a finger at her. ‘You’re much too scrappy for my taste.’
The raven flapped her wings.
‘Be nice, you two,’ Kali said, stroking down the ruffled feathers.
Hotha bowed an apology. ‘Your apprentices safely tucked away in Dumarka?’ he asked.
‘They’d be scathing to hear you put it that way, but yes. They went last night.’
He nodded, and gave her a sly smile. ‘Good luck in your search, my queen. Be safe. The corridors…’
‘They are being tampered with, I know, but they will run true for me. It’s your safety I’m concerned about. Eyes open, Hotha. There could be trackers about.’
‘The Lupins will keep watch here, Kali, and on Gaela.’ He embraced her again, kissing both cheeks and then her lips.
She lingered for a moment before stepping back. ‘Ready, Jarrod?’ she asked, waving the other two ravens into the portal.
Jarrod gripped the Lupin’s forearm in farewell and followed. Kreshkali came last, passing her hand, open palm, over the plasma ripples of the Entity, bowing as she did. She focused her mind on An’ Lawrence.
‘Take us to him, please, wherever he may be,’ she whispered and felt the rush of energy carry them away.

Rosette waited until Hotha had returned to his wolf form and trotted through the gates. He disappeared down the lane to Temple Los Loma. When he was completely out of sight, she relaxed, allowing the glamour to slip away. Sweat dripped down her brow and she wiped it with the back of her hand. She exhaled in a long, low whistle. ‘Close call.’
Teg agreed. ‘That’s the best glamour I’ve ever seen. Hotha was staring right at me and didn’t suspect a thing.’
He clapped her on the shoulder. ‘You’re amazing. I almost wish we were going to Dumarka to study together.’
‘There’ll be plenty of time for that once we find An’ Lawrence.’ She looked down at her belly. ‘I don’t plan on this rescue mission taking long.’ Her shoulders squared. Safety tucked away indeed.
‘Shall we?’ Teg asked. He gestured towards the portal.
Rosette took a final look at the gates of Temple Los Loma and the dry red lands beyond. She bowed to the Entity, following Teg and her temple cat into the portal. Her face relaxed as she placed her hand over the warm plasma stream, electric strands of energy zapping towards her palm. ‘Follow them,’ she said. ‘Take us as near to Rowan An’ Lawrence as we can possibly get.’ She closed her eyes and the portal whisked them away.
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RECOMMENDED WEBSITES:

Kim Falconer’s official Quantum Enchantment Website www.kimfalconer.com
Kim Falconer’s Astrology, Mythology and Quantum Theory Site www.falconastrology.com
Voyager Online www.voyageronline.com.au
Voyager Blog www.voyageronline.wordpress.com
Rosette is a child of two worlds: Gaela, steeped in magic, and an Earth choked with failing technology. The key to their survival is literally in her blood, a spell passed down through her family line to preserve the one they’re sworn to protect.

Unaware of her lineage, Rosette runs scared when her family is murdered. She takes refuge with Nell, a shape-shifting high priestess of the ancient blood, who teaches her the arts of witchcraft, stars and sword.

Shadowed by the fabled Kreshkali, queen of the underworld and mistress of the wolf-like Lupins, Rosette and the temple cat, Drayco, find themselves little more than a step ahead of those who will do anything to control the portal that links the many-worlds.
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Kim Falconer lives in Byron Bay with two gorgeous black cats. As well as her author website, she runs an astrology forum and alternative science site, trains with a sword and is completing a Masters degree. Her novel writing is done early every morning. Currently she is working on additional volumes in the Quantum Enchantment series.

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