Strange Attractors

One spell can save them ... but it's hidden in a past that may never be.

Kim Falconer

Book Three
In memory of Matthew & Xe’nedra Grace
# Table of Contents

## Cover Page
## Dedication
## Maps
## Epigraph

### CHAPTER 1 TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH & CORSANON FIELDS, GAELA

### CHAPTER 2 CORSANON FIELDS, GAELA

### CHAPTER 3 TENSA & CORSANON, GAELA

### CHAPTER 4 TEMPLE LOS LOMA & BORDERLANDS, EARTH & CORSANON, GAELA

### CHAPTER 5 DUMARKIAN WOODS, CORSANON & RIVERLANDS, GAELA

### CHAPTER 6 CORSANON & RIVERLANDS, GAELA

### CHAPTER 7 CORSANON & RIVERLANDS, GAELA

### CHAPTER 8 BORDERLANDS, EARTH & CORSANON, GAELA

### CHAPTER 9 RIVERLANDS & CORSANON, GAELA & BORDERLANDS & TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH

### CHAPTER 10 TEMPLE LOS LOMA & BORDERLANDS, EARTH & CORSANON, GAELA

### CHAPTER 11 CORSANON, GAELA & BORDERLANDS, EARTH

### CHAPTER 12 TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH & CORSANON, GAELA

### CHAPTER 13 TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH & CORSANON & DUMARKIAN WOODS, GAELA

### CHAPTER 14 TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH & CORSANON & DUMARKIAN WOODS, GAELA

### CHAPTER 15 TEMPLE LOS LOMA & BORDERLANDS, EARTH & PRIETA FOOTHILLS & DUMARKIAN WOODS, GAELA

### CHAPTER 16 PRIETA FOOTHILLS & DUMARKIAN WOODS, GAELA & BORDERLANDS, EARTH

### CHAPTER 17 DUMARKIAN WOODS, CORSANON & CUSCA PLAINS, GAELA

### CHAPTER 18 DUMARKIAN WOODS, PRIETA FOOTHILLS, CUSCA Plains & Corsanons, Gaela & TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH

### CHAPTER 19 PRIETA FOOTHILLS, CUSCA PLAINS & CORSANON, GAELA & TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH

### CHAPTER 20 CORSANON, CUSCA PLAINS, PRIETA FOOTHILLS & GOREGAN RIVER, GAELA & TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH

### CHAPTER 21 CUSCA PLAINS, PRIETA FOOTHILLS & GOREGAN RIVER, GAELA & TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH

### CHAPTER 22 TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH & PRIETA FOOTHILLS & DUMARKIAN WOODS, GAELA

### CHAPTER 23 PRIETA FOOTHILLS & DUMARKIAN WOODS, GAELA

### CHAPTER 24 DUMARKIAN WOODS, GAELA

### CHAPTER 25 DUMARKIAN WOODS, GAELA & TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH

### CHAPTER 26 BORDERLANDS & TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH & TEMPLE LOS LOMA & DUMARKIAN WOODS, GAELA

## RECOMMENDED READING

## RECOMMENDED WEBSITES

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

## About the Author

## Books by Kim Falconer

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## About the Publisher
Maps
A strange attractor is a pattern that appears chaotic, random in both trajectory and purpose, until seen from the right perspective.
CHAPTE

1

TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH & CORSANON FIELDS, GAELA

‘Demons,’ Rosette whispered. She gripped the rock face, her fingers cramped into spider shapes. The sun was scorching hot. Her clothes stuck to her back, sweat dripping down her spine. She didn’t know how much longer she could hang on. Below was a red desert plain marked only by the wrought-iron gates of Temple Los Loma and the boulders that concealed the portal. Her familiar paced in front of them, pausing every few strides to look up.

You’re not moving, Maudi. What’s wrong?

Her boot slipped and she hung midair. I’m fine, Drayco. She caught her breath and found better footing.

Can you see them yet?

I can, Maudi, and if you want to stay concealed, I suggest you hurry things along.

Thanks, Dray. I’m coming.

Drayco had made it look easy; he’d scampered down the cliff then waited for them to catch up. Teg wasn’t so sure. He had suggested they shape-shift, her flying to the portal while he followed Drayco’s descent in wolf form, but Rosette had cautioned against it. The shock wave from the transformation could be felt for a fair distance, like sounding an alarm. What they wanted was stealth. How hard could the climb be?

Harder than I thought. Rosette swallowed the dust in her throat and looked up. ‘Teg, we have to jump!’

‘From here?’ He was squeezed into a narrow crevice, loose dirt breaking free as he tried for a better grip.

‘It’s not that far.’

‘Easy for you to say. You’re ten feet closer.’

‘There’s no more time.’ She took a breath and let go, pushing back from the rock wall as she launched. The ground came up to greet her sooner than she expected, jolting her legs and spine. She tucked into a backward roll as Teg landed in front of her.

Finally, Maudi. Drayco rubbed his cheek on a nearby rock.

They come.

‘We have to hide,’ she said.

‘Where?’ Teg looked at the open expanse. ‘They’ll know if we go through the portal now.’

‘Not the portal. Come closer, both of you,’ she said as she dusted herself off. ‘And don’t move.’

‘You’re going to weave a glamour out here?’ Teg asked, rubbing his elbow. ‘They’ll spot it, won’t they?’

‘Not if you stop talking and keep still.’ She visualised a circle around her body and pulled him in. ‘Slow your breathing. Think calm thoughts.’

Drayco sat in front of them, his tall ears pointed forward. There’s no more time. Make the curtain now, Maudi.

She threw the enchantment around them like a cape and there, in front of the gates of Temple Los Loma, it settled over their heads and they disappeared. A moment later Kreshkali and Jarrod came into view, striding along the track. They were on foot and travelling light—backpacks and swords—their long cloaks flowing out behind them. They were overdressed for the desert, but not for where they were going. Rosette reinforced the glamour. Three ravens winged in, cawing and scolding. One landed on Kreshkali’s shoulder. The other two perched on the rocky outcroppings that marked the entrance to the portal. As the birds shuffled their wings and settled, heads tilting this way and that, Rosette reminded herself to breathe.

From inside the enchantment, the world took on a violet hue—the glamour filtering out all but the shorter waves of light. It created a surreal ambiance, her only hint that the spell was working. From the outside, she hoped it was having the desired effect—a seamless blending of the rock wall with no hint of their presence. Instead of seeing Rosette, her temple cat and the young Lupin a hand’s reach away, Kreshkali and Jarrod would notice only the dry red landscape and the crevice that housed the portal. The sun baking down from its zenith cast no shadow and the hot breeze blew right through them.

The glamour didn’t actually make them vanish. That would have been the most effective way to weave the concealment, but neither Rosette nor Teg had mastered the technique. Her glamour simply absorbed the light normally reflected from their bodies; with nothing to bounce off, nothing could be seen. It took only a small additional conjuring of the Elementals to paint the landscape behind them. It was a good spell for the occasion but she strained to hear what they were saying. The glamour filtered sound waves as well.

Do you know what they’re talking about, Drayco? She let the thought slip through her mind shield.

I do.

And?

They’re talking about the Lupin.

Teg?

Not him. The one headed this way.
Teg shifted behind her.
Hold still! she cautioned him.
Hotha comes, Teg’s mental voice whispered.
I see that. Just relax. It’ll be all right.
Not if we’re caught.
We won’t be. Hush.

Hotha loped towards them, shifting from wolf form to human as he came to a halt. The shock wave rushed past, stirring her hair. She closed her eyes, concentrating on the glamour, glad the Lupin was more intent on talking than observing the environment. Hotha was the leader of the Lupin clan on Earth and apparently he had much to say to Kreshkali before she left. Jarrod looked on. Rosette was relieved the glamour worked for him as well. Because he was a quantum sentient, his visual consciousness could perceive energy regardless of the light spectrum. All he had to do was tune into it. Fortunately, his focus stayed on the others.

Hotha was having a tête-à-tête with one of Kali’s ravens. He smiled, bowing with what looked like an apology.

‘Your apprentices are safely tucked away in Dumarka then?’ Hotha asked Kreshkali.
‘They’d be scathing to hear you put it that way, but yes. They went last night.’
He nodded, giving her a sly smile. ‘Good luck in your search, my queen. Be safe. The corridors…’
‘They’ll run true for me. It’s your safety I’m concerned about. Eyes open, Hotha.’

They embraced, kissing in the traditional manner of Gaelean temple witches—both cheeks and then the lips. Kreshkali didn’t step out of his arms immediately. She whispered something Rosette couldn’t catch before slipping into the portal behind Jarrod and the ravens. The plasma ripples jumped out—a lightning-flash greeting—and they were gone.

Hotha remained for some time, staring into the portal that had turned again into an unremarkable rock formation, a fissure in an otherwise banal landscape. As she held the glamour in place, he shifted his view, focusing on where she stood.

Don't think! she cautioned both Teg and Drayco, sending the message directly to their minds. Shield!
Hotha continued to stare until he turned around, shaking his head and chuckling. ‘Fynn, lad. I said to stay.’

Maudi, this could be a problem.
I see that, Dray.

Fynn came loping up, tongue lolling. He may have stayed for a while but the little hunting dog clearly didn’t want to be left behind. He had a particular attachment to her and Drayco. She hoped it wasn’t so strong he would sniff them out.

‘What is it, boy?’ Hotha said when Fynn sniffed, his tail going in circles. He was trotting back and forth in front of the portal, right where Rosette and Teg touched down from the cliff. ‘You missing your people? Come on then, you’ll join my pack.’

Fynn’s head went up and he sat, barking once, his tail sweeping the ground. If Hotha continued to speak to the dog, Rosette didn’t hear. They were moving away; she let out her breath.

That was lucky, Teg said.

There wasn’t much of a shock wave when Hotha shifted back to wolf form, the blast diminished by her glamour. He trotted through the gates, Fynn on his heels, and headed back to Temple Los Loma. When he was out of sight, Rosette relaxed, allowing the spell to disperse. Sweat dripped down her brow and she wiped it with the back of her hand. ‘Close one.’

Teg clapped her on the shoulder, letting out a whistle. ‘That’s the best glamour I’ve ever seen,’ he said, keeping his voice low. ‘Hotha was staring right at me and didn’t suspect a thing.’
‘I don’t know. I think he suspected something. I know Fynn did, and he might mention it. We’d better go.’
‘If he did, it baffled him.’ Teg gave her another pat. ‘You’re fantastic. I almost wish we were going to Dumarka to train for the winter.’
‘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 taking long.’

Drayco’s tail lashed. Less talking, more moving, Maudi.

Good idea. ‘ Safely tucked away indeed,’ she added in a barely audible tone.
‘Shall we?’ Teg gestured towards the portal.

Rosette took a final look at the green apple trees and the gates of Temple Los Loma, scanning the dry red lands beyond. She bowed to the Entity and followed Teg and her familiar into the portal. Her face relaxed as she touched the warm plasma stream, electricity 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 swept them away.
In retrospect, Rosette wished she’d worded the request differently—perhaps with less urgency and more circumspection. Where the Entity took them was as close as they could get to her father, Sword Master Rowan An’ Lawrence, but it was also right in the midst of a battle. The place was a sea of uniforms, red tunics and feather-crested helmets of foot soldiers interspersed with a darker-garbed cavalry. Scores of riders charged past, hooves churning and coat-tails flying.

She couldn’t tell who they were fighting. There was no sign of an enemy, but by the casualties alone it had to be a powerful one. She took in the landscape; the hot golden plains spread out like butter on bread in every direction, fringed with pines and white oaks. ‘The Corsanon Fields?’ she whispered. The troops were defending their city, though the gates were not visible from where she stood. ‘What in the many-worlds is he doing in here?’

Teg pointed to the south. ‘That’s their target.’

The red-mantled troops were converging on a distant knoll—all their energy was directed there, but she still couldn’t spot the enemy. The Corsanons drew their swords as they rushed past, the broad blades glinting in the midday sun. Those on foot were running double time to keep up with the cavalry—tall riders mounted on golden horses. She frowned. ‘When in the demon’s underworld are we?’ she whispered. It was clearly not any Corsanon she knew. The palominos had vanished before she was born.

Teg scratched his neck. ‘This can’t be right, can it? It looks like before the temple wars.’

*Or during*. Drayco’s hackles were up. *Maudi, they have yellow horses.*

*I see that, Dray. We are before our time, again.* The din of battle droned in the background. Rosette shook her head. ‘The Entity’s askew. This can’t be where the Sword Master is. Let’s get out of here before we’re spotted.’

As she spoke, the Entity expelled her from the portal, like an innkeeper tossing a stray cat. She landed on her feet, eyes flashing. The stream of Corsanon warriors stopped, stunned for an instant, before pointing their swords at her. She tore back to the portal, but Drayco and Teg were flung out as well, the crevice snapping shut in front of her face. ‘Swords!’ she screamed. ‘Teg, kill circle!’

She drew her blade and extended her arm in an arc as she spun around. Her eyes relaxed, losing focus as she widened her peripheral vision. She barely noticed the three heads rolling from her single swipe. Teg had jumped to the side, out of the reach of her swing, drawing his sword and covering her back. For an instant they stood motionless. Drayco crouched at her side, facing down the horde. Frozen by the sudden decapitations, the warriors quickly recovered and sprang.

Rosette ducked to avoid an axe slicing over her head and Drayco sprang at the wielder, snapping his neck. The axe fell from his hand, clattering as it hit the rocky ground. Two more stepped up to replace him. They were stripped to the waist, their chests soaked red with blood and sweat. Their swords were thick blades and heavy, made more for cleaving than her thin, articulate weapon. She knew she could outmanoeuvre these fighters one at a time—but so many? That would take something else. She needed to conjure a massive boost of magic. Teg was holding ground behind her but they were surrounded, and ridiculously outnumbered.

She called on the Elementals, drawing the energy to her, channelling it through her body, up her arms and into her blade. It took longer than she expected, the Elementals distracted by some other summons. They came, though, weaving into her spell as she honed the energy to a pinpoint. The force of the boost heated her sword blue-white.

She swung, releasing the energy. She could feel Teg do the same behind her and was grateful he’d recently learned the technique. They continued to boost and cut, taking down any warriors who didn’t retreat fast enough and hurling away those who charged. It wasn’t long before the attackers were down, the remnants running as Drayco pelted after them.

*Leave them, Dray. We have to get out of here.*

*I’ve spotted the Sword Master, Maudi. He’s over there, by the pines.*

*He’s here?* Rosette snapped her wrist, flicking blood from her blade before sheathing it. *Got him.* She tuned in, listening to An’ Lawrence grunt obscenities. *He seems upset.*

*More than usual?* Drayco chuckled in her mind.

Not far from them another band of warriors was charging the knoll. So far, their efforts seemed futile. The slopes were strewed with bodies—limbs askew, many headless—and in the centre stood the Sword Master and his familiar, Scylla. The ferocity coming from them permeated the air. It nearly knocked her over where she stood. There was no sign of fatigue in his aura, nor was there any indication he’d sensed her presence.

Rosette thought to send him a mental message, a scathing one, but changed her mind. No good distracting him, no matter how much he deserved her wrath. It looked like a tricky fight. The odds would be a challenge even for him and Scylla. The feline swiped at warriors, toppling them like empty tins. None got up again.

*Dray, can you tell Scylla we’re here, coming up the north side of the hill. We don’t need her attacking us as well. She’s gone berserk.*
Scylla knows we’re here. He paused for a moment. She’s glad it’s me. Drayco’s message was sweet in her mind.

Of course she is. Please make sure she tells An’ Lawrence. He’s gathering for quite a boost there. Can you feel it?

A wind rippled across Drayco’s fur. I can.

Oh, demons. Here it comes! ‘Teg! To me!’ She clutched his arm and pulled him down. ‘Drayco, get in here!’ Rosette conjured a dome of energy and they crouched, shielded from the blast. It hurtled towards them—a fireball taking out everything in its path.

The force ripped by, knocking the Corsanon warriors back like tumbleweed, even the dead ones. In spite of the shield, some of the blast whirled into their shelter, sending her hair streaming back from her face, eyes watering, sand stinging. Teg gripped her tight and Drayco’s head pressed into her lap. As the wave subsided, the surviving warriors scrambled away, racing back towards the city at the sound of the retreat. Rosette lowered her shield, locking eyes with An’ Lawrence as she stood. She crossed her arms, ignoring the sea of bodies, blood and gore between them. ‘What in the demon’s pit of gnash are you doing? Trying to kill me?’ she shouted.

Rosette! You’re alive. He answered back with a mental message. His voice sounded thick in her mind, as if he was choking.

‘Barely, after that blast, Sword Master.’ She made a show of straightening her clothes and tightening her sword belt before heading towards him. ‘What in all the worlds are you doing here?’ She swept her arm across the field. ‘And when is this, anyway?’

‘Corsanon’s past, I think.’ He flicked blood from his blade and sheathed it then waved them in.

‘And why are you here?’ she asked again.

‘I was searching for Makee, to help you. Last time I looked, you were in desperate need of a High Priestess and Kreshkali was nowhere to be found.’

Rosette laughed. Cupping her hands to her mouth and shouting as if he were hard of hearing, she yelled, ‘I’m fine now, but thanks anyway.’

Maudi, is this conversation wise? We are still in the middle of a battlefield and the enemy isn’t far off.

At that moment an arrow shot from the pines and before Rosette could warn him, An’ Lawrence flicked his round shield behind him. She heard the shaft sink deep into the wood. A dozen more followed.

‘Run!’ An’ Lawrence shouted. He flashed his sword and several arrows rebounded off the blade, returning full speed towards the archers. He disappeared down the other side of the knoll, emerging on a golden warhorse with a flaxen mane and tail. He urged it into a collected canter, picking his way across the battlefield towards her, shield slung to his back.

‘Where did you get that horse?’ Her mouth hung open as it came towards her.

‘A parting gift from La Makee. Get moving!’

‘La Makee?’ As she turned towards the portal, a score of riders appeared on the horizon. ‘So much for the retreat.’ Looking back at An’ Lawrence, she caught sight of a full complement of archers, also on horseback, charging at the gallop. In a matter of seconds they would be trodden into the ground.

‘Shift!’ An’ Lawrence snapped her out of her stupor.

She took the form of a black wolf, a better shape for fighting than her customary falcon. The portal’s cut off! she screamed into his mind.

This way. He rolled the horse back and shot westward.

Teg had already changed into his alternative Lupin form—wolf—and was racing after An’ Lawrence. The warhorse swerved, and they headed northwest at a dead run.

You can’t mean to race all the way to the Prieta Mountains, can you, Sword Master? she asked as she leapt over bodies and abandoned weapons.

That’s our only way out. He stood up in his stirrups, looking down at the three as they caught up. Since when does ‘shift’ mean anything but a black falcon to your line?

You like it?

No.

Well, I do. Rosette accelerated, running ahead of the others, blazing the way towards the foothills of Los Loma Prieta.
CHAPTER 2
CORSANON FIELDS, GAELA

‘We’re too late,’ Kreshkali said, gazing over the battlefield. There was little movement save the wind through the distant pine trees. It wafted over the ground, lifting red hems and ruffling the crows’ feathers as they hopped from corpse to corpse, exposing the white down beneath their black mantles. In the pale blue sky buzzards circled. ‘Damn that man. Where is he now?’

‘Are you sure An’ Lawrence was ever here?’ Jarrod asked, scanning the fields. He had to shout to be heard over the crows.

Kali covered her nose when the wind shifted. She pointed with one finger. ‘What do you see out there?’ she asked, her voice muffled by her hand.

‘Murder? Death? Decay? Way too many black birds?’

‘What else?’

‘Stench. It’s revolting.’

‘You can’t see stench.’

‘I can.’

‘Fair enough, but look deeper.’

Jarrod frowned. ‘I know you can’t recognise his footprints from this far away. Even I can’t do that.’

‘Look at the dead.’

‘I’d rather not.’

‘Jarrod, this is no ordinary battle scene.’

The late afternoon sun emerged from behind the clouds, illuminating the field with a rosy glow. The dead were rotting where they’d fallen; from their uniforms, it was clear they were Corsanon warriors. It was a field of red cloaks, broken limbs and horse-trampled dirt.

‘How so, exactly?’ Jarrod asked.

‘The ground’s littered with the fallen but can you see who they were fighting?’

Jarrod’s eyebrows went up. ‘Now that you mention it, I can’t.’

‘This was a one-sided skirmish, Jarrod, and there is only one…or two…’ She frowned, thinking of alternatives before going on. ‘Only one or two Sword Masters who would take on a legion single-handed. The signature of magic is all over this place. There’s been a colossal spell unleashed here. More than one.’ She felt the air with her fingertips.

‘I get that too. You think it was him?’

‘I do, and not long ago.’

‘Long enough for a moderate level of decomposition.’

‘In this heat, it could be less than twenty-four hours.’

‘It’ll get worse.’

Kali narrowed her eyes. ‘I wonder why the dead haven’t been buried? We’re only a stone’s throw from the city.’

‘Maybe the battle’s still going on? A pursuit?’

‘Maybe. In any case, we need to get wind of which way he headed.’

‘He’d want to run fast with the forces of Corsanon after him. They couldn’t have been happy.’

‘What was he thinking? This isn’t even his fight any more, unless…’ Kreshkali whispered the words to herself, rubbing her hands together. The Three Sisters, perched behind her on the escarpment, cawed, their pale blue eyes glistening. See what you can discover, my lovelies. You know who we seek?

They took to the sky. The big man? The Sword Man? they answered her in unison.

That’s the one. Off you go, and mind the crows. No tussles.

No need. We would out-tussle them all.

Sweethearts, there are hundreds of black birds out there and you’re trespassing in their territory. Please don’t start anything.

They cawed out a cheeky retort as they flapped hard to gain altitude. They were larger than the other birds and their progress went unchallenged. For once there was plenty of food to go around.

‘Let’s check that hill.’ Jarrod pointed to the east. ‘The energy signature emanates from there.’

The macabre landscape assaulted them from every side. Bodies, and body parts, were everywhere, twisted at unnatural angles and covered with crows that took flight when they came near then resettled after they passed. Kali swallowed the bile in her throat as she examined the tracks around the small hill. She waved Jarrod closer, pointing
at the ground. ‘What do you make of these?’

Jarrod studied the impressions and frowned. ‘Very large wolf tracks,’ he said. ‘Could it be Lupin?’

‘Possible. And see how they cross here and there?’

‘Two of them at least.’ He sketched another print with a thin stick. ‘This isn’t wolf, though, is it?’

‘Feline,’ Kreshkali said.

‘Scylla?’

‘Too big.’

They exchanged looks but said no more.

‘There were dozens of horses here, all shod. The tracks are too distorted to read.’ Kreshkali swatted a mosquito against her neck. ‘Can you see anything more?’

‘It’s been trampled, crossed and re-crossed. There’s one set of hoof prints that stands out, though.’ Kreshkali smiled. Leave it to a farrier to spot something like that. ‘Which one?’

‘Here. The size gives it away. They belong to a warhorse. The rest of these are light cavalry, but look at this.’ Kreshkali braced her hands on her knees, leaning over. ‘Show me.’

‘It’s the shoeing technique. Three toe-clips, front and back, for extra grip, and heels on the hind hooves, for traction. There’s only one temple I know of that follows that tradition.’

‘Treeon?’

‘You got it.’

‘Treeon,’ she whispered. ‘Can you follow the warhorse’s tracks?’

‘They’re muddled—like a stampede ran past—but we can check the perimeter of the hill. You go left and I’ll go right. Call out if you spot the shoe pattern again.’

Kreshkali headed down the hill, keeping her eyes on the ground. She came up with nothing but Jarrod yelled from the other side of the knoll. When she caught up to him, he was scanning the horizon, pointing towards the northwest.

‘Anything?’ she asked, knowing his eyesight was remarkable.

‘I can’t see through mountains, Kali.’

She squinted. ‘I can’t even see the mountains,’ she said.

‘Send the Three Sisters ahead for a look. They can’t be that far off.’

‘They?’

‘The tracks are fresh. And look here—Scylla’s prints, definitely.’

Kreshkali agreed. ‘And what about these?’ She pointed to another set of tracks, wolf and feline.

Jarrod studied them. ‘It can’t be,’ he said. ‘Rosette’s in Dumarka.’

Kreshkali nodded. A gust of wind blew her cowl back and she let loose a high-pitched whistle. The Three Sisters arrowed towards her. ‘Will you search that way, my sweeties?’ she asked, opening her arm towards the northwest. ‘Find the Sword Master?’

They answered by shooting out across the sky, black wings flapping hard.

‘He’s headed for the Prieta portal, I’ll wager,’ Kali said.

‘What was wrong with this one?’

‘Maybe there was a legion of Corsanons in his way.’ She scanned the ground again. ‘In their way…’

‘We’ll never catch them on foot.’ Jarrod inspected the terrain. He turned a full circle. ‘We need transport.’

‘I can shift and fly ahead but that would leave you behind.’ She wrinkled her nose at the battleground. ‘Not a good choice. They will come to bury this lot.’

‘That’s the only disadvantage to my tulpa body. It still takes me too long to think up a different species.’

She laughed. ‘I could train a pair of green-broke fillies to precision level before that was accomplished. Come on. With all this death, there must be some loose horses around. Spot any?’

‘I’m looking.’

She linked minds with her familiars. Horses, my lovelies? Did you see any without riders?

Many colours and many hues. What would you like?

Sound, sturdy and sensible. She smiled. Black’s always been my favourite colour, of course.

The ravens cawed out their delight, circling in the distance. Pines’ edge. Two. One black as should be, the other golden like the sun.

‘Golden like the sun?’ Kreshkali repeated, her voice a whisper. ‘What time are we in?’

‘You found some horses?’

‘The Sisters have. I can’t spot them from here, but they’re at the edge of the woods.’

‘Got ‘em,’ Jarrod said, shielding his eyes as he stared towards the trees. ‘Don’t know how I missed them. One’s as bright as a gold coin. It looks like they could use some help, too.’
'Injured?'
'I don’t think so but they’ve managed to get their reins caught up in the brambles.'
'They’ve managed to lose their riders too. Be careful. We don’t want to be pulling arrows out of each other’s backs.'

They crossed the battlefield with their swords drawn, sheathing them when they reached the horses. The black mare took to Kreshkali immediately, nickering as she approached.

‘It’s like she knows you,’ Jarrod said.

‘I can’t see how, poor dear. She’s Corsanon-bred. Not bad, though, considering the conditions. Desertwind.’

‘An elegant breed,’ Jarrod said, stroking her arched neck. Her coat was sleek and her black mane long. Her dished face had a thin white stripe down the centre, her brown eyes wide-set and kind.

The mare’s reins were caught at a low angle, anchoring her face to the spines of the blackberry brambles. She was impaled all along her off side, thorns gouging her flesh and scoring the leather of the small military saddle. Kali worked quickly to release the reins, talking in a lilting voice and soothing the animal with a calming spell to ease her stress. Jarrod scanned the woods. There were plenty of victims, no survivors.

‘She’s all right,’ Kali said.

The horse quivered, rubbing her head on Kreshkali’s shoulder.

‘Fine mare.’ Jarrod rested his hand on her crest. ‘Grateful too.’

The other horse was finer still, though not grateful in any obvious way. A tall gelding, the colour of golden poppies, he stood with his eyes rolled back, whites showing, ears pinned and hind legs flying whenever they approached. Jarrod knew they didn’t have time to make friends slowly so he called the horse’s bluff, walking straight up to his shoulder and placing one hand firmly on his withers while the other reached for the reins.

‘Whoa, son. I’m going to get you out of here.’

The horse swung around to bite. Jarrod offered him the flat of his hand, ignoring the aggression. The golden head jerked back; his ears were still pinned, but he didn’t strike again. Jarrod clucked, urging him to take a step forward, acting as if they were old friends out for a Sunday hunt. Jarrod’s manner anticipated full cooperation, and the horse seemed so surprised that he gave it. The gelding stepped closer to the brambles. The reins slackened but even with the extra give, Jarrod found them hopelessly caught. Before the horse lost his patience, he pulled out his knife and cut the leather, keeping a firm hand on the short lengths.

‘I can salvage the rest,’ Kali said, untangling the long ends of the reins. She was going to secure them to the bridle but handed them to Jarrod when the horse bared his teeth. ‘Cranky bastard, isn’t he?’ she said.

Jarrod stroked his cresting neck and picked long thorns from his mane, ignoring the near hind hoof that flashed out at the mare as she was led past. ‘It’s no wonder. He’s a pin cushion. Look at this.’ Blood dripped down the horse’s flank, turning his golden legs and white socks a dirty brown. Both animals had suffered similar wounds; their eyes were sunken, coats spiked with dried sweat, and their gait stilted.

‘They need water,’ Kreshkali said.

‘We’ll be good as long as they’re sound, and it looks like they are.’ Jarrod watched the horses walk. ‘But you’re right. We need to find water before we go anywhere. I wonder how long they were left like this?’ He continued to stroke the gelding’s neck, talking to him quietly.

‘All day, at least.’ Kali scanned the sky. Drinking water for the beasts, lovelies? Can you see any?

Her familiars came winging back, circling for some time before shooting off south. Follow. Not far!

‘It looks like there’s a water hole over that ridge, on the other side of the portal.’

‘It’s the wrong direction, Kali. The tracks all lead the other way—like you said, towards the Prietas.’

‘True, but the Three Sisters say it’s closest. We have to risk it. These horses can’t carry us when they’re so dehydrated.’

‘It may be contaminated. Or guarded.’

‘Let me check.’ Warriors, my lovelies? Do you see any?

None that live.

Clean water too?

Very clean.

‘Apparently it’s not guarded,’ she said aloud. ‘And fit to drink.’

‘I hope you’re right.’ Jarrod led the golden horse, still watching for any signs of lameness in either animal. ‘We best pull their saddles and give them a quick rubdown. No telling where those thorns got to.’

They groomed the horses as best they could with wool swatches cut from a fallen warrior’s cloak. By the time they mounted up, the gelding’s temper had improved somewhat and both animals seemed eager to be away. As the sun dropped towards the horizon they headed out across the field, picking their way around the bodies, following the ravens’ line of flight to the water hole.
Shaea watched the witch and her companion ride away. They were travelling south across the battlefield, searching for fresh water, no doubt. The way they were going, they would find it. The wide rock spring wasn’t far off. They would also find a hundred Corsanon warriors if they didn’t hurry along. Smart as the witch seemed, there was one thing she couldn’t possibly know. Among the dead littering this battlefield, there were no scouts. They’d got away, some to follow the sword-witch on his huge warhorse, and some to take word back to the city. They wouldn’t be long in sending out more troops, that was certain.

Maybe the three ravens would raise a warning. They belonged to her; Shaea could tell. They were guiding her straight to water, just like they’d guided her to the horses. She bristled, frustrated with her own inaction. She hadn’t dared to challenge them, but it rankled to let them ride away, especially on her brother’s charges. She knew it didn’t matter now that he was dead, but it seemed wrong that the horses should be stolen while his body was still warm.

She’d come to him when she had the burning—a pain in her chest that she’d recognised immediately as a cry for help, a cry from her brother. She’d felt it before, years ago when they were young children. He’d fallen from a scaffolding and broken three ribs and his right leg. She’d been on the other side of the city, begging for food, when it hit her. It burned from the inside out. She’d startled and muffled a scream, her small grubby hands slapped over her mouth. She’d scooped up the pennies lying bright in the stained oil rag, shoved them in her pocket and run all the way across the city to find him. He’d recovered that time but she knew the pain when she felt it again. It was a warning. It meant her brother Xane was hurt. And the way her heart had pounded this morning—like it would tear her chest apart—she didn’t think he had long to live.

He hadn’t. Xane was lifeless when she found him, dead without a mark that she could see, save a small arrow in his neck. A Corsanon arrow. How could he have been shot by his own?

She didn’t pull it out. The arrow would be dipped in hemlock, or a faster-working poison. It was not worth the risk to touch it. She buried him quickly, wanting to keep the crows from his face. His beautiful, unseeing eyes were still there, but that was only because he’d covered himself with his cloak. Had he known she would come? Was he saving her from a hideous welcome? How long had he held out, before he slipped away? She would never know.

Once she found his body, her only thought was to bury him, away from the crows and the Corsanon death wagons. There would be no mass burning for Xane, not if she could help it. And she could. She tapped the dirt from her shovel and threw it over her shoulder. ‘Rest well, my Xane.’ Shaea’s eyes filled with tears and she could say no more.

Her twin brother had been a stableboy, apprentice to the master of the Corsanon High Guard. Now he was dead, but she’d always know where his body was. She would have that at least. Shaea looked skyward through the leaves of the white oaks and pines. The sunlight warmed her face, making rainbows of her tears. She had done the ritual, the one they’d promised each other they’d perform if they died apart. He was on his way, alone. She dropped to her knees, choking on the tears. How would she live without him?

They’d been inseparable since birth, as far as she knew. That’s what the old witch Rall had told her. They grew up together in the streets of Corsanon, staying alive any way they could, the hardship of abandonment like a silver cord that bound them to each other. She didn’t remember ever having parents, but of course there had to have been some, at least at first. She understood biology. Parents were necessary. What she couldn’t get her mind around was the fate that had made their lives so brutal.

‘And now this, just when we were on the rise.’ She swiped her eyes with dirty fingers and blew her nose on the hem of her dress. She would pilfer what she could from the fields before the wagons came. And then she would get away. ‘As far away as I can.’

Damn that strange witch for taking the horses. She’d had her eye on the black mare before they’d shown up. She recognised the horse, and would not have left either tangled up in any case. She would even have taken the palomino if it came to it, in spite of his bad temperament. A cranky animal, that one. Of course who wouldn’t be if they were pierced by briars and desperate for water? Poor wretch. She had the skills to handle him. That was no problem. She simply would have preferred the black—a sweet mare, through and through. Now they were both gone and her options for a quick escape with them.

Who the strangers were—the tall witch with the spiky yellow hair and icy blue eyes, and the young man who came so close to spotting her she shivered at the thought—she didn’t know. It had felt like he’d looked right into her bones, giving her almost no time to conceal her energy. She’d done it, though, and remained hidden. It was a risk, but the proximity was worth it. She’d crept up to them, slow and steady, without rustling a leaf or snapping a twig. She’d got close enough to hear their words, strange accents and all. Most of them, anyway. Some of the conversation was meaningless to Shaea but one thing was clear. They spoke of a portal and it sounded nearby. She closed her eyes. ‘We hunt all our lives for a way out, Xane, and now that you’re dead, I find it.’

Not everyone in Corsanon knew of the portals that linked the many-worlds. Most that had heard of them didn’t
believe they were real. She and Xane did, though. She’d learned about them from Rall, a toothless woman, with lava-black skin and eyes the same, who lived in a dead-end alley near the refuse dump. She survived, just, by selling news to the High Guard. Apparently Rall had been a witch of the Corsanon Temple once. She never talked about it and Shaea never asked, but Rall had taken a liking to her and Xane and that was a gift. The witch had taught them things, secret things—things that helped them survive. The magic Rall knew saved Shaea’s life more than once, especially after Xane had gone to apprentice with the Stable Master—when he was no longer there to watch her back. She stared at his grave, her lower lip trembling.

She and Xane had believed they would someday find a portal and get out. They would escape from their life before it consumed them. When Xane was offered the apprenticeship—a miracle in itself—her hopes had risen. Though they were both gifted with animals, it was Xane the Stable Master had spotted the day of the fire and Xane who was offered the job. She closed her eyes, remembering.

The city of Corsanon was dotted with stables and kennels, usually next to inns for the convenience of travellers. Last autumn there had been a fight in the Shek, a substantial inn next to the bakery where they begged. Fights were not uncommon but this one was wild. What caused it she never heard but a table was cleaved in two and an oil lamp with it. When the fire broke out, the men continued to brawl and the place went up like a tinderbox.

Shaea and Xane had heard the screams—horses, mules and dogs terrified by the smoke and heat coming through the stable walls. Onlookers had released the animals. They’d opened the stall and kennel doors but by then the flames were so high the horses wouldn’t budge. They backed into the rails, their heads tossing, whites of their eyes showing. Only the mules pinned their ears and charged through the flames, bucking like broncos when they emerged into the street.

Shaea and Xane acted fast. The heat seared her skin and the thick smoke choked her lungs as she and her brother blindfolded each horse, keeping a calming hand on their necks. One by one they led them to safety. When the High Guard Stable Master arrived, he saw Xane leading out the last mare and nodded his approval. Shaea slipped into the background when they started to talk and before she knew it, he was packed off to begin a five-year apprenticeship with the most respected horse master east of the Prietas. Pride had swollen her heart.

Xane had to pretend he didn’t know her, of course. Corsanon’s homeless were shunned, thought to be diseased, so he lied, making up a story about parents who had come for the Festival of the Five Rivers. Parents who would be proud of his chance to train. They believed him, and they took him on. Though she missed him terribly, it was the best bit of luck in their short lives. Now he was dead, buried in the dirt of the Corsanon Fields, shot by one of their own arrows. What were the odds?

She pushed matted hair from her face and struggled to her feet. Following the path of the witch, she headed south towards the water hole, towards the portal that would lead to the many-worlds.

Kreshkali loosened the reins as the mare lowered her head to drink. The sound of slurping broke the monotonous drone of crows, the horses taking their fill. They’d crested the lip of the water hole with increased enthusiasm and would not be stopped, even for their riders to dismount. Kali vaulted to the ground, her boots splashing in the mud. She patted the glossy black shoulder as the mare’s muzzle glided over the surface of the spring, ripples expanding out from the contact.

‘Apparently this water hole is not guarded,’ Jarrod said, keeping his voice low.

‘Except for him.’ Kreshkali pointed at a kingfisher poised on a branch overhanging the water. The bird took flight as the Three Sisters arrived, retreating to a higher branch. Kreshkali’s eyes went to the horizon but she was too low to see over the crest. ‘Did you hear that?’

The mare lifted her head. Her ears were pricked forward, the last mouthful of water splashing down to the surface as she rolled her tongue over the bit.

‘Someone’s coming.’ Jarrod’s eyes were closed.

‘We can’t gallop off with their bellies full of fluid,’ Kreshkali said. ‘Demons!’ They’d cut it too close, she knew, but the animals had had to be watered. What choice did they have? ‘Suggestions, Jarrod?’

‘We need to do something unexpected,’ Jarrod said, his eyes opening.

‘Like what?’ Kreshkali could feel the rumble in the ground beneath her. They had to get away, and quickly. The agitation of her familiars added to her own.

_They come_, the ravens cawed in unison. _Bright spears and fast running. Fly, Mistress. Fly with us._

_I know, my darlings. Thank you. We’re making a choice now._

‘We could cut An’ Lawrence off,’ Jarrod said, leading the sated gelding up the slope.

Kreshkali followed beside him, scanning for approaching riders. ‘How do you mean?’

‘We could take the portal to the foothills of Prieta and ride back this way. An’ Lawrence has to be somewhere in between.’
‘Interesting. We’d be riding straight into the blades of a hundred warriors,’ Kreshkali said. She tightened the mare’s girth, feeling the horse’s muscles bunch as she mounted. She shortened her reins. ‘And that’s only if we’re lucky enough to come out at the right time.’

‘Still, it seems preferable to trying to outrun this lot.’

‘Can you see them?’ she asked.

‘They’re coming up the ridge.’ He narrowed his eyes. ‘Demon’s death,’ he said under his breath. ‘They’re closer than I thought.’ He mounted up, holding the gelding back as the horse pranced in place, hooves mincing the grass. ‘They’re charging! We won’t outrun them, even with a head start.’

‘What’s it to be?’ Kreshkali followed his line of sight. She could just make them out, coming at full gallop. They’d be spotted any second. ‘The portal?’

‘Looks like our best choice now.’

Kreshkali summoned the Three Sisters who swooped alongside her, wings cutting through the air, voices shrieking. ‘To the portal, my ladies,’ she said to them. ‘Hurry now. Lead the way.’

The horses were uneasy; their sides were raw from the thorns and they were clearly not accustomed to the large birds’ proximity, but they made it to the portal before the riders had them within bowshot. The sheer rock face surrounding the opening shot skyward like a great wall. On the other side was a quarry, the city of Corsanons southern border. If it wasn’t for the portal, they’d be stapled to the wall any second. Kreshkali shivered before nudging the mare forward with her heels, careful not to tap the thorn wounds. ‘Gee up, beautiful. Let’s disappear.’

The Three Sisters swooped into the portal but the mare didn’t move. Her front legs braced, her nostrils flared. The gelding was worse. He shied to the side, backing away when Jarrod tried to urge him onward.

‘They’ve never been in a portal, it seems,’ Jarrod said, keeping his mount from bolting as it spun around. He turned the gelding back, stroking his neck and talking to him. The horse finally stood still but his limbs were shaking. He snorted at the opening between the rocks. The galloping Corsanons were gaining.

‘We don’t have time for this!’ Kreshkali stood up in her stirrups and chanted a calming spell. She directed it towards both animals, feeling the tension in her mare melt away as she did. ‘In we go, no hesitation,’ she said, clicking her tongue. ‘This is a safe place.’ She tightened her legs around the mare and nudged her heels deeper into the horse’s sides. After a single baulk, the horse jumped across the opening as if it were three lengths wide, lifting her hooves with exaggerated steps when she landed on the far side. Jarrod didn’t follow.

‘Demon palomino!’ Kreshkali yelled. ‘Get your horseflesh in here.’

‘That tone’s not helping, Kali.’

An arrow whizzed by Jarrod’s head and bounced off the rock face. He spun his mount around to face a barrage of arrows which fell just short of the mark and backed him into the portal. He kept backing up until the sound of the approaching Corsanons vanished. Soon the echo of hooves on fine gravel and the horses’ laboured breathing was all that could be heard. ‘Do you think they know about the corridors?’ he asked.

Kreshkali leaned over the mare’s shoulder, swiping the plasma stream before she answered. All her focus was on the shape and contours of the portal in the foothills of the Prieta Mountains—their intended destination. It was a day’s ride away as a crow flies—or a blink of an eye through the corridors. If they got there before An’ Lawrence, they could find him easily enough. If he’d already gone through, she hoped there would be a sign left behind offering some clue to his intention. The energy signatures of the Entity remained altered for some time after each pass. She was getting better at reading them. With any luck she’d know where he’d gone. ‘What’s that, Jarrod?’ she asked.

‘Do you think they’re aware of this portal? Will they follow?’

‘Not likely. If they knew about the portals, they would have sent troops on ahead.’

‘Any sign of that?’ Jarrod made to dismount and she stopped him with a warning hand.

‘No Corsanons been through here in ages, I’m certain. But we don’t know what we’ll find on the other end. Best stay mounted. This won’t take long.’

‘What’s going to stop them now? Haven’t we just given away the location of the portal? All ye world travellers come hither?’

‘Good point,’ Kreshkali closed her eyes and called in the Elementals, sending them to the entrance of the crevice as she chanted. She stroked the mare’s neck to keep her still then opened her eyes and smiled. ‘That should fix it.’

‘I’m almost afraid to ask what you’ve done,’ Jarrod said.

She winked. ‘I conjured a bit of a glamour over the entrance. It won’t look like more than a pothole in the road for quite some time. Nobody’s going to be following us today.’

‘Unless they saw us go in.’

‘The riders were too far away, even with hawk-eyed scouts. We’re safe, so you can relax.’ She looked at the
trembling gelding. ‘And then maybe your horse will too. He’s a wreck.’ She sent a further soothing spell to the animals, filling the portal with a warm glowing light.

The horses exhaled and lowered their heads. The mare cocked a hind foot and swished her tail. The gelding stretched his neck down to his knee, rubbing his face on his outstretched foreleg.

‘Thanks,’ Jarrod said. ‘But don’t take it too far. We’re already here.’

Kali waited in front of the portal as the whirl of colours, like the curtain of lights in the far northern skies, dissipated. In front of them was a familiar view—the foothills below the Prieta Mountain Range. The wind swept by her face as she urged the mare forward, only to halt abruptly.

‘Back!’ she yelled as an arrow whizzed by her ear and hit the granite wall behind her. ‘We mistimed it!’

The horses took little encouragement to retreat, but they weren’t fast enough. A shower of arrows fell, one skimming Kali’s shoulder, the others glancing off the rocks. The mare squealed but kept backing. The portal whisked them away. Kali didn’t have time to focus on a new destination.

‘Jarrod! Are you with me?’ She tested her shoulder. No blood. ‘Jarrod?’

‘Over here.’

‘What’s wrong?’

‘You’d better come see for yourself.’

She dismounted and led the mare further back into the corridors. When she found Jarrod, he was leaning over Teg. The Lupin wasn’t breathing.

Shaea stared at the ground. All she could see was a pothole in the rutted wagon track, a deep rent where the wheels of a cart had been stuck. This couldn’t be a door to another world. No way. It wasn’t even a place to hide. A mud worm would have trouble finding shelter here. She examined the area for some other means of escape but nothing came into view save the charging Corsanons. At the sound of a kingfisher, she looked up.

There was a high rock face in front of her, impossible for the horses to climb. They couldn’t have gone that way. The road itself ran north and south and there was no movement for as far as her eye could see, and that was to the horizon, both ways. ‘Where in all the demon’s magic did they go?’ she whispered.

They had vanished in a snap. One minute they were in front of her, the horses baulking when they tried to get them to climb. Idiots. No horse could manage that cliff. When she looked again, after marking the warriors’ approach, they’d vanished. It was like they’d dropped out of sight, falling foot first into the underworld. But nobody could do that, could they? It was only a child’s story—a witch who could disappear into the ground. She twisted around again to gauge the distance of the warriors. Too close! The sun glinted off their drawn swords and she could feel the ground beneath her rumble as the horses thundered towards her. She had to hide, and quickly. The Corsanon troops were out for blood and she had no intention of letting them have any of hers. ‘Damn you, witches! Where did you go?’

She swung the shovel from her shoulder and thrust it into the ground, blinking as a purple light wisped through the air. Before she could investigate, the rumble of the troops turned into shouts. The blow and churn of the horses brought her head around again and she saw how fast they’d advanced. ‘Damn you too, Corsanon pigs!’

If this was a portal, it was shut tight and they’d left her no key. She stomped the shovel with her foot, sinking it deeper into the soil, and started up the cliff, her tattered brown cloak a perfect camouflage. She scrabbled over boulders, pressing herself flat and climbing higher and higher up the quarry wall. They couldn’t ride after her. She was safe from that threat, but their scouts might follow on foot. Of course, their bulk would slow them down, if they could manage at all. No one she’d ever known could climb as well as her, not even Xane. Like a spider, she could find footings and handholds where there were mere juts of rock to grasp. She could squeeze into cracks only a waif of a girl would fit. Her thin, boyish body wouldn’t have made her much on the streets of Corsanon but it was her best friend here. Like the witches she’d been tracking, she vanished, leaving only her shovel behind to baffle them.
CHAPTER 3
TENSAR & CORSANON, GAELA

Shane leaned over the cave pool; his torch illuminated the water. It was a familiar place, the caverns that bordered
the Black Swamp, and the sensation of standing there, peering into the depths of the pool, brought back memories of
his travels with Rosette.

The surface of the water was like a mirror revealing the outline of his body, a silhouette. He couldn’t spot
Selene behind him, but he knew she was there. He could feel her breath on his neck. And what was that sound? Was
she actually tapping her foot? ‘Can you relax?’ he said, his jaw barely moving.

‘Not really.’ Her voice was cool, a contrast to the cave’s sultry atmosphere.

‘Then at least back off.’
She didn’t move. ‘This is our way out?’ she asked. ‘Are you sure?’

He turned to her. ‘I am.’

‘And what if it’s not?’

‘Trust me. It is.’

‘Where does it lead?’

He braced the torch in a nest of rocks and pulled off his shirt, indicating for her to do the same. ‘Last time, it
took us straight to Gaela. It’s a portal, of sorts.’

‘You and Rosette? To her home world?’

‘Where she grew up, yes.’

‘But didn’t it end up being the wrong time? Some kind of unlived past?’

‘Something like that.’

‘So how do we know when or where we’ll come out, Shane? How do we know it will even be Tensar?’

‘We don’t.’ He undid his sword belt and stuffed his clothes into his pack. The water wouldn’t be good for his
flutes and whistles, or his sword, but they’d exhausted every other option. The other portal was gone, a solid wall in
its place, and he knew of no other escape than the cave pool. They had to risk it if they were ever to get out of this
prehistoric world. In all their searching, they had found no settlements and no other human being.

He stood naked, holding the torch over the pool again. Last time there had been fish in the water, blind,
colourless and biting, but now he couldn’t see anything moving in the depths. Had something eaten them? Scared
them away? Had they even evolved yet? He had no idea how far back into the past they’d gone. It wasn’t recent.

When he and Selene had returned to Tensar, their home world, he’d been relieved. The portals had run true.
Selene was thrilled to be back as well, glowing with the new intimacy they’d shared. He sighed. That was until she’d
realised they’d returned to a Tensar millennia before his time. Coming through the portal into the Black Swamp was
the first hint that something was askew. A major ground shaker had destroyed that portal before he’d left but the
Tensar they were in now hadn’t experienced that event—not yet, and maybe it wouldn’t for a million years to come.

An extended exploration had confirmed his theory—no cities, no roads, no people. The only animal life they
encountered was an abundance of strange and varied birds, enormous insects and alarmingly large footprints around
the edge of the swamp. The flora was ridiculously green and healthy, though the trees were not tall and there were
many more ferns than he’d ever remembered—their leaves thick and broad, their trunks laced with dew-dripped
spider webs large as rope. It unnerved him.

Selene didn’t admit to any fear, keeping quiet for most of the exploration, but he had no problems voicing his.
There was something disquieting about finding an untouched valley where a city of thousands had been the last time
he looked. It was like a dream, a nightmare. He shook his head. What had he been thinking, travelling the corridors
without a witch of the blood, without Rosette? Now he was about to do it again.

He knelt by the edge of the pool and tested the water. Better to sacrifice his fingers to a cave predator than his
entire body. Or was it? He drew his hand away.

‘What are you doing?’ Selene’s voice echoed in the cave.

‘Just checking.’

‘For what?’

‘Anything that might nip.’

‘Nip?’

He smiled but she didn’t return the gesture. She stood naked, her sword and pack in one hand, the other on her
hip. Her expression made him cringe, but by the goddess of the night, she did look good. Unfortunately, her mood
made it impossible for him to enjoy the moment beyond an abstract pleasure in her form.

She snarled at him, pointing a finger. ‘If you think I’m getting into that black hole if it’s harbouring vipers,
you’re deranged.’

‘If we stay in this ancient world one more minute, I will be. Come on.’ He held out his hand. ‘I’ll go first. It’s only a few seconds’ swim to the other side. Or it was last time, anyway.’

She didn’t budge.

‘Fine. I’ll be back in a moment.’ He sucked in a deep breath, about to lower himself in.

‘And if you’re not?’

He shrugged, exhaling quickly. ‘You’ll have to find another way out, on your own.’

That changed her expression. ‘Hurry up then,’ she said, taking a step closer. ‘I’m getting goosebumps.’

Ripples expanded across the surface as he lowered himself into the water. The tiny waves raced away, leaping in victory when they reached the far edge of the pool. His body vanished into the black, his head and neck bobbing above the surface like a harbour buoy. Nothing bit off his arms or legs...so far. He dunked, suspecting it couldn’t be much worse than getting his head bitten off by Selene. There was no sign of predators, though in this thick soup he wouldn’t see them coming if there were any. He sucked in another breath and submerged, pushing off from the rock wall.

The darkness engulfed him and all he could think of was how distasteful this would be to Selene. She was a strong swimmer, but in the depths of the mountain cave pool, it was a cold, blind journey and she would hate that. He had an advantage. He’d been this way before, seen where it led. This was the way out; at least it had been in a future he’d already experienced. Focus. Don’t let the mind wander.

He groped along, his hands stretched out to feel the way as he flutter-kicked deeper into the cave. An opening couldn’t be far off. He kicked harder, straining to see light up ahead. There was none. When the first niggling desire to breathe crept over him, he felt it—a tickle of scales sliding past his arm. He swam by it—twice his own length. Bubbles escaped his mouth. He needed air.

With a force that expelled his breath, it slammed him into the rocks. Heat ripped across his side, cutting like knives, jolting his body. The last air bubble escaped his lips and he panicked, the darkness a tomb around him. His eyes bulged wide, desperate for the surface, for light. His hands pressed the vault above him, searching for an opening. He had to get out before that thing came back. He couldn’t see the blood flowing from his wound, but he could feel it warming the water around him. He had to breathe. He turned back; he was kicking hard but his legs barely responded.

His head spun and his body tingled as he sank, too weak to carry on. This was it. Shane MacVenton, master bard, left-hand rank of the T’locity border scouts and many-worlds traveller, was about to die, drowned in a cave pool, filleted by a dark water demon. He tried to imagine the look on Selene’s face when he didn’t return, when the minutes passed and she knew that—even with his massive lung capacity—he could no longer be alive. Would she mourn him? Miss his company? Most likely she’d be venomous at his disappearance. After all, he was abandoning her—her very worst fear, as it turns out. He’d never live it down.

Stop being so dramatic, Shane MacVenton. It’s not as bad as you think.

Shane pulled his head back. What?

Relax. I can get you out of this. Just let go. The words had to be in his head. They were as clear as a high whistle on a sunny day.

You want me to let go?

Exactly.

Help me! I need help. He struggled again at the wall of rock but his hands were unresponsive, doing no more than brushing across the rough stones.

That’s what we’re here for, lad. To help you. Follow.

He didn’t know who was speaking to him but his last glimmer of consciousness locked onto the light ahead of him. He forced his legs to kick and followed the light until the desperation for air made him gulp. As water rushed down his throat and into his lungs, the light faded and darkness swallowed him up.

Rosette ran hard to keep up with Teg. By the goddess, that Lupin could cover ground. He took long, graceful strides, his paws gliding over the rough terrain without a single misstep. Effortless. She’d matched him at first but they’d been running for hours now and the strain began to show—on her, anyway. Her limbs ached, the impact of each paw jarring her spine. She stumbled more than once and imagined the Corsanon warriors releasing a shower of arrows that clanked onto the ground behind her. She was safe enough, out of range, but they were gaining.

Stop thinking about falling, Maudi. It’s not helping.

Her familiar’s voice was like a splash of ice water. He seemed tireless too, like Teg, his sleek body bounding over the ground beside her. Perhaps she would have been better off shifting into a falcon’s form after all. She’d be sitting smugly on the edge of the Prieta Mountain portal by now, watching their approach, cheering them on.
there was something about her new-found power in the wolf’s body that excited her. It felt like a compensation, a solace for the uncomfortable aspects of her pregnancy. In the body of the wolf, she felt none of them. Thanks, Dray. I’ll be all right. How’re you?

I’ll feel better when we’re inside the portal. He’s cutting it quite close, don’t you think?
The Sword Master? He is, and he’d better have something planned for the finale. The warriors are starting to gain.

He does, surely.
Can you ask Scylla what it is? I’d like us all to be in the loop.
You’re scared to ask yourself?
Of course not! She reconsidered. Maybe a little. He isn’t happy with me, particularly in this form, and I’m sure that last order of his…
The one you ignored?
That one. It had something to do with shifting to a raptor and flying out of here.
I’d be scared too, Maudi.

Thanks, Dray. She snarled, a wolf’s laughter. Can you ask Scylla please?

They were running abreast with the warhorse and she could see An’ Lawrence to her left, leaning over the charger’s neck, focused on the portal ahead. Scylla was just in front of him, slackening her pace. Rosette bristled. Why was his familiar slowing down? Drayco? What’s happening?
Rosette kept her focus on the destination—an outcropping of rocks that housed the portal, the gateway to the many-worlds—but in her peripheral vision she could see the warhorse easing back too. She shot ahead, sticking to her pace.

Is he insane?
Perhaps, Maudi. I think he’s going to blast them again so we can all get away.
Another spell? It won’t happen, at least not effectively. He won’t be able to conjure the Elementals on the run like this, exhausted. I know I couldn’t.
He’s going to try, nonetheless.
Wrong choice! She looked back at An’ Lawrence and caught his eye. Don’t do it! It’s too risky. She saw the grim smile on his face. She knew that look.

His mental voice boomed into her head. Rosette de Santo, the last time I checked, you were the apprentice and I was the master. Has something changed that I am not aware of? He drew his sword and eased his horse back.
Nothing has changed in that regard, Sword Master.
Then if I were you, Rosette, I’d be focusing all my energy on getting into that portal. Your pace is letting up. I thought you’d have more stamina.

But I can help with the spell if you just wait. We’ll conjure it together.
And I told you to get into the portal. Odd I don’t see you there yet.

His look changed and she cut off the retort forming in her mind. Instead she called for a final burst of speed and shot ahead of Teg, Drayco accelerating by her side. Her lungs burned with every breath. The air seemed to tear in and out of her throat and her heart pounded so hard she thought it would burst. The dry grass of the foothills shredded beneath her paws, clods of dirt and small rocks flying out behind. The slope increased to a sharp incline and she wrenched her shoulder scrambling up the rise. The horse would have trouble here. Why hadn’t he thought of that? He needed to take the trail to the east—the longer way around.

The realisation worried her, but she didn’t slow down or look back until they were through the portal, skidding to a stop. She braced her forelegs and dropped her haunches to the ground. At the speed she was travelling, it was all she could do to cushion the impact. She slammed into the far wall of the corridor, feeling her shoulder crack as it hit the smooth granite surface. The next thing she felt was Drayco’s body ploughing into hers, knocking the breath from her lungs.

Maudi? Did I bump you?
I need air. She gasped.
Me too. After a few attempts she finally drew a deep breath and with it she gathered the energy it would take to morph back into her human form. ‘Oh, why’d I do that?’ She braced her ribs, still aching from Everett’s ministrations. Her body felt like it had been hammered thin, the edges cracked and brittle. She struggled to sit up, her arm throbbing.

Drayco was panting on the ground, tail lashing. I’m wondering why we’ve done any of this. We could be curled up by a warm fire, tucked away in Dumarka right now. Remind me why we didn’t want that, Maudi?
‘I had the perverse idea the Sword Master needed rescuing, remember?’
I do, and now that the rescue is accomplished, are you ready to go home?
‘Yes, oh yes. I’m ready.’ She rubbed her belly, the smallest bulge pressing at her waist band. It felt like
butterflies were dancing in there. ‘As soon as I have a proper word with An’ Lawrence, we are heading back.’

_I suspect he is thinking the same of us._

She squared her shoulders. ‘I’ve nothing to justify. He vanished and we came looking. Simple as that.’

_What about the part where we disobey the direct request to stay in the Dumarkian Woods and tutor Teg in the star lore while Kreshkali went tracking him down herself?_

‘He doesn’t know that bit, does he?’

_If not, he soon will. Would you deceive him?_

‘No, it’s done. No point trying to paint it different colours.’ She rubbed her arm. ‘Where is Kreshkali, anyway?’

She left before us.’

_Wherever she is, whatever has happened, there is no point worrying._

Rosette stroked the temple cat’s back. He was stretched out like a sphinx and she kissed the top of his head.

‘Well said.’

Drayco purred and she closed her eyes, exhaustion taking over, especially now that she was back in her human form. Her stomach growled. ‘I’m famished.’

_I will hunt for you, Maudi, just as soon as we are away. Is there water, though? I’m thirsty._

‘Good idea.’ She got out her waterskin and took a long swig, then cupped her hand as she poured out a drink for her familiar. When he’d finished lapping, she took her damp hand and stroked the fur of his face, wiping away dust until his coat glistened jet black. She got lost in the depths of his amber-orange eyes for some time before suddenly stiffening. ‘What’s keeping them?’ She stared out the portal entrance.

Drayco’s hackles were up, but he didn’t reply.

‘Drayco? Do you hear something?’

_We’ve heard many things, Maudi._

‘Of course, but do you hear the sound of the others charging into the portal after us?’

He pricked his ears. _I hear the warhorse. Stand back!_

‘Oh crap. Here he comes!’ She struggled to her feet and jumped aside, pressing against the corridor wall as the clip of iron-shod hooves sounded at the entrance. The golden warhorse rushed in, ears back, nostrils flaring. Rosette held out her hand to him, reaching for his reins as he reared, trumpeting a challenge. ‘Easy, big man,’ she said, sending a waft of tranquil energy from her fingertips. ‘We’re safe here. The battle’s over.’

The stallion brought his head around to her shoulder, whiffling in her scent. He did the same to Drayco and fluttered out his breath, clearly deciding all was well. She ran up the stirrups and loosened the girth a few notches.

‘You’ll need water too. Where are the others?’

She went to the edge of the portal, tendrils of energy reaching out to her as she passed. ‘Not yet!’

Too late. The portal blurred, streams of colour racing by.

‘Oh, Dray. Not this again.’

_We’ve left them behind?_

‘You were meant to wait,’ she said to the Entity. Her voice was a whisper, her eyes welling.

_It’s all right, Maudi. I’m sure they would have got through behind us._

Tears fell down her cheeks.

_Why are you so upset?_

She pushed her fists into her eyes and shook her head. ‘I’m not upset.’

His tail snapped the air. _Really?_

‘All right, I am upset, but not really. I mean, I feel waves of emotion at the slightest thing lately. It’s like I’ve turned into a little water-sign child.’

Drayco sat down. _It’s the litter. They always bring up emotion._

‘I wish you would stop calling her a litter. I’m only having one!’

He ignored the emphasis. _In any case, I trust we’re heading for the Dumarkian Woods?_

‘We’d better be.’

_I shall rest until we arrive._

Without waiting for her response, he laid out flat and closed his eyes.

Shaea kept her head down, her body pressed against the rock. She thought of nothing but dirt and shale, willing herself to remain camouflaged. She knew the goddess of good fortune was with her when the captain mounted up again. He stared at the place in the road where she had left her shovel as if looking straight through it. A command was barked, repeated by his second, and the troops charged away at the gallop. Even though there was still no obvious access to the portal, at least she hadn’t been picked off the cliffs like a fly on the wall. There were archers among that party. Thank the goddess she hadn’t been spotted.
Curious, that, she thought to herself. While working her way down towards the hole in the ground where her shovel still rested, buried to the hilt in the mud, she considered her options. It was the first time in her life she had thought of a future alone. Xane had always shared their choices, even the small ones like which alley should they sleep in or how much of the mouldy bread could they eat without getting sick. She laughed to herself as she moved from grip to grip. It turned out that they had eaten the whole loaf, green fuzz and all. When it hadn’t hurt them, they made a practice of it. She suspected that was why they were the only ones on the street didn’t get consumption every winter.

‘There’s something in the mould,’ the old witch Rall had said, her lips revealing a toothless grin. ‘You put the right one in the brew and the sickness is banished.’

‘What if you put the wrong one in?’ Shaea had asked.

‘Eat the wrong one?’ She’d laughed. ‘You die.’

Shaea wondered what would have happened if she’d got to Xane in time, if she could have saved him from his wound. She shook her head. There was no blood left in his body when she’d found him. His life had been drained clean out. ‘Demons!’ she screeched.

The footing gave beneath her and she dropped, saved only by her right arm. Her fingers dug into the tiny cracks, a miniature ledge in the rock. It held her weight until she could find purchase again. She thought her shoulder would come straight out of the socket before she finally managed to thrust her toe into another chink. Focus, Shaea!

Keeping her mind on the descent, she shimmied her way down the cliff and jumped the last few feet to the causeway below. The mud splashed her legs and sucked at her thin-soled boots. It oozed between the stitching and chilled her bare feet.

She stepped up to the shovel, rubbing her hands together and blowing into them. This was it. It was either figure out the secret to the portal or go back to the streets. She jingled her pockets. She had enough gold to get out of the city now, but she’d never get a coach dressed the way she was. She’d have to clean up. Her brow wrinkled. She wasn’t completely sure how to go about such a task.

She gazed towards the west where the riders had gone. There was no sign of them. The only thing around was the brightly coloured kingfisher perched on a dead branch. ‘What’re you looking at?’ The bird flew off towards the high towers of Corsanon and Shaea returned to her problem. ‘And what’s your secret, little door? I can understand hiding from the warriors but surely you can let me through. I’m just a girl.’

There it was again—a kind of ripple of energy, like someone had thrown a stone into a pond. Only this was no pond and the ripple had a purple hue.

You are not just a girl, and I am no ordinary door.

Shaea jumped, her eyes wide. She looked behind her, searching for the source of the sound. Slowly her head turned back to the mud hole. ‘What did you say?’ she asked the ground, the air barely passing over her lips.

You referred to me earlier as a little door and I found that somewhat condescending. Same goes for you as a ‘girl’. If you want passage into the corridors, you’ll need to reappraise yourself.

‘Demon guts and bile, you can talk?’

That wasn’t the improvement I was anticipating.

‘Huh?’ She scratched her head. ‘I have no idea what you’re on about, but I need help. I’m desperate. Will you let me pass? I bear no harm, nor do I harbour any guile.’

Shaea wasn’t certain what ‘guile’ was but she remembered Rall talking about the Entities, guardians of the portals. She’d remembered every word, the story had impressed her so. Rall had a chant for it that she repeated to herself late at night. Shaea closed her eyes and said the words as she had heard them.

‘Round the worlds, worlds round. Found the entrance, entrance bound. Who shall pass, pass not with guile. Who shall try, shall only fail…’ She never heard the rest of the evocation as Rall would mumble it to herself. But when Shaea opened her eyes, the little rent in the ground was gone and before her was a crevice, an opening that led into a cave. With a deep breath she stepped forward, the tendrils of purple light dancing out to touch her arm. It stopped her sharply, a searing pain.

Not so fast, Shaea of Corsanon. Bring me the witch Rall. I must see her before I can let you through.

‘Rall? You want me to bring you Rall? But she’s…’ Shaea’s words were cut short and she was thrown backward, smacking her tailbone hard on the ground. The crevice had vanished and so had her shovel. Mud seeped over the pothole without a sound.

She rubbed her backside. ‘You want Rall that bad, do you? Just don’t go away. I’ll fetch her, though how I’m going to get that old witch out of the city is more than I can think of.’ Shaea studied the pothole. ‘Any suggestions?’ When there was no reply, she let out an oath and kicked the ground.

She huffed. It was a good hour’s climb to the top where the huge tunnel drains led back into the city. In wet weather they ran full, the effluence plummeting down to the quarry sluices that seeped out into the fields. Fortunately,
it was the dry season, more or less, and the way clear. She headed south, preparing to climb the ancient quarry stairs—a safer path than the cliff face, but less direct. On her way up the broken steps, she pondered what to say to Rall. How would she convince the old woman to come, and what would she say when she returned without the witch’s shovel? She’d borrowed it this morning with the idea of digging for wild yams at the edge of the Corsanon Fields. That was before she felt the burning pain, before her brother had died. Darkness swept over her face. What would she say when she returned without Xane?
Grayson folded his sketches and tucked them back into his notebook. He’d been staring at them for so long the images were starting to jump off the page. They were unusual animals, arranged in a stylised totem that Rosette had described some time ago. It was her idea for a new work, one that she would receive when she finished her apprenticeship. He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. A while back?

It was almost a year ago now. They were at Treeon Temple, sitting in the apple orchard, finding shade from the summer sun. She’d told him about a dream she’d had and the animals that featured in it. They hadn’t had time to discuss it further. He hadn’t even shown her the sketches. When they last talked, the topic was on other concerns—mainly his desire to pull back from their ‘relationship’. He clicked his tongue. It was hardly a relationship by his standards. Gaean witches had different ways.

A knock on the door brought his head up.
‘Enter.’ He reached for a pen.
‘Am I disturbing you?’ Hotha stood in the doorway, Fynn squeezing past.
The young dog made to jump up but Grayson held out the flat of his hand. ‘Sit, lad. I’m working.’ Grayson closed his notebook and scratched Fynn behind his ear. He turned to Hotha. ‘Just finishing up for the morning.’
‘You’re usually so busy I have to wait in line to catch you,’ the Lupin said, his voice light.
He might as well have been talking about the weather but Grayson knew he had something more on his mind. ‘Someone’s coming in after lunch but I’m free now.’
Hotha pulled out a chair and sat, resting the side of his head on the palm of his hand. ‘I’m gathering news,’ he said. ‘And it’s not shaping up into what I’d anticipated.’
Grayson waited for him to go on.
‘I thought you might know something…more.’
‘More than what, Hotha?’
‘More than what I’ve heard from Dumarka.’
Grayson tucked his notebook under the bench. ‘Is it Rosette? She’s having trouble settling in?’
Hotha shrugged. ‘You don’t know more then?’
Grayson shook his head. ‘What’s happened?’
‘I’m not certain.’ Hotha’s eyes wandered as he took in the rows of coloured bottles on the shelves. He picked one up, turning it around in his hand. It was a brilliant pansy violet.
Grayson took the bottle out of his hand and returned it to the shelf. ‘Has something happened to Rosette?’ he asked.
Hotha hesitated.
‘Just tell me what you do know, please.’
‘Maka’ra was meant to be there, at the cottage in Dumarka with Rosette and Teg.’
‘Teg is with her?’
Hotha smiled. ‘She’s teaching him star lore and Earth literature and he’s…well, he’s babysitting, though I don’t imagine he’d complain. Rosette’s…’
‘Babysitting?’
‘Well, that’s not how I’d put it to them, of course, and it’s not completely descriptive. They are advancing in their craft and looking after each other.’
The furrow between Grayson’s brows deepened. ‘I don’t follow.’
‘Teg was my apprentice originally and I’ve wanted to keep a close watch on him, with Kreshkali gone. Teg’s looking after Rosette and Maka’ra’s checking up on them both.’
‘I don’t see the problem or, quite frankly, the need. She can look after herself.’
‘Of course, but it seemed a sensible precaution, if a bit overprotective. The thing is, we got word from Maka’ra. Nobody’s there.’
Grayson stood up, his chair scraping the tiles as it slid back. He began straightening his instrument shelf. ‘What do you mean? Annadusa delivered her last week. She told me…’
‘She did escort them there, but the cottage is empty now. I sent a scout from Los Loma Prieta and they confirmed it. No sign of them, not even a note.’
‘Horses?’
‘Grazing in the paddocks.’
‘They could have been out gathering herbs or…’ Grayson rubbed the back of his neck.
‘My scout waited three days.’
‘That would be a long excursion. What’s your guess?’
‘I think Rosette and Teg took off to find An’ Lawrence.’
Grayson nodded. ‘There’s your answer then, and it makes sense. I never worked out why she didn’t go in the first place. I can’t imagine her stepping aside like that, with the Sword Master missing.’
Hotha shook his head. ‘She knows she’s in no condition to travel the corridors, otherwise she would have gone with Kali, certainly.’
Grayson was about to question him further when Fynn jumped up, barking. There was a knock on the door. A message runner stuck her head in.
‘Maluka,’ Hotha and Grayson said as one. Fynn wagged his tail.
‘What’s got you all so jumpy?’ she asked. ‘I’ve only come to announce lunch.’ She spoke smoothly but her face was red, beaming. ‘We’re serving on the veranda.’
‘I won’t be long,’ Grayson thanked her and turned back to Hotha. ‘What were you saying?’
‘I was hoping Rosette had let you in on her plans,’ Hotha said, standing up, and touching the tops of the ink bottles as if they were delicate flowers.
Grayson walked him to the door. ‘We didn’t talk much about…her plans.’
Hotha looked surprised. ‘I’ll let you know if I hear anything.’
They shook hands and Hotha turned to go. Grayson felt a strange sensation in the pit of his stomach. ‘Wait.’ He pulled him back. ‘What did you mean when you said she was in no condition to travel the corridors? Is she not recovered completely from cryo?’
‘Oh, she’s well recovered.’ Hotha stood in the doorway, his head tilting. ‘You don’t know about the restriction on corridor travel?’
‘If I did I wouldn’t be asking.’
Hotha grinned. ‘The pregnancy, of course. It’s a bit of a wild card, hopping about in the corridors while gestating. Didn’t she mention?’
Grayson willed his knees not to fold. He shook his head.
‘I’m surprised.’
‘It’s dangerous for her?’ He didn’t know how he was still standing.
‘Apparently it can be. She’s travelled the corridors so much this year, there’s no knowing when she conceived, or when the little girl’s due.’
‘The little girl,’ Grayson whispered.
‘We can’t have her going into labour in some other world or some other time.’
Grayson forced himself to nod. ‘Of course not.’
‘We’re all very excited about this. Aren’t you?’
‘Thrilled, of course.’
‘The line goes on.’
Grayson smiled. ‘So it does. Such a relief.’
Hotha thanked him again for his time and left. Fynn stayed behind, looking up at Grayson.
‘What?’ Grayson stared back. ‘I suppose you knew too? And Annadusa? Am I the last to hear the news?’
Fynn’s tail thumped on the floor, his brow twitching. Grayson returned to his workbench and took a swig from his waterskin before sinking into his chair.
‘Rosette,’ he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

Shaea skirted the tall cliffs until she came to the old stairs. Who had built them, she had no idea. They were in ruins, wasting away, the corners rounded and whole sections broken apart. The ground was eroded where water and sewage had run in torrents, making the steps stand out like teeth—an old jawbone of some giant herd beast, jutting out of the cliff. They were hard to climb, harder still to get down, but it was better than coming into the city by the main gate, especially with what she had in her pockets. Pilfering the dead was a hanging offence.

Halfway up the climb, she was on her hands and knees clinging to rocks buried beneath silt baked to a fine powder. The stairs had disappeared in this section and she was clawing her way up. Sweat trickled down her face as she scrambled. It was hard to find a grip and the bottom was far below, a deep ravine. If she went over the edge her body would break like a fine porcelain teacup, chips flying off in different directions. When she reached the top of the next step, she turned around and sat, brushing the black powder from her hands and knees. She stroked the polished surface of the step as if it were a workhorse.

It felt smooth under her calloused fingers, cool to the touch and soft like a baby’s hair. Xane had said the stairs were solid granite, hewed by master sculptors, the same ones who had made the statues at the city’s gate. She’d told
him he was full of dung, that it couldn’t be true. Those statues had come as gifts from Dumarka when Corsanon first hosted the Fire Festival and that was back not more than five generations. Besides, the statues weren’t worn, not like these steps. The stairway beneath her had come from a much earlier time, from an earlier people. He’d laughed and said she was dreaming. Maybe he was right.

She grabbed her shins, tucking them into herself. The view from this height was extraordinary, a rare sight for eyes that usually rested on garbage pails, pigswill and street filth. Even though her life had improved since Xane was taken on by the Stable Master, the furthest distance she usually gazed was down the next alley, or across a row of rooftops in the moonlight when she and Rall performed the lunar rituals. She pushed a long tangle back from her face and scratched her ear. Xane had made her life more bearable, though his absence erased that now. He was gone forever: no extra food and no coins. No Xane. How would she live?

She rubbed her eyes with balled fists. Would Rall come? Could the old witch make it down these stairs, even if she agreed to meet with the Entity? Rall had to be a great-great-grandmother by now. Her gait was unsteady and her fingers like gnarled twigs. They shook whether she used them or not; the tattoos on her hands were faded, indistinguishable from the dark veins and discoloration. She walked with a cane—when she could get around at all—and there seemed to be little strength in her limbs. Her back was hunched, her face sagging. After a lifetime of poverty there wasn’t much left of her. Only her mind remained open, sharp and expansive, like this view. ‘How in demon’s death will I get you to the portal?’

As Shaea resumed her climb, slipping several feet before finding a grip again, she realised the front gates would be the only way, preferably in a cart. She stood up for the next flight of stairs, keeping her centre of gravity low. On her left the water had cut a huge gorge. It still flowed, only a trickle at this time of year, all the way to the depths far below. Clods of dirt and rock broke loose when she passed. They tumbled over the edge but it was too far down to hear the splash when they hit bottom. She kept her eyes up, thinking only of her destination and her dilemma.

With the valuables she had in her pockets, she could hire a cart but questions would be asked. A street girl like herself, and a toothless old witch, would not have the money to travel. They’d be interrogated. Taken in. She couldn’t let that happen.

Maybe Rall would have an idea, or a vision. With food in her belly and a hot bath, Rall might have the energy for a glamour. She said she could still conjure one. Shaea thought it might be time to put that claim to the test.

The thought of washing with hot water made her smile. She’d always been filthy; it was her way of life. At first, there was no one to care for her enough to keep her clean, and later, when she could have done it herself, she chose not to. She stank like a latrine, her hair was infested and her body covered in scratches and scrapes. Her front tooth was chipped, her lips cracked, but her eyes were vivid, magnificent. She knew they were, because Rall said so. She didn’t lie about such things.

But Shaea and Xane had agreed to hide their looks. They’d concealed their lovely faces, their bright eyes and their lithe bodies under the armour of filth. Any appeal remained occult, and they found ways to live without using it. When Shaea looked at the girls and boys who sold their bodies on the streets—the ones who had food most days and a bed of sorts to sleep in, the ones who had water to wash with and kept their faces clean, hair untangled—she wondered if it had been the best choice. When she saw them in the morning after a bad night’s work, she knew it was.

Her grime was her best friend and it had been Xane’s too, until he got the apprenticeship. After that it shocked her to see him, fresh, neat, smelling of pine chips and newly cut hay. His hands were still calloused but they were usually clean, even the fingernails. He’d filled out too, no longer looking like a rake with rags hanging off it. She knew he tried to hide his repugnance of her condition, and his guilt, now that he lived a different life, but it showed through all that cleanliness like a beacon. It should have been me, shot in the neck. I should have died, not you, Xane. You had the potential. Should?

Rall said there was no should. Funny, coming from such a haggard witch. She sighed, her pace slowing. Her repulsive appearance was her only companion in the world now that Xane was gone. What would replace it when she cleaned up?

By the time she reached the top of the steps, she was slick with sweat and black silt, the stink rising from her skin like the vapours off a tallow pot. She headed for the main drain, a mosaic tunnel that bore straight through the mountainside and into the city. It was dark, the tiles slimy, with only a distant glimmer of daylight at the other end to guide her. Sometimes it would be blocked with mesh to keep out the rats, but not today. Thank the goddess.

She waded through the brown water towards the heart of Corsanon. It was waist high at one point but she was lucky. It didn’t get any higher, though the water was cold, the surface oily. Goosebumps rose on her arms and the weight of her treasures slowed her down as she trudged. Her skin was blue and her limbs shivering by the time she
climbed out. She slunk away, keeping to the shadows, heading for her familiar alley.

Finding Rall was easy. The woman never ventured far from her spot on the corner—her begging place, she called it. It was near the bakery and served a dual purpose. Stale bread was tossed into the bins at random times and Rall was always close to hand. She had to be. Her lameness made it difficult for her to compete for the crusts—often they were gone before she could stand. But she was a witch and that kept others from knocking her back. It also paid to beg near the exit. People with warm bread in their baskets and small coins in their hands were more likely to toss a halfpenny her way.

Shaea spotted Rall sitting on the footpath, her back against the brick building. She was chewing on a small bit of mouldy bread and seemed not to notice her approach. Shaea sat beside her, wet and shivering.

‘Get any yams?’ Rall said, tearing off a chunk of bread and handing it to her.

‘I’ve got more than that.’ Shaea jingled her pockets and the old witch’s eyes widened.

‘You’ve been pilfering?’

‘I have.’

‘Where?’

‘The fields below the quarry. There’s been a battle.’

Rall closed her eyes. ‘There’s news that goes both ways, good and bad. I felt it when I woke. What’s happened, girl?’

‘Xane’s dead.’

Neither spoke for some time.

‘As are others, by the sound of your pockets,’ Rall said. ‘Did you bury him?’

‘I did.’

‘My shovel?’

‘I can get you another.’ Shaea’s body shook and Rall put her arm around her shoulder. The traffic on the street increased, but most people passed by as if the two of them were invisible.

‘It’s not as I thought, but fate just the same,’ Rall said. ‘What else? You’re bursting with something.’

Shaea dropped her voice to a rough whisper. ‘I’ve found the portal.’

Rall hissed. ‘Are you sure, lass?’

‘I am, and I’ve got enough trinkets to get us out the front gates.’

Rall stiffened. ‘We can’t go like this.’

‘I’ve got enough gold to fix that, too. Come on.’ She stood, hauling Rall to her feet and propping her cane in her hand. ‘We’re getting a room, a bath and a meal, and then we’re getting out.’

When Rall looked back at her, there was a shine in her eyes that Shaea had never seen before. She shivered again, but this time not from the cold.

An’ Lawrence watched Rosette and Drayco disappear into the portal. He exhaled. It felt like he’d been holding his breath since she’d arrived. How he could care so much about someone who gave him constant discomfort, he didn’t know. Kali called it parenthood, but he shook his head at that. They’d both missed out on raising their daughter. He didn’t feel any more parental towards her than he did towards his other apprentices. He thought it was their chemistry, a strange brew. They were oil and water, trickster and fool, and he never knew which one of them was which. It changed all the time. Now that he had her safe in the corridors, he could concentrate on this rabble, and he could get the Lupin away from her. What was Kali thinking, mentoring them together? He wouldn’t have it.

‘Not you!’ he yelled to the Lupin who scrambled up the cliff face behind Rosette. ‘I need you here.’

Teg skidded to a halt and doubled back.

An’ Lawrence frowned. He had to admit he was impressed at the Lupin’s response—no discussion, query, rebellion or flack. Nothing like Rosette. It almost made him feel guilty about keeping him behind. Almost. He knew there was a thin chance of getting them both out unscathed at this point. He had superior magic and sword skills but the odds were against them, at least one hundred to one.

Two, Teg said, his mental voice undaunted.

Three, Scylla added.

An’ Lawrence nodded. ‘Three to a hundred it is.’

The plan, Sword Master?

‘We’re going to blast these Corsanon warriors back to their city. Teg, get the stallion into the portal and guard the entrance. No one gets through. You got that?’

No one gets through.

An’ Lawrence knew it was a lot to ask. Teg would be an easy target for the archers in human form, the shape he’d have to take to manage the horse. If he was hit, his chances for survival were low. In wolf form, Lupins were
near impervious. He ought to know: he’d battled the demons.

Teg morphed, stepping up to take the reins as An’ Lawrence dismounted. Their eyes met briefly and then Teg led the horse towards the corridor at a trot, not pausing to run up the stirrups which clanked at the horse’s sides. The animal’s ears were pinned back. It would be tough going, getting the stallion up the grade. An’ Lawrence tossed a calming spell their way and turned back to the charging warriors.

He had to be quick or they’d be skewered. He had no intention of dying here in some other-time Gaela, stuck by a Corsanon he’d well and truly defeated in the past—his past, anyway. He didn’t want Teg getting stuck either. Kreshkali had taken a shine to him and even though it rankled, he felt it best to bring the Lupin back in one piece. As for his familiar, he would protect her with his life. Into the portal, Scylla. I’m right behind you.

An’ Lawrence took a fraction of a second to still his mind, releasing the conflicting thoughts. He drew in his breath and with it he called on the four Elementals—Fire, Gaela, Air and Water—filling his body with sparks and snaps of energy from each. He contained its building mass until an arrow fell just short of his foot. It was too soon to release the spell. He knew it instantly. Cut loose now it would lack the volume needed to bowl over this many, but he was out of time. He let the spell rip, like an invisible shock wave radiating out from his centre. As it sped away, he turned to race up the cliff to the portal. He didn’t bother to look back and see the results. He could tell from the shouts and hoof beats that the effect was minimal.

You knocked down the front row, and tripped up the second. Teg’s report was not encouraging. And the rest? They come. Run!

An’ Lawrence scrambled up the cliff face, his sword sheathed as he made his escape. Arrows fell around him, one grazing his hand as he reached high to pull himself up the incline. He was nearly there. One more foothold and a clasp of Teg’s outstretched hand and they’d be safe.

Quickly, Rowan. The arrows! Scylla’s voice screamed in his mind. To the portal, lovely, he commanded his familiar. I follow.

You’re nearly there, Teg said. Keep climbing!

An’ Lawrence heard the whiz and thwack before he registered the pain. His hand slipped out of Teg’s grip. Run, both of you! Get away!

A searing cold snaked its way from his leg, up his spine and to his head. He wanted to scream but he fell to the ground instead, sliding down the length of his hard-won advance. He tried to connect to Scylla but his mind blurred. He lost all sense of where he was, what he was doing and whom he was with. He slid further down the embankment before he felt the hands clutching at him, grasping and dragging. He was hoisted like a sack of feed, but he couldn’t tell which direction he was taken. He opened his eyes. Dull shapes surrounded him, blurring into darkness. There were voices in his head, but the language was foreign. He made one final attempt to struggle free but it was feeble, a child’s fist against a warrior’s chest. He gasped at the pain as something struck his head. Scylla screamed and he passed out.

Teg had managed to get the horse through with only a few scrapes. He’d worried when the animal stumbled to his knees but the stallion continued on without a limp, thank the goddess. Amarillo’s heart, it seemed, was as golden as his hide. He slapped the warhorse’s rump as he sent him through the portal, hoping the Entity would keep him safe until he returned with An’ Lawrence. He hadn’t had time to warn Rosette that the beast was charging in but he didn’t dare wait. The Sword Master was about to be ambushed.

There was no way An’ Lawrence could do much to slow the Corsanon warriors in such a short time. He wouldn’t be able to conjure a potent enough spell in the few moments it would take for them to be in range. Even if Teg contributed, the arrows would be on them soon enough. Sooner. The archers fired, their stings landing not far from the mark.

He watched the wave of energy emanating from the Sword Master. He’d released it too soon. It was a ripple over the top of a pond when what they needed was a tidal wave. Teg scuttled down the embankment, greeted by arrows clanking to the ground. They’d gone wild with that blast, small as it was, but the archers would refit their bows. Nothing would stop their accuracy the next time.

Teg was desperate to shift into wolf form, but he needed his human hands to help An’ Lawrence up the cliff. He anchored himself to a twisting shrub and reached out, ready to grip the Sword Master’s arm. Scylla paced at the top of the cliff, roaring before she leapt into the portal.

You’re nearly there, Teg said. Keep climbing! He gripped his hand.

An’ Lawrence let out a curse seconds after the sickening thud. Teg watched helplessly from his perch as the Sword Master slid down the cliff face. Without thought, Teg morphed into wolf form and leapt down after him, his teeth bared, back bristled. He may not be able to haul him to safety, but he could keep the Corsanon warriors back.
The arrows that hit him stung like demons, but they did not penetrate his Lupin skin. Many warriors fell before he saw the club. When it came down on his head, he saw nothing at all. Blinded, he leapt to the top of the cliff, falling unconscious in front of the portal.

When Teg awoke, it was night and the sky was filled with stars. They twinkled against the dark vault and he smiled, recognising the constellation called the Lion of Ishtar. Was it summer then? The ground felt so cold, but the hand on his forehead was warm and tingling with energy. It soothed him like a sweet song and he needed that. His head ached as if blacksmiths were pounding their way in, or out.

A conversation murmured in the background, like a small waterfall. He didn’t try to make out the words but let the sound wash over him as he watched the gleaming stars. Slowly a single voice distilled out of the babble and he recognised the speaker. It was her. Kreshkali. That confirmed it. He wasn’t dead.

'That’s correct, Teg. You’re not dead, but you may wish it before I’m through with you.’

He flinched. ‘Mistress?’ His tongue felt thick and dry.

‘I’ve got one question, Teg. If you want to keep your apprenticeship, you’d best have a sharp answer.’

He swallowed. ‘Yes, Mistress?’

‘Where is Rosette?’

Teg frowned, searching his memory. Nothing surfaced immediately. Like floating puzzle pieces, all the fragments were there, but not in the right places. He started with the only thing he was sure of, hoping the rest would follow. He cleared his throat. ‘We ran into the corridor, ahead of the arrows. Then the Sword Master called me back.’

‘The Sword Master? You found An’ Lawrence?’

‘We did. At the Corsanon Fields. There was a battle. The numbers were a little lopsided.’

‘So we gathered. What happened next?’

Teg frowned. He couldn’t find a piece to fit this shape. ‘I don’t know. I got the warhorse through, Scylla shot past, I think. She came back out, and then…I don’t really remember what happened.’

‘And what about Rosette?’

The question came in even measures, devoid of emotion. It would be easier if she had yelled. Her cool detachment was much more unnerving.

‘They were ahead.’ He coughed, rubbing his chest. ‘She and Drayco are safe in the corridors. They have to be.’

‘And the archers? Did any find their mark?’

Teg wrinkled his brow again. Someone was hit. Who was it? He scanned for the answer, shifting the question around in his mind. ‘One did.’ He closed his eyes against her urgency, her anger. She grasped his biceps and shook him.

‘Who got hit, Teg? Tell me now! Was it Rosette?’

‘Easy, Kali,’ a deep voice said.

For a moment Jarrod came into focus, his hands prying loose her grip. Teg felt the blood rush back into his arms. How long had she been clutching him?

‘He has a concussion, Kali,’ Jarrod said. ‘You don’t want to rattle his brain any worse than it already is.’

‘He has no brain to rattle. If he did, he wouldn’t be here.’

‘I’m sorry, Kali. I’m so sorry.’ Teg sent the message to her mind with all his heart.

‘Apology not accepted,’ she said aloud.

‘Kali, he’s not the first apprentice to take action on his own. He’s…’

‘Why are you defending him?’ She turned on Jarrod. ‘He risked Rosette. He risked you, for that matter, and the future of Earth.’

‘I did what?’

‘There. You see?’ Jarrod said. ‘It wasn’t intentional. He has no idea what’s at stake.’

‘We followed, is all.’ Teg’s strength was coming back. He tried to rise. ‘Rosette and I got to Dumarka and it felt wrong. We came here to help.’ His voice trailed off, not so much because of the pain but because of the weakness of his argument. He and Rosette had ignored the direction of their mentor, their High Priestess, for no other reason than they didn’t want to be left behind. Teg groaned again. How could he redeem himself?

Kreshkali paid no attention to his discomfort, though she kept her hand on his forehead. Her words carried an edge, but her touch was soft. It was the longest she’d ever held him, he thought, realising his head was in her lap.

‘And where is An’ Lawrence?’ she asked. ‘His signature is all over this mess but I can’t trace him.’

‘He’s…’ Teg forced himself to concentrate. Where was the Sword Master? They had run with him from the battlefield near Corsanon all the way to the foothills of Prieta. It was coming back to him, their wild escape. Rosette and Drayco got into the portal but An’ Lawrence had stopped him. He conjured the spell, releasing it too soon and
then…‘Shot,’ Teg said, blurt it out.

‘What?’

‘The Sword Master was shot and the Corsanon warriors took him away.’

Shane couldn’t believe his eyes. He blinked, closing his lids then opened them wide again. A kelp garden? He was weightless, buoyed up by the liquid around him. His toes barely touched the sandy bottom and he felt himself drifting along as if in a dream. Tiny fish swam inches from his face, clinging to each other in close-packed schools. When he reached towards them, they darted away, all turning in the same direction as if guided by a single mind. That confirmed it: definitely a dream. Either that or he was drunk. Perhaps it was both.

Everything was soft, blurry; a landscape ringed by underwater plants. They undulated around him, dancing to an invisible breeze. He gripped a rock, resisting the pull. Reeds were bent at an angle, shaped by the current. Was it getting stronger? The plait at the nape of his neck streamed out to the side, longing to escape. He guessed it would be best not to breathe but, strangely enough, he had no inclination to.

Brightly coloured fish emerged from the rocks—yellow with blue dots, black with white stripes—or was it the other way around? White with black stripes? In any case, they looked like banded saucers with bulging eyes and transparent fins. It was the most peculiar, wondrous experience—watching them navigate in the current. It had to be a dream, though if it was, he was in no hurry to wake up. He let go his grip, pushing off the bottom, exploring, smiling, until it all came to a stop.

Something gripped his shoulder, clamping like a vice. He rolled away from the grasp and kicked hard. He couldn’t see the lovely gardens any more. It was dark, murky and cold, the rapids dragging him over rocks. Again the attacker grabbed him, this time with two hands, and before he could get away they yanked him upward, pulling him into a pale light. When next he opened his eyes, Selene was sitting astride him, pushing on his chest. Water came up out of his lungs and she rolled him over, thumping his back none too gently.

‘Breathe, you idiot!’ she said, slapping him hard between the shoulder blades. ‘Breathe!’

Her hand against his wet skin stung like a cactus. He coughed and choked, trying to push her away as he braced himself for another blow. It fell hard, pressing his cheek into the ground. He went into fits of coughing. ‘Leave off, woman. I’m breathing.’

She sat next to him, her arms crossed. ‘You weren’t when I found you, so stop grumbling and thank me.’ She pressed her fingers into his jugular vein, feeling his pulse. ‘I just saved your life.’

Shane pushed her hand away. ‘I wasn’t dead. I remember fish. Brightly coloured little things and the most lovely kelp gardens.’

‘Then there are fish on the other side of life because you, my friend, were dead. Unconscious, anyway. Why didn’t you just swim up? You were under the opening.’

‘What opening?’

‘This one.’ She waved her hand. ‘Look around. We’re out of the mountain and…somewhere else.’

He drew in a deep breath and exhaled slowly, the action no longer sending him into sputtering fits. ‘Where else?’

‘See for yourself.’

He propped up on his elbows. They were in a meadow fringed by unrecognisable trees, their thick trunks sprouting twisted branches and small prickly leaves. The grass beneath him was clover green with white flowers. A few bees hovered, alighting on the blossoms briefly before moving on to the next. Slender willows swayed overhead, filtering the sun and creating shifting patterns. The air was filled with the warble, cluck and chitchat of dozens of birds. A river ran past, a short distance from his toes. He wiggled them, blue shrivelled nubs. He sat up, tucked his feet underneath himself and straightened his back, wincing at the pain in his side. ‘We came out of there?’ he asked, pointing at the rushing water.

The opposite bank was further away than he could throw a stone. It looked dark and still in the centre but the edges bubbled, white water flowing around the rocks.

‘I did. You had to be rescued.’ Selene avoided his eyes.

‘How did you manage it?’ He shivered.

‘I dragged you. Come on. Let’s get into the sun. We need to warm up.’

‘Where’re my clothes? My pipes! Didn’t you get them?’ He looked around, seeing nothing on the shore but grass and sand. ‘Annadusa gave me those instruments. I can’t leave them behind.’

Selene stood naked in front of him. ‘Be grateful you’re alive to play another tune, bard.’

He reached for her outstretched hand and struggled to his feet, his face contorting. ‘You lost them? You lost my flutes, my clothes…my sword.’

She let go of his hand and he fell back to the ground. ‘Don’t be stupid. They aren’t lost. They’re down there, in
the depths of that rushing river, or perhaps at the bottom of the cave stream. You go right ahead and look for them, if you want to so badly. Dive down into that black hole and bring them up. Get my pack while you’re at it, and my sword, will you? I’ll be waiting over there, in the sun.’ She strode away. ‘Just don’t expect me to retrieve you ever again.’

His shoulders sagged. He could barely stand, let alone dive for sunken treasures. He followed her into the heat of the day, careful not to tread on the bees. The sun warmed him immediately though his knees were still wobbly. He collapsed in the thick grass, shading his eyes. ‘You don’t have any clothes either?’ He looked her up and down, keeping his expression neutral.

‘Let’s review, shall we?’ She made a show of looking around. ‘No. They must be at the bottom of the river too, where I had to choose between holding onto my pack and saving your life.’

He closed his eyes. ‘Sorry. I don’t remember what happened.’

‘Well I do. You didn’t come back. I stood at the edge of the cave pool and waited, counting my own breaths. When I knew it had been too long, by double, I dived in. You were right. It was a short swim to the other side but you had sunk to the bottom. I dragged you up, letting go of my pack to get you ashore.’

He groaned and sat up. ‘Do you see the mountain anywhere?’

‘Mount Pelt?’ She shook her head. ‘Nothing like it. I don’t think we’re on Tensar. Not any Tensar I ever scouted.’ She waved towards the horizon. ‘Does this look like Gaela to you, or Earth? Somewhere you and Rosette have been?’

Shane didn’t answer right away. So far it didn’t but he scanned the horizon, hoping something familiar would appear. ‘I don’t recognise it.’

She blew out her breath. ‘We need to find habitation before dark. The sun is already getting lower.’

‘If we do find anyone, how will we explain this?’ he asked, looking down at his naked body.

‘You’re the bard,’ she snapped. ‘Make something up. Come on. There isn’t much time left.’ She squinted towards the sun. ‘That way is east.’

He struggled to his feet, rubbing his hands together. ‘Or west.’

‘Gaela’s sun sets in the west.’

‘Impossible!’

‘Rosette explained it but I didn’t quite follow. Parallel something or other.’

‘I suppose Rosette knows everything?’

He brightened. ‘When it comes to the sun and moon and stars, she’s…’

‘Never mind.’ She stopped him with a look. ‘If this isn’t Tensar, then where could we be?’

He shuddered. His toes burned with the returning circulation. ‘I have no idea.’

‘Then we’re lost, Shane MacVenton.’ She laughed and it made him shiver. ‘Come on. Let’s find a road out of here.’
Rosette swung the cast-iron pot away from the flames and built up the fire with fresh logs. The pot bubbled and she stirred the contents—red tomato soup with a rich blend of forest herbs, winter vegetables and pinto beans. ‘I’m famished.’ She blew on the spoon, testing it. ‘I don’t smell any rabbit. Drayco stared at her. Or buck, for that matter. To the temple cat’s dismay, Rosette had taken an aversion to meat, leaving him to eat his quarry raw. He didn’t mind but he missed the aromas that used to fill the cottage at dinner time.

‘That’s because I haven’t cooked any.’ She tapped the wooden spoon on the side of the pot and replaced the lid. ‘Your litter has become mildly inconvenient, Maudi.’

‘She, Drayco. I’m having one, a singleton, a little girl, and she has particular tastes.’ Rosette stroked her familiar’s back. ‘How about we go hunting in the woods tomorrow? Just think—whatever we bag will be all yours.’

Drayco became preoccupied with grooming his forelegs. ‘I won’t say no.’

‘Didn’t think you would.’ She rinsed their wooden bowls in the sink and set them on the rack to dry. ‘I need more snow root cream,’ she said, getting up on her tiptoes to search a top shelf. ‘Ah!’ She winced as she slid the last jar forward. She rubbed the herbal concoction into her cracked ribs and bruised shoulder.

‘You’ll find more on our hunt, no doubt.’

‘It is the perfect time of year.’ She closed her eyes as the salve took effect, warmth spreading deep into her bones.

A rasping sound came from the rafters. Mozzie’s head dropped down, gliding towards her as he uncoiled, his body draping in loops the size of wagon wheels.

‘I don’t suppose you’ve heard anything?’ she asked the carpet snake.

If he replied, she didn’t understand it. The serpent’s language was a mystery, one only Nellion had solved. He scented the air around her face, though, his red tongue flickering. His thick coils wrapped around the beams, moving in slow motion as he wound his way towards the back of the cottage. She noticed a large lump in the middle of his body, the shiny green and yellow scales expanding to accommodate the meal.

‘I get it. You’re saying goodnight, aren’t you? Off to have a long, digestive sleep?’

‘Obviously, Maudi.’ Drayco answered for the snake without opening his eyes.

‘Are you going to bed any time soon?’

She sighed, pulling another textbook down from the shelves and returning to the table. ‘It’s a good idea, but I’m not quitting until I make sense of this.’ Rosette was working on a horary chart, a horoscope drawn for the moment in time she asked a question regarding the whereabouts of the others. So far the chart described her question perfectly—What happened to everyone when I entered the portal?

She’d been settled in Dumarka for weeks and still there was no sign of Teg, or anyone else. She had to know why, or—if they were in danger—if they needed help. The chart described the events surrounding her question, if she was reading it properly, but what about the answer? Where were they?

Neptune, the planet of mysterious events, confusion and drawn shades, was rising. No big surprise there. She was in the dark without a clue. And she certainly needed to let go of the struggle—the only creative way to respond to a prominent Neptune. Relax. That was the first step. What did surprise her, though, was the sign of the Archer, and its ruling planet Jupiter, falling in the tenth house. That usually meant travel, exploration and adventure, and it was conjunct her significator, making it doubly so. But where was she going? The answer remained obscure. She had no destination and no inspiration. Besides, she was meant to stay put.

What you are ‘meant’ to do has never been your strongest guide.

Rosette laughed. ‘That’s because there are two kinds of meant, Drayco. The kind you think you are supposed to do and the kind you know is right.’

And in this case, Maudi? Are we meant to go or stay?

‘That’s the problem. I can see merit in both choices.’

Are you thinking of the old rule, Maudi?

‘I am.’

When Rosette was a child growing up on the Matosh Estate, Jarrod and his brother Liam and she had made a pact. When diving in the coves of the Azul Sea, or hunting in the forest of Esperio Dell Ray, if they became separated they were to go to a designated place and wait. The same thing held true for the portals and she and Teg had made the same pact. If they lost track of each other, they would return to the cottage and wait.

When the Entity had landed her back in the Dumarkian Woods, she’d thought the others would catch up. But
Teg hadn’t shown—she wasn’t even sure he and An’ Lawrence had got away from the Corsanons. Kreshkali and Jarrod were nowhere in sight and neither was Scylla. The temple cat had been racing towards the portal behind her and Drayco, but like the others, she never turned up. It was just her, Drayco and the huge golden stallion that stepped out into the Dumarkian Woods.

Rosette blew a stray hair off her forehead. The winter was setting in and she’d had no word or whisper. Not one of the Three Sisters had come home to check on her. Even Maka’ra had kept away. Mozziie said nothing—nothing she and Drayco could understand, anyway. Where could they all be? The chart wasn’t giving any indication, yet.

She checked again, running her finger over the aspectarian, the grid where the angular relationships between planets and points were listed for quick reference. There was no aspect, no link, between her—the seeker—and the others—the sought. The planets signifying them all were separate and not one connected to the other. She tapped her pencil on the table. ‘There has to be some relationship.’

*Then there is.*

She was about to reply when her eyes narrowed. ‘Wait a minute.’ She flipped through her notes as she half rose out of her chair.

*Onto something, Maudi?*  
‘I am, and I think you’re right.’

She stopped on a page titled ‘Translation & Collection of Light’. She sucked in her breath as her eyes raced across the text. ‘How could I have missed it? Listen to this,’ she said, reading the notes aloud. ‘*When there is no relationship between the seeker and the sought, the two are like strangers that never meet, making void the question unless...*’

*Unless?* Drayco prompted her when she paused.  
‘Unless there is a Collection of Lights!’

*Explain?*  
‘It’s simple, really. When the two planets representing seeker and sought apply to a third planet that is slower in motion and later in degree, the lights are collected and the missing one found. The third planet represents a third person who brings them together so that the question is perfected. I couldn’t see it before, Dray, but here it is.’ She pointed to Jupiter’s upcoming square to Uranus and Mercury’s approaching quincunx to the same planet. ‘This is a perfect Collection of Lights.’

*Who’s doing the collecting, Maudi? Us?*  
‘Not us. We are ruled by Jupiter, but it’s someone we will meet. Someone Uranian.’

*Uranian?*  
‘Unusual, zany, unexpected. Not what they appear to be on the surface.’

*Interesting. Where do we meet them?*  
‘Challenge, danger or excitement? Definitely risk.’ She stretched her arms high, tilting back her head. ‘We won’t find out sitting here.’ She scribbled a list. ‘We need to get a few more bales of hay down from the loft tomorrow, Dray, and see to the hens’ grain. We can open the goat paddocks to the creek and chop more wood.’ She topped up her tea when the kettle whistled. The cabin filled with the scent of mugwort and red raspberry leaves.

*Is that what the chart says?*  
She chuckled. ‘The chart isn’t commenting on the stock feed, at least as far as I can tell. I’m just thinking ahead.’

*Rats?*  
‘I’m sure we’ll come across some in the loft.’

*I’ll help with the hay then.*  
‘Thank you. I was hoping you’d say that.’ She looked at the chart again, blowing on the rim of her cup.

*Worried about the horse beasts, Maudi?*  
She shook her head. ‘They’ll be fine.’

*Maka’ra then?*  
‘A bit. He was meant to be here.’

*So were we. But we left.*  
‘True.’ Her eyes drifted to her sword which was leaning near the door. She’d been training every day, thinking the islander would arrive at any moment to test her skills. It had been quite some time since they’d sparred and she couldn’t wait to show him her new patterns. But he didn’t come. No one did. She was all alone.

*I’m here.*  
She smiled at her familiar stretched out on the plush rug. ‘And I thank the goddess of the woods every day that you are.’

He purred. *Are you restless, Maudi?*
She rubbed her belly; it was only slightly round even with the passing time and her enormous appetite. She picked up the chart again. ‘I’m keen if you are.’

_Do we have a destination?_

‘We haven’t, and that’s got me concerned.’ She frowned. The only planet in the seventh house, the designation for ‘the others’, was Mars, the warrior planet. That fitted, considering where she’d left Teg and the Sword Master, but it was square to Saturn—the hermit, the planet of hard work, ambition and boundaries—and Saturn was not well placed. ‘The boundaries are too tight,’ she said.

_What’s that, Maudi?_

‘Saturn can be restrictions, impediments.’

_What are you suggesting?_

‘They may have been captured.’ She stood up. ‘We’ve got to help.’

_There’s a certain logic there. I follow it. But what about the litter? He flattened his ears when she hissed. I mean, what about the little girl? Kali didn’t want you travelling the corridors and that was two moons back._

‘My little girl seems fine, and very small. I’m hardly showing and aside from needing to eat half a hay field every day, I’m the same as ever.’

_And you don’t like meat._

‘And that, yes.’

_Drayco got up and bow-stretched._

_Nell didn’t show much until the end either._

‘What?’

_Nellion was the same with you. She didn’t get big until the end._

‘Drayco, darling, you can’t know that. You weren’t even born yet.’

_It’s curious. I can’t know it, but I do._

Rosette rubbed his flank with her toes. ‘I don’t see how. In any case, a quick trip to check things out will do us good.’

_The chart uses those words?_

Rosette studied the symbols again, her eye going back to Neptune rising, and the Archer. ‘Not exactly. It does say to trust intuition and explore.’

_That could mean our hunting party tomorrow?_

Rosette laughed. ‘It could. How about this? We get hay down for the horses before the hunt, pack in the afternoon and head out on dark. Deal?’

_Sounds good to me, though I have nothing to pack._

She laughed again. ‘It’s done then. We’ll be off at sunset.’

Grayson brushed snow off the latch; the change of climate from Temple Los Loma was shocking. He huffed into his hands and rubbed them together. ‘Rosette?’ he called. ‘Are you about?’ He knew the answer before the silence gave it away. He called again, cracking ice from the hinges and pushing the gate open.

The cottage was still. No smoke wafted from the chimney and no light glowed from within. The windows were black, free of condensation. They reflected his bulk as he ploughed through the drifts. He stepped onto the veranda and stamped his feet. The path hadn’t been shovelled and snow piled high. A blanket of white covered the rose garden and no tracks—paw, boot or bird—marked the ground. Wherever Rosette was, she’d been gone for days, if not all month. He shivered and turned away from the door. He had his horse to look after. He’d do that first before searching the cottage for clues.

‘Let’s get you rugged up, shall we?’ he said to the animal, running up the stirrups and loosening the girth.

The barn was unoccupied save for scattering hens and pigeons cooing in the rafters. He groomed the mare, whose nose was buried deep in the manger. Grayson concentrated on his task, trying not to think of why Rosette hadn’t rushed out to greet him, Drayco loping at her side. Hotha had said she wasn’t here. Why was he so surprised? He shrugged. _I thought she’d be here by now._

The wind gusted through the barn and he found a thick rug for his horse, buckling it into place. Where was the rest of the livestock? Jarrod’s red mare, Wren, and the mountain ponies were nowhere in sight, nor were the goats and house cow. She couldn’t have taken them all with her through the portal but how’d she expect them to survive winter without care? He checked the loft. There was a full store of hay and grain. What was going on?

The mystery solved itself when he opened the back door. The animals had been pastured in the adjoining southern paddock, the gate to the overhang tied open so they could get to shelter and the outside mangers. Hay bales had been stacked in the chute—as they were eaten, another dropped down to replace it. Clever. She’d even re-tied them with thick rope so there was no chance of the animals ingesting the twine that normally held them fast. She
must have planned on being away for some time.

What could she be doing? Searching the corridors for An’ Lawrence, or rearing her child in some other world? His child? He shook his head as he returned to the cottage. Maybe she’d left a note. In any case, he had to get warm. He couldn’t think in the cold.

He pushed the garden gate open, again cracking ice from the hinges. The string of tiny bells that chimed in the summer was soundless, their clappers frozen solid. He waded through the powdery snow, a layer of drift rising in the wind. Frost covered the front door knob and he had to crack it loose to turn it, or was that a spell? In either case, he entered the cottage and it welcomed him. Even without a fire it felt warm and it smelled sweetly of cedar wood and apples.

Leaving his boots by the door, he hung his fur cloak on the rack and started a fire. She hadn’t been gone as long as he’d thought. He could tell by the smell of wet charcoal and the thin layer of ash that the down draught had blown over the tiles; a few paw prints marked Drayco’s presence.

‘So it was you two,’ he said aloud. ‘Not Maka’ra or Hotha’s scout who was here last.’

They had left in the afternoon, he guessed, when the fire was cold. He stared up the chimney, checking the flue. Was it yesterday? Perhaps they were only out foraging. Collecting snow root? Or was it the day before? I should have come sooner.

While the kettle was set to boil, he rummaged for tea and honey. There were plenty of supplies in the cupboards and hard cheese, soy milk, flour and butter in the cool box. He found his favourite cup and laid the table, mixing up a batch of pan bread to fry. The little chores gave him comfort and kept the waves of worry from crashing.

Where could she have gone this time?

The star chart on the table caught his eye and he looked at the date. She’d been here two weeks ago, that was obvious. He frowned. Unless the chart had been set for a time in the future, or the past. She did that often—looked ahead or behind. She said hindsight and foresight were brothers and she was well acquainted with them both. He didn’t know enough star lore to understand astrology in the way she did, but he knew enough about Rosette’s nature to realise that this chart had not been left haphazardly. All her other papers and notes were tucked away, but here was a clue, a message perhaps, for those who could read it. He folded the chart in quarters and put it in his pocket. Kreshkali would know what it meant. He would save it for her.

He frowned. ‘But she’s off looking for the Sword Master as well.’ Had they found him yet? ‘What were you thinking, Rosette?’ he asked the walls. As if in answer, he spotted her diary by the bedside. He sucked in his breath.

‘Dare I?’

He didn’t. Whatever reason she had for going off into the freezing wilderness and many-worlds beyond, he would not discover it that way. A witch’s bedside writing was a private matter. He’d learned that the hard way. His fingertips still burned when he thought of it. He had no intentions of ever touching that book again.

Grayson poured his cup of tea. The scent of rosehips and basil rose with the steam, mingling with the hardwood smoke and disappearing up the chimney. He warmed his hands around the cup and stared at the flames. ‘Maybe she went back into the corridors. Or maybe she sailed to the islands with Maka’ra, or maybe…’

Who was he kidding? She could be anywhere. It was all speculation but one thing was for sure—it was no herb hunt she was on. Her sword was missing from its place by the door. He also suspected she was still pregnant—the basket by her bed sat unused as were the tiny clothes in the cupboard beneath her mirror. He rubbed his temples. How long would this pregnancy last?

Hotha had told him it was unpredictable. Her travels through the corridors, not to mention her prolonged suspension from her body, her death, had changed the gestation. They didn’t know if it added days, weeks or months, or subtracted them. At this point it was clear it had added.

He leaned back, staring at the rafters. Nell’s mobiles of stars and planets danced, suspended like puppets. ‘At least you could have left me a better clue. You know I can’t read the stars, and I can’t wander the corridors without guidance.’

A whinny from the barn brought his head up. It wasn’t his mare’s. He stamped into his boots and charged out the door. When he reached the gate he saw two horses standing outside the barn, pawing the snow and whiskering. They turned their heads to him and one trumpeted a brassy challenge. He was a huge warhorse, his face obscured by a thick white forelock; his body was rugged up in a green canvas blanket that didn’t quite fit over his dappled rump. His neck was a sleek gold, not yet thick with a winter coat. The long flaxen tail whisked the ground, yellow against the white snow.

The other horse he recognised. Her name was Wren, the brilliant copper-red chestnut mare that Jarrod favoured. He didn’t know how they’d ended up in the house paddock but their request was clear. They wanted into the barn. He shook his head. What could this mean?

‘It means they’re hungry.’
He jumped out of his skin as Maka’ra, tall, bundled in furs and smiling an ivory grin, walked up the path. A cowbell clanged and soon a spotty, long-haired bossy appeared, meandering through the snow behind him.

‘Demons, Maka’ra! Where did you come from?’
‘You know this, Grayson. Rahana Iti, across the Emerald Straits.’
‘I meant…’ He shook his head, extending his hand. ‘It’s good to see you.’
‘I’ve come to check on this lot,’ he said, nodding towards the horses and slapping the cow’s rump as she strolled past. ‘While Rosette’s away. It looks like the horses crossed the ford to the north pastures and the rest followed. None found a way back.’

Half a dozen long-eared goats trotted past, a few of the yearlings kicking up their heels and bounding like gazelle through the deep snow.

‘And Rosette? Do you know where she is?’
Maka’ra inclined his head for a moment before following the animals to the barn. ‘She’s still not here, is she?’

He chuckled.

Grayson fell into step beside him, walking in the fresh path made by the horses. He didn’t see the humour.

Maka’ra kept smiling. ‘I was coming to…’
‘Check on her?’ Grayson asked, interrupting.
‘Check on the livestock. I knew she was gone.’
‘You knew?’
‘She’s not one to sit still when there’s a search party out.’

Grayson nodded.

‘When she didn’t show up at the start of winter, I took the mare and house cow to the stone paddocks, the ones with the cave shelters. The fields are too deep with snow now—no grazing—so I was going to bring them up to better ground. But she’s been back. Moved them already. Besides, there’s no other way to explain him.’ Maka’ra indicated the golden warhorse. ‘He’s not from around here, not with that colour.’

‘I wouldn’t know.’ Grayson pushed the horses back and opened the barn door. The animals knew the way, each going to a stall, except for the cow. She went straight to the loose hay beneath the loft steps. Grayson tugged on her bell collar and led her, with a bucket of oats, to the far end of the barn and helped Maka’ra settle the horses. The goats bounded in, heading straight for the grain bins. Grayson led them out the back where the mangers were brimming with oat grass hay. He latched the gate, relieved to get them settled. They were like a mob of school children, jumping and bleating and head-butting. He was comfortable with neither kids nor goats. His own mount seemed delighted with the company, though, and alternately whickered and tossed her head.

‘Did she leave a message?’ Maka’ra asked as they returned to the house.
‘Not one I can read.’ Grayson fished out the chart. He didn’t know if the big islander read the star symbols, but he trusted the man’s instincts. His own, he was beginning to doubt.

Maka’ra squinted at the page, stamping his feet on the porch. Once inside he continued to read the horoscope, naming the planetary placements aloud. ‘She’s asked a question about her father,’ he said, pointing to the moon just over the fourth house ruler. ‘He’s trapped somewhere. She’s off to find him, again.’
‘Again? I thought she would have done that already. Why come back otherwise? Unless…’
‘She found him, and then lost him?’

Grayson rubbed his temples. ‘Does it say where she went?’
‘She has the moon in the sign of the Fishes,’ he said, pointing to the crescent symbol at the top of the page. ‘It’s conjunct the ruler of the Archer, indicator of long journeys and new horizons.’ Maka’ra swung the kettle over the fire to boil. ‘She’s walking the corridors, but where she ends up is not as expected.’

‘Nothing’s been as expected, Maka’ra. Not since I met her.’ Grayson mumbled the words, his mouth turned down at the corners.

Maka’ra leaned back, his chin on his hand. ‘The new one has not arrived yet,’ the island man said, taking in the empty basket and smooth covered bed.
‘Apparently not. She and Teg…’
‘He was not here. Just Rosette, with the big black,’ Maka’ra said. He tossed the chart onto the table.
‘And now, she could be…’
‘Anywhere.’

Grayson stared into the fire. ‘That leaves a lot of possibilities.’

Shaea couldn’t believe her eyes. She’d never seen her whole body naked, sparkling clean, her hair washed and untangled. She’d never seen herself properly at all. As she stood in front of the full-length mirror, her hair combed and dripping down to her thighs, her round breasts and buttocks rosy red from the hot bath, she laughed. ‘I could have made some comforts with this,’ she said, her hands on her hips, turning side to side. ‘I had no idea, but I’m
something that would fetch a price, don’t you think?’ She turned her bottom towards Rall and wiggled.

Rall hobbled into the room, a towel twisted around her head, another over her shoulders. She glanced at the mirror; her hunched shape was more like an insect’s than a woman’s. She snarled. ‘And I’ve got less than I thought.’ She slid into a chair, picking at the scraps left from their earlier meal. ‘Come on, girl. Stop staring at yourself and finish your supper. We will leave tonight.’

‘Tonight?’ Shaea looked at the bed and pouted. ‘I thought I’d get to actually sleep in one of these.’
‘You may still, but not here. We need to be out of the city before word goes round. There’ll be talk—that old witch’s got herself some coin, they’ll say. She took the girl and ran.’
‘What’s worrying you, Rall? Can’t you have had a lucky day?’
‘Not me. They’d be onto it in a blink.’
‘Who’s they?’
‘Never mind. Just get that new dress on and dry your hair. We’re leaving tonight.’
‘What will we tell the gate guards?’
Rall chuckled. ‘What will we tell them? Where’s your imagination, Shaea? Can you think of nothing?’
‘Not yet. It all seems too…big.’
‘Big, is it? I think you mean to say extraordinary. Start using your words, girl. They’ll catch you out otherwise, wearing a dress like that and speaking from the gutter.’
‘I am from the gutter.’
‘Exactly, but you don’t want them to suspect it.’
‘All right.’ She cleared her throat. ‘This all seems so extraordinary.’
‘That’s better. Now, think of something extraordinary to you that would be ordinary to them.’

Shaea thought of getting rid of Rall so she could simply enjoy the boon. The woman was getting on her nerves. If the portal hadn’t insisted she bring her along…But Rall had a point. She needed to think further ahead. ‘What about a pilgrimage? We could be a great-grand and her youngest, heading to the temple to meditate and offer the rituals.’

‘Great-grand?’ The old woman snapped her fingers. ‘Are you so sure about that?’

Shaea stiffened at the change in Rall’s voice. It was buttery smooth, the gravel washed clean. She turned towards the sound, not sure what she’d find. Rall’s familiar raspy voice had softened, taking on a glossy texture, cool, educated and alluring. It matched perfectly the strange woman standing where the old witch had been. Shaea gasped. ‘What did you do to Rall?’

‘I told you I could spin a glamour that would set a warrior’s heart on fire.’
‘Rall? Is that you?’

The woman winked and Shea knew it was. The crooked limbs that had protruded from Rall’s body like sticks in a potato, the matted hair and sagging flesh that hung from her face, the toothless mouth and red eyes were gone. In their place was the most beautiful woman Shaea had ever seen. Her skin, a rich mahogany brown, glowed in the warm light. Her hair was a mass of tight black ringlets, her lips full, her body curved, her eyes dark as a moonless night. She moved with confidence, graceful and poised. Her smile flashed a full set of even white teeth. Shaea held up her glass and dipped her head before taking a sip. ‘That’s an extraordinary glamour. To you, Mistress Rall of Corsanon.’

The witch smoothed her dress. ‘What makes you think this is the glamour, child?’

Shaea swallowed. It couldn’t be true. No one would conjure such a decrepit shape as Rall had lived in, not for all those years. Shaea couldn’t make sense of it, so she shrugged her shoulders and turned back to the mirror. ‘Two witches then,’ she said. ‘Called out to the temple to initiate the new priests?’

‘That’s more to my liking.’ Rall smiled. ‘And more to yours as well, I’ll wager.’ She picked up her glass and drained it, startling Shaea as she then hurled it into the fire. A blue light flared briefly and was gone. ‘Now put it on,’ Rall said, pointing at the dress. ‘I want to be out of this place before curfew.’

Shane felt cold to the bone. His hands and feet were still blue, his skin was covered with goosebumps and his teeth chattered. Glancing at the sinking sun, he stepped into a small patch of slanting light. There was little warmth there and the wind whipped the plait about. ‘We’ve got to find shelter. The sun’s nearly set.’

‘Obviously.’ Selene rubbed her hands together. Somehow she didn’t look near as cold as he felt. Maybe her blistering temperament was keeping her warm. ‘I don’t know how we’ll last the night,’ Shane said, crossing his arms in front of him.

‘We won’t with that attitude.’ She looked at him sideways before pointing down the road. It was barely an overgrown wagon track and they hadn’t met anyone as they alternately walked and jogged along. If anything, the path was becoming narrower, more clogged with tussocks and weeds. ‘We can keep going that way in hopes of
finding a settlement or…’ She nodded towards the woods.

Shane followed her line of sight. ‘In there?’

‘Why not? There’s bound to be a sheltered grove, deep leaf mould or a hollow tree. We can make a nest.’

‘A hollow tree? And what if there are creatures looking for nestlings?’

‘Shane MacVenton, you’re the most negative man I know.’

‘I’m only saying what’s apparent. These are practical considerations. Any sane person would voice them.’ He sniffed. ‘There could be predators.’

She waved away his response. ‘It’s negative, and you know it. Now, which way do we go? I’m liking the look of those woods.’

‘I’m not. We don’t know what kinds of beasts are in this time and place. We don’t even know where we are.’

‘That’s not completely true. We’re lost, is where we are.’

‘Thank you.’ He turned his back on her, staring down the track. ‘Let’s follow it until dark and if we still can’t see a dwelling, we’ll head into the woods.’

She hesitated. ‘I suppose if there are any homes nearby we’ll see their firelight.’

‘Good point.’ He led the way, his teeth still chattering, not waiting to see if she followed.

‘Into the woods then?’ Selene’s expression was hard to see in the dark but her voice carried an edge.

Shane nodded. ‘Looks like our only choice.’ He was certain she was more pleased about being right than she would have been if they’d found shelter. She hadn’t complained of the cold, though, and to her credit she hadn’t harped on about his part in landing them in this predicament either. The opportunity had been there, all afternoon, and perhaps just cause as well. He wasn’t certain. It might have been his blunder in the cave pool that created this situation, and it might not.

He took a final sweep of the land before turning towards the woods. The road disappeared into the twilight and a mist hovered over the ground. ‘Did you see that?’ He pointed into the darkness. ‘There it is again.’

Selene stepped closer. They’d been jogging since sunset and her body was warm against his side.

‘That’s no open fire,’ he said. ‘Is it?’

‘A lamp light? Among trees?’

‘Could be, or maybe a dwelling.’

‘Only one way to find out,’ Selene said.

They headed towards the light, sticking to the road, their progress slow. No moon had risen and they were close to travelling blind. As they approached, Shane saw the light was spilling out from a dwelling, a log cabin with a warm glow in the windows and a plume of smoke rising from the chimney. The smell of bread and spices made his mouth water. Selene strode forward, about to knock. He pulled her back. ‘We can’t just bang on their door like this. What are we going to tell them?’

‘I’m not going to tell them anything. I’m going to ask for food and shelter.’ She pulled her hand out of his grip.

‘And if that doesn’t work, I’m going to beg.’

‘Don’t you think it will seem a bit odd? The two of us—naked, without water, packs or weapons; travellers with no idea of when or where they are? They might be confused about what we are offering.’

‘It depends.’

‘On what?’

‘On when and where we actually are.’

Shane ground his teeth. ‘You’re starting to sound like Jarrod.’

‘If I am, it’s because riddles are the only way to make sense of things. I understand that now. Come on. I’ll do the talking.’

‘This should be interesting,’ he said under his breath, though he brightened when they stood in front of the door. He could hear the sound of guitars coming from the house, one quite good, the other not virtuoso but very pleasant. It reminded him of when he was a boy, learning from his older brothers. The memory made his brow crease. It was much like the tunes they used to play as well.

‘Bards!’ Selene whispered. ‘Two at least. This is good news. You can charm them with your skills.’

Shane shrugged. ‘I’d feel a lot more charming if I had clothes on.’

‘Demon’s pit, Shane. Can you think of anything other than the worst possible angle?’

‘Given time, I could…’

She cut him off, gripping his hand. ‘I’ve got an idea. Follow my lead.’

She was knocking before he could answer and his thoughts were frozen by deep-throated barks and snarls coming from the cabin. When the door opened, a flood of light fell across the threshold and a surprisingly large dog bounded out. Its hackles were up, teeth bared. Shane was very glad to see it come to the end of a short leash; the
owner was holding it back, a plump hand over her mouth. Was she laughing? Shane had automatically covered his crotch, not from modesty so much but from the direction the dog’s nose was headed. He took a step back.

The woman kept hold of the animal and a youth poked his head around the door and outright giggled. Selene chatted away, introducing themselves, but Shane didn’t follow her words. He was too busy shoving the dog’s head away from his groin. The beast was now wagging its tail, overzealous in its sniffing. The dog seemed to realise they were no threat and suddenly decided to sit on its haunches, laughing along with its owners at their unexpected company. Shane never felt more awkward.

Selene paid no notice. She was speaking with the same confidence she always had, as if she weren’t naked, bruised, hungry and cold—lost in a world completely unfamiliar. ‘We stripped out of our clothes to swim hard against the current. We were nearly drowned by then,’ she was saying. ‘Our supplies gone, we ended up on the opposite side of the shore.’

‘I can see why you didn’t want to risk the swim back. That river is treacherous this time of year. I’m surprised you even attempted it.’ The woman kept one hand on the lead, the other clutching the door. She had short waves of honey-red hair; her skin was smooth and her body like a peach, round and glowing. She gradually opened the door further, the youth hiding behind her. Shane couldn’t quite make him out but he continued to giggle.

‘Come in with you both,’ the big woman finally said, swinging the door wide and pulling the dog back. ‘The fire’s on. Get yourselves warm and I’ll find you some clothes.’ She turned to the youth and Shane saw it was a dark-haired boy, probably just in his teens. ‘Tamin, can you check the river chest? There’ll be something to suit there.’

The lad disappeared without a word and the dog went back to its place by the fire as if all the excitement was over.
CHAPTER 6
CORSANON & RIVERLANDS, GAEFA

Rosette focused on the Sword Master and Teg, picturing them as she entered the portal. She caressed the plasma Entity and tiny bolts of lightning tickled her palm, making her laugh. While the portal turned into a whirl of lights spinning around like a miniature cyclone, she curled up with Drayco and closed her eyes. ‘We’re on our way.’ She looked at her belly. ‘And no surprises from you!’

Back to Corsanon, Maudi?
‘I certainly hope so. In the meantime, I’ve got to sleep.’
She’d had a long day of organising the self-feeding system for the livestock. Amarillo, the Sword Master’s new warhorse, needed a constant supply of hay as his coat was thin compared to the others—not near heavy enough to get him through a Dumarkian winter. She’d rugged him up and between the hay, the slightly ill-fitting horse blanket and Wren’s proximity, he’d be all right. Even the house cow had taken to him, following him about the paddock and chewing her cud at night while she lay beside him. That would certainly keep him warm.
‘Better than a hot-water bottle,’ she said aloud. ‘Besides, Maka’ra will come soon, anyway.’

Of course. That is why we left, wasn’t it?
She laughed. ‘He’d have talked us out of another corridor trip, I’m sure.’ She dozed off and it felt like only a second before a warm breeze pushed the hair back from her face.

We’re here now, Maudi. The temple cat sniffed the air. Do you recognise anything?
Rossette got up and stretched then stepped into the desert night. She felt refreshed. The stars glittered overhead and as she lowered her sights to the valley below them she gasped. ‘It can’t be.’

She didn’t know exactly when they were but the land was familiar and so were the buildings. She’d seen sketches of them in the history books from exactly this perspective. It was a rugged terrain, vague in the grey of night, but recognisable nonetheless, mainly because the skyline was interrupted by an enormous temple. The main entrance was flanked by two towers reaching towards the moon. A golden glow filled the windows and music wafted up on the breeze. The rise and fall of laughter and clapping came from inside the courtyard—the sounds of dancing and revelry.

‘Drayco.’ She clutched his neck. ‘This is Corsanon Temple, some time in the past.’

Really? Before the wars?
‘I think so.’ She pushed back her hood.

Does that mean Teg and Rowan are here?
‘They must be. Can you reach Scylla?’

I’m searching for her now. Drayco sat on his haunches and closed his eyes; he opened them a moment later, purring. She’s glad we’ve come back. She’s been very concerned.

‘What’s happened? Is she all right?’
She’s angry and she needs help. Drayco bounded down the slope and Rosette chased after him.

‘Wait up. We can’t just barge in on the temple like this. We’re Dumarkian, remember? We might be the enemy.’

She’s not in the temple, Maudi. She’s in the city, hiding. They’ve taken An’ Lawrence prisoner.

‘The chart…It said there was a restriction, but how is that possible? His magic alone would…’

His magic doesn’t work when he’s unconscious.

‘Unconscious?’ She caught up to Drayco before he crossed the road and held him back. ‘Wait. We have to think this through.’

The temple cat whipped his tail, snapping the air, but he halted. Let’s think it through quickly!

‘First we have to mark where we are. We have to be able to get back.’ There was no path leading from the portal so Rosette studied its position, taking in the flanking white oaks and the stand of eucalypts further up the hill. She gauged the distance to the temple grounds and frowned. ‘If An’ Lawrence is in the city, why did the Entity bring us here? The portal over the river gorge is a closer hike to the gates.’

Drayco didn’t answer, though his tail stopped whipping.

She crossed her arms. ‘There must be something at the temple we need to see.’

Or meet. Someone comes.

As they stood by the side of the road, a coach pulled up to the temple entrance. It was drawn by four dappled grey horses, purple plumes on their headstalls, white manes braided with dark ribbons.

‘Priestesses,’ Rosette whispered. ‘This is definitely before the sundering!’

Before the Entity was split apart? That’s interesting. Then Dumarka is not yet at war. Maybe we should
announce ourselves? Get a lift back to the city?

‘Worth a try. Keep your eyes open.’
Always.

The witches who stepped from the coach were stunning. One had ringlets of black hair bouncing over her shoulders. Her cape was thrown back to reveal white satin lining and a violet dress. She wasn’t as tall as the younger woman with her but she carried herself like a warrior, or a queen. The other had honey-coloured hair sweeping down to her thighs, rich against her sable cloak. Her body was lithe and graceful but she seemed uncertain—the apprentice? Neither was visibly armed.

Rosette could tell they’d been arguing. The younger woman’s face was tight and her companion’s eyes blazed, black coals framed by her dark curls. But as they stood to instruct the driver, they transformed—eyes relaxed, lips smiling. There was no glamour on them; Rosette was sure of that. But the dark-haired one had an aura of crimson, and more than temple initiation on her mind. The other’s aura matched, though it was shot with purple and gold as well.

Rosette suddenly felt rustic in her woollen cloak and leggings. She went to cinch her sword belt a notch tighter and found it wouldn’t move; the bulge in her belly had grown. ‘Great,’ she whispered. ‘I told you, no surprises.’

Problem, Maudi?

She squared her shoulders and took a deep breath, wafting a gentle glamour over herself and Drayco, hiding her sword and turning him into a sheepdog. Not any more.

Drayco took a few steps forward and looked down at his shaggy white paws.

Maudi. I know what you’ve done. Don’t think for an instant that I am at all pleased.
Let’s just get ourselves into the city without debate, shall we?
You mean other than the one we’re about to have?
Dray, sweetheart. We need to hide our identity until we find out what’s going on. Remember, Scylla needs us.

An’ Lawrence needs us.

Yes, and Teg probably needs us too. He’s completely lost, it seems.
Demons. I forgot about him. Where is he?
No idea.
Right. To Corsanon then. Please play along.
And what will you call me?

‘Laddie! Come on, boy,’ she said aloud, slapping her thigh.

Drayco tried to hiss but it came out like a sneeze. Rosette stepped up to the coach as the women passed, smiling as if she’d come from the temple and was expecting the lift. She did her best to look the part of a young priestess on her way to the city, no doubt to join a nobleman in some festivity. The women nodded to her and walked towards the temple gates without a word.

That was easy, Maudi.

So far. What did they have in old Corsanon, Dray? Palaces? Mansions? Halls?
I believe it would have been palaces.

Rosette turned a bright smile onto the coachman. ‘Take us to the palace square please,’ she said.
The horses were fine enough to be from the higher end of the city and she thought the more extravagant her request, the less likely it was to be questioned.

‘My pleasure, Mistress.’ The driver tipped his hat. ‘And the dog can ride with you.’

Isn’t he just cordial, Maudi?

‘Thank you.’ She popped a gold piece in his hand and opened the door for Drayco. ‘In you get, Laddie.’

Drayco jumped onto the seat and stuck his head out the far window, panting as the horses took off.

‘What are you doing?’ she whispered.

If you’re going to make me into a dog, I’m going to behave like one. He tipped his nose to the moon and barked all the way to the city.

When An’ Lawrence awoke, it felt like he was crawling out of mud. He didn’t recognise his surroundings. He automatically reached for his sword, straining until he realised his hands were bound behind his back, his face pressed into the ground. He was certain someone had been hammering his head with a shovel. It throbbed with every heartbeat and his ears were ringing. He tried to move his legs only to find the pain in his head redoubled. It was worse in his thigh, shooting to his toes when he tried to look. He forced one eye open. All he could see was a stone floor, filthy straw and the edge of a wooden bucket. The light was dim, coming from a lantern outside. A shadow fell across his face from a high barred window.

Prison? How did that happen?
His memory had not returned as quickly as the physical sensations. He felt tortured and it took a few moments of controlled breathing before he could manage the pain and assess his situation. As he generated a warm, vitalising energy up his spine and through his limbs, he lifted his head a little higher. Memory returned.

He was shot. That was certain. He blinked his eyes and strained to look down his side. A broken arrow protruded from his left thigh, the blood around it brown and crusted. They’d taken his boots and his cloak and sword. There was no food or water nearby. So they aren’t planning on keeping me alive for long? That’s almost a relief.

The relief, Rowan, is the sound of your voice. I’ve been trying to wake you for hours.
Scylla, my lovely! Do they have you too?
Certainly not. I’m outside your window, on top of a wine cart.
I thought I sent you into the corridors?
You did.
What happened?
I came back out.
An’ Lawrence chuckled then winced. How many guards?
Seven, but that’s not the problem, Rowan.
It’s not?
Hardly. They are planning on executing you in about five minutes and Rosette is still on her way.
She’s what? I know I sent her and Drayco into the corridors. Isn’t anyone staying put? Where’s Teg?
I don’t know about the Lupin. I can’t reach him, which means he’s probably dead.
An’ Lawrence groaned. Kreshkali’s going to kill me.
Actually, Rowan, the guards coming down the stairs are going to kill you. Stall them, if you can. I’m waiting for Rosette. She comes now. Be ready.

Scylla, my lovely. I’m shot in the leg, hog-tied and barely able to control the pain in my head. Also, my bladder’s about to burst. What is it you want me to be ready for?
I suspect we will have to fight our way out. Here they come. Buy time!

An’ Lawrence took a deep breath, then blew out towards the cockroach inches in front of his face. Its long antennae waved at him briefly before it scuttled over his head and down his back. He focused on his solar plexus, generating more energy to soothe his pains. He couldn’t think with the pounding in his skull. As the waves of heat rolled up his back, he imagined perfect health, perfect fitness, perfect strength. He opened and closed his eyes a few more times, like working the hinges on a rusty old gate, and relaxed. As the headache lessened, the throbbing in his thigh increased and he focused more healing energy there. Just when he thought he might be able to sit upright without vomiting, he heard footsteps outside. A key twisted in the lock and the stone door swung open, grating over the cobbles.

‘We’ll do it here,’ a deep voice said. ‘Less mess.’
‘They aren’t going to question him?’
‘Too risky. He’s a temple-trained witch. He might bend their minds. Don’t look in his eyes and whatever you do, don’t speak to him.’
‘I doubt he’s still alive.’ The owner of the voice stepped closer to him, nudging him with a staff. ‘That arrow’s black-tipped. Cast in hemlock.’

Hemlock? That would explain the headache. Scylla, how’s the backup looking?
We can get you out, but you’ll have to deal with those two yourself. Rosette’s got a prince on her tail. She’s trying to lose him.
A prince?
Focus, Rowan!

An’ Lawrence closed his eyes and soothed his mind. He sensed the boots near his face and listened for the draw of the man’s sword. It came with a pure-pitched sing—a fine blade, for the broad, double-edged kind. Today he was glad the Corsanons wielded such chunky weapons. It would do the trick.

The man lowered his sword to An’ Lawrence’s head. He paused for a moment, hovering just above the articulation of his first and second cervical vertebrae. The proximity of the steel raised the hairs on his neck. As the guard lifted the sword, An’ Lawrence sprang, twisting his back to the blade and holding his wrists as wide apart as possible. The tip of the steel blade sliced through the bindings before the guard had time to stop the momentum. An’ Lawrence spun back around, his hands free. The second guard drew his sword and charged towards him.

An’ Lawrence leapt away from the first guard’s hammer blow, grabbing the wooden bucket. He smashed it into the second guard’s face, the splinters impaling like daggers. With a focused boost of energy, he called on the Elemental Fire and the shards burst into flames; the guard’s broadsword clattered to the floor and the man frantically
swatted his face. An’ Lawrence swept up the blade, freeing his feet in one swipe. Thrusting his sword arm up, he blocked a strike from the first guard and followed with an uppercut that sliced his opponent’s torso before driving the blood-soaked blade deep into the second guard’s chest. The Corsanons dropped to the ground at the same time.

An’ Lawrence flicked the weapon clean of blood, groaning at the effort, but stayed poised to strike in case either opponent moved. As dark fluid seeped from their still bodies, he stretched his neck left and right, letting out his breath. *I’m ready when you are, Scylla.*

*Brilliant. Rosette is near. Hold them off a little longer.*

*Hold who off?*

*The guards coming down the stairs. Mind the fire, too.*

An’ Lawrence ducked behind the door when he heard marching boots. His fire spell was out of control. It leapt into bright orange flames, consuming the guards’ uniforms and ripping across the straw and splinters scattered on the floor. Smoke rushed out the barred window, taking the gagging stink with it. He stifled a cough then dragged one body back against the wall and pressed himself flat as the door swung open.

Orders were barked and a string of guards carrying water buckets poured in. They were preoccupied with the flames until the fire was almost out. When they rolled the remaining body over, the cell went quiet. The charred man smouldering on the floor was not the prisoner but a fellow warrior, though there was a moment’s debate over which one it might be. The ring of drawn swords was deafening. As one, the guards in the room turned to spot An’ Lawrence pressed against the back wall.

They screamed a battle cry and charged. He was counting on that—overzealous, foolish Corsanons. The room was too small for them to manoeuvre. They were all in each other’s kill circle and none of them could swing without slicing a head or an arm off their comrades. An’ Lawrence took advantage of their lack of foresight and swung his blade double-handed across the lot. He charged the steel with a boost of magic, but the blade was broad and thick, not as quick a conduit as he was used to. Still, it was effective. The three warriors left standing jumped forward and with another boost he knocked them back against the far wall. Conjuring a final spell of strength he dashed out of the cell, slammed the door and bolted it.

Sweat dripped off his forehead and his breath came in ragged gasps. Before he could register the location and severity of pain his body screamed with, he froze, hearing the growls. Slowly he looked over his shoulder, blade ready to follow in an arcing swing. A High Guard soldier was coming down the steps, taking them two at a time—in long stately strides—his dark blue cloak flowing out behind him. Leading the way, straining at their tethers, was a pair of bullmastiffs. Their jaws were like bear traps; their wide collars spiked with steel blades and lips pulled back over white teeth, their black faces contorted as they snarled and snapped. Saliva hung in strands from their lower lips and their hackles ran the length of their spines. An’ Lawrence was gathering his energy, hoping he could call up a big enough boost to fend them off, when the guard stopped midway down the steps and unsnapped their leads. The dogs bounded towards him as he lifted his blade, the weight of it heavy in his hand.

*Put the big knife down, Rowan. It’s me.*

*Scylla?* An’ Lawrence dropped his arm.

Midway in the air, the two beasts shimmered, the glamour falling from their bodies like leaves in the breeze. Instead of two death dogs charging for his throat, the temple cats leapt towards him then landed lightly, one on either side.

*I told you we were coming, Rowan. Hurry, Rosette has a coach waiting, though for how long I don’t know. You started quite a fire.*

An’ Lawrence looked again and the figure on the stairs winked, waving him on. ‘Quickly, Sword Master. I left the meter running.’ It was Rosette’s voice though the High Guard spoke.

He grizzled, wincing as he climbed the stairs towards her. ‘Your glamour just took ten years off my life, daughter!’

‘Did you like it? I thought it quite inventive. Got us right past the inner guards without a query. Drayco’s idea. He thought it much better than the sheepdog.’

‘What sheepdog?’

*Later, Rowan. We need to get away.* His familiar urged him forward but he paused before he reached the top. *This way, Rowan. Scylla was growling. Every alarm in the city is about to go off.*

‘Wait,’ he said. ‘My sword.’

‘Blow your sword!’ Rosette turned on him. ‘I’ll commission a new one for you myself when we get back, but we’ve got to get out of here now.’

The High Guard soldier was gone and in his place stood Rosette. The cloak was the same but underneath she wore a black dress edged in red lace. The bodice was very low cut and her pregnancy-enhanced breasts captured all the attention. She gripped her sword in her right hand, her eyes levelled at his.
‘Rosette,’ he said, staring at her dress. ‘What exactly have you been doing?’

She looked him up and down in turn, taking in the bare feet, foreign weapon and sawn-off arrow protruding from his thigh, a trickle of fresh blood oozing from his torn leggings. ‘I could ask you the same, Father.’

‘I’ve been covering your back,’ he said, his eyes going to the bottom of the stairs. He spotted the guard room, door ajar, and he limped back down.

‘What are you doing now?’ she said.

‘Just a quick look. And I have to piss.’

Scylla tore after him.

‘A quick look for what? We have to get out!’

‘I’ll be right there.’ He ducked into the guard room. He didn’t want to leave his blade behind, not if it was within easy reach.

The guard room was empty; the only troops on duty were locked in the adjacent cell. They pounded on the bolted door; smoke was sneaking out between the cracks and the heat was rising. His fire had spread to adjoining cells. He ignored the cries and searched, finding his blade among a stack of other booty. He strapped it on, then frowned as he lifted up a small silver flask. It was sheathed in an embroidered leather case with long straps—perfect for wearing on a journey. ‘Demon’s death.’

He turned it around, rubbing his thumb over the outline of a Lemur raven burned into the leather.

‘What is it, Rowan?’ Scylla asked as she stood watch by the door.

‘I think they have La Makee.’ He limped back up the stairway to join Rosette and Drayco on the landing. ‘We have a problem,’ he said, lowering his head to whisper into Rosette’s ear.

‘I think there’s more than one,’ she said. ‘How long’s that been stuck there?’ She tilted her head towards the protruding arrow.

‘I don’t know, but it can wait. Rosette, I found this in the guard room.’ He held up the flask, letting it speak for itself.

Rosette’s eyes went wide. ‘Makee?’

‘I thought so too.’

‘Would she be in a cell?’

‘If she’s still alive.’

‘Can you contact her?’

An’ Lawrence shook his head.

‘Then let’s hope she’s in her raven form.’ Rosette turned to her familiar. ‘Dray, can you sniff out La Makee?’

Scylla sat on her haunches and tipped her nose towards the ceiling. There’s a Lemur raven in the tower, Rowan. Everyone is frightened of it.

‘That’s her!’ An’ Lawrence said, clutching his familiar’s neck. ‘Scylla says…’

‘I know,’ Rosette cut in. ‘Drayco told me.’

‘Do you know which stair leads to the tower?’ An’ Lawrence asked.

‘We passed one when we entered. That must be it.’

‘Guarded?’

‘Somewhat.’

‘Then conjure us up another glamour, apprentice. That fire’s blazing, fit to take the whole citadel down. There isn’t much time.’

Rosette closed her eyes and rubbed her hands together as if to warm them. He felt the glamour settle around him, surprised by the low-ranking uniform that replaced his clothes. Rosette was back in her High Guard finery, the temple cats again death dogs, snapped onto their leashes and snarling.

He cleared his throat. ‘A foot soldier?’

‘You’ll go unnoticed.’

‘And you?’

‘These are death dogs, An’ Lawrence. No one’s questioning me tonight.’

A blast brought flames and smoke up the steps. They launched out the door, racing up to the ground floor. The wide spiral stairway to the tower was unguarded, though alarms were sounding and people were running everywhere, smoke billowing behind them.

‘Did you light the tower on fire as well?’ Rosette asked as they ran up the stairway.

‘I’m guessing that is the work of La Makee.’

‘Alive and well then, I suspect. Let’s hope she doesn’t blast us to another world before we can introduce ourselves. Where now?’
They’d come to a split in the stairway, one way leading to a series of circular walkways, the other continuing up.

‘To the top. That’s where I’d put her, if she were my captive.’

They ran on, the flames below them crackling.

Shaea tried not to gape when they entered the temple hall. It was all she could do to keep from exclaiming aloud. The setting was luxurious beyond her dreams, the people astonishing. No one from her end of the city, not even the mounted warriors on the drill grounds, ever looked this fine. The men were remarkably well groomed—clean and smelling fresh like a forest. She had no idea a man could smell good. Her lips widened, letting out a sigh.

Many of the women had red or golden hair with sapphire ribbons and jewels woven into their long braids. Some were darker-complexioned, like Rall, and they had red stars sparkling in their ebony curls. They were all dressed in purple robes—like the ones Rall had obtained after they’d cleaned up. They’d worn them to get out of the city and had attracted little comment. No guard would dare to detain a temple priestess for long, and those robes were their garb. They’d changed in the coach, bringing out the dark cloaks that marked them as visiting priestesses before they could be recognised as imposters. They planned to slip away as soon as they could. The portal was a good hour’s walk to the south and they wanted to make the trek while the moon was up.

‘Close your mouth, girl,’ Rall said. ‘You’ll give us away.’

Shaea lifted her chin the way Rall had coached her and smoothed her hands over her hips. She kept her excitement contained, but she still took it all in. ‘Where to now?’ she asked, giggling as she spoke.

The hall was filled with men and women, and a few groups of temple children were racing about the periphery. It was the young ones’ job to offer refreshments but for the most part they were leaving the bite-size food on the long tables and playing hide-and-seek. Shaea was mesmerised by the sight of fresh food, freely offered, and from the hands of children. She’d never imagined anything so wonderful in her life.

‘Don’t gorge,’ Rall said, pulling her away from the trays.

‘Others are eating,’ Shaea pouted until Rall daintily took a morsel from the table and passed it over. ‘Just one.’

‘Thank you, Mistress.’

Most of the women were witches of the Corsanon order, with only a few visiting from other areas. They were relaxed and elegant, their hoods thrown back to reveal gowns that shimmered when they moved. Their graceful arms drew attention here and there as they talked—hands touching someone’s shoulder to capture their smile, gold bangles sliding to their wrists when they lowered them again. Shaea knew she and Rall were at least as well presented, and that her long lace dress covered the rough skin and scabs. It felt like a dream. Had Xane only died this morning? Maybe she had died too and this was another life. She moved closer to a group of men, hoping to hear news of the battle.

‘Get back here,’ Rall said, catching her arm. She shook her head.

Shaea rankled though she soon realised that these men were not talking about battle or strategies at all. They were not warriors, at least not tonight. Dressed in fine light robes themselves, with loose-legged pants, unfit for riding or battle, and open shirts of raw silk, the men, with their heavenly scents, were engaging the women, telling little stories or reading snippets of poetry, describing the moonlight, a flower or an animal until all their words were a string of adjectives and the thing they described was no longer the moon or flower or animal but the feelings they had for the women in front of them. Shaea shivered. How could she keep up this sham? No one had ever spoken to her that way and although Rall had taught her to read and write, she knew her limitations, and she knew her accent too. Gutter slang. It would never do. It would never pass.

She panicked, looking for a way out, but before she could bolt, Rall grasped the crook of her elbow and whisked her down a hallway. As they turned a corner, they bumped straight into two men, tall and smiling.

‘Off to gaze at the stars?’ the older man asked, nodding his head. ‘We would be honoured to join you, if so.’

Shaea was stunned, unable to keep her mouth from hanging open. She pushed it closed with her free hand, Rall still gripping the other. The men smelled of sandalwood and myrrh, their clothes were clean and their voices gentle. They weren’t yelling and they weren’t sicking their dogs on her or beating her with a stick. A quick jab from Rall snapped her back to attention. She tried to soften her eyes, as coached.

‘That would be lovely,’ Rall said.

Shaea turned to the old witch. She wanted to ask how in all of Gaela that would be lovely, since their aim was to slip away to the portal undetected.

‘My apprentice and I will meet you on the terrace? We’re just going to change.’

That renewed their smiles. They bowed and drifted off towards the terrace, no doubt to wait patiently for their return.

‘What’s this about?’ Shaea whispered as Rall herded her in the other direction.
‘The young one’s applying for initiation,’ the witch answered.
‘Initiation? But we’re not temple priestesses, are we?’
‘We are for the moment.’
‘I thought we were visiting priestesses—no purple robes.’
‘Tonight’s a special occasion. We’re in the shadow of the eclipse. All priestesses are open to initiates, purple
robes or not. We have to appear to be considering.’
‘Considering what?’
Rall looked at her and clicked her tongue. ‘Taking on a man for training, of course. Don’t you listen to my
words?’
‘I do.’ Shaea frowned. ‘I get it. They think we’re off to find our purple robes so we can…’
‘They’re hoping.’
Shaea blanched. ‘We aren’t, are we?’
‘Of course not. Initiation by a temple priestess is a sacred commitment. It lasts the entire transit of Mars and…’
‘Two years?’
‘Exactly. I don’t plan on us being here for more than two minutes. Besides, you would have no idea where to
begin. Have you ever even kissed a man?’
Shaea touched her lips and looked away.
‘Thought so. Get our bags. They’re by the alcove. I’ll meet you at the gates.’
‘Where are you going?’
‘Never mind. Keep your head up—back straight and step light. Act as if you are the High Priestess of the
Temple Corsanon. Can you imagine what that would be like?’
‘I can’t.’
Rall pressed her lips into a thin line. ‘Of course you can’t. What about top dog of the bakery alley?’
‘I think so.’
‘Close enough.’
Before Shaea could say any more, Rall had disappeared into the crowd.

Shane scraped his bowl, taking the last spoonful of his meal. ‘Delicious,’ he said to their host. ‘Thank you.’

Selene murmured, an agreeable sound. She had made herself comfortable in a large overstuffed chair near the
crackling fireplace. She held her bowl of pumpkin soup as if it were her child. She was wearing a dusky black dress
of finely woven cotton with tiny red flowers embroidered at the sleeves and hem. Shane thought she had never
looked more beautiful, or peaceful. He wondered how long that would last.

Their luck had changed but he wasn’t comfortable with it. Something wasn’t right about this place out in the
middle of nowhere with only a tiny path leading to or from the front door. The woman who had taken them in, fed
and clothed them, seemed jovial enough. She shared stories and music with the most dramatic delivery. Polished,
and very hospitable. No argument there. But he couldn’t shake the prickly feeling, and that was a sign he’d learned
to trust. Who were these people, playing music like master bards, treating them as if they were royal blood? Where
in the many-worlds could they be?

‘More soup, Shane?’ May asked.

May was a large woman with soft thick arms and stubby fingers. He was amazed at her expertise on the guitar.
She picked out arpeggios at lightning speed, accurate to the note, perfect intonation. Her face became angelic when
she played, as if she had lifted off to another realm. Her hair was spun around on top of her head, and loose strands
swpt across her face as she tapped out the rhythms. Her voice was pitch perfect as well. She had to be formally
trained, but what temple or school she came from, she wouldn’t say. That was the peculiar thing. They had spent
hours together and he still had no idea who she was or, more importantly, where they’d landed.

The lad was the opposite of his mother, if indeed that was the relationship. He was lithe, with long fingers, dark
eyes and no voice at all. He could play the fiddle, though. Remarkably so. Shane was in musical heaven. Why
couldn’t he just enjoy it?

‘No thank you, May. I’m fully satisfied.’ It was almost as if they were being fattened for a Beltane feast.

‘Selene?’ May turned to her. ‘There’s plenty in the pot and you’re all but skin and bones.’

‘I’m fine, May. Thank you. It was the perfect amount.’ May was about to turn away when Selene stopped her
with a light touch. ‘I would like to talk to you about our location, though. Do you have a map of this region? We
need to make plans and I’m afraid we’ve lost our orientation since the river crossing.’

‘A map?’ May repeated. ‘I can’t say I’ve got one of those.’ She pushed a wisp of hair back from her eyes.

‘What is a map, exactly?’

Selene looked at Shane.
‘It’s a drawing,’ he said, miming a square. ‘Marks written on a single page that represent the lie of the land.’

May wrinkled her nose. ‘Lie of the land? Never heard of one. But there might be something in the river chest.’

She turned to the lad. ‘Tamin? Have you ever seen anything like that—a map?’

Tamin shook his head. He wasn’t a mute—he’d giggled loud enough when they’d first arrived—but so far no words had passed his lips.

‘Have a look anyway, can you? Then we’ll play one last tune before bed.’

When Tamin had trotted up the steps that led to the loft, May sat with a sigh, scooting her chair closer to Selene and Shane. ‘I’ve a favour to ask.’

‘You’ve been very kind,’ Selene said. She put her hand on Shane’s shoulder briefly and smiled. ‘We’d like to help you, if we can.’

Shane’s neck pricked again and he rubbed the guitar strings with his cuff, nodding agreement and keeping his brow from creasing. ‘What do you need?’ he asked.

‘I need you to take Tamin.’

Selene tilted her head. ‘Pardon?’

‘I need you to take the lad.’

‘Take him where?’ Shane asked.

‘Take him with you. It’s no good for him here. He needs people his own age, opportunities, you know? Can you help?’

Shane was speechless. What parent would give up her child to strangers?

‘May?’ Selene frowned. ‘Is he your son?’

‘Oh, goodness no. He came like you, from the river. All things come here from the river. Everything’s in the chest. Who knows? Maybe even your map will be there.’

Shane cleared his throat. ‘He came from the river?’

‘That he did. Was standing naked and shivering just as you were, wasn’t he, Halo?’ She patted her thigh and the dog got up and stretched deep, his tail wagging in loops.

‘How long ago was that?’ Shane asked.

May ignored the question. ‘He’s been good company, as have you, but I’d appreciate it if you could all be on your way by morning. I’ve things to do.’

Shane looked around the small cabin. ‘Of course.’

‘The river chest?’ Selene said. ‘Would we be able to have a look at it? Not to take anything, but maybe we would find some clue to our whereabouts.’

‘Well, there’s a question no one’s asked before.’ She smiled. ‘Why not?’ She braced her arms and pushed herself out of her chair. ‘This way with you. It’s all up in the loft. Everything the river brings, I’ve kept it there.’ She led the way, the stairs creaking under her weight as they climbed.
CHAPTER 7
CORSANON & RIVERLANDS, GAELA

Rall smiled as she walked the halls of Temple Corsanon. It was wonderful—her cloak flowing out behind her, the sweet scent of lilac in her hair, the clip of new boots on the polished floorboards, and the grace of her familiar body—an exhilaration she hadn’t felt in years. Throwing off the glamour of the old hag was like diving into a crystal-clear pond. But it had been worth the discomfort, masquerading for so long. And now this was her chance—what she’d been waiting for. The time had finally come. She was back in the temple and only steps away from reaching her goal. Thank the goddess her stint in old Corsanon was over and she could get to where she belonged—to her true place, her heart’s desire.

Can you hear me? She sent the message cautiously, her mind shield tight.

There was no answer, but she knew her familiar was not far away. She would free him, any moment, and they would be off. She passed a few initiates who acknowledged her rank, the young women stopping to offer greetings. Around the next corner a priest in dark red robes paused, hoping to engage her, but she waved him off. It wouldn’t be questioned nor remembered. Not tonight. Not with Corsanon about to burn to the ground. Her smile deepened. Would the fires have started yet? If she knew An’ Lawrence at all, they would be raging by now.

She listened for the alarm bells but the only sounds she caught were the drums coming from the dance hall and waves of distant laughter, like chimes in a thunder storm. She paused, putting thought into the weather. In moments she’d conjured a breeze then reinforced it, encouraging it to grow. A strong northwesterly would spread the fires across the city before any witch could pray rain. She snapped her fingers and her ringlets were whisked back from her face, the draught racing to catch up with its own. She quickened her pace.

Corsanon was still silent and she knew there was just enough time to set the bird free. She chuckled. Set herself free, she meant. Kreshkali wasn’t the only witch who could be in two places at once, and Rall’s years of relentless glaming in the filth and stench of lower Corsanon were about to pay off. Her training of the children was going to pay off as well. She had to keep the girl in line, though. That young witch brewed plans of her own. She could taste them on the back of her tongue. With the other gone, her strength had doubled, though the girl didn’t notice. Not yet.

Rall had called them her ‘encontras’, the opposed twins—though they were not linked by blood. One was light, with honey hair and a bright smile, her heart sweet as magpie chortles, the other dark, reticent, with no mental voice at all, not one that she could hear anyway. She sighed. Shaea and Xane had been her apprentices, though they’d never known it. Now Xane was lost. Rall shook her head. She only needed one of them, and hopefully Shaea was the right one.

She closed her eyes, tuning into the girl. She was waiting at the entrance as instructed. Good lass. Rall had one more trap to set and then the lot of them could spring. She broke into a jog. As long as she hadn’t been spotted, nothing could stop her. Rall turned the last bend of the long covered walkway and ran straight into an ambush.

A heavy net dropped her to the ground before she could respond. It carried a spell that burned her skin, searing through her fine robe and chewing her flesh. She twisted and turned, shrieking as she called in the Elementals to blast her way out. She had less than a second to escape. ‘Demons to you,’ she shouted.

‘Get the cage,’ one yelled. ‘And mind the wings! We have her now.’

Others were not so sure. They rubbed their singed arms, some still trying to open eyes that had been scorched by the shock wave of Rall’s transformation.

In raven form Rall strained towards the opening in the net but was slammed back, dazed by a blow. She heard the clank, an iron door locking, and she cursed, folding her wings over her back. Rall had not planned on this event, nor had La Makee.

Kreshkali walked her horse out of the portal, the mare’s hooves crunching in the gravel path that led from the corridors into the fresh night air. Jarrod followed with Teg behind in wolf form.

Lie down before you drop, she said to the Lupin. He limped after her, his tail dragging. I’ll wake you when we make a decision.

Teg didn’t protest but stumbled to a grassy hollow and circled a few times before collapsing, the tip of his tail covering his nose. He sighed, closing his eyes.

‘I’m glad I was never your apprentice,’ Jarrod said, shaking his head. ‘You’re a hard taskmaster, Kali.’

‘I’m meant to be.’ She was only half listening. The view of Temple Corsanon, a silhouette in the valley below,
captivated her. She’d never seen it before the wars and the illustrations in the history books didn’t do it justice. There was splendour in the simplicity of its design. The landscaped pathways were lined with glowing lanterns, like twinkling stars from her perspective, and music played on the wind. It sounded like a festival night and the moon was indeed full overhead. What had brought An’ Lawrence here, she couldn’t imagine. If he’d been after a High Priestess for Rosette, he could have searched a lot closer to home.

She turned away, catching the wisp of smoke snaking towards the stars. A red ember glow pulsed beneath the highest turret in the city, expanding like a sunrise as she watched. Somebody had lit a match under Corsanon, and she had a fair idea of who that might have been. She leaned towards Jarrod and spoke softly. ‘That’s the citadel tower.’ She pointed towards the smoke. ‘It’s got his mark all over it, don’t you think?’

‘His, and hers as well, I’ll wager, but I don’t hear any alarms.’

‘Give it time.’

A whoosh cut through the air as the Three Sisters swooped in from the south, their voices muted, wings beating fast. Kreshkali had asked them to scope the city and not make a sound.

‘There’s a first,’ Jarrod whispered.

‘They can be quiet, if they have to.’ She straightened as one raven back-winged onto her shoulder, the other two finding perches in the beech trees beyond.

‘What do they say?’ Jarrod asked, stroking the fine black feathers as the bird tilted her head to the side. Her mouth opened but still no sound came out.

‘The city’s in turmoil. The fire has started in the lower level of the citadel,’ Kreshkali said.

‘You mean the dungeon.’

She nodded. ‘One and the same, but they don’t like to use that word.’ She frowned. ‘It’s starting to jump from roof to turret. Spreading fast.’

‘With this wind, it will consume everything to the river before long. I don’t remember that in the history books.’

‘Me neither, but I’m guessing the Sword Master is no longer a guest of the Corsanon guards,’ she said. ‘Do you think he needs help?’

‘If he does, he’s not calling me.’ She looked over her shoulder at Teg. He was sound asleep in the hollow, curled tight in his Lupin form, his breathing finally coming in long, steady streams.

‘Reluctant to leave him behind?’ Jarrod asked.

‘I am.’ She turned back to the glowing city, shading her eyes, searching for clouds. ‘We need to raise a storm, fast.’

I can do that, Mistress.

Hairs pricked on her arms and she turned to Teg. Not so deep asleep after all.

I’m fit to travel, Mistress, and to conjure. Teg sent the mental message before appearing at her side. He hadn’t made a sound, though she saw he still favoured his hind leg, even in wolf form.

‘Are you certain? We can’t have you leaving a trail of blood wherever we go. Too easy to track.’

Jarrod stifled a laugh. ‘Gentle, Kali. He was wounded trying to protect them, remember?’

She clicked her tongue. ‘Trying is the operant word.’

Teg didn’t cringe but faced his mentor. His tongue lolled out and he licked his chops. What is your pleasure, Mistress?

She crossed her arms. ‘I want you to stay put. I know you still have a shocking headache. It would only be worse bipedal. Besides, we’re planning on riding at the gallop. You wouldn’t keep up in either form.’

I will keep up, Mistress.

‘And I will that you stay.’

Jarrod led the horses forward, the black mare placid as a lamb, the gelding snorting at Teg but otherwise controllable. They mounted and Kreshkali shortened her reins as the mare bunched her muscles. The horse was on familiar ground, excited and ready to run.

‘Teg, you’re not going anywhere and if you can’t follow my directive this time—staying here until we return—you’ll not find another apprenticeship on Earth or Gaela until you’re an old grey wolf. Do those instructions confuse you in any way?’

Teg sat on his haunches. No, Mistress. No confusion.

‘I do have a task for you, though,’ she said, smiling as he sprang up, wagging his tail. ‘Two really. Bring in those clouds from the east. Pray rain. I want a downpour inside the hour.’

‘You don’t ask for much, Kreshkali,’ Jarrod said, holding the palomino back.

She ignored the comment. ‘And keep an eye on the temple. If you see a strange energy signature, one you think does not belong, I want to hear about it immediately.’
Yes, Mistress. I will.

‘And I mean hear about it, Teg, that’s all. You’re to tell me. Nothing else. We won’t be long.’ She turned to Jarrod. ‘We’ll skirt the city and enter through the quarry road.’

‘There’s a road through the rocks?’ he asked.

‘It’s more like a goat track, but it’ll get us in the back way. Teg, stay occult, and if you get a stitch, I want to know about that too.’

If I’m spotted?

‘Best you morph without being seen. Otherwise, you’d be very hard to explain.’

I would?

‘I have a feeling this is a Gaela before the first Lupin ever showed his lovely face to the temple priestesses of Corsanon. You may be nothing but a myth here, and if the history is right, it didn’t portray you in a very pleasant light. Let’s not put it to the test.’ A cloud passed over the moon and she urged her mare into a canter, heading towards the burning city.

Shaea waited by the entrance, partly in the shadows to keep from being approached yet close enough to the light so Rall could spot her easily. What was keeping that old woman? Shaea frowned. Old woman? Rall wasn’t the toothless old skeleton any more, and it made Shaea wonder if she ever had been. There was so much to think about this day, she hadn’t had time to sort any of it out. All she knew was the voice at the portal wanted Rall, and she was going to do everything in her power to deliver her. Now that she had tasted another side of life, she had no intentions of going back to the gutter, ever again. Oh, Xane. If only you could be here too.

She watched the temple priestesses come and go, some taking a carriage to the city, others walking arm in arm with young men under the starlight. The gardens were extraordinary, lit with stone lanterns and planted to offer a meditative beauty. The paths led to ponds and fountains with benches in front of them for quiet thought. She was surrounded by tiered flower beds, sculptures and exotic shrubs; the contrast to her usual traps was striking. Rall had told her all about the temple, but she never fully believed anything could be so lush, and so clean. As Shaea inhaled the night-blooming jasmine and watched for shooting stars, she was convinced old Rall had lived here once. How else could she know so much about it? I wonder what in the world would have made her leave?

No witch in their clear mind would alienate themselves from such a wondrous place. Shaea chuckled at her joke. Old Rall had never been in a clear mind, at least not that Shaea could remember. Xane had cautioned her more and more to keep an eye on the witch. He never fully trusted her and didn’t like Shaea spending so much time in the old woman’s presence. Not that he could do much about it. He wasn’t around, and Shaea didn’t like being alone, especially at night.

She drew in her breath, trying to forestall the tears. She’d held them back so far; she could do it for a little longer. She could do it forever if need be. The shock of Xane’s death helped at first. It allowed her to detach, like being in a dream where nothing connected in the usual way. She’d done everything—buried him, followed the strange witches, hidden from the troops, talked to the portal—in an emotionally suspended state. Next her focus was directed towards getting Rall and herself out of the city. With that accomplished, all that was left to do was get back to the portal. They would disappear, leaving Corsanon behind forever. Shaea didn’t know where the portal led, but it had to be a better place than where she had lived so far.

Again she concentrated on what was next so she didn’t have to think about what she had left in the ground. Straightening her spine, she watched another carriage approach. Rall would be here any moment and maybe they would take that very coach to the crossway, slipping out in the dark to find the portal.

A crack of thunder sounded on the horizon and she tipped her head to the stars, expecting to see a rush of clouds closing in. The sky was clear but the thunder sounded again. Alarms rose in the distance, the clang of bells coming from the city. Shaea climbed to the top of a stone hedge and stared towards the centre of Corsanon. A red glow flickered about the main citadel, plumes of smoke rising towards the moon. ‘Fire!’ she said, the word escaping her lips before she could stop it.

Others came out of the temple, gathering on the hedge and straining to see into the distance. The music stopped and voices clamoured in the background. Suddenly her quiet corner sanctuary was filled with people, everyone pushing to glimpse the city that was now orange as sunrise. Their voices were shrill, near panic, and still Rall did not come. Shaea edged further away from the crowd, following a path beyond the hitching rails and coaches where teams of dappled horses with purple-plumed headstalls pranced on the spot, fidgeting in their traces while coachmen tried to settle them. Under the shadow of a tall oak, she caught her breath, leaning against the white-skinned bark. From there she kept one eye on the entrance, and the other on the road to the portal. She wanted to run, but didn’t know which way to go. What could be keeping Rall?

‘Are you waiting for someone?’
The voice startled her. She’d let her guard drop, distracted by the people and the sound of alarms. She hadn’t heard a footfall, even on this gravel path. She turned to the stranger, pulling her cloak snugly around her shoulders, and gave a little nod. ‘My mentor’s coming any moment, but thank you for asking.’

She did her best to keep her voice smooth and rich, avoiding the garbled drawl that would mark her as a street beggar. Rall had made her practise, from time to time. She’d said it would be useful though Shaea never understood how. Now she did.

‘May I keep you company, to help pass the time?’

She nodded again. It was easier than talking.

‘There seems to be trouble in Corsanion tonight,’ he said.

‘Indeed.’ She looked at him sideways. Why was he speaking the obvious? Of course there was trouble in Corsanion tonight. The whole place was going up in flames. ‘Big trouble.’ Shaea gave a small smile, hiding her chipped tooth behind her hand. When he smiled back, she realised he was really only a lad, not much older than herself, she guessed, and only a little taller. She had nothing to fear from him. Their conversation would lead nowhere, even if the excitement died down and the festivities resumed. Nothing was expected of her tonight. She knew how it worked. Rall’d told her often enough.

Young men who came to the temple were only initiated by High Priestesses. He would no doubt assume she was an apprentice herself—training in the arts of tantra and ritual magic under the guidance of a mentor. Apprentices and initiates were not encouraged to experiment with each other, not until their training was more advanced. She was glad. She’d never fumbled about with anyone and the proximity of this young man disturbed her. She wouldn’t have known what to do.

Rall! Where are you? She pushed back her hood. ‘Your company is welcome, thank you.’

Rall had told her to act as if she were the High Priestess of Temple Corsanion and she was doing her best to oblige, though the High Priestess would not likely have time to converse with a youth in the moonlight, under the shade of the white oaks—even with such a beautiful young man as this. He had strange eyes, oval, mystical, entreatng. She was lost in their darkness until she saw the glow of the fires mirrored there. She straightened.

‘My name is Teg,’ he said, his voice cutting through her thoughts. ‘What may I call you?’

‘Shaea,’ she said, not having given thought to an alternative. Surely she didn’t need one. It wasn’t like she would ever be recognised from her past. No one would think she was the filthy street urchin too revolting to hold the eye for more than an instant. No one had ever marked her passing. Shaea frowned. ‘Why are you staring at me, Teg?’

‘Oh, was I? Forgive me. You’re so lovely. I had to drink it in.’

Shaea smiled brightly before blushing, her hand coming up again to her mouth. She had to get away from this person. He was upsetting her inside and out. Rall!

Shaea! It’s gone bad. Get out, girl! Run!

Shaea startled; she looked left and right before she realised it was Rall’s voice in her head that had spoken. When her eyes returned to Teg, she could see that he had heard it too. How was that possible?

‘Your mentor?’ he asked, reaching out his hand to steady her.

Shaea pulled away, hiked up her skirts and fled.

Heat wafted into the portal. It was like standing in front of a bakery oven, warming Grayson’s face, melting icicles from hem and cuffs. He took off his coat and strapped it to his pack. The view looked peaceful—no sign or scent of battle. ‘Where in Gaela is this?’ The sunny sky and green foliage made him smile and he stepped out of the portal and into the world.

The land sloped towards a valley, undeveloped save for a large building overgrown with ropey vines. It stood at the edge of a wide green field, flat as a lake. The sun was hot and the air smelled like warm honey. It reminded him of the hills surrounding the Gulf of Tasisia only there was no sea breeze. Whip birds fluttered in the low branches, cutting the air with their whistle-snap-crack calls. Brightly coloured lorikeets chattered and shrieked, taking flight when he turned towards them. All this luxuriance of nature meant it was clearly not Earth, but neither was it like any place on Gaela he’d ever been, and Rosette had taken him almost everywhere. The old corrugated building, a warehouse or hangar, was certainly not Gaelean. Where could he be?

The horizon was blue, turning mauve near the mountain peaks behind him. What range was it? The north side of the Prietas? Oldosia? Surely not with this sticky climate. It was too moist here, too tropical—like Rahana Iti only there were no mountains there. He studied the trees next to the portal, two tall cypresses warped by the wind, a stand of ironbarks and beyond them groves of bananas and papaya. Convinced he would recognise this entrance from any direction, he headed towards the valley.

He knew the building would be abandoned. There was no path leading to it and the grass grew thick right up the walls. Grayson pulled the corrugated door open, scraping dirt back with it. Inside was a vast open space with a
set of double doors at the far end. There were several high windows; the glass was broken, but little breeze came through. The rafters were lined with bats, an entire colony hanging like bits of charred meat from a grill. The stench made him screw up his face. ‘Sorry to disturb,’ he said, though the occupants didn’t make a sound to complain or reply.

He checked the other side of the building, finding a tyre pump and an empty tool box but nothing else. A sign hung at a slant, the large painted letters weathered and chipped. He walked around to stand square in front of it, and read the words: ‘Flight Centre.’ He swatted his neck, flattening a tiny mosquito against his skin, his fingertips coming back with a drop of blood. ‘Definitely not Gaela.’

A road led out of the valley, overgrown in a tangle of vegetation. He followed it, trusting the Entity had sent him exactly where he needed to go. It was a risk, he knew. The Entity may or may not have his best intentions in mind. He had been cautioned not to travel the corridors alone under any circumstances even with his coded DNA. They hadn’t solved the puzzle of the shifting destinations. He was meant to stay in Dumarka until Kreshkali, or Nell, or Rosette for that matter, returned.

He’d become restless. Travelling the corridors was better than sitting out the winter in Dumarka. His intuition told him Rosette needed help and he listened to that voice. He took action. ‘Lead on, old road,’ he said, shooing the flies. ‘Show me what I’ve come here to see.’

Behind him a gust of wind blew the sign and it rocked on its old hinges. He turned around and caught a glimpse of eyes watching from deep in the foliage. They were following his progress down the track. He prickled, straining to catch them again, but they were gone. Did I imagine it? They didn’t look human.

Rosette charged up the stairs on the temple cats’ heels. Stealth was no longer required or even wise. They’d been found out and speed would be the only chance of escape. They were near the top of the tower. Bells were clanging below and the heat of the fire warmed the stones, smoke choking the air. An’ Lawrence had his sword drawn and they were both cutting down the sentries, blazing the trail to the highest room. When they reached it, Rosette blasted the door with a single thought. There was no time for hesitation or intricate conjuring. They still had to get out and though she could morph and fly away, the others could not. The only way to safety was back down those stairs, littered with corpses and slick with blood.

‘A little warning would have been nice,’ An’ Lawrence said, brushing splinters off his cloak.

‘No time.’ She whisked into the room and scanned it top to bottom, sword in the guard position. What she saw stopped her in her tracks. ‘Which one’s Makee?’ she asked, staring at the iron cages.

Drayco?

Rosette’s familiar stepped forward, extending his nose towards the nearest cage.

They smell the same, Maudi.

Curious.

‘What does Scylla say?’ Rosette asked, turning to An’ Lawrence.

He chuckled, the sound grating. ‘She suggests we take a punt.’

‘A punt?’

‘A guess.’

‘I know what the word means.’ She raised her sword. She didn’t know what would happen if they released the wrong witch. Who could the other be? No one trapped a Lemur raven on a whim. ‘She’s your priestess, Sword Master. You choose.’

An’ Lawrence flicked blood from his sword and sheathed it. He hesitated over one cage before turning to the other and unlatching the door. The raven pushed through the small opening, beating her wings with powerful downstrokes. As she morphed, a blast of energy warped the room, knocking Rosette to her knees. She leapt back up, sword high overhead, Drayco bristling at her side.

The witch in front of her was laughing, her black ringlets shaking as her head bobbed. ‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘Though I thought you’d be quicker.’

Before Rosette could respond, the woman released the other raven, morphed again, and the two black birds flew out of the tower window.

Rosette stared at her father. ‘Who was that?’ she asked, sheathing her sword.

He shrugged. ‘An enemy of Corsanon?’

‘Before the wars?’

‘Interesting, isn’t it? Like watching history.’

‘Like changing it, more likely. What now?’

I suggest you find your way down from that tower, lovely. Company’s coming and I think there are too many for even you and An’ Lawrence to entertain.
Rosette’s eyes flashed. She recognised the voice in her head. ‘Makee!’ She said the name like a war cry. ‘What have you done?’

‘Let’s go.’ An’ Lawrence grabbed her arm and spun her around.

‘But did you hear that?’

‘I did. Out of here, now!’

Rosette gave Drayco’s neck a squeeze and ran back down the stairs. By the next landing she had her sword high over her head, ready to cut through the advancing guards, but she hung back. Drayco and Scylla cleared the path, leaving the tower guards face down on the steps.

‘Thank you, Dray.’

The window, Maudi. You can fly out of here.

‘I’m not leaving you,’ she said over the sound of marching feet.

‘We may not be leaving at all,’ An’ Lawrence answered. ‘There’s too many.’

She looked at the Sword Master; his bare feet were stained with blood and his limp was worsening.

‘Then we disappear,’ she said, sheathing her sword. She waved them in close, looping her arm around An’ Lawrence, the temple cats on either side. ‘Slow your breathing, all of you. I can’t pull this off with you puffing and grunting.’

Rosette drew the energy of the Elementals to her, conjuring a glamour to blend them into the stone and brick walls. As long as the guards weren’t marching four abreast, they would pass them by unseen, untouched. The tap of boots on the steps echoed and a moment later the warriors appeared, rounding the corner, climbing fast. They weren’t four abreast. They were five.

So much for disappearing, An’ Lawrence said, sending the message straight to her head.

He made to draw his sword and step out of the glamour but she stopped him.

Wait.

For what? They’re going to plough straight into us.

I don’t think so.

Physics, Maudi, Drayco said, his tail lashing at her side.

This is a one-plus-one-equals-too-many scenario. We have to fight.

Rosette held her breath. The tower guards were a hand’s length from her now. She went for her sword but a voice stopped her, screaming in her head.

Hold! I’ve got you covered.

Rosette warned the others. Wait. Help comes.

What help? An’ Lawrence asked, but he didn’t budge.

In the narrow tower window a Lemur raven landed, cawing at the guards and flapping her wings.

‘There she is!’ the one closest to her yelled. He broke formation and the others followed, missing the glamour and lunging towards the bird. ‘Grab her.’

Rosette didn’t wait to see if they did. She doubted Makee would let herself be caught again, if that had indeed been La Makee. Whichever bird, it had given them just enough distraction for a dash down the steps while the guards’ backs were turned.

She kept the glamour around them until they neared the bottom step. Death dogs, Drayco? Please? One more time?

Only if you promise to never turn me into a sheepdog again.

Agreed.

She grabbed An’ Lawrence. He laboured to stay upright, his hand clamping his thigh. She realised now that much of the blood saturating his clothes was his own. ‘You’re a mess, Sword Master.’

‘Thank you, Rosette. You’re quite a sight yourself.’

She brushed off the comment, catching him as he listed to the side. ‘That arrow wasn’t dipped, was it?’

‘A touch of hemlock, apparently.’

‘Now you mention?’

‘We’ve been busy.’

‘Come on. One more glamour and we’re out of here.’

As she honed her thoughts towards the temple cats, energy drew to them, clinging like metal filings to a magnet, until they morphed, taking on the shape of huge bullmastiffs. The blood on their muzzles and throats she didn’t have to fake. In the guise of a High Guard officer, she snapped leashes to their spiked collars and pushed An’ Lawrence in front of them.

‘Hands behind your back,’ she said, binding them.

‘You think we’re going to walk right out of here, like this?’
‘I do. Please try to look defeated. In your state, it shouldn’t be difficult.’

His eyes flashed once before he acquiesced. She gave him a nudge towards the bottom of the stairwell then followed behind, the death dogs straining at their leads, snapping and growling.

As they reached the landing, a score of warriors entered the tower, pushing past the water line. Rows of men and women were passing buckets hand over hand, a meagre attempt considering the size of the blaze. All the warriors veered away from her party. No one was keen to stand in the path of a death dog, though the captain drew his sword, shouting to Rosette from across the doorway, ‘Where’re you taking him?’

‘Out for a feed, of course.’

He nodded. ‘Any more up there?’

‘They’ve got the witch cornered. You’d do best to put out the flames before they reach the armoury.’

‘The armoury!’ he shouted.

Smoke billowed and a thunder of explosions erupted. The walls of the tower rippled. Rosette used the moment to carry on, marching her prisoner past the warriors and out of the citadel as it crumbled around them. She didn’t look back, though she felt their eyes return to her when the blast subsided. Had the glamour slipped? Looking down she caught her breath. Her belly seemed to have doubled in size.

_Maudi?
I don’t know what’s happened, Drayco, but suddenly I feel the need to sit down.
Not yet. Keep walking.
I will, and you keep snapping. You’re hungry, remember? And he’s food._

Cool air hit her as she walked into the night. There were clanging bells and rushing people, a horde of noise around them. The square was grey with smoke, flames licking the rooftops on both sides of the street. People ran in every direction: the appearance of the death dogs scattered them like hens. She doubted the coach would still be waiting, but she headed them across the square and down the side alley anyway. They had to get out of the city fast. It was going up in cinders. When they reached the shadows of the side street, she let the glamour drop, falling with it to the ground.

‘Rosette!’

An’ Lawrence was hovering over her, slapping her face until she opened her eyes. On his third swipe, she grabbed his wrist before contact, stopping him short. ‘Enough. I’m awake.’

Drayco’s nose pressed into her neck. _He was worried, Maudi. Angry too, I think. We have to get out of here._

‘Rosette!’ The Sword Master stared at her. ‘You’re pregnant!’

She clutched Drayco’s neck, ignoring her father’s hand, and pulled herself up. Her belly swelled in front of her, making it hard to get to her feet. Her balance was all wrong; the buttons on her coat strained and her back felt like an anvil was pressing into it.

‘It does seem that way, doesn’t it?’ she said, warding him off when he tried to steady her. ‘How did you end up in there?’ She tilted her head towards the flaming citadel.

‘Don’t change the subject. What are you thinking, travelling the corridors like this?’ He caught her as she slumped.

‘I wasn’t like this yesterday.’

_Maudi? Fire’s coming. Time to go._

She straightened, unbuttoning her coat and loosening her sword belt to adjust it lower on her hips. Instant relief. Her clothes had been too tight, was all. ‘What’s the fastest way out of here, Sword Master?’

‘To the south. We can take the quarry road.’

‘Quarry?’

‘It’s a bit of a climb. There are steps, though, all the way down.’

‘Lead on.’ With an arm around her belly, Rosette followed him through the maze of alleyways, slowing when she heard music.

‘Come, Rosette. This way. You have to keep moving.’ He waited for her to catch up.

‘Hang on.’ She cocked her head. ‘Do you hear that?’

‘I hear the sound of Corsanons marching towards us with battle-axes. Let’s go!’

‘No, it’s something else. That music. Listen.’ She pressed her ear against the brick wall. The fires were far behind, and the wall cool to the touch. Music played inside, light as a harvest festival. ‘I know that tune.’

‘It’s not from Treeon.’

‘I recognise it anyway.’

‘I’m glad you have such an eclectic ear. You can hum it to me as we escape.’ He grabbed her shoulder.

‘It’s more than that.’ She felt the colour drain from her face. ‘I know that musician.’

‘Not likely. We are way before your time, or mine.’
‘It’s Clay,’ she said. Tears formed in her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. He shook his head. ‘Clay’s dead, love. And we’re way before his time too.’ An’ Lawrence pulled her into his arms. ‘Pregnancy does strange things to the mind, Rosette. It’s okay. Come along.’

It does sound like him, Maudi, now that you mention it. It sounds like Clay.

She gave the Sword Master a quick squeeze and slipped out of the embrace. ‘I’ve got to check.’

‘The pub? No way!’

‘I’ll just be a moment.’ She looked up at the sign. It was newly painted, as were the doors. It read: ‘The Shek Inn’.

‘Rosette! You can’t. We’re nearly to the quarry road and…’

His voice faded as she pushed through the double doors, Drayco leading the way into the noisy pub.

Shane was panting when he reached the top of the stairs. The climb had been steeper than expected. How many storeys could there be? True, he hadn’t studied the rooftop when they’d approached the cabin. It was dark and he’d been much too busy fending off Halo to take in the architecture. He’d assumed it was a simple loft but now he felt like they had climbed to the top of Mount Pelt.

Odd that their hostess, May, with her generous size and weight, was not winded. She appeared before him as if awaking from a nap, not even any colour in her cheeks. Selene seemed perplexed as well, though his thoughts did not stay with that mystery for long. Perhaps it would have been better if they had. He might have grabbed Selene, turned around and run for his life. But he didn’t. He stood on the landing and May pushed open the door, waving them in.

The stench hit him before he could back away. He clapped his hand over his nose and he tried not to breathe. Lungs burning, he gulped in a breath, sickly odour and all. At first he thought there must be rat traps in the attic—definitely something dead—until his eyes adjusted to the dim light. There was no preparation for what he saw, not even in his most macabre nightmare. Bile rose and he swallowed it, listening to Selene do the same.

The attic was long, running the length of the cabin, with high-pitched rafters sloping down to the floor creating the shape of an A. But the design was not what shocked him. There were cabins in the mountains above T’locity made of similar shape. What shivered him to the bone was the content. Never before had he seen such a horrible mixture of treasures and chests—rib cages and skulls, femurs and toes, bodies decomposing among the gold and jewels.

Trunks piled high with coins and sparkling gems were thrown open, the contents spilling over the tops to form mounds of wealth on the floor. Clothes were scattered here and there—frilly dresses, military uniforms and children’s garb, some fine and new, some tattered and worn. Rifles and china cups, books and maps, kettles, forks, knives and clocks all strewn like leaves in a storm. There were signs of struggle: tables overturned, lamps knocked askew, gold and silver flung in every direction. And then there were bodies, the source of the smell. Corpses were everywhere, in various stages of decomposition, the sickly-sweet aroma of death wafting up from torn limbs. He wanted to throw up.

Selene gasped beside him, snapping shut her mouth as he gripped her arm. He could feel her fear through his hand.

‘See anything you recognise?’ May asked.

Her voice was as entreatcing as ever, as if she’d simply said, fancy a cup of tea?

‘Not exactly,’ Shane said, though his eye caught the bag in the far corner—his bag, with his flutes and whistle from Los Loma poking out the top. Their swords were next to it, on a chest of gold.

‘Have a good look around.’ May flung her arms wide open. ‘While there’s time.’

‘I think I’ve seen enough,’ he said, backing towards the door. He kept Selene by his side. She didn’t resist.

‘No, no. Look harder. You stay too, Tamin.’ She pushed the boy back when he tried to leave. ‘See if you can find something that you want to take with you.’ She left, slamming the door behind her. Her laughter echoed as she retreated down the stairs, boards creaking and groaning under her weight. They all stood looking at each other in silence.

‘What is this place?’ Selene finally said.

‘It’s what the river brings,’ Tamin answered. His voice was clear, like a small-town bell. The sound of it surprised Shane though he couldn’t give it full consideration. His eyes were riveted to the bodies. They were in poses of struggle, some clutching the gold with bony fingers, some scratching at the barred windows, tags of flesh falling from their hands and elbows.

‘I think we’d best go while we can,’ Selene said. ‘May’s not in a right frame of mind.’

Shane nodded, reaching for the nearest chest to scoop up a handful of gold. ‘We might as well have something to trade when we find our way back to Tensar. This is weighty gold. A temple full of instruments in one hand alone.’
Tamin grabbed his sleeve, pulling him back; the coins fell through his fingers. ‘Don’t touch.’
‘Why, lad? We’ve an unknown journey ahead and she clearly offered it. I’ll get my pack as well, and the swords.’
Tamin shook his head. ‘That’s what she always says, but she doesn’t mean well.’

Shane looked again at the corpse nearest him. The gold coins had slid from its skeleton hand, down the arm, to pile high in a hollow ribcage.
‘Best not to touch,’ Tamin said again.

Shane shook his hand as if spiders had crawled over it, brushing away the memory of the gold. ‘Who is she, Tamin?’

‘May’s the River Queen. We have to do what she asks.’
Shane attempted a smile to keep the child from fear but it went crooked. ‘And what has she asked of you?’
‘To play her the fiddle, of course. And not say a word.’

‘I think it’s time we all leave.’ He gripped the door knob. It moved a quarter turn but no more. He leaned his shoulder into it and shoved. It didn’t budge.
‘Too late,’ Tamin said.
‘Is there any other way out?’
‘None that’s ever been found, as far as I can see.’
‘But you’ve managed. She’s sent you here more than once and you’ve come trotting back.’
The boy shook his head. ‘She’s never closed me in before.’
‘There’re swords here, heavy blades. We can cut our way out and…’ Selene faltered.
‘You think they didn’t try?’ Shane pointed to the marks on the door and walls.
‘They grabbed the booty, is what stopped them.’ Selene’s voice gained confidence. ‘Forget the gold. Forget the treasures. Don’t look at it. Don’t touch a thing. There has to be another way out.’
‘What makes you think that?’ Shane asked, his eyes going to the barred window high above.
‘Because I’m not going to die here in this stinking room. Come on. Give me a boost. There’s a chink of light behind that wardrobe. Lift me up.’

There was no way out there but Selene didn’t stop searching. They all fell to inspecting the walls, going over them inch by inch. Shane applied himself to the search. Maybe if they ignored the treasures, they would find what the others had missed.
CHAPTER 8
BORDERLANDS, EARTH & CORSANON, GAELA

Everett hacked at the woody vines. His arms were aching, the blade heavy in his hand. Sweat dripped down his neck and saturated his shirt. His palms were slick with it. The smell of freshly chopped yucca and banana leaves rose from the ground, the sun drawing its essence upward in steamy tendrils, moist and sweet. He cut at the base of a petrified fern tree, the machete bouncing off the trunk.

‘Damn the thieving demon!’ he cursed, but the sound of his voice was drowned out by parrots chattering in the rainforest canopy. It was an empty threat, and he knew it. ‘Stop laughing at me,’ he said, shaking his fist at the rainbow birds.

Everything ridiculed him—the parrots, the heat, the greenery. He felt it in the intensity of the light, the smell of the air and the cackling sounds in his head. Of course they laughed. They had good reason. Everett had got himself lost again, and was doing his best not to let the crazed desperation take over. He wiped his hands on his pants. ‘How could I have let them go?’

He took off his pack and sat on a fallen log, drinking from his waterskin. That was one thing never in short supply: water—clear, clean and abundant. It rained buckets every afternoon and he could fill his canteen, and slake his thirst, in moments during a cloudburst. That’s why everything grew so fast—the trees, the ferns, the birds. He looked over his shoulder at the trail that had taken hours to blaze. It was already closing over, like a wake behind a boat, subsumed into the jungle—a curtain of green heat. He slumped against the tree, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. He’d lost the trail and he’d lost his way. He’d lost the thief. It couldn’t get any worse.

Thunder clapped overhead as clouds rolled in. The bright green foliage turned dull, the colour drained from the leaves. The air went thick and still.

‘Perhaps it can get worse.’ He strained to see the sky through the treetops. ‘Coming early, are you?’ He waited for a reply but the storm didn’t answer.

He’d been tracking the thief for two days, falling further and further behind. There was little chance of catching up now, considering he had lost the trail, had no idea where he was or where the demon thief had gone. ‘You think you can take my life from me, but you can’t. I will find you!’ He sank the machete into the ground.

For months, or was it years, Everett had relived the night the babies had vanished, the night they’d been spirited away. His sleep was tortured by the memory, his mind never quite getting past the shock, the guilt, the paranoia. When he awoke, he would run after the phantom. Sometimes he told Regina or the others he had to go back to Sector Six for supplies; other times he said nothing and took off, running away in the night, under a new moon, and not returning for days. When he did come back, he had little recollection of his absence—none that he could discern from his strange dream states—and no better understanding of his own behaviour, though he was haunted with peculiar visions. Haunted and disturbed.

Regina wanted to take him on a vision journey, a ritual that would penetrate the disassociated realms of his mind and bring him back to balance, but he refused. At those times, when she encouraged him, it seemed that she was in league with the thief. He accused her of it, pounding his fists on the table or threatening her with the back of his hand. She denied it, of course, which enraged him further. She remained calm, sitting quietly with her hands folded in her lap, her eyes resting gently on his. He wanted to kill her in those moments. He could never trust her in any case. It was her fault. She was the one who had let the thief in.

No matter how Regina explained it, he knew she was to blame as much as he, but if he killed her the thief may not come back. Then how would he find the children. Everett needed to follow the demon’s trail. The children would be grown now, he realised in his more lucid states. Still, he had to get them at any cost. One of them was different—more different than could be imagined. She was from a distant world perhaps. He’d yet to find out where, or how that could be, but it was the only explanation for her peculiar DNA.

Regina offered her vision quest to solve that mystery as well but he suspected it was a way for her to control him, subdue his behaviour, trap him even. She would bind him up in his own mind and he would never return. Yet she coaxed so innocently at times, as if she had no selfish thought or agenda other than his wellbeing. Could he trust that? It was worth the risk, she’d say, but she didn’t know the child’s true origins, or what he’d done in the past. No one did, and these strange happenings were between him and the thief alone. He would succeed, some day, if he persevered. He had dreamed it. And the thief always returned, a strange cloaked figure that arrived in the morning like a crow, vanishing before he could find out what had happened to the children. He would find the thief and bring the children back.

‘Find the thief? There’s something to laugh at. I can’t even find myself.’ He slammed his hand into the trunk then roared with pain. His knuckles were bleeding now. Why did he do that? He slammed the tree again; tears were
running down his cheeks as he tried to remember where he was. ‘I’m hunting the demon,’ he told himself and sprang back to his feet.

He capped the waterskin and, using double-handed swipes with the machete, he chopped his way through a mass of palm fronds. They fell to the ground, leaving a carpeted trail, a bridge over the rich loam of the jungle floor. He altered his course, taking the easiest way he could find—the path of least resistance. Being with Regina had taught him that, when he could remember it. When he could trust it.

‘Life is best when you travel with ease and peace,’ she’d said, and she was right. Why did he ever doubt her?

He hacked again at the leaves; working his way forward, he moved steadily towards the thinning foliage. Another clap of thunder ripped overhead. ‘Here it comes.’ He gazed skyward.

The birds went silent. That was a sure sign. The thunder sounded again and the rain hit his shoulders in fat heavy drops, cold and stinging like needles. In moments, water ran into his eyes and down his back, soaking his socks and boots. Winding up for the next slice, he tightened his grip, stopping short before the swing. He squinted, pushing his glasses up his nose. There was movement ahead.

He lowered his arms and squatted to watch through the cover. He recognised the valley, the edge of the Borderlands. That was something. He knew his way home from here, but who was that sheltering under the strangler fig, huddled in a large sheepskin coat?

It wasn’t anyone from the village, but the man ahead did remind him of something, someone. The way he sat there immobile, as if asleep, registered in the back of Everett’s mind. For an instant, a slice of light cut through the gloom and he recognised him. Then it was gone. He scratched his head. At least he had found his way back to the edge. That was good. The thief had eluded him again, but it was time to return home. He would try again tomorrow. He laughed to himself, a chicken’s cackle.

He thought he’d been lost when it turned out he was paralleling the valley all along. When he shifted his weight a frond snapped and the sound brought the other man’s head around. Not asleep after all. Everett froze, uncertain what to do next. This was the Borderlands. All forms of strange people could wander here. But there was still something evocative about this one. It reminded Everett of another time in his life—a time before the darkness grabbed hold. A time before the thief.

He straightened his back and took a chance. ‘Hey there!’ He waved, cutting his way out of the last line of twisting vines and fronds. ‘Are you lost?’ Everett’s grip stayed tight on the machete.

The other man called out to him, waving back. ‘I’m not certain.’

Everett sheathed his machete and trotted down the grassy slope. The voice was kind, easy.

‘Kelly?’ the man said. ‘Everett Kelly?’ His voice was a whisper, his brow furrowed.

‘Do I know you?’ Everett asked. He wiped his hand on his soaked shirt and extended it. The other man pulled him under the fig tree to get him out of the downpour. ‘From Sector Six perhaps?’

‘You do. I’m Grayson Nath.’ He returned the handshake. ‘We met not long ago, in the Parklands. Canie introduced us.’

‘Canie?’ Everett shook his head. ‘I don’t think so. I haven’t been to the Parklands in many years. You got my name right, though. I’m Everett Kelly. Must be some other explanation.’

‘Must be. But if you don’t remember me, then I think I am quite lost.’

Kreshkali rode at the gallop, the glow of the flaming city lighting her way. Jarrod was beside her on the tall palomino gelding, matching her mare stride for stride. They were on the quarry road, the jagged stairs looming in front of them.

‘Some path you picked,’ Jarrod said when they came to a halt under the steps. He twisted his neck to view the top of the quarry wall. ‘I have a bad feeling about this place.’

Kreshkali stared at him. ‘You don’t get bad feelings.’

‘I do about this.’

The stairs were broken, chipped away by runoff, deep gutters turning to ravines on either side.

‘I thought it would be in better repair,’ Kali said.

‘The horses won’t make it.’

‘I see that.’

‘Turn them loose, or tie them until we get back?’

‘We’ll have to let them go. There’s no telling how long this will take now.’

He shook his head. ‘Too many variables to round it down.’

They dismounted and untack the horses, leaving the saddles on the ground and the bridles hanging on a nearby branch.

‘This will be a little puzzle for the Corsanons, I imagine.’ Kreshkali smiled as she released the mare. The
palomino had bolted the moment Jarrod slipped off his headstall, but the mare lingered, whickering as she stroked her neck. When the Three Sisters swooped in, the mare’s head went up and she trotted down the path, following the other horse.

‘Where is the rain?’ Kreshkali stared at the sky.
‘Teg may not be up to the task,’ Jarrod said, pointing at the glowing orange city above them. The stars were fading behind plumes of smoke. ‘No sign of a storm.’
Teg? Kreshkali called to her apprentice. Had he fallen back asleep?
I’m here.
How are we coming with the rain?
I got distracted. There’s this young witch…
Teg!
She has the strangest eyes. Reminds me of…
Teg, forget the girl. We need rain. Work with me.

Kreshkali kept her mind linked to Teg’s as she and Jarrod climbed the ruined stairs. All she allowed herself to think about was rain. She imagined the wind blowing, her sleeves saturating, droplets moistening her eyelashes and beading in her hair. She smelled the earth release its rich fragrance of soil, roots and grass in response to the rain, the sound of patters hitting the dry stones, forming pools and rushing to the road below. The higher she climbed, the harder the rain fell in her mind until she reached the top and looked skyward again. Clouds had gathered overhead and the first drops of rain, big as plums, splattered the back of her hand.

Nice rain pray, Teg. Well done. You have it there?
Coming down in buckets, Mistress.

How’s your head?
Better.

And that girl? What were you going to tell me about her?
She’s got some strange magic. Something you need to see.

Keep her close.
Can’t. She’s gone.
Where to?
Same way you and Jarrod went.
Follow her.

Shaea ran down the road as the storm gathered. There hadn’t been a single wisp of cloud obscuring the stars moments before and she suspected sorcery. She also suspected it had something to do with the trouble Rall was in. She frowned, looking up at the clouds. Rall had told her how weather could alter with a single thought, though she’d doubted it at the time. Otherwise, why would winters be so cool and summers parched? Why frostbite and floods and icy winds? Living on the streets kept her apprised of the climate, day and night. If she had known how to control the weather, she would have made it forever spring. Wouldn’t everyone?

Shaea stumbled to the ground, tripped up in her long skirts. She hadn’t kept her beautiful dress clean for long. Would she be sucked back into her gutter life, this moment of release fading into memory, a dream that didn’t come true? She listened hard before scrambling to her feet. She knew the lad was following her, though not by any sound he made. There was nothing on the wind. It was more a sensation in the pit of her stomach that warned her of his proximity. He wasn’t far behind. Maybe he was curious, an idle lad with nothing more on his mind than following a pretty girl? She giggled to think of herself in that way but she’d seen the reflection in the mirror. She was pretty, no other way to say it.

Or was he simply trying to get a better view of burning Corsanon? Maybe. Or he might have been sent—a spy. She didn’t know. Her mind whirled, the events of the long day taking the sense right out from under her. She ducked behind a grove of elms, flipped up her cowl and hid, catching her breath. She was a fast runner, had to be in the streets, but the fine outfit slowed her down, and the new boots. In any case, he kept up. Rain hit the ground and in moments it turned the road into a muddy river. She shivered, wrapping her cloak tight.

‘Uncanny weather, don’t you think?’
Shaea started at the voice. ‘Teg! Why are you following me?’

‘Not following. Our paths are simply taking the same course.’
They were both puffed from the run.

‘Same thing, don’t you think?’ She coughed, clearing her throat, remembering to keep her voice smooth and clear. ‘Where are you going? This way leads only to the quarry road, did you know?’

‘The quarry road is where I’m headed,’ he said, laughing. ‘Don’t look so startled. I’ve been asked to meet
someone there, is all. Same as you?’
‘Who’ve you been asked to meet?’ She watched for it but he didn’t hesitate. His pupils didn’t expand. He
didn’t lie.
‘My mistress.’
Shaea nodded. It was a truth, and no surprise that he would have been attached to a mentor. One with his looks
and manner would not be passed by no matter what his other talents. He was too pleasant to be around. She couldn’t
imagine passing him by in any case.
‘Shall we go together?’ he asked.
‘Might as well. You’d have a hard time tracking me in the downpour.’ She lifted her cloak up to her knees and
examined her new boots.
‘I would never have a problem tracking you,’ he said.
‘What do you mean?’ He was talking nonsense. Her prints vanished the moment she lifted her foot from the
ground and she told him so.
He winked. ‘Tracks are not the only way to follow a woman.’
Shaea scrunched her face. ‘Then don’t follow.’ She held out her hand and pulled him into step beside her. Rall
had said to run and she had, but the quarry was in sight. There was no need to race now and she didn’t mind his
companionship. His hand was large, his long fingers lacing hers. She pretended it was Xane and smiled, until she
remembered Rall. The witch said things had gone wrong.
How wrong, she didn’t know. Shaea looked over at Teg; the rain hammered down between them. On closer
inspection, he looked battle sore, battle weary. It didn’t make sense, unless he’d been in the fray with Xane. She
wanted to ask which side he was on but didn’t. He was with her now and it felt right. Besides, with his build and the
sword he carried, he could come in more than handy before the night was over. It didn’t hurt to have him along; she
could use someone like him. He might even help her find Rall. She squeezed his hand and carried on.
Rosette followed Drayco through the double doors, a wash of light, sound and merriment meeting them. She paused.
What’s wrong with these people, Dray? Don’t they know their city’s on fire?
If they do, Maudi, they don’t seem to care. He was at her side, mouth open, tasting.
The place was a carnival—laughter rang like bells, music played, couples danced. She looked over her
shoulder, checking to see if the alley was still there. The way these people were carrying on, she could have entered
a whole other world, leaving the dark streets of Corsanon far behind.
Patrons grouped at the bar, roaring over frothy mugs of ale and throwing dice along the counter top, whooping
at the results, no matter what they were. Smoke wreathed their bodies, hanging at shoulder height. Others were at
long tables, clapping and shouting and stomping their feet. Five musicians played a spirited tune, weaving the
melody between guitars, mandolin and flute. Low wooden drums kept the beat. Her foot tapped of its own accord
and she could see why so many were dancing. The rhythm drew her in—the rhythm she recognised from the dance
hall at Treeon Temple. ‘Clay?’ She couldn’t see all the players from where she stood.
Chairs and tables had been pushed against the back wall to make room on the floor. Everyone appeared to be in
various stages of intoxication. She laughed aloud. The atmosphere of the pub enveloped her and she loosened her
cloak, smiling. ‘I guess if I could find Clay anywhere in the many-worlds, it would be in a place like this,’ she said,
though her words were muted and didn’t bring a response from those nearby.
On the stage, Maudi. The one in the middle playing the black guitar. It’s him. It’s Clay!
She shifted until she could spot him; when she did, her breath caught in her throat.
She stumbled into a chair and dropped her head between her knees. How can it be him, Drayco? I mean, it
looks just like him, but Clay died.
I thought so too.
The next thing she knew the music had stopped and she was soaking wet, gasping and coughing. An empty
bucket lay next to her head and Drayco stood over her, licking her eyes. Faces peered down and she realised she was
flat on her back.
An’ Lawrence held her hand. ‘You’re going to have to stop passing out, Rosette.’ He turned to the people
surrounding them. ‘She drinks too much, is all. Sorry for the commotion.’
She pinched his fingers. ‘I drink too much?’
‘What would you like me to say?’ he whispered.
She groaned as she struggled to her feet. Several men helped her, though they shied away from Drayco. She
eyed the Sword Master, her hands going to her belly. ‘You could just tell them I’m pregnant.’
‘I didn’t know if you were announcing.’
She looked at her abdomen: it was swollen to the size of a ripe pumpkin. ‘You’re kidding.’
He shrugged. ‘You hadn’t announced it to me.’
‘Things have been moving a little quickly, if you recall, what with the prison break, Makee and city-wide fires.’
‘Not so quickly that you couldn’t drop into the pub. What are you doing here? We have to escape, remember?’
She pointed at the stage. ‘Take a look and tell me you don’t feel it was worth the stop.’
An’ Lawrence followed her line of sight and whatever retort he had ready for his daughter fell from his lips.
‘Remind you of someone too, does he?’ Rosette said. ‘Close your mouth. It’s unbecoming.’
An’ Lawrence snapped his mouth shut. ‘It can’t be.’
‘Can or can’t, I’m going to go talk to him. Meanwhile, will you order me some food? The supper smells divine.
What is that spice?’
‘Cardamom,’ a serving lad said, leaning towards her ear as he passed. ‘You’ll be staying for dinner?’
‘Yes, please.’
‘No, thanks anyway.’ An’ Lawrence shook his head, dismissing the boy.
‘Why did you do that? I’m famished.’
‘The fire? The guards? We need to get out? And these people should too. The flames will be on us.’
A crack of thunder boomed overhead and an instant later rain pummelled the roof—an audible drone in spite of
the music and cheer.
‘Not any more. This is uncanny, don’t you think? Those fires will be out before they set our table.’
‘Do you require assistance?’ The barkeeper came over. He stared at An’ Lawrence’s leg.
I forgot about the arrow, Rosette said, sending him a mental communication.
How’re you feeling?
Terrible. Thank you for asking.
That settles it. We stay, get that shaft out of your leg and eat. Then we can tackle your quarry steps.
And if we’re tracked?
I think the warriors have a lot more on their hands right now. Besides, if you feed me I can conjure another
glamour.
‘Yes, thank you,’ he said to the barkeeper. ‘Two meals for us and raw meat for our friends.’ He motioned
towards Drayco and Scylla who were sitting side by side. ‘And if you have a healer, I wouldn’t mind her taking a
look at this.’ He nodded towards the shaft in his leg.
‘Coffee or strong tea as well, please,’ Rosette said, sending him a mental communication. How’re you feeling?
Terrible. Thank you for asking.
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Terrible. Thank you for asking.
That settles it. We stay, get that shaft out of your leg and eat. Then we can tackle your quarry steps.
‘We know each other.’ Tears trickled down her cheeks.
‘But I can’t quite remember. Why is that?’
She took his hand and laced her fingers in his before letting it go. ‘Because it hasn’t happened yet.’
The rain drove down harder; water was overflowing the gutters and sheeting down the windows.
‘I don’t understand.’
She brushed her tears away. ‘Me neither.’

The crowd must have heard news of the fire as people were peering out the main door and gathering in small
groups. Nothing could be seen through the rain, though the smell of wet wood and old smoke wafted in. Bells rang
in the distance, a tiny sound.

Clay’s face lit up in a smile. ‘There are two of you,’ he said, whispering the words.
She laughed. ‘How’d you know I was born in the sign of the Twins?’
‘That’s not what I meant.’ He touched her belly without asking and she felt the baby move for the first time.
‘Did you feel that, Clay?’
‘I did.’ He smiled.
‘And when were you born? What sign?’
‘The Water-bearer. My moon’s in the sign of the Twins.’

Tears welled again. ‘Just playing tunes, though it looks like that might be over for the night.’ He frowned, catching the other
musicians’ attention. ‘The hat, James, mind the hat.’

‘You mind it, Clay. City’s on fire. I’m out of here.’ James took a handful of coins from the hat and stuffed them
in his pocket.
‘Nothing’s on fire in this rain, James.’
‘I’ll be going to check on my own home at any rate. Looks like they’re doing the same. Pack it up.’

People were bundling on coats and grabbing their bags, all making a run for it into the deluge.
‘Come share a meal?’ Rosette said. ‘I’d like to talk more.’
‘Me too.’ He scooped up the hat and divided the contents with the other bards.

She brought him to the table.

‘My goddess of the woods,’ he said, drawing in his breath. ‘Temple cats?’
‘They are.’ She stroked the top of her familiar’s head. ‘This is Drayco of the Dumarkian Woods, and Scylla,
from the South Tuscaro Cliffs.’ She turned to the Sword Master. ‘An’ Lawrence, I’d like you to meet Clay.’

An’ Lawrence stood then limped forward to take the lad’s hand. What do you think you’re doing, Rosette?
It’s Clay, for the goddesses’ sake. I’m bringing him home. ‘He’s going to have supper with us,’ she said aloud.
‘Do I know you?’ Clay asked the Sword Master, his brow wrinkling.

You can’t, Rosette.

Don’t you want to find out who he is?
It’s obvious who he is and you can’t tell him a thing. He’s certainly not coming with us. Her father’s voice was
like an arrow in her chest.

Why not?
It’s the timeline, Mauri, Drayco cut in. If he knows the future while in the past or if you change his position by
taking him elsewhere, you may never meet in the first place.

She pulled out a chair and plopped herself down. But we did meet, Drayco.
So far. This could make that different. It could make it never happen.

And why is that so bad? Maybe he doesn’t die in the stronghold of ASSIST either. ‘Please join us,’ she said to
Clay, kicking a chair out for him and frowning at An’ Lawrence.

The time frame is all wrong, Rosette. An’ Lawrence hadn’t returned to his seat. We are in a very old Corsanon.

This isn’t your Clay.

We’ll see if that’s true, shall we? ‘What brought you to Corsanon?’ she asked Clay, leaning back as she was
served a large steaming bowl. It was full of vegetables on a bed of saffron rice; the smell of the rich red sauce made
her mouth water.

‘I was going to take on a job at Treeon Temple, but I came here to the Festival of the Five Rivers instead.’

See what I mean, Rosette? The Festival of the Five Rivers ended well before Clay was born. The war halted
everything.

Unless now that Makee’s been here there never was a war. Maybe Corsanon never fell.
That would mean the Entity never split apart. Can you see where this is leading?

Myriad possibilities, though Jarrod could list them for you in a second.

We don’t need him to point to the obvious. It’s leading to a world where you don’t exist. He’s not the Clay any
of us knew.

And you can’t be sure of that. Besides, we know him now.

Don’t play with it, Rosette! An’ Lawrence crossed his arms as he sat. He propped his wounded leg on the opposite chair.

Rosette cranked the pepper grinder over his bowl until his meal was covered in grey dust. ‘Eat up,’ she said.

He scraped the top layer back and dipped his spoon underneath, then took a bite and smiled.

‘You want to be poisoned to death?’ she asked. ‘Is that your plan?’

‘It might be preferable to what you’re instigating.’

Rosette stuck her spoon in his bowl and stirred the contents before he grabbed her hand, squeezing it until she slapped her thigh. ‘Tio, I give up,’ she said, pulling her arm back. ‘Die if you like. I won’t try and save you.’

He took a few more bites, washing them down with the steaming coffee.

‘You two together?’ Clay asked.

‘No,’ they both said at the same time.

‘He’s my father,’ Rosette said, turning her attention to her meal.

‘She’s my apprentice,’ the Sword Master said. ‘Though that might not be evident by her manners.’

‘Eat it,’ she said, tapping his bowl with her spoon, ‘before your leg falls off.’

‘She has a point, An’ Lawrence. You might want to get that looked at.’ Clay frowned at the arrow shaft protruding from the Sword Master’s thigh. ‘I hear they dip the tips in…’

‘Hemlock. I know. Your healer said it’s better to leave it in, for now, unless I plan on staying off it for a day or two.’

‘And I take it you don’t?’

‘We’re gone as soon as the meal’s done.’ He let his eyes rest on Rosette as he spoke. ‘Isn’t that right, daughter?’

Maudi. Hate to interrupt but Kreshkali’s coming at a run, and she’s not happy.

Rosette stopped chewing and swallowed hard, her back stiffening.

I guess she’s upset that I left Dumarka?

That’s only the beginning.

‘Oh no,’ she said aloud.

‘What’s wrong?’ Clay asked.

She was about to elaborate when the Three Sisters flew into the pub, squawking and screeching, darting from corner to corner. Their feathers were glistening, heavy with rain, their necks scrawny and saturated. Two of them disappeared out the door and the other back-winged onto Rosette’s shoulder, scolding her like a mother hen.

‘How many familiars do you have?’ Clay asked. He lifted his finger towards the black bird and the raven struck at it.

‘This isn’t mine. She belongs to my mentor.’

‘I thought he was your mentor.’

‘He is, and so is she.’

Rosette stood as Kreshkali stormed into the room. Heads turned and conversations stopped, all eyes on the witch. Her hood was thrown back, spiky blonde hair wet, blue eyes blazing. ‘Rosette de Santo!’ she screamed.

‘Over here.’ Rosette waved, giving a small smile. ‘Are you hungry? The stew is delicious. Best ever. I’ll order you some. Meat or no meat? They offer it either way.’ She made to call the waiter.

What Kreshkali said next was unintelligible to most—a string of profanities popular in the back streets of Earth’s Half Moon Bay. Rosette cringed under the onslaught. Drayco ducked his head, his ears drooping.

Kreshkali stood above her, a raven on each shoulder, Jarrod at her side. He stepped forward, wrapping his arms around Rosette and hugging her tight. ‘Brace yourself, my lovely,’ he whispered in her ear. ‘Kali’s not pleased.’

I get that…

‘In all the worlds, in all the times, this is where I find you two?’ As Kreshkali bellowed the words, the remaining patrons grabbed their children and headed for the exit. ‘Supping in the Shek while Corsanon burns?’ All three birds took flight and circled under the rafters. It was hard to hear anything over the sound of their protests, save for Kreshkali’s voice. It cut through, even with the pounding rain. She turned to An’ Lawrence as if seeing him for the first time. ‘And you! What have you been doing? You look fit to faint.’ Kreshkali pointed at his wound. ‘Why haven’t you seen to that?’

Everyone looked at the protruding arrow and he pushed the chair away, standing. ‘She’s the one fit to faint,’ he said, his voice matching Kreshkali’s intensity. ‘What were you doing letting her run through the corridors in that condition?’

‘Letting her?’ Kreshkali’s eyes slowly turned to Rosette, as did her father’s.
Maudi? It seems that now you will need to explain what you neglected to mention before. You know? The bit about ignoring Kreshkali’s directive to stay in Dumarka?

I see that. Any suggestions?

If you feel at all inclined to lose consciousness again, this would be the perfect time.

Rosette winced then squared her shoulders. ‘I…I didn’t…Actually, I did…We, that is, Teg and I…we thought…’ She turned to Clay. ‘But look! I found him! I found Clay.’

Nice diversion, Maudi.

The young bard had stopped chewing the moment Kreshkali entered the room. His spoon was still suspended over his bowl, his eyes glued to her.

Kreshkali startled. ‘And now you’re grave robbing?’

‘Grave robbing?’ he said around a mouthful of food. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

Kreshkali ignored him. She felt the top of Rosette’s abdomen as if trying to determine the contents of a solstice gift. ‘How’re you feeling?’ she asked, her voice lighter.

‘Hungry,’ Rosette answered, returning her attention to the meal.

There was no telling how long the reprieve would last. She might as well get a few bites in while she could. Kreshkali turned her attention back to the shaft in An’ Lawrence’s leg. Her hands hovered over it for a moment before she slipped it out and handed it to him. As she put pressure on the wound, he blanched white.

‘A warning would have been nice,’ he said through gritted teeth.

‘You’d only have tensed up.’ A golden light glowed from her fingertips and surrounded his leg. ‘Feeling better?’

‘Somewhat. Thank you.’ He rubbed his shoulder. ‘This still hurts, though.’

She placed her hands over his head and closed her eyes. ‘Do eat your pepper stew,’ she said, stepping back.

‘Rosette’s cure?’

He nodded, and started to finish his food.

‘At least you got your herb lore right.’

‘Actually, she pulled off a glamour that surprised even me. But, Kali, things aren’t right. Makee’s here, and so is another Lemur witch. One I don’t recognise?’

‘Makee?’ She was about to say more when the Three Sisters swooped out of the pub only to return immediately, even more agitated, their volume redoubled. ‘Warriors are coming!’ Kreshkali said. ‘Is there a back door?’

‘The fire escape. This way.’ Clay grabbed his guitar case and motioned to the stairs. He led them up, the temple cats leaping past when they reached the landing. Rosette kept one hand on the rail and the other on Clay until An’ Lawrence stopped them.

‘You’re not coming with us, lad,’ he said, blocking the way when they reached the alley.

‘I have to. They’ve seen me with you.’ He threw his hand towards the building. ‘I’d be taken if I stay. Questioned. You can’t leave me behind for that.’

‘We’ll get you out of the city, but no further,’ Kreshkali said. She led the way into the empty street, the deluge already turning it into a river.

Rosette squeezed Clay’s hand. ‘You are him, through and through,’ she said, though her words were lost in the downpour.

‘What’s that, Rosette?’

‘I said, this time I’m not letting you go.’

When they reached the top of the quarry road, Rosette was soaked to her skin and shivering in spite of the pace. She peered over the edge, unable to see more than a few feet in front of her. ‘Where are the steps?’ she asked.

Jarrod was on one side of her, Clay on the other. They seemed to think she was likely to tumble and she suspected An’ Lawrence had instructed them to mind her.

‘It looks more like a waterfall than a road,’ Clay said.

Drayco shook, his ears and tail languid. There is too much water. I hate this.

‘Who conjured the rain, anyway?’ Rosette asked. ‘It’s got an uncanny feel.’

‘I did, with Teg,’ Kreshkali said. ‘Would you have preferred to burn?’ She leaned over the edge. ‘The steps are a little rough in spots, so mind your footing.’

‘Teg’s okay?’

‘You’ll see for yourself,’ Kreshkali said. ‘We’re meeting him at the bottom.’
CHAPTER 9
RIVERLANDS & CORSANON, GAELA & BORDERLANDS & TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH

‘This might be it,’ Shane said, running his hand along the smooth wooden surface.
‘It’s a wall, Shane, solid wood. Face it—there’s no way out of here unless May decides to let us go.’ A chuckle floated up the stairs and Selene tightened her jaw. ‘It doesn’t sound like there’s much chance of that.’ She was slumped on the floor, huddled with Tamin as far away from the corpses as possible. Her hand was over her mouth and nose, her eyes closed.
‘This isn’t just a wall, Selene. See the purple glow? Like the Entity, don’t you think?’
She opened one eye. ‘You said that hours ago and still I don’t see a way out.’
‘At least I’m looking. Come on, Selene. Help me.’ He stepped aside. ‘I can’t figure out what opens it but something must.’
Selene skirted the treasures to inspect the wall, Tamin’s small hand in hers. ‘It is glowing.’
‘As I said…’
‘Could there be a glamour on it?’ she asked.
‘If May is a witch, I don’t see why not.’
‘She’s a strange witch,’ Tamin said, looking at all the riches side by side with the decay. He reached out to the wall, stroking it like a horse. ‘Sometimes you can coax it open,’ he said.
‘What?’ Shane turned the boy around to face him. ‘You’ve seen this before?’
He nodded. ‘But it only led back to the river. Back to May.’
‘Was it this exact one?’ Selene asked.
He pointed to the other side of the room. ‘It was over there, last time.’
‘Then maybe this is our way home.’ Selene’s voice lifted and she stroked the wall as well.
The thick timber logs that made up a solid barrier rippled and disappeared. Light struck Selene’s face. ‘The Entity!’
‘What is it?’ Tamin took a step back.
‘A friend.’ Selene tightened her grip on his hand. ‘Let’s give it a try. Anywhere has got to be better than this.’
She reached for Shane. ‘Come on, before we miss the chance.’
Shane glanced at the treasures. ‘What the river brings, is it, May? We’ll see about that.’ He gave Selene and Tamin a nod. ‘You first. I’ll be right behind.’
The portal opened wider and Selene stepped into the light, the edges shimmering. She pulled Tamin with her.
‘Tensar,’ Shane said. ‘The courtyard in spring. Think of nothing else, Selene.’
‘What are you doing?’
‘I’m getting my flutes.’
‘You can’t!’
‘They were gifts, and demons if I will leave them behind. Go. I won’t be long.’
Shane backed from the portal as the wall blurred. Selene and Tamin were whisked away, the sound of Selene’s retort vanishing with them. Thank the goddess for that. Her last look was fit to boil.
‘I’m not leaving what is mine,’ he said, though he knew she was already worlds away. His flutes and pipes were gifts from Annadusa and the Temple Los Loma bards. He had no intention of letting them rot. ‘There are some things I’ll not abandon.’ He picked his way over a torso and found his pack half buried among limbs and weapons.
A particularly large pile of gold coins caught his eye. ‘Why not?’ He figured he’d earned it. The crazy witch downstairs had, in a moment of clarity, asked him to take the boy and he would. He would also take some resources to help with the project. Minding a youngster wasn’t cheap. He knew that from his sister’s brood. He wouldn’t leave his instruments, or the opportunity for wealth. It could take some time to situate the lad, even with his talent. Best have backup.
He pinched the bony arm of the nearest corpse like lifting a rat by the tail. The odour made him gag. Swallowing his bile, he moved the limb aside, dropping it as it came away from the torso. The drawer beneath it glistened with gold. There was enough treasure there to finance an army. ‘What the river brings,’ he whispered again. He took two fistfuls and dropped them in his pack, the weight surprising him. ‘That’ll do.’
Shane didn’t want an army. He just wanted to get home, buy a new low whistle and resign from the border scouts. If it meant raising the fiddle-playing lad, he’d gladly do that too. He shouldered the pack. ‘Gladly.’ But when he turned to the portal the purple glow was gone. Where a moment ago was a whirling vortex, thick boards now
barred the way; it was a wall without any sign of entry or exit—no glow, no swirl, no light.

‘Demon’s blood!’ He pounded the wall, his fists hammering out the panic in his head. When the cackle of May’s voice reached him, he stopped. ‘Enjoying this, are you?’
She laughed harder.
Shane looked at the floorboards. ‘If you want the boy looked after, you best pull back your glamour. Selene’s hopeless with children and wouldn’t have a clue how to support his musicianship.’
The laughter stopped.
‘I can bring him up right and it’s no consequence to you that I take some coin.’
The laughter resumed and the wall remained solid.
‘Let me out!’ he shouted, again pounding on the wall. His fists stung and still there was no hint of the portal. He stopped and wiped the sweat from his face. *Steady,* he said to himself. *There must be a way.*

‘There is.’
A smile lifted his face as he imagined Rosette’s voice answering him. He remembered a conversation he’d had with her on this very topic. Conversation? It was more an argument, on his side anyway, but he could hear her clearly and it started to make sense. She’d said calm, sweet and easy, as if it mattered nothing to her if he believed what she was saying or not. At the time he hadn’t, but now it was sounding different.

‘It’s like this, Shane,’ she had said. ‘I respond to what I want to see, not what’s there.’
‘But that’s just crazy talk.’
‘No, it’s witchcraft. It’s what I’ve been taught and—more than that—it’s the law of nature.’
‘How can it be the law of nature?’
‘Because it is.’
‘More like demons’ trickery.’
‘Hardly. Shane, relax for a moment and think about it. What you see is what you expect to see. Nothing more and nothing less. How do you think a glamour works, for the goddesses’ sake?’

‘I’m trying not to think about it at all. It’s too confusing.’
He’d been baffled that day and still was, but he closed his eyes and pictured Rosette, her raven hair blowing across her face, her dark eyes, her hawk nose, slender limbs and extraordinary tattoos. *Tell me again, Rosette. A simple bard’s version.*

‘See not what is, but what you desire.’ Her voice filled his mind as if she were standing next to him. ‘It’s easy, if you know what you want.’
He let her words sink in. When he opened his eyes he ignored the solid wall and imagined the portal instead. He saw its glowing purple light, the zapping tendrils of the Entity reaching towards him. He dismissed the barrier and saw instead what he wanted to see—a way out. The one he knew could be there, the one that moments ago had been. Exhaling, he stepped forward, not smacking into a solid object but gliding through, into the portal, the plasma tickling his hand as he passed. ‘Tensar, please,’ he said, and he imagined the palace courtyard in the time of spring.

‘Thank you, Rosette, wherever you are.’ He smiled and the Entity locked onto his vision of gratitude—including his memory of Rosette, the joy in her voice, the smile on her face, the softness of her touch. It locked on and it took Shane straight to her, straight into the driving rain of Corsanon’s quarry road.

Shaea ditched Teg, but she didn’t know for how long. The handsome young man who’d tailed her from the temple had gone up the quarry steps, checking the runoff levels. She’d suggested he climb a few flights first, before they both ventured up, explaining how the downpour could bring a wash of water fit to drown them both. It was true. She’d seen it happen and, in her frock and fancy new boots, he didn’t question her suggestion. Of course, Shaea could climb twice as fast and high as any boy, but she saw no need to tell him that. She wanted a word with the Entity and she had no intention of giving away her secret to Teg, no matter how beguiling he was.
She made her way back to the pothole in the ground; barely distinguishable from the rest of the road, it was half buried in mud and rising water. She knew the place, though. She recognised it immediately and stood right over it like it was really there, the portal to another world. ‘I got Rall out of the city but there’s been a bit of grief. She’s not with me at the moment. Do you really mind? I’d much appreciate you letting me through, so we can talk about this face up.’

The ground shimmered and a rippling wave of energy blew her hood back, pasting her wet hair to her face. From the edge of the road a wall of rock emerged, the portal opening. It quickly became a gaping maw glowing with purple light. ‘Get in here then, girl, before you’re washed away.’
She slipped into the shelter of the corridors without a second thought, letting out a scream when she bumped into a man, lean and rugged, with startling blue eyes and a long thin plait at the back of his neck.

‘Entity?’ She made a little bow. ‘Thank you for letting me in.’
The man laughed, a delightful sound, and held out his hand to steady her. ‘Entity? Not hardly. The name’s Shane MacVenton, bard of Tensar and second marshal of the border scouts, though soon to retire that position.’ He narrowed his eyes. ‘Have you seen a lad? He’d be attached to a woman, no doubt with a sour look on her face but otherwise beautiful.’

‘You’re not the Entity?’

‘Not me, lass.’

‘Name’s Shaea. But, you didn’t ask for Rall?’

He shook his head. ‘I don’t know anyone by that name.’

She took a step back. ‘You didn’t speak to me the other day—the day of the battle?’

‘It wasn’t me, Shaea. I’ve only just arrived.’ He looked out into the driving rain. ‘Where are we, anyway? This isn’t the T’locity courtyard in spring, and you are speaking in the tongue of Gaela. Don’t tell me I’ve gone askew.’

‘I don’t know where you’ve gone but spring’s long past and I’ve never heard of T’locity.’

‘Not again.’ He grumbled before giving her a half smile. ‘I best look around in any case. The Entity makes these choices for a reason.’

‘You’re welcome to it, Shane. I’m staying put. The only thing out there is an oncoming flood, putting out the fires of Corsanon and washing away its filth.’

‘Corsanon?’

‘Where did you think we were?’

‘Anywhere but Corsanon.’

‘Why do you say the name as if it were poison? Corsanon’s a beautiful city—the upper levels, anyway. We have the most magnificent temple. It’s the centre of Gaela.’

‘That’s not how I heard it.’

‘True? What do your stories say?’

Shane frowned. ‘That nothing good comes from Corsanon and the temple has long been in ruins, but I can amend that now.’

‘You can what?’

He laughed again—such a warm sound. ‘I’d say there is something beautiful about Corsanon, and her name is Shaea.’

She smiled widely, not bothering to hide her mouth.

Teg spotted them descending the quarry road. The jagged steps had disappeared, a section completely missing. The footing was slick with silt and rubble washing by in rivulets. The Sword Master was limping, leaning hard into Jarrod, his familiar beside him. Rosette was glowing, plump with her pregnancy. How long had it been? He thought only a matter of days had passed since she and Drayco shot into the portal ahead of him but now he wondered. She held hands with a lad he didn’t recognise.

Rough time, Rosette? Teg asked, sending the thoughts directly to her mind.

Teg! It’s good to see you. Are you well?

Well enough.

Excellent, because we haven’t heard the half of it from Kali or An’ Lawrence. She slipped a few feet before catching herself. Drayco bounded to her as the lad pulled her up.

Our apprenticeships are hanging by a strand. He looked at her belly. I think we’ve been travelling at different speeds. It’s only been a day or so on my side.

Much longer here.

I see that. Who’s your friend?

She beamed. It’s Clay.

Clay? Didn’t he die?

Not yet and I want to make sure he doesn’t. Teg, I need your help. I want to take him with us. Rosette glanced at Kreshkali as she slipped to a stop in front of Teg.

That could be tricky, Rosette. What’s Drayco’s view?

See for yourself.

The rain pounded down on them, and Drayco cursed, not bothering to keep his complaints occult. The vocabulary was colourful and included words Teg would have to look up later. The downpour ran off the temple cat’s flanks, sheeting from his chin and belly fur.

You’re wet, Teg said to him.

Drayco hissed. As are you.

One of the Three Sisters was hunched on Kreshkali’s shoulder, wings slightly open for balance, feathers
rumpled. The other two shot down to the portal. Kreshkali’s aura was like a live volcano. Teg swallowed and turned towards her.

‘Teg.’ Kreshkali gave him a quick nod. ‘Care to shut down this rain?’

‘Pray sun, Mistress? It’ll take a moment.’

‘A moment might be more than we have.’ She looked back up the cliff.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Observation, Teg. What’s that you’re standing on?’ Kreshkali asked.

He looked at his boots. The growth underfoot was bent, grey under the cloudy night sky. Silt rushed past in black globs. ‘You mean the grass?’

She shook her head. ‘Is that all?’ She turned to her daughter. ‘Rosette?’

Rosette squatted by his feet; she plucked a blade and tried to stand. Clay, still holding her hand, hauled her up. She wiped water out of her eyes then twisted the stem.

‘Class liliopsida, order poales, family…’ She squinted, holding the blade closer and feeling its edge.

‘Cyperaceae, most likely. There are more than three thousand species filling seventy-five genera, so I can’t be sure.’

‘Hazard a guess?’ Kreshkali said.

‘Carex, most likely.’

‘Which is?’ She turned to Teg.

He scratched his nose. ‘That’s a…um.’

‘A common sedge,’ Rosette said, supplying the answer.

‘I was about to say that.’ Teg kept his eyes on the ground. The water pooled in the culvert, the surface rippled by the wind. It was rising fast.

‘And, Teg, what do ground-sprouting sedges tell you?’

‘Wetland, Mistress.’ He answered quickly, his head coming up. ‘Listen! Hear that roaring?’

Above the sound of the driving rain came a rush, the rip of fast-flowing water.

‘Get out of it, now!’ Kreshkali reached for Rosette, the raven taking flight. Teg crouched and sprang; shifting in midair, his body cleared the oncoming water as he landed on higher ground. He whirled, shifting back to human form to grab An’ Lawrence, pulling him up as the water swept past. Scylla stood behind him, shaking her wet fur. When he looked at Kreshkali’s face, he knew instantly who hadn’t got out.

‘Rosette!’ she screamed. Rising out of a shock wave, Kreshkali morphed into falcon form and shot down the cliff. She’s caught in the deluge. Run, Teg. Get to the bottom as fast as you can!

Again Teg shifted, tearing down the teeth of the stairs, following the rapids that carried Rosette and her familiar towards the bottom.

Rosette loved reciting the scientific names of flora and fauna, especially in moments like these when her mentor was fit to snap. It might pacify the High Priestess a little. She had thought of sending the information to Teg, knowing he would not look good with his stammering, but she changed her mind. He could handle it and she wanted the redemption herself. They had yet to sit down with Kreshkali and explain themselves. It was very much her idea to leave Dumarka and search for An’ Lawrence. She would have to admit that, so why not at least gain a little ground while she could?

Maudi, I think we need to literally gain ground. Do you hear the roaring?

Like a beast. What is that?

Water.

Water?

Yes, and we’re standing in a culvert, as your sedge grass shows. The temple cat’s head went up. Climb, Maudi! Get out!

Kreshkali screamed, grabbing her arm. Rosette felt the vice-like grip for a second before it was ripped away. A wall of water knocked her off her feet. She gulped in a breath and was dragged under, the black deluge closing over her head.

Drayco! She shrieked her familiar’s name. Where are you?

Beside, Maudi. I’m here.

She was buoyed up, and wrapped her arm over Drayco, the momentum of the rapids throwing them forward as they shot down the cliff.

‘Clay!’ she screamed above the white water, her head barely above the surface. She couldn’t see; her eyes were stinging and her cold limbs were finding it hard to keep her upright.

He’s here, Maudi, next to me.

Is he breathing?
He’s screaming, just like you.
What about Jarrod? The others?
I don’t know.

The ground came up fast, the water pounding her into the road. She gasped, choking as she half crawled, half swam to the edge and dragged herself out. An arm reached for her, helping her up. Drayco had her by the cloak, pulling her forward as well.
‘Rosette! Where in the demon’s mountain did you come from?’ Her rescuer pulled her to her feet, supporting her as she coughed up water. ‘You’re nearly drowned.’ He pulled sticks from her hair as he pushed it back from her face.

She focused her eyes. ‘Shane!’
‘Aye, it’s me.’
‘How did you get here?’ she asked, coughing and spitting.
‘I could ask the same of you.’
She enclosed him in a bear hug. ‘To the portal,’ he said as he started to lead her away.
‘Wait. The others. Where’s Clay?’
‘Clay?’

They’re coming, Maudi.

She looked up the cliff and a wolf leapt into view, skidding to a halt in front of Shane. He morphed, Kreshkali landing on his arm before shifting as well.
‘Shane?’ Teg said. ‘How?’

‘Long story.’

‘Help me find Clay,’ Rosette yelled above the rain.

‘Teg, enough of the storm. Shut it off.’ Kreshkali closed her eyes, searching with her mind. ‘Godesses of the woods, not this,’ she whispered.

‘It’s all right, Kali! He’s here!’ Rosette called out, but Kali didn’t move for some time.

They found Clay in an eddy a little further downstream and pulled him out. He was conscious, no broken limbs. Leaning him against her shoulder, Rosette walked back to the portal.

‘Where are you going with him?’ Kreshkali asked.

‘We’ve got to get dry,’ she shouted, the rain pouring into her mouth as she spoke. ‘And he’s not being left behind. Look at him. He can barely stand. He’ll die if we leave him.’

An’ Lawrence and Scylla came slipping down the embankment, both covered in mud.

‘It’s been quite a gathering, I see,’ Shane said. ‘And this is what happens when I leave you, my girl?’ he said to Rosette, taking in her swollen belly.

‘You know not to call me girl; besides, it could be misconstrued. I’m not entirely certain about everything that happened in that time loop, are you?’

He froze. ‘You don’t think it’s mine, do you?’

She waved her hand in the air, laughing as she and Clay headed to the portal. ‘You should see your face! Come on, Dray. I want out of this rain. And tell Jarrod and An’ Lawrence to hurry. Knowing him they’ll be debating in the rain until sunrise.’

Kreshkali followed Rosette towards the portal, pausing outside the entrance until everyone passed through. Her guts were in knots. She did another mental sweep of the area. Get them away first, she whispered to herself. ‘We are off to Temple Los Loma,’ she said aloud, setting her intention before swiping the plasma Entity. ‘No detours please!’

The Three Sisters teetered on her shoulders, vying for space, their black twig feet clinging to her cloak as they cawed a warning. Too late.

‘Aren’t you forgetting someone?’

Kreshkali froze as a hand gripped her, spinning her around.

‘I can’t imagine you’d want to leave the most precious member of your party behind—the one you’re sworn to protect? What would Docturi Janicia think of such an oversight?’

Kreshkali went to draw her dagger but the grip on her wrist tightened.

‘Don’t even think about it, High Priestess. I’ve got a demon’s spell woven under your feet. Unless you want to take the lot of them to the underworld, you best listen to me.’

Kreshkali hissed but lowered her hand.

‘That’s better. We’ve got some things to talk about and this time you’re going to listen.’ The glamour faded like a shawl slipping off one shoulder. The witch became immediately recognisable.

‘Makee! What are you doing here?’
‘Surprising, isn’t it? I’m called Rall, by the way, so try not to confuse anyone.’
‘What have you done with Jarrod, Makee?’
‘Are you sure that’s the best question?’
‘I saw his tulpa. No consciousness was there. What have you done?’

While Makee chuckled, Kreshkali made a choice. She took the moment—a split second—to shoot herself through the portal and into the corridors, the shape of Nellion Paree forming in her mind. It would have been visible to none, a faint shadow rendered unimpressible by its short duration. There was a wisp of breeze, enough to turn Teg’s head, but that was all. ‘So you’ve learned a new glamour, have you?’ Kreshkali said, keeping Makee’s attention on her. ‘Well done. We’ll have to compare notes some time.’

‘I look forward to it, but not now.’
‘No, not now.’ Kreshkali’s hand was throbbing under the vice grip. ‘What’s this about, Makee? I thought we were on the same side.’

‘We were, while it was convenient.’
‘And it’s not any more?’
‘Makee lowered her voice. ‘I’ve figured out a way to change the past. You’ll be impressed.’
‘Is that so? And what have you done exactly?’

‘I think it’s safe to say there won’t be any temple wars now that I’ve had him here to help things along.’ She tilted her head towards An’ Lawrence who was slumped against the wall. ‘You’ve put my fires out, though, and I’m not at all happy about that. Still, there can’t be much of a war now, and you know what that means.’

Kreshkali smoothed her face, considering. ‘You’ve kept the High Priestesses of Corsanon away from the Entity? They never concoct their brew that sunders it? The other temples don’t step in. The battles are not fought…’

‘That’s it. You can rewrite the history books, if you like. But don’t forget the most important event, or should I say non-event?’

‘What’s that, Makee?’

‘Nellion Paree won’t change the course of the Lake Drid rivers.’ Kreshkali’s knees weakened. *Passillo.*

‘That’s right. You can’t have taken the spell.’

Kreshkali looked towards the gorge above Corsanon though all she saw was rock and rain.

‘The Spell of Passillo is still resting quietly in its cairn.’ Makee clicked her tongue. ‘Waiting.’

‘And you think you can simply dive in and take it for yourself?’ Kreshkali said.

‘Precisely.’

Kreshkali shook her head. ‘It’ll do you no good. Don’t you understand? You don’t have the DNA for it. You can’t carry it and you certainly can’t use it.’

‘Maybe not me, but I found someone who can.’ She glanced to the back of the portal.

‘You’re mad.’ Kreshkali followed her glance. ‘Rosette will not bend to your will.’

‘I’m no madder than most,’ she laughed. ‘And you aren’t seeing what I see. Now play nice or I’m not going to tell you where Jarrod is.’

Kreshkali stiffened. She had been searching wildly for Jarrod’s consciousness ever since spotting the corpse but there had been no response. *Teg, can you sense Jarrod?* *Not here, Mistress. Do you want me to… Stay. Don’t say anything. Wait.*

Makee jerked her arm. ‘None of that,’ she said. ‘I need you to play along, so don’t even think of giving me away.’

‘What have you done?’

La Makee winked. ‘It was a slip. An accident. It was not my intention for it to happen quite that way but it’s done now. Your quantum sentient’s out of the picture, Kreshkali. Get used to it.’

Kreshkali tuned into An’ Lawrence. He leaned against the back wall, his leg braced, eyes closed, hands clutching the wound on his thigh. He needed a healing. Everyone did. They were all so pummelled that no one had noticed Jarrod’s absence. She had planned to get them under shelter before discussing what to do. Rosette would react the strongest. She didn’t want her traumatised further.

Rosette was in the corner shivering. Teg held Clay as the bard doubled over, coughing until he retched. The Lupin was hiding his own pain, barely. Shane was there—how, she’d yet to learn. He chatted to a girl she didn’t recognise. Who was she? They were no match for Makee in this state. She searched again for Jarrod and got no response. Kali levelled her eyes on the other witch. ‘What exactly do you want?’

‘You’ll see, High Priestess, if you live long enough.’ She laughed again, the sound of burning leaves. ‘Just mind you don’t let anyone out of the corridors. Rosette is to stay put, or she draws her last breath where she stands.’

Makee didn’t wait for an answer. She blinked, weaving her glamour again; the luminous dust at her feet rose,
clinging to her body. In the time it took her eyes to open, she returned to the guise of Rall, a Lemur raven landing neatly on her shoulder.

Rosette had walked Clay to the portal, Drayco at her side. They made their way to the back wall of the corridor and collapsed, water dripping from their faces, cloaks saturated, bodies bumped and beaten. Her skin was blue and she shivered uncontrollably. Drayco shook water from his coat like a dog, his limbs braced wide, water spraying the walls with dark spatters. She pulled Clay closer and took his hands, trying to warm them. Everyone stared until she snarled back. ‘What?’ she said through chattering teeth. ‘You think I should have left him to freeze, or get swept away in the next flash flood?’ She eyed them all, daring anyone to cross her, until she noticed the strange young witch leaning against the opposite wall. Rosette’s brow lifted. ‘Who are you?’

The girl cleared her throat. ‘Shaea’s my name, and I come from Corsanon, but she can tell you more.’

Shaea pointed outside. Next to Kreshkali stood another witch, lithe and beautiful. They were talking in the rain. A Lemur raven clung to her shoulder, wings shuffling as she folded them back. The Three Sisters bristled, screeching out a territorial ahk ahk ahk aaaah, their throat hackles fanned. The Lemur didn’t respond but only tilted her head to scratch her ear. Rosette looked back to Shaea, remembering them both. They were from Temple Corsanon, the women from the coach.

‘I’m Rall.’ The witch next to Kreshkali stepped forward. ‘Glad you all made it out of the city.’ She frowned, scrutinising their faces. ‘But where’s Jarrod? Don’t tell me you were going to leave without him.’

Kreshkali bristled.

Rosette’s head shot up. ‘Jarrod! Drayco? Can you hear him?’

The temple cat was up, tasting the air. ‘He’s not here.’

What do you mean, he’s not here? We left him behind? Where? What happened?

I don’t know, Maudi. He never came into the corridor. There is no scent of him at all.

Talk to him, Drayco! He can hear you at this distance.

Maudi, I tried. There is no answer.

She struggled to her feet. ‘We’ve got to go back.’

‘Rall, is it?’ Kreshkali said, moving to Rosette’s side. She kept her eyes on the other witch while holding her daughter back.

‘She’s Rall all right,’ Shaea said. ‘But she didn’t always look like that.’

Kreshkali nodded. ‘I’m not surprised.’ She pushed Rosette down. ‘Sit. You’re freezing and half drowned. You can’t do anything for Jarrod now but keep yourself alive.’ She helped her out of her wet cloak.

‘We can’t leave without him,’ Rosette said. She shook uncontrollably.

‘Technically, we’re not, as long as we’ve got you,’ Kali whispered.

‘Are you saying he’s dead?’ Rosette’s voice went shrill. She tried to get up again. ‘Jarrod!’ she screamed.

Kreshkali held her. ‘Rall, make yourself useful and help me warm it up in here.’ She looked at Rosette. ‘You are staying put!’

Kreshkali placed her hands on the wall until a golden glow emanated from the rock surface. Rall hesitated a moment before doing the same on her side of the corridor. Rosette felt the warmth penetrate her limbs, relaxing her from the inside out. Steam rose from their wet clothes as cloaks, boots and hats were stripped off.

‘Thank you,’ Rosette said. ‘That’s much better. Now excuse me while I go find Jarrod.’ She pulled herself up to her feet.

An’ Lawrence came to her side and took her hand.

‘What?’ Rosette shouted. ‘Why is everyone looking at me?’

She turned away from An’ Lawrence and headed for the portal. He caught her and pulled her back. ‘Rosette,’ he said. ‘Listen to me.’

‘Let go!’ She had one hand on the hilt of her sword. He grabbed her shoulders and gave her a shake.

Rall stepped up. ‘Jarrod went over the edge, Rosette.’

‘What?’

‘He went off the cliff.’

Rosette doubled over.

Maudi, sit. You’re going to faint again.

Rosette slid to the ground, tears welling in her eyes. ‘He’s dead? It can’t be. I went over the edge and I’m all right. We all did.’ She stared at their faces. ‘We need to look for him. He could be…’

‘Rosette,’ Kreshkali cut in. ‘He must have gone over the other side of the steps.’

‘The quarry side?’ Shaea asked. ‘There’s no surviving that.’

Rosette sobbed.
‘Sorry,’ Shaea said. ‘But that’s the way of it. The quarry side drops straight down to the bottom, half a day’s climb. Unless he can fly, he’s as dead as my Xane.’

Rosette looked at her, the tears spilling down her cheeks. ‘He can’t fly.’

Grayson eased himself into a chair. It was a long hike to the village and he’d been alternately soaked with rain and blistered by the tropical sun. He took a drink, grateful for the refreshment. ‘You don’t remember me at all?’

Everett shook his head. He was folding and refolding a small towel, keeping his eyes on the door.

‘And Rosette?’ Grayson asked. ‘That name means nothing to you?’

‘Sorry.’ Everett left his preoccupation and lifted his head. His eyes were round, anxious. His hands trembled.

‘So sorry. I should know, of course, and I do but I don’t, if you follow. What I mean is, if I ever did it’s gone.’ He snapped his fingers and laughed. ‘Vanished, like the infants.’ He lowered his voice. ‘It was her fault. Did you know? Hers. She’s shaman and it happened right under her nose.’ He grabbed the towel, twisting it tighter and tighter. ‘She let the thief come. Might have even helped.’ His knuckles went white.

‘The thief?’

Everett jerked out of his chair. ‘Have you seen her? I know I was close this time. Had her on the run. Did she come your way?’ Everett narrowed his eyes. ‘Do you know the demon?’

‘I don’t.’

Everett looked out the window, into the distance. ‘Of course you don’t. It was long ago. Before your time.’

Grayson shifted in his seat. ‘Time is not always what it seems.’

‘Nonsense. Time is fixed. You can set your life on it.’

Grayson sighed. ‘I used to think so too.’

Everett returned to his chair. ‘If I were you, I’d go back to it. Time works best when we think of it properly.’

‘And what is proper?’

‘Time is solid, reliable. Always where you left it.’ Everett lifted his mug and clinked it against Grayson’s. ‘In any case, we have a common goal.’

‘We do?’

The sun was setting and a stream of golden beams shone through the clouds.

‘Of course.’

Grayson rubbed his throat. ‘And that goal is…’

The clouds closed in as the moments passed. The rain returned, beating out a steady rhythm on the bamboo roof. Everett tapped his fingers. ‘We’re both looking for lost ones, so we might as well do it together. I’m heading for the Allied States in the morning. That’s one place the thief could be, unless he’s still lurking in the depths of the jungle.’

‘Lurking?’ a woman said. She entered the bungalow, her arms laden with vegetables. She was barefoot, in a short dress, with most of her body under the shelter of a wide-brimmed hat. She spilled her load into the sink and hung the hat on a peg by the door, then offered a smile, dazzling white against her dark brown skin.

Everett startled. ‘Where have you been? Lurking around yourself, are you? Brewing something with the others?’

‘I’ve been in the vegetable garden, Everett, digging sweet potatoes and yams. Hardly the job of a lurker.’

Everett straightened. ‘I didn’t mean lurking like a beast, of course. It’s just a turn of phrase. Means nothing.’

He motioned her to the table. ‘Regina, this is Grayson.’

She reached out her hand and nodded briefly before looking to Everett. ‘Best use your phrases carefully, Ev. You know what words can do.’

Grayson didn’t miss the exchange. This was an old argument between them, a stalemate perhaps. She seemed to know how to handle him, though, her responses snapping him out of his paranoia. That was a relief.

‘As I said, a figure of speech, nothing more,’ Everett said.

‘Did you two work together?’ Regina asked, turning her attention back to Grayson.

‘Not really,’ Grayson said. ‘We met briefly in Sector Six. He was treating a friend of mine.’

‘So you say. I strangely cannot recall a bit of it.’ Everett held his mug in both hands, staring into it.

‘Memory works mysteriously you know.’ She winked at Grayson, noticing his tattoos. ‘And you remember a different world, I see. Same as our Everett.’

‘That’s not true!’ Everett slammed his mug on the table.

She shrugged. ‘You can add it up any way you like, Ev. Please yourself. But you are not of this world and if you’ve forgotten why it’s because you don’t want to know.’

Everett’s face darkened. ‘You don’t know what you’re saying.’

‘But I do.’ She went to the sink, filling it from a jug and washing her hands. ‘All his roaming? The
disappearing? You seek your own kind.’
‘I seek the thief that took what was ours!’
‘Those children would be grown by now, living their own lives without thought of their origins. The sooner you see that, the sooner you can let it go.’ She pointed a long purple gourd at Grayson. ‘He’s your key, Ev. I’d listen to him.’

Everett didn’t reply. Instead he raised his eyebrows at Grayson. ‘What’s it to be? Are you coming with me to the Allied States? We can start our search in Sector Six. That’s the first drop-off from the Borderlands.’

Grayson cringed inwardly though he kept his expression smooth. The Allied States was the last place he wanted to go. He remembered the feeling of relief when he’d left Sector Six the last time. There was no part of him that wanted to return. Yet the Entity had brought him here. What if Rosette had become trapped there again? It was possible. She’d been in a repeating cycle before. He couldn’t abandon her just because he wasn’t enjoying the search. Of course, he wasn’t even certain if this now was before or after he’d been there the first time. Everett’s memory certainly wasn’t helping situate them, nor was his state of mind. He seemed to have developed a personality disorder since they last met. He didn’t want to aggravate the man, but he needed more facts.

‘What happened before you left Sector Six, Everett?’ Grayson asked. ‘What’s the last thing you do remember?’

‘Tell him,’ Regina said. ‘If you don’t, I will.’

‘Truth is,’ Everett finally said, ‘I don’t remember a thing. It’s like I was never there.’

Hotha stood on the edge of the cliff, high above the gates of Temple Los Loma. He’d been there all afternoon, the sun baking down on his shoulders, his body a dot on the rust-red earth. In his wolf form he could see clearly to the horizon. There stood the backs of the mountains that drew the ocean to their knees, the haze of heat making them appear closer than they really were. Crows filled the bare-branched trees in the foothills, silhouettes against the sky—a smoky brown. It was thick with ash, pluming out the tops of three extinct volcanoes. Extinct? Not any more.

He flicked his ear when a fly landed on it, turning his head in the other direction. Smoke rose there too, feather-like wisps floating from the cone-shaped mountains to the east. Temple Los Loma was surrounded in a ring of fire. Kreshkali, where are you? We need help.

He stood, shaking the dust from his coat. With one more glance at the western horizon, he trotted down the cliff to the gates, picking up speed when he reached the bottom. The spell that protected Temple Los Loma was powerful. It had been in place for centuries and the grounds stood pristine, untouched by the turmoil that shook the rest of the planet. But no spell could endure if the Earth herself caught fire. What he saw today made his heart ache and a choice had to be made soon. Makee had been helpful, offering to move the entire temple clan to Gaela, but he was not going to give the go-ahead without consulting Kreshkali. Not unless she didn’t return.

He stopped in front of the portal, projecting his thoughts into the depths. Come soon, my queen. While there is still a choice to make.
CHAPTER 10
TEMPLE LOS LOMA & BORDERLANDS, EARTH & CORSANON, GAELA

Nell gazed out of the portal. The wind was up and red dust stung her face. The heat burned her lungs. Afternoon then. Perfect.

She stepped into the world, but it was far from perfect, far from right. Ash filled the air and the wind brought the scent of burnt eggshells—nothing like the saguaro blossoms and prickly pear she was expecting.

‘Strange,’ she said to the land. ‘You’re not at all as I left you.’ She flipped her cowl over her head. Hotha? Are you near?

She sensed his proximity even though he didn’t reply. Had he been watching the portal or travelling it? She’d find out soon enough. Not much got by Hotha—if anything at all. It’s me, Kali, or Nellion Paree, to be precise. She felt the ripples of his approach and hoped he would recognise her immediately. There wasn’t time to convince him if he didn’t. They needed quick action, not long debate. She tilted her head towards the clouds. They were as grey as the falling ash. Volcanic then? How could this be?

The mountains threatened a shower that even Temple Los Loma might not survive. They had to do something before the next surge of tectonic activity. She paused by the apple trees, rubbing a dull leaf until it shone, her thumb coming away smudged with soot. She spotted Hotha over the rise. He came at the run, morphing as he breezed to a halt. The shock wave blew her cowl back; her hair, matching the red of the surrounding land, danced.

‘Kreshkali?’ he said, his eyes gleaming. He all but sniffed her. ‘I’ve been waiting for you. New look?’

‘Old one, really. Call me Nell when I’m like this,’ she said. ‘It helps me keep it straight.’

‘Nell.’ He took her hand and drew her close. ‘In any form you are magnificent. How could you think I wouldn’t know you?’ He kissed her and whispered, ‘I’m glad you’re here.’

She kissed him back, lingering for a moment before straightening. ‘Problems?’

He nodded to the west where ash plumed from the mountain peaks. ‘I think we need to consider evacuation.’

‘That’s drastic.’

‘It is. We can consult Jarrod, though. He can give us the probabilities, the potential outcomes. Is he with you?’

Hotha looked towards the portal.

‘That’s going to be a little tricky, I’m afraid.’ She took his arm and walked through the gates, her head bent.

‘Tricky?’ His brow wrinkled. ‘How so?’

‘Jarrod’s lost.’

‘Lost?’

‘Gone. At least, his tulpa body’s been destroyed.’

‘He can create another?’

‘That’s possible, of course. It’s what I was expecting but his consciousness appears gone as well.’

‘How can that be?’

‘I don’t know. The shock of death perhaps? He’s been living in a body for hundreds of years now.’

‘But not the same one, surely.’

‘It doesn’t look the same. He’s morphed that tulpa around over time, but it’s still the body he thought up the day he left his hardware back at ASSIST.’ She squeezed his hand. ‘And one can get attached.’

‘But lost? It’s hard to believe.’

She sighed. ‘All I know is he can’t be sensed, by me or the temple cats.’

‘And Rosette?’

‘She’s safe, but she can’t feel him either.’

‘We have his backup CPU. We can bring him online again.’

‘That was the theory.’ She smacked her lips. ‘Janis Richter could have brought him back online, of course, and maybe her daughters Ruby and Layloni. They were trained in the same field, but there are no more techno-witches on Earth—not of that calibre. Grayson’s the closest we have, on our side.’

‘Kreshkali can’t do it?’ Hotha did a double take. ‘I mean, you? It’s beyond you?’

‘I understand the theory, of course. The knowledge has been handed down. We have textbooks, journals, notes and charts, but I can’t build a quantum computer—the housing necessary. We haven’t the resources or the expertise.’

‘Then we need to find someone who can.’ He waved his arm towards the smouldering mountains. ‘Not just for us. For the sake of the many-worlds. If Earth tips over…’

‘Exactly. That’s why I’m here.’

He smiled. ‘What have you in mind?’
‘We’re going to come up with a range of possibilities while they get themselves together in the corridors.’
‘They?’
‘I’ve left Kreshkali there to deal with Makee. She’s gone rogue, Rosette’s close to term, An’ Lawrence is wounded and…’
‘Teg?’
‘Injured as well but holding it together. He’s a valuable apprentice, Hotha.’
His eyebrows went up.
‘What?’ She stared at him. ‘He’s doing well. Be proud of your son.’
‘I am. I dare say he can handle Makee.’
She nodded. ‘He could if he knew her game.’
‘He doesn’t?’
‘I thought it best to play along, for now. She’s threatening with everything she’s got. Once they get out of the corridors, I’ll deal with her.’
‘Taking their time?’
‘Disparate intentions. They’re effectively trapped there until they get in alignment with each other. There’s too many of them in one space, with too many different ideas, let alone desires.’
‘But not you?’
‘Not me, here and now. I slipped out while I could. No one noticed. I searched for Jarrod’s consciousness but…’
He nodded, keeping hold of her hand as they crested the rise. ‘What’s first?’ he asked, bringing her back to the present.
‘We get Grayson in on this. He’s the most familiar with the technology. I’ll fly ahead and find him. Is he in his workshop? Busy today?’ She lifted her eyes to the horizon. ‘In the middle of a brilliant tattoo, no doubt.’
Hotha shook his head. ‘Save your wings, beautiful.’
‘Why’s that?’
‘He’s not here.’
Nell’s face froze. ‘Where then?’
‘He left for Dumarka weeks ago.’
‘And?’
‘There’s been no word back.’
‘We’re not going to get far without him.’
‘Then we best go looking.’

The corridors were steamy warm, rain pouring down outside the portal. Kreshkali clapped her hands. ‘You can drop the glamour, Makee,’ she said, pointing at the witch Rall. ‘You’re not fooling anyone.’

The Lemur raven clinging to her shoulder opened his mouth wide but no sound came out. Rall laughed and her body began to shimmer, her skin and clothes turning into luminescent dust that fell about her feet. When it settled, Makee stood in Rall’s place, hand on her sword.

Shaea gasped, covering her mouth. ‘She’s done it again.’

‘I’d say I have some fooled,’ Makee laughed. ‘And you!’ She strode up to An’ Lawrence, tilting her head back to take him in. ‘What have you done with Amarillo?’

‘The warhorse? That’s all you’re worried about?’ His voice boomed. ‘You left me in the middle of the Corsanon battlefield. You vanished mid-sentence!’

‘You managed to survive.’

‘No thanks to you, Makee. Did you tip them off as well? Risk Rosette’s life? Why would you think I give a demon’s balls about your warhorse after that?’

‘Are you saying you’ve neglected him?’ She drew her blade.

‘He’s fine,’ Rosette cut in, Teg nodding agreement. ‘Amarillo came back with me to Dumarka. He’s wintering there, with plenty of feed, so stop your babbling.’ Her voice was flat, vacant.

‘Rugged up? The snow would…’

‘He’s rugged,’ Rosette answered.

‘That’s better news.’ Makee sheathed her sword. ‘Oh, don’t look so demolished, girl. We’ll get Jarrod back. That’s the whole point of having the spell in you, isn’t it? So he can never be destroyed?’

‘We don’t need the backup,’ Rosette said. ‘He’s out there, somewhere. I can feel it. I just can’t get an answer.’

‘Sounds like he’s dead to me,’ Shaea said. ‘That’s how it was with Xane.’

‘He’s not!’ Rosette snapped her head around. ‘He’s not like that.’
Shaea held up her hands, warding her off. ‘He can’t vanish.’ Rosette turned away. ‘Where would he go?’

‘If we are going to solve this, we need to agree on a destination,’ Kreshkali said, returning to the Entity. ‘We can’t stay here arguing. We have to make a choice.’

‘And I suppose you have the answer to that?’ Makee asked, one eyebrow going up.

‘I do. We need to go straight to Temple Los Loma.’ Kreshkali’s voice filled the corridors. ‘There we can build the hardware for a standard quantum computer. It’ll take a continuous power supply and…’

‘Excuse me, Kreshkali,’ Makee cut in. ‘I know you are the descendant of Docturi Janicia but what in demon’s spit do you mean by “build a standard quantum computer”? There are no standards for such things any more. We, ironically I might note, destroyed the only place left on Earth that knew how to make one.’ Makee crossed her arms under her breasts. ‘This won’t work. I say we go back to Treeon. And cross me again and you won’t ever see that place either, Makee added.

I’m suggesting what’s logical, Makee. You didn’t want to raise suspicion, remember? An’ Lawrence will cut you in two if he knows your intention, so don’t you argue. ‘It won’t work if you keep saying that,’ Kreshkali said aloud. ‘I have Richter’s notes, and Rosette has the DNA. The rest is just minor details.’

‘I still say he’s out here…somewhere.’ Rosette closed her eyes.

‘Minor details?’ Makee shouted. ‘A quantum computer is a minor detail? It’s taken me a year of study just to grasp what it does, let alone how it’s made. Minor details? We aren’t trying to bake oatcakes, you know, and simply missing a cup of flour.’

Kreshkali smiled, thin and cool. ‘But we are. You’re forgetting that we have Grayson. He’s the one who can extract the CPU from Rosette’s DNA and he knows what kind of power supply we need. He can interpret Janis’s notes.’

‘Wonderful. Perfect. Where is he now?’

‘Temple Los Loma.’ She glanced at Rosette who shook her head.

‘Jarrod’s still alive!’ she said.

‘His body isn’t.’

‘It never was. He made a tulpa, a thought form, and he can do it again. His consciousness is still nearby. We have to search for him.’

‘What does Drayco say?’ Kreshkali asked.

‘Dray?’

Maudi. I can’t hear his thoughts anywhere, and I’ve been trying with all my heart.

I know you have, love. Me too. She buried her face in her temple cat’s neck and sobbed.

‘He’s lost,’ Kreshkali whispered. ‘Can we all agree on the destination now?’

They murmured different answers.

‘Disparity will send us who knows where. We have to be of one mind for the corridors to run true.’

‘I don’t understand what we are voting on,’ Shaea said. ‘But I’m for any place that isn’t Corsanon, and isn’t raining.’

The others turned to her as if it suddenly occurred to them she was there. Before anyone replied, the Entity zapped like a lightning strike and whisked them all away.

Jarrod stood at the edge of the culvert, a wall of water rushing towards him. ‘Flood!’


The water, like a black tongue, plunged towards them. Rosette tried to climb but the ground gave way and she buckled.

‘Rosette!’ Jarrod screamed and dove. The torrent whipped him around, dragging him under. Logs jagged his body, snapping into his wrists and elbows as he reached for Rosette. Together they raced downstream, the cold clamping like a vice, the darkness blinding. He couldn’t surface, but that wasn’t his intention. Carried along underneath Rosette, he put all his strength into buoying her up. If he could keep her face above the surface and cushion her fall, she would survive.

The ride wasn’t long. They plunged to the bottom of the quarry road in a matter of breaths, though Jarrod never took any. He never breathed again. His tulpa body ached for air and while he forced himself to stay under, to keep Rosette afloat, the world around him slowly disappeared, retreating from the edges of his mind like waves sucked back from the shore.

When he hit the bottom he used his last wisp of awareness to propel her to the shallows, then the water towed him under, taking him further downstream until its voracity was spent, defused by the expanse of the Corsanon Fields. He drifted away from his body as it died. Like a bubble popping, the sensation reminded him of waking from
a dream—a little sudden and disorienting but only a dream after all. For a moment he let go of every intention and desire he’d ever had. His awareness scattered, leaving him bit by bit—honeybees fleeing their smoky hive, searching for flowers far afield.

The rain fell through him, and no wind blew. Further and further he drifted away. From a great distance he heard a cry and the corners of his mind that still recognised such things turned back. He knew the voice. It was Rosette, and she was crying for him. Sobbing.

Rosette?

He didn’t struggle with the choice. There was nothing to fight or push against. He knew what he wanted to do and in the clarity of that goal he became coherent. He was Jarrod again, skimming over the terrain, searching the wetlands for the remains of himself, searching for the quickest way to return to Rosette. All he had to do was find his body and heal it. How far could it have gone? He spotted something. Was that a boot up ahead? He dropped lower to inspect.

It was a boot, and a bit of his leg. When he discovered the rest of his body twisted around a tree trunk, he changed his mind about jumping back into it. The broken limbs, severed leg and eviscerated organs were not inviting, and not habitable either. He couldn’t tell if he’d drowned or bled to death but either way he’d have to create another tulpa from scratch. How long will that take? Days? Months? He didn’t know, but this place seemed as good as anywhere else for the task, so he started immediately.

He hovered in the fork of a giant white oak, settling in for the long process of turning his thoughts into form. He had a good visualisation started, almost an outline, when something distracted him. The water below had subsided, revealing a corpse. He paused his creating to take a closer look.

Floating face up was a young man, his body lapping the base of the tree like a dinghy tied to a wharf. It was caught on a root, the trickling stream washing the body clean as it flowed past. Jarrod dropped closer still. The young man’s eyes were the strangest colour. Like violets in the snow. Fascinating.

They were open eyes, staring into nothing without a tear or a blink. The rain fell into them, overflowing the rims. Definitely dead, but from what? Jarrod scanned the internal organs. The body had been buried quite recently, judging by the congestion of muddy water in his lungs, which was great news. There was no damage from the crows or other scavengers. Everything seemed in quite good order. He looked for the cause of death and found an arrow in the neck. Tricky. So many veins and arteries in that region. He checked for toxicity and found traces of Conium maculatum. Hemlock? Primitive. Still, the preserving qualities of the alkaloids could be a blessing. Jarrod felt a prickle, like goosebumps. If the ascending paralysis hasn’t travelled too far it may not be so bad.

There would be one screaming headache to deal with if he did wake up in this body. He probably wouldn’t be able to eat for a week, but hemlock toxicity didn’t cause lesions of any kind—no cellular damage. No necrosis. It wouldn’t take long to heal if he could remain conscious, remain self-aware. That was the big if.

Can I do it? Jarrod glanced at his thought form, an outline in his mind’s eye. At this rate it would take him close to a full lunar cycle to create a functional tulpa. The lad’s body could be healed in less than a day. If the previous owner isn’t about and I can keep the crows away in the morning...

He tuned into the energy of the grove and expanded out over the field. It was a mess, filled with maimed bodies and their sundered spirits. Some ghosts sat next to their corpses, the driving rain forming septic pools of blood and sludge at their feet. They didn’t appear to notice him. They didn’t know they were dead. He scanned beyond the battleground in all directions but nowhere could he find an echo or hint of this lad’s consciousness. It was gone. In the time it took him to blink he made a choice based on myriad possible outcomes in as many branching worlds. He entered the body of the boy and attempted to bring it back to life.

Pain. Incredible pain.

He rolled over and coughed until he threw up, bile burning his throat, his lungs turning inside out. On hands and knees he crawled out from under the cloak, untangling it from the roots and branches, and collapsed on the grass. He felt his neck, tugging the arrow and screaming as the splintered shaft came free. He threw it aside and checked the wound with the palm of his hand, pushing hard. That seemed important, like something he had told himself to do as soon as he awoke. Had he been passed out for long? His body felt like wagon wheels were parked on it. He blinked, sensing part of himself hard at work, racing to make something happen. It felt urgent but he couldn’t think why. He pulled the cloak over his head and curled into a ball, shivering until he fell asleep.

When he woke again, the sun was shining on his face, the warmth of it coaxing him back to consciousness. His head pounded and his guts were in knots. For a brief moment he had the strangest feeling of satisfaction, as if he had achieved exactly what he had set out to do. Perfect. Now I can just...

He frowned, pulling twigs from his hair. There was something he was meant to do. He was sure of it. There was a sense of significance to his life that felt bigger than anything he’d remembered. Bigger than the memory he
had of living on the streets with his sister, Shaea. Bigger even than an apprenticeship to the Stable Master—which
was the biggest thing he could ever imagine. On the edge of his mind were all the answers and for a flashing
moment he glimpsed them. And then they were gone.

Like a cliff face breaking free of the mountain, awareness dropped from the boundaries of his mind, sliding
away. The moment passed and all he could remember was the last thing he was told to do.

‘Mind the horses, Xane, and don’t get shot.’

Propping himself up on his elbows, he realised he’d managed neither. The horses were gone and he’d clearly
been wounded. He touched the hole in his neck, glad the scab had formed and stopped the bleeding, though his head
felt caught between a hammer and an anvil. He needed a stimulant, strong tea or coffee, before the hemlock set in.
Judging by the pain in his guts, it already had. Maybe they botched the job and the arrow had been underdosed. That
was the only explanation for him waking up at all. Hemlock, administered properly, was lethal, and fast. It caused an
ascending paralysis that...How in the course of the Five Rivers would I say a thing like that? Ascending paralysis? I
don’t even know what that means.

He was about to chastise himself for carelessness—getting shot, losing the horses—when he studied the
surrounding fields. They were littered with crows, squawking and squabbling over chunks of flesh still sporting bits
of uniform—Corsanon uniforms. The whole place was choked with bodies and as the death wagons rolled towards
him, he realised he’d actually done all right. He was alive, which was more than he could say for any of his
comrades.

He checked his side, smiling to feel his sword still in place. Not many stableboys wore them, but he’d shown
aptitude. He ran his hand down the length of the scabbard, frowning for a moment at the thickness of the width. For
an instant he struggled to remember something different. An image of the thin blades used by the Timbali witches
formed in his mind. He coughed, his throat sandpaper dry. What would make him think of that? He didn’t know
anything about Timbali. He wasn’t even certain where it was.

He tried shouting to the nearest wagon but his voice was hoarse and the sound didn’t carry. Struggling to sit, he
waved at the driver—a burly man standing on the buckboard, supervising the others. It was pulled by four palomino
horses, one of the teams in his charge. He delighted in seeing them. He loved horses. That felt familiar.

The thought triggered another image. Into his mind came clear as daylight a copper-red mare tied to a tree,
pawing the snow. The horse whickered at him and he smiled, calling back, but that was crazy. He’d never seen
snow, or a mare so red. The hemlock must be causing hallucinations. He scratched his head. Hallucinations? What’s
that mean?

The driver halted, whistling to him. He tried to stand but couldn’t. He wondered if his legs were broken. He
slumped against the tree trunk, waiting to be collected. For a horrid moment he thought perhaps he was only a ghost
and these men were going to pull his body out of the ground and throw it onto the heap with the others, but he
laughed and heard the nervous sound in his ears. He felt the vibration in his throat, the dappled sun touching his
tongue until he closed his mouth. A spirit wouldn’t feel such things, he was certain.

‘Ain’t you just lucky?’ the driver said.

Strong arms gripped him, hoisting him out of the muck. He still couldn’t make his legs move. ‘I think so,’ he
said, the words a whisper.

‘Xane, isn’t it? The Stable Master’s new boy? He’ll be pleased you survived. Says you got talent.’

‘Xane.’ He said the name and was new to agree but felt a protest, as if it wasn’t quite right. ‘No, I’m Jar…’

‘What’s that, lad?’

His thought disappeared. ‘Yah, I’m Xane.’ He did remember being called that. Of course. He was Xane, and
his sister was Shaea. He lifted his head. It was all there in his memory. He pictured Shaea. She would have known
he was hurt. She would have tried to come to him, but he didn’t see her anywhere. He sensed for her but got nothing.
It was like she wasn’t in the city. ‘Something’s wrong,’ he said.

‘Damn demons there is, lad.’ The man checked his neck wound. ‘You’ve been shot by one of our own arrows,
and by all rights you should be dead.’

Xane smiled, thinking of someone he cared about but couldn’t quite remember. ‘There is no should.’ He
mumbled the words.

‘Say again?’

They’d reached the wagon and lifted him up, sitting him on the tailgate. He wrapped his arm around the railing
and shook his head, wincing. ‘Never mind.’

‘It’s the poison,’ the other man said. ‘We best get him to the healers.’

The driver clucked to his team and the wheels lurched forward, half rolling, half skidding through the mud. It
must have rained buckets. Xane bumped along, careful not to look at the bodies piled high beside him. The warm
sun, buzzing flies and the sickly-sweet smell of decomposition all seemed to mix with the bile in his throat, and he
spent most of the journey dry retching over the rail. When he looked up, he yelled out, ‘Stop!’ He struggled to his knees. ‘My charges.’

The driver pulled his team to a halt as a tall palomino gelding and a mud-caked black mare came trotting to him, their hooves squelching in the muck.

‘You are blessed, lad. What stars have you rising today?’

‘My stars?’ He stiffened. The question was like a match striking the edge of his mind, unable to light. ‘I don’t know. I’m not a star watcher but…’

‘Lucky ones,’ the driver said, ignoring Xane’s confusion. ‘You’ve got lucky stars.’

The driver caught the horses and tied them to the back of the wagon. Xane relaxed. At least now he wouldn’t have to explain to the Stable Master why he’d lost both the sweetest mare in Corsanon and the fastest gelding ever bred. He closed his eyes, hoping they would get there soon. He had nothing more to retch but it didn’t stop him trying.

When they reached the city gates he had a terrible feeling they were going the wrong way. He tried to protest but they dropped him at the healers’ temple where they tended his body, washing it clean, flushing the wound and encouraging him to drink coffee so strong it was like bitter mud. But even when his headache subsided and his vision cleared, he had the most uncomfortable feeling that he had forgotten something vital, something more important than minding the horses or even finding his sister to let her know he was all right. Struggle as he did, for the life of him he couldn’t work out what it was.

Grayson tried not to breathe. He didn’t want to taste the air. When he finally did have to fill his lungs he had a coughing fit. Sector Six reeked; the air carried a metallic odour like a blacksmith’s forge that burned refuse instead of coal. It made his tongue prickle and his stomach clench. He didn’t want to believe this was the right place, but the Entity had brought him here, along with Everett, for a reason. At least that’s what he kept telling himself. If it was simply a random event selected from an array of possibilities with no purpose behind it other than to propel him through existence, he was going to be sick. How Everett would respond, he didn’t know. The man was far from his right mind. Everett believed he would find evidence of the ‘thief’, though Grayson had his doubts. Was there a thief? What children was he talking about? Everett’s stories made little sense. They seemed to be bouts of paranoid ranting. He had no memory of the time they’d spent together in Sector Six, busting Rosette out of Cryo. It was like it never happened. Everett’s obsession was the thief who had stolen infants from the village. Nothing else mattered to him and Grayson hadn’t had a chance to question Regina, if indeed she knew any more.

The experience was disquieting, raising difficult questions. How could Everett not remember Canie and Rosette, and himself for that matter, unless it wasn’t really Everett—or the Everett he knew? Had the doctor lost his memory or his mind? Or had a future event changed the past? A past in which Rosette never was trapped in this world? Grayson tightened his jaw and followed Everett down the path. He would have a look around, humouring the man until he could figure out what to do next.

‘Grayson?’

He heard the voice but didn’t believe it.

‘Grayson!’

‘Rosette?’ he whispered.

He wanted to spin around, run to her, hold her, convince himself it was truly Rosette, but he couldn’t move. His body was frozen, petrified. As long as he didn’t turn, didn’t see, it could still be her. It could be Rosette, not a dream or a fantasy or a terrible trick of the wind. He kept his back to the portal, prolonging the answer for as long as he could.

‘Grayson!’ Her hand gripped his shoulder and pulled him around. ‘Are you deaf?’

‘It is you,’ he said.

‘Of course it’s me. What in blazing demons are you doing here again? Do you have any idea how we’ve been trying to find you?’

He looked at her belly, huge under the soft creamy dress, her dark cloak floating in the breeze behind her.

‘Rosette, it’s you.’

‘You said that already.’ She gave him a little shake. ‘You have to come back with me. Kali needs you. We all need you. Right now!’

He turned to Everett, wondering if seeing Rosette would jog his memory, but the man was far down the hill and talking with someone near the lake. ‘Where have you been?’ he asked, taking her hand. It felt warm, familiar, and his breath caught.

‘No time for this.’ She gripped him tight and hauled him back towards the portal.

He stopped, pulling her into his arms. ‘Rosette, I was looking for you,’ he said. ‘Looking everywhere, and…’
‘And now you’ve found me. Good work. Let’s go.’ She’d slipped out of his embrace and led the way. ‘Hurry up.’

He couldn’t breathe only this time it wasn’t because of the foul air. Rosette felt different, distracted, like he’d never experienced before. The sweet connection and warmth were gone. He groaned. Of course she would be detached. It’s self-protection. He’d told her he couldn’t continue their relationship, that it was too complicated for him. He pulled her back to him. ‘I’m an idiot,’ he said. ‘Rosette, we have to talk.’

‘You’re certainly not an idiot. You’re a quantum geneticist, and you’d better remember everything you were ever taught. We can’t stop now. We have a quantum computer to build.’ She led him up the hill, tugging him when he dragged his heels.

‘What is the urgency? An’ Lawrence still missing? What’s happened?’

‘Not An’ Lawrence. I found him, twice. It’s Jarrod,’ she said. ‘We’ve lost him.’

‘Lost? As in misplaced?’

‘Lost, as in body-dead.’

Grayson felt the blood drain from his face. ‘You want to use the backup? Passillo?’

‘The spell, yes. That’s why we need you. Come on.’ She yanked him. ‘Grayson, what’s the matter? We are in a hurry!’

He didn’t budge even though she tugged again. ‘Rosette,’ he whispered. ‘Don’t you know?’

‘Know what?’

‘That’s not how it works.’

‘How what works?’

‘The backup.’

‘Of course it is. That’s the whole point in having it squirreled away in my blood—so we can re-boot Jarrod if we lose him.’

‘Rosette, darling. That’s not it.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s there to ensure the continuation of Jarrod all right, but I don’t think you need to build another quantum computer to activate it.’

She looked at him and raised an eyebrow. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, from what I understood, the CPU is designed to boot up right where it is.’

‘Where it is?’ She wrinkled her nose. ‘That’s ridiculous. It’s in me.’

‘Janis wanted to guarantee the continuation of the Jarrod, at any price.’

‘Price?’ She frowned.

‘The CPU sequestered in your DNA is a failsafe, activated if there is no other possible way to restore him. That’s in all the notes.’

‘I understand but…’

‘Are you sure his consciousness hasn’t gone elsewhere?’

‘If it has, we can’t reach him.’ Rosette’s hands encircled her belly. ‘Grayson, what price? What happens, exactly, when the CPU is activated? How do we get him back without a computer? He needs to be somewhere while he creates another tulpa.’

‘He does. That part’s true. He needs…housing.’

She frowned for a moment, looking at her feet. ‘Housing?’

‘Hardware.’

Rosette looked up. ‘So what happens to me if I activate the spell?’

Grayson cleared his throat. ‘I don’t know. It’s never been done before.’
CHAPTER 11
CORSANON, GAELA & BORDERLANDS, EARTH

Xane walked back to the military stables. They wanted to take him by donkey cart but he told them he felt fine—the air would do him good. It was a lie. He felt like a herd of grunnies had trampled him into the ground, but he could handle it. He had to find Shaea and assure her that he was well. She’d be sick with worry. She always got that way if something happened to him; such a sensitive girl.

He searched every burnt-out alley and street he knew. There were plenty of beggars lining the gutters and scavenging the bins—going through the wreckage wrought by fire and storm—but there was no sign of Shaea. Could she have been trapped in a burning building? Caught in the flood? There was plenty of talk at the healers’ temple about the foreign spells that ripped through Corsanon last night—some demon warrior from the west caused it all. Could she have got in the way of his magic? _Shaea, where are you?_ Maybe she’d been out digging for yams when he was shot. She might have raced to the battlefield to find him. Foolish girl. He imagined her scrambling down the quarry steps, her rag of a dress like a tattered flag, the iron smell of battle in the air. _Did you get lost, Shaea?_ Maybe the witch Rall would know, but he couldn’t find her either.

He turned a corner and a vision filled his mind. He was on the quarry steps. They were slick with rain and a torrent roared in his ears. It was dark, night-time, and his eyes were locked on a young woman—not Shaea. It was someone else. Someone he wanted to reach for. Someone he loved. She was in trouble. She was about to be swept away.

He shook his head. It was a dream. A nightmare. It had to be, but it felt strangely like a memory. _The hemlock’s doing, no doubt. I couldn’t have a memory like that._

He’d never been down the quarry steps in the rain at night and neither had Shaea. What idiot would risk such a journey? It was too easy to be knocked off the edge in a flash flood. He shivered. When the drains under Corsanon filled, clogged with refuse until the pressure was so great they broke free, the water and waste flowed like a rushing river, a waterfall spilling over the edge. He shivered again, even though the afternoon sun was warm on his shoulders, the cobbled street radiating heat. _Shaea? Why can’t I find you?_ He called to her in his mind, not daring to say the words aloud. The Stable Master didn’t even know he had a sister and that he snuck food to her when he could, stealing away from his duties to make certain she was all right. He still had moments of guilt that it was he the Stable Master chose that day and not Shaea. He was good with animals, to be certain, but his sister was equal at least. She had some kind of magic touch. But she’d been shy and hung back and neither of them would ruin the chance for a better existence, whichever one was chosen.

What could have happened to her? He’d been gone only a day and she was nowhere to be found. He asked after her, tapping the sleeping drunks on the shoulder or passing a penny to soot-covered children. No one had a clue, not about Shaea or the old witch Rall. He picked the scab on his neck, the shooting pains startling him. _Shaea. I need you. Don’t be gone. Please don’t be gone._

The fires hadn’t damaged this part of the city but who knows what happened when they broke out? People could have scattered anywhere. And then there were the floods. They’d swept through every street, heading for the outlet above the quarry steps.

He searched his memory, aware again of the sensation that he stood on the wrong side of a door, locked out of the most important room in his mind. He beat on it with his fists, twisted the handle and forced his fingers into the cracks to pry it open. Sweat beaded on his forehead and he panted, trying harder, hammering at it with his thoughts until he gave up. It wouldn’t budge. Whatever it was, he wouldn’t get at it that way.

He took a deep breath and exhaled, blowing stray hair from his face. He couldn’t force it. It was a fluke that he was alive at all. The healer had said he should be performing an autopsy, not sending him merrily on his way. There was that word again—_should._ Thinking of it made him want to laugh and cry at the same time. How strange. But merry was not how he felt in any case. Xane rubbed his temples. He didn’t think he could feel worse and still be standing.

A thought trickled into his mind. _Head for the portal._ He chuckled. Now he knew he was deranged. The portal was one destination he knew nothing about. Those things were witches’ business and best left at that, though Shaea longed to find one and get them both out. Could that be where she’d gone? Had she somehow found a portal and vanished to another place in Gaela, one that would offer a better life? _Did you leave without me, sister?_ If so it would explain why he felt to go that way himself. _What if…_ He shook his head, brushing it off. His place was back at the stables where the smell of horses, straw and leather would ease his aching head. He would report to the Stable Master, who would be well pleased to see him. He’d check his charges and hopefully be able to go to his cot early. The stimulants were wearing off already and he
didn’t think he could stay on his feet much longer. He certainly didn’t feel like eating dinner either. He looked down the last alley, empty save for afternoon shadows and a family of stray cats. They might know something but, unlike Sheaa, he couldn’t communicate with them. As he walked on, the image of a large black temple cat rippled across his mind. The creature winked at him. This is madness. I’ve got to lie down.

When he reached the stables he went straight to his section. There he found Fortuna and Grace, his charges. They were fed and watered but not groomed—their coats crisp with dry sweat and mud, their hooves packed, manes and tails full of brambles. He sighed and brought Fortuna, the palomino gelding, out first. He cross-tied him in the breezeway and with a curry comb in both hands he went to work.

Using circular strokes he started at the gelding’s neck, just behind his ears, flipping the tangled mane to the other side. His strokes lifted the caked mud, the powder falling to the ground. He did a thorough job, currying the entire body save his legs and the lesions left by bramble thorns. Fortuna tolerated the grooming with only an occasional pinning of his ears or swish of his tail. Good lad.

‘You must be tired to be this well mannered, eh, boy? If I wasn’t beat myself I’d dose you for worms while you’re placid.’ He combed out his mane and tail and finished with a stiff boar-bristle brush, running his hand down each leg to check for injury. ‘Sound as always, Fortuna, though you look like you swam through a briar patch. You fit your name, lucky one.’ He treated the wounds and stood back, checking his work. ‘Let’s tend to your hooves and be done.’

He grabbed a hoof pick from the groom box and bent over, running his hand down the near front leg, clucking as he leaned into the horse’s shoulder. Fortuna lifted his hoof and Xane cleaned it, picking out the packed dirt and rocks until the V-shaped sole was clean and smooth. He checked the shoe nails, running his thumb across the heads before setting the hoof down.

Xane repeated the procedure on each hoof and with a bucket of water and a brush he scrubbed the last of the mud away from the hoof walls, rubbing in oil until they shone like polished wood. When he finished, he looked at the ground, frowning. One of the rocks that he picked from the hooves caught his eye and he held it to the light. ‘Where have you been, Fortuna?’

He groomed the mare next, saving the sweet one for last. Grace always lived up to her name. She stood poised and serene as he curried and brushed her coat until it shone like obsidian. He examined the stones from her hooves as well, shaking his head. ‘How could this be?’ he whispered as he led her back to her stall, refilling the water buckets and giving them each an armful of hay. ‘If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’ve been halfway to Mount Pele and back. But that’s impossible.’ He scratched his head and went off in search of the Stable Master, the blue metal rocks in his hand. Impossible?

Xane tapped on the Stable Master’s door. ‘Master?’ He wasn’t expecting to be chastised but his charges had been injured and only returned by chance. He squeezed the rocks in his hand.

‘Xane,’ the Stable Master said. ‘Are your horses settled?’

He entered the room as several officers filed out. ‘Aye, sir, and groomed.’

‘Injuries?’

‘They’re sound, sir, with minor scratches.’

‘From?’

‘Brambles. They’d both been tied in them, I’d say.’

‘By Captain Naden?’

‘I don’t know, sir. I can’t remember.’

The Stable Master got up from his desk and examined Xane’s neck.

‘I’m surprised you’re alive, with or without memories.’

A fire jolted up Xane’s spine and he shivered. ‘Me too,’ he whispered. He squared his shoulders. ‘Sir, I think the horses have had an uncanny journey.’

‘A what?’

‘I found these packed into their hooves.’ He held out his hand, the blue metal dull in the evening light.

The Stable Master took the stones and held them to the lamp. Under the candlelight they sparkled, their edges like glitter. ‘You picked these from their hooves? Are you sure, boy?’

‘Certain. Do you know where they’re from?’

The Stable Master nodded. ‘Nowhere accountable, lad.’ He headed for the door. ‘Bring them up. I want to check them for myself.’

Xane almost wished he’d waited until morning to show the Stable Master the rocks. His head throbbed and his stomach ached. He was overcome with a sudden thirst but ignored it, forcing his legs to work. He reached for the halters hanging next to the stall doors and brought out the animals one at a time for the master to inspect. It was lucky he had done a first-rate job of cleaning them up. The Stable Master went over them from head to hoof, eyeing
the angle of wear on their iron shoes, looking through the sweepings and the manure pile for more clues. He grabbed the boar-bristle brush from the rack and pulled out a few winged seeds.

‘You used this brush?’
‘Aye, sir. Sorry. I didn’t clean it yet. I…’
The Stable Master waved him silent. ‘Good you didn’t. It’s got our clue. They were ridden to Prieta, most likely with the troops that chased the war witches.’
‘How can you tell?’
‘See these seeds?’
‘Pine nuts? They grow everywhere.’
‘Pine nuts do, indeed, but take a closer look.’
Xane focused his eyes and for a moment the seed zoomed in so close he thought he could see through it. He jumped back.
‘Are you all right, lad?’
He nodded, looking again. ‘They’re bigger than our pine nuts, aren’t they? And darker?’
‘They’re Parana nuts, grown only in the foothills of the Prieta Mountains.’ The Stable Master took off his cap and scratched his head. ‘But their shoes don’t show the wear we’d expect to see from a journey there and back.’
‘Some mystery,’ Xane said. Where have you been, my lovely Grace? My fractious Fortuna? And who was it that rode you, leaving you at the battlefield with neither saddle nor headstall?
There was no answer. He hadn’t expected one.
Xane led the horses to their stalls, relieved that he was finally dismissed. He went straight to his cot in the stableboys’ dorm, curled up and fell asleep.

Xane awoke in a sweat, his throat dry and head pounding. What was that sound? He strained to identify the noise. It could have been barn cats, or maybe it was the grating of the main gate to the brood mare barn. The hinges were old and it had to be lifted high to keep from scraping the ground. He listened again. Crickets resumed their chatter and a horse groaned as it lurched to its feet, its rug straps slapping when it shook. Bats were returning to the loft, their swoops and flutters muffled by the wall of hay stored overhead.

He reached for his waterskin and took the last sip. Just ordinary night sounds. Nothing to worry about. Nothing to worry about except his aching head. I’ve got to get a drink. He wrapped his blanket around himself and crawled out of bed, his toes curling when they touched the stone floor. Cold. He pulled on his boots and scuffed down the hall to the courtyard well, gazing at the stars while dropping the bucket over. It hit the water, the splash echoing, but he kept his eyes on the night sky.

Ceres, Regulus and Saturn were near to setting—almost dawn. He cranked the handle and the sloshing bucket appeared from the depths. He filled his waterskin. His fingers were cold, his body shivering. He’d become soft since moving to the stables. It came with having dry clothes and a bed, and food every day. He used to be a lot tougher—tough like Shaea had to be. ‘Shaea,’ he whispered, pushing the cork into his waterskin after taking a long swig.

He didn’t expect an answer but the hairs on the back of his neck pricked. Someone was near. He picked at his neck, acting as if he didn’t notice. They were hidden in the shadows yet quite close to hand. He pretended to study the stars again, honing his peripheral vision as he turned back to the stables. A blast of insight hit him, like a flash of memory, a slap upside the head. Am I dreaming?

It felt like it had all happened before, this sense of being watched. His response was involuntary—kneejerk. He had the strangest sensation behind his eyes and realised he could see everything around him in a grid-covered red light. It was how he imagined a nocturnal raptor might view the world, scanning the woods for a mouse hidden in the pitch black. He paused by the stable doors and heard the flutter of wings taking off. The noise he’d heard earlier came again. He recognised it immediately. It was the cry of a goshawk winging far above. ‘It’s closer to dawn than I realised,’ he said aloud.

‘Aye, and time for chores soon, Xane. Are you feeling up to it, lad?’
He startled but immediately recovered. The voice was one he knew, the Stable Master’s second, Willem. He’d taught Xane how to mend and clean tack, the measuring of the grains and hay and, most important, he had been Xane’s advocate when he was under consideration for the runner’s team. They were the apprentices who not only looked after the horses and their gear but would exercise them as well, and follow them into battle.

‘Good morning,’ Xane offered a smile.
Willem came from the brood mare barn at the opposite end of the courtyard. He was carrying a lantern and a wooden bucket full of grain. ‘Morning back and I must say I’m glad you didn’t die. Plenty others did.’
Xane nodded. ‘I’m pleased about that myself.’
Willem motioned him closer. ‘How long have you been at the well?’ he whispered.
‘Not long.’ Xane glanced at the stars on the horizon. *Ceres setting after the Pleiades at thirty-two south, Regulus conjunct*, he said more to himself than Willem. He looked up. ‘A tenth of an hourglass, is all. I just came out to fill my waterskin.’

‘Really? A tenth, is it? Never heard it put that way. Did you see anything else besides the stars? Anyone else?’ ‘I heard something. It woke me up and I felt like I was being watched but it could have just been the last of a dark dream. Apparently I’ll be prone to hallucinate for a while. That’s what the healer implied.’

Willem narrowed one eye. ‘Implied, did he?’

‘Is there something wrong?’ Xane asked.

‘You sound different, lad.’

‘Different?’ Xane pulled on his ear. Different wasn’t good. All his life, he’d been careful to be anything but different. He frowned. *Now why would I think that?* He smiled at Willem, not needing to feign confusion. ‘How do I sound different?’

Willem scratched the stubble on his jaw. ‘You sound smarter.’

Xane snorted. ‘That’d be the hemlock, sir. They say if you live through it, you gain the knowledge of all those that didn’t.’ He laughed. ‘But I don’t think that’s likely, do you?’

Willem agreed, but he didn’t laugh.

Rosette felt a roiling in her belly. She wanted to run. Grayson stared at her, but he didn’t answer. His blue eyes filled with tears.

*Not a good sign, Maudi. I don’t like what he’s saying and I don’t like you in this world. Come back.*

Drayco hadn’t entered Sector Six. He didn’t like the idea of her stepping through at all and had spent a fair bit of time reminding her of what had happened last time she did, but the sight of Grayson heading down the barren path decided it for her. She’d run to him, waddling like a duck with her progressing pregnancy. He had to come back. They had to activate Jarrod’s CPU. There wasn’t much time. She’d risked portal travel to find him, trusting her daughter would cooperate and stay put until she did.

But Grayson’s response made her stomach go cold. Rosette’s first reaction was to shift forms, to become anything other than what she was, and get out. Instead, she sucked in the acrid air around her, consciously slowed her pulse and exhaled. She wasn’t going anywhere until she understood what he was talking about.

‘It’s a simple question, Grayson,’ she said, her feet planted on the ground. ‘And I’d like a clear answer.’ She paused to give him a chance to reply. When he didn’t, she repeated the query. ‘What happens to me when the spell is activated?’

‘I’m not certain.’ Grayson wiped his eyes and cleared his throat again. ‘We need to find Richter’s journal notes.’

‘Journal notes?’

‘Her grimoire. They will clarify it, I hope. At this point, it’s speculative.’

‘You seem to have a lot of emotion for something that is only “speculative”. Tell me what you think will happen.’

He swallowed. ‘As far as I understand quantum sentience, the other one would have to make room.’

‘Make room? What, like scoot over?’

‘More like they’d have to go.’

‘Go?’ She creased her brow. ‘Go where?’

‘It would be something akin to death, I imagine.’

She squared her shoulders. ‘I don’t believe in death. Not any more. Consciousness is energy. It cannot be created and it certainly can’t be destroyed.’

‘That’s how we understand it. But consciousness also has a wider range than any attachment to the body. I think it would go elsewhere, if there is nothing to anchor it here.’

‘It being me?’ She scratched her nose. ‘So, you’re saying…effectively, I die?’

*Again, Maudi?*  
*Seems so, Dray.*

‘I’m not saying that.’ Grayson touched her cheek.

‘What then?’

‘I’m saying I don’t know until I find Richter’s notes.’ He reached for her hand but she pulled back, her arms encircling her belly.

‘And my baby? What happens to her?’

‘There’s no way of knowing what effect…’

‘That settles it,’ Rosette said, backing towards the portal.
Maudi?
‘Sets you what?’ Grayson asked.
‘I’m going to Corsanon to search for Jarrod. He’s building a tulpa, I’m certain of it. I don’t know why we didn’t just wait for him there.’
‘If his consciousness is dispersed, he…’
‘He needs me to bring him back. I can feel it. Are you coming?’
Grayson didn’t hesitate. ‘Of course,’ he said, stepping towards her, reaching out. ‘Please listen to me. I didn’t mean what I said before, about not being able… I didn’t know.’
‘It doesn’t matter.’ She scanned the desolate parkland. ‘Why were you looking for me here?’ The sky was brown as ever, the trees brittle and bare, the grass sparse dry tufts. If anything, it was more lifeless than the last time she saw it.
‘Everett seemed to think…’
‘Everett’s here?’
‘Down by the lake.’
‘Excellent. Bring him too. He can help.’
‘Help what?’
‘With the activation, if I can’t find Jarrod. We have to cover every corner.’ She lifted her chin. ‘New plan. Meet me at Temple Los Loma.’ She pointed towards the lake. ‘With him. If I still can’t find a trace of Jarrod after the baby’s born, we’ll activate the spell.’
‘Rosette, Everett’s not quite together these days.’
‘What do you mean?’
‘He’s not quite sane.’
‘Perfect. He’ll fit right in.’
Come, Maudi. Others have spotted us.
Don’t worry, Dray. This is one world I’ll not be trapped in again.
‘Rosette, wait!’
‘No time. See you at Temple Los Loma.’ She didn’t turn back.
He called to her but she kept climbing up the hill, not looking to see his choice. She’d meet him in Los Loma, with or without Jarrod—and she hoped with her whole heart it would be with.

The portal felt warm, inviting. The crunch of stones underfoot, the familiar zap of plasma tickling her palm as she brushed the Entity, the faint smell of wet cedar wood that lingered in the air, and the touch of Drayco’s cheek rubbing the back of her knee gave Rosette a sense of relief. Her mind was clear and she felt at peace again—the first time since she and Teg landed in Corsanon. She basked in the feeling and focused on an explicit intention.

‘Corsanon,’ she said aloud, running her fingers across the Entity’s plasma field. Her voice resonated through the corridors as she dropped her hand, letting it rest on the top of Drayco’s head. He purred, a sound she hadn’t heard for a while.

We go to find Jarrod?
‘One way or another, Dray…’
‘We will find him,’ Teg said, finishing her sentence.
Rosette spun around in her skin. ‘Teg!’
‘You didn’t think I’d be left behind, did you?’
She glared at Drayco. A heads up would have been good.
I only just sensed him, Maudi. He excels in the art of camouflage. Remarkable, really.
She spotted Teg in the shadows.
Maudi, relax, this is good news.
Why exactly?
You’ll have someone to talk to while I sleep.
Drayco locked his orange eyes on Teg for a moment before bow-stretching. Rosette didn’t know if he spoke to him. If so, it was a private exchange. Her temple cat settled down, tucking his front paws into his chest like neat dresser drawers, closed his eyes and rumbled himself to sleep.
Rosette turned back to Teg, taking his hand and drawing him forward. ‘How long have you been lurking in the corridors?’ she asked.
‘Not lurking. Waiting.’
She raised one eyebrow. ‘How long?’
‘Long enough to work out there is something going on behind our sight. Something we need to figure out,
quickly.’
‘Behind our sight?’
‘Can’t you feel it? I think it’s close by. Haunting, like a shadow.’
‘Do you mean the volcanic activity about to blow Temple Los Loma off the map, or Makee’s strange appearance in old Corsanon—and disappearance I might add—or Kreshkali’s inexplicable urgency to use the backup CPU or that vanishing act of Clay and Shane, and that strange young witch…What’s her name?’
‘Shaea.’
‘Right, Shaea.’ She sat beside Drayco, leaning her head against the wall. ‘I don’t even know what happened to them all.’ She stretched her neck. ‘Kreshkali will disown us, by the way, for going against her direction again. We’re compost. You know that, don’t you?’
‘I do.’
She closed her eyes as Teg rubbed her shoulders. ‘We might as well kiss our apprenticeships goodbye.’ She opened her eyes, looking at him sideways. ‘Why are you chuckling?’
‘Nervous laughter, mostly. I do want to pass my apprenticeship, but, Rosette, surely we will, if we bring Jarrod back.’
‘Good thought, Teg. That’s exactly what I intend. Something happened in the corridors back there with Kreshkali. Did you feel it? I know we were all knocked around, wet and cold and not thinking clearly, but something doesn’t add up. She wanted to get us out of there too fast. Why didn’t we search longer?’
‘This is what I mean. Something’s going on between the lines.’ He motioned her to sit in front of him so he could massage her head and neck. ‘How well do you know your history?’
Rosette wrinkled her nose. ‘Not my top subject but I know it well enough to see things in Corsanon were mixed up.’
‘Mixed up?’
‘Out of synch. It was before the wars, but Clay was there. He was older than when we first met, but he didn’t remember me.’ She closed her eyes again; the sound of Drayco’s purring, a soft flutter in the back of his throat, soothed her. ‘I don’t trust Makee. Where did she vanish to? Where did the others go?’
‘Wherever it was, they shot off in a hurry.’
‘Makee said she was going to find Grayson, but I’ve already done that.’
‘Had she been there? Had she reached him?’
‘I don’t see how. He didn’t know Jarrod was lost.’
‘And what is he going to do?’
‘Head straight back to Temple Los Loma, I hope.’
‘He didn’t try and stop you?’
‘I didn’t give him the chance.’ She shook her head. ‘I didn’t like what he had to say about me activating the spell either.’
‘Can’t he build a quantum computer?’
‘He said we didn’t need one. The spell activates Jarrod on the spot, in my body.’
Teg frowned. ‘What happens to you?’
‘My consciousness? He wasn’t certain but chances are good I wouldn’t be able to hang around.’
‘And the baby?’
‘Don’t know about that.’ She closed her eyes, turning her mind to other thoughts.
Their party had disbanded when they’d reached the portal of Temple Los Loma. Hotha was missing and the place was in chaos. The mountains smoked and the earth rumbled. There was talk of evacuation. Kreshkali was swept up in conversation with Annadusa and An’ Lawrence. She had a word with Teg who took off to find Hotha, or so she thought. Rosette realised now that he had been tracking her.
But Makee mysteriously vanished along with Clay and Shane, and the young witch who’d appeared as if from nowhere. Rosette had hung back, watching for the right moment when everyone was out of the portal and no one was looking. She swiped the plasma Entity just as Kreshkali called her name.
Screamed is more like it, Maudi. Drayco’s voice was sleepy in her mind.
I know, Drayco. She was not pleased.
Do you think you’ll lose your apprenticeship?
If we can’t find Jarrod, it won’t matter either way.
Then we’ll find him.
‘Thank you,’ she said aloud, stroking her familiar’s neck. She thanked Teg for his healing touch as well and curled around Drayco, throwing her arm over the temple cat’s shoulder. ‘Wake me when we get to Corsanon, will you Teg?’
‘I would love to, Rosette, but we’re already here.’
She sighed and pushed herself up; Drayco did the same, stretching and yawning. ‘That was fast.’
Teg smiled. ‘The rain’s stopped,’ he said as he led the way. ‘We can all curl up for a sleep in the ferns.’
She shook her head as she overtook him. ‘I’ll sleep when I’m dead. We have to find Jarrod.’ They emerged into
the moonlight, the soft outline of Temple Corsanon below. Rosette lifted her face to the stars. ‘How soon after
sunset is it?’
Teg gazed at the moon. ‘She’s still in the twelfth house and full to the brim. Less than an hour.’
‘Well done.’ Rosette pointed at the bright star not far from the moon. ‘And conjunct what?’
‘Regulus, so in the sign of the Lion and full. That means the sun is still in the sign of the Water-bearer.’
‘Excellent, Teg.’ She beamed. ‘A few days since the fires, do you think?’
‘If it’s the same year…’
Rosette and Teg both inhaled deeply.
It is, Drayco said before they could comment on the ambient scent. I smelled wet ash the moment we walked
out of the portal. The place reeks of it. About four days ago, I would say.
Rosette exhaled. ‘Thanks, Dray. It’s faint to me but I agree.’ She looked at Teg and he nodded. ‘We’re going to
find Jarrod, if he’s anywhere to be found,’ she said, her face lifting in a smile. ‘Follow me.’ She headed down the
path, Drayco loping beside her.
‘To the temple? You think Jarrod’s there?’
‘He isn’t—at least I can’t sense him—but supper is. I’m starving.’
‘And they will feed us, just like that? No introduction. No reference?’ He pulled her back. ‘Don’t you think
they’re going to be a bit suspicious, what with the battle in the fields, your prison break in the citadel, the fires…’
‘And the flood? Your flood, I might add.’ Rosette laughed. ‘Fortunately, they don’t know it was us that caused
so much trouble! Are you going to tell them?’
‘I’m not planning on it.’
‘Then relax. They’ll let us in. We’re either before the temple wars, or maybe the wars never happened at all,
and even if they are a little edgy from recent events, Teg, look at me.’ She straightened her shoulders and patted her
round belly. ‘I’m not going to get turned away anywhere I go. Not like this, and I want to take advantage of it.’ She
laced her fingers with his. ‘Come on, husband. Let’s go beg a meal.’
‘Husband?’ he said, the word sticking in his throat.
‘Would you prefer brother?’ She squeezed his fingers. ‘We’re aiming for empathy so no point in posing you as
some stranger I picked up in my travels.’
‘I guess not.’ He coughed. ‘Husband is…fine then.’
‘And, Teg, no mention of Lupins, please. Whatever you do, don’t shift or ask for raw meat.’
Teg frowned. ‘I don’t like raw meat.’
I do, Maudi.
They both laughed.
‘I’m sure you’ll be offered some, Drayco.’
‘What about him?’ Teg asked, nodding towards her familiar. ‘Aren’t you going to glamour him up?’
‘Not this time. I’d like to see exactly how they respond to a Dumarkian witch. Should tell us a lot more than
words.’ Rosette hugged her belly as they reached the temple gates. ‘Serious now, Teg. Keep to your skin. I don’t
know what they would make of a Lupin.’
‘I won’t shift unless your life depends on it.’
‘Thank you.’ She smiled. ‘This is reconnaissance, remember.’
Teg pulled back at the sound of the word. ‘What?’
‘Reconnaissance. You don’t know it?’ She looked into the distance.
‘I don’t.’
‘It’s one of Jarrod’s. Like a scouting party. We’re going to gather as much information as we can and give
nothing of ourselves away. We have to find out when we are and if and when the wars began, or if they’re brewing
still. How are the temples getting along? Do they know about the portal Entities? Let’s find that out too. The goal is
to say nothing and learn everything. The more we know, the better chance we have of finding Jarrod quick smart
and getting out of here.’
Teg nodded, giving her hand a squeeze back. Heads up. Here they come.
It’s our welcoming party. She smiled like sunshine. Play the part!
The guards, a man and a woman, were dressed more for meditation than battle, but she knew that was a
deception. Swords hung beneath their robes and she guessed their mind powers would be well honed. They were
questioned briefly, in polite tones, the severity of the guards’ faces relaxing as she explained their journey.
‘We’ve come from the north, from my family’s farm near the Dumar Gorge,’ she said waving her arm in the general direction of the Oldosia Mountain Range. ‘I promised my sister we’d visit before the baby was due but I’d forgotten how long the road was to Corsanon.’

‘Your sister lives in Corsanon?’

‘Aye, she does.’

‘My Rosette was determined to come, though,’ Teg said.

The man eyed Drayco. ‘A visit from a Dumarkian temple witch and her familiar, even by chance, is always appreciated.’

‘Thank you,’ Rosette said.

‘You’re welcome to rest here, the lot of you,’ the woman said. ‘We have plenty of guest rooms.’

‘Delighted.’ Teg offered a stunning smile.

‘And there’d be supper enough for you in the kitchens, though it’s past serving time in the hall,’ the man said.

‘Tell them Lars sent you and they’ll look after you well.’

‘You are very kind,’ Rosette said.

The guards stepped aside, opening the gate. ‘Ask for Mavis at the reception hearth. I dare say she’ll find you the best bed for the night. You can take the carriage to the city in the morning.’

‘Wonderful,’ Rosette answered. ‘We will do just that. Thank you.’

Teg stared at the bed; the temple cat was stretched along the length of it, the rhythmic rise and fall of his breath hypnotic. Rosette was in the bath, the scent of orange blossoms and papaya wafting in from the adjoining washroom.

‘You’re going to love this, Teg. The water is divine. I’m thrilled with the cordial relationship between Corsanon and Dumarka. Aren’t you?’

He didn’t answer. They’d been given a small room, warm food and a hot bath. It was generous of the temple and he was grateful. But because they were travelling companions—introduced as a couple—they clearly felt one bed would be enough.

‘I can sense you’re fretting out there,’ Rosette said. ‘What’s the problem?’

He turned his back on the bed. ‘Nothing.’

‘Are you puzzling over one of your crosswords?’

‘Not exactly.’

Water splashed and she waddled into the room wrapped in a huge purple towel. ‘Concerned about our sleeping arrangements then?’

‘Of course not. I’m easy. I’ll sleep…’

‘In the bed with me and Drayco, of course. Don’t even consider anything else.’ She wiggled her toes on the tile floor. ‘It’s not yet spring and the temperature drops all night in Corsanon before it bakes through the day. I know that much from the last visit and I plan to be kept warm tonight.’ She shivered, wrapping the towel tight around her body. ‘And you and Drayco are my hot-water bottles.’

‘At your service, of course.’

‘Teg, are you blushing?’

He turned away. ‘Not at all.’ He unbuttoned his shirt. ‘If you’re finished with the bath I might have a quick wash.’

She smiled, stepping aside to let him pass. ‘You’re not betraying her, you know, no matter what. She doesn’t go by the Lupin customs.’ Rosette chuckled. ‘She doesn’t go by any customs at all, as far as I can tell.’

He blushed deeper. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ Teg held his hand over the steaming tub, his finger breaking the surface of the water to touch a single orange blossom. The moonlight shone in from the high window, the beams falling onto his face.

‘My mistake,’ Rosette said. ‘I thought…’

‘You thought?’

‘Never mind. Take your time in the bath. It’s wonderful.’

He undressed and submerged in the dark water, the steam enveloping him like a night fog.

‘Did you bring any of your word puzzles, Teg?’

He opened his eyes. I thought we were going to discuss a strategy. Compare notes?

They had each made contacts after dinner. Rosette had seen the healer and Teg had gone to the late meditation. He didn’t have much to add to their building hypothesis but he was certain this Corsanon had never seen any temple wars. At least not yet. He was curious to hear what Rosette had discovered

Best we play the part of a travelling couple, Teg. Someone’s listening. I can feel it.

‘I brought a new one, just for you,’ he answered. ‘It’s in my pack. Side pouch.’
He heard rummaging.
‘This is cryptic,’ she called out.
‘I picked it up from Treeon. Been saving it for...this journey.’

After a long soak, Teg came out dressed in a thick robe, his hair wet and smelling sweet. Rosette was dressed the same and propped up in bed, Drayco at her feet. ‘How are you going with it?’ he asked.
‘It’s hard.’
‘Give us a clue?’
She scooted over, patting the covers. ‘Ten letters. Ends with n. Dromedary thoughts.’ She knitted her brow.
‘Who writes this stuff?’
‘A Treeon wordsmith named Julian de Normeny. Timbali-trained.’ He got into bed next to her. ‘It’ll be a challenge.’

‘No kidding. Dromedary?’ Rosette said. The page was backed by a thin book resting on her knees. She hunched over it, her writing lead poised. ‘That’s a type of goat, isn’t it?’
‘Not quite a goat. Dromedaries have different feet—pads not cloven hooves—and they’re huge, taller than horses. They run wild on the Ubi Plains.’
‘With the hump on their backs? Yellow coats?’
‘That’s the one. They chew their cud, though, like goats and cows.’
‘So it’s a ruminant?’ Rosette said, counting the letters on her fingers.
‘Oh, good one. Does it fit?’
She clicked her tongue. ‘Too short.’
‘Rumination!’ Teg snapped his fingers. ‘Thinking things over!’
‘Ten letters. Perfect!’
‘What’s next?’

They worked the puzzle until it was finished, the soft sounds of Drayco’s sleep filling the room. Rosette pulled back the covers and crawled in, scooting towards the wall to leave room for Teg.
‘Come on. Keep me warm. I’m so tired.’
‘I thought you weren’t going to sleep until you were dead.’
‘I changed my mind. I want to sleep now.’
‘And in the morning?’
‘To Corsanon, by coach please. I’m tired of walking too.’
Teg settled in beside her and she sighed.
Is the listener still with us? Rosette asked.
I can’t feel her if she is.
Me neither. She yawned.
I think the crossword put her to sleep.
‘I think so too.’
‘Rosette, what would happen to Gaela and Earth if there were no Corsanon wars?’ He whispered the words in her ear, her long hair tickling his nose.
‘We would never meet, for one.’
‘And the spell?’
‘It would still be in the bottom of the gorge.’ She spun around, her nose bumping his. ‘Teg, that might be it.’
‘You think Makee’s going to go looking for the spell?’
‘It’s possible.’
‘But she can’t get to it. It’s buried under fathoms of water.’
‘Unless she plans on changing the course of the rivers.’ She sat up. ‘Or she’s worked out how to shift into a water serpent.’
‘Tricky, in any case. What’s our plan?’
Rosette slid back under the covers. ‘Same, Teg. We search for Jarrod. But we also keep our eye on the temple politics, and we keep an eye out for La Makee.’ She rolled back to the wall. ‘Let’s have breakfast early, in the main hall.’

‘More reconnaissance?’
‘Exactly. We’ll add it all up on the way to the city.’
He lay next to her; the rhythm of her breath was soothing until she suddenly gasped.
‘Quick, Teg! Feel this.’
Before he could respond, she planted his hand on her belly. He felt the movement, like a puppy wriggling under a blanket. He smiled, holding her until she fell asleep.
Xane led Grace in a smart trot, his legs working hard to keep abreast of the mare as he circled the parade ground. She was a tall horse, bred from a particularly spirited line of Desertwinds—the breed most favoured for the arid lands around Corsanon. If it weren’t for the five rivers that overflowed from the Dumar Gorge each spring, no crops would grow and no city would have sprouted either. But even with the rich water source, a half-hour’s ride in any direction brought endless sand dunes, dry prairie and rocky gullies lined with prickly pear cactus and rolling tumbleweed. The Desertwinds were champion steeds for such terrain, long on endurance and elegant as well. Grace’s hooves clicked over the hard-packed clay, her black mane and tail floating on the breeze. She was showing off today, trotting with exaggerated steps, her neck arched and nostrils flaring. Xane was pleased. She made him look good.

‘Tack her up, lad. I want to see her at the gallop,’ Willem said.

He was hoping for that. ‘Aye, sir.’

He eased her down to a walk, puffing as he led her back to the stables. He loved riding the horses but hadn’t had a chance to lately. There was a new string of lasses and lads in to exercise the mounts and he’d been kept busy with more mundane tasks. He suspected it was because of his injury—the arrow wound to his neck and the hemlock poisoning being no small things—but that was days ago now and he felt fully recovered.

Willem must think so too, if he’s asking me to ride.

He tacked up the mare in the saddle and bridle he’d oiled the night before, eager for the gallop. This was the best part of his apprenticeship and he was enjoying every moment of it.

He returned to the parade ground, both he and the mare perfectly groomed. He stood for inspection, waiting for orders, trying not to smile. Would this be a practice run or did they have an actual task for him? His head lifted when he saw the Stable Master himself arrive and hand Willem a satchel.

A proper errand then, Gracie!

‘Are you well enough, Xane, to deliver a message?’

‘Of course, sir. I am, sir.’ He felt a tingling up his spine as Willem handed him the satchel.

‘Put that in your saddlebag and show it to no one but the High Priestess of Temple Corsanon. You must deliver it to her directly. Is that clear?’

‘Perfectly. Yes, sir.’ He took the message, recognising the seal. It came from the citadel and bore the stamp of the High Regent. He tucked it into a saddlebag and mounted up.

‘Take the north road, and let her run. Just make sure she comes back in good condition. Gauge her pulse after the first climb and water her at the temple. I’ll be checking her myself when you return,’ the Stable Master said.

‘And I’ll be timing you,’ Willem added.

‘It sounds like a test, sir.’

‘It is.’

Xane held back the smile that threatened to burst. This was one test he knew he would pass.

‘Give her a turn around the track, at the hand gallop, and then on your way,’ Willem said, waving him towards the starting line of the large oval parade ground.

Xane jogged her to the mark and checked his girth before mounting. He waited for the signal, keeping his hands soft on the reins, the mare as poised and alert as he. When the Stable Master’s hand dropped he let her fly, but not a dead run. She wasn’t warmed up enough for that and he knew they were watching for his judgement, not the horse’s speed. They already knew her capabilities; it was his that were under assessment. He kept her in a collected canter until the second turn, taking the corners smoothly and allowing her the slightest increase of speed down the last straight. When they came to the north gate, he slowed her down, approaching the five-foot fence at a collected canter. Grace cleared the barrier gate with ample room to spare. She landed lightly on the far side and they were off.

Perfect, Gracie! Thank you. He knew his exit had been well received by the cheers from the other grooms. We’re already getting high marks and that was the trickiest part of the journey! He could see it all going well. He would deliver the message before the noon meal and be back on the parade ground by afternoon tea. Just like that. He clicked his tongue, easing the mare down to a brisk trot and headed up the hill to Temple Corsan on.

They trotted over the last wooden bridge, Xane guiding the mare down the winding road to the valley. The temple gates were not far off. The mare was in excellent form this morning, a joy to ride. The sun was shining and he hummed as they covered the ground, the horse’s iron-shod hooves clicking out a cadent beat. When the temple was in full sight, he eased the mare to a halt, dismounting by the side of the road. He ran up his stirrups and loosened the girth a notch, leading her the rest of the way to the temple grounds. He planned to bring her back on time and in perfect condition, the note delivered, job done. He would pass this test and move on to the next stage of his apprenticeship. He felt it in his bones.

He walked down the middle of the road until the sound of wagon wheels brought his head up. He moved the
mare to the grass, making room for the oncoming traffic. It was a coach from the temple, drawn by a dappled grey team, purple plumes on their headstalls, tacked in black leather traces with shiny brass buckles. As it approached, he felt his breath catch. The mare picked up on his excitement, prancing on the spot. ‘Easy, girl,’ he said, his hand on her neck. ‘It’s all right.’ Why am I shaking? He didn’t breathe as the coach passed.

Leaning out the window, face to the breeze, was a magnificent black temple cat. He’d never seen one before, not this close up even in a book, but he knew what it was—a temple cat from the Dumarkian Woods. A witch’s familiar. His stomach did a somersault and the creature’s orange eyes penetrated his own. The coach rolled past and he glimpsed two others seated beside the feline—a young man and a beautiful pregnant woman.

Xane’s heart galloped. He opened his mouth to speak but no sound came out. His pulse raced and he felt like part of him was trying to crawl out of his skin. The mare—usually placid—reared, whinnying. By the time he had her under control the coach was gone, winding its way out of the valley, over the wooden bridge and on to Corsanon.

‘Amazing creature, that temple cat,’ he said aloud. ‘Harmless to us, though.’ He patted the mare’s neck and led her down the road, heading for the temple gates, but he turned around, again and again, to watch the coach’s progress until it disappeared over the hill.

The guard made him wait while he checked the seal on the satchel. That was expected. They were all more cautious since the battle in the Corsanon Fields and the uncanny fires. He’d heard what had happened. They talked of nothing else in the stables. Some witch on a golden warhorse had blasted the troops and when captured he and a temple High Priestess in the form of a Lemur raven had broken free, setting Corsanon on fire. Hundreds of warriors had died and the fires had spread through the city until the Corsanon priestesses had conjured the rain to put them out. But meanwhile the enemy had enchanted the death dogs and let the war witch escape, both flying away to their stronghold in the Isle of Lemur. They had to be Timbali witches with unfathomable powers. At least, that’s what the gossip said.

‘You can water the horse.’ The guard’s voice snapped him to attention. The man pointed to a shaded well. ‘And deliver the message yourself, as asked.’

Xane nodded. ‘Thank you. I won’t be long.’

He tied the mare to the hitching post and dropped the bucket into the well. It didn’t fall far before it splashed, a shimmer of light glinting before it sank. He cranked the handle and brought it up; the smell was earthy and fresh. He let the mare drink before he filled his waterskin. She was well cooled off and the water tepid—safe to let her have as much as she liked. He loosened her girth another notch and gave her a pat. ‘Rest easy. I’ll be right back.’

Again he looked over his shoulder at the road winding out of the valley. A sudden desire to catch up to the coach came over him. He wanted another look at that temple cat, and the beautiful witch.

‘Maybe I’ll see them when I return. I’d say it’s likely.’

Nodding to the guard, he tapped the satchel on the side of his thigh and strode into the temple grounds.

An apprentice in a long blue robe pointed him to the High Priestess’s chambers. ‘Down the breezeway and to the right. The double doors will be open. If they aren’t, you wait. I’ve sent word you’re coming.’

Xane thanked her and walked away, his boots clicking on the wooden boards. He knew what kind of word she’d sent. It was a mind-to-mind message, like he could sometimes feel with Shaea. He frowned as the memory blurred. For a moment he imagined sending a mind-to-mind message to the witch with the temple cat. What would he say? Hello, beautiful witch... Where did you come from? My dreams?

His thought was interrupted as he neared the double doors. They were closed but strangely he could hear people conversing on the other side as if they were right next to him. Two women talked in hushed tones, though it sounded loud enough for the entire temple to follow. It didn’t make sense. If they wanted to be covert, why were they shouting?

‘The temple cat was Dumarkian and that makes her a Dumarkian witch.’

‘She didn’t deny it.’

‘She didn’t give her true reason for being here either.’

‘The pregnancy was no glamour.’

Xane realised they were talking about the witch in the carriage!

‘Are you certain?’

‘If it was, I want to learn how she did it. I felt the baby move myself.’

‘The Stable Master’s boy is here with a message. Maybe that’ll offer a clue.’

‘And we can send this one back.’

‘You hardly need the written word to speak to the insider.’

‘Of course, but this isn’t for the Stable Master.’

‘It’s meant to be intercepted?’

‘I’d say its chances are very good, wouldn’t you?’
Xane scratched his head. The conversation didn’t make any sense. The fact that he could hear them through the solid oak door while they whispered was even more startling. He picked at his neck. Could hemlock poison be doing this? Was it a hallucination? They’d talked about the Stable Master as if he were more important to the temple than Xane ever imagined. It almost sounded as if he was their spy. As he pondered these ideas the doors opened and he was ushered in. His audience with the High Priestess lasted only a matter of moments.

‘Take this back with you. It’s for the Stable Master, or the first authority who asks. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’ He understood perfectly. With a nod he backed out of the chambers, wondering what intrigue the temple was plotting. He felt like it was already something he knew about, and something he needed to remember, fast. He shook his head. That was nonsense. What could such witches’ business have to do with him?
‘Where do you think she went, Sword Master?’ Kreshkali spat the words as she poured boiling water into a pot.

‘I’m not sure, but whenever you say my name like that I know I’m supposed to have the answer.’

Kreshkali sprinkled dried herbs over the steaming liquid and stirred. ‘Back to Corsanon, of course.’

‘She’s looking for Jarrod?’ An’ Lawrence shifted in his seat, bracing his wounded leg with both hands. ‘You can’t blame her, Kali. We gave up the search before it began.’

‘I was under some constraints. Besides, she and Drayco would have heard him if he was anywhere near. I would have heard him, for that matter. We didn’t. He’s gone.’

‘You would have heard if he had been conscious.’ An’ Lawrence winced as he straightened his knee. ‘What if he was knocked out?’

‘After that fall? It’s a flesh-and-blood tulpa he lives in, not a tortoiseshell. His body was dead.’

‘If you had told me Makee had a knife to your throat I would have dropped her in a second. I would have found out her game and…’

‘Are you so sure? As I recall you were having trouble holding your head up at the time.’

‘We’d just come down the quarry road. I was catching my breath.’

‘And I was making the choice that seemed most creative.’

‘You could have warned me at least. I wouldn’t have let her slip away.’

‘Who? Rosette or Makee?’

‘Either.’ He groaned. ‘Both.’

‘So you say.’ She tapped the spoon on the rim of the pot. ‘Get ready,’ she said. ‘This is hot, and it bites.’

‘Are you trying to kill me!’ he hollered as she applied the poultice. ‘What’s in that, woman!’

Scylla leapt to her feet, hackles up.

‘It’s medicine,’ she said to Scylla. ‘Good stuff.’ She turned to her patient. ‘Hold still, Rowan, I’m not done with you yet.’ Scylla had a sniff of the wound as Kreshkali packed it with hypericum pulp and bay leaves steeped in pure onion juice. ‘See? It’s helping already.’ She blew on her finger, shaking it when a drop of the juice seeped into a tiny cut. ‘That does smart.’

An’ Lawrence’s face was red, tears streaming down his cheeks, but he didn’t say another word or move again until she finished splinting the leg, binding it tight with broad flat sticks. He got up, testing the cure.

‘How am I supposed to train in this?’ he said, struggling to stay upright. ‘I can’t even bend my knee.’ He limped around the room, like a man with a wooden leg, his frown deepening with every stride. ‘This is unmanageable. I can’t fight like this.’

‘That’s the whole point. You’re not meant to.’

‘Ridiculous! Kali, you realise this is a crucial time. I need to be ready for anything and so do my students.’

‘Most of all I’d say you need to be alive, so let’s get you past the septicaemia stage before you strap on your sword again. A day or two? That’s all. You have to rest. This is not negotiable.’

‘You could heal me in an instant, Kreshkali.’

‘Perhaps, if I had the time. But I think I like it better this way.’

‘With me crippled?’

She chuckled. ‘I wouldn’t call you that. You can heal yourself now while we work out what to do here.’

‘Evacuate?’

‘I don’t want it to come to that.’ Her smile fell. ‘We need Jarrod and we need him now.’

‘The backup CPU?’

‘There has to be more information about it here. Richter’s original notes, her journals. We need to search the library.’

‘I’ll help.’ His eyes narrowed. ‘That’s it, isn’t it? You wanted me in the library, not the training ground! That’s why you’ve strapped me up like a solstice parcel?’

‘Your Virgo mind is exceptional at nutting out complex systems.’

He snickered, mumbling something she thought best not to catch.

‘Come on. Lend me your skills. Please? Your knack for the fine details is going to lead us to those notes today. I feel it.’

‘Maybe. But when we do, it’s Rosette we need to find. She’s the one carrying the spell.’

‘Don’t worry. I’m tracking her already.’

‘Teg?’
‘He doesn’t know it, but yes.’
‘So you let them go, with blessings?’
‘I did.’
‘Because?’
‘If Jarrod really is out there, she’s the one who can find him.’
‘And that is preferable to activating the spell?’
‘As far as I know, much preferable.’
‘And what about the baby?’ An’ Lawrence sat and propped his leg up. ‘I thought you didn’t want her hopping through the portals.’
‘Seems all right—a lesser of two evils at this point.’
‘Let’s hope it stays that way.’

Rosette smiled as Drayco jumped into the coach. He leapt across the bench seat and stuck his head out the window, sniffing in the air.

‘We aren’t moving yet,’ Rosette said, sliding in beside him.
*I’m getting ready for when we do.*

At least you won’t be barking all the way to the city.

Drayco yawned. *At least you didn’t turn me into a sheepdog.*

Sheepdog? Teg asked.

He’d taken the opposite seat and was staring at her with his lovely dark eyes.

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘You turned Drayco into a sheepdog?’ He laughed. ‘I would have loved to have been there.’

No, you wouldn’t have, Drayco growled.

‘It was part of the glamour to get us to the citadel, is all,’ Rosette said quickly. ‘An effective part, I might add.’

She stroked the top of her familiar’s head.

*I bet you didn’t like that much, eh, Drayco?* Teg’s laughter faded as the temple cat turned, his pupils dilating.

After a short exchange Teg glanced away.

I promise I won’t mention it again.

The coach rolled along and Rosette reviewed everything she’d learned at the temple, comparing notes with Teg. ‘The healer was most helpful,’ she said. ‘An effective part, I might add.’

*I think the Sword Master is? If they are tracking him?’* Rosette patted the top of her belly.

‘A month? This is the longest pregnancy on record, I’m guessing.’

‘It’s the only one on record. At least, the only one we know of that has been through the corridors and cryosuspension.’ She yawned. ‘I’ll admit I squirmed when she asked me my due date.’

‘Did she suspect…?’

‘What? That I was a witch of the ancient blood travelling the corridors between the many-worlds?’ Rosette laughed, shaking her head. ‘She thought I was a young apprentice from Temple Dumarka that had herself a lovely beau.’

Teg blushed, shifting in his seat.

‘Well, you are.’

‘Temple Dumarka?’ he said quickly. ‘The guard assumed that too. Because of Drayco?’

She smiled. ‘You’re so like my dad.’

‘What? I’m like the Sword Master?’

‘No, my pa that raised me. He had the sun in the sign of the Sea-goat too—and he didn’t know how to take a compliment either.’

‘I can.’ Teg straightened. ‘I’m just focusing on the strategy. We are about to be surrounded by hundreds of Corsanon warriors. It’s on my mind.’

‘Always the practical one!’ She blew hair off her forehead. ‘Fine. All business then. Drayco’s presence signals us as Dumarkian, but it’s incredibly strange seeing as the temple was in ruins before we were born.’

‘But you’ve seen it. You’ve been there! When you met the other Nell?’

‘I have.’

‘Rosette, how can we tell if this is our Gaela, in our time?’ He rubbed his brow.

‘It’s safe to say it’s not. Temple Dumarka, Teg, doesn’t exist in our time. And neither does Clay.’

‘Unless Makee actually did stop the wars from ever happening. We don’t know how far back she went.’

‘Or how far forward.’
They both groaned.

*Look at what you do know, Maudi, not what you don’t. That always works best for me.*

She turned to Teg. ‘We know that we have lost Jarrod and, temple wars or no, we have to get him back.’

Rosette felt a chill run up her spine. The coach slowed.

‘Nice-looking horse,’ Teg said, staring out the window. ‘She’s almost a blue-black.’ He tilted his neck to see around Drayco. ‘What’s the breed? Desertwind?’

Rosette followed his gaze. A black mare rocked back on her hindquarters, rearing as they passed. The boy handling her stole a glance, his eyes penetrating even with the brief touch. Her forehead broke out in a sweat.

‘It’s…’

Teg nudged her and smiled. ‘A nice-looking lad as well. I see you don’t disagree.’

Rosette couldn’t breathe.

Maudi?

*Drayco, did you feel that? I always feel that when you talk about Jarrod.*

She nodded. ‘We were talking about him, weren’t we? That’s all.’ As the coach rolled on she closed her eyes, thinking of her childhood friend, her lover, her companion—the quantum sentient her family line lived to protect.

‘We’ll find him. He’s got to be near. I feel it in my bones.’ When she opened her eyes, she found herself leaning out of the coach, looking back the way they’d come. She lifted her finger in a small wave but the lad was too busy with the mare to see. When they crested the second hill, she felt a whisper at the edge of her mind.

*Hello, beautiful witch…*

‘Teg, did you just say something? Drayco? Did you?’

*Not me, Maudi.*

‘Say what?’ Teg asked.

She pushed her hair away from her face. ‘I must be imagining things, is all.’ She leaned back in her seat and the coach rolled on.

An’ Lawrence sat at the long table, his leg on the opposite chair. He was getting comfortable with using the computer database. He’d grasped the basic structure of its complex systems and felt close to pinpointing the code. Richter had hidden her notes, embedded them in other applications of the computer. There were so many password protections he was certain she assumed Jarrod would be there to run the numbers and open them. But Jarrod wasn’t there and An’ Lawrence was sure the techno-witch would have left hard copies somewhere, and a key to finding them as well. ‘Have you come up with anything, Kali?’

Her head popped up, looking over the stack of books piled high around her workspace. ‘It’s fascinating. There is so much here about the last century before the tectonic shifts.’

‘Anything about Jarrod, I mean?’

‘Not yet.’ She closed a book and set it aside, bringing another down from the stack. ‘What about you?’

‘I’ve split all the apps into front and back ends, and I’m running searches through every generic code, form, report, query, table and update I can find. So far, it keeps sending me around in circles. Janis Richter didn’t want this information found by anyone.’

Kreshkali raised one brow. ‘I knew you’d be good at this.’

‘Not good enough.’ He lifted his splinted leg with both hands and stood. ‘We need another approach, Kali.’

‘The horary chart was unreadable. Not enough degrees on the ascendant. Too soon to tell. You know we can’t ask the same question twice.’

‘But we could weave a calling spell. If she had her hands on those notes last, they’ll respond.’

Kreshkali put down her book. ‘A calling spell is risky.’

He hobbled to the door and locked it. ‘Time to take one, don’t you think? We could search for years and not find what we’re after.’

‘But a calling?’ She looked pale. ‘Just the two of us?’

‘Three,’ he said, tilting his head towards Scylla. ‘If it’s going to work, three is enough. If it doesn’t work, only three are lost.’

Kreshkali closed her eyes.

‘Hotha and Grayson can take over, with Zero and Annadusa,’ he added. ‘We aren’t irrereplaceable. But Jarrod is.’

She stood, pushing back her chair. ‘Power down the computers. We better do this before I lose my nerve.’

Scylla emerged from under the table, stretching. She sat, looking up at An’ Lawrence. *Rowan, are you sure a calling spell is wise?*
We need the notes, Scylla. We need them now.
But if the spell doesn’t bring the notes to us, it will…
I know. It will send us to them.
All fine if they are on a bookshelf in a cosy room upstairs, but, Rowan, if they don’t exist, you realise we go there too.
I do. ‘They have to exist. I stake my life on it.’
‘And ours.’ Kreshkali pushed aside the chairs and tables until the centre of the library was clear, a circular space beneath the high-domed ceiling. The sun was at the zenith, turning the carpet into colourful patterns as light filtered through the stained glass. She lit candles and looked around, satisfied with the preparations.
‘Pyramid?’ An’ Lawrence asked.
They took up the positions of north, southeast and southwest, Kali at the top of the pyramid, Scylla and the Sword Master forming the base. They focused on the empty centre and began to weave the spell. Clouds obscured the sun and the room turned dark, the candles flickering though there was no breeze.

Teg opened his eyes when the coach rolled to a stop. ‘I didn’t expect to see those here.’ He pointed at the tall white statues guarding the gates of Corsanon—temple cats carved out of marble. ‘A perfect likeness, don’t you think?’
Rosette studied the twin cats. ‘The ties between Corsanon and Dumarka must be strong.’
‘Gifts?’ Teg asked.
‘I don’t know.’ She capped her waterskin. ‘They aren’t in the histories.’
The driver jumped down to help them out.
Your pregnancy is quite an asset,’ Teg whispered. ‘I never remember being treated so well.’ He winked. ‘Or maybe it comes with having such a beautiful travelling companion?’
She laughed. ‘It’s not always like this, I promise.’
Are you remembering our first coach ride to Treeon, Maudi?
‘I am.’
‘Run into some trouble there?’ Teg asked.
You could say that. The temple cat yawned, flashing his teeth.
Teg roughed his neck. It was a pleasure when Rosette’s familiar spoke to him directly, or even let him share in their conversations. He missed the intimacy of multiple mind-to-mind communication—one of the most rewarding aspects of being Lupin born and raised. Rosette and Drayco filled a void and he was grateful.
I miss it too, sometimes.
He frowned, looking at the temple cat.
‘What do you miss, my lovely?’ Rosette asked. She stepped down from the carriage.
More minds.
Rosette opened her mouth to reply but instead she stammered, clutching Teg’s arm.
‘What is it?’ He held her up, searching her face. ‘Is it the baby? Rosette! What’s happening?’
‘Not the baby.’ She shook her head, her cheeks burning, her eyes wide. Her hair was wafting about her face though there was no breeze anywhere else. ‘Something’s got me.’ She was choking, as if an invisible riptide pulled her under.
The guard approached wearing an amiable smile, asking their destination. When he caught sight of Rosette—her arms flailing, gasping for breath, a now wild wind blowing past her face—his hand went to his sword. Teg gripped her tight, feeling the storm. He braced his legs. Rosette drew her sword.
What are you doing, Rosette? Don’t challenge them.
Someone’s spelling me! she shouted in his head. Beware! Drayco, to me!
Drayco’s hackles were spiked and he stalked forward; the coachman tripped over himself to back away. The guard stood his ground, his sword drawn, ordering them against the wall. Teg fought the urge to shift and dispatch the man. He held onto Rosette.
Shield your mind, Rosette.
It’s taking me!
I’ve got you. I won’t let go.
She was shaking uncontrollably, her hair lashing her face as if she were caught on the brink of a whirlpool. Drayco’s snarl was blood-freezing. The guard shouted to the troops. Teg heard them approaching, marching at the double time.

When they burst through the gate, Rosette screamed. ‘It’s pulling me apart! Teg, help!’ She screamed again and was gone, sucked into nothing by a wind so strong it grazed Teg’s hands. Empty hands. Teg’s fingers curled around vacant space, clapping together as Drayco roared, leaping after Rosette. The temple cat landed hard and spun on his
haunches, circling the ground where Rosette had stood seconds before. The guards were on them.

Teg leapt, gathering energy to him as he sprang away, shifting into Lupin form. *To me, Drayco! Come to me. Run!*

*Maudi! Maudi! They’ve taken her.*

Before Teg could say more, Drayco launched at the guards, tearing out the first man’s throat before his sword came down. It fell from his hand as his head rocked back, no longer supported by a neck. The other guards spread out, their broad blades drawn, ready to close in on the temple cat.

*Not them. Drayco. Listen to me. They don’t have her.*

Drayco didn’t listen. He spun in a circle, his claws extended like daggers, lips pulled back over blood-soaked teeth. With his tail as counterbalance, he rushed and swiped at the men as if they were toy soldiers. He crushed their bodies, severing heads and breaking limbs, spitting one out only to launch on the next. He was impervious to their weapons, his speed too fast for them to find their mark. In moments the gate yard was littered with bodies, the bell tower ringing the alarm. Shouts and screams rose from a distant crowd. Drayco continued to maul the victims, shaking the bodies like old rag dolls.

*Stop, Drayco. Enough! They’re dead.*

Teg stood at the edge of the kill circle, his tongue lolling out, limbs quivering. He wanted to run. More warriors would arrive and Drayco was ready to kill until there were none left, or until he died.

*Maudi! Drayco’s voice screamed in his mind. Where is Maudi?*

*Not here!*

The temple cat dropped his last victim and levelled his orange eyes on Teg’s. *Where is she? I don’t know. A spell took her.*

Mounted guards approached at the gallop.

*We have to run, Drayco. There’s no finding her here.*

Drayco roared again and launched into the air, clearing the circle of mangled bodies and landing beside Teg. He shook the blood from his ruff, red droplets flying in an arc around him. *I have to find Maudi.*

They took off, heading down the hill towards the quarry road. Drayco’s roaring echoed through the plains of Corsanon, followed by the sound of a hundred-horse pursuit.

Rosette continued to scream until she landed hard on her tail bone. The pain shot up her spine to the top of her head. She felt like she had been sucked through a mouse hole at high speed. Her throat burned. Her eyes stung and hot tears streamed down her cheeks. She had no idea how long she’d been screaming, or ripping through the unknown space. She kept her eyes clamped shut, her fists clenched. Her chest heaved, each breath tearing in and out of her lungs.

‘Rosette?’

She opened one eye. ‘Kali?’ Slowly her mother came into focus.

Kreshkali’s lips were parted but no words came out.

‘What in demon’s darkness just happened?’ Rosette said between gasps. She rubbed her eyes, allowing them to adjust to the light. She was in the library. ‘Temple Los Loma?’ The words grated her throat. ‘How did I get here?’

Scylla came up to her, touching her nose to nose, her purr rumbling in the silence. Rosette gripped the cat’s neck and struggled to her feet. She got her breathing under control and encircled her belly with her arms. ‘Great goddess of the woods, can’t you two say anything?’

Kreshkali cleared her throat. ‘We wove a calling spell…’ Her voice trailed off.

‘It was my idea,’ An’ Lawrence added. ‘Thought it would expedite things.’

‘You wove a calling spell? On me? What were you thinking! Do you know where I was?’

They stared at her, shaking their heads. ‘You weren’t where I left you, that’s for certain.’ Kreshkali narrowed her eyes.

‘If you wanted me so urgently you could have sent a message, or come for me yourself. Bloody demon’s fire, that was horrid.’

An’ Lawrence and Kreshkali came closer, Scylla between them; the look on their faces was incomprehensible.

Rosette’s hands went to her face. ‘Do you realise Drayco’s left behind with no idea of where I am, if I’m alive or dead? He’ll be tearing chunks out of everyone he meets until he finds me. And Teg’s left to deal with it? What will they do? We were at the gates of Corsanon!’

‘Rosette,’ Kreshkali whispered. ‘I can’t believe it’s you.’

Rosette glared at her. ‘Who were you expecting?’

‘Not you, daughter,’ An’ Lawrence said, his voice wavering. ‘We weren’t expecting you.’

Kreshkali came to her side and led her to the table.
‘What do you mean, not me? It was a calling spell, wasn’t it? And I can’t stress enough how uncomfortable it felt. Have you ever been through one? It’s criminal. I’m tearing that spell out of my grimoire as soon as I get back to Dumarka.’

‘I’m sorry, Rosette.’ Kreshkali pulled out a chair and eased her down. ‘It was a calling spell, yes—but you’re not the one we called.’

‘Well I’m the one you got.’ She took the water her mother offered, frowning. ‘Who were you after?’

‘Whom.’ An’ Lawrence sat beside her.

She clicked her tongue. ‘Whom then?’

‘We were calling a manual,’ Kreshkali said. ‘Richter’s notes to be exact, the ones we need to bring back Jarrod.’

Rosette looked at each of them in turn. ‘A manual?’

‘Richter’s journals. She hid them from ASSIST and we’ve been searching the library.’ An’ Lawrence waved towards the shelves lining the walls to the ceiling. ‘We thought a calling spell would bring them.’

Rosette exhaled. The sun came out from behind the clouds, flooding the library with light. She rubbed her hands, flexing her fingers one at a time. The colours from the stained glass played across her skin, saffron, emerald and azure. She shook her head, a small smile lifting her face. ‘At least now we know where she hid them.’

Kreshkali hissed. ‘Is there anything that techno-witch didn’t put in our blood?’

Xane cantered the mare along the road, keeping her collected. There was plenty of time, no need to rush. He’d delivered the letter to the High Priestess and had her reply tucked safely in his saddlebag. Over the next rise was a steep climb and then the road skirted the river gorge, crossed the high arched bridge and snaked its way back to the main gates of Corsanon. He would be there within the hour, the mare in grand condition. He stroked her neck, about to praise her, when he saw them coming. ‘What’s this?’

Barrelling down the road were two black beasts. He squinted to make them out but they ran so fast he couldn’t identify them immediately. Dust billowed behind them as their long strides tore up the ground.

‘Easy, Grace.’ He shortened his reins and brought her to a halt. Her head was up and she pranced on the spot, nostrils flaring. Xane kept her under control, moving well to the side. When he looked again at the approaching creatures, he knew what they were—a black temple cat and a very large wolf.

‘That’s the one we saw before. The witch’s familiar.’ He was hypnotised, watching their approach. The mare broke out in a sweat and tossed her head, limbs shaking. ‘Easy now. They’re not after us, Gracie.’ He stroked her neck. ‘At least, I don’t think they are.’

The temple cat roared and the mare backed away, shying into a stand of white oaks. Xane’s leg slammed into the trunk, the stirrup gouging the bark. His head whipped backward as the mare lunged, her hind leg firing towards the beasts as they passed. He kept her from bolting and watched the temple cat speed away. Inexplicably, he wanted to follow. ‘Settle, Grace. We’ve got a message to deliver,’ he said aloud. ‘To the city!’

Xane shifted his weight forward, easing up on the reins. Like a racehorse from the gate, she charged, cresting the hill at a dead run. He couldn’t slow her down. He looked over his shoulder once to see the wolf and temple cat disappear around the bend. The mare ran on until halfway up the next hill. She was blowing hard when he could finally ease her to a walk, her neck and flanks drenched with sweat. They had no time to relax. A mounted troop crested the ridge at the gallop. They were headed straight towards him.

‘Pursuit!’ the captain yelled. ‘Give way!’

The road was narrow at this point and it took all his skill to keep the mare to the side as the other horses charged past. He recognised the unit and exchanged glances with some of the riders. The look in their eyes was the same. Fear. When they’d gone and the dust settled, he walked the mare the rest of the way up the hill. Once around the gorge he had a clear view of the Corsanon gates and it didn’t take hard maths to guess what had happened.

Bodies were strewn everywhere, the ground soaked in blood. The temple carriage was just inside the gate; the horses were agitated and the driver was standing at their heads, holding the reins short as he spoke with one of the guards. Other men were searching the carriage. Xane didn’t have much time to wonder about the beautiful young witch before he was approached by a guard.

‘Name and business,’ the man said.

Xane produced the letter from the High Priestess, explaining his errand, but while answering questions his focus kept returning to the carriage. The doors were open and two guards were looking under the seats. One stood, waving the captain to him. He held a trinket to the light, a pendant, silver and lapis, shaped like a bird of prey with a ruby sun above its head. Xane’s eyes welled. The headaches, all but gone this morning, came hurtling back. In the centre of the pain, he had a vision.

He could see himself on a farm, an expansive estate. There were brood mares in the paddocks and blossoming
fruit trees, cherry, apple and peach. He was walking down a cobbled drive and she was with him, the witch whose
dark eyes he had gazed upon, the beautiful woman in the coach. They were laughing together, climbing a stile,
running through the fields, holding hands. The sound of waves filled the air and an eagle circled overhead, riding the
thermals that rose from the high sea cliffs. She turned to him, laughing, calling him by name, but it wasn’t Xane. It
was…

‘Xane!’ The guard snapped his fingers.

He blinked several times, bringing himself back to the present. The guard was nodding for him to pass but it
was all he could do to urge the mare forward. He rubbed his temples, mumbling his thanks. He couldn’t tear himself
away from the vision. It didn’t feel like a dream or a fancy. It felt like a memory. But that was impossible. Xane had
never been near the sea, and he had never held a beautiful girl’s hand.

‘Get that message straight to the citadel, lad,’ the captain said. ‘Before you see to the mare.’

The guard’s instructions brought Xane fully back from the reverie. ‘Yes, sir.’

He checked over Gracie as they walked down the main streets, avoiding the marching troops that were heading
for the gate. His horse’s eyes were sunken, her coat crisp with dried sweat and her legs filthy with road grime and
dust. When he leaned over her shoulder he saw where the oak branches had scratched her hide and the saddle as
well. He groaned. The Stable Master himself would check her condition when he returned. He didn’t imagine his
story of the huge black beasts on the road would count for much. The mare was a mess and clearly overrun. ‘At least
you’re sound,’ Xane said, smiling. ‘Not a hint of lameness.’

As the words escaped his lips, she stumbled, her toe catching on the jagged lip of a pothole. The steady clip-
clop of her iron-shod hooves changed to something like drunken castanet dancers. He dismounted, mumbling as he
bent over. ‘We gallop all the way to the temple and back, nearly trampled by beasts and warriors, and you pull a
shoe inside the city gates? On a pothole?’

The mare twisted around as he bent over her hoof. The shoe was loose, two nails missing. He’d be lucky if it
stayed on long enough to get to the stables.

‘There’s nothing for it, Gracie. I’m going to be put in charge of the aged brood mares and never ride again.’ He
ran up his stirrups, loosened the girth and led her the rest of the way to the citadel. The lieutenant made him wait for
more than an hour. At least he had time to water Grace and rub her down. When he finally was called in, he was hit
with a barrage of questions about the girl in the coach and her travelling companions.

‘No, sir, I didn’t see a wolf in the carriage. She was with a man and her temple cat but that was all I spotted.’

‘Her temple cat?’

‘It was clearly Dumarkian,’ Xane said. That couldn’t be news. ‘And I presumed the creature was her bonded
familiar.’

‘You presumed?’

‘I did. It seemed a logical conclusion at the time.’

The lieutenant’s brow knitted. ‘How long have you been apprentice to the Stable Master?’

‘Not long.’ Xane hesitated. As he scanned his memory, he had a moment of doubt. ‘This past year.’

‘You were at the battle on the fields?’

‘I was, sir.’

Again his mind wandered. Snippets of other memories emerged, overlapping his recent encounter just days
before. Of course, he’d been shot and left for dead. The order of events would be a little vague. He put the new
visions down to dreams, or maybe hemlock hallucinations, though he clearly saw a dark battle. It took place in a
strange world with a flat, ungiving ground, thunder clapping overhead and beams of red light streaming from strange
weapons. There was a troop of swordsmen, and women, sheathing their blades and shifting into beasts, wolves like
the one he saw on the road today, huge, elegant, fierce. They were beautiful creatures, and they were helping him.

_Clearly I’m losing my mind._

‘Did you see the beasts there? On the battlefield?’

Xane shook his head. ‘There were no such beautiful creatures on the Corsanon Fields.’

‘Beautiful creatures?’ the lieutenant asked. He snapped his fingers. ‘Those _beautiful creatures_ killed many of
my men!’

Xane straightened. ‘And the woman?’ He felt suddenly bold enough to ask. ‘Where’s the woman? What have
you done with her?’ Xane heard the words but they didn’t feel like his own. They were strong and confident with an
edge of threat. Suddenly he was overcome with a burning desire to know that she was all right.

‘What have we done with her? There’s a good question, lad.’ He pushed his face up close to Xane’s and
snapped his fingers again. ‘She vanished, as some of the temple witches can do. Left only this behind.’

He held up the pendant Xane had seen before.

‘Recognise it, lad? Did the girl in the coach wear this?’
Xane’s hand trembled as he opened it. The lieutenant placed the silver-and-lapis bird in his palm and the touch of it filled him with light. For an instant he thought he knew where she was and felt he had to get there no matter what it took, but the sensation vanished just as fast, leaving him dizzy. ‘It was hers,’ he said. ‘I recognise it.’

The lieutenant was called to the door, an urgent message from his second. Xane didn’t think twice. He slipped the pendant into his pocket. When the man returned, he was too preoccupied to notice it was gone.

‘You’re dismissed.’

‘The message?’ Xane asked. ‘I was meant to deliver it to the Stable Master.’

‘We’ll see that it’s passed on.’ The lieutenant waved him to the door and Xane left.

He walked the mare back to the stables and although he kept to the smoothest streets, the shoe was off before they reached the barn, just as he predicted. He squinted, holding it at arm’s length. ‘They didn’t get it level, Gracie, and the toe-clip’s too thin. Snapped clean off from just a little stumble.’ He patted her neck. ‘Not your fault at all, nor mine.’ He shook his head. ‘He didn’t know that much about horseshoeing. At least, he didn’t think he did. ‘But it’s clearly not level, or even shaped to your hoof. Who shod you?’ Oddly, he couldn’t remember.

When he arrived back at the stables, Willem was waiting. Xane braced himself, drawing a deep breath. He explained what happened, why the mare appeared overworked and what the problem was with the shoe. Willem starred down at the single unshod hoof and unleashed a horde of queries. The sound of his ranting faded into the background and again a vision filled Xane’s mind.

This time he and the beautiful witch were hiking over lava fields, leading their mounts down a narrow path. Her horse had thrown a shoe as well and the hoof was bound in leather, protecting it from the obsidian, sharp as glass. Xane rubbed his head. He didn’t know what obsidian was. He wished he could clear his mind as easily.

Willem had stopped talking and was staring at him. He hoped he wasn’t waiting for the answer to a question. If so, Xane had no idea what it was. But Willem said no more. He checked the mare’s hoof and then the shoe, felt her pulse and noted the gouges in the saddle. Finally he spoke.

‘We send you off to deliver a letter and you come back as if from the border wars.’

‘Yes, sir. I’m sorry, sir.’ Xane started untacking the mare, surprised when Willem helped him. They curried and rubbed her down until she shone like black jade. Xane watered her again and turned her into her stall, filling her manger with an armload of hay. Xane smiled at the sound of her chewing and the languid swish of her tail.

‘And the shoe didn’t fit?’ Willem asked, watching the horse as well.

‘It was close, but not a proper fit. The hoof was shaped to match the shoe, and as it grew again to its natural contours, it created a lip. Just enough to catch on the edge of the pothole. The toe-clip was too thin as well. It’s a close call when drawing out the iron, I’ll admit, but…’

‘Are you saying you can do better?’ Willem asked, handing him the horseshoe.

Xane avoided the other man’s eyes.

‘No criticism taken, Xane.’ Willem’s voice brightened. ‘Get yourself fed and then you can show me how you’d do it better. I want you to reshoe her. Shouldn’t be too hard with all your farrier knowledge.’

‘Me?’

‘I’ll bring the Stable Master to watch as well. You can educate us both.’ Willem chuckled.

Xane swallowed and thanked him. He was about to panic when a warm glow swelled his chest. He gave a final pat to the mare’s rump and went to get cleaned up and find some food. He had no idea where the confidence was coming from, but there it was. At least he would go down smiling. He’d never shod a horse before in his life but for some strange reason he believed he could.

Grayson paced the length of the library, his bare feet soundless in the soft rug, his hands knotting into fists. ‘Even if I can separate the chromatin without destroying the histones, we need an electron microscope just to get a look at it. I can’t see DNA with a magnifying glass, for demon’s sake.’ He crossed his arms. ‘And it’s not like untangling a ball of yarn, you realise. I need the technology. Specific technology.’

‘Or magic,’ Kreshkali said. ‘If I can figure out the right kind.’

‘How small is this DNA again?’ An’ Lawrence asked, interrupting them. He picked at the knot securing his leg wrap.

Rosette swatted his hand away. ‘Stop it,’ she whispered.
‘How small?’ Grayson said. ‘Picture a single strand many billionths of a metre long.’

‘Oh.’ An’ Lawrence rubbed his head.

‘Can you picture it?’ Grayson pressed him.

‘Not really.’

‘Exactly my point.’

They fell silent. Rosette went to the window, avoiding Grayson’s eyes. ‘He’s close. I can feel him.’

‘Jarrod?’ Kreshkali asked.

‘Drayco.’ She turned to face her mother. ‘I don’t understand why I couldn’t go straight back to him. He’s insane with worry. He has no idea what happened to me. He might have even torn Teg apart for all I know.’ She started to pace.

‘Sit!’ Kreshkali said. ‘Both of you.’ She motioned Rosette and Grayson to the table. They sat at opposite ends.

‘Rosette, your temple cat may be tearing heads off but he’s on his way here. You said you felt so yourself. Once he gets into a portal, the Entity will not detain him, I promise. No one in their right mind would try to keep you two apart.’ She took a sip of tea. ‘Grayson, there has to be an electron microscope here at Los Loma.’

‘Why does there have to be?’ An’ Lawrence asked.

‘Because Janis carried on years of research after she left ASSIST.’ She gazed around the library. ‘I feel like it’s right under our noses.’

‘Maybe she hid that technology in me as well,’ Rosette said, her sarcasm increasing the tension in the room.

Kreshkali slowly turned her head around. ‘That’s it,’ she whispered.

‘What’s it?’ Rosette kicked the chair opposite her. ‘An electron microscope tucked behind my heart? Or maybe it’s under my fingernail? Is that what you’re saying?’

‘There are worlds within worlds there,’ An’ Lawrence said. ‘But I don’t think that’s what Kali means.’

‘It’s not.’ Kreshkali filled her daughter’s cup and pushed it towards her.

‘What then?’ Rosette struggled to stand, the bulk of her pregnancy and the recent calling experience making her less than graceful.

Kreshkali tapped the rim of the saucer. ‘Drink.’

Rosette sat back down and held the cup in her hands. They shook slightly as she sipped the herbal brew. She screwed up her face. ‘This is disgusting.’

‘It’s good for you,’ Kreshkali said. She topped the cup up again and turned to Grayson. ‘It’s possible that we don’t need an electron microscope after all.’

‘Kali…’ He started to answer but she waved him silent.

‘Janis was working with nanotechnology and we know that she and Luka had nano-devices embedded in the pi stacks of their DNA—the spell that’s been handed down our family line.’

‘And continues to do so,’ Rosette added, patting her swollen belly.

‘Indeed. We also know the nano-level devices, the spell, contain vast amounts of information.’

Grayson looked at the bookshelves that covered all four walls of the library. ‘You mean this was just a front? Like a permanent glamour? Something to throw ASSIST off the track while they merrily stored the real findings in their blood?’

‘Bingo,’ Kreshkali said.

‘It’s more than a glamour!’ Hotha entered the room, Fynn trotting behind him. The dog made a beeline for Rosette and she tussled his head.

‘More than a glamour?’ she said, her eyes bright as she studied Hotha’s face.

‘It’s a legacy, and a beautiful one—tangible and priceless.’ He paused, letting his eyes turn to Kreshkali. ‘But the High Priestess is right. He came closer, standing in front of her chair. ‘What we seek is here in front of us.’

Grayson shook his head. ‘I still need an electron microscope to view it.’

‘Maybe not,’ Hotha said.

Everyone turned to Kreshkali. She was smiling at the Lupin.

‘Explain,’ An’ Lawrence said, the corners of his mouth downturned.

‘The microscope is just a tool,’ Kreshkali said.

Grayson coughed. ‘Hardly a hammer or a rake, Kali.’

‘But still, it is a tool, an aid to consciousness.’

‘You can’t build a gate without a hammer and you can’t sweep a path without a broom,’ Grayson said.

‘Maybe you can’t, but I can.’ Kreshkali smiled.

‘I can too,’ Rosette added, her eyes widening.

‘All fine for you witches but I need an electron microscope to get at those notes, and anything else buried in your DNA.’ He looked at each in turn and raised his hands, palms up.
‘You can move mountains with a single thought,’ Kreshkali said, as Rosette rose to stand behind her mother’s chair. ‘Magic leaves the tools behind, even those of the most complex technology.’

‘It’s the thought that counts,’ Rosette said, tapping her finger on Kreshkali’s back. ‘But we have to be able to visualise what you need to see. We have to know what to think about, for the magic to work.’

‘And that’s where the books come in.’ Kreshkali got out of her chair. ‘What am I looking for, Grayson? Describe it to us.’ She headed for the catalogue files.

‘You’ve lost me,’ he said, his hands going to his pockets.

‘We need images, pictures. A diagram of what it would look like if you did have that electron microscope of yours.’

‘Images of DNA? Okay. I get it now.’ He started pacing again. ‘Something that details chromosome organisation.’

‘Right. Key words?’ Kreshkali asked.

‘DNA, of course,’ Rosette said as she joined her mother, searching the tabbed cards alphabetised in the long narrow drawers.

‘Chromatin, heterochromatin, euchromatin…’ Grayson said.

‘Nucleoprotein filament?’

‘That’s the one, with DNA-histone spacers.’

‘Two hundred thousand forty-five B.’ Rosette tilted her head up to the top rung. ‘Who’s climbing?’ She rubbed her belly. ‘I recommend you don’t pick me.’

‘Not you,’ Grayson said. ‘Or you.’ He nodded towards the Sword Master leaning on his cane.

Kreshkali was up the ladder while they talked. ‘This is it,’ she called from the top rung. She thumbed through the book. ‘You won’t believe this! I’ve got the images, and I’ve got something else as well.’ She backed down the ladder, Hotha taking the book from her as she jumped lightly to the ground.

‘What else did you find, Kali?’ An’ Lawrence asked.

‘I’ve got a note,’ she said, retrieving the book. She sat at the table.

‘From whom?’ Rosette sat next to her.

An’ Lawrence smiled at his daughter and they all crowded in.

‘It’s from Janis Richter.’ Kreshkali locked eyes with Rosette. ‘And it’s addressed to us.’

Teg ran side by side with Drayco, their sprint to the portal turning into a free fall down the quarry road. They’d cut across the fields above the temple grounds and raced down the hill, making straight for the corridors hidden below. Drayco’s only thought, the only one that boomed into Teg’s mind, was Rosette. He screamed her name until Teg felt it would stab him to death. The temple cat’s intention was so powerful and clear, Teg was confident the Entity would have them to her the moment they shot through the portal. He certainly hoped so. He didn’t want to think what it would be like in the corridors with an irate feline if they didn’t go straight to her, or if she was somehow lost.

In his wolf form, Teg was immune to the worry that sometimes afflicted his human thoughts. He was also more impervious to physical distress. When they reached the portal, he didn’t shift but remained quadruped, slamming into the back wall of the corridor, Drayco’s roar shaking the halls.

To Maudi!

Drayco’s mental instructions to the Entity rang through the corridors. To Rosette.

We’ll find her, Drayco. I think she’s been called, is all. That would explain it.

Called?

A spell to bring her close.

Who would do that?

I don’t know.

Drayco paced, sides heaving. He kept up the earpiercing snarls, his tail snapping the air.

Teg stayed out of his way, silently asking the Entity to make it quick. We’re here now, Drayco. In the corridors. The Entity will take us to her. Everything will be all right.

Teg wasn’t sure what to do if it wasn’t. The fresh blood on the temple cat’s neck and red strands of saliva stuck to his throat spoke louder than any words. Teg felt concerned about what had happened to Rosette as well—he’d never seen someone scream for their life and vanish in front of his eyes. But the savage reaction of the temple cat shocked him, even in his wolf form. He was doing all he could to balance the fear and rage with trust. He sat on his haunches, panting, waiting for the Entity to take them to Rosette.
‘Sit back, everyone.’ Kreshkali waved them away. ‘I can’t breathe with you all so close.’ She studied the letter. It was handwritten, not clicked out on a keyboard, and the page was in perfect condition, unlike the other notes she’d found.

‘How could it be for us?’ Rosette asked. ‘It was written centuries before we were born.’

‘True, but it says, To the daughters of my line, though we have never met.’

‘She was a techno-witch,’ Grayson said. ‘And we have evidence that she linked with the quantum sentient when the computer was brought online. She may have glimpsed this very moment.’

‘Caused it, is more likely,’ An’ Lawrence said.

‘Maybe. She talks about the quantum sentient here.’

‘What does she say?’ Hotha asked.

Kreshkali read aloud. ‘You may not fully understand the JARROD or the alterations to your DNA. It’s been a long time, if you are reading this, long enough for worlds to change and meanings to alter. I don’t have time to do more than give you some facts, and some images. This text is the one you’re after, if you want to visualise where to find your spell.’

‘She called it a spell?’ Rosette asked.

‘Techno-witch,’ Grayson said again. ‘She saw no distinction between magic and technology.’

‘She saw no distinction between forms of matter,’ Kreshkali said. ‘Everything’s energy.’ She smoothed the page and read on.

‘Essentially, the JARROD has a CPU with five-point-nine trillion times the capacity of a classical computer on a chip that’s taking up less space than a single chain of DNA—if you can call it space at all. It’s more like a metaphor. It’s a juxta-quantum chip—a quibit sandwich made out of a few photons. As you must realise now, it’s also a bridge into subatomic space, one only the JARROD and my descendants can walk. There are inherent risks.’

‘As with any spell,’ Rosette said.

‘My theories on the quantum properties of DNA have been rejected by the ASSIST ratifying board. To them it is a breach of ethics to merge human consciousness with technology, regardless of my argument that DNA already communicates on the quantum level—a state where technology and awareness become indistinguishable from each other. But they choose to see this as a moral dilemma. I do not. Universal energy resides everywhere in everything—a boundless interconnection. The similarities between DNA and quantum entanglement proved it. If you can’t understand this, I hope my journal notes will help.’

‘Me too,’ Rosette said. ‘Does she say what happens when we activate the spell?’

‘Not yet.’ Kreshkali continued reading: ‘When Luka altered my DNA, I was able to entangle with the quantum computer. I opened myself to an infinite number of systems, in an infinite number of worlds. I now am beginning to grasp the full nature of “reality”, not only on Earth but throughout the many-worlds. In my mind’s eye, I can see them clearly. You will have this sensation too, of course, as will all the women of our line.

‘What I found in my quantum journey came back with me. The JARROD, our Jarrod—a consciousness beyond anything I’ve ever imagined. You must protect him always. We are the key to his survival and the many-worlds depend on him.

‘If you’ve found this message, you’re most likely looking for my notes on re-booting his hard drive, only that term is antiquated, of course. All the information you need is in the key codes, activated through holo-projection. The password is long. Don’t be daunted. If you watch the stars today, you will see it written in the sky.

‘All my love to you, Roses of our family line.

Docturi Janicia
May 23, 2098
Half Moon Bay, CA’

Kreshkali passed the letter around to the others.

‘What does it mean?’ Hotha held the paper as if it were sacred. He read the words again. ‘Activated through holo-projection.’

‘It’s a theory of consciousness,’ Grayson said. He was flipping through the textbook, pausing on an image of a chromosome magnified two million times its actual size. He passed it to Rosette. ‘This is what we’re after.’

‘Looks like a worm.’ She passed it to her mother.
‘Holo-projection?’ Hotha asked.
‘It’s a techno term for glamour,’ Kreshkali said. ‘The ability of consciousness to conjure an image and project it into “reality” for others to see. All we have to do is work out the password and tap into the key codes. The answer will be there, in the DNA.’
‘In my blood,’ Rosette said. ‘What’s the password then?’
‘She didn’t make it easy,’ An’ Lawrence said. ‘Watch the stars today? She couldn’t have known what day we would read this. Where do we begin?’ An’ Lawrence stood, leaning onto the back of the chair.
Rosette and Kreshkali exchanged smiles.
‘What was her sun sign?’ Rosette asked. ‘Scorpion?’
‘Yes, Scorpio—shrewd, secretive, intense.’ Kreshkali laughed. ‘Clever as daybreak. She was a cryptic witch but I can see the key to this lock now.’
‘Care to share?’ Hotha asked.
‘It’s written in the stars, of course.’ Kreshkali went to the nearest computer and switched it on.
Grayson frowned. ‘I don’t get it.’
‘She left us a date,’ Rosette said, tapping the note at the bottom. It was the first time she’d spoken directly to him since her arrival. ‘All we have to do is run the chart and read the planetary longitudes, or maybe the declinations. The password will be there.’
‘And then?’ Grayson’s brow remained wrinkled.
‘We use these diagrams to image the strands of DNA, projecting them like a glamour onto a blank wall,’ Rosette said. ‘As we insert the password, the key codes will open and we’ll have the information we need to bring Jarrod back.’ She looked at her mother. ‘Is that about right?’
‘Perfect, dear. Done and well done.’
‘Thank you.’ She beamed. ‘Now if you will all excuse me, I’m heading up to the gates.’
‘Drayco?’ An’ Lawrence said as Scylla jumped to her feet.
‘He’s just launched out of the portal and I think he needs to see me, right now!’
‘Go,’ An’ Lawrence said. ‘Before he terrorises the place.’
‘But he’s so gentle,’ Grayson said.
‘Not today.’ Rosette left the library, Scylla and Fynn on her heels. ‘I’m here, Dray. I’m here. It’s all right. I’m on my way.

Xane pounded the iron, sweat trickling down his temples. He had no idea how he was shaping the shoe to the precise fit, pumping the bellows to achieve the perfect white heat in the forge, using the hammer with the exact amount of force to draw out the toe-clip and finding just the right angle on the anvil to flatten one side of the shoe the minuscule amount necessary to match the mare’s right front hoof. He didn’t question it past a rushing feeling, a private moment of joy. He simply got on with the job.

With seven new nails hanging out the side of his mouth, he lifted the mare’s hoof, straddling it to rest between his knees. With the shoe in place, he set the first nail, tapping gently until giving one hard thwack to catch the bevelled edge. The nail popped out the side of the hoof wall, exactly where he wanted it. He repeated the process, three on the inside, four on the outside—all in neat rows. He twisted off the ends with his claw hammer, clenching the stubs tight with the nailing block and tapping them down, snug and secure. He finished off with a light rasp over the nail heads to smooth them and bring up a shine. When he put the hoof down and stood back, he’d never seen a better job in his life. He was certain that Willem and the Stable Master would agree, but the looks on their faces were strained.

‘Walk her out,’ Willem said.
Maybe they were going to reserve judgement until they saw she was sound. She would be, of course. What were they worried about? He led the mare down the length of the breezeway, the sound of the men’s conversation hot in his ears.

‘He’s not even been to the shoeing barn more than a dozen times,’ Willem said. His voice was a whisper, not intended for Xane’s ears, but he heard him clearly enough.
‘I hadn’t thought to apprentice him there yet,’ the Stable Master said.
‘Seems we hardly need to.’
‘Hardly.’
‘He could instruct the Master Farrier.’
‘True.’
‘Have you noticed his words of late?’ Willem asked. ‘He’s using ones I never heard come from him before.’
‘I noticed.’
‘What do you think? Temple witch?’
‘Possible. The beasts passed him by without attacking. He admitted it himself.’
‘Do you think he’s from Dumarka?’
‘That would explain the way he has with animals. But why reveal it if he is a spy? Why show off such skills that an apprentice could never have?’
‘Maybe the hemlock’s addled his mind. He might have forgotten his purpose.’
‘Possible.’
‘Do we report him?’
‘Not yet.’ The Stable Master sighed. ‘He was just a kid on the street, with uncanny good horse sense. Now this.’
‘That’s how it can seem, with a witch’s glamour, sir.’
Xane turned the mare around and headed back, keeping his face smooth. He wanted to defend himself, to say that he really was just a street kid, but he kept silent, his expression unconcerned. Beneath the mask his mind churned over the facts. If he was who he remembered, Xane the street boy, brother to Shaea, where did he learn to shoe horses like a master, and why was he having such strange memories? And what about being able to hear and see anything he put his mind to, no matter how far away it was? Anything I put my mind to.
For the moment, he put his mind to being the new apprentice who seemed to have a knack for blacksmithing. He planned to avoid being reported, whatever it took. He halted the mare in front of them, beaming his warmest smile. ‘She’s sound as gold,’ he said, slapping her neck affectionately.
‘That she is, lad,’ Willem said. ‘Stable her now and clean the tack. You’ll need to oil the saddle to get those scratches out.’
‘Yes, sir,’ Xane said, leading the horse away. He heard them even after he rounded the corner.
‘Keep an eye on him, and keep him close,’ the Stable Master said.
‘I’ll have a legion ready to march if we turn on Temple Dumarka. You want him along?’
‘By your side.’
‘Aye, sir,’ Willem said. ‘Nothing will get past me.’
Xane frowned as he led the mare back to her stall. The thought of marching on Temple Dumarka upset him, angered him, and he had no idea why. His loyalty was to Corsanon, wasn’t it? He’d seen what the temple cat had done at the gates. He didn’t know those guards, not that he could recognise them after the mauling, but that didn’t explain his lack of compassion. Lack of compassion? Willem is right. I do sound smarter, even in my own head.
He picked at the scab on his neck. There was no way he would be fighting the Dumarkian witches and their huge temple cats. Not because he was afraid, but because he didn’t want to hurt them. He laughed at his own thoughts. How could I hurt a temple witch? I don’t even know how to use my sword much past a basic block and strike.
He went to the tack room, grateful to find no one there. Alone with his thoughts, he pondered the events of the last few days, his mind going again to the woman in the coach and her black temple cat. Who are you, my beautiful witch? And more important, where did you go?

Rosette ran down the halls and out into the baking heat of the courtyard. The sky was hazy with smoke, the mountains spewing ash. The skyline was tinged sulphur yellow. She didn’t hesitate when she reached the bottom of the steps. She flexed her knees and sprang into the air, the ripples of her transformation making her hair dance around her face. In the next breath her feathers ripped through the sky as she shot over the trees towards the gates. The road became a single thread, snaking through the red sand. The corrugations on the dunes smoothed out until not a ripple was seen. She tilted her head slightly, spotting the Three Sisters flapping hard to stay abreast. Hotha ran below, chewing up the ground in his wolf form. Scylla led the way and Fynn ran behind.

Drayco! She spotted her familiar. He was out of the portal and racing through the gates. She didn’t miss the blood-soaked fur, even from her height. Teg ran beside him. He was all right. Relief. I’m here, Drayco. Stop. Let me land. I’m here. I’m safe.

Maudi! The temple cat slowed his pace, panting as she circled above him. Teg morphed, his wolf form blowing away with the wind and leaving him standing on two legs, holding out his bare arm for her to land.

Thank you! She back-winged onto his wrist, jumping off as she shifted, the shock wave knocking him back. She was on her knees in the red dust, her arms around her familiar’s neck, her face buried in his crusted fur. ‘Drayco! I’m fine. You didn’t have to worry.’
‘He did a long sight more than worry,’ Teg said.
She looked up at him, noting the fear in his eyes. ‘I’m glad you’re safe.’
‘Me too.’
Hotha caught up, skidding to a halt and shifting. Teg startled when the elder Lupin embraced him. 

‘Are you all right, son?’
‘Nothing a long meditation won’t fix, but I can’t say the same for the guards we left behind.’
‘That bad?’
‘Drayco ripped through a dozen Corsanon warriors before we bolted to the portal.’ Teg looked behind him.

‘I’m just glad the Entity got him to you so quick, Rosette, and kept the Corsanons out.’

‘I can’t imagine what they are thinking now.’

Maudi, I had to find you. He rubbed his face with his forepaw, flakes of dried blood falling to the ground. They tried to stop me.

‘Oh, Dray.’ She hugged him tight. ‘It was a calling spell, an accident really. Kreshkali was looking for Janis Richter’s journals, her notes to help us bring Jarrod back, and it turns out they are in my blood.’

Kreshkali did this to you? His tail snapped.

‘She meant no harm.’ Rosette stroked down his hackles. ‘I’m so sorry this happened to us both.’ Rosette wanted to ask Hotha something about La Makee but he was having a private exchange with Teg. The younger Lupin did not appear comfortable, whatever was being said. ‘Come, Dray.’ She gave her familiar a playful slap. ‘Let me bathe you and find us both a meal.’

‘And then we best see what this fracas has caused in Corsanon,’ Hotha said.

Trouble?

‘What a wondrous woods!’ Shaea turned in circles, her arms outstretched, her head tipped back to the dark green canopy. Beams of sunlight streaked down, dappling her skin. Her cloak was laid out over a boulder to dry and her hair flowed behind her in long strawberry-gold streams.

Shane watched her before taking in the tall, red-barked trees; their tips seemed leagues above him. The warm scent of the forest was a refreshing change from the cold desert land of Corsanon. Clay and the girl seemed curiously unconcerned by their new surroundings but he was not so naive. He recognised the scent and ambiance of the Dumarkian Woods, but when he looked for the meandering stream and the high arched bridge that led to the temple, it was nowhere to be seen. Where once there were open walkways and broad stone steps that led to the turreted meditation hall there now stood a few tumbled columns and a long granite slab covered with brambles and vines. This was not the Dumarka he knew, and he didn’t recall asking to be taken here in any case.

‘Wondrous and strange,’ Clay said to Shaea. He tuned his guitar and picked a sweet melody, the lightness of it floating away on the breeze.

‘It may be more strange than wondrous,’ Shane said. ‘It’s not how I remember it. What happened at the gates of Los Loma? Did either of you speak to the Entity?’

‘I did.’ Shaea stuck out her chin.

‘What did you say?’ Shane and Clay asked at the same time.

‘I said, get us as far away from here and the filthy streets of Corsanon as you can. And look!’ She spun around again, her dress opening like an umbrella. ‘We are in a beautiful green forest the likes of which I’ve never imagined.’

‘Someone’s imagined it,’ Shane said, grumbling.

She stopped spinning, letting her hands fall to her side. ‘Why so glum? We’re free!’

‘Are we?’ He looked at them both, stopping Shaea as she began another twirl. ‘We’ve no supplies, no idea of where or when we are. No idea of what might befall us after sundown.’

‘What do you mean when?’ Shaea asked.

‘Long past this temple’s day for sure,’ Clay said as he continued to play.

‘Exactly. What do we do now?’

‘Explore,’ Shaea said. She frowned back at him. ‘Don’t you want to investigate?’

A single kite cried out above them and Shane sighed. ‘I don’t see that we have any choice.’

‘There’s always a choice,’ Clay said.

‘Is there?’ Shane crossed his arms. ‘I’d love to hear it. What are our choices in this matter? Sit and play music until the sun goes down only to be eaten by bears at night?’

‘I suppose that would be one choice.’ Clay laughed. ‘But that’s not one I’m considering.’

‘Do share,’ Shaea said.

‘First up, we can always go back into the portal and see where else it will take us. Maybe it was just fulfilling Shaea’s wish, to experience some land far from Corsanon, lush and green. I suspect we only need to close our eyes and agree on a place to get us somewhere new. Imagination is everything, don’t you think?’
Shane frowned at him. ‘You sound like you’ve been talking to Rosette.’

‘Not near as much as I’d like.’ He shook his head. ‘I still can’t believe I have no memory of her.’ He put down his guitar. ‘What’s it to be? Do we let Shaea enjoy her green haven while we teach each other a new tune?’

‘Then back to the portal with a destination in mind?’ Shane said, taking off his pack.

‘Sounds like a good choice to me,’ Shaea said, not waiting for either to answer. She wandered down the broken steps to the edge of the ruins.

Shane shrugged. ‘Beats getting drowned in Corsanon, but let’s not stay overlong. I don’t think this place would feel so cheery after dark.’

Clay agreed and played a slip jig, one Shane had never heard before.

‘Slow it down, just a step. Is that A major?’

‘A major seventh.’

Shane took off his wet cloak, picked up his flute and played along.

Shaea listened to the music as it followed her down the path. It became fainter when she skirted the ruins, fading into the background and replaced by the sound of buzzing insects, noisy mynah birds, woodpeckers and the increasing flap and caw of forest ravens. She felt she’d died and gone to heaven, the aroma of pine cones, redwood bark and blackberry blossoms filling her senses, the colours of leaf and branch and sky tantalising. She didn’t recognise most of the herbs and trees. Nothing like this grew in Corsanon’s streets, or even hung in the markets. She pinched each leaf and vine between her fingers, lifting it to her nose, taking in the fragrance and textures. It was intoxicating.

Thank you, Entity, for bringing me here. It is a wondrous place, no matter what the others think! She sent the feelings of gratitude in all directions, tilting her head towards the sun, again twirling around, arms flung wide. Caught up in the dizzy sensations, she imagined a young man minding Xane’s charges. At first he looked like Xane but she knew it wasn’t him. He stood on the parade ground, the black mare, golden palomino and a Desertwind grey in hand. It looked like a legion was about to march.

Don’t wander your mind so far, girl. There’s work to do.

She stumbled, her boot catching on a root. Was the Entity speaking to her again? Work to do?

That’s right. Enjoy your little meander in the woods, breathe in the sweet scents, but it’s back to me when I call. There will be no waiting. The bard was right. You don’t want to be here after dark.

Shaea scratched her ear. Had she really heard the Entity or was her imagination going wild, stimulated by this rich environment?

You heard correctly. Listen for my call.

She looked over her shoulder. The wind had shifted and the music sounded so faint she wasn’t sure they were still playing. Marking her spot with an X of branches, she carried on. The exploration had lost some of its enchantment. Her new-found freedom had a leash. What work? What did the Entity mean by that?

She shrugged then skidded down a bank to the edge of a babbling stream. She washed her hands, marvelling at how clean they were even before she submerged them. She thought of Xane, buried beneath the white oak. Tears fell down her cheek and mixed with the babbling brook, her sobs lost in the sound of the stream, the ravens and the gathering wind. Alone at last she fully mourned his passing.

Drayco sat in the tub, Rosette leaning over him with a stiff bristle brush. His coat was finally clean, the last of the sticky blood washed away though the water was tinged deep red.

‘You need a good rinse now.’

The waterfall pool would be nice, Maudi.

She roughed his neck. ‘Perfect. Let’s go.’ Rosette straightened only to squat back down. She groaned, her brow knitted tight.

Maudi?

‘Just a twinge,’ she said, rising again slowly. Her knees were shaking. ‘I guess I can’t stay in one position for so long these days.’ She panted, waiting for the gripping feeling to subside.

Drayco leapt from the tub and shook. Do you want me to get Kreshkali?

‘No!’ She laughed. ‘No, I’m fine. I think when the time comes I would rather have Nell with me anyway.’

They are one and the same, Maudi.

‘Technically they are but...’

Nell’s not quite so fierce?

‘With me? Yes, that’s one reason.’ She pulled the plug, letting the water drain towards the filter system and the crops below. ‘But I’m fine now. The feeling’s past.’
Swim?
‘Lead the way.’
Drayco shook again and loped towards the palm-shaded bathing pool, Rosette waddling behind. They dove in together, both making a big splash. The water was warm, almost too hot in the midday sun. Plumes of black smoke still rose from the distant mountains, the peaks of the Sierras, but Temple Los Loma remained clear, pristine under the protection spell, save for the slivers of ash filtering down from the sky like tiny black threads.
‘How long can it last?’ An’ Lawrence said.
He sat by the edge of the pool as she floated on her back. Drayco dog-paddled to the edge and climbed out, giving Scylla a nose touch before shaking the water from his coat and lying on the hot tiles. He began licking his fur.
‘Not long if we can’t get Jarrod back,’ Rosette answered. ‘How are they going in there? Ready for me yet?’
‘They sent me to find you, but that’s not what I meant.’
She tilted her head, taking his hand as she climbed the steps.
‘I meant, how long is your pregnancy going to last?’
‘Good question!’ She swiped water from her arms. ‘I’ll need to have a good look at those images too.’ She reached for his book.
‘Not long if we can’t get Jarrod back,’ Rosette answered. ‘How are they going in there? Ready for me yet?’
‘They sent me to find you, but that’s not what I meant.’
She tilted her head, taking his hand as she climbed the steps.
‘I meant, how long is your pregnancy going to last?’
‘Good question!’ She swiped water from her arms. ‘I’ll need to have a good look at those images too.’ She reached for his book.
He held it back. ‘Come. Dry off first. You can study on the way.’ He looked at her belly and frowned. ‘You feeling all right?’
‘Fine,’ she said, taking the towel he offered. ‘Never better.’ When they got to the library she had a clear picture in her mind of the images and what they needed to amplify. Grayson would do the rest. If he could see the embedded message codes, he could translate them. All she and the others had to do was enlarge the image of her DNA and project it onto a wall.
‘There you are. What have you two been doing? Raiding the kitchen?’ Kreshkali asked.
‘Washing enemy blood from Drayco’s hide,’ Rosette said, pushing damp hair out of her eyes. ‘But food’s a good idea. Can we…’
‘Later. Grayson needs to see this now.’
See what I mean, Drayco? She’s cranky with me.
You’re right, Maudi. Nellion would have let us make lunch.
‘Teg!’ Kreshkali motioned him to her. ‘Help me clear this wall.’
There was one corner of the library free of books and covered with a tapestry. They took it down, leaving the smooth white wall for their projection. Kali, Hotha, Teg, An’ Lawrence and Rosette, with the temple cats on either side, sat in a semicircle facing it. Grayson was behind them, ready with his sketchpad. Fynn was asleep under the table.
‘I’d rather enter the data directly into the computer. It would be faster that way.’
‘It wouldn’t,’ Kreshkali said.
‘Electrical power supplies disrupt the streams,’ Rosette said to explain what the High Priestess had not.
‘The streams?’
‘Of consciousness. We need a one-way path from the amplified image of my DNA to that wall. Having the computer on is like throwing out a sand bar in the middle of a smooth-bottomed bay. It would put waves where we don’t want them.’
Grayson nodded. ‘I’ll record by hand then. I’m ready.’
Kreshkali began. She chanted in a deep tone, calling in the Elementals, Fire, Earth, Air and Water. Her voice was joined by the men’s as Rosette visualised the structure of her DNA, amplified one billion times. She imagined the right-handed double helical twist with its upper and lower grooves, following it further by tracing the skeletal-like structure. Each adenine and guanine base, the energy-carrying molecules, took shape as she focused on the bonds to the complementary nitrogenous opposites, the thymine and cytosine bases. She pictured it as she’d been taught, as the image in the text portrayed, each base and phosphate group individually amplified larger and larger.
When Kreshkali’s chanting shifted, Rosette drew her image up from her body and, linking to the minds of everyone around her, projected it onto the wall. Slowly she opened her eyes, swallowing the shock of what she saw. The double helix structure was beautiful, like gemstudded serpents entwining a golden branch. Within it was the ancient caduceus, the Hermetic staff of healing, filled with light, moving to the rhythm of her heartbeat. At the base of the rungs, the energy emitters unfolded like a deck of tarot cards spread face up across an emerald cloth. Running the length of the cards were streams of code, each figure the size of an egg, clearly distinct as they scrolled from top to bottom—a river of symbols, as individual and sparkling as snowflakes. She felt a thrumming in the back of her throat as she joined in with the chant, maintaining the vision spectacular.
When the image finally faded, her stomach growled and her throat felt dry. She blinked her eyes a few times and Drayco came to her side, gently head-butting her shoulder. ‘I hope that was enough, Grayson, because I’m
really famished now,’ she said, stretching her arms high overhead.

Drayco’s fur was dry, his coat smelling of chamomile and sage. *I’m hungry too, Maudi.*

‘Did you get it all?’ Kreshkali asked.

‘I’ll know soon enough,’ Grayson said, moving to the closest computer and powering it up. ‘What I can say is that was more stunning than any electron microscope I’ve ever looked down. You’re all amazing.’

‘Done and well done,’ Kreshkali said, giving the traditional mentor’s approval, directing it to Teg and Rosette.

‘Excellent.’ Rosette mopped her brow. ‘Then no one will mind if I go see about some food? Teg? Are you coming?’

Teg looked towards Kreshkali and she nodded. ‘Bring something back for us as well.’

Rosette cradled her belly as she led the way out of the library, Teg and Drayco close behind.

Xane woke slowly, the dawn turning the barracks a rosy peach hue. A dream hung at the borders of his mind, like sharp-clawed creatures struggling to climb over the edge of a pit. Their grip was failing, some dropping, swallowed by the depths, but one or two hung on, carrying snippets of memory like dog bones for him to grasp. The strain he felt was inexplicable. There was something important for him to understand but as he fully awoke it slipped away. *Only a dream after all.* He rubbed his eyes.

In the dream he’d been riding a copper-red mare, bright as a forge fire. She was strong and supple, and they were climbing through a high mountain pass. The sky was clear, the air cold and he shivered with the memory. He was searching for someone, worried about her. He could almost see her face, almost remember her name. As he crested a rise, the mare shied, frightened by a cloaked woman standing close to the edge of a precipice. He asked her if she’d seen the girl he was looking for.

‘Xane!’ Willem shouted.

Xane sat bolt upright, banging his head on the bunk.

‘Wake up, lad. You’ve missed first call.’ Willem shook him.

The dream faded like wisps of smoke in the breeze. ‘Yes, sir.’ He pulled on his pants and shoved his feet into his boots. ‘Sorry, sir.’

‘You’ll ride with me today. Saddle Grace and Fortuna, and the new grey. She’s in stall twenty-three. And mind her hindquarters; she’s only green-broke. Pack for an extended journey. We march at second call.’

‘March?’

‘We’re paying a little visit to the Dumarkian Woods.’

‘We are?’

‘We, and a legion five hundred strong. Saddle up!’

‘We’re marching on Temple Dumarka?’

‘Are you still dreaming, lad? Get packing!’

*The Dumarkian Woods? Does this mean a temple war?*

Willem disappeared and Xane realised he was the only one left in the barracks. He’d lost time, somehow, in his thoughts. He shut his eyes, rubbing his face. *What’s happening to me?*

He finished dressing and ran to the mess hall where he grabbed bread and cheese and a few apples from the barrel. When he reached the stables, the place was buzzing—horses were being tacked up, packs filled, feed sacks loaded onto mules. He made his way to Gracie’s stall and groomed the three horses he was in charge of, checking their hooves and making sure to pack a small hammer, rasp, nails and a clinch block.

*If I’d thought of that before, the mountain horse would never have come up lame.* He rubbed his neck, the scab still rough. *What mountain horse?*

He slipped a hoof knife into his pack as well. *What nonsense was he thinking? He’d never been further out of the gates of Corsanon than to the temple and back and that was yesterday. What did he know of the road to Dumarka? A sudden chill took him. He was leaving Corsanon proper for the first time in his life. He had to find Shaea. He couldn’t just disappear. And this march—it wasn’t a peace party; he may never return.*

He left his three horses cross-tied in their stalls, tacked up and ready to go. If he could only get a glimpse of where Shaea was, he could race to her and be back before he was missed. Xane closed his eyes and thought of her, surprised at how detached he felt. He used to spend most of his waking hours worrying if she was safe, if she had food, if she was being abused. They grew up in the streets together and she was left without him to watch her back. Why did he feel so removed from her now?

It wasn’t that he didn’t care about her; he just couldn’t feel her the same way he used to. As he searched his thoughts, he sensed a buzz of excitement, as if all those clawing creatures at the bottom of his mind were going to burst out at once.

‘Xane, there you are. Daydreaming!’ Willem said.
His eyes popped open. ‘Yes, sir?’

‘Bring the horses to the parade ground. We’re leading the scouts.’

‘I’m riding?’ Xane was shocked. He thought he’d be marching far behind, catching up only in the evenings to feed and groom the mounts.

‘The grey’s yours. Didn’t I tell you?’ Willem chuckled. ‘Her name is Rose.’

Xane thought his smile would split his face.

‘Don’t be too excited, lad. Thorn is more fitting. She’s badly trained and worse behaved. I promise, you won’t be grinning for long.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Xane said, laughing aloud. ‘I promise I won’t be too happy.’

Rose. Rose. Rose. He said the name over in his head, amazed at how peaceful it made him feel.

‘Don’t dawdle.’ Willem snapped his fingers making Xane blink. ‘What’s wrong with you today?’

‘I’m fine, sir,’ Xane said. ‘I’ll bring them directly.’

Shaea, forgive me. I have no time to search for you. Please be safe, sweet sister. He led the horses to the parade ground.

While standing in formation, he had a fleeting glimpse of Shaea twirling under the sun, a canopy of green overhead, her honey-red hair streaming out behind her. She must still be sleeping. You seem happy enough in your dreams, Shaea! Somehow he couldn’t make himself worry about her any more. ‘To Dumarka!’ he called out with the other equestrians. ‘We ride to Dumarka.’
Rosette peered over Grayson’s shoulder. She knew he didn’t like it. It wasn’t the scrutiny so much that bothered him but the psychic pressure. She was literally breathing down his neck. She couldn’t help it. She had to know.

‘Anything?’ she asked, her face close to Grayson’s ear. Fynn, who’d been curled quietly by his feet, jumped up, paws in his lap, tail wagging.

Grayson clicked his tongue, pointing to the floor. Fynn slunk back to his position under the chair.

‘Is there?’ Rosette asked again.

He mumbled a response and she sighed. Teg kept a more respectful distance, repressing a chuckle.

‘I’ll leave you to it then,’ she said and left the library, calling Drayco to her side. ‘I’m going for another swim. It’s the only way to feel comfortable in this heat.’

‘Wait. Rosette, come back.’ Grayson straightened. ‘Look at this.’

He made room for her at the desk and she eased herself into the chair, Teg standing behind. She adjusted the microscope lenses, blinking as the white light hit her eyes. When her pupils constricted the image came into sharp focus. There they were, rows and rows of tiny tablets, spread like cards, with inscriptions on each—paragraphs of writing in a long flowing script.

‘You found them!’

‘How did you do it?’ Teg asked Grayson.

She leaned aside for Teg to look.

‘Once I broke the encryptions with the key code…’

‘From our wall projection?’

Grayson nodded. ‘I had my foot in the door, and it was all there. These molecules are made to amplify for transcription. It’s what they do.’

‘So once you zero in on them…’

‘They amplify about one hundred million times.’ He finished her sentence.

‘DNA is like the planet Mercury,’ Rosette said.

‘How so?’ Teg asked.

She smiled. ‘Messenger of the gods.’

Teg wrote in his notebook.

‘Once I was able to view the text Janis had embedded, I uploaded the code into the computer, linked to this light-scope, and there you have it.’

‘So it’s a simulation of her notes?’ Rosette asked.

‘Simulation or real thing. It’s one and the same. Here, I’ll switch to monitor.’

The wide screen plasma monitor winked on and Rosette leaned back, clearly seeing the tablets with their notations. Rosette drew in her breath. ‘She’s designed them like tarot cards! I thought so before but this is quite vivid.’

‘I actually think that was Paree’s touch.’

‘Why do you say that?’ Teg asked.

‘Look at the bottom corner of each card,’ Grayson said, pointing to the screen. ‘Hang on. I’ll magnify it further.’

Rosette leaned forward, squinting. ‘Initials?’

‘L.P.—and look closer.’

‘A wolf emblem!’

‘So he was artist as well as architect.’ She turned to Grayson. ‘Like you, and your DNA tattooing.’ She drummed the table with her fingertip when he didn’t comment. ‘How big is the palette?’

‘Good question.’ He clicked the screen, zooming out until the double helix structure of the DNA molecule was visible, showing thirteen rungs on the ladder.

‘To understand size, first realise that the width is only about six micrometres in diameter.’

‘Micrometres?’ Teg asked.

‘Like this.’ He held his arms out, the length of Drayco’s tail. ‘You could put a million micrometers in this space.’

‘A million?’
‘Yes, and we are only looking at six.’
‘So, it’s very small,’ Teg said.

He nodded. ‘But the length of the human genome is twice this distance.’ He stepped forward taking a large stride. ‘So what we see here,’ he said, tapping the plasma screen, ‘to scale, would stretch from the city of Corsanon to the harbour in Morzone.’

‘How can it fit in the cell then, if it’s as long as half the world?’ Teg asked.
‘Coiling and supercoiling,’ Grayson said. ‘That reduces the length about ten thousandfold.’

Teg whistled. ‘Ten thousandfold…’

‘Zoom in again, please?’ Rosette asked.

The cards became visible, fanned like a poker hand.

‘Have you been able to read them?’

‘I was just about to when you…’

‘Hovered?’ She smiled. ‘Kreshkali will want to get a look at this immediately.’ Teg? Can you sense her?

Teg closed his eyes for a moment. ‘She’s in the orchard, with Hotha.’

‘Are you calling her in?’ Grayson asked.

‘Inviting.’ Teg closed his notebook then turned his gaze to Rosette’s belly. ‘Are you all right?’

‘Why does everyone keep asking me that? I’m fine.’

He motioned towards her abdomen, waiting for permission. She nodded and he felt her belly with both hands.

‘Did Kreshkali ask you to do that?’ Rosette pushed his hands away. She didn’t wait for an answer. ‘We need to get those notes deciphered. There’s no time for this.’ She narrowed her eyes. ‘Why are you both frowning at me?’

‘Has Kali checked recently?’ Teg asked.

‘Is an hour ago recent enough?’ Rosette snapped.

‘What’s wrong?’ Grayson asked. He stepped up, his hand feeling her abdomen. ‘Is the baby all right?’

‘I’m fine!’ Rosette pushed them both away. ‘Everything is fine here. The only thing we need to focus on is Jarrod and how we’re going to use the spell to get him back. We need to read these messages, not poke and prod me and baby.’

Walk, Maudi? We could go get Kali? Meet her along the way.

‘I’m getting Kreshkali,’ she said, heading for the door. ‘I’ll be back.’

She left the library, trying not to waddle. It was getting harder every day to carry this baby, hard to make a dignified, poignant exit. Her pelvis felt like it was held together with elastic bands.

Rosette? Teg’s voice sounded in her head.

I just need some air.

Grayson’s pretty confused. He…

Don’t tell me. I don’t want to know. I can’t deal with it right now.

Her bare feet padded down the hall, Drayco beside her. She stopped and winked at her familiar.

In here? Maudi, the walls are too close and they…

There was a boom and a shatter as picture frames jumped off their hooks. The shock wave from her morphing rebounded from the walls and smacked the back of her head. She dropped to her belly, then leapt up and ran full pelt down the hall, her wolf form sleek and graceful.

…might be a hindrance. Drayco finished his thought.

I see that now, Dray. She looked over her shoulder. It’s a good thing I didn’t try that in the library. Kreshkali would…

Kreshkali would what?

Rosette looked just in time to leap over the threshold and run straight into Hotha and Kreshkali ascending the steps. Drayco skidded to a halt and Rosette picked herself up, limping slightly as she followed them back into the shade of the entrance. Kreshkali threw out her hand. ‘Don’t even think about shifting. You can stay like that and go for a hunt. Teg too.’ She closed her eyes briefly. ‘The lot of you need a good run. Take Fynn!’ The young dog had run down the hall after her.

In this heat?

‘Especially in this heat. You’ve been cooped up too long. I don’t know if you can stand it, but I can’t. Go hunt!’

The notes?

‘I’ll read them. We’ll discuss it over supper.’ She gazed at the sun. ‘That’ll give you three hours. Go!’ She clapped her hands and Rosette took off, Drayco leading the way. In a few moments, Teg caught up, Fynn behind him, and the four sped through the orchard, veering towards the red desert plains and the nearest smoking mountain.
They were three days into the march and Xane had the grey mare as calm and responsive as a well-schooled cavalry horse. He even led his section of the scouting party, under Willem's command.

‘She’s not green-broke any more, lad. Job well done.’

‘Thank you, sir, but all it takes is a few long days in the saddle. She knows her business now.’ He stroked her neck as he looked at the mountain peaks to the north. ‘We’re heading for the Dumar Gorge?’ he asked. ‘The pass will be tricky this time of year. There can be…’ He cut himself short. How could he possibly know what there could be in the Dumar Pass this time of year?

‘Can be what, lad?’

‘Sudden blizzards, I’d imagine?’ He said it like a question but he knew the answer was correct. He could clearly see the track in his mind’s eye and he felt like he could calculate the chances of any weather pattern at any given moment. *Calculate*? Xane realised that before the battle on the Corsanon Fields, he couldn’t multiply double digits in his head and he certainly wouldn’t have used the word *calculate*. He closed his eyes, testing. *Twelve times twenty-three is two hundred seventy-six.* The answer came instantly, almost before he asked the question. *Two hundred seventy-six times four hundred ninety-seven is one hundred thirty-seven thousand seventy-two.* One hundred thirty-seven thousand seventy-two times…

‘We’ll get through the pass without trouble. We’ve weather witches along to make sure of it.’

Xane’s eyebrows went up. ‘High Priestesses from Temple Corsanon? Riding with us?’

Willem nodded while Xane multiplied a few more numbers. He had no idea if his instant answers were correct or not. He’d have to wait until camp to work it out longhand. He frowned. He had no idea how to do that beyond double digits. How could these figures have jumped into his head, as quick as lightning? He went back to simpler calculations, ones he knew he could check on paper. *Forty-seven times ninety-eight equals four thousand six hundred and six,* which is numerologically a seven, the number associated with thinking, analysing, introspection. He bit his lower lip.

*Numerologically?* What was happening to his mind?

He knew old Rall threw the numbered stones and muttered the meanings to herself. She even taught them to Shaea but it had never made sense to Xane, nor interested him, until now. His stomach tightened. Inexplicably, he had vast amounts of information about mathematics, numerology, geography and demons knew what else. He looked at Willem and tried to smile.

‘Ride with me, lad.’

‘Yes, sir.’ He urged the mare forward, buttoning his coat against the north wind.

When they camped that night Xane found the ground cold and hard to sleep on. He shivered in his blankets for hours before moving closer to the banked fire. The sound of mountain bears roaring in the distant valleys filled his dreams and a near panic took him. Again the creatures dwelling in the depths of his mind tried to claw their way up to the rim of his awareness. Heart pounding, he watched their struggle, paralysed against any action to aid or thwart. *It has to be the hemlock. The poison’s still in me.* But his conviction didn’t ring true. Something else was going on and he needed to discover what it was. *I feel like I have to warn someone.*

Whom did he want to warn? Temple Dumarka? And warn them of what? Dumarka was the enemy. No wonder Willem and the Stable Master had their doubts about him. He was starting to sound like a traitor even to himself. Could there be a spell on him? Some witch’s glamour? He shut his eyes against the thought and slowly the demons in his mind slid back down into the abyss, disappearing from sight like rain down the side of a well. Xane exhaled long and slow, curled up into a ball and finally fell asleep.

Kreshkali opened her eyes, wiping the tears with the back of her hand. ‘This isn’t how I envisioned it.’

‘What is it, love?’ An’ Lawrence put his arms around her and for a brief moment she allowed herself the comfort. He held her until she stiffened, moving away. His hands fell to his sides. ‘Let’s hear it,’ he said. ‘It can’t be worse than what I’m imagining right now.’

She lifted her eyes. ‘It is.’

He pulled out a chair for her and took the one next to it. ‘Then tell me quickly so I can share the burden.’

She nodded, re-reading the translation aloud: ‘*My daughter, my daughter’s daughter. I trust there was no difficulty in accessing these notes? You understand the need for concealment?*’

‘So well concealed we nearly couldn’t get to them. Did she think her technology would last forever?’ An’ Lawrence interrupted.

‘She hoped our magic would, and it did.’ Kreshkali read on: ‘The re-boot sequence for the juxta-quantum-arranged RAD RAM operating determinant is laid out below. Realise it has never been done before—these are conceptualised, untried notions that so far operate in theory only. If you’re reading this, it’s about to be put to the
test. I wish I were there to see the results.

‘I’m the only one who has successfully linked with the quantum computers thus far, though that was easy enough once the nano-devices were in place. For you it is a matter of re-visualising the unlocking of the quantum keys. Below is the image you’ll need to focus on and the mantra that will take you to a theta brainwave cycle. I trust you meditate regularly? If you are going to do this, be aware of the inherent risks. I don’t know what will happen to your consciousness when the JARROD comes back online.’

‘What does she mean—comes online?’ An’ Lawrence asked. ‘And, computers?’

‘It does sound like she’d made more than one. I think she means when the spell is activated, when the backup CPU is engaged, Jarrod effectively boots up on the spot.’

‘On the spot?’

‘In the body.’

‘You mean in Rosette’s body?’

She nodded, pinching the notes in her hand, reading the rest of the translation. ‘This is a labour of love, my daughter. A sacrifice. You’re giving up your body for JARROD. When you make the decision to do this, there is no going back.’

‘What?’ An’ Lawrence said. ‘You’re saying Grayson’s right? To recover Jarrod we lose Rosette?’

She let the page slide from her hand. ‘If I’d known this, I would not have passed the spell on.’

‘You had to,’ he said, his voice flat.

‘Eventually, of course, but I could have carried it longer. I could have found another way to hide from the trackers.’ He reached for her hand but it was too late. She was out of her chair. ‘I could have hung onto it and then this would be my sacrifice, not Rosette’s.’

‘But you didn’t.’

Kreshkali shuffled the notes together and folded them into her grimoire. ‘True.’

‘I thought it might be like this,’ Grayson said, his eyes red. ‘The process itself seems painless…’

She turned on him. ‘The absence of pain is not what I’m concerned about in this instance.’

‘I just meant…’

‘We can’t risk it while she’s pregnant, in any case.’ Kreshkali looked out the window as she spoke. ‘There is no knowing how the boot-up would affect the pregnancy. That baby girl’s been through enough already.’

‘But we need Jarrod now,’ Grayson said. ‘Earth is unstable. He’s the only one who can calculate the probabilities, and we need those probabilities to decide whether to evacuate or not, or if there is anything we can do to stop the turbulence. He can determine what is causing it, effect a cure, if there is one. It’s what he was built for. We need him to answer the calls to the many-worlds. The integrity of the portals depends on him. The entire…’

‘Stop.’ She straightened. ‘I know what he is needed for.’ Her eyes narrowed on him. ‘I’m glad you can be so practical, Grayson.’

‘Kali, I meant…’

‘I know what you meant. Our family line exists to protect and sustain Jarrod and so do you.’ She went to the closest row of books and tucked her grimoire in a tiny gap between two novels. It vanished as she passed her hand over the spine, blending into the hundreds of books around it. ‘But Rosette is not going to activate that spell. Not yet. Not if she doesn’t have to.’

An’ Lawrence stood, making to follow as she headed for the door. ‘Where are you going?’

‘To trade places with an old friend.’

‘Nellion?’ An’ Lawrence asked.

She didn’t miss the hint of longing in his voice. ‘I need to get Rosette out of here. It’s time she nested in Dumarka and Nell is the one to see to her there.’

‘Where is Nell?’

Kreshkali gave a small smile. ‘She’s watching Makee, but that’s a better task for me now.’

‘Makee?’

Kreshkali frowned at the Sword Master. ‘Your friend that you felt so compelled to free from the Corsanon tower knows what happened to Jarrod. Most likely caused it, if my guess is right. It’s time I tracked her down.’

‘Makee knows?’ An’ Lawrence said, screwing up his face.

‘So she claims. He was her bargaining chip, or her bluff. I don’t know which.’ She lowered her voice. ‘I wish I’d cut that witch’s throat while I had the chance.’

‘What’s Makee got to do with this?’ Grayson asked. ‘I thought she was making her own escape back in the quarry steps portal.’

‘It was more than that.’

They both stared at Kreshkali. She avoided their eyes, turning her gaze to the window. Teg? Are you about?
We’re cresting the plateau ridge. It’s hot as demon’s fire out here, and the shakers are getting worse.
Can you see the mountains?
Aye. Smoking like a festival fire.
Rosette?
She and Drayco are chasing rabbits. She’s happier now.
I’m coming.
Is everything all right, Mistress?
It always is, with a great enough perspective. Meet me at the gates.
Kreshkali turned back to the men and nodded, leaving the library. They didn’t follow. She knew the look she
gave them would keep them in their seats.
Are we going somewhere, Mistress?
We are. And, Teg, you’ll need your sword and a warm cloak.

Rosette saw it coming. The storm gathering around Kreshkali couldn’t be missed, even before she landed.
What’s happened? she asked Teg. Did she translate the notes?
He shifted from his Lupin form and waited for their mentor, his arm outstretched, his hair whipping about his
face as she back-winged onto his forearm. ‘I’m not certain.’
Rosette didn’t morph. The heat was too much, and her pregnancy too uncomfortable to bear in human guise—
not out here on these baking red plains and smoke-filled sky. As a wolf, it was tolerable, pleasurable even, though
her tongue lolled, as did Fynn’s.
Drayco panted next to her as well. Judging by her aura, Maudi, I’d say she’s not in a good-feeling place.
I agree.
They stood near Teg, waiting for her to morph.
‘Back to Temple Los Loma!’ she said before she’d fully shifted. The shape of the black falcon scattered in a
twisting dust devil and Rosette shut her eyes against the soundless shock wave that rushed by her face.
Did you decipher the notes? Rosette asked. Can I bring Jarrod back now?
‘That’s not going to happen. Not yet.’ She held out her hand to stop the replies. ‘Teg, you’re coming with me.
And you!’ She turned to Rosette. ‘You’re going back to your rooms at the temple where you and Drayco will wait
quietly for Nellion to collect you.’
Nellion? Is she coming? Her tail fanned. What’s happening?
‘The only happening you need to think about is your baby girl and the only place you’ll be contemplating that,
and writing your apprentice dissertation I might add, is Nell’s cottage in the Dumarkian Woods. There you will stay
put, with your mentor, until further word. Is there any part of those instructions you feel uncertain about?’
Rosette sat on her haunches, careful not to bristle. It’s perfectly clear.
Like crystals, Drayco added.
Fynn barked.
‘Not you, little one.’ Her voice softened when she turned to the dog. ‘You’ll stay here, with Hotha.’
His tail wagged and he took off, running towards the temple grounds.
‘At least one of you listens.’ She faced her pupils. ‘Teg, go pack and meet me by the entrance gates. Rosette,
Nell will be here for you by midnight. You are not to budge from your room until then. Do I have to put a
restraining spell on you?’
Certainly not.
‘Good.’ Kreshkali knelt to the ground and in one smooth motion she launched into the sky. It was like she
jumped out of her body, leaving it behind to scatter in the wind, a black falcon rising from the dispersing particles,
shooting towards the east.
Rosette growled.
I think Dumarka will be perfect this time of year, Maudi. Good for a whelping.
She licked her chops. You’re right, Drayco. But she could have told me what the notes said. I’ve a right to
know. The spell’s in my blood. I should have been there when she deciphered them.
Should?’ Teg lifted his eyebrows.
Rosette snapped her jaw shut and trotted down the slope, leading them back to the temple grounds. She felt a
chuckle rising up from her belly. There’s a bit of good news there, don’t you think?
What’s that, Maudi?
She said I was to finish my apprentice dissertation. That means I’m still in line to pass, and become a High
Priestess by the solstice. She looked over at Teg, trotting in his Lupin form beside her. You too, Teg. She hasn’t
disowned either of us. She knew that under his wolf skin, he was beaming a smile.
Her enthusiasm faded when she was back in her rooms. ‘When did she say Nell would arrive?’

Don’t you remember, Maudi?
She tickled his spine when he walked past. ‘If I did, I wouldn’t have just asked.’

Midnight. He pressed his head into her thigh. What’s going on in your Twin mind? It feels like a storm at sea.
‘Nothing. What do you mean?’

You have that look.
‘What look?’ She rubbed her face. ‘There’s no look.’

When he turned away, she pounced on him, rolling to the floor where he flipped her over, his massive paw pressing her into the carpet.
‘Tio! Dray, Tio! I give up!’ She giggled, pushing him aside. It took her some time to get to her feet. ‘Okay. There is a look. I can’t stand it any more, Drayco. I have to find out what was in those notes.’

Dangerous business, Maudi.

All the more reason for me to know what we’re up against. Jarrod’s lost, though we didn’t have long in Corsanon to look before that shocking spell snapped me back. But we would have heard a trace of him if he’d been there. Don’t you think?

If he’d been in Corsanon, you both would have been drawn to each other. Even when you didn’t hear from him all those years, before you knew who he was, there was a sense of his existence, every day.

‘Jarrod was always there.’ She didn’t allow the tears. ‘I don’t have that feeling any more, Drayco. In Corsanon it was so faint, and I don’t know if it was a memory or a longing or a hallucination.’ She shook her head. ‘They called me before I could be sure!’

I was there, Maudi. He didn’t answer me either. Then you vanished and I raged.

She frowned at her familiar. ‘What did you just say?’

Maudi, your attention span is getting shorter by the moment.
‘Just say it again, sweetheart.’

Which part? Jarrod didn’t answer. You vanished; I raged?

‘I vanished because they called me.’ She drummed her fingers on her chin. ‘They called me.’

Now you’re repeating yourself. Please tell me it’s intentional.

She laughed. ‘That’s the one thing we haven’t tried! We haven’t done a calling on him.’

I thought you said it was a horrific experience you wouldn’t wish on an enemy let alone a friend.

‘Did I say that?’

Precisely that.

She pushed him off balance with her bare foot and he spun on her, playfully slapping her shoulder with a sheathed paw. ‘But, Drayco, listen! A calling is exactly what we need to do.’

Correct me on this, but if the calling fails to bring Jarrod to us, don’t we go to him? What if he’s a billion tiny molecules spread across the galaxy? It would make it difficult to continue our quest, in such a state.

‘Good point.’ She didn’t speak for some time. ‘We can call the translated notes. They are here. Kreshkali wouldn’t destroy them after what we went through to find them in the first place.’

And then?

‘We read the message from Janis Richter and activate the spell. We bring Jarrod back, if we can.’ She sat up, her eyes locking onto Drayco’s. ‘Let’s find the transcripts first. We don’t have much time.’

Maudi? Do we dare?

We dare! She sent the answer directly to his mind, tuning into her surroundings, shielding her thoughts.

Kreshkali and Teg are gone. An’ Lawrence is asleep, finally. Grayson’s in his workshop and the library is empty.

Hotha?

Can’t tell. Not in the library.

You think the transcriptions are still there?

I do, and most likely inside her grimoire.

Are you certain?

There’s a quick way to find out without risk.

A horary chart?

That’s the one. Mark the time.

You best do that, Maudi.

Done. The question is, Where is Kreshkali’s grimoire, and the transcription of Janis Richter’s notes? She grabbed her compass and opened the door wide enough to look both ways. The hall was deserted and she and
Drayco slipped down the stairs, silently making their way to the library.

Why so much stealth, Maudi? You’re actually crouching, which I wouldn’t think possible in your condition.

I’m about to do a horary chart to find Kreshkali’s grimoire. Worth a crouch, don’t you think?

Perhaps. Or we are simply going to the library for a read, to create natal charts for speculated birth times? It might seem plausible and attract less attention.

Good thought, Drayco. She straightened and relaxed her stride. I’m feeling guilty, is all.

In this case, Maudi, there is ample cause.

Teg loped up the hillside, tracking Kreshkali high above. She let out a long slow whistle and darted into the cover of the trees.

They’re headed right for you, Teg. Twenty strong, with five hundred more on foot to follow.

It seems La Makee was unable to stop the wars after all.

I’m starting to think she never intended to.

Mistress?

She delayed them. And Jarrod’s loss led to the calling that unleashed Drayco’s rage…

Makee planned all that?

She might have.

Ingenious, but why?

I’m not sure yet.

Do we warn Temple Dumarka?

I imagine they would hear this lot coming already with the noise they’re making. This is a diversion, Teg.

From what?

From whatever that demon witch is up to. Makee wants us focused on Corsanon’s movements and not hers.

Then we’d better find her. Teg stopped in a clearing.

Get out of sight, Teg. Now! There’s a lad on a grey mare about to spot you.

Teg darted into the tree cover and froze, watching the scouts pass. He startled, recognising the rider. He’d been on the side of the road, handling a black horse the day he and Rosette drove past in the carriage. Was it only two days ago? He backed further into the shrubs, his eyes shifting behind the leafy cover. A second later he turned and bolted. The lad was heading his way.

Keep hidden, and make your way to the lower Prieta portal. Get back to Temple Los Loma and let An’ Lawrence know what’s going on. We might have a war on our hands before sunrise.

Yes, Mistress. And you?

I’m going on to Dumarka. Time to visit the High Priestess there.

What about Makee?

Nell’s going to have to stay on that.

But she’s on her way to Los Loma, to Rosette.

She won’t be gone long.

The library lights were on but no one else was about. Rosette closed the door and turned on the computer and a small table lamp. The vastness of the room shrank, the warm glow of the lamp making Drayco’s eyes shine. She used the computer program to create the horary chart, marvelling how the click of a few buttons calculated the position of the planets in seconds, a process that used to take her up to an hour using longhand maths and logarithms.

Is it readable, Maudi?

‘Checking.’ She tapped her lips. ‘There are enough degrees on the ascendant, the moon is not void of course, and yes, Saturn’s clear of the seventh and first houses. We’re good.’

And the location?

She studied the chart, a smile crossing her face. ‘The moon rules the second house of possessions and it’s angular in the tenth.’

Interpret?

‘That means Kreshkali’s grimoire is where it belongs or where she worked with it last.’

Here in the library?

‘Exactly.’

Or by her bed.

‘I hope not.’

What else does it say?
‘The moon is intercepted, in a sign with no house cusps, no doors. That means the grimoire has either fallen
behind something or she’s put a glamour on it. Concealed it. We need more light.’

I’m guessing Kreshkali wouldn’t be so careless as to let it fall anywhere.

‘It’s a glamour, of course, and it has to be here. She wouldn’t have had time to take it to her rooms. She came
straight to us after translating the notes.’ Rosette flipped open the compass.

Do we have a direction?

‘We do. The tenth house means the south room, confirming the library. The moon in Pisces indicates the north-
by-west wall and water signs denote lower levels.’ She looked up at the two-storey shelves. ‘I’m very glad of that.
Help me, Drayco. Look for a shimmer when I brush past.’

The northwest wall of the library held thousands of books but Drayco spotted the ripple in the glamour as she
swept her hand over the lowest shelf. Rosette chuckled.

Something humorous?

‘It’s ironic, Dray. It would have taken us a lot longer to find if there’d been no glamour at all.’ She hesitated,
her fingertips tingling.

Second thoughts.

‘Not any more.’ She plucked the book from the shelf, not expecting it to sting her, and it didn’t. Sitting on the
floor, her legs stretched out, Rosette held Kreshkali’s grimoire in her lap. ‘Watch the door for me, Dray. I’m going
to have a look.’ She took a deep breath and opened the book.

Nellion smiled as the melodies drifted towards her. She rode the thermals downward, swooping in low to catch a
glimpse of the musicians between the treetops. Shane stood near the temple ruins, tapping his foot and playing the
flute. The sweet sound, like a bird song, filled the woods. Sitting on a stump nearby was Clay. He played guitar in a
driving rhythm, his red hair jouncing as his head rocked in time to the beat. That was an enigma—finding the lad in
Corsanon. And not their Corsanon by the look of it, yet still in their time. The paradoxes were bumping into each
other so fast she knew it was more than random.

Makee had to be playing at this, a step ahead, and Nell wanted to enlist these young men to keep an eye on her,
at least here in this Gaela. She landed on the bough of a tall redwood, flapping and hopping her way down the
branches until she was nearly on the ground. She took a final jump, shifting back into human form as her bare feet
touched the ground. Adjusting the glamour of her cloak, she headed towards the music.

Shane took a breath, about to play another refrain, when he lowered his flute. He gave Clay a tap, his eyes

‘That’s delightful,’ she said, clapping her hands. When neither spoke, she went on. ‘I don’t suppose you
recognise me, do you?’

They shook their heads.

‘You feel familiar,’ Shane said. He took his flute apart and slipped it into his pack. ‘Where did you come
from?’

‘Not the portal, if that’s what you’re asking.’ She sat on a log and smiled. ‘How would you bards like a job?’

‘What did you have in mind?’ Clay asked.

Shane crossed his arms but didn’t speak. Instead he looked down towards the temple ruins where Shaea had
gone.

‘She’s got tasks of her own,’ Nell said, following his line of sight. ‘Her mentor’s about to collect her.
Meanwhile, I can offer you good food, a warm bed and all the music you can play.’

‘Where?’ Clay asked.

‘Treeon Temple. Heard of it?’

They had.

‘And what do you want in return, witch? You haven’t even told us your name.’

‘Haven’t I? Let’s just say I’m working with Kreshkali and we need a few extra eyes.’

‘Eyes?’

‘I want you to go to Treeon Temple and keep watch on La Makee. Follow her if she journeys. There’s plenty of
gold to make it worthwhile.’

‘The High Priestess? From the portal?’ Clay asked. ‘You want us to track her?’

‘That’s the one. If you report her doings, I would be most grateful, and it will help Rosette and Jarrod.’

‘Rosette,’ Clay said. ‘The beautiful witch who swore she knew me? Where is she?’

‘I’m about to meet her.’ Nell stood. ‘What will it be, boys? Play your tunes at Treeon and keep me informed?’

‘Or…’ Shane asked.

‘Wander wherever the Entity sees fit to land you, I’d say.’ She glanced at the sky. ‘Or stay here and be
pummelled by the gathering storm.’

‘Storm?’ Shane looked skyward. ‘Treeon’s exclusive. How will you get us in?’

She winked. ‘It’s already done.’

Clay slung his guitar over his back and stood. ‘I’m keen.’

Shane gave a curt nod.

‘Done then,’ Nell said. ‘This way. I don’t want you to be late.’

She guided them into the portal, visualising Treeon in the early morning light as her hand passed over the plasma Entity. ‘You won’t regret your choice.’

Rosette closed the book and placed it back on the shelf.

_Maudi? I’m not comfortable with this._

‘I am, sweetheart. And remember. I’ve been body-dead before. It didn’t sever our connection. We are bonded always. I trust that.’

_I trust it too, but there were aspects of being a disembodied spirit that didn’t sit well._

‘That’s because we were worried about losing Jarrod’s backup.’

_I remember you being worried about a fair bit more than that._

‘But I’m not now. We need Jarrod, and if anything goes wrong, Nell’s on her way. The weapon calling didn’t bring anything of his, not a sword or a knife. Just this broken arrow.’

She had woven an attribute calling spell like the one she found in Kreshkali’s grimoire. It posed little risk, unless Jarrod had been in the middle of a sword fight. The spell would bring his weapons or accoutrements in exchange for the one she offered—a master sword from twelfth-century Earth on display in the library. She'd attached a note but it hadn’t made an exchange. The only thing that appeared was the short end of a broken arrow.

_It doesn’t smell of Jarrod, Maudi. Why would a random arrow come when you called Jarrod’s sword?_

‘I don’t know, though I doubt it is random.’ She sighed. ‘Activating the CPU is the only way to get him back. I’m sure of it now. Come, let’s awaken the spell. I’ll step aside, he’ll have my body, and if all goes well he can birth the baby too. I’m certain that’s an experience he wouldn’t want to miss.’

*But you do?*

She smiled, rubbing her belly. ‘I don’t mind.’

You make it sound simple, Maudi.

‘It is!’ She wasn’t frightened. ‘He’ll have a tulpa body again in no time, Drayco. And then I can have this one back.’

Best do it quickly, Nell will come soon.

‘I’m ready.’

I love you, Maudi.

She buried her face in his neck. ‘I love you too.’

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and repeated the mantra. Her brainwave cycles slowed as she drifted out of her everyday consciousness and into a meditative state. Reality slipped away. She visualised her circulatory system, amplifying the view until the cells became enormous features of her inner landscape. She pushed her awareness through the nearest cell membrane and made her way to the nucleus. The chromosomes were like long gaping eels, floating in an endless sea. She dove into the mouth of the nearest one, kicking hard past the teeth, over the tongue and down the throat. It was a huge tunnel and down she went, following the track as it wound deeper into the strands of DNA. At each base pair molecule she looked for the nano-device imaged in the grimoire, Jarrod’s CPU, but each base pair was empty. She checked over miles of them one by one, swimming by each ladder rung. There were plenty of quantum devices around, but none of them resembled the backup CPU.

_Are you seeing this, Drayco?_

I see what you see, Maudi. Nothing matches the images in the book. Not even close. Some interesting technology, though.

At the nitrogenous base pair she found a nano-device with a plasma screen much like the portal Entity’s. She passed her hand over it and saw duplicate DNA, a mirror of her own only there were more pairs. They were vibrating too fast to count properly, but there definitely were more of them, and…different. She wished she had time to investigate. The **CPU isn’t here**, Drayco. The spell is gone!

Maybe it is smaller than we thought, or in a different form?

Possible. I’ll envisage the activation anyway. See what happens. She pulled back from the depths of the cell structure, out of the mouth of the eel and back into a quiet place in her heart. There she was lulled by the rhythm of blood rushing in and out, and air filling and receding from her lungs. She pictured the CPU, the boot-up sequence and the experience of Jarrod’s quantum sentient coming back online. After some time, she opened her eyes.
Maudi? It’s still you.
‘It didn’t work.’ Her guts tightened. ‘The spell is gone.’ She pulled herself up and headed for the door.
‘Where’s Grayson?’
Grayson?
‘He’s the only one I know who understands this. Where is he?’
Workshop. But, Maudi, how could the spell be missing?
‘That’s what we’re going to find out.’
CHAPTER 15
TEMPLE LOS LOMA & BORDERLANDS, EARTH &; PRIETA FOOTHILLS & DUMARKIAN WOODS, GAELA

The knocking was urgent, jolting Grayson from his thoughts. He knew it was Rosette. The sound of her bare feet, along with Drayco’s, gave it away. His stomach rumbled. Was she coming to press him for news of the notes? He’d already told her what it might mean to activate the backup CPU but now they knew for certain. What would he say? Kali had sworn him to silence. She wanted Rosette in Dumarka with Nell, safe until the baby came. The baby…He closed his journal. ‘Enter,’ he said, turning towards the door.

Where was Nell, anyway? He was curious to meet her, and he had hoped she would arrive before he faced Rosette and her questions. Maybe she had, and Rosette was simply coming to say goodbye. Goodbye? He hadn’t even had a chance to say hello. He schooled his thoughts, ready to tell her what he was feeling, ready to ask if he could accompany her to Dumarka. He took a deep breath and smiled, opening his arms.

Rosette stormed into the room. ‘It’s gone!’ She slapped her palm on the bench. Drayco growled at her side, his tail lashing.

Grayson had never noticed her resemblance to Kreshkali—not until now. Her eyes were on fire, her cheeks red. His smile evaporated and he took a step back. ‘What’s gone, Rosette?’

‘The spell is gone. Vanished! It’s not in my DNA.’

‘You can’t know that.’

‘I can and I do.’

‘Impossible. The CPU is encoded. It can’t disappear.’ He took her hand, guiding her towards a seat.

She pulled loose, bristling. ‘I’m telling you it’s gone. There’s no spell in my blood to activate.’

‘There has to be.’

She planted her hands on the back of the chair. ‘Really? There has to be? Funny, because I tried and nothing happened.’

The blood drained from Grayson’s face. ‘You tried to activate the spell? How could you know what to do?’

‘It’s simple really. I think I could have done it without the translated notes but it’s not there, so it doesn’t matter. Jarrod is gone—as far as I can see, forever.’ She was panting between her outbursts. Drayco jumped up onto the bench and snarled, knocking over inks and needles.

‘Drayco, easy. Please. Deep breaths, the both of you.’ He nudged the temple cat down and sent soothing energy to them both, righting his ink bottles, straightening papers.

Slowly Rosette’s hands opened, and she let out a sob. ‘He’s gone, Grayson. He’s gone.’ Tears ran down her cheeks. ‘Jarrod is gone.’

He took her into his arms and this time she didn’t pull back. He brushed his lips over her ear, whispering, ‘You can’t be certain.’

‘The CPU is gone, Grayson. It’s not there.’

‘You looked at the notes?’

‘I did and Drayco and I did a calling too.’

‘You what?’ He held her at arm’s length.

‘Just a weapons calling. I had to be sure he wasn’t wandering around with amnesia, or dispirited. But nothing came. Nothing but a broken arrow that had never been in his tulpa anyway. He’s not there, in Corsanon. I’m sure of that now.’

Grayson held her close again and she sobbed.

‘I found the notes and did the ritual, only nothing happened. I couldn’t visualise Passillo.’

He exhaled, releasing her, though she lingered, her body leaning against his. ‘Rosette, that can only mean one thing.’ He searched her face, hoping he was somehow wrong, knowing he was not.

‘What?’

‘It means you never actually had it.’

‘But I did.’

He nodded, sitting down and offering her the seat beside him. She took it. He rubbed his temples. ‘You had it when you were in Cryo. I saw the slides myself.’

‘Could Everett have done something? Could he have taken it?’

‘I don’t see how, but I couldn’t get him to come with me to Los Loma. He was paranoid.’

‘You said.’ Rosette looked out the window into the dark.
‘It’s nearly midnight. Nell will be here soon and she might have some answers.’ He cleared his throat. ‘Rosette, we haven’t had time to talk.’

‘About?’

‘About us.’

She lifted her head. The look in her eyes made him wince. ‘We did, Grayson. You said you couldn’t handle the uncertainty of relating to me. Perfectly understandable. I’m fine with it.’ She stiffened. ‘Why bring it up now? There are much more important things to consider.’

‘Not more important to me.’ Immediately he wished he hadn’t said that, but it was too late. He hurried on. ‘I didn’t know you were pregnant, Rosette.’

‘That only makes things more uncertain, Gray, not less. Anyway, our relationship isn’t about the obligation you felt when you heard I was pregnant. We are friends. I’m glad of it. But right now it’s your knowledge I need.’

‘Sweetheart, please listen to me. When I realised you were pregnant I felt…’

He was cut short by the sound of boots clipping down the hall. Rosette pushed out of her chair.

‘Nell!’ she said, opening her arms.

Drayco bounded out of the room only to return immediately with Nellion Paree. Rosette raced to the door, embracing her mentor, her mother, tears flowing down her face. ‘I’m so glad you’re here.’

‘Me too, my darling, though it’s not like I was ever gone. You’ve had Kreshkali. You know we are one and the same.’

‘You are one, but not the same, Nell.’

Grayson stood, waiting to be introduced. ‘I’ve heard so much about you, Nellion Paree.’ He reached out his hand and she drew him into a warm embrace.

‘Are you coming to the Dumarkian Woods with us then?’ she asked, looking first at Grayson and then Rosette.

‘Nell. We have to talk. Something’s happened.’ Rosette waved the query aside.

Grayson sank back to the bench.

Nell felt Rosette’s swollen belly and checked her pulse. ‘Indeed, though you’re not ready yet. This baby girl wants to be born in Dumarka and no doubt under the Water-bearer’s moon, like her mother.’

Rosette smiled. ‘I think so too. But it’s not that, Nell. It’s not the baby. She’s fine.’

‘What then?’

‘It’s the spell.’

Nell’s eyebrows went up.

‘It seems it’s gone, Nellion,’ Grayson said. ‘As if it never was.’

Nell stepped closer to Rosette. ‘How do you know?’ she asked, her voice low and potent.

Rosette closed her eyes, swallowing. ‘I looked in your…rather in Kreshkali’s grimoire. I read the transcription notes.’

‘You read the notes? In my grimoire?’ Nellion’s voice cut through the workshop, sending the rows of coloured inks jumping on the shelves.

‘I knew that would be the more upsetting news,’ she whispered.

Grayson noticed the perspiration on Rosette’s forehead. He started to speak but a tilt of Nellion’s head silenced him.

‘You activated the spell?’ Her voice rang like a town bell.

Rosette covered her ears. ‘I tried to activate the spell. It was my risk and I was willing to take it. It’s not like I haven’t been dead before. But it doesn’t matter. Nothing happened. The CPU is gone, the base molecules are empty.’

Nell looked at Drayco. ‘And you were in on this?’

The temple cat stared back, unblinking.

‘Where’s An’ Lawrence?’ she shouted.

‘Sleeping.’

‘Wake him up!’ Nell clapped her hands. ‘Get to the kitchens, now! I want coffee, a strong pot, and something sustaining. We’ve much to consider.’ She eyed her daughter. ‘And you have a fair bit more explaining to do.’ Nell stormed out of the room, leaving a palpable wake behind her.

‘We’ll meet you there,’ Rosette called out, her hands clasped behind her back.

Grayson looked at her. ‘So that’s Nell?’

Rosette nodded.

‘Not so different from Kali after all, I guess.’

‘Not tonight.’ She shook her head and followed Nell to the kitchens.
Xane shaded his eyes, scanning the woods. He felt a presence there, though he couldn’t spot it. As he concentrated, the scene in front of him changed, the blurred outlines coming into sharp focus and the colour shifting to red. There it was—a wolf peering from behind a tree. It was watching him! Xane’s horse shied, more a response to his excitement than from the sight or scent of the creature. They were upwind and the wolf a long way off. Xane rubbed his neck, feeling the scab. It was confounding, spotting the creature—possibly the same wolf that ran with the temple cat. He was also disturbed by his inexplicable vision. He didn’t understand it but if it was real and not illusion, he had to consider it a boon.

If that’s what it takes, getting shot in the neck with a hemlock-dipped arrow, to wake up my magic, then I’ve no regrets.

He urged the mare forward, turning off the road and entering the woods. His eyesight remained infused with the strange red-shifted colours, a grid mapped over the top of everything. It was some spell, this vision enhancement. As he honed in, the wolf disappeared, vanishing into the thick tree cover. Xane frowned, realising he was calculating streams of numbers—the variables of direction the animal might take, based on an infinite number of possibilities within a 360-degree radius, each degree endlessly divided in half.

He stopped his horse. Infinite? I don’t even understand what that means. ‘Come on, Rose. He’s gone. Nothing to fear,’ Xane said, about to turn around. ‘But we best let Willem know.’ He hesitated. There was something compelling about the wolf that made him want to follow. He looked over his shoulder. The scouts had moved on, fanning out around the foothills of the eastern Prieta Mountains, leading the way for the foot soldiers. ‘I guess it wouldn’t hurt to track him a bit, would it, Rose? After all, we’re here to report as much as we can. No sense going back saying I think I saw a wolf and it might be like the one at the gates.’

He smiled and his vision returned to normal as he headed deeper into the woods. He didn’t know what kind of magic was going on in his head, but he was learning how to turn it on and off. He searched for tracks but found none. It must have been imagination after all. It must have been imagination after all.

Rosette refilled the coffee cups, pouring ginger and mint tea for herself. She propped her elbows on the table, holding the mug under her chin, pungent steam warming her face. An’ Lawrence argued with Nell, but it was different from the way he and Kreshkali fought. How can it be, Teg? Kali and Nell are the same person—different glamour—but then again, they are not. Rosette turned to him. Are you finding this strange?

Teg stretched his arms over his head and yawned. She wondered when he last slept. It couldn’t have been recently by the look of him. He leaned towards her, sending his thoughts directly to her mind.

It’s all about viewpoint.

You mean Nell’s is different than Kali’s?

Well it would be, wouldn’t it? Kreshkali stayed on Earth, for the most part, and from what I gather her work was grim, the environment horrible: quite a contrast to the beauty of the Dumarkian Woods and Treeon Temple. Nell had the admiration of all her peers, at least until she nicked off with Passillo. Kreshkali was shunned, under constant threat of death just for being a witch. Her closest confidante betrayed her. Jaynan, was it?

Right, Jaynan…You sure know a lot about it.

We talk. He shifted in his seat. She told me about Jaynan. She turned out to be a tracker. Kreshkali killed her in the end, her best friend. Horrid, really.

I think I get it. Nell and Kreshkali experienced different realities and it’s given them—the same person—different perspectives. Is that what you’re saying, Teg?

I am. It’s like when I take wolf form. I have a kind of meta-awareness that both shapes—man and wolf—house my consciousness. I’m detached enough to know that my point of view has shifted, but I still have two distinct points of view. Don’t you, when you swap with Drayco, or fly off as a falcon? Run as a wolf?

I worry less, that’s for certain.

And think what would happen if you swapped for years, or shifted for years. How different would the two aspects of you become?

‘That makes sense,’ she said aloud.

‘So you’re siding with him, Rosette?’ Nell looked at her, waiting for her response.

I want to congratulate you both on your mind shields. Nell sent the message to Rosette and Teg. I have no idea what you’re prattling on about, but if you can’t stay focused, there’s no point in you being here, is there?

Rosette blew on the rim of her mug and took a sip. ‘Can you repeat the question for me please, Nell? I drifted off, I’m afraid.’

Nell chuckled, levelling her eyes at Teg. ‘And you? Did you drift off too?’

‘I did, Mistress. The coffee will help.’ He took a gulp and blinked his eyes. ‘I’d best have another.’

‘I wish I could have one,’ Rosette whispered.

‘Pregnancy can make you a little vague, sweetie,’ Nell said. ‘How are you feeling?’
‘My legs ache a bit…’
Nell patted her thigh and Rosette offered her bare foot. Nell nested it in her lap, massaging her toes. ‘Shall we recap?’
‘Please,’ Rosette said, though her eyes were closed. Drayco purred.
‘Since Teg’s news of the march, your father’s wanted to join ranks with Temple Dumarka and fight the Corsanons.’
‘Of course, that does make sense,’ Rosette said.
‘You agree?’ The Sword Master’s brow went up.
‘It’s what you did, isn’t it? Fight the Corsanons, but I was thinking it might be the perfect diversion.’
‘Good to have you back with us, Rosette. Diversion for what?’
‘It’s clear to me that Makee, or Rall if that’s who she really is, wants the spell so badly she’s been willing to change events to the point where you never got it, and you never passed it to me. That’s what we suspect, right?’
Nell nodded.
‘So the spell is still in the gorge. Maybe battle would be the perfect diversion. We can slip in there and retrieve it again, before she does.’
‘Makee didn’t stop the wars,’ An’ Lawrence said. ‘She’d planned to delay them long enough to get the spell.’ He drained his mug. ‘That must be why she tipped me off to the Corsanon warriors. She knew if I were captured, it would bring you looking for me, Rosette.’
‘But I was dead at the time. You were looking for a High Priestess.’
‘For all we know, Makee may have put that falconer Jacko in my path,’ Nell said.
‘She saved you, so you could save me, so I could save An’ Lawrence?’ Rosette shook her head. ‘That’s planning. I’m starting to think she’s Virgo rising, not Leo.’ Rosette stiffened. ‘I had to be in the same place and time in order for the spell to be gone from me and still in the gorge.’ She looked up. ‘It’s my fault we lost Jarrod!’
‘It’s no one’s fault, Rosette.’ Nell squeezed her foot. ‘I’m beginning to see just how deeply La Makee has orchestrated this. Corsanon wouldn’t be marching on the Dumarkian Woods if a temple cat hadn’t slaughtered half their gate guards.’
‘Drayco did that because you called Richter’s journal notes and I vanished.’
‘And you called them because Jarrod was lost.’ Teg put down his mug.
‘She wanted Jarrod gone!’ Rosette’s voice rattled the glasses in the hutch. Drayco was up, growling. ‘She destroyed his tulp and whisked us away!’ The temple cat roared and everyone covered their ears.
‘Easy, all of you.’ An’ Lawrence put his hand on Teg’s shoulder.
‘The gorge?’ Rosette said, sitting on the edge of her seat.
‘The spell was buried under leagues of water. I changed the course of five rivers to reveal it.’ Nell closed her eyes and smiled. ‘I’d like to see her pull that off in a hurry.’
‘She’s got the hang of being in two places at once,’ An’ Lawrence said. ‘I didn’t see that coming.’
‘I think she might have shoved Jarrod off the cliff,’ Rosette said. ‘If she wants to activate the spell and bring him back, she must have some powerful reason. I can’t believe I was sucked into her trap.’ She looked at the Sword Master. ‘We actually saved her in the citadel! Both of her!’
‘If this is all her doing,’ Nell said.
‘How would it work, though?’ Teg asked. ‘Would she pose as one from the Richter line?’
‘Can’t be done.’ Nell frowned. ‘In the portal, she said she had someone who could carry it.’
‘You were in the portal with us?’
Nell winked. ‘Kreshkali was.’
Teg scratched his head. ‘Of course.’
‘Someone who can carry it?’ Rosette repeated the words. ‘That can only be one of us.’
They all looked at Grayson. He hadn’t said a word while they debated. His mind seemed far away.
‘Gray.’ Rosette patted his hand. ‘Am I the only living descendant from Earth? Is there a record of the Richter line branching?’
‘If there is, I’ve never seen it, but it’s certainly possible. Janis had two daughters, but we only trace the line back to one. There is something about a rogue Lupin, but I don’t know how that fits in. I’d have to find the reference and study it.’
No one spoke for some time. Even the crickets outside the kitchen window were silent.
‘Who’s watching Makee now?’ Grayson asked.
‘Kreshkali’s tracking the Corsanons and I’ve got Shane and Clay keeping an eye on Treeon and the surrounds.’
‘Do we know where she is at the moment?’
‘Precisely? No.’
An’ Lawrence rose from the table and grabbed his sword. Scylla bounded to the door. The sunrise sent a golden glow through the window as the Three Sisters swooped onto the sill, scolding and flapping, vying for space on the narrow ledge.
‘There are too many unknowns,’ An’ Lawrence said. ‘And we are going to need that diversion to catch Makee out.’ He grabbed his cloak.
‘Where are you headed?’ Nell and Rosette spoke at the same time.
‘To the Dumarkian Woods to protect the temple, as is my charge.’ He tested his wounded leg and gave it a slap.
‘Teg, to me. I want you leading the lower ranks.’
‘You do?’ The Lupin was on his feet as he spoke, a smile lifting his face.
‘Grayson? Your plan?’ The Sword Master turned to him.
‘I think I’d best track down Everett. He’s a missing piece to the puzzle.’
‘But he wouldn’t come with you before,’ Rosette said.
‘I’ll drag him here this time. If he somehow extracted the nanotechnology, we need to know. In any case, there is a clue in the Borderlands. I just have to find it.’
‘Is that where he is?’ Nell asked.
‘I’d say so.’ He turned to Rosette, his eyes soft. ‘Be well.’
‘Come to the cottage when you’ve found him, or found your puzzle piece,’ she said.
He nodded and left, Rosette following him with her eyes. We didn’t have that talk, Grayson.
He can’t hear you, Maudi.
I know, but when he could hear me, I didn’t speak.
There will be another chance.
Will there?
An’ Lawrence clapped his hands. ‘Teg, I want everyone on the training ground inside the hour.’
‘Yes, Sword Master.’
An’ Lawrence disappeared down the hall only to come shooting back. He kissed Rosette’s forehead and her belly and turned to Nell, kissing her deeply. ‘We’ll change the course of those rivers again, if we have to,’ he said, and was gone.
Teg embraced Nell, kissing each cheek and her lips. He did the same to Rosette.
‘There’s only one thing that worries me,’ Teg said as he followed An’ Lawrence out.
‘What’s that, Teg?’
‘Temple Dumarka fell. It’s in the history books.’
‘And?’
‘And no one survived.’
Rosette turned to Nell. ‘No one survived, did they?’
Not ‘no one’, Maudi. I’m here. I am of that line.
The temple cats endured, Rosette, but Makee is playing at something well beyond her knowledge.’
Rosette eyed her mother. ‘You have that look.’
‘What look?’
‘You’re going to chat with the Watcher, aren’t you?’
‘I am, just as soon as I have you settled. I can’t say when that baby’s coming, Rosette, but it’s time you nested.’
‘I feel that too.’
‘Really?’
Really, Maudi?
‘Why are you both so surprised? Did you think I would resist this pregnancy forever?’
‘It was looking that way,’ Nell said. She smiled. ‘Come. To Dumarka, our time, our cottage. I’ll see you there and then pay a visit to the Watcher. Have you thought of a name?’
‘For her?’ Rosette patted her belly. ‘Not yet.’
‘All the more reason to nest.’ She stood. ‘To the cottage.’

Shaea startled when the Entity called. She nearly lost her footing on the mossy rocks. ‘Entity?’
Who else would it be?
She shrugged. It sounded like the Entity. Besides, there was no one else around. The bards certainly didn’t have the trick of mind speech.
Stop nattering and get back to the portal, girl. We have work to do.
‘What work?’
_I want you to report to Rall. She’s your mentor now._

‘My mentor?’ Shaea tapped her walking stick on the ground. The breeze turned cold. ‘I have no mentor.’

_If you want to travel the corridors, you need to learn the witches’ ways. Did you think I would let you run loose in the halls of the many-worlds like a child in her parents’ manor? I’m not. To the portal with you. To Rall. You will do as she says._

Shaea threw the stick in the stream and crossed her arms. ‘What if I say no? I could live here, in these beautiful woods. I don’t need to ever go another step.’ She planted her feet wide, staring in the direction of the portal. The sun disappeared behind clouds and her damp hair whipped about her face. Thunder rumbled on the horizon.

_Are you prepared to go the way of your brother?_

‘How do you know about him?’ she asked, shivering.

_How do I not?_

Lightning zipped overhead, followed by a crackling boom. A sudden squall dumped buckets of rain, soaking her to the skin. Shaea sprinted up the path, climbing the steps to the portal. She grabbed her coat and pack, looking for the bards. There was no sign of them as she scurried into the corridors, rushing past the plasma Entity and turning around. She pressed her back against the wall.

‘There you are,’ Rall said. She pushed wet curls from her face. ‘I’ve been looking for you.’ Her cloak was saturated but she brushed her shoulders as if there was only a light dew.

‘Well you found me,’ Shaea said, frowning. ‘And I’m guessing you had help?’

‘Why, darling girl, what do you mean? Come with me, will you? I’ve a place near Treeon Temple where we can get dry and share a meal.’

‘Treeon Temple?’

‘You don’t know your way around these parts, do you? I can help with that too.’

_‘I know the names of the temples. I know that one anyway.’_

_‘Of course you do.’ Rall passed her hand over the plasma Entity, jerking it back as if it stung. A whirl of lights raced across the entrance. Shaea closed her eyes, rubbing her head. She wondered about Clay and Shane but felt it best not to ask where they had gone. Wherever it was, they hadn’t waited for her. When the portal cleared, she followed Rall, glancing at the glowing purple strands of the Entity. ‘You’ve gone silent?’ she whispered._

_‘What’s that, child?’_

Shaea cleared her throat. _‘It’s dark here, I said. How can it be night already?’_ She waited for her eyes to adjust to the moonlight.

_Rall didn’t answer her question but strode off into the meadow. ‘We’ve a good way further east to travel tonight. Keep up. The horses are waiting.’_

_‘Horses?’ Shaea hurried after her, wading through the tall grass. She wrung her hair, twisting it into a knot on top of her head, and wiped her hands on her cloak. She kept her eyes on Rall, a black form in the darkness. They climbed to the edge of the valley where trees and shrubs appeared like sentinels, their groping branches warning them back. She hoped they weren’t going to enter the wood. It was darker still._

_‘Where are we?’_

_‘The southeast border of the Cusca Plains.’ Rall winked. ‘Does that help?’_

_‘Not really.’ Shaea followed Rall into the trees._

At least the wind was gone, and it was dry. Stars twinkled between the treetops, the moon high overhead lighting the way. She smelled the horses before she could see them, the warm aroma of alfalfa, leather and dried sweat wafting towards her. When she pushed through the shrubs to a clearing she saw the creatures tethered to a low branch, silhouettes under the dappled moonlight. One was a magnificent warhorse, from fine-bred stock, palomino in colour and perfectly groomed. The other was a Desertwind, a bay with long black legs and a sweet face with a single white star on her forehead.

_You’re gorgeous, the both of you,_

_she said to them, automatically using her mental voice._

_In the streets of Corsanon, she’d had plenty of time to commune with horses. Hitched to wagons or tied outside pubs, they were always around. She sighed. After Xane got the apprenticeship, those horses were her best friends, her only friends. I see you’ve been waiting for us._

_Both animals nickered._

_‘Off to a good start. Excellent,’ Rall said. ‘But can you sit one?’_

_‘I can, Rall.’ Shaea laughed. ‘You know I can! Xane and I used to walk the carriage horses for the pub masters, remember? One leading and one riding. That’s how we got so good at their ways.’_

_‘I remember, and lucky for you. We have a few miles to cover. Mount up.’_

_‘Thank you,’ she whispered, her eyes on the bay mare. Rall kept talking but she was too absorbed to hear the_
Rosette held Nell’s hand as she walked into the early morning light of Temple Los Loma. The air was fresh; a strong breeze was coming up from the south, clearing the ash and smoke. The mountains still plumed in the distance but Temple Los Loma remained untouched. ‘There’s some potent spell on this place, isn’t there, Nell?’

‘There is, and I’ve yet to find the source.’

Rosette closed her eyes. ‘It’s running underneath everything, like the caverns of Los Loma Gaela.’

Nell touched her arm. ‘That’s a thought worth exploring.’

Rosette smiled. ‘Thank you.’

Nell inclined her head towards the entrance gates to the north. ‘Shall we fly?’

‘If we want to get there before noon, I think we must. I’m down to a waddle these days.’

Drayco took off at a run, the Three Sisters above him. I'll meet you there, Maudi. He gave a roar that surprised her. It was answered by Scylla, her screech coming from somewhere behind the training grounds. Horses' heads flew up and the brood mares bolted, foals frisking at their sides. They stampeded to the far end of the paddock.

' Drayco, what's that about?

Just saying goodbye, Maudi.

You've never done it like that before.

I might be gone for some time.

I hope not. Rosette crouched, dipping her head to her chin. She took a deep breath and launched into the air. As her toes left the ground she shifted into a falcon, light, free and soaring. The shock wave scattered leaves across the road and bent the trees lining the driveway. She shot upward, Nell beside her, calling in a high-pitched whistle. Oh, this does feel good. As the wind streamed past, her eyes adjusted to the telescopic vision. I love flying!

She spotted Drayco running below—the top of his back arching, his legs bunched before stretching into a straight line as he extended his paws. Shield, my lovely, she said to him. I've something to discuss and we've only seconds.

I thought our packing off to Dumarka was a little complacent.

She kept her own mind shield tight; Nell was gliding in a thermal above her. I am packing off to Dumarka. I must. I know the baby’s coming soon and really, I need the rest, in that form.

In that form?

Drayco, I discovered something new and I think I can do it. I know I can.

Maudi?

I read the theory of how to be in two places at once. She said the words in a rush before he could interrupt. So the pregnant me is going with Nell to Dumarka but another me is slipping out when we get to the portal and going to track Makee. I’m not letting her get the spell, Drayco, and I can do this. I want to do this.

She swooped lower, bracing for her familiar’s response.

Maudi, must I point out the obvious? You have no experience with the technique. It’s not taught in any of the temples and only a rare few High Priestesses know how to do it.

I realise that, Dray. Also, remember you are not yet a High Priestess.

I haven’t forgotten that either.

Then how can you contemplate it? It’s a brilliant idea, I give you that, but I think the next thirty seconds that it will take us to reach the portal isn’t quite enough time to study and prepare for the ritual, let alone understand it and perform it. Am I missing something, Maudi?

You are. She veered to the right, catching a thermal that lifted her high above her familiar until he was a black speck on the dust-red plains. From that vantage point, she dove.

Best tell me quickly. It’s fifteen seconds away now.

Janis Richter’s notes were not the only thing I read in Kreshkali’s grimoire.

Even from her high vantage point she saw Drayco falter. Maudi, you didn’t… I did. The book itself opened to the exact page.

Really, Dray, it offered it up to me. I had to read on. I know how it’s done and alignment is nine-tenths of it anyway. I’m aligned, Drayco. I can feel it. I want to be in two places at once and I will.

This is going to be hard to explain.

What’s that?

I will be with you in the hunt for Makee, Maudi. There could be a battle. I will go with you there. Not open to discussion.
You can’t, not at first. Listen, sweetie. Here’s what we will do. She broke out of the dive, riding a thermal to the entrance gate as Drayco dropped to a trot. You stay with me and Nell until I’m settled at the cottage, a few hours at the most. When Nell goes to engage the Watcher like I think she plans, you come to the portal. I’ll be there waiting. We’ll track Makee together, ahead of An’ Lawrence and the others.

How will you explain my absence at the cottage?

I’ve got it figured out. Don’t worry.

I am worry-free, Maudi. You know that, though it would be an easier state to maintain if you’d discussed this topic with me sooner.

Rosette back-winged onto the ledge above the portal, shifting to her human form when she landed. Nell had done the same and was already down the embankment, looking up at her. She tightened her mind shield. There wasn’t time, and I didn’t want Nell picking up on it.

She might have agreed.

And she might not have. This is necessary, Dray, and it will work.

Risks?

Best not know them…

Drayco’s tail snapped.

It’s going to be fine. I promise.

He rumbled a purr. If anyone can do it, Maudi, a witch born under the sign of the Twins can.

Thank you, Drayco.

Rosette groaned as she slid down the bank, Nell clasping her hand and keeping her upright as she hit the ground. Drayco came to her side, panting. He pushed his head into her thigh and she buried her hand in his ruff. Nell stared back at Temple Los Loma and together they surveyed the wide expanse, their eyes resting on the mountains, smoking and rumbling as if the Earth would soon erupt. Rosette kept hold of Nell’s hand as the Three Sisters glided into the crevasse behind them. ‘We’ll bring him back, Nell. We’ll find a way to bring Jarrod back, and figure this out. Earth will survive.’ Rosette squeezed her hand.

Nell nodded and led her into the portal.

Here I go, Dray. Here I go! Rosette closed her eyes and let her hand slip from Nell’s. She called in the Elementals, conjuring a spell that would allow her awareness to inhabit two places at once. The force of energy that came startled her, and then it snatched her breath away.

Maudi?

Grayson watched Rosette fly into the clouds, his spine prickling. He never had got used to her ability to shape-shift and seeing her do it only reminded him of how different they were. ‘See you in Dumarka, Rosette,’ he whispered as he shouldered his pack.

She didn’t look back but her high-pitched falcon cry whistled across the wind. He exhaled and headed towards the portal at a slower pace. He wanted to use the time it took to cross the heat-soaked plain to meditate on his destination. The clearer his mind was, the more likely the Entity would take him exactly where he wanted to go. If he could capture the moment perfectly, he would land himself back in the Borderlands the moment Everett returned from Sector Six. He didn’t know how receptive the man would be, especially if he had taken more than DNA samples from Rosette, but there was only one way to find out—confront him. Grayson hoped Everett’s shifting psychological state was up for it.

He stretched his arms over his head and let them fall, allowing the concerns and fears, the building battles and missing pieces, to drop as well. His whole attention zeroed in on the instant he wanted to be, and the reason why. When he entered the portal, he bowed to the Entity, and relaxed. ‘To Everett. In the Borderlands, please.’

When he stepped out of the corridors, he knew he had got part of it right. The air was warm and moist, carrying the fragrance of ginger blossoms and banana sap. Whip birds called with their lash and snap voices, their bodies invisible in the dense forest behind him. The sun baked down from above. It wasn’t the penetrating dry heat of the Temple Los Loma plains, heat that cooked to the bone, but a thick, wet warmth that made it feel like he was breathing steam from a bubbling jam kettle.

He headed for the abandoned Flight Centre, a horde of crows taking off as he emerged from the bush. They shot skyward, squawking and flapping until they resettled in the treetops a bit further away. He found a spot in the shade of a tall palm grove and took off his pack. Nesting it behind his head, he stretched out on the grass and waited.

Grayson watched the comings and goings of the crows, black against the blue sky, and the pecking guinea fowl in their herringbone suits, scratching up dust, searching for seeds near the shed. A lone eagle winged into the valley, riding the thermals high above, scattering the crows and the ground birds. Without realising it, his lids grew heavy, the warmth of the day and the lack of sleep catching up. Of their own accord, his eyes closed and when he popped
them open again, Regina stood above him, tapping his foot with her walking stick.

‘Grayson?’

He scrambled to his feet.

‘I thought that was you,’ she said. ‘Gave me a fright. You looked dead.’

‘Live and well and…’

‘Looking for Everett?’

He nodded.

‘Me too. Perhaps we’ll find him together.’

Regina embraced him, giving him a strong thump on his back and a kiss on both cheeks.

He relaxed, glad to have found her so soon. ‘Has Everett been missing long?’

‘You mean this time?’ she asked. ‘A day. A little more. He’s like a sheep caught in a maze: one moment browsing contentedly on the shrubs, the next bleating and racing into the barriers, desperate to find his way out.’

‘No improvement then,’ Grayson said, giving her hand a squeeze. ‘His memory?’

‘It comes and goes, along with the paranoia and angst. After he saw you last, he seemed to recall more. I think you’re good for him.’ She led him down the path. ‘Come. It will rain soon.’

The clouds, as if on command, raced towards the mountains, covering the sun and billowing into giant thunderheads.

‘Hike it back to the village?’ he asked.

She closed her eyes for a moment, lifting her palms to the wind. A downy feather escaped from her sleeve and disappeared with the breeze. ‘We might as well. That is where he will return to, when he regains his senses.’ She looked over her shoulder at the portal. ‘Unless there was any trace of him that way.’

Grayson shook his head. ‘None.’

‘Come then. Home.’

He shouldered his pack, following her down the path and into the valley.

Grayson was drenched when he reached the village, the cloying heat of the jungle sticking to him like a second skin. Water ran down his back, off his cuffs and into his boots. He blinked the drops out of his eyes and smiled. No matter how uncomfortable he felt, he still found joy in the touch of pure water falling from the sky—no sting, no burn, no acrid smell. He held his hand under the tip of a broad banana leaf and let the water cascade onto his palm. It ran through his fingers. ‘The path of least resistance,’ he said.

Regina smiled. ‘That’s the first step.’

She led the way up the steps to the veranda, ducking under the waterfall sheeting off the roof. Grayson followed, stomping his feet and shaking his wet head. She gave him a brightly coloured sarong and disappeared into the bungalow. When he wiped his eyes clear, he saw Everett standing in the doorway. ‘Everett,’ he said, reaching towards him. ‘I’ve been looking for you.’

‘Do I know you?’

Grayson kept up his smile. ‘You do. We met in Sector Six, and again here, in the Borderlands. How’ve you been?’ He kept his hand out.

Everett shrank back from the gesture. ‘I don’t remember.’

‘Come in,’ Regina said, looking around the door at them. ‘Dry off. Eat.’

Grayson lowered his arm. ‘Thank you. That would be grand.’ He stripped out of his wet clothes and boots, hanging them next to others under the veranda. They wouldn’t dry, not completely, but if a breeze came up they wouldn’t mould either. He wrapped the sarong around his waist and entered to be greeted by the sweet scent of ripe papaya. Regina was seeding the bright orange fruit, slicing it into a large bowl. She squeezed a lemon over the top and put the bowl in the centre of the table. Next to it she placed a long boat of steaming rice and bamboo shoots. Grayson’s mouth watered.

‘Tea?’ she asked, filling mugs with a spicy brew.

‘Please.’ Grayson smiled as he took a seat.

Through the course of the meal, Everett came alive. He talked of his search and of the thief, speaking first in whispers as if they would be overheard but later gaining confidence and volume. Grayson resisted the urge to look at Regina. He could see her in his peripheral vision; her face was placid, her reaction unreadable. She cleared the table and poured more tea.

‘I’ve brought something to show you, Everett.’ Grayson reached in his bag and unzipped a folder. He pulled out a notebook, opening it to a page with quantum computations and images. ‘I’m stuck, actually, on a problem and was hoping you could help.’ He pushed the notes towards Everett and tapped the centre. ‘Does this look right to you?’
Everett studied the page, his hands shaking. ‘Rosette,’ he whispered. ‘Her name was Rosette.’ He looked at Regina. ‘I can remember that.’

She smiled, patting his shoulder. ‘What else?’ Her voice was an invitation, so warm and steady that Grayson thought if he had no words left to say, no memories to uncover, he would surely make something up just to satisfy her. But Everett clearly remembered something. His brow was knitted, his eyes half closed.

‘You remember Rosette…’ Grayson said, leading him to the information he so hoped was there.

‘She died on my table, but they said they could bring her back.’ Everett stared at his hands, the notebook falling from his grip. They trembled until he clamped the mug. When his head came up, he levelled them on Grayson. ‘You said you could bring her back.’

‘We did. She is well and grateful. She sends her best wishes.’

His face softened. ‘Can I see her?’ He played with his ring finger, though it was bare.

‘She’s not here, Everett,’ Regina said. ‘Only the picture.’

Everett’s eyes went back to the page and he scrutinised it again, pinching the corner into a dog’s ear. He studied the equations, his eyes flashing across the images.

‘Everett, I must ask you something.’ Grayson waited for a response, continuing even though there was none.

‘Did you remove this from Rosette?’ He pointed to the diagram of Jarrod’s backup CPU. ‘Extract it from her DNA? To examine it closer, perhaps?’

Everett shivered. ‘She wasn’t like us. She had life in her, more life even in death, more than any at ASSIST, Sector Six. Fecund she was, so I took a chance and removed it. Why let the child die? I didn’t know about the devices. I didn’t have the requisition forms. How could I? She had no ID. We didn’t even know where she was from. But I faked one. I got it, stored it, before I knew.’ He pulled on his earlobe while he talked, his words a stream of thought. ‘Then I saw the slides. The technology was banned. Demon technology. How could she have it? I didn’t know what to do after that. Would it pass on? Did it pass on? I don’t know. The thief came and took the child. Took them both.’ He grabbed his head and rocked back and forth. Regina placed her hand back on his shoulders but he didn’t notice. Suddenly he stiffened, slamming his fists on the table. ‘The thief came and took them before I had a chance to know.’

Grayson swallowed. ‘The thief took them?’

‘One moment they were here and then they were gone.’ Everett drummed the diagram with the palm of his hand. ‘We’ll never know. I wake up and it’s too late. I can’t catch the demon. She’s looking for more, smells for them. I can hear her scratching about the bungalow. I can see her at the edge of my mind trying to worm her way in.’

Everett’s body shook. Sweat dripped into his eyes but he didn’t blink.

‘It’s all right,’ Regina said. ‘The demon’s gone.’

‘Not gone!’ he shouted, knocking his chair over as he stood. ‘Not gone like the infants!’ His eyes were searching—a lighthouse, unseeing. ‘The thief followed me here. She hunts for more. I have to track her down!’ He ran out of the bungalow, his screams drowned by the pouring rain.
Xane rubbed the grey mare with liniment, a mixture of snow root and peppermint tincture, butcher’s broom, rue and witch hazel. She had swollen tendons along her cannon bones and the pitting oedema was getting worse. The ride had strained her; she wasn’t in condition for it.

He straightened, letting her hoof drop gently back to the ground. ‘Snow root?’ He scratched his head, the vision of the black temple cat and the beautiful young witch coming to mind. *Symphytum Officinalia*. He was certain that was the correct name for the herb. He was also certain he’d never learned it. ‘How can I know that?’

The mare rubbed her forehead on his shoulder.

‘You two seem to be getting on,’ Willem said, cutting into Xane’s thoughts.

‘She’s learning fast, but not in fit condition for these mountain passes.’

Willem ran his hand down her front leg, pressing his thumb into the swelling, waiting to see if the indentation refilled. It took some time. He sniffed his fingers.

‘Snow root liniment?’

‘It’ll help but I can’t see how she’ll stay sound.’

‘And the others?’

‘No problem.’ Xane was going to elaborate but reconsidered. Every time he opened his mouth, he found himself using words he could tell others didn’t recognise. They were getting suspicious. He was getting suspicious. He put his hands behind his back.

‘Lead her as much as you can tomorrow. There’s a river to ford…’

‘The Goregan River? Near the Dumar Pass?’

Willem frowned. ‘Had a look at the maps, have you?’

Xane had never seen the maps, but he could picture the terrain clearly in his mind. It was like he’d been imprinted with detailed topographical renditions of the known lands of Gaela. More than that—he could see the entire world. *The entire world?* The unknown lands? Impossible. ‘I had a glimpse of the maps, sir,’ he lied. ‘Fascinating.’

‘They are.’ Willem sniffed. ‘We’ll camp tonight along a tributary. Make sure you stand her in the shallows for an hour or two.’

‘That should help the inflammation.’

Willem’s eye twitched.

Xane kept his face calm though behind the mask he kicked himself. *Inflammation? Where was this coming from?* ‘She’s that stocked up, ain’t she?’ he added quickly, letting the syllables hang. He cringed as soon as he said it. The contrast of his words made them seem all the more contrived. He wiped his forehead.

The creatures were climbing again, desperate and ravenous, struggling to escape the high-walled fortress of his mind. Their claws slipped and scratched as they gained purchase. He shivered, his eyes closed tight against the struggle. When he opened them, Willem was gone and the grey mare had buried her face in the pack mule’s grain sack.

He pulled her back. ‘Not now, girl. You’re tethering with the others in the picket line.’ She pinned her ears and snaked her head around towards him. He held his palm out flat, clicking his tongue when she bumped her nose into it. ‘No need to get vicious, sweet pea. Your legs will feel better when the liniment takes effect and you’ll have plenty to eat. Patience.’

He gripped her crest and gave it a shake, leading her away. Once secured with the others in his charge, he slipped on her feed bag and headed for the cook tent, his stomach rumbling. The aromas drew him but before he entered, he overheard a conversation. The whispers were hushed but he heard just the same.

‘Are you certain, Willem? He said that?’

‘Aye. It was like he had a map in his head. He knew what was coming. Described it perfectly.’

‘Then there’s more than one spy among us.’

‘That’s what I was thinking too, sir. But I’ve had my sights on him all day and there’s no one he’s talked to, save the beasts.’

‘He’s a witch then, linked with the mind speech.’

‘Living as a peasant boy, like you found him?’

‘It doesn’t make sense, unless it’s a glamour.’
‘How can we find out?’
‘You could just ask me,’ Xane said. He’d walked up on them so quietly that they startled, their mouths snapping shut. Neither Willem nor the Stable Master spoke.
‘And if you did just ask me,’ Xane went on, ‘I’d tell you I’ve got no witch blood in my veins, nor do I know any witch unless you count the dried shell of a being called Rall, and she’s not taught me a thing, I promise.’
‘Then how’d you know what was ahead?’ Willem asked, his hand on his sword.
‘Easy, Willem. It’s me. Xane. I’m not a spy. I knew because I figured it out.’
‘How?’
‘We’re heading to Temple Dumarka and we took the north road. The only way there, unless we sprout wings and fly, is to cross the Goregan River at the ford of Dumar and take the north Prieta pass. It’s not witchcraft. It’s common sense.’ Xane didn’t know what had possessed him but he felt good he’d spoken out. He didn’t like being accused of spying and he didn’t want to get a knife in the back, which was what spies generally got. He thought his explanation would solve everything, but the looks on their faces told him it had not.

Finally the Stable Master waved his hand, dismissing him. ‘Get yourself some food, Xane. And see to your neck.’ He pointed at the wound.

Xane touched it and his hand came away bloody. ‘I will,’ he said and walked away, the scent of the pan-fried corn cakes losing their appeal. They didn’t believe his explanation. He could tell more by what they didn’t say than by what they did.

He couldn’t hear any more of their conversation, if indeed they carried on. He ate his ration in silence, washing his plate and tin before seeking the healers’ tent. When he found it, he went straight in, no waiting. They’d brought only two healers with the scouting party and neither had much to do, yet. That would change when the fighting started. He creased his brow. He didn’t want the fighting to start.

‘You needed to let it close over!’ The healer slapped a swab against it, shaking his head.
‘Must have come open from the ride.’
‘You should be in the ward. Who released you?’
‘The Master Healer Grebes, sir.’
‘Grebes?’ He let out a rush of profanities Xane didn’t recognise, nor did he need to. The meaning was obvious. ‘Hemlock makes it harder to mend,’ the healer said as if he were talking to a five-year-old. ‘And this wound is nothing close to mended.’

‘It wouldn’t be,’ Xane said, straightening. ‘The alkaloids inhibit stem cell production via the myo—’ He let his voice trail off and screwed up his face. He really couldn’t keep his mouth shut. ‘Ouch!’ He winced. ‘That hurts!’ It didn’t, but he jumped in his seat anyway to break the silence.

‘What’s that you were saying?’ The healer was too preoccupied to register his strange sentence, the inexplicable answer to why his wound had not closed.

‘Tobacco weed, it makes things hard to heal. They mix it with the hemlock, just in case I guess.’
‘You know your herbs well, for a stableboy.’

Xane rubbed his head. Better than you can imagine.
‘Still with the headaches, lad?’

He nodded.
‘Well it’s too late to send you back. You’ll have to carry on.’ He handed him a mug. ‘Drink this. It’ll help.’

Xane held the mug to his nose, inhaling deeply. He identified the contents, a benign mix of herbs designed to soothe and promote a good night’s sleep. He tossed it down and thanked the healer.
‘Stay warm, lad. And don’t get shot again. You’ll not be so lucky a second time.’

Xane nodded and left the tent. There was more to worry about than getting shot, now that the Stable Master and Willem thought he was a spy. He buttoned his coat, the wind off the mountains cold enough to rattle his teeth.

Nellion Paree felt a waft of air in the corridors. It lifted the hair that framed her face the moment she’d let go of Rosette’s hand. A spell? She glanced over at her daughter and the temple cat. They were making their way to the back of the portal and didn’t seem to notice. ‘Wait,’ she called to them both. ‘Did you feel that?’

Rosette rubbed her belly and yawned. ‘I felt the baby kick. Are you saying you did too?’

‘There was something else,’’ Nell said. ‘Be mindful.’

Rosette’s hand went to her sword hilt but her belt was empty. The temple cat’s head came up.
‘Where did you leave it?’ Nell asked.

Rosette groaned. ‘No idea. An’ Lawrence will disown me.’
‘Perhaps not under the circumstances. Never mind. You have a blade at the cottage.’
‘I wish you’d warned me that late pregnancy was akin to amnesia.’
‘I did.’
Rosette winced. ‘Then I’ve forgotten that as well.’
Nell laughed to hide her shivers. In spite of her daughter’s lack of concern, she felt certain someone had just been in the corridors. Darlings? she asked the Three Sisters. Anything?
They perched high on a ledge, flapping their wings before they folded them neatly into their backs. All’s well. Only our family be here.
‘I don’t sense anyone,’ Rosette confirmed. ‘Nor does Drayco.’
‘Nor do they.’ Nell tilted her head towards the ravens before passing her hand over the plasma Entity. ‘Just us.’
The tiny zaps of electricity tickled her palm. ‘Something’s not right though.’
‘Do you think we’re being tracked?’ Rosette asked. ‘Is Makee about?’
‘I think she’s running the corridors like a scent hound.’
‘I guess my timing’s not the best.’ Rosette slid to the ground, her hands holding her belly. ‘What can I do from Dumarka?’
‘Plenty,’ Nell said, sitting beside her. ‘First and foremost, you can have this baby. That’s a complete enough task on its own.’
Rosette closed her eyes. ‘I won’t argue.’
Nell listened for her daughter’s thoughts but her mind shield was tight. That in itself was not suspicious. She’d taught her to keep it that way. Whatever she and her familiar were saying to each other was private. She respected that. There was something, though—perhaps in the complacency and speed of Rosette’s agreement to come to the cottage—that suggested trouble.
Nell shook her head, remembering how she felt, late pregnant with her own daughter and uncertain of the spell. She had taken comfort in the safety and seclusion of Dumarka. It made sense that Rosette would too. Stop worrying about it, Nell! she told herself. If there is anyone lurking in the corridors, all the more reason to take the next step.
‘Are you nervous about seeing the Watcher?’ Rosette asked. She hadn’t opened her eyes but took her mother’s hand and held it in her lap.
‘I always feel some anticipation.’
‘That’s a new word for it.’
They both laughed.
‘Come.’ Nell stood, helping her daughter to her feet. ‘We’re here.’
Drayco was up and sniffing at the edge of the portal. Nell and Rosette followed, listening, feeling, sensing.
‘Right time, right place? No battles, no temple?’ Rosette asked.
‘Feels so.’ Nell led the way into the woods, her arms stretched wide in greeting. ‘Winter’s past.’
The air smelled of early spring, of sap running in the pines, daffodils and jonquils poking their yellow faces up from the loam, and white berry blossoms floating like stars on the breeze. The Three Sisters whizzed past, out of the corridor and skyward. They were high above them in seconds, circling over the treetops. Home, Nellion! All clear and home beautiful. Come!
‘Are we good?’ Rosette asked, her face to the sun.
‘Indeed!’ Nell put her arm around her daughter. ‘Home, shall we?’
They trekked back to the cottage, picking herbs as they went—raspberry leaf, moss, lichen, angelica and tiny purple mushrooms. Nell had an armful of everything she wanted for the birthing by the time they reached the cottage. She smiled and undid the latch, the bells ringing as she pulled the gate wide. The goats came trotting up, bellies wider than Rosette’s and udders full, swinging side to side with every step.
‘You’ve got good company,’ Nell said, closing the gate before the nannies could get into the cottage gardens.
‘Off with you, girls. I’ll see to you shortly, though you haven’t had a too hard winter, I can tell.’
Rosette laughed. ‘It’s the hay chute. I rigged a self-feeder before I left. Seems to have worked. I want to check the horses, though.’
‘Settle first. We’ve a pot of herbs to brew, bread to bake and soup to put on the fire. The hearth will be long cold. Can you start there?’ She tilted her head. ‘Mozzie’s about as well. He has news.’ Nell gave her daughter’s hand a squeeze, leading the way. The stone path was carpeted with plum blossoms, the gardens bursting with new life.
‘The lilies are open!’ Nell paused by the spring beds admiring the white and orange trumpets bunched together, pointing towards the south, tracking the sun. The chamomile lawn sprouted bright green lace and had grown over the stone path, filling the cracks and climbing the fence posts.
‘And the orchard!’ Rosette said, pointing.
Surrounding the cottage were groves of fruit trees: apples, figs with thick dark trunks and delicate pale blossoms, cherry trees with their long thin branches weeping towards the ground laden with fuchsia-pink blooms.
Apricot, peach and pear trees were dotted with buds.

‘I love spring,’ Rosette said.

‘Me too.’ Nell opened the door and Mozzie was there to greet them, his serpent body looped over the rafters, his dark tongue flickering in and out. ‘You’ve doubled in length!’ Nell said, stroking his diamond-shaped head.

‘Tripled,’ Rosette said, gazing at the coils.

Mistress is home! Winter was well?

Well enough. And you? I know you have news? Nell shrugged out of her pack and hung up her cloak.

All is well on land and air, save the golden horse.

‘What golden horse?’ Nell asked aloud.

‘That would be the warhorse I brought back from Corsanon. He’s called Amarillo.’

‘Makee’s? How did he end up here?’

‘When I first found An’ Lawrence he sent him into the portal after me.’

Nell went to the hearth and checked the wood box, recalling the brief argument between Makee and Rowan.

‘Mozzie says the horse is gone.’

Rosette pulled off her boots and lined them up by the door. ‘Do you think she’s come for him?’

The witch came. I did not allow her entrance.

‘She did!’ Nell bristled before clapping her hands together. ‘Let’s warm this place up—fire, soup and bread.’

Rosette set to the chores and Nell headed for the barn. Drayco shot past, running back the way they’d come.

‘Where’s he going?’

‘Drayco? He says there’s a female deep in the woods and she’s singing to him.’

Nell frowned briefly, checking if it were true. ‘So there is. What a spring we are having!’ Drayco was being called, urgently, by a female voice. That was certain. Nell smiled. ‘I wondered if that would happen. I suppose we won’t see him for a week or two.’

‘I suppose,’ Rosette answered, her voice muffled by the crackling fire.

‘I’ll check for eggs and bring fresh water up from the creek.’ Nell’s smiled widened as she walked to the barn.

It was good to be home. When she opened the barn door, the chooks rushed towards her, all feathers and fuss. ‘One at a time, girls. I want to hear every word!’

They cackled their news and in between detailed information about crickets and worms, eggs and nests, they confirmed that a witch had come for her warhorse and not more than a few days ago.

‘Consensus reality?’ Nell wrinkled her brow as she watched the stream. From her vantage point on the high arched bridge she could see the carp under the rippling surface, swimming in the clouds reflected from the sky.

Yes, Nell. Consensus reality. The ‘reality’ agreed upon. Observers are not conscious of anything outside of it. Remember that.

‘But I asked about Earth, about Temple Los Loma. ASSIST was destroyed, the solar shields down, acid rain neutralised, sea devils mutating back into harmless dinoflagellates…’

It sounds like you’ve been busy.

‘I have. But still the Earth is about to blow. It’s like all our work has not been enough.’

It is enough. It is more than enough. It’s just not happening within the consensus reality.

‘Are you saying Temple Los Loma isn’t in the same reality as the rest of Earth?’

Did you think it was, Nell?

She clutched the railing. ‘Great Sphinx,’ she whispered. ‘I did.’

Most of the beings on Earth have been consuming energy and making choices based on their own needs. Most are thinking about their small life span, not ten life spans or ten million life spans ahead, or behind. The Watcher chuckled. Can you imagine it? ‘Pass me the salt, dear.’ He’s about to comply. ‘But how will that affect my great-great-granddaughter?’ The Watcher continued to laugh.

‘Good to know you think it’s funny.’

You would too, if you could see it from here.

‘That’s what I came for, a larger perspective. I’m making choices and considering how it will affect hundreds of years into the future.’

And?

‘And hundreds of years into the past.’

Well done. Now instead of hundreds, do billions.

Nell choked. ‘Without Jarrod, it’s…’

Are you certain you are without him?

She loosened her cloak, the sun beaming on her upturned face. A hawk rode the thermals above her. ‘Sphinx,
I’ve got a world about to explode, a daughter about to give birth, a witch about to nab the spell, a man about to start
a war, a Lupin about to break all the rules ever made and a quantum sentient nowhere to be found. I’m not certain of
anything and I don’t feel like playing games.’
    Worried about the entropy, are you?
    ‘You aren’t?’
    Hardly.
    Nell felt fit to scream.
    Nell, if it’s entropy that’s upsetting you, seek the energy outside.
    ‘Outside what?’
    The closed system, of course.
    ‘Outside the closed system?’
    Where else? Energy only becomes increasingly unavailable within a closed system. If you remember that
consciousness has no dividing walls, no doors and no doorkeepers, if you remember that consciousness doesn’t need
them because it is an open system, you’ll see how to reverse the ‘law’ of entropy. That’s what you are wanting to do,
isn’t it? Turn the entropy wheel around on old Earth?
    She nodded. ‘I do.’
    Nell, relax. Consensus reality is egocentric for a reason. You are in the Borderlands. The spaces on the edge.
    ‘The Borderlands?’
    It’s a metaphor, Nell. Loosen up.
    She unclenched her fists, rubbing the backs of her knuckles.
    Remember the first rule.
    ‘The first rule?’ Nell asked.
    The first rule of magic, the first rule of physics, the first rule of the universe. The only rule that really counts in
such instances.
    ‘Everything is energy?’
    That’s the one. Keep that in mind, and get outside the notion of closed systems. Consciousness is open, and
‘enlightenment’ is simply realising it. Are you ready to move on?
    A carp jumped out of the water, its orange and black scales shimmering as it flipped in the air, caught a moth
and dove back under the ripples.
    Sphinx? She called to him silently, though she knew he was gone. The luminous surface of the water sparkled
like laughter. Nell closed her eyes and began the journey back up the layers of her mind until she could hear the
Three Sisters squawking in the redwood branches overhead. ‘How far?’ she asked them, looking to see the progress
of a red-tailed kite. It was heading south when she began her meditation. She couldn’t see it now.
    A short cloud and one tall tree.
    She smiled, brushing the leaves from the hem of her skirt. ‘That’s less than a minute.’
    The sisters took off, zipping past, heading back to the cottage.
    ‘What else can you see, my lovelies? Any sign of Drayco prowling about?’
    They cawed and jeered and swooped.
    None of the temple cats are here.
    Nell frowned, about to ask more, when the words of the Watcher echoed in her mind.
    Observers are not conscious of anything outside of consensus reality.
    ‘Indeed, they are not.’ Nell dropped to one knee and sprang into the air, morphing into a black falcon, the
leaves and loam rising about her as she shot away towards the cottage.

Rosette stared at her soup, spoon hovering. Her mouth watered, the rich aromas of tomato, beans and chilli wafting
up, making her whole body smile. But she couldn’t take a bite. Not yet. Nell was making a point and she hadn’t got
it yet.
    ‘It’s not like it isn’t your third helping,’ Nell said.
    ‘I know, but I’m still hungry, and you’ve set a hard task.’
    ‘It will be hard, if you see it that way. Come. Let go. Nothing is accomplished through struggle. Nothing
magical, anyway.’
    Rosette let her shoulders relax. This wasn’t a simple summoning. She needed more than a conjuring of the
Elementals to achieve the desired results. All this because I complained of the soup being too hot! That will teach me
to comment. ‘I need a hint, Nell. Please?’
    ‘A hint?’
    ‘Just point me in the right direction before I faint from hunger.’
Nell sighed. ‘There are three ways you can cool your soup down. Think of the obvious first.’

‘That would be time,’ Rosette said. ‘Given enough time, the soup will reach the same temperature as
everything around it.’

‘That’s the easiest way, if you have the patience. The universe does it for you.’

Rosette wished she did have patience, yet part of her was exhilarated. Nell was giving her opportunities to
demonstrate her skills. She was on her way to passing her apprenticeship. She could feel it. She straightened,
focusing. ‘I could also hasten the process by slowing the soup down.’

‘Explain.’

‘Heat is molecular motion. If I slow the motion with an inertia spell, it will cool faster.’

‘Excellent. There is one other way. Can you imagine it?’

She couldn’t, and the strain of trying was tensing her up again. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly.
Drayco wasn’t around to help, and she didn’t want to tap that channel. Nell would sense it and this was about what
she knew as a witch, right here, right now. She took another breath and closed her eyes.

She and Teg had talked about something like this, a problem of energy conservation versus energy
consumption. He had been studying these ideas on a quantum level, fascinated by the world of the very small. His
time with Kreshkali at the library of Temple Los Loma helped because he...She stiffened, her mouth gaping open.

‘Got something, dear?’ Nell asked.

‘He’d had time to consider physics from a philosophical view!’ She finished her thoughts aloud.

‘Are you talking about Teg?’

She nodded. ‘He’s brilliant with the word puzzles, and the mind puzzles too, don’t you think? We talked about
this but I didn’t get it then.’

‘And now?’

‘I’m catching a glimpse of the third way.’

‘Let’s hear it.’

She was about to explain but shook her head. ‘I’ll just do it. The process will explain itself.’

Nell’s eyebrows went up. ‘Well said.’ She leaned back, taking a sip from her mug.

Rosette allowed her awareness to surround the soup, visualising the bowl until it became a vast landscape, seeing the contents as tiny particles of energy. They were all moving about in wild gyrations, some faster than
others. The quicker ones were the hottest, the more languid ones cool. She imagined a wall splitting the terrain in
half and in the divider she visioned a small door. Rosette smiled, rubbing her hands together. This would work.
In her mind she allowed some of the molecules to come together, forming a tiny entity, a guardian of the door. She
instructed the guardian to let the faster-moving energy pass through one side of the divider and the slower-
moving energy to the other. The tiny guardian cackled, clearly enjoying the task, swinging the door open and closed
as energy exchanged places. Soon all the faster molecules filled one side of the bowl, the slower filled the other. She
thanked the imaginary being, giving a little nod, and drifted back up into her normal awareness, the landscape of the
bowl retreating until it was no longer a red sea but a dish of soup on the table.

Nell whistled. ‘Done and well done, my brilliant daughter! Who would have thought!’ She got up from her
chair to take a closer look.

‘You didn’t think I could do it?’

‘Break every law of thermodynamics? Of course, but you’ve gone about it in an extraordinary way. I’m very
proud.’

‘Thermodynamics? I thought I was defying entropy.’

‘That too, my dear. That too! You cooled the soup without dissipation. Inspirational!’

They both looked down at the bowl. ‘Well said.’ She leaned back, taking a sip from her mug.

Rosette beamed and toasted Rosette but as their mugs clanked she frowned. ‘Makee, what are you playing
at?’ she whispered.

‘Nell?’

‘Makee has spent a great deal of time on Earth,’ Nell said, tapping the side of her mug as she held it close to
her lips.

‘I thought she was helping us settle the environment.’

Nell dipped her spoon in the boiling side of Rosette’s soup. ‘I think she might have been helping herself, and
I’m getting an idea of how.’

‘The mountains?’

‘All the new volcanic activity might well be Makee’s doing.’

‘Why would she? If we have to evacuate Temple Los Loma, it will only make our presence in Gaela stronger.’

‘Maybe she’s hoping to keep us distracted, for one, but there’s more to it. I’m just not sure what it is yet.’
Rosette drained her mug. ‘The sign of the Archer can get a little like a megalomaniac, yes?’ she asked.

‘Sometimes. Their propensity for expansion can sweep them right over the edge.’

‘Is there any coming back? From that edge?’

‘If she can imagine it, there is.’ Nell’s eyes drifted to the window before she turned her attention to Rosette.

‘Eat. I know you’re still hungry.’

Rosette blessed her little guardian and stirred the soup, the boiling side whirling over the ice, melting it fast with a few quick strokes. She blew on it, taking a mouthful. ‘Just one more question,’ Rosette said after she had swallowed. ‘If La Makee did make the mountains around Temple Los Loma boil, what did she freeze solid?’

Nell clicked her tongue. ‘I don’t know but I intend to find out.’

Kreshkali rode at the gallop, hood flung back, cloak trailing behind her. She wanted to reach Temple Dumarka in the most expedient way and, at the same time, stay clear of the portal. She’d felt something there when she left Temple Los Loma, like eyes that vanished the moment she searched for them. If someone was lurking in the depths of the corridors, she thought it best to circumnavigate them, whoever they were. Nell had felt something too when she took Rosette to Dumarka. She ducked under branches heavy with last night’s rain.

Being in two places at once had myriad advantages but it also created some problems of cognisance. Not everyone could keep hold of their objectivity while living two lives, especially if there was much crossover. Having different identities helped with integration of the experiences, like friends telling each other about their day—easy enough. But the level of detachment it took was taxing at times. ‘Was that what did it, Makee?’ she asked aloud.

‘Did it make you snap?’ Something had to explain the High Priestess’s madness.

Kreshkali shortened her reins, keeping the mare collected as she cantered towards the Dumarkian Woods. Shape-shifting would have got her there sooner, and in better form, but Kreshkali didn’t want to leave her energy signature behind. If there was a tracker in the corridors, Makee or otherwise, why leave a trail of crumbs to follow? The closer she kept her powers, the harder she’d be to find.

When she’d left Teg and the scouts, she’d flown high, following the Goregan River to its outlet on the North Seas. It snaked beneath her, a shimmering light, the fringing willows mere tassels of green far below, the farmlands a patchwork quilt with crops and orchards crisscrossed with brown dirt roads. On reaching the coast, the waves looked like thin white threads hugging a motionless shore but as she rode the thermals down, the sea came to life. It crashed hard against the cliffs, the offshore wind blowing froth from the peaks.

She back-winged onto a large twist of driftwood and shifted to her human form. It took her a day to reach the township of Dumarka by foot, following the sandy coastline to the west. She stayed the night in the local inn, buying the horse first thing in the morning. No one had followed and she felt confident her journey to the temple was not being tracked.

The sun warmed her face and the smell of pines filled the air. She turned down the forest road that wound its way to the temple—a place that never existed in her time save as ruins when she crossed over from the sewers under Half Moon Bay. ‘Not then, but you are certainly here now,’ she said, marvelling at the sight.

She took in the magnificence of the temple grounds. The bridges arching the stream, the close-clipped grass and the wide steps to the temple courtyard made the dark woods look like a mythical realm. Flags whipped in the wind, lashing the sky with purple and red streamers identical to the illustrations she’d seen in the ancient textbooks. The archives had it right, for the most part. What she hadn’t remembered from the depictions were the high towers on either side of the gate. Perhaps Temple Dumarka was more prepared for assault than she had imagined. She had only one thought as she eased her horse to a halt. Goddess of the woods, please don’t let my visit be their ruin.

Playing with history was risky business. One never knew when the best intentions would change the course of a river, a child’s life or a world’s destiny. She dismounted, studying the woman who approached. She wasn’t dressed like a guard but wore leggings and boots. A rag hung from her hip pocket.

She reached for the reins. ‘I’ll mind your mount,’ she said.

‘Thank you.’ Kreshkali patted the horse’s shoulder. ‘Easy on the water, please. We’ve ridden hard this morning.’

‘In a rush to see me, High Priestess?’

Kreshkali turned at the voice. Descending the steps was a woman of extraordinary beauty. She wore a long fern-coloured dress that flowed like the sea behind her. Kreshkali didn’t think the woman’s feet actually touched the ground as she glided towards her. ‘I am,’ Kreshkali replied, drawing in her breath as the temple cats appeared.

Rosette had talked about her experience at Temple Dumarka but to see the felines parade down the stairs towards her was something she hadn’t been prepared for. They were magnificent—long-bodied with sleek dark coats of black and rust, and one a charcoal grey with black bands and no tail. She held out her hand in the traditional greeting, introducing herself. ‘Kreshkali, High Priestess of Temple Los Loma and friend of Dumarka.’
‘Saphon, High Priestess of Temple Dumarka. This is Noel, my familiar.’ She touched the back of the grey temple cat. ‘Welcome to our home.’

Kreshkali kept her face smooth, her mind shield tight. She wished the Three Sisters were here to confirm her suspicions, but this woman, this High Priestess Saphon, had the same look about her as Le Saint. The same wide eyes and dark hair. *Those traits are not so rare,* she reminded herself. *Still*…She followed the High Priestess up the steps.

‘We’ll have tea on the back terrace, under the shade of the redwoods. You will tell me of your need and I will see if I can help.’

‘The Sea-goat?’ Kreshkali asked. It was bold to inquire, she knew. Those in power rarely gave information about their birth charts unless it suited them and even then it could be hard to authenticate. Sometimes a priestess wouldn’t announce the birth of her child for days after the event to cloud the exactitude of her child’s horoscope. Knowledge was power in the time of the temple wars. Information embedded in the birth chart could be used as a weapon. But sometimes the sharing of such information could build trust. Kreshkali was hoping for the latter.

Saphon laughed. ‘I do like to plan things, you’ve got that right. But let’s leave the intimate details aside, at least until we get to know each other.’

Well answered, Kreshkali said, using her mental voice.  
*Ah, the mind speech. I rarely get that uninvited, from a human, anyway. Thank you.* Saphon looked back at the temple cats. Some were wandering out into the woods, others following through the courtyard. The mare had been led away, the sight of so many felines too much for her.

‘Are you testing me, High Priestess Kreshkali?’

I hope I’m protecting you.

Corsanon rides?

They are crossing the Goregan River this moment. ‘What lovely flowers,’ Kreshkali said aloud, her fingertips brushing the hanging baskets as they walked past.

‘There are gardeners among us,’ Saphon said. ‘From the Southern Cusca Plains. They know how to grow a posy there.’

‘Indeed.’ *You have spies?* Kreshkali asked.

Doesn’t every temple?

They sat at a table under the trees; the light filtered through the branches and made golden patterns as the limbs swayed. After a light meal of cornbread, honey and spiced apricots, and more polite exchanges than Kreshkali thought she could endure, Saphon got down to business.

How many?

Five hundred strong.

Five hundred? Saphon paced, her bare feet padding alongside her temple cat’s. *What could provoke this?* She turned to Kreshkali. Horsed or on foot?

Marching, for the most part. About one hundred cavalry. Kreshkali put her arm out to stop Saphon. *It will take them another six days to get here. We have time.*

Time for what? *This is not a warrior temple. Our skills are in explorations of the mind, not battle.*

The towers?

They are for the star watchers.

Did they foresee this?

Saphon crossed her arms. ‘Change comes in many forms,’ she said aloud.

‘And change there will be.’ *But, Saphon, it is the skill of the mind that can turn them.*

With illusion?

Alteration. High Priestess, you are not alone in this. My warriors…

From Treeon?

Not exactly, but I do have skilled fighters. They plan to meet the Corsanons and turn them back.

Saphon returned to the table. She sat opposite Kreshkali and folded her hands. *Forgive my bluntness. I fear it will betray another quality of my personal zodiac, but why would I listen to you, Kreshkali? I have no knowledge of you or these events, forward or backward in time. No dreams, no premonitions, no point of reference. No predictions. It is like you came out of nowhere. Unheard of and unheralded. Why would I trust you?*

You will, Saphon.

How can you be so certain?

‘Because you already have.’ Kreshkali again spoke aloud, letting the words ring through the hallways.

‘And have you seen the results? Do the temple cats and priestesses of the Dumarkian Woods prosper?’

Kreshkali lowered her voice. ‘Not yet. But I think this time, they will.’

This time?
I’m confident, yes.
Grayson hesitated at the garden gate, listening to the cacophony of sounds, searching for a single voice amongst the myriad others. It was a contrast to the stark winter silence of his last visit. The creek babbled, flush with spring runoff. Woodpeckers were tapping away, magpies sang their sweet operas and butcherbirds twittered in the trees. The caws of the Three Sisters rose above them all, loud enough to bring an army. He didn’t hear anything else—particularly, he didn’t hear the cry of an infant. ‘Rosette?’ he called. ‘Nell? Drayco?’

‘Drayco’s not here. He’s catting about in the woods and I haven’t seen him for days,’ Rosette said.

Her voice warmed his heart. She was coming up from the barn, a milk pail in each hand. Her smile made him answer in kind in spite of his perceptions. She didn’t need him, and that was the problem. His problem, he corrected himself. She might love him, but he could see it all in her single look—her boots caked with mud, her swollen round belly, her hair tied with red leather in two long braids, the milk splashing as she waddled. She was happy, with or without him around, complete within herself. Wasn’t that what they were all striving for? If so, he wasn’t there yet. He wanted her to need him. No denying it. But she didn’t and he had to deal with it. He opened the gate and let her through. ‘Rosette, I…’

She kissed his cheeks as she passed. ‘Good to see you, Gray.’ She kept walking.

He cleared his throat. ‘Rosette, I wanted to…’

‘Nell’s spotted you,’ she said. ‘She’s on her way in. Let’s save the news for her too.’ Rosette led the way into the cottage before he could say more. He’d wanted to speak to her alone, before he told them about Everett, but now, in her presence, he wasn’t sure how to begin and she didn’t seem to want the intimacy. He let the smell of baking bread distract him. Food seemed a much easier topic. ‘If you run this down to the creek, lunch will be ready when you get back.’

Again the smile, the confidence, the peace. No trace of need. His heart skipped a beat. He found himself out of the cottage, trotting down the steps to the creek before saying another word. He hauled up the cold box, a large lobster trap that nestled in the eddies of the icy stream, and settled the milk jar.

‘Bring us up the cheese jar, can you? And the butter?’ she called out from the window.

When he retrieved the other jars, he caught sight of a black falcon winging in from the woods. Nell was here already. So much for his private conversation with Rosette. He wasn’t sure if he imagined it or if she was avoiding any talk of the child with him. True or not, he would speak with her tonight no matter who was in the room. He had to!

Nell greeted him at the door, relieving him of the items and kissing his cheek, one and then the other, and his lips. ‘Did you find Everett?’

‘I did.’

Both women stared at him.

‘From the sound of your voice, it’s not good news.’ Nell ushered him inside. ‘Did he tamper with Rosette’s DNA? Was it him who took the spell?’

‘Not the spell.’ Grayson blew into his hands, rubbing them together.

‘What then?’ Rosette asked.

He nodded to the table. ‘Let’s sit down.’

The women remained standing.

‘What could he take?’ Rosette asked, lifting her palms. ‘I’m not missing anything, save Jarrod’s CPU, am I?’

‘You might be missing more than you think. There’s no way to know for certain. He’s unstable, his mind erratic.’

Rosette brought the food to the table.

‘What do you mean, erratic?’ Nell asked.

‘He’s paranoid, disordered. His behaviour is unpredictable, his thoughts inconsistent. Particularly his memory. It’s flawed.’

‘What do you mean by paranoid?’ Nell asked.

‘He thinks a thief is stalking him.’

Nell frowned. ‘Maybe there is.’

‘What am I missing, Grayson? What do you think he took?’

Grayson looked at her beautiful round belly. How would she take this? He couldn’t guess. ‘I can’t be sure, Rosette, but it’s possible this isn’t your only child.’
The atmosphere in the cottage became perfectly still. No one spoke. Only the sound of the creek in the background and the breeze through the willow tree could be heard.

Rosette broke the silence, her face crinkling as she broke out in laughter. ‘Is that it?’ She held her belly, cackling so loudly the Three Sisters came to the window to investigate, joining in the chorus.

The sound was deafening until Nell hushed them.

‘That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard,’ Rosette said. ‘I think I would know it if I’d had another child!’

Nell wasn’t laughing though, nor was Grayson.

Rosette wrapped her arms around Drayco’s neck, burying her face in his thick black pelt. ‘We did it! You did it, Maudi! I’m very proud of you. I wonder if Kreshkali will be too.

‘Kreshkali? Nell? I’ll simply remind her that she’s been in two worlds at once since before I was born, if the question ever comes up.’

Would you keep it occult?

‘For now, at least, I think it best.’

They may ask where the child is, however. You realise you aren’t pregnant in this body, don’t you?

‘I do and I can’t say that I miss not being able to touch my toes.’ She whooped, wrapping her arms around herself. ‘Anyway, I’m aware of the other me, at the cottage. I’m pregnant enough there for both of us, I promise.’

Some witches have gone mad with the paradoxes.

‘I’m not some witches.’

Indeed, you are not. And you have me to help keep you straight.

His purr filled the air in the gully and she pressed her ear to his neck, smiling. ‘I love that sound.’

The purring suddenly stopped.

Riders, coming from the south. Down!

She crouched low, the ferns concealing all but her eyes as the riders galloped past. They were twenty strong, mostly on warhorses, which surprised her. Scouts would have done better on mountain ponies if they wanted to get through the Dumar Pass ahead of next spring. One lad rode a grey mare, lithe and spirited. Desertwind. Oh, Drayco, they are beautiful animals, aren’t they?

Her thoughts tangled in her mind as she watched the young rider. He was turning her way, as if a magnet pulled him. He eased the mare down to a jog, falling behind the group.

Glamour, Maudi. He’s about to spot us.

She hesitated, a smiled lifting her face as she looked upon the rider.

He looks familiar.

Maudi! Now!

She wove an illusion, doubling the thickness of the ferns and blocking any hint of their auras in case he could see them. Most young witches couldn’t, not on command, anyway. It had taken her over a year at Treeon Temple and a stint of disembodiment to develop the skill and this lad was quite young, though that might be a glamour in itself. Whatever he was, he looked past them, urging his mare back into a canter as he followed the troop.

Who was he? She followed their path, risking a peek over the glamour.

We’ve seen him before.

Rosette frowned. I thought so too, but where?

On the road to Corsanon City, from the temple. Remember?

She closed her eyes, recalling the day. You mean just before I got pulled through a stack of dimensions arse first? When Kali wanted a look at Richter’s notes? Before you savaged half the gate guards?

Yes, that day.

I’m hazy on those events, but if you say he’s one and the same, I believe you. I wonder if he was scouting then as well. She smiled, capturing the memory. He was lovely, wasn’t he? A very lovely young man.

I suppose. Drayco yawned, white teeth flashing. Where are we going next?

‘Down to the Corsanon gorge.’

To find the spell?

‘We’re going to make sure Makee doesn’t get to it.’

Before we do?

‘Exactly.’ She took a deep breath and stood, marvelling at the ease she felt in the movement. ‘Goddess of the night, it’s good to have my body back.’ She raised her arms to the sun and leapt over the lip of the gully, transforming into a wolf before she landed on the other side. Eyes wide open, Drayco. Makee could be anywhere.

I’ve got your back, Maudi. Lead the way.

She ran ahead, her stride long, unhampered by the logs and brambles that covered the forest floor. In wolf form she could leap them in single bounds. It was a good day’s run down to the Corsanon gorge and her ears were
pricked, ever alert for the High Priestess of Treeon Temple, La Makee. Glamour or no, she intended to find the
woman and confront her. If she had indeed killed Jarrod, shoving his body off the quarry steps, Rosette planned to
show the other witch exactly what that felt like.

Vengeance, Maudi?
I’m thinking of it more as an initiation…

An’ Lawrence galloped to the head of the line, signalling Teg to keep the Lupins back. Most of the horses were still
unused to the shape-shifters in their wolf form and he didn’t want to risk a stampede. He was still getting them
accustomed to his own familiar. Scylla, how far south of Dumarka would you say we are?
The temple cat loped beside him, her nose lifting to test the air. A day and a half at the run.
Thank you, lovely.
We aren’t going to run for a day and a half though, are we, Rowan?
Not at all. We camp at the next sheltered valley. Teg can search north and you and I’ll go east. Once we spot
the Corsanons, we’ll call Kreshkali and…
I think she’s already spotted them, Scylla interrupted.
An’ Lawrence caught sight of the falcon riding the thermals high above them. That’s good news. He brought
his horse down to a halt and waved Teg in. The lad shifted as he approached, tipping his head skyward. He’d spotted
her too.
‘Any word?’ the Sword Master asked the Lupin. There was no point in both of them bombarding Kreshkali
with questions. He suspected Teg was already speaking to her. The lad had his eyes closed. An’ Lawrence didn’t
miss the serene expression that crossed his face.
She’s his mentor, Rowan. He’s bound to have a deep reverence.
I’m Rosette’s mentor and I’ve never seen that look on her face when she speaks to me.
She was never in love with you.
My point exactly, though the confirmation isn’t particularly comforting.
‘She has news from Temple Dumarka,’ Teg said, cutting into his thoughts. ‘She asks when you plan to camp.’
‘As soon as we find a decent valley.’
Teg closed his eyes again. ‘She says there’s one ahead, over the next ridge and to the south. Grazing for the
stock and several springs.’
You could tell me directly. An’ Lawrence tipped his head towards the sky.
This is more fun, don’t you think? Kreshkali’s voice warmed his mind.
Not really. He turned to Teg. ‘That’s where we’re headed then, over the ridge and south.’ An’ Lawrence gave
him a quick nod and waved his riders on. ‘Pass the word. We camp at the next valley.’
He urged his horse forward as Teg morphed back into wolf form and darted away. It wasn’t far to their
destination and within an hour the expansive valley was inhabited like a small village. Rows of tents had gone up, a
picket line enclosing the far end where horses grazed. Smoke rose from cook fires and a hunting party had already
gone out. He made certain Teg was leading one of the groups. The lad was an excellent hunter.
Is that the only reason, Rowan?
Scylla asked him.
Hush, lovely, she comes.
Kreshkali back-winged onto his outstretched arm, leaping away the moment her talons brushed his wrist. She
morphed into human form, the ripple hitting his face, stinging his skin. He shut his eyes, waiting for the shock wave
to pass.
‘Nice spot,’ she said, shading her eyes as she surveyed the valley. ‘And your warriors impress me. If they fight
as well as they pitch a tent, we’re in good shape.’
‘It’s not the fighting I’m worried about, Kali.’
‘Me neither.’
She filled him in on her meeting with the High Priestess Saphon.
‘Saphon? That name’s not in the archives.’
‘Not even in Timbali?’
‘Not that I’ve ever heard.’
Kreshkali tapped her lips. He wanted to kiss them but looked away instead.
‘If the plan works, it’s a perfect result,’ she said. ‘There will be no trace of the temple at all. Corsanon can’t
touch them.’
‘Unless we can’t get them back.’
‘Not an option.’ She brushed dust from her cloak, blowing a small down feather from her shoulder. ‘You sent
my apprentice hunting?’
‘I didn’t know you’d mind.’
‘Hardly. Sounds a grand idea.’

Before he could say another word, she dropped to one knee then launched herself into the air, morphing as she cleared the ground. She flew over the treetops, her long shrieking whistle coming back on the wind. It was answered in the distance by a wolf’s howl.

*Not quite the exchange you were hoping for, Rowan?*

*Scylla, I…*

*He comes. The lead Lupin.*

An’ Lawrence didn’t finish his thought but turned to face Hotha. He stiffened at the Lupin’s grin and his fingers twitched, pausing for a moment over the hilt of his sword. The action wasn’t missed but it only made Hotha’s grin widen.

‘What are the odds, eh, Sword Master?’ he said. His voice was a little too cheerful. ‘I send her the most troublesome whelp under the mountain and she takes to him like a bee to honey.’

‘I hadn’t noticed,’ An’ Lawrence said. He crossed his arms, staring into the other man’s eyes. ‘Did she speak to you?’

‘Too busy on her escapade, it seems.’ Hotha shook his head. ‘What I would give to have her hunt again with me.’

He said the last bit under his breath and the Sword Master lifted his brows. It wasn’t the words themselves that surprised him, but the frankness, the honesty. He gave the smallest nod of agreement. ‘Join me at the cook fires?’

An’ Lawrence invited him, waving towards the centre of the valley. ‘I’ll fill you in.’

Hotha pulled his eyes back from the sky. ‘I’d appreciate that.’

*Making friends, Rowan?*

*Scylla, lovely. I know you hold a grudge. I do too, when I’m not mindful. But this is Hotha. He’s on our side, and he really did try to stop the others that day.*

The operant word being ‘try’. *I don’t forgive him, nor any of the demon wolves. Except sweet Teg.*

*Sweet Teg?*

*That’s what Drayco calls him. Picked it up from Rosette.*

*Rosette calls him that? Is every priestess from Treeon to Los Loma smitten with the man?*

She yawned. *Pretty much.* Her bobtail twitched and she bounded away.

*Where are you going?*

*To join them.*

*Hunting with the Lupin?*

*Why not? Like you said, he’s the best there is.*

*Thank you, Scylla. Good to have the reminder.* An’ Lawrence led the way to the central tent, focusing on the campaign. It would be good to discuss it with Hotha. It would be better still to fight.

When Kreshkali returned, she and Teg joined them. The hunt had been successful and several deer were already dressed and turning on spits, the aroma drifting over the camp. Kreshkali leaned close to Teg and whispered something. The lad glowed, whispering back. An’ Lawrence clenched his jaw. Was she trying to annoy him? Why didn’t she just use a mind link? He preferred not to witness their every little exchange.

‘Even if Saphon’s idea works, we need to engage the Corsanons before they set foot in Dumarka,’ Kreshkali said aloud.

‘You’re right.’ Hotha turned to her, clinking his mug against her own. ‘Five hundred brute warriors, man and woman alike, charging through the forest would decimate the place.’

‘It’s sacred ground. We have to protect it,’ Teg added.

‘You’ll get no argument from me,’ An’ Lawrence said, holding up his hand. ‘Besides, we need to keep them busy while we get to the bottom of the gorge.’ He’d lowered his voice to a whisper. ‘Where’s La Makee? Have you spotted her?’

‘We haven’t,’ Teg and Kali said at the same time.

The Sword Master looked at them both. ‘I thought Nell was tracking her?’

“She was,” Kreshkali said. ‘But when Nell took Rosette to Dumarka, Makee slipped away.’

Shaea clucked to the bay mare, leaning forward in the saddle as they climbed another hill. When they reached the top, a meadow spread out before them, a silver-blue sea in the moonlight. She slumped back into the saddle and groaned. ‘How much further, Rall?’

They’d been riding east for several hours and though she loved being on horseback the novelty had quickly
worn off. She wasn’t used to it and she certainly wasn’t fit for it. Her legs ached, her hands were cold and her bottom sore.

Rall pointed in the distance. ‘Just over that knoll. We’ll stop there for the night.’

‘Are we camping in the wild?’

‘Hardly.’

‘But all I can see is grass and trees.’

‘There’s plenty more than grass and trees about us, girl. Just ahead. Come on.’ Rall broke into a brisk trot, the warhorse cresting his golden neck, lifting each hoof high off the ground.

The mare took little urging to keep up though Shaea thought she would be churned to butter if they didn’t arrive soon. She imagined being jarred right out of the saddle, falling to the ground and blending into the blue moon lit grass—disappearing forever. She saw it clearly in her mind’s eye, a vision of her jouncing along, the mare stumbling and her falling forward, hitting the ground hard. The tall grass would cover her head like water closing over its victim. Rall would eventually turn around to find the mare trotting behind—riderless with her reins slack and stirrups flapping against her sides.

*Careful what you focus on, girl. Thoughts are powerful things.*

Shaea startled. ‘How do you do that?’

‘Do what?’

‘How do you get your voice inside my head?’

*With clear intention. You can do it too.*

‘I don’t think so.’

*You can. It’s in your blood.*

‘Nothing’s in my blood but chill and ache, I promise.’

*Give it a chance. Concentrate.*

‘I don’t want to. I can’t, anyway.’

Rall chuckled, a grating sound. *You do it the same way you used to speak to Xane.*

Shaea looked at her hands, the reins sliding through her fingers when the mare tossed her head. *I don’t want to talk about Xane, to you or to anyone else.* She sent the words like an arrow to the target.

‘Well done!’ Rall said aloud. ‘You’re a natural.’

Shaea glared at the back of her head and didn’t reply.

When she crested the rise, a village appeared underneath the stars. It spread out from a single street, the lights still on in many buildings. There was a central bakery with a warm yellow glow, the multiple chimney stacks high and smoking. Shaea’s mouth watered. There were other establishments—a stable, a bank, a barber and a pub. Farms appeared in the distance dotted with sheep, everything blue-white in the moonlight. She could hear voices above the music. A few horses were tied up outside the pub, light pouring out from the double doors. The animals had their heads down, a hind foot cocked.

‘Don’t people go to sleep around here?’ Shaea asked, yawning.

‘Not when there’s music on. This is where Treeon apprentices come to play and the place is usually fully awake until near dawn. Lucky for you, if it’s supper you’re after. Stay alert, and don’t give anything away.’

*How would I do that, Rall? I don’t know anything to give away. I don’t even know what we’re doing here.*

*Excellent communication, girl! But you need to shield your thoughts and keep your face smooth. You’ve got consternation written all over you.*

‘I don’t know what that word means, and what’s a mind shield for demon’s sake?’

*Think of it as a secret door, one that lets messages in and out at your command, and keeps the source hidden.*

*I have no idea what you’re on about.*

Rall lifted her brows. ‘Don’t you?’ she said aloud. ‘Then what were you doing when you chatted to Xane, him all the way over at the military yards and you behind the bakery, snivelling in the street?’

*I said I don’t want to talk about Xane. And that was private.*

Rall continued to explain but Shaea tightened her fists and turned away. She was cold, tired, hungry and displeased. She tuned the witch out, closing that imaginary door with a snap.

‘That’s perfect. Well done.’ Rall jumped off the warhorse. ‘You’re definitely a natural.’

Shaea dismounted, shaking her head. If the Entity hadn’t insisted she follow Rall, she might still be in those lovely woods. She wished the Entity was close to hand. She’d ask why. Or perhaps give it a kick.

‘Take the horses to the stable and see that they are rubbed down, fed and watered.’ Rall tossed her a coin.

‘And where are you going?’

‘To the pub, of course.’ Rall cocked her head towards the door. ‘Meet you there.’
Shaea led the horses to the stables. She was greeted by two girls lounging on hay bales. They were playing a game with dice and cards but got up the moment they eyed the warhorse and the lovely mare. They went to work on the animals and Shaea watched for a while until she felt satisfied they knew their business. She patted the bay mare’s rump and handed over the coin. *We’ll be back for you two. Hopefully not until we’ve all had a proper rest.*

She braced her back, pushing her palms deep into her spine.

‘Saddle sore?’ one of the girls asked.
‘It’s been a long ride.’ Shaea returned her smile.
‘Stay a while.’ The other girl winked. ‘We’re good at getting the knots out.’
Shaea kept her grin in place. ‘I would, but my mentor…’ She tilted her head towards the pub.
‘Slip away, if you can.’ The girls held hands for a moment before returning to their tasks.
‘I, um…’ Shaea had no idea how to respond. ‘Thanks.’ She headed for the pub at a brisk walk.

Riding horseback was definitely something to get used to, and so, it seemed, was talking to people. When Shaea reached the double doors of the noisy pub, she halted. All her life she’d been excluded from the warmth and congeniality of such establishments. She was a street child, unwanted and uncared for. Oddly, there was a certain comfort in that. She knew who she was, where her boundaries lay. Even though the lines that marked her life were jagged—like debris that clogged gutter drains, broken glass windows in abandoned cellars, the edge of night creeping into her hiding places in the hours before dawn—she was still Shaea, sister of Xane, and she was alive.

This other world—the one where she rode horses instead of cleaning up after them, ate fresh food instead of begging for scraps, wore fine clothes instead of filthy rags—it was all new. The edges were smoother and though it attracted her, it repulsed her as well. It was foreign and she didn’t believe, no matter how she looked in the mirror, that she belonged. How could she?

*Stop gawking and get in here, girl.*
The familiarity of Rall’s voice, harsh and demanding, eased her mind. She pushed through the doors and into the warmth of the gathering. Her eyes were cast downward, her movements slow and hesitant. It would be far more comforting if she were hunched over a rubbish bin in some Corsanon back alley. *But I hated that life, didn’t I?*

*Now you’re dawdling! Straighten up. Look bright. Do you want to draw attention?*

No.
*Then stop acting like a misfit.*
She squared her shoulders, lifting her eyes off the floor. Rall was right. She didn’t want to draw attention but it was already too late for that. Heads turned and conversations stopped. Shaea swallowed the bile in her throat and searched for Rall.

The room was packed, smoky and animated. Voices talked over the music, the rhythm loud and lively. She pushed through the gathering, avoiding eye contact, until she found Rall at a table against the side wall. She kept her eyes locked on the witch, unwavering, until she caught a glimpse of the musicians playing on a small stage in the back. Her mouth gaped open at the sight of them. She whistled through her teeth.

*That’s hardly subtle, dear. I do want you to tell me if you recognise anyone but try not to signal it to the entire establishment.*

Shaea’s mouth snapped closed. *I know that guitar player.*
*It’s obvious he knows you too.*
Clay thrummed out his chords, standing as Shaea walked past. He beamed a smile at her.
*Come and sit down, Shaea! Ignore him.*
‘There you are,’ Rall said aloud. ‘Horses settled?’
‘That’s where you sent me, so of course they are,’ Shaea said.
‘Yes, Mistress’ would do better, girl.
Who are we trying to impress? If it’s those lads on the stage, it’s too late.
The word is “whom”, and no, not the lads. Play along.
The tone in Rall’s mental voice made Shaea lift her chin. ‘Yes, Mistress.’

That’s better.
‘The horses are well taken care of. I saw to their feeding myself and…’
Don’t overdo it.
Shaea closed her mouth to keep from snarling.
‘Do you know these musicians then? From your time at Treeon?’
I’ve never been to Treeon, and you know it. What’s the game?
The game, girl, is to seem one thing and be another. You aren’t playing well, I promise.
‘Not from Treeon Temple, Mistress, but from the quarry road in Corsanon.’
At the mention of Corsanon, even though the word came quietly from her lips, their corner of the pub hushed
over. The music stopped and there was a brief silence before the crowd cheered for more. Shaea thought she could see steam coming out of Rall’s ears.

*What are you doing? I told you not to mention Corsanon.*

*Then why did you ask me about it?* ‘Is it too late for supper?’ Shaea said aloud. ‘I’m famished.’

Rall stood, her fists on the table, her black curls bouncing as she dropped her head level with Shaea’s.

‘And what would you fancy, young witch? Some bread and soup perhaps?’ Rall’s jaw locked tight.

‘That sounds wonderful, thank you,’ Shaea said, folding her hands in front of her.

*I should have left you in the gutter!*

*No, Rall. I should have left you in the gutter!*

‘I’ll order us soup then.’ Rall straightened, patting Shaea’s hands. ‘You can tell me all about your friends when I get back.’

Shaea watched Rall push her way through to the bar. Most of the punters stepped back to give her room though some, drunk and oblivious, had to be nudged aside. Shaea was fascinated by the power of the woman. Could this really be that old stick insect she knew as a child?

A hand touched her shoulder and she nearly jumped out of her skin. ‘What are you doing here, beautiful?’ Clay asked.

‘Me? What are you doing here?’

‘Playing music, of course. Where did you get to, Shaea?’ Clay shoved his red curls up into his knitted cap. ‘You left without a word.’

‘I’d say it was the other way around.’ Shaea pointed a finger at him and he grabbed it, pretending to bite. She tried to pull away but he brought it to his mouth and kissed it. Her eyes widened. ‘You were gone when I got back to the portal,’ she whispered.

‘And you were nowhere to be found when we left.’

‘But here we are now,’ she said, her face lifting. ‘How strange.’

‘It is.’ He leaned in close. ‘What are you doing here?’

She shrugged then whispered into his ear, ‘I’m doing as the Entity has told me.’

‘The what?’

‘The Entity. The guardian of the portal. It speaks to me.’

He cocked one eyebrow. ‘It speaks to you?’

‘It does.’

He leaned forward, his lips brushing the curve of her ear. ‘The Entity didn’t speak to me, but a High Priestess did. I’m working for her,’ he said, tilting his head back towards Shane. ‘We both are.’

‘How?’

‘We’re playing music and watching out for the High Priestess of Treeon Temple. There’s something going on with the temples. Something big.’

‘Which High Priestess of Treeon Temple?’ she asked.

He was about to reply when Rall returned to the table.

‘Who’s your friend, Shaea?’ Rall asked. ‘Please introduce us.’

‘This is Clay, a lad I met…on my way here,’ she said.

*Where, girl? Say it plain.*

*Corsanon!* she said, her arms crossing.

*Not aloud! Pests and demons, you don’t understand this at all, do you?*

Shaea stuck out her lower lip. *How could I when you haven’t taught me anything?*

‘Pleased to meet you, Clay, though there’s more to that name, I’m certain. What brings you to the edge of the Mobbie Desert, if I may ask?’

‘I’m honoured by your interest, Mistress. I’m a journeyman bard, playing in the outlands of Treeon until the end of summer. It’s part of my apprenticeship.’

‘Then it’s been plain luck to find you here tonight. What a coincidence.’

‘Plain luck it is,’ Clay said, looking over his shoulder. ‘I’ve more music to perform, so if you will both excuse me.’ He gave a smile and was gone.

‘Is that what you mean?’ Shaea said, leaning back in her chair. *Because he was certainly playing a game with you.*

*He was. And I know exactly who put him up to it, too.*

*I’m happy for you, Rall, but I’m still in the dark.*
Rosette opened the barn door, the sweet scent of alfalfa and oat hay rushing to meet her. The chickens cackled and she led them out the back, scattering scraps over the ground. With them out of the way, she poured grain for the cow and retrieved the silver bucket from the milk room. ‘Oh, Delilah, I’m so grateful for your cream. It goes perfectly with hot pancakes and strawberries. Don’t you love spring?’

Delilah mooed, her long rasping tongue sweeping up the grain. She would calve soon and the goats would kid as well. ‘We could supply Dumarka with butter and cheese, at the rate you are all freshening.’ Rosette grabbed the low stool and plunked herself down, resting her cheek against the cow’s golden flank. ‘And I will be full of milk too. Any day now.’ With the pail between her knees, the rhythmic motion of her hands and the milk streaming into the bucket became hypnotic. Her mind wandered, reaching out to Drayco.

She couldn’t speak to him in her usual way. He was in another world, with herself in another form. It would be jarring to communicate so she sensed for him instead, searching for his silhouette, allowing the image to play across her mind. She sighed, spotting him in the underbrush. She saw herself as well. They were near the Corsanon gorge, hidden in the reeds, watching the water. In her vision, she had her arm around Drayco’s neck, his rumbling purr making her fingertips vibrate. She smiled, both aspects of her feeling satisfied, connected.

As the pail filled, she felt a warm sensation along her spine, though when she reached for the cow’s hip to pull herself up, the warmth turned into a ripping pain. It lasted for thirty heartbeats and vanished. Rosette’s forehead was damp with sweat, and she leaned against Delilah who looked back at her with huge brown eyes. ‘What was that?’

Am I being spelled?

Bracing her back, she waddled over to the gate and latched it open. ‘You don’t mind if you find your own way to the paddock this morning?’ she said to Delilah. ‘I’m not feeling up for the walk.’ The thought of getting back to the cottage seemed daunting enough. She covered the milk pail and collected the eggs, the pain not returning. Perhaps it had been a cramp from sitting on the low stool. It felt like her body had doubled in size, after all, and it was bound to be hampered by certain positions.

Or the baby is coming, Maudi.

Drayco, my love! You can talk to me!

Of course I can, when you are asleep on this side, it’s easy for me to find your mind there. Either way, here or there, you are still you.

She smiled, relishing the sound of his voice, catching up on his doings as she shuffled along towards the cottage, bucket in one hand, basket in the other. He was telling her about the rabbit he caught when the pain struck again.

Maudi?

I’m fine, she said, panting. Her knees wanted to buckle but there was no way she would let them, not with a full pail of milk and a basket of eggs at stake. She started to call for help but didn’t have the breath for it. Excuse me, Nell? Are you busy? She sent the mental message through clenched teeth.

There was only a moment’s hesitation. Rosette! I’m coming. Breathe!

Rosette took a deep breath but it was knocked from her as pain gripped her body. The pail fell and white milk splashed to the ground, disappearing into the soil without a trace. She dropped to her knees. The eggs rolled from the basket, cracking open, bright orange yolks sticking to the new spring grass like strange wet flowers.

Nell. Help!

It was the longest day Rosette could remember and the longest night. By morning she couldn’t pretend the look on Nell’s face meant everything was all right, though her mother’s words were soft, encouraging, loving. Grayson’s too. He remained calm and strong, holding her up when the contractions came, allowing her to sink deep into each one. She’d panted, walked, focused, turned and twisted but nothing was helping. The baby didn’t come.

Night turned to day again and for the first time ever she saw fear in Nell’s eyes, and Grayson wouldn’t look her way at all. She pushed, screaming, the roar of Drayco echoing in her mind, though no other sound came when she finally birthed her child. The cottage went deathly quiet.

‘What’s wrong? Nell? How is she?’

Rosette struggled to get up, but Nell eased her back down, her hand on her heart. ‘Give me a moment.’

Still there was no coo. No cry. No movement from the baby. Finally Nell passed the limp body up to her and she held him to her breast. Her eyes closed, tears streaming down her cheeks. He was perfect, not a flaw or a mark,
though his eyes stared at her, unseeing. Deep, empty eyes. Lifeless. Her tears fell onto her baby as she sobbed.

Nell massaged her belly and Rosette was barely aware when the afterbirth came. They washed her and changed the sheets around her as she held the dead child. Grayson pressed a steaming cup to her lips. She drank without tasting. ‘I don’t understand. Nell? What happened?’

‘It was a boy.’
‘I see that. A perfect boy, but why did he die?’
‘We can’t carry males, Rosette.’
‘I don’t understand.’
‘Nor do I. This has never happened before.’

Rosette touched her lips to her lifeless child’s forehead. ‘Why can’t we bring him back, like you did me?’
‘He’s gone.’ Nell shook her head.
‘But he got this far. He nearly made it.’
‘He did. Nearly. Rest now, Rosette. Let your body heal.’
‘What about my heart?’ She looked at Grayson.
‘You have to let that heal too.’ Nell soothed her, brushing out her hair and weaving it into braids.

Rosette clutched her child and cried, a torrential sorrow overtaking her.

Rest, Nell said again, and followed with words Rosette couldn’t understand, a deep spell woven over the top of her head.

Nell, despite her exhaustion, conjured a healing. Rosette felt the comforting lassitude infuse her limbs. It pulled her out of her body and into another world. She surrendered to it, leaving to the goddess and her mentor’s wisdom whatever would come next.

Maudi?
The baby didn’t live, Drayco.
I know. I was there.
Why didn’t he?
Sometimes the spirit draws back.
It was a boy…
Not meant to be.
I’m coming soon, Drayco. I need to be with you.

Drayco’s purr echoed in her mind. You’re here already, Maudi.

Xane pulled his mare to a halt. He could see the others ahead, spreading out through the forest. He knew he was meant to keep up, stay on track, but what he felt overwhelmed him. A deep sadness washed through his mind and he reached out towards it, towards its source. ‘Shaea,’ he whispered. ‘Is that you? Are you hurting?’

It didn’t seem like Shaea but what else could it be? He didn’t have any other bonds. He cared for no one else in such a way, save his charges. Could Grace be injured? Fortuna? The awareness that struggled to be free screamed at him and he glimpsed it for an instant—a dazzle of stars, lights and whirls—too much for his mind to comprehend. He shut it away, turning his attention to his hands, their grip on the reins, the mare’s crested neck, the way her mane flowed like a rippling grain field, the sound of his laboured breathing. Anything to keep him grounded right here where he was. Anything to keep him from drifting into that ocean of stars that threatened to engulf him.

‘Who am I?’ he whispered. He didn’t know if he was asking himself the question or some other being lodged inside his mind. ‘Who am I?’ He wasn’t certain any more.

Teg looked at Kreshkali, watching her pupils expand until her eyes were black. She’d been talking about La Makee, giving him a full history of the witch’s life achievements, both glorious and catastrophic. Teg had been mesmerised, the sound of her voice and the proximity of her heart making his own race. Then she had stopped mid-sentence, her mouth going slack, eyes dilating.

He knew what it meant. She was in her other presence. She was with Nell. When she stirred, her pupils shrank, her eyes closed. Tears ran down her cheeks and he reached to brush them away. Her hand came up, catching his, her eyes opening. She looked past him. ‘It’s Rosette.’ Her voice was difficult to hear, a whisper swept away by the wind.

‘What’s happened?’ Teg leaned closer. ‘Is it the baby?’
Her long fingers laced with his. She squeezed his hand once before letting go. ‘The baby’s dead.’ Kreshkali stood. ‘I best tell Hotha.’

‘And the Sword Master?’
She nodded. ‘Of course. Him too.’
Teg got to his feet. ‘Can I go to Rosette? She’d be…’
‘She’d be gone.’
‘Where?’
‘I don’t know. Nell wrapped her in a healing spell straight after and she vanished.’ Kreshkali’s forehead furrowed with lines.
She looked golden in the late afternoon light. Teg reached out but she shook her head.
‘Bring Hotha to me, and An’ Lawrence. Please.’
Teg’s heart pounded and he turned away, leaping over a log and morphing into a wolf midair. He found the conflicting emotions too much for his human form. The wolf could handle them though. The wolf knew what to do. As Lupin his emotions sat without judgement or restraint, pure energy in honour of his feelings—for Kreshkali as well as Rosette. In that instant he had an image. It flashed into his mind like a bolt of lightning, illuminating his thoughts before disappearing again.
In that flicker of vision he saw Rosette, her body lithe and strong, arms wrapped around her familiar as they sat in the reeds, hunkered down, watching the Corsanon gorge. He sent the vision to Kreshkali and her voice came back to him, warm and comforting.
*Good work, Teg. And thank you.*
*Mistress?*
*For being there.*
He glanced back before bolting away, seeking first Hotha and then the Sword Master.

Shaea went to fetch the horses, rubbing sleep from her eyes. Her idea of freedom in another world seemed far away, a distant dream. Here she was, at the start of another day, her backside sore, arms aching, heart broken. The food in her belly had tasted strange—Rall said that was because it was fresh—and the despair of her brother’s death sapped her strength. She wasn’t where she wanted to be, not yet, but she would play along, pretending to be Rall’s apprentice for a little longer. Long enough to earn the confidence of the Entity. Long enough to learn to travel the corridors on her own and get somewhere else. Somewhere better.
The stable doors were open, the sunlight streaming in. It was warm already and she took off her cloak, tossing it over the railing. The two stable girls came around the corner, arms full of hay, faces smiling. ‘We fed yours first. That mare was banging on the manger fit to break it loose.’
‘Thank you,’ Shaea said, looking over the railing at the bay mare. She was nosing around in her manger for more.
‘Just a wisp, and then we ride,’ Shaea said to her. She gave both horses a small flake of hay and set to grooming them.
The shorter of the two stable girls stopped to watch. ‘You didn’t come back,’ she said, smiling.
Shaea shrugged, continuing to groom the horse. ‘I couldn’t get away.’ The girl moved off, the chores keeping her occupied. By the time Shaea had the horses tacked, saddled and bridled and ready to ride, she realised Clay had been watching her as well.
‘You’re not leaving without a word again, are you?’ He cringed as he spoke, pressing his hand into the side of his head as if to keep his brains from falling out.
‘I’m surprised to see you up, Clay, after what you drank last night.’
‘Did I drink that much? I can’t recall.’
‘Really?’ She laughed. ‘It was way too much.’
He unlatched the stall door. ‘What are you doing? Going off with the witch?’
‘Like I said last night, I’m her new apprentice.’
Clay grabbed her arm, pushing up her sleeve. ‘You don’t wear the tattoo of an initiate, Shaea.’
She jerked her arm away, the horse’s head flying up. ‘I do.’
‘Where?’
‘None of your business.’
‘Shaea, this is dangerous. You don’t know what you’re getting into.’
She levelled her eyes on his. ‘That’s where you’re wrong. If anything, you’re the one who’s on the cliff edge.’
Clay frowned. ‘Like Jarrod? On the quarry steps?’
She closed her mouth, lips tight. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’ Clay started to speak but her eyes shot past him to the entrance. ‘Get out. She’s coming. And you’re right—it is dangerous. Beware.’ She opened the stall door and swung it wide, tilting her head towards the back of the barn. He took the hint and left, disappearing behind the haystack before Rall appeared.
The witch wasn’t fooled. She followed the path of his exit, tapping her fingers on her staff. ‘Having a little
farewell, are we?’
‘He thinks I’m in danger, is all.’
Rall smiled, a hungry look. ‘He’s inconsequential. We will be there and back before he knows we’ve left.’
‘But he’s already seen me tack up, Rall.’
Rall unfocused her eyes, letting a stream of sounds escape her lips. ‘Not any more he doesn’t,’ she said, straightening her cloak. ‘Let’s go.’
‘What did you do?’
Rall glared at her and Shaea cleared her throat, trying again.
‘Where are we headed today, Mistress?’
That’s not something we will be discussing aloud. Have you forgotten how to send a mind message already? Hardly.
Well then? Your question please?
Where in blazing demon’s balls are we going now?
Rall covered her ears. No need to shout.
Where then? she said softly.
We’ll camp under the shadow of the eastern Prietas tonight and cross to Corsanon in the morning.
Back to Corsanon? Why?
There’s something to retrieve.
A treasure?
You can call it that, if you like.
Who’s it for?
You, Shaea.
Me?
You will have the honour of carrying it.
‘Well, I hope it’s not heavy. I’m already sore as cuss from riding so far.’
‘It’s light as a feather, my dear. Mount up!’
Shaea led the bay mare out into the sunshine, following Rall and the golden warhorse. She took a deep breath, shielding her mind. When she felt her thoughts were tight, well secluded from the probing mind of Rall, she searched for Clay and Shane. She kept the shield up, and sent them a querying message but there was no answer. Maybe they couldn’t read thoughts at all. She hoped that was it. The other option was too distasteful to consider.
After a long walk to warm up the horses and her aching muscles, she urged the mare forward, cantering beside Rall, heading towards the unknown treasure. She smiled. On reflection, this was much better than spending her days in the gutter, arms stretched out towards passing strangers, hoping for a coin or crust.

Grayson stood at the edge of the path, the depths of the Dumarkian Woods behind him. He’d walked with Nell in silence; they’d buried the baby near the old temple ruins, a young weeping willow planted to mark the spot.
‘Make me a willow-cabin at your gate, and call upon my soul within the house,’ he had said, reciting the ancient playwright William Shakespeare.
‘Write loyal cantons of contemned love,’ Nell whispered. ‘And sing them loud even in the dead of night.’
It was like being in a dream. Nothing felt real, neither his boots on the cold ground and the shovel over his shoulder nor the wings of the Three Sisters swooping past. Particularly not his aching heart. ‘She should have been here, for herself as much as for the infant’s honour.’
‘Should?’ Nell shook her head. ‘I don’t think so. Rosette doesn’t believe in death. How could she, after experiencing her own so recently?’
Grayson frowned. ‘Nell, that’s a ridiculous paradox and you know it.’
‘I do.’
He drifted off into his thoughts as they walked back to the cabin. He wanted to undo the past. He wanted to go back to that moment in the late afternoon heat of Temple Los Loma and tell Rosette he felt differently now. He wanted to go back and ask what was important to her. Instead, he had assumed he knew, without discussion, and he had withdrawn. Later, when they had talked about it, she’d said it was the natural proclivity of his sun sign, Cancer —Cobra as she called it—to self-protect. What was I protecting from? He couldn’t see the big fear any more. Was it intimacy? Uncertainty? Vulnerability? He had none of that with Rosette now and still he’d buried his child.
He kicked the dirt, shooting a rock out ahead of him. It caught Nell on the leg and she spun around, eyes blazing.
He ducked. ‘Sorry, I just…’
‘Just thought you might share the pain?’
‘No, I…’
‘Grayson, listen to me. If you want to change the past, do it.’
‘Easy for you to say.’
‘It is, for me, and for anyone. Care to learn?’
He caught up to her, switching the shovel to his other shoulder. ‘Please.’
‘It’s simple but you have to let go of the grudge.’
‘The grudge?’
‘The self-loathing-style resentment you are broiling in. I know the sign of the Cobra well. It has a knack for holding onto the past. I want you to drop it, at least long enough to see how your grip is making things worse.’
‘How can it make things worse if it’s already happened?’
‘Simple. Every time you re-visit the thought, you set it alight. You empower it to continue its creation.’
‘I don’t get it.’
‘Grayson, you’re a quantum geneticist. This is not beyond your grasp.’
He sighed. ‘I’m trying.’
‘That’s the problem. Forget about trying and visualise it.’ She pulled out her short knife, testing the edge. ‘Give me your hand.’
He hesitated.
‘Trust me.’
He laughed, holding up his palm. She took it and immediately gouged him.
‘Ouch!’ He snapped back his hand. ‘Nell, what’s that for?’
‘Your education. Now, think about that pain. Focus on it. Feel only the pain.’
‘I am! It’s all I can feel.’ He pressed the wound to stem the bleeding. ‘That really hurt. Look.’ He held it out to her, blood rushing into the grooves of his palm and around the back of his hand. ‘That’s going to leave a scar.’
She patted his cheek. ‘Walk with me, Grayson.’
He carried on down the path while she chatted about something Rosette did when she was young. It was a delightful story and he pictured her there, a small child scampering away from the nanny goat as fast as she could run.

The Three Sisters cawed in the distance; the sun was finally warming his face. Nell clapped her hands, bringing him out of the reverie.

‘Think about your palm again. Remember how it felt?’
‘I do. It hurt like demons.’ He held out his hand, staring at the red mark and crusting blood. ‘It needs suturing, you know. At least three stitches.’
‘Good. Focus on that. Think of nothing but how much it hurts.’
‘Nell, this isn’t helping. It hurts worse than when you first did it.’
‘Ah.’ She smiled. ‘Is it making more sense to you then?’
Grayson stopped. ‘Are you saying that re-visiting the past is affecting the present?’
‘It’s more like the future is affecting the past. The further you go into the future, the more you are getting stabbed in the past.’

He scratched his head.
‘Grayson, the mind doesn’t know the difference between a memory and a current event.’

The furrow between his eyes deepened. ‘What?’
‘There is no difference between the process of remembering, imagining and seeing. The mind has no sense of time, so everything is experienced as real and in the present, whether it’s already occurred or a fantasy about the future.’
‘This is proven?’
She laughed. ‘You’re such a scientist.’ She took his hand and held her palm over it; the redness and discomfort vanished at once. ‘It is part of the natural paradigm on Gaela, so there is no proof needed here. On Earth, centuries ago, it was known but the information was withheld.’
‘I can imagine. ASSIST wouldn’t want the masses getting a hold of that concept.’
‘They didn’t. The point is, if you continue to remember events in a certain way, the results of those events, painful or happy, or positive or enlightened, continue to affect your reality. So you can keep thinking and reliving your conversation with Rosette that brings you grief, or you can play it out in your mind a different way—the way you want it to be. Focus on that, and before you know it, the old memory loses power.’
‘The pain goes away?’
‘Does your palm still hurt?’
‘You healed it, Nell. It doesn’t hurt at all.’
She laughed. ‘You thought I healed it, Grayson?’

‘You didn’t?’

‘It doesn’t matter if I did or not. What matters is what you think. When I was telling you the story about Rosette’s first experience milking a goat, did your palm hurt?’

He cleared his throat. ‘Not at all.’

‘And when you put your attention back on it?’

‘Like the demons again.’

‘So you understand. Pay attention to how you remember. Change it where you want. Think it the way you wish it were true.’

‘And that affects the future and the past?’

She put her arm around him and kissed his cheek.

‘Does it ever!’

Grayson contemplated her illustration when they returned to the cottage. He made them a pot of liquorice and mint tea, watching the herbs saturate, sinking to the bottom before securing the lid. Nell lit candles and burned scented oils. It soothed his soul. The sun brightened the stained-glass windows and he felt lighter.

‘Better?’ Nell asked.

‘Much.’

‘Part of her wasn’t here for this,’ she said, staring out the window. ‘I didn’t put it together before but it makes sense now.’ Her hands were on her hips, a crooked smile on her lips. ‘I’m guessing Rosette had more than a quick glimpse at my grimoire.’

‘What did she read?’

‘Enough to understand how to be in two places at once, I’ll wager.’

Grayson’s mouth dropped open.

‘Witches’ business,’ he muttered.

‘Indeed.’

‘What’s next, Nell? Do we set out to find her?’

‘I’ve a pretty good idea of where she is.’

‘If I’m not mistaken, she’s hiding in the reeds.’

‘Keeping watch over Passillo?’

Nell nodded. ‘One of us needs to get back to Temple Los Loma. See what the mountains are doing,’ Nell said.

‘Like to volunteer?’

‘Good plan.’ He studied her face. ‘Where are you going?’

‘Right now? To sleep. You too. Neither of us has had a wink for days.’

Grayson yawned and nodded. ‘And then?’

‘I’m off to the heart of old Dumarka. There’s a High Priestess named Saphon I need to meet.’ She took up her mug and sat across from Grayson. ‘There are a few more pieces to this puzzle we’ve yet to fit.’

‘What can I watch for on Earth?’

‘A thief in the night, I’d say. And, Grayson, mind your thoughts. Pulling this off is going to take a lot of reaching back…’

‘To change the future?’

‘Precisely.’

Maudi, wake up. Someone’s coming.

Where, Drayco?

I smell horses, and witches. Upwind, on the far side of the gorge.

Rosette loosened her grip on Drayco’s neck and propped herself up. She had slept the night with her arms around him; the warmth of his body was pervasive but she’d still shivered and sobbed. Her eyes were puffy slits, and she blinked them, waiting for her vision to clear. On the opposite side of the gorge, two riders approached—one on a bay mare, the other on a golden warhorse.

‘Amarillo,’ she whispered. ‘That’s La Makee.’

Since when does she have dark hair and long legs?

Since she learned to be in two places at once. That’s the glamour, Dray. She was like that in the corridors when Jarrod was lost, remember? Rosette felt heat rise to her face, the hairs on the back of her neck standing out. She gripped her sword, pulling the blade a fraction from the scabbard.
She’s sensing this way, Maudi.

Got it.

Even though they were hidden deep in the reeds, Rosette wove a glamour around them, merging them with their surroundings. Through the tiniest peephole, she watched, using all her energy to keep the glamour up, and to keep herself from morphing into a winged lion and tearing out the witch’s heart.

We don’t know for certain that she killed Jarrod, Maudi.

That’s why I am still here, in the reeds, and not over there, my sword against her throat.

Do you recognise the other rider?

Rosette focused on the girl dismounting the bay mare. She had honey-red hair, shining like gold against her dark cloak. She walked as if she’d been overlong in the saddle, though she had sat the horse as smoothly as any well-trained equestrian. She might be from the portal that night as well. The girl with the dark eyes? Said her brother had died? Can you tell from here? It’s too far for me.

She has dark eyes and yes, it looks like her.

Must be Makee’s apprentice. What was her name?

Shaea?

Sounds right. Rosette tuned into the girl’s thoughts. To her surprise, she met with a strong mind shield.

Definitely an apprentice. But if she’s not aware of us, why is she shielding?

From Makee?

Interesting. She didn’t risk testing La Makee’s mind. That would give them away as quick as a shout. Rosette could learn more by observing. Besides, she knew what Makee was here for. She had come for the spell. She can’t get to it, Drayco. Not unless she empties the gorge.

Makee had handed off her mount to the girl and was climbing the rocks. The water was clear, the cairn that marked the spell’s hiding place visible at the bottom, at least two chains below the surface. Rosette had studied it the day before. She knew there would be no retrieving the spell unless she could morph into a fish, and even then she’d have no hands to clasps it.

Drayco had suggested morphing into a melesin, a mythic creature from the Rahana Island tales—half human and half dolphin. She’d laughed. Even if it were possible, she didn’t have the skill.

Anything is possible, if you can imagine it, Drayco had reminded her.

That’s just it, Dray. I can’t imagine how to do it!

She guessed Makee had come to the same conclusion. She left her perch on the rocks and got back in the saddle, taking the trail to the top of the gorge. As the horses disappeared from sight, Rosette let the glamour down.

‘She’s gone upstream.’

To divert the water.

‘It’d take one demon’s fire of a spell to do it, but yes. I think that’s her plan.’

Then what? She can’t carry Passillo.

‘That’s the one aspect of this whole business I haven’t figured out. Only my line can use the spell. Maybe Makee is going to grab it and try to keep it from us.’

A dog with a bone?

Rosette chuckled. ‘Something like that. Whatever it is, she has a strong intention going.’

One that precludes Jarrod.

‘That must be part of it. She’s gone to a lot of trouble to get him out of the picture.’ Her hand went to her belly, pulling away when she felt it flat, hard.

Are you all right, Maudi.

I’m fine…Thank you, sweetheart. She sighed as she looked at the twist in the path that wound behind the mountain. ‘What’s that witch up to?’ she asked aloud.

Follow, Maudi?

‘Oh yes. I’m not letting her get far from my sights unless…’

Maudi?

She climbed a nearby boulder and tossed a rock into the depths. It sank to the bottom like an arrow to its target.

I’ve got an idea, Drayco. With a little luck, I think it just might work!

Grayson gripped the gates of Temple Los Loma, holding the wrought-iron post to keep from being knocked off his feet. The ground churned, the surrounding mountains choking the sky with smoke. The haze burned his eyes, the air thick with sulphur and ash. Fissures cracked the land around him and he buckled, staying down on his knees until the undulations subsided. The ground gave one last shudder, like a belch, and went still.

He brushed the red dust from his pants as he stood and headed down the lane towards the temple. An eerie
silence blanketed the land; not a bird was in the sky. The dogs didn’t bark to greet him, and the paddocks were empty. There was no sign of the Three Sisters either. The heat baked down and his shirt was drenched when he reached the temple grounds. What he saw in front of him was not expected. He stood, barely noticing when Fynn came up, wagging his tail and sitting on his feet. The pup whimpered and Grayson squatted down to pat him.

‘What’s this, little Fynn? What’s happened here?’

It seemed the spell that had protected Temple Los Loma all the centuries was failing. Statues were overturned, trees down, water flowing past in a muddy torrent where the aqueduct had ruptured. One of the buildings near the orchard had collapsed and a fire was being put out. He spotted Annadusa heading towards him, her sleeves rolled up, her hair tied back, wisps clinging to her damp forehead. Her hands were covered in soot.

‘Spell’s broken?’ he asked, bending down to embrace her.

Fynn barked as if to answer first.

‘Only in the last few days. I can’t tell why. It’s stood for so long.’ She squeezed his hand. ‘Rosette?’

He lowered his eyes. ‘Baby died…’

Annadusa bit her lower lip. ‘And the mother?’

‘Gone to…I don’t know where.’ He lifted his face, tears in his eyes. ‘We buried him in the Dumarkian Woods.’

‘Him?’

‘It was a boy.’

‘That can’t be, unless there were twins. Even so, only the female would have developed.’

‘It was a boy,’ he said again.

‘And Kreshkali? Where is she?’

A call from the barn turned their heads around. A young girl was trying to control a horse, blood soaking its neck and chest.

‘We’ll talk later,’ Annadusa said, hurrying towards the barn.

‘Where do you need me?’

‘The fires. There’re still some to put out.’

Grayson left his pack by the temple steps and ran to the shed, grabbing a sack to beat out the flames. Fynn stayed behind, trembling, watching the road.
CHAPTER 19
PRIETA FOOTHILLS, CUSCA PLAINS & CORSANON, GAELA & TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH

Kreshkali pounded her fist on the table and the argument came to an abrupt halt. An’ Lawrence and Hotha were not in accord and even Teg had been emboldened by the debate, firing his thoughts at the others. They’d been yelling and howling out their concerns and conflicting ideas for the better part of the morning and Kreshkali had had enough.

‘If you can’t speak one at a time, how do you expect to hear each other?’ she asked. ‘You’re behaving like whelps with a single shin bone.’

He’s the whelp, An’ Lawrence said to her privately. He glared at Teg. Why is he even here?

Because he’s my apprentice.

I can’t see how this will resolve as long as your Sword Master refuses to acknowledge the true threat of the Corsanons, Hotha said, his inner voice drowning out her own.

‘Get out of my head, the both of you,’ she yelled, rubbing her temples.

They all pulled back and she stood, leaning into the table and tapping her finger on the map. ‘Let’s review what we know,’ she said, her voice low and smooth. ‘Just the facts. Where are the Corsanon warriors?’

Hotha stood beside her, pointing to the mountainous regions. ‘They’ve crossed the Goregan River and are heading for the northern Prieta pass, ill prepared.’

‘More than ill prepared,’ Teg said. ‘Now that they are out of the Corsanon lands, they’re storming like locusts.’

‘Locusts?’

‘They’re slaughtering livestock, felling trees and fouling streams. They’re five hundred strong. It’s a lot of mouths to feed, man, woman and beast. They’re decimating the land as they go. The settlers in their path are being slain. They can’t stand against that many, even the fey ones.’

Kreshkali visualised the path left behind them, and narrowed her eyes to slits.

‘Now can you see the need to stop them before they get any further? This is no longer a diversion. We must protect the land,’ An’ Lawrence said.

Hotha raised his hand. ‘But if we wait until Rashnan and the Lupins under Los Loma arrive…’

‘It will be too late!’ An’ Lawrence cut in.

The argument erupted again.

‘Enough!’ Kreshkali gripped the edge of the table and overturned it in one quick heave. Scylla’s hackles went up as she leapt aside, hissing. Cups, mugs, maps and plates crashed to the ground, the notes floating like leaves in the sudden silence. Kreshkali turned to Hotha. ‘Is Rashnan coming?’

‘He’s a day’s trek away, one hundred Lupins strong.’

She wheeled on the Sword Master. ‘How far are we from the Corsanons if we march immediately?’

‘Thirty leagues to the scouts. Another ten to the legions.’

She pulled the table back upright, the others helping.

‘It’s clear we cannot let them reach Temple Dumarka. That must be protected, first order. Can we take half our troops and circle past the scouts?’

‘Trapping them between us and Rashnan’s warriors?’ Hotha asked.

‘That could work,’ An’ Lawrence said, tracing the route on the map.

‘As long as we weren’t detected.’ Teg’s voice was soft.

Kreshkali left the three with their heads together, working out the details.

Mistress?

I’m going to get some sleep. Wake me in an hour. She smiled at his affirmative and headed for her tent.

Clay wiped down his guitar strings before closing the case. He slung it over his back then mounted the chestnut gelding and rode out into the sunshine. When Shane didn’t follow, he called over his shoulder. ‘It’s a horse, Shane, not the peaks of Prieta.’

Shane heaved, scrambling into the saddle. The brown horse sighed, swishing his tail when the saddle slipped to the side, Shane hitting the ground like a sack of potatoes.

‘Forget to tighten your girth?’ Clay asked, laughter crinkling his face.

Shane let out a string of curses as he brushed himself off.

‘Who taught you to ride?’ Clay asked.
‘Rosette, though I’ve had little chance to practise.’
‘I can see that.’ Clay hopped off the chestnut and re-saddled Shane’s horse, tightening the girth snugly and giving him a leg up. ‘Even your reins! You’re sending her in circles.’
Shane sat rigid, looking at either side of the horse’s neck, trying to get the lengths right. Clay held the horse still, taking a twist out of the bridle strap. ‘Lucky she’s a school horse, eh?’ After a little more adjusting they were on the road, heading back to Treeon. ‘I still don’t understand it,’ Clay said. ‘Why did I wake up in the stables? I can’t recall a thing.’
‘You got very drunk.’
‘I don’t remember but I guess those stable girls might have been enough to lure me to the barn late last night.’
Shane shook his head. ‘I don’t think so.’
‘Didn’t they appeal to you?’
‘Very much, but they had eyes only for each other. Besides, I distinctly recall you staggering into bed around dawn. Something’s not right.’
‘Most likely your memory.’
‘Maybe. I had a bit to drink myself.’
‘The more important question of the morning is, why would the witch Rall be riding towards Corsanon with a war about to break?’
‘War?’ Shane screwed up his face.
‘They’re marching on Dumarka. I can practically feel the ground shaking from here.’
‘You can’t feel any such thing,’ Shane said.
‘I can, and I do.’
Shane shook his head. ‘Perhaps she’s off to sack the unguarded citadel, or maybe the coffers. Who knows? Witches’ business.’
‘Our business. We’re witches’ spies.’ Clay grinned but let it fade when he saw Shane’s response. ‘What’s wrong now?’
‘Witches’ spies? You say it like it was an honour.’
‘It is!’
‘We’re bards caught in a death game, way over our heads.’
Clay wrinkled his nose. ‘I hadn’t thought of it that way.’
‘I have.’
They rode on, the whistle and chorus of magpies filling the air around them.
‘How do we get this news to Nell?’ Clay asked. ‘She’ll want to know.’
‘If she’s anything like the other Nells I’ve met, she’ll come to us before the day is out.’
‘Other Nells?’
‘Don’t ask. I can’t even explain it to myself.’
They trotted past farmlands, the pastures close-cropped, the cattle fat. A bird of prey whistled overhead and Shane’s horse came to a sudden stop. He slammed into the pommel, cursing. ‘What’s that for?’ he asked the horse, digging her sides with his heels. She didn’t budge.
‘Look, there.’ Clay pointed to the sky. ‘The bird’s coming this way.’
Shane’s horse snorted, backing up. A huge raptor headed straight towards them. It was flanked by three ravens.
‘Ease up on your reins. Legs still,’ Clay said. ‘She’s just spooked. Go with it.’ His eye followed the progress of the bird. ‘Why’s it coming at us like that?’
‘To land. You’ll have to do it. I can’t keep my horse still.’
‘Do what?’
‘Roll down your sleeve and hold out your arm.’
‘You’re kidding?’
‘She needs a place to touch down before she morphs.’
‘Morphs?’
‘It’s Nell. Be quick.’
Clay swallowed hard and held out his arm in time for the black falcon to stall overhead and alight on his wrist. The claws barely curled around his sleeve before she sprang, a shock wave blasting his face. His horse’s head was up, mane streaming in the wind. As he watched, mouth open, the falcon dissolved like grains of sand and a cloaked witch appeared. The chestnut horse jumped sideways and Clay was nearly unseated before he brought the animal under control.
‘Sorry, lads.’ Nell clucked to the horses and they settled, though their ears remained pricked, their necks crested. ‘What news do you have? Is Makee afoot?’
'Not her,' Shane said. ‘At least, not the Makee we left at Treeon.’

‘Who then?’

‘Her name’s Rall, a dark-haired witch, riding a golden warhorse.’

‘Beautiful woman,’ Shane said.

Clay nodded. ‘She was in the pub last night.’

‘For how long?’

‘She stayed over.’

‘Alone?’

Clay shook his head. ‘With her apprentice, Shaea.’

‘Shaea, is it?’

‘From the night in the corridors, yes.’ Clay sighed. ‘With the honey-red hair and dark eyes.’

‘She’s beautiful as well,’ Shane added.

‘Did you see, after noticing all this beauty, where they were headed?’

‘That’s the curious thing,’ Shane said. ‘They were riding straight back to Corsanon.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘The road only leads two ways—east to Corsanon or west to Treeon. They were heading east.’

‘Good work, lads.’ Nell went to the side of the road. ‘Mind your horses. I’m off.’

‘Wait.’ Clay held up his hand. ‘What do you want us to do?’

‘Back to Treeon. Let me know if Makee makes a move.’

‘But…’

‘Thank you.’ Nell dropped to one knee and sprang, shooting into the air. The horses spun in circles when the warp of energy smacked them. Shane lost his seat and hit the ground, Clay reaching for the brown horse’s reins as it turned to bolt. He managed to grab them and hang on but the effort jerked him from the saddle, the wind knocked from his lungs when he fell. By the time he got to his feet, the falcon had vanished and his horse was cropping grass at the side of the road. He brushed himself off, checking his guitar case. ‘No worse for it,’ he said. ‘On to Treeon then?’

Shane rubbed his shoulder, staring into the distance. ‘Without my horse?’

‘She’s headed the right way.’ Clay waved in the direction the horse had run. ‘Come on. We’ll find her around the next bend.’ He offered a stirrup and his arm. ‘I can double you until we do.’

‘No thanks. I’d rather walk.’

The conversation in the kitchen fell silent. Grayson sat across from Annadusa, Fynn curled up asleep near his feet. The fires were finally out. He’d eaten his fill, and bathed, but still had not slept. From the strain on his mother’s face, he felt sure she hadn’t slept either. She poured him more tea and his lids grew heavy. ‘What’s in this?’ he asked.

‘Nothing much. Some ginger, mint, that sort of thing.’

He cocked an eyebrow. ‘What else, Mother?’

‘Maybe some valerian root…’

‘Maybe a fistful?’

‘Oh, all right,’ Annadusa said after draining her mug. ‘A teaspoon of the stuff. You need to sleep, and so do I.’

He nodded. ‘What started the fires?’

‘I’m not sure. I felt the spell lose potency. We need to reinforce it, but I don’t know where to begin.’

‘Has there been anyone about that seemed strange to you?’

She chuckled. ‘You mean stranger than those haunting Lupins and other Gaelean witches that wield swords and weave spells?’

He laughed with her for a moment. ‘It feels like we’re being watched, is all.’

‘I hadn’t noticed. Been too much to tend to.’

‘That’s what worries me.’

‘You think the fires were set on purpose?’

‘It’s possible.’

‘By whom?’

‘I don’t know, but I wish Kreshkali were here. She might pick it up.’

‘There’s a way to find out.’ Annadusa refilled her mug.

‘How?’

‘Temple Los Loma is an island. We’ve nothing but red desert around us. Unless a witch flies in, there have to be tracks.’
'Tracks can be covered.' He frowned. 'But not scent!'
'Grayson, no one here’s got the nose for it,'
Fynn woke up and yipped.
'He does,' Grayson said, patting the dog’s head. 'But we can’t communicate with him…not like Rosette can.’
Annadusa brightened. 'A Lupin might hear his thoughts! And a Lupin would have the nose for it too.' She leaned forward and grabbed his hand. ‘That’s our answer.’
‘But there aren’t any about. They all followed Hotha and the Sword Master.’
She smiled, her face creasing. ‘Not all. There was one left behind. The goddess knows she grumbled about it too.’ Annadusa went to the sink and rinsed her cup. ‘Maluka’s here, and she’s perfect. Fynn adores her. I’m sure they talk.’
‘Maluka? I know her. Fights like a demon. I’m surprised they excluded her. What did she do?’
‘Broke her clavicle. It’s nearly healed.’
‘But she can morph, sniff out the perimeter with Fynn?’
‘I can’t see why not. She looked at her son. ‘Where are you going?’
‘To get her, while the trail’s hot.’
Fynn’s tail was wagging.
‘It’s three in the morning, Grayson. Let the girl sleep. She’s been fighting fires for two days.’
He felt his lids grow heavier and suspected Annadusa had cast a spell with the words.
‘You’re right. But wake me at dawn. We need to know what we’re up against.’
‘You mean more than a volatile environment?’
He grimaced. ‘Volatile is putting it lightly, but yes.’
‘You think ASSIST is still…active?’
‘If they are, we best not be blind to it.’
‘The library!’
‘That would be the first thing they’d want to destroy.’
‘We’ve guards around the temple grounds now.’
‘Good.’ He kissed her cheek before heading upstairs. ‘I’ll see you at dawn.’
‘Grayson,’ she called him back. ‘Are you all right? With Rosette, I mean, and the baby.’
‘I am.’ He nodded. ‘Everything is all right.’

*Mistress*
Kreshkali opened her eyes.
*I’ve brought coffee.*
She yawned, stretching her arms over her head.
‘Good man,’ she whispered, looking at his shadow in front of the tent flap. ‘Come in, Teg.’
He ducked his head at the entrance, light streaming in with him. He had two mugs and a plate of flat bread.
‘How’d it go?’ she asked, taking the drink. ‘Do we have agreement?’
‘We do. An’ Lawrence is leading half the troops south to circle behind the Corsanons. They left almost an hour ago.’
‘Hotha’s holding on here?’
‘Until Rashnan catches up.’
‘Excellent.’ She ate in silence, studying his face.
‘I want you with An’ Lawrence, Teg.’ She held his eyes. ‘Don’t look so worried. It’s not a punishment.’
‘I thought I would fight beside you.’
‘You may still, but I want you with him for another reason.’
He sat immobile, eyes soft, waiting for her to continue. She loved that about him, the way he didn’t interrupt. So much patience in one being, true to his Capricorn sun. He had Earth magic, through and through, even though he was born on Gaela. Or maybe because of it.
‘All Lupins carry Earth magic,’ he said, his voice barely audible.
‘I remember.’ She blew on the edge of her mug, taking a sip, offering a smile.
‘My task with An’ Lawrence?’
‘Depending on what Makee pulls, Rosette may come up behind the Corsanons. I want you there in case she does. She’s no idea of our plans and I can’t reach her.’
Teg nodded. ‘Me neither, but I’ll find her if she’s anywhere to be found.’
Kali bit into the bread. It was still warm from the pan and had a smoky taste. ‘Thank you.’ She washed it down with more coffee, strong and black. ‘How long will it take you to catch up?’
‘I’ll be at their camp tonight, whenever I leave.’
She laughed. ‘I love your confidence.’
His voice went very soft. ‘I love your…’
She stopped his words, her fingers resting lightly on his lips. She could feel his pulse there.
‘Kali,’ he whispered.
She brushed his hair back from his cheek, leaning forward. Her lips almost touched his. Almost. She stood abruptly. ‘I’ll meet you,’ she said. ‘When there are no Corsanons between us.’ She didn’t hear his response. She was out of the tent and into the sky, streaming for the heart of the Dumarkian Woods before he could respond.

Grayson tapped on the door, the frame vibrating as he did. Maluka had taken over one of the rooms next to his workshop. He wondered why he’d not noticed that, and laughed to himself. *I’ve not had time to notice the little things, the inconsequential details of life.*

_Inconsequential, is it?_
The voice rocked him back on his heels. It sounded like it was inside his head.

‘Entrée.’

He rubbed his neck. ‘Lack of sleep,’ he muttered to himself. He opened the door to Maluka’s room and was met with the scent of peppermint oil and soot. It took his eyes a moment to adjust to the dark.

‘Come in,’ she said.

There was a short candle burning on her bedside table, a journal face down on the pillow. The shelf above her bed was stacked with books and odd items—feathers and stones, sticks and woven webs. He didn’t know if they were for spells or ritual, or simply a Lupin girl’s tendency to collect interesting things. He pulled his eyes away in case they were for magical purposes and turned to her. ‘I got you up,’ he said, realising she wore only a singlet and a sarong draped around her hips.

She shook her head. ‘Couldn’t sleep.’

He understood. If it hadn’t been for Annadusa’s herbs, he doubted he would have caught his few hours. ‘We need your help,’ he said, lowering his voice.

‘That’s what I’m here for.’
‘Can you communicate with the pup?’
Fynn sat by the door, his eyes never wavering from Maluka.
‘Of course. What’s up?’

The breeze came in from the open window, ruffling the curtain. ‘Are you healed enough to check the perimeter?’

‘Run the boundary? Certainly.’ She bookmarked her journal and returned it to the shelf. ‘You think the fires were intentional?’

‘I want to rule it out.’
She nodded. ‘Just give me a moment to change.’

‘Of course. I’ll…’
She peeled her singlet off and dropped her sarong before he could finish his sentence or avert his eyes. By the time she’d buttoned her leggings and vest, he realised he was still staring.

‘Close your mouth, Grayson.’ She laughed, strapping on her sword. ‘It’s nothing you’ve not seen plenty of, with your line of work.’

He stiffened, looking past her to the window. ‘I…’

Can you keep up?
He frowned, realising she’d gone, slipping right past him and out the door, Fynn behind her. He followed, boots clipping over the cobbles. She was stretching in the centre of the plaza, arms high over her head. The grounds were empty, the sunrise turning everything rose-gold. Most of the residents would only just be getting to sleep.

Or trying to sleep.
A voice filled his mind again; her voice, he realised, sweet and warm. Fynn barked, snapping him out of the daydream. ‘How do you do that?’ he asked her.

She laughed. ‘I’m Lupin; you’re receptive. How can I not?’
He shook his head. He was on unfamiliar ground with this young woman. She reminded him of Rosette, and something else he couldn’t quite recall.

And if you’re worried about spies, we best play it safe. We can make out to be heading for the gates, checking the land for damage from that last quake.

‘Quake?’
A sizeable one ripped through here two days ago. Where’ve you been?
He shut his eyes. ‘Elsewhere.’ He cleared his throat, speaking over her head. ‘We’ll check for damage, out to the gates and surrounds.’

*And halfway there I’ll switch and run the fence line. Fynn can stick with you. I’ll be waiting at the gates.*

‘That’s ambitious.’

That’s Lupin.

She was proud of her heritage and confident in her abilities. He liked it.

‘So many crows,’ he said as they crested the rise, the entrance gates visible on the horizon.

‘They’re seeking refuge.’

‘It must be getting worse out there.’ He shaded his eyes against the sun, straining to see in the distance. The sky was full of ash and the haze prevented any view of life beyond the plains. ‘We’ll need to check on Half Moon Bay. They could need help.’

‘Half Moon Bay isn’t the only other place left on Earth, you know,’ Maluka said. She looked over her shoulder. ‘Cover your eyes.’

He had barely time to shut them before the sand stung his arms and face. When he looked again he saw a rust-brown she wolf running away, her coat turning to gold in the morning light. She shot towards the fence line, dust billowing. Fynn darted after her, spinning back on his heels to stick with Grayson. She must have set him the task—sniff his way to the gates and let them know if he identified an intruder. Grayson walked on, letting his thoughts settle to the bottom of his mind. In the trees the crows rasped their eerie language, joined by the chatter of jay birds and plovers.

Plovers? *That’s not right.* He squinted at the birds. Some dropped to the ground in front of him, their stilt-like legs pacing in the hot sand, a staccato *kerr kick* *ki* blasting from their yellow beaks like miniature horns. ‘What are you doing here, you crazy birds? The ocean’s that way.’

The yellow-wattled plovers were one of the few sea birds that had survived the algal blooms and sea devils. Many were missing a foot or a leg, but they’d migrated to the silt-covered mudflats that spread across the once fertile ground of the San Joaquin Valley. What brought them this far from the coast both baffled and worried him. They best check on Half Moon Bay soon.

He took a swig from his canteen and jogged the rest of the way to the gate, Fynn nose to the ground. When they reached the apple trees, Maluka was back in human form. She was sprawled out beneath the branches, her eyes closed, her chest rising and falling in rapid succession.

‘Have a good run?’

‘I did,’ she said, opening her eyes. She pushed Fynn away when he tried to lick her face. *And not unproductive either.* The young dog sat at attention.

Grayson picked two apples and handed her one. ‘Let’s hear it.’

She polished the green fruit on her vest and took a bite, the juice running down her chin. He looked away. *Too much like Rosette.*

She straightened her spine, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. ‘You’ll want to get over that, Grayson.’

‘Pardon me?’

‘I’m Maluka, no one else, and I’ll not walk on eggshells because you’ve been hurt.’

He shined his apple on his sleeve, watching her face. She didn’t avert her eyes. ‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘Nor will I.’ He bit into the crisp fruit, the sugary taste melting on his tongue. ‘Tell me what you found?’

She chewed and swallowed. ‘I will, but you’re not going to like it.’

Rosette stood naked on the rocky outcropping, staring at the bottom of the gorge. She could do it. Her eardrums would blow out—no way around that—but it was worth the risk. The wounds would heal, the pain would pass. It didn’t matter, as long as she could get to Passillo before La Makee. *Before Rall and her young apprentice.*

*Maudi, I don’t like it. If you black out before you reach the surface, I don’t know if I can save you.*

‘We’ve been over it. There’s no time to weave a rope long enough.’ She clutched a fistful of his neck fur. ‘I’ll be all right. It’s just like scallop diving in South Sea Cove.’

*Scallop diving was never as deep as this.*

‘You don’t know. You weren’t there.’

*Was it this deep?*

‘No. But it’s a lot like this, in theory.’

*A lot like* and *just like* are not quite the same.

‘True.’ She shivered. ‘I’m getting my intention warmed up, Dray. I need to believe I can do it.’

*You can, Maudi.*
‘I think so too, thank you!’ She hoisted a rock. It was a quarter of her weight and had taken the afternoon to dig out of the field. Her biceps quivered as she pushed it high over her head. After three exaggerated breaths, she dove, throwing the weight in front of her and hanging on tight.

The water hit like an icy rain, chilling her skin while the blood drained from her extremities. Her ears cleared in a matter of seconds but she plummeted too fast to keep up with the building pressure. A searing pain shot through her head and she swallowed hard, ignoring the urge to drop the rock and shoot back to the surface. She clung tight and relaxed her body, soothing her hunger for air and the tearing pain in her eardrums. When she thought she would have to let go, her fingers losing their grip, unable to respond to her will, she clanked into the granite floor of the gorge, on top of the spell’s cairn. Keeping one hand on the weight, she tore at the rocks that sheltered the spell in its crystal vial. I’ve got it, Dray. It’s in my hand.

Swim, Maudi. Surface. It’s been too long.

She clutched the vial, the same one she’d worn as a child, Bethsay’s child. She pushed the memories aside and kicked, her legs working in smooth, even strokes, the pain in her head slowly replaced with lassitude.

Dizzy, Dray. I’m…

Swim, Maudi! Don’t stop now. Kick. You’re nearly there.

She knew about shallow-water blackout. She’d seen Liam succumb when he and Jarrod challenged each other, competing for the largest catch in the scallop coves at the south end of Lister Bay. She bit her tongue hard, letting a few bubbles of air escape her lips. Old air, stale air. She had to breathe!

Her nose led and she watched the surface appear, a warping wall of sky blue filling her vision. It was close now. Light. The water suddenly warmer. Tingling. She smiled, more air bubbles escaping. They rose around her and she bit down on her tongue again to stay awake, the pain keeping her from gulping before she reached the surface.

The water felt almost hot to the touch at the very top. She saw a flash of movement, the strong strokes of her temple cat’s legs dog-paddling towards her. He clamped his jaws around her upper arm when she broke the surface, keeping her from slipping back under. She gasped, sucking in air and water at the same time. Rosette choked and sputtered while Drayco hauled her to the shore.

She yelled at the intensity of his jaws around her bicep, stopping only to gasp and cough. Her feet touched the bottom when they reached the bank and she crawled out of the gorge, collapsing in the mud between clumps of reeds, panting for breath. Warm sticky fluid trickled from her ears. She rolled over on her side to throw up. Drayco stood over her, licking her face, and she clutched his neck with one hand, the other throbbing with pain.

Thank you, Drayco. You saved me.

Do you still have it? Did you hold onto Passillo?

She looked down at her hand, a tight fist, knuckles white. Slowly she relaxed her fingers, mud oozing out between them. In the palm of her hand was the vial, pulsing with a faint blue light.

We got it, Dray. Passillo is here with us. Jarrod is here with us. We are safe. The corridors are safe.

That’s a relief, he said, stepping back a few feet before doing a full body shake. Water flung from him in arcs, his fur spiked like lava peaks. You need to get warm, Maudi. You’re the colour of mould.

‘Nice comparison.’ She struggled to sit up. ‘Dray, you put tooth holes in my arm.’ Her hands went to her ears.

‘Drayco? Drayco!’

Maudi, don’t shout. They’ll hear you in Corsanon.

‘Drayco! I can’t…I can’t…’ She pulled her hands back from her head, her fingertips bloody. I can’t hear. She looked at the clouds moving under the sun, the treetops swaying, the gorge water bubbling past. She surveyed the silence, her eyes returning to Drayco. I’m deaf.

Grayson finished his apple, the sweet juice washing down the bile that rose in his throat. ‘Are you sure, Maluka? ASSIST?’

‘I’ve spent time in Half Moon Bay, remember? I was there when we stormed ASSIST. Their scent is all over the place. The boot prints, everything. They climbed the fence a league to the west. Three of them. Maybe a fourth. The tracks are crisscrossed.’

‘Behind the first knoll?’ He shooed away flies that were alighting on his apple core.

‘They were out of sight, but the scent is clear.’

Grayson shaded his eyes; the sun was baking the top of his head, even through the branches. ‘That means we’ve trackers among us?’ he asked. ‘Spies?’

‘We had. They’re gone now. The trail leads back, towards the coast. Three of them at least.’

‘There could be one among us still?’

‘Either that, or they didn’t survive.’

He searched the distance. ‘Trackers,’ he whispered. ‘ASSIST isn’t down after all.’
‘What are they, exactly? Scouts?’
‘ASSIST’s hunting squads.’
She cleared her throat. ‘What do they hunt?’

He reached for her hand, hauling her up. When she stood in front of him, he didn’t let go. ‘Originally they were after witches, techno-witches to be exact. Then they tracked Jarrod. Followed him to Gaela, too.’

‘And now? What are they after?’
‘I can’t be sure, Maluka, but it seems they’re after us.’
‘I’d say they’re not far from their goal then. What do we do?’

‘We wait.’

‘Wait, like nesting ducks? Ridiculous! I’ll not be…’
‘Easy. We wait for Kreshkali. She won’t be long.’
Maluka strode beside him, her fists clenched. ‘And if she doesn’t come?’

‘She will.’

‘How can you be so sure?’

‘Because I believe it is true. We aren’t going to let Earth go under!’

‘Go under?’ Maluka looked at the jagged red plains and the distant mountains like chimneys clogging the skies with black dust. Sweat ran down her face. She blinked her eyes. ‘How can you be so sure it hasn’t already?’

‘Because we’re still here.’

Kreshkali towered above the cliffs of the North Seas, clinging onto the highest branch of a cypress. There she perched as the sun rose, checking the landscape with her falcon eyes. As if through a telescope, she could see fine details leagues away—the paper-thin ear of a mouse, backlit by the sun, red veins standing out like rivers in a map; a drop of amber trickling down the trunk of a distant pine; the flap of purple flags anchored to Temple Dumarka’s turrets. She watched for signs of being followed—particularly trackers in the woods. When she was convinced there were none, she waited a little longer before swooping down to the temple grounds, announcing herself with a high-pitched whistle.

Saphon met her on the steps, her temple cat, Noel, by her side. ‘How lovely of you to return so soon,’ she said, her arms outstretched. She kissed Kreshkali’s cheeks, one and then the other, and then her lips.

‘The pleasure is mine.’

‘Come. We’ll have morning tea and talk of the weather. I sense a storm is coming.’

‘It’s building, indeed. Your senses do not betray you.’

Corsanon still marches on us?
We have plans to turn them back.
Plans are fine but what happens if they break through?
That’s what I’ve come to discuss.

Saphon led her to the inner chambers. Mint tea and honey sat ready on the table, steam rising from the copper pot. A young woman brought them a loaf of nut bread, apple jam and cheese, setting out plates, smiling as she worked. Saphon waved her away, serving Kreshkali herself.

‘Delicious,’ Kali said and explained her plan.

Saphon hadn’t taken a bite. Her hands shook slightly when she poured more tea.

What you suggest is extreme,
perilous perhaps.

It is the only way to protect Temple Dumarka, and the felines, if Corsanon breaks through our defence.

How can you be certain it will succeed?

I can’t. ‘Are there any litters about?’ Kreshkali asked aloud. ‘I would dearly love to see the kittens.’

Saphon held her eyes. You’ve none, have you? In your future? There are no more temple cats. I can see it in your face.

‘I’ve been blessed to participate in the rearing of one, but am always thrilled to see more.’

One temple cat? Is that all?

There’s more than one.

In Dumarka?

They’re hidden.

You mean we’re hidden...Saphon put her cup down without taking a sip. ‘Come then. Let me show you the younglings. Tell me, Kreshkali, does Temple Dumarka lie in ruin because I didn’t follow your plan, or because I did?’

Kreshkali smoothed her cloak, loosening the clasp around her neck. She looked into Saphon’s eyes, black in the shadows. ‘I believe it is because you did not, High Priestess.’
‘Can you be certain?’
Kreshkali cleared her throat. ‘I can’t.’
CHAPTER 20
CORSANON, CUSCA PLAINS, PRIETA FOOTHILLS & GOREGAN RIVER, GAELA & TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH

Rosette sat close, the warmth of the fire barely penetrating her bones. She held her cloak around her tight, visualising a small flame in the base of her spine. A gust of wind blew it out. *This is absurd, Drayco. I can’t even get my visualisation to light.*

Drayco leapt to his feet, hackles up, ears pricked. *Someone comes!*

She put her hand on his back. Still deaf, she couldn’t hear him growl but the vibration was palpable. *How close?*

*Above us.*

*Makee?*

Drayco’s tail lashed once as he sniffed the air. He sat on his haunches, his mouth slightly open. *It’s a black falcon, whistling her head off. The Three Sisters, too.*

*Nell!
Drayco was on his feet again. Can’t you hear her? Run! Water’s coming, Makee’s made a flood.*

*A flood?*

*She’s cracked open Lake Drid!*

*What?*

*She’s going to blow the banks of Corsanon gorge. Drayco dashed forward.*

*Wait, Dray. The fire.*

*Run, Maudi! Fly! The fire will be washed away, and us too. A torrent comes!*

Rosette leapt over the rocks, shape-shifting into a wolf before she cleared them. Her head throbbed, ears ached, but the urgency had finally lit the fire in her spine and the flames grew. She and Drayco ran hard, cutting across the cliff until they were forced to turn down the only track. The ground shook, boulders vibrating. They reached the valley and shot straight for the higher hills, the black falcon leading the way.

When Rosette crested the edge of the woods above Temple Corsanon, the falcon landed, morphing into Nell, the Three Sisters circling above. The shock wave smacked into her own as she shifted at the same time. Drayco squeezed his eyes shut.

*Nell! She fell into her mother’s arms.*

*Are you all right?*

*I’m having a little trouble communicating, but I hear you fine now. Just stay in my head.*

As they watched from the elevated position, Rosette realised the magnitude of Makee’s action. The witch had released a rush of water about to crack the gorge, draining it out, revealing the spell’s cairn, or at least placing it within reach. She must also have planned an even more ruthless tactic—the destruction of Temple Corsanon.

*The temple! Nell, they spotted us.*

Before Nell could respond, a wall of water crashed down the face of the mountain, plummeting into the gorge. It took with it trees, grass and boulders, the spray shooting up above the valley. The weight of the water cracked the far end of the gorge, breaking the natural dam. The river that roared into the valley was higher than the peaks of the temple, heading straight for it.

*Is Makee insane?*

*Far from it, Rosette. In one moment she’s revealed the spell, destroyed the temple and blamed it on a Dumarkian temple cat and a Lupin. Clever, really.*

*She’s not destroyed the temple yet. Help me!*

Rosette pointed to the barn, a two-storey brick building that stood on raised ground near the temple road. *If we can bring it down crosswise, the water will disperse around it.*

*We have to lift it.*

*How?*

*The Air Elementals!*

*A twister?*

*Definitely!*

Rosette took a deep breath, calling on the Elementals. The fire in her spine burned bright and she felt it growing, encouraged by Nell’s similar actions beside her. Together they called in Air, drawing it into a spiral, augmenting its spin and volume until it swelled like a giant dust devil—a tornado larger than ever seen on the Ubi
Plains. At the last moment before the torrent reached the temple grounds, they released their spell.

The twister cut across the valley, straight to the barn. It lifted the building, spinning it around, the bricks flying out in all directions. With a wave of her arms, Rosette halted the call. The twister dispersed and the brick building crashed to the road, blocking the temple grounds with roof-high rubble. The water hit it full force, forming a standing wave, rivers cutting their way around both sides of the grounds.

People were climbing onto the temple roof, clinging there with bags and belongings. Some were standing on the walls, casting spells of their own to protect what was left of the grounds. The water had diverted, but not all of it. A rushing river snaked through the temple gardens, tearing a new path, leaving trees and statues uprooted in its wake. Rosette didn’t miss the arms pointed towards her, even from such a distance away.

*We’ve got to get out of here, Nell. They’re coming.*

*Not without the spell!*  
*Passillo?* She laughed but heard no sound. *It’s all right, Nell. I’ve got her.* Rosette pulled open her cloak, revealing the vial secured around her neck. Nell’s face contorted, mouthing words. Rosette shook her head, cupping her ears. *I can only hear your mental voice, Nell.* She shrugged. *I’ve gone deaf. Hope it’s temporary.*

*It best be temporary. I have much to say to you with both voices.*  
*Excuse me, Maudi? Nell? The Corsanon temple guards are halfway up the hill. They seem upset. Shall we go?*  
Rosette spun around. *Run!*  
Nell morphed, the wind nearly knocking them down. *Head for the mountains, both of you. Dead run! Stop for nothing.* The black falcon screamed towards the top of the gorge, though Rosette could see no sign of Makee, or the witch Rall and her apprentice.

*Where are you going, Nell?*  
*She’s got to be stopped. Meet me at the portal below Prieta south. If I’m not there before you, head straight back to Los Loma!*  
Rosette bolted, Drayco on her heels.

The chestnut mare trotted along at an easy jog while Clay sang. He was learning a new tune from Shane, his eyes bright with excitement. ‘What’s it called?’

‘It’s got a few different names.’  
‘What do you call it?’  
‘Her Long Black Hair.’  
‘Ah, like Rosette? Did you two…’  
‘Nah,’ Shane answered fast. ‘She’s too…’  
‘Yeah. I know what you mean. She’s daunting, in a way, but also alluring. I think I wouldn’t mind…’ Clay was about to say more when he spotted a large black bird zeroing in on them.

‘How many shapes can that witch shift into?’ he asked, pointing skyward.  
‘Don’t know. Plenty, I’ll wager.’  
Clay kept his arm outstretched. ‘Try not to lose your horse this time.’ His face crinkled, eyes squinting at the creature flapping overhead. It knocked his arm hard as it landed, springing back and morphing, the wings turning to particles of dust that floated away, a cloaked woman touching her feet lightly to the ground as she landed.

‘Here you are!’ she said.  
Clay screwed up his face. ‘On the road, right where you left us, Nell.’  
‘Indeed.’ She brushed a white down feather from her sleeve.  
‘Did you want us to gallop all the way back to Treeon?’ Shane asked, struggling to keep his horse still. ‘I was on foot for a while, you realise.’

‘Nell laughed. ‘Treeon? Hardly. There’s been a change of plans.’  
Clay frowned. ‘How so?’  
‘I want you to follow a young witch, keep an eye on her. Can you do that?’  
‘Rosette?’ Clay whispered.  
‘That’s the one. She’s running northwest, towards the Prieta portal. If you turn off at the foothills road, you’ll get there before her. Any questions?’

She didn’t wait to hear an answer before she took off again. The horses reared but Clay was ready for it. He leaned forward when his mount reared, keeping the gelding under control. Shane managed the same. Far in the distance a raptor whistled and the raven shot away towards the west.

‘I’ve never seen a black bird so huge,’ Clay said, scratching his head. ‘Can they shape-shift into any creature or does it have to be real?’  
‘I’m not sure what you mean by real, but I’ve seen such a bird before. They’re called Lemur ravens. There’s
plenty of them at Timbali Temple. At least, that’s what I’ve heard.’

Clay’s face lit up, his smile wide. He whooped, urging his horse forward. ‘What luck. We’ll be seeing Rosette before the day’s out. And we were just thinking about her, both of us.’

Shane frowned. ‘It doesn’t feel quite right.’

‘Not right?’ Clay called back over his shoulder. ‘Come on, man. It’s all right. Keep up!’

Nell rode the thermals high above the Lemur raven. When she was directly overhead, she dove.

To the ground, La Makee, or I’ll break your neck midair.

The Lemur raven cawed, faltering before cutting sharply to the right. Nell adjusted her dive, picking up speed by the second. In falcon form, she was the fastest animal alive. No one could outdistance her, and certainly not in a dive. The Three Sisters vanished from her peripheral vision. They couldn’t hope to keep up. Last chance, Makee.

The raven dipped its wings, stalled and recovered in time to flap hard in the opposite direction. Nell had to pull out of the dive, riding the thermals back up. She kept Makee in her sights, the wind rushing past her face as she gained altitude, closing in.

You’ve done enough damage, Nell. I’ll not have you destroy my last effort.

Effort for what, witch? To plant yourself on every dragonbone chair in the known lands of Gaela?

Hardly. I’m saving this world from your stupidity.

Nell whistled and dove again, the raven in her sights. The black bird’s head came up and it flapped hard against the wind. Nell saw that she was labouring. She pinned her wings to her sides and plummeted. Again the raven evaded the strike, though her recovery was slower. Nell hit an updraught and soared above her, sure this would be the last strike.

Wait, Nell. Stop. Makee’s voice strained in her head. I’m landing. We can talk.

Nell followed the raven down, tracking her every move. Adrenaline rushed in her veins. She felt a wash of emotions, trust in the other witch not being among them. She dropped to a grove of oaks, touching lightly to a branch beside Makee. The raven’s head cocked, her blue eyes blinking before she jumped to the ground, morphing as she landed. Nell did the same, her toes touching the dirt an arm’s length beside her. Makee began to pace, her hand on her sword, her red hair flaming behind her.

Nell stood back, watching. ‘What do you think you’re doing, La Makee?’ The Three Sisters landed in a grove of beech trees, echoing the challenge. ‘You stop the wars, you start the wars. You destroy Temple Corsanon and point the finger at Dumarka, and you nearly kill Rosette in the process. From what I can see, you’ve destroyed Jarrod and set the mountains of Earth to boil. Have you gone insane? What are you thinking? What purpose could you possibly have?’

Makee spun on Nell. ‘What shall I answer first?’ She didn’t give Nell time to speak. ‘It was An’ Lawrence who started the Corsanon wars again. I had that fire out.’

‘Out? Hardly, Makee. You baited him and you know it.’

Nell ignored the comment. ‘And Temple Corsanon was set to blast the Entity apart, or didn’t you remember that? The flood just saved my world.’

‘You’ve never heard of diplomacy, Makee? Did you even try to talk to their High Priestess?’

‘Try to talk?’ Makee spat. ‘I’m sorry, Nell, that you think I didn’t discuss matters thoroughly enough with their High Priestess. I was too busy being stalked, caged and locked in a burning citadel.’

‘Where Rosette saved your life! And you promptly try to drown her in a flood and send the temple guards to run her down.’

‘She’s fast enough, and her temple cat too.’ Makee leaned towards Nell. ‘She’ll survive.’

‘At what cost? She’s deaf now. Did you know that?’

‘She’ll heal.’

‘And Jarrod, the spell! What’s your game, Makee?’

‘You don’t know, do you?’

Nell crossed her arms under her breasts. ‘That would be why I’m asking.’

Makee looked over her shoulder. Not here, Nell. We’re being watched.

Nell stiffened. She sensed someone in the distance and hissed, Follow me. She knelt for an instant and sprang into the air, La Makee a wing’s length behind her. I know a more private place.

An’ Lawrence rode Cheetah, a black mare, sixteen hands high and full of the demons. A four-year-old daughter of his stallion, Diablai, he’d been training her in Los Loma, with mixed results. She had all her sire’s gusto but so far none of his good sense. She knew the Lupin was not far off; his form was hidden in the tree cover, but not his scent. She also was familiar enough with this particular one by now that her skittishness was uncalled for. An’ Lawrence
stroked her neck, motioning Teg to back away. He ground his teeth. He’d have words with the lad when they camped for the night. It was easier to blame his proximity than any shortcomings of his mare’s.

He’s following your orders, Rowan, Scylla purred in his mind. Clearly he has something to communicate but you banned him from mind speech while scouting, remember?

There could be Corsanonical priestesses about. They would hear.

With his mind shield ability?

Scylla, I can’t believe you defend him.

I tell the truth. And I like Teg. She ran ahead, leaping over a fallen log. They were heading south, skirting the foothills of the northern Prieta range, hoping to stay out of sight. He’d wanted Kreshkali to fly scout, but she’d had other plans. It would have been nice if she had let him in on them. ‘Whoa, girl.’ The mare’s head shot up and she braced her forelegs, snorting. He caught the Lupin taking off, a flash of black in the corner of his vision. ‘Where in demon’s dark woods are you going now?’

Get out of there, Father! The Corsanons are headed right for you!

He jerked his head skyward. Rosette?

Ride! Back to the hills!

It couldn’t be Rosette, could it? She was at the cottage, in a Dumarkian Woods far from this one. The mare crow-hopped and he was preoccupied with controlling her for a moment. Then he heard the thunder. It shook the ground like a wave crashing onto the shore. He squinted at the sun. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky as far as the horizon. He cursed.

Rolling the mare back on her haunches, he turned westward and headed into the deeper cover of the forest. He signalled his lateral scouts and galloped to the troops, leading them in the new direction. Teg came sprinting up, still in wolf form, matching the speed of the mare as she tore across ground. An’ Lawrence steadied her with a single word and reached out towards Teg. The mare trumpeted.

‘Get up here,’ he yelled over the horse’s challenge.

Teg’s dark eyes lifted towards him and he leapt, morphing into his human form, and grasped the Sword Master’s forearm, swinging into the saddle behind him. The mare shrieked, bucking twice before she galloped on.

He patted her neck. She’d take more work, but not bad for a green-broke mare, under the circumstances. What Teg thought of it, he didn’t know. The lad clung to him, shouting in his ear.

‘They were closer than we thought. Hundreds strong. Coming this way at the run.’ Teg’s breath came in panting rasps. ‘If we can hide while they pass, we’ll be behind them all.’

An’ Lawrence nodded. ‘Meet us on the other side of the rise. Get everyone out of sight. Now!’ He pointed towards the grade and promptly assisted Teg’s dismount, pulling him off the mare and leaving him where he hit the ground. It was not a smooth execution, but he didn’t have time to explain. There were scouts to the north, and he couldn’t risk them getting cut off. He rolled the mare back on her haunches again, heading off to find them.

A little harsh, wasn’t that, Rowan? Scylla asked.

He can handle it.

Teg nursed his arm, rubbing the bruised bone. What was wrong with that man? He could have simply asked. The Lupin shook his head, then morphed into wolf form and continued to shake his whole body. The grade was steep and he wanted to get up it fast. In the form of a wolf he was quicker but many of the horses were not used to him yet. He stayed wide, morphing back when he got to the summit. Signalling for the captains, he gathered them round, keeping one eye on the troops and the other over the ridge where a cloud of dust advanced.

‘Keep everyone quiet, out of sight. We’ll give them an hour’s lead then double back.’

‘The Sword Master?’

‘He’s catching up our north scouts.’

‘And what about the Corsanons? They’ll have scouts riding flank as well.’

‘Good point. Mind the horses.’

‘And you?’

‘I’ll mind the scouts.’

Rosette panted, her sides heaving. The only sound she could hear was the rush of blood in her head and the pounding of her heart. In wolf form, the landscape took on an eerie feel. She knew that twigs snapped under her feet, wind whipped through the pines, birds called, leaves flew out behind her, but she didn’t hear any of it. Her world was silent, her sense of smell and sight magnified in the absence of sound.

How far, Dray?

Suddenly it seemed like no time had passed since she last ran this way, from the Corsanonical fields to the portal
near the foothills of Prieta. But this time they were staying under the cover of the trees, as much as was possible.

Across the next creek and two more hills. Nearly there, Maudi.

I thought so. Do you hear them behind us?
A far distance.
Horseback?
Ten or twelve.

Her tongue lolled out and she ran harder. Nell? Are you near? There was no answer. They didn’t break stride when they hit the creek, fording it in three bounds. Straight into the portal when we get there, Dray.

We won’t wait for Nell?
And give the portal away to the Corsanons? If Nell’s not there, it’s straight in.
And if she is there?
Straight in either way.

Nell wasn’t at the portal. Rosette called to her, in case she was overhead, out of view, but there was no answer. When they dropped to a halt below the entrance, two horses reared, the brown one breaking loose and shying away. She morphed, sending out a calming spell to the animals. The riders looked on, one shocked, the other grinning wide.

‘Have you seen Nell?’ she shouted, rushing up. Her voice was loud in her head. She had no idea what the volume was like for them.

Shane said something, mouthing words. It looked affirmative. Clay added something else. His eyes were wide, his face soft. She reached for him, falling into his arms. ‘I didn’t know what happened to you,’ she whispered.

He hugged her back.
Shane is saying he’s all right too, no worse for all he’s been through, thank you very much for asking. Odd. He doesn’t sound thankful, Maudi.

She pulled away from Clay and clasped her hands around the other man’s neck, planting a kiss on both cheeks and then his lips. ‘I can’t hear.’ She cupped her hands behind her ears, shaking her head.

Shane frowned, pointing at her belly. Clay touched her arm, asking questions, his eyebrows raised. She pretended she didn’t know what they meant.

Maudi? The temple guards? They’re about thirty seconds behind.

‘Into the portal!’ she shouted, pulling away. ‘Bring the horses. I’ll cover the tracks!’

Drayco led the way up the path and into the crevasse. They got the horses through, just in time, and Rosette waved her hand over their tracks below, causing the dust to sweep the ground clean. She caught sight of the guards before she ducked in and hoped they hadn’t spotted her.

Teg ran hard, nose to the ground. In his wolf form, he could cover the distances effortlessly. Almost. He was running on little food and less sleep, keeping the fatigue away with thoughts of his mentor. Meeting back with her, perhaps even…

Teg! Location? Hotha’s voice jarred him, like a trap door opening beneath his feet.

West of the Corsanon troops. Pursuing the scouts to the north.

Too late, lad.

Too late? It can’t be.

They got through. I don’t know how. They must have temple witches with them.

A glamour?

Couldn’t have. I can smell through any ever made.

Teg knew that wasn’t true, but he wasn’t going to make the point. Where are they headed?

Kali’s spotted them, riding straight for Temple Dumarka.

Teg had stopped under a pine grove, scenting the air. What now?

Report back to An’ Lawrence. We’ll have to deal with the ones in front of us first.

But Dumarka?

Kreshkali’s domain. Turn back.

Teg bristled, spinning around the way he came. He hoped to avoid the hundreds of Corsanon warriors that marched between him and An’ Lawrence. Nose to the ground again, he tore through the woods, hugging the foothills, staying out of sight.

Xane smiled as he jogged along. He loved these woods, the scent of forest loam, sticky pine sap running down the thick trunks, the sound of the wind through the boughs. There was nothing like this in Corsanon. He scratched his head. He’d never been out of Corsanon, until now. Bizarre. Why did everything seem so familiar? Like returning to
The creatures in the well of his mind were climbing again and he used all his focus to push them down. Every time they rose, words and ideas spouted out of his mouth that made onlookers step back. He didn’t blame them. He wanted to step back too. He picked at the wound on his neck before pulling his hand away, chastising himself. It itched like a dog’s belly.

As he rode along the track, the rocking of the saddle soothed his worries. The squeak of leather, the clip-clop of the mare’s animated stride, the smell of the woods, all conspired to relax him in spite of the rising creatures—those figments of his imagination that were desperate to get out.

‘If I let one of you up, just one, will the rest of you leave me alone?’ He heard a roar of voices, a cacophony of sound in his head. He hunched his shoulders and shut his eyes. ‘I guess not.’

Before he could give it any more thought, the mare’s head lifted, her ears pricked forward. He shortened his reins and peered into the distance. ‘What’s that, Rose?’ He pulled the mare to a halt. Ahead, further ahead than he should rightfully be able to see, were riders. Dozens of them coming at the gallop. The one in the lead rode a huge black mare, a warhorse like the ones bred in the Cusca Plains. He was enchanted with her for a moment then shook his head, turning his mare northward at the run. He had to warn Willem, quickly. But when he caught up with Willem and the Stable Master, he saw immediately they were not surprised.

‘You knew they were coming?’

Willem leaned his head towards a group of cloaked riders, temple priestesses who were not with them when they began the march. ‘We got the warning.’

Xane’s brow creased as he took them in. The horses were fresh, run hard to be certain, but not for more than a league. He glanced at their legs. No mud. No dried sweat. Where did they come from?

‘Stay tight, lad. We’re going to let them ride by.’

‘Ride by? We’ll be spotted.’

‘That’s where they come in.’ Again he indicated the cloaked priestesses. They sat their horses like statues, neither women nor beasts moving save the rise and fall of their breath and the odd swish of a tail. The horses were palominos, golden hides with flaxen manes and tails. As one they turned to look at him. He swallowed; his grey mare tossed her head, pawing the ground.

I know, Rose. I feel the same way. I’d let us run flat out in the other direction but that would only put us face-on with the enemy.

‘They’re weaving a glamour about us, lad. We can’t be seen.’

Suddenly Xane felt the energy of the spell rise up his legs like warm water. It covered his head and his shoulders relaxed. There was a calming spell in there too, he was sure. His mare exhaled, her head dropping, nostrils fluttering. A raptor whistled long and mournful overhead. The priestesses all tracked the bird as it coursed across the sky.

Like a dream he watched the enemy ride past. The warhorses pranced, snapping twigs and leaping over logs, tireless, magnificent. There were mountain riders among them too and, surprisingly, a troop of sword riders on Desertwinds. Where did they come from? That breed belonged only to Corsanon. They were never sold or traded outside the borders. He sensed the shock in Willem as well. He imagined he could hear his thoughts.

Demon witches! They’ve been stealing from us all along.

If that was true, it would have been going on for years. These animals were fully trained, mature. It didn’t make sense. It would take decades of theft to breed up a herd like this.

And then he saw the wolves but it was clear no one else did.

He was glad the temple priestesses had put a calming spell in the glamour. He knew these scout horses and more than a few of them would have bolted, no matter what was saying whoa. He was certain Rose would have, but under the glamour her lids were half shut, a hind hoof cocked. He wished he felt as calm. Inside, he wanted to shout—not with fear but with recognition. There was something in the wolf creatures that stirred him deeply. He was not afraid. He was exhilarated. How was that possible?

He hid his thoughts from the priestesses, who could probe his mind. This was crazy. He shouldn’t feel this way. When the riders passed, the glamour dissolved. His mare’s head came up and he barely kept her from slamming into Willem’s mount as she shied. He got her under control and looked to the Stable Master for instructions. He didn’t mention the wolves.

‘You’ll ride with Willem’s lot. Stay close. No wandering.’ He raised his voice so all could hear. ‘We aren’t scouting any more. It’s straight to Dumarka. We’ll settle the temple.’

Xane wasn’t sure what settle meant but he had a pretty good idea it wasn’t a friendly activity. His hackles went up. He didn’t want to harm Dumarka. It was inexplicable—it could even get him hanged—but he was dead set against it, just the same.
Rosette kept a hand on Drayco’s neck, smiling up at Clay. It was hard to believe he was alive, and still harder to realise he didn’t remember their time together at Treeon, or on Earth. She had to keep reminding herself that it hadn’t happened to him.

Not yet, anyway, Maudi.

Drayco, what are you saying? Do you think we have to live through all that again?

Not us, but maybe he does.

I hope not.

Why? You both seemed to enjoy it.

She closed her eyes, remembering—picnics under the apple blossoms, late nights in the hot springs, talks by the fireside, wild revelry and dancing at the festivals. He was a great kisser.

Drayco sneezed. If you say so...Maudi, they are asking about the baby. They want to know where it is. They don’t understand what happened.

I know. Thank you, Drayco. She pressed her head into her familiar’s neck and closed her eyes. When she turned to Shane and Clay, tears streamed down her cheeks. ‘He died.’ She shook her head. ‘My baby died.’

Shane placed his hand on her knee and studied a pebble he’d picked up from the ground. Eventually he kissed her forehead and skimmed the stone towards the entrance. ‘Where to, Rosette?’ he asked, finally looking at her face.

She couldn’t hear the words but his gestures were obvious. His expression made it look like any destination was going to be wrong. She rubbed her eyes, wiping her nose. ‘We need to get a bird’s-eye view of what’s happening.’

Clay answered but she couldn’t read his lips. He stood to the side, leaning against his horse’s shoulder, pensive.

Dray?

He says it sounds like a good trick, getting a bird’s-eye view. He’s very sorry for your loss.

‘Thanks, Clay.’ She looked towards the sky. ‘I couldn’t do it when we were friends but I’ve got it down now.’

‘You can shape-shift? Fly?’ He made the motion with his hands.

‘I can.’ She passed her fingers over the plasma field, the purple zaps of energy tingling her palm. To the North Seas portal, my lovely Entity.

Maudi, didn’t Nell say to head straight back to Temple Los Loma?

Really? I didn’t catch that. She could smell the ocean before the thought was out and she knew the Entity had already chosen. It was a bit of a concern, one she would have to ponder later. For now, they were where she wanted to be, out of the way enough to avoid conflict yet close enough for her to get a good look at what was going on. With the spell safe in its amulet around her neck, she led them out into the afternoon light, her cloak streaming behind her as the wind greeted them.

They were well south of Romanon Bay, near the Goregan outlet, hundreds of feet above the pounding surf. Drayco scented the air, his mouth partly opened. Shane and Clay led their horses into the tree cover, the cypresses sculpted by the wind.

I’m going up, Dray. Checking it out. You keep an eye on the boys?

Drayco winked at her and sauntered into the woods, his tail in the air.

‘I won’t be long,’ she said aloud and waved. ‘Mind your eyes.’

Leaning into the headwind, she leapt, morphing into the form of a falcon. She flapped hard to gain altitude then found a thermal and rode it high to the clouds. The air streamed past her face, her wing feathers rippling, the whiffling sound punctuated by her high-pitched call. When she came upon the foothills of the northern Prietas, she hovered, watching the scene below.

An’ Lawrence rode in the lead, heading east, Scylla with him. He led one hundred horsed warriors, and a few Lupins. She thought one must be Teg but she didn’t try to speak to him. She wanted to check the lie of the land first. With her telescopic vision, her eyes trained on a group of riders a distance away. An’ Lawrence was heading straight for them.

Some scouting party you have, Sword Master!

She was about to warn him when the group disappeared. It had to be a glamour, and quite a good one. An’ Lawrence and all his warriors went past without a glance in their direction. Even Teg. She saw them safely away and shot west, searching for Hotha’s clan. Not far in her flight she found him, joining up with Rashnan’s Lupins. The gates of Los Loma Gaela must have opened wide. She’d no idea there were so many Lupins. They were headed in the same direction as An’ Lawrence.

Who’s minding Dumarka?

She shot east again, unable to spot the group of Corsanons she’d seen before the glamour went up. Tracking further still she found An’ Lawrence, only to come upon legions of Corsanons less than a league ahead of him.
She screamed into his mind. Get out of there! The Corsanons are headed right for you!
Teg was doubling back. An’ Lawrence got the message from both of them it seemed. He had his troops hidden to the south in moments, Teg heading east. She followed An’ Lawrence.
They tricked you with a glamour. Watch out, Sword Master. I can’t tell where they are.
Far below, An’ Lawrence tilted his head skyward. Rosette? What are you doing here?
Keeping you from falling into a ditch. What are you doing? Dumarka is the other way!
Kreshkali’s seeing to Dumarka. We are circling around the Corsanons, rounding them up like a herd of grunnies.
Great idea, but you’ve let the bulls out of the pen! And, by the way, you’re ridiculously outnumbered.
Lucky for them. It’ll make things more even.
He galloped on through the sparse trees. She caught a glimpse of him, the black mare’s neck crested, her mane flowing over his hands, the hilt of his sword glinting in the sunlight. It’s a distraction, Rosette, so Kreshkali can get the spell.
Already done and well done, Sword Master. I’ve got it.
You? Where’s Makee?
I don’t know, but there’s a legion of Corsan on warriors riding hard to Temple Dumarka, and I can’t spot a one of them.
There’s not much I can do about that until we subdue this lot.
Bangeesh and Timbali are marching north, according to Clay and Shane, but they have to get through the pass before they can join you. She kept flying east over the foothills. No sign of them yet.
We’ll play cat and mouse until they arrive.
Just make sure you’re the cat!
And where are you going? he asked.
She stalled in the air, letting a thermal spin her around. To find Kreshkali. She made like an arrow back to the North Seas.
CHAPTER 21
CUSCA PLAINS, PRIETA FOOTHILLS & GOREGAN RIVER, GAELA & TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH

Nell landed on a rocky outcropping, folding her wings to her back. She spotted the Three Sisters working hard to catch up. *Stay high, my lovelies. Keep out of the trees.*

The Three Sisters cawed in unison, circling overhead. Nell waited until she spotted the Lemur raven before she morphed. Makee flew to the top of a nearby oak, hopping down the branches until she landed on the ground, the green clover covering her black claws and tail feathers like a shallow sea. She morphed, the shock wave making Nell’s hair dance about her face.

‘Who was watching us back there?’ Nell asked.

‘So you don’t think it was an excuse to lure you away?’ Makee flicked a down feather out of her hair.

‘Of course not. I felt it too. Bangeesh scouts? They’re marching on Corsanon, you know, thanks to your antics.’

‘As well they should. Corsanon is out of control. You’ve seen what they’ve done.’

‘We’d put a stop to it. Turned it around. The Entity was healed, Earth coming good. Why are you meddling? And don’t think that I’m ignorant to what you’re doing on Earth. Every mountain on the planet is about to blow. It’ll be the end.’

La Makee chuckled. ‘Exactly. The end of ASSIST. The end of the witch-trackers.’

Nell’s face blanched. ‘Witch-trackers?’

‘You didn’t know, did you! You’re so busy getting in my way that you missed it. ASSIST is up and running. They aren’t just tracking your Temple Los Loma clan, or the coven at Half Moon Bay. They’ve come through the portal again. They’re searching for Jarrod and the spell. If they haven’t got Rosette already, they will soon, and you too. You’re tagged.’ She narrowed her eyes. ‘They’ve got you scoped, Nellion, and I’ve been re-arranging events to make sure they never find any of you ever again.’ She drew in her breath, pointing her finger at Nell’s chest. ‘I’m closing the door on Earth. ASSIST will be finished. Buried under molten lava, the portal shut forever.’

Nell took a step closer, leaning in. ‘Aye. A sacrifice, I admit, but worth it.’ She laughed. ‘Think of it this way. Most of your clan are out now, so how much could really be lost?’

‘How much?’ Nell straightened to her full height. The faces of those she knew passed before her—Annadusa, Grayson, Maluka, Zero, the new apprentices, their hopeful eyes waiting for a word, the Lupins, the wildlife, the familiars, the mountains, the seas that were beginning to recover, the hundreds and thousands of saplings ready to plant, streams and waterfalls running clear and clean, the beings of the entire world—plant, animal, sky and stone—all re-creating their lives in new and beautiful ways. ‘How much could be lost?’ she said again, her voice gaining volume. ‘Makee, you ignorant, interfering, short-sighted fool of a witch. You have no idea how much!’

‘I’m setting things straight. A few will be died but what is death…’

Nellion Paree bellowed out a string of words, a guttural chant, her hand slicing through the air. ‘Consisto statim! Consisto…consisto!’ A wake of energy followed and everything froze. The trees were caught in mid-sway, pebbles stopped in their path as they trickled down the cliff face. Sparrows flitting in the sky were now painted there, dabs of brown on a blue background. Ants halted in their march, leaves hovered midair. All sound vanished.

‘Enough,’ Nell said. ‘That will be enough.’

Makee’s mouth was open, her eyes straining. She could hear every word, Nell knew, but could not move a muscle. Nell had a mind to leave her like that forever. She leaned towards her, her face a hand’s width from the invisible barrier. ‘I’m going to say this once, La Makee, so listen close. If you thought that Earth was some foreign place, some other land disconnected from Gaela, I want you to think again. The many-worlds, the portals that link them, the branching paths that come into existence with every single choice ever made, they are pearls on a string. Mirrors of mirrors of mirrors.’ She braced her hands on her knees, dropping her eyes level with Makee’s. ‘You crack one of those mirrors, you get much more than seven years’ bad luck.’

Nell fluttered her fingers in the air, producing a black pearl necklace. She pinched one of the beads until it was crushed to powder. The string broke and the pearls fell in slow motion, bouncing off the rocks and disappearing into the grass. ‘You cut the string, Makee, and it’s done. Lost. Every single pearl will fall. They’ll roll across the floor and under the bed. Darkness, Makee. Isolation. Disconnection. Do you know how to string them up again? Can you mend the mirror? Bring them all back together?’

Nell stepped away, dropping to one knee. She took a last look at Makee; the other witch’s face was still frozen, eyes wide, staring. The only movement was a single tear falling down her cheek. ‘I didn’t think so.’ Nell sprang into
the air, morphing into falcon form, making straight for the portal in the foothills of the Prieta Mountains. As she sped away, Makee’s voice sounded in her head.

  *You can’t leave me like this! The trackers…*

  *A fitting end, don’t you think?*

  *Nell, listen. I didn’t know. I can help.*

  *You’ve helped quite enough, thank you. But you don’t understand. The girl, Shaea, she’s your blood.*

  *Nell wavered.*

  *She can carry the spell, Nellion. She has the DNA.*

  *How?*

  *Let me free. I can make it right. There’s still time, but you can’t let Rosette use the spell. She’s marked. The trackers will spot her the moment she does.*

  *Nell screamed a high-pitched whistle. Lies, Makee. I’ll not trust you again.*

Shaea rode the golden warhorse at the trot, leading the mare. She figured it was the one chance she had to see the world from such a perspective, and she took it. The stallion was tall, his gait smooth, effortless, like floating downstream. She sat the animal as if she were a queen, her back straight, hands soft, face lifted to the sky. She was following the line of flight Makee had taken. It had been a day and there was no sign of her.

  ‘That bitch,’ Shaea said, cursing the air. ‘She leads me to the realm of Corsanon and dumps me. It was her plan the whole time. I see it now.’

Shaea wrinkled her nose. It might have been her plan all along, but why would she leave the horses? None of this made any sense. She urged the stallion into a canter, the syncopation tapping out a beat as his hooves hit the ground, one-two-three, one-two-three. She rocked with the motion, the strain in her legs easing. She was saddle sore, for sure, but the palomino was ever so much easier to ride, quite a contrast to the jarring beat of the mare. Her head was off with the muses when she heard the Entity call.

  *Shaea! Why haven’t you answered me! The voice was like sharpening knives.*

  *Entity?*

  *Who else, you feckless girl!*

  *I didn’t hear you, Entity. I’m sorry. I’ve been busy with…*

  *Never mind what you’ve been doing. I’ve a task for you.*

  *Another? Because, really, the last one with Rall wasn’t good. She’s gone and…*

  *This is more important.*

  *It is?*

  *The Entity didn’t answer for some time. Shaea wondered if it was talking to someone else.*

  *I want you to head west, back the way you came.*

  *I’m on the road now.*

  *Which horse are you riding? Amarillo?*

  *Shaea frowned. Why would the Entity care about that? Yes, the warhorse. She thought she heard twigs snap.*

  *Mind you don’t strain him. Keep him out of the culverts.*

  *She looked down at the huge beast, his legs churning, mane flowing, ears forward. His breath came easy. There was no sweat on his neck. She kept her hand gentle on the reins, her legs quiet, heels down, toes parallel, her body light as a feather on his broad back. I don’t think he’ll be overtaxed, Entity.*

  *See that he isn’t.*

  *Shaea eased the horses down to a walk. What do you want me to do? Pay attention. Just before the township, off to the west side of the valley, you’ll come upon a strange scene.*

  *Don’t be alarmed. Nothing’s wrong—it’s just a glamour. You’re to go up to the red-headed witch and touch her.*

  *Touch the witch?*

  *That’s right.*

  *The red-haired witch?*

  *Yes.*

  *Anything else? She’ll instruct you from there. Do as she says.*

  *What about Rall?*

  *Never mind Rall. This is the witch you must answer to, if you want to find your way to the many-worlds.*
What happened to Rall?
She’s out of the picture, for now.
And what’s this one’s name?
La Makee. Ride now; there isn’t much time.
I’m on my way.

Shaea didn’t ride, not yet. She wanted to think it through and the valley the Entity spoke of was not far off.
‘Touch the witch? What kind of glamour is that? La Makee? Isn’t that what they called Rall in the portal under the quarry steps?’ Her head hurt trying to figure it out.

She sucked on her lower lip, urging the stallion into a brisk trot. The road was smooth, the grade downhill. She had no idea what was going on but she figured it would make sense, sooner or later. Maybe something would come to her when she faced it head-on.

Shaea had trouble controlling the horses. Amarillo pranced in place and the mare planted herself, all four feet braced. Both animals were snorting, the sight of the frozen witch too much for them. Shaea thought it might be too much for her as well. She’d never seen anything so uncanny. It was like a piece of landscape had been stopped cold.

A woman stood before her, a Treeon witch by her tattoos, eyes unblinking. Was this La Makee? It must be. Her long black robe had been open, frozen in the act, revealing her sword, the hilt silver with inlays of lapis. Her sword belt was made of fine black quilted cloth—nothing like what Corsanons wore. Her hair was flaming red, immobile as though it had been captured in a dance. The surrounding trees and birds were statue-still. Shaea’d never imagined anything like it could exist save in a book or painting. ‘Easy now,’ she said, holding tight to the mare’s lead, keeping the warhorse from bolting. ‘This is just a glamour, apparently.’

Shaea calmed the horses before dismounting. She tied them well to the side of the glamour, uncertain what would happen when the frozen picture came back to life, or even if it would.

‘You be La Makee then?’ she asked, stepping towards the witch. If it were true, Shaea was about to touch the High Priestess of Treeon Temple. Her hand shook as she pointed her finger. ‘Pardon me, but the Entity said I am to do this.’ She didn’t get a response. ‘I’m guessing it’s going to crack the spell?’

The strain on the witch’s face was unbearable. Her eyes bulged, the whites dry and gritty, bloodshot. Her posture may have been confident, once, but it had caved in on itself, as if age had come all at once. Her face was lined, her mouth tight and the feeling emanating from her was menacing, cold and specific. Shaea stepped closer, her arm extended. She realised she was holding her breath. ‘A tap then, if you don’t mind?’ Shaea leaned in, her finger touching the witch on the shoulder. ‘Just like that.’

She snapped her hand back, clutching it to her breast. It burned and when she examined her finger she expected to see the flesh seared. She had no time to consider it further, in any case. Like falling glass, the glamour hit the ground. The sparrows squawked and faltered, righting themselves and flying away. The trees all but groaned, resuming their graceful sway in the breeze. An instant of cacophony blasted, the warhorse answering with a trumpet of his own before everyone settled. Everyone except the witch.

‘What took you so long?’ she asked, stepping towards the witch. Her voice was dry, like the sound of rocks scooped from a bucket. The witch shut her eyes and took a step forward, rubbing her shoulders. When she opened them again, she locked onto Shaea. ‘Did you walk the horses here backwards? Lazy, dawdling girl.’ She clapped her hands. ‘Get them! Now!’

Shaea didn’t move. ‘La Makee?’ She knew it was audacious, but she had to make certain. She wasn’t about to move until she was sure.

‘That be me,’ she said and spun around once. ‘And so be this.’
Shaea blinked. Suddenly Rall stood before her, still rubbing her shoulders, her face even more fierce.

‘You get it now, girl?’
Shaea nodded and Rall morphed back into the glamour of La Makee, if that really was the glamour. She wanted to ask which was really her but thought better of it.

Makee snapped her fingers. ‘The horses? Move your legs. We’ve far to ride.’
Shaea brought Makee the warhorse and returned for the mare. She mounted up, trying to sort her thoughts.

‘The Entity said if I...’
Makee lifted her hand, cutting her off. ‘The Entity said to do as I instruct. We ride, at the gallop. Follow.’

The golden horse reared, catching the urgency. Shaea held the mare back. Her horse wanted to bolt in the opposite direction, and so did she, but she resisted the instinct. The Entity was her key to freedom and she wasn’t going to lose it after getting this far. Makee turned her horse north at the run and Shaea followed.

Xane kept his outward appearance calm but, inside, his stomach roiled. The creatures in the well of his mind were frantic, shouting at him, passing images and numbers, symbols and letters across his mind’s eye faster than he could
think. Everything he saw clashed with his memory of who he was. It didn’t make sense, yet it felt so familiar. *I’ve gone mad. The hemlock’s driven me psychotic.*

He dropped his reins and clutched his head. He didn’t even know what *psychotic* meant. Was he possessed? Had his body been taken over? He shuddered, guiding the mare around a fallen log. It was too much to know. Too much to understand. In the depths of his mind, the creatures pounded their fists. He turned away, shortening his reins and pressing Rose into a gallop. *Ignore them. They aren’t there.*

Willem had ordered him to stay close, and Xane kept him in sight, along with the temple priestesses. They galloped down the main road, but Xane followed the tree line, a stone’s throw away. Leagues of forest spread out before them and he navigated the terrain, keeping his eyes forward, trying not to think.

Then he spotted it. Or did he? Hallucination again? He double-checked and there it was, or was that another? A wolf? He reined the mare back to the road, nearly ploughing into the temple priestesses. He had to catch up to Willem. He had to report. This time it was real. The big man saw his panic and held up his arm, stopping the others.

‘Wolves!’ Xane said, sputtering the words. ‘They’re running this way.’ His mare rocked back on her hindquarters, pawing the air. The witches exchanged glances but didn’t speak.

‘Easy, lad. You’ve seen wolves? Are you sure?’ Willem snapped his fingers over his head as he spoke, sending a scout in each direction.

‘I don’t know how many,’ Xane said, catching his breath. ‘More than one, though. I’m sure. They’re coming this way, coursing for scent.’

Willem waved up the archers and they set arrows to their bows, following the scouts into the woods. One of the temple witches pushed back her cowl, speaking directly to Xane. He shivered under her gaze but didn’t look away.

‘There are no wolves in these woods, lad. You must have seen a stray dog, or a badger.’

Xane didn’t respond immediately. A falcon whistled overhead and he resisted the urge to look up. He swallowed. The woman had hauntingly pale eyes and red hair that fell to her waist in a dozen braids. He squared his shoulders, finding confidence from an unknown source. ‘I know the look of a dog, Mistress, and that of a badger. They each move in distinct ways, and have their own conformation. I saw neither dog nor badger. These were wolves, Mistress, the size of timber ponies. They were like wolves of the Lupin order, if the stories are true.’ His chin lifted. ‘That’s my guess. Lupins.’

A gasp rolled over the nearest riders. The witch lifted her brow. ‘The Lupin order, is it? And what do you know of such things?’

A flash of images crossed his mind—twisting ladders, rivers of blood, wolf packs hunting, being hunted. Silver tables, heat lamps, puppies in a box. They came so fast he wanted to scream. These couldn’t be true visions. They made no sense. Besides, Lupins were mythical creatures, composed by the ancient storytellers to control adventurous children, explain strange sightings, missing livestock, rumblings in the ground and even the theft of blue lapis, a stone supposedly sacred to the creatures. Myths, all of it. Xane used to think so, anyway. Why was he even speaking of them?

He recalled the man in the carriage next to the temple cat and the later reports of the wolf. The ravaging. He cleared his throat, thinking of the wolf that had passed him and Gracie that day on the road. ‘Lupins are myth, as far as I know, but what I’ve seen is the likes of them and I’ve seen more than one for sure. They are headed this way.’ He didn’t mention the ones he saw, or thought he saw, before.

The witch waved her hand, shooing a fly. ‘I hardly think you’ve seen one at all, lad.’ She turned her attention to Willem. ‘Ride on. We’ll follow the scouts. This is nonsense, but we will vanquish the fears.’

Xane frowned. The temple priestesses were giving orders to Willem?

‘And you!’ She pointed her finger straight at him. ‘Follow me.’

Xane hesitated, looking to Willem. He knew the man wanted to keep him close but his face was a mask. He flicked his hand at Xane, his attention elsewhere.

‘Yes, Mistress,’ Xane said, clucking to Rose. This High Priestess was doing nothing to vanquish his fears, or the mare’s. Rose was reluctant to ride off with the temple witches on their golden mounts, and so was he. It took a strong heel pressed into her flank but he got her moving, off the road, into the trees, straight for where his Lupins were last seen.

Teg skidded to a halt, his tongue lolling. He’d left Rashnan’s clan to the south and was checking the road to Dumarka. He sensed riders coming his way and ducked behind a tree just in time. He knew he was hidden from human eyes and the horses wouldn’t scent him upwind. He peeked around the edge of the tree, his ears pinned to his neck, out of the way. He blinked once and dropped to his belly. That lad on the dappled grey mare, the same one he’d seen from the carriage with Rosette, had halted a tree length in front of him, staring. *Can that be coincidence? Why do I keep running into this boy? He drew to him the Elementals and made ready to blast him out of the saddle.*
He didn’t want to drop him, or send up a warning that would alert the other scouts, but he was ready in case he was spotted.

Teg waited a moment before backing away. He stayed crouched and hidden. In three silent leaps he was far off to the side, indistinguishable among the foliage. The lad looked immediately his way. Impossible. A human couldn’t have spotted that movement. Teg lifted his head and they stared at each other until the lad turned his horse, bolting towards the road.

_Teg? Are you crazed? You’re like a duck on a dinner plate that close to the road. Get out of there._

He took off.

_Not that way! she screamed in his mind. You’re heading straight for the archers._

He doubled back and she screamed again.

_Stop! It’s no good. They’re all around you._

_I’ll not be trapped._

_Not if you hold still and listen to me._

He froze, trying to control his panting.

_Stop gasping. I can’t weave a glamour over you when you’re heaving like a bellows._

He snapped his mouth shut, the air rushing in and out of his nose.

_Quiet!_ He took one long, exaggerated breath and let it out a molecule at a time, willing his heart rate to drop and his respiration with it.

_Better. Are you so out of shape?_ 

_Hardly. I’ve covered leagues at a dead run since sunrise._ 

_And you didn’t know you’d tripped over this lot? There are temple witches among them. I bet they’d love to get their first look at a live Lupin—or a dead one, for that matter._

_Teg licked his lips. How’s the glamour coming?_ 

_I’ve got you covered, Teg. They are here. Silence._

He felt the ground vibrate. Horses trotted by, the cowled riders looking left and right, some looking right at him before riding on. He allowed a small sigh. Archers followed, and the lad on the dappled grey mare.

_Mind this one, Rosette. He spotted me in the first place. He’s got some eyes._

He felt another layer of the glamour waft over him, like a blanket draping about his shoulders on a winter night. The archers disappeared, leaving only hoof prints and scattered leaves behind. He felt the glamour lift.

_Thank you, Rosette._

_My pleasure, sweetheart. May I suggest you give me a hand?_ 

_Where are you going?_ 

_To Dumarka. I want to get there before they do._ 

_We need more than the two of us to defend the temple._

_If Kreshkali is doing what I think she is, we won’t. Can you bespeak her?_ 

_I will. And you?_ 

_I’m going north, picking up Drayco and the bards. Meet you in the Dumarkian Woods?_ 

_Meet you there, if the mistress consents!_ He turned north, crossing the road and heading west, tuning his mind towards Kreshkali. No answer.

_And, Teg. Rosette’s voice sounded distant. Stay off the road. Stay out of sight._

_Aye. Thanks. I thought that was what I’d been doing._

He thought he had stayed off the road and out of sight. But the lad on the grey mare came to mind, giving him a tingling sensation in his spine. Interesting. He ran on, keeping north, keeping alert. A few leagues off the main road he stopped at a creek and drank his fill. He sat on the bank, watching the water float by.

_Mistress? Are you about?_ 

He sent his thoughts out to Kreshkali, wondering if she was near enough to hear him but keeping his mind shield up in case the Corsanon temple priestesses were close by too.

_Where are you, Teg?_ 

He stood, his tail waging back and forth of its own accord. _I’m north of the main road. He sniffed the air. Not far from the sea. A creek, a stand of eucalypts, scattered oaks. He shook his head. Way too many flies._

_Show me._ 

He opened his eyes wide, taking in the river and the pastures beyond the gum trees lining the waterway,
thinning into small scatterings of oak and laurel; rolling fields spread out before him and windswept cypresses leading to the sea.

I've got you. Sit tight.

He crouched to the ground, his front paws in the stream. He drank again, his tail sweeping the leaves from side to side.

Rosette heard the whistle before she spotted the lads. She smiled. At least the high end of her hearing was coming back. The shrill notes from Shane’s instrument flew up to meet her, an eerie melody with the lower notes missing—like the sound of a tiny bird calling. Clay was sitting on a stump, playing his guitar. She couldn’t hear the chords or the sound of his voice; only the flute and the rush of the wind registered.

Maudi? Drayco was on his feet, sniffing the air.

Shane stopped playing and scanned the sky. ‘Dear heart.’ He held out his arm, giving her clear landing.

I’m coming. She stalled overhead, dropped to his wrist and morphed to the ground. Drayco jumped up, his paws on her shoulders. She tussled with him, gripping his neck. ‘I wasn’t gone long, lovely.’

Both lads were talking at once. She couldn’t understand either of them. She held up her hand for silence and motioned them to sit. Raking the ground in front of them, she drew a map with her finger, pointing out the groups of Corsanons and those from Temple Los Loma, and the Lupins and An’ Lawrence’s riders as well.

‘Crap, Rosette,’ Clay said slowly. There was no mistaking his words.

Again they talked at once, gesturing to her, to the map and into the distance.

‘I’m sure all your ideas are grand, but I’ve got to get to Temple Dumarka. I’ve got to catch up with Kreshkali. I’m not certain what she’s planning, but Corsanon has it in their mind that the temple cats have become minions of evil. They are out for blood. I have to help.’

More talking. She couldn’t make out what they said.

‘Look, you two, stop. Ride with us to Dumarka. Stick to the coast road and stay out of the warriors’ way, either side.’ She leaned close, making her voice soft in her head. ‘I could use the help.’

They were mounted up and tailing her seconds after she morphed into wolf form. They galloped behind her and Drayco, all headed for the Dumarkian Woods.

Kreshkali hugged the coastline, spotting the stream. She followed it inland until the grove of gum trees was visible, their white bark peeling in long strips as they did this time of year, blue-green leaves dancing in the breeze, a hint of their medicinal fragrance in the air. Teg had shifted to his human form and was bathing in the creek, his naked shoulders dappled with sunlight. She circled, calling out in her falcon whistle.

Mistress?

Is the water warm, Teg?

Freezing. I love it.

She perched high in the treetop, fanning her wings as the branch swayed under her weight. He climbed out of the water, his body glistening. He was nearly hairless, his skin tan, smooth, muscles flexing as he wrung his hair and shook out his clothes. He had stunning tattoos, unusual among Lupins. Maluka was the only other one she knew who’d been marked. She exhaled, realising she’d held her breath.

He put on his pants and extended his bare arm for her to land. She gripped his wrist before hopping to the ground. The shock wave made him squint. When the ripple passed, he opened his eyes, dark, dreamy, aware.

‘I thought I sent you to An’ Lawrence,’ she said. ‘What are you doing this far north?’

‘I found Rosette.’ He shook his head. ‘She found me, actually.’

He filled her in while she stripped off her cloak and knelt by the stream, washing her hands. The water played over her tattooed fingers, turning the ink jet black. She drank the cool water with its faint taste of the earth.

‘Rosette’s heading to Dumarka? Alone? An’ Lawrence is facing off the Corsanons, their four to his one? What about Hotha? Where’s he now?’

‘South, backing up An’ Lawrence.’

‘You mean getting himself trapped between the Corsanons.’

‘We all are now.’

Kreshkali took his hand and he pulled her up. He held on for a moment as she stood in front of him. Warmth. Energy. He let go.

‘Are you run out yet?’ she asked.

‘I’m Lupin. I never run out.’ He gave her a half smile and she pretended not to see it.

‘I wish I’d put La Makee in the midst of this mess. Let her get a taste of what she’s done,’ she said. She clicked her tongue. ‘Here’s what we’ll do.’ She retrieved her cloak, clasping it at the neck. ‘You catch up to Rosette and
Drayco. The bards are with her?"
   ‘On horseback.’ He nodded.
   ‘All right. Good. You stick with them and cut in front of those temple witches and their warriors.’ She
squeezed his arm, the muscle like steel under soft skin. ‘Stay hidden. I think a Lupin trophy is high on their list of
priorities.’
   ‘Rosette said that too.’ He looked at her hand still on his arm and stepped closer. She told her legs to take a step
back but her body didn’t obey.
   ‘And you, Mistress? What will you do?’ he whispered.
She swallowed. ‘I’ll get Hotha and half his Lupins to meet us.’ She hesitated. ‘At Dumarka.’
   He stepped closer still, his breath sweet, warm.
   ‘Teg. We’re in the middle of a battlefield.’
   His hand touched her cheek.
   ‘Teg…’
He lifted her chin and bent towards her. She felt a thousand choices rise up to meet him. When his lips touched
hers, she let them all melt away. The kiss washed over her like waves on the shore. When he stepped back, she
looked at a man she’d never seen before. She opened her mouth to speak but no words came out.
   ‘I’ll meet you in Dumarka,’ he said.
She nodded, dropped to one knee and leapt, arrowing into the sky. Her falcon whistle sounded over the
headlands as she let the thermals carry her higher.
CHAPTER 22
TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH & PRIETA FOOTHILLS & DUMARKIAN WOODS, GAELA

Nell blasted through the portal, the sulphur taste in her mouth sending her into coughing fits. A flock of sea birds took flight, filling the sky with white noise. The Three Sisters added their caws and croaks, flapping in circles, black against the grey ash. Nell leapt to the air, joining them, flying the perimeter of Temple Los Loma before dropping into the courtyard. Grayson and Maluka were below, shoulder to shoulder, Fynn behind. She whistled loud and back-winged onto Grayson’s arm.

‘Makee!’ Nell screamed as she morphed, taking in the burnt buildings and broken water ducts. ‘This is her work?’

‘She isn’t here,’ Grayson said, shaking his head.

‘She isn’t, but she’d want to be,’ Nell stormed up the steps, leaving the others to follow. ‘Where is everyone?’ She strode through the hall to the library. Annadusa came trotting down the stairs, her hair unbraided, trailing behind.

‘I’ve sent them back, most of them,’ she said, meeting Nell halfway.

‘Back where?’

‘To Gaela. To Los Loma, Gaela.’ Annadusa held up her hand. ‘Don’t look at me like that, Nellion Paree. You weren’t here. You don’t know what’s happened.’

‘I can see what’s happened. The mountains are boiling, ice caps melting, seas rising. Is all of Half Moon Bay under water? The Sierras about to blow?’

Grayson nodded. Annadusa confirmed as well.

Nell let out her breath, clenching her fists. ‘I will not lose this temple ground. I will not let Earth go under.’

‘Nell.’ Grayson put his hand on her shoulder. She shrugged it off.

‘This is a glamour. Can’t you see that?’

They stared at her. Blank.

‘This is a consensus reality. One of many. That’s all. I will change it.’

Grayson brushed the ash out of his hair. ‘A glamour? If so, it’s a damn convincing one.’

Annadusa stepped closer. ‘Nell, Earth’s had it. She’s fighting back.’

Nell’s eyebrows lifted. ‘You think so?’

‘I do.’

The others nodded.

‘And just what kind of consensus reality do you think a belief like that would create?’

Annadusa crossed her arms under her breasts. ‘You’re saying it’s our fault?’

‘I’m saying this reality, set in motion by La Makee, must be changed! She’s closing the door on this world.’

Maluka’s head shot up. ‘To keep the trackers out of Gaela!’

Nell turned to her. ‘Precisely.’

‘Isn’t that going to mess with the many-worlds? Cutting off Earth?’

Maluka reached for Grayson’s hand and he took it.

‘Right again,’ Nell said.

The others sank into chairs, eyes on Nell.

‘We can turn it around,’ she said, her voice softer.

Annadusa frowned. ‘How?’

‘First up, we run a little experiment.’ She had their attention. ‘We restore some natural balance to these rampant molecules. We need to open some doors.’

‘They aren’t locked?’

‘They are, but I’ve got the keys.’

‘You’re not the only one,’ Grayson said.

‘How’s that?’

‘ASSIST. They’re closing in.’

‘Out here?’

Maluka shook her head. ‘They’re using the portals.’

Kreshkali felt a rush of relief. She’d spotted Hotha just as she, Nell, got back to Temple Los Loma. There was still
time. She winged in, Hotha’s eyes closing when she morphed in front of him.

‘You look flushed, my queen,’ he said, shielding his face from the shock wave.

‘Headwind.’ Lupins loped past, barely visible in the tree cover. ‘Hotha, can you bring some of the clan north, to Dumarka?’

‘The scouts have slipped by? Are they on the doorstep?’
She nodded.

‘You’ve been consulting with Teg?’
She felt heat rise to her face and dispelled it. ‘He’s given me the lie of it, yes.’

‘But only a taste?’
She knitted her brows. ‘Don’t play games with words, Hotha. This is the moment, the crucial one. We can save Temple Dumarka or we can lose her forever.’

Hotha winked, apparently not ready to let it drop. ‘He’s your apprentice. My son…’
She smiled. ‘And a fine one. Thank you. Now answer my question. Can you come with me north? I don’t have time to beg.’

Hotha tilted his head. ‘What about the spell? Makee?’

‘I’ve left Makee with a little puzzle to ponder. Rosette has the spell.’

‘Good work.’

‘She is my apprentice as well.’

‘A testimony to your…’

‘Hotha, shut up! For a bloodthirsty race, you Lupins have a hard time keeping your minds on the battle.’

‘Bloodthirsty?’

‘As the stories go.’

‘The stories be wrong.’

‘I’m beginning to believe that now.’

He stepped closer, leaning in. She planted her hand on his chest, sending a wave of energy to his heart.

‘Dumarka? Now?’

‘Where are your birds?’

‘The Three Sisters? Nell’s got them, Temple Los Loma.’

‘They might have served better here.’ He looked skyward. ‘Scout?’

‘I’ll fly.’ She touched his cheek, giving him a light pat. ‘Don’t pout, Hotha. I won’t let you run into the Corsanon temple witches.’

‘Unless they’ve woven a glamour even you can’t see through.’

‘Unless that.’

His eyes softened and he leaned towards her face. She clapped her hands, dropping to one knee before launching skyward.

*Bring the Lupins, Hotha, plenty of them. Corsanon must not set foot in Dumarka’s sacred woods.*

Xane felt the clouds approaching. The wind got under his skin and he knew the storm was uncanny. He shivered. He really didn’t like the cold. He liked even less riding with the Corsanon temple priestesses. They were silent, using mental speech among themselves, or so he suspected. He couldn’t hear it. He couldn’t hear their horses either—the tall, perfectly matched palominos with their long flaxen manes and tails—not a snort or a stumble. They never put a foot wrong. He felt out of place and not just because he rode an unschooled grey mare that spooked and crow-hopped at every twig that snapped and every owl that hooted.

He felt claustrophobic. It wasn’t too many leagues into the tree cover before he couldn’t stand it any more—the constraint, the formality, the foreboding. He was desperate to get away and imagination seemed his only escape. He let his mind wander, a young dog without a leash.

Visions appeared, vivid and confronting. The one that entranced him the most was the wolf, the Lupin, if that’s really what it was. He felt like he knew more than his mind could remember. Could that man sitting with the lovely witch in the carriage have really been Lupin? His face was striking enough—legend had it they were beautiful, in either form. Beautiful, and dangerous as demon’s fire. The witch was striking as well, and the temple cat. He sighed. Maybe they all were Lupins!

While he speculated, the creatures in the depths of his mind began to climb. They did so quietly, innocuously. If they could only reach the surface, come to light. If only…Xane shuddered, catching their approach and slamming the hatch door of his awareness, knocking them back down into the pit. How long would he have to battle this? Would he ever feel himself again?

*What’s wrong with the lad?*
It was the voice of a temple priestess. He heard it in his head and resisted the urge to yelp his surprise.

*Hemlock.* Another spoke. *He was shot in the skirmish.*

*Skirmish? You call what happened on the Corsanon Fields a skirmish? We lost half a legion.*

There was a sudden pause.

*Shield. Someone’s listening.*

*Who?*

*Quiet. Shield.*

Xane pinched the bridge of his nose. He was hearing voices in his head again. Were they imagined or real? They were women’s voices. One he clearly recognised as the Corsanon High Priestess who rode several horse lengths ahead of him. He wrinkled his nose. Had he really caught part of their conversation? If so, it confirmed it. They thought the hemlock had sent him mad as well. Perhaps he would die from it, after all.

He rode on, staying mindful. He didn’t want to miss a chance to hear more, and he didn’t want his daydreams to give those inner creatures the opportunity to rise. A wind rippled under his skin and he sat up, the mare leaping over a tangle of vines as if she’d seen a snake. He steadied her, focusing again into the distance. ‘Too cold for snakes, Rose. Take it easy.’

But it wasn’t too cold for Lupins. Dozens of them. Wolves, anyway, up ahead. He was certain of that. They ran, powerful legs churning, heading northwest, the same direction as he and the witches were going. Could they be called to Temple Dumarka? In its defence? He’d not imagined Lupins would align with any temple. They kept to themselves, or so the stories told. He cleared his throat, ready to alert the priestesses. Why hadn’t they spotted them? Then he realised the distance. It was leagues away. Nobody could see that far. No one could sense that far either. That’s why the horses were still calm, unaware. He had to be dreaming. Hallucinating.

*But what if the vision were true?* He rubbed his neck, picking at the wound. The witch beside him rode closer, her face unreadable beneath the dark cowl. ‘What frets you?’

‘Senneca, leave him.’

‘But he’s seen something. Look at him. He’s sweating.’

The lead witch called a halt, motioning Xane to her side.

‘What do you see, lad?’ Her voice was not unkind—like an elder speaking to a foolish child.

‘Up ahead,’ he said, pointing into the distance. ‘Can you see them?’

She didn’t answer.

‘There are more…wolves, Mistress.’

The temple witches scanned the horizon, turning left and right, taking in the rolling terrain. It was scattered with oaks, brambles and tall gums with clusters of thistles, pale green with mauve flowers. The sun slipped further behind the clouds and the land lost its colour, the leaves a carpet of mist. Fog rolled in from the North Seas and the air became moist, their voices echoing.

‘How many?’ she finally asked.

Xane tightened his fists, dew heading on his horse’s mane. ‘I can’t see them any more, but there were many. Over a dozen.’

The High Priestess didn’t move. They had to have been conversing with each other but Xane couldn’t hear them now, if he ever had.

‘Back to the road. There’s nothing here but a boy’s illusion.’

They turned as one, galloping north. Xane didn’t like the choice. They would make faster time to Dumarka by road, but the Lupins would get there first in any case. He scratched his head. Why did that make him feel better? A falcon whistled again, long and mournful in the distance. He couldn’t find an answer that made any sense. He turned his mount and followed the priestesses.

Rosette had the edge of the woods in sight. Drayco ran ahead, his instincts leading him through the thick fog as he raced towards his ancestral home. Teg ran with her, shoulder to shoulder. They jumped a fallen log, landing lightly on the opposite side, covering the miles effortlessly. Lupins were made to run.

Horses were made to run as well but Clay and Shane had fallen behind. She’d told them to stick to the road—the fog would be too difficult to navigate otherwise. She also knew that Shane’s horsemanship wouldn’t handle the woods. There were too many fallen trees, culverts and ravines. She hoped the bards didn’t meet any trouble. Why Nell would send them to her she couldn’t work out.

*Teg, did Kreshkali mention anything about those two?*

*The bards? Not that I recall.*

*Strange, don’t you think?*

*It’s all been strange for me, this whole venture. Ever since Kreshkali took me on…nothing but strangeness.*
They crossed a stream, leaping up the far bank, running on. 

*I feel the same way.* Rosette couldn't see the sun dropping to the horizon but she felt it. Darkness came quickly and they slowed their pace. When Drayco halted, Rosette sighed. They’d reached the borders of the Dumarkian Woods ahead of Corsanon.

*Straight to the temple, Drayco?*

*This way.*

They followed him, the air thick, the trees closing in. Tall redwoods surrounded them, interspersed with the pines. The forest floor was covered with deep leaf mould, silencing their footfalls. There wasn’t a sound save for their panting.

*We’re close, Maudi. I’ve found the waterway that surrounds the temple.*

*How far downstream are we?*

*A short sprint. Drink first? Refresh?*

She tested her hearing, ears pricked before shape-shifting back into human form. ‘Good idea.’ Rosette wrapped her arms around Drayco’s neck, covering his eyes with her hands as Teg morphed.

He was breathing hard, smiling. ‘Great run!’

‘You’re in a particularly good mood, Teg, considering how close you came to being skewered by the temple witches.’

‘I am.’ He smiled wider.

‘And also considering we have half of Corsanon bearing down on us, no idea if Hotha’s clan will get here before them, have had no word from Kreshkali and as far as I can tell An’ Lawrence is surrounded, cut off, and La Makee a wild card.’

His smile faded. ‘There are a few unknowns, I admit.’

‘What’s that?’ She cupped her ear.

*More than a few unknowns. But sometimes it’s the uncertainty that…*He didn’t finish his thought. His smile grew again.

They went down to the edge of the creek and drank. Drayco stayed above the bank, peering into the dark, his tail waving back and forth.

*What’s wrong, lovely?* she asked, joining him.

*No one answers.*

*None of the temple cats hear you?*

*Not a one.*

*Are we in the right time?* Teg asked, taking over watch while Drayco slid down the bank and lapped at the edge of the stream.

‘You saw Kreshkali last. Did she say what was happening here?’ Rosette turned him towards her, catching his eyes. ‘What’s that look for?’

*It’s nothing.*

‘Are you blushing?’

*No, I’m thinking. Kreshkali said to meet us here. That’s all.*

*There’s no one here, Maudi. The temple is gone, just like it’s always been.*

*Could we be too late?* Teg asked.

Rosette put her hand on Drayco’s back. *I can’t smell battle, can you?*

*There’s been no battle, Maudi.*

‘No battle,’ she repeated aloud.

*What next?* Teg asked.

*There’s only one way to find out, Maudi. Shall we check the temple grounds?*

*Lead on, Drayco.* She turned to Teg. *Eyes open, all of us. Traps, glamours, ambush. Be aware!* 

Shaea grimaced as she dismounted. Her back ached and her legs nearly buckled when she touched the ground. The constant riding was getting her down.

‘Water them, be quick about it.’

So was the constant nagging from La Makee. They’d jogged for the last hour, picking their way through the foothills until they came to this creek. La Makee was animated. She said they were nearly there. Where *there* was, Shaea didn’t know, but the Entity was close. It had spoken to her again. It had told her to do whatever La Makee asked, no matter how strange or dangerous it sounded.

She frowned. It seemed very convenient, that directive. Convenient for La Makee. She loosened the girths and led the horses to the stream. They tugged at the reins, their heads dropping to the water the moment they reached the
sandy bank. She squatted beside them, watching the ripples expanding out from the horses’ muzzles. When they lifted their heads, water fell from their mouths. The stallion rolled the bit with his tongue, turning to sniff the top of her head.

‘Hey, that’s wet!’ She pushed him aside, thinking of Xane and how much he would have loved caring for these horses. ‘At least your last year was happy,’ she whispered to him. ‘Wasn’t it?’

‘Get them up here.’ La Makee’s voice cut into her thoughts. ‘Let’s go, girl.’

Shaea bristled. She wasn’t used to taking orders from anyone. Living off the filth of Corsanon, she was free. She never knew if she’d find food, or if she would survive the streets and alleys through the night, but she was her own spirit. She answered to no one else. She’d never appreciated that before. Never thought her life lucky. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. If it weren’t for the Entity’s instruction, the promise of travel through the corridors, escape to another world, she’d be re-thinking her company. ‘Coming, Mistress.’ She hustled, leading the horses back, waiting for Makee’s next order.

The witch was gazing up at a granite cliff face. ‘Take them the long way around,’ she said, pointing to a side track. ‘But don’t go into the portal. I’ll meet you there.’ Makee morphed into a raven and shot towards the mountain.

‘Where are you going?’ Shaea asked.

‘Checking on the enemy.’

The enemy? Shaea had no idea who that was. She led the horses up the track, wondering if she would recognise the portal when she saw it. This time, she did. It was a wide, tall opening in the side of the cliff. She stood at the entrance and poked her head into the dark. ‘Entity? Are you in there?’

She waited for a reply, kicking at stones on the ground when none came. She had half a mind to lead the horses straight in and take her chances when the raven landed on a gnarly oak growing between the boulders. La Makee morphed, the wave of energy stirring the dust, the horses backing down the trail.

‘A little warning next time, if you don’t mind,’ Shaea said.

La Makee ignored the quip. ‘Follow me. They’re getting away!’

Shaea led the horses into the cavern. Neither baulked, which surprised her.

‘Been this way before, have we?’ she whispered.

‘Listen up, girl.’ Makee stood directly in front of her. ‘When the portal stops spinning, we’re going to be in a dark woods.’

‘Dumarka?’

She snapped her fingers. ‘Don’t interrupt. I’m laying a glamour on you that’s going to be a protection.’

‘What kind of glamour?’

Shaea sucked in her breath, shooting a glance towards the horses. ‘Lupins?’ she whispered.

‘You’ll be fine. They won’t hurt you.’

‘But why the Lupins?’ She looked over her shoulder.

‘We’re going to find Rosette.’ Makee smiled. ‘Remember what she looked like?’

Shaea nodded. ‘I remember. She’s beautiful. A mother, or about to be, anyway.’

‘That’s right. You’re going to find her and you’re going to ask for a spell—the spell. It’s in a vial, probably hanging around her neck. You ask for it, like you mean it, and she’ll hand it over.’

‘A spell? In a vial? You want me to ask for it, just like that? What makes you think she’ll hand it over?’

La Makee chuckled. ‘You’ll be looking like someone she trusts.’

‘Who?’

‘You’ll be the spirit and image of the High Priestess Nellion Paree.’

Clay shivered under his cloak. The fog thickened and his horse stumbled to a halt at the crossroads. They were far behind Teg and Rosette now. He was cold, tired and hungry. Shane didn’t look much better; his lips were blue, his shoulders hunched. ‘We’ve got to stop for the night,’ Clay said. ‘The horses have had it and I don’t know about you, but if I don’t eat soon there’ll be nothing to feed.’

Shane nodded. ‘Which way?’

‘To the town of Dumarka.’

He turned his horse, taking the north fork. Shane trotted to catch up.

‘How far away is it?’

‘Should be over this rise.’ Clay smiled when he saw the town below; the main street was lined with lamps, glowing softly in the fog. The wharf was filled with boats, lanterns swaying from the clipper ships’ masts.

‘I didn’t know it was such a big harbour,’ Shane said.

‘Biggest capacity on the north coast, save for Romanon Bay.’
‘You know your way around Gaela.’
‘That’s the life of a bard.’ He tipped his hat. ‘Come on, I can smell dinner from here.’
The horses picked up on his enthusiasm and trotted the rest of the way to town. They stabled them, tossing the
maids a few extra coins to rub them down and check their hooves.
‘I thought we could hire their care tonight, unless you’d rather do the work.’ Clay could see the relief on
Shane’s face.
‘It’s a good call.’
They made their way to the central pub, the warmth splashing over them as they pushed through the double
doors. Clay went straight to the bar to order, leaving Shane to find a table. He grabbed two mugs of hot spiced wine
and turned to the crowd. He stopped short. Shane wasn’t alone. ‘Kreshkali? What are you doing here?’
‘I could ask the same of you.’
Clay cleared his throat. ‘Have you eaten?’ he asked.
She shook her head.
He put down the mugs and headed back to the bar to order a third meal. He returned, placing a fresh mug of hot
wine in her hand. She thanked him, but her eyes looked stern.
‘How did you end up here? I sent you back to Treeon. Are you taking the long way around?’
Clay frowned. ‘Treeon?’
‘You did, at first,’ Shane said.
‘At first?’
‘But you came back, Kreshkali. Shortly after.’ Clay looked at her sidewise. ‘You told us to follow Rosette. And
we have.’ He ended with a smile, quickly letting it drop.
‘Didn’t you?’ Shane asked.
‘Tell me, boys. How did I come to you, when I said to follow Rosette?’
‘You flew in,’ Clay answered. ‘Just like always.’
‘Black as night,’ Shane said.
‘A black falcon?’
Shane shook his head. ‘No, Mistress. A raven.’
‘A Lemur raven,’ Clay added, his voice a whisper. ‘Are you saying it wasn’t you?’
‘It wasn’t me.’
‘Who then?’
‘If it’s who I think, I underestimated her.’
Their food came and the bards set to it like famished pups. Kreshkali ate lightly, keeping an eye on the front
and back doors. Clay stopped before taking a huge mouthful. ‘Are we being watched?’ he whispered.
‘That’s always a good question to ask,’ she said. She pushed her bowl away. ‘And where is Rosette, if you
were meant to be sticking to her side?’
‘She and Teg were running straight to the Dumarkian Woods.’
‘And Drayco, of course,’ Shane said around a mouthful of bread. ‘They’d be there now.’
Kreshkali downed her wine. ‘Look at me, both of you. I don’t want you to misunderstand any of this.’ She had
their attention. ‘Stay here. Stay put.’ They were about to protest and she held up her hand. ‘There’s a wave about to
break that’ll wash the land clean. I don’t want you caught in the undertow.’ She picked up her staff, nodded to them
and left.
Shane resumed chewing. ‘We’re meant to sit on the sidelines? Is that it?’
Clay folded his arms, slowly shaking his head. ‘Not on your life.’

This way, Maudi.
She could see Drayco’s tail in front of her but not his body. He disappeared into the fog. Wait up, Dray. There’s
water nearby. I can smell it.
Is it the creek beside the temple? Teg asked.
Both are here. Temple and creek. Drayco snapped his tail and she followed him to the water’s edge, the railing
of the bridge just visible above the mist. They crossed it, the arch rising high over the clearing, the outline of the
temple grounds before them.
Ruins, Maudi. They are gone.
‘I’d hoped to see them but it’s too late.’
Teg took her hand and squeezed it. ‘As planned, I think,’ he said.
She turned to him, touching her ear and shaking her head.
As planned, I said.
She nodded.

The wind picked up, the tips of the trees swaying like paintbrushes against the starry sky. The crescent moon gleamed, winking in and out behind trailing clouds. A white light illuminated the ruins, the steps discernible only on one side, the other having given way to erosion. They rose up out of the mist, like the edge of an ancient coastline. Where the steps were still intact, moss and leaf covered them, the stones protruding like bleached jawbones. Trees grew in the centre of the grounds—tall redwoods and a single weeping willow near the other side of the bridge. She let her eyes rest long upon the willow. Tears fell down her cheeks.

*What’s wrong, Maudi?*

*I don’t know. She brushed her cheeks. Everyone’s gone.*

*Not everyone.*

They crossed to the other side and the vibration of their boots clicking over the stones ran up her legs. A faint echo of the rhythm sounded. She rubbed her ears, wincing.

*You okay, Maudi?*

*I’d be better if I could hear. It’s eerie in this silence, with only some tones coming through.*

*I listen for you.*

*Thank you, lovely.*

She explored. A huge slab lay on its side, the monolith once a central support. Vines crisscrossed its surface, brambles growing where sacred fires had burned. Rosette pointed her nose at the night sky, sniffing the breeze. A bird of prey whistled. She heard that shrill call clearly enough. It circled high above. *‘Kreshkali,’ she whispered. ‘She’s here.’*

She held out her arm, noticing Teg do the same. He lowered his, taking a step back. The black falcon landed, back-winging onto Rosette’s forearm. She perched there for a moment, tilting her head, wings not quite folded over her back. In a burst of energy she leapt off Rosette’s arm, shifting into human form before her feet touched the ground.

Rosette shut her eyes, opening them slowly when the gust dissipated. Kreshkali and Teg were staring at each other, a silent exchange. Drayco’s tail snapped, and Kali turned to her. *‘You made it here in good time,’ she said.*

Rosette cupped her hand behind her ear.

*We made it in good time, Teg repeated.*

*We did, but has anyone else?*

*Hotha comes,* Kreshkali said, using her mental voice.

*With how many Lupins? Teg asked.*

His voice sounded different. It was low and smooth—a new confidence. He must have passed some test he didn’t tell her about. *Good.*

*With more Lupins than this woods has ever seen.* Kreshkali turned to Rosette, resting her hand on her shoulder.

*Are you all right?*

Rosette straightened. *‘I’m fine. Just a little deaf and a bit sore.’ She spoke aloud, crossing her arms.*

*‘Still no sword?’*

There was no mistaking the question, even though Rosette didn’t hear it properly. Her hand went to her empty belt. *‘I’ve had some trying events, Mistress.’ She said the words formally. ‘I’ll replace it, again.’*

*I’m sure you will, but I doubt you’ll like the weight and feel of the Corsanon blades.* She pulled Rosette into her arms and hugged her. *I know what you’ve lost. Her eyes drifted over to the willow tree.*

She followed her mother’s gaze. *Is he there?*

Kreshkali nodded.

Rosette buried her face in her mother’s bosom.

*And I know what you’ve gained!* Kali touched the fine silver chain at her daughter’s throat. *Keep it safe, keep it hidden.* She turned to Teg and motioned him closer. *Things are going to get messy tonight. Corsanon rides, one hundred strong. I don’t want them setting a foot on our sacred land, but if they do, I don’t want them to ever leave.*

Drayco roared, planting his forepaws on Rosette’s shoulders, his head inches from her face. She embraced him, joining his song, feeling the vibration in both their throats. Teg morphed, threw back his head and howled. As their chants died down, she turned to Drayco. *Anyone answer?*

*Many—all Lupin. They come.*
CHAPTER 23
PRIETA FOOTHILLS & DUMARKIAN WOODS, GAELA

An’ Lawrence signalled his archers and they spread out, taking up vantage points all around the valley. He kept them in check, though he could see their itchy fingers even this far off.

Why not now, Rowan? The camp sleeps.
Tactically it’s a good move, Scylla, but we are badly outnumbered. I’d rather wait for Bangeesh and Treeon to arrive.
We didn’t last time.
But last time Nell had the spell and Rosette wasn’t born. This isn’t a recapitulation of previous events. The same strategy may not work.
If not a repeat, what then? I’m a little confused, Rowan.
An’ Lawrence rubbed the sweat off his face. He was a little confused himself and it didn’t help knowing Scylla felt the same. She was usually the crystal-clear one. Her unruffled, unfettered mind often contrasted his over-analytical or blocked viewpoint, but not today.
Scylla, I…
Rowan, I hear Drayco. He says it’s time.
Now?
Dawn. We can’t let them join up with the temple priestesses.
How far have they got?
Scylla bristled. To the edge of the Dumarkian Woods.
He groaned. There would be no waiting for the other temples’ support. He would launch an attack on these warriors at sunrise.
We may want to free the horses, Rowan? Scylla purred, an offer of comfort.
I was thinking the same. You keep watch. I won’t be long.
I will come.
Not this time, lovely. These are Corsanon horses. Most have never seen a creature such as you. You’ll alarm them as sure as beating a drum.
She purred louder, sweet in his mind. Be safe. I’ll keep watch. Bangeesh is not far off.
Can you hear them?
I hear Peony, the High Priestess’s familiar.
What does she say?
They are breaking camp. She says they’ll be here not long after sunrise.
An’ Lawrence wrapped his arms around Scylla’s neck and kissed the top of her head before slipping out of the shadows. Turning the horses loose was a grand idea, if he could get them to run without raising the camp. He’d heard of the loyalty of these Corsanon beasts, especially the golden ones. He hoped it was more myth than fact.
He worked his way down towards the camp, keeping his eye on the guards. They were posted at every corner of the valley and at the midpoints halfway between. They paced back and forth, two death dogs straining at the ends of their leads. Voracious animals. He shivered while watching them chew up the ground as they lunged against their restraints. The bullmastiffs were huge beasts, bigger even than Rosette’s glamour. Certainly more dangerous. These animals couldn’t be called off. They were trained to attack, to latch onto their prey and not let go until they held a limp carcass. They would then shake them like rags, crushing bone with their teeth. He’d seen two of them dispatch a small calf. Gruesome.
It was said that they came from an ancient line of Dire wolves, a species long extinct. Not surprisingly they made the horses nervous, and that might be to his advantage. Surely there would be none posted near the picket lines.
He was right about that. There were no death dogs at the picket lines. There was something worse.
Demons!
What’s wrong, Rowan?
Mules.
Mules?
Tied among the horses.
That’s a shame.
It was more than a shame. He’d planned to untie the first horse of the line, jump on and gallop away with the entire string. With mules in the picket line, that was not going to happen. Those creatures wouldn’t budge. He’d
have to think of something else.

Think quickly, Rowan. The camp is waking up.

He muttered to himself, crawling along on his belly. He stayed downwind of the death dogs, but the thought of
them and their slobbering jaws so near was not helping him concentrate. The horses were a stone’s throw away, the
one nearest him restless. It was a palomino gelding with a sour disposition. He could tell that from a distance, in the
dark. It was tossing its head, ears pinned back, teeth bared.

Has he spotted you, Rowan?

I don’t think so. He just doesn’t like his stable mate.

An’ Lawrence crept closer until he was at the edge of the tall grass. He was about to make a move when Scylla
hisssed in his ear, her whiskers tickling his chin.

What are you doing here? I said, wait.

And I said, be safe. You clearly are not.

Down! He pushed her head to the ground. A stableboy was saddling the gelding, and having a difficult time of
it.

He’s the bugle boy, readying to wake the camp. This is luck.

Wait until he tightens the girth, Rowan. Remember the time…

I remember. He turned to her. And please, you must wait here. Stay hidden. You can run flank when I cut these
beasts loose.

Meanwhile?

Meanwhile, handle the death dogs, if they come this way.

My pleasure.

He waited until the lad led the horse away from the picket line and was about to mount up. The horse didn’t
seem any happier with the boy than he’d been with his stable mate. His ears pinned back and he took a swipe with
his near hind hoof, almost kneecapping the lad. A string of curses filled the air and An’ Lawrence jumped in. ‘I’ll
take him off your hands, thanks,’ he said, knocking the lad out.

He grabbed the reins and vaulted astride. The horse planted all four feet and trumpeted, the sound echoing
across the valley. An’ Lawrence stood up in his stirrups, cracking the split reins behind him. The gelding lurched
forward and he drew his sword. The horse immediately came under his control, arching his neck, ears forward, gait
smooth. ‘So you’re battle-trained,’ An’ Lawrence said. ‘Good lad. More luck for us!’

It took little urging to push the horse into a gallop. He rode down the picket line, sword arm extended. Every
horse and mule pulled back, front legs braced, haunches to the ground, tethers tight as fiddle strings. He lowered his
sword and sliced through each rope, freeing the horses to scatter up the valley walls. He was a quarter way down the
line when he hit metal; his arm jarred, the concussion nearly ripping the sword from his hand. A mule brayed as if
demons were chewing its legs off.

Why are you stopping, Rowan? The camp’s awake. Cut the horses loose and get out!

Slight hitch, so to speak.

Hitch?

The mules are tied with chain.

That’s not humane. Perhaps you can…

He didn’t wait for her reply. His arm went up and he sent a wave of energy from his solar plexus to the tip of
his sword. It glowed, a white light, and he swung again, slicing through the chain and on down the picket line until
every horse and mule was free.

Use some magic. Scylla finished her thought before snarling.

Scylla?

Death dog behind! Run!

He didn’t look over his shoulder but he heard the growls. They were answered by the high-pitched scream of
his familiar. A flurry of screams and snarls followed, like a back-alley catfight amplified a thousand times. It moved
at lightning speed. A dog cried out, shrill until it was suddenly cut off. Scylla appeared at his side, her ruff covered
in blood.

‘None of that’s yours, I trust.’

None that I notice. Ride on, Rowan. They’ve set the others loose.

He leaned forward, the palomino galloping hard up the hill, ears still forward. ‘You love battle, do you, lad?
Stick with me. This is going to be a big one and you’re on the winning side.’

Rosette closed her eyes, straining to hear the riders from her hiding place in the brambles. Their hoof beats thudded
on the hard-packed road. She could feel it in her bones as she lay on her belly, pressed under the thickets of
blackberries—their stems like spiky purple sea urchins, their tiny white flowers an illusion of sweetness. She strained harder. Her hearing was still dulled, random at times. High-pitched sounds got through loud and clear, but that was about it. She sent her thoughts to Kreshkali who was circling high overhead in the early dawn light. *We’re ready, Mistress.*

*Wait for my mark.*

She put her arm around Drayco. *Can you tell how many?*

*About a dozen, Maudi.*

She felt the ground beneath her vibrate. They were getting close. It rattled her teeth. *A dozen? It feels like more than that to me.*

*His tail bristled. You’re right. It is a fair bit more.*

*Why didn’t you say so?*

*I didn’t want to worry you.*

*Thanks.*

Teg leaned over. He was snug against her other side. *I can’t see much from here. How many do you reckon?* About a dozen…or so.

*He frowned. More than that, surely.*

*You mean how many all together?*

*They are fifty strong. Kreshkali’s voice cut in. Shield. There are plenty of Corsanon witches among them. High Priestesses from the old temple. Beware.*

They both looked skyward and then at each other.

*Is Hotha’s lot ready?* Rosette asked.

*I certainly hope so,* Teg replied.

They scooted back until Rosette could only see a thin ribbon of road in front of her. The sun was rising, washing the edge of the woods with a rose light. Birds burst into song as if a switch had been flipped. Some were like little alarms, others coaxing, all tweeting and chirping and cackling. She smiled. *I can hear the birds!*

*I knew you’d be all right.* Teg nudged her.

*And I am.* She kissed his cheek.

*Focus, you two!* Kreshkali cut into their thoughts.

Rosette peeked skyward through the brambles. A stand of white egrets took flight, their wings blood red in the sunrise.

The black falcon shot out of view. *They are here.*

The horses came to a halt in front of her, the ground becoming still, dust settling. She could see them from their knees down, golden legs, shod hooves, long flaxen tails swishing. They were in perfect form. She nudged Teg. *Those are the temple priestesses.*

*How can you tell?*

*All palominos. That was their way.*

A few other horses approached, one with grey legs and a white tail. It was particularly well shod—the nails perfectly even, a neat row of three on the inside, four on the outside, a well-drawn toe-clip in the middle. Rosette’s spine tingled. It reminded her of Jarrod. He was so precise when it came to farrier work. She flung the thought out, concentrating on the group in front of her.

Orders were barked. A temple witch dismounted along with several Corsanon warriors. Rosette strained, cupping her ears. She could make out fragments of the conversation, the higher frequency of the priestess discernible. It was enough to know what would happen next.

*‘This is the only way in,’* the priestess said.

*There was a long pause.*

*What are they saying, Dray?*

*The warrior is concerned about ambush, Maudi.*

*As well he should be.*

*‘That’s what the scouts are for,’* the temple priestess said. *‘Send them in first.’*

They lowered their voices to a whisper and Rosette couldn’t follow any more. She sighed, her mind suddenly wandering back to her childhood. She recalled the day she and Jarrod were playing hide-and-seek. She’d buried herself so deep in a bramble patch that he couldn’t find her. She had to yell for help to get out. She clasped her hand over her mouth to keep from giggling at the memory.

*Maudi? Hardly the time for such reverie, do you think?*

*I know, Dray. It just came out of nowhere.*

*Nothing comes from nowhere.* Drayco stiffened. *Don’t move. They are riding in.* His hackles shot up.
Six horsemen and a priestess rode past, straight into the woods. Rosette felt another shiver up her spine. Did you feel that?

Neither Teg nor Drayco answered. She pulled brambles aside to get a better view. A temple witch raised her hand, the sleeve falling back from her wrist to reveal a spiral tattoo. She mouthed words Rosette couldn’t hear but the glamour she wove was palpable. It fell over the Corsanons like a gentle mist, erasing them from sight. Rosette squinted, tilting her head to the side. She couldn’t glimpse a thing though the ground moved with each horse’s hoof fall, leaves displaced by their hooves. She leaned closer to Teg.

*Can you see them?*

Nope.

*Anything at all?*

*The horses were leaving tracks but she’s covered that too.* He leaned away, following the progress of the scouts. *Not good. I can’t see a thing. Some glamour, eh?*

She pressed her head into Drayco’s shoulder. *Can you see through the glamour, Dray?*

Nothing, Maudi.

She and Teg exchanged a look.

*It’s going to take something extraordinary for us to see past the spell. Got any ideas?*

He shook his head. *Let’s hope Kreshkali does.*

Roissette pointed to the sky. *She’s watching.* Roissette focused her mind on the falcon. *Can you spot them, Kali?*

The bird whistled long and shrill before taking off. *Rosette, Teg! Stay there, stay hidden, and keep track of how many enter.*

*Anything else?* Teg asked.

*Pray thunder! I want the biggest, darkest storm you can conjure.*

Yes, Mistress, they said in unison.

*We need lightning strikes. Plenty of them. Now! We’re on it!*

Shaea led the horses to the edge of the portal, taking in the dawn. The woods were glowing, birds bursting into song. Far above, a flight of egrets arrowed towards the east. Their bodies glowed in the sunrise until they vanished behind the canopy of trees. It was the same woods she’d wandered in before. Was that only a few days ago? She could see the ruins of the old temple in the distance, the stone bridge arching over the creek. Very pretty, in a ghostly, but haunting, sort of way.

She was feeling more and more like a stable hand than a witch’s apprentice. She didn’t mind so much any more. The thought of being glamoured to appear like a High Priestess and asking Rosette for her spell was not pleasant though. Nor was the idea of being surrounded by Lupins. She sensed them. They were everywhere and she didn’t like the feeling one little bit.

At least, she imagined Lupins surrounded her. She had no idea what a Lupin really looked like or what their presence felt like. There were so many different stories about them. Maybe it was all made up—hearsay or myth. But Makee sounded confident they were real and Shaea was pretty sure the witch had seen more than one. She stroked the warhorse’s neck. It was taut and the mare was trembling. *La Makee? Where are you?*

‘We’ve got to wait until they’re preoccupied, which shouldn’t be long.’ Makee chuckled.

Shaea had no idea what she meant.

‘I want you under the bridge.’

‘Under the bridge?’ Shaea followed Makee’s pointing finger. ‘In the water?’

‘Not in the water, stupid girl. On the bank, just out of sight. There’s going to be some fighting. Don’t worry about it. No one will see you until I want them to, and then you’ll be protected.’

‘Because I’ll look like Nellion Paree?’

‘Exactly.’ She snapped her fingers when Shaea looked down. ‘Pay attention! When I give the word and cast the glamour, ask Rosette for the spell. When she hands it over, bring it to me. Questions?’

‘Just one. Why are we doing this?’

‘Wrong question.’

‘What about the horses?’

‘They’ll be safe in the portal. Off you go.’ She waved her hand—like shooing a fly from a bowl of fruit. ‘Get yourself to the bridge and don’t move until I say.’
Shaea handed over the mare’s reins and wrapped her cloak tight, cinching up the belt. The woods looked cheery but they didn’t feel that way; nothing like the playful energy of the other day. A storm was brewing. She flinched when the glamour fell over her. Even though she could see her hands and feet, she was certain no one else could. They glimmered, iridescent. Shaea made her way down the path, stumbling on the rough stone steps. The creek babbled, and the air turned cold under the bridge. She squatted on the highest ground, wrapping her arms around her knees. The grass was pale and squishy under her boots. I’ll wait and I’ll get your spell, but that’s all. She kept her mind shield up, her thoughts to herself. I’m through doing your tasks, Entity or no—after this, I’m getting out.

Rosette didn’t move. She was still sandwiched between Drayco and Teg, brambles poking like tiny knives. She’d linked minds with the Lupin and together they were praying rain—a colossal storm—by picturing it as if it were already there. She made it real with her mind. Rosette imagined she could hear the crack of thunder on the horizon, like a bull whip snapping, silencing the birds, sending the bees back to their hives, squirrels to their hollows. Clouds obscured the sun, gathering thick and fast like a total eclipse. The air around them went still.

She pictured the darkness, the ominous silence punctuated by thunder and flashes of lightning. The first drops of water fell, large splatters hitting her nose, her eyelids, sweet rain running into her mouth. She felt the icy touch on the back of her hand; the droplets turned into a pounding rain, leaves jumping from each hammer fall. Rivulets formed around her, soaking her clothes and streaming down her fingers, along her arms, over her boots.

She imagined Drayco’s ears wet, the weight of the tufts making them droop, his eyes hooded, whiskers heading. His breath became visible puffs, his respiration increasing as the storm gathered. His coat spiked, his tail snapped. Each flash of lightning brought the trees closer for an instant before they retreated into darkness again.

I hate this, Maudi.

I know, lovely, but it’s working.

Teg leaned over; it was like pressing a wet sponge against her ribs.

Great conjure, Rosette. I love working with you!

Don’t gloat, you two. It’s only half done. I want a revealing spell with each lightning strike. It’ll take the three of us to keep it up. Are you with me?

Rosette understood immediately. They couldn’t unravel the Corsanons’ glamour directly—the High Priestesses’ spell was too tightly woven for that. They couldn’t conceal all the Lupins and themselves either—it would take more thought than they could spare. What they could do was expose them during the instants of every lightning flash, if they wove their revealing spell right. She took Teg’s hand. Ready?

He nodded and the deeper layer of the spell began.

Shane grabbed Clay by the coat, pulling him back before he ran smack into the horse’s rump. Clay clearly hadn’t seen the animals standing in front of the portal. It was dark, sure enough, but Shane had spotted their silhouettes outlined against the rocky cavern wall. One was a warhorse, the size of a small pub. He didn’t know how it had happened, but it looked like the portal had shot them smack into the backside of two warriors and their beasts.

‘I thought you said if you focused on Rosette, the portal would take us to her,’ Clay whispered. ‘Now do you see why I thought we best ride straight to Dumarka? We weren’t that far away.’

‘Ride?’ Shane kept his voice low. ‘We’d have ridden on the heels of the Corsanons, or maybe the other way around. This is a war zone, remember?’

‘We don’t even know where this is. Looks to me like we could be anywhere.’

Shane shook his head. ‘Listen.’ A whipbird called, the whistle-crack ringing loud. ‘It’s the Dumarkian Woods.’

‘Maybe, but if so, who are they?’ Clay pointed towards the two women at the entrance.

Shane pulled him back and they crouched in the shadows.

‘How do we get past them?’ Clay whispered.

‘We wait.’ When the two women moved off, he grabbed Clay’s arm and led the way out into the sunrise. ‘See,’ he said. ‘Eyes open. Rosette must be nearby.’ Shane scanned the woods but the smile he had ready disappeared along with the sun. The warm glow of the woodland went cold as clouds swept over the canopy. Thunder rumbled and large drops of rain began splattering down, hitting hard. A wolf howled in the distance. Another answered, and then another. Shane pointed towards the creek. ‘Under the bridge. Hurry.’

He ran down the steps; the moss was turning slick, water flowing over the stones. The creek roared, whitecaps cresting. He ducked under the high arch of the bridge, staying as far back from the water as he could. Clay followed.

‘Ouch! Get off my foot, you big ox!’

Shane leapt to the side and smacked into Clay. ‘Did you say that?’

‘Say what?’ He shoved him forward. ‘Move! It’s sheeting down out here.’
‘Listen. Someone’s there.’ He pointed at the ground.
‘You’re bats. There’s no one there, but we ought to be. I’ve glimpsed more than trees in the woods. Let me by.’
There was a flash of lightning and before them stood a witch, sword drawn, cloak snapping in the wind, red
hair streaming behind her.
Shane backed away. ‘La Makee?’ His words hung on the air long enough for him to see her smile, then
everything went dark.

‘Why’d you do that?’ Shaea asked Makee. She kicked Shane’s boot as he lay face down in the mud. ‘Do you know
what a fine musician he was? The other one too. Now they’re dead.’
‘I’ve hardly killed ‘em. They’re just having a little rest. Stay put, Shaea. Stay alert. I’ll be back.’
Shaea had a retort ready but La Makee was gone before she could get it out. ‘Stay put?’ She looked at the
comatose bards; their faces were obscured and their limbs were at odd angles. ‘It’s an unnatural sleep you put them
in,’ she called out. ‘Can’t be good for their health.’
Her only reply was laughter in the distance.

Shaea’s old life in the streets of Corsanon was looking better by the moment. ‘How’d I get into this?’ She bit
her lower lip. The sight of the bards in the mud was too strong a reminder of Xane. She couldn’t stand seeing them
like that. ‘Come on. Let’s get your faces out of it at least. Can’t see how you’d be breathing like that.’
She dragged them up from the water’s edge and turned them on their backs. Their chests were rising and falling
in a slow, even rhythm. It became hypnotic watching them until a crack of thunder made her jump. It pealed across
the treetops, then lightning revealed the clearing. She wrapped her cloak tight. ‘How long am I meant to stay here?’

Not long, girl. The battle is getting closer. Be ready.

‘Great.’ She slumped down next to the bards, folding her hands in her lap. ‘I can’t wait.’

An’ Lawrence tore up the valley, the palomino’s hooves churning out clods of dirt behind him. His second-in-
command was there to meet him. They conversed before he rolled the horse back on its haunches, his sword
pointing straight towards the camp. ‘Charge!’
Like a damburst, the sword riders from Temple Los Loma stormed the valley, galloping down the slopes and
straight into the thick of the Corsanons. The warriors that met them were ill prepared, unhorsed and clumsy. An’
Lawrence led his riders, cutting tent ropes and trapping the enemy under their shelters. He kept his eyes open for
temple witches, but none appeared. They’re idiots for not keeping a High Priestess or two about.

They probably thought the death dogs would be adequate, Rowan.

He stood up in his stirrups, scanning ahead. Good point. Where are they?

Coming around the corner, full pelt. Heads up!

An’ Lawrence saw them before Scylla had finished her thought. Three had broken loose from their chains and
were barrelling straight for him, or so he thought. Their jaws were open, lips pulled back over long fangs, strands of
saliva, red with blood, hanging from their mouths and sticking to their tan chests. They shot past him, their eyes set
on Scylla. ‘To me!’ he screamed, his blade held high over his head.
He pulled the horse to a stop and spun around, bolting back towards his familiar. She had jumped on top of a
wagon and was lunging left and right, swiping at the dogs’ faces as they reared on their hind legs, snapping at her.
Their skin was being torn to strips. One fell back, his jugular lacerated, pumping blood like a geyser. Another caught
sight of An’ Lawrence and turned on him. Before he could swing his blade, the palomino reared, his front hooves
striking the beast in the skull, driving it into the ground. Champion move! He stroked the gelding’s neck. When he
looked up, the last death dog had Scylla in its jaws.

He kicked the horse forward, his sword levelled at the dog’s chest. Scylla screamed, rolling around in her skin,
her jaws wide, sabre fangs catching the dog behind his neck and under his throat. An’ Lawrence’s sword pierced the
dog’s side and he drove it down, through heart and lungs. It released the temple cat and fell dead.

Scylla shook; her fangs were still bared and her hackles were spiked with blood. She screamed towards An’
Lawrence and he turned to find a dozen more dogs bearing down on them.
Where are the Lupins when we need them? she asked, panting.

‘Stay behind!’ He held his sword overhead with both hands, controlling the horse with his legs only. He called
on the Elementals, drawing to him Air and Fire. His blade turned red as an energy wave built up. When the dogs
were a horse length away, he swung, releasing the spell and blasting the beasts with full force. They were thrown
back as if flicked aside by a giant hand. Wagons overturned and tents were ripped from their pegs, the grass torn
from its roots. Flames ignited everything in the spell’s path. The charging warriors were bowled over as well, swords flying from their hands.

More are coming! Scylla screamed in his head.
An’ Lawrence gave the signal to retreat, sending a blast of blue light high into the morning sky. Scylla jumped down from the wagon and led the way out of the valley, blood oozing from her shoulders as she ran. The Temple Los Loma warriors evacuated as plumes of smoke rose from the valley. They retreated to the foothills of Dumar, skirting the Goregan River gorge. An’ Lawrence stopped to take stock of his riders when they filed by. They were in excellent shape, for the most part, though a few horses came back riderless.

‘You’re still bleeding, lovely,’ he said, examining Scylla’s wounds. The tooth hole at the back of her neck was particularly deep. ‘How do you feel?’

I have a slight headache.

‘I’ll bet you do. We need to flush that wound out straight away.’ He led the palomino to the picket line, noting he was sound.

Your new horse beast is injured too.

He looked again, realising the animal had lacerations on his front legs and chest. When he ran up his stirrups he saw the tiny brass plaque riveted to the horse’s saddle. It read Fortuna.

‘Fortuna!’

The horse’s golden ears pricked at the sound of his name.

‘Didn’t you just prove right by me,’ An’ Lawrence said softly. ‘Brave lad, you are, and smart fighter too. We will see to your wounds, and your feed.’

‘The Desertwinds did well, Sword Master,’ his second said, taking the reins. ‘As did Cheetah.’

The palomino closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead on the Sword Master’s shoulder.

‘I’m pleased with them all.’

Are you taking the golden horse, Rowan?

He stroked Fortuna’s neck. ‘I’d say he’s a keeper, wouldn’t you?’

Before she could answer, a raven swooped overhead, screaming once before it disappeared. All heads turned, following the bird’s path.

‘A warning, Sword Master?’

‘More like a threat.’ He surveyed his troops, selecting twelve riders, all uninjured. ‘One hour to attend your horses, then you ride with me.’ He turned to Zero who’d come up late with his section from Half Moon Bay.

Injuries?

‘None, Sword Master.’

An’ Lawrence nodded. ‘We need to keep the Corsanons moving east, but don’t engage them again.’

‘That won’t be hard. They’re heading that way now.’

‘They’ve got wind of Bangeesh?’

‘I’d say so.’

‘Good. I’ll meet you at south Prieta.’

Which way are we going, Rowan?

‘Through the portal to Temple Dumarka. I have a feeling the distraction didn’t work.’

More like it worked in reverse.

‘How so?’

I think they were there to distract us.

Rosette signalled to Teg. The rain was sheeting down and they needed to get out of the culvert before they were swept away. Drayco was cursing in her head, and the Corsanons had just sent in more scouts.

They won’t keep that up, Teg said. Sending them in a few at a time never to return.

Rosette watched the stream of warriors enter the woods. They’re all following! To the temple ruins. We have to run!

We have to remain hidden as well. Teg held her back. Glamour?

We can’t hide and keep the storm and lightning conjure going at the same time, she said.

They’re doing it.

Of course they are—a dozen High Priestesses can. They’re four to our one.

Twelve to our one, Teg said. If you’re counting High Priestesses.

Exactly.

They waited until the troops had gone further from the entrance before they morphed, concealing the shock waves. The rain was less torrential under the trees, but a fog was rising and the atmosphere dank. When the lightning flashed the clearing was revealed. She saw the outline of Lupins lurking behind trees, Teg on her left, Drayco on her right—and, in front of her, a Corsanon warrior with his sword raised, about to cleave her head in two.

Drayco sprang but when he connected with the Corsanon, the lightning flash winked out and it looked like he
hung in midair, his jaws clamped around an invisible being. The glamour remained, even in death, and as Drayco dropped the warrior he fell with the body, slow motion to the ground. The temple cat stood over the invisible victim, shaking his head free of blood. That she could see. The ground turned red with it.

At the next flash, Rosette morphed back into human form and grabbed the victim’s sword, tucking the scabbard into her belt. It was an unwieldy blade, as were all forged in Corsanon. The broad, double-edged steel was bulky and the thick hilt felt strange in her hand. She drew it though, and kept it ready. They waited for the next lightning flash before moving forward. By the time they reached the temple ruins, the battle was in full fury.

Every crack of lightning revealed the enemy, Corsanon warriors attacking the Lupins, two or three to one. When the illumination winked out, the clash of steel rang in her ears. Rosette could hear that clearly now, but the growls and snarls she knew must be screaming through the woods were still beyond her register—too low a vibration for her tattered eardrums. When the light flashed brightly she again saw the Lupins, some in wolf form and some bipedal with swords and shields. They were tearing into the warriors, even though outnumbered.

Rosette was by the river, holding the broadsword in the guard position, waiting for the next wink of light. Teg and Drayco were behind her and she pressed tight against the Lupin, keeping back to back, moving slowly towards the shelter of the bridge.

Mind you don't slice my ears off with that thing, Maudi.
She felt the vibration of Teg’s chuckle through her spine.
Mind you don’t slice mine either, Teg said. It’s double-edged, in every sense of the word.
It’s a heavy mother of demons, is what it is. I’d like to see you wield it gracefully!
I’m sure Kreshkali would say it serves you right for losing track of your own.
Thank you, Teg. Lovely reminder. And by the way, what happened?
What do you mean?
I know something’s up with you and our mistress. You pass some test I didn’t hear about?
Teg didn’t answer for some time.
I certainly hope so...

The lightning ripped and Rosette pushed them all back, out of the kill zone of another opponent. Before the light vanished, she blocked a strike and lunged forward, driving the sword tip through the warrior’s abdomen, pulling down hard as she drew back. She pivoted, her sword arm pointing behind as counterbalance, and threw a spinning side kick to his throat, launching him backwards into the creek. Without thinking, she made to flick blood from her blade, but the weapon was sluggish, too heavy to snap at the end of her wrist. ‘Blast this ramrod that passes for a sword!’ She turned to Teg and Drayco who stood under the bridge.

What are you two staring at?
Maudi, you’ll never guess.
What?
Look who’s here.
Shane and Clay were propped up, side by side, chins resting on their chests. Drag marks led from the water’s edge and they were soaked to the skin. Rosette sheathed her sword, kneeling next to their bodies. Teg and Drayco stood guard.

Are they alive? Teg asked without turning around.
Rosette sat next to Clay. His face was grey, his red curls caked with mud. She patted his cheek. He didn’t respond. With her hand on his heart, she counted the beats against her own, his one to her every ten.
He’s alive, just. She checked Shane. So is he. It feels like a sleep spell of some kind, or a slow death spell. Demons! How did they end up here?
Perhaps they were drunk and took a wrong turn at the last pub, Maudi. Clay used to pass out often. Remember?
A smile parted her lips. I do.
Lightning flashed and Drayco launched on two approaching Corsanons.
We’ve got to get them out of here, Teg.
I don’t see how.
Maudi! She comes. Drayco’s voice cut through her mind.
Who, Dray?
She looks like Nell, but...
His words were cut off as he dropped the warriors, knocking them to the ground with a sweep of his paw. In the next lightning flash Nell stood under the bridge, her robe splattered with blood, her hood thrown back.
Rosette’s head shot up. It’s Nell! Drayco, look! Check, please. Is it really her?
The temple cat didn’t answer immediately. He made sure the warriors wouldn’t get up before turning to the woman, tasting the air, his mouth slightly open. She’s of your blood. Must be Nell.
‘Nell!’ Rosette ran to her, falling into her arms. ‘I’m sorry I disappeared. I had to get away, get to my other self. But you know this, of course. Kreshkali knows this. Why is it you’re here and not she?’

Nell looked at her and swallowed. ‘The baby…’ she said.

‘I know. It’s so sad. I can’t bear it yet. That’s why I ran.’

Nell cleared her throat. ‘Give me the spell,’ she said, holding out her hand.

‘What?’

‘The spell. I need it now.’

‘Why?’

‘Just give it to me.’

Another flash of lightning revealed three more Corsanons charging towards them, a Lupin on their tail. Teg and Drayco attacked as the light winked out. When the next flash ripped through the woods, the warriors’ bodies were prone, minus their throats.

Rosette unclasped the vial.

‘Quickly.’ Nell thrust her open palm towards the vial. ‘Pass it over.’

It pulsed for a moment, warm in Rosette’s hand. ‘Jarrod,’ she whispered, her lips brushing the crystal, kissing it before she handed it to her mother. ‘Nell’s going to mind you now.’ Rosette felt ice in the pit of her stomach when she let go. As the spell left her hand she nearly buckled.

Maudi, what’s wrong?

I don’t know. Danger…

No kidding, Maudi. He shook blood from his ruff.

Nell backed away.

‘Where are you going?’ Rosette sucked in her breath, trying to slow her heart rate. Her pulse was rushing faster than the rapids behind them. When she tore her eyes off Nell and the vial, a wind slapped her face. She slammed her eyes shut, finding a Lemur raven fanning the air when she opened them. Her hand went to her sword. ‘Makee!’ Rosette screamed. ‘You’ll not take it from us!’

Nell froze, bringing her fist to her chest. Rosette moved beside her, drawing her weapon, but Nell ran, disappearing into the rain. The raven darted after her.

‘Nell!’ Rosette screamed. ‘Where are you going?’
CHAPTER 24
DUMARKIAN WOODS, GAELA

When the lightning winked out, Xane urged his mare forward. The woods were dark, haunted with wolves—Lupins, he was certain. He’d watched the Corsanon troops engage them, and the temple priestesses too, but each time the lightning struck the wolves would have them, bringing them down. They never got up again. He was doing his best to make sure that wouldn’t happen to him. For some unknown reason, he wasn’t afraid, but he didn’t know how to fight them either. His sword training had only begun in the last year. He couldn’t face a Lupin and come off the better. His job was to see to the horses, anyway. So far he was leading a string of six, all riderless.

The animals were crowding together, heads high, the whites of their eyes showing. He didn’t blame them. This forest was a strange and eerie place with the storm, the wolves and the metallic scent of blood and blade, though he felt a thread of kinship here. It was inexplicable, made no sense, but he felt like he’d been here before and he didn’t want harm to come to this land. *Hardly a warrior’s stance, or a stableboy’s. I might as well be an enemy, having such a thought in my head.*

He kept his mare under control but he wasn’t sure how many more horses he could lead without losing them all. The harm he didn’t want to inflict was everywhere, and he was in the middle of it. Lightning flashed again and the horse at the end of his string reared. She took off, dragging two others with her. He struggled to keep the grey mare from turning on her heels and running after them. He leaned forward, grabbing her mane when she reared and pawed the air.

‘Easy, Rose. Easy.’ He pressed his face into her neck, sending his thoughts as if she would hear them in her mind. *We’ll be safe. I’ll protect you.*

He had no idea how he would protect her, or himself, but he sent the thoughts anyway, as if they were true. Her hooves hit the ground, jolting hard, but she settled and they moved on. There was no point in trying to find the horses that bolted. He needed to mind the ones he still had control of.

There were three in tow now, near panic. The empty stirrups slapped their sides as they pranced. Wolves were all around. He caught sight of them with each flash, and so did the horses. He moved them into a trot and followed the creek upstream. Willem was not far ahead. In the next lightning flash he saw a bridge, a full battle scene raging around it. When the light faded, he realised he could still see the fighting, though the figures were dark, etched in red. How could that be? He worked his way towards the bridge, hoping to get the horses to higher ground on the other side of the creek, when a scream split his ears.

What he saw jarred his mind and the creatures in the depths of his soul launched sky-high like leaves in the wind. They hung on the sides of the well, clawing and grasping for purchase, awake, strong, frantic to escape. Under the bridge stood a witch, the beautiful woman he’d seen in the carriage. *Her again? Was he dreaming?* He stopped the mare and the other horses bunched around him. He opened his mouth, waiting for his frenzied thoughts to form a word, to call out to her. Before they could, lightning ripped the sky.

A young girl ran, her cloak streaming behind her, hair drenched and clinging to her skin. A glowing blue light pulsed in her fist. She clutched it to her breast and ran like all the demons of the underworld were on her heels. His head felt like a club had struck him. He knew the gait, the shape, the energy, the scream.

‘Shaea!’ he shouted above the storm. ‘Shaea! Wait!’

He drove the mare towards her at the gallop, the other horses dragging behind, anchors in the mud. ‘Shaea, wait! It’s me. It’s Xane. Where are you going?’

She froze. Her head turned towards him but their eyes never met. Lupins closed in and she took off again, up the jagged steps of the northern cliff face, slipping and falling and scrambling to her feet, climbing towards the top. Why was she going that way? There was nothing up there save unpassable rock. The Lupins would run her down. They were gaining with each breath. ‘Shaea! You’ll be trapped.’

A raven swooped past, chasing her as well. A witch? He let loose his string of horses and made it to the bottom of the cliff at a dead run. He jumped off the mare and drew his sword. ‘Shaea, I’m coming!’

The lightning flashed and one wolf dropped back, turning on him. He stood still, not breathing, waiting for the light to vanish. The animal’s eyes were black and lucid. He could see his own reflection in them, a boy with a sword too big for his arm, holding it high over his head, leaving his entire body unguarded. And then he saw her.

In the reflection of the wolf’s eyes, he could see the beautiful witch standing behind him. Her sword was not as high as his, her body protected by the length of it dropped along her side. The light vanished and he knew, to them, he had disappeared, leaving the witch and the Lupin face to face—too dangerous a stance for either to strike.

He leapt to the side as Willem stepped up, swinging his sword like an axe. It caught the Lupin’s shoulder and the animal yowled, spinning on the invisible attacker, missing the mark as he lunged. When the lightning flashed
again, the beautiful witch sheathed her sword, transforming in front of his eyes. She jumped towards Willem, shape-shifting into a wolf as her jaws closed on his throat. The light vanished again but the wolf didn’t let go.

Xane was paralysed as he watched her break Willem’s neck. Her head came up snarling, her eyes locked onto his in the next flare of light. He stole a glance towards the cliff face before he swung his sword wide, making her jump back. He lifted his arm for another blow but he never brought the blade down. He never attacked. A black temple cat appeared at the witch’s side. The animal screamed at him and he staggered back, saved only by the glamour that hid him between lightning strikes. He crouched, holding his breath. The temple cat screamed again and the witch turned into her human form, calling after it. ‘Drayco! Drayco, to me! Up the cliff.’

He heard the name and faltered as if a hand had slammed his head into a stone wall. Dazed, he barely noticed the Corsanon High Priestesses appear, warriors on either side of them. They were after the temple cat and his witch, that was clear. He gripped his sword. Something was very wrong with his head. It felt like it was no longer connected to his body. He couldn’t move. He didn’t think. He didn’t know what to do. Drayco? She called the temple cat ‘Drayco’. I…I love that name.

Xane thought he would be sick. His head spun. The pain was killing him. Everywhere he looked triggered thoughts that pulled against each other. He felt like he was being torn apart. Willem was dead, the temple priestesses were cornering the witch and her familiar. The wounded Lupin didn’t move. Xane pressed his sword hilt into his forehead, blinking, trying to relieve the pressure hammering him. The lightning flashed and vanished; the troop sergeant yelled for him to rally with the others.

‘Xane, mind the horses. Bring them round!’

He scanned the grounds and spotted his mare, two other horses with her. He turned away from the cliff, away from Willem’s dead body and his lost sister, away from the cornered witch and her temple cat, and ran, calling the horses to him, gathering as many as he could.

Rosette waited for the next lightning bolt before chasing after Nell. What was she doing, asking for the spell back and then running away? ‘Nell!’ she screamed. ‘Where are you going?’

Kreshkali’s voice rumbled deep in her mind. What do you mean, Nell?

Kali, don’t confuse me.

Nell’s at Temple Los Loma. Who are you talking to?

Nell is here. You...she...she asked for the spell. I gave it to her. Makee appeared. They both took off. Rosette clamped her hands over her ears while Kreshkali’s scream blasted her mind.

That wasn’t me! After them! Get the spell!

Rosette and Teg bolted. Drayco led them straight for Nell who raced towards the cliff steps, the raven just above her. As Rosette gained on her, the icy hand in her stomach gripped again. The woman she ran after shimmered, a glamour falling. Her stride changed, her form ever so slightly altered. She saw how she’d been tricked but why had Drayco not sniffed it out?

Teg! Call the Lupins to her. We can’t let her get to the portal! We can’t let her take the spell!

Between lightning flashes she could see nothing but the gathering Lupins. A rush of air went past and she smelled horse sweat. A Lupin yowled and dropped to the ground. When the lightning flashed again she saw the girl with the spell was climbing the steps, already halfway to the portal. Rosette stopped at the base of the ruined stairs, lifting her sword behind a young Corsanon staring at Teg, transfixed. He looked hardly more than a boy. She hesitated, unwilling to strike. The light disappeared and she and Teg faced each other.

The next moment Teg was down, blood spraying from his shoulder. When the lightning came again she saw a different Corsanon warrior standing over him, ready to swing and finish him off. She leapt, morphing midair, her jaws going for the enemy’s throat. The darkness returned and he disappeared but she clamped tight, the weight of her wolf body smacking the man to the ground. She shook her head, breaking his neck. When the light returned, the boy ran.

Teg, Drayco, get behind me. Temple witches come!

Teg didn’t move. She glimpsed him out of the corner of her eye. He was down on his belly, panting, the rain
washing blood from his shoulder. It mixed with the mud and coursed past her boots. She backed towards him, Drayco with her, his tail lashing, his ears flat. Half a dozen Corsanon High Priestesses had them trapped, their fingers pointing towards Drayco. His hackles were knife points, his lips drawn back over fangs, claws out, ready.

Rosette drew in the Elementals, building up a banishing. Before she could unleash it, Drayco dropped, his legs knocked out from under him. Rosette cut loose the spell to save him. Too soon. It ripped through the witches like a spinning top but it didn’t have enough force behind it to knock them back more than a few feet. Lupins attacked from outside the ring and Corsanons poured in, surrounding them as well.

_Kreshkali!_

She didn’t answer.

Rosette crouched to touch Drayco’s chest. He was still breathing, but the temple priestesses pressed forward. She sprang at the nearest. It was too close for sword work. She morphed into a falcon, talons forward, slicing. She raked across the faces of the first two priestesses before dropping to the ground, springing back up in wolf form. She cut to the left, tearing off the shoulder and arm of the nearest warrior, and slamming to a halt. The priestesses were making way for a flood of troops, swords drawn. She morphed again, the momentum between shape-shifts so fast, for an instant her wolf form kept going as she twisted in her skin, launching in the opposite direction as a falcon, tearing at the warriors. Her talons locked onto the back of a Corsanon’s head, catching the front of his throat. She closed tight and his sword dropped from his hand, his body following. She morphed again into wolf, the wings of the falcon barely vanishing before she hit all fours.

_Bones cracked in her jaws, hot blood filled her mouth. She dropped the next body and tore back to Teg, morphing into human as she reached him. She crouched, drew Teg’s sword and sprang. The thin curved blade came alive in her hand and she waited for the next lightning flash._

A wall of Corsanons charged. She held the blade in both hands, guard position, drawing up a boost of power from her solar plexus. The energy burst from the tip of the sword as she lunged, dropping to her knee. She cut through the enemy, her blade a foot above the ground, slicing shin and bone in a wide arc. She let the momentum of the swing pull her upright, wet cartilage flying from the steel; the centrifugal force wheeled her around and blood splattered her cheeks. When her sword was high overhead, she loosened her grip, letting the hilt spin. Clamping tight, she stepped back, her weapon behind her back, parallel with her spine. In a smooth arc, she swung again, dropping the sword towards the Corsanons. It cut this time through shoulders, shields and ribs, felling another row like sapling trees.

_Maudi. Help. The temple witches!_

She flicked blood from her sword as she turned towards Drayco. Her face drained of colour. They had him bound by the neck and hind legs and were stretching him. She screamed, and with sword high she ran towards him but hands grabbed her, knocked her down from behind. Her face was pressed into the mud, limbs pinned, a boot between her shoulder blades. She struggled for an instant and then stopped. _Deep breath. Don’t let them see it coming._

She let go her human form, like releasing sand through her fingers. It fell away and in its place she took the form of a python, the body like a twisting tree in the mud. The boot lifted and she reared, striking the face of the warrior as he stumbled over himself, hands flailing. The men who’d pinned her arms and legs fell forward, fists empty. She hissed, striking again. They recovered. Swords came out and she coiled, springing to strike, her wolf form morphing out of the snake’s head as she did.

The closest fighter swung wildly towards her throat as she leapt. Rosette latched onto his forearm and dragged him to the ground. Lupins pressed in behind her, attacking those that blocked the way to Drayco, but she couldn’t get through. She growled and snarled in the darkness, shifting again, falcon wings rising out of the wolf’s forelimbs. As the lightning flashed, her talons ripped the neck of the nearest warrior, catching his windpipe and taking it with her as she rose above the battle. The rain beat down, washing the blood from her claws, striking her feathers like needles, running off her back. She screeched.

From above she could see the cowled hoods of the temple witches forming a circle around Drayco, keeping the ropes taut. He was choking and spitting and they held him down with their intention. She gauged the force of the spell, folded her wings behind her back and dove straight for them. A second before connecting she opened her wings, pivoting her body to drive her talons forward. A witch bent over Drayco, a knife in her hand. Rosette screeched again, slitting her throat. Back-winging, she stopped her momentum with powerful downstrokes and rose out of the circle. The witches were wielding staffs, more Corsanons coming to their aid. She dove again as lightning cracked the sky.

The momentum of her strike snapped the arm of a witch who was raising her staff. Bones protruded and blood sprayed the air. Rosette hit the ground next to Drayco’s head, talons first, severing the neck rope. Darkness blinded her, the enemy disappearing with the light. She jumped back out of her falcon form and shifted; drawing her sword
in a wide arc, she cut through staffs and limbs alike. The fools were all in her kill circle now. Drayco’s head lifted and he struggled to stand. Nearly retching, he lunged at the captor behind him. Lightning flashed. The temple witch let go of her rope, hands coming up to throw a spell. Drayco connected, jaws wide, fangs closing between her shoulder and neck. Blood sprayed, and he dropped the limp body. The other witches faltered.

Rosette fought beside him, cutting and blocking, boosting her power into the sword. The rain fell harder; her hands were soaked red, the ground slick beneath her feet.

Behind, Maudi!

She spun too fast, lost her footing and slipped to her knees. She blocked with her sword but a Corsanon knocked it out of her hand with an axe blow. She crouched, shifting into a temple cat. With one swipe of her claws she raked his chest, hooking in between ribs, puncturing his heart and lungs. She flung the body aside and sprang, not waiting for the lightning to reveal her foe.

They’ve got Teg, Maudi!

She spun inside her skin, jaws open, leaping to the warriors who were dragging Teg away.

They want one of us alive. Stop them, Maudi! Drayco screamed in her head while he held three more warriors back.

A wave of energy welled up. She connected with the guards blocking her way to Teg, shifting to wolf, crushing bones before shifting back to feline, severing limbs, and up to falcon, slicing jugulars, her talons dripping red. She ripped from shape to shape, the essence of each totem so strong it hung midair, still fighting, as she shifted to the next. Each beast of her making battled beside the other, guarding her back and flanks. She leapt to her sword, buried to the hilt in mud, drawing it as she shifted again to human form. Mud slung in a high arc over her head as she lifted the blade. The lightning flashed, revealing her foe. Each alternative form hovered like ghosts around her, gathering for the next assault.

Drayco stood over Teg, fangs sinking into anything that came near, a sea of bodies around him. The rain diluted the pools of blood; it washed dead faces clean and filled vacant eyes then streamed across the ground, racing to the foaming creek. It ran dark red. Gaëla’s tears washed through the Dumarkian Woods and the battle raged on. Lupins lay among the Corsanons. Rosette seethed, her chest rising and falling as she turned to face the last of the enemy. Her sword came singing through the air and she screamed a war cry, her blade poised to sever the head of the young warrior in front of her. His broad blade swung as well, the double edge coming up in a block across his face. Steel struck steel and the reverberation jarred them both back. Lightning flashed.

The jolt vibrated the ground and her shape-shifting forms snapped still, sucking back into her as she drew a deep breath. She let the momentum of the impact turn her side on, her blade again singing through the air, building for a backhanded strike. She called on the Elementals and brought the blade down over her enemy.

Their eyes locked and he whispered a single word. In the heartbeat before impact, she stopped, her sword freezing before it struck his bare neck. There hung a falcon pendant at his throat, the wings upstretched, a ruby sun on top of the raptor’s head.

Tío, he said again. This time the voice sounded in her mind. I give up.

She didn’t move. No longer did she see a Corsanon warrior in front of her but a young man, a boy really, who had dropped to his knees. His eyes were soft, staring up at her; his hands raised as he said the words again, mouthing them aloud—the words she had only ever heard from one other living soul.

‘Tío. Rosette. Tío.’ Tears streamed down his face. ‘It’s me. I’m…Jarrod.’

Her sword arm lowered, holding her blade out to the side. Darkness fell and when the lightning flashed again he stood to face her. The rain beat down on them, the battle raged, and still they didn’t move.

‘Jarrod,’ she whispered.

He nodded.

‘I’ve been looking for you.’ Her eyes filled with tears.

I got lost.

Drayco shouted in her mind. Maudi, a little help over here?

She and Jarrod turned as one and charged towards the warriors circling the temple cat.

Some tulpa you made, Jarrod. I like it. Attractive, but isn’t it a little…young?

Not actually a tulpa, Rosette. That’s been the problem.

She did a double take. What?

I healed the body but couldn’t get past the memories of the previous occupant. I thought I was him.

You’ll have to explain but in the meantime, please keep it in one piece, will you? I’d like to check it out before you get any scars.

He winked and they screamed a war cry together that shook the depths of the Dumarkian Woods.
Xane watched the shape-shifting witch. She tore through the High Priestesses to get to her familiar. The sight of the temple cat stretched between the ropes enraged him too. The animal was not the enemy. As the lightning flashed and he took in the death toll, he reconsidered. They had the advantage in numbers but the wolves, the witch and her familiar were decimating them. His head throbbed as he watched. The creatures in his mind were gaining the rim of his consciousness. He was losing his willpower. He was losing control.

He couldn’t pull his eyes away from her assault—a frenzy of shape-shifting, a savage and invincible woman. As he lifted his blade the lightning flashed again and she stood before him. His breath caught. Her totems rushed back into her body like water into a whirlpool. Her blade lifted, ready to sever his head. She had him. It was the end. Surrender! the chorus in his mind shouted.

He blanched, falling to his knees. ‘Tio…’ The creatures grappling to escape the prison of his mind gained the rim of his unconscious and in one sudden thrust they burst to light. He convulsed, the memories falling away. The echo of Xane’s past that had kept him entombed was gone. In an instant he knew who he was. He was Jarrod, quantum sentient who’d lost his tulpa body over the cliffs of Corsanon. In front of him was a warrior woman about to split him in two—Rosette, the love of his life. He raised his eyes to hers. ‘Tio. Rosette. Tio. It’s me. I’m…Jarrod.’

Her face transformed, the contorted lines of fury softening to wonder, rapture. Each of her totem animals appeared for an instant, peeking around her as if she were a tree in the wilderness, their eyes wide, blinking. They saw him, recognised him—and so did she.

He wept, warm tears chasing the cold raindrops from his face. He wanted to fall into her arms, to hold her. The battle around him disappeared—the flashes of light, the sounds of clashing steel, screams and snarls—all was subsumed by his awareness of her and his recognition of Self. He opened his mouth to speak then his eyes drifted to her flat belly. ‘The baby,’ he whispered.

She shook her head, her own tears flowing freely.

Maudi, a little help over here?

They turned together at Drayco’s call.

Drayco! They ran. We’re coming!

Jarrod? The temple cat’s voice was quizzical. You’ve shrunk.

He heard Rosette’s laughter as he grabbed his sword.

Ah but, Drayco, this body’s real and I’m not through growing yet.

That would explain it then, Drayco said, snarling at the enemy.

Explain what?

Why I couldn’t recognise you.

You told me that young glamour witch was Nell, Dray, Rosette said as she cut down two Corsanons who were swinging their heavy blades her way. I think maybe you need your nose checked.

She was, Maudi.

Kreshkali didn’t agree.

She has the same blood as you and Nell, and Kali. Drayco dodged a blow.

How?

Ask Nell. He spun around. Here they come! About time.

‘Who?’ Rosette asked aloud.

Scylla! And the Sword Master.

An’ Lawrence charged down the ancient steps from the portal riding a brilliant palomino, leading his sword riders straight into the heart of the battle.

‘Fortuna!’ Jarrod cried out.

Definitely fortunate! Rosette whooped delight in his mind.

I meant the horse! He’s riding Fortuna.

Rosette looked confused, but he had no time to explain. The witches were cornered now and he fought to clear a path to Teg. He cut through the surprised warriors, wielding the heavy double blade. When he reached Teg, he dropped to the Lupin’s side, sheathing his sword.

‘Teg? Can you walk?’

The Lupin struggled to raise his head, fangs snapping. Teg, it’s me. Jarrod. Don’t take my hand off. I’m rescuing you.


That’s just my body. Come on. An’ Lawrence is here. You don’t want him to see you floundering in the mud.

Teg morphed bipedal and leaned on Jarrod as he pulled him up. ‘My sword.’ He reached to the empty scabbard.

‘Her High Priestess has it,’ Jarrod said, nodding towards Rosette. ‘Seems she mislaid her own.’

‘High Priestess?’
‘When you see the new trick she’s learned, you’ll elevate her too.’
‘I already have.’ Teg’s voice was a whisper but Jarrod heard it. He walked Teg to the edge of the cliff, the rain washing blood from the Lupin’s face. The battle had moved down to the river, the Corsanons gathering their temple witches, trying to escape. It was over.
‘Speaking of worship, where is Kreshkali in all this? You’ll need her to heal that shoulder. Massive rent. I don’t know how you’re standing.’
Teg groaned, whether from the reminder of the wound or Kreshkali, he didn’t know.
‘What’s this?’ Jarrod pulled them up short. The broken body of a Lemur raven lay before them, wings bent, face buried in the mud. The feathers were lank, soaked in blood and rain. Her blue eyes were unseeing.
‘Oh no. Makee…’ An’ Lawrence appeared behind them, handing his reins to Jarrod. He knelt, pulling the bird out of the mud; he tried to fold the wings to her back but they kept falling open. He looked up at Teg and Jarrod, his face white. ‘She’s still breathing.’ As he stood, he put the black bird under his cloak; rain was sheeting off his face and shoulders. ‘Enough of the rain and lightning,’ he shouted. ‘It’s over. Call it off. Bring out the sun.’
Jarrod nodded, guiding Teg to a tree stump. The horse, delighted to see him, followed like a puppy. He took Teg’s cloth sword belt and cinched it tight over his gaping shoulder wound. The Lupin winced but didn’t cry out. They sat together, back to back, with Drayco, Scylla and Rosette surrounding them, guarding the circle, adding their thoughts to the spell.

_The sun warms my face_, Teg began. _I’m glad in my heart to see it shine again._
_The earth is firm beneath my bare feet_, Jarrod replied.
_I’ve never seen the sky so blue_, Rosette said. She pulled off her cloak, turning her face towards the clouds. _Or the breeze so soft._

_My fur is dry, my paws clean._ Drayco’s rich voice filled his mind. Together, with their thoughts as one, they dissipated the rain storm and brought sunshine and warmth to the battleground.

The reprieve was short-lived, at least in Rosette’s heart. As she looked around the battlefield she wished they’d left it raining. The drab colours had veiled what the sun exposed. She was happy for the warmth, but the visual revelation was another thing. The light stung her eyes and the shimmer of every wet surface magnified the feast of death around her. Bodies glistened in the mud everywhere she looked. Bile rose in her throat and she pulled her eyes away from the twisted limbs and vacant eyes. She focused on the top of Drayco’s head; his large ears were pointing back, listening. ‘What is it, Dray?’

_Can you hear now?_
She rubbed the side of her head, pushing lengths of wet hair away. ‘It’s coming back, slowly.’ She scratched him under the chin, her fingers bloody. ‘You’re a mess, lovely.’
_Have you seen yourself, Maudi? Not any better, I promise._
She smiled. ‘I feel like a blacksmith’s anvil that’s been pounded all day.’
_You look pretty much like that as well._
‘Thanks. You too.’ She gazed at Teg then allowed her eyes to drift over Jarrod, her lifelong companion in a stranger’s body. ‘We all do.’
An’ Lawrence’s scouts and a pack of Lupins were readying to escort the surviving Corsanons out of the woods, seeing them back to their borders. It would be a long ride and she was glad she hadn’t been assigned it. The dead were dragged across the ground, over the pools of blood and gore, and tied to their horses. A grey mare stood to the side, not letting anyone handle her.
‘Rose,’ Jarrod said, and went to her. ‘Easy girl.’ He calmed her, whispering something in her ear, and handed her over to a disarmed Corsanon. Rosette put her head in her hands, covering her eyes.
_Maudi?_ Drayco’s tail fanned the air. _Are you all right?_
‘I’m not. Look at our temple grounds, Dray. Our beautiful forest is defiled, and still Temple Dumarka has vanished. It’s abandoned, ruined. What happened? Where is Kreshkali?’ She sucked in her breath and turned to the crevice in the cliff. ‘Where is Passillo?’
_The temple is not abandoned, Maudi._
‘What’s that, Drayco?’ She stood, scanning the woods.
_Temple Dumarka is not lost. They come._
‘Who comes?’
_Follow me._
He led her past the clearing, skirting bodies yet to be hauled away. They passed ancient columns scattered like kindling around a camp, overgrown with vines, half buried in the loam. At the edge of a towering redwood tree she stopped, her hand on the soft strands of peeling bark. ‘Dray? What are we looking for?’
What is looking?
A pair of temple cats emerged from the trees—a jet-black male and a female, black with flecks of red. Drayco went to them and head pressed the male, giving the other a lingering nose touch. Rosette hung back, her mouth open. ‘Who are they, Dray? They look so much like you,’ she whispered.

*Come meet them. This is Drack, my sire, and Maudi, my dam.*

Rosette’s eyes filled with tears. ‘Your mother and father? Here in the woods all along?’ She knelt in front of them. ‘I am so grateful to you both. I’ve blessed you every day for allowing Drayco into my life. I’ve loved him as fiercely as any ever could, and he me.’

*Are you comforted now?* Drack asked his mate, his question filtering into Rosette’s mind.

The only answer was the warm purr of the temple cat queen.

‘What’s happened? Where are the others?’ Rosette asked.

*All here, all well,* the queen said, grooming Drayco’s ruff.

‘But where? I can’t see anyone but you two.’

*Yet we are all here just the same.* Drack looked around, focusing on things Rosette could not see.

*‘A glamour?’*

*Not that.*

‘What then?’

*We are in a different vibration, a different alignment.*

The temple cats became transparent, as if they were wisps of smoke. Drack’s translucent form headed back into the depths of the woods. The queen followed.

‘Wait. When will we see you again?’

*When you are also in alignment with this temple.*

Rosette watched them vanish, her hand resting on Drayco’s shoulder. ‘I don’t understand.’

*They are satisfied, Maudi.*

‘Satisfied?’

*That you and I must be.*

‘But we’ve been all your life. It’s not like they are just deciding to let us meet—to let me rescue you as a tiny kitten.’

*Actually, they are.*

‘But…’

‘Rosette?’

She looked over her shoulder; An’ Lawrence was motioning her back.

‘Teg said you’re deaf?’ He mouthed the words with exaggerated expression.

‘It’s just my eardrums. I blew them diving for Passillo.’ Her head lifted to the corridor entrance. ‘I can hear a lot better now.’

‘Who were you talking to?’

She looked at the ruined temple. ‘Just Drayco.’

He gazed at the broken columns, the sun sparkling on the wet stones. He rested his hand on her shoulder. ‘How are you?’

She gave him a brief hug. ‘I’m fine.’ His eyes took in her slender body and she looked away. ‘Not now.’

‘Your child was my blood too, Rosette.’

‘I know. Just, not now.’ They stood beside the weeping willow; Rosette pressed her cheek against the smooth white bark and An’ Lawrence grasped a branch. Both avoided looking at the ruins, the bodies, the mud, the decimation.

The river ran clear. They focused on that. Rosette watched a tangle of twigs race past, bouncing along the rapids. It was caught in an eddy for a moment before ripping free, racing on towards the distant ocean.

‘What about the Lemur raven?’ she asked. ‘Was that really Makee?’

An’ Lawrence clenched his hands. ‘It was.’

‘And?’

‘She died, and Wocca’s vanished.’

‘Her familiar?’ Rosette sighed. ‘And what she’s done? What about that?’

‘It can’t be undone.’ He took Rosette’s hand.

His fingers felt cold and stiff. She flooded them with warmth and watched his face relax.

‘We need to get the wounded out of here,’ he said. ‘Teg’s bad. He must be healed.’

‘I have to find that young witch.’

*Shaea,* Drayco said.
‘Shaea. I have to track her and get Passillo back.’ She frowned. ‘At least Jarrod is here now, but his backup is wandering somewhere in the corridors with a rogue apprentice—and Passillo is more than Jarrod…’

An’ Lawrence turned to face her. ‘I thought you had the spell?’

‘Not any more.’ She told him what had happened and his face tightened again.

‘Who is Shaea?’

Rosette shook her head. ‘An apprentice of La Makee’s?’

‘Perhaps.’ An’ Lawrence straightened. ‘Get Jarrod and Teg to the portal. Scylla and I’ll be along.’

‘We’ve got Clay here too, and Shane.’

‘What? Where?’

‘Under the bridge, last time I looked.’

He pulled his head back. ‘How?’

‘No idea, but we can’t leave them behind.’

‘You help Teg up the cliff. I’ll bring the bards.’

‘Where’re we going?’

‘Temple Los Loma. We need to talk to Nell. Kreshkali’s beyond my thoughts.’

‘Mine too. Have you checked with Teg?’

An’ Lawrence frowned. ‘Why should I?’

‘They’ve got quite a strong link.’

He looked away. ‘Hadn’t noticed.’

She patted the back of his hand. ‘To Los Loma then. To Nell.’
Rosette leaned against the corridor wall, picking dried blood from her wrist. The fumes wafting from her soaked robes were not pleasant. She couldn’t wait to get cleaned up.

Agreed. Her familiar sat very still.

‘Eating and sleeping will be welcome too.’ She reached over Jarrod to pat Teg’s cheek. ‘Hey?’ His head lolled to the side. ‘You okay?’ She slapped his face lightly. ‘Teg?’

He caught her hand before she could hit him again, opening one eye. He shut it immediately and groaned. ‘I was for a moment. Hurts like demons now.’

‘Think about something else, Teg. Get your mind out of the wound.’

The Lupin licked his tongue. ‘I was, until you woke me.’

‘Sorry.’ She climbed over Jarrod and knelt in front of Teg. Her hands hovered above his shoulder and she hummed a monotone chant, flowing warmth and energy to him. He was asleep in moments.

‘Drayco, what are you doing?’ she asked, as she crawled back to her spot against the wall.

Her familiar sniffed Jarrod’s boots, tasting the air.

‘He’s Jarrod in his mind, but he’s got younger, and shorter. Strange, isn’t it?’

‘Strange indeed.’ She frowned. ‘How did it happen?’ She directed the question to Jarrod. ‘The last time I saw you was on the Corsanon steps in the driving rain.’

‘That’s right. You went under and I tried to fish you out.’

Rosette wrinkled her nose. ‘Makee didn’t push you over the edge?’

‘Is that what you thought?’ He shook his head. ‘I was trapped under the rapids for the whole ride down and had a rather hard landing. My tulpa lost some of its integrity.’

‘Integrity?’

‘Limbs, lower jaw, bit of spinal column—it was uninhabitable.’

‘So you took this boy’s body and carried on his life as a Corsanon stable hand?’ Rosette stared at him.

‘I didn’t steal it! He’d died the day before. Arrow in the neck.’

‘Is that what you thought?’ He shook his head. ‘I was trapped under the rapids for the whole ride down and had a rather hard landing. My tulpa lost some of its integrity.’

‘Integrity?’

‘Limbs, lower jaw, bit of spinal column—it was uninhabitable.’

‘So you took this boy’s body and carried on his life as a Corsanon stable hand?’ Rosette stared at him.

‘I didn’t steal it! He’d died the day before. Arrow in the neck.’

‘Arrow? That makes sense. But why didn’t you come to me?’ She brushed his hair back from his cheek. ‘We saw each other! We passed each other, more than once. Why the deception?’

‘I was deceived myself! The original occupant of this body, Xane, left behind some powerful memories and the hemlock was still on board. When I woke up, I glimpsed myself for a moment and then went under. I thought Xane’s old data files were me. My memories. I thought I was him. My conscious awareness was buried for quite some time.’

‘And I nearly killed you,’ Rosette said.

‘I know.’

She took his hand. He had beautiful, long tapering fingers. She studied them, turning her wrist back and forth.

‘Where is Xane now?’

‘I don’t know. His consciousness was not around when I took over.’ He scratched at the scab. ‘I think the hemlock poison was partly why I had so much trouble connecting to my own memories and not his. I thought I was going mad.’

She squeezed his hand. ‘Xane…I like that name.’ Rosette’s mind turned back to the night Jarrod was lost.

‘Shaea—the girl who has Passillo—she talked about a brother who had just died.’

‘I know. This was him.’

‘Was it? Are you sure that he was dead? He’s not still in there somewhere?’

‘He is gone, Rosette.’

‘But the memories.’

‘Memories are the books in a library, not the librarian.’

She nodded. ‘I understand. How’d you get the body to life?’

‘The hemlock preserved the organs, and kick-starting his old physicality seemed easier than creating a new tulpa.’

‘Kick-starting?’

‘Earth term. Motorcycles. Means to get it up and running.’ Rosette kissed his hand. ‘And Shaea’s his sister?’

‘He thought so…’

‘You still remember his life?’
Jarrod nodded. ‘I have my sense of self, but I can still access his memories. Like a movie.’
‘A what?’
‘Like a biography—a story about someone else’s life. He and Shaea were abandoned, raised by no one, surviving in the streets of Corsanon.’ He frowned. ‘Actually, not by no one—Rall had a pretty strong hand in it. I think she was interested for reasons of her own.’
‘Rall?’
‘A witch. Xane didn’t know much about it. I’ll see if I can access his earlier memories.’
‘It’s bizarre, Jarrod. You’ve appropriated this young man’s life.’
‘Believe me, it’s bizarre for me too.’ He smiled. ‘But even without knowing myself, when I saw you I loved you.’ He whispered the last part.

You were leading a black mare. I was in a coach. You caught my eye, I’ll admit it.
I wanted to follow you forever.
And now? She opened her palm, his fingers staying laced.
All the more so.
I’m glad we have that worked out, Maudi. It still doesn’t solve the mystery of why Shaea’s blood is the same as yours and Nell’s. Drayco yawned like a cavern.

It doesn’t. Rosette scratched her familiar’s head, her eyes drifting over to An’ Lawrence. He stood with the palomino gelding. The horse’s head was down, eyes hooded. The bards were slumped against each other in the saddle, tied securely. She pointed her finger at him. ‘Sword Master, I have a question for you.’

‘What is that, daughter?’

‘In your crusades through Corsanon and surrounding lands, did you happen to have any other kinds of adventures? Any offspring that I would be related to? Can you recall?’

‘No,’ he said, snapping off any further comment. ‘I didn’t and I don’t so take your search elsewhere.’

‘You were accusing, as if fathering children was an unworthy pursuit.’
‘Nothing wrong with fathering. It’s the raising part, or lack thereof, that concerns me.’

This is an old debate, Maudi? Besides, it’s Nell’s blood, Richter blood, not his.
She laughed, rubbing Drayco behind the ear. Right. ‘My apologies, Sword Master.’

He gave a half smile. ‘Jarrod, can you remember more of Xane’s life?’

Jarrod opened his eyes. ‘Plenty. His memories go back to his birth. I can still see many images, though he didn’t understand them very well.’

‘Can you see his mother?’ Rosette asked.
‘Or his father?’ An’ Lawrence cut in.

Jarrod concentrated. ‘I can hear jungle sounds.’

‘Jungle sounds? Like roaring beasts?’

‘More like rain on banana leaves, parrots in the canopy, a waterfall.’

‘Anything else?’

‘Voices, warmth, shouting…running.’ He squeezed his eyes tight. ‘A face. I recognise her, but I don’t think he did. He didn’t know the face.’

Rosette squeezed his hand. ‘Whose face, Jarrod? Who do you recognise?’

‘La Makee.’ His eyes popped open. ‘She was running with us!’

‘Makee! Were they her children?’ Rosette asked.

An’ Lawrence shook her head. ‘She had none.’

‘What then?’

‘I think she took the babies away to Corsanon.’ Jarrod straightened. ‘They weren’t born there, that’s for sure. There isn’t a jungle within a week’s distance of that city. I think she stole them.’

‘Whatever for?’

He shook his head. ‘Xane didn’t know. Maybe Shaea does.’

Rosette re-tied the leather thong on her sword hilt. ‘And the blood link? How’s that fit in?’

He shrugged. ‘Grayson can help us there perhaps.’

She exhaled. ‘I hope so, because I sure don’t understand.’

The portal flashed and swirled, myriad colours racing around a whirlpool until it slowed, the view clearing—if clear you could call it. Rosette and Drayco stepped outside the corridors into smoke and ash; the ground was shaking, the wind tossing her hair. Red dust stuck to her damp clothes. The apple trees at the entrance to Temple Los Loma were bare, swaying violently in the gusts. Three ravens perched in the top branches—wings spread as they struggled to
keep a grip, like riding a bucking bronco. They cawed and scolded, clicking their beaks. She waved to them and they took flight, arrowing away at high speed. Drayco lashed his tail. Scylla hissed beside him. ‘This isn’t giving me much confidence, Sword Master,’ she said as he led the horse from the portal.

Jarrod followed, supporting Teg. ‘What’s happened here?’ he asked, scanning the smoking mountains.

‘The protection spell’s gone?’ An’ Lawrence asked Rosette.

She felt the air with her fingertips but before anyone could answer, a black falcon shot towards them, flanked by the ravens. The raptor back-winged onto the Sword Master’s arm, fanning hard before she jumped to the ground, shifting into Nell. She locked eyes with Teg for a moment, but didn’t speak. After assessing them all she clapped her hands. ‘Worse for wear, the lot of you. Let’s go.’

She shot her arms towards the sky and as she brought them down Rosette felt a glamour settle over them.

‘Who are we hiding from out here, Nell?’ she asked.

‘Trackers. Plenty of them. Hurry. There isn’t much time.’

‘Trackers?’

‘ASSIST. Run if you can! Teg, to me.’ She stretched out her arms.

Shaea brushed her hand past the plasma field as she raced through the portal, purple veins of light dancing towards her. ‘Get me out of here! Get me someplace safe! Hurry!’ She pressed against the back wall, panting, her clothes soaked through, her body shaking. She kept her eyes on the entrance. Any moment the raven would streak in, talons bearing down to slit her throat. She squeezed the vial, the edges digging into her palm. Rain sheeted down outside. The portal blurred, the streams of coloured lights swirling as if someone mixed them with a stick. Her legs gave way and the ground came up to meet her. ‘I made it.’

She’d outrun them—the wolves, the warriors and Rosette. She’d even outrun Rall and the raven, if the two weren’t one and the same. There was a moment she thought to turn back, when she heard Xane call out to her. She’d nearly faltered, thinking he was caught in the battle somehow. But that was a trick. A glamour. It had to be. Xane was dead. She’d buried him herself. Rall, or Makee, was trying to stop her with his voice. She didn’t fall for it.

She wiped her face with her sleeve; in her hand, the blue light of the vial pulsed. ‘Xane is gone.’ She squared her shoulders, pushing them hard against the wall. ‘And I am going away. Far away.’ She opened her palm and stared at the vial. ‘Who are you, my fancy-coloured friend?’ The crystal changed tone as the many facets caught the light. She secured the silver chain around her neck. ‘Not some minor trinket, that’s for certain.’ Shaea laughed. ‘Whatever you are, you’re all mine now.’

Makee would be furious, of course. This spell, as she called it, was very important to her, and to those others no doubt. They’d come after her, tried to run her down. She had to find somewhere safe to hide—somewhere safe to live. She looked back at the portal. ‘Where are you taking me?’ she asked, directing her voice to the plasma energy. It was sleeping, indistinguishable from rock. ‘Not talking any more? You were vocal enough when you told me to mind Rall. Do her bidding.’ Shaea chuckled. ‘I’ve lost my place in that apprenticeship, I imagine.’

The walls were silent, but she felt warm, finally out of the wind and rain and torrent of the battle. She loosened her cloak and stretched her legs out long, tapping her toes together until the cakes of mud fell away from her soles. She took off her boots then wrung out her wet socks. She hadn’t worn shoes much in her life and it felt good to free her feet. It also felt good to own a pair of fine boots. ‘Take me where you will then, Entity. Just make it far from battle, hunger and cold. Take me somewhere I can call home.’ She stared at the bare rock. ‘If you would, please.’

Jarrod spotted the trackers before anyone else. There were two of them, and judging by their movements the glamour was working. ASSIST trackers, Rosette. Behind and northwest. Can you see them?

Drayco’s and Scylla’s hackles went up. ‘Not yet. Where are they heading?’ she whispered.

‘This way. Fast.’

‘I’ll go.’ Nell crouched for an instant. ‘Keep moving—and, Rosette, keep the glamour up.’ Nell passed Teg over to Jarrod, the Lupin leaning hard on his shoulder. Nell launched, shooting skyward. The ripple in the glamour was palpable as her falcon form tore through it.

‘Did they spot that?’ Teg asked.

Jarrod watched their approach. ‘Doesn’t appear so. They’re covering ground too fast for stealth. I’d say we’re nothing but empty space to them.’

‘Until they catch up. They’re coming straight this way.’ Rosette scanned the horizon.

The trackers approached at the run, their camouflage blurring with the surroundings. The ground rattled and shook. It was in a constant state of agitation as the mountains belched out ash and smoke.

‘This isn’t right,’ Jarrod said, hoisting Teg when the Lupin stumbled.

‘Which part?’ Rosette asked. ‘The vanishing of Temple Dumarka? The loss of the spell? The destruction of
Temple Los Loma or the bits of Corsanon gut and bone stuck in my hair?’

Teg chuckled in Jarrod’s ear. ‘Nice one,’ he whispered. He turned to him. ‘Don’t addle her. We need the glamour.’

Jarrod shook his head. ‘All of it, Rosette. Everything’s askew. But these tremors—they’re unnatural. The mountains are about to blow and that’s not where Earth geology was when I left. Someone’s tampering.’

‘We think it was Makee,’ Rosette said.

As they crested the last rise, the temple grounds appeared below.


‘Spell’s all but gone,’ Rosette said. Her voice was tight. ‘How did this happen?’

‘Makee’s demon,’ Jarrod replied under his breath.

Nell circled once overhead, filling the air with a long, descending whistle that snapped at the end.

‘Are you okay, lovely?’ he asked Rosette.

‘Of course.’ She looked down.

Grayson and Annadusa met them, taking the horse and bards from An’ Lawrence. Jarrod passed Teg over, the Lupin grizzling.

‘Teg,’ Rosette said. ‘You have to be able to stand to fight. Let them heal you.’ She exchanged looks with Grayson but didn’t speak.

Fynn said enough for everyone. Maudi home! All is well! Maudi! He jumped up, his nose whiffling in her battle-soaked gear. Maudi hunts.

‘Maudi did hunt, little Fynn. Hunt and fight. Not through yet it seems.’

The young dog growled.

‘You can guard the temple grounds. This won’t take long.’

He yipped once and ran back to Annadusa, following her and Teg up the manor steps. Nell arrowed in, transforming as she rebounded off the Sword Master’s outstretched arm. ‘There are two bearing down on us, heavily armed. Five more skirting the borders.’

An’ Lawrence pulled them in close. ‘Nell, stay aloft. Keep an eye on them all. Scylla and I will take the two behind. Jarrod, you and Drayco mind the borders. Rosette, you’re with them.’

‘What do I do?’ she asked.

‘Keep us all glamoured.’

They spread out, melting into the landscape under her spell.

‘Jarrod, can you manage in that boy’s body of yours?’ Rosette asked.

‘I promise you, I’m old enough.’

She winked. ‘We’ll have to put that to the test.

‘Focus, both of you!’ Drayco’s voice barrelled into their minds. Trackers. North behind the orchard.

The three of them ran, circling around the charred fruit trees and taking the trackers by surprise. The ASSIST men didn’t see them coming. Rosette’s glamour blended with the landscape and they slit the trackers’ throats before they set foot on the temple grounds. When they searched the bodies they found explosives. A lot of explosives.

‘This is what Nell meant by heavily armed?’ Jarrod said.

‘Like the mountains going off isn’t enough,’ Rosette said.

‘It seems they don’t want to leave a trace.’

‘Of the temple?’

‘Or us.’ Jarrod rubbed his neck. ‘Me, most likely.’

Rosette slapped his hand away. ‘Don’t pick.’ She pushed his hair back to study the wound. ‘I can see why it killed him.’ Her fingertips swept the dried mud from his cheek. ‘I’ll work on it, as soon as we have a moment.’

Scylla’s calling us in, Drayco said. The trackers are all down.

Rosette pulled her hand back. ‘If I know ASSIST, there will be more on the way when these don’t report.’

‘They’ll send an army if they’ve got one.’ Jarrod looked at the packs full of explosives. ‘And I’d say they do.’

Rosette hosed down herself and Drayco in the stables. The ash and red dust ran in streams off her skin, along with enemy blood and some of her own. Nell hadn’t let them inside to bathe. She’d said neither smelled very pleasant.

‘Did you fillet half of Corsanon?’ Annadusa had asked, handing her a bottle of peppermint soap, staying as far from her as arms would allow.

‘Nearly. How’s Teg? The bards?’

‘Clean up and you can see for yourself.’

Rosette smiled. That meant they were recovering. Her joy faded as she grabbed the hitching rail for balance.
The ground shook almost continuously. ‘I’d hate to think we’re getting all cleaned up to be buried alive.’

‘Then don’t think it!’ Jarrod said. He came armed with towels and his own bottle of soap. Apparently they didn’t think he smelled very good either. She hadn’t noticed.

_We smell like old dog breakfast, Maudi. Very old._

‘You’re right,’ she said, handing Jarrod the hose. She concentrated on scrubbing mud and bloodstains from her skin, alternating with vigorous curries of Drayco’s fur. It soothed her mind, like a ritual cleansing. The water was warm, pumped by the Pelton wheels and heated by the sun—still shining hot through the haze. She rinsed Drayco clean, forbidding him to roll. The grounds were covered in a carpet of ash and the clover pastures were dry and full of grass seeds. The soot floating down from the mountains was difficult enough to keep clear of. It was falling like rain. Her familiar exhaled forcibly and sat on the covered deck adjacent the tack room, licking his sparkling fur. She roughed him with a big towel.

*Will they have hunted, Maudi?*

‘I certainly hope so, Dray. I could eat an entire bush pig on my own.’

*Liking meat, now that the litter is gone?*

She shut her eyes and rinsed her hair of suds as it streamed past her flat belly. ‘Seems that way.’

‘Rosette?’ Jarrod asked. He was lathered from head to toe and she passed him the hose again.

‘I’m fine.’ She watched him rinse, a smile playing across her face.

‘What are you staring at?’

‘No tattoos. It’s so strange to see all that untouched skin.’

He swung his hair out of his eyes, a trail of water arcing overhead. ‘Something to look forward to?’

‘I think so,’ she said, stepping closer.

He hesitated. ‘Have you talked to Grayson?’

‘Not since the birth.’

*Rosette?* He used his mental voice.

*I can’t talk about it now. Later?*

She nodded then hung her war gear on the fence and hosed it down. The horses stabled nearby flared their nostrils, taking in the battle smells. An’ Lawrence approached, leading Fortuna. The gelding’s ears pinned back at her. Drayco hissed.

‘I don’t know what you see in this one, Sword Master,’ she said, moving clear from the horse’s path. ‘His legs are too long, flanks too narrow and his disposition leaves…’ She shook her head as the horse pawed the ground.

‘Much to be desired.’

‘You haven’t seen him in battle, Rosette!’ His eyes were fierce. ‘Magnificent warhorse. He loves it.’

The animal side-kicked the stable door when the other horses tried to sniff him.

Rosette rolled her eyes. ‘I’ll bet he does.’

She pointed at the rail and An’ Lawrence passed her a clean towel. At the tilt of his head, Scylla jumped into the tub that Drayco had vacated. ‘Go get something to eat, the lot of you. I’ll finish up here.’

The horse took a nip at her bare shoulder as she walked past. She scolded him and he squealed.

Jarrod walked straight up to the beast and stroked his neck. ‘I remember you.’ The gelding’s ears relaxed as he whickered. ‘I am proud of you, Fortuna.’

‘Some friends you pick.’ Rosette wrapped the towel around her shoulders, drying her hair with the ends.

‘We’ve got to do something about this ash. Is all of Earth on fire?’

‘I think it might be,’ An’ Lawrence said. ‘The whole continent is about to blow.’

The kitchen was silent save for the thump of Fynn’s tail. The temple cats stared at the dog and he stopped.

‘It surprised me too, I promise,’ Grayson said. He could tell by Rosette’s face she wasn’t liking it. He sat back, folding his hands. He’d checked and double-checked. There was no mistaking it. DNA didn’t lie.

‘It has to be a mistake,’ Rosette said.

He stared at his mug.

She grabbed his shoulder, forcing him to turn towards her. ‘It’s a mistake, Grayson.’

‘Rosette, it’s no mistake, not according to the technology we found in the cellar. The hair you brought me from Shaea, her DNA, it’s the same as yours.’

‘Like a sister?’ Rosette’s eyes went to Nell who shook her head.

‘Like a daughter,’ Grayson said.

Rosette pounded the table, tea jumping out of the cups. ‘My child is dead. You buried him yourself. I have no other! Certainly not a full-grown daughter.’
Teg mopped the table. Nell had her eyes closed. Jarrod stared as if he were a million miles away. An’ Lawrence seemed asleep. No help there. Grayson had hoped they would have something to say. He didn’t want to try and explain how this could have happened but he realised he was the only one who could. ‘Rosette.’ He touched her hand and she pulled back. She didn’t look at him. ‘Rosette, listen. I think I know what happened.’

‘Tell us,’ Nell said, opening her eyes.

He cleared his throat. ‘When you were in Cryo, under Everett’s care…it must have happened then. He took samples of your DNA. He knew you were different and he catalogued everything. When we got you out, he still had the samples.’

‘Samples of what?’ Rosette asked. Her eyes bore into him.

‘Cell structure, tissues, maybe more. Maybe cultured ovum. Everett started an in vitro program in the Borderlands and I think that’s where Shaea—and Jarrod’s new body—are from.’ He looked at Jarrod. ‘Xane’s memories correlate, don’t they?’

Jarrod nodded. ‘Could fit.’

‘I have no idea what any of that means,’ Rosette said.

‘It means, Rosette, effectively, you’re right. You never had another child, but someone did for you.’ Grayson did not meet her gaze.

‘Twins?’ She pointed to Jarrod. ‘Was Xane mine as well?’

‘She birthed both Shaea and Xane but only Shaea is your blood.’

‘Who, Grayson?’ she asked. ‘Who birthed them?’

‘Her name is Regina. She’s a shaman, a witch in the Borderlands.’

‘And Makee stole the twins?’ Jarrod said, his voice very quiet. ‘She must have followed us through the corridors, hid there and tracked Everett onto the Borderlands.’

‘Why?’ Rosette said through clenched teeth. ‘What possible reason?’

‘To get the spell,’ Nell said. ‘She needed someone of the blood to carry it. She must have known Everett’s plan all along.’ Nell crossed her arms tight. ‘She intended this from the start. Everett took the female from you, Rosette. That’s why the male developed.’

‘My boy?’

Nell nodded. ‘Twins aren’t uncommon in our line but the males don’t grow past the first trimester. The mitochondrial DNA prevents it.’

‘Luka Paree’s tampering…’ Rosette stared at her hands.

‘Rall, old witch Rall,’ Jarrod shook his head. ‘It’s all making sense.’ She was Makee in one world and Rall in the other, keeping an eye on the two children.

‘Not much of an eye, from what I can tell.’ Rosette’s face was flushed. ‘You said you two were gutter-raised.’

‘We were.’ He rubbed at his scab and Rosette pulled his hand away. ‘I don’t see why she took Xane though.’

‘Maybe she didn’t know which of the babies was the right one. She couldn’t know half the truth of our DNA or the spell it carries.’ Nell looked at An’ Lawrence. ‘Where is La Makee now?’

The Sword Master shifted in his seat. ‘The Lemur raven died in my hands.’ The cups and saucers rattled as a tremor shook beneath them.

Rosette glanced at Grayson and broke the silence. ‘What do we do?’

‘My question exactly,’ he said.

Rosette stood. ‘We’ve ASSIST trackers sniffing our borders, fit to detonate what’s left of the northern hemisphere, my…offspring is traipsing through the corridors on her own, Passillo in tow—unless she’s dropped it in a ditch or sold it to a baker for an apple pie. She has no idea of what it is. I don’t even fully understand its link to the Entities. Would she know how to navigate? Where would she go? And Kreshkali’s vanished, who knows where.’ She leaned closer to Nell. ‘Did I miss anything?’

‘We’re cut off from the resistance at Half Moon Bay, and the corridors out of this world are filling up with magma.’

‘Are they? I didn’t know that.’ She looked at An’ Lawrence. ‘Did you see Kreshkali when you came through the portal?’

He shook his head.

‘Where could she be?’

All eyes turned to Nell.

‘I know where she is,’ Teg said, speaking up for the first time. His shoulder was wrapped tight, his arm in a sling. He cradled a large mug in his free hand, staring into it.

‘You do?’ An’ Lawrence asked.

Teg levelled his eyes on Nell. ‘She’s on Shaea’s heels.’
‘And where is that?’ Rosette asked.
‘The Borderlands.’
Jarrod looked up. ‘The young witch’s trying to find her way home.’

An’ Lawrence insisted they ride to the portal. The horses would be easier to control that way and he didn’t want to lose any more. There was his stallion, Diablai, and three Desertwind brood mares left behind as it was. They had taken off to higher ground in the east and short of doing a calling spell, he couldn’t get them back. There was no time. The world was breaking apart and his heart broke too, leaving them behind.

The ground shook, the groan of the land deafening. They had to evacuate. The spell Makee had laid beneath the mountains to make them boil was not undoable but Jarrod had calculated the possibilities from an infinite number of variables and had come up with an unequivocal get out! Nell and Rosette were stubborn. They grabbed Teg and did some investigations in the ether. The information they came back with didn’t look any better.

The polar caps were frozen solid, the ice spreading to the sixty-degree latitudes, north and south—not a natural state for the hothouse phase of Earth’s climatic cycle. Magma was erupting from rifts and crevasses at the fifty-degree line on to well south of the equator thanks to Makee’s thermodynamic meddling. She wanted to shut down ASSIST—stop the trackers from crossing into Gaela—and when conventional magic didn’t work, she decided to close off the doors to Earth. The portals were filling with lava, Entities fossilising. The tectonic plates were shifting again. There was no way to undo Makee’s spells in time, no foreseeable way, so they were evacuating, going back to Los Loma Gaela to await the fallout. What would become of the many-worlds was yet to be seen. Jarrod had some likely scenarios in mind. An’ Lawrence couldn’t say he was fond of any one of them.

He ground his teeth as he handed the palomino over to Jarrod. The horse went willingly, though he suspected the animal knew this wasn’t the same stableboy from Corsanon. He turned to Nell. They exchanged a single look, letting everyone pass before them towards the crevice. Together they followed the others into the portal, jumping back the moment Rosette ran her hand over the plasma stream. Scylla sprang from Drayco’s side, leaping through the portal as if it were a ring of fire. She landed in front of An’ Lawrence and leaned into him as she screamed a farewell to those in the corridor. The Three Sisters shot out as well. An’ Lawrence took Nell’s hand and they ran back into the ash, rumble and spit of a dying Earth.

‘Nell! Rowan!’ Rosette shouted. She squeezed Teg’s shoulder, making him yelp. ‘Where did they go?’
‘Nellion!’ Jarrod yelled.
‘Noooooo!’ Rosette’s cry was ear-splitting.

The palomino reared and the other horses pawed the ground. Rosette rushed to the portal edge with Jarrod and Grayson, leaving Teg and Maluka to settle the horses. Annadusa’s head came up, but she didn’t leave Clay and Shane. They were propped against the back wall, still recovering from the short ride to the portal.

Teg stroked the palomino’s neck, soothing the others with a calming spell. He didn’t look to the portal. He knew where they had gone. Nell had tried to hide her thoughts from him. He’d pretended he didn’t read them—but he did. She hadn’t given up on Earth. He guessed she never would.

Rosette spun on him. ‘You knew!’
He licked his lips. ‘They’re making one last attempt.’
Rosette wailed.
‘They can’t be!’ Jarrod said. ‘Even if it succeeds, the portals will be closed. They won’t be able to get out.’
‘Nor us in.’

Rosette looked down. Her eyes filled with tears and she wiped them with her fingertips, her hands bearing the intricate designs of her new tattoos. She was a High Priestess now, initiated the night before in the dark of the moon. She wouldn’t try to follow. There was too much at stake. Her path lay ahead.

Drayco’s tail lashed as he stared at the whirling portal. Maudi, they are gone.

The pain in his voice made her tears flow again. She dropped her hand into his fur, gripping tight.

We have to keep moving. Start again.

Without them?
She squeezed his neck tighter but said no more.

Nell ran from the portal; Scylla was racing ahead, the Three Sisters circling above. Rowan didn’t let go of her hand. She blinked back the tears, slipping and stumbling as the ground tremors rolled beneath them. She stopped by the wrought-iron gate to catch her breath. Ash piled up on the ground like autumn leaves. She flipped up her cowl, hiding her face.

Rowan stood, legs wide, braced against the tremors. ‘Are you ready?’ he asked. His eyes went to the closest
peak; plumes of smoke rose hundreds of feet in the air creating a vault of black above them.

‘I am. Back to the temple,’ she said.

‘While it still stands.’

An’ Lawrence and Scylla ran, Nell and her familiars flying ahead. The sudden gusts of hot wind tipped her wings as she careened towards the temple grounds, the ravens’ flight erratic in her wake. They met by the stables; the remnants of Janis and Luka’s protection spell were barely holding the place together. She didn’t shape-shift but perched on the hitching post, watching Rowan work. He armed the first set of micro-explosive devices confiscated from the trackers and held them out in the flat of his hand. The Three Sisters each picked one up neatly in their claws. Nell hovered over him for a moment, grabbed her and took off.

Nell, I...

Don’t jinx it, Rowan. This will work if we see it working. I’ll be back.

She flew northwest, high over jagged peaks, catching a stabilised thermal above the ash clouds. When she spotted the northern vein of the old San Andreas fault line, she called the Sisters in and dove. Just above the sealed ravine, where the pressure was highest, she opened her talons and let the megaton explosives drop. The Three Sisters did the same. Instantly she back-winged, catching an updraught rushing south. Wings wide and flapping, she flew for all she was worth, her familiars on each side as they rushed higher and further away from the blast zone.

When the shock wave came, it rolled her head-over-tail through the air, down feathers levitating about her. She tucked, plummeting until she was able to correct her descent. The Three Sisters fared worse—unable to manoeuvre as quickly. Their broad wings were strong though and they were climbing again before the ground came up to meet them.

The hot air burned her cere, ash clouding her vision. Behind, lava spewed in bright red geysers from the new rupture between the Earth’s plates. Perfect. Thank you. Come, ladies, this is only the start.

By the time she winged back to Temple Los Loma, the shakers had subsided. She didn’t bother to shift but resumed her perch, taking a drink from the trough. Three more like that and we’re in business.

‘Three?’

The last one is a parting gift to ASSIST. She blinked her falcon eyes.

‘Nell, you look like you could use some…’

Don’t say it. We have to keep going.

Rowan’s face was white, his hands shaking by the time he loaded her with the last micro-explosives. ‘Have you seen Half Moon Bay?’

It’s a mess, but we’ve got people there, still alive. I gave them the coordinates around the mountains. They’re on their way.

‘How long will it take them to get here?’

If they make it? Two weeks. There are children and elders among them.

‘And you? How long?’

She clenched the explosives in her talons. Less than an hour.

‘I’ll have a hot bath waiting for you.’

She circled Temple Los Loma, taking in the fractures in the ground, the burnt paddocks, the fallen trees. Remarkably, the manor house was unharmed, the giant stained-glass dome over the library obscured by ash but otherwise untouched. That will be lovely. A birdbath for the Sisters too, please, and food. We’re famished! She whistled, long and shrill, before darting away. This is it, Rowan. The last one. After I drop it, no matter what happens to me, the Allied States will not rise again.
CHAPTER 26
BORDERLANDS & TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH & TEMPLE LOS LOMA & DUMARKIAN WOODS, GAELA

Everett didn’t move. He sat in a clearing above a waterfall, his eyes hooded. Regina sat opposite him on the other side of the fire. She wore a simple orange sarong around her hips and her dark hair fell over her breasts. She placed a log from the sacred journey tree on the coals; the smoke plumed about them, its pungent odour filling the air. Warmth from the flames hit his face and he closed his eyes. The spirit journey began.

In the form of a black eagle, he flew high above the canopy, above the tallest palms, up to the mountain peaks and higher. He flew above the clouds where the air was icy and the wind ripped over his wings in great gusts. Higher still he went, into a whirling vortex in the sky. The clouds parted and he could see billions of stars twinkling in the indigo universe. The eagle knew where to go and Everett didn’t question.

Moments later he plunged back into the world beneath the clouds. Only this was not his jungle forest, nor was it the ghost city of the Allied States far beyond the Borderlands. He flew straight down into a desert, where a central city rose up like an island in a sea of yellow sand. A battle raged. A young man was shot. He saw him fall. A girl came and buried him, and then she was gone.

He lingered by the graveside, watching the spirit rise from the ground. It passed through him, around him, on its way out of the world. He flew with it, until he lost track of its essence. He sighed and circled high over the land, searching for the girl.

He followed a path that took him across the desert, through the mountains and into the long corridors that separate the worlds. She burst out into a battle scene and he feared for her. He tried to get her attention, get her to safety. But she kept running until she entered the corridors again, a blue light pulsing in her hand. A Lemur raven followed, the scream of her deafening. He knew that spirit. It was the thief. The demon who’d stolen the children.

He dropped his wings to his side and dove, talons outstretched, knocking the other bird back before she reached the corridor. With massive downstrokes, he gained altitude again and shot into the portal behind the girl.

She was safe now. He could guide her home. He perched nearby, watching her catch her breath, willing the portal to take them back—back to the land of her birth. She had to ask for it though. It had to come from her. He watched, breathless, waiting for a sign. And then she spoke.

‘Take me somewhere I can call home.’

Shaea came out of the portal, her cloak strapped to her pack. A wave of warmth embraced her and she took a deep breath. The scent of wet grass, banana fronds and ripe papaya filled the air. The sun was overhead, a yellow haze in the cornflower sky. She slung her boots over her shoulder and headed down the path, the smile on her face as high and undaunted as the mountain peaks.

Colourful birds chattered behind her, drowning out her laughter, but she giggled anyway. Someone was coming up the road and she knew she should be cautious but she couldn’t manage it. Something felt completely right about this place—the smell of it and the sounds. She didn’t care for prudence. She couldn’t feel fear. The woman waved, her face kind, arms graceful. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a black bird winging towards the forest, its call warm, welcoming. She squared her shoulders and lifted her chin, striding towards the woman and her wide-open arms.

‘Welcome home, dear Shaea. Oh, how we’ve missed you.’ The woman embraced her, circling her tight.

Shaea melted. ‘I’ve missed you too.’

‘Whoa,’ Rosette said. As soon as the word left her lips her horse’s head disappeared into the tall oat grass. ‘Hold on, Cheetah!’ She pulled the mare up. ‘Not with the bit in your mouth.’

‘She’s taking time to train,’ Jarrod said, stopping his horse beside her.

‘Worth every minute, though.’ Rosette dismounted then slipped off the bridle and replaced it with a halter. She loosened the girth a notch and ran up her stirrups, taking the saddlebags down before letting the mare graze. Jarrod had done the same; Wren, his copper-red mare, was already up to her ears in the feed, a golden palomino filly at her side. ‘It’s a great spot you’ve picked.’ He slipped his arm around her waist. ‘The perfect view.’

She followed his gaze across the gorge to the sheer slopes of Los Loma Prieta. ‘I wanted to bask in our achievement.’ She turned back the way they’d come; the mountain track was fringed in gold poppies and deep purple violets. ‘I want everyone to bask. Are they coming?’

‘Bards, scribes, mentors, apprentices, elders and toddlers, they’re all on their way.’
Timbali Temple is crossing the pass and Treeon’s right behind them, Maudi. Bangeesh is already here. Everyone’s ready to celebrate.

‘It will take their breath away, Drayco. I know it does mine.’

They walked to the edge of the gorge, the breeze rippling across the grass like an invisible hand. A herd of grunnies dotted the valley, black specks on a golden carpet. Across the way, carved from the side of the mountain, stood Temple Los Loma Prieta in all her glory.

‘We did it,’ Rosette said.

Jarrod turned her face to his and kissed her. ‘It’s magnificent,’ he whispered, not letting her go.

The cliffs were terraced, the wide steps sprouting tall maples, crimson in the early autumn. Birch, elm and cherry trees hugged the slopes and hanging baskets of late-blooming orchids and fairy ferns lined the archways. The temple itself formed a relief out of the side of the mountain, the towers, balconies and spiralling steps cut from white granite and blue-veined marble. On top of the turrets, flags snapped in the wind—orange and yellow, black, red, purple and green. The main windows were two storeys high, the bell tower twice as tall.

‘And that’s only the entrance,’ Rosette said, finding his hand and lacing her fingers in his.

The catacombs of Los Loma lay beyond the cliff face, lit to the depths with mirrors, the long hallways and many rooms refurbished—a place of reverie, craft, initiation and apprenticeship.

‘Temple Los Loma is the star in Gaela’s crown,’ he said.

She squeezed his hand and brought it to her lips.

Music floated on the wind and they turned. Clay was setting the bards up at the base of a knoll, and tunes echoed through the mountain valley. Clay smiled then her hands lifted over her head and she started clapping and dancing. Clay joined them, still strumming his guitar while he chatted. ‘Perfect acoustics up here,’ he said, beaming.

‘I see that.’ Rosette smiled. ‘Not the same without Shane, though.’

‘I miss his flute already. Any word?’

‘No, but I escorted him back myself,’ Jarrod said. ‘He’s safe and sound in Tensar.’ He chuckled. ‘Selene and a young fiddle player were there to meet him.’

‘The right Tensar then?’

Rosette gave Clay’s shoulder a playful shove. ‘I think so. And don’t complain. If we sent you back to your right time, you’d be dead.’ She laughed.

‘I’m not complaining!’ He slapped the guitar as he strummed, shifting the bards into a driving syncopated rhythm. Rosette surveyed the festival grounds. ‘Where’s Annadusa? Grayson?’

Maluka’s head came up. ‘They’re coming.’

‘Will there be enough food? Are the tables here?’ Rosette shaded her eyes and looked up the path. ‘I don’t see them.’

‘Relax, my queen.’ Jarrod kissed her cheek.

‘Our first equinox as a fully recognised temple! If Kreshkali and Teg don’t get back in time…’

Behind, Maudi.

Rosette spun around.

‘You keep grinning like that and you’ll burst,’ Kali said as she came up the pathway. Teg was at her side, his face serene, eyes dancing.

‘You’re back! I was worried you wouldn’t make it.’ She hugged her mother, kissing her soundly.

‘And miss the first official celebration? No chance.’

Rosette leaned towards Teg, kissing his cheeks, one and the other, and his lips. ‘Anything?’ she whispered.

‘Could you get through at all?’

Kreshkali shook her head. ‘It’s sealed off.’ She gripped her hand. ‘We’ll talk of it later. Today is for joy, appreciation, and the lightness of being. Come! Our guests arrive. Let’s show them how to feast and dance!’

Bards from the other temples joined Clay’s group, the music rising to the clouds. Tables were set up, spread with food and drink, and a picket line was strung for the visitors’ horses. There were tubs of apple cider being pressed on the spot, wines from Cusca Valley and coffee from Oldosia. A huge pot of Avanchak was simmering over the fires and whole salmon from the Terse River, wrapped in leaves, were baking in the coals. Fruit, bread, rolls, butter and cheese were pushed back to make room for the delicacies brought from each temple. More horses were picketed, and familiars rushed in—ravens, hawks and canines.

‘How do you grow the grass so rich?’ a temple witch from Timbali asked as she led a string of horses past.

‘Good intentions,’ Rosette said, laughing.

The day burst into celebration and when the sun dropped low—the slanting rays turning the mountains red—they moved the whole fete inside. The halls under the mountain rocked with dance and song. Towards midnight, Rosette found Kreshkali in her old chamber, the one Rosette escaped from before she knew who her mother was.
The light was soft, obscuring the mosaic tiles that decorated the walls. Steam wafted from the bathing pool and candles floated near the steps. Kali was curled in a bed of cushions. Teg rose from her side and stretched.

‘Rosette, you have that look,’ Kreshkali said.

‘What look?’

‘Like you’ve had enough of the company.’

Rosette laughed as she picked up an empty glass. Teg filled it and they sat together, Drayco peering into the water, watching the candles float by.

‘We agreed I’d spend winter in the cottage,’ Rosette said. ‘The work’s done here and I’d like some time for quiet study.’

‘Jarrod going with you?’

‘He is.’ She grinned. ‘I didn’t even have to ask.’

‘You’ve my blessing then, as long as you don’t go running into walls. Earth’s closed, at least for now. Teg and I tried. There’s no way in.’

‘Agreed.’ She took a sip of the deep red merlot, a bottle from the year she was born. ‘But you can’t hear yourself there at all? You don’t know what’s happening to Nell, to Earth?’

‘Nothing.’ Kreshkali shook her head. ‘It seems the open corridors are what allowed me to know what the left hand was doing, so to speak.’

‘I thought that too. It’s something I plan to study more. There is so much we still don’t understand about the corridors. And if Earth has perished…if Shaea and Passillo are lost forever…’

‘We have to trust it, Rosette,’ Teg said. ‘Shaea may be lost but Nell and An’ Lawrence chose to stay back because they had an intention. They believed it would work. If there’s a way to get through, they will find it.’

‘There is always a way,’ Kreshkali said, hugging them both. ‘I don’t know how, but I know we’ll get a message, and we’ll find Shaea and the spell too.’

Nellion leaned over the rows of strawberries, planting out the last of the fresh runners. The ground was warm, the earth rich and porous from its top dressing of ash. ‘We’ll have bumper crops for decades,’ she said to the Three Sisters. 

*No hunger! No worry!*

‘There’s plenty enough for everyone, isn’t there, lovelies?’

The ravens preened their wing feathers, revealing soft grey down beneath glossy black mantles. As one, they took flight, shooting towards the corn fields that edged the green pastures. A small herd of horses grazed nearby, mostly golden palominos, their manes and tails lifting in the breeze. Bells rang as the milk goats clustered around blackberry patches, kids leaping in the air, jumping over each other. ‘Save some for us, you gluttons!’ Nell called to them. ‘I want to make jam for winter.’

‘If we have a winter.’ An’ Lawrence came up the row of strawberries, his bare feet silent in the soft dirt. ‘This is the warmest autumn I can remember.’

‘It’s not Gaela, love.’ Nell took his hand and he hoisted her up. ‘And Earth is mild as a lamb these days. Where’s Mamá?’

‘Behind the stables. She’s taking them for their first hunt. I thought you’d like to join us.’

‘I wouldn’t miss it!’ Nell carried her basket on her hip, her other arm going around An’ Lawrence’s waist. They strolled past the central fountain; the grounds were raked smooth and the water crystal clear as it sprayed the marble statues. Flower baskets were full of bright blooms and sapling trees grew where old ones had fallen. Zero nodded from the training ground as he drilled the sword students, the last of the survivors from Half Moon Bay. When she reached the stables her face lit up. ‘Oh how I wish Rosette and Drayco could see this.’ Her eyes welled.

An’ Lawrence squeezed her hand, letting go as one of the cubs spotted him. The little black ball of fur came streaking forward, misjudging the distance and slamming into the Sword Master’s legs. He recovered and climbed up An’ Lawrence as if he were a tree.

‘Ouch! Stop! Claws, little Gratanach! You’re shredding me.’

The cub was jet black with a white star on his chest and streaks of tabby grey on his legs, as if he wore stripy pants. His paws were huge, out of proportion to the rest of his body, and his tail, like his mother’s, was bobbed. An’ Lawrence gave Gratanach a pat before peeling him off his chest and sending him back to his litter mates. Scylla strolled towards him, still heavy with milk, her ears a little droopy. Half a dozen cubs ran about her, hiding behind the hitching posts, then launching an attack and tumbling over themselves to get to An’ Lawrence.

‘Surely you won’t bond with them all?’ Nell said, kneeling down to scoop a small rust-coloured female into her arms. ‘Do they speak to you?’

He shook his head. ‘Scylla says they will choose, if at all, in the spring, as is the way with her line.’
‘That’s a relief.’ She straightened, putting the cub up on her shoulders. It draped like a shawl, a long ringed tail waving in the breeze. ‘Let’s go, Scylla. I’ll help you teach these tykes to hunt.’ She turned to An’ Lawrence.

‘Horses?’

‘I’ll saddle up. Just keep an eye on Gratanach. He’s a wanderer! I had to bail him out of the attic yesterday, and he was trapped under the stable floorboards last week.’

‘Will do.’ She squeezed Rowan’s hand before he walked away. ‘Have you checked lately?’

‘Not since the last of the lava cooled.’

‘Let’s look today.’

He smiled then kissed her lips, lingering. ‘If there’s a way back to Gaela, we will find it.’

‘And if not,’ she whispered, ‘it’s all been worth it. Earth survives.’

‘Survives?’ He laughed and picked her up in his arms, baby temple cat and all. ‘She flourishes!’

Rosette watched Mozzie slowly winding his way across the rafters. He was heading towards his cubby hole next to the chimney. ‘If you get any bigger, Mosaic, we’ll have to build a larger cottage.’

*Then, technically, it wouldn’t be called a cottage,* Drayco commented.

She scratched her familiar with her big toe. He was laid out on the rug in front of the fire, eyes closed, whiskers twitching.

‘Technically?’ She laughed. ‘What would it be then?’

*A chateau, perhaps, given that we are growing grapes on the hillside. Or simply a homestead?*

‘Definitely a home.’

Mozzie’s head turned back and he hissed. Drayco leapt to his feet. *Do you hear that?*

‘What?’ Rosette was at the door, reaching for her sword as she looked out the window. Someone was running up to the gate.

‘Rosette, quickly! Help!’

She swung the door wide, Drayco leaping out beside her. ‘Grayson! When did you arrive?’

‘Help!’

‘What’s happened? Are you being chased?’

He shook his head. His eyes were wild, breath labouring. ‘He’s hurt, or not. I don’t know. He’s frozen cold. I found him near the portal when I came through. He was all alone. Is that normal?’

‘Found who, Grayson? Calm down. You aren’t making any sense.’

Drayco had raced past him and out the gate, but quickly doubled back.

*Maudi! Can you hear him! He’s cold. And hungry. Quickly. Get him inside. Get him warm!*

Rosette grabbed Grayson and pulled him into the cottage. ‘Who’s cold and hungry? I can’t hear anyone.’

‘He is.’

‘Show me!’

Grayson stomped his boots on the mat and slipped off his pack. Drayco jumped up, his forepaws on Grayson’s shoulders, his nose pressed into a bundle.

‘Don’t frighten him,’ Grayson said, his voice soft. ‘He’s had a long journey and doesn’t know where he is.’ He opened his cloak and up popped the face of a feline. His head was broad, ears large and tufted, his fur a rich black with dusty grey undertones. Grayson knelt in front of the fire and lifted him out; his hindquarters were tall, tail bobbed. He was shivering uncontrollably.

‘Oh my goddess of the woods,’ Rosette said. ‘Where did you come from, you beautiful one?’

Drayco sat very still. *He says his name is Gratch.*

‘Gratch?’ Rosette and Grayson said together.

*That’s how he says it.*

‘Where did he come from?’

*He says they were all hunting and he wandered into a tiny cave.*

‘He’s freezing,’ Grayson said.

‘Hot water. A tub. We need to immerse him. It’s the fastest way to warm him up.’ Rosette grabbed Grayson’s arm. ‘You’re talking to him?’

He nodded, his eyes filling with tears.

‘Dray, get a message to Jarrod. We need more wood.’

They had a hot tub in moments, the patient not resisting when they slipped him in up to his neck.

*Drayco, who is he?* Rosette asked her familiar privately.

Drayco lowered his head to sniff the cub’s face, giving him a nose touch. Gratch immediately began to purr, the rasping sound of his little motor sending ripples across the water. *I best hunt. My son is hungry.*
‘Your son? How?’
Drayco rested his orange eyes on her. Scylla’s had a litter.
‘Scylla?’ Rosette said.
The baby cat’s head went up at the sound of his mother’s name.
‘It seems so.’ Grayson washed the cub’s fur, picking out twigs and thorns. ‘He says they were all calling for
him—Scylla, Rowan, Nell and his siblings—but the cave whisked him away.’
‘Nell?’ Rosette whispered. ‘An’ Lawrence and Scylla? Temple Los Loma survived?’
Grayson washed clods of red earth from between Gratch’s toes. ‘It seems so, Rosette.’

They had him toasty warm by the time Drayco returned with a rabbit. When he’d finished he was sleepy but Rosette
pestered Grayson and Dray for details, anything Gratch could tell them about where he was from.
‘It seems that Temple Los Loma did more than survive,’ Grayson said, taking her hand. ‘He’s sending me
pictures of gardens, orchards, horses, goats and sword classes. Mostly he has images of Scylla, Nell and An’
Lawrence. They’re always smiling.’
‘Earth is thriving?’ Rosette’s face lit up.
‘What’s this about firewood?’ Jarrod said, slipping off his boots as he entered the cottage. ‘Grayson, you made
it.’ He hung his coat by the door along with his compound bow. He stopped short when he spotted Gratch. ‘Who’s
this?’ When they’d filled him in he was beaming.
The cottage was full of celebration that night. Even Mozzie stayed awake to listen to the songs and stories.
When they finally made ready for sleep, Rosette took Grayson’s hand. ‘I know you were only going to stay a few
days, to do Jarrod’s work and my totems, but would you consider staying longer?’ Her eyes drifted to Jarrod.
‘We’ve a very cozy setup in the barn now.’
‘You might appreciate the guidance, with this one to raise.’ Jarrod looked at Drayco. ‘He would benefit from
his father too, don’t you think?’
‘I’m not sure.’ Grayson stroked Gratch in his sleep. ‘I would love the help, but…’
‘We can send for Maluka,’ Rosette said. ‘I would adore the female company myself.’ She smiled at him when
he looked up. ‘Please? Dumarka is Gratch’s ancestral home. Let him grow up here, at least for the winter.’
Grayson closed his eyes and nodded. ‘I’d like that very much.’
‘And who knows—we might find a way back to Earth, with this little one to guide us.’ Jarrod laughed aloud,
tussling the cub’s sleepy head.
‘We might.’ Grayson watched Gratch as he took a playful swipe at Jarrod’s hand.
‘Then it’s done,’ Rosette said.
Done and well done. Drayco stretched his forepaws out like a sphinx; little Gratch, awake now, attacked his tail
as it swayed back and forth. I think he has a knack for finding lost ways.
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RECOMMENDED WEBSITES

Kim Falconer's official website
kimfalconer.com
Kim Falconer’s Astrology, Mythology & Quantum Theory Site
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Jeannette Maw’s Good Vibe Blog—Law of Attraction for the Real World
goodvibeblog.com
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About the Author

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 a new trilogy set in the worlds of Gaela and Earth with many of the wonderful characters from Quantum Enchantment.

Visit her website at kimfalconer.com

Visit Voyager at:
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QUANTUM ENCHANTMENT
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Table of Contents

Cover Page
Dedication
Maps
Epigraph
CHAPTER 1 TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH & CORSANON FIELDS, GAELA
CHAPTER 2 CORSANON FIELDS, GAELA
CHAPTER 3 TENSAR & CORSANON, GAELA
CHAPTER 4 TEMPLE LOS LOMA & BORDERLANDS, EARTH & CORSANON, GAELA
CHAPTER 5 DUMARKIAN WOODS, CORSANON & RIVERLANDS, GAELA
CHAPTER 6 CORSANON & RIVERLANDS, GAELA
CHAPTER 7 CORSANON & RIVERLANDS, GAELA
CHAPTER 8 BORDERLANDS, EARTH & CORSANON, GAELA
CHAPTER 9 RIVERLANDS & CORSANON, GAELA & BORDERLANDS & TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH
CHAPTER 10 TEMPLE LOS LOMA & BORDERLANDS, EARTH & CORSANON, GAELA
CHAPTER 11 CORSANON, GAELA & BORDERLANDS, EARTH
CHAPTER 12 TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH & CORSANON, GAELA
CHAPTER 13 TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH & CORSANON & DUMARKIAN WOODS, GAELA
CHAPTER 14 TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH & CORSANON & DUMARKIAN WOODS, GAELA
CHAPTER 15 TEMPLE LOS LOMA & BORDERLANDS, EARTH &; PRIETA FOOTHILLS & DUMARKIAN WOODS, GAELA
CHAPTER 16 PRIETA FOOTHILLS & DUMARKIAN WOODS, GAELA & BORDERLANDS, EARTH
CHAPTER 17 DUMARKIAN WOODS, PRIETA FOOTHILLS, CUSCA Plains & Corsanon, Gaela & TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH
CHAPTER 18 DUMARKIAN WOODS, PRIETA FOOTHILLS, CUSCA Plains & Corsanon, Gaela & TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH
CHAPTER 19 PRIETA FOOTHILLS, CUSCA PLAINS & CORSANON, GAELA & TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH
CHAPTER 20 CORSANON, CUSCA PLAINS, PRIETA FOOTHILLS & GOREGAN RIVER, GAELA & TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH
CHAPTER 21 CUSCA PLAINS, PRIETA FOOTHILLS & GOREGAN RIVER, GAELA & TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH
CHAPTER 22 TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH & PRIETA FOOTHILLS & DUMARKIAN WOODS, GAELA
CHAPTER 23 PRIETA FOOTHILLS & DUMARKIAN WOODS, GAELA
CHAPTER 24 DUMARKIAN WOODS, GAELA
CHAPTER 25 DUMARKIAN WOODS, GAELA & TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH
CHAPTER 26 BORDERLANDS & TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH & TEMPLE LOS LOMA & DUMARKIAN WOODS, GAELA

RECOMMENDED READING
RECOMMENDED WEBSITES
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